LESSONS FROM THE PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP OF REFUGEES – A CANADIAN INNOVATION

INTRODUCTION

Private sponsorship of refugees is a significant Canadian social innovation now being replicated around the world. Beginning as a response to the crisis of Indochinese refugees following the war in Vietnam, private sponsorship is now a pillar of Canadian refugee settlement, responsible for helping more than 327,000 refugees find a new home in Canada since 1979 (Government of Canada, 2020).

While many faith-based and community groups continue to privately sponsor asylum seekers from around the world, the Syrian crisis in 2015 motivated Canada to commit to settling 25,000 Syrian refugees, which occurred within 100 days. Massive changes to government policies and systems were implemented in record time and 62,000 Syrians resettled in Canada through a combination of government and private sponsorship. This was mostly achieved in a matter of months, and more than half of the refugees were privately sponsored (Government of Canada, 2020). Grassroots organizations emerged with new partnerships, processes, and approaches that were enabled by novel applications of simple technologies and revealed opportunities to leverage and amplify government resources. While fragmented and sometimes undeveloped, these efforts signalled new opportunities to create an innovative "sharing economy" approach to supporting newcomers.

Not only has private sponsorship as a model of refugee resettlement been sustained throughout the past four decades, but it has expanded over time. Around two million Canadians have been personally involved in helping Syrian refugees come to and settle in Canada (Government of Canada, 2020). Beyond Canada, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has embraced this model in the hopes of increasing refugee resettlement. Other countries such as Argentina, Australia, France, Germany, New Zealand, and Spain have implemented or committed to similar programs (Van Haren, 2021). Despite the model's broad implementation and impact, little research has examined private sponsorship.

This article examines the Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge as an example of effective social innovation and aims to identify best practices for future private sponsorship policy and implementation. While technological change has dominated discussions of innovation, researchers increasingly recognize that social innovation also has power. The term social innovation refers to "a new combination of practices in areas of social action, with the goal of better coping with needs and problems than is possible by use of existing practices" (Howaldt et al., 2014). Many social innovations can help governments achieve objectives in a more efficient manner by leveraging the resources and techniques of the private sector.

PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP

Canada currently has three programs for refugee resettlement: the Government Assisted Refugee program, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program, and the Blended Visa-Office Referred (BVOR) program. Introduced in 1979, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program allowed private individuals and organizations to assume the responsibility of a refugee's resettlement. Facing pressure to act, the federal government developed the program to allow for the resettlement

of more refugees than was possible when the government alone provided all settlement services. With the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program, the government implemented a 1:1 matching program – with one government funded refugee settled for every privately settled refugee. In just 18 months, more than 60,000 refugees were privately sponsored from 1979 to 1980.

While current discussions of private sponsorship often focus on financial costs, the responsibilities taken on by sponsors include financial, emotional, and social support. Financial responsibilities are clearly defined in government regulations and are roughly equivalent to social assistance rates. An individual or group sponsoring a family of four could be expected to provide approximately $27,000 (CAD), distributed over the first twelve months after arrival in Canada. These funds provide for the family's needs, including food, furniture, transportation and shelter for one year. Social support responsibilities require the sponsors to help newcomers' transition into a new country: finding an apartment, enrolling children in school, finding work, and choosing a family doctor among other essential support. The broad support sponsors are required to provide can create barriers for sponsorship: people with means often do not have time and people with time often do not have the means.

EFFECTIVENESS OF PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP

Private sponsorship works. Most refugees prosper and their children achieve social mobility via educational achievement and occupational status attainment. In fact, privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) have better outcomes than government-assisted refugees (GARs). While this can likely be attributed in part to higher levels of education, skills and language, some credit must also go to the social, emotional and cultural capital accessed through the networks of their private sponsors. This support enables them to navigate the "unspoken rules" and to get the support they need and to find jobs through informal job markets (Yu et al., 2007).

PSRs experience quick labour market integration upon arrival to Canada, especially when contrasted with other modalities. For example, the 2016 tax records report that 40% of adult Syrian PSRs reported employment earnings within their first months of arrival, compared to 5% of Syrian GARs and 15% of BVOR refugees. According to the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) Settlement Outcomes Survey (2019), of the Syrians reporting they were currently employed, PSRs reported 60% employed, BVOR refugees reported 55% employed, and GARs reported 43% employed. Overall Syrians' employment earnings increased with time spent in Canada. Syrian GARs and BVOR refugees' social assistance usage in 2016 aligns with historical trends for resettled populations – 93% of Syrian GARs and 88% of BVOR refugees reported social assistance usage in their first year in Canada, compared to 2% of PSRs (IRCC, 2019).

Refugees across modalities are not the same. They vary in their workplace experience, formal education, and language (Treviranus & Casasola, 2003; Bloch, 2008). For example, about 20% of government-assisted Syrian refugees had English or French language skills, compared with 67% of privately sponsored refugees. Less than 3% of Syrian GARs had a university degree, compared with 25% of those who were privately sponsored (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017).

