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Issue 17: Private Sponsorship in Canada: The Resettlement of Syrian Refugees in the Kitchener-Waterloo Region

Suzan M. Ilcan
University of Waterloo, suzan.ilcan@uwaterloo.ca

Diana Thomaz
Wilfrid Laurier University, dthomaz@balsillieschool.ca

Manuela Jimenez Bueno
University of Waterloo, mjimenezbueno@balsillieschool.ca

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resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees in a short period of time, in what became known as *Operation Syrian Refugees*. Since the launching of this Canadian operation, there has been abundant research analysing the large-scale resettlement process, its successes, limitations, and lessons for future policymaking and host communities (for example, see Drolet et al. 2018; Hamilton et al. forthcoming; Hynie et al. 2019; Kyriakides et al. 2018; Walton-Roberts et al. 2018), although little focused scholarly and policy attention on Syrian refugee resettlement in the Kitchener-Waterloo region.

This *Policy Points* contributes to these analyses by unpacking the particular lessons from one host community in Ontario, the Kitchener-Waterloo region, and highlighting the resettlement experiences of privately sponsored Syrian refugees in this area. It draws on policy, program, and scholarly documents, and on a selection of 55 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with mainly privately sponsored (and some government-assisted) Syrian refugees on their experiences of resettlement in southern Ontario, Canada.² The interviews were conducted in either Arabic or English and lasted 90 to 120 minutes. They took place in the Kitchener-Waterloo region, Mississauga, and Toronto³ in 2017 and 2018. Participants included 26 women and 29 men who lived in Syria both prior to and during the recent civil war. They were aged between 28 and 63 and from diverse social backgrounds. Most participants self-identified as Syrian; the remainder self-identified as Kurdish, Palestinian, and Turkmen. All interview participants had departed from Syria to the nearby host states of Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey during the period of 2012 to 2017. Upon their arrival in Canada, they received formal residency status and some now hold Canadian citizenship.

Through these research participants, we learn about some of their resettlement experiences, their connections to local organizations and social networks, and the challenges they face in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. In this *Policy Points*, we emphasize that strong leadership by governments and civil society groups and organizations is crucial in the private sponsorship of Syrians. In this context, more policy attention and research are needed to improve the private sponsorship program in the region. These include: offering educational training to new sponsors that is designed to assist both sponsors and newcomers in their relations with and expectations of each other; reuniting recipients with a selection of their extended family members who have been left behind, which can assist in reducing family emotional stress and fostering stronger familial networks; and expanding Syrians' ties to local community organizations and social networks, which can increase their ability to secure employment, augment forms of community belonging, and enrich their resettlement experiences.

Policy Context

Private Sponsorship in Canada

Canada's Private Sponsorship Program (PSP) was first introduced under the 1976 Immigration Act, and it has become an important element of both Canada's global humanitarian obligations and its immigration policies. The PSP was first implemented in 1979 to support Indochinese refugees whose mediatized

² The research for this *Policy Points* was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grant (2016-2019) and a SSHRC Connection Grant (2018-2019). The lead researcher, Suzan Ilcan, conducted all 55 interviews with Syrians living in southern Ontario and received translation assistance from MA students Zainab Abu Alrob, Violette Khammad, and Nour Al Nasser. A special thank you to the Syrian families in the Kitchener-Waterloo region for their valuable time, insights, and knowledge, and to the research assistants for their valuable translation and transcription work.

³ One of Canada's main global cities, Toronto is widely known for its diversity. In 2016, the city's foreign-born population accounted for 46% of its total inhabitants (Government of Ontario 2016). The 3,306 Syrian refugees (government-assisted and privately sponsored) who arrived in the Toronto area were welcomed with an outpouring of support by community organizations, private groups, and regular citizens. Still, as with other large metropolitan areas with high costs of living, the city's support agencies struggled to meet the increased demand during the initial phase of resettlement.

plight as “boat people” had been sparking public outrage (Labman 2016).⁴ In the more than 40 years of the program’s existence, 327,000 refugees have been welcomed to Canada by private sponsors, be they community associations, cultural, humanitarian, or faith-based organizations, or groups of five or more individuals (IRCC n.d.). Considered “the longest-running and most successful” private sponsorship program in the world (Lenard 2016, 301), it has served as a policy model for many countries. In 2016, for example, the Government of Canada, along with other actors, spearheaded the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, which aimed at supporting the governments of Argentina, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom to implement community sponsorship programs (Reynolds and Clark-Kazak 2019; UNHCR 2016).

