



Why Matching Matters

Improving outcomes in refugee sponsorship and complementary pathways

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Executive Summary

Community sponsorship and complementary pathways (such as education or labour mobility programmes) have garnered significant attention and investment to broaden the range and reach of permanent solutions for refugees beyond traditional resettlement, which is an option for only a small fraction of those displaced worldwide. These approaches rely on the assumption, supported by evidence, that resources, networks, and capital provided by individuals and organisations in receiving communities can support refugees' immediate settlement, improve their longer-term integration, and positively influence public opinion about the value of welcoming refugee newcomers. The success of community sponsorship (also called private or refugee sponsorship) and complementary pathways depends on closeness of fit between arriving refugees' characteristics, the supports and services available in the communities where they settle, and the quality of their relationships with their sponsors, hosts, or employers. To put it succinctly, *where and with whom* refugees are matched matter a great deal. New approaches to matching in Europe and North America look to take advantage of research around the quality of relationships and integration outcomes by accounting for the characteristics, needs, and prefer-

ences of refugees and the capacities and preferences of sponsors or receiving communities.

To put it succinctly, where and with whom refugees are matched matter a great deal.

While effective matching and placement of refugees are fundamental to the success of sponsorship and pathways programmes—and are arguably also important in the context of mainstream resettlement—this remains an emerging and, to date, little examined policy area. The majority of programmes with government-led matching and placement do not account for individual refugees' capacities, attributes, skills, or preferences, and rarely optimise placement in the interest of integration outcomes; instead, most placements are made based on the capacities of settlement agencies, existing conational communities, or in the interest of dispersing refugees in a receiving country. Some recent reception schemes in response to high-profile emergencies (such as European and North American responses to the Ukraine displacement crisis) have featured more complex matching procedures but have not collected rigorous data to evaluate programme outcomes. Likewise, both sponsorship initiatives and complementary pathways face significant barriers to scaling

up, given the labour-intensive nature of matching ‘by hand’, wherein government or civil-society organisation staff examine potentially vast amounts of data on refugee and sponsor profiles and try to make the best possible matches. And while laudable, both government and civil-society efforts to make more personalised matches entail often unstated assumptions on the part of the staff conducting matching around where and with whom refugee newcomers would best fit, which can introduce bias and leave unclear records that then limit the value of programme evaluations.

Newer, more sophisticated approaches to matching have the advantage of drawing on a range of evidence, best practices, and partnerships developed since the 2015–16 migration crisis in Europe. More enduring programmes often grow out of pilot projects created during emergency situations, capitalising on and driving policy change by collecting evidence about their efficacy. The programmes that have emerged since the 2015–16 period, including in response to humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine, offer several valuable lessons, particularly around ways to incorporate refugees’ attributes and preferences into matching processes and collecting evidence about the benefits of doing so, that can be used to bolster efforts to mainstream refugee agency into resettlement processes. Recent experiences and new ways of working also point to the benefits of adopting more data-driven methods to scale matching operations and improve match quality, and of developing multistakeholder coalitions to expand and sustain the scope of volunteer recruitment beyond high-profile emergencies.

1 Introduction

Europe’s 2015–16 migration emergency spurred a wave of new and expanded sponsorship initiatives, in which volunteers provide immediate settlement services and longer-term integration support for

refugee newcomers. Sponsorship initiatives both informed and were given additional emphasis by the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, which drew on lessons from Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees programme to foster and support locally informed work in countries around the world. The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, created in 2016 during the lead-up to the compact, has been instrumental in pushing for the expansion of sponsorship programmes globally. Journalistic, political, and scholarly attention has focused in particular on how ensuring strong relationships between volunteers and newcomers can improve refugees’ integration and foster social cohesion within receiving communities. Volunteer-centred initiatives mobilised again in response to the exodus from Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Western forces and the return of the Taliban in August 2021, followed six months later by the staggering pace and scale of displacement from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

These new programmes have the added benefit of drawing on a growing body of lessons, best practices, and empirical research.

In addition to channelling public desire to directly support arriving refugees, these new programmes have the added benefit of drawing on a growing body of lessons, best practices, and empirical research. Several have given careful consideration to how to best match sponsors and newcomers. Matching implies forethought about optimising refugee–sponsor relationships to further desired outcomes such as access to immediate settlement services, social engagement, language training, job placement, homestays, and long-term integration. Crucially, matching differs from some traditional government-led placement procedures or geographical allocation because it involves mechanisms that account for specific refugee and sponsor attri-

butes, needs, and preferences, thus giving greater weight to receiving community capacities and to refugees' agency.

BOX 1 What is 'matching'?

Matching can be loosely defined as a systemised process that determines the placement of refugees with sponsors, host communities, or employers (depending on the programme type) by taking into account the specific attributes, needs, and preferences of refugees, in conjunction with the capacities and preferences of sponsors or receiving communities. Matching processes may be used within either established or novel policy contexts.

Matching models generally proceed from the assumption that a better fit will mean better outcomes and experiences, and they have been used not only in community sponsorship programmes but also in some contexts to connect refugees with emerging complementary pathways for international protection (e.g., education or labour mobility programmes).¹ Matching models can be applied within various programmes, from ad hoc and short-term mentorship, to facilitating labour or student visas and placement with employers and educational institutions, to formal sponsorship in which volunteers take on financial and legal responsibilities for refugee resettlement. These models vary in terms of who or what is considered on the other 'side' of the match, whether mentors, private sponsorship groups, city services, or employers committed to providing jobs for displaced talent.

Policymakers now have more options and evidence at their disposal as they consider how matching can support sponsorship and resettlement and improve outcomes. The inherently multistakeholder and international nature of matching means state-level policies are crucial for scaling and providing space

for context-specific programmes, but also that responsibility for implementation, volunteer recruitment, oversight, and technological innovation may need to be delegated to civil-society partners. Creating the policy space for matching can also open avenues to make good on the commitments to safe and legal mobility options enshrined in the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees.

