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► Digital refugee livelihoods and decent work

Towards inclusion in
a fairer digital economy



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Digital refugee livelihoods and decent work - Towards inclusion in a fairer digital economy

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Executive summary



Digitalisation is rapidly changing the character of work around the world. Technological advances will create new jobs and opportunities while making others obsolete. The implications of this digital transformation in the world of work for refugees are far-reaching but still remain poorly understood. Despite a lack of evidence-based guidance, there are now numerous experimental innovations that utilise digital technology in livelihoods programmes, employment, and skills training among refugees, migrants, and host community members. To harness the inclusive potential of the digital transformation in the future of work for refugees, it is crucial to understand the possibilities and limitations of *digital livelihoods*. Refugees are an important test case for the feasibility of digital livelihoods at some of the world's economic and political margins, offering new insights about global digital divides and how to overcome them.

This report offers the first comparative global assessment of the emerging field of digital livelihoods and digital work among refugees. The insights are based on eight unique case studies that are authored by leading experts in their respective fields and study locations. While each of the sections offers its own conclusions and context-specific insights, together they provide a new basis for assessing the prospects for decent work within digital refugee livelihoods on a global scale.

► What are digital refugee livelihoods?

We define *digital livelihoods* broadly to include at least four aspects of digital work and learning:

- a) Digital educational efforts and trainings in digital skills.
- b) Work practices on digital labour platforms and for remote employers, such as home-based freelancing and microwork.
- c) Work that makes use of digital skills but takes place locally outside of the digital economy.
- d) Small-scale digital entrepreneurialism that uses digital tools and e-commerce platforms to run and grow businesses, often from home.

The wider ecosystem of digital livelihoods among refugees entails a diversity of activities in work, learning, and entrepreneurship, alongside a set of important infrastructural and connectivity related fields that mediate digital access. These include internet connectivity, computer and mobile hardware, payment mechanisms, national and international laws and regulations, and the diverse social and economic contexts of each location and refugee population.

► Moving from digital skills to decent work?

Digital skills trainings for refugees and other migrants cover a wide range of skills and areas of work, ranging from basic computer skills to microwork and advanced skills in web development, programming, and data science, as well as “soft skills”, language skills, and career coaching. These trainings often provide transferable skills for enhanced employability, aim to build motivation for further learning, while increasing confidence and providing a supportive social environment as well as access to professional networks.

The promise of inclusivity and a fast lane to employment

Two case studies of digital skills trainings for refugees – the ReDI School in Germany and the Digital Skills Training (DST) in Lebanon – underline the strong appeal the technology sector and digital careers have for refugees. Students in coding schools are attracted by the powerful idea that anyone can become a coder and earn a decent salary as long as they have the desire and the commitment to learn. This appeal was paralleled by a perceived promise of easy access and inclusivity, circumventing conventional barriers to accessing skilled labour markets. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a global shift to remote work amidst widespread unemployment, adding further credibility to the promise that digital labour offers an untapped alternative source of income generation at a time when refugees’ access to informal and formal local work is heavily restricted.

Digital opportunities and barriers to accessing decent digital work in Germany

Around 60% of alumni who graduated between 2016 and 2019 from the ReDI School for Digital Integration were employed in 2020, two thirds among them full-time and a third part-time, although refugee alumni had lower employment rates than migrants with other legal statuses. Despite important successes in placing migrants and refugees in digital employment, some coding school students in Berlin face discrimination on the job market and often end up working in exploitative low-paid jobs. Even among those who succeed in landing a decent job, entering “tech” not only involves significant risks, detours, and unpaid or underpaid labour, but also demands a process of socio-cultural adaptation to “working culture” in the name of “soft skills”. Soft skills serve as an indirect filter of cultural and gender difference

in a predominantly male and white IT sector. Moreover, unfamiliarity with established workplace norms and the application process disadvantages migrants and refugees. Almost by definition of their recent arrivals, refugee and migrant “newcomers” enter the route into the IT sector without a network of contacts. Refugees and migrants are particularly susceptible to the tech sectors’ promise of a fast lane to decent work because they often cannot accredit their pre-existing qualifications and face a loss of class status, which digital careers promise to reinstate.

