

Policy Brief no. 1

Canada's private sponsorship program. Contemporary challenges and policy recommendations

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February 2020**

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 835466. The content of this document reflects only the author's view and the Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.



Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that currently over 70.8 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, including more than 25.9 million refugees, 3.5 million of these refugees are still waiting a decision about their application for asylum¹. Most of them remain in protracted displacement situation for 5 years or more and about 1% percent of refugees are offered a resettlement solution every year². In 2018, Canada resettled 28,100 refugees, surpassing the United States which resettled 22,900. Canada is taking the lead in yearly refugee resettlement for the first time in 72 years³. Of these 28,100 refugees, more than 19,000 arrived in Canada through the private sponsorship program. This program, formalized by the 1976 Immigration Act, was intended as complementary to the federal resettlement program and was motivated by the will of private individuals to support refugees⁴. The Immigration Act established a set of regulations to allow citizens to identify refugees in need, to financially and emotionally support them for 1 year by taking the responsibility for their resettlement and integration. It includes housing, access to the labor market, health care, language and recognition of credentials⁵. According to the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, between January 2015 and November 2019, 81,165 were resettled through the private sponsorship program. The main country of citizenship of resettled refugees during this period was Syria, followed by Eritrea and Iraq. If referring to the admission of refugees for each resettlement program, during the last years the number of refugees settled through private sponsorship surpassed the number of government-assisted refugees. This surpass has been severely criticized both by scholars and community organizations as an “aberration” of the principle of additionality, which represents, as highlighted before, a fundamental principle of the program⁶.

Program’s challenges

Although the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program is the “longest-running and most successful in the world”⁷ and it has offered protection to more than 327,000 refugees since its beginning in 1978⁸, there are still challenges due to both the inadequacy of some services offered and the government priorities.

Regarding *language*, several challenges were identified, such as the long waiting times to access trainings, the trainings are not job-specific and not suitable for people who have low levels of education or are totally illiterate⁹; “one size fits all” approach is not the best one¹⁰; higher risks of social exclusion for women and people with low language competencies¹¹; difficulties for mothers of young children to access language classes¹².

Refugees experience significant *employment* challenges in their early years after arrival because of low language skills, lack of Canadian work experience, difficulties regarding the recognition of foreign educational credentials¹³. The government-assisted refugees showed lower employment rates¹⁴ and poorer economic integration than the privately sponsored, at least during the early years, and the latter earned on average more than other refugee groups¹⁵. However, it is not always clear a direct link between better employment achievements of privately sponsored refugees and the care of their sponsors¹⁶. Other research suggests that the resettlement outcomes reflect more the different socio-demographic background of two groups than the role of private sponsors¹⁷.

Housing. The vast majority of refugee newcomers having to settle in private sector rental housing, such as most low-income households, since social housing availability is limited to refugees with extreme needs¹⁸. Refugees experienced difficulties in finding an acceptable permanent house, *i.e.* suitable in size and of

affordable prize especially in high-cost cities¹⁹. Studies confirmed unequivocally that housing affordability is a primary challenge both for government-assisted Syrian refugees²⁰ and for private sponsored ones²¹. Consequently, refugees very often lived in over-crowded apartments²² and it was noticed a growing number of refugees to find themselves homeless, and using emergency shelters²³.

Health. Refugees underlined barriers in accessing the *healthcare system*, due to the difficulties to find family doctors and long waitlists²⁴. The literature identified the lack of mental health services available for all refugees, by underlining the mental health issues as a potential challenge for the Syrian refugee population²⁵.

Schooling. The high number of children and youth was a characteristic of the Syrian refugees arrived in Canada, with 46 percent of them under 15 years old. A large percentage of children are enrolled in school. However, parents were concerned about their roles in the children's education, mainly because they did not have sufficient information about the Canadian school system²⁶. The research highlights the need for teachers to foster intercultural competencies and the knowledge on the anti-discriminatory education²⁷.

