

Concept Note

Nordic network for community support programs and similar initiatives

Community support programs

-a systematic and personal approach to social inclusion for refugees

1. Introduction

As a next step after the webinar *Meet a local. A Nordic model of community sponsorship for refugees* co-organized by the Nordic Council of Ministers and UNHCR Representation for the Nordic and Baltic countries in March 2024 it was proposed to form a network with the purpose of raising awareness and share hands-on experiences on community support programs and similar initiatives in the Nordic countries. The purpose is also to potentially inspire and advocate for the advancement of the model and a systematized approach to social inclusion of refugees in more locations in the Nordic countries. The objective and suggested structure of the network is further outlined below.

2. Background

The Nordic model for community support to refugees is inspired by the community-based sponsorship programmes originating from Canada.¹ The Nordic model, hereafter also referred to as community support program, aims to support the reception and integration of refugees by engaging citizens and local communities in providing emotional and practical support to newly arrived refugees. These programmes complement government-assisted reception and integration activities and facilitate positive and vital interaction between refugees and their new host communities. They also support resettlement in a manner that strengthens and accelerates the reception and integration of UNHCR-referred quota refugees.

Given the fact that the Nordic societal model is anchored in a system of free access to a range of public services for refugees (including social welfare, housing, healthcare and education) the type of community support applicable for Nordic countries complements and extends existing state and civil society integration and mentorship programs by mobilizing citizens committed to foster inclusion and self-sustainability of refugees without a financial element. Recently launched pilot programmes in the Nordic countries are designed for quota refugees within the national resettlement programmes as well as for spontaneously arrived refugees with residence permits.

¹ [What is Community Sponsorship? - GRSI \(refugeesponsorship.org\)](https://refugeesponsorship.org/)

3. Objective of the network

The community support pilot programs and similar initiatives in the Nordic countries are facing similar issues in terms of building sustainable structures, funding and matching, recruitment, and retainment of volunteers. A cooperation between the Nordic countries on community and social support for refugees could both be a platform for experience exchanges, sharing of concrete tips and tools etc. (more examples below) as well as an advocacy instrument towards national decision-makers promoting a sustainable structure around social inclusion for newly arrived refugees.

Many refugees in the Nordic countries do not feel fully integrated into society, even after several years in the country. The envisioned objective of this initiative is to create a sustainable system ensuring that refugees after receiving a residence permit and being registered in a municipality will be automatically offered a contact with a local volunteer or group of volunteers. As neighbouring Nordic countries, this network could be viewed as an opportunity to showcase our Nordic approach and reinforce both regional cooperation and national development. It could be a way of showing governments that this is something we can do together and learn from each other, which would benefit all.

This network will focus on how the involved organizations and countries work with social inclusion of refugees, both as a community support program under the umbrella of the community sponsorship model as well as similar initiatives such as Friends showing the way in Denmark.

4. Added value of network

Networks focusing on social inclusion of refugees, including for example a Nordic network within the Red Cross context already exists. The added value of the Nordic network for community support programs and similar initiatives is the concrete aim to together build sustainable systems for social inclusion of refugees in a Nordic context considering similar factors in the different countries such as well-structured integration and welfare systems where newly arrived refugees have the same rights and access to same services as established citizens. What is not included in the services offered is a systematic access to social networks and the local community, which is often taken care of by local civil society actors and local communities but primarily on an ad-hoc and not long-term basis lacking secured funding and relying primarily on volunteers. A systematized approach to social inclusion of refugees with the model included into the national systems is therefore what we would like this network to support, create and advocate for.

5. Common principles

The network has agreed on a set of common principles for the Nordic community support models and similar initiatives. The content and exact set-up of each program may differ, but the common principles has been agreed upon. The principles might be adjusted when the programs develop, and more actors and countries are being included into the network.

Common principles:

- Activity **starts early** in the integration phase. (Additionally, there may be an opportunity to test early contact before departure from host country for resettled refugees to Sweden with the long-term goal for inclusion in the resettlement chain).
- Intention to support the **creation of a national systematic approach** to social inclusion meaning that all newly arrived refugees with residence permits will have the opportunity to be matched with a local welcome guide/volunteer or group of volunteers from the beginning, given that he/she/they want to.
- **Formalized cooperation between municipalities** (or similar state-run entity) **and civil society organization/-s**.
- Promotion of **local community engagement** and support to **building welcoming societies**², which is **mutually beneficial for both newly arrived refugees and receiving communities** is key.
- **Long-term planning and secured long-term funding** and activity preferably included as part of the national regular reception and integration system.
- **Monitoring and safeguarding mechanism in place**.

