

Policy Paper

Private sponsorship of refugees in Canada: updating contemporary challenges and policy recommendations

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1- Background

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. In the late 1970s, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) of Canada became the first non-profit organization to sign a private sponsorship agreement with the federal government to assist large numbers of refugees. Since then, more than 327,000 refugees have been privately sponsored to resettle in Canada.

Private Sponsorship factsheet

1979-2019	327,000 refugees have been welcomed by private sponsors
1979-1980	34,000 Indochinese refugees privately sponsored to settle in Canada
1980-1996	49,000 Polish refugees arrived through PSR
1982-2018	9,000 refugees from Iran privately sponsored
1988-2018	63,000 Iraqi, Afghani and Somali refugees arrived through sponsors help
2004-2018	17,000 Eritrean privately sponsored welcomed in Canada
2015-2019	71,000 Syrian refugees resettled, more than half of them through PSR
2015-2019	2 million Canadians personally involved in helping resettlement of Syrians
2019-2021	59,000 refugees are planned to be welcomed through PSR program
2020	123 organizations have signed agreements with IRCC to sponsor refugees

Source: Government of Canada, 2019; <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2019/04/by-the-numbers--40-years-of-canadas-private-sponsorship-of-refugees-program.html>

Although private sponsorship program is not exclusive to Canada, as different countries recently experienced similar scheme, it is the “longest-running and most successful in the world”⁶ as it presents some distinct features. Indeed, it is open to all nationalities, privately sponsored refugees are immediately granted permanent residence, whereas sponsorship programs offered by other countries are often associated with a temporary permit, it does not require a family connection between sponsor and refugee, it is additional to government quotas and any citizen or permanent resident can participate⁷. The private sponsorship program also deserves particular attention if we consider it in the context of the overall immigration policy. This policy is characterized by an efficient managing of immigration and diversity, and by positive attitudes of the Canadian public toward immigration. It has also attracted international attention and has been praised by different leaders for respecting diversity and nurturing a Canadian identity without rejecting others⁸.

Concerning refugees, the Canadian program of resettlement and integration has been a considerable success. In 2016, the Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship of Canada (IRCC), John McCallum, argued that the Canadian model should be “exportable” to other countries. A representative from the UNCHR also mentioned: “our hope is that the successful Canadian private sponsorship model will inspire other states to develop programs appropriate to their context”⁹. Recently, during the World Refugee Forum hosted by UNHCR that took place in Geneva on December 17th to December 18th 2019, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Marco Mendicino, confirmed that Canada is represented as a model for other countries who also started to implement community sponsorship initiatives and look to Canada as a leader¹⁰. The overall Canadian resettlement policy is for people in need of protection from outside Canada. It has three main programs: 1. The Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) program for refugees referred by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) or other designated referral agencies. This program, since the late 1940s, currently includes the Resettlement services and income support that are provided by the federal Government up to 12 months through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). Since 2002, the GARs selection shifted from the ability to establish criteria to the protection needs. In fact, the 2002 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act “placed a greater emphasis on

selecting GARs based on their protection needs rather than on their ability to establish in Canada. As a result, GARs often carry higher needs than other refugee groups”¹¹. 2. The Private Sponsorship of Refugees program (PSR) for Refugees and people in similar circumstances, identified by sponsors, who supports them financially (or through a combination of financial and in-kind) during their first year of arrival, or until they are self-sufficient¹². This program, launched officially in 1976, is sponsoring refugees through 4 ways. Firstly, it is via a Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH), an organization that signed an official agreement with the Ministry of Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship in order to submit sponsorship cases. Secondly, via a Constituent Group. A Constituent Group is a community local group authorized by a SAH to sponsor and provide support to refugees. Thirdly, it is via a Group of five (G5) or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents (2 to 5 in Québec) who will be responsible for one or more refugees and will ensure the necessary support during the twelve months period of sponsorship. The last way is via a Community Sponsor (CS). A Community Sponsor is an organization located in the community where the refugees are expected to resettle, but the organization doesn’t have a formal agreement with Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and, accordingly, has to present a financial and settlement plan every time they will decide to sponsor.

