

# The Principle of Substitution: The Argentine Contribution to Private Sponsorship Schemes?

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[See table of contents](#)

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## Article abstract

This paper provides a critical review of the first private sponsorship scheme to be introduced into Latin America in the last decade, the Syria Program, which has been in place in Argentina since 2014. Though the national and international bodies involved in the initiative (including the International Organization for Migration, UNHCR, and the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative) have described it as a good practice, a content analysis of their publications indicates that their interpretations may be overly rosy. Unlike refugee sponsorship schemes that have appeared in other countries, the Argentine private sponsorship program does not complement a public state resettlement scheme but rather appears to replace it.

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# The Principle of Substitution: The Argentine Contribution to Private Sponsorship Schemes?

Ana Irene Rovetta Cortés<sup>a</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical review of the first private sponsorship scheme to be introduced into Latin America in the last decade, the Syria Program, which has been in place in Argentina since 2014. Though the national and international bodies involved in the initiative (including the International Organization for Migration, UNHCR, and the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative) have described it as a good practice, a content analysis of their publications indicates that their interpretations may be overly rosy. Unlike refugee sponsorship schemes that have appeared in other countries, the Argentine private sponsorship program does not complement a public state resettlement scheme but rather appears to replace it.

## KEYWORDS

private sponsorship; refugees; resettlement; Argentina; Syria

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose un examen critique du premier programme de parrainage privé introduit en Amérique latine au cours de la dernière décennie, le programme Syrie, mis en place en Argentine depuis 2014. Bien que les organismes nationaux et internationaux impliqués dans l'initiative (notamment l'Organisation internationale pour les migrations, le HCR et l'Initiative mondiale pour le parrainage des réfugiés) l'aient décrite comme une bonne pratique, une analyse du contenu de leurs publications indique que leurs interprétations sont peut-être trop optimistes. Contrairement aux programmes de parrainage de réfugiés apparus dans d'autres pays, le programme argentin de parrainage privé ne complète pas un programme public de réinstallation, mais semble plutôt le remplacer.

## INTRODUCTION

Refugee sponsorship schemes have, over the last decade, proliferated in several countries: 12 in Europe, 2 in Oceania, and 1 in Latin America (Bertram et al., 2020). The United Nations agencies for refugees (UNHCR) and migrants (International Organization for Migration [IOM]) have widely supported this phenomenon, especially since September 2016, the date on which the United Nations General Assembly adopted the **New York**

**Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (UNHCR, 2019b).**

At that time, the Assembly decided to form a multi-sectorial partnership composed of Canadian governmental, educational, and philanthropic organizations and UNHCR, which is known as the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI) and whose declared purpose is to encourage and support the adoption and expansion of refugee sponsorship programs around the world (Global

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Refugee Sponsorship Initiative [GRSI], 2022). The decision was also made to create the Emerging Resettlement Countries Joint Support Mechanism (ERCM), an instrument used by UNHCR and IOM to encourage the development and implementation of resettlement programs in about 20 European and Latin American countries (UNHCR & IOM, 2017).

Of the latter, Argentina has been the first country to develop a private sponsorship scheme and receive advice and funding from the GRSI and the ERCM. Since previous publications on private sponsorship programs have merely acknowledged the existence of the Argentine scheme (Lenard, 2016; Tan, 2021) or offered concise or partial descriptions of it (Figari Costa & Penchaszadeh, 2017; Fratzke, 2017; Sobieray et al., 2017), the aim of this paper is to provide a critical review of the Argentine initiative based on an analysis of the documents published by, on the one hand, the public institution responsible for its design and implementation, and, on the other, the national and international non-governmental bodies that have received international (technical and/or financial) support owing to their engagement in the scheme.

This paper is structured in four sections. The first provides a description of the methodological approach used to conduct the content analysis. The second section is divided into two parts: the first presents a historical overview of past resettlement and private sponsorship initiatives implemented in Argentina, while the second contains a descriptive analysis of the main features and accounts of the private sponsorship scheme that was introduced in 2014, based on the data published by government agencies and by four participating national and international bodies. The third section then provides a critical evaluation of the program. Notably, it finds that the legal framework

chosen for the program is not the most appropriate among those available in the country; that the reach of the program has been limited, in both numerical terms and with respect to the national and religious profile of the population for which it is intended; that it can be interpreted as an attempt to display a humanitarian image before the international community at the least possible financial cost; and that it has been introduced into a country in which there is no existing public resettlement program at a national level. The paper concludes by pointing out the urgency of problematizing the overly rosy interpretations offered by representatives of governmental and non-governmental bodies—particularly those with an international reach: UNHCR, IOM, and GRSI—concerning the first experience of private sponsorship introduced into Latin America over the last decade. As representatives of these bodies have overlooked the limitations of the scheme and have been actively promoting the implementation of similar private sponsorship programs in other Latin American countries (UNHCR, 2019c; UNHCR & IOM, 2018), the conclusion is reached that it is vital to question the convenience of normalizing and, potentially, extending humanitarian initiatives based on completely delegating the state's public responsibility for receiving, supporting, and integrating forcibly displaced populations to private actors.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper is part of broader ongoing ethnographic research into the implementation of the Argentine sponsorship program, the Special Program for the Issuance of Humanitarian Visas for Foreigners Affected by the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (hereafter, the Syria Program). This research began in 2017 with the aim of analyzing the perspec-

tives of the different stakeholders involved in the sponsorship scheme in the two inland regions in which most applications have been submitted since 2014 ([Dirección Nacional de Migraciones \[DNM\], 2019](#)).

