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CONNECTING THE DOTS: UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP AS A NETWORK

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The momentum behind the community sponsorship of refugees has been building steadily in Europe, in parallel with growing global interest in this approach. The conflict in Syria has spurred several states to take action, with Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom all implementing some type of community sponsorship initiative since 2013. Additional European states pledged to look into launching community sponsorship programmes during the 2019 Global Refugee Forum. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, released by the European Commission in autumn 2020, goes one step farther, proposing to build a European Union community sponsorship model. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to yet more policymaker interest in this model, as it offers a way of expanding refugee protection without drawing (heavily) on public coffers in an already challenging budgetary environment.

What exactly is community sponsorship?

Community sponsorship lacks a singular definition or objective, being characterised instead by a set of common elements, notably public-private partnership that centres on the provision of "financial, emotional and practical support" by civil society or groups of individuals. It has often been considered in relation to refugee resettlement, owing to the pioneering role played by Canada in this regard. In the 40 years since its inception, Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) programme has supported the resettlement of 327,000 refugees, with the country playing an active role in promoting the idea of community sponsorship at the global level.

However, community sponsorship can also be leveraged to support other 'complementary pathways' – which is itself an umbrella term for multiple channels of migration that can provide additional third-country opportunities for refugees beyond resettlement, such as those related to work, study, or family reunification.

The momentum behind both complementary pathways and community sponsorship has been picking up steam in recent years, as the limited availability of refugee resettlement places, combined with continued record global displacement, has led thinkers and doers alike to look to alternative ways of increasing access to third-country solutions. Set against this backdrop, community sponsorship offers a flexible approach that can be applied to various migration pathways to support the expansion of solutions.

Community sponsorship as a tool to strengthen and leverage refugee networks

As community sponsorship gains traction in Europe, there is an increasing recognition of its utility beyond the resettlement context. Indeed, it is useful to view community sponsorship as a tool that builds, strengthens, and taps into national and transnational networks to:

1. Facilitate refugee mobility via existing channels; and
2. Support integration into receiving communities.

The support these networks provide can be beneficial for those refugees resettling, but also for people arriving via labour, study, family reunification, or humanitarian admission pathways.

Community sponsorship has been touted as a way of fostering community engagement, and its strength lies in its community-based approach. At the core of its value proposition stands its ability to foster networks. Sponsors help newcomers to find housing and employment, learn the language, and navigate their environment, and in so doing help refugees build relationships with sponsors and networks within their new community.

More broadly, community sponsorship creates bridges between newcomers and other community members. Putting it in simple terms, sponsors are able to help in ways that governments often lack the capacity to do, providing personalised, one-on-one assistance and multifaceted support. And it works: Community sponsorship has been found to help refugees access key services and lead to better employment and earnings outcomes.

Some programmes, such as that of Canada, enable sponsors to name those refugees they wish to sponsor, thus enabling the leveraging of existing networks. Many programmes do not provide this option, instead initiating the creation of new networks for refugees.

Building networks and building communities

Refugees operate within a vast array of networks, especially with the proliferation of ICT connectivity, which can enable them to forge new connections more easily while maintaining existing connections. These contacts can help people move out of displacement: Empirical findings from the Horizon 2020 Transnational Figurations of Displacement (TRAFIG) research and innovation project, of which ICMPD is a partner, show that displaced persons work to cultivate and utilise their networks to find solutions – including through the use of mobility via existing pathways.

Supportive policies and practices can be a deciding factor as to whether refugees can fully leverage opportunities provided by their networks.

These networks may be comprised of personal contacts, such as family, friends, or business associates. Networking may also be facilitated by universities, NGOs, religious groups, diaspora organisations, employers, governments, or other actors – pointing toward an important area for policies and programmes to support the building and strengthening of networks.

TRAFIG research indicates that quality is more important than quantity in determining the opportunities that these networks can unlock. With a significant number of refugees having weak networks, or networks that do not extend beyond the host or origin country, community sponsorship is poised to play an important role.

Community sponsorship presents an opportunity for a variety of actors to become involved in building networks to support refugees – and help refugees build up their own networks.

Tapping into the potential of community sponsorship in Europe

Europeans in urban and rural areas alike are increasingly putting their money – and time – where their mouth is, looking to play an active role in welcoming refugees. Baking community sponsorship into refugee resettlement and complementary pathways can harness volunteer power and realise the benefits of networking to increase Europe's overall admission of refugees, while fostering their inclusion.

While community sponsorship initiatives in Europe are relatively new, several already have a few years' experience. With these programmes maturing, the time is ripe for scaling them based on the lessons learnt thus far.

Faith groups have long played a role in this space, while universities are increasingly active. Private sector organisations have also displayed increased commitment in the Global Refugee Forum and could emerge as a valuable player in community sponsorship, opening doors to refugee employment opportunities.

Onboarding a greater number and range of actors is *crucial to expanding refugee support networks.*

Research has highlighted the vital role played by networks and the importance of leveraging these networks in the search for solutions to refugees' displacement. Practical examples show that a range of actors are ready to demonstrate solidarity with refugees and major refugee-hosting countries.

EU policymakers could easily step in to create an enabling framework for these actors to cultivate and tap into refugee networks, thus supporting third-country solutions for refugees in EU Member States. Networks are key to unlocking the potential of community sponsorship.

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