



Co-funded by the
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
of the European Union

FACT SHEET

**SUPPORTING VOLUNTEER
ENGAGEMENT IN
SPONSORSHIP AND
COMPLEMENTARY
PATHWAYS FOR REFUGEES
AND OTHER PEOPLE IN
NEED OF INTERNATIONAL
PROTECTION**

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- The sustainability of sponsorship and other complementary pathway programmes depends on the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, including governmental agencies, civil-society organisations, and crucially, individual members of receiving communities who act as volunteers. The volunteers involved in these programmes play a key role in helping newcomers build social connections and navigate the labour and housing markets. More broadly, this type of community engagement can help promote positive narratives about beneficiaries (including refugees and other people in need of international protection) and reduce xenophobic attitudes.
- Engagement of volunteers in beneficiaries' settlement and integration is not without risks. Volunteers often encounter social and institutional challenges that can make fulfilling tasks difficult and time-consuming, such as when helping beneficiaries get their residence permits or find accommodation. Providing volunteers with targeted guidance and training on how to successfully perform their tasks is thus an essential part of maximising the impact of their engagement, ensuring high-quality support for beneficiaries, and avoiding frustration on the part of volunteers as well as beneficiaries.
- Training programmes and resources should aim to provide volunteers with information about the settlement process and the range of services and support available to beneficiaries within their receiving communities. Specific guidance should also be provided to volunteers on how to help beneficiaries navigate the transition out of the programme's settlement support and towards self-sufficiency in their new community (for example, guiding them towards independently accessing public services and establishing meaningful connections with local stakeholders).
- Developing initiatives to expand a programme's volunteer base can help avoid overburdening current volunteers. This may entail targeted outreach to a wider profile of volunteers, beyond members of faith-based and humanitarian organisations who have thus far played a leading role (this could include, for example, outreach to diaspora, cultural, or LGBTQI+ organisations). In addition to numbers, a diversified pool of volunteers may increase the likelihood that a programme has volunteers with the right skills and experiences to effectively assist specific groups of beneficiaries (for example, language skills, previous experience working with vulnerable groups, or familiarity with beneficiaries' cultural and religious backgrounds).

WHAT IS VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT?

The expansion of sponsorship and complementary pathway programmes worldwide has gone hand in hand with a redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of both public and private actors involved in refugee support.¹ While different in their scope, design, and objectives, a common feature across these programmes is the engagement of actors from within receiving communities, in particular individual volunteers who support the reception and integration of refugees and other people in need of international protection.

The resources volunteers bring to a programme—in terms of their time, experiences, social networks, and first-hand knowledge of the local context—can allow these initiatives to improve the scale and quality of support offered to refugee newcomers. In particular, volunteer support can complement the assistance provided by professional settlement workers from state agencies or nongovernmental organisations and help to alleviate capacity constraints.²

Volunteers' engagement in supporting refugees and other people in need of international protection can take different forms. In the case of private or community sponsorships programmes, a group of volunteers commit to providing financial assistance as well as administrative and social support to newcomers for a specific period of time (usually one or two years).³ Outside of a formal sponsorship commitment, volunteers may support admitted

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), '[Community Sponsorship](#)', accessed 27 January 2024; UNHCR, '[Complementary Pathways for Admission to Third Countries](#)', accessed 27 January 2024.

2 Susan Fratzke and Emma Dorst, [Volunteers and Sponsors: A Catalyst for Refugee Integration?](#) (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2019).

3 For an example of a well-established sponsorship programme, see Government of Canada, '[Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program](#)', updated 11 January 2024.

beneficiaries through tailored activities (often with shorter time frames), the exact nature of which depends on a programme's objectives and requirements and volunteers' available time and resources. These activities may include providing specific information, facilitating access to public services, delivering language tutoring, or helping beneficiaries compile résumés and prepare for jobs interviews.⁴

GOOD PRACTICES FOR ENHANCING AND SUSTAINING VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

Evidence from existing sponsorship and complementary pathways initiatives points to a set of promising practices that integration agencies and civil-society organisations involved in these programmes can adopt to improve their engagement and support of volunteers, to the benefit of programme participants and the programme more broadly.