This policy brief explores the evolution of matching in community sponsorship and resettlement programmes and opportunities for further innovation. It first outlines the use of matching in such programmes to date, paying particular attention to evidence about how strong relationships between sponsors and refugee newcomers can improve integration outcomes, as well as lessons from new initiatives that could be used to improve on established government-led matching processes. It then surveys innovative models that have largely emerged from high-profile refugee emergencies, noting the importance of drawing on established constituencies and stakeholder coalitions to develop longer-term programmes. It also highlights the promise of data and technology to support and scale matching initiatives, as well as to contribute to high-quality monitoring and evaluation in the interest of producing policy-relevant outcome data. The analysis presented in this brief is derived from a close review of sixteen established and emerging programmes in Europe and North America, which made it possible to compare different populations, matching procedures, and outcomes.² In addition to surveying government-led matching initiatives, the brief also draws on available literature on localised programme design and implementation, the scale and scope of matching, and local and international policy environments within the context of research on the impacts of matching on integration and social cohesion.

2 The Role of Matching in Community Sponsorship and Resettlement

In community sponsorship programmes and complementary pathways, matching serves a number of important functions. It helps support the goals of sponsorship and resettlement by ensuring that placements are an appropriate fit, and that sponsors or receiving communities have the resources to meet refugees' specific needs. In most cases, civil-society organisations play a key role in mobilising volunteers either to act as ad hoc support systems or more long-term sponsors, with evidence suggesting that matching models can improve government-led matching and geographical allocation of refugees.

A. *Evidence on the benefits of strong relationships for integration outcomes*

The underlying argument for high-quality matching draws on evidence from countries with long-running refugee resettlement programmes and with available longitudinal data, particularly the United States, Canada, and Australia.³ *Where* refugees are resettled (including local conditions such as access to services, labour markets, diaspora communities, and ease of achieving self-sufficiency) and *who* they have social contacts with profoundly shape integration outcomes.⁴ It follows that more precise and holistic matching of refugees and localities or sponsors might not only benefit refugees but also provide a better experience for sponsors and receiving communities. Research from Canada and the United Kingdom illustrates that when refugee households are matched with sponsors who can provide appropriate support, this is associated with feelings of satisfaction and optimism from sponsors and better experiences for newcomers.⁵ Moreover, effective

matching can foster long-term changes in public opinion around refugees by facilitating positive interpersonal experiences and changing narratives around the impacts of humanitarian resettlement, thus helping communities develop resiliency to the type of xenophobic attitudes that have led nativist populist parties to electoral success in a number of countries over the last decade.⁶

A vast literature has also found significant relationships between refugees' social ties and better integration and social cohesion outcomes.⁷ Refugees who are resettled through some form of community sponsorship that facilitates social connections with established communities have better cross-cultural and linguistic outcomes.⁸ Newcomers matched in recent U.S. co-sponsorship initiatives, for example, were more likely to enrol in language classes and found employment more rapidly when they maintained their relationships with their sponsors and participated in additional programming after the initial three-month sponsorship period, particularly for those without existing family ties in the receiving community.⁹ While the evidence regarding the effect of social capital and appropriate community support and placement is strong, it has historically been challenging to translate these findings into actionable policy given that long-term social processes such as improvements in integration and social cohesion are hard to encapsulate in the kind of quickly achieved indicators (e.g., immediate employment or housing) that tend to inform policymaking.¹⁰

B. *The shortfalls of government-led assignments and matching*

Within traditional resettlement and some community sponsorship programmes, matching between refugees and receiving communities or sponsors is conducted by civil servants or civil-society organisation staff, and typically driven by a narrow set of programme criteria. Most states assign and distribute

resettled refugees based on political considerations and often narrowly defined integration indicators—with a focus on short-term objectives such as immediate employment, housing, or language training, rather than the attributes of refugees in resettlement pipelines. The majority of refugee resettlement initiatives also do not account for refugee preferences in determining placement location, except in the case of existing family ties.¹¹

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In the United States, which has historically resettled the most refugees annually (though per capita it falls behind Canada and Australia) and plays an outsized role in resettlement policy, practice, and agenda-setting, nine nongovernmental resettlement agencies assign refugees to their networks of local affiliate agencies, which are then responsible for settlement services. The majority are placed in major cities with established diaspora populations, where services and culturally appropriate institutions are concentrated. The availability of local services is the primary factor in placement decisions. Likewise, in Canada's Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) Program, civil servants assign settlement locations in collaboration with organisations that provide refugee services. The U.S. and Canadian systems are similar in that they do not account for complementarity between refugees' skills and local labour markets or other integration-relevant factors, and refugees have little to no influence on their destinations.

These processes show room for improved outcomes. Roughly 17 per cent of refugees resettled to the United States from 2000 to 2014 moved within the first year to seek out employment opportunities and conational network elsewhere in the country, in

comparison to only 3.4 per cent in other categories of immigrants.¹² In Canada, roughly 15–20 per cent of refugees resettled via the GAR Program move within the first year of arrival, though figures vary depending on whether they were placed in one of Canada's few 'gateway cities' (i.e., Calgary, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver) or communities elsewhere. Newcomers in the GAR Program are significantly more likely to move than those resettled via Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program, many of whom are joining family and friends in Canada; this is the case even when the two groups face similar conditions of economic duress.¹³ Secondary migration, as seen in the United States and the GAR Program, is understood as resulting, in part, from mismatches between local conditions and refugees' needs, capital, and social connections, and it is thus often taken as a proxy for the relative success of their placement upon arrival. This movement does not, however, necessarily imply worse integration outcomes in the long term.¹⁴

Canada's Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program offers an interesting case study around a mixed model of government, civil-society organisation, and sponsor-informed matching, and has seen secondary movement and issues with sponsorship breakdown. The BVOR Program, introduced in 2013, sits between the GAR and PSR streams in that sponsor groups and the government share responsibility for financially supporting refugees. However, rather than having sponsors identify potential resettlement candidates as in the PSR stream, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) proposes refugees for the BVOR Program based on urgent need and travel readiness, absence of family ties in Canada, and limited settlement and health needs (in order to reduce demands on sponsors).¹⁵ Sponsors are then supported in selecting cases from a docket of profiles managed by the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, which is funded by the Canadian government and administered by settlement organizations. Between 2016 and 2020, 29 per cent of

BVOR matches experienced sponsorship breakdown (a rate much higher than PSR matches); 39 per cent of those breakdowns occurred because newcomers moved to be with family members, and 46 per cent because newcomers had unclear expectations about the scale and types of support sponsors would provide.¹⁶ The BVOR case points to potential difficulties in the matching process, particularly when refugee preferences, match quality, and available supports and services are not accounted for.

