

Community sponsorship schemes under the new pact on migration and asylum

Take-up by EU regions and cities

SUMMARY

The number of people in the world that are forcibly displaced inside or outside their home country has risen significantly in recent years, as also showcased by the unprecedented arrival of refugees and irregular migrants in the EU since 2015. This highlights an urgent need to ensure organised, legal and safe pathways for protecting migrants who embark on dangerous journeys in an attempt to enter countries of destination irregularly, or find themselves in protracted refugee situations.

A potential solution is the community sponsorship scheme, understood as encompassing several different approaches for refugee admission to third countries other than countries of origin or transit. The concept includes a shared responsibility between civil society and the state when engaging in refugee admission efforts, by providing financial, emotional, social and/or settlement support to help newly arrived refugees integrate in a third country.

Community sponsorship for integration is particularly important in the EU, where local and national governments, alongside civil society, have been pondering how best to support newcomers and ease integration and social cohesion. Since 2015, the concept has been piloted and launched in several EU countries, including through the active input of regions and cities.

In 2020, the European Commission presented a new pact on migration and asylum, affirming its commitment to supporting national sponsorship schemes through funding, capacity-building and knowledge-sharing.



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This Briefing has been drafted at the request of a member of the European Committee of the Regions, in the framework of the cooperation agreement between the European Parliament and the Committee.

Introduction

In recent years, the number of people in need of protection across the world has risen significantly as a result of persecution, war, crime or human rights violations. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates, at the beginning of 2020, there were 45.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs), 29.6 million refugees and others forcibly displaced outside their country, and 4.2 million asylum-seekers; by mid-2020, more than 80 million people had been forced to leave their homes. Furthermore, fewer durable solutions (such as voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement) were found for the displaced in 2020 compared to the same period in previous years, with only 17 400 refugees resettled in the first six months of 2020 – half the figure for 2019.

In the past few years, the European Union (EU) has geared its migration policy towards strict border controls and the externalisation of migration management through cooperation with third countries. Although this has [reduced migrant arrivals](#) to the EU, it has also forced people in need of protection to embark on unsafe journeys in even greater numbers, often at the mercy of human smugglers and traffickers. Over the past couple of years, the Mediterranean has witnessed the largest number of [casualties and missing people](#) of any part of the world. Those who are returned or do not decide to risk their lives remain stuck in countries – Libya, in particular – where they are exposed to human rights abuse, detention and perilous conditions.

This situation highlights an urgent need for more and better solutions, that involve replacing irregular migration with organised, legal and safe pathways such as community sponsorship. For this purpose, the European Commission in its 2020 [communication](#) on a new pact on migration and asylum stressed the EU's readiness to support its Member States in establishing community sponsorship schemes through funding, capacity-building and knowledge-sharing. The aim is to develop a European model of community sponsorship that can lead to better integration outcomes in the longer term.

What is community sponsorship?

There is no uniform definition of the concept of community sponsorship (sometimes also known as [private sponsorship](#)), which can be understood as encompassing several different modalities of refugee admission to third countries. As explained by the UNHCR, the main characteristics of the concept is [shared responsibility](#) between civil society and the state for the integration of refugees. More [specifically](#), the term encompasses programmes that allow 'individuals, groups of individuals, or organizations to directly engage in refugee admission efforts by providing financial, emotional, social and/or settlement support to help newly-arrived refugees integrate in a third country'. It involves the following elements:

- the planned arrival of refugees;
- a safe, legal pathway to protection, ideally in addition to resettlement;
- shared responsibility for financial and social support between government, civil society and individuals for a defined period; and
- the ultimate responsibility for refugee integration, which remains with the government authorities.

Some [experts](#) define community sponsorship as a form of [resettlement](#) or a [complementary pathway](#). As regards **community sponsorship as resettlement**, it only includes integration support for resettled refugees, which is matched with support from civil society sponsors. According to this model, refugees are admitted through existing UNHCR and state resettlement channels (including selection, referral, health checks, etc.). Civil society participates mainly in the provision of support after arrival and focuses on the successful integration of refugees. Furthermore, community sponsorship as resettlement generally benefits UNHCR-referred refugees rather than 'named'

individuals, i.e. refugees who are not part of the state-run resettlement schemes. **Community sponsorship as a complementary pathway** involves a standalone pathway of admission and integration led by civil society. It can include entry and protection of specific individuals who are 'named'.