Ensure strong coordination and supervision of volunteer activities

- Volunteers engaged in supporting beneficiaries often find themselves operating in a complex environment and having to assist individuals or families with complex reception needs. It is thus important to clearly delineate volunteers' responsibilities, set realistic expectations for their roles and level of commitment, and oversee their progress.
- It is also important to establish a clear division of responsibilities between volunteers, governmental agencies, and civil-society organisations involved in supporting beneficiaries. This can be done through memoranda of understanding (MoUs) or guidelines that specify the roles of different stakeholders in the context of joint activities and that give volunteer participants clear guidance about their tasks.⁵
- Establishing clear communication channels between settlement organisations and volunteers can enhance volunteers' awareness of the range of services available within a community and improve their responsiveness to refugees' needs. Promising approaches include organising pre- and post-arrival meetings between settlement and integration workers on the one hand and volunteers on the other to share information, assess arriving beneficiaries' needs, and coordinate support, and establishing single information points that can support both volunteers and beneficiaries.⁶
- Allocating dedicated and stable financial resources to public agencies or civil-society organisations responsible for coordinating volunteer activities would strengthen the infrastructure around volunteer engagement in beneficiaries' settlement. This could involve mainstreaming practices that have proven successful in specific contexts, such as hiring a full-time volunteer or community engagement coordinator to serve as a point of contact for community members.⁷
- Regular monitoring and evaluation of volunteer involvement and the establishment of feedback mechanisms are crucial to identifying and addressing obstacles volunteers face in a timely manner. In addition, establishing reliable and accessible communication channels that both volunteers and beneficiaries can use to seek advice or report issues they encounter in their interactions is key to preventing or addressing misunderstandings between them, increasing transparency, and gathering evidence that can be used to improve the quality of the assistance provided.⁸

4 Fratzke and Dorst, *Volunteers and Sponsors*, 4.

5 See Allies for Refugee Integration, *Intentional Connections for Welcoming Communities: Improving Settlement for Privately Sponsored Refugees in Ontario through Settlement-Sponsor Collaboration* (Toronto: Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants and Refugee 613, 2021).

6 Share Network, *'Resettlement & Community Sponsorship across Europe'* (booklet, Share Quality Sponsorship Network, 2023).

7 Fratzke and Dorst, *Volunteers and Sponsors*, 12.

8 María Belén Zanzuchi, Nadja Dumann, Florian Tissot, and Admir Skodo, *Attracting, Retaining, and Diversifying Sponsors for Refugees in Community Sponsorship Programmes* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2023), 34; Hanne Beirens and Aliyyah Ahad, *Measuring Up? Using Monitoring and Evaluation to Make Good on the Promise of Refugee Sponsorship* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2020).

Design high-quality pre- and post-arrival training for volunteers

- Training programmes and informational resources (e.g., toolkits and guidance documents) can play an important role in helping volunteers to prepare for their tasks and enhance their understanding of beneficiaries' backgrounds and integration needs. Targeted training is also key to ensuring that volunteers can successfully collaborate with public and civil-society stakeholders involved in a sponsorship or complementary pathway programme, reducing potential tensions over their respective roles and preventing volunteer burnout.⁹ Thus, dedicated funding from government or private actors should be allocated to expanding the training capacity of local organisations responsible for volunteer coordination.
- Training for volunteers should aim to cover all the main dimensions of volunteer engagement and provide volunteers adequate information on the programme's structure, expected outcomes, and the range of services and supports available to beneficiaries at the local level. Targeted training for volunteers should also provide guidance on how to help beneficiaries navigate the transition out of programme support, for example by gradually encouraging them to make more autonomous decisions (e.g., about how to handle the family budget) and independently access health care and other public services.¹⁰
- Economies of scale in training delivery can be achieved by developing and sharing resources among national and transnational networks of actors, for example in the form of toolkits, volunteer management guidelines, or online training programmes.¹¹ At the same time, training activities should be designed in a way that takes into account the specificity of local service systems and resources and that taps into the knowledge of local stakeholders and beneficiaries already established within a local community.¹²

Take volunteers' capabilities and experiences into consideration in matching decisions