In emerging community sponsorship programmes—such as Community Sponsorship Ireland, Germany’s Neustart im Team (NesT) programme, the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme, and New Zealand’s Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship pilot—government officials have been either partly or wholly responsible for first vetting refugees and then matching them with prospective sponsors by hand (and without the support of digital tools), though often in collaboration with implementing partner organisations.¹⁷ In each of these cases, relatively small-scale matching (ranging from a few dozen to 150 individuals, to 200 households in the United Kingdom) took refugees’ needs into account

to some extent, but more often this process was driven by somewhat rigid government matching and selection criteria, particularly the availability of accommodations and services, rather than the quality of matches between sponsors and newcomers. (See Appendix Table A–1 for details on different programmes’ matching processes.) While these programmes’ relative novelty means comparable, long-term data are not available, some have published qualitative studies that point to the centrality of good quality matches to programme success. Their relatively small scale also points to the challenge of implementing objective matching criteria to ensure programme outcomes within the confines of often narrow placement options and government admissions criteria.

One such study is the 2023 evaluation of Germany’s NesT programme. This programme was the first of its kind in the country and aimed to match and resettle 200 refugees annually in its pilot phase.¹⁸ The pilot was hampered by pandemic mobility restrictions, but it also faced significant regulatory barriers, particularly around suitable housing for refugee families and processing delays in the countries hosting

BOX 2

Data gaps for outcome evaluations and comparative research

While efforts are underway to increase understanding of the outcomes and best practices of community sponsorship initiatives, most new programmes do not mainstream data collection for comparative research on relationships between matching protocols and outcomes. For example, the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme contracted with the University of Birmingham’s Institute for Research into Superdiversity to produce a rigorous evaluation via a large sample of qualitative interviews. It provides important evidence about subjective experiences of sponsor–newcomer relationships and settlement challenges, but the programme did not mainstream a theory of change or evaluation protocols, resulting in low reporting for longitudinal data and predominantly qualitative reporting. More broadly, a meta study commissioned by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that most available data on the impacts of resettlement is context-specific and thus often not suitable for large-scale comparative research.

Sources: Jenny Phillimore, Marisol Reyes, and Sara Hassan, *Sponsorship in the UK: Formative Evaluation. June 2020 Final Report* (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham Institute for Research into Superdiversity, 2020); Graeme Rodgers and Jessica Porter, *The Impact of Government-Sponsored Refugee Resettlement: A Meta Study of Findings from Six Countries* (Geneva: UNHCR Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Service, 2020), 38–43.

refugees before resettlement to Germany. Some mentors (the programme’s term for what others call ‘sponsors’) were dissatisfied with long wait times, the process of civil servants making matches by hand resulted in what some perceived as mismatches, and the labour-intensive selection process was a barrier to scaling the programme up.

While most programmes have not published rigorous evaluations, available evidence suggests that government-led or mixed matching processes are often not nimble enough to account for changing situations in receiving or third countries, and that limited information about the role of sponsors or the methods for matching can lead to dissatisfaction with the programme and misunderstandings around sponsors’ role. This in turn suggests that a more tailored approach to matching, one with objective and outcome-centric matching criteria, could lead to programme improvements over time.

C. Evolution of old models and emergence of new approaches

As sponsorship and complementary pathways initiatives have proliferated, some have innovated on approaches to matching. A large number of small-scale European matching initiatives emerged in 2015 and 2016 to directly assist newly arrived refugees, often through buddy or mentorship programmes that focused on supporting refugees’ labour, education, or cultural integration. They differ from community sponsorship in that they are often more informal and involve less oversight and training, and many existed alongside more formalised, government-led community sponsorship programmes.¹⁹

While no research project has systematically categorised or compared the wide range of community sponsorship programmes and their matching components, most policymakers and practitioners in the field are informed by the understanding, based

on academic research, that social connections and local peer support are key facilitators of integration. Several nongovernmental programmes explicitly apply matching to community support models to address the needs of underserved newcomers by recruiting volunteer groups that provide direct support, as do some community-based initiatives in policy contexts where government-led sponsorship is absent. For example, the organisation Together Project, launched in 2016, adapted Canada’s PSR model to recruit volunteers for Welcome Groups and then matched the groups with underserved but more needs-intensive cases in the GAR Program. The project has since expanded to work with asylum seekers and Ukrainian humanitarian arrivals, and has matched more than 300 households or single people, for a total of 1,200 individuals supported.²⁰ Likewise, the Samen Hier project in The Netherlands matched groups of five or more volunteers with asylum seekers who had received a positive refugee status determination and been in the country for up to two years, but who were socially and economically isolated as a result of Dutch asylum policies that contain asylum seekers in reception centres. Both of these initiatives are important examples in that they drew on evidence about the quality of relationships and integration outcomes, and considered a degree of objective matching as a key programme step, rather than as an afterthought.

3 Innovations in Matching

The Western withdrawal from Afghanistan and return of Taliban rule in August 2021 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered an outpouring of support from established organisations and new grassroots initiatives. This included the creation of new sponsorship programmes that attempt to mainstream innovative and sophisticated matching procedures, many of which incorporate lessons from the past seven years, informed by sustained research and international capacity-building.

To varying degrees, this new generation of programmes incorporates participants' preferences, needs, and capacities. Large-scale and high-profile refugee emergencies often necessitate pilot projects for community sponsorship and new resettlement pathways with a broad range of stakeholders and innovative models, offering the opportunity to consider how matching practises could be strengthened within mainstream resettlement and community sponsorship programmes.

