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Community Sponsorship in the Basque Country: Empowering Autonomy and Integration Through a Constructive Private and Public Partnership

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Abstract

The Auzolana II agreement is an innovative multi-level governance initiative in which the Spanish national government and authorities of the Basque Country agreed to set up a pilot community sponsorship programme (CSBC) in 2019. The CSBC is a new sponsorship model which operates through a strong partnership between regional and local authorities, civil society organisations and volunteers within local communities. This paper offers insight into the design and functioning of the CSBC and how its approach facilitates or hinders sponsored refugees' autonomy in their settlement processes, ultimately aiming to facilitate their integration into their new communities. Based on qualitative data collected from two evaluations conducted in 2021 and 2022, the analysis involved combining two theoretical frameworks. The first, refugee-integration-opportunity structures, examines autonomy and integration through locality, relations, structure, support initiatives, and discourse. The second framework comprises 15 assessment points used to measure the effectiveness of private sponsorship. Findings show that the CSBC enhanced refugees' access to services, training, education and social networks, strengthening their autonomy. To maximise future impact, regional disparities must be addressed, volunteer profiles diversified, cultural training expanded and the CSBC should complement rather than replace Spain's refugee quota.

Keywords Community sponsorship · Regional authorities · Basque country · Opportunity structures · Assessment community sponsorship

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Introduction

The approval of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants by the United Nations General Assembly in 2016 (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2018; United Nations, 2016) marked a pivotal moment in global governance concerning refugees and migration. This declaration laid the groundwork for the adoption of two key instruments: the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration (UNHCR, 2018; United Nations, 2018). In particular, the Global Compact on Refugees offers a comprehensive framework for governments, international organisations and other stakeholders to enhance the protection and inclusion of refugees, enabling them to lead self-sufficient and productive lives. It further emphasises a multi-stakeholder, whole-of-society approach, which fosters cooperation among various actors. In line with this approach, community sponsorship (CS) programmes have emerged as a critical mechanism for involving individuals, local organisations and communities in the reception, support and integration of refugees. Beyond providing additional solutions for displaced people, these programmes can enhance refugee settlement and foster social cohesion within host communities (European Commission, 2018).

In 2019, the Basque Country launched the Auzolana II agreement (CSBC), creating Spain's first sponsorship pilot initiative. Rooted in multi-level governance, the CSBC involves regional, national and international actors, including the Basque Government, Spain's Ministry of Work, Migration and Social Security and UNHCR. Initially supporting five Syrian families, followed by six more in a second phase, the programme has since expanded to operate in eight municipalities, sponsoring a total of 57 individuals between 2019 and 2023.

Despite growing interest in the CSBC as an innovative model for refugee protection and support, there is limited research on its overall effectiveness. While it is widely regarded as a promising initiative, particularly in fostering collaboration among different levels of government and civil society, further research is required to determine whether it enhances refugee autonomy. Specifically, key questions remain regarding how its multi-level governance structure influences the opportunities available to refugees and whether it successfully empowers them to become self-sufficient members of their new communities. This study aims to address this gap through the following research question: *How does the multi-level governance approach of the CSBC impact the autonomy of sponsored refugees in the Basque Country?* This study employs Phillimore's (2021) opportunity structures framework, which explores how host societies enable or constrain refugee autonomy, and integrates it with McNally's (2020) evaluation model of private sponsorship. McNally's 15 dimensions provide a comprehensive set of indicators for assessing the effectiveness of CS initiatives. By combining both analytical frameworks, this paper explores how the CSBC's governance mechanisms, from local to national levels, work in tandem to create environments where refugees can exercise greater agency in shaping their own lives. Moreover, their combination helps to identify best practices and potential gaps in CSBC's approach, offering valuable insights into how similar initiatives can be optimised for greater social impact.

In the following section, we examine the concept of refugee autonomy and introduce Phillimore's (2021) refugee-integration-opportunity structures framework. We then present McNally's (2020) evaluation points and propose a new approach that integrates it with Phillimore's model. After outlining the key elements of CSBC, we detail the methodology employed in this study. The findings are organised according to the five dimensions of Phillimore's (2021) framework. Finally, the article concludes with reflections on resettlement in the context of the CSBC and offers recommendations for enhancing its sustainability.

The CSBC-Auzolana II in a Nutshell

Auzolana II is a multi-level governance agreement that created a pilot CS in the Basque Country. The programme has its roots in the onset of the Syrian civil war and the increasing need for international protection in Europe. Seeking to explore new reception pathways, the Basque Government became aware of the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), which promotes and supports CS programmes worldwide (Fratzke et al., 2019). Negotiations initiated in 2018 between the Basque Government and the Spanish national government were endorsed by GRSI. These negotiations culminated in the signing of a collaboration agreement to set up the first CS programme in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country[1] and in Spain. Signatories included the General Secretariat for Human Rights, Coexistence, and Cooperation of the Basque Government; the Directorate-General for Integration and Humanitarian Assistance of the State Secretariat for Migrations (SEM); UNHCR; and representatives of the civil society organisations selected from the Basque government to act as lead sponsors. Civil Society stakeholders were as follows: Cáritas Diocesana de Bilbao, Cáritas Diocesana de Vitoria, Cáritas Diocesana de San Sebastián and the Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation (Manzanedo, 2019). As per the collaboration agreement, the Spanish government agreed to identify sponsorship refugees based on UNHCR recommendations; however, selected families are *not additional* to the number of refugees considered for resettlement in Spain. The CSBC commenced its operations in March 2019.

