

TOGETHER PROJECT

FILLING THE GAP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Volunteer & Settlement Sector Interactions In Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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ABOUT TOGETHER PROJECT

Together Project, a project of Tides Canada Initiatives, believes that access to social networks can lead to more rapid and durable integration. Connecting Canadians and refugee newcomers leads to inclusive, safer, and more resilient communities.

Together Project currently operates in four Canadian cities: Toronto, Thunder Bay, Ottawa, and London.

Learn more at www.TogetherProject.ca, and follow us on Twitter @Together_hello.

For more information or to contact the Research Team please email research@togetherproject.ca.

Matching

Building on Canada's unique private sponsorship model, Together Project matches Government-Assisted Refugees with Welcome Groups of five or more volunteers. Newcomer families are supported in their settlement as they find housing and work, access healthcare, enroll in school, and navigate daily life.

Over time, we believe the development of these networks will lead to a better, more equal Canada.

Community

Together Project works with partners to host community events and programs to orient refugee newcomers to life in Canada.

Refugee newcomers and volunteers explore urban nature and culture through monthly field trips.

Research

Integration of displaced populations into destination societies is a politically challenging and complex topic. We believe Canada has much to contribute in this dialogue.

We partner with universities and organizations in Canada and abroad to strengthen analysis and inform policy.

We are building a dynamic research team of academics and practitioners with significant experience in the field.



SUMMARY

The arrival of 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada in 2015 and 2016 generated a massive amount of support from volunteers and volunteer initiatives. Volunteers encountered an established settlement sector, which, on top of dealing with more than double the number of resettled refugees, often struggled with what one settlement sector respondent interviewed for the report called “too much help” from volunteers.

While coordination improved over time, many volunteers lost interest or were not effectively mobilized. On the other hand, new volunteer initiatives have successfully filled gaps in service provision.

Focusing on Ontario, our research sought to understand these dynamics in order to identify successful, collaborative models of volunteer mobilization and identify best practices for volunteer initiatives. Our findings are based on three months of research from January through March 2017.

We identified best practices as those which foster collaboration between settlement sector actors, harness volunteer capacity to fill real gaps in service provision, and build volunteer capacity for working with vulnerable populations. Additionally, those which serve to foster refugee newcomers’ social networks offer low barriers to entry for volunteers to play active roles in integration. Finally new volunteer initiatives are a crucial source of innovation.

- Most volunteer initiatives cited the singular and tragic death of Aylan Kurdi, often referred to as “the boy on the beach”, as the primary catalyst for action.
- Rural areas were characterized by the absence of the settlement sector, with self-organized volunteers.
- Mid-sized cities represented a “sweet spot” of tight-knit community, coordinated volunteer mobilization, and a centralized settlement sector.
- Large cities were difficult to generalize given high variability of volunteer initiatives. The size and complexity of the settlement sector meant mixed results with volunteer initiatives, but with some notably high potential for scalability.
- Across the majority of cases, the effect of the surge of public interest in getting involved can be characterized by what one respondent called “too much help.” Civil society mobilization often overwhelmed mobilization capacities of the settlement sector, sometimes leading to tensions.



- In large cities, many volunteer initiatives were frustrated by what they perceived as a gatekeeper mentality among the settlement sector. Lack of immediate access and the complex nature of the sector meant they lacked a focal point for engagement.
- Sustained engagement often led to better cooperation and mobilization.
- The most successful volunteer initiatives were those which acted as a hub for volunteer engagement with the settlement sector and lowered barriers to entry for supporting Syrian newcomers.
- Private sponsorship groups often have minimal training and little oversight after the arrival of sponsored families. In some cases this allowed for paternalistic behaviour.
- The bureaucratic and legal distinction between Privately-Sponsored Refugees and Government-Assisted Refugees obscures the functional overlap in service provision for both groups.
- The potential for burnout among private sponsors and volunteers is high since they serve as de facto social workers, therapists, and counselors – roles for which they are often unprepared. Many sponsors are not aware that newcomers can and should register with settlement agencies.
- Private sponsorship groups and volunteers were concerned about the persistence of cultural differences for future engagement.
- Privately-Sponsored Refugees received more support than Government-Assisted Refugees. In almost every location we found volunteers and settlement agencies cooperating to match under-supported Government-Assisted Refugees. Actively including citizens in integration is thus not limited to private sponsorship and its attendant financial and legal responsibilities.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada

- The IRCC should fund **dedicated volunteer coordinator positions** within the settlement sector, particularly in RAP SPOs. While the precise responsibilities of the role would be specific to the different agency actors, one of the most common findings is the sector has heretofore lacked the capacity to manage and empower volunteers.

The lack of volunteer coordination capacities often led to tensions both within specific settlement agencies and between would-be volunteers and the settlement sector. With relatively minimal funding the Federal Government could ameliorate tensions and foster durable integration between civil society, the settlement sector, and newly-arrived refugees.

Importantly, this position should expressly service newcomers from all countries of origin given the global scope of the refugee crisis. This represents an opportunity for public education that the global refugee crisis is not limited to Syria or the Middle East.

