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A comparison of community sponsorship and government-led resettlement of refugees in the UK

Key Findings

Mahdy Alraie, Hannah Collins & Andrea Rigon
In partnership with Citizens UK.

September 2018

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Citizens UK Foundation for Community Sponsorship of Refugees

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Highlights.

- Social support from the host community is an important part of both resettlement schemes but is more actively promoted through community sponsorship policy, which allows for both newcomers and host communities to integrate and access services with more ease and support.
- Community sponsorship is a big commitment for any community group but has bene its beyond assisting newcomers to resettle; it offers communities the opportunity to lourish and brings them closer together through active participation and engagement with diversity.
- Government-led resettlement has the potential to effectively contribute to a successful integration process but needs supportive systems to enable open communication and collaboration between volunteer community groups and local councils.

Introduction

This document presents a summary of the findings of a study conducted by Mahdy Alraie and Hannah Collins under the supervision of Dr Andrea Rigon at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit, University College London, in partnership with Citizens UK and Sponsor Refugees (The Citizens UK Foundation for the Sponsorship of Refugees). It compares two schemes for resettling newcomers in the UK and considers the perspectives of the newcomers and the host community.

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion". Out of 193 members, 147 United Nations member states have signed the convention on refugees, committing to providing asylum to the persecuted and stateless. However, only about 20 states offer permanent resettlement. At the end of 2016 less than 1% of the 17.2 million refugees were resettled.

Resettlement is a life-changing experience for refugees who are forced to make a home somewhere where the society, culture and language are different from their own. It is the responsibility of these host societies to facilitate integration of those involved in the resettlement process including cultural orientation, language, access to services such as education and employment.

With the impacts of climate change and continuing conflicts around the world, the displacement of large numbers of people fleeing their homes has become one of the most pressing issues of current times. Resettlement offers a chance for people to start a new life, but their arrival on new shores marks the beginning of another difficult journey towards integration.

Until recently, Canada has been the only country to offer what it dubbed private-sponsorship of refugees. Refugees become Canadian citizens upon arrival and their sponsors fund the first year of resettlement, with the government covering the costs of healthcare and education. This scheme strengthens host communities, builds powerful bonds between sponsors and newcomers and fosters positive attitudes towards refugees. Advocates for private-sponsorship argue that its primary benefit is not to reduce government costs and commitments in the resettlement process but to enable more refugees to be resettled, complementing the government's role. At the core of successful private-sponsorship is a respectful partnership between the government and civil society.

Since 2015 two resettlement programmes have allowed 25,980 refugees resettle in EU member states which aim to take the pressure off countries like Italy and Greece and Turkey which have large numbers of refugees. Germany for example, who has accepted more asylum seekers than anywhere else in Europe since 2015 also takes part in the UNHCR's resettlement scheme. Resettled refugees are selected on criteria relating to education, language, vulnerability and family reunification. Once they arrive they are given a three year temporary residence permit and it is up to local NGOs and authorities to assist in the integration process.

Resettlement in the UK

The UK government has committed to resettle 20,000 people affected by the conflict in Syria by 2020. To assist in the resettlement of the 20,000, two programmes are in place: government-led resettlement scheme (GS) and community sponsorship (CS). These 20,000 are to be admitted into the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (VPRP). By February 2018, there have been over 10,500 people resettled in the UK through the VPRP since the conflict in Syria began in 2011.

Through this programme local authorities, who participate on a voluntary basis, are matched with refugees and play a central role in their resettlement. Information about these refugees is sent to the local authority, which must accept the referral. Local authorities can commission a non-governmental organisation (NGO) to facilitate the process of resettlement. The local authorities (or outsourced NGOs) are required to meet the refugees at the airport, provide accommodation and assistance in accessing welfare benefits, education, employment and other services laid out in their 12-month support plan. The costs of the first 12 months of resettlement are covered by central government, which continues to assist but gradually reduces its financial assistance.