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A primary example of how matching has evolved can be found in the U.S.-based Sponsor Circle Program, launched by the Community Sponsorship Hub as an emergency resettlement initiative in response to the Afghan evacuation under Operation Allies Welcome. Sponsor Circles enable communities to provide initial settlement services, and co-sponsorship groups were hand matched through a consent counselling process with Afghan newcomers. The programme has since expanded to serve Ukrainians, Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans entering the United States on humanitarian parole.²¹ As the programme has grown, it has used a variety of means to match sponsors and newcomers, including hand matching facilitated through virtual meetings, organic matches made on social media, existing social ties and networks, tech solutions such as an algorithmic matching process, and the online Welcome Connect platform through which potential sponsors and displaced people could meet one another in a safe and monitored environment.²²

A similar initiative developed under the United Kingdom's Homes for Ukraine scheme, which offers visas to Ukrainians who had sponsors offering homestays.

The majority of initial connections took place on social media, particularly Facebook pages, with the UK government initially stating it would not be involved in matching. This hands-off model led to concerns about the influence of government cash incentives for hosting and the lack of oversight, sponsor vetting and training, and post-arrival safeguards, with some rights groups likening the Facebook pages to 'Tinder for people traffickers'.²³ The UK Home Office then partnered with the charity RESET, which drew on its experience with community sponsorship. A government-run portal allows members of the public to register to provide accommodation and act as de facto sponsors, and matching criteria include refugee needs, housing availability, and the preferences of both sides of the match. Matching is conducted by hand by RESET caseworkers—an approach that is often labour intensive and entails assumptions about appropriate matches, and that rarely optimises outcomes across the whole of a population.²⁴ The UK Home Office also recognised seven other initiatives by local charities with a range of different matching criteria.²⁵ To date, the scheme has approved 170,900 of almost 210,400 host applications, and as of September 2023 had facilitated 133,400 arrivals.²⁶

At a smaller scale, The Berlin Governance Platform's Re:Match pilot, in partnership with the Krakow-based Salam Lab, uses an algorithm developed by Pairity (a Canadian organisation that applies evidence around social capital and integration to data-driven matching for relocation and community sponsorship programmes) to help relocate displaced Ukrainians from Poland to six German municipalities. It accounts for a range of preferences from programme participants, and matches them with available services, labour markets, and settlement spots in reception centres based on administrative data collected from city authorities. Re:Match is unique not only in terms of its use of objective matching criteria, but because one of the programme's priorities is to generate evidence around the effectiveness of

BOX 3**The role of established constituencies in matching**

Matching initiatives often depend on established civil-society organisations to mobilise volunteers. A significant proportion of long-standing sponsorship and matching initiatives are sustained by faith-based organisations that do consistent work beyond high-profile refugee emergencies. Often, these organisations are also key stakeholders in new matching initiatives. For example, HIAS's Welcome Circles recruited members of Jewish communities to offer reception and integration services to displaced Ukrainians throughout Europe (ten EU countries and Moldova) and to Ukrainians and Afghans in the United States. In Europe, devoted programme coordinators in each participating country recruited a fluctuating group of local volunteers for specific tasks to support a number of households. The U.S. programme took on a more traditional community sponsorship model, in which a Welcome Circle of at least five people supported a single household, sometimes matched using algorithmic assignment. In both cases, these efforts drew on the organisation's established constituencies.

Note: At the time of writing, HIAS was conducting an evaluation of its Welcome Circles programmes in Europe and the United States, with an eye to improving and scaling volunteer support and understanding how different types of matching and support affect outcomes. It will provide interesting comparative results around differences in matching procedures, organisational structures, and protection pathways.

Sources: Brian Zumhagen, 'How an Innovative Algorithm Helps Ukrainian Refugees Find New Homes', HIAS, 15 December 2022.

For examples of other civil-society organisations engaged in refugee support work on an ongoing basis, see Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association, 'The Voice of Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders', accessed 29 September 2023; Refugee Council USA, 'For Refugees', accessed 29 September 2023.

city-level engagement to bolster European relocation programmes and overcome political impasses that have stymied the EU Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism to relocate refugees from frontline states.²⁷

These initiatives, often stood up quickly in response to emergencies, share several innovations in their approaches to matching, in that they:

- ▶ **Take into account a more detailed assessment of refugees' characteristics, skills, and needs.** For example, Re:Match accounts for refugees' personal preferences for the characteristics of and services in destination cities.
- ▶ **Place civil-society organisations in the lead on matching.** Many of the organisations involved have experience in social services and understand how refugees are best supported by sponsors, while also considering how matching can shape sponsors' satisfaction with a programme. This was the case with the Community Sponsorship Hub-led Sponsor Circles in the United States, for example.
- ▶ **Utilise online platforms to facilitate matching.** Through these platforms, sponsors and refugees can make more organic connections and discuss expectations before being matched. This is the case with the UK Homes for Ukraine scheme and Community Sponsorship Hub's Sponsor Circles.
- ▶ **In some cases, take steps to increase refugee agency by allowing refugees to accept or decline a placement.** Though the majority of programmes are limited by conditions in third countries in terms of collecting refugee preferences, several

including Talent Beyond Boundaries and Re:Match do not bind refugees to matches and offer them the opportunity to accept or decline a match.

In addition, many of these programmes have embraced the role of digital technology to support informed and date-driven matches.

