

Summary: ‘Misleading Expectations About Vulnerability: A Key Issue in the Community Sponsorship of Refugees?’

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Misleading Expectations About Vulnerability: A Key Issue in the Community Sponsorship of Refugees?

Executive Summary

- This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the relational aspects in the success of sponsorship programmes.
- The authors investigate how sponsors perceive and navigate their relationships with the refugees they were matched with through Germany's community sponsorship programmes, NesT. They seek to understand why tensions arise as well as how such tensions impact the programme's success.
- The source is secondary data from a study on the successes and challenges of NesT. All interviews conducted as part of this study involving *active* sponsoring were analyzed (fifteen sponsoring groups and refugees hosted by twelve of those groups).
- The authors find that the humanitarian narrative of "rescuing" especially vulnerable refugees is instrumental in motivating sponsors to invest the required resources.
- Due to their idea of what vulnerability looked like, sponsors appeared to expect refugees to have a limited capacity for self-reliance. Conversely, refugees expected full agency. This created an expectation gap (see Figure 1 in the Appendix), which, in some cases, led to the deterioration of relationships.
- The authors call for the incorporation of the different ways vulnerability can manifest into training programmes for sponsors to address this expectation gap.

Background Information

Sponsorship Programmes in Europe

- Sponsorship Programmes (SPs) have been operational in Europe since 2015.
- While most SPs in Europe are modest, they have successfully mobilised private actors and civil society to advocate for policies that promote refugee rights.
- **SPs show that, despite rising anti-immigrant attitudes, Europe remains engaged in refugee protection.**
- The benefits of SPs in Europe include:
 - Cost-effectiveness.
 - Potential to encourage positive views of refugees at the local level.

NesT in Germany

- NesT has been operational since 2019 and became a regular part of Germany's resettlement scheme in 2023.
- Volunteers must form a group of at least four people, known as a sponsoring group.
- NesT does not have an important numerical impact on Germany's protection system, but is viewed as innovative.
 - From the launch of NesT to April 2024, 39 sponsoring groups welcomed 168 refugees.

- NesT makes up less than 1% of resettlement admissions.
- The German government, in collaboration with UNHCR, chooses vulnerable refugees to be sponsored. The sponsors are not involved in this process and can not propose specific refugees.
- There is no commonly recognised legal definition of vulnerability in the EU, so the UNHCR's definition is used.
- Through NesT, sponsors are expected to:
 - Provide emotional support and housing for at least one year.
 - Provide social support.
 - Address individual needs.
 - Encourage refugees to engage in community activities.

Methods & Data

- The authors used **secondary data** from a 2019-2022 implementation study about the challenges and good practices of the NesT programme.
 - During that period, 27 sponsoring groups participated in NesT. 21 agreed to participate. Of those, 15 cases were actively sponsoring. Those 15 cases were all included in the sample for this study on vulnerability.
 - In 12 of the cases, both the sponsoring groups and the refugees they sponsored were interviewed separately.
 - In seven cases, two rounds of interviews were conducted with refugees and their sponsoring groups for longitudinal insights.
 - Interviews were semi-structured, lasted 1.5 hours on average, and were recorded.
 - Group interviews with sponsoring groups:
 - Most occurred online.
 - Between two and seven sponsors represented each sponsorship group when interviewed.
 - The average sponsor was German, female, well-educated, and about 59 years old. 80% had previous refugee support experience.
 - All interviews were transcribed and pseudonymised.
 - Group interviews with sponsored refugees:
 - Most occurred in-person at the refugees' homes.
 - In most cases, several adult members per household participated.
 - Refugees were born in Syria, Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia and resettled from Ethiopia, Niger, Jordan, and Lebanon.
 - Interviews were conducted with assistance from translators. Half of the interviews were transcribed and pseudonymised, while half were only summarised, with an audio file available for in-depth analysis.
- The secondary data were coded, then analyzed using MAXQDA through grounded theory.
- Sponsors' motives and expectations, and refugees' hopes and expectations were separately coded, then compared and connected through an "expectation gap"(see Figure 1 in the Appendix).
- How sponsors and refugees described their day-to-day experiences were coded under "relationship breakdown," "reducing the relationship to formalities," and "building a

cooperative and empathetic relationship.” The researchers linked these findings to the expectation gap.