Digital opportunities and barriers to accessing decent work in Lebanon

Digital skills training among Syrian refugees and vulnerable host community members in Lebanon increased self-confidence and social cohesion, while motivating participants to continue their pathway of digital learning. Despite some successes where graduates obtained local employment with the help of digital skills, their high expectations that the training would help them find employment did not often transform into real job prospects. An alumni survey conducted among 542 Syrian and Lebanese participants of the Digital Skills Training (DST), who had participated in trainings during the preceding 12 months, showed that only 13% were employed. One of the main reasons for Syrian refugees’ limited capacity to obtain employment is Lebanon’s restrictive legislation, which excludes them from many professions and sectors of the economy. While freelancing over the internet presents a possible alternative in a legal grey zone, refugees also face significant barriers in accessing work online. These barriers include a widespread struggle to fulfil even the basic pre-conditions for accessing digital livelihoods: a computer, reliable internet, and digital literacy.

► Digital livelihoods and connectivity in refugee camps

Digital access and connectivity among refugees in Kenya and Uganda

“How can you become a professional coder without internet access?” is one question asked by a 17-year-old in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Refugees in East Africa faced a reality of digital barriers to access digital livelihoods opportunities. Studies in two refugee settlements in Kenya and Uganda showed that age, gender and education influence digital access barriers while the male, younger, and educated refugees were most likely to access smartphones and mobile internet. The most significant barriers have proven to be structural inefficiencies of poor digital literacy, limited awareness about available digital opportunities, poor connectivity and electricity, as well as the high costs of mobile data and devices.

Connectivity and entrepreneurship among Rohingya in Bangladesh

Research on the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh revealed extreme challenges when it comes to digital access, because they have faced exclusion from SIM cards and from reliable internet connection. This results in the use and trade of illegal SIM cards that must be obtained at a cost. Moreover, the Rohingyas were prohibited from conducting business and from using different digital platforms. This exclusion of refugees from digital access gives birth to unexpected spheres of informal work and entrepreneurship: an array of entrepreneurial ventures that respond to this lack of online connectivity. Entrepreneurs open mobile shops that offer mobile phone repairing, recharging, and file transfers of media from a hard drive to refugees’ devices. They act as intermediaries between the internet and those who are excluded from it. This entrepreneurial “data work” can become a stepping-stone for refugees to acquire English skills and other employment related capacities through digital learning. However, very low levels of literacy and other obstacles to utilize digital technology continue to pose severe challenges for some of the optimistic objectives within digital livelihoods narratives.

► Digital refugee work for social impact platforms

From a normative perspective, the conditions of refugee freelance work for social enterprises and social impact platforms are generally indecent and insecure. At the same time, they often provide livelihood opportunities in the absence of viable alternatives. Interviews and surveys among 131 refugees who worked online and remotely from a diversity of locations highlighted common barriers to accessing digital platform work, such as a lack of reliable internet connection, unsuitable hardware, and a lack of advanced digital skills. Most digital refugee freelancers were relatively young and very well educated, pointing at an underutilization of their qualifications and skills.

Economic dependency and payment levels

Most refugee freelancers and their households depended on their digital earnings, which often were their only source of income. Not only did refugee freelancers depend on digital work, but children and family members also largely depended on them for economic survival. Determining average daily or monthly income for digital refugee freelancers is difficult due to the irregularity of such work. About 35% of freelancers working for a social enterprise in language training and translation services earned less than \$200 USD a month, 44% earned between \$200 and \$400, while 21% earned between \$400 and \$600 or more. In the field of image annotation, the average monthly salary that respondents of one surveyed platform estimated was around \$270 USD, at an average 35 hours of work per week.

Home-based work is viewed as positive

Home-based remote work was widely viewed as a welcome alternative to the challenges the local labour markets pose for many refugees. The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local labour markets has further cemented this perception of home-based remote work as a desired alternative. Refugee women especially considered the ability to work from home to be beneficial for their family life and for balancing work with other responsibilities, while others noted that working from home helped them to escape discrimination and other risks in restrictive local labour markets.

Training opportunities and career progression

Digital freelancing for social enterprises that are dedicated to a positive social impact usually involves a range of short and long training opportunities for refugees. Yet, despite these efforts at providing specific digital skills, a pathway for career progression into decent employment was often absent for a variety of reasons, including a lack of suitable vacancies and a lack of competitive advanced skills. Although most refugee-specific digital work platforms are designed to provide an additional source of income, rather than a main job, transitioning from such freelancing into decent work and skilled careers remained a major difficulty for most refugees.

