

Summary: ‘Community Sponsorship and Complementary Pathways: Global Movements for Resettling Refugees Driven by Local Actors’

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Community Sponsorship and Complementary Pathways: Global Movements for Resettling Refugees Driven by Local Actors

Executive Summary

- The Special Issue sets out to address gaps in knowledge on Community Sponsorship (CS) and Complementary Pathways (CPs) outside Canada, by reviewing global developments, programme adaptations, and roles of national authorities and other stakeholders in refugee protection through a systematic scoping review of literature between 2015-2023.
- Research highlights that CPs can enhance inclusion, social integration, and rural revitalization, but face challenges such as bureaucratic barriers, exclusionary practices, temporary status, and uneven human rights protections
- Findings on CS programmes also highlight how they help provide social, emotional, and financial support to refugees, promoting wellbeing and volunteer engagement. However, risks include power imbalances, volunteer burnout, temporary protection, and shifts from government to private actor responsibility.
- Key gaps include understanding of refugee lived experiences, long-term impacts on integration and settlement outcomes such as careers and mobility, the effects of discrimination, and the need for stronger theoretical and analytical frameworks.
- The Special Issue articles provide comparative insights across Europe, the US, and Australia, examining governance, stakeholder engagement, sponsor expectations, refugee autonomy and experiences, and legal and policy frameworks, offering guidance for programme scalability, sustainability, and policy development.

Introduction

- This article outlines the results of a systematic scoping review to identify the state of knowledge on CS and CPs outside of Canada, identifying the existing gaps in knowledge.
- The number of forced migrants displaced globally continues to increase, while most refugees are located in low- and middle-income countries within proximity of their countries of origin.
- **CS and CPs offer alternatives to the conventional resettlement programmes** and were devised by the UNHCR and other stakeholders, including national governments, to create additional mechanisms for refugee protection.
- **CPs have dominated in Europe.**
- CPs include a variety of forms, **with CS being the most utilised.** These also include provisions of humanitarian visas, family reunion programmes, third-country education and employment routes, and sponsorship.
- Third-country employment routes provide regulated avenues to facilitate entry or stay in a safe third country for employment purposes.
 - CPs may be part of conventional immigration systems, adapted to enable admission, or can include temporary and permanent skilled entry arrangements.

- Programmes in Australia, Canada, and the UK “rely on employer sponsors to offer jobs to pre-screened refugees in occupations affected by labour shortages.”
- Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) is specific to refugees.
- Education pathways are increasingly being introduced as a form of CP, including:
 - Australian CRISP and student visa programme
 - Mexican Habesha Project
 - Japan’s private and joint programme with the Government and UNHCR
- CPs and CS have proliferated globally, necessitating new scholarship.

Background

- **The Global Compact on Refugees invites states to adopt the principle of additionality and develop CPs that are additional to conventional resettlement.**
- Humanitarian Corridors are a form of CPs that are often led by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who have signed Memoranda of Understanding with their national governments. Refugees are typically identified and selected for sponsorship by the NGOs in partnership with the UNHCR, IOM, and other national-based organisations.
- CS programmes operate based on a public-private partnership between governments that regulate refugee admissions, and private actors who are responsible for providing monetary, social, and/or emotional support to help refugees settle and integrate into their new communities.
- **More than 20 countries have developed CPs since the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI) was launched in 2016 with the support of the Government of Canada, UNHCR, the University of Ottawa Refugee Hub, and other organizations.**
- Countries developing CPs mostly depended on findings from Canadian-based studies to develop their programmes, **predominantly focusing on the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) programme, despite newer initiatives better resembling Canada’s Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) and the Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) programmes.**
- Canada’s PSR programme is largely dissimilar to new forms of CS and CPs developed in Europe.

Assessing the State of Knowledge on CP and CS

- The authors conducted a systematic scoping review of peer-reviewed articles from 2015 as it coincided with the creation of Humanitarian Corridors in Italy as a response to the Syrian conflict. This was the catalyst for the creation of various other CPs and CS programmes.
- They used a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) approach to search for peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2023 in English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese on CS and CPs, excluding Canadian-focused ones, to identify the state of knowledge outside of Canada.
- Using a multi-screening process, the authors narrowed down the total number of articles from 377 to 35, which focused on CS or CPs. They found that 16 of the articles were

empirical, with the majority employing qualitative methods, whereas the other 19 were descriptive or theoretical and did not employ empirical data or describe a methodology.

- Many articles explored the operational components of CS and CP, while others examined these programmes through a theoretical, legal, or conceptual lens. Other research focused on the role of civil society responses and the privatization of refugee resettlement.
- Some articles examined why employment pathways remained limited despite international promotion, while others conducted cross-country pathway comparisons, examined how embassy or national practices shaped implementation, and assessed how CS and CPs interacted with multi-level regulatory frameworks (national, regional, and international).
- Research highlighted volunteer motivations, impacts on and outcomes of sponsored refugees, emotions and power in CS relationships, and broader themes such as climate-related displacement, pandemic challenges, protection-regime interactions, and regional prospects for CS.

The State of Knowledge about CP and CS outside of Canada

Complementary Pathways

- Scholars assert that national authorities must create protection tools that meaningfully involve refugees and communities, while **noting tensions between CPs and international law, uneven human rights protections, and the EU-level legal barriers that can both enable and restrict the development of CPs.**
- Research on humanitarian corridors shows that local authorities, civil society, and faith groups can strengthen inclusion and revitalise rural areas, whereas **education pathways risk leading to statelessness or destitution unless post-study pathways are ensured and were also criticized for favoring certain nationalities.**
- Labour pathways were found to **exclude vulnerable refugees, face employer reluctance, long visa wait times, and may expose applications to exploitation or temporary status precarity.**
- Evidence from the US co-sponsorship system, where government resettlement agencies work with community groups rather than private individuals, demonstrated how **hybrid CP/CS models can generate better early outcomes for refugees.**
 - Data from the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) indicated higher English language enrolment rates, greater participation in early employment programmes, and higher employment rates compared to non-sponsored refugees.

