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Humanitarian Corridors in France: Evaluation of the Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante's Community Sponsorship Programme

SHARE Quality Sponsorship Network (QSN) Publication

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Humanitarian Corridors in France:
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WHAT IS THE SHARE NETWORK?

Share is an inclusive network of EU-based local communities and actors engaged in welcoming and including newcomers in Europe. Share promotes and fosters safe pathways to Europe for migrants and refugees to integrate into their new homes. We support and connect local initiatives, share best practices, and amplify the voices of communities to inspire action and policy change.

WHAT IS THE SHARE QUALITY SPONSORSHIP NETWORK (QSN)?

The Share QSN project uses multistakeholder, grassroots and bottom-up strategies to build sustainable sponsorship programmes for migrants and refugees. During its implementation period from January 2021 to June 2023, its goal is to ensure that the voices and experiences of sponsorship stakeholders are present at an EU level.

Co-funded by the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and coordinated by ICMC Europe's Share Network, the project brings together a consortium of actors in Belgium (Caritas International), France (Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante), Germany (DiCV Cologne), Ireland (the Irish Refugee Council), Italy (Consortio Communitas), Spain (Basque government) and the UK (Citizens UK). It is also closely allied with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR's) Three Year Strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways and the EU's Action Plan on Inclusion and Integration.



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Summary

The context

The efforts made by private groups and communities to ensure the safe arrival and integration of asylum-seekers and refugees in France led to the creation of Humanitarian Corridors programme. The first step towards developing the programme was a protocol, signed on 14 March 2017, between the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and five faith-based organizations (The Community of Sant'Egidio, The Protestant Federation of France, la Fédération des Entraide Protestante, Bishops' Conference of France, Caritas France). After signing the protocol, the French government issued humanitarian visas to 500 refugees and people in need of international protection who were, at the time, transiting from Syria and Iraq towards Lebanon (Delaplace and Chobotva 2018; Stuppia 2020).

The citizen sponsorship mechanism (or “Community Sponsorship”), driven by the Fédération Entraide Protestante (FEP) in the context of the Humanitarian Corridors project, is a type of legal and safe access permit, enabling displaced people from Syria who have sought refuge in Lebanon to legally arrive in French territory. Once in France, they can apply for asylum and be supported by a group of citizens, thus providing them with accommodation, as well as financial, administrative, and emotional support throughout the duration of the asylum procedure and beyond.

Method

The researchers conducted 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and three group discussions with received people, volunteers, and key stakeholders between Nov 2021 and March 2022 in Toulouse and Vernon. This report represents a base-level evaluation of the current state of Humanitarian Corridors in France.

Main results

- The Humanitarian Corridors programme is a global mechanism which provides beneficiaries with accommodation, administrative and financial support, as well as a social network to facilitate integration into the host society.
- Self-contained accommodation for the beneficiary families is more suitable and appreciated than accommodation in someone's home.
- The level of support that should be provided by the hosts to the people being received is a subject of constant debate within communities and within the FEP.
- Some volunteers have expectations (whether they realise it or not) for the people being received, which may lead to frustration.
- The transition from collective support to public and administrative assistance measures at the end of the programme is difficult.
- The main difficulties for those received by the programme include learning the language and access to employment and transportation — especially in rural areas.
- Centre managers play an important role in supporting volunteer collectives and managing their expectations.
- The State's involvement in Humanitarian Corridors is limited.

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Recommendations

- Broaden awareness amongst volunteer collectives regarding their supporting role and deconstruct any potential stereotypes they may have about refugees and migrants.
- Increase the project's visibility in France and Lebanon.
- Encourage collectives, where possible, to assign a volunteer in charge of ensuring group cohesion and mediation between its members.
- Continue to involve beneficiary families in the implementation of Humanitarian Corridors.
- Foster a network of people to share best practices for the programme through regular consultations with volunteers and beneficiaries; establish a relationship between these two groups.
- Create standard tools and technical notes on specific administrative topics for volunteers and beneficiaries.
- Further involve the State in supporting and receiving refugees on a local level.
- Extend the project to other nationalities of refugees.
- Increase resources for unit managers.

Introduction

As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019, many countries closed their borders — fully or partially. Countries with resettlement programmes for refugees were forced to cancel their identification missions, and UNHCR reduced its activities significantly. One positive outcome, however, was the development of new online tools and resources to ensure continued support and access for refugees to find safe 'third-country solutions.' Even so, the responsiveness of protection mechanisms was less than expected. In 2021, more than 25 million people were in need of resettlement. Of those, the UNHCR submitted requests for 63,190 individuals, but only 39,266 were effectively resettled in that year (Figure 1) (UNHCR 2020; 2021; 2022).

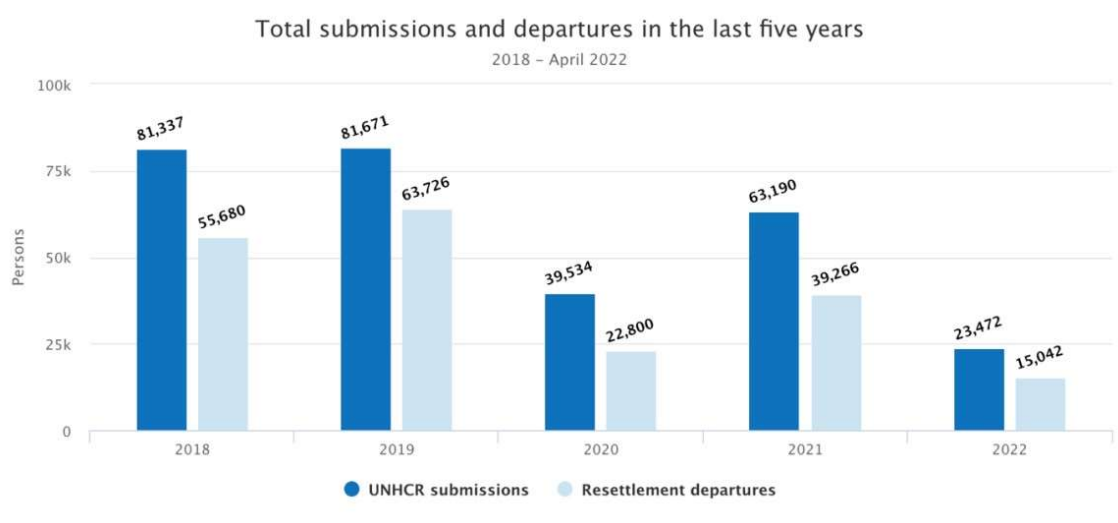


Figure 1. Shows the annual number of UNHCR submissions compared to the number of resettlements between 2018 and 2022. Source: UNHCR