- The IRCC should differentiate between **volunteers and volunteer initiatives** and develop a mechanism for monitoring successful instances of the latter outside of the framework of their interaction with the settlement sector. One way of doing so would be to **establish and innovation fund for successful volunteer initiatives coordinated with different levels of government.**

Indeed, the Federal Government can use funding mechanisms to overcome gate-keeping. Exclusive funding volunteer initiatives through existing settlement sector actors will likely exacerbate gate-keeper dynamics.

- Recognize the persistence of cultural differences and attendant difficulties in volunteer / newcomer relationships. Concretely, the IRCC should take pains to ensure that **volunteer coordinator positions include training on cultural sensitivity and engage with faith, ethnic, or national community groups** in direct support or some capacity of supervisory or consultant role.



- The IRCC should **conduct public consultations** with grassroots volunteer initiatives to understand best practices and develop an authoritative institutional memory of the types of volunteer initiatives which emerged from the period of Syrian refugee resettlement.

The civic momentum and outpouring of support should not be squandered, and the government should take a bottom-up approach to harnessing the lessons learned over the past two years. It is important these public consultations include all regions.

It is advisable that these public consultations be contracted to a trusted third party on a limited timescale and with clear deliverables. This contract should include a partnership with IRCC and relevant Federal, Provincial, and Municipal levels of government to disseminate findings.

An **innovation fund** would mean findings from public consultations have the opportunity for support and scaling.

- The IRCC should strongly **consider more active training and oversight for Private Sponsorship Groups**. Across a number of cases respondents of all types noted a lack of clear training and oversight meant private sponsors were more often than not left to their own devices.

While SAHs undertake training and vetting activities, the overwhelming need to immediately resettle Syrian refugees meant this was not done in a sustained manner in the case at hand. The IRCC should develop clear training manuals, codes of conduct, and best practices for interacting with vulnerable populations. This should include training around trauma-informed care, Canadian resettlement policy, RAP and IFHP services, education, employment, and ESL training.

The IRCC should acknowledge that Private Resettlement is not a substitute for state oversight over integration and resettlement. Sponsors and resettled refugees should be made aware of their rights and duties under Federal and Provincial law, with clear lessons around individual autonomy, with particular reference to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.



To Settlement Sector Actors

- The Settlement Sector should take the opportunity to help **educate the general public** on its role in the process of refugee resettlement. The vast majority of volunteers were completely unaware of the settlement sector or its mandate.
- Concurrently, the settlement sector should **explain perceived gate-keeping** as the necessary response to its duties of care and protection to vulnerable clients. We found that the majority of volunteers responded favorably to this rationale.
- Perhaps more importantly, settlement sector actors should **rethink the practices and organizational cultures which result in gate-keeping in the first place**. Volunteer initiatives are an important source of innovation, and the resettlement of Syrian refugees to Canada represents an important opportunity for evaluating existing practices.

Settlement sector actors should thus **consider enlisting outside auditors to consider organizational practices**.

At a more philosophical level, settlement sector actors should **embrace innovation as a mode of fostering and harnessing the goodwill of Canadians**.

- As with the recommendations to the IRCC, the settlement sector should **differentiate between volunteers and volunteer initiatives and consider the latter as potential partners rather than a pool of people requiring management**. Many novel volunteer initiatives were (and are) comprised of high-capacity professionals and experience service-provision personnel. The settlement sector should consider the criticism of volunteer initiatives as an opportunity for innovation and creative partnerships. Many of the volunteer initiatives would not have flourished if settlement sector approval were a necessary criteria for engagement.
- The settlement sector must **develop best practices** to differentiate between a stable pool of committed volunteers who should receive significant training, and pools of volunteers who can be mobilized for ad-hoc tasks.
- Settlement sector actors working with GARs, as well as PSRs past “month 13” should understand the need for access to social networks as an important source of support. More specifically, **RAP SPOs should take full advantage of matching programs and create mechanisms for taking into account the feedback and advocacy of those who create relationships with GAR newcomers**.



To Volunteer Initiatives

- Volunteer initiatives must understand **resettled refugees are uniquely vulnerable**, and that settlement sector actors have legal and ethical responsibilities. Rapid access to resettled refugees must be subordinate to ensuring vulnerable newcomers are not exposed to undue risk.
- Volunteer initiatives should **understand that the settlement sector has traditionally not had to respond to large-scale volunteer initiatives**. Priority is generally given to serving clients over mobilizing volunteers.
- Novel volunteer initiatives should **consider some degree of service overlap and duplication as a source of learning and engage the settlement sector and all levels of government with policy learning**.
- Volunteer initiatives should do their best to **maintain and disseminate the knowledge and expertise** they developed in aiding in Syrian refugee resettlement. The lessons learned and knowledge acquired in mobilizing to help newly resettled Syrians is invaluable to future cohorts of volunteers and resettled refugees regardless of the country of origin.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

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Craig is a Together Project co-founder and Research Director. He has conducted field research throughout Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the Western Balkans. He is wrapping up his PhD in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, where he researches and teaches on the international politics of human mobility.

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