The research was carried out by adopting a theoretical-methodological approach that understands policies as socio-cultural constructs that condition the ways in which political actors interpret and intervene in various social phenomena ([Shore & Wright, 2003](#)). This paper presents a conventional content analysis ([Hsieh & Shannon, 2005](#)) with the intention of understanding the definitions, reach, evolution, and evaluations that are associated with the implementation of the first refugee sponsorship scheme to be implemented in Latin America in the last decade. The textual material published by the political actors (both governmental and non-governmental) involved in the formulation, transformation, and/or divulgation process of this scheme has, therefore, been analyzed. This comprised the following: (a) the material published by the National Migration Directorate (DNM), the governmental agency responsible for overseeing the Syria Program (regulations, statistics, and web descriptions), and (b) a set of reports and academic publications issued by representatives of bodies linked to the program, specifically IOM, UNHCR, GRSI, and the Argentine Commission for Refugees and Migrants (Comisión Argentina para Refugiados y Migrantes [CAREF]). Insights from documents published by other governmental organizations in charge of forcibly displaced populations, such as the National Refugee Commission ([Comisión Nacional para los Refugiados \[CONARE\], 2014, 2019, 2022](#)) and the General Directorate of Demographic Policies ([Dirección General de Políticas Demográficas \[DGPD\], n.d.](#)), and from observations registered during the first phase of the ethnographic fieldwork

of this study (2018–2019) are also included, although to a lesser extent.

This paper focuses on identifying the design and implementation phases of the Argentine private sponsorship scheme by examining the published documents concerning it, and on placing the scheme in a broader historical context by studying previous resettlement and private sponsorship programs in the country. Publications produced by governmental bodies are analyzed to understand how and when the Syria Program emerged in Argentina, along with its antecedents, scope, rationale, and evolution. Publications produced by the non-governmental bodies linked to the program are examined to clarify the interpretations that they have made of its implementation and the concepts employed to describe it.

Regarding the data collection process employed, governmental publications were accessed by means of successive online searches on the Syria Program, DNM, CONARE, Argentine Ministry of Justice and Human Rights Law, and DGPD websites. The publications produced by non-governmental bodies were principally accessed by means of online searches of their platforms. This process allowed me to identify and analyze 11 government documents (4 regulations, a decree, 3 statistical reports, and 3 responses to requests for public information) and 5 non-governmental documents ([Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017](#); [Bond & Kwadrans, 2019](#); [Cymment et al., 2019](#); [Liguori et al., 2018](#); [UNHCR, 2019a](#)) that contained descriptions, comparisons, and/or evaluations of the program.

Finally, it is necessary to specify that, in order to examine the definitions and comparisons contained in the documents, the meanings of **refugee sponsorship** proposed by [Tan \(2022\)](#) are employed herein as the conceptual framework. It is, therefore, understood that refugee sponsorship “may

be either a form of resettlement or a complementary pathway” (Tan, 2022, p. 256). When private sponsorship takes the form of resettlement, the destination state does not create a new path of admission, but rather employs that which already exists and encourages citizens, residents, and/or representatives of civil society organizations to assume support tasks (both financial and emotional) aimed at integrating resettled refugees (Tan, 2022, p. 257). When the complementary pathway form is adopted, private sponsorship schemes create a new route for the admission and integration of the forcibly displaced population that is different (and complementary) to the state resettlement program and authorize citizens, residents, and/or representatives of civil society organizations to participate in the reception and integration tasks and sometimes also in the selection process.

Having clarified the methodological approach and essential criteria that will be used to assess the Argentine programs, an overview of the history of resettlement and private sponsorship programs in Argentina is now presented.

## RESETTLEMENT AND PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP SCHEMES IN ARGENTINA

### A Historical Overview

As GRSI representatives have described, there have been three resettlement programs in Argentina: one for the Indo-Chinese population, one for Colombians, and another for Syrians (Bond & Kwadrans, 2019).

The first of these, intended for the Indo-Chinese population, was established during the period of Jorge Rafael Videla's military dictatorship (1976–1981). This made it possible for 192 families from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam to enter the country

(approximately 1,270 people). This initiative was based on an agreement between the government of the day (which selected the candidates and facilitated their entrance into the country with the support of the UNHCR) and those people and companies who, in response to a public announcement, agreed to provide accommodation and jobs to those arriving on Argentine soil (Rizzolo et al., 2012).

If we consider that the state authorized the entrance of population in need of international protection and that reception and support tasks were delegated to people and private organizations, this scheme could be better characterized, using the definition proposed by representatives of the GRSI, as a private sponsorship program rather than as a resettlement program:

We define community sponsorship programs as programs that empower groups of ordinary individuals—as opposed to governments or professionalized agencies—to lead in welcoming, supporting, and integrating refugees. While policy design features vary between countries, the basic model is a “public-private partnership between governments who, [at minimum,] facilitate legal admission of refugees, and private actors who provide financial, social and/or emotional support to receive and settle [those] refugees into [their] community.”