- Evidence suggests that personalised matching procedures that take into account volunteers' capacities (e.g., specific language skills, previous experience working with vulnerable groups, or knowledge of their cultural and religious backgrounds) and that give volunteers a say in matching decisions can improve volunteers' sense of ownership over the process and help sustain their engagement with a programme.¹³ Examples of programmes that have done this include Italy's humanitarian corridor model (which considers sponsors' preferences and characteristics) and sponsorship programmes in Australia, Canada, and the United States (which allow sponsors to propose matches that are then reviewed by the programme's implementing organisation or government agency).¹⁴
- Some sponsorship programmes have developed innovative approaches to integrating volunteers' characteristics and input into the matching process. For example, some have created online platforms through which sponsors and beneficiaries can take an active and direct role in the matching process by making organic connections, expressing their preferences, and discussing expectations. Other initiatives, such as the U.S. Welcome Corps' matching stream and the Berlin Governance Platform's Re:Match pilot, have used preference-matching algorithms to suggest matches based on data from demographic and preference-ranking surveys filled out by sponsors and interviews with programme participants.¹⁵

Sustain volunteer engagement through wider outreach and flexible programme design

- Targeted outreach strategies can increase the size and diversify of a programme's pool of volunteers, and thus help address capacity shortages and support the programme's sustainability, including by decreasing the risk of overburdening existing volunteers. Some sponsorship programmes, including those in Canada, Ireland, and the

9 Zanzuchi, Dumann, Tissot, and Skodo, *Attracting, Retaining, and Diversifying Sponsors*, 18.

10 María Belén Zanzuchi, *Supporting Self-Sufficiency: Considerations for Refugees' Transition out of Sponsorship and Complementary Pathways Programmes* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2024).

11 For example, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) funds the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program to address the ongoing information and training needs of organisations and individuals involved in sponsorship. See IRCC, '[Refugee Sponsorship Training Program](#)', accessed 27 January 2024. See also Share Network, 'Resettlement & Community Sponsorship across Europe'.

12 Lillie Hinkle, *The Unmet Potential of Community Consultations in U.S. Refugee Resettlement* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2023), 23.

13 Zanzuchi, Dumann, Tissot, and Skodo, *Attracting, Retaining, and Diversifying Sponsors*, 30.

14 Craig Damian Smith with Emma Ugolini, *Why Matching Matters: Improving Outcomes in Refugee Sponsorship and Complementary Pathways* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2023).

15 Smith with Ugolini, *Why Matching Matters*, 12.

United Kingdom, have adopted strategic approaches (such as market studies, interviews, or reviews of existing evidence) to analyse the profiles of potential volunteers and craft targeted outreach.¹⁶

- Establishing a more diverse pool of volunteers can also increase the likelihood that a programme has volunteers with the right skills to effectively assist beneficiaries with specific needs, enhancing the quality of support and volunteers' experiences. Many programmes rely on faith-based or humanitarian organisations when recruiting volunteers, but some have sought to engage other segments of receiving communities. In Canada, for example, community-led initiatives supported by government funding have mobilised volunteers with an interest in and the capacity to support beneficiaries with specific backgrounds, such as individuals persecuted due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status.¹⁷
- Sponsors and volunteers engaged in supporting beneficiaries must often meet strict administrative and financial requirements. Identifying and addressing barriers to volunteer participation stemming from programme design could help broaden and sustain engagement. Programmes through which private individuals support Ukrainian refugees in Europe, for example, have illustrated how streamlined application procedures and flexibility in the scope and length of volunteer commitments can facilitate engagement of a greater number of motivated individuals, in particular young adults.¹⁸

RESOURCES

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This fact sheet was prepared by the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) as part of the Complementary Pathways Network (COMET) project. Its author is Roberto Cortinovis, Associate Policy Analyst at MPI Europe.

The COMET project received funding from the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the European Union. All project documents can be found on the COMET project website: www.cometnetwork.eu

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¹⁶ Zanzuchi, Dumann, Tissot, and Skodo, *Attracting, Retaining, and Diversifying Sponsors*, 21.

¹⁷ See Rainbow Refugee, '*About Us*', accessed 27 January 2024.

¹⁸ Zanzuchi, Dumann, Tissot, and Skodo, *Attracting, Retaining, and Diversifying Sponsors*, 10.