



Q&A: Trending Issues on Migration

Community-based refugee sponsorship in Spain:

What are the experiences?

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- Since 2018, Spain has set the course for a new approach to resettling refugees by introducing the concept of community-based refugee sponsorship. The country has started a pilot project in three Basque cities, Bilbao, Donostia and Vitoria, where 29 Syrians have currently been resettled.
- The concept of community-based refugee sponsorship was originally introduced in Canada forty years ago. Under the program, refugees can resettle with support and funding from private or joint government-private sponsors who vouch for the refugee. So far only a few European countries have tried to adopt the model, and for Spain it is the first time.
- According to testimonies from local groups, the first experiences are very promising. The project is developing a new policy whereby individuals may directly engage in refugee resettlement efforts in their town. The power of local community groups (usually faith communities) for the bottom-up integration of refugees is making a valuable difference.
- As for the future, the Spanish central government, the Basque regional government and UNHCR are championing the pilot and are interested in exploring the possibility of expanding the pilot to other regions in Spain. Dialogues are underway, but so far no agreement has been reached.

The Genesis – What motivated Spain to start a Community Sponsorship Program for Refugees?

The model of private sponsorship has never been tested in Spanish migration and asylum policies before. Official asylum seekers' reception and resettlement is managed exclusively by the central government. Resettlement applications (from outside Europe) are analyzed by the Ministry of the Interior. Once approved, refugees and asylum seekers are received in places facilitated by the Ministry of Labor, Migration and Social Security, be it a public center or, more often, one managed by a non-governmental organization subsidized by the Ministry.

However, in 2019 a pilot project has been put in place for the first time in Spain, where resettlement and integration of refugees is undertaken by different public administrative institutions (State, autonomous community and municipalities), social organizations and private citizens that welcome refugees into their communities.

Community sponsorship programs are an innovative way to welcome refugees, and to facilitate their reception and integration. The programs mobilize and rely upon the enormous potential of organised citizens' solidarity. The programs are complementary to the State's efforts to receive and integrate refugees and asylum seekers.

Essentially, the idea is based on the model used in Canada, a country with a long history of welcoming refugees. Canada introduced a private sponsorship program forty years ago, which demonstrates that community-based sponsorship programs can build powerful bonds between sponsors and refugees. Under the program, refugees can resettle in Canada with support and funding from private or joint government-private sponsorship.

For Spain, this process took more time. The disposition to consider new models to welcome refugees dates back to the events of 2015. The arrival by sea of around one million migrants and refugees in Europe in 2015 was a landmark event. In Spain, there was a grassroots surge in support for the rights of refugees. Especially in the Basque region, the citizens widely mobilized to welcome refugees, and Basque institutions were very sensitive to this demand. The Basque regional government has a long tradition of support for social policies, human rights and international cooperation for development. It therefore expressed its interest in collaborating with the Government of Spain to improve and strengthen the reception of asylum seekers and refugees in the region. After many discussions, in January 2018, the Basque regional government finally signed a bilateral agreement with the central government (Auzolana¹) to complement, in a coordinated way and within the competences of the regional government, the reception and integration procedures of asylum seekers and refugees in the Basque country following the model established by the central government.

At the same time, there were increasing demands from civil society institutions and regional administrations that the central government should develop safe and legal paths to protection in Spain, as well as additional reception measures and policies. On November 2017, a delegation of the [Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative](#) (GRSI) visited Spain and gathered with a broad range of government and community representatives in meetings organized by UNHCR's Spain office.

In June 2018 there was a change of government and the leader of the Spanish Socialist Party became Prime Minister; he made several steps for a more open migration policy. The next month, on

1 Auzolana can be translated as "proposal for shared-work".

July 16 2018, a joint statement committing to the concept of community-based refugee sponsorship was signed by Spain, the UK, Ireland, Argentina, New Zealand and Canada. The model connects refugee families with local groups, supporting the new arrivals' integration into their new community.

Following the meeting, the Spanish Government officially announced the launch of a pilot project in cooperation with the Basque regional government and UNHCR Spain:

"The Spanish government, together with the regional government of the Basque Country, and with the collaboration of the UNHCR, is working to develop a community sponsorship programme, building on the solidarity with refugees shown by the people of Spain. This programme presents not only the chance to strengthen resettlement and refugee integration in Spain, but also a unique opportunity to advance coordination among central, regional and local authorities to welcome refugees. Spain hopes the successful implementation of the programme in the Basque Country will lead to the implementation of similar initiatives in Spanish regions that have expressed an interest in contributing to this effort."

Consuelo Rumí, Secretary of State for Migration, Ministry of Labor, Migration and Social Security, Spain

How does Spain's community sponsorship pilot program work? The Basque initiative

In 2019 a Sponsorship Agreement (Auzolana 2) was established between the Ministry of Labor, Migration and Social Security, the Basque regional government, UNHCR Spain, [Caritas Euskadi](#) and [Ellacuría Foundation](#) – the Jesuits in the Basque Country – to implement a community sponsorship pilot project².

The Spanish pilot is included in [Spain's National Resettlement Program](#), which means that:

- It is the UNHCR that conducted the identification of vulnerable refugee families abroad (in Jordan) and submitted the profiles to the Spanish Government for its consideration and approval.
- It is the Government, as part of the approved annual quota of resettlement, which selected the refugees and brought them into the country.

The novelty is that once the families arrived in Spain, the Basque regional government took charge of them. They were distributed in the three Basque capital cities (Bilbao, Donostia and Vitoria). The municipalities and the organizations to take care of the refugees had previously been notified by the Basque regional government of the arrival of the refugees under the pilot scheme.