A 2018 Commission [study](#) lists the six most commonly cited goals that sponsorship schemes should accomplish:

- expanding the number of admission places available to persons in need of protection;
- facilitating legal admission for groups that might not otherwise have access to it;
- improving public support for refugees/resettlement and addressing public anxieties;
- undertaking resettlement in a cost-effective way;
- providing admission to a particular group (such as extended family members of refugees already living in the resettlement country);
- securing better integration prospects for beneficiaries.

Although sponsorship schemes may facilitate beneficiaries' integration in the destination country, [experts](#) point out that there is no conclusive evidence or empirical confirmation to this effect. Furthermore, there is no consensus on whether private-sponsored refugees perform better than government-sponsored ones in terms of employment status and income. Nevertheless, a number of positive factors make integration easier and faster, among them the community's unique commitment to and involvement in becoming an active part of the reception and integration process; the one-to-one, tailored support by the sponsors who act as a point of reference and guide; and the unique support network of sponsors active in organisations, associations or local governments.

International framework

The 2016 [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#) calls for new and expanded resettlement and complementary pathways, including community sponsorship for individual refugees. The [Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative](#) was created on the side-lines of the September 2016 UN Refugee Summit and was formally launched in Ottawa (Canada) in December that year. Its mandate is to 'encourage and support the adoption and expansion of refugee sponsorship programs around the world'. On 17 December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing for refugees in the world. The compact calls for expanded access to resettlement and complementary pathways, such as private or community sponsorship programmes that are additional to regular resettlement, including community-based programmes promoted through the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative. In June 2019, the UNHCR released its [2019-2021 strategy](#) on resettlement and complementary pathways, with the aim of improving the availability and predictability of complementary pathways for refugees (including community sponsorship schemes), based on cooperation among global, regional and national actors. It also acted as a guide for pledges and contributions made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum.

Community sponsorship in Europe

The push for community sponsorship has not only been witnessed at the international level and in the international fora. Since 2015, when the irregular arrival of asylum-seekers reached unprecedented levels in the EU, community sponsorship models have been piloted and established in a number of EU Member States. Policymakers have focused on better managing the admissions, including by introducing stricter controls at the borders, while civil society groups have showed [increased interest](#) in helping asylum-seekers and refugees.

In May 2015, the [European Agenda on Migration](#) identified safe and legal pathways as a priority. In 2017, the Commission in its [communication](#) on the delivery of the agenda called on the Member

States to explore ways to establish private sponsorship schemes. Also in 2017, the European Asylum Support Office launched a [pilot project](#) on community sponsorship with interested EU countries. A 2018 Commission [feasibility study](#) found that 'sponsorship could contribute to meeting the goal of promoting safe and legal channels of admission'. Accordingly, in 2019 the Commission [opened a call](#) under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) to finance projects seeking to increase the capacity of Member States' existing private sponsorship schemes, or to support the establishment of new ones in Member States that had none.

As the number of people seeking asylum in the EU has grown, Member States have become increasingly involved in creating public-private partnerships to help with their admission and reception. Private actors, in particular, have become more involved in community sponsorship programmes to address persistent needs in the area of international protection. In response to the [Syrian](#) and [Iraqi](#) refugee crises, sponsorship or sponsorship-like arrangements first appeared in Europe as part of [humanitarian admissions programmes](#) under which beneficiaries are admitted by a state with a view to being granted (often initially short-term) residence in receiving countries. Later on, the community sponsorship in Europe evolved into a broader concept.

According to the [SHARE Network](#), a platform promoting resettlement and other complementary pathways in Europe, community sponsorship in Europe consists of three approaches: family reunification-based sponsorship; humanitarian corridors; and resettlement-based sponsorship. As regards **family reunification-based sponsorship**, [Germany](#), [France](#) and [Ireland](#) have been among the first to introduce the scheme, mostly for Syrians, in order to reunite relatives residing in Europe with extended family members who were residing in countries of first asylum. The largest of these schemes is Germany's Federal *Länder* Sponsorship Scheme (*Landesaufnahmeprogramme*), which between 2013 and 2018 admitted around 25 000 people as part of family reunification. The programme is still being implemented in some federal states.

