

Policy Brief

Towards a European Model for Community Sponsorship

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#CommunitySponsorship
#MigrationEU
#NewPact

Community sponsorship has become an increasingly popular instrument for setting up safe and legal pathways to protection in recent years. As part of its New Pact on Asylum and Migration, the European Commission now assumed ownership of the concept and called for a distinct “European model” of community sponsorship. However, the Commission remains vague as to how a European approach should look like. This Policy Brief analyses existing sponsorship schemes in EU member states and argues that a “European model” should be based on two principles: the additionality of sponsorship schemes and their focus on the protection of beneficiaries.

Local actors play an increasingly salient role in shaping EU asylum and migration policy. While migrants [predominantly settle](#) close to large urban areas, [smaller towns](#) and rural communities are equally important for the reception and integration of asylum seekers. Recently, cities and regional governments across the EU have started counterbalancing restrictive national policies by demanding a stronger say in the [admission](#) of asylum seekers.

An example of such local engagement that has attracted much attention over recent years at both global and European level is community sponsorship. There is no settled definition of what community sponsorship entails precisely. Yet, inherent to the [concept](#) is a “shared responsibility between civil society and the state for the admission and/or integration of refugees”. On the one hand, community sponsorship offers opportunities for countries to offer a greater variety of safe and legal pathways to protection. Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Belgium and Portugal have all piloted different types of community sponsorship. On the other hand, its loose definition may lead to lower reception and protection standards.

As part of its [New Pact on Asylum and Migration](#), the European Commission acknowledged the growing relevance of community sponsorship as a legal migration instrument. It even [called](#) for a distinctly “European model of community sponsorship” thus [claiming](#) “a sense of ownership”. There is, what’s more, the hint of a potentially important role for community sponsorship in the future implementation of the EU’s asylum and migration policy. We thus face a contrast between the growing relevance and political endorsement of community sponsorship and its vague definition and enactment.

This policy brief looks at current EU practices and asks what might characterise a “European model” of community sponsorship? By analysing selective examples, we make recommendations as to how the Commission might put a European approach to community sponsorship to work.

1. What is community sponsorship?

Given the absence of a settled definition, community sponsorship is best described as a modality of welcoming asylum seekers based on the shared responsibility of private actors and public authorities. It does not thereby constitute a legal pathway in its own right. Instead, the concept has been deployed with a degree of flexibility across EU member states (and in third countries) as an [all-encompassing approach](#) to supporting the integration of refugees and offering pathways to protection. Sponsors bear financial and practical responsibilities for integrating beneficiaries in the host society, including the provision of housing, language and cultural support. Ideally, community sponsorship should have the following three effects: (i) extra pathways to protection, with more refugees admitted on top of a member state’s existing resettlement commitment (‘additionality principle’); (ii) better integration outcomes; (iii) greater public support for letting refugees in by directly involving local communities.

Current practice can broadly be sub-divided in two categories: Community sponsorship can either take place within traditional resettlement programmes or be linked to a complementary pathway. In the latter case, it operates independently and thus creates additional safe and legal pathways. This usually involves a sponsoring individual or organisation at all stages of the process, which includes the identification of beneficiaries, as well as their admission and integration process. Family-based sponsorship and the humanitarian corridors programme are examples of this category (see: Table 1). In [humanitarian corridors programmes](#), faith-based organisations refer to local partners on the ground who identify potential beneficiaries based on their degree of vulnerability. Beneficiaries are granted humanitarian visas and can apply for asylum upon arrival in the country of destination. These organisations cover all costs and responsibilities related to the travel, accommodation and integration of beneficiaries.

The second category of community sponsorship is resettlement-based and builds on existing state-led channels. While some member states deploy this approach within their resettlement efforts, others do so by creating additional resettlement places (see: Table 1). The identification and selection of sponsored persons is done by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and based primarily on vulnerability criteria. The responsibility of private sponsors remains limited to providing integration support. Sponsors assume the role of mentors who support beneficiaries’ integration into the host society, e.g. by facilitating encounters with the community, providing language support or assisting beneficiaries with the authorities. The sponsoring entity here is more flexible and can consist of individuals (usually a minimum of five)

or civil society organisations. Following the United Kingdom's lead, which pioneered resettlement-based community sponsorship in 2016, Germany, Ireland, Portugal and Spain have launched similar schemes. The [Global Refugee Forum](#) in December 2019 fuelled the popularity of resettlement-based sponsorship, with Ireland and Spain pledging to expand their current schemes, while Belgium and Portugal committed to establishing pilot models.