To ensure a more predictable and fair system of responsibility sharing between member states, the European Union included 'access to third-country solutions' as one of the four key objectives of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#). This includes the development of 'Private Sponsorship Programmes' that allow individuals and communities to be directly involved in the resettlement of refugees (UNHCR 2018). Moreover, the European Union's commitment to increase the number of resettlement spaces and complementary pathways was reinforced by the [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#). Released in 2020, the pact calls on EU member states to increase resettlement spaces and implement private sponsorship programmes with the support of EU funding (European Commission 2020). It also financed community-based programmes that were inspired by the [Private Sponsorship of Refugees \(PSR\) Program](#), which started in Canada (1979).

Community or private sponsorship is broadly defined as "a public-private partnership between governments, who facilitate legal admission for refugees, and private or community actors who provide financial, social and emotional support to receive and settle refugees in the communities" ([SHARE Network N.d.](#)).

In the European context, there are two main approaches to community-based sponsorship which have emerged as a response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in 2015 and the rising refugee mobility into Europe between 2015 and 2016.

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The first approach is the Humanitarian Corridors programme in Italy, France and Belgium. Under this model, faith-based organisations establish agreements with their respective governments to receive refugees who were initially admitted on humanitarian visas. The three countries all began the programmes between 2015 and 2017 and, in total, they have provided approximately 2,800 safe settlement spaces in addition to the national resettlement commitments.

The second model is based on Community Sponsorship resettlement schemes. Under this model, refugees come through resettlement but are not in the State reception system, but welcomed by volunteers. First explored by the UK in 2016, other countries soon followed including Ireland (2019), Germany (2019), Belgium (2020) and various regions in Spain — Basque Country (2018), Valencia (2020) and Navarra (2020).

Research context

In January 2021, the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) co-founded the [SHARE QSN project](#) with the aim of growing pilot and ad-hoc sponsorship initiatives — beginning with those above — into sustainable, community-driven programmes. Led by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), the SHARE QSN project brings together a consortium of actors in Belgium (Caritas International Belgium), France (Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante), Germany (Caritas Cologne), Ireland (Irish Refugee Council), Italy (Consorzio Comunitas), Spain (Basque Government) and the UK (Citizens UK).

The project uses a multi-stakeholder, grassroots and bottom-up strategy to foster refugee participation and ensure that the lessons learned from community-based projects are heard at the EU level. The project is in close alliance with the UNHCR's [Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways](#), as well as the EU's [Action Plan on Inclusion and Integration](#).

As part of its monitoring and evaluation work for QSN, ICMC Europe has been working with partners since 2021 and external evaluators in Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Spain to conduct baseline research. The research gathered feedback and insights on community and faith-based refugee sponsorship from each of the six countries, and the findings are included in these reports.

During the development of this project, two major displacements shocked the world. The first one originated in Afghanistan (2021) where some 3.4 million people were displaced due to conflict. The second occurred in Ukraine in March 2022 when more than ten million people — almost a quarter of Ukraine's population — were forced to leave their homes. These ongoing crises validate the need for stronger community and faith-based sponsorship programmes to support government initiatives.

Global goals of the research project

The global objectives of this research project are:

- to describe the background and key elements of the six settlement/integration sponsorship models;
- to explain the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in the scheme;
- to understand the challenges newcomers face and try to mitigate those difficulties so they can live autonomously at the end of the sponsorship period;
- to improve programme effectiveness by highlighting best practices, which stakeholders can use to design more effective and efficient future programmes.

I. Resettlement in France

The resettlement system in France is complex and combines a small-scale, annual resettlement programme with larger scale, ad hoc admission programmes, primarily in compliance with EU resettlement priorities.

The French government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed the first resettlement agreement in 2008. Among other things, the agreement aimed to settle 100 cases per year in France, and this agreement is still ongoing. Within the same year, France launched a humanitarian admission programme which welcomed nearly 1,200 Iraqi nationals up until 2012. In 2015, France committed to resettling 2,375 Syrian and Palestinian refugees from Syria. This quota was increased by 6,000 additional people following the EU-Turkey statement of March 2016. A bilateral agreement with Lebanon added 2,000 refugees to France's commitments. The government formed after the 2017 Spring elections renewed France's commitments, and the French government announced it would resettle 10,000 refugees by autumn 2019 (Tardis 2019: 27-28).

The law of 10 September 2018 introduced resettlement for the first time into the Code governing the entry and residence of foreigners and the right to asylum, but it remains a possibility and not an obligation¹.

The Humanitarian Corridors are not a resettlement programme insofar as the beneficiaries do not have refugee status when they arrive in France; the granting of a D visa through the programme allows them to come to France legally to apply for asylum. In fact, all the people received under the programme have obtained refugee status.

II. Humanitarian Corridors in France

The Humanitarian Corridors protocol was signed in France on 14 March 2017 between the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and five non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (The Community of Sant'Egidio, Fédération d'entraide protestante (FEP), The Protestant Federation of France, Bishops' Conference of France and Caritas France). The protocol allows the government to issue humanitarian visas to 500 refugees and people in need of international protection from Syria and Iraq, coming from Lebanon. The transfer, accommodation, reception and integration of refugees in France are entirely managed by citizen groups under the aegis and coordination of the five NGO partners.

The five main organisations, with the support of self-funded citizen groups and churches, are responsible for funding the programme. Their contributions cover the plane tickets (provided at a 50% discount by Air France), inland transport, accommodation, settlement support and integration assistance. The sponsoring organisations are fully responsible for identifying and selecting programme beneficiaries, arranging their transport to France, and receiving them from the time they arrive for a period of 12–18 months.