Following the instrumental work of the National Refugee Welcome Board, the CS scheme was launched in the UK in July 2016. CS aimed to assist Syrians' integration into UK society, with the idea that successful integration of resettled refugees into the UK can be aided by their new local communities. Community groups must be a registered charity or Community Interest Company to sponsor refugees and support their resettlement. Sponsors are responsible for the newcomers from the moment of their arrival, providing airport pick-up, housing, access to medical and social services, English language tuition, schooling, and support towards employment and self-sufficiency. In this sense, sponsors take on the same role as local authorities in the GS. One year after the CS scheme was launched, in July 2017, the UK had welcomed 10 families through this scheme.

Understanding integration

Central to the resettlement process is the complex concept of integration. Despite there being no single definition, model or theory of integration, integration is the policy goal and target outcome for refugee resettlement programmes. Integration is better understood as a strategy chosen by the newcomers that occurs when they maintain their original culture and take part in that of their host societies. Integration must include acceptance of and active engagement with diversity by all those involved in the process. For integration to be successful there must be policies in place that recognise difference and do not attempt to deny cultural diversity. Integration involves the active engagement by policy makers, state institutions, local communities and the newcomers, with all groups interacting with and adapting to diversity.

Integration is a multi-dimensional process, involving the host community, newcomers and state institutions. Integration depends on cultural and structural dimensions. Structural factors include access to health, education, housing, and employment. Cultural integration refers to the formation of social connections, language and participation in the host community's cultural practices. Cultural integration also involves the host community adapting to the newcomers.

Findings

This document focuses on the perspectives of individuals in the host community that have been directly involved in either scheme and the newcomers that have been resettled in the UK under either the community sponsorship or the government-scheme. These findings provides insights into the strengths of each scheme.

The major difference between the two schemes is the level of engagement of the host community in the integration process. In CS, a core group of hosts is responsible for and committed to the process of integrating with their sponsored newcomers. All the CS groups divided into sub-groups focused on an important aspect of integration: education, health, housing, finance/benefits and language/interpretation. Implicit in this relationship is the formation of social connections between sponsors and newcomers. Whereas in the GS, one support worker is allocated in the local authority or outsourced NGO who oversee all aspects of integration for roughly five families.

Although community groups across the UK are organising to assist newcomers under the GS, there are considerable barriers to them engaging with the integration process. They are dependent on the willingness of their local authorities and outsourced NGOs to allow for volunteer community engagement.

In the CS scheme, host community and the newcomers are equally engaged in the process of integration and state institutions play a smaller role in the integration process. In the GS, the newcomers and host community have less power to engage in the process of integration due to barriers from state institutions that may reduce the opportunity for them to meet each other.

Safety and stability are enablers of other aspects of integration. Without these minimum conditions newcomers can feel unsafe, unwelcome and threatened by foreign systems of governance and cultures that work as barriers to integration. In both schemes host community members are working as advocates for the newcomers by assisting them to access the services they are entitled to. In both schemes, feeling part of the community and considering the UK as a new home largely depends on the extent to which newcomers feel safe and stable. Moreover, such feeling were associated with the newcomers' ability to maintain their cultural and religious practices. Being a good citizen, considering the UK a new home, and making a positive contribution to British society were considered a duty to give back for the protection, services and support received.

Structural integration

Housing

Housing is a huge barrier for communities who are engaged in either scheme to resettle newcomers. Even in GS the community plays a huge role in sourcing the houses. Once the newcomers arrive landlords have guaranteed tenants for two years. In rural parts of the UK, where housing is cheaper, letting to newcomers can be an advantage, whereas in the cities, where the market is competitive, landlords will receive less income by renting to newcomers. There seem to be varied experiences around the country in the selection of suitable houses under the GS. For example, in rural areas there are also problems of mobility, accessing halal meat and mosques. In CS, sponsors live close to the newcomers and can give them support that goes beyond the resources local authorities can provide.