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[1] See "*Convenio entre la Dirección General de Integración y Atención Humanitaria, la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco, el Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados y las entidades sociales Cáritas Diocesana de Bilbao, Cáritas Diocesana de Vitoria, Cáritas Diocesana de San Sebastián y Fundación Social Ignacio Ellacuria, para desarrollar en Euskadi una experiencia piloto de patrocinio comunitario Auzolana II en materia de acogida e integración de personas beneficiarias de protección internacional*" [Agreement between the Directorate-General for Integration and Humanitarian Assistance, the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the social entities Cáritas Diocesana de Bilbao, Cáritas Diocesana de Vitoria, Cáritas Diocesana de San Sebastián, and Ignacio Ellacuria Social Foundation, to develop a pilot experience of community sponsorship, Auzolana II, in the Basque Country concerning the reception and integration of individuals benefiting from international protection] at https://www.legegunea.euskadi.eus/contenidos/tramita_nbnc_convenio_colaboracion/nbnc_cco_836_19_01/es_def/adjuntos/convenio%20auzolana%20ii%20escaneo%20original.pdf

The CSBC is a groundbreaking model as it is the first multi-level governance sponsorship initiative directly promoted by a regional authority within the EU framework. Its approach involves collaborative efforts across national, regional and local governments to ensure all levels of governance are involved in policy implementation for welcoming and integrating refugees. The CSBC differs from other sponsorship initiatives in Europe because of the central role played by the Basque Government and local authorities in supporting, funding, coordinating and monitoring the civil society organisations and volunteers involved in the programme (Share QSN, 2023). The CSBC approach is characterised by a strong partnership and coordination between governments and private stakeholders. Regional and local authorities are responsible for providing essential resettlement services such as education, health, employment support, social services and funding accommodation, and civil society groups identify suitable housing and recruit and coordinate volunteers to provide practical and emotional support (Basque Government, 2021). The objectives set out in the Auzolana II agreement include the development of a reception and integration model based on social participation and collective responsibility to promote the autonomy and harmonious inclusion of sponsored families in their new communities. It also aims to promote the replication of the model in other regions of Spain (Basque Government, 2021). So far, the autonomous communities of Valencia and Navarra have adopted a sponsorship model inspired by the Basque Country (Spanish Government, 2021; Universitat de Valencia, 2023).

During the design phase of the CSBC, the Basque Government selected the civil society organisations, Cáritas Euskadi and the Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation, to lead the social support aspect of the programme. These organisations were chosen based on their established track record and expertise in providing support and social mentoring to vulnerable groups (ICMC Europe, 2023). Specific programme commitments include recruiting a group of at least five volunteers from the local community and appointing a group coordinator to establish a social network that helps them navigate various practical tasks in an unfamiliar environment. The lead sponsor groups are also responsible for finding and securing appropriate housing for the project's two-year duration, although rents are covered by the Basque Government. In terms of financial support, the sponsor groups need to fundraise €10,000 to support the refugee families and the Basque government committed €300,000 for refugee provisions across a 27-month period. This government support funds part-time social workers employed by the lead sponsor groups to mentor the groups of volunteers. This innovation has proved to be pivotal for the success of the pilot (Basque Government, 2021).

A Local Coordination Board integrated by representatives of the Basque government, local authorities and lead sponsor organisations oversees the allocation of necessary economic resources for volunteer groups and sponsored families. Each lead sponsor, holding the sponsorship agreement, is responsible—together with the local sponsorship group—for developing a comprehensive strategy outlined in a detailed settlement plan. This plan encompasses key components, including the motivations beyond the initiative, identification of individuals and the local CS group involved and the objectives and priorities of the reception and integration project. It also details the group's specific commitments and the resources available, including language support,

healthcare services, psychological support services, education, employment training, job search assistance, legal aid and leisure opportunities. Serving as a blueprint, the plan ensures a structured and holistic approach with a strong focus on fostering autonomy and empowerment for the sponsored families (Basque Government, 2021).

Opportunity Structures for Autonomy

Recent migration literature increasingly acknowledges that promoting autonomy and agency among refugees is essential for achieving integration (Frazier & van Riemsdijk, 2021; Hynie, 2018; Khan, 2018). The Auzolana II agreement highlights autonomy as a key objective, aiming to enable sponsored families to become active community members swiftly. In the CSBC, support for autonomy includes language acquisition, compulsory education, employment training, financial literacy and social network development to prepare families for independent living (Basque Government, 2021). Autonomy is broadly defined as "an individual's capacity for self-determination or self-governance" (Mill, 1956: 73). Refugees are often portrayed as powerless, with limited control over key aspects of their lives, such as resettlement location and family reunification (Tazzioli et al., 2018). In response, refugees often engage in acts of "self-rescue"—actively seeking mentorship, education and self-employment, avoiding long-term dependence on shelters and creating their own social networks (Kyriakides et al., 2019). Scholars like Hynie (2018) call for policies that challenge the victim narrative, advocating for approaches—like CS initiatives—that restore agency and build community ties.

While CS can help refugees regain autonomy, it also risks perpetuating paternalistic relationships. Sponsors may unintentionally reinforce dependency by making decisions on behalf of refugees, limiting their agency (Ali et al., 2022; Haugen et al., 2020; Lenard, 2016; Macklin et al., 2020). Much of this evidence comes from Canada, with limited research on European programmes. This study argues that the CSBC pilot model, which employs different opportunity structures within a multilevel governance approach, has contributed to improving refugees' pathways to autonomy. However, to generate meaningful results in the long term, it is necessary to improve different aspects of its operation.

