

Sponsorship and Public Narratives on Refugees

Global Refugee
Sponsorship Initiative

Evidence, Limits, and Future Directions

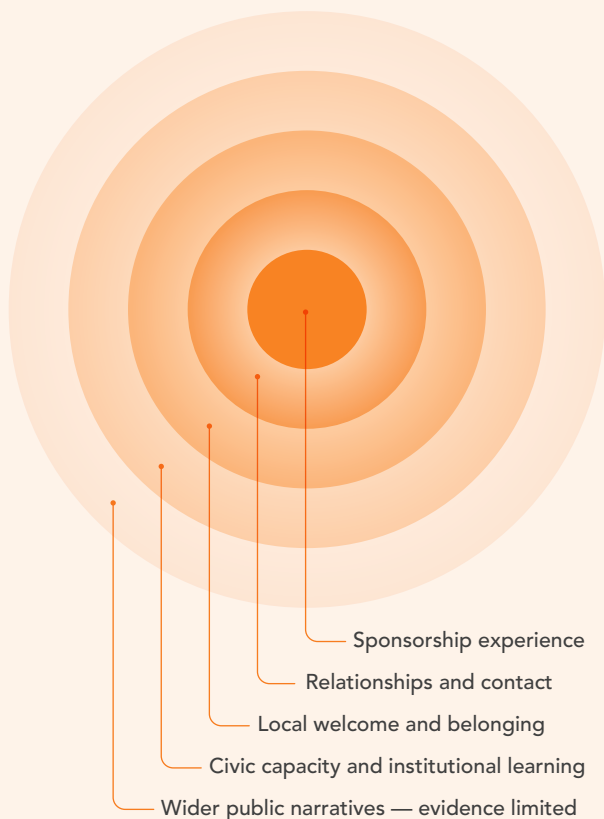
This meta-synthesis reviews evidence on how sponsorship relates to public attitudes and narratives about refugees and refugee policies. The evidence shows a two-way relationship: public attitudes shape how sponsorship is received, and sponsorship can in turn influence local welcome, relationships, civic capacity, and community understandings of refugee inclusion. The strongest evidence is local and relational; evidence that sponsorship shifts national narratives or wider public attitudes in a durable way remains limited.

46
sources
reviewed

Academic-style research and evaluations focused on public attitudes, narratives, host-community reception, and sponsorship.

Strength of Evidence

Evidence is strongest closest to the local and relational level, and weaker as claims move outward toward broader public or national narrative change.



Core Takeaway

Sponsorship can support integration, but it cannot substitute for strong systems.

Key Findings

1. Sponsorship is associated with positive local and relational effects.

The strongest evidence points to local welcome, belonging, social inclusion, relationship-building, host-community openness, and civic learning.

2. Public attitudes are often conditional.

Support for refugees is frequently shaped by perceptions of deservingness, fairness, order, cultural fit, and whether refugees are seen as likely to belong or integrate.

3. Sponsorship can build civic and institutional capacity.

When communities participate in sponsorship, they may become more organized, more knowledgeable about refugee welcome, and better prepared for future arrivals.

4. Wider narrative change is harder to demonstrate.

The evidence is much weaker on whether sponsorship produces durable shifts in national public attitudes, political narratives, or population-level opinion.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Implications for Policy and Practice

Design for sustained, meaningful contact.

Positive effects are most likely where sponsorship creates repeated, supported, and reciprocal relationships between refugees and receiving communities.

Avoid deservingness-based narratives.

Messaging should not rely only on exceptional, sympathetic, or group-specific stories. More durable public support requires principled narratives of protection, inclusion, and shared responsibility.

Address fairness and integration concerns directly.

Public support can weaken when refugee reception is perceived as disorderly, unfair, or disconnected from local pressures. Clear communication and strong support systems matter.

Guard against paternalism and privatized responsibility.

Sponsorship should strengthen community participation without shifting responsibility away from public institutions or positioning refugees as passive recipients of help.

Connect local stories to broader strategy.

Local sponsorship stories can support positive narratives, but wider narrative change requires deliberate communications, media engagement, policy framing, and institutional support.

Limits of the Evidence



STRONGER EVIDENCE

- Local welcome and relationship-building.
- Sponsor and host-community learning.
- Civic capacity and community openness.
- Positive effects of sustained contact.



WEAKER EVIDENCE

- Durable national-level narrative change.
- Long-term shifts in public opinion.
- Causal evidence that sponsorship changes attitudes.
- Comparative evidence across countries and models.

Priorities for Future Research



Host-community effects

Study how sponsorship shapes receiving communities, not only refugee outcomes.



Longitudinal public attitude research

Track whether attitudes change over time and whether change endures.



Comparative research

Compare countries, models, scales, and program designs.



Refugee experiences of welcome

Measure welcome through refugees' own experiences, not only sponsor or host-community perceptions.



Media and digital narratives

Study how sponsorship is represented in media, social media, and political discourse.



Unintended consequences

Examine paternalism, conditional welcome, selective deservingness, and the privatization of refugee support.

Bottom line

Sponsorship can help reshape how communities think, talk, organize, and act around refugees. However, the strongest evidence is local and relational. Broader narrative change requires more than sponsorship alone.

For the full evidence base, methodology, and references, please see the complete GRSI MEL meta-study.