Public awareness and interest have had significant impacts on the success of the private sponsorship program in Canada. The peak numbers of sponsorship arrangements have been reached when mass media and public authorities “have heralded certain refugee waves as priority concerns” (Lanphier 2003, 253), as during the Indochinese crisis in the late 1970s and the more recent Syrian Civil War. During these highly visible humanitarian crises, interest groups unconnected to the refugees usually offer substantial assistance. In visible forced displacement cases, sponsors tend to be more limited to those with a personal or organizational link to the affected refugee communities. Further, not all refugee groups have been similarly perceived as vulnerable people in need of immediate assistance; some influxes have been met with hostility and vilification instead of private sponsorship applications. For example, the arrival of the cargo ship MV Sun Sea to the British Columbia coast in 2010 carrying 492 Tamil asylum-seekers ignited wide-spread, anti-migrant sentiments across the country (Krishnamurti 2013). At the time, the ship’s passengers were portrayed by the media and the presiding Conservative government as human smugglers and terrorists, despite limited evidence supporting such claims.

Currently, the resettlement of refugees in Canada might be sponsored by the Canadian government, through the Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) program,⁵ or by private groups, through the Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR) program. There are five different categories of private sponsorship arrangements in Canada (excluding Quebec): Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs), Constituent Groups (CGs), Groups of Five (G5), Community Sponsors (CSs), and Blended Visa Office Referral (BVOR) (Macklin et al. 2018; Agrawal 2019). SAHs are mostly religious organizations, ethnocultural groups, or humanitarian organizations, which have formal agreements with the federal government. CGs are formed by individuals who sponsor refugees with the assistance of SAHs. G5s have five or more Canadians who provide and guarantee the necessary support. CSs are any private organizations that are willing to commit the requisite funds towards sponsorship. Finally, BVOR is dedicated to refugees referred to the Canadian government by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Private sponsors of BVOR refugees split the support costs with the government on a 50-50 basis. The Syrian refugee crisis was the first time the BVOR program was deployed. Some scholars have argued that it allows the federal government to fulfill its international commitments while shrugging its responsibility to fully fund refugee resettlement in Canada (Agrawal 2019).

Canada’s PSP stands out internationally for its longevity, but also because of the various types of private sponsorship arrangements available. Another unique characteristic of the program is that sponsored refugees arrive in Canada with permanent resident status – in most other countries, sponsored refugees are only given temporary residence in the host country. Additionally, privately sponsored refugees receive support from their sponsors to obtain housing (see, for example, Rose and Charette 2016) and other kinds of resettlement assistance, and they acquire financial support for up to

⁴ Canada resettled over 60,000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos between 1979-80 (Macklin et al. 2018).

⁵ The GARs receive federal income assistance as financial support through the Refugee Assistance Plan and settlement support from government-funded agencies, generally for a year ensuing arrival (see Hyndman and Hynie 2016).

one year after their arrival (or until the resettled refugee becomes economically self-sufficient, whichever happens first).