Kyriakides et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of considering broader societal inequalities that shape refugee-host relationships. Policies should aim to re-balance these disparities and enhance refugees' access to resources which promote autonomy. To analyse the conditions fostering autonomy, we use Phillimore's (2021) opportunity structures framework, which examines external factors and pathways that influence access to resources, services and opportunities. For refugees, these structures are essential for achieving self-sufficiency and independence. The framework includes five dimensions (see Table 1).

Evaluating Sponsorship Programmes

Building on Canada's longstanding sponsorship model, over 20 countries have developed similar programmes in the last decade (Zanzuchi et al., 2023). Evaluations of

Table 1 The five dimensions of refugee opportunity structures (Phillimore, 2021)

Locality	The resettlement location significantly impacts refugees' prospects and community welcome (Jones and Teytelboym, 2017), encompassing access to work, good-quality housing and healthy living (Ager & Strang, 2008)
Discourse	Media and political narratives shape public attitudes and the emotional orientation of host communities (Fotopoulos & Kaimaklioti, 2016; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017)
Relations	Host-refugee interactions influence how welcoming or hostile communities are (Phillimore et al., 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2020)
Structure	Institutional and legal frameworks define resettlement systems and policies across governance levels (Tan, 2021)
Initiatives and support	Specific programmes, whether state-led or through migrant organisations, which directly support refugee autonomy (Cortes, 2022)

Canadian sponsorship highlight its positive impact on refugee autonomy and integration (Stansbury, 2021). While it is important to acknowledge differences between Canada's private sponsorship system—on which most literature is based—and European programmes (Tan, 2021; Share QSN, 2022), some scholars have begun developing evaluative frameworks for cross-country comparisons to inform policy and improve programme effectiveness (Kamran, 2023). For the Canadian model, McNally (2020) proposed 15 key evaluation questions, which were adapted for use with the CSBC.

1. *Durable solution*: Does the programme provide permanent protection and pathways to citizenship?
2. *Settlement needs*: Does the programme meet the concrete settlement needs of refugees?
3. *Refugee perspectives*: Do refugees have a positive experience in the programme?
4. *Integration outcomes*: Does the programme lead to positive integration outcomes and equal or better outcomes compared to government programmes?
5. *Vulnerability assessment*: Does the programme resettle the most vulnerable?
6. *Scale*: How many refugees does the programme resettle?
7. *Additionality*: Do sponsored refugees replace government resettlement?
8. *Public opinion and welcome communities*: Does the programme promote positive public opinion and encourage welcoming communities?
9. *Mobilising civil society*: Does the programme effectively mobilise residents and various community organisations (religious, ethnocultural, businesses, etc.) to support refugees?
10. *Sustainability*: Is there sufficient sponsor interest and government support to sustain the programme long-term?
11. *Effective process*: Is the process clear, efficient, fair and transparent?
12. *Safeguarding*: Are there sufficient safeguards in place to protect refugees and to hold sponsors accountable for their obligations?
13. *Sponsors experience*: Does the programme adequately train and support sponsors, encouraging them to sponsor again?

14. *Reunifying family*: Does the programme reunify separated refugee families?
15. *Global context*: Does the programme focus on high-profile populations at the expense of other refugees?

While Pinyol-Jiménez used these questions to conduct the first CSBC evaluation, this paper integrates McNally's assessment points with Phillimore's (2021) refugee-integration-opportunity structures framework. This integrated approach examines not only the design and functioning of the CSBC, but also how it facilitates or hinders sponsored refugees' autonomy during resettlement. To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have explored how opportunity structures influence autonomy in CS schemes. To address this gap, we linked Phillimore's (2021) model to McNally's (2020) framework and developed an analytic diagram illustrating their compatibility (see Fig. 1).

Methods

The data for this research were drawn from two evaluations of CSBC coordinated by Pinyol-Jiménez. The first, commissioned by the Basque Government in 2021, analysed the design and implementation of the Auzolana II Pilot CS programme launched in 2019 (Basque Government, 2021). As noted earlier, McNally's (2020) 15 key questions were employed to assess the programme's effectiveness. The evaluation aimed to explore resettlement and accommodation outcomes and support knowledge transfer for potential replication in other regions by identifying challenges, stakeholders and opportunities (see Annex 1 for the topic guide). The
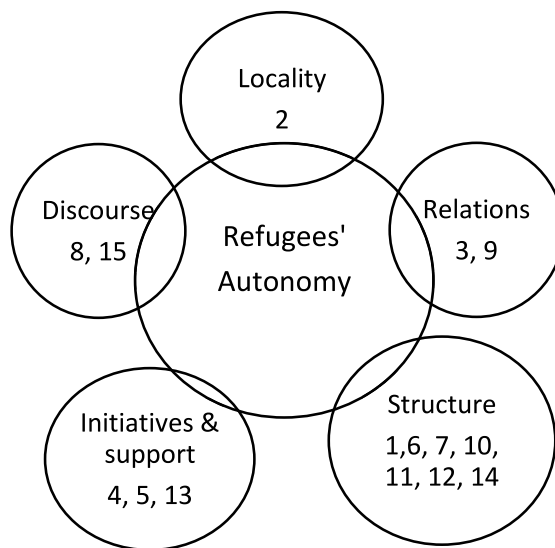

Fig. 1 Opportunity structures and CSBC assessment points

analysis was conducted across three levels. At the macro level, evaluators examined objectives, planning, resource allocation, governance and stakeholder engagement. The meso level focused on the development and implementation of the sponsorship programme, while the micro level addressed specific actions in programme delivery. Figure 2 illustrates these three levels of analysis.