However, even controlling for these demographic and socioeconomic differences, PSRs advantage over GSA remains strong and long: 15 years after arrival PSRs have higher employment rates and earnings than GARs. According to one study, PSR employment rates (89% and 69% for men and women, respectively) in the first year after landing are 19 and 25 percentage points higher than their GAR counterparts, for men and women, respectively (Kaida et al., 2020). The difference in employment and earnings between PSRs and GARs is greater for refugees with less than a high school diploma than those with more education, suggesting that the PSR pathways are particularly beneficial for refugees with limited formal qualifications.

But the higher employment rates and earnings of PSRs does not mean that they are not subject to the structural and systemic barriers that affect immigrants at large. For instance, in-depth interviews of Syrian refugees such as doctors, pharmacists, and teachers, revealed frustration over slow recognition of foreign credentials, In the words of one Syrian mother who was a school teacher before emigrating to Canada:

> "I came here [to the Kitchener-Waterloo Region] believing that I would find work as a school teacher. But that has not happened, and no one really recognizes my training and experience anyway." (Ilcan & Connoy, 2021, p. 306).

CASE STUDY – THE RYERSON UNIVERSITY LIFELINE SYRIA CHALLENGE

New approaches to private sponsorship created innovative new combinations of resources to meet refugee needs. Launched in July 2015, the Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge (RULSC) program is an example of effective collaboration where universities harnessed the assets of post-secondary institutions to provide volunteer support, raise funds, and privately sponsor hundreds of Syrian refugees.

There were notable differences in RULSC compared to the traditional private sponsorship model. First, it leveraged technology to reach volunteers, crowdsource donations for

sponsorship groups, and broker online resources to support refugees in their resettlement journey – such as connecting job seekers with employers through Magnet's online job matching platform. Technology further aided in personalizing the experience for donors by connecting them to sponsorship groups and specific refugee families. Second, rather than having the private sponsorship group bear the brunt of the resettlement responsibility, RULSC harnessed the capacity of student volunteers and private sector organizations to provide critical post-arrival support. Third, the program was designed to be easy to navigate, and focused on removing roadblocks in order to engage "more than the usual suspects" rather than expecting sponsors to navigate complex forms or find access to resources. Lastly, RULSC relied on well-developed project management and reporting processes to set goals and monitor results.

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Timing was critical. Citizen demand to sponsor privately reached new heights following the publication of young Alan Kurdi's tragic photograph in September 2015. RULSC harnessed this interest, and its user-friendly interface sought to demystify private sponsorship and made engagement simple: donations and volunteer registration was made with a click of a button, while sponsorship "teams" of five or more were matched with families based on the team's capacity. Unlike traditional approaches, this involved no training or workshop attendance, but instead matched refugee families and volunteer sponsors based on the skills and resources offered. By undertaking this "mass customization" approach, the program was equipped to mobilize and coordinate significant human and financial resources at rapid speed. More than 4000 individuals provided donations generating more than nearly $5 million in a very short period of time. Over 1000 individuals registered to volunteer and nearly 150 refugee families were sponsored (RULSC, 2016).

The RULSC program not only mobilized large numbers of people but also a diverse coalition of groups across different sectors. Whereas the traditional model treats sponsorship as a more or less individualized activity that is coordinated mainly by faith-based organizations, in the RULSC model, sponsorship is privately undertaken but collectively executed. Critical to the success of the program was the partnerships with students and organizations seeking to hire Syrian newcomers, as well

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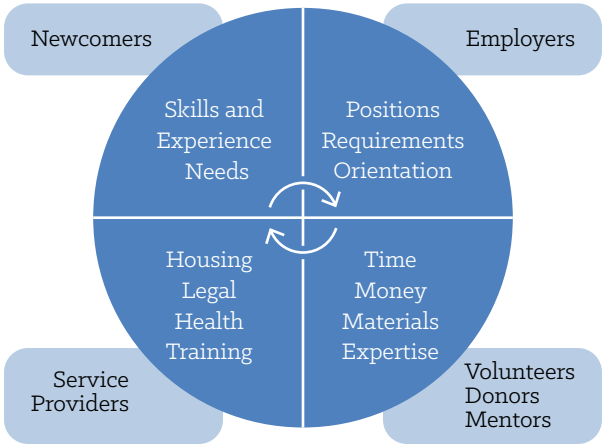
as the implementation of activities – such as job fairs and language training – that respond to research-identified newcomer needs. Student groups were encouraged to innovate and create new approaches and solutions through hackathons and competitions. The impetus behind a cross-sectoral and community-based approach comes from the understanding that innovation flourishes where sectors converge and effective response to social problems requires breaking through silos between the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

The RULSC model, implemented here to respond to a global refugee crisis, offers potential lessons to quickly and effectively mobilize and leverage additional resources. The goal is to more effectively address complex local and global crises and situations calling for urgent and challenging action. The model leverages student energy, existing university institutions, and the power of technology and crowdfunding. Its integrated yet decentralized network of persons, organizations, and resources responds to urgent needs.

