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Canada Supplement
Crowdsourcing Refugee Resettlement
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Crowdsourcing Refugee Resettlement

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Four decades ago, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians fled their homes in rickety boats, seeking safety and opportunity. But as refugee camps became overburdened, several neighboring countries began to refuse safe passage, leaving many people stranded at sea. The world was confronted with an urgent refugee crisis, and after hard work by many individuals, but Canada stepped up. Between 1979 and 1980, the country resettled more than 60,000 of these refugees as permanent residents with a pathway to citizenship. Another 140,000 later joined them. Many arrived through the world's first Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program. In other words, Canada's response to the "boat people" took the form of a social innovation that was largely unique both nationally and globally.

The PSR program arrived with Canada's Immigration Act of 1976-77, and the aftermath of the fall of Saigon was the first opportunity to test it. With pressure from media, the public, provinces, and opposition parties, the Canadian government began to raise the number of resettlement spots. Thanks in part to the efforts of Operation Lifeline, 30,000 sponsoring groups (of five or more Canadians each) had formed across the country by 1980.

The PSR program is at its core a public-private partnership. By tapping into the resources, creativity, and connectivity of citizens, private sponsorship bolsters Canada's ability to accept more refugees than the government of Canada could alone manage. This idea is known as "additionality" and is a mobilizing force for sponsors. You could also call it crowdsourcing.

The program enlists private groups of citizens to act as sponsors and de facto guarantors for refugee families during the first year after their arrival. These private sponsors—once clustered in faith communities but now spreading to workplaces and book clubs—raise funds and develop resettlement plans prior to the refugees'

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LinkedIn's Toronto office hosts a Refugee Career Jumpstart Project hiring event.

arrival. Afterward, they invest countless hours in planning the minutiae of resettlement, from trips to the doctor and the principal's office to weekend museum trips, late-night phone calls, and more. It is not uncommon to hear that sponsorship can be one of the most difficult community undertakings these groups have ever taken on—but also among the most rewarding.

Today, Canadians have privately sponsored more than 288,000 refugees from all over the world. Canada's PSR program remains an integral pathway—including, recently, for more than 40,000 Syrians and Iraqis. During the latest resettlement surge, a group of international partners led by Jennifer Bond, a law professor at the University of Ottawa, worked to export this innovation beyond its Canadian roots. Pilot programs are now developing in both countries familiar with resettlement, like the United Kingdom, and those new to it, such as Argentina and Chile.

Private sponsorship is considered a best practice within international immigration and refugee circles in part because of its track record in Canada. Refugees, private sponsors, and Canada as a whole have benefited immensely from the practice. Privately sponsored refugees have a built-in support network embedded in the local community, made up of people who are socially and economically established. As a result, they can experience a sense of belonging from the moment they arrive. What's more, program evaluations show that privately sponsored refugees are more likely to enter the Canadian

job market sooner and at higher income levels than those who enter as refugees outside of the PSR program.

PSR also has served as a pathway for refugee family reunification—an important if unintended result of the program. Many Canadians use private sponsorship to reunite family members who may have been separated as a result of armed conflict or oppression in their home country. In addition to other forms of social capital provided

by private sponsorship, family ties are one reason why privately sponsored refugees are less likely to rely on social assistance after their sponsorship period than their government-sponsored counterparts.

Finally, private sponsorship gives citizens a tangible way to contribute to alleviating the migration

crisis at a grassroots level. Enabling this personal engagement is one of the essential ingredients behind the program's success. It's good for sponsors who feel empowered to make a real impact, it's good for refugees who experience the expressions of inclusion, and cumulatively, it's good for communities big and small.

One of the less documented benefits of PSR is that a broader circle of citizens than just the sponsors participate in resettlement and integration. More than 250 communities in Canada have welcomed privately sponsored refugees, and any group of five or more sponsors is increased exponentially through the informal roles of extended family, friends, colleagues, local politicians, and others. Private sponsorship involves everyone: All have a stake. In that sense, PSR is truly a resettlement and integration program.

Images of tragedy in the Mediterranean and on overland routes through hostile environments continue to mirror the horror experienced several decades ago by the "boat people" from Southeast Asia. And the number of refugees globally is climbing each year.

As Canada continues to crowdsource a compassionate response to the plight of refugees, other countries ought to open the same channels. The pilot programs are a beginning.

This form of active engagement is not a unique capacity of Canadians. In different ways, citizens worldwide have shown the will and ability to welcome refugees as neighbors and friends. Governments should take their cue. ❌