During this first CSBC evaluation, data were gathered through desk reviews, interviews and questionnaires. Evaluators reviewed documents related to CSBC as well as sponsorship programmes operating in other countries. In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with key stakeholders engaged in CSBS, including representatives of public administrations, UNHCR and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) delegates, organisations supporting sponsoring groups, local groups and sponsored refugees. Table 2 provides a list of the 51 stakeholders who were interviewed.

The second evaluation was conducted between June 2021 and May 2022 as part of the Share Network's Quality Sponsorship Network (QSN) project. Funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and led by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe, the QSN involved actors from seven countries: Belgium (Caritas International Belgium), France (Féderation de l'Entraide Protestante), Germany (Caritas Cologne), Ireland (Irish Refugee Council), Italy (Consorzio Comunitas), Spain (Basque Government) and the UK (Citizens UK). Together with QSN partners and external evaluators, ICMC Europe conducted research on sponsorship programmes across these countries. In the Basque Country, the evaluation aimed to expand and update findings from the first assessment.

In the second evaluation, semi-structured interviews were used to gather in-depth qualitative data. Topic guides, developed for each stakeholder group and based on McNally's key questions, addressed themes such as community engagement, adequacy of services for refugees and collaboration between municipalities and civil society organisations. Annex 2 contains the topic guide. In total, 28 interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including staff from local authorities, civil society
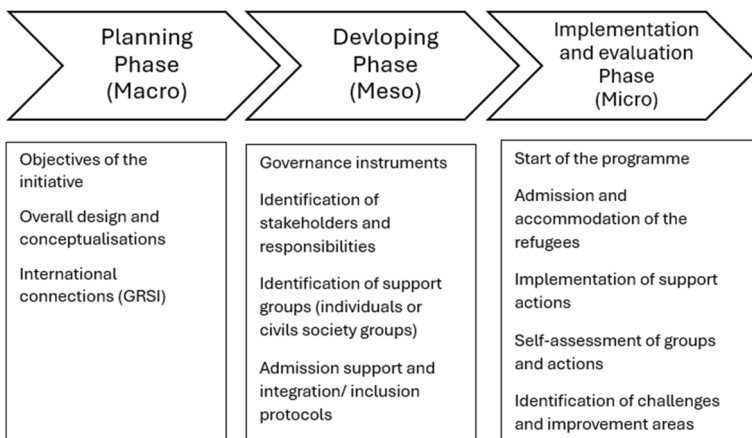
Fig. 2 Level of analysis of first CSBC evaluation

Table 2 List of stakeholders interviewed during the first CSBC evaluation

Typology	Name	Numbers
Public administrators	Secretariat of State for Migration	2
	General Secretariat of Human Rights, Coexistence and Cooperation	1
International bodies	UNHCR – Spain	2
	IOM-Spain	2
Civil society groups leading CSBC	Cáritas-Diocesana	9
	Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation	10
Local groups	Local Group-Cáritas Diocesana Donostia-San Sebastián	9
	Local Group-Cáritas Diocesana Vitoria-Gasteiz	8
	Local Group-Cáritas Diocesana Bilbao	4
	Local Group-Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation	2
Others	Comisión de Ayudas al Refugiado Euskadi	2

groups leading the CSBC, local groups not directly involved in the programme and two sponsored refugee families. The families were selected based on willingness and availability. Given that only 12 families (57 individuals) had been resettled, access was limited. These two families likely represent those more accessible and willing to participate, offering valuable, though not generalisable, insights. See Table 3 for further details on participants.

The geographical distribution of the families was a significant consideration. Families were resettled across eight municipalities, each offering varying levels of support. Selecting families from different locations ensured that the research captured a variety of resettlement contexts. Differences in family size, origin and time since resettlement were also considered to reflect a broader spectrum of perspectives on challenges and opportunities including employment, education and creation of social networks. Access to the families was facilitated by Cáritas Bizkaia and

Table 3 List of stakeholders interviewed during the second CSBC evaluation

Typology	Name	Numbers
Regional government	Secretariat for Migration and Asylum, Basque Country	2
	Bilbao City Council	1
	Arrigorriaga City Council	2
	Portugalete City Council	2
Civil society groups leading CSBC	Cáritas Diocesana	2
	Ignacio Ellacuría Foundation	2
Local groups	Cáritas Diocesana	3
	Ignacio Ellacuría Foundation	4
Sponsored families	Family 1	2
	Family 2	1
Local community	Other members of the community not part of the civil society organisations	7

the Ellacuría Foundation, who coordinated with volunteers and families to confirm participation. Municipalities were chosen for their geographical diversity and varying administrative capacities. The research focused on administrative staff directly involved in implementation, rather than elected political representatives.

In the second CSBC evaluation, greater emphasis was placed on the involvement of local community members who were not directly part of the sponsorship programme. This approach aligns with the Share QSN methodology, which highlights the importance of considering both direct participants in the CS scheme, but also the broader community members who play an indirect but significant role in the integration processes. These individuals, including teachers, healthcare providers and social workers, are essential because they provide everyday services that support refugee resettlement. By including them in the study, the research aimed to capture a holistic view of the broader social impact of CS. The Share QSN methodology recognises that the interactions between local institutions and resettled individuals contribute significantly to the overall success of the programme, even if these actors are not formally part of the sponsorship initiative. Their perspectives provide valuable insights into how local institutions and services support refugee families beyond the formal scope of the scheme.