The project reinforced the importance of undertaking a systems approach to dealing with social issues and to recognize that often the roadblocks are not due to the lack of capacity but rather political, organizational and behavioural policies and factors. In spite of this, the program, and a review of competitive technological solutions has helped inform the development of functional specifications for a global sharing economy platform to link refugees without homes to people willing to welcome them and, perhaps even more importantly, to leverage financial resources and human capital needed to support them.

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FIGURE 1: PORTAL STRUCTURE



Source: Cukier, W. & Jackson, S. (2018). Welcoming Syrian refugees to Canada. Technology-enabled social innovation. IEEE Canada International Humanitarian Technology Conference (IHTC), DOI: 10.1109/IHTC.2017.8058194, 32–36.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our experience with Indochinese refugees in 1979-80 and Syrian refugees in 2015 showed the power of innovation to harness the resources of civil society and the private sector to augment the resources of government and community organizations to help with the resettlement of refugees. The Federal Liberals, who began the campaign in third place, campaigned on the promise of bringing 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada by the end of 2015. The campaign was charged with pro- and anti-immigrant rhetoric, but the Liberals were ultimately victorious.

There can be little doubt that setting an aspirational goal and strong leadership helped fuel a "whole of government approach" to implementation that allowed more refugees to find new homes in Canada faster than anyone thought possible. Not only did departments work together to align on-the-ground supports with vetting and approval processes and settlement services, but the process was modified as it unfolded. Collaboration at all levels and jurisdictions – internationally, nationally, and more locally – was key to the speed and success of the resettlement initiative. Waiting for UNHCR designation was an impediment, so Canada accepted a prima facie designation of Syrians as refugees and harnessed the networks of community organizations to help identify candidates. Canada also set up local processing sites in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey with more flexibility in documentation requirements. Under the leadership of Canada's Border Security Agency, a multilayer security screening process was developed and deployed to meet operational timelines. The Minister also encouraged active engagement by the private sector and civil society to complement the work of established settlement agencies. By defining and focusing attention on a single goal – bringing 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada in 100 days – and challenging the status quo, Canada drove collaboration and innovation to accomplish what many thought was impossible (Government of Canada, 2019).

On a much smaller scale, the RULSC project showed the power of an entrepreneurial approach, of harnessing the power of citizens and of corporations to complement the work of government, settlement agencies and community organizations. It also demonstrated the often-untapped potential of youth – postsecondary students accounted for more than 500 of the volunteers that supported the initiative, providing everything from translation, to help with housing, education and navigating the health care system and even financial literacy and job searching. In the end, the program helped sponsor almost 500 Syrian refugees from widely diverse backgrounds (RULSC, 2016). Some had not completed high school, while others had PhDs. Five years later, many are now Canadian citizens. While not all have regained the status they lost when they left Syria, the group includes entrepreneurs, professionals, a dentist, now practising in Newfoundland, and many with steady work. Others have returned to postsecondary education. The children have done very well, including some with disabilities that would probably have severely limited their opportunities in Syria. Many have also sponsored their extended families – one family of four is now a family of five and has brought 12 members of their extended family to Canada, all of them employed. Many sponsors, including the Mayor of Toronto, John Tory, will say it was a life-changing experience and that the sponsors got more from the relationships than the refugees.

> "Many involved in the project came together to create Lifeline Afghanistan, hoping to apply the lessons learned to a new humanitarian crisis and to help support Canada's commitment to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan refugees."

Like many small scale "frugal" innovations, the long-term impact of RULSC is uncertain – will it drive change or will systems that protect entrenched interests and processes work to reinforce the status quo? (Chalmers, 2013.) For example, the policy structures which separated GARs and PSRs were sacrosanct leaving RULSC in the paradoxical position of having more sponsors and funds than "available" refugees (Keung, 2016). Many involved in the project came together to create Lifeline Afghanistan, hoping to apply the lessons learned to a new humanitarian crisis and to help support Canada's commitment to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan refugees.

While there are differences, lessons learned from the RULSC experience could and should inform government strategy to fulfill its commitment to sponsor Afghan refugees. But even beyond the support for refugees, the experience shows the value of social capital in helping with the resettlement process. Whether someone is a government-assisted refugee, a privately sponsored refugee, a blended visa office refugee, an economic immigrant, a temporary foreign worker or international student, many of the same principles apply. Navigating the settlement process, housing, education, health care and employment as well as acclimatizing to Canadian culture and expectations, is greatly facilitated by having social capital whether composed of relatives or sponsors. Finding ways to provide newcomers with a Canadian "family" has a significant impact on their social and economic success.

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