The agreement sets the foundation for strong coordination between sponsoring organisations, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the French Embassy in Beirut. It also outlines cooperation with

¹Article 7 of French law no. 2018-778 of 10 September 2018 for managed immigration, an effective right of asylum, and successful integration.

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international organisations such as the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration. The programme prioritises refugees and people in need of international protection from Syria or Iraq who are currently living in Lebanon with specific vulnerabilities (i.e. female heads of household, victims of human trafficking, elderly people or people with disabilities or diseases), as well as those with family members or other ties with France who can enter with a humanitarian visa to seek asylum.

III. Research method and sample

This research was conducted in two regions of France. The first was the urban city of Toulouse. This city is in the French department of Haute-Garonne, in the larger region of Occitanie. According to the census of January 2019, the population of Toulouse was 493,465, with 1,454,158 inhabitants in the wider metropolitan area, making it the 5th most populated agglomeration in France. The second location studied was Vernon, a rural town in the French department of Eure, in the administrative region of Normandy in the north of France. In 2019, it had a population of 23,727.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 people (including three hosted families) and three group discussions which took place between November 2021 and March 2022. These people were contacted following recommendations from the FEP, which is in charge of implementing the Humanitarian Corridors programme in France. Table 2 represents the different categories of people interviewed.

Table 2. Categories of people interviewed within the framework of the evaluation and case study.

Refugees		CS volunteers		Institutional participants		Members of the wider community		Project team staff (EFP)
R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	4* from different regions
3*	4*	4*	4*	2	0	4	4	
Total: 26 interviews and 3 group discussions.								

(R) Rural area (U) Urban area *Including group discussions

A qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews was adopted to ensure a thorough understanding of the experiences and processes underpinning the citizen sponsorship model of Humanitarian Corridors. The interviews were the main emphasis of the primary data collection in the field of qualitative research. The questions covered several themes, namely the departure process, the reception stage, the support provided by the collectives during the first few months, and its evolution over time, the difficulties and successes, as well as the prospects for integration in France. The evaluation was compliant with data protection principles and relevant ethical guidelines. All data collected were digitally recorded and summarised to draw the key conclusions and trends highlighted in this report.

IV. Results and discussion

The following sections will present the relevant results from the interviews with participants. The results were organised by the three phases of a Community Sponsorship programme, namely: 1) pre-

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departure preparations 2) reception and support upon arrival and 3) the phasing-out period towards an independent life.

A. PRE-DEPARTURE PREPARATIONS

The pre-departure phase is the first step of the sponsorship journey which paves the way for future integration processes. During this phase, all actors engage in preparation activities which have an impact on the operating efficiency of the French Humanitarian Corridors programme. The interviews on this topic focused on highlighting the views of centre managers, volunteers and sponsored families who commented on programme governance, the coordination of groups, the management of expectations and the relevance of training volunteers to set boundaries and avoid clientelism.

Governing aspects

Some participants mentioned the limited involvement of the French State in the Humanitarian Corridors programme, even though the FEP is involved in fostering relations with national asylum authorities. For instance, aside from issuing type-D visas allowing people to legally travel from Lebanon to France to file their asylum application, there is no specific provision for supporting these people once arrived on French soil. In addition, volunteers are not financially supported by the State, and families received through Humanitarian Corridors are subject to the same asylum procedures as other refugees. The State's very limited involvement in the programme has generated frustration amongst some of the volunteers:

“When a State undertakes to select a family amongst so many others who are waiting, it must at least be able to take care of them quickly, so that the collective [of volunteers] can fully concentrate on their reception and support. It's not acceptable to put all this financial and administrative responsibility on a group of citizens. We were shocked. It is not the FEP's fault; we had been warned before accepting, but I think we hadn't been expecting it would be on such a large scale. There is a lot of tension and misunderstanding within the collective because of this.” — Volunteer (rural area)

However, this clear-cut opinion is not shared by all volunteers, and most seem to have more ambiguous ideas on the matter, as a higher level of involvement from the State to support the collective would eventually lead to a loss of independence and freedom of action. Greater government involvement would pervert the volunteering system and the purely “citizen” approach of the Humanitarian Corridors' commitment. Some volunteers have also highlighted that the State is already present, as they offer an Asylum Seeker's Allowance (ADA) and social assistance once refugee status has been obtained. Furthermore, many feel that the State's assistance is necessary to raise citizens' awareness about refugees, as well as to encourage volunteering and develop new collectives. The State could also grant more visas in order to welcome more people.

FINDING

Overall, most volunteers spend time, energy and money on this cause, and many think that State compensation — provided it is not conditional — would be legitimate.

Relationships between managers and volunteers

The unit manager position has recently been added to the project. They are professionals in the social sector whose job is to ensure the coordination of volunteer collectives on a regional level. They are

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also responsible for following-up with beneficiaries (especially in terms of asylum procedures) and communicating with various actors about the project. Working alongside the FEP and civil society partners, the aim of this new position is developing new collectives and accommodation spaces for refugees.

All unit managers interviewed highlighted the complexity of relations with volunteer collectives; each collective has its own operating method, but all are more or less open to receiving support from a unit manager. Their willingness to engage with a new manager is particularly relevant in collectives that were established before the creation of unit managers and which are more wary of 'external involvement' from the FEP:

"There were collectives before I started my job, 'the old ones', who worked alone and more or less relied on the unit when it was created. Some were relieved [when unit managers were added], others didn't really want it. Let's say that the emergence of centres and the general structuring of the project left some volunteers frustrated, as they no longer had the flexibility required to find [their own] solutions. However, I find that the new volunteers who throw themselves into receiving [refugees] are at first very reliant on the unit, the FEP and myself; they involve me a lot." — Unit manager

Despite these differences, the unit managers are working on developing shared tools for collectives so that they can effectively work together. Unit managers also play a role in uniting collectives:

"Some collectives do not work together, and their members feel isolated. In one collective, for example, there was a single man who managed everything, including the recruitment of volunteers and the assignment of their tasks. When he died, it was complicated for the other members, as there weren't any strong ties between them. So, I went to see them, and it turned out that the volunteer in charge of administration and the volunteer who took care of everyday life met for the first time on this occasion! So, my role was to create a dynamic between them." — Unit manager

Unit managers also play a mediation role between those received and the collectives, thus helping to reframe the expectations of these collectives by reminding them of the aims and limitations of supporting refugees. Sometimes, they serve as buffers between the two parties by trying to find suitable solutions for each party. Finally, the unit managers are also present to listen to frustrations, thus playing a catalytic role.