Through this program, refugees are resettled in addition to those resettled by the government and private organizations. Thus, “additionality”, is a fundamental principle of the Canada’s model¹³. The “naming” principle – the possibility for the private sponsors to identify and propose the refugees they wish to resettle – is the other fundamental principle¹⁴. It is important to stress that according to the agreement on immigration with the Government of Canada (1991) the province of Québec has its own private sponsorship program: refugees destined to Québec must meet the Québec’s selection criteria. Therefore, Québec government must first agree to settle a sponsored refugee in Quebec and only after that the application is sent to the federal government for the application processing which is the same as any other refugee sponsorship in the country. The third program introduced in 2013, the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program, matches refugees referred by the UNHCR or other designated referral agencies with private sponsors¹⁵. Under this program, the resettlement cost is shared between the

government and the sponsors. While the former provides initial start-up expenses and income support under the Resettlement Assistance Program up to 6 months, the latter provides the remaining 6 month of income support, and is also responsible for providing social and emotional support during the first year because BVOR refugees are not eligible for resettlement services under the Resettlement Assistance Program¹⁶.

According to the figures of the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, between January 2015 and November 2019, 148,965 refugees were admitted through these three programs: 81,165 PSRs; 59,145 GARs; and 8,650 BVOR. As shown in the table below, the main country of citizenship of resettled refugees during this period was Syria, followed by Eritrea and Iraq.

Admissions of Resettled Refugees by Country of Citizenship and Immigration Category, Jan. 2015 – Nov. 2019

	Syria	Eritrea	Iraq	Afghanistan	DR Congo	Somalia	Ethiopia	Other
GARs	32,390	2,620	5,310	685	5,030	2,690	835	9,585
PSRs	33,635	16,220	10,150	8,080	865	3,260	3,255	5,700
BVOR	5,605	560	420	15	500	140	135	1,275
Total	71,630	19,400	15,880	8,780	6,395	6,090	4,225	16,560

Source: IRCC (2019). Resettled refugees – monthly IRCC updates, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/4a1b260a-7ac4-4985-80a0-603bfe4aec11>

Furthermore, the figures show that Canada experienced a considerable increase in the number of resettled Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2019 (more than 71,000). This initiative was both supported by political will and community engagement. More than half of Syrians were resettled through private sponsorship and approximately 65 per cent of refugees privately resettled were sponsored by a SAH, 75 per cent of which are connected to religious communities¹⁷.

Regarding the admission of refugees for each resettlement program, in the last years, the number of refugees that arrived through private sponsorship surpassed the number of government-assisted refugees.

Admitted refugees by resettlement program 2010-2019 and targets for 2020-2022

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 ¹⁸	2021	2022
GARs	7,266	7,363	5,426	5,722	7,625	9,488	23,624	8,823	8,080	9,940	10,700	10,950	11,450
PSRs	4,833	5,584	4,227	6,332	5,071	9,747	18,646	16,874	18,560	19,130	20,000	20,000	20,000
BVOR	-	-	-	153	177	811	4,435	1,284	1,155	990	1,000	1,000	1,000

Source: IRCC (2019), Permanent Residents – monthly IRCC updates, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/f7e5498e-0ad8-4417-85c9-9b8aff9b9eda>

This change 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 program¹⁹.

