

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES: INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP

RISE Thematic Brief

Introduction

On April 4, 2025, RISE project team held a webinar titled "Empowering Communities: Insights and Recommendations on Community Sponsorship". The webinar, moderated by **Vytautas Ežerskis, RISE Project Manager at IOM Vilnius Office**, discussed the development and impact of community sponsorship programs in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania and provided insights on the recently released RISE Assessment Report "Insights and Recommendations on Community Sponsorship: Perspectives from Volunteers, Forced Migrants and Key Stakeholders in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania". The webinar, uniting 75 participants from 46 organizations active in 14 countries, featured 5 key speakers who shared their insights and recommendations from their experience in research, migration and integration fields. This thematic brief overviews the key insights and recommendations stemming from the discussions and presentations.

Origins and Impact of Community Sponsorship

The webinar was opened by **Jason Theede, Senior Regional Specialist in Labour Mobility Division, IOM Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia in Vienna**, who provided background on the roots of community sponsorship (CS), tracing them to Canada, where the private sponsorship of refugees' program has been in place since 1978. The model's cost-effectiveness, its role in reducing the financial burden on governments, and its facilitation of self-sufficiency for refugees were highlighted. Individuals and organizations in Canada were empowered to act as private sponsors, directly supporting the resettlement of refugees. Research from Canada has shown that the model can accelerate language acquisition, labor market entry, and overall self-sufficiency, which is crucial for successful integration. This model is now rapidly being adapted to European context and is gaining more attention.

The concept of community sponsorship has no single official definition. It is broadly understood as a public-private partnership where host country residents voluntarily provide social, practical, financial, and emotional support to facilitate the integration of beneficiaries of international protection. Community sponsorship is built on shared responsibility between public authorities, local communities, and private actors, by actively engaging local communities, these programs foster stronger integration outcomes and broad public support for refugees and displaced people.

However, community sponsorship is not a legal pathway to protection itself; rather, it serves as an integration and support mechanism for those already accepted in the country. Evidence-based solutions, such as the RISE project, are important, and access to housing is a prerequisite for meeting all basic human needs and achieving social inclusion.

INSIGHTS

- **Cost-Effectiveness and Self-Sufficiency:** The community sponsorship has proven to be cost-effective by reducing the financial burden on governments. It facilitates faster language acquisition, labor market entry, and overall self-sufficiency for refugees, which are crucial for successful integration.
- **Importance of Housing:** The Rise Project focuses on addressing housing challenges within community sponsorship programs. Adequate housing is recognized as a prerequisite for dignity, autonomy, and integration into society. The project aims to foster inclusive, well-structured, and evidence-based community sponsorship programs to ensure that migration benefits both refugees and host societies.

Community Sponsorship: Key Findings and Strategic Recommendations

Mieke Schrooten, Researcher at the Social Work Research Centre, Odisee University of Applied Sciences, presented insights and recommendations on community sponsorship, focusing on the findings from the RISE assessment report, which summarized findings from a comprehensive literature review, two surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews. The literature review aimed to understand the reception and housing issues faced by beneficiaries of international protection, as well as examine relevant policies, trends, and how the concept of community sponsorship was understood and implemented in the three countries involved in the project.

The surveys targeted volunteers and forced migrants, gathering data on the current state of sponsorship schemes, integration processes, challenges, gaps, and evidence of good practices. The volunteer survey included questions about motivation, support offered, challenges encountered, future engagement, and personal situations. The forced migrants survey focused on how they were matched to volunteers, support received, challenges faced, experiences after hosting, and personal situations. FGDs and in-depth interviews provided a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, including perspectives from landlords, real estate actors, policymakers, and social workers.

The profiles of volunteers and forced migrants were explored in detail, revealing significant insights into their needs and experiences. Volunteers were predominantly female, highly educated, and nationals of the country they resided in, with higher financial comfort levels. Their motivations for volunteering were diverse, including a sense of moral duty, personal fulfillment, and encouragement from social networks.

On the other hand, forced migrants exhibited more varied profiles and expressed a range of support needs, including material and financial assistance, practical help, and legal support. The research highlighted the importance of housing stability, which was highly valued by forced migrants, and the critical concern of finding durable housing solutions. Additionally, the lack of formal matching processes and training for volunteers was identified as a gap that needs to be addressed to improve the effectiveness of community sponsorship programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Engagement of Key Stakeholders:** The importance of engaging key stakeholders, including landlords and real estate actors, was emphasized. Effective engagement can facilitate the availability and verification of housing, which is crucial for the success of community sponsorship programs.
- **Structured Training and Mentorship Programs:** There is a need for structured training and mentorship programs for sponsors. Many volunteers did not receive formal training or mentorship before starting their engagement, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive preparation and ongoing support.
- **Effective Matching Criteria:** The research identified the need for effective matching criteria and systematic screening processes. Most respondents reported that there had been no formal matching process between volunteers and forced migrants, indicating the need for a more structured approach to ensure successful integration.
- **Housing Stability:** Housing stability is highly valued by forced migrants, and support in finding durable housing solutions is critical. The research highlighted the importance of providing ongoing support to ensure housing stability for beneficiaries of international protection.
- **Diverse Volunteer Profiles:** There is a need for more diverse gender representation among volunteers, opportunities to mobilize younger demographics, and leveraging high educational attainment. Expanding the older demographic of volunteers and addressing obstacles for diaspora engagement were also recommended.

Integration Challenges and Strengths of Community

The panel discussion brought together experts from various fields to explore effective ways to boost community participation in sponsorship programs. The panelists shared their diverse experiences and insights, highlighting the importance of housing, volunteer engagement, and the role of local authorities in facilitating successful integration of refugees.

