

Introduction to Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative – GRSI

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One of the golden threads through the fantastic discussions yesterday and today has been the importance of partnership in supporting the growth of community sponsorship.

And the GRSI is a true – and pretty unique – partnership between the Government of Canada; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); private sector Foundations and the University of Ottawa Refugee Hub.

The GRSI was launched in December 2016 with the purpose of working with countries around the world to assist in the creation and development of new community sponsorship programmes, through sharing Canada's history and experience of private sponsorship – and using this to support the creation of new programs that countries design to meet their own unique needs.

The GRSI has three main aims:

- Increase the capacity for countries to welcome refugees and improve refugee integration outcomes through a whole of society approach;
- Strengthen local host communities that come together to welcome newcomers; and
- Promote welcoming and inclusive societies and improve the narrative about refugees and other newcomers.

We are in our 5th anniversary year – and, wow, the sponsorship ecosystem has evolved dramatically during that time. From 3 countries back in 2016, there are now community sponsorship programmes either in development, being piloted or active in almost 20 countries.

Part of our role at the GRSI has been both in supporting the development of these programs, and also learning from them to inform new program design – and program adaptation.

So, what has the GRSI's role been in this? What do we do? I'm going to pull out three main elements:

- **We do specific country work, working alongside governments, civil society organisations and other partners to design and develop policy frameworks and support the development of civil society infrastructure.** This includes partnering local actors with experienced advisors from other countries who can help them with the specifics of their programs, from policy writing to community mobilisation and every detail in between. What a joy to be able to do this work in person again!
- **We act as a convener** – creating a space for shared exchange and connection at many different levels.
- **We produce resources and tools that are openly accessible** – ranging from a training package that local organisers can use to train new community sponsorship groups to a detailed policy design workbook. And, watch this space, a little plug: we are shortly going to be launching a new Guidebook to support policy design, a new Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit, and our new website.

I thought I could bring to life the work of the GRSI through a personal story:

In early 2017, the first formal visit of the GRSI partnership was to the UK – to promote the fledgling UK Sponsorship Scheme.

At that time, as a UK government official, I was benefiting from GRSI's expertise rather than being a member of staff.

On a sunny January day, we heard Canadians speak inspiringly about the origins of community sponsorship and the power of welcome which now was part of the fabric of Canadian society. And then two representatives from the very first UK groups stood up – and spoke in strong Manchester and South London accents about how community sponsorship was transforming their communities.

I can still feel the thrill in the room as they spoke – this was happening in our communities, it wasn't something that could only happen in Canada.

A few years later, at the Canadian High Commission, New Zealand voices told their stories of sponsorship.

One of my favourite GRSI videos is from Ireland – where we hear Angham Younes, a sponsored refugee herself, speak in an Irish accent, about becoming part of a sponsorship group.

This multiplicity of voices, accents, languages claiming the power of sponsorship for their own communities shows what we all know – the universality of welcome. And to the point that was made yesterday, we need to amplify these voices, tell these stories and work in partnership to create many more.