Advantages and Challenges of the Private Sponsorship Program

Although the PSP has been generally favoured as a more effective model of refugee resettlement than its government-assisted counterpart in Canada (Agrawal 2019; IRCC 2016), research suggests that it is more effective only in certain ways, such as integrating the newcomers into local practices, developing social networks, and forming a sense of belonging in the community more quickly. For example, the emotional and cultural support provided by sponsors tends to lead to more successful resettlement experiences; it often improves refugees' ability to become economically independent (Neuwirth and Clark 1981). Sponsors have been said to facilitate refugees' access to wider social networks and to enhance connections between refugees and their resettlement communities (Agrawal 2019; Hanley et al. 2018; Lanphier 2003); however, while these social networks may create quicker opportunities for employment, privately sponsored newcomers may face situations where they do not acquire sufficient official-language competence, which in turn can lead to low paying, precarious, and dead-end jobs (Hyndman and Hynie 2016).⁶ Moreover, refugees who have been sponsored by private groups report being satisfied with their experiences transitioning to Canada. They often forge life-long friendships with their sponsors, and the feelings of isolation and loneliness, commonly experienced by newly arrived refugees, can be attenuated (Lenard 2016). Sponsors also benefit from these arrangements by having an opportunity to support a humanitarian cause and, in cases where the sponsors are related to refugees in need of resettlement, the program offers them a way to reunite with relatives who were persecuted or otherwise displaced by conflict. Finally, the PSP has had promising effects that extend to various dimensions of Canadian society. It can promote pro-refugee attitudes among the broader public, especially in the communities where sponsored refugees are located. The program has been praised for its unique ability to empower "ordinary individuals from any background to take primary responsibility for all aspects of welcoming and integrating the newcomers" (Reynolds and Clark-Kazak 2019, 4).

Despite the positive aspects of the private sponsorship program, many challenges persist. As one might expect, given the complexity of human relationships, sponsor-sponsored relationships have not always unfolded in a constructive way. Research has indicated cases in which sponsors' "initial cultural, religious, and linguistic expectations" did not "mesh with the reality of the refugees they were matched with, just as refugees might have had unrealistic expectations of the sponsors and life in Canada" (Agrawal 2019, 944). Unlike government-sponsored refugees, who receive uniform service provision, the support provided to privately sponsored refugees varies greatly, depending on the group welcoming them (Woon 1987). First-time sponsors may be less prepared for the long-term demands that are needed to resettle refugees (Macklin et al. 2018). Similar to other refugee settlement streams, privately sponsored refugees also face challenges in learning English and finding employment. Those who had professional degrees in their home countries often convey aggravation with the standards of English language classes and with foreign credential recognition, as they are often unable to find a job that matches their skills and abilities (Agrawal 2019). Moreover, some privately sponsored refugees challenge the meanings associated with the status of refugee ascribed to them by asserting their authority to act as "persons of self-rescue" in search of a life beyond refuge (Kyriakides et al. 2018, 59). More broadly, a commonly identified concern of the private sponsorship model is the way it downloads refugee resettlement responsibility to the private sector (see Dauvergne 2005; Labman 2016). In this regard, Catherine Dauvergne emphasizes that such a model permits "the government an easy response to domestic pressure to act more humanely and allows it to withdraw from direct responsibility for

⁶ In contrast, GARs are encouraged to take up to one year to develop their language skills, which in turn often enables them to enter the job market with stronger knowledge of English or French (see Hyndman and Hyman 2016).

admission totals” (Dauvergne 2005, 93). While these concerns are not new, they raise important questions about the government-sponsorship relationship (Labman 2016) and about the broader political and social implications of ‘privatizing responsibility’ (Ilcan 2009).

Private Sponsorship of Syrian Refugees in Canada

Over 5.6 million people have fled Syria since the outbreak of the Civil War in 2011 (UNHCR n.d.). The vast majority of those are hosted by the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, where many experience precarious conditions of living (see, for example, Ilcan 2018; Ilcan et al. 2018). In 2015, the plight of Syrian refugees gained global notoriety as millions of people (not all of them from Syria) attempted to reach Western European countries in search of safety and survival. In early September of 2015, the tragic image of the body of a three-year-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach, reached and shocked global audiences, arguably affecting different governments’ willingness to welcome Syrian refugees. Kurdi’s family had been trying to reach Canada, where they had relatives, so his death helped bring the “Syrian refugee crisis” to the centre of Canadian politics. In an electoral year, Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau promised to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015. Once sworn into office in early November, Prime Minister Trudeau oversaw what became known as *Operation Syrian Refugees*, through which the federal government resettled 26,172 Syrian refugees between 3 November 2015 and 29 February 2016 (Government of Canada 2017). By January 2017, 40,081 Syrians had been resettled across more than 350 Canadian communities (Government of Canada n.d.). Forty-seven percent of resettled Syrian refugees were privately sponsored (Houle 2019).

