

FOCUS ON *rural* MANITOBA

While Francophone immigration to Manitoba has been positive since the *Shared Framework 2001-2050: Expanding Francophone Space in Manitoba*, it has remained very concentrated in Winnipeg. Now, rural Manitoba hopes to benefit from this influx of Francophones.



Photo: Courtesy of l'Accueil Francophone

Since 2016, the Accueil francophone has been organizing tours for newcomers in rural areas, such as À la découverte du rural (Discover Rural Manitoba).

BY CAMILLE HARPER

Rural communities in Manitoba have not had as positive an experience of Francophone immigration as the urban area. Some regions have tried to attract newcomers, but the results have not lived up to expectations.

Salwa Meddri, Coordinator of the Réseau en immigration Francophone (RIF) (Francophone Immigration Network) Manitoba: "There was, for example, a major recruitment campaign for Francophone newcomers in Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes in 2012-2013. Unfortunately, these families had to face many challenges, for example in renewing their work permits. While some were able to settle successfully in the region, most eventually preferred to return to Winnipeg or even leave Manitoba."

"With immigration, not only does our community grow, but we also bring new ideas and an open mind. It is an opportunity for us, an enrichment."

- Armand Poirier

Regionalization of immigration is part of the mandate of the RIF Manitoba. "Until now, the focus has been on strengthening cooperation and partnerships in Winnipeg because that's where the majority of immigrants are. Now we're starting to work with the rural population.

"There's a lot of outreach work to be done. Many newcomers do not know that French-language services and resources are available in rural areas, and rural communities are not used to welcoming newcomer families."

Salimata Soro, Director of Human Resources at the CDEM, confirms: "There is a lack of knowledge of the rural world among newcomers, and rural communities are often less open. Families have always known each other; they grew up together. It's harder to integrate."

She adds that the issue of employment is another barrier to ruralisation, as is networking. "There are not as many jobs in rural areas as in urban areas, and most newcomers want both spouses to be employed. It keeps them in the city.

"Also, for many, it's reassuring to find peers when they arrive. But those networks are in the city. For example, there are several African community associations in Winnipeg, but not in rural Manitoba."

To remedy the situation and better ensure a successful welcome, the communities can count on the support of the RIF, the Accueil francophone and the CDEM, whose mandates are provincial, as well the support of the Réseau communautaire (Community Network), the Bilingual Service Centres, the Community Development Corporations, and the Rural Municipalities.

In addition, a few rural awareness programs have recently been launched. At the Accueil francophone, every month since 2016-2017, between 30 and 60 newcomers discover the rural environment. Wilgis Agossa, Executive Assistant and Head of Communications at the Accueil francophone:

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SALWA MEDDRI

Coordinator, Réseau en immigration francophone Manitoba.



ARMAND POIRIER

Municipal Councillor, Rural Municipality of Taché.



JUSTIN JOHNSON

Chief Executive Officer, Association of Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities.



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“We launched the À la découverte du rural (Discover Rural Manitoba) Program because we realized that some of our clients, who had been in Manitoba for five to ten years, had never been further than Lorette. Some of them had never even been outside of Winnipeg. They didn’t know anything about rural Manitoba. They didn’t know about the French language services that are available there.”

The program has already borne fruit: Wilgis Agossa says that “some clients have moved to rural areas afterwards, thanks to the connections they made during the program.”

Similarly, at the RIF Manitoba level, the Communautés francophones accueillantes (Francophone Welcoming Communities) Program is being implemented.

Salwa Meddri explains: “The program was launched nationally in June 2018. In 2019, in Manitoba, the Seine River region, including the Town of Ste. Anne, the Rural Municipality of La Broquerie and the Rural Municipality of Taché were identified as target Francophone communities. This region had expressed an interest in receiving newcomers.”

The goal of Communautés francophones accueillantes is to develop regional community plans and partnerships while taking into account local particularities, in order to prepare communities to welcome potential newcomers and newcomers to their new life in rural areas.

“We are working to enhance the Friendly Manitoba side by making communities even more welcoming,” notes the RIF Manitoba Coordinator. “We’re going to support and equip communities so that everyone can live in the greatest possible harmony.

“To that end, we will notably set up cultural, sports, community or even job search activities to promote exchanges between newcomer communities and welcoming communities,

and encourage newcomers to become involved in rural community life.” The Communautés francophones accueillantes initiative will begin on April 1, 2020, for a period of three years.

Armand Poirier, Municipal Councillor for the Rural Municipality of Taché, explains the importance of Francophone immigration for his community: “With immigration, not only does our community grow, but we also bring new ideas and an open mind. It is an opportunity for us, an enrichment.”

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He also revealed that the AMBM has obtained a promise of funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to develop a municipal strategic plan for the recruitment, retention and success of bilingual municipalities in immigration for rural municipalities.

“We want to go one step further by developing a common strategy to attract

“Immigration is essential today to ensure the sustainability and vitality of our Francophone minority communities, but also to strengthen local economies. Rural municipalities are increasingly recognizing the added value of French, and therefore the importance of keeping it.”

- Justin Johnson

The road is still long, but he remains confident: “We start from the bottom. We are not yet equipped to receive newcomers, but we are working on it. In particular, we are going to create affordable housing. It is not enough to be able to welcome a family, we must be able to receive several families so that they want to stay with us.”

The Chief Executive Officer of the Association of Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities (AMBM), Justin Johnson, adds: “Immigration is essential today to ensure the sustainability and vitality of our Francophone minority communities, but also to strengthen local economies. Rural

Francophone immigration.” The strategy should be developed by 2023.

Salwa Meddri concludes: “If we manage to have more people outside of Winnipeg, it will be very positive for the Francophonie and the expansion of the Francophone space throughout the province. We will all work together towards this goal, capitalizing on everyone’s expertise. Each of us is a piece of the puzzle.” ►