The **humanitarian corridors**, which have been developed in [Italy](#), [France](#), and [Belgium](#), involve faith-based organisations that establish a memorandum of understanding or an agreement with their respective governments to receive refugees who were initially admitted on humanitarian visas. The project first began in Italy in 2016 by the Community of Sant'Egidio, which, in collaboration with other Catholic and Protestant organisations, offers protection places to refugees from Syria and sub-Saharan Africa who are living in critically vulnerable conditions.

Resettlement-based community sponsorship schemes were first introduced in the [United Kingdom](#) in 2016 as a strand of the country's resettlement quota. This changed in 2020, when the scheme offered protection places that were additional to those under existing resettlement commitments. Similar programmes were introduced in [Germany](#) and [Ireland](#) in 2018-2019. All three resettlement-based programmes are similar in that the UNHCR recognises and refers refugees in need of protection, who are then matched with sponsoring organisations in charge of fundraising, finding accommodation, and providing post-arrival assistance.

Table 1 – Community sponsorship approaches in Europe, 2013-2019

Programme	Approach	Who sponsors	Who is sponsored	Commitments of sponsors	Complementarity
German regional admission programmes	Family reunification-based programmes	Family members	Syrian family members of German residents and citizens	Full financial support for five years, excluding healthcare	Additional to resettlement
Irish Syrian humanitarian admission programme (SHAP)	Family reunification-based programmes	Family members	Syrian family members of Irish residents and citizens	Full financial support (indefinite)	Additional to resettlement
French humanitarian visas	Family reunification-based programmes	Family members and faith based organisations	Syrians and Iraqis in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey	Full financial support until granted refugee status (approx. six months)	Additional to resettlement
Humanitarian Corridor Italy	Humanitarian corridors programmes	Faith-based organisations and churches	Vulnerable persons in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Niger and Ethiopia	Travel, housing, integration support for an undefined period (usually 1-2 years)	Additional to resettlement
Humanitarian Corridor France	Humanitarian corridors programmes	Faith-based organisations and churches	Vulnerable Syrians and Iraqis in Lebanon	Travel, housing, integration support for an undefined period (usually one year)	Additional to resettlement
Humanitarian Corridor Belgium	Humanitarian corridors programmes	Faith-based organisations and churches	Vulnerable Syrians in Turkey and Lebanon	Housing and integration support for one year	Additional to resettlement
UK community sponsorship programme	Resettlement-based programmes	Registered charities	Refugees referred by UNHCR	Housing and integration support for two years	Additional to resettlement as of 2020
German community sponsorship	Resettlement-based programmes	Groups of at least five German citizens or residents	Refugees referred by the UNHCR	Housing and integration support for two years	Additional to resettlement (resettlement and sponsorship pledges announced at the same time)
Irish community sponsorship	Resettlement-based programmes	Groups of Irish citizens or residents, supported by regional support organisations	Refugees referred by the UNHCR	Housing and integration support for two years	Within resettlement (not additional)

Source: [Share Network](#) (data from October 2019).

In addition to the community sponsorship schemes described above, there are other initiatives that incorporate some elements of sponsorship. One such example is the Italian [university corridors programme](#), launched in 2019 with the aim of providing scholarships for university studies, integration support and stipends for a small group of refugees brought from Ethiopia to Bologna. Another example is a pilot sponsorship programme ([Auzolana](#)) developed by the Basque regional government in Spain in 2019. The initiative, financed by the Basque government, facilitates the reception and integration of refugees resettled from Jordan and included in Spain's resettlement quota. Other examples of public-private partnerships with elements of sponsorship include humanitarian and medical evacuations of vulnerable people from third countries in partnership with civil society, such as in [Italy](#).

These examples show that community sponsorship can take various forms, be it as a standalone scheme, a specific strand of resettlement or a part of another parallel pathway such as a higher education scholarship programme or a family reunification programme.

Community sponsorship as part of the pact on migration and asylum

The number of refugees in need of international protection is rising globally. The situation has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and the measures to contain the spread of the virus, which have had a considerable impact on all operations and procedures related to resettlement, humanitarian admission and community sponsorship.

As explained by [experts](#), the pandemic may 'erode the financial capacity or political will to prioritise refugee resettlement or explore community sponsorship programs'. Community organisations, especially those whose funding is based on refugee arrivals, may be at risk in the short and medium term. The pandemic can also fuel xenophobia, by causing public concern about border control and boosting the general mistrust of migration. Even as the pandemic subsides, such changes threaten to further erode those countries' potential to restart refugee arrivals and/or attract sponsors.