The researchers ensured data protection and participant confidentiality by adhering to the ICMC code of ethics. All participants provided informed consent for voluntary participation and digital recording of interviews. Interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted to organise the data according to the topics identified in McNally's framework. The study employed a qualitative data analysis framework, utilising thematic analysis to interpret the data and identify patterns and themes across the findings from both assessments. No software was used in the analysis. Data from the initial evaluation were integrated with responses from the second assessment through cross-validation, helping to corroborate and deepen the overall analysis.

Findings

In the following sections, we present and discuss key findings that help to explain how the CSBC has supported sponsored families to gain autonomy into their local communities. The results are reported in a logical order according to the five opportunity structures connected with the 15 assessment points identified in the theoretical framework.

Locality

The impact of the places where sponsored refugees live is likely to play a profound role in their autonomy processes. Locality is complex and multifaceted, encompassing aspects of basic needs such as the availability of jobs, good quality housing and healthy living conditions (Phillimore, 2021). The quality and accessibility of these factors significantly influence the extent to which refugees can become self-sufficient and actively participate in their new communities (Ager & Strang, 2008).

To assess if the CSBC met the settlement needs of refugees, the evaluations found that at the meso-level, good planning, along with clear and effective communication between authorities and lead sponsor groups was crucial to help secure adequate housing, education, health, benefits and social services for the refugee families. Specific resources for learning the local language and translation support were effectively provided in the first three months after arrival. Healthcare and wellbeing assistance was available, including access to counselling and psychological support. The financial autonomy of the adult refugees was encouraged with the provision of training for employment and job hunting. A training programme was set up to teach sponsored families to manage their personal finances, pay for some services and administrate their benefits received from the state. These provisions underscore that early access to structured support enhances the likelihood of successful settlement (Hynie, 2018).

However, despite strong initial service access, long-term autonomy was undermined by local economic and social disparities—particularly in housing. The CSBC provided housing for a two-year period, with the goal of transitioning refugees into independent living arrangements thereafter. At the end of the programme, however, it was found that refugees remained reliant on support groups for managing certain aspects, such as rent payments and financial management. Notably, during the planning phase of the CSBC at the macro-level, greater emphasis was placed on the broader context rather than the specific circumstances of the areas where refugees were resettled. It was found that the CSBC lacks tailored agreements with local social entities beyond the support groups in the resettlement locations, failing to account for variations between different areas—such as the disparities in employment and housing opportunities between rural and urban settings (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Phillimore, 2021). Such an approach risks leading to inequitable refugee experiences and may limit the long-term success of resettlement programmes, as the adoption of one-size-fits-all approaches to refugee autonomy fails to address localised barriers (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Morrice, 2007). Furthermore, due to disparities in service availability and institutional support structures, some refugees may be able to integrate more effectively than others, depending on the resettlement area. This raises questions about the equity and fairness of community sponsorship models (Kyriakides et al., 2018), particularly given that refugees do not have the opportunity to choose their resettlement location.

Relations

The formation of social relationships plays a critical role in fostering refugee autonomy, as social networks provide not only emotional and practical support but also access to key resources and opportunities (Ager & Strang, 2008). The importance of social relations is also widely recognised in CSBC. One of the main roles of the lead sponsor organisations responsible for monitoring and coordinating the programme—Cáritas Euskadi and the Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation—was to develop strong social networks to provide emotional and practical support to the sponsored families. At the micro-level, they involved a diversified

group of volunteers, which in turn encouraged the creation of strong relationships with the sponsored families. Volunteers played a key role in connecting refugees with wider community members through direct introductions and organisation of leisure activities as well as inviting refugees to participate in volunteering activities. However, there is limited evidence regarding the development of refugees' relationships outside the sponsorship groups and the extent to which volunteer-facilitated interactions with other community members. This raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of social capital created through sponsorship programmes and whether such networks serve as a stepping stone to independence or reinforce dependency (Kyriakides et al., 2019). Yet, from the *refugees' perspective*, the close bond created with some volunteers led to a kinship-like relationship.

> We have trips to the zoo, to the beach, and some of the members of the group have taken on the role of our grandparents. Member of a refugee family

These close relationships play a critical role in fostering a sense of stability, helping refugees feel psychologically and socially included in their host societies (Hynie, 2018). However, successful refugee autonomy should not solely depend on sponsorship networks but should also include relationships with diversified groups of individuals (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). If sponsorship networks become too insular, they may inadvertently reinforce dependency, preventing refugees from fully integrating into wider society (Haugen et al., 2020).

At the macro-level, the involvement of the Basque Country's government further facilitated the development of social links between refugees and institutions, with volunteers often mediating such relationships. These connections facilitated their settlement processes, especially in the face of unexpected challenges, such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, areas of improvement were identified, for example the need of more preparation during the pre-arrival phase. The Basque government, as well as sponsoring groups, received information about selected refugees shortly before their arrival in the country. This timeframe did not provide sufficient time to adequately prepare for the specific needs of the refugee family. Refugees further encountered confusion and disarray because they lacked pre-departure information regarding the programme's specifics and what to expect, with possible negative consequences on their relationships with sponsors.

> UNHCR contacted us and suggested Spain. We knew nothing about the country (all we knew about was Barça and Real Madrid). We looked for information on the internet, but we weren't all that sure. We asked an Algerian friend who had a very good impression of the country, so in the end we said yes. Member of a refugee family

With little understanding of what to expect, some made their decision based on limited or informal sources of information, rather than being fully briefed on the programme's structure and expectations. This aligns with the findings of Tazzioli et al. (2018), who argue that refugee agency is often constrained by a lack of access to information and decision-making power within resettlement processes.