► Refugee work, gender, and the gig economy

Efforts to integrate refugees into the online gig economy should be accompanied by a wider effort to improve conditions within this new form of work, so as not to exacerbate their existing marginalisation and economic precarity. Due to major challenges and risks, low payment levels, and insecurity, the gig economy can only be viewed as one element in a wider range of options, as a complementary form of livelihood provision rather than a stand-alone solution.

Refugee work and the digital economy in Jordan

Syrian refugees in Jordan typically earned the minimum wage or less, working in often insecure, informal, and irregular employment. Due to seasonal and irregular work practices, work for digital labour platforms has a strong potential as a side income to supplement existing livelihood strategies. But a major skills mismatch between the digital economy and seasonal workers would require significant upskilling. Moreover, Syrian refugees in Jordan cannot have bank accounts and would therefore not be able to get paid for remote digital labour, while most IT jobs in the local economy are closed to foreigners. They also have restricted trade union rights and lack social protections in the jobs they work in.

Refugee women and the Jordanian gig economy

A deeper analysis of the gig economy in Jordan from the viewpoint of female refugees points at an ambivalent situation: the gig economy – as labour-market activities that are coordinated via digital platforms – may offer women expanded options for paid work in a context of limited access to economic opportunities; but it does not currently offer feasible pathways to decent work. The gig economy offers some promise to provide work to refugee women, especially by providing wider markets to women who are already economically active on a small scale. Owing to social and cultural factors, notably women's responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, home-based work appears to be an attractive option for many Syrian refugee women. The on-demand work opportunities on digital platforms that appear most accessible are in fields in which they are already skilled, and in many cases already active informally, including using the internet in home catering or beauty services.

Specific challenges for refugee women in the gig economy

Refugee women face a number of challenges in relation to digital work and online entrepreneurship. While on-demand services that take place in client homes raise safety concerns, homeworking may lead to isolation, poor working conditions and difficulties in linking and organising with other workers. Other reported challenges are limited internet access, limited digital literacy, as well as widespread social monitoring of women's use of smartphones and the internet. There are further concerns about promoting unregulated and insecure gig work in a context of forced displacement, if digital freelance work without protection makes refugee women and their families vulnerable to economic shocks, while risking unemployment and precarity without protections during life events common to women, such as childbirth. Second, the prohibition of unionisation among refugees in Jordan further exacerbates the lack of bargaining power that is already prevalent in the digital platform economy.

► The private sector and refugee remote work

As COVID-19 changed the perspective many employers had on remote work, a possible momentum emerges for advocacy towards the private sector to consider refugees as remote employees. Amidst a variety of global initiatives, there is now a growing willingness among the business community to engage in support of refugees. However, perceptions among potential remote employers indicate a number of barriers to the employment of refugees as remote workers.

One perception is that refugees' ambiguous legal status poses a risk for businesses, with concerns about their right to work. Other issues raised by remote employers regarding the prospect of hiring refugees centred around their unsuitable internet connectivity and lacking access to hardware, as well as concerns about the suitability of refugees' locations as a viable place to work from. Companies further expressed concerns that refugees should have the "cultural sensitivity" to work with western companies and colleagues, and that they needed the right "soft skills" and language abilities to work remotely in a team.

► Recommendations: Towards fair and decent opportunities for refugees in the digital economy

Building on the diverse research perspectives presented in this report, we argue that a concentrated global effort that works towards a future of decent digital refugee work needs to integrate at least the following interlinked goals:

1. Improve refugees' access to the internet and to its economic and employment related dimensions.
2. Deepen efforts to build a variety of digital skills among refugees that increase their employability in a digitized future of work, while cooperating with relevant employers and sectors of the economy to match skills with demands.
3. Work towards improved and more decent working conditions for refugees in digital freelancing and entrepreneurialism, while strengthening the institutional protection mechanisms available to them.
4. Support existing remote employers of refugees with financial and technical assistance, including social enterprises and social impact work platforms, in achieving better working conditions and higher payment levels for their employees or freelancers.
5. Specifically address barriers and obstacles to digital livelihoods posed by legal and political refugee regimes through high-level advocacy and policy innovation.