(Bond & Kwadrans, 2019, p. 88)

In other words, this could be considered Argentina's first private sponsorship initiative and, to the best of my knowledge, the only one in the world to have been carried out during a military dictatorship. This last assessment is critical because, among other things, while the Indo-Chinese program was being implemented, (a) the dictatorship hindered the settlement of refugees of any other origin as much as it could;<sup>1</sup> (b) an estimated 8,500 Latin American refugees fled

<sup>1</sup>The coups that took place in Brazil (1964–1985), Chile (1973–1990), and Uruguay (1973–1985) led to forced displacements in the region. The Argentine military government used



from Argentina and had to be resettled in other countries in the region and in Europe; (c) thousands of Argentine citizens went into exile to escape repression (Jensen, 2012); and (d) tens of thousands of young people throughout the country were disappeared.

According to its promoters, the Argentine program for the Indo-Chinese population was proposed as a response to a request from the United Nations. According to subsequent readings on the program (Cicogna, 2009; Rizzolo et al., 2012), the military regime sought to portray an image of respect for human rights before the international community. Whatever the case may be, the program failed in many respects. To begin with, as a program, it did not meet its programmatic goal of resettling 1,000 families (DGPD, n.d.). Second, and focusing on the population towards which it was addressed, it should be noted that they were not granted the same rights as the autochthonous population. A large portion of the refugees were victims of labour exploitation, repression, relocation, and/or discrimination in Argentina during the dictatorship, and, more than 30 years later, many were still experiencing problems with their residence permits or had still not received a National Identity Document (Documento Nacional de Identidad [DNI]) (Rizzolo et al., 2012).

The second program, which was directed at the Central American population, came into being two decades later, between 2005 and 2014, during the Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner administrations. The program was coordinated by the CONARE and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially those of a faith-

based nature (Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish). The budget depended entirely on international co-operation funds that were managed principally by UNHCR (Clavijo, 2017). This program was part of the **Mexico Declaration and the Plan of Action to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees in Latin America**. This was a regional initiative promoted to pay homage to the twentieth anniversary of the **Cartagena Declaration** by incentivizing more interventions with which to support refugees.

It is claimed that 249 Latin American refugees—principally Colombians resettled from Ecuador and Costa Rica—arrived in the country as a result of this program. These people were awarded the status of refugee and a temporary renewable residence permit that could be converted into a permanent residence permit or even allow the holders to become Argentine citizens if they fulfilled two requirements (no criminal record and holding legally paid employment) after a three-year period of residency in the country (UNHCR, 2013). According to a UNHCR report published a year after the program was suspended in Argentina, 65% stayed in the country and the remaining 35% returned to their countries of origin (Ruiz, 2015). Of the reasons proposed to understand why one out of three refugees left the country, the focus was on their frustrated expectations. It was suggested that the refugees had hoped to be resettled in European or North American countries and to receive more assistance than they were able to access in Argentina (Marcogliese, 2017). However, the low number of people actually resettled while the program was in place could be seen as more striking than the high rate of re-emigration and could give the idea that the program was more a declaration of intent than an effective practice.<sup>2</sup>

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several means to make it difficult for these people to settle in the country, from the implementation of administrative obstacles to the excessive use of repression and violence (Cicogna, 2009). Although the statistical data are incomplete, it is estimated that more than 11,300 forcibly displaced Latin American people were in Argentina between 1973 and 1975 (Asa et al., 2007).

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<sup>2</sup>Around 1,500 people arrived in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay through this program. Brazil and Chile

## Argentina's Current Private Sponsorship Scheme

During Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's second mandate, and while the program for the Central American population was being closed, there appeared what is identified herein as the country's second private sponsorship initiative: the Syria Program. This scheme preceded the 2016 global campaign to expand refugee sponsorship programs and was launched in a regional context in which numerous speeches were being given and certain specific measures were being taken in support of the Syrian people (Balloffet, 2016). The program was initially presented as a response to, on the one hand, the UN's call to assist with the humanitarian emergency in Syria, and, on the other, demands made by the Syrian diaspora in Argentina (DNM Disposition 3915/2014, 2014). A later justification was that the initiative also responded to the requirements of members of the civil society and organizations interested in collaborating in the reception and integration of Syrian citizens (DNM Disposition 4499/2015, 2015).

This program was framed within Argentine migration law (Law 25,871/2004, 2004), and not in the refugee law (Law 26,165/2006, 2006), and appeared in 2014 as the result of an administrative regulation (DNM Disposition 3915/2014, 2014) as a mechanism for extensive family reunification. The Argentine state employed the DNM as a means to offer humanitarian visas and renewable temporary residence permits to the relatives of up to fourth degree of kinship of Argentine citizens, who, for their part, would provide maintenance, housing, and support (DNM Disposition 3915/2014, 2014, art. 5). A year later, in 2015, another administrative regulation broadened the sponsors' pro-

file to incorporate Argentine citizens and permanent or temporary residents without family ties to the Syrians (DNM Disposition 4499/2015, 2015, art. 5). According to the CAREF report, this change was inspired by the Canadian private sponsorship model (Liguori et al., 2018). In 2016, a third regulation included not only citizens and residents but also NGOs and provincial governments as sponsors (DNM Disposition 4683/2016, 2016).<sup>3</sup> The time required to support integration was fixed at one year, and the period during which the program would be in force was prolonged until the armed conflict in Syria ceased. Moreover, in 2016, a presidential decree created an interministerial cabinet and a national work committee in support of the program (Presidential Decree 1034/2016, 2016), neither of which had a specific agenda or functions (Figari Costa & Penschaszadeh, 2017). Finally, in 2019, the last regulation of the program to the time of writing was published (DNM Disposition 1025/2019, 2019). This proposed the formation of groups of sponsors containing at least three people for those cases in which there was no family tie between the sponsors and those being sponsored (DNM Disposition 1025/2019, 2019, art. 3).

