

THE PROMISE OF AN EU APPROACH TO COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP

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Executive Summary

Community sponsorship seems to yield some solutions regarding increasing safe and legal ways of admitting refugees, fostering refugee integration and creating positive narratives surrounding migration. Although the schemes are national, the European Commission wants the EU to play a role in encouraging and supporting their expansion. This brief finds that if the EU offers a framework for reference and corresponding support tools, this could represent a value added to community sponsorship schemes across Europe.

Introduction

Community sponsorship¹ enables individuals and communities to engage directly in welcoming and supporting refugees. There is no set definition for the scheme and its design can take various forms. The core of the concept lies in a group of private citizens, who, with the help of civil society organisations (CSOs) and in close cooperation with local and national authorities, provide financial, practical and moral assistance to admit and integrate refugees.² The beneficiaries are usually identified by UNHCR but host governments retain ultimate responsibility for the sponsored refugees.³

The first community sponsorship schemes originated in 1979 in Canada as ‘private sponsorships’. By 2019, groups of private citizens and organisations had welcomed over

¹ Sometimes known as private sponsorship or community-led sponsorship. It has also been referred to as encompassing humanitarian corridors and family reunification schemes, but in this brief will apply to community sponsorship only.

² **EC (2020)** “Commission Recommendation on legal pathways to protection in the EU: promoting resettlement, humanitarian admission and other complementary pathways” preamble 27, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/commission_recommendation_on_legal_pathways_to_protection_in_the_eu_promoting_resettlement_humanitarian_admission_and_other_complementary_pathways.pdf.

³ **DG HOME (2018)** “Study on the feasibility and added value of sponsorship schemes as a possible pathway to safe channels for admission to the EU, including resettlement” available at <http://www.europeanmigrationlaw.eu/documents/Sponsorship-schemes.pdf>.

300,000 refugees, in addition to those resettled by the Canadian Government.⁴ From 2015 to 2019, the EU resettled 65,000 refugees, and EU Member States (EU MS) pledged to offer an additional 30,000 places for 2020.⁵ To fulfil this target, the European Commission encouraged EU MS to use community sponsorship to increase resettlement places while fostering integration.⁶

Community sponsorship is considered a successful tool to enhance the social inclusion of refugees, and a potential path to expand the number of refugees accessing protection in a safe and legal manner. In the past few years, this whole-of-society-approach has gained momentum on the international stage. It has garnered growing support among experts, donors and practitioners, and the *Global Compact for Refugees* names it a promising third country solution. In the EU, three of its MS (Germany, Ireland and Spain) have established community sponsorship schemes, which are designed and implemented at the national level. At the same time, the EC has called on the “Union [to] promote an EU approach to community sponsorship”⁷ in its *Recommendation on Legal Pathways to Protection*, published as a companion to the *EU Pact on Migration and Asylum*. The *Recommendation* does not provide an EU blueprint for community sponsorship schemes. However, the EC’s encouragement to work towards a common approach shows a certain willingness of the EU to take ownership of community sponsorship.⁸ Given that national authorities and communities remain the main actors for their community sponsorship programmes, the EU’s role needs to be defined.

This policy brief will discuss what an EU approach could look like, examine its benefits, review schemes implemented in EU MS and propose recommendations for scaling up community sponsorship across Europe.

⁴ **Canadian Government (2019)** “By the numbers – 40 years of Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program” available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2019/04/by-the-numbers--40-years-of-canadas-private-sponsorship-of-refugees-program.html>.

⁵ **European Commission (2019)** “Resettlement: EU Member States’ pledges exceed 30,000 places for 2020” available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_19_6794. These pledges will be carried into 2021 due to the ongoing Covid-19 related travel restrictions.

⁶ **EC (2020)** “Recommendation on Legal Pathways”, preamble 27.

⁷ **European Commission (2020)** “Recommendation on Legal Pathways”, preamble 29.

⁸ **ICMPD (2020)** “Community sponsorship - What potential for scaling up resettlement in Europe?” Vienna Migration Conference available at <https://live.vienna-migration-conference.org/vmc2020>.