In order to continue supporting rising number of refugees around the world, the EU and all its Member States need to strengthen their capacity to fulfil their moral duty to show solidarity with refugee-hosting countries and offer effective protection to those who need it.

In its [Covid-19 guidance](#) of April 2020, the Commission therefore encouraged the Member States to keep communication channels open with sponsor organisations and individual sponsors and to continue sponsors' recruitment and screening so as to enlarge future hosting availability. Promoting complementary pathways for people in need of protection and for their further integration is also one of the topics included in the call for proposals under the [AMIF 2020 work programme](#). The aim is to establish private/community sponsorship programmes for the purposes of humanitarian admission 'led by locally established actors in the receiving country (e.g. civil society organisations, diaspora communities, local authorities) and carried out in cooperation with the relevant national authorities'.

In September 2020, as mentioned earlier, the European Commission presented a [new pact on migration and asylum](#), reinforcing its commitment to increasing the number of resettlement spaces and complementary pathways available for refugees, and calling anew on EU Member States to increase resettlement spaces and implement community/private sponsorship programmes with EASO support and EU funding. More specifically, the Commission expressed its commitment to national sponsorship schemes 'through funding, capacity building and knowledge-sharing' in order to develop 'a European model of community sponsorship'. However, the Commission remained vague as to the details that should underpin a common European approach. The design and implementation of community sponsorship programmes ultimately remain a matter within the discretion of the Member States.

In its [recommendation](#) of September 2020 on legal pathways to protection in the EU, presented as part of the pact, the Commission also stresses the need to scale up existing and create new community sponsorship programmes, including through family reunification, education or work. The document lists several recommendations to the Member States as regards their implementation of community sponsorship schemes. These recommendations include:

- focusing on close cooperation with civil society;
- defining clear selection criteria when designing sponsorship schemes;
- ensuring better and faster integration and social inclusion of persons arriving via sponsorship schemes;
- making use of EU co-funding tools;
- developing programmes focused on skills and qualifications and access to the labour market for those in need of international protection.

However, rather than outlining the characteristics of a distinct 'European model' of sponsorship, the recommendation too merely refers to the possibility of 'drawing upon the wide range of models of humanitarian admission'. It also vaguely refers to a division of responsibilities between private and state actors as well as to transparent and non-discriminatory criteria for selecting beneficiaries. Yet, it does not refer to the principle of additionally or to the need for a clear protection status of beneficiaries.

Role of EU regions and cities

In recent years, local and regional governments have been at the forefront of refugee reception in many refugee destination countries. Many aspects of migrants' everyday lives depend on the capacity of the local governments to provide basic services, such as access to housing, education and the labour market, as well as other aspects of integration.

The [Global Compact on Refugees](#) affirms the role of local governments and other local actors in both urban and rural settings as that of first responders to large-scale refugee situations. They are among those who experience the most significant impact over the medium term. The compact stresses the importance of the support that the international community as a whole could provide to strengthen institutional capacities, infrastructure and accommodation at the local level, including through funding and capacity development where appropriate. The compact also calls upon networks of cities and municipalities hosting refugees to share their good practices and innovative approaches to responses in urban settings, including through twinning arrangements, with the support of the UNHCR and other relevant stakeholders.

The added value of community sponsorship for integration is particularly important in Europe, where local and national governments, together with civil society, have been facing questions of how to best support newcomers and facilitate integration and social cohesion.

In March 2021, the Commission and the European Committee of the Regions launched a new [partnership](#) to increase cooperation and support to EU cities, regions and rural areas in integrating arriving refugees. In particular, the partnership aims to build capacity and promote an exchange of experiences in the area of integration and community sponsorship through workshops, online training materials, study visits, mentoring and exchange programmes.

The Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament published a [position paper](#) for a fair and efficient asylum system in Europe, which touches upon the role of local and regional authorities in welcoming asylum-seekers. While the primary focus is on the role of municipalities in relocating asylum-seekers already present in the EU, the concept could also be applied to their role in community sponsorships. According to the paper, the EU should provide financial incentives through AMIF to municipalities and regions receiving asylum-seekers. Further incentives for

municipalities and regions could be provided through the [European Social Fund](#) and the [European Regional Development Fund](#).