Currently, the Auzolana II agreement is only executed at the macro-level between national and regional government. At the meso-level, the local authorities coordinate with two organisations selected as lead sponsors; they are the faith-based organisations: Cáritas Euskadi and the Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation. While these organisations have played a crucial role in ensuring the programme's success, the exclusive reliance on faith-based groups raises important questions about inclusivity and diversity in sponsorship. Refugees often need support from people who share commonalities—whether in culture, language, religion or background—because it helps them navigate the challenging process of rebuilding their lives in a foreign environment (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014).

It was pointed out in the assessment that in the future would be beneficial to expand and diversify the lead sponsor groups mobilising secular groups of the civil society who have not been involved in sponsoring refugees but have the resources and capacity for running the CSBC in their localities.

> The local support groups have been established through the volunteer group, individuals from the parish who were interested. These are people who are already familiar with the organization's work and are committed. Civil Society Group leading CSBC

The current structure, lacking participation from secular civil society groups, means that some refugees may struggle to find culturally appropriate or familiar support networks. Expanding sponsorship to include a broader range of civil society actors—such as secular community organisations, professional associations and migrant-led groups—could enhance the inclusivity and adaptability of the CSBC model. Involving multiple stakeholders would ensure greater choice and agency for refugees in their support networks (Kyriakides et al., 2018).

Structure

Although most of the CS programmes in Europe lack a legal framework, at the macro-level, the Basque Country demonstrated that the Auzolana II agreement is an important tool that assures resettlement and permanent international protection for its beneficiaries and guidance for both sponsors and sponsored families. It defines the responsibilities and obligations of each stakeholder, ensuring that the rights of refugee families are respected and safeguarded throughout the sponsorship process. This can also help the development of sponsor-refugee relationships (Phillimore et al., 2020), while a clear legal framework enables refugees to rent homes legally, open bank accounts, pursue higher education and participate in civic activities. In terms of *durable solution*, the evaluations found that when sponsored refugees have their status recognised from day one after arrival, their autonomy increases because they feel more stable and safer. This aligns with the concept of opportunity structures (Phillimore, 2021), particularly the structural dimension, where legal recognition creates an environment conducive to long-term stability and social integration. Unlike ad hoc or temporary asylum measures that leave refugees in limbo, the

Auzolana II framework promotes a durable solution, enabling them to build stable lives and establish deep-rooted connections within their new communities.

> Auzolana II stands as a pivotal crossroad where the Basque Government's eagerness to engage in refugee reception intersects with the escalating demand for accommodation since 2015. This is where the community sponsorship process converges with our efforts. Auzolana II embodies the intersection of community-driven endeavours and institutional backing for providing permanent resettlement. Basque Government Representative (2020)

The *scale* of the CS programmes refers to the numbers of places provided to support sponsored refugees. Up to December 2022, around 1300 refugees were resettled through this model in Europe (ICMC Europe, 2023). CS programmes resettle relatively fewer refugees than other forms of resettlement, mainly due to their resource-intensive approach which requires a significant commitment of time, funding and volunteer effort. The two editions of the CSBC resettled 57 refugees from 2019 to 2023, comparing that number with other European countries the scheme progressed on a good peace.

In the context of CS, *additionality* refers to the idea that these programmes should offer durable solutions to sponsored refugees, beyond those available through existing resettlement programmes (Hirsch et al., 2019; Tan, 2021; UNHCR, 2018). The aim is to effectively contribute to an increase in international responsibility-sharing. Although CS was conceived as a legal pathway that seeks to offer protection places in addition to resettlement, this aspect is at the discretion of each nation state adopting the model. The evaluation found that the CSBC did not lead to the resettlement of an additional number of refugees, resulting in the loss of one of the original objectives of Auzolana II (2019). This aspect was identified as an important shortcoming of the CSBC in the first evaluation.

> What we discussed the most was the issue of additionality (...). We wanted the agreement include it to be a 'plus', not only for the sponsored families but also as a mean to create more places for the protection system. Civil Society Group leading CSBC

The costs, the resources needed for running sponsorship programmes, are a key consideration for the *long-term sustainability*. To increase refugees' autonomy, sponsorship programmes should be tailored to meet specific needs. This might include personalised mentorship, assistance in finding employment or addressing specific health and education requirements. If lead organisations or volunteers lack the necessary resources for supporting, they may be hesitant to engage in such initiatives. When setting up the CS, the Basque Government identified experienced civil society organisations with a track record of working on the ground with grassroots initiatives and social mentoring. They have had the ability to recruit and engage local volunteers from their own networks and support them to avoid burnout or overwork. Most members were adults, between 35 and 65 years old, though young people and senior citizens were also involved, and there was a balance between men and women.

Each individual has taken on the role they could according to their professional experience and availability. The level of involvement could not have been sustained without the organization's support. Volunteers from a Local Group

However, the second evaluation found the need to encourage the formation of civil society groups with a diversity of genders, professions and cultural, linguistic or religious backgrounds to help refugees expand their networks beyond the support group.

Assessing the *effectiveness* of the CSBC requires a comprehensive approach to evaluating its performance. At the macro-level, both evaluations agreed that the pilot programme worked well, mainly because of the clear and transparent division of roles and responsibilities between the private and public actors involved in the project. However, at the meso-level, the first evaluation highlighted the relevance of improving the pre-arrival information received by the families to explain them the differences between the sponsorship programme and mainstream resettlement programmes.

There has been informal and unstructured cooperation with the project from the City Council. Social services were informed of the project, and at some moments, we have helped facilitate access to documentation or services, however better pre-departure information is needed. Local Authority

Additionally, the second evaluation found that when the groups of volunteers have good communication with the officers of the municipality, they understood the aims of the programme and facilitated access to services and support to sponsored families.