What the EU envisages for community sponsorship

An EU approach to community sponsorship as such does not yet exist. Nevertheless, by examining previous EU actions and the EC's *Recommendation*, EU involvement on different levels by various actors, including the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), can form the building blocks of a common approach.

An approach in the making

Previous actions aimed at gauging EU MS interest in community sponsorship schemes, and explored avenues for EU involvement. The first reference to community sponsorship dates back to 2017 when the EC mandated EASO to implement a pilot project to facilitate dialogue on community sponsorship among 13 EU MS.⁹ In a feasibility study conducted in 2018, DG HOME explored possible EU actions to support EU MS in setting up community sponsorship schemes, identifying financial support as the most valuable option.¹⁰ In 2019, this recommendation was taken up in the form of an Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) call¹¹ that contributed to financing the German community sponsorship scheme.¹²

Building blocks of an EU approach: the *Recommendation*

Drawing on the *Recommendation*, a key element of an EU approach could be to offer various tools to guide and support communities, local authorities and civil society when developing their own tailor-made schemes. Such a support framework could also be used to advocate for using community sponsorship to expand legal routes into Europe.

1) Offering an array of tools

- Exchange and networking platforms

The EC suggests that the *EASO Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Network* should lead exchange and networking projects.¹³ This could enable technical cooperation between EU MS looking to design schemes and facilitate the sharing of promising practices. Ultimately,

⁹ EASO (2018) "EASO-GRSI Workshop on Private Sponsorship Programmes" available at <https://cpjj-pcij.ca/event/easo-grsi-workshop-on-private-sponsorship-programmes/>.

¹⁰ DG HOME (2018) "Study on the feasibility and added value of sponsorship schemes".

¹¹ AMIF (2019) "Fostering the integration of persons in need of protection through private sponsorship schemes" available at <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/amif-2019-ag-call-01>.

¹² ECRE (2020) "Follow the money III" available at https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Follow-the-Money-III_AMIF_UNHCR_ECRE.pdf.pdf.

¹³ EC (2020) "Recommendation on Legal Pathways", article 23.

it could feed into the creation of an operational support platform for community sponsorships. Due to their vast knowledge and resources, the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI) could support such activities.

➤ Capacity building activities

The *Recommendation* suggests that the EU could support the capacity building of civil society actors targeted at pre-departure orientation and post-arrival information.¹⁴ This could support the development of a minimum standard, and complementarity of the various national schemes in Europe. For this purpose, EASO envisages cooperating and coordinating with the EC and other relevant stakeholders, such as CSOs. Furthermore, upon EU MS requests, EASO plans to offer tailor-made support actions for national stakeholders involved in community sponsorship schemes.¹⁵

➤ Funding

EU funding could provide an incentive for more EU MS to design their own schemes or expand existing ones. The EC encourages its MS to make use of the various co-funding possibilities for community sponsorship programmes.¹⁶ A recent AMIF call ending in February 2021 supports the *Recommendation* by describing community sponsorship models as “particular[ly] valuable” tools in promoting complementary pathways for people in need of protection and their further integration.¹⁷

➤ Monitoring and evaluation

The EC states that a common approach must build on the “promising experiences [that] already exist in EU MS which can be scaled up and replicated.”¹⁸ For this purpose, EASO proposes to facilitate exchange and cooperation on monitoring and evaluation of schemes.¹⁹ To scale up and replicate the most promising parts of the various national schemes, EU MS could also have recourse to the studies conducted by the EU. Similar to the aforementioned feasibility report by DG HOME, the EU should evaluate its own approach and actions to discern which support has worked best.

¹⁴ Ibid. article 8.

¹⁵ EASO (2021) “Preliminary Draft EUAA Work Programme 2022”, page 43.

¹⁶ EC (2020) “Recommendation on Legal Pathways”, article 18.

¹⁷ AMIF (2020) “Promoting complementary pathways for people in need of protection and their further integration” available at <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/amif-2020-ag-call-04>.

¹⁸ EC (2020) “Recommendation on Legal Pathways”, preamble 25.

