

## Workshop on Sponsorship and Integration

### Outcomes Document

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The [University of Ottawa Refugee Hub](#), hosted the third workshop of the Colloquium series on 16 June 2021. The Research Colloquium on Refugee Sponsorship involves a series of workshops and symposia held in 2021—2022 drawing upon expertise from many disciplines and from around the globe, and is organized with partners from the University of Ottawa, the [Institute for Research into Superdiversity](#) (IRiS) at the University of Birmingham, the [Centre for Refugee Studies](#) at York University, and the University of Toronto. It is funded by the [Alex Trebek Forum for Dialogue](#) and the [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council](#).

This workshop hosted panelists [Jennifer Hyndman](#) and [Michaela Hynie](#) of York University, Barbara Nzigiye of [Refugee 613](#) and the [Allies in Refugee Integration Project](#), [Marisol Reyes-Soto](#) of the University of Birmingham, Shabnam Safa of [Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia](#) (CRSA), and [Anna Ziersch](#) of Flinders University. The panel was moderated by [Natasha Nicholls](#) of the University of Birmingham. 170 participants from at least five countries attended the workshop.

Panelists discussed the following questions during the workshop:

1. What does integration mean? Do we need to re-examine the level or scale at which we conceive of integration?
2. How can we maximize refugee agency in defining and shaping what integration looks like?
3. What role do sponsors play, or can they play, in supporting integration? What support or training do they need?
4. How can insights related to the social determinants of health help us to understand integration in the context of refugee sponsorship?
5. Who are the different actors that need to be involved in supporting integration, and how can they work together?

### **Defining integration and the level/scale at which we conceptualize it**

Prof. Hynie highlighted three issues in current conceptions of ‘integration’. The first issue is that integration is defined and measured by the state in order to meet bureaucratic goals, such as employment and access to education. *Optimal integration* defined by the state is grounded in an assimilation assumption that newcomers will use the system as designed, internalize values and norms, and incur minimal cost and disruptions. The system simultaneously expects newcomers to be satisfied with achieving and aspiring to less – in respect to housing, employment, and education – than other members of the host country. This creates a tension in defining and documenting integration.

The second issue is that benchmarks of good integration are too broad and disregard the intersectionality of histories, migration pathways, and material and social circumstances. In one of the CRS’s research studies as part of the project, refugees were asked “What makes you feel most at

home?” Most responded that having a *good* job, with opportunities for advancement, having an impact on society, and consistent with past expectations, makes them feel most at home. Most women responded that reuniting with their family would make them feel at home.

The third issue is that measuring and documenting an individual’s integration and change, rather than units such as family or community, is too narrow. Findings from the SyRIA.lth project revealed that individual circumstances, such as disease, require strategic decision-making by all family members regarding resources such as employment and education.

Prof. Hyndman noted that defining and measuring integration needs to shift from the nation-state mindset to the lived experience point of view. She quoted one of the [SyRIA.lth](#) project participants: “Belonging and being able to make connections that support the journey ... starts the moment you step out of the airplane. If you were lucky enough to find the right people [sponsors] and make the right connections, then you’re set for success.” Integration assessments must prioritize the role of social connections, community welcome, and institutions, and highlight them as key areas of failure where integration is not successful.

### **Maximizing refugee agency in defining and shaping practical integration**

Ms. Safa commented that maximizing refugee agency must mean directly involving, and incorporating feedback from, refugees in integration activities. ‘Maximum refugee agency’ will be reached where an individual refugee newcomer has the power and capacity to make decisions for themselves. Maximizing refugee agency involves constant and active work to positively check the inherent power imbalance in sponsorship, where community groups have power and privileges because of the information they hold, and the complexities of structures and institutions involved.

Ms. Safa stated that the paternalistic nature of sponsorship – including sponsor motivations and expectations – must be checked by empowering refugee households to become more independent. Sponsor motivations documented CRSA include creating a life-long and generational friendship with refugee households. Rejecting such high expectations may be uncomfortable for refugees. Sponsors often assume that refugees are extremely resilient and will take every opportunity to achieve great results. However, the settlement system also assumes a linear journey of integration starting at acquiring language and ending with employment. These expectations of the extent and timeline of integration are impractical, reduce refugee agency, and can be demotivating for sponsors. Ms Safa advised that the first step is for sponsorship stakeholders – sponsors and organizations – is to recognize that individuals are expert in their own circumstances. Transparency and maximum disclosure of information (including translation as required) allow refugee households to make informed decisions and reduce the possibilities of unmet expectations, before and after arrival. While there is no one answer to aligning sponsor and refugee motivations and expectations, the sponsorship system, operations, and sponsor thoughts need to be flexible and able to be informed by refugee priorities and experiences. Taking a whole of society approach to integration, by seeking input from the refugee community, enables informed decision-making in integration work, from day-to-day matters to policy and program design.