1.1. Community sponsorship in the New Pact on Asylum and Migration

The call to support community sponsorship schemes as a way of increasing legal avenues to entering the EU is not new. The Commission advocated private sponsorship in its 2016 [guidelines on regular migration](#) and conducted an extensive feasibility [study](#) on such schemes. In line with the recommendations of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), the Commission further invited member states in [2019](#) and [2020](#) to expand existing community sponsorship schemes and develop new ones through two designated funding calls under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) reiterates this call and mentions sponsorship as a tool to [enhance member states' resettlement efforts and improve integration success](#).

While the New Pact marks a qualitative shift by explicitly calling for a distinct **“European model of community sponsorship”**, it remains vague as to the details that should underpin a common European approach. The design and implementation of community sponsorship programmes ultimately remain a matter for the member states. Still, the Commission has arguably missed an opportunity to define clearly the principles and standards that it wishes to promote [“through funding, capacity-building and knowledge-sharing, in cooperation with civil society”](#). Rather than outlining the characteristics of a distinct “European model” of sponsorship, the New Pact merely refers to the possibility of “drawing upon the wide range of models of humanitarian admission” ([#13](#)). Further, the Commission vaguely refers to a division of responsibilities between private and state actors as well as to transparent and non-discriminatory criteria for selecting beneficiaries ([#15](#)). Yet the New Pact refers neither to the principle of additionality nor to the need for a clear protection status of beneficiaries. Furthermore, it expresses no preference for any of the two categories of community sponsorship outlined above.

This lack of clarity in the Commission's recommendation thus provides little guidance for member states when exploring prospects for expanding community sponsorship into a putative common European model. A clearer definition of the characteristics of existing sponsorship practices and their role in creating such a “European model” may help to that end. In addition to the Commission's emphasis on sponsors' responsibility (i) and the selection criteria for beneficiaries (ii), we argue that a closer look at the principle of additionality (iii) and beneficiaries' protection status (iv) are equally relevant factors when it comes to setting down the potential added value of community sponsorship.

2. Community sponsorship in Europe: patchwork or common pattern?

This section analyses selective examples of community sponsorship programmes and identifies their main characteristics in line with the four principles mentioned above. A review of these criteria points to the heterogeneity of existing practice and provides relevant lessons for the process of formulating a “European model”.

First, the principle of additionality is (almost) only upheld when community sponsorship is tied to a complementary pathway. Additionality remains an essential criterion, if community sponsorship is to complement resettlement and broaden the number of legal pathways. Where community sponsorship was tied to a complementary pathway, programmes have always come on top of member states' resettlement commitments. This has been the case for family-based sponsorship in Germany and Ireland, as well as for the humanitarian corridors programme in Italy, France and Belgium (see: Table 1).

Resettlement-based community sponsorship can generally take place *in addition to* and *within* existing government resettlement schemes and quotas. Such schemes have outgrown the number of sponsorship programmes tied to complementary pathways in recent years (see: Table 1). Even so, most European resettlement-based schemes fail to meet the criterion of additionality. Whereas Germany's NesT programme remains a notable exception, the UK pledged to make its sponsorship schemes additional as of 2020. As long as states use community sponsorship as a way of fulfilling their resettlement pledges, an expansion of community sponsorship in Europe will miss the target of expanding the number of admission places available to persons in need of protection.

Second, member states proceed differently in selecting beneficiaries. In line with the Commission's recommendations, selection criteria should be transparent and non-discriminatory. In family-based sponsorship and the humanitarian corridors programme, private sponsors are responsible for selecting beneficiaries. Under the humanitarian corridors programme, [local partners help to identify and select the beneficiaries](#). This way, community sponsorship targets specific groups of beneficiaries. Meanwhile, resettlement-based community sponsorship in Germany, Ireland, Spain and Portugal relies on the UNHCR for referring beneficiaries. Instead of 'naming' beneficiaries, they apply a 'matching system' where these are identified using [vulnerability criteria](#). These two different selection procedures offer distinct advantages and disadvantages. If sponsors choose who should be admitted, community sponsorship can help diversify existing safe and legal pathways to protection. However, if such programmes are not designed to amplify traditional resettlement, they risk undermining the principle that resettlement should benefit primarily the most vulnerable refugees.

