

**'The Role of Churches and Christian Organisations in Community-based  
Sponsorship Programmes of Refugees in Europe:  
Challenges, Opportunities and next Steps'  
18 and 19 September 2017, Brussels  
Draft – 13<sup>th</sup> July**

***1. Introduction: Expanding legal pathways to Europe***

In Europe and elsewhere, the millions of people affected by displacement have renewed the debate and urgency to enhance access to international protection and durable solutions by expanding safe and legal pathways.

With persistently high numbers of deaths at sea and migrants taking increasingly dangerous routes to reach safety, churches and religious organisations have been on the forefront of calling for safe passage, pressing decision makers for more resettlement spaces and the opening of complementary legal pathways, such as community based private sponsorship programmes, extended family reunification and student scholarship programmes. These calls for legal channels have been recognised by the European Commission in its European Agenda on Migration.<sup>1</sup> In Europe, this discussion has been closely linked to both expanding refugee resettlement and the issuing of humanitarian visas.

In this context, community-based private sponsorship schemes in particular can play an important role in providing safe passage, protection, welcome and integration. They offer a tangible engagement in solidarity, creating a more welcoming and open environment for newcomers, countering the tide of anti-migrant voices. Churches and faith-based communities can play an important role in building up and facilitating such programmes, ensuring a structured, sustainable and long-term engagement of civil society in the resettlement, welcoming and integration of refugees.

While not all existing private sponsorship programmes have officially been 'branded' as such, the idea of involving private actors in the sponsoring of refugees has seen growing support through specific initiatives, particularly in Italy, France, Germany and the UK. Most of these initiatives originate from the collective action and support offered by civil society groups and citizens to respond to the 2015 refugee

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160406/towards\\_a\\_reform\\_of\\_the\\_common\\_european\\_asylum\\_system\\_and\\_enhancing\\_legal\\_venues\\_to\\_europe\\_-\\_20160406\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160406/towards_a_reform_of_the_common_european_asylum_system_and_enhancing_legal_venues_to_europe_-_20160406_en.pdf)

situation in Europe and the awareness that the current context offers too little options for refugees to reach safety and receive protection. These have led to discussions about how responsibilities between the state and private actors are shared and defined, with civil society and churches calling for a more active role to play in refugee admissions. Still, efforts by private groups to sponsor refugees to arrive safely in Europe that have emerged in a number European countries have thus far taken the form of ‘pilot programmes’ and vary substantially in objectives, scope and approach.

## **2. Defining Private Sponsorships: the Canadian Model**

There is no single, agreed-upon definition of private sponsorship, and programmes thus take many forms. In the context of ICMC Europe’s research, “private sponsorship” is defined as ***a public-private-partnership, which facilitates legal entry for certain refugees through formal commitments by private actors of financial, social and/or emotional support for reception and integration.*** As this definition implies, sponsorship combines legal entry with integration support. It can be a tool to channel, bundle and coordinate community engagement in refugee admission, reception and integration, and to ensure an open and welcoming environment for new arrivals. In sponsoring a specific individual, private persons and communities become part and parcel of a refugee’s journey, and their engagement is often strong and long-lasting.

In Canada, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) programme has developed steadily in close relation with refugee resettlement since the 1970s, becoming a much-admired model for citizen engagement in the admission and reception of refugees.<sup>2</sup> For more than 40 years, the Canadian PSR has engaged citizens across Canada to welcome **more than 250,000 refugees**. In recent years, about 46% of all refugees admitted to Canada were privately sponsored.<sup>3</sup> A few elements make the PSR programme successful: it is relatively **accessible**, with broad eligibility criteria; it offers **refugee status** and a pathway to permanent residency and citizenship; roles, responsibilities and rights are clearly-defined; and it maintains the principle of **‘additionality,’** such that sponsored refugees are admitted *in addition* to the national resettlement quota.

In total, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) facilitates three types of resettlement: the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) programme - Canada’s national resettlement programme; the PSR programme – sponsorship; and the newer Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) programme – shared responsibility between private individuals and IRCC. This report focuses primarily on the PSR programme.

While it needs to be recognised that models cannot not be transposed simply from one country to another, much can be learned from the Canadian experience. Building on its successes and experiences, the Canadian government, together with UNHCR and the Open Society Foundation, therefore launched

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<sup>2</sup> Consider inserting link to PSR/BVOR page

<sup>3</sup> Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs, 2016 (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP):

<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/resettlement.asp>

the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative<sup>4</sup> in the fall of 2016, to amplify the success of the Canadian approaches to sponsorship, and to promote the model elsewhere.

### **3. Taking stock of ongoing Private Sponsorship initiatives in Europe**

Indeed, among those existing programmes in Europe, church-led or accompanied initiatives such as the Humanitarian Corridors in Italy and France, led by a coalition of faith-based actors – both Catholic and Protestant as well as others<sup>5</sup> -, and the involvement of a number of archdioceses in the welcoming and reception of refugees under the UK community-based sponsorship have proven to be crucial pioneers in expanding refugee protection in Europe.