¹⁹ EASO (2021) “Preliminary Draft EUAA Work Programme 2022”, page 43.

2) Supporting legal migration avenues

The aforementioned tools could guide EU MS in expanding legal migration avenues such as complementary pathways, which are “safe and regulated avenues that complement refugee resettlement”.²⁰ Currently, all EU MS that opted for community sponsorship use the scheme for resettlement, either within resettlement pledges or additional to them. Hence, the *Global Compact* names it a third country solution.

The *Recommendation*, however, suggests that community sponsorship schemes could be used to diversify complementary pathways as well. At the same time, the schemes could create the human and social capital for refugees who lack the information and necessary network to access legal migration avenues.²¹ Rather than an alternative to resettlement only or via a legal pathway in itself, EU support could promote using community sponsorship as a tool underpinning existing labour mobility schemes such as blue card visas or student mobility schemes.²² This could take the form of student peer-to-peer sponsoring, inspired by the Canadian Student Refugee Program, which allows university staff and student groups to sponsor refugees for the first year of their higher education. For labour pathways, sponsorship could take the form of businesses and employees sponsoring other employees with refugee status. Alongside student and labour pathways, the *Recommendation* also refers to “family-based sponsorship”, which would allow people to sponsor any family member with refugee status.²³ This could reduce incentives for irregular migration, which family members of admitted refugees often resort to given the lengthy family reunification processes in the EU.²⁴ Concurrently, it could boost admissions by widening the scope for admissions beyond the ‘nuclear family’ set out in the *Family Reunification Directive*.²⁵ Family reunification sponsoring schemes have existed for decades in Europe, albeit under different names and slightly differing parameters. Austria, for example, has been allowing families to sponsor third country nationals, provided that the family members can cover adequate accommodation,

²⁰ UNHCR (2019) “The Three-Year Strategy (2019-2022) on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways” available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5d15db254.pdf>.

²¹ TRAFIG (2020) “Networks and mobility: A case for complementary pathways” available at <https://trafig.eu/output/policy-briefs/policy-brief-no-3>.

²² EC (2020) “Recommendation on Legal Pathways”, article 22.

²³ Ibid. article 12.

²⁴ UNHCR (2019) “Families together. Family Reunification for Refugees in the European Union, February 2019” available at <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/basic/5f5743f84/families-together-family-reunification-for-refugees-in-the-european-union.html>.

²⁵ Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32003L0086&from=EN> preamble 9.

means of subsistence and health insurance. Community sponsorship for family reunification purposes could learn from such existing programmes or support them in scaling up.²⁶

The added value of EU-level efforts²⁷

The decision to create and design a scheme lies entirely in the hands of EU MS, since citizens, CSOs and local, regional and State authorities are responsible for community sponsorship schemes. This is a strength of the scheme and should be preserved. An EU framework could consist of the aforementioned tools, and be made available by different EU actors to each stakeholder when implementing national schemes. While doing so, EU actors should be mindful to allow for the environment for national actors to create their unique schemes. This would reflect the community-based nature as a central component of the concept, necessary for the success of the schemes.

Strategic support for key stakeholders

➤ Individual citizens

The *Community Sponsorship Ireland* and the German *Neustart im Team – NesT* schemes set out that groups must comprise a minimum of five persons, while the Spanish *Community-based Refugee Sponsorship* restricts the number of sponsors to a maximum of 10 to 12 persons. The citizen sponsors commit to providing daily moral, practical and sometimes financial support to refugees. In Ireland, sponsors give support for 18 months and in Germany and Spain for two years. The financial assistance provided by the sponsors varies from paying rent in Germany to fundraising a bank account with €10,000 in Ireland to cover any costs additional to housing. Citizen sponsors in Spain do not provide any financial assistance to the refugees, since the government provides all funds. As the schemes are tailored to different national realities, an EU-led networking and exchange tool could yield benefits to citizen sponsors. It could enable peer-to-peer learning and valuable sharing of experiences to facilitate exchanges of the various national sponsor groups.

²⁶ Austrian Government <https://www.migration.gv.at/en/types-of-immigration/permanent-immigration/family-reunification/>.