As the Syria Program was gradually modified, the role played by international organizations, namely IOM and UNHCR, became more important. This occurred principally after the aforementioned UN General Assembly in September 2016, where it was decided that Argentina would become a member of the ERCM and would, as such, receive counselling and financing for three years,

<sup>3</sup>It is important to clarify that although the Syria Program includes provincial governments as possible sponsors of refugees, it does not seem accurate to interpret their participation as a form of private sponsorship given that they are public entities. Representatives of the UNHCR (Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017) and of CAREF (Liguori et al., 2018) coincide with this statement, while those responsible for the IOM report (Cyment et al., 2019) do not.

received almost 75% of them, and their rates of return were lower than the Argentine rate (Ruiz, 2015).

and should resettle 3,000 Syrian refugees during this period (Redacción Clarín, 2016; Rivas Molina, 2016). This funding (UNHCR & IOM, 2017), in addition to other funding provided by means of international co-operation (European Commission, 2017) also managed by these UN agencies, is the only financial resource that the program has had at the national level to date. In the nine years since the program was introduced, the Argentine government has not provided any specific budget commitments to it.

The IOM activities included what is known as pre-departure socio-cultural counselling and technical support, and some financing for flights from Syria to Argentina. UNHCR, for its part, collaborated in the selection of potential program applicants from 2017 onwards, and when the regulations changed in 2019, it became the main appointing agent. This meant a substantial modification to the profile of those who could be sponsored: applicants no longer had to be affected by conflict (whether they had left Syria or not), but they had to be recognized as refugees by the agency.

In addition to these tasks, UN agencies have joined other bodies, such as the GRSI (based in Argentina since 2017) and Amnesty International, to support the creation of a network of eight organizations with central or sole headquarters in the city of Buenos Aires, through which they promote private sponsorship. One of these organizations is an American philanthropic organization, and five are based on the Christian faith (one Adventist, two Evangelist, and two Catholic).

Nevertheless, despite the considerable number of governmental and non-governmental actors involved in the Syria Program, and of the financial resources provided by the latter by means of international co-operation, the number fixed as the programmatic goal for three years has not been attained in

the more than nine years that have passed since its implementation. The number of Syrian people that this program has actually allowed to enter Argentina from 2014 to 2022 is a total of 491 (mostly Christians), which is a far cry from the 3,000 people announced by then-president Mauricio Macri to the international community for the period 2017–2019. If the number of people with Syrian nationality who have obtained political asylum in the last decade is added to this count, the total number of Syrian nationals who have received some sort of protection in Argentina is close to 1,000.

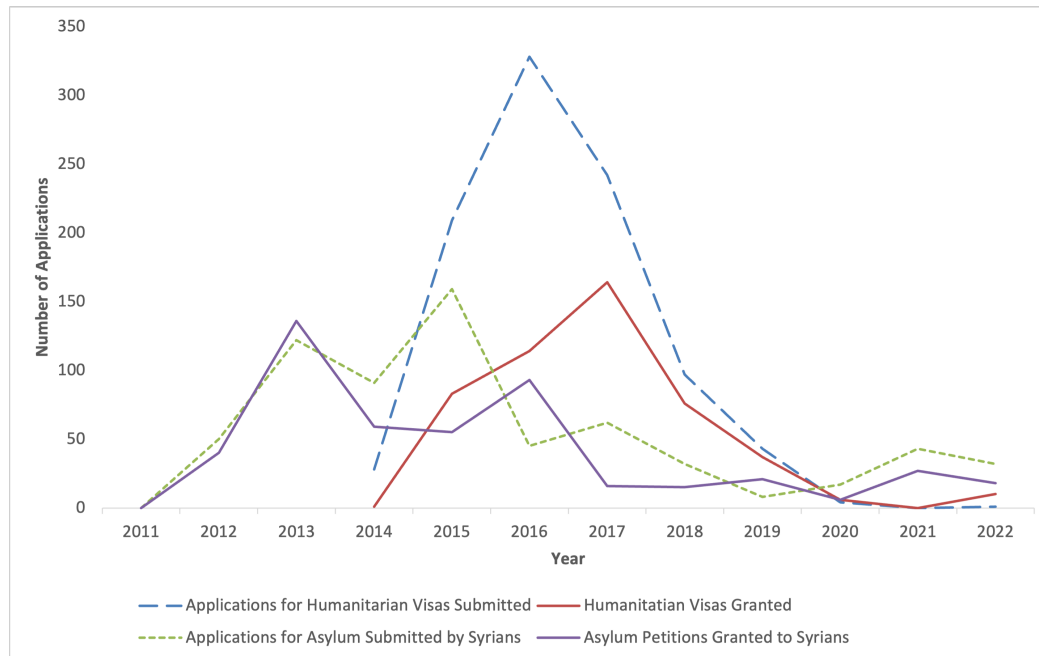
Figure 1 shows the levels of application and granting of both asylum and humanitarian visas to Syrian citizens since the year the armed conflict began. The vertical axis shows the number of applications/grants, while the horizontal axis displays the years in which these applications/grants were processed.