Special accommodations were made to resettle this influx of Syrian refugees in a short period of time. For example, the Canadian Government prioritized the processing of sponsorship applications for this refugee group.⁷ Processing delays are a longstanding and persistent problem for those seeking to sponsor refugees in Canada (CCR 2004; Lenard 2016). Yet, despite efforts to expedite this process, the frustrations of private sponsor groups across Canada who were waiting for their Syrian sponsored parties to arrive received widespread media attention (see, for example, Stueck and Mahoney 2016). The prioritization of Syrian applications also resulted in applications for non-Syrian refugees, some of whom have been in protracted situations, to be subjected to even further processing deferrals, which may result in several years’ delay in some cases (Hyndman et al. 2017).⁸

The Kitchener-Waterloo Region

The Kitchener-Waterloo region has an extensive history of addressing immigration and refugee issues, holding diverse events and forums on these issues, and welcoming immigrants (Bedard 2016, 31; Cullen and Walton-Roberts 2019). The “twin cities” had an initial settlement of German Mennonite farming families from Pennsylvania in the late 18th and early 19th century on land bought from the Six Nations. European immigrants became a dominant newcomer group during the two world wars, but the region currently attracts highly skilled migrants and students from diverse nationalities. It has a booming high-tech sector, three higher education institutions (University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University, and Conestoga College), and a long tradition of refugee sponsorship, especially through religious groups.

Between January 2015 and August 2019, 4,215 refugees (55% GARs, 8% BVORs, and 37% PSRs) arrived in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. The highest proportion of permanent residents without

⁷ The swift processing of Syrian refugee applications is due in large part to the use of *prima facie* status determination and the selection of “vulnerable” candidates, often families or women and children, who were perceived as low security threats (Hyndman et al., 2017, p. 57-58).

⁸ Other examples of accommodations made for resettling Syrian refugees include the waiving of the requirement that private sponsors provide evidence that the individual(s) they intend to sponsor have formal refugee status (IRCC 2016a), and the waiving of Syrian refugees’ obligation to repay travel loans granted through the Immigration Loans Program (Lynch 2016).

knowledge of the two official languages arrived in the region in 2016, which corresponds to the increase in the number of Syrian arrivals in that year.⁹ The region is the 10th largest destination for government-assisted refugees and 9th for privately sponsored refugees in Canada (IRCC 2019). Approximately 850 government-assisted and 350 privately sponsored Syrians currently live in the region. Like many other areas resettling Syrian refugees, the region has a list of federally funded service providers, NGOs, private sponsors, and other community-based organizations offering support to newcomers. In order to better cope with the incoming Syrian families, the Kitchener-Waterloo region launched the Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan (RRPP), an initiative combining municipal offices, resettlement organizations, community groups, and private sponsors to effectively assist newly-arrived Syrian refugees. The RRPP is considered an “effective model for collaborative leadership” between local government offices and partners in the Kitchener-Waterloo region, but it also provides “coordinated communication to provincial and federal counter parts... [by] raising concerns and promoting solutions to the challenges that our community has been facing...” (Bedard 2016, 19).

Many community groups and organizations provide support to help resettle Syrians in the region. Local organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, Kitchener-Waterloo Muslim Social Services, local mosques and churches, and ShamRose for Syrian culture have particularly focused on emotional aspects of resettlement, seeking to foster a sense of belonging among the Syrian newcomers. For example, Big Brothers Big Sisters Waterloo Region provides a Summer Discovery camp program for Syrian youth that organizes activities to assist with English language skills, music therapy, and a “hello game,” where the goal is for youth to become socially engaged, make friends, and develop a sense of belonging. Likewise, the Muslim Association of Canada’s Embrace Syria program aims to assist newly arrived Syrians in meeting basic needs and developing strong community connections, through efforts such as matching refugee families to local host families and coordinating festival sponsorships to enable Syrian families to participate in local community events.¹⁰ Several privately sponsored Syrians in the region highlighted their positive ties to this local association. Many commended their private sponsors’ affiliation with this association, which assisted their children’s resettlement in schools and neighbourhoods, gave them the opportunity to make new friends, and helped families expand their social networks (Interviews, Kitchener, April 2018). As one privately sponsored Syrian man in the region attested: “It’s easier for them (privately sponsored Syrians) than the government-sponsored ones. Because [the former] have the community; you have people committed to helping you. They start dealing with you as a family” (Interview, Kitchener, March 2018).