Furthermore, this report puts forward 12 additional objectives for ensuring better access and more decent and fair conditions for refugee workers and entrepreneurs in the digital economy. For decent conditions to fully materialize, action is needed in order to:

1. Deepen the connection between digital skills trainings and employers and thereby improve enhanced employment outcomes for graduates.
2. Address problems with internet and mobile connectivity among refugees and incentivise operators to lower the costs of digital access.
3. Pressure states that categorically deny refugees access to mobile sim cards and the internet.
4. Address deficits in the current working conditions of digital refugee freelancers, through increasing payment levels, addressing irregular work and income patterns, and by increasing social protection, autonomy, and bargaining power.
5. Raise awareness among employers about the feasibility and social impact of hiring refugees remotely.
6. Revise freelance payment mechanisms and contracts that result in unfair hourly or monthly pay, with the aim to work towards decent employment conditions.
7. Provide refugees with financial inclusion, including access to bank accounts and other digital payment mechanisms, while pressing for a revision of exclusive international and national policies that exclude refugees with certain nationalities from digital economies.
8. Support home-based digital refugee workers and entrepreneurs in establishing a safe and supported place of work with suitable hardware and an adequate environment.
9. Establish initiatives that increase information sharing, mutual support, and collective organising among refugees and migrants engaged in digital work and digital skills.
10. Integrate current efforts invested by governments into preparing citizens for the digital economy with efforts to upskill refugees and migrants, in order to increase social cohesion and ensure that no one is left behind.
11. Strengthen networking and information sharing among initiatives and actors involved in the design and implementation of digital livelihoods, while doing more to establish international policies and norms that can guide and integrate the largely disconnected efforts currently underway.
12. Integrate world of work actors, such as governments, employers, the private sector, and workers organizations, more deeply into the design and implementation of digital livelihood programmes.



Introduction: Digital refugee livelihoods and decent work

Andreas Hackl



Digitalisation is rapidly changing the character of work around the world.¹ Technological advances such as artificial intelligence, automation and robotics will create new jobs and opportunities but also make others obsolete. New skills are required as old ones expire. The digital economy is likely to widen both regional and gender divides further, while digital labour platforms could recreate “nineteenth-century working practices and future generations of ‘digital day labourers’”.² As digital inequalities are becoming more ingrained and insidious, they leave those without resources ever further behind.³ Some of the largest tech corporations increasingly realize their responsibility in helping to close the gaps. Microsoft announced it aims to deliver digital skills and training to 25 million people globally in 2020, while calling on countries to make sure “that people have the skills to ensure they reap the benefits rather than suffer from the consequences of the changes unleashed.”⁴

To harness the positive potential of this digital transformation for the future of work and reduce its harmful impact, global action and planning must give more attention to populations that are economically and politically marginalized, such as refugees. The current digital transformation has far-reaching implications for forcibly displaced persons and many other migrants who are in search of employment and come under pressure to secure a livelihood for themselves and their families. The bulk of this report focuses explicitly on digital skills and digital labour among refugees living in a variety of host countries around the world, where they are often one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market.⁵ At the same time, some of the research includes a diversity of forcibly displaced persons, including IDPs, as well as other migrants and host community members, who come to see the digital economy as a promising alternative to often exploitative and restrictive local labour markets.

Despite the growing prevalence of digital learning and digital labour among refugees, the effects, possibilities, and risks of their inclusion into the digital economy remain poorly understood. Without coordinated action, a digitized and increasingly cashless future of work poses existential threats to the displaced and uprooted, whose livelihood often depends on informal jobs, who are frequently excluded from access to bank accounts or electronic payment mechanisms, and who must often accept exploitative working conditions in exchange for any kind of income. While many refugees are already incorporated into a transnational digital economy, be it as platform workers or as online entrepreneurs, many others remain locked out of digital opportunities due to systematic exclusion on national and global scales.

In this report, a diverse collective of authors offers insights from pioneering research on the possibilities and the limitations of digital work and digitally mediated livelihoods. In doing so, we build on the ILO’s centenary initiative on the Future of Work and its research on decent work in the digital economy.⁶ Our research gives reason for concern about the volatile place of refugees in this future, as digitalisation exacerbates inequalities and threatens to leave some of the most vulnerable behind. As Microsoft’s president, Brad Smith, recognized in 2020: “tech cannot solve everything.”⁷ At the same time, the case studies from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East in this report bear witness to the real potential for economic inclusion that digital skills training and opportunities in digitized employment and entrepreneurship offer.