The Basque regional government selected Caritas and the Jesuits to participate in the pilot. Both are faith-based organizations, but their choice for the programme was based on their experiences in providing support to vulnerable people, and on their supporters and wide social networks. Both organizations have in recent years developed private models for the reception of migrants and asylum seekers in collaboration with civil society. For the pilot, Jesuits and Caritas were required to form local groups of concerned citizens (the sponsors) to support the families. They were also required to submit an integration project for the approval of the Basque regional government.

It is not easy to create a community. The local groups are usually people that already know each other and have previous ties. Each local group is formed by 6-8 people, volunteer citizens that join efforts to support a family. They are the ones directly in touch with the refugees. The roles and

2 The Agreement was signed on June 20, 2019.

responsibilities of the group are clearly defined in the integration project. Jesuits and Caritas provide support and guidance to the local groups and they are in communication with the administrative institutions.

In February 2019, GRSI and UNHCR Spain organized a four-day training program for the organizations and sponsors welcoming the refugees in the Basque region. The training worked on areas such as sponsors' roles and responsibilities, newcomers' rights, intercultural communication, financial obligations, and working toward successful integration.

In March 29, 2019, Spain welcomed 29 refugees under the pilot (17 of them are children). They are five Syrian families that lived in Jordan. Each family is accompanied by a local group. There are five local groups coordinated by the Ellacuría Foundation and Caritas Dioceses who work in Bilbao, San Sebastián and Vitoria. The project offers integral support for two years. Children go to school, like all foreign children in Spain, and adults receive some training and are helped to find a job.

Financially, the Basque regional government sponsors each family for two years and funds a part-time social worker (one per family) employed by the organizations. The organizations have made a house available for each family for two years and maintain a bank account with €10,000.

According to some testimonies by the local groups, the first experiences are very promising, although everything is still very fresh.

"Refugees are progressively integrated in a particular neighborhood with the help of the local group. Refugees know and are known to their neighbors, the Arab shopper, the leisure time association, the school teachers, the dentist... Refugees slowly feel that it is also their neighborhood."

"A member of my local group is in charge of education and she has already contacted a friend

who works in education to supplement with Spanish classes in the refugee's family home. The lessons are at home because while Spanish classes take place another person from the local group is playing with the kids."

"In community sponsorship, refugees are not a 'Government problem' but become everyone's responsibility."

"It is interesting to see how quickly refugees move from a passive to an active role insofar as they participate in the decisions, they are helped and listened but the final decision is theirs."

"A process for 'normal' people accompanied by 'normal' people. This way we all try to save an emergency situation by forgetting that we are refugees and becoming citizens."

No more families are expected to arrive under the pilot during 2019 and there is no commitment as of today for 2020.

A promising beginning for Spain's Community Sponsorship Program?

The Spanish pilot is a small experiment but also a very significant one. First, it is a pilot for a new public policy in Spain, of community-based refugee sponsorship. Second, it may also serve as a model for other countries.

This experiment opens the door to a new model in the resettlement of refugees in Spain based on partnership and solidarity. The pilot develops coordination among different administrative institutions, and involves civil society in public policies. The resettlement of refugees is not handled only by the central government, but with the collaborative efforts of regional government, municipalities, organizations and citizens.

The experiment expands the pathways for refugee resettlement. For the first time, community sponsorship is used as a legal pathway to Spain. The pilot is part of the national resettlement pro-

gramme and does not create additional places. However, given the limited capacity of the Spanish reception system now, community sponsorship is a way of encouraging resettlement.

The project develops a new policy whereby individuals may directly engage in refugee resettlement efforts in their town. The power of local community groups (usually faith communities) for the bottom-up integration of refugees is making a valuable difference. The local groups share daily life and provide emotional and resettlement support to help newly arrived refugees integrate into life in the Basque country. This builds powerful bonds between them. Refugees tend to have relatively early positive settlement and employment outcomes, thanks in part to the social support they receive from the local groups.

Social organizations are very important for the success of the program. Jesuits and Caritas have formed the local groups and provide them with professional advice and coordination.

The experience is working as a very powerful pedagogical tool. It raises awareness and converts its participants to anti-rumor³ agents and advocates of diversity. The community-based sponsorship strengthens host communities and fosters positive attitudes towards refugees.

It has taken a lot of effort and time to start this pilot experiment in Spain, but it has a vocation to stay for the future. The Spanish central government, the Basque regional government and UNHCR are championing the pilot, and are interested in exploring the possibility of expanding the pilot to other regions in Spain. Dialogues are under way, but no agreement has been reached so far. As for social organizations, the pilot publicly endorses the work that they have been carrying out privately for years, and provides financing and the possibility to escalate their efforts.

The central government and the Basque regional government are committed to detailed annual written reports describing the intervention followed and its results, so that the pilot may hopefully be replicated in other regions of Spain.

3 The anti-rumor strategy aims to raise awareness about the importance of countering diversity-related prejudices and rumors that hamper positive interaction and social cohesion, and that lay the foundations of discriminatory and racist attitudes.

About the author

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- Monitoring national discourses on flight, migration and integration and contributing to mutual understanding among the European countries.
- Exchanging experiences concerning integration and sharing best practices in the field of integration policies.
- Developing ideas and recommendations for a Common European Migration and Asylum Policy, as well as contributing to a rapprochement of the divergent approaches towards migration policy within Europe.

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