Understanding Livelihoods and Employment Opportunities in Myanmar

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The UN Refugee Agency

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New evidence on how livelihoods, employment and protection challenges shape the lives of forcibly displaced communities

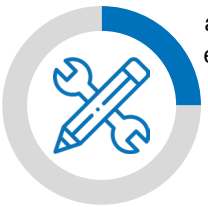
Livelihoods and Employment Opportunity Needs Assessment (LEONA) is a large-scale livelihoods and employment assessment in Myanmar, done in collaboration between the World Bank and UNHCR, covering 10,700 households across 178 townships, with both household and employer components.

The study finds that livelihoods cannot be separated from protection. Economic exclusion, low-paid work, unsafe mobility, weak access to finance, and disconnected labour networks shape household choices and exposure to risk.

LEONA helps explain why some displaced households remain unable to move toward greater self-reliance, why work does not always reduce vulnerability, and why jobs and workers in the same area do not automatically translate into safe, dignified livelihoods.

LEONA shows that exclusion from work among displaced people is not simply a question of skills or willingness to work.

One-quarter of displaced adults are outside work, education or training (NEET). Yet many have prior work experience (62% of protracted and 54% of transitional NEETs), often in agriculture, pointing to a significant pool of human capital pushed out of the labour force by displacement, insecurity and local constraints.



One quarter of displaced adults have no work, education or training

73% of women cite care duties or family/social restrictions non-working reason

For women, barriers are primarily linked to care responsibilities and family or social restrictions, cited by nearly three-quarters of women IDPs in NEET status. This shows that work is shaped not only by labour market conditions, but also by household decision-making, social norms, access to services and safe mobility.

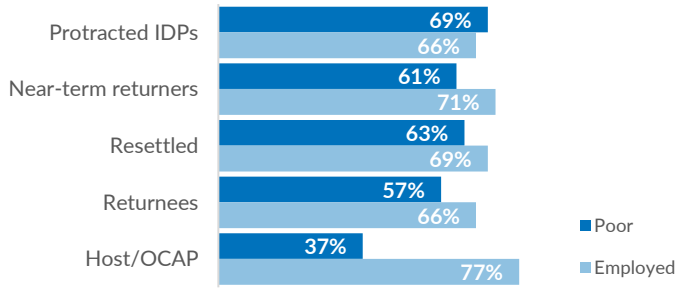
Among women in the transitional group, access to bus/rail services is associated with a 13% higher employment rate, while access to health facilities and piped water is associated with an 8.5% increase. As communities stabilize, safe mobility and basic services can directly support women's participation in work.

WB-UNHCR collaboration

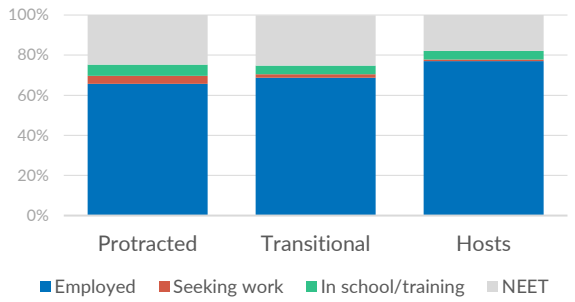
Productivity: being employed does not mean being self-reliant

LEONA shows that employment status alone can be misleading. Displaced and host workers are active in similar sectors, especially agriculture and retail, but displaced workers are more likely to be in casual work (56% of protracted and 53% of transitional workers, compared with 32% of hosts). Some three-quarters of protracted and two-thirds of transitional casual workers are poor. Even after accounting for worker and job characteristics, displaced workers earn less than hosts (-10% for protracted and -6% for transitional casual workers). Showing that access to work alone is insufficient: the quality, stability and remuneration of work determine whether households can reduce vulnerability, avoid harmful coping strategies and move towards self-reliance.

IDPs and hosts' employment and poverty levels



Work status by population group



Matching: jobs and workers can coexist without connecting

One of LEONA's most striking findings is the "matching paradox": employers in townships with the largest displaced populations are more likely to report difficulties finding displaced workers. This challenges the assumption that workers and jobs automatically match where displaced populations are concentrated. Workers and employers rely heavily on informal networks, but often different ones. In high-displacement areas, employers increasingly consult village leaders, while very few workers find jobs through them, creating parallel but disconnected recruitment channels. Mobility is another constraint: only 15% of transitional IDPs are willing to travel to another village or town within the same township, compared with 25% of hosts, due to checkpoints and conscription-related concerns. Wage expectation gaps and employer concerns about reliability further hinder matching.

Financial access: starting from what people already use

Formal banking remains limited among displaced households (8%, compared with 16% of hosts), while mobile money is more widespread. Among transitional households, 31% report access to mobile money or digital financial services, and 87% of users use them regularly. Financial inclusion supports transfers, savings, payments, and small self-employment opportunities. However, documentation barriers, distance, trust and digital literacy remain key constraints.

Why does socio-economic evidence matter?

LEONA demonstrates that economic constraints are an integral part of the protection environment. The findings provide evidence to support more informed policy and programming on safe mobility, financial inclusion, care and service provision, and the quality of employment available to internally displaced people. By helping identify practical pathways to increased self-reliance and economic inclusion, LEONA contributes to operationalizing the 50 by 35 vision in the Asia and Pacific region. Full report available here.