

Private refugee sponsorship in Canada

Jennifer Hyndman, William Payne and Shauna Jimenez

For almost four decades, groups of Canadian private citizens have sponsored refugees for resettlement in addition to federal government resettlement programmes.

Until recently, Canada has been the only country that offers private sponsorship to refugees. Sponsors fund the first year of resettlement while the government covers health care and children's education; in the second year, refugees (who become permanent residents upon arrival in Canada) are eligible for means-tested government social welfare benefits.

Since 1978, more than 200,000 privately sponsored refugees have arrived in Canada. While civil society groups were involved in bringing refugees to Canada after both the first and second world wars, the 1976 Immigration Act provided a formal legal framework for the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSR). Two major movements of refugees define this private sponsorship. The first relates to the arrival of some 60,000 Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including 29,269 privately sponsored refugees in 1979 alone. More recently, nearly half of almost 40,000 Syrian refugees who had arrived in Canada by the end of January 2017 were privately sponsored in whole or in part.

New restrictions on private sponsorship began after 2011. Sponsors' ability to support

refugees of their choosing was undermined by the introduction of limits on the number of PSRs and caps on those who could be sponsored from particular Canadian missions abroad, which has caused frustration for civil society groups hoping to sponsor refugees in Canada.¹ While the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program helped to bolster and make up for the limited spaces for PSRs and the reduced numbers in the government-assisted refugee (GAR) category between 2012 and 2015, the BVOR category restricts private sponsors' ability to choose who can be sponsored but still allows the federal government to fulfil its international commitments. It is important that private sponsorship is **additional** to government-assisted resettlement commitments, and not a substitute for them. However, this complementary protection stream can be put at risk if the government depends on it to fulfil its international obligations. In 2013, for the first year in many decades, the number of PSRs exceeded the number of GARs.

Over the past ten years, the repetition by elected federal government officials and the media of the phrase 'bogus refugees' and depictions of asylum seekers as queue

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jumpers and potential terrorists have led to a deterioration in attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. Nonetheless, the resettlement of refugees selected from overseas remains relatively popular with the Canadian public. And since the election of a new government in late 2015, Canadian politicians and civil servants have kept separate the politics of radicalisation and the question of Syrian refugee resettlement.

In March 2016, Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship outlined Canada's commitment to Syrian refugee resettlement. In addition to sharing knowledge and resources with other countries about private refugee sponsorship, he confirmed that Canada would continue to consider Syrian refugees as *prima facie* refugees until September 2017. In December 2016, the Canadian government, in partnership with UNHCR and the Open Society Foundations, launched a major initiative to promote private refugee sponsorship on a more global scale.

A side-effect of priority processing for Syrians, however, is that some files for refugees from protracted situations continue to languish in the backlog of other refugee

applications by sponsors of non-Syrian refugees who completed their applications before the Syrian crisis. In some cases, sponsors and applicants alike have been waiting years for processing to take place.

Private sponsorship and government sponsorship

Well before the October 2015 election pledge to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada by the end of 2015, civil society groups had already stepped up to privately sponsor Syrian refugees. New Syrian refugee-focused sponsorship groups formed, with Canadians signing up to sponsor Syrian refugee families. As of January 2017 45% of the total number of Syrian refugees coming to Canada were privately sponsored in some part, if one includes partially privately sponsored refugees (Blended Visa Office-Referred refugees – BVORs) in which the private sponsor provides half of the first year's financial support while the federal government contributes the other half.

Using *prima facie* refugee status determination rather than the more onerous individual refugee status determination for eligibility for private sponsorship has made



UNHCR/Annie Sakkeab

A Canadian sponsor plays with Syrian refugee children who have been resettled in Toronto under the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program.

processing in regions of origin much easier and faster. Yet, at the Canadian end, the application forms to be completed for private sponsorship of non-Syrian refugees are longer than ever. In addition the recruitment criteria for Syrian refugee families in the government-assisted refugee (GAR) category prioritised refugee families that qualified as 'vulnerable' and therefore were unlikely to be seen as security risks. Single men were not selected for government sponsorship, though some did come through the BVOR category.²

Direct participation by civil society in resettlement has been the hallmark of Canada's private sponsorship programme, and a major element in its success. The majority of PSRs are supported by Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs), who have formal agreements with the federal government, or by constituent groups that fall under the auspices of the SAHs. Some 75% of SAHs are faith-based organisations, and consist of 'constituent groups' of at least five sponsors who contract to assist a refugee family for twelve months. A smaller number of refugees are sponsored not by SAHs but by 'groups of five' – groups of individuals who sign a commitment of support for a specific refugee or refugees.

Private sponsorships have been mobilised to assist with family reunification. Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act defines 'family' in nuclear terms: up to two adults and their non-adult children. Families – and particularly extended families – can therefore become separated through the resettlement process. The former federal government expressed concerns that private sponsorships were a de facto pathway for refugees to reunite with family members left behind in camps or settlements in the absence of alternative pathways to reunification. Research on SAHs shows that the personal connections to extended family members of sponsored refugees already in Canada become priorities for sponsors. This 'echo effect' is an expression of sponsors' willingness to assist family members left behind.