²⁷ The information contained in the following section is taken from the **Neustart im Team** webpage available at <https://www.neustartimteam.de/>; **Community Sponsorship Ireland** available at <https://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/community-sponsorship-resources>; **UNHCR (2019)** “Community-based refugee sponsorship in Spain-Basque Country” available at <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/article/community-based-refugee-sponsorship-spain-basque-country>.

➤ Civil society organisations

To provide quality support, civil society actors support and accompany both sponsors and beneficiaries. Germany set up a civic contact point and Ireland regional support offices for this purpose. These provide pre-arrival training and information to the sponsors and refugees throughout the journey. From the outset, Irish sponsors must partner with a regional support office, which is a CSO, to become eligible to sponsor. Spain has specialised CSOs, which additionally employ part-time social workers. While the role of CSOs varies in all three countries, they are always involved with the sponsor groups at pre-departure, and are a knowledge-hub for them and the refugees post-arrival and throughout the sponsorship. EU capacity building activities for CSOs could contribute to an expansion of the admission capacity. Germany currently offers 400 places in addition to existing pledges, while Ireland offers 100 and the Spanish Basque country 29 places within existing pledges. These numbers vary starkly and an exchange among CSOs, coupled with increased funding to bolster training capacities, could encourage the expansion of schemes within EU MS. Further, training and coordinating CSOs under EU guidance could fulfil the EC's vision for community sponsorship to diversify complementary pathways: CSOs could promote family, student and labour mobility pathways by offering training to families, students and businesses.

➤ Local, regional and State authorities

Government authorities must be involved for sponsorship schemes to come to life. In all three country examples, State authorities approve the refugees identified by UNHCR, must provide a safety net and retain responsibility in the rare cases of a sponsorship group splitting and ceasing support. Therefore, they ultimately have the logistical and legal responsibility for sponsored refugees. The Spanish Government provides all funds and personnel resources until the refugees arrive, while the Spanish Basque regional government finances housing and part-time social workers. The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) is responsible for the operational implementation of the resettlement procedure. Local authorities are heavily involved in refugee reception and can contribute to designing the scheme. This represents valuable opportunities for cities, considering that they are usually at the forefront of integration. EU involvement could yield targeted funding to local authorities and guidance to cities and communities through technical cooperation on how to scale up existing schemes or design new ones.

Greater number of better integrated refugees

The EC's *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027* cites community sponsorship schemes as a valuable tool.²⁸ EU support to schemes could lead to a greater number of faster and better integrated refugees. The wealth of resources tailored to the refugees, as well as the hands-on support network upon arrival, benefits refugee integration.²⁹ Sponsors can provide invaluable resources complementing those of the State and CSOs for navigating customs, health, education and housing procedures.³⁰ Improved integration outcomes also result in significantly less secondary movement. Sponsored refugees acquire language skills faster, enter the labour market earlier and thus become self-supporting sooner than government-assisted refugees.³¹ As the research community cautions, faster self-sufficiency should nevertheless not undermine upskilling opportunities or push refugees to take 'any' job.³²

The members of the community deciding to host refugees become agents for change in the societal narrative and public support around migration. Through a common project, community sponsorship has the potential to create inclusive and closer-knit communities.³³ More EU MS running community sponsorship schemes could contribute to creating more welcoming societies across Europe.

Recommendations

An EU approach should encompass multiple institutions, ranging from EASO to the EC, whose actions should be mindful to ensure the following elements:

²⁸ **European Commission (2020)** "Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027" page 20, available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/pdf/action_plan_on_integration_and_inclusion_2021-2027.pdf.

²⁹ **EC (2020)** "Recommendation on Legal Pathways", article 16.

³⁰ **The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (2018)** "A comparison of community sponsorship and government-led resettlement of refugees in the UK: Perspectives from newcomers and host communities" available at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/sites/bartlett/files/comparisonukresettlement_schemes_fullreport.pdf.

³¹ **Judith Kumin (2015)** "Welcoming Engagement: How Private Sponsorship can Strengthen Refugee Resettlement in the European Union" available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/Asylum-PrivateSponsorship-Kumin-FINAL.pdf>.