The core of CS models is the importance of establishing effective mechanisms to monitor programmes and ensure the well-being of both sponsored refugees and sponsor groups.

Safeguarding measures are essential in promoting and supporting the autonomy of refugees to ensure that they are protected from harm, abuse and exploitation while still respecting their independence and right to make choices about their own lives. In the CSBC, the role of the lead sponsor organisation with experience of working with vulnerable people has been helpful for tackling potential risks, minimising the likelihood of problems arising and responding effectively to support the well-being of sponsored individuals and families.

The organisation has conducted an evaluation, and based on this, has included improvements in volunteer training and project design. Civil Society Group leading CSBC

Procedures and clear referral pathways for *family reunification* are not explicitly included in the legal framework of the CSBC; however, the group of volunteers in the municipality of Vitoria welcomed two individuals who are acknowledged as members of the same family. Without formal pathways for family reunification, refugee autonomy remains constrained, as separated family members may experience additional psychological and economic vulnerabilities (Phillimore et al., 2023).

Discourse

Welcoming refugees with kindness and respect reinforces their sense of self-worth and dignity. When refugees are treated with humanity, they are more likely to regain confidence in their own abilities and reclaim control over their lives, fostering their autonomy. At the micro-level the evaluations found that the CSBC fostered positive welcoming experiences for volunteers and refugees, especially in smaller communities where there was a wider involvement of the host community's members. Volunteers participating in the programme reported a broadened understanding of refugee issues and their needs as they forged friendships with sponsored families. Volunteers further pointed out that the CSBC experience not only affected them personally but also influenced their wider network by fostering relationships between refugees and their neighbours, thereby contributing to the breakdown of societal barriers and fostering more welcoming communities. These findings suggest that localised, community-led initiatives have the potential to challenge and counteract dominant media narratives that portray refugees and migrants negatively (Reyes & Phillimore, 2020).

However, the programme's national impact remains limited due to two key factors: first, the replication requires a significant number of resources (technical, human, and economic), which restricts its implementation in different territories. This highlights a broader structural constraint within Phillimore's (2021) framework: while local initiatives can foster positive relational and discursive shifts, institutional and policy-level barriers often limit their scalability. Second, low media coverage at the national level hinders broader public awareness and positive sentiment towards refugee-sponsoring initiatives. Given the significant role of mass media in shaping public attitudes (Fotopoulos & Kaimaklioti, 2016), the lack of sustained national attention to CSBC reduces its potential as a model for reshaping Spain's refugee reception policies.

> The impact of the model is very positive. On one hand, it has an immediate awareness impact on us [the volunteers], our close networks and beyond. For the families, it's an automatic message of welcome that someone is willing to dedicate their free time to help them without knowing anything about them and welcoming them into society. Volunteers from a Local Group

Initiatives and Support

The groups selected to run the CSBC were chosen for their extensive experience in assisting *vulnerable* populations. Their role extends beyond coordination; they serve as mediators between the state, volunteers and refugees, ensuring that support mechanisms are both effective and responsive to the needs of the beneficiaries. In turn, support to vulnerable groups improves their autonomy by providing the resources, opportunities and protection they need to make independent choices.

Improving the *experience of sponsors* is an important aim of the CS model, as most volunteers are members of the local community who have no previous

experience of supporting refugees. At the micro-level, the evaluators found that training in intercultural competence would help volunteers to develop their ability to interact effectively across cultures and to better understand the needs of refugee sponsors.

> The initial training was very focused on the project's operation. Now, additional modules on the Syrian context or interculturality have been added. Civil Society Group leading CSBC

While volunteers' commitment was crucial in building strong social networks, a lack of structured guidance sometimes led to unintentional power imbalances in sponsor-refugee interactions. Scholars have warned that, without proper training, well-intentioned sponsorship programmes may reinforce paternalistic dynamics, treating refugees as passive recipients rather than active agents in their own resettlement (Ali et al., 2022; Haugen et al., 2020). Training in interculturality and anti-paternalistic engagement has the potential to shift sponsors from "helping" refugees to "supporting" them in achieving self-sufficiency and autonomy.

Limitations and Broader Implications

While this study provides valuable insights into the CSBC model, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of refugee participants (only two families from the total 57 individuals sponsored) restricts the generalizability of findings related to refugee experiences. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal data tracking refugees beyond the two-year programme period limits our understanding of long-term autonomy outcomes, which are central to evaluating the programme's success. However, this study provides valuable insights that can inform the development of CS beyond the Basque Country context. The CSBC's multi-level governance model offers valuable lessons for other regions and countries implementing similar programmes. Valencia and Navarra represent a scalable model across Spain and potentially other European contexts.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies tracking refugees' integration outcomes beyond the programme's duration, comparative analysis between diverse geographical settings (urban versus rural) and examination of how specific elements of the multi-level governance approach contribute to refugee autonomy in different contexts.

Conclusion

The research question of this article aimed to explore how the multi-level governance approach of CS has impacted the autonomy of sponsored refugees in the Basque Country. However, at this stage, it is still too early to determine whether these outcomes have been achieved; further research is necessary to track the long-term paths and experiences of the individuals and families who participated in the programme. However, our analytical approach has contributed to advancing

the analysis of five areas of opportunity structures that demonstrated a positive impact on refugees' autonomy by providing the resources, opportunities and protection they need to make independent choices and live fulfilling lives.