[Tihomir Sabchev and Moritz Baumgärtel](#) list several reasons why local governments are best placed for the development of sustainable complementary pathways, including community sponsorship:

- They are in a position to easily and accurately assess local capacity to host and integrate refugees. They have the most recent information on housing availability, health-care services and school places, ethnic and religious communities, and local labour market conditions.
- Many local governments have gained significant experience in managing refugee reception and integration and are willing to continue investing in this field. Their accumulated knowledge and the links they have established with NGOs and private actors can be mobilised for the locally organised resettlement initiatives.
- Local governments have started collaborating directly with international organisations such as the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration and Unicef. They can capitalise on these transnational partnerships to facilitate a wider collaboration in the area of refugee resettlement.

As part of a [project](#) funded by AMIF, a publication entitled 'Private sponsorship for integration: Building a European model' includes a list of recommendations for national and local governments on how they can support the development and expansion of community sponsorship programmes. Some of the measures include:

- ensuring that agreements are in place defining the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders participating in the community sponsorship (central governments, local governments, sponsors, participants, etc.);
- ensuring that central and local governments provide adequate and sustainable financial and practical support to CSOs and local communities involved in community sponsorship programmes;
- fostering social cohesion by facilitating training and support for sponsoring groups and preparing both refugees and host communities for the refugees' arrival.
- supporting and promoting actions and projects that encourage intercultural dialogue by means of community engagement through sports and cultural activities;
- supporting the participation and empowerment of migrants, migrant-led organisations and civil society in the formulation, governance, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of private sponsorship programmes and integration policies.

[Regional approaches](#) to community sponsorship and integration should be developed for those municipalities that are smaller in size and new to receiving refugees, through support and funding for capacity-building provided by the regional governments. Furthermore, EU funds ([Asylum and Migration Fund](#), [European Social Fund+](#)) aimed at supporting reception and early integration should be made more easily accessible to local governments and civil society organisations.

Sabchev and Baumgärtel suggest a two-step approach to expanding locally organised resettlement. With the approval of the respective national governments, self-financed small-scale resettlement projects led by local governments could be implemented simultaneously in several countries. Established transnational migration city networks could help speed up the process. Municipalities can also request additional EU funds to help them with their initiatives. In the long run, city-led relocation programmes could be scaled up both within and across countries. According to the authors, the gradual expansion of city-led resettlement practices could become a type of 'controlled'

policy reform that, without strengthening political divides, could usher in a new era of migration governance.

Selected examples from European cities and regions

Several cities and regional governments in Europe have been actively engaged in helping the communities and supporting refugees from the moment they arrive in a host country in settling in and integrating into society.

The [Solidarity Cities](#) project was initiated in 2016 by the mayors of 11 European cities to help municipalities' efforts related to receiving and integrating refugees. The mayors of [Barcelona and Athens](#) have agreed to collaborate under a pilot initiative to move 100 refugees living in camps in the Greek capital to Barcelona. Barcelona has been actively collaborating with local volunteers to develop a [city-level strategy](#) to accept displaced refugees; the city has also been campaigning for the Spanish government and the EU to increase relocation and resettlement options.

In June 2020, [Eurocities](#) and the [Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative](#) hosted a [webinar](#) to explore how cities can become more involved in community sponsorship schemes. [Bristol](#) and [Birmingham](#) shared their experience from working together with the UK Home Office, local communities and volunteers in the implementation of such schemes. The cities' councils are involved in raising awareness among volunteer organisations, coordinating and monitoring sponsorship groups, and assisting groups with their national sponsorship applications. Furthermore, this involvement can also include locating suitable homes, providing support and advice in the process, and fostering long-term partnerships with and within communities. The UK Home Office has issued [guidance](#) for local governments on their role in the community sponsorship process in order to ensure the best welcome and to support refugees directly in their local host communities.

In 2019, a [sponsorship agreement](#) was signed between the Spanish Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, the Basque regional government, UNHCR Spain, Caritas Euskadi and Ellacuría Foundation to implement a [community sponsorship pilot project](#). The Basque regional government took charge of the families arriving in Spain by distributing them among the three major Basque cities (Bilbao, Donostia and Vitoria).

In Germany, several [regional governments](#), such as Berlin, Schleswig-Holstein, and Thuringia, are actively working with civil society groups to facilitate the community sponsorship of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, more and more [mayors and city and local councillors](#) are declaring their willingness to take in refugees who have been rescued from distress at sea or who are staying in Greek refugee camps. For this purpose, many of the municipalities have joined forces in the Cities of Safe Haven alliance ([Städte Sicherer Häfen](#)).

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