Finally, upon analyzing the ways in which the program has been defined in the publications of the non-governmental bodies involved in its implementation, and which received international funds, it is possible to identify that this initiative has been described in many ways: as “private sponsorship” (Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017, p. 235; Liguori et al., 2018, p. 5), as “community sponsorship” (Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017, p. 235; Bond & Kwadrans, 2019, p. 93; Cyment et al., 2019, p. 15; UNHCR, 2019a, p. 9), as “resettlement” (Bond & Kwadrans, 2019, p. 92; Cyment et al., 2019, p. 23; UNHCR, 2019a, p. 9), as a “complementary pathway to refugee admission” (Cyment et al., 2019, p. 15; Liguori et al., 2018, p. 135), and as an “alternative pathway or resettlement-type model” in which state responsibility is assumed by “private individuals” (Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017, p. 238). Regarding evaluations, these publications have appraised the Syria Program as a “good practice” characterized by facilitating the



**Figure 1**

*Number of Applications and Grants of Refuge and Humanitarian Visas for the Syrian Population in Argentina (2011–2022).*



*Note.* The graph is based on DNM and CONARE statistics.

“integration” processes of newcomers (Cymment et al., 2019 p. 14), an “innovative, well-delineated” proposal (Bond & Kwadrans, 2019, p. 93), a “unique opportunity,” and “a more sustainable durable solution model” (Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017, p. 239). Finally, in comparative terms, it has been equated with the sponsorship programs of Ireland and the United Kingdom (UNHCR, 2019a, p. 9).

### CONTRASTING THE OVERLY ROSY INTERPRETATIONS

Based on the interpretive analysis of the aforementioned publications, a discussion of the main problematic aspects of the Syria Program is now provided. The following subsections show that the normative framework chosen for the program is not the most appropriate of the laws available in the country; that its application, which is limited to a national (and, to a certain extent,

religious) group, could be interpreted as discriminatory from the perspective of international human rights and refugee law; and that the discrepancy between the projected and the real number of people admitted into the country could be viewed as an ineffective attempt to present a humanitarian image to the international community at the least possible cost. This action additionally entails a risk, since the implementation of a private sponsorship scheme in a country in which there is no public resettlement program in force could lead to the establishment and normalization of what could be seen as a new principle among sponsorship schemes: the principle of substitution.

### Program Not Framed Within Refugee Law

As stated in the previous section, the Syria Program is framed within Argentine migra-

tion law and not in that concerning refugee, which supposes, on the one hand, that the institution in charge of the functioning of the initiative was the DNM and not the CONARE and, on the other, that the initiative is not within the frame of international refugee law. This circumstance was questioned by representatives of CAREF, whose 2018 report criticized the decision to resort to the migration law as they considered the program “devoid of the framework of international and asylum law” (Liguori et al., 2018 p. 18). This would not have occurred had this program been based on the 2006 Refugee Recognition and Protection Law, which was created precisely to put an end to the previous dispersion of regulations related to refugees in the country (Asa et al., 2007) and whose article 25 establishes that the CONARE is the body in charge of protecting the rights of refugees and those seeking asylum and of resolving the granting of authorization for those requesting entry into the country for reasons of family reunification and of resettlement (Law 26,165/2006, 2006, art. 25).

The GRSI document, meanwhile, provided a different evaluation of the legal framework in that it stated that one of its positive aspects was that it did not require legislative modification, as it was based on some of the existing migratory pathways and categories in the 2004 migration law. In the face of this argument, it is necessary to point out that, although it is correct to state that article 23, subsection m, of the migration law refers to the granting of entry permits for humanitarian reasons (Law 25,871/2004, 2004, art. 23), as other authors (Figari Costa & Penchaszadeh, 2017; Sobieray et al., 2017) have indicated, these are administrative mechanisms whose purpose is to assist people requiring international protection who do not fit any definition of

refugee. This situation does not correspond to the members of the Syrian population who have been forced to flee their country in the last decade. If we keep in mind that the Argentine refugee law includes two meanings of the term **refugee**—the traditional or narrow meaning, coined in Geneva, and the regional or extended meaning, that originated in Cartagena—and we consider the characteristics of the war in Syria (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2022), it is possible to conclude that all members of the population that have entered Argentina by means of this program could have been considered refugees.

However, despite the fact that those who were sponsored through the Syria Program were not legally recognized as refugees but rather as migrants, the legal situation of the sponsored population has been similar to that of those who obtained recognition as refugees by the CONARE. In both cases, they received two-year temporary residence permits<sup>4</sup> that could be renewed and that could, after three years of continuous residence and by fulfilling certain documentary requirements (proof of identity, residency, and good conduct), be converted into permanent residence permits. This could in turn later, and with more administrative requirements (no criminal record and legally paid work), lead to the attainment of nationality.

### Just for (Christian) Syrians

The fact that the sponsorship program is reserved exclusively for people of Syrian or Palestinian origins affected by the armed conflict in Syria is another matter deserving of attention. Although the practice of selecting people according to their nation-

<sup>4</sup>The Syria Program allows those sponsored migrants who wish to do so to apply for asylum after arriving in the country. However, as pointed out by the authors of the CAREF report, choosing this option supposes confronting a “more prolonged and uncertain” procedure (Liguori et al., 2018, p. 130).

ality is widely extended in private refugee sponsorship schemes (see [European Commission, 2018](#)), and tends to be justified using economic arguments such as the lack of state funds, it is problematic because it does not comply with the standards of international refugee and human rights law ([Tan, 2022](#)) and generates a “two-tier system” ([Labman & Pearlman, 2018](#), p. 446) among the population requiring international protection.