³² **Research Social Platform on Migration and Asylum ReSOMA (2019)** "Private Sponsorship Programmes and humanitarian visas: a viable policy framework for integration?" available at https://www.migpolgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Discussion-Policy-Briefs-PSPs_0.pdf.

³³ **EC (2020)** "Recommendation on Legal Pathways", article 16.

Creating a framework allowing for flexibility

The aforementioned three EU MS have faced the same questions of how to involve all key stakeholders, each coming up with different solutions. With 27 EU MS, an EU approach should provide a support and reference framework adaptable to each national scheme, rather than focusing on a single country's needs. This could allow for flexibility in design and give national stakeholders and civil society the opportunity to choose from a plethora of tools and references. A European approach can be inspired by longer-standing programmes outside the EU but should not mimic, for example, the Canadian approach.

Establishing a quality standard

EU actions in the field of community sponsorship should ensure a coherent quality standard for the different national schemes, where government-led resettlement provides the benchmark. Private citizens, faith-based organisations, churches and small CSOs are the main actors in community sponsorship schemes rather than State services. This is an important difference from traditional resettlement and results in a small group of people, who potentially have not yet worked with refugees or people with a different cultural background, closely supporting and guiding refugee families. Capacity building activities for those stakeholders focusing on cultural and religious orientation and inter-religious dialogue are thus crucial. Further, the EU, together with the GRSI, could issue guidelines on minimum reception conditions to be provided to refugees throughout the various EU schemes. These could, for example, set out the type of accommodation, access to education and healthcare to be made available as well as the amount of clothing and food to be provided to refugee families. It would also be important to monitor whether the sponsors do provide the support to which they commit. The aforementioned EU-led monitoring and evaluating tool could fulfil this function, or the EU could encourage national CSOs in contact with the sponsors to perform regular checks.

Maintaining a focus on additionality

The EC views community sponsorship as “an *additional* means of admission to expand the number of places offered.”³⁴ The notion of ‘additionality’ in this context does not mean that it should be a separate pathway but rather that the schemes when applied to resettlement should, in principle, be additional to government-led resettlement. This ensures that State integration and resettlement responsibilities are not discharged onto private individuals. However, from the previously mentioned schemes, only the German programme guarantees

³⁴ EC (2020) “Recommendation on Legal Pathways”, preamble 23 emphasis added.

additional places. The remaining two national schemes are currently within the respective Government's resettlement pledges but intend to become additional.³⁵

In the context of community sponsorship as a tool to support complementary pathways, additionality is less important because the focus lies on opening up pathways and allowing refugees to enter them.

Conclusions

Refugees currently in need of resettlement far outnumber pledges made and implemented by EU MS. At the same time, enhanced integration outcomes for refugees are of key concern. An EU approach could encourage EU MS to create community sponsorship schemes by offering various support measures to all stakeholders. The dimensions to be taken by community sponsorship in Europe remain to be seen, but support from the EU can result in more EU MS opting for community sponsorship schemes, an increase in the number of beneficiaries in existing schemes and an expansion and diversification of complementary pathways. Although EU MS develop the schemes and tailor them to their own realities and needs, the EU can play a role in upscaling by providing a framework for reference and corresponding support tools.

Further, a coherent and successful common approach could sound the beginning of the EU becoming a global leader in the expansion of such schemes.³⁶ The EU could advocate for the schemes and set an example for other major refugee-hosting countries. The tools developed under an EU approach could be used to support countries outside of the EU including by sharing experiences and lessons learnt.

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³⁵ **Nik Feith Tan (2020)** "Community Sponsorship, the Pact and the Compact: Towards Protection Principles" available at <https://www.asileproject.eu/community-sponsorship-the-pact-and-the-compact-towards-protection-principles/>.

³⁶ **EC (2020)** "Recommendation on Legal Pathways", preamble 6.

AMIF (2020) “Promoting complementary pathways for people in need of protection and their further integration” available at <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/amif-2020-ag-call-04>

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