

Summary: ‘The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative: A Case Study in Canadian Engagement’

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[The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative]

Executive Summary

- The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative launched in 2016 as a multi-sectoral partnership providing tailored support to state and non-state actors across more than twenty countries. Its mandate centers on three primary goals: expanding global refugee protection through civic involvement, strengthening host communities, and improving public narratives around newcomers.
- The authors argue that evaluating Canada's global impact solely through traditional policy transfer theory is inadequate. To accurately measure Canada's influence, researchers must ground their evaluations in the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative's explicit operational objectives and combine policy transfer theory with two complementary analytical frameworks: migration diplomacy and capacity building.
- Aligned with its core objectives, the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative operationalizes learning-based policy transfer by offering a flexible, citizen-empowering alternative to resettlement, engaging non-state partners to drive local policy innovation, align public-private interests, and secure long-term program sustainability.
- The Initiative further leverages migration diplomacy to create strategic opportunities for high-level political commitments, deploys 'public diplomacy' via non-state partners to build local sponsorship ecosystems, and utilizes platforms like the GRSI States Network to replace top-down statecraft with non-hierarchical, collaborative dialogue.
- The Initiative also prioritizes long-term program sustainability and capacity building by investing in local infrastructure and facilitating mutual knowledge exchange, enabling both government and community leaders to co-design policies and achieve deep local ownership and buy-in for new sponsorship programs.

Introduction

- Canada played a major role in establishing the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), a collaborative effort involving the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the University of Ottawa, and various private philanthropic organizations.
- Since its inception, the GRSI has successfully assisted numerous state and non-state actors in developing and launching community sponsorship programs across fifteen different countries, heavily engaging local civil society organizations and government advocates.
- While researchers frequently utilize policy transfer theory to evaluate Canada's historical Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program and its international expansion, the authors argue that this specific theoretical framework alone is inadequate for fully analyzing the initiative's broader impact.
- To better comprehend Canada's influence on the global refugee regime, the authors argue that future academic inquiries must also incorporate the distinct concepts of migration diplomacy and capacity building alongside traditional policy transfer theory.

- The authors also contend that any evaluation of Canada's success in exporting its policies must be deeply rooted in an evidence-based understanding of the GRIS's specific policy transfer objectives and its bespoke, multisectoral operational model.

The Mandate and Model of the GRIS

- The GRIS was announced in 2016 by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the UNHCR, and the Open Society Foundations on the margins of the United Nations Summit for Refugees and launched three months later in Canada, with the Giustra Foundation and University of Ottawa formally joining as partners. In 2020, the Shapiro Foundation also joined as a formal partner.
- During the preparatory period for the GRIS, multi-day consultations were held with Canadian experts, government and community stakeholders from ten countries, which prompted a shift toward three finalized goals:
 - Expanding global refugee resettlement by engaging private citizens, communities, and businesses in the resettlement effort;
 - Strengthening local host communities that participate in welcoming newcomers;
 - Improving public narratives around refugees and other newcomers.
- The authors also highlight three noteworthy aspects of these revised goals:
 - First, the goals are explicitly centred around supporting host communities alongside refugees, signaling that assistance would target both state and non-state actors.
 - Second, removing rigid "pathway" language enabled flexible policy adoption tailored to diverse national contexts.
 - Third, using "community sponsorship" instead of "private sponsorship" distinguished the model from Canada's program, avoided implying a privatization of state duties, and signalled support for flexible, community-driven models.
- The GRIS launched with a collaborative model linking government, UNHCR, and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff. Internally, the GRIS reflected Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff's "fullest expression of partnership" marked by joint goals, consensus decision-making, non-hierarchical and horizontal structures, trust, and joint accountability. Externally, its integrated approach operated across five core areas:

1. Encouraging Leadership

- a. The GRIS leveraged and extended Canada's ability to engage diverse global actors in community sponsorship through traditional diplomacy by Canadian Ministers, Ambassadors, and officials. As more states introduced sponsorship programs, the GRIS built momentum by enabling senior leaders to demonstrate shared commitment through joint ministerial statements, co-hosted events, and a formal network of states