The ethical use of data and technology to support and scale matching initiatives

While more sophisticated and detailed matching of refugees and communities or sponsors has clear potential to improve outcomes, such processes require collecting, storing, and analysing large amounts of data about refugees, sponsors, and community services. Managing these processes by hand can thus quickly run up against the real capacity constraints of both civil-society organisations and government agencies—as was the case in the German NesT pilot—and thus present a barrier to scaling.²⁸

Technological interventions offer an opportunity to bolster community sponsorship and complementary pathways by optimising match quality, reducing barriers to scaling, and ensuring accountability through digital records. To date, technology has been used in matching programmes to store and sort data on refugees in order to query possible candidates. For example, Talent Beyond Boundaries maintains a unique Talent Catalogue of displaced individuals with skills in a variety of fields, who are onboarded by local staff in host countries and matched with jobs throughout North America and Europe. Some large-scale programmes now also use online registration portals for sponsors in order to collect data on their capacity to support refugees with specific types of vulnerabilities and on their preferences for refugee household composition. For example, this

type of registration system is now a central part of the U.S.-based Welcome Corps programme for private sponsorship. The most sophisticated initiatives use preference-matching algorithms in order to help match sponsors, communities, and refugees based on a broad set of criteria. Such algorithms are employed in the German Re:Match programme, U.S. Welcome Corps, and a subset of matches in HIAS's U.S. Welcome Circles.

Research has already shown the promise of algorithmic matching for improving integration outcomes. This approach builds on lessons around social connections and integration outcomes, and explicitly accounts for complementarity between refugee profiles and local conditions. Experimental predictions have shown significantly improved labour market outcomes in the United States and Switzerland by maximising alignment between refugees' personal characteristics and the geographic contexts with which they are matched.²⁹ Similarly, the Annie™ Moore software, developed by economists in collaboration with HIAS, predicted that optimising placement around skills and labour markets could increase immediate employment for refugees resettled to the United States by 22–38 per cent over current rates.³⁰ Other experimental algorithms account for refugees' preferences about their resettlement location and community capacity to receive refugees.³¹

Importantly, each of these algorithms is designed to increase operational efficiency *and* the well-being of people already in resettlement pipelines, rather than to determine who is resettled or to privilege those identified as economically or socially 'desirable' populations. Likewise, algorithmic interventions typically suggest matches to specialised staff for vetting and oversight, with explanations of why specific matches are suggested. Staff review acts as a safeguard, confirming a match is appropriate. Unlike hand matching, algorithms produce more transparent, objective decisions because they are based

on verified data and generate objective records of how matches are made, which can inform research on relationships between matching and integration outcomes.

Each of these algorithms is designed to increase operational efficiency and the well-being of people already in resettlement pipelines, rather than to determine who is resettled or to privilege those identified as economically or socially ‘desirable’ populations.

These efforts point to the significant promise in developing digitally assisted matching processes that account for refugees’ specific characteristics, needs, and preferences and that can readily incorporate best practices for securing genuinely informed consent about the purposes and uses of personal data. Such approaches also offer the opportunity to introduce matching at scale through online platforms and large datasets, which help to reduce the capacity demands of running a large programme. And they can allow for better collaboration and integration across initiatives operating in the same context, for example where similar programmes in different countries might be resettling refugees from the same displaced population. Talent Beyond Boundaries, for example, has called attention to the fact that resettlement at scale requires systemised digital tools for pre-screening and matching, including data architecture to pre-screen and sort candidates into potential mobility pathways.³²

Advanced data architecture of this kind would help ensure a smoother process for enrolment and eligibility vetting, avoid fragmentation whereby refugees themselves try to determine which pathway is most suitable to their situation and needs, and support

the capacity of states and civil-society organisations to cooperate on matching from universal applicant pools while accounting for their varied regulations, applications, and skills requirements. The UNHCR’s Roadmap 2030 likewise emphasises data and technological interventions’ potential to help scale resettlement and effectively monitor outcomes by systematising indicators and programme eligibility requirements.³³ Digitally assisted matching is also uniquely placed to offer democratised data for the purposes of granular and comparative research, and large datasets can eventually be used to further optimise matching and placement.

To date, much of the academic and grey literature on the role of data and tech in migration governance has, however, focused on its applications for controlling rather than facilitating mobility—and for good reason.³⁴ The use of digitally or AI-assisted decision-making for visa approvals in particular suffers from a lack of transparency about how and which data are used and how decisions are rendered, and from an absence of recourse for appeal or review. But much of the techno-sceptical literature proceeds from an unstated premise that established ways of working are less prone to bias than data-driven solutions, and can conflate some of the more problematic elements of AI models with algorithmic approaches. In reality, most matching and placement assignments are conducted by civil servants under little public scrutiny, and their decisions tend not to be informed by data-driven approaches. Likewise, in the context of refugee resettlement and sponsorship, hand matching by civil-society organisations is necessarily informed by staff assumptions about refugees’ needs and preferences, or goodness of fit with sponsors or locations, and thus introduces unstated bias, with less transparency about the rationale behind matches.

The U.S. Sponsor Circle Program offers an example of a programme that has evolved and scaled to centre modern, technology-based matching in its design,

BOX 4**Data-driven matching, and differentiating algorithms from AI**

Algorithmic approaches to matching are not equivalent to AI-assisted decision-making. While algorithms necessarily include assumptions about matching criteria (for example, the goal of maximising employment outcomes, accounting for housing needs, or proximity to available social services), they also incorporate the preferences and capacities of sponsors, receiving communities, and refugees. They are designed to limit personal bias. No existing algorithmic interventions for community sponsorship or resettlement use AI to offload matching assignments.

Most often, an algorithm's primary purpose is to equitably distribute scarce resources at scale (for example, suitable sponsorship groups) and to identify goodness of fit around refugee characteristics and conditions in receiving communities (for example, between refugees' skills and local labour markets). Most experimental and real-world interventions use preference-matching algorithms, which are already used in similarly complex matching operations such as the U.S. National Resident Matching Program (which matches health-care professionals to graduate education and advanced training programmes). They consider whole populations, rather than identifying a single 'best match' and moving down a ladder of suboptimal choices. They also offer the promise to generate large datasets, from which machine learning models can identify interesting correlations and optimise matching assignments.