"Some volunteers expect rather friendly relationships with the people that they host, but I have to repeatedly tell them that we are not here to make friends. If it happens, that's great, but otherwise, that's just the way it is. It's not the aim of the support given" — Unit manager

Managing expectations

As hinted above, some volunteers have unrealistic expectations with regards to the people that they receive, which can lead to frustration. During exchanges with the collective members and the centre managers, researchers found that volunteers often have expectations or even make plans for the people that they are hosting that align with their own ideals of what an "integrated foreigner" is. These expectations clash with the diversity of situations they encounter with the refugees, thus generating frustration and sometimes even a feeling of failure.

"Some volunteers look down on those who refuse to do a trial or a work placement because they aren't interested, and this kind of behaviour doesn't go down well within the collective because the idea that "the foreigner must work" is present. However, when we dig deeper, we realise that it isn't idleness but rather that the person would like to do the same kind of job as

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they did before, so they would prefer to take the time to get training or start after the summer holidays, rather than accept less-skilled labour in the construction or catering industries.” — Unit manager

This behaviour also reflects the complexity of hospitality within the programme, which always assumes a form of reciprocity in the shape of financial, practical or symbolic compensation.

“In exchange for the fact that they are protected and welcomed in France, I think that we could ask families for some kind of reciprocity in terms of respecting Republican values and explain that too many archaic Arab-Muslim expressions could multiply the hatred for refugees and migrants in France.” — Volunteer (rural area)

Having expectations regarding the people received inevitably leads to disappointment when these expectations are not met.

“I was supposed to teach French to this person, and it was too hard for me, and to me, this was a failure — a personal failure.” Volunteer (urban area).

FINDING

This research revealed that groups often have one or two volunteers who have specific expectations and set goals with the families. When these goals are not met, they consider this to be a failure, and this situation hinders their willingness to continue volunteering.

Volunteers need more training to establish clear boundaries

The level of support to be given by volunteer collectives to sponsored families is a permanent subject of discussion within the collectives and at FEP level. It is difficult to define ‘support limits’ due to the lack of common guidelines in terms of professional education and training. For example, it is often complicated for volunteers to set boundaries with regards to their support, even if the lack of boundaries means making important decisions that affect family matters.

“One of the volunteers sent a message to all the members of the group to organise outings for the refugee children and look after them. I found this initiative cool but also, I wondered, how did they manage before? It is the parents’ responsibility to find their bearings and take their children out. We can’t alleviate the educational problem, that’s the parents’ role. The volunteer took this initiative because she believed that it was important for them, but this request didn’t actually come from the family themselves.” — Volunteer (rural area)

This debate has been present since the implementation of Humanitarian Corridors and was particularly visible during group discussions and interviews with volunteers and centre managers.

“We have had a debate about being friends or sticking to our role as companions. Then, a volunteer invited [the sponsored family] for dinner, and this shocked the rest of the group as we had agreed that this wasn’t an option.” — Group discussion between collective volunteers (urban area)

On the other hand, the lack of effective guidance and training in boundary setting tends to generate a sort of involuntary oppression from the volunteers who, under the guise of kindness, develop controlling behaviours towards the families.

“I noticed that there was a sort of ‘control’ from certain volunteers on what the family could and couldn’t do. For example, they reminded them to wash their sheets every two weeks,

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forced them to go to the Secours Populaire² — as if to get them used to being poor — and suggested they save part of their welfare allowance for when they move into their future apartment.” — Volunteer (urban area)

FINDING

Unit managers play an important role in supporting collectives and managing their expectations.

This type of controlling behaviour dates back to a problem highlighted in the 2020 research report (Stuppia 2020), which brought to light the existence of a sort of ‘competition’ between different members of the same collective when it came to supporting others. This can cause tension within the group, as well as a feeling of infantilisation for the people who are being received, but who do not want to openly express their criticism towards the group of supporters for fear of upsetting them.

“We have had a meeting with families who arrived at the same time, and we have individually received feedback that certain things bothered them regarding their relationship with the collective, especially with regards to money. Then, we had a video call with other FEP colleagues and myself to discuss with the families and actually, people weren’t giving up. The families in the meeting said that everything was fine, even if they had individually sent an email to criticise.” — Unit manager

B. SUPPORT UPON ARRIVAL

This section deals with the global aspects of support required to meet the beneficiaries’ basic needs upon their arrival in France and over the following months³. It presents relevant findings on the crucial aspects of the resettlement process such as accommodation, administrative and financial support, language, and access to employment and transportation.

Accommodation

Accommodation is typically private and provided by the collective. Sometimes the lodgings are obtained free of charge through various calls for solidarity to property owners. Accommodation is granted based on the number of family members. Most large families are given accommodation in rural areas, where large homes are easier to find than in urban areas. While these allocation criteria are obviously important, several volunteers and unit managers have highlighted that it is also important to consider, where possible, the medical requirements of those received. Indeed, some have serious or chronic illnesses which require specific and regular medical services. These services are not always available in rural areas, requiring volunteers and beneficiaries to travel long distances to find them.

“Accommodation is crucial. It is an indispensable condition with regards to the support given, as it helps make other actions more efficient, insofar as the people are safer and more at ease.” — Volunteer (rural area)

Refugees echoed this feeling. One person, for example, stressed how easy it was for her and her family to obtain accommodation through the Humanitarian Corridors programme in comparison with other

² A non-profit that distributes food, clothing, and provides other services for those in need.

³ This confirms the survey results from 2018 and 2020 (Delaplace and Chobotva 2018; Stuppia 2020).

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asylum seekers through the national reception scheme.⁴ Those in the national reception scheme often have to wait several weeks or even months before being able to obtain CADA (Centre for Asylum Seekers) accommodation.

