

Background Paper

Professional skill development of refugees, IDPs and host communities

Rationale for professional skill development programmes in contexts of displacement

Professional skills development is a central strategy to give refugees and IDPs the opportunity to continue their education, improve their employability and thus provide an opportunity to live up to their potentials and **contribute economically to the host economy**. A main objective of professional skills-development programmes is either to ease access to the labour markets for refugees, IDPs, or unemployed in the host communities, or to prepare refugees and IDPs for return and reintegration.

Approaches can be divided into two broad categories. One involves supporting the **formal technical vocational education and training (TVET) or university systems** in the host countries in improving the quality of education and strengthening them structurally to take on the influx of refugees and IDPs in certain regions. The other encompasses a diverse set of **non-formal short-term trainings** that impart professional and life skills to refugees, IDPs and members of the host communities. In response to the refugee influx, donors have set up many new programmes, often in cooperation with local training providers and NGOs, which are specifically designed for refugees and part of larger programmes, e.g. cash-for-work.

Challenges in access to TVET and university systems

Obstacles to encouraging TVET and university systems to embrace refugees and IDPs include limited legal access of refugees to the formal education systems in the host countries and the absence of systems that accredit education and skills acquired in the country of origin. Even in the presence of these structures, formal accreditation is frequently difficult due to loss or inaccessibility of refugees' and IDPs' documents. Moreover, the **transferability of curricula and certificates** between host countries and countries of origin is limited, and language barriers hinder participation in the education system, e.g. for Syrians in Turkey.

In addition to the access difficulties refugees face, TVET and university education are often **not adequately aligned with the needs of the host countries' private sectors**. The education is overwhelmingly theoretical and fails to include components of practical on-the-job training. The resulting mismatch between skills acquired by TVET or university students and the needs of local employers hinders a smooth transition from school to work. In consequence, unemployment and underemployment are prevalent, even among highly qualified youth in the region. Additionally, refugees are discouraged from taking up a long-term course if they do not have the prospect of employment due to limited work permits, closed occupations and sector quotas, or residence permits that restrict freedom of movement, and in consequence their access to certain courses and job opportunities.

Effective skills development in short-term trainings

Short-term trainings can be a suitable measure to teach additional professional skills or life and soft skills. Due to their short-term nature, the trainings can be target-group and demand-oriented tailored to specific needs. In the context of the Syria crisis, donors have embraced short-term trainings – tapping on existing schemes and providers, but also developing and offering new ones. Reasons for the popularity of these programmes are that they can be implemented relatively fast and cheaply and that they can reach a significant number of people. Moreover, in the face of **restrictions to the formal TVET and education systems**, they are sometimes the only option of supporting refugees' employability.

Despite their popularity, short-term trainings come with marked limitations, and their effectiveness in improving participants' employability is low. Such trainings are often not labour market oriented. Interventions are largely **designed without prior skill-needs assessments** (UNDP, 2017). Despite the relevance of practical skills for employers, the trainings often lack practical components (e.g. internships, on-the-job training). In addition, trainings of a couple of days' or weeks' duration are often simply too short to significantly impact their beneficiaries' skill sets. A final issue is that due to the non-formal nature of most of the programmes, participants usually do not receive certificates that are accredited and recognised, either by employers in the host country or in their country of origin.

Increasing efficacy of professional skills development

Despite the limited impact that trainings linked to professional skills-development programmes for refugees and IDPs have had on increasing employability so far, there is some evidence on how to design them more effectively. In the past, the emergence of refugee-targeted training programmes was **usually independent of existing TVET systems and strategies**, despite the fact that inclusion of refugees and IDPs in host-country systems or harmonisation of the refugee-targeted programmes with existing curricula bear known advantages (UNDP, 2017, p. 64). A necessary prerequisite for these actions is the acknowledgement that refugees and IDPs live in protracted situations and participate in their host countries' labour markets – either formally, if possible, or informally.

To address the mismatch between labour supply and demand in a host country or community and design trainings in a more market-oriented manner, a thorough stocktaking of labour market constraints and **skills-related need assessments** that include the private sector should be carried out prior to the definition of training contents. Moreover, evidence suggests that combining **employment services** with skills-development projects can help to improve participants' employment outcomes. In particular, the implementation of additional practical components such as internships can help job seekers to better self-assess their talents, interests, and potentials. Complementary job-matching approaches can help to better link trained beneficiaries to prospective employers (UNDP, 2017, p. 73).

All in all, skills-development programmes might fuel participants' expectations about improving their employment prospects. However, since often the major constraints on the labour markets in the host countries lie on the demand side, namely, a **lack of jobs**, these expectations can result in disappointment. An integrated process that links the training programmes to programmes of private sector promotion or cash-for-work activities might overcome these obstacles.

Literature

UNDP, ILO, and WFP (2017): Jobs make the difference – expanding economic opportunities for Syrian Refugees and Host Communities.

UNHCR (2017): Guide to market-based livelihood interventions for refugees, (UNHCR).

UNDP (2016): Sustainable Livelihoods in Response to Syria Crisis - UNDP portfolio for economic opportunities and sustainable livelihoods in the Syria crisis response.