

Summary: ‘Community Sponsorship in the Basque Country: Empowering Autonomy and Integration Through a Constructive Private and Public Partnership’

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Community Sponsorship in the Basque Country: Empowering Autonomy and Integration Through a Constructive Private and Public Partnership

Executive Summary

- The article examines Spain's first community sponsorship programme, Auzolana II (CSBC), a multi-level governance model in the Basque Country that brings together national, regional, and local authorities with civil society organizations (CSOs) to enhance refugee autonomy through coordinated reception and integration support.
- Using two theoretical frameworks, Phillimore's opportunity structures and McNally's evaluation model of private sponsorship, the study assesses whether CSBC led to successful integration outcomes.
- Strong planning ensured access to housing, health care, education, language learning, and financial literacy, but long-term autonomy was hindered.
- Refugees developed close, emotionally supportive relationships with volunteers, but these ties sometimes became overly insular, limiting interactions with the wider community.
- The CSBC's legal framework was a durable solution by enabling refugees to work, study, and participate in society, yet the model lacked additionality.
- CSBC positively shifted local discourse, fostering welcoming attitudes and undermining negative stereotypes, though its national impact remained modest.
- Lead CSOs acted as mediators between the state, volunteers, and refugees, but evaluations identified the need for stronger intercultural training.

Introduction

- In 2019, the Basque Country launched the Auzolana II agreement (CSBC), Spain's first community sponsorship pilot, built on multi-level governance between national, regional, and international stakeholders; by 2023 it had supported 57 people across eight cities.
- The study asks how the multi-level governance approach of the CSBC impacts the autonomy of sponsored refugees in the Basque Country and answers it by using Phillimore's opportunity structures framework and McNally's evaluation model of private sponsorship.

The CSBC-Auzolana II in a Nutshell

- The CSBC is the first multi-level governance sponsorship initiative promoted by a regional authority in the EU. The program differs from other European sponsorship initiatives by providing the **Basque Government a central role in coordinating reception, integration services, funding, and monitoring, alongside civil society organizations (CSOs).**
- The Basque Government selected the CSOs, Cáritas Euskadi and the Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation, to lead social support. As lead sponsors, they must recruit at least five volunteers, secure housing for two years, fundraise, and create a detailed settlement plan outlining priorities, services, and pathways to autonomy.

- A Local Coordination Board (comprised of the Basque government, local authorities, and lead CSOs) develops a comprehensive strategy in a detailed settlement plan, ensuring access to language support, health care, employment training, legal aid, and social networks.

Opportunity Structures for Autonomy

- Autonomy is **a refugee's capacity for self-determination and is essential for integration**. The authors argue that the CSBC pilot contributes to refugee autonomy by employing different opportunity structures.
- While community sponsorship can enhance autonomy, paternalistic volunteer–refugee dynamics may unintentionally limit it. The authors argue that Phillimore's opportunity structures framework can explain how **broader societal inequalities, institutional conditions, and support systems shape refugees' ability to act independently**.

Evaluating Sponsorship Programmes

- The authors set the stage for their analysis by integrating Phillimore's opportunity structures framework and McNally's evaluation points to provide a framework for assessing refugee integration outcomes under the CSBC.
- Phillimore's opportunity structures consider resettlement locality, political and media discourse, host-refugee relations, institutional and legal structure, and initiatives and support.
- McNally's 15 evaluation points assess: durability, settlement needs, refugee perspectives, integration, vulnerability, scale, additionality, public opinion, mobilising civil society, sustainability, effective process, safeguarding, sponsors' experience, family reunification, and global context.

Methods

- The study draws on two evaluations of the CSBC, conducted in 2021 and 2022. The first examined macro-level objectives, planning, resource allocation, governance and stakeholder engagement, meso-level programme development and implementation, and micro-level actions for programme delivery. The second expanded these findings through a cross-country framework developed under the SHARE Quality Sponsorship Network.
- The first evaluation collected data through combined desk reviews, interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires with government officials, UNHCR/IOM staff, civil society leads, local volunteer groups, and refugees.
- The second evaluation used semi-structured interviews with municipal staff, civil society organisations, volunteer groups, and sponsored families, focusing on community engagement, service adequacy, and municipal–civil society collaboration.

Findings

Locality

- **Strong planning between national, regional, and local actors enabled sponsored families to access appropriate housing, education, healthcare, language classes, and financial literacy training**, reinforcing early-stage autonomy and helping them navigate essential services.
- However, long-term autonomy was limited by local economic and social disparities, particularly in housing opportunities. The CSBC did not account for differences between rural and urban municipalities, leaving some families more dependent on support groups when transitioning to independent living.

Relations

- Volunteers played a central role in helping refugees build practical and emotional support networks, facilitating leisure activities and encouraging participation in community life.
- However, refugees forming connections beyond the sponsorship group was limited, raising concerns about whether networks create dependency loops that restrict wider integration.
- Limited pre-arrival information for both sponsors and refugees created confusion and strained early interactions, as families arrived without clear expectations of the programme and volunteers had insufficient time to prepare for refugees' specific needs.
- Reliance on faith-based organisations as lead sponsors restricted the diversity of social networks, and the evaluations identified the need for more secular, culturally varied groups.

Structure

- The CSBC provides a clear legal framework offering **a durable solution by securing refugees' protection status from the moment of arrival, enabling them to rent housing, open bank accounts, access education, and participate in civic life.**
- The CSBC did not generate additional protection spaces, as sponsored refugees were counted within Spain's existing resettlement quota, undermining one of the programme's original objectives around additionality.
- Sustainability depends on the programme's resource-intensive model, which was effective through drawing on volunteers and CSOs, but there remains a need to diversify volunteers.
- Safeguarding and accountability mechanisms were reinforced through the experienced CSOs, yet gaps remain through the absence of formal family reunification pathways.

Discourse

- At the local level, **CSBC generated welcoming attitudes**, as volunteers' direct relationships with refugees broadened understanding of displacement; this exposure also expanded acceptance within volunteers' wider social circles.
- National-level impact remained limited because replication requires 1) substantial resources and 2) increased media coverage.

Initiatives and Support

- Lead CSOs acted as critical mediators between the state, volunteers, and refugees, but evaluations identified the need for stronger intercultural and anti-paternalism training so volunteers can shift from “helping” to genuinely supporting refugee-led autonomy.

Limitations and Broader Implications

- The study’s insights are constrained by the limited number of refugees under the CSBC and the absence of long-term data. However, it has broader implications beyond Basque Country, and can be used as a broad model for other regions and countries.

Conclusion

- The CSBC’s multi-level governance model strengthened autonomy in several opportunity-structure areas by ensuring access to housing, services, legal stability, and community networks, though long-term outcomes remain unknown without follow-up research.
- The CSBC has already inspired copycats throughout Spain in Valencia and Navarra, showing increased commitment to international protection.
- Further recommendations include developing context-specific integration strategies, diversifying sponsorship networks, improving pre- and post-arrival preparation, and separating the CSBC as additional to and outside Spain’s resettlement quotas.