6. Network structure (target group, ownership & costs)

- The network should remain informal and flexible and be further developed during 2025. The participants from the different countries should stay the same but more participants may be included as the community support initiatives nationally are evolving and expanding. In December 2024 the following actors are included in the network: Danderyd Municipality Sweden, Red Cross Finland, Amnesty International Iceland and Red Cross Denmark.
- Regular touch base/thematic meetings online and 1 F2F meetings per year
- UNHCR will chair the meetings in 2025. To be re-visited for 2026.

² There is broad consensus on what constitutes a welcoming and inclusive society which are based on ideas of integration. A welcoming and inclusive society would:

- promote diversity as an asset to receiving societies.
- accept and embrace age, gender and diversity.
- foster inclusiveness, sense of belonging, feeling of acceptance, making roots and connections, a sense of giving and taking.
- provide opportunities to contribute to community, free of barriers.
- value cultural identity.
- ensure equitable access for newcomers to the resources of the receiving society allowing equal participation.
- promote freedom from xenophobia, racism and discrimination.
- promote an understanding of the nature and consequences of the refugee and integration experience at governmental, institutional and community levels. [Promoting welcoming and inclusive societies | UNHCR Integration Handbook](#)

- Ownership: UNHCR leads the network during an initial period and gradually shifts the leadership to the participating actors (possibly on a rotating basis) but continue having a supporting role.
- The network does not have to incur significant costs, or any at all. But the network could look for funding to for example facilitate study visits or in-person meetings.

7. Concrete activities

Some of the concrete activities in the network is suggested to be the following:

- Share the Nordic network concept note with civil society and other actors in the respective countries, for example through a roundtable discussion. Later in 2025 organize a Nordic roundtable related to the network, also inviting Government counterparts/local authorities, to share experiences and raise awareness on community support and social inclusion.
- Translation of the concept note into local language if relevant.
- Online and in-person experience exchanges.
- Study visits.
- Sharing of tools/templates/ structures/methods/training set-ups/financial solutions/tips on how to attract and retain volunteers (also with input from other actors/projects).
- Joint advocacy efforts towards decision-makers, such as joint awareness raising events, opinion pieces etc. advocating for creation of national social inclusion systems.
- Joint projects/funding) (such as AMIF, Nordic Council of Ministers' funds etc.).
- Joint publication of booklet on the different programs.

Annex

Below follow brief descriptions of examples of current national community support programs and similar initiatives in the Nordic countries.

Finland: An AMIF-funded pilot programme in 14 municipalities coordinated by Finnish Red Cross Headquarters together with four Red Cross Districts, Humak University of Applied Science and The Church Council of Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland was launched in January 2023 and runs until December 2025. The pilot programme is a cooperation with 14 municipalities and local civil society organizations and parishes. Focus on matching with local community groups as well as individual volunteers. ³

Sweden: Pilot programmes funded by the county administrative board were launched in Danderyd, Mora, Strängnäs and Sjöbo municipalities in 2023 (different starting and end dates) and in Stockholm in January 2025. The four municipalities have set-up a coordinating structure to share experiences and hands-on tips along the way with each other. The Immigration Lab at Uppsala university is involved in monitoring and evaluating the pilot programmes. ⁴

Iceland: Advocacy and awareness raising efforts led by Amnesty Iceland with support from UNHCR are under way. The next step is to include more actors, form a working group and advocate for the introduction of community support towards the authorities.

Norway: A UNHCR commissioned study exploring the potential to introduce the community sponsorship or community support model in Norway was published in October 2024.

Denmark: A feasibility study on the potential for introducing community sponsorship in Denmark was published end of 2019. Due to the existing Danish Refugee Council and Danish Red Cross initiative Venner Viser Vej (Friends showing the way)⁵, which is very similar to the community support model it has been assessed that a community support programme is currently not needed in Denmark. The Danish initiative is used as a good practice and inspiration for the community support programs in the other Nordic countries.

³ Turtiainen, Kati & Sapir, Henna, *Feasibility study on the potential for community-based sponsorship in Finland*. Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, Helsinki 2021

⁴ Feith Tan, Nikolas, *A study on the potential for introducing a community sponsorship program for refugees in Sweden. Scoping report for UNHCR representation for the Nordic and Baltic countries*, February 2020

⁵ [Venner Viser Vej | DRC Dansk Flygtningehjælp og Røde Kors \(rodekors.dk\)](https://www.vennerviservej.dk/)