Education

All newcomer children attend the local schools, however, under CS the children have the extra support of the sponsored group to assist in the transition to school. According to a host, their local community and schools benefit from new cultures and experiences that the children bring: *"these kids are bringing so much to the schools and they teach even their teachers about the Syrian crisis, open their eyes to another culture, it enriches the entire community."*

Health

Some newcomers arrive with significant health issues. While they all receive health services through the NHS, navigating the system in a foreign language and culture is extremely difficult. In both schemes we saw examples of the host community supporting newcomers in accessing healthcare. The GS requires local authorities to take the initiative to involve the host community but it does not always happen. Whereas in CS, the host community is not only dedicated to supporting the family but can draw on their social connections to help the newcomers access the best care possible.

The NHS in the UK is accessible to all newcomers, however, not all newcomers are able to receive the services the same way. For example, interpreters are not always available and there are long waiting list for medical appointments. The way the NHS functions can be difficult to understand for the newcomers and most of the interviewed newcomers expressed difficulties being able to follow up their cases and receiving proper assistance.

Employment and Benefits

Employment is crucial to integration. However, navigating the Job Centre requires confidence and perseverance that many newcomers may not have the strength or skills for at first. Finding a job when you have limited social networks is difficult. Under CS sponsors are committed to assisting the newcomers through the complexities of the Job Centre's processes.

Getting access to benefits presents can be a challenging and overwhelming experience. For example, one of the interviewed newcomers, an elder in their 70s who arrived in the UK three month earlier, had not yet received their pension. Two children with disabilities arrived four months previous were unable to apply for Disability Living Allowance as they are still waiting for medical reports as required evidence for the application. These are great barriers to wellbeing for the newcomers that can be overcome with the support of locals who have experience navigating the systems.

Cultural integration

We considered two dimensions of cultural integration: language ability and social connections.

Language is the clearest indicator of integration and feeling settled. Without language, access to all other dimensions of integration is challenging. In both schemes newcomers are required to attend ESOL classes. Under the GS ESOL classes are available from standard ESOL providers. Their quality varies from place to place but generally classes are large, predominantly made up of Arabic speakers and have a set curriculum, inflexible to different start dates. The CS groups had trained English teachers as members of the core group who committed to teaching the newcomers each week. In CS interpreters are required to be available for the first 12 months (Home Office, 2017c). Interpreters made up the core members of the sponsoring team and sometimes advise other group members on cultural issues. In the GS interpreters are outsourced and called up when required and are not consistently present to provide support, creating further barriers for the newcomers in progressing through other dimensions of the integration framework.

Without social connections between newcomers and the host community, learning English is more difficult.

Social connection was consistently recognised as crucial to integration. The major difference between the two schemes' capacity for integration is social connection. Social connections can improve feelings of security and remove barriers to integration. This is where the host community plays a crucial role in providing the extra support that goes beyond what the government can provide.

Building strong social connections and meaningful friendships seems to be affected by location and language barriers for the newcomers, especially those who came through the GS.

Strengths of Community Sponsorship

For the host community participating in the integration process is essential. Not only for the wellbeing of the newcomers, but it creates new experiences and learning for all involved. Engaging with diversity strengthens communities and changes perspectives and breaks stereotypes.

Working on the CS process as a group was recognised as a positive outcome of CS for the hosts involved. One described the experiences as *"transformative"*, and another described; *"the effect [CS] has had on us is probably the biggest success of the whole thing really… you are supporting the family and you can see the effect it's having on them, but on many levels it has given us a common purpose as a group… it's just created community"*.

In CS, the sponsoring groups displayed huge respect and understanding of the importance of the newcomers having the right to maintain their own culture. CS groups worked within their local communities to prepare them and address any uncertainties before the newcomers arrived. In the GS there is great variation across local authorities in terms of engaging local communities. In addition to social connection, CS provides a sense of ownership that comes from responsibility, offering locals the opportunity to help and a sense of pride.

The participation of host community members and institutions leads to positive impact on the process of integration. Such participation can take place in different ways and contexts in both CS and GS. However, under CS the role of the host community in the process of integration is more institutionalised and structured, which leads to more efficient management of allocated resources, effectively accelerating the process through clear communication channels, well planned flexible interventions, and a sense of responsibility of the host community.