Anna Zlobynets, Ukrainian refugee and enumerator, shared her personal journey and challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania. The main challenges encountered by Ukrainian refugees outlined include difficulties in finding work due to language barriers and discrimination in housing and the labor market. Anna's unique experience of working as an enumerator enabled her to gather individual stories of refugees who integrated in Lithuania, contributing to a broader understanding of challenges faced by refugees in both larger and smaller cities, such as a lack of awareness about where to seek help, knowledge of their rights, and, at times, an unwillingness to report misconduct.

Stefano Portelli, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Roma Tre University, highlighted the importance of understanding regional contexts and the role of housing in achieving refugee autonomy. The researcher discussed various strategies to boost community participation and the challenges faced by volunteers in Italy, including the need for decentralizing institutionalized reception centers. Italy boasts a diverse landscape of actors involved in humanitarian corridors, with examples such as Refugees Welcome, Camini Initiative, and Ufficio Pastorale Migranti as prominent actors in humanitarian corridors and community sponsorship initiatives.

The effectiveness of personal connections and local champions in mobilizing volunteers remains crucial to the success of CS programmes, with tailor-made recruitment campaigns and storytelling identified as powerful tools for engaging volunteers. Lack of affordable housing and administrative burdens are prominent issues, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems, engaging local authorities, educational institutions, and community organizations to enhance support for community sponsorship programs.

Anna Coulibaly, Project Officer for Share Network, The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) highlighted the efforts to foster safe pathways to protection and improve newcomer inclusion. The creation of the Share Network in 2012 by ICMC was discussed, with the goal of building a community of practice. The importance of identifying targets and reaching the right population was emphasized, with strategies such as leveraging events on solidarity, faith-based events, and individuals with a background in activism. The effectiveness of personal connections and local champions in mobilizing volunteers was underscored, along with the need to address external factors like affordable housing and administrative burdens.

The discussion was followed by a **Q&A session**, which provided deeper insights into the practical aspects of community sponsorship. The diversity of community sponsors was highlighted, including retired persons, faith-based individuals, and those with a background in activism. The need for more diverse gender representation and the mobilization of younger demographics were emphasized to make community sponsorship more inclusive and sustainable. The role of local authorities in facilitating housing for refugees was discussed, with a focus on the necessity for intermediary support to bridge gaps between landlords and forced migrants. Participants also highlighted the challenges refugees face in securing housing and employment, particularly in different regional contexts, and stressed the importance of addressing these challenges for successful integration. The need to simplify administrative procedures and remove legal hurdles was also discussed. The importance of formal matching processes and comprehensive screening of volunteers and accommodations was emphasized to ensure successful integration. Additionally, the need for ongoing support for both volunteers and refugees, including administrative and legal support throughout the sponsorship period, was highlighted. Structured training and mentorship programs for volunteers were recommended to enhance their effectiveness. These insights underscored the importance of structured programs, ongoing support, and collaborative efforts to enhance the effectiveness of community sponsorship initiatives.

INSIGHTS

- **Understanding Regional Contexts:** It is important to understand regional contexts and the role of housing in achieving refugee autonomy. Various strategies to boost community participation should be used. There is a need for decentralizing institutionalized reception centers and showcasing the diverse landscape of actors involved in humanitarian corridors.
- **Challenges Faced by Refugees:** Common difficulties include finding work due to language barriers and facing discrimination in housing and the labor market. Additionally, there is often a lack of awareness about where to seek help, knowledge of rights, and, at times, an unwillingness to report misconduct.
- **Effective Volunteer Mobilization:** It is important to harness personal connections and use local champions in mobilizing volunteers, as this approach proves to be effective. Additionally, there is a need to address external factors like affordable housing and administrative burdens.

Summary

The **RISE Webinar on "Empowering Communities: Insights and Recommendations on Community Sponsorship"** provided a comprehensive overview of the current state and future potential of community sponsorship programmes. Expert panelists underscored the critical role of housing in the successful integration of refugees, highlighting that adequate housing is essential for dignity, autonomy, and the fulfillment of basic needs. The discussions revealed that while many regions face significant challenges due to uneven distribution and limited infrastructure, intermediary support can bridge gaps between landlords and forced migrants, facilitating better housing solutions. The importance of local authorities in facilitating housing opportunities and simplifying administrative procedures was also emphasized, showcasing the need for collaborative efforts at multiple levels of governance.

Volunteer support and training emerged as another crucial theme. The webinar highlighted the diverse profiles of volunteers, predominantly female and highly educated, and stressed the need for more diverse gender representation and the mobilization of younger demographics. The lack of formal training and mentorship for volunteers was identified as a significant gap, with recommendations for comprehensive screening processes and structured training programs to better prepare volunteers. The motivations of volunteers, driven by moral duty, fulfillment, and social networks, were discussed, along with the diverse and comprehensive support they provide across various life domains. Continuous support for both volunteers and refugees were deemed essential, including ongoing administrative and legal assistance throughout the sponsorship period.

The interactive panel discussions and Q&A sessions provided deeper insights into the practical aspects of community sponsorship. Participants inquired about the profiles of community sponsors, the role of local authorities, and the challenges faced by refugees in different settings. The diversity of community sponsors, including retired persons, faith-based individuals, and those with a background in activism, was highlighted. The need for formal matching processes and comprehensive screening of volunteers and accommodations was emphasized to ensure successful integration. The discussions also underscored the importance of engaging a diverse range of volunteers and activating the wider society through targeted recruitment strategies.

Overall, the webinar underscored the potential of community sponsorship to create resilient and cohesive communities through shared responsibilities and collaborative efforts of public authorities, local communities, and private actors.