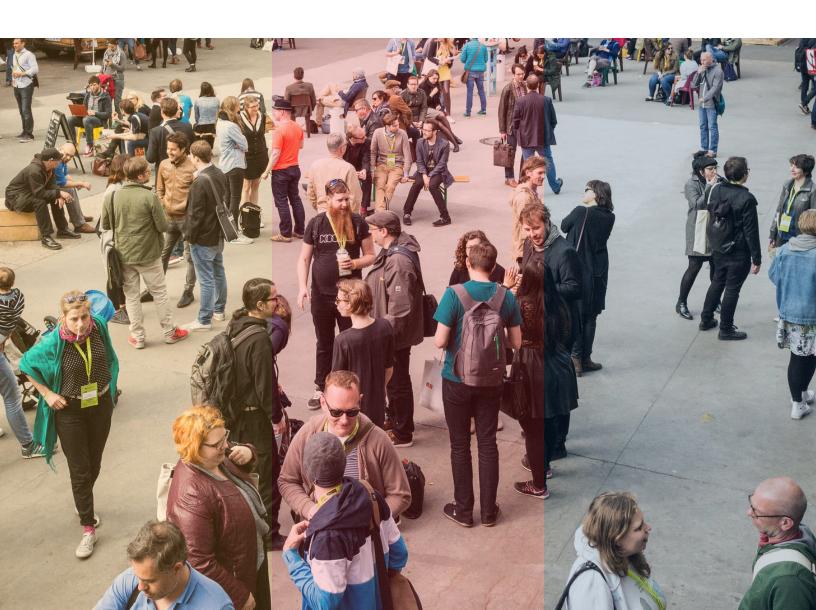CEDOM Canada-Europe Dialogues on Migration

Welcoming refugees into the community: Privately - sponsored refugees and the community partnership network model

Alexander Norfolk

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Alexander Norfolk, Performance Management Analyst, Government of British Columbia

Purpose

This policy memo provides a summary of a Master's project submitted by Alexander Norfolk at the University of Victoria in November 2017. A model for supporting private sponsorship groups in Victoria, British Columbia, is presented and evaluated. The memo concludes that there is strong potential for replicating such a model to assist the private sponsorship of refugees in other parts of the world.

Background

Navigating the complex process of refugee sponsorship requires that the sponsoring groups have access to the resources available among local businesses, organizations, and agencies in the community, and that community organizations openly share resources with these groups. The primary objective of this report was to identify ways to further develop the private sponsorship of refugees (PSR) program of the Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA). The project sought to leverage the resources that exist among local agencies, businesses, and institutions that make up ICA's Community Partnership Network (CPN), to better assist sponsorship groups in resettling refugee newcomers.

ICA is a non-profit organization that focuses on providing settlement services to recent immigrants and newcomers with a refugee background in the Greater Victoria region. The CPN was established by ICA with funding from the United Way of Greater Victoria and the Government of Canada. The CPN is staffed and managed by ICA's Community Development Coordinator, and consists of over 270 local businesses, agencies, and institutions spanning multiple sectors in Greater Victoria. CPN members include arts and cultural associations, educational institutions, faith groups, government agencies, health organizations, and police departments, among others.

As the lead agency for the CPN, ICA organizes regular workshops, diversity training, and information sharing events for members.

The operation of the CPN is guided by the following goals and principles:

1. Raise awareness among community leaders and business managers of the need to create more welcoming and inclusive communities and workplaces in Greater Victoria

2. Strengthen the collective knowledge and skill-set of partnering organizations and develop an ongoing professional learning network and learning opportunities

3. Identify and apply solutions to known barriers to inclusion. Ask leaders, employers, service and learning agents, policy/program decision makers, front-line staff and others what types of organizational and educational needs will enable them to facilitate newcomer integration. Facilitate opportunities, provide useful tools and establish new relationships

4. Create a Local Immigration Partnership (LIP), a community-based initiative to coordinate and create a strategic plan for the settlement and integration of newcomers in the community