From a newcomers perspective, an effective response to their needs is crucial and depends upon treatment, communication, time and flexibility. Our findings show that CS has more capacity to respond to these issues because it does not depend on overstretched, bureaucratic and rigid state institutions or outsourced NGOs. However, in both schemes engaging the host community in accessing services can be beneficial and there are examples of host community engagement in access to services in both schemes, but in CS the role of the host community is structurally built in the scheme.

The implications of GS is that it is more likely to give priority to the structural integration dimensions at the expense of the cultural ones. In contrast, CS seems to provide a more holistic approach, addressing all integration dimensions, especially the cultural ones due to the deep community engagement and the wider social network offered by the CS group. Interaction is a key element of integration, the difference between CS and GS lies in their capacities to create more spaces for interaction between newcomers and host community.

CS depends on the community groups who voluntarily participate in the scheme by raising funds and offering their time and expertise. While GS depends on state institutions including the council and outsourced NGOs. The interaction between host community, newcomers and service providers is stronger in CS due to the available resources and flexibility, while the GS is unable to offer such level of interaction. Moreover, the sponsor community group is already part of the host community, who has the will and the resources to interact with the newcomers because it is the main function of creating the community group. Therefore, the interaction in CS is easier and smoother than the GS approach where the outsourced NGO mediates encounters between the newcomers and the host community.

Conclusion

CS has a greater potential to successfully address all dimensions of integration. Under current cuts and increase stress on public services, navigating the system of entitlements is increasingly difficult for people who are already precarious and marginalised. Extra support is required for the 'most vulnerable' beyond what the government provides to access their rights. CS is more adaptable to respond to individual needs and differences, and thus facilitates the multidimensional process of integration.

When newcomers feel safe and stable in their host community, integration becomes easier, facilitated by social connections with the host community and the provision of basic rights through state institutions. In CS the social connection dimension of integration is much stronger than in the GS because of the functional responsibility and commitment of the sponsoring community. The GS has limited potential for social connection because of the inherent nature of government systems and the devolved responsibility which results from outsourcing services. There are examples of active community members engaging with newcomers in the GS. This shows the potential in the GS for an active engagement of the host community but this requires a willingness of the local authorities and can be hindered by the way safeguarding procedures are often implemented.

Host communities work with newcomers to show them how things work so newcomers build trust and understanding of the systems of their new government. At the same time the host community changes; stereotypes are broken and the community cultures adapt and are strengthened by their new members.

Recommendations

Both CS and GS are likely to continue to play a very important role in UK resettlement of refugees. The GS should find ways to more systematically involve the host community in the resettlement process by going beyond the risk averse attitude towards local residents' involvement. This is likely to require a bigger investment in brokering these relationships initially but it may increase the chance of a successful integration process with higher benefits on society in the long-term. The GS should also adapt more to the specific needs of each family rather than assuming that the same approach would work with every family.

While maintaining its flexibility and diversity, the CS needs to ensure some consistency through different sponsor groups. The state or an institution mandated by the state can play an important role in supporting the exchange of good practices and provide training and guidelines to community groups willing to host refugees in their communities. Overall, increasing communication channels, collaboration and social connection between sponsoring groups, NGOs and the local authorities will insure the sustainability, resilience and success of both schemes.

The Development Planning Unit, University College London, is an international centre specialising in academic teaching, research, training and consultancy in the field of urban and regional development, with a focus on policy, planning management and design. It is concerned with understanding the multi-faceted and uneven process of contemporary urbanisation, and strengthening more socially just and innovative approaches to policy, planning management and design, specially in the contexts of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East as well as countries in transition.

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The academic staff of the DPU are a multi-disciplinary and multi-national group with extensive and on-going research and professional experience in various fields of urban and international development throughout the world. DPU Associates are a body of professionals who work closely with the Unit both in London and overseas. Every year the student body embraces more than 45 different nationalities.

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