Furthermore, in addition to discrimination on the grounds of nationality, both the report by CAREF representatives ([Liguori et al., 2018](#)) and my fieldwork observations suggest that there might also have been a trend that could be described as discrimination on a religious basis, which was favourable to Christians. This may have taken place between 2014 and 2018, during the implementation rather than the design phase of the program. The two tentative explanations that can be offered in this regard include, first, the greater presence of Christians among the members of the Syrian diaspora in Argentina, and second, the profile of those who took part in the process of selecting potential candidates between 2015 and 2018.

In connection with the first explanation, it is necessary to point out that the role played by Syrian diaspora organizations in receiving those fleeing the armed conflict has not been particularly active, mainly because of the political interpretations that these organizations have made of the war ([Baeza & Pinto, 2016](#)). Nevertheless, it is probable that more Christians than Muslims have been reunited with their families, especially during the first year of the program, simply because of the greater number of Christians among the members of the diaspora ([Liberali, 2007](#)). Regarding the second argument, it is worth noting that when the Syria Program was expanded to include sponsors with no family or affective ties with Syrian citizens,

personnel from the Argentine consulate operating in Syria at that time transmitted information regarding the program to Argentine Christian missionaries in Syria and Lebanon and requested their collaboration in regard to seeking potential candidates. These missionaries consequently gave the contact details of many of the parishioners who asked for help to leave the country to NGOs, who then acted as mediators between potential sponsors and sponsored migrants in Argentina.

Although the preference for Christians was expected to diminish as a result of the UNHCR becoming the main selecting agency in 2019, all arrivals were suspended between March 2020 and December 2021 owing to the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the borders were reopened in 2022, at the time of writing (July 2023), 10 people have entered the country, so it will be necessary to continue examining the figures to observe to what extent the involvement of religious organizations as sponsors influences the selection processes.

## Unfulfilled Objectives

When positively evaluating the program, two aspects not often mentioned in the reports and publications are its short reach in terms of numbers and the fact that only half of the almost 1,000 people who initially applied for a humanitarian have, to date, entered the country. No mention of quantities is made in the UNHCR documents, while the authors of the GRSI publication limit themselves to providing an estimation of the number of arrivals until 2018, without mentioning the disparity between applications and entries ([Bond & Kwadrans, 2019](#)). The IOM report, meanwhile, indicates that the key to understanding the gap between the number of visas requested and the number of effective entries into the country is the waiting time

between the issuance of the visas and the actual displacement, as this would lead people with visas granted to desist from moving or to go to another place (Cyment et al., 2019). Finally, the CAREF report provides a similar argument and adds another reason: possible refusals or “entries turned down for various motives” (Liguori et al., 2018, p. 34) that may have been decided by the Argentine migration authorities.

Furthermore, in numerical terms, it is necessary to mention that the authors of the CAREF report, which was published a year after the presidential announcement regarding the programmatic goal of receiving 3,000 Syrians, not only ignored the fact that the projected figures were not being reached but justified the existence of the program by arguing that the armed conflict in Syria could have led to an increase in the number of people seeking asylum, which would have created “a potential overload on the asylum system” (Liguori et al., 2018, p. 130). According to this statement, a massive arrival of Syrian nationals could have become a burden for the Argentine state, and that is why it was necessary to provide another entrance route.<sup>5</sup>

However, fewer than 200 applications for asylum were submitted in the three years prior to the implementation of the Syria Program (years of war in Syria; see Figure 1). During the same period (2011–2013), nearly 900 Senegalese, more than 650 Colombians, and more than 300 Dominicans began the application procedure, while in the years during which the Syria Program was being implemented (2014–2022), more than 6,400 Venezuelans, 2,100 Senegalese, and 1,400 Haitians submitted applications (CONARE,

2014, 2019, 2022). Argentina has not launched any resettlement or private sponsorship programs for these or other national groups. Moreover, no special measure has been proposed to ease their asylum applications,<sup>6</sup> nor have the authorities given any warnings regarding a possible overloading of the asylum system.

### Low-Cost Face-Saving Humanitarian Image

Despite the fact that, as has been argued, the implementation of the Syria Program has led the Argentine state to generate a two-tier system for the population in need of international protection, and that it has not fulfilled its three-year programmatic goal in practically a decade, the publications examined have evaluated this private sponsorship scheme in a favourable light. Both governmental and non-governmental representatives have evaluated this plan as good, long lasting, innovative, and suitable.

The few suggestions regarding the program that have been made by representatives of NGOs have focused on improving its functioning. The IOM report recommends improvements to “the scaling and strengthening of sponsors” (Cyment et al., 2019, p. 86), the CAREF report suggests the need to extend the period of accompaniment and institutional involvement (Liguori et al., 2018), and one of the UNHCR documents proposes extending the reach of the Syria Program to populations of other origins, particularly those from Latin America (Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017). This situation—that is to say, the fact that the refugee sponsorship

<sup>5</sup>This argument concerning the possible overloading of the asylum system may be seen as problematic because it assumes that if this overloading were to occur, it would be the responsibility of those seeking international protection and not a consequence of the inadequacy of the state budget.