Methodology and methods

The qualitative research was approached as a small-scale developmental evaluation of a complex and emergent program, in which multiple stakeholders are involved (Dozois, Langlois, & Blanchet-Cohen, 2010). The data collection methods consisted of three focus group sessions with representatives from the current roster of CPN member organizations in Victoria, to gain an understanding of available resources within the wider community, opportunities for enhanced connectivity, and to elicit sug-

CEDÖM Canada-Europe Dialogues on Migration

POLICY MEMO : Welcoming refuges into the community: Privately-sponsored refugees and the community partnership network model **by Alexander Norfolk**

2

gestions for improved program delivery. In addition, five semi-structured, key informant interviews with professionals from sponsorship agreement holder organizations and other settlement organizations within Canada. The interview questions addressed smart practices, refugee newcomer integration, and sponsorship group needs.

Findings

All focus group participants recognized the value of the CPN, and appeared to have a firm grasp of the CPN's mandate, but indicated less clarity with regard to their roles as members of the network. Research found that partnerships between CPN members are few and far between, and most participants commented that they had limited knowledge of the activities offered by other member organizations. All participants supported the development of deeper intra-CPN partnerships, but identified this as a significant challenge. Other challenges included CPN membership size and sponsorship group identification.

All interview and focus group participants agreed that maintaining strong working partnerships between stakeholders was a key element of delivering successful PSR program activities. Participant CPN members frequently commented on the value of developing solid, long-term collaborative relationships with other members to assist sponsorship groups and refugee newcomers. However, many added that the CPN's large size and low organizational capacity has hindered effective coordination between its members. In instances where coordination does exist, it is primarily between member organizations that operate within the same sectors, a situation that is referred to in the literature as bonding social capital (Larsen et al., 2004). A number of focus group participants discussed methods by which future partnerships might be developed across sectors, thereby enabling CPN member organizations to bridge social capital, i.e. establish vertical social networks between socially diverse groups or organizations (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Interviewees representing sponsorship agreement holder organizations and settlement service providers also acknowledged the benefits of forming partnerships with

other like-minded organizations, as well as developing multi-sectoral collaborations.

Although there was a general recognition among focus group participants that cross-sectoral partnerships do indeed help to ensure more effective service delivery, discussion regarding specific opportunities for the creation of such partnerships was limited. When asked specifically about this, CPN member participants had few suggestions regarding potential or innovative ways in which their respective organizations might connect with other businesses, agencies, or institutions within the CPN to assist refugee sponsorship groups in their work. There may be a number of factors contributing to the lack of proposals for new collaborative activity between CPN member organizations. One such factor may be that CPN member participants generally have limited knowledge of the activities and resources offered by fellow members. A lack of regular CPN-led meetings, and an inability to connect directly with sponsorship groups may also contribute to this lack of partnership innovation.

Recommendations

We offer three main recommendations based on this research:

1. With regards to network development, we recommend addressing intra-CPN and CPN-sponsorship group partnerships, as well as taking a proactive approach to engaging less active members. This may be done via online databases or forums.

2. In the area of stakeholder and resource management, we recommend enhanced dialogue and information-sharing between the PSR program and its stakeholders (i.e. CPN members and sponsorship groups), and amongst the stakeholders themselves

3. We recommend developing new program protocols, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and further collaborative activity with other settlement organizations in the region.

POLICY MEMO : Welcoming refugees into the community: Privately-sponsored refugees and the community partnership network model by Alexander Norfolk

3

Conclusion

The Community Partnership Network model is an innovative and effective way to deal with the influx of refugees in a community; it has strong potential to be replicated in other parts of the world where private sponsorship programs are already in place and where mid- to large-scale settlement service providers operate. The challenges and recommendations addressed in this memo should be considered before adopting such a model.

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ALEXANDER NORFOLK

Alexander Norfolk is Performance Management Analyst for the Government of British Columbia. He wrote his MA on the topic of the private sponsorship programme and worked for the Borders and Globalization (BIG) project at the Centre for Global Studies. His previous work has focused on human trafficking, poverty alleviation, refugees, street children and youth, orphans, runaways, and children with disabilities.