In terms of *locality*, the research found that good planning by the national, regional and local authorities was an effective approach for identifying municipalities in which sponsored refugees were able to access housing, education and healthcare, key elements of autonomy. Those locations also provided a conducive ecosystem for groups of civil society to participate in practical and emotional support. A drawback of the model was its "one-size-fits-all" approach that failed to account for variations between rural and urban where areas of opportunities differ. The challenges to achieving autonomy for refugee families in the Basque Country (and Spain in general) stem from structural issues deeply embedded in society, particularly in relation to housing access and availability. This becomes especially problematic when considering that refugee families are often larger than the average household, making it even more difficult for them to find suitable and affordable housing. These barriers create significant obstacles to autonomy, as stable housing is a critical foundation for achieving self-sufficiency.

Relations developed by the sponsored refugees and the volunteers were fundamental for sponsored refugees to build social networks, learn the local language and participate in community activities. The downside of high reliance on volunteers is that refugees struggle to expand their networks beyond the support group. Therefore, a need was identified to diversify and include secular groups to improve the programme.

The *structure* of the CSBC is one of its most distinctive features. Auzolana II is a legal agreement that enables refugees to secure their legal status. This is fundamental to autonomy because it provides the stability and protection needed to plan for the future, access services and participate in society without fear of deportation or exploitation. Its multilevel approach involves the coordination between different levels of government (local, regional and national) and sectors (public and non-governmental organisations) to ensure that the specific needs of refugees are met at various stages of their integration. At the time of conducting this research, refugees resettled by the CSBC were not additional to the resettlement quota of the Spanish government.

The CSBC has been a positive model for reframing the negative *discourse* towards refugees portrayed in some outlets of the Spanish and international mass media. Experiences of welcoming attitudes and friendship between volunteers and refugees have been helpful in shifting public perception, fostering empathy and providing real-life success stories that challenge harmful stereotypes. Sponsors often became advocates for refugees in their own communities, educating others about the realities and causes of displacement, increasing refugees' opportunities for autonomy and integration.

Finally, the analysis of the *initiatives of support* in the CSBC found that, particularly, improving training in cultural understanding plays a crucial role in helping refugees feel accepted and integrated into their host communities. When local communities and service providers understand and respect the cultural

backgrounds of refugees, it fosters an inclusive environment where refugees can engage more freely and confidently.

Overall, the experience of conceiving and making Auzolana II a reality has inspired its replication in other autonomous communities in Spain, with Valencia and Navarra currently adopting the CS model. The incorporation of the CS as a complementary resettlement pathway in Spain has represented a political opportunity for the Basque Government. On one hand, it stands as an affirmation of an ethical commitment to international protection, and on the other, it presents an opportunity to broaden the scope of competency in an area where autonomous communities have limited participation. Furthermore, aligning Auzolana II within the framework of an international network has facilitated the active participation and acknowledgement of the Basque Country's contribution to resettlement in Europe.

Nevertheless, several recommendations emerge for enhancing the sponsorship programme's efficacy and expanding its positive impact. Firstly, the development of contextually appropriate integration strategies is paramount. This would entail a departure from the current standardised approach towards more nuanced strategies that account for the socio-economic particularities of rural versus urban settings, thereby acknowledging the distinct opportunity structures that exist across different localities. Such localisation of integration policies would more effectively address the varying employment landscapes, housing markets and social service availability characteristic of different municipalities.

Secondly, while the role of volunteers has proven invaluable in facilitating social network development, there is a clear imperative to diversify sponsorship networks beyond their current composition. The inclusion of secular organisations and community-led initiatives could potentially mitigate the observed tendency of refugees to remain socially bounded within their immediate support groups, thus enhancing their prospects for broader social integration.

A third recommendation pertains to enhancing both pre-arrival and post-arrival support mechanisms. The research indicates a notable deficit in preparatory information provided to both refugees and sponsors. Implementing structured pre-departure orientation sessions coupled with comprehensive post-arrival training programmes would significantly fill this gap, equipping refugees with the necessary knowledge to navigate their new environment while ensuring sponsors possess the requisite competencies to address refugees' multifaceted needs.

A key structural issue lies in the relationship between community sponsorship and national resettlement quotas. Currently, the CSBC operates within Spain's existing commitments, rather than as a complementary pathway. This limits its potential to expand protection spaces. While ideally community sponsorship would add to, rather than substitute government quotas, there is little indication that the Spanish state is moving in that direction. As such, the programme's capacity to contribute to broader responsibility-sharing remains constrained under current policy priorities. The demonstrated success of the CSBC model and its subsequent adoption in other autonomous communities presents an opportune moment for scaling the programme through innovative partnerships. Engaging businesses, educational institutions and labour unions in public–private collaborations could yield substantial benefits, particularly in addressing persistent challenges related to employment training,

educational opportunities and housing solutions for resettled refugees. Finally, while the CSBC has contributed positively to local discourse surrounding refugee integration, the limited national media coverage suggests a need for more coordinated public awareness initiatives. A strategically designed communication campaign highlighting successful integration narratives could effectively counter prevailing misinformation and foster broader societal support for community sponsorship models.

In conclusion, the CSBC represents a promising approach to refugee resettlement and integration in Spain, with particular emphasis on fostering refugee autonomy. However, its evolution and efficacy are contingent upon addressing the structural, social and policy considerations outlined above. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can enhance the programme's capacity to provide meaningful pathways to autonomy for resettled refugees while strengthening Spain's overall contribution to international protection frameworks.

Data Availability This essay does not analyse or generate any datasets, because the work proceeds within a theoretical approach.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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