1 ILO, “Technological Changes and Work in the Future: Making Technology Work for All,” Future of Work: The Centenary Initiative (Geneva, 2016), http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/future-of-work/WCMS_534201/lang--en/index.htm.

2 ILO, “Work for a Brighter Future: Global Commission on the Future of Work” (Geneva, 2019), 18, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_662410.pdf

3 Laura Robinson *et al.*, “Digital Inequalities 3.0: Emergent Inequalities in the Information Age,” First Monday 25, no. 7 (2020).

4 “World faces staggering jobs challenge, says Microsoft president”, BBC online, 18 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53444823>.

5 UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019,” 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37.pdf>.

6 Janine Berg *et al.*, “Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work: Towards Decent Work in the Online World” (Geneva: ILO, 2018).

7 “World faces staggering jobs challenge, says Microsoft president”, BBC online, 18 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53444823>

The current relevance and urgency of this investigation of digital work and refugee livelihoods emerges from three entangled developments that hint at the growing significance of digital work in situations of forced displacement:

1. The increasingly high penetration of smart mobile phones and internet among refugee populations,⁸ and the growing reach of digital economies and remote learning opportunities into global margins, increasingly incorporating people from low or middle-income countries.⁹
2. The urgency of re-defining the meaning of “durable solutions” and economic integration in the face of the global digitization of work among refugees, whose displacement is increasingly prolonged: some 15.7 million refugees, or 77% of refugees, were living in “protracted refugee situations” of five years or more by the end of 2019.¹⁰
3. The recent emergence of a plethora of development programmes, social enterprises, and other initiatives that target refugees with projects and programmes in digital skills, online freelancing, platform work, digital entrepreneurialism, or digital livelihood provision.¹¹

Amidst these important interlinked developments, it is surprising that most research on refugee economies and digital work has taken place separately with very little cross-fertilization.¹² More specifically, discussions about the conditions, protections, and labour rights of workers in the digital economy do not commonly address its unique impact on refugees and migrants.¹³ In our aim to fill this gap, our effort ties into the important synergies between the decent work agenda in relation to the digital economy on the one hand, and the spread of digital approaches to refugee livelihoods on the other. The widening common ground between the efforts of UNHCR and the ILO regarding refugee work reflects these synergies, which are enshrined in a joint 2016 Memorandum of Understanding.¹⁴ Moreover, the Global Compact on Refugees, in its aim to foster decent jobs and livelihoods opportunities for refugees, calls for efforts to close “the technology gap” and build capacities in order to facilitate online livelihood opportunities.¹⁵ A joint ILO-UNHCR action plan includes the aim to implement the Compact, with the ILO contributing on a range of labour market and employment interventions, including new research and interventions on refugee inclusion in the digital platform economy as part of the Dutch-funded PROSPECTS Partnership Programme.¹⁶ UNDP has equally joined action with UNHCR to promote decent work to drive forward the self-reliance of refugees, with a focus on coordinating innovative digital initiatives that foster the economic inclusion of refugees.¹⁷ The research we present contributes important evidence and analysis to inform these and other coordinated efforts to work towards a more just and decent future of refugee work amidst global digital transformations.

8 Ashwed Patil, “The Role of ICTs in Refugee Lives,” in *ICTD ‘19: Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development*, 2019, 1–6.

9 Mark Graham, Isis Hjorth, and Vili Lehdonvirta, “Digital Labour and Development: Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods,” *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 23, no. 2 (2017): 135–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258916687250>.

10 UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019,” <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>.

11 Evan Elise Easton-Calabria, “The Migrant Union: Digital Livelihoods for People on the Move,” 2019.

12 Alexander Betts *et al.*, “Refugee Economies,” in *Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development*, ed. Alexander Betts *et al.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Mark Graham and Mohammad Amir Anwar, “Digital Labour,” in *Digital Geographies*, ed. J Ash, R Kitchin, and A Leszczvynski (London: Sage, 2018).

13 Berg *et al.*, “Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work: Towards Decent Work in the Online World.”

14 UNHCR and ILO, “Memorandum of Understanding Between The Director-General of The International Labour Organisation and The United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees,” 2016, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---jur/documents/genericdocument/wcms_433878.pdf.