Accommodation in a host family

Most of the people interviewed had their own accommodation, while three people were living or had lived with a host family. Amongst the volunteers, just one interviewee hosted a family directly under their roof. Interestingly, on both sides, the only negative comments concerning the relationship between the guests and the volunteers came from the volunteer. The volunteer in question shared their poor experience, where the welcomed person did not do the household chores correctly and did not respect the household furniture. This person also mentioned that things would have worked out better if they hadn't provided accommodation directly in their home and is not against the idea of repeating the experience, as long as the person does not stay in their home.

Regarding the guest beneficiaries, one highlighted that, even if the relationship between her and the hosts was generally very good, she sometimes felt there was a discrepancy between their expectations and her own. She felt the host family wanted a "culture of exchange," while she preferred to keep herself to herself in order to rest and avoid dwelling on her story:

"The host told me that she was expecting more exchanges and interactions like when she had done AirBnB or lent her house to other families. Because I am a refugee, they saw me as a 'new cultural experience' and expected more cultural exchanges. But I had said from the beginning that I had a lot to process and to think about in my head and that I wasn't necessarily on the same page as them. They also had two children, while I'm on my own; I had spent my life on my own for years so living with a family for me wasn't uncomfortable, but it was a little strange." — Received person

This contradictory expectations between residents who join this type of programme for humanitarian reasons and hosts who are seeking a "human encounter" was also highlighted in the sociological work "Hospitalités en France - Mobilisations politiques et intimes" (Agier, Gerbier-Aublanc and Masson Diez 2019: 48). In the Humanitarian Corridors' 2020 research report, this question was also raised during the questionnaire analysis (Stuppia 2020: 105).

FINDING

The availability of self-contained accommodation for those being received is more suitable and appreciated than accommodation in someone's home.

Administrative and financial support

As asylum seekers, those received benefit from an asylum seeker's allowance (ADA) — a monthly allowance which is granted every month until the end of the asylum application. However, a period of around two months is often required before the first allowance, and as such, during these three months, the people are financially dependent on the collective, which covers all their needs. Once the ADA has been received, the collectives sometimes ask the beneficiaries to contribute to paying the bills (e.g. water and electricity).

⁴ The national reception scheme (*dispositif national d'accueil* (DNA)) is made up of various schemes: CADA, HUDA, CAES, Transit centre, CAO and PRADHA. Asylum seekers are hosted in these centres while their request for protection is reviewed by the Ofpra and the CNDA, where necessary: <https://www.forumrefugies.org/nos-actions/en-france/demandeurs-d-asile/centres-d-hebergement>

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On an administrative level, the collective handles most of the “ordinary” procedures such as enrolling children at school or making medical appointments, while the unit managers carry out procedures specific to the asylum application. This distinction is recent as, previously, the collectives were also in charge of asylum applications.

Some volunteers — albeit a minority — lamented this change which stripped them of their prerogatives. Nevertheless, the added position is generally perceived positively by most volunteers and by all members of the FEP. The unit manager relieves the volunteers of some of their tasks, but also ensures the intimacy and privacy of those welcomed; under the new system, refugees are free to not share their story with the volunteers who are already very involved in their lives through the daily support that they provide. Unlike the volunteers, unit managers are all professionals in the social sector who are not present every day and do not therefore develop a close relationship. Such conditions create an emotional distance which is more suited to sensitive asylum procedures.

“Now, volunteers are no longer in charge of Ofpra cases, as the life stories [of the programme beneficiaries] are often very complicated. The major difference is that I, as a professional in the social sector and as an employee, am sworn to professional secrecy and the [volunteers] are not. Initially, some collectives were surprised that I kept the Ofpra case and managed it, but I didn't give up because it's one of my missions, and I was unwilling to compromise on this.” — Unit manager, FEP

Learning the language

For all interviewees, this component was the main difficulty. The national reception scheme does not provide any French lessons for asylum seekers. It is only once the refugee status has been obtained that those received can take up to 400 hours of French lessons given by the OFII (the French Immigration and Integration Office). However, volunteers within the Humanitarian Corridors collectives arrange for French lessons to be given upon their arrival and throughout the duration of the procedure. They are therefore in contact with the French language as soon as they arrive through lessons given by volunteers, but also through interactions with them. In addition, there is platform available even when the beneficiaries are in Lebanon to provide the first lessons, as mentioned in the 2020 report (Stuppia 2020). Despite everything, learning the language usually takes years rather than months, and not being able to speak French has a strong impact in other areas, such as access to employment, healthcare, as well as the management of administrative procedures.

“It's complicated because you need appointments for everything, and without the language, it's difficult. For example, I had to make an appointment at the hospital, but I couldn't do it because of the language, so it was my husband's niece who did it for me. I sent her the necessary paperwork for the doctor, and she got me an appointment. Then, the hospital called me back, and I was on my own, and it was very difficult for me; I didn't understand and there was no-one there to help me. In the end, my husband and I went to the appointment, but we didn't know anyone, and we couldn't communicate. We were shown loads of different offices and in the end, we went home without seeing the doctor.” — Received person (urban area)

It seems that learning French is much quicker for children, through school. However, several interviews highlight that the UPE2A schemes provided in schools to accommodate allophone pupils are insufficient in urban areas and non-existent in rural areas.

“Having someone within the high school who is trained in French as a foreign language is essential when welcoming these youths, and yet this is not taken into consideration or into account by the national education system.” — High school representative (rural area)

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A councillor for the local government and a collective volunteer in a rural area also highlighted this pitfall:

“There is a severe lack of staff on a State level who are trained in welcoming children who do not yet speak French in the classroom, especially in small villages. There is no involvement from the national education system to support these children in learning the language, while in cities, there are often French as a foreign language classes for children several hours per day. In France, children are placed in classes depending on their age and not on their level of French, which causes learning problems for the teachers.” — Volunteer (rural area)

These conclusions are in keeping with the conclusions of the 2020 survey (Stuppia 2020: 124-126). From this point of view, there has been little improvement over the past two years.

Access to employment

Access to employment is made difficult for those who are received for several reasons. On the one hand, the asylum-seeker status does not allow people to work. A received person shared this difficulty with the researchers:

“When I arrived in France, I had a plan to work, thanks to my network, but the OFII told me this was not possible before obtaining [a different] status.” — Received person

On the other hand, it seems that the language barrier considerably limits job opportunities, especially in skilled trades.