2- Private sponsorship program outcomes: a short review

The researches on the Canadian programs for the settlement of refugees are continuously growing, and have outlined their development, outcomes and successes. The first sponsorship experience from 1979 to 1982 showed that private sponsors tended to offer refugees a broader range of services compared to what the government settlement was able to do²⁰. More recently, a study on the integration of 1300 Southeast Asians admitted to Canada during the 1979-1981 “boat people” crisis (Canada agreed to admit 60,000 Southeast Asian refugees between 1979 and 1981), demonstrated that the refugees privately sponsored were more successfully integrated than the government-assisted refugees, ten years after their arrival²¹. This is mostly due to the strong link between sponsors and refugees, which facilitates their access to the wider community and reinforces solidarity and social cohesion²². It can also be explained by the fact that privately sponsored refugees often develop friendship with their sponsors that goes on beyond the sponsorship period, facilitating their successful integration²³. The direct participation of civil society in the resettlement process represents another important driver for the success of the program²⁴. Regarding the economic outcomes, it was highlighted that privately sponsored refugees earned on average more than other refugee groups²⁵ with government assisted refugees showing lower employment rates²⁶. For this reason, the private sponsorship is often described as a win-win situation where, the financial, cultural and emotional support offered by them “translate into economic benefits for the welcoming society as a whole”²⁷. Moreover, recent studies confirm that in the early years, the employment rates and earnings were higher for privately sponsored refugees compared to the government assisted refugees but the gap diminished over time²⁸. Previous studies underlined that sponsors exposed refugees to a broader range of services²⁹ by offering them personal support, money and time, which resulted in better integration opportunities³⁰, and better access to social capital networks, compared to government assisted refugees³¹. Other studies concluded by saying there was no clear

correlation between better employment outcomes for privately sponsored refugees and the care of their sponsors³². It suggests that the resettlement outcomes reflect more the different socio-demographic characteristics of two groups than the role of private sponsors³³. In a recent study on the on Syrian refugee integration in Canada was founded that PSRs were helped to find their job mostly by co-ethnic friends and only 12 % of PSRs who had found jobs identified sponsors as source of employment³⁴.

The Canadian program is considered as more suitable than the government sponsorship for the long-term integration of refugees³⁵. Besides its success for the resettlement of refugees, private sponsorship and public-private partnerships are looked favorably because they reduce both short and long-term government costs associated with refugee settlement because the cost is either borne entirely or shared with private citizens during the sponsorship period³⁶, and aid can be offered to a greater number of refugees and private sponsorships add to the government-assisted projects and increase the number of resettlements.

In short, the main positive outcomes of the program for the private sponsorship of refugees are the promotion of social and economic integration of refugees, the reduction of government costs, the enhancement of resettlement capacity and the facilitation of the compliance with international humanitarian obligations. Lastly, it also provides citizens with a direct channel for action, assistance and a more personal experience with refugees; the promotion of the regionalization of immigrant settlement³⁷.

3- Contemporary challenges of the private sponsorship program

As stated above, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program is the oldest, the most successful in the world and it has offered protection to more than 327,000 refugees since 1978³⁸. Nevertheless, there are still challenges due to inadequacy of services offered and government priorities (unwillingness to increase the number of GARs), which could potentially threaten the successful integration of refugees and the resolution of which could further refine the program.

While language is seen as a fundamental driver for the social integration of refugees and their access to the employment, language skills also impact the other aspects of settlement, such as, their ability to access services and to participate in Canadian society, especially their access to the labour market³⁹. Several challenges were also identified

such as long waiting times to access training programs, for example. Trainings programs aren't job-specific, and they are not suitable for people who have low level of education or are totally illiterate⁴⁰. Considering the fact that language learning is influenced by demographic, pre-migration and post-migration factors⁴¹, language trainings must be drawn up according to the people to whom they are addressed, gender dimension included, since the “one size fits all” approach is not the best one⁴². In the case of Syrians, administrative data indicates that 89% of adults accessed government funded language assessments and 77% of them accessed government funded language trainings since their arrival in Canada⁴³. Nevertheless, language challenges have been seen as a difficult barrier for Syrians, leading them to feel isolation⁴⁴. Women and those with lower language skills are more likely to be socially excluded⁴⁵. Other research underlined the inaccessibility of language classes for mothers of young children, mainly 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 household⁴⁶.