Faith-based communities are brought together by their shared believe that providing safety, and a new home to those in need is one of the most fundamental Christian duties. Our shared response as faith-based communities have been articulated by Pope Francis and ecumenical actors through four concepts:<sup>6</sup>

- **To Welcome:** Enhancing Safe and Legal Channels for Migrants and refugees
- **To Protect:** Ensuring Migrants' and Refugees' right and dignity
- **To Promote:** Advancing Migrants' and Refugees' integral human development
- **To integrate:** Neither assimilation nor incorporation, integration is a two-way process, rooted essentially in the joint recognition of the other's cultural richness.

Facilitating refugee integration requires a broad range of initiatives at all levels of society, by individuals, churches, and other local organisations and must be actively promoted through coordinated and structured approaches to reception and integration and support for the creation of welcoming local communities. Integral to the success of such sponsorship programmes is the therefore role of volunteers.

In order to reflect on the central role of faith-based actors in the resettlement, welcoming and integration of refugees, ICMC Europe, within the framework of the European Resettlement Network ([ERN+](#)), in partnership with the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe ([CCME](#)), is organising a one-day conference 'Engaging Churches in the Sponsorship of Refugees.' Both our organisations have had a longstanding cooperation in promoting durable solutions for refugees and in promoting refugee resettlement in Europe. ICMC Europe and CCME have been discussing and promoting sponsorship for many years. This conference seeks to tap into the momentum reached to initiate a structured dialogue among constituencies.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.refugeesponsorship.org/>

<sup>5</sup> In Italy, the Community of Sant'Egidio, Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian and Methodist Churches, as well as Caritas in a later stage; in France, the programme is equally led by the Community of Sant'Egidio, together with the Protestant Federation of France, the French Bishops' Conference, Entraide Protestant and Secours Catholique.

<sup>6</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170221\\_forum-migrazioni-pape.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco_20170221_forum-migrazioni-pape.html)

#### 4. Objectives of the Conference

This conference seeks to identify best practices and existing challenges faced by the various programmes. Sponsorship need not take only one specific form; a variety of approaches have been and can be successful. However, certain key elements and benchmarks should be considered in order to ensure both protection to beneficiaries, and sustainability of programmes. As such, the discussions of the conference will seek to bring about a common understanding among church actors regarding these ‘minimum standards’ necessary for any sponsorship initiative.

These key elements of sponsorship to consider are below, as well as questions which will guide discussions at the conference:

- *Clear agreements between governments and private actors:* What agreements are developed between private actors and national governments and under what conditions? Are these agreements clearly defined? Who identifies beneficiaries and according to what criteria are these selected?
- *Additionally:* Do sponsorship programmes offer protection places additional to those offered by governments under regular resettlement programmes? In what ways are they complementary to resettlement, rather than replacing national programmes? What strategies can be pursued to ensure a longer term vision on complementary pathways?
- *How are responsibilities divided between public and private actors?* How long will refugees receive support from sponsors? What will be covered by whom and for how long? How will sponsorship initiatives link to mainstream reception and integration services?
- *How can welcome and services be prepared in local communities?* How can groups plan for financing, divide responsibilities and ensure quality support. How can sponsorship organisers ensure refugees are provided adequate financial and social support, while also promoting autonomy and self-sufficiency?
- *Legal status:* how can sponsorship organisers ensure that refugees are provided full protection, including a pathway to permanent residency and citizenship, and family reunification?
- *Safety net:* How will sponsorship organisers support refugees if circumstances change? Who will provide a safety net in the event of unexpected circumstances?

The conference will bring together around 40 Christian organisations who are actively or want to get involved in private sponsorship initiatives in their communities and will seek to produce recommendations regarding the ‘minimum considerations’ listed above. At a time when collaboration and creative problem-solving is crucial to promoting a positive European response to the global increase in people on the move, this conference seeks to unite church actors towards common a common understanding of, and involvement in, sponsorship moving forward.

The conference aims to offer a thorough understanding of the long-standing Canadian model, and to map current initiatives in Europe through a comparative lens. For this occasion we are pleased to have five Canadian organisations (both Catholic and other, including some from Quebec) with us to present and to

discuss their experiences and to provide input to strategies about best ways to strengthen expand sponsorship initiatives in Europe, while introducing quality standards. Ahead of the conference, ICMC Europe will share their comparative research paper on community-based private sponsorship to provide focused input to the discussion.

### **5. Background to the Project: ERN+**

Building on the experience that the European Resettlement Network ([www.resettlement.eu](http://www.resettlement.eu)) has gathered since 2010, the ERN+ follow-up project, ERN+ “Developing Innovative European Models for the Protection of Refugees and Providing Support to New Resettlement Countries”, seeks to demonstrate the complementary nature of pathways such as private sponsorship with existing resettlement programmes and to highlight the increased need to expand the European protection landscape.

In the framework of this project, various forms of admission will be examined, including community-based private sponsorship programmes, student scholarships, as well as other programmes of humanitarian admission in a range of forms such as, for example, enhanced family reunification schemes.

Using the established structure of the European Resettlement Network to communicate and inform on such pathways of admission, the project aims to bring together national, regional and local government, international organisations, civil society, think tanks, academia and diaspora. Through a series of webinars, targeted roundtables and focused feasibility studies, the project seeks to identify possibilities for the implementation of pilot projects in selected European countries, while also further expanding the ERN community of practitioners and stakeholders. The project will build upon the experiences and the lessons learned in order to identify opportunities for the incorporation of these pathways as more permanent features of international protection in Europe.