Since 1978, students at universities across Canada have also privately sponsored refugee students to attend Canadian universities.

More than 1,400 refugee students have come to Canada through World University Service Canada, an NGO that facilitates and supports student-run committees who welcome and guide the refugee students. The organisation announced that in 2016 its capacity would double, to fund almost 160 refugee students per year. Analysts have noted that this private resettlement pathway is especially attractive because it offers refugee protection and also an opportunity to access Canadian post-secondary education and to seek work experience.

Privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) to Canada are often compared with their government-assisted refugee counterparts (GARs). Of Iraqi refugees who arrived in Canada between 2009 and 2014, it was reported that PSRs slightly outperformed GARs in being in employment during the first three years in Canada. But fewer Iraqi PSRs were in employment and they had lower average earnings than non-Iraqi PSRs during the same period, despite higher educational levels prior to arrival.³ There was reportedly a high incidence of disabilities and mental health needs among the refugees from Iraq, without specifying whether or not this was a higher level than other refugee groups. Furthermore, while Iraqi PSRs from this group were able to secure a job more quickly than GARs in the first three years, other research has shown that early access to the labour market may have a negative impact on language learning. Federal government data in 2016 shows no major difference in income earnings between GARs and PSRs ten years after arrival in Canada, which is significant since PSRs arrive with much more education and official language ability (English or French) than GARs.

In an earlier study that tracked the resettlement experiences of both PSRs and GARs who arrived in Canada from Southeast Asia between 1979 and 1981, private sponsorship appeared to be more likely to lead to successful integration than government assistance. However, the same research also found cases of excessive intrusiveness of sponsorship groups in the lives of refugees, very slow overseas

processing times, and unnecessary burdens created by government application processes. It was concluded that sponsors themselves need support.⁴ There are also some concerns that the work of supporting privately sponsored refugees depends too heavily on a few individuals and organisations.

A model for the future?

Since concerns were raised more than a dozen years ago, improved structures and practices have since been incorporated into the thinking of sponsors and the operations of SAHs, constituent groups, and groups of five. Improvements to private sponsorship in Canada at that time included greater involvement of refugees in shaping their own resettlement, the reconceptualisation of sponsorship as a partnership between newcomers and their sponsors, recognition of the importance of transnational linkages for newcomers, and the expanded use of places of worship for hosting widely used programmes such as health and employment services so that newcomers could access as many services as possible in one space.⁵

The primary benefit of private refugee sponsorship in Canada is not to reduce government costs or commitments but rather to increase protection space through increasing resettlement spaces. While the relatively new BVOR category may be a potentially useful resettlement stream whereby the government and private sponsors share costs in the first year, it cannot and should not replace the fundamental intention of the PSR category and programme – namely, that private sponsors are able to name specific refugees for sponsorship. A respectful partnership between government and citizen groups is at the core of private sponsorships, one that respects the voluntary work and decisions of a mobilised civil society and aspires to the fair selection and successful settlement of refugees.

At the UN Summit in New York in September 2016, Canada pledged to ‘export’ the private sponsorship model to other interested states. In December 2016, the Canadian government in concert with UNHCR and the Open Society Foundations

launched the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative to make good on the pledge. Both Australia and Britain have new private sponsorship schemes underway. There is no single private sponsorship recipe to follow, however, and the relatively positive public opinion towards refugee resettlement in Canada is somewhat unusual. Strong leadership by government along with civil society’s engagement is pivotal. In relation to Syrian refugees, Canadian civil society came out ahead of the government in active support of resettlement. More research on what the other most critical conditions and factors are is sorely needed.

Private refugee resettlement cannot be about the privatisation of states’ international obligations and related costs. In Canada, the principle of additionality ensures that private efforts **expand** refugee protection spaces by complementing government commitments to resettlement.

Jennifer Hyndman jhyndman@yorku.ca
Director, Centre for Refugee Studies, York University <http://crs.info.yorku.ca/>

William Payne wpayne@yorku.ca
Doctoral candidate, York University and part-time professor; Community Worker Program at George Brown College www.georgebrown.ca/

Shauna Jimenez sjoutdoors7@gmail.com
Community social worker and long-term volunteer as a private sponsor of refugees

1. In late December 2016, the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada eliminated the caps on these Canadian missions abroad, a change that reversed the geographically and racially prejudiced management of potential refugees to Canada through private sponsorship. www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/laws-policy/protect-psr.asp

2. See article by Lewis Turner pp29-31.

3. Data from an April 2015 classified briefing note to then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, accessed through a freedom of information request, *Summary of Preliminary Findings: Iraqi Resettlement (2009-2014) Case Study, Ministerial Briefing Advice to Minister*. Not for citation or distribution.

4. See Beiser M (2003) ‘Sponsorship and resettlement success,’ *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 4(2):203-15; and Beiser M (2009) ‘Resettling refugees and safeguarding their mental health: lessons learned from the Canadian Refugee Resettlement Project,’ *Transcultural Psychiatry* 46(4):539-83.

5. Lanphier M (2003) ‘Sponsorship: Organizational, sponsor, and refugee perspectives,’ *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 4(2):237-56.