Source: The Match: National Resident Matching Program, '[The Matching Algorithm](#)', accessed 21 September 2023.

alongside comprehensive monitoring and evaluation. The Community Sponsorship Hub that oversees the programme now also leads a consortium tasked with implementing the State Department's Welcome Corps programme—the first large-scale private refugee sponsorship initiatives in the United States, drawing from the general U.S. Refugee Admissions Program pool. Welcome Corps includes matching and naming streams, and it is likely the first global scheme to use data-driven matching tools to place refugees based on the quality of matches with private sponsorship groups. One of Welcome Corps' central objectives is to broaden the geographical scope of refugee resettlement by providing new communities without long-standing resettlement affiliate offices the opportunity to directly welcome refugees. Its matching stream employs the Pairity algorithm, which collects preference-ranking and demographic data from private sponsorship groups, administrative data on available settlement services, and a range of other key socioeconomic data, as well as biographical data on refugees in the U.S.

Refugee Admissions Program pipeline. The algorithm sends matches to a Matching and Placement Team from the International Rescue Committee and Community Sponsorship Hub, identifying those requiring review, after which they transmit matches to sponsorship groups and supporting organizations for confirmation. These innovations in data-driven matching offer several layers of oversight, create firewalls against bias, and move towards agency in matching.

4 The Value-Add of Sophisticated Matching in the New Resettlement Policy Landscape

Sophisticated matching practises that take into account detailed characteristics of refugees and communities, capitalise on data and technology, and consider refugee preferences can strengthen reset-

tlement and sponsorship programmes in a number of ways. The added value of these approaches to matching can also be brought to bear on new pathways emerging outside traditional resettlement systems. At the global level, the UNHCR, European Union, and a number of long-standing resettlement states have committed to developing complementary pathways to traditional refugee resettlement, which revolve around identifying displaced people eligible for admission to other countries via family reunification, education, or labour mobility channels. Like sponsorship efforts, many complementary pathways hinge on effectively matching displaced people with country-specific and regional reception schemes, often implemented by broad stakeholder coalitions.

A. Facilitating refugee agency and a greater role for refugee-led organisations

Since the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of refugees' agency and voices in decisions that affect their future. More deliberate matching offers the opportunity to increase refugee agency by integrating refugees' individual attributes, needs, and preferences into decision-making. Programmes that allow refugees to consent to specific matches take this one step further by giving refugees the ultimate say in their settlement decisions—something that is largely absent in most mainstream resettlement programmes.

The post-2016 policy landscape has also seen a growing voice for refugee-led organisations. This is largely due to the efforts of people with a history of displacement advocating for a meaningful place for displaced people in international dialogue, policy development, and refugee support initiatives.³⁵ Indeed, refugee-led organisations and advisors have in some contexts played pivotal roles in shaping

national policies and international dialogue.³⁶ New matching initiatives hold the promise of integrating such organisations into programmes from the outset by including their experiences and expertise in what constitutes positive matching assignments and how best to interact with vulnerable populations.

B. Scaling complementary pathways

In recent years, states and UNHCR have placed a clear priority on developing complementary pathways that operate alongside resettlement. As of 2024, the UNHCR-led Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement—which bring together states, the private sector, academia, nongovernmental organisations, and refugee-led organisations—will be renamed the Consultations on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways. In 2022, the United States launched the Resettlement Diplomacy Network, a convening of major resettlement states in consultation with refugee-hosting states, international organisations, and refugee-led organisations, with the goal of expanding both resettlement and complementary pathways.³⁷

Matching initiatives have taken advantage of the emergence of these new immigration pathways to provide proof of concept for scaling and policy transfer. For example, Talent Beyond Boundaries in collaboration with refugee-led organisations such as Jumpstart Refugee Talent were pivotal in advocating for new mobility schemes for displaced talent through Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot, which is now championed by UNHCR and emulated internationally. The World University Service of Canada has successfully scaled its Student Refugee Programme and is partnering with several U.S.-based organisations to implement an education pathway within the U.S. Welcome Corps known as Welcome Corps on Campus, and it is likewise emulated throughout Europe.³⁸

Effectively matching refugees with a growing number of available pathways will be central to these efforts. Yet current global matching runs up against simple yet daunting human resources limits since enrolling displaced people would mean conducting large-scale, consent-based interviews in order to understand eligibility. The person-to-person nature of vetting and matching displaced talent with work or educational opportunities in third countries represents a barrier to scaling.³⁹ Innovative methods that capitalise on technology to sort and organise data and speed up matching can help to address some of these issues. Having clearly defined matching criteria that are coordinated among various programmes and stakeholders will also be critical.

C. *Contributing to a growing evidence base*

There is currently very little comparative research that disaggregates individual refugee outcomes, or explores relationships within programmes by backgrounds, attributes, and skills within the context of different resettlement, sponsorship, and complementary pathway programmes. This limits the ability of researchers, programme designers, and policymakers to understand the mechanisms behind the almost universally better integration of those resettled under community sponsorship programmes, much less the impacts of matching criteria for different outcomes. Such evidence is critical to improving the design of emerging and growing programmes. Ongoing monitoring also provides an evidence base that can be used to build stakeholder trust in such programmes by demonstrating the value of their interventions and ensuring previous experiences are taken into account to refine programme operations.⁴⁰

Matching projects present unique opportunities for evidence-based policy in that they necessarily collect participants' baseline information and often

incorporate administrative data (for example, census data on local and regional employment rates, diversity, or housing availability). Such data can be a goldmine for analysing programme outcomes. In addition to helping ensure high-quality matches, baseline data can be used to measure longitudinal impacts as monitoring continues over the life of a programme. Setting evaluation criteria and frameworks based on a theory of change and embedding them into a programme's design have significant advantages over attempting to measure impacts at the end of a programme, which is often more costly and challenging.⁴¹ Establishing matching protocols at the outset and adhering to objective matching criteria inherently mean collecting baseline data to inform outcome analysis.

Matching projects present unique opportunities for evidence-based policy in that they necessarily collect participants' baseline information and often incorporate administrative data.