Third, the protection status granted to beneficiaries of community sponsorship equally varies across member states. Persons admitted through a scheme tied to a complementary pathway were often not guaranteed full refugee status. This is true for the humanitarian corridors programmes in Belgium, France and Italy where beneficiaries had to apply for protection after arrival. Under the family-based sponsorship schemes in Germany and Ireland, beneficiaries received humanitarian protection status (see: Table 1), whereas resettlement-based schemes operated in Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the UK all granted beneficiaries full refugee status.

Fourth, the responsibility of sponsors diverges significantly across member states. Family-based sponsorship and humanitarian corridors programmes were often characterised by a substantial shift of responsibility from the state to private actors. Sponsors had to cover all costs related to the beneficiaries' travel, admission and integration, sometimes for an unlimited period of time. In more recent resettlement-based schemes, sponsor responsibility is limited to integration support. Even so, the scope of sponsors' responsibility and financial commitment has varied across resettlement-based sponsorship programmes. While in the UK, Ireland and Spain the

sponsoring group needs to organise housing for the beneficiary, the German Nest programme further requires sponsors to cover housing costs for two years. Another difference lies in sponsors' proof of financial means if they are to be considered eligible for sponsorship. In Ireland and the UK, sponsors are required to evidence their financial means, must be at least €10,000 and £9,000 respectively.

Lastly, most community sponsorship schemes grant access to only a limited number of refugees (see Table 1). This is true for both categories of sponsorship. The humanitarian corridors programme in Belgium and France, for example, admitted just 150 and 365 refugees, respectively. As few as 29 refugees arrived under the Spanish resettlement-based sponsorship scheme, whereas 30 were admitted under Ireland's resettlement-based programme. Thus far, Germany's family-based sponsorship scheme (23,500), Italy's humanitarian corridors programme (2,239) and Portugal's relocation effort (1,534) are the only examples in which a sizeable number of refugees have been admitted. What's more, sponsorship schemes are predominantly designed as pilot projects and thus limited in duration. Apart from ad-hoc schemes in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, community sponsorship programmes were mostly set up in Western European member states.¹

In summary, existing practice within member states' community sponsorship schemes does not suggest any distinct European approach. There is rather a patchwork of diverse practices including both resettlement-based sponsorship and sponsorship tied to a complementary pathway. One reason for the heterogenous character of existing programmes is the fact that member states have considerable leeway in programme design and implementation. While this has been an incentive for EU countries to explore sponsorship as an option for providing safe and legal pathways, it contradicts the Commission's ambitions to forge a common European model.

Convergence towards a common pattern may nevertheless emerge from the recent trend towards resettlement-based sponsorship schemes. This is a positive development to the extent that it provides clarity on the beneficiary's legal status. All resettlement-based sponsorship schemes in the EU awarded full refugee status (see: Table 1). It also facilitates coherent selection criteria via the UNHCR and designates clear responsibilities for sponsors and the state. However, almost none of the existing resettlement-based sponsorship schemes has provided additional pathways to protection. Conflating sponsorship with resettlement therefore demands clear safeguards if the cornerstone for a European model of community sponsorship is to be found.

¹ These examples were excluded from the overview in Table 1, because they were simply designed on an ad hoc basis.