Ms. Nzigiye commented that the key to refugee agency is recognizing power dynamics, independence, and choice. Breaking down resettlement methodology to reframe refugees as people existing within communities and families illustrates that the formal system alone cannot achieve integration. Parts of resettlement have to be informal, through community and connections, to approach refugees as who they actually are, rather than who the community wants them to be. For example, in developing

COVID-19 information, Refugee613 connected with communities to understand their needs, co-create multilingual and culturally appropriate and accessible resources, and created a feedback loop to track changing needs over time.

### **The role of sponsors in integration and supports they require**

Dr. Reyes-Soto characterized sponsors as a core part of integration structures as they shape local discourse, create relationships, and offer intensive personalized support. Sponsor groups consist of professionals from various sectors who offer valuable expert support to refugees in key areas of need.

Sponsor groups in the UK have been successful in supporting refugees to navigate language, culture, institutions, and emotional well-being in the first crucial months of resettlement. However, most families require more than the one year of support prescribed by the UK resettlement scheme to acquire these skills. Depending on the particular relationship established between the two groups, sponsors can choose to continue supporting the refugee family into the second year of resettlement. Sponsors' critical contribution to resettlement is sharing their local and personal networks, connecting refugee families with their inner circle and the wider community. Finally, sponsor groups have been at the forefront of educating the host community about the needs of refugees and changing the narrative around resettlement.

Dr. Reyes-Soto noted that before refugees arrive, sponsor groups receive training by [Reset UK](#) on the refugee resettlement process, empowering refugees, addressing power imbalances, setting boundaries, and understanding cultural differences. Exchange of good practices between peer community sponsor groups is a key aspect of the UK scheme in practice.

Prof. Hyndman explained that many sponsors in Canada view sponsorship as a local enactment of global social justice, a means for them to have an immediate impact on global issues. However, although sponsorship brings families to safety, it also separates them and leaves family members behind. For sponsorship and resettlement policies to reflect this trans-nationality, sponsors and stakeholders need to view sponsorship as a globalized, rather than international, project that connects families across borders.

### **Social determinants of health in context of integration and sponsorship**

Prof. Ziersch explained how a Social Determinants of Health (SDH) perspective on integration highlights the range of factors (at different levels) that affect settlement outcomes. At the general socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental level, factors such as immigration and welfare policies influence refugees' experiences in the receiving community. The living and working conditions level considers housing and barriers to services, such as health, language, and transport. At the social and community networks level, neighborhoods, welcome initiatives, refugee peer supports, and discrimination are relevant factors. Finally, at the individual level, trauma, language, education, and income are factors that intersect with integration outcomes.

Integration in the context of SDH also considers the quality of integration factors and their meaning to people. For example, the employment factor is not just about having a job, but rather finding quality work where the person's skills match the job requirements and finding a job with good working conditions and protection from exploitation. Finally, an SDH lens of integration defines health as both a 'marker' and 'means' of integration. While employment, housing, and discrimination are integration markers that influence health, good health is also a means of securing a job and building

social connections. The SDH lens on integration highlights the importance of sponsors in navigating systems related to working and living conditions, community and social ties, and national advocacy for policies that address needs rather than job readiness.

Professor Micheala Hynie commended the SDH model of integration as one that reinforces the impact of environment on health and illustrates how structures create different opportunities for different groups of people. The impact and outcomes of social/environmental conditions on health can be documented by both the material conditions of people's lives and psychological impacts. The material outcome for many people who resettle in the UK, Canada, and Australia is life in poverty – the strongest social determinant of health. The psychological outcomes of inequality and control, inadequate housing and health services, and lack of social support and community connection include depression, altered immune function, and subsequent illnesses. One of the SyRIA.lth project studies found that although refugees with higher education were more likely to find employment—better material outcomes—they had higher levels of depression than other newcomers because of unmet expectations of employment and quality of life, leading to worse relative outcomes.

### **How different sponsorship actors can work together to support integration**

Ms Nzigiyé highlighted that, as part of the Allies in Refugee Integration Project, Refugee613 piloted [two models](#) (an Intentional Connection Practice and a Knowledge Exchange Practice) to enhance collaboration among refugees, sponsors, and settlement professionals. The Intentional Connection Practice focused on making necessary connections between settlement supports to create roles, responsibilities, and specific touch points to identify refugee needs. The settlement worker and sponsor connect before arrival, and the three-way connection is established when the refugee arrives in Canada. Ongoing support can then be three- or two-way, depending on whether the sponsor needs to be involved. The Knowledge Exchange Pilot establishes advisory committees, consisting of all three groups as well as relevant community members, to discuss specific topics such as housing, employment, and mental health. This community wide approach to integration highlighted the need for a combination of formal and informal collaboration for better understanding and problem solving.

Ms. Nzigiyé stressed that, in order for refugees and settlement providers to collaborate successfully, expectations need to be clear and set early. Understanding roles and valuing one another's expertise, whether in the defined structure of the Intentional Connections Pilot or in the informal Knowledge Exchange Pilot, encourages actors to invest the time and effort required for successful collaboration.

## Appendix

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