Community Sponsorship

- Research highlights the need for culturally responsive CS models, but the authors note this body of work fails to acknowledge the flaw in homogenising refugee cultures. Scholars have also explored expanding CS to contexts such as climate displacement, East Asia, and Latin America, but are uncertain about how CS can be scaled up to meet the levels of need.
- The articles also observed how **managing emotions can shape CS relationships, volunteer motivation, and mitigate experiences of burnout, and how CS can enhance**

the social inclusion and wellbeing of refugees while providing volunteers with purpose. Authors also warned of how inherent imbalances of power can produce ambivalent outcomes within the CS relationship.

- CS routes closure during the COVID-19 pandemic was seen to generate opportunities for innovations within the refugee protection system, including technology, resources, and investments
- Evidence from multiple regions has also revealed challenges in new CS programmes; targeting of ‘labour-ready’ refugees rather than addressing humanitarian commitments; temporary protections instead of permanence; weak application of additionality; and the use of CS as a migration-management tool rather than a protection framework.

Gaps in Knowledge

- Research on CS and CPs has expanded by examining contextual applicability, emotional dynamics, power relations, and impacts on wellbeing, while also identifying challenges, such as bureaucratic barriers, exclusionary practices, limited capacity, and lack of permanence.
- Key gaps in CS research include:
 - How sponsorship functions across rural and urban settings; **how programmes compare between countries and between different CS, CPs, and resettlement models**; and how selection criteria for refugee admission operate and the structure and processes underpinning CS programmes.
 - **How sponsorship impacts refugee integration outcomes**; how contact with sponsors shapes community attitudes beyond the sponsoring group; and how motivations behind volunteer involvement and the impact that sponsorship has on them and their social networks.
 - Limited understanding of the role that NGOs, UNHCR, IOM, and local institutions play in facilitating sponsorship; **how refugees themselves perceive sponsorship**; long-term studies comparing the experiences and outcomes of sponsored refugees vs. other routes; and how transnational connections influence and are shaped by sponsorship experiences
- Key gaps in CP research include:
 - **How refugees actually experience CPs, including the barriers they face and how they navigate and overcome bureaucratic and capacity issues, as well as how it shapes their social networks and those of other local actors involved in the programme.**
 - What local actors, such as employers, agencies, and other stakeholders, understand and implement CPs, or the full range of actors involved in organizing pathways.
 - **Evidence on the post-education destinations, and a better understanding of long-term career trajectories, residential mobility, and overall life impacts for beneficiaries of education pathways and other CPs**
 - **How racism and discrimination shape CP and CS design, determine who is seen as a ‘deserving’ refugee, and influence the experiences and opportunities of refugees.**

The Special Issue

- Stefańska et al. conduct a comparative overview of how sponsorship programmes developed in Europe, **examining how different welfare-state models influence the initiation and design of CS** in response to two key waves of refugees following the Arab Spring and Ukraine conflicts.
- Baraulina and Tissot analyse 15 sponsorship cases from Germany's Community Sponsorship Programme (NesT) and identify **sponsors' expectations of refugee vulnerability as a point of tension through which conflicts emerge**, in addition to factors such as power asymmetry and lack of trust.
- Pinyol-Jimnez et al. examine the Community Sponsorship Programme in the Basque Country (CSBC). Using two evaluations conducted in 2021 and 2022, **they analyse how the design and operation of the CSBC facilitates or restricts the autonomy of sponsored refugees across five areas: locality, relations, structure, initiatives of support, and discourse.**
- Broadhead and Turcatti highlight the importance of multi-level stakeholder involvement in designing and implementing CS programmes through the UK's Home for Ukraine programme, which required coordinated input from various actors. **The authors argue that working towards the success of CS should be the responsibility of all stakeholders, and not just solely the sponsors.**
- Smith et al. examine Ireland's Community Sponsorship programme through the concept of 'devolved responsibility' to analyse the 'hospitable relations' that shape CS arrangements. **This work reveals how hospitality in CS inevitably involves unequal power dynamics that intersect with broader social inequalities.**
- Sulewski examines two forms of complementary pathways by comparing the design and implementation of Humanitarian Corridors in Italy and Belgium. He identifies how **faith groups have succeeded in persuading anti-immigration states to expand protection pathways despite not being legally obliged to do so, arguing that when parties mutually align legal, political, financial, and practical considerations, national governments become more receptive to civil society proposals.**
- Baker et al. examine the expansion of CPs in Australia, including community sponsorship, employment pathways, and education pathways. **They identify the levers used by policy entrepreneurs to advance CPs, and discuss how they constructed 'problem' narratives and proposed solutions to set the stage for future CP initiatives in Australia.**
- Seyoum, a beneficiary of an education CP, recounts Emanuel's journey and experiences in an education CP in Italy to highlight both the rewards and difficulties associated with pursuing higher education. **He emphasises the intense stress caused by the lack of a pathway to permanent protection and highlights the weak links between education pathways and employment access. He argues for refugee inclusion in CS and CP design, and for the essential need for pathways that lead to permanent protection.**
- Collectively, the articles shed light on the viability of emerging CP and CS models, and highlight the need for further research as policy and political interest in them continues to grow.