<sup>6</sup>Although not explicitly directed to asylum seekers, it is relevant to mention that in 2017, over a six-month period, there was a special program for Haitians (Figuerola & Marcogliese, 2017). DNM Disposition 1143-E/2017 (2017) did not allow the entry into the territory of people in need of international protection but enabled those Haitians who were already in Argentina and had no way to access temporary residency to remain in the country.

scheme has been limited to a population that is fleeing a war which is taking place 13,000 kilometres away from Argentina, while geographically closer prolonged crises (such as those in Colombia or Venezuela, which have been producing much larger population movements towards the country) have received much less attention, support, and recognition—has remained unmentioned in all the governmental publications examined. In this regard, it is worth noting that the statistics published by CONARE show that this institution has favourably processed more than 73.5% of the 661 applications submitted by Syrian nationals between the years 2011 and 2022. Asylum seekers from other countries have not achieved such a high percentage of acceptance of their asylum applications in recent years. Upon examining that which has occurred with other national groups with high application rates, it can be noted that between 2010 and 2015, the Argentine state recognized 20.1% of the 910 applications for asylum submitted by Colombians and, between 2016 and 2022, 4.9% of the 6,468 applications for asylum submitted by Venezuelans (CONARE, 2014, 2019, 2022).

This omission could demonstrate that the objective of this initiative has not been to reduce the number of people who require international protection and to alleviate their suffering, but is rather the fact of doing so “efficiently”: with as little public spending as possible and with the greatest possible benefit as regards how the country is viewed by the international community. In that respect, one may conjecture that Syrian nationals were not chosen by chance. The prominence of the Syrian crisis in the Western media, particularly between 2013 and 2017, is, to some extent, comparable to the Indo-Chinese crisis of the late 1970s (Hyndman et al., 2017; Labman, 2016).

Although it can be appreciated that non-humanitarian criteria have not been adopted for the selection of recipients of the Argentine refugee sponsorship program—such as employability or previous knowledge of the language, as recently occurred during the implementation of pilot sponsorship programs in Australia and New Zealand (Hirsch et al., 2019)—it is pertinent to question the exclusion of people from other countries in need of international protection as potential recipients in a regional context characterized by a considerable and growing number of forced displacements (UNHCR, 2022b). In this regard, however, it may be necessary to emphasize that the intention of this argument is not that of rejecting inter-regional or intercontinental humanitarian initiatives, but rather that of denouncing the lack of attention paid to those people who, being nearby and in need of protection, are relegated to the background.

### A Private Sponsorship Program Based on the Principle of Substitution?

Finally, as already mentioned in the descriptive section on the Syria Program, it is necessary to highlight that the documents analyzed have resorted to different descriptions with which to define it, with the term **private/community sponsorship** being the only one that is common to all of them. Taking into consideration, on the one hand, that as refugee sponsorship schemes have expanded around the world, they have adopted different characteristics and, on the other, that the Argentine scheme has been equated with others (specifically with the British and Irish schemes; UNHCR, 2019a), Tan's (2022) definition of refugee sponsorship will be now used to better understand the Argentine initiative and its comparison with other schemes.

Taking into account the first meaning of refugee sponsorship provided by Tan



(sponsorship as a form of resettlement), upon examining the Syria Program, it may be noted that it does not fit the definition (unlike that which occurs in the English or Irish cases), basically because the program was established in a country in which no public state resettlement route was in force to which citizens and civil society organizations could adhere by engaging in support or integration tasks. In contrast, when considering the second meaning (refugee sponsorship as a complementary pathway), it might be possible to interpret that the Syria Program fits the definition insofar as the Syria Program opened a new entrance route into the territory. Yet, the Syria Program has a peculiarity with respect to the other private sponsorship schemes that have been implemented elsewhere and categorized as complementary pathways, and this is the fact that, in all the other cases, the schemes have complemented an already-existing resettlement program.<sup>7</sup>

While resettlement programs are a state prerogative (Ineli-Ciger, 2022), since there is no international regulation that obliges governments to resettle refugees (de Boer & Zieck, 2020), when we consider that states are responsible for guaranteeing the fulfillment of international human rights law and refugee law, we might wonder, as other authors have (Good Gingrich & Enns, 2019; Hashimoto, 2021; Ilcan & Connolly, 2021), whether it is appropriate for them to completely delegate their duty of admitting and assisting population in need of international protection to private actors.

In this respect, it is relevant to note that in Canada, the first country to implement a private sponsorship scheme for refugees, the question of articulation between public and private actors has been so relevant that compliance with the principle of additionality was proposed as one of the main features of the initiative. Given that the meaning of the term has undergone transformations over time (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2013), which has led to numerous debates (Labman, 2016), and that an exhaustive examination of these changes is beyond the scope of this paper, it is necessary to state here that the principle of additionality is currently considered to be fulfilled when the private sponsorship program enables more people to reach the country than would have done so if there had only existed a state resettlement program (Hyndman et al., 2017)—in other words, when the private effort accompanies the public commitment.