- The data on refugees’ experiences was limited.
 - The interviews may have been influenced by power dynamics and the fact that their context was a study on the successes and challenges of NesT: volunteers seemed eager to contribute, but some refugees appeared cautious and gave socially desirable answers.
 - There may have been quality limitations due to the use of translators.
 - For time and cost reasons, there was a lack of complete transcripts in many cases.
 - **Due to these limitations, the main source for this analysis were the interviews with sponsors.**

Results

- **NesT’s focus on particularly vulnerable refugees motivates the participation of sponsors and has encouraged public acceptance of the programme, but also fuels sponsors’ expectations about the sponsored refugees.**

Sponsors’ Humanitarian Attitudes

- Humanitarian attitude was the #1 motive to volunteer.
- Wishes to support refugees living in intolerable conditions, with illnesses or disabilities, or who have been traumatised.
- Most participants attributed vulnerability to individual characteristics associated with a lack of capacity for self-reliance.

Refugees Expectations

- All participants had experienced loss and conflict in their home country, but had escaped to host countries, and often had lived there for many years before resettlement. They experienced discrimination and responded with resilience.
- Most participants were excited to take control of their lives once in Germany. Their hopes included participating fully in society and not being dependent on others.

Expectation Gap

- **Sponsors were expecting to sponsor refugees lacking agency, while refugees emphasised their agency.**
- Once in Germany, refugees began making decisions about their everyday life, some of which were not appreciated by sponsors (for example, buying new furniture).
- Some sponsors perceived the refugees as ungrateful and questioned their vulnerability.

Navigating the Expectation Gap

- **The expectation gap was present in most relations, but handled in different ways.**

- About half of the sponsoring groups held on to their expectations of vulnerability, and because of this, distanced themselves or withdrew from the relationship.
- The other half responded to the expectation gap by adapting to the attitudes of refugees and changing how they understood vulnerability.

Maintaining One's Own Expectation Gap

- Four sponsorship groups reduced their relationship (by providing basic support, without a personal relationship), and two withdrew entirely because of it.
- These sponsors doubted the vulnerability of the refugees and believed that some of their wishes were not urgent or appropriate.

Aligning Expectations with Refugee Aspirations

- The seven other sponsoring groups experienced the expectation gap, but adapted, recognised the agency of refugees, and realised that being a refugee in Germany leads to other kinds of vulnerability, such as social isolation and marginalization. This allowed them to better address the refugees' needs.

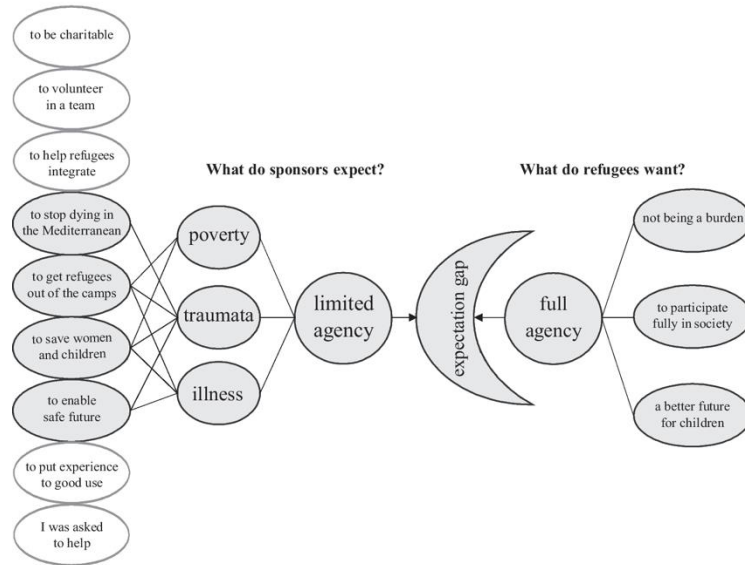
Conclusion

- The success of community sponsorship programmes is dependent on the satisfaction of private actors. Disappointments and dropouts can tarnish the reputation of such programmes and lead to low participation.
- Based on an analysis of 15 active sponsorship cases in Nes'T, the researchers show that sponsors experience a discrepancy between their expectations and those of the refugees they support.
- An inability to change expectations to align with the needs of refugees has led to decreased sponsor involvement.
- The authors suggest:
 - Overfocusing on vulnerability can negatively affect everyone involved in humanitarian action.
 - To address the expectation gap, training programmes should better account for sponsor expectations and prompt reflections on vulnerability and agency.

Appendix

Figure 1.

Why do sponsors help?



Source: Inductive coding of sponsors' and refugees' motivations and aspirations, own analysis with MAXQDA.

Figure 1.