“I hope to be able to work in order to make French friends, integrate with them, learn French with them... But at the same time, it's hard. I went to Pôle Emploi [the Job Centre] to sign up, and I asked for a job where there are lots of people like a restaurant, so I can see people, see how they talk, what they eat, how they drink, how they interact, but I was told it was very complicated because you have to be able to speak English after having learnt French... it's hard to find a job when you don't speak French; it's the most important aspect when looking for a job. Wherever you look, if you don't speak French, you won't find a job.” — Received person (urban area)

The language barrier also makes access to Pole Emploi difficult, as they don't provide any specific scheme for refugees. Also, those who have found a job managed to find one informally (and not via Pôle Emploi); for example, received people found jobs thanks to the collective's network or on websites such as 'leboncoin'. Finally, when people do manage to find a job, they sometimes feel they are downgrading from their skill level because of the language barrier, the lack of a social network, and the lack of appreciation for their previous work experience in their country of origin.

“Before the war started in Syria, I was self-employed. I had a garage. I was in a very good situation, but now I am employed and earn minimum wage, so it is different. I am happy with my job, but the salary is a bit low, and I have to travel 60 km there-and-back every day to get there, so it's not easy. I have ambition; I'd like to have my own garage but, here, I have to work three years in a garage before being able to open my own, as I don't have any qualifications. It's the law.” — Received person (urban area)

Mobility

Geographic mobility is another major difficulty, especially for those who live in rural areas — far from shopping facilities and administrative and healthcare services. In fact, initially, people who are received largely depend on volunteers to transport them, which involves a significant investment of

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money and time. This mobility is made even more difficult as, for some years now, the Syrian driving license can no longer be converted into a French driving licence, which causes frustration amongst volunteers and people who are received alike:

"The driving licence problem is completely absurd. They arrive with a Syrian driving licence, they can drive for a year in France, and then they are no longer allowed! [This is] especially [challenging], as we live far away from everything; we are a two-hour drive from the city. And then, [the law] expects people who don't speak the language to take their driving test again with the difficulties and the cost that this involves; I think it's totally ridiculous!" — Volunteer (rural area)

This constraint linked to mobility in rural areas led one of the received families to move to the city once they had obtained their refugee status:

"Life in the city is easier and more practical due to the proximity of public transport, shops, schools, etc. But we also liked our life in the countryside — the atmosphere, the closeness to others. There are pros and cons in both scenarios." — Received person (rural area)

FINDING

The main difficulties that people being received are faced with include learning the language, and access to employment and mobility, especially in rural areas.

C. PHASING-OUT PERIOD TOWARDS AN INDEPENDENT LIFE

The following section describes some of the most important challenges that sponsored refugees are faced with when collective support ends and they must rely on public and administrative assistance. It also underlines the pertinence of fostering the sponsored families' independence.

Challenges during the transition from collective assistance to public assistance

The Humanitarian Corridors programme provides citizen support for a limited time only and is supposed to end once refugee status has been obtained. This is because refugee status allows people to access the common law system in terms of social assistance (i.e. the possibility of seeing a social worker, enrolment with Pôle Emploi, being eligible for social welfare and social housing, etc.). In practice, understanding the administrative procedures and transitioning from collective support to public aid schemes proves to be difficult for most people, as many cannot speak French proficiently once refugee status has been obtained. In addition, newly-designated refugees must also tackle the complexity of administrative procedures in the social protection system. Therefore, even once the status has been obtained, many people seem to still depend on the collective in this domain, as the following interview extracts demonstrate:

"We would have liked more help; one year isn't enough, and there is still a lot of administrative paperwork and lots of information that we don't know how to handle." Received person (urban area)

FINDING

This research revealed that, in certain cases, sponsored families do not know the social worker who responsible for supporting them when volunteer support ends.

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Despite the fact that sponsored families are put into contact with social workers, they do not fully understand the system and the administrative formalities needed to request their services once the Humanitarian Corridors programme ends.

"They go and see the social worker, but I don't know if they'd do it if the volunteers or the unit manager didn't make the appointments for them. They know where the social worker's office is; they know that the social worker reviews certain cases. But in terms of understanding the procedures, I'm not sure if they understand everything." — Wider community member (rural area)

Even when sponsored families would like to manage their administrative situation themselves, they are sometimes met with the rigidity or reluctance of certain services:

"We went to see the social worker two or three times; we did some paperwork, and then she never got back to us. We had a first appointment with her when we handed in our paperwork for the social housing request. Then, we asked for another appointment to follow-up on the request, and she didn't contact us. Even today, she has never asked if we found anything, and it's been over a year since we called her." — Received person (urban area)

Support from volunteers in the transition towards public services

Some volunteers have had to speak up to service providers in order to deal with important procedures, such as opening an account.

"I accompanied the person to the post office to open a bank account. We met some surprisingly reluctant people, and I noticed that the staff were reluctant to open an account for migrants despite their leaflet saying the opposite. So, I went to the central post office in Toulouse, and I was lucky to meet a lady who listened to me and told me about this mental block with regards to migrants. She helped us open the account." — Volunteer (urban area)

The collective questioned in the urban area were not able to give us the contact details of a social worker in charge of those received. The collective in the rural area maintains a close relationship with the social worker and the social service that deals with families. The interview extracts below reveal both a regular follow-up of welcomed families by the social services and close coordination between these services and the volunteers within the collective:

"As a social assistant who follows up on received families in the village, I work quite regularly with the collective. We know the volunteers well and we work closely together; we are significantly supported by them, and we answer any questions they may have." — Social Worker

FINDING

It is interesting to note that in rural areas, sponsored people and families seem to benefit from better social support than in urban areas, due to better access to public services. This is surprising given the services are further away geographically than for those living in cities but more quickly available. Rural areas also seem to have better proximity between collectives, local charities and public structures.

Support towards an independent life

This research revealed that the volunteers should receive more training to understand the necessity of preparing refugees to lead an independent life and avoid clientelism.