Another top priority for the resettlement success is represented by the employment, which impacts both economic and social integration aspects of these refugees. Especially in their early years of settlement, refugees experience significant employment challenges⁴⁷. Indeed, researches demonstrated that refugees experienced high rates of unemployment in the early years after arrival, and face various barriers such as language skills, lack of Canadian work experience and difficulties regarding the recognition of foreign educational credentials⁴⁸. Other research suggests that even when refugees obtain employment opportunities, they tend to start with a low salary and low skill level, regardless of their qualifications⁴⁹. Syrian refugees who arrived in Alberta in 2015 and 2016 reported their inability to work in their area of expertise because their credentials were not recognized (however credential-recognition problem affects many economic immigrants as well as refugees), their area of expertise did not meet the labour market needs, or because of the level of language competencies, which was a major challenge for them⁵⁰. Refugees complained that despite their qualifications and professional experience, it was unlikely that they would find a job that matched their skills and abilities⁵¹. Similar employment outcomes and barriers were found in the settlement of Syrian refugees in other provinces⁵².

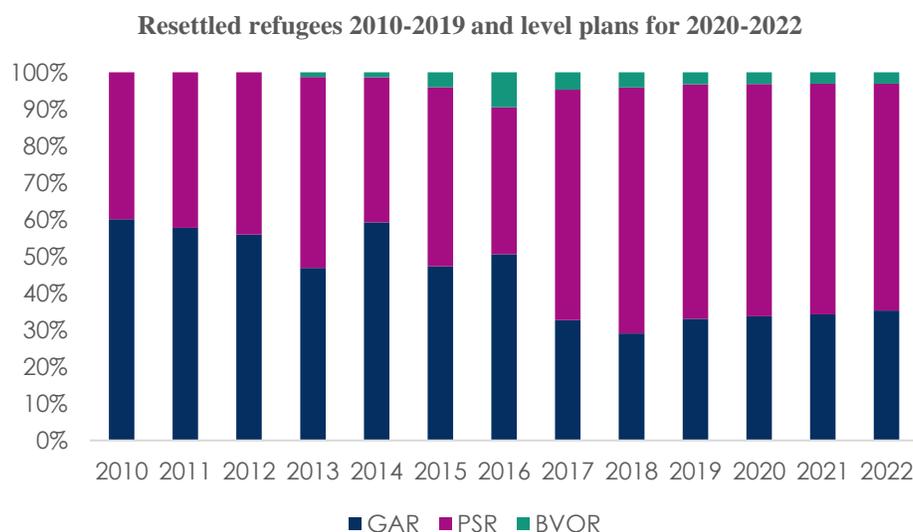
Housing, similarly to employment and language, is an immediate need for the settlement of refugees, with the vast majority of refugee newcomers have to settle in private sector rental housing, like most low-income households in Canada, since social housing availability is limited to refugees with extreme needs (there are different advantages of social housing for the minority of refugees who were able to access it)⁵³. In fact, refugees experienced difficulties in finding an acceptable house, *id est* in adequate condition, suitable in size, and above all affordable, since affordability represents the most important barrier for refugees, especially in high-cost cities⁵⁴. Considering the high rental cost in proportion to their financial resources⁵⁵, housing affordability directly impacts suitability, as renters are often forced to live in over-crowded apartments, mainly because they cannot afford large houses, and adequate conditions⁵⁶. Finding affordable permanent housing is a challenge for all resettled refugees⁵⁷, and studies confirm unequivocally that affordability was a primary challenge in finding the first permanent housing for government assisted refugees⁵⁸, while this challenge also affects the private sponsored refugees⁵⁹. During the Syrian operation, the housing was affected by insufficient information about the size and configuration of families, challenging the capacity to manage the situation due to the unexpectedly large family sizes and the need to respect the occupancy codes. In the case of privately sponsored refugees, despite the low prevalence of large families, the housing challenges resembled those of the government-assisted refugees, at least in key aspects⁶⁰. The housing challenge was also amplified by the limited housing capacity of the main cities of destination, resulting in an increasing number of refugees becoming homeless, and the increasing number of refugees using emergency shelters⁶¹.

According to the government of Canada, Syrian refugees identified the need for *health care*, mental health or well-being support, with 71% of government assisted refugees, 32% of privately sponsored and 35% of Syrian BVOR⁶². They also underlined barriers in accessing the healthcare system, due to the difficulties to find family doctors and long waitlists⁶³. The major health issue identified by the government assisted refugees who arrived in Alberta concern kidney disease, high blood pressure, dental problems, hearing and vision issues, heart conditions, seizures, and diabetes⁶⁴. Nevertheless, these problems were satisfied with the care they received⁶⁵. Lack of mental health services available for

all refugees was identified. Mental health issues may be a potential challenge for the Syrian refugee population⁶⁶.