As new matching initiatives develop, they present an opportunity for international collaboration on standardised indicators for comparative analysis across contexts and programmes—an effort that has been a priority at the international level but that resettlement programmes have long struggled to achieve. The EU Zaragoza Indicators, which the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development employs in its *Settling In* reports, offer one set of measurements that can be used to generate rich comparative data, if used as a basis for indicators and data collection within matching programmes.⁴² They not only measure whether or not newcomers have achieved employment outcomes, for example, but also the quality of employment and whether refugee newcomers are working in fields where they have previous training. Matching-based programmes also

offer a unique opportunity to collect longitudinal data for specific cohorts over time because they inherently collect baseline data from both refugees and sponsors, and can track the relationships between types of matches and integration outcomes. The use of standardised indicators would also make it possible to compare outcomes while recognising variation in programme priorities (such as labour mobility, educational, or community sponsorship initiatives), and data could be readily disaggregated by participant characteristics such as duration of displacement, country of origin, gender, or age.

D. Capitalising on local resources to grow pathways

Matching can also give greater voice to transnational affinity groups and tap into the resources they offer to support broader categories of displaced people in accessing protection pathways. For example, Rainbow Railroad—a growing organisation that works on protection pathways for LGBTQI+ refugees and other people in need of international protection—has increasingly developed international activities to match refugees with community members in receiving countries to serve as sponsors. Rainbow Railroad has extensive networks of allied organisations who support displaced LGBTQI+ people for whom UNHCR or resettlement countries may not have identified sexual orientation or gender identity and expression as their reason for flight or need for protection, and they can thus expand the populations for whom third country solutions are available.⁴³ Other affinity groups can include co-nationals, survivors of domestic violence, veterans’ organisations looking to support their colleagues in places such as Afghanistan, or human rights defenders from around the world. Specialised matching initiatives for affinity groups have the added benefit of connecting refugees with sponsors or communities who share a given identity or experience and can

provide more appropriate support, as well as broadening resettlement to include nontraditional actors.

Beyond sophisticated approaches to matching within emerging or established protection pathways, matching can also help ensure more direct engagement with volunteers and beneficiaries and allow for a focus on service provision and support. Effective coordination between government and civil-society actors in the development and implementation of matching can also help reduce gaps and duplication of integration services by ensuring that supporting organisations work directly with constituencies involved in sponsorship.⁴⁴ Matching methods can be modified to meet specific needs and outcome targets, and account for the priorities of multiple stakeholders including government resettlement targets, civil-society organisation volunteer recruitment drives, and diaspora community or other affinity groups.

Adapting existing matching methods to support innovative programming can also support the growing trend to broaden international resettlement beyond UNHCR referral frameworks. A range of refugee-led organisations such as R-SEAT, policy entrepreneurs such as the Refugee Hub, faith-based international nongovernmental organisations, and rights groups including the International Rescue Committee have all devoted resources to growing the space for resettlement by working with local partners in host countries. However, these initiatives face technical barriers around the front-end tasks of identifying and recruiting displaced people, and subsequently connecting them with a multiplicity of pathways. Employing lessons from matching programmes can help scale collaboration with international organisations such as International Organisation for Migration to help identify and match people in need of protection with both traditional and non-traditional pathways and programmes, while adhering to principles of additionality.⁴⁵ Finally, relocation programmes such as the European Union’s Volun-

tary Solidarity Mechanism, which seek to disperse asylum seekers throughout Member States, would benefit from tools to match refugees based on their skills and preferences with locations, services, and community support programmes, rather than by often-simplistic distribution keys.

5 Conclusions

Sponsorship and complementary pathways have shown significant progress in mobilising a whole-of-society approach to helping welcome and settle refugee newcomers, and are poised to scale globally. Matching initiatives can help ensure they contribute to positive outcomes for all parties: refugees, receiving communities, and resettlement countries more broadly. The development of these programmes necessarily entails delegating responsibility to trusted civil-society organisations for the labour-intensive tasks of recruiting, supporting, and retaining volunteers, including mobilising volunteers beyond high-profile emergencies. The scale of support for Syrians and Ukrainians depended on those displacement crises' political salience, media attention, and liberal mobility schemes, conversely highlighting deep inequities in empathy and mobility options for other refugee populations. Sustainable sponsorship initiatives will require well-designed matching mechanisms that contribute to positive outcomes and an excellent programme reputation, which can foster public support and grow the pool of volunteers, as well as education around lower-profile refugee populations.

Significant attention should also be paid to how front-end recruitment in host countries can be accelerated and expanded through technological interventions, in partnership with rights-focused organisations, the private sector, and international or-

ganisations. Regardless of the point in resettlement pipelines, a programme's scope, or particular resettlement pathway, matching should strive to equally account for refugee and volunteer capacities and to ensure refugee agency. Sophisticated matching with objective criteria can embed agency within programme design. It is likewise crucial to ensure transparency about what data and characteristics inform matching in the interest of managing participant expectations around the availability of often-scarce resources such as the number of sponsorship groups or quotas in resettlement streams.

Including objective and considered matching protocols in both community sponsorship models and complementary pathways—if paired with strong monitoring and evaluation—can also serve as an opportunity to build on the body of evidence showing that goodness of fit and strong relationships contribute to better integration outcomes, and to positive experiences for refugees and receiving communities. Contributing to that evidence base should be a key objective for civil-society organisations and funders in order to inform country-level and regional policies.

But perhaps the greatest potential of well-designed matching processes lies in their ability to equitably allocate scarce resources and produce the best possible matches across the whole of a beneficiary population, whether those resources are defined as private sponsorship groups, job opportunities, housing, or specialised services for vulnerable people. To make good on this promise and overcome potential pitfalls, data-driven matching must ensure transparency around the use of personal information and inputs for matching, build in oversight from specialised placement staff, allow programme participants to accept or decline matching assignments, and prioritise stakeholder feedback.