“During our reviews with the first family, we were more concerned with meeting their needs and didn't consider their independence. We never raised the question about their independence or whether they were capable of doing it on their own. We need to tell the new collective to address this issue with future volunteers within the collective in rural areas.” — Volunteer (rural area)

V. Case studies: Impact of Humanitarian Corridors in host communities

Strong ties and positive collaborative relationships between all players are essential to the success of Humanitarian Corridors. Ties and relationships between volunteer support groups and sponsored people are also central to the programme. The following section will examine the ties and relationships created between sponsored individuals and the members of the two communities included in this study. The sponsored people developed close ties with local organisations and individuals in their region so they could access social services, as well as expand their networks and make friends.

A. RELATIONSHIPS WITH VOLUNTEERS AND SPONSORED FAMILIES

Church communities play an important role in the creation of social ties and networking.

This observation was made both by a sponsored family who went to church (and who already went to church in Syria) but also by respondents from the wider community, who were also members of the church.

“Church was the best place to meet and interact with people and to integrate. It is difficult to connect with people that you don't know if there is no structure; I wouldn't spontaneously speak to people in the street. For us, Church was the only way to interact with people. At church, we know each other, we pray, our friends from the church come and pray with us, they greet us, we are included. Outside, it's more complicated.” — French-as-a-foreign-language volunteer and church member (urban area)

Through these testimonies, we can see that the church plays a role in welcoming foreigners who, irrespective of their origins, come together on the basis of shared beliefs. Sponsored families are not really perceived as refugees, but rather as simple parishioners. This type of welcome is a way of building a network of friends and solidarity which may then open other doors in terms of schooling or access to employment.

“The fact that they go to church gave them a network; the private Catholic school immediately admitted their child, free of charge.” — Volunteer (urban area)

Collectives play a key intermediary role between people who are received and the host society

All people from the wider community who participated in this study were introduced to the sponsored people by the collective volunteers. This observation underlines the crucial role of volunteers who

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mobilise their own networks for the benefits of asylum-seekers and refugees, thus facilitating their integration in the local area.

"People are welcomed in the town; a network is created around them, thanks to the collective which organised a big meal to thank everyone who helped them. This type of event allows guests to meet people, and the collective facilitates this integration." — Social worker (rural area)

A UNHCR study conducted in 2013 showed that only 12% of the refugees interviewed had ties with French citizens.⁵ The role of the volunteer collectives in facilitating access to a social network makes the Humanitarian Corridors model special compared to the national reception scheme. The programme enables those received to be brought into direct contact with citizens of the host society who are proactive and can facilitate the sponsored peoples' integration. Through the programme, for example, sponsored people build up their networks by getting closer to local associations, youth centres, churches, casual jobs through friends and more.

This immersive dimension in the host society is a key point, as it helps people to get to know the host society more quickly, as well as encouraging their independence and their capacity to create their own circles based on the volunteer collective's network.

"One of the main advantages of this project is the immersion of people into French society — getting to know other French people, friends, neighbours, etc. They won't create friendships with everyone, but at least they will be integrated in a network of people, and then they'll find people that they have an affinity with. It's a huge advantage, especially as social workers don't have the time to do this and have to also keep a certain professional distance. So, it really helps; the collectives are really complementary to the work of social workers." — Unit manager

B. TIES WITH SCHOOLS AND SERVICES

Schools and youth centres quickly facilitate children's socialisation

Despite difficulties linked to learning the language and the lack or absence of dedicated facilities for French-as-a-foreign-language lessons in the school curricula — especially in villages —, schools, and the activities they offer, are an important place for socialisation, which accelerates French language learning and children's integration in society:

"When we arrived, our son had a mental block; he refused to learn French. When the school year ended last year, he did a work placement in a shop. He enjoyed the work which also forced him to speak French with the customers. In two months, he made lots of progress in French. He is learning in this shop at the moment." — Received person (mother, urban area)

The schools who admitted sponsored children helped put them into contact with local pupils and to raise awareness around their culture and traditions.

"We explained to the other pupils that we were going to welcome these children; we tried to promote ties between the pupils. They were in good hands. We also organised informal discussions during which the students were able to talk about their home country." — Supervisory colleague (rural area)

⁵ <https://singalyon.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/523aefec4.pdf>

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Outside of school, free youth centres (whether they are state structures — like community youth clubs and arts centres — or associations) also help with children's socialisation:

“The young girl had a few problems at high school with other pupils, and our centre allowed her to meet other youths to make a new circle of friends outside of her class. She was also involved in various activities and outings. I am glad that our structure is useful to help these young people integrate.” — Director of a rural youth centre.

The (important) resources and services deployed to enable the Humanitarian Corridors programme to function generate tension within the community

The collectives of volunteers working with Humanitarian Corridors are made up of around ten people, on average, who apply their skills and dedicate their time to looking after one sponsored family at a time. The number of volunteers involved for a single family is considerable, especially if we compare it to the support reserved for other asylum seekers. It has been mentioned that the national reception system (DNA) framework suffers from major shortcomings as, on the one hand, it does not have the means to fulfil its basic mission (i.e. to provide accommodation and administrative support to all asylum seekers) and, on the other hand, it doesn't provide for such “close” support in everyday life and in the creation of social ties.

“This system centralises a lot of effort on a select few while a huge proportion of asylum seekers in France are living on the streets. It's not very fair.” — Volunteer (urban area)

This research revealed a controversial difference in the treatment of families sponsored by Humanitarian Corridors compared to those supported by other programmes.

“Numerous member associations of the FEP support unsuccessful applicants on a daily basis or people without residence permits who cannot benefit from the same support as the small number of families welcomed in the Humanitarian Corridors framework, which is sometimes considered to be a double standard by our member associations.” — Unit manager

C. TIES WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Hosting in a rural area has a positive impact on the local environment

This observation was also highlighted in 2020 by the positive role of the out-of-city project (Stuppia 2020: 122). Whether it involves revitalising rural areas marked by a population decline or giving villages the opportunity to open up to other cultures, hosting in rural areas is viewed positively by the different members of the wider community interviewed in this study.