The number of children and youth was a characteristic of Syrian refugees arriving in Canada, with 46 percent of them under 15 years old. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada reports that a large percentage of Syrian children were enrolled in school. However, parents identified concerns about their roles in their children’s education, mainly because they don’t have sufficient information about the Canadian school system⁶⁷. A research highlighted the need for teachers to foster intercultural competencies and knowledge about anti-discriminatory education⁶⁸.

For several years, the number of privately sponsored refugees exceeded those assisted by the government. It can be seen as a deviation from the “additionality” principle, according to which refugees in the PSR program are supposed to be resettled in addition to those arriving under the GAR program, as the PSR program “allows Canadians to get involved in refugee resettlement and offer protection space over and above what is provided directly by the government”⁶⁹. Therefore, the support of private individuals is additional to the government commitment to sponsor refugees, and the high number of privately sponsored refugees raises the question of whether the government is beginning to privatize refugee resettlement⁷⁰.



Source: IRCC (2019), Permanent Residents – monthly IRCC updates, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

Furthermore, according to the government of Canada, this trend will also continue in 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, as PSRs levels plan are fixed in 20,000 PSRs per year for 2020, 2021 and 2022⁷¹.

There are also some other important challenges that need to be briefly described. Various researches have pointed out that sponsorship has sometime failed, putting refugees in a situation of real difficulty. Refugees expressed serious concerns about some sponsors who have been unable to support them financially, few revealed that they were not receiving the monthly allowance to which they were entitled under the sponsorship agreement⁷². It was reported that due to an insufficient support from sponsors, an unexpected number of refugees were seeking help from community organizations for housing and other basic needs⁷³. Some privately sponsored Syrian refugees were “suffering tremendously” because of the manipulation and the complete lack of financial and emotional support from their sponsors⁷⁴. This problem was especially detected in the situation, where the sponsors were distant relatives, rather than close family, community, religious or citizen groups⁷⁵.

Long waiting time represents a concern for both refugees and sponsors because during this processing time, 18 to 36 months at best, changes in family sizes and composition and thus can directly affect funds and plans required for sponsoring refugees. This can cause an increase of the delay considering the need to amend applications. Another concern regarding refugee system, although not linked with the private sponsorship, is related to the delay for obtaining work permits. This delay forces refugee claimants to turn to welfare program because without documentation, despite the willingness to work, nobody is willing to hire them⁷⁶. However, during the Syrian operation this delay was reduced considerably.

After 18-month suspension, the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration du Québec reopened on January 20th, 2020 the reception of 750 collective sponsorship applications – Programme for Refugees Abroad – only 100 are from groups of two to five people, with a “first come, first served” formula. To make sure that their request will be processed by the officials, aspiring private sponsors slept all weekend in the offices of the Quebec Immigration Ministry in Montreal, then leaved the place to a

courier because applications must be sent to the Ministère by courier mail, one application at a time, with a cost from 500 to 1000 Canadian dollars per application⁷⁷. Beyond the exaggerated cost, this modality has been harshly criticized by sponsors and organizations that support refugees for being very restrictive. In addition, some incidents occurred, corruption attempts and intimidation have been reported to the ministry, when some people tried to “buy places”⁷⁸.

4- 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.

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About the author

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About the project

“The Canadian model of the public-private sponsorship for the integration of refugees: the case of Syrians and its possible application in EU countries” is a project led by the University of Genoa (Italy), in partnership with the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, INRS (Canada). This research, funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 835466, has as overall objective a comprehensive analysis of the Canadian private sponsorship model to integrate refugees, of its impact in providing to Syrian refugees a safe and legal way to resettlement and socio-economic integration, and an exploration of its possible modalities of application in some countries of the European Union.