2. Unbundling Policy

- a. The GRSI translates community sponsorship into context-specific policies by breaking sponsorship infrastructure into modular “building blocks” that state and non-state policy entrepreneurs can adapt and reassemble to design custom systems. Its policy design guidebook, launched in 2017 and updated in 2022, uses Canada’s and other countries’ approaches as flexible examples rather than prescriptive blueprints, guiding policymakers in 15 countries and informing dozens of GRSI workshops.
- 3. Accompanying Policy Entrepreneurs**
 - a. The Policy Design Guidebook and in-person workshops form part of the GRSI’s broader toolkit for supporting the state and non-state policy entrepreneurs who design and deliver new sponsorship programs. The GRSI identifies these changemakers and provides tailored support throughout the adoption lifecycle, recognizing their role in overcoming institutional barriers, navigating stakeholders, and building support for new sponsorship initiatives.
 - 4. Supporting Local Infrastructure and Ecosystem Building**
 - a. Since sponsorship programs rely on strong public-private partnerships, the GRSI works with partners to build context-specific infrastructure, including NGOs, multi-sector coalitions, and specialized projects. It also provides customizable train-the-trainer materials to address initial capacity gaps and build sustainable local training systems, while supporting public uptake through communications, community events, and positive media engagement.
 - 5. Building a Global “Community Around Community Sponsorship”**
 - a. As community sponsorship expanded globally, the GRSI connected government and community leaders through peer networks, evolving from targeted discussions and international events into formal networks, including the GRSI States Network, civil society champions network, and cross-border sponsor mentorship program. These networks helped establish a flexible model for locally owned programs worldwide and demonstrated how Canada leveraged international partnerships to support state-led policy transfer.

Policy Transfer

- Key studies by Nikolas Feith Tan, Daniel Bertram et al., and Damian Smith apply policy transfer theory to the GRSI, observing that successful policy transfer depends on adapting sponsorship models to local realities rather than direct replication.
- However, because these scholars rely on varying definitions of ‘sponsorship’, the authors argue that this ambiguity makes it difficult to assess policy transfer success and that accurately evaluating Canada’s global impact requires examining the GRSI through its explicit objectives and operational framework.

- Aligning with their stated objectives, Canada and the GRSI position community sponsorship as a citizen-empowering, community-led alternative to institutionalized or agency-led resettlement, deploying an operational model that enables local actors to design context-specific programs.
- The GRSI's tailored support and peer networks reflect endogenous policy transfer theory, serving as collaborative sites for local policy innovation rather than rigid duplication. Through learning-based transfer, adopting states can evaluate foreign experiences to refine local programs and advance broader goals around refugee narratives.
- Grounded in driving broad social change rather than transferring technical policy mechanics, the GRSI's multi-sectoral approach uses non-government partners as trusted messengers to negotiate public-private interests, engage local policy entrepreneurs, and establish the shared government and community ownership vital for long-term program sustainability.

Migration Diplomacy

- Canada explicitly embedded migration diplomacy into the IRCC's formal 2020-21 departmental plan, stating that it will leverage the GRSI to advance national humanitarian priorities, expand global protection spaces, and improve integration outcomes.
- The GRSI's operational model demonstrates migration diplomacy by leveraging global leadership to shape the international refugee regime, creating strategic opportunity windows for official and community policy entrepreneurs to secure high-level political commitments and advance program design.
- Referring to Nye's theory of diplomacy, the authors also contend how partnering with non-state actors democratizes diplomatic outreach, building Canada's soft power and credibility to achieve diplomatic goals beyond the reach of standard state channels as a form of "public diplomacy".
- Framing community sponsorship as a "global good" can leverage its broad political appeal in polarized migration debates, serving as a useful strategy to secure and sustain resettlement support across government leadership changes.
- Through initiatives like the GRSI States Network, Canada replaces traditional, top-down state messaging with a non-hierarchical, networked environment built on dialogue among interdependent actors working toward shared goals.

Capacity Building

- The GRSI explicitly prioritizes capacity building beyond initial program design, offering ongoing operational resources, infrastructure guidance, asset sharing, and troubleshooting to foster long-term program sustainability.
- Placing equal emphasis on state and non-state actors, the GRSI strengthens community capacity by equipping local leaders to co-design policy, engage in advocacy, and deliver recommendations that resonate with government decision-makers.

- By using an adaptable "building blocks" approach, the GRSI enables local actors to adapt external knowledge to their local contexts, leading with questions to encourage mutual learning and the development of sustainable, locally owned policies and infrastructure.
- Grounded in capacity-building theory, the GRSI embeds sponsorship initiatives within broader social and political ecosystems, engaging government and civil society as co-owners to secure deep local buy-in and long-term sustainability.
- The partnership cultivates global and regional networks as critical "connective tissue," providing peer-learning venues that accelerate strategy sharing and unite a global community around refugee sponsorship.

Conclusion

- As a unique multi-sectoral partnership engaging stakeholders across more than twenty countries, the GRSI serves as an important mechanism for Canada to influence the global refugee regime through an adaptive operational model rather than promoting a rigid duplication of domestic policies.
- Evaluating the GRSI requires moving beyond the ambiguous concept of "sponsorship" by combining policy transfer, migration diplomacy, and capacity-building frameworks to capture both its diplomatic outreach and its investments in local infrastructure.
- These analytical lenses are interconnected: migration diplomacy establishes the political "enabling environment" that allows policy entrepreneurs to effectively drive policy transfer and launch sustainable capacity-building efforts.
- Ultimately, capturing Canada's true impact on global refugee protection requires leveraging a multiplicity of theoretical frameworks that reflect the complex, multi-faceted nature of the GRSI itself.