“Our small villages have a basic problem: the population is ageing, and it is difficult to renew it, so the fact that young people are arriving — regardless of where they come from — is a huge advantage for the local area. It's especially good for our schools, since this enables them to have a minimum number of students; otherwise classes have to close. Finally, [the arrival of newcomers] is also an opportunity to be confronted with another language, another culture, and this confrontation brings so much; it brings life. The benefit is therefore huge for a small town like ours.” — Mayor (rural area)

According to certain members working with the wider community, the presence of sponsored families is an opportunity to reinforce values of inclusion and tolerance.

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"In my opinion, the more we mix people, the more positive it is. That's how I see it and that's how a lot of people see it here; our village is generally pretty welcoming. We have every interest to live together and share our lifestyles, even if they are different." — Social worker (rural area)

It should be noted that every person interviewed from the wider community had a positive opinion of refugees, insofar as they were introduced to the research team by volunteers or by sponsored people. This fact indicates that the people interviewed have (good) relationships with programme volunteers and beneficiaries. This is not necessarily the case for the entire community.

"There are a few people who still object to welcoming people into the village, fearing the 'Great Replacement.' [This sentiment] can be felt at certain events — at the Christmas market or the associations forum, for example. But they are a minority. Our collective has brought together nearly 95 members two months after its creation and was very quickly integrated into the local voluntary fabric. There is a good culture of voluntary service in the village." — Community volunteer (rural area)

According to these testimonies, unfavourable views towards asylum-seekers and refugees exist in rural areas but remain a minority.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

This study has highlighted certain advantages of the Humanitarian Corridors programme in France. In addition to accommodation and administrative and financial support, the people welcomed by the programme have access to a rich social network which enables them to immerse themselves in the host society. However, there are still some important challenges to face.

Firstly, it is essential to reduce the volunteers' expectations regarding what should happen to those received once in France. It is worth reminding the collectives that the aim of the Humanitarian Corridors programme is to develop a legal and safe route towards asylum in a third country, and not to force a 'Republican-values integration' for those received. In this way, it could be useful to train willing volunteers on interculturality, Syria or Islam to better understand the people welcomed. It would also be useful to train collectives on the subject of asylum and, in particular, on resettlement procedures and legal, safe access routes to enable a better understanding of the project and its aims.

More information on Humanitarian Corridors should also be provided to people waiting to be resettled in countries such as Lebanon, where most refugees were not aware of the UNHCR's resettlement programmes.

In addition, there is a need to involve a more diverse group of volunteers in terms of educational and professional backgrounds. The programme should also strive to include volunteers and community members from secular or non-protestant environments to increase the impact of the programme and broaden it. Volunteers would also benefit from a professional social volunteer to guide them and ensure group cohesion and mediation between members. Regional centres should be equipped with additional resources to facilitate the recruitment of volunteers and monitor the well-being of volunteers and refugees.

It is also important that volunteers and refugees have a platform where they can share their experiences and learn from one another. Refugees should be more involved in the choices and orientations of Humanitarian Corridors through the forming of participative groups, so that their

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feedback and recommendations are better represented and considered for future arrivals. However, it is essential that the respondents and the sponsored people feel comfortable to express their frustrations and ask questions without worrying about offending others, which can be the case in the context of this intrinsically unbalanced relationship between the host and the sponsored refugees.

The study has also revealed frustrations caused by challenges linked to complex and ever-evolving asylum procedures, as well as ordinary administrative procedures. Volunteers and sponsored people often find these systems difficult to navigate and, in certain cases, this leads to a number of delays in the reception of the necessary documents and access to services. In order to alleviate the workload for volunteers and to better support the people welcomed, this study recommends that the programme create short fact sheets (in French and in Arabic) on precise topics such as ADA, RSA, CAF, Pôle Emploi, CCAS, and social housing application procedures. These fact sheets should specify important global details such as that these services cover the entire country and not just the region in which the people arrived. The fact sheets will complement the programme "[Welcome Guide](#)," which is already available to collectives and available on EFP's website.

The State and local authorities also need to be involved in supporting new arrivals. However, it is important to remember that a greater involvement from the State in Humanitarian Corridors would also accentuate the "preferential treatment" given to people welcomed in this programme compared to other state-sponsored resettlement programmes; it would amplify the difference in treatment between these people and the rest of the asylum seekers falling under the national reception system. Therefore, a call for greater involvement from the State should be done for all asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection (BIP) and not only for those who are received through the Humanitarian Corridors programme.

Finally, in this current international context, protection needs are quickly evolving and affect a wide variety of regions across the world. For example, in less than a year, the Afghan and Ukrainian crises have meant that millions more people require international protection. It would therefore be appropriate to adapt the programme depending on international needs without necessarily confining it to one specific country of origin or transit.

Recommendations

- Promote awareness amongst collectives regarding their supporting role and deconstruct any potential stereotypes they may have about refugees.
- Diversify the pool of volunteers involved in Humanitarian Corridors. In particular, mobilise volunteers from secular or non-protestant backgrounds.
- Increase the visibility of the project in France and in in-between transit countries, such as Lebanon.
- Encourage collectives, where possible, to appoint a volunteer in charge of ensuring group cohesion and mediation between its members.
- Involve sponsored people in the implementation of Humanitarian Corridors.
- Promote the emergence of a good-practices network through regular consultations with volunteers and those received, thus strengthening the link between them.
- Create standard tools and technical notes on specific administrative topics for collectives and sponsored people.

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- Further implicate the State and local authorities with regards to providing support to those received.
- Extend the Humanitarian Corridors programme to asylum-seekers and refugees of other nationalities.
- Increase the resources of regional centres.
- Promote encounters between sponsored people and the members of the host society.

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HUMANITARIAN CORRIDORS IN FRANCE: EVALUATION OF THE FÉDÉRATION DE L'ENTRAIDE PROTESTANTE'S COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMME

Principal Authors: Claire Cabrol (Independent Consultant) with the support of Paolo Stuppia (consultant), Micheline Helaleh (FEP volunteer legal consultant and Share QSN Refugee Advisor), Marisol Reyes-Soto and Gabriella D'Avino (Independent Consultants)

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International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC Europe)

Rue Washington 40, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

+32 (0) 2 227 97 29

www.icmc.net

www.share-network.eu



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