Several Christian churches in the region have privately sponsored Syrian families and are helping them to feel connected to local events, neighbourhoods, and communities. One Syrian woman, Mona [pseudonym], whose family was privately sponsored three years ago by a Group of Five who attend the same church in Kitchener, recalls how her sponsors introduced them to many people and remain their close friends. “In the beginning, they helped us settle in Kitchener... they found us a place to live, gave us furniture and clothes, took us to doctors... They brought us to local community events... [such as] YMCA events... Our sponsors introduced us to many people and they even found my husband a welding job” (Interview, Kitchener, August 2017). Although previous research has revealed that private sponsors can be crucial resources in finding employment (see, for example, Eby et al. 2011), in our study only a small number of Syrians reported that their sponsors were able to connect them to larger social networks that would increase their chances of finding employment. In fact, most (over 70%) reported facing structural

⁹ The number of these permanent residents totals 1,690, which represents 45% of this category (Waterloo Region Immigration Profile 2019, 27).

¹⁰ For more on these programs, see: https://www.immigrationwaterlooregion.ca/en/business-opportunities/resources/Events-and-Initiatives/donate/Syrian_Fund_Grant_Outcomes_Report_February_2018.pdf

and systemic barriers when seeking employment. Those who had established professional careers in Syria, such as in the medical, pharmacy, and education professions, frequently expressed exasperation with foreign credential recognition, which often prevents them from obtaining a job that pairs with their proficiencies and work experience (see also Agrawal 2019). However, many emphasized the growing expansion of their social networks which was understood to provide crucial emotional support and assist in securing employment. Indeed, social networks are increasingly central for newcomers' early employment opportunities. Recent research on private sponsorship experiences for Syrians in six Canadian cities has concluded that obtaining employment "was predicted both by having relatives in Canada and having friends from other ethnic communities" (Hynie et al. 2019, 46).

In recent years, a variety of local and non-profit organizations have advanced new initiatives to provide enhanced resettlement experiences for newcomers in the region, including developing new services and forming connections with private sector employers to assist Syrian refugees in their search for paid work. For example, Kitchener's Working Centre, established in 1982 to build community interest in responding to unemployment and poverty, provides diverse community-based initiatives for Syrian and other newcomers. It offers a number of services to support employers who want to hire refugees, including services that provide them with a "job coach" who would accompany a newcomer to their job on the first day and assist the person in understanding specific terms and navigating health and training sessions.¹¹

In addition to local organizations in the region that assist Syrians and other groups in their resettlement processes, numerous private sponsors have not only sponsored Syrian families and supported their resettlement in the Kitchener-Waterloo region, but they have also helped them with housing, health, and educational matters, establishing their connections to community events, and enhancing their social networks. Although privately sponsored Syrians are not a homogeneous group, as there are different types of sponsorship (see, for example, Hynie et al. 2019, 46; Kyriakides et al. 2018), many speak highly of their relationships with their sponsors, emphasizing their sponsors' ability to connect them to community groups, religious organizations, and friendship circles, which helps them widen their social networks (Interviews, Kitchener, April 2018).¹² In interviews, several privately sponsored Syrians highlighted the role of their sponsors in recognizing the importance of education for their children and understanding that some Syrian children have had to re-start their education and, consequently, face challenges in school, including social and academic barriers, English language struggles, and mental health issues. As one Syrian mother of three recalled:

During the war in Syria, my oldest daughter experienced horrible things; she witnessed many bad things and has suffered... She is having a difficult time concentrating, sleeping, eating properly, making friends... Our sponsors helped our family: they made an appointment with a therapist for my daughter and sometimes they take her to the appointment... I think she is doing better now (Interview, Kitchener, June 2017).

Additionally, many privately sponsored Syrians in the region stressed the challenges facing both sponsors and newcomers. On the one hand, they highlighted that sponsors may not fully understand the

¹¹ Likewise, Reception House, Waterloo Region's community service provider for government-assisted refugees, has developed a volunteer-based initiative, the Family Partnership Program, through which government-assisted refugees are matched with a person or family from the region who provides social and practical resettlement support for one year. Initiatives like the Family Partnership Program may be instrumental in closing the gap in resettlement outcomes for government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees while simultaneously providing connections and spaces for Syrian newcomers to become more socially active in their new communities, and to gain better access to employment through these networks.