Sponsors responsibility. Refugees expressed serious concern when some sponsors were unable to financially support them, few of them revealing that they were not getting the monthly allowance to which they were entitled under the sponsorship agreement²⁸. It was reported that due to insufficient support from sponsors, a higher number of refugees than expected were seeking help from community organizations for housing and other basic needs²⁹. Some privately sponsored Syrian refugees were "suffering tremendously" because of a complete lack of financial and emotional support from their sponsors³⁰.

Government objectives. The support of private individuals is additional to the government's commitment to sponsor refugees. According to the principle of *additionality*, PSR refugees are to be resettled in addition to those resettled through the GAR program³¹. However, for several years, the number of privately sponsored refugees exceeded those assisted by the government raising the question of whether the government plan to privatize more and more the refugee resettlement³². According to the government objectives, this trend will continue the next three years, with a small increase of the resettlement admission target for GARs in 2021 and 2022, respectively 10,950 and 11,450, and PSRs levels fixed at 20,000 PSRs per year for 2020, 2021 and 2022³³.

Long waiting time represents a concern for both refugees and sponsors because, during 18 to 36 months, the changes in family size and composition can affect the funds and plans required for sponsoring refugees, and cause an increased delay considering the need to amend applications.

Policy recommendations

As above outlined, despite Canada's private sponsorship program is the oldest in the world and it has offered protection to more than 327,000 refugees, some challenges still persist. The following recommendations could help policy makers to address these challenges in order to improve program's effectiveness and quality.

- Enhance the quality of language classes making them suitable for the diverse audience addressed, with particular attention to the gender dimension in order to allow mothers with young children to attend classes. In fact, as aforementioned, due to the lack of available childcare services and sometime due to the fact that families only send one parent to these trainings, usually the father of the household, the accessibility of mothers of young children to language courses is affected. Therefore, more childcare provision for people attending language classes and more flexibility in the hours and locations at which classes are offered seems critical to resolve this issue. Moreover, a shift from "one

size fits all” to the customized classes seems fundamental for the purpose of removing barriers and accelerating the integration of refugees.

- Explore the possible methods regarding the recognition of foreign credentials and diplomas in order to allow refugees an access to a wider range of employment opportunities. However, credential-recognition represents a problem which similarly affects economic immigrants.
- Deliver training courses which match the refugees existing skills and vocation to the labour market in Canada, so they can be ready to work in Canada in short-term period, considering the very low employment rates of refugees in the early years after their arrival.
- Return to the additionality principle. As highlighted above, in the last decade, the number of privately sponsored refugees is higher than the government assisted refugees. This trend is expected to continue in the next years. Therefore, in the last years, a shift has been observed from the supplementary role of private sponsors towards the substitution of the public sponsorship. To respect this fundamental principle, the government must therefore increase the number of assisted refugees, at least in equal or higher number than privately sponsored refugees. The government also needs an appropriate budget associated with the increasing number of government-assisted refugees.
- Considering there are still cases reporting insufficient support from private sponsors, the government should enhance monitoring and control over the matter to carefully evaluate if privately sponsored refugees are indeed receiving resettlement services from their private sponsors as expected, and should immediately intervene when needed. Moreover, the government strategy should also aspire to improve the refugee’s involvement in the resettlement plan. This could be done by enhancing refugees’ awareness regarding the support available after their arrival in Canada and about sponsors such as, regarding what sponsorship entails, in order to build a relation between refugees and sponsors based on partnership rather than dependency.
- While housing is referred as the primary challenge for government assisted refugees, this issue also affects also the private sponsored refugees. The program assumes that refugees are supported by the sponsor for their housing during the year of sponsorship and when they are finding permanent accommodation. However, the government must provide additional support, i.e. through enhancing social housing capacity. Therefore, as in the case of education and health services provided by the government, privately sponsored refugees must have access to other settlement services in order to not leave them totally dependent on the support and resources provided by the private sponsors.
- Immediate need to speed up the processing time by updating management tools and implementing measures to avoid the lack of interest from sponsors and lose the community’s commitment towards private sponsorship as a whole.

Endnotes

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