Table 1: Overview of community sponsorship programmes in the EU

Programme	Approach	Relation to resettlement programmes	Responsibility of sponsors	Selection process of beneficiaries	Protection status	Time-frame	Number of persons admitted
Belgium: humanitarian corridor programme	Tied to complementary pathway	additional	housing and integration support for one year	local partners identify and refer beneficiaries	beneficiaries apply for protection status after arrival	2017-2018	150
France: humanitarian corridor programme		additional	travel, housing, integration support for undefined period (1-2 years)	local partners identify and refer beneficiaries	beneficiaries apply for protection status after arrival	2017 – ongoing	365
Germany: family reunification (HAP)		additional	Full financial support for five years, excluding healthcare	Family members submit application for relatives	beneficiaries receive national humanitarian protection status	2013- ongoing	23,500
Ireland: family reunification		additional	sponsors cover all costs for two years (but renewable)	Family members submit application for relatives	beneficiaries receive national humanitarian protection status	2014	119
Italy: humanitarian corridor programme		additional	travel, housing, integration support for undefined period (usually 1-2 years)	sponsoring organisations identify and select beneficiaries of program	90-day temporary visa; beneficiaries apply for protection status after arrival	2015 - ongoing	2239
Germany: community sponsorship “NesT” (pilot)	Resettle-ment-based	additional	sponsorship group (min. 5 persons) covers costs of rent for two years and provides integration support for one year	UNHCR referrals	refugee status	2019 - ongoing	n/a (goal: 500)
Ireland: community sponsorship		not additional	sponsoring group (min. 5 persons) organises housing for two years and provide integration support for 18 months (financial and non-financial), raise a minimum of €10,000	UNHCR referrals	refugee status	2018 - ongoing	30
Portugal: community sponsorship		not additional (contribution to existing relocation efforts)	Sponsors responsible for accommodation and other support services for 18 months	UNHCR referrals	refugee status	2015 - 2018	1534
Spain: community sponsorship “Auzolana II” (pilot)		not additional	Basque regional government sponsors beneficiaries for two years, social organisations organise housing for two years and must fundraise minimum of 10,000€	UNHCR referrals	refugee status	2019 - 2021	29
United Kingdom: community sponsorship		not additional (but pledged additionality as of 2020)	sponsors must secure housing for two years (but state covers costs of housing), provide financial assistance (9,000 £) and provide integration support for one year	UNHCR referrals	refugee status	2016 - ongoing	450

Note: The data was collected from various sources, in particular from [Amnesty International](#) (2019), [Caritas](#) (2019), [European Commission](#) (2018) and [UNHCR](#) (2020). The information on the number of admitted refugees may not be up-to date given the lack of available recent sources in some cases.

3. A principle-based “European Model” of community sponsorship

Despite the Commission’s ambition to forge a “European model” of community sponsorship, implementation ultimately remains a matter for the member states. This flexibility in setting up sponsorship schemes has been one of the main reasons why member states started exploring the concept. More rigid parameters for setting up new sponsorship programmes may therefore disincentivise member states’ participation. As current negotiations on the [Resettlement Framework](#) show, designating common European standards may further risk (mis)using safe and legal pathways as an instrument for migration management. The Commission should therefore not only consider whether further harmonisation is practically possible, but also to what extent it is desirable. Establishing a common European approach can nevertheless be of added value when it is tied to certain safeguards which help ensure that sponsorship programmes create additional pathways and remain geared to providing protection.

First, the **principle of additionality** should underpin Europe’s approach to community sponsorship. This implies that where sponsorship is tied to resettlement, it should serve to establish further legal pathways. For pragmatic reasons, initial sponsorship schemes may be placed within resettlement programmes. Yet, such schemes should always be established on the premise of eventually becoming additional. In a broader sense, the principle of additionality also implies that legal pathways to protection should not be used as a fig leaf for an otherwise restrictive deterrence policy. Member states hence remain obliged to receive and process spontaneously arriving asylum seekers.

Second, the European model of community sponsorship should **focus on protection**. This should underpin selection criteria, legal status, and sponsor responsibilities. Sponsorship programmes should always be designed to benefit people who meet the Geneva Convention’s definition of a refugee. Any other selection criteria should remain secondary. Moreover, sponsorship programmes must provide clarity on the beneficiary’s legal status after arrival, which should include the same rights and entitlements as refugees arriving through other legal avenues. Lastly, sponsorship schemes must ensure that the receiving member states bear ultimate responsibility for granting protection and ensuring the beneficiary’s integration where the sponsor fails to meet his/her obligations.

Of the three instruments enlisted by the Commission (funding, capacity-building, knowledge sharing), **funding** is likely to be the most important tool for promoting these principles. For example, it would be helpful to explicitly include sponsorship as a funding priority in the new Asylum and Migration Fund (AMF) regulation. To incentivise the additionality of sponsorship programmes, another option could be to extend the current payment of lump sums (EUR 6,000 – 10,000) to refugees who are admitted outside member states’ contributions to the Union’s resettlement programmes. Given the limited scope of existing sponsorship programmes, increasing financial support for member states and civil society actors is required to guarantee that current pilot projects can transit into reliable legal pathways. That way, the Commission can help ensure that the stronger role of local actors in shaping EU asylum and migration policy is backed by a principle-based “European model” of community sponsorship.

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