15 UN, “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Part II Global Compact on Refugees” (New York, 2018), 14.

16 ILO and UNHCR, “ILO-UNHCR PARTNERSHIP: Joint Action for Decent Work and Long-Term Solutions for Refugees and Other Forcibly Displaced Persons,” 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/77519.pdf>.

17 Asako Okai, “Global Refugee Forum- High Level Debate on Burden and Responsibility Sharing,” undp.org, 2019, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/speeches/2019/global-refugee-forum.html>; Easton-Calabria, “The Migrant Union: Digital Livelihoods for People on the Move.”

► Digital work and the internet at global margins

Widespread hopes for digital livelihoods to become a force of sustainable development build on the more general aim of connecting people to the internet and using ICTs in development practice. According to the ITU, some 51 per cent of the global population, or 4 billion people, were using the Internet by 2019.¹⁸ The spread of the internet in the Global South and the role of ICTs for international development have long inspired expectations of social, political, and economic change:

“A pervasive idea exists that the Internet can liberate economic information from many of its traditional geographic constraints, and so ultimately benefit the world’s poor by removing frictions, barriers, and intermediaries that stand between producers of goods and services in the Global South and consumers of those things in the Global North.”¹⁹

As the image of digitally connected refugees has captured the public imagination, internet connectivity and mobile devices have become a focal point of refugee support.²⁰ UNHCR sees mobile and internet technologies as potentially transforming the lives of refugees through improving security, protection, information access, and health services.²¹ While the applications of the internet for refugees are many, digital livelihoods and access to digital labour markets entail very specific opportunities, risks, and effects.

Digital work can contribute to strong disparities related to geographic location, whereby workers in emerging nations are most affected by uneven Internet connectivity, time zones, language, security, and pay mechanisms.²² Importantly, there are many different kinds of economic activity among refugees that can be called “digital” and not all digital work happens exclusively online. A freelancer who works remotely from home experiences different working conditions than a junior software developer who lands an internship at a technology firm. **In this report, we define digital livelihoods as a term that broadly incorporates at least the following four aspects of digital work and learning:**

1. Educational efforts and trainings in digital skills such as basic digital literacy, computer programming, web design, and other skillsets that are broadly considered to be digital.
2. Work practices mediated by digital labour platforms, such as location-based on-demand platforms in ride hailing or delivery, and home-based work on digital freelancing platforms.
3. Work that makes use of digital skills but takes place outside of this digital platform economy, within formalized employment as part of remote business process outsourcing, in the local hi-tech and software sectors, or in the traditionally non-digital economy that has been subject to the digitization of work (including sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture).
4. Small and medium scale digital entrepreneurialism that uses digital tools to run and grow businesses, such as refugee e-commerce businesses or hardware repair shops.

18 ITU, “Statistics,” Itu.int, 2019, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

19 Mark Graham, “The Internet at the Global Economic Margins,” in *Society and the Internet*, ed. Mark Graham and William H Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 267.

20 Mark Latonero, Danielle Poole, and Jos Berens, “Refugee Connectivity: A Survey of Mobile Phones, Mental Health, and Privacy at a Syrian Refugee Camp in Greece” (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

21 Alan Vernon, Kamel Deriche, and Samantha Eisenhauer, “Connecting Refugees: How Internet and Mobile Connectivity Can Improve Refugee Well-Being and Transform Humanitarian Action,” UNHCR, 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/5770d43c4.pdf>.

22 Robinson *et al.*, “Digital Inequalities 3.0: Emergent Inequalities in the Information Age.”

► The four dimensions of digital refugee livelihoods

1. Digital skills trainings

Digital skills are considered to be “key to combat digital exclusion”.²³ The digitization of labour markets around the world has reshaped the skills workers need to succeed in their work lives, including the demand for data skills, entrepreneurial skills, and so-called “human skills” or soft skills.²⁴ However, most analysis of the digitization of work and digital skills continues to focus on the Global North, while only little attention is paid to the possibilities and limits of digital skills in the specific situation of those living at global economic and political margins. Refugee status and the wider condition of forced displacement often negatively affects early skill building, results in higher school dropouts, lower earnings, and increases the likelihood of ending up in dissatisfying jobs that do not match one’s qualifications.²⁵