Appendix. Overview of matching in selected programmes

TABLE A-1

Overview of matching procedures in community sponsorship and complementary pathways programmes

Country/ organisation and programme	Years active	Refugees (or refugee families) are matched to...	Number of matches*	Matching procedure
Belgium, Community Sponsorship	Since 2020 (pilot)	Sponsor groups (4–5 members)	39 arrivals as of 2022	Caritas and the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) conduct matching and discuss matches with sponsors.
Canada, Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program	Since 2013	Sponsor groups (a recognised organisation or a group of at least 5 people)	9,245 arrivals as of July 2023	Sponsors select refugees from a government-run platform of profiles, and an immigration officer makes the final decision.
Canada, Together Project - MakeWay	Since 2016	Welcome Groups (3–5 members)	1,200 individuals (or roughly 300 families) as of September 2023	Staff from the Together Project hand-match beneficiaries (refugees admitted via the Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) Program, refugee claimants, protected persons, or Ukrainian arrivals) with groups of volunteers based on support capacity and closeness of fit between volunteers and refugees.
France, Humanitarian Corridors	Since 2017	Volunteer groups (10 members)	376 arrivals as of 2022	Matching is carried out by social workers in Lebanon and organisations in France, which use a French national platform that gathers volunteer pledges (e.g., offers of accommodation).
Germany, Neustart im Team (NesT) Programme	2019–22 (pilot), in January 2023 NesT became a permanent programme	Mentor groups (at least 4 members)	152 arrivals as of March 2023	Staff from the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) conducts matching by hand, considering factors such as size of available/needed accommodation and language skills.

TABLE A-1 (cont.)

Overview of matching procedures in community sponsorship and complementary pathways programmes

Country/ organisation and programme	Years active	Refugees (or refugee families) are matched to...	Number of matches*	Matching procedure
Germany and Poland, Re:Match	2022–23 (pilot)	Six participating German municipalities	78 individuals relocated from Poland to Germany as of September 2023	The Pairity algorithm is used to support the Berlin Governance Platform and the Polish organisation Salam Lab in matching Ukrainians in Poland with German municipalities based on refugees' preferences and needs and municipalities' services and capacities.
HIAS Europe, Welcome Circles	Since 2022	Welcome Circles in 11 European countries (members are volunteers from local Jewish communities)	712 Ukrainians supported, 419 relocated from Poland and Moldova as of July 2023	Matching is conducted by HIAS Europe coordinators or through social connections.
Ireland, Community Sponsorship	Since 2019	Sponsor groups (7–12 members)	157 arrivals as of March 2023	The Irish Refugee Protection Programme and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conduct matching based on refugee families' needs and characteristics and volunteers' capacity and resources.
Italy, Humanitarian Corridors	Since 2016	Local diocesan host communities (at least 1 volunteer and 1 coordinator)	4,231 arrivals as of 2022	Caritas Italy conducts matching based on refugees' needs and vulnerabilities and receiving communities' capacities and resources.
Netherlands, Samen Hier	2018–21 (pilot)	Welcome Groups (at least 5 members)	42 refugee families were paired with 42 Welcome Groups as of December 2020	Samen Hier used the Pairity algorithm to match Welcome Groups with refugees using demographic and preference-raking surveys.
New Zealand, Community Sponsorship	2017–18 (pilot)	Community organisations (refugees were supported by at least 6 volunteers)	24 refugees matched with 4 community organisations as of 2018	Community organisations could nominate refugees. Otherwise, refugees were referred by UNHCR to Immigration New Zealand (INZ), and INZ staff hand-matched refugees with sponsors based on information provided by UNHCR.

TABLE A-1 (cont.)

Overview of matching procedures in community sponsorship and complementary pathways programmes

Country/ organisation and programme	Years active	Refugees (or refugee families) are matched to...	Number of matches*	Matching procedure
Spain, Community sponsorship in Basque Country, Navarra, and Valencia	Since 2019	Sponsor groups (5–6 members)	102 refugees welcomed as of March 2023	The region and the Spanish government conduct matching.
Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB), employment-based complementary pathway	Since 2016	Employers	1,546 refugees were connected with an employment opportunity in a third country and secured a visa as of October 2023	TBB staff contact employers in various countries to facilitate the hiring of refugee professionals via a safe migration pathway.
United Kingdom, Community Sponsorship Scheme	Since 2016	Sponsor groups (8–12 members)	Approx. 1,000 refugees (or roughly 200 families) as of March 2023	The UK Home Office's Resettlement Team, sponsor groups, and local authorities conduct matching by hand.
United Kingdom, Homes for Ukraine Scheme	Since February 2022	Hosts who offer Ukrainians accommodation	133,400 visas issued as of September 2023	Formal matching is conducted by organisations recognised by the UK Home Office and is based on refugee needs, housing availability, and refugees' and hosts' preferences. The charity RESET, one of the main recognised organisations, conducts online matching. Many other connections occur organically (e.g., via personal networks or social media).
United States, HIAS Welcome Circles	Since 2021	Welcome Circles (5–8 members)	100 Welcome Circles, 350 refugees as of March 2023	This programme involves several types of arrangements: supporting existing refugee–sponsor relationships, matching of Welcome Circles with people arriving under humanitarian parole programmes, and matching of Welcome Circles with refugees using the RUTH algorithm.

TABLE A-1 (cont.)

Overview of matching procedures in community sponsorship and complementary pathways programmes

Country/ organisation and programme	Years active	Refugees (or refugee families) are matched to...	Number of matches*	Matching procedure
United States, Welcome Corps	Since 2023	Sponsor groups (at least 5 members)	Data not yet available for this new programme	The programme includes both a naming and a matching stream. In the latter, the Pairity algorithm suggests matches to the Matching and Placement Team comprised of staff from the International Rescue Committee and Community Sponsorship Hub.

* These figures are based on the latest available data for each programme. Because programmes collect and report data differently (and many programme evaluations do not report the number of refugee-sponsor matches), some of these figures reflect the number of refugees admitted via a programme or the number of sponsors or sponsor groups involved in supporting them.

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Endnotes

- 1 Complementary pathways allow displaced people special access to immigration streams outside of humanitarian pathways. They adhere to the principal of additionality in that they do not 'draw down' quotas in humanitarian streams (e.g., refugees admitted to a country via a complementary pathway are not counted towards the national resettlement quota).
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