Keeping in mind that this principle has not been adopted in many of the sponsorship programs implemented in other places in the last decade (European Commission, 2018), the following questions are raised: When the principle of additionality is not fulfilled, might it be useful to speak of other orientating principles of the sponsorship schemes in order to demand that states become more implicated in the tasks of taking in and assisting populations in need of international protection? If the people who arrive through a private sponsorship program are subtracted from the annual commitments to public resettlement established by the receiving country, as has occurred in, for example, the United Kingdom and Ireland, would it be possible to speak of the principle of subtraction?<sup>8</sup> And in the case of Argentina,

<sup>7</sup>The only other cases in which a private sponsorship scheme has been implemented in a country in which no resettlement program was in place are those of Poland and Slovakia. Both countries had refugee sponsorship programs for Christian Syrians and Iraqis for a few months in 2015 (European Commission, 2018). If the Argentine program for the Indo-Chinese is considered as a private sponsorship scheme, as proposed in this paper, it can also be included.

<sup>8</sup>Tan (2022, p. 266) alludes to this phenomenon as “additionality in principle” because he estimates that the considerations guiding the state’s behavior in this respect are pragmatic and that it is hoped that these schemes will eventually fulfill the

would it be pertinent to refer to the principle of substitution?

If we consider that in the case of both the current program for the Syrian population and that which was employed for the Indo-Chinese population, the Argentine state set up a private sponsorship program without the simultaneous existence of a public state resettlement program, it is possible to state that it delegated its responsibilities as regards taking in and integrating those who had been forcibly displaced to actors in civil society. Although the state granted entry and (temporary) residence permits to the population in need of international protection, it allowed other social actors to take charge of providing accommodations, maintenance, linguistic learning, insertion into the workplace, education, and so on. Could it, therefore, be said that the state fostered a situation in which it was substituted or replaced by other actors who became the main guarantors of the protection of rights of that population?

Rather than questioning the state's behaviour, the authors of publications concerning the Syria Program have argued that, given the growing number of people in need of international protection and that the high costs associated with resettlement, refugee sponsorship schemes like the Syria Program may be the most appropriate and sustainable solution for Argentina (and Latin America) (Alfaro & Lettieri, 2017; Cyment et al., 2019). In my opinion, if what is herein denominated as the principle of substitution is not reviewed, this proposal will legitimize the privatization and perhaps also the dualization of humanitarian protection.

In the firm belief that states should comply with the spirit of international human rights

and international refugee law, and keeping in mind both, the increase in forced displacements (on a global and regional scale) and the economic circumstances that are devastating the country (and the region), it would perhaps be better, for both Argentina and Latin America, to promote schemes that operate on other scales in the public sphere, as it has been occurring in the province of San Luis (Cuyo region). A commitment of this nature, in which local governments assume a greater role in the tasks of reception and integration of the forcibly displaced population, would be in line with the proposals made by the **Global Compact on Refugees** in 2018 and could be "the path of least resistance" (Sabchev & Baumgärtel, 2020, p. 38). If the international co-operation budget was transferred to the provincial (or municipal) governments, it would perhaps be possible for more provinces (or localities) to become committed to this task. Moreover, the fulfillment of programmatic goals could be monitored with transparency and accountability, autochthonous populations could relate with newcomers without necessarily assisting them economically, and, more importantly, the number of people receiving international protection would increase.

## CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration that the Syria Program is the first scheme to have been depicted as private sponsorship in Latin America in the last decade, the purpose of this paper has been to provide a critical review of it on the basis of a conventional content analysis of the documents released by the governmental and non-governmental bodies involved. This analysis has shown that it is necessary to provide a warning about an initiative that exclusively targets the Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian populations, excluding other people in need of international

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principle of additionality. However, until this is achieved, it does not appear to be incorrect to refer to subtraction as a mean of reminding public state actors that they are letting others fulfill what is their responsibility.

protection. Although this practice of selecting forcibly displaced populations according to criteria such as nationality of origin is frequent among most states that have implemented refugee sponsorship schemes, it is a procedure that does not correspond to the spirit of international human rights and refugee law, and this is, in my opinion, particularly striking in a context in which the majority of protection claims originate from other countries in the same region (such as Venezuela, Colombia, and Haiti).

This discriminatory aspect is not new in Argentina's history of private sponsorship and resettlement. The two programs implemented previously also selected recipients on the basis of their nationalities of origin. Besides this similitude, this paper has revealed that the three programs share at least two more characteristics: they have allowed very few people to enter the country (together they barely reach 2,000), and their objective has been to promote an image of solidarity, humanitarianism, and/or respect for human rights vis-à-vis the international community with low or no cost for the state. Lastly, it has been pointed out that the private refugee sponsorship program in Argentina has not complied with the Canadian principle of additionality or what, it has been suggested, should be called the principle of subtraction, as has occurred in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Rather, upon being implemented in a country in which no public resettlement program was operating on a national scale, the Argentine program appears to be based on what could be denominated as the principle of substitution.

In this respect, it would seem that the Argentine state does not wish to question this principle, but rather to consolidate it, since, in the last few years, the government has not only not set up any public state resettlement scheme; it has also launched

two new sponsorship programs: a pilot program coordinated by UNHCR denominated as GROW (Growing Funding and Solutions for Refugees), through which donors to the Argentine UNHCR foundation will be able to become mentors of forcibly displaced persons and provide them with social and financial support (UNHCR, 2022a); and a new sponsorship program for environmental migrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean (DNM Disposition 891/2022, 2022). Given that the UN agencies responsible for migration and refuge have been urging countries that are developing public resettlement schemes, such as Brazil or Chile, to follow what they call Argentina's good practices, it is necessary to continue carrying out critical analyses of these new initiatives and questioning interpretations that could be viewed as overly rosy.

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