¹² This differs from the experiences of many government-assisted Syrians who often feel isolated and without adequate social networks (Interviews, Kitchener, March 2018).

long period of resettlement that newcomers often require in order to achieve financial and employment security (Interviews, Kitchener, 2017 and 2018; see also Macklin et al. 2018) and to overcome language barriers and personal and mental health issues (Interviews, Kitchener, 2017). On the other hand, they emphasized being separated from their adult siblings, married and unmarried daughters and sons, parents, or other extended family members, and some newcomers expected their sponsors to unite them but became “deeply disappointed” when this did not occur. For example, one privately sponsored Syrian woman recalls the family members she left behind after arriving in Kitchener: “In Lebanon, we left behind my mother, two brothers and three sisters, who are not married. Of my two brothers, only one is married... . The married one lives with his in-laws. My sisters and brother [live] together [in Beirut]...”.

In the context of family separation, only some Syrians stressed that their sponsors had financially assisted or privately sponsored members of their extended family who were left behind in Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey. Indeed, in interviews they emphasized the numerous applicants and sponsors who have been waiting for long periods of time for the processing to occur. However, due to limited support and resources, many Syrian families in the region have not been reunited with their extended family members, which has produced emotional hardship for them. One privately sponsored Syrian man, who has lived in the region for more than four years and has been waiting for two years for his parents to join him and his family, shared his thoughts about the future:

Our dreams are for our kids to study and for all of us to settle. I would love for my parents to come here. I would like to give back to the people here. I can do that by working and paying taxes. For the church, I try [to give back]. I used to get \$3000 a month, so I donated to the church. They help us a lot and they really like us. They did a celebration for me and I gave a speech... Even at the church, everyone wanted to come and say hi to me after my address. And one guy wanted to give me money... I told him to put it away, I won't take it (Interview, Kitchener, February 2018).

In the interview, he emphasized that he and his family members are not merely facing the effects of resettlement and family separation, but are making a life for themselves in Canada as they, like other Syrians in the region, confront challenging conditions as well as new and stimulating prospects and opportunities.

Policy Considerations and Research Needs

This *Policy Points* has focused on the private sponsorship of refugees in Canada, with particular attention given to the experiences of privately sponsored Syrians in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. It has highlighted the variety of practices and initiatives that have developed and are developing within the region as well as some of the challenges. The overwhelming majority of privately sponsored Syrians in the study have emphasized their gratitude to and satisfaction with their sponsors, and recognized the extensive and diverse forms of support they received from them. However, much more research is needed on the sponsors themselves (see, for example, Macklin et al. 2018), especially in terms of the nature of the relationship, the types of Syrian families they sponsor, and the kinds of social, cultural, and economic support they provide to them. More research is also needed into understanding the diverse ways to foster the development of social networks for newcomers in the region, since such networks can help to secure employment. With respect to the role of religious organizations, it is important to explore how ties to religious organizations intersect with other aspects of social identity that may help to shape Syrians' social networks.

With the above issues in mind, there are several ways that the private sponsorship refugee program could be improved. These include:

- (a) enhancing the program so that its recipients can be reunited with a selection of their extended family members who have been left behind, which in turn would reduce family emotional stress and foster stronger familial networks;
- (b) enriching ties with local community organizations to expand support and social networks for program recipients, thus advancing their resettlement experiences; and
- (c) providing educational training to new sponsors about the expectations and demands associated with the sponsor-sponsored relationship.

Given that the private sponsorship refugee program takes a variety of forms, at the research level it is important to understand the types of challenges facing newcomers (e.g., concerns around accessing sustainable employment and social networks) and sponsors (e.g., some lacking experience in refugee sponsorship), which will be useful in improving the government's organization of the program in terms that support both refugees and sponsors, reduce the uncertainties associated with resettlement for newcomers, and move sponsor-sponsored relations beyond limited understandings of refuge. We view strong leadership by governments and civil society organizations as crucial to the success of the private sponsorship of refugees.

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