Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program: A Practitioners Perspective of its Past and Future

Barbara Treviranus  
Refugee Sponsorship Training Program

Michael Casasola  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Over its history, the private sponsorship program has been an important vehicle for Canada and Canadians in their response to refugees. It has been a flexible tool able to respond to both small and large-scale resettlement needs. The result is that thousands of refugees have found a durable solution in Canada. This article chronicles the evolution of this program. It argues that while the program is driven by the interest of Canadians to assist particular refugees, it is still in keeping with the international objectives of increasing and diversifying resettlement. It identifies a number of the challenges that program faces. Ultimately, it urges that the program be given greater attention and study so as to ensure that it is able to continue to provide additional refugees with a durable solution.

Disclaimer: This article reflects the views of its authors and does not necessarily represent the views of RSTP or UNHCR.

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Canada has a long tradition of resettling refugees. Since its creation in 1978 private sponsorship has been an integral part of this tradition. While currently less than 2% of Canada’s new immigrants arrive each year as privately sponsored refugees, the voluntary contribution made by Canadians through this program has nevertheless become an important part of Canada’s response to the international plight of refugees. The resettlement places offered by private sponsors are in addition to those offered through Canada’s government resettlement program. Through the program, over 180,000 refugees and persons in refugee-like situations who might not have otherwise been able to come to Canada were resettled between 1979 and 2002.

The program has not only expanded Canada’s resettlement capacity—it has also become an important part of Canadians’ personal experience concerning refugees. Private sponsorship provides a means through which the Canadian public can funnel their desire to provide direct personal and financial assistance. The result is that refugees benefit through increasing the number who are resettled, but also through the personal assistance provided by a sponsoring group, which ultimately enhances a resettled refugee’s ability to integrate in Canada.

While Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program is valued by both sponsors and immigration officials alike, it faces genuine challenges. The program’s objectives at times must compete against other Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) objectives for scarce resources. Some of the program’s difficulties are the consequence of its evolution from a program initially focused largely upon visa officer referrals of candidates for refugee sponsorship, to one where sponsoring groups identify most of the candidates. At the same time, practical operational problems have dogged the program almost since its inception, and the resulting delays and frustrations present real challenges to motivating participation.

This article examines Canada’s Private Sponsorship Program from the non-governmental (NGO) perspective of refugee advocates and sponsoring groups. It puts the Private Sponsorship Program into context within both international protection and Canadian resettlement. The article maps the evolution of the Private Sponsorship Program from its inception to the present day. It reveals the program’s strengths and flexibility, while also identifying long-standing concerns and challenges. Finally it highlights research gaps and suggests areas for future research.

The International Resettlement Context
It is important to put the Private Sponsorship Program into context—both