Digital skills programmes often implicitly promise a quick fix to these problems, suggesting that anyone anywhere in the world with a computer, internet, and time for digital learning can earn money as a programmer, web designer, or remote data worker. There is a diversity of digital education providers working with refugees covering a variety of skills, ranging from courses on basic digital literacy and data entry tasks to advanced software engineering. There are programmes that want to build software engineers from scratch over longer periods, so refugees can find decent work in well-paid jobs; there are ad-hoc trainings that merely prepare refugee workers for a single specific project of outsourced data work; and there are many shorter courses and programmes that aim to deliver the basics of a particular field of digital skills, be it how to work in e-commerce, in web design, or in tech-enabled manufacturing. **Digital skills trainings become crucial mediators between economically marginalized refugees and the digital economy, which tends to be highly competitive and is often only accessible for refugees through upskilling and tailored support.**

2. Digital platform work

Although much of the economy is in the process of digitization, digital labour in the narrow sense of the word has been closely associated with the platform economy. Digital labour platforms include web-based platforms that outsource tasks or work assignments online to remote workers, and location-based applications (apps) which allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area. The ILO conducted a survey on working conditions in these platforms among 3,500 workers living in 75 countries around the world.²⁶ The report did not specifically explore the role of these platforms for migrants and refugees, but it provides important insights that are relevant in this respect.

23 European Commission, “Human Capital: Digital Inclusion and Skills. Digital Economy and Society Index Report 2019” (Brussels, 2019). <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/human-capital-and-digital-skills>.

24 Burning Glass and BHEF, “The New Foundational Skills of the Digital Economy: Developing the Professionals of the Future,” 2020, https://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/New_Foundational_Skills.pdf.

25 CLS and CENDEP, “Every Action Counts: Determinants of Young People’s Trajectories from Education to Employment in Protracted Displacement” (Beirut, 2020), <https://lebanesestudies.com/every-action-counts-determinants-of-young-peoples-trajectories-from-education-to-employment-in-protracted-displacement/>.

26 Berg *et al.*, “Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work: Towards Decent Work in the Online World.”

The first important realisation is that crowdworkers are often well educated although they frequently perform repetitive tasks that do not match their education backgrounds. Indeed, fewer than 18 per cent surveyed by the ILO only had a high school diploma or less, while one-fourth had a technical certificate or went to university. Despite strong qualifications, the average hourly earnings of workers in 2017 was US\$4.43 per hour for paid work, and only US\$3.31 per hour when total paid and unpaid hours were considered. This drops to US\$1.33 for Africa and US\$2.22 in Asia and the Pacific per hour of paid and unpaid work.

The study also found that women only represented one out of every three platform workers. This gender gap became even more skewed in developing countries, with only one out of five workers being a woman. Gender also mattered in the reasons for doing platform work, as 13% of women could “only work from home” due to care responsibilities, while only 5 per cent of men stated the same reason. **In sum, one can say that digital platform workers at global margins earn much less and are less likely than those from the global north to be women.**

The most common tasks workers carried out on these platforms included responding to surveys and participating in experiments (65 per cent), accessing content on websites (46 per cent), data collection (35 per cent) and transcription (32 per cent). One out of five workers regularly performed content creation and editing and 8 per cent were engaged in tasks associated with training artificial intelligence – a string of AI-training data work that has recently been promoted among refugees. In sum, “Most microtasks are simple and repetitive and do not coincide with the high level of education of crowdworkers.”²⁷

The working environment on digital labour platforms is further described as very insecure and lacks social protection, with unpaid working hours and widespread feelings of social isolation. Indeed, nine out of ten workers in the ILO survey have had work rejected or payments refused, often without any ability to appeal unfair rejections. As the survey included workers from developed and developing countries, it found both commonalities and differences between workers from the global North and global South. The ILO’s most recent World Employment and Social Outlook on digital labour platforms mirrored some of these earlier findings, while also highlighting that: many workers on digital labour platforms experience discrimination and harassment and faced significant risks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the report found that 17% of workers on online web-based platforms and 15% on app-based delivery platforms were migrants.²⁸

While there are many other applications of digital skills than work on platforms, including formal and secure employment in tech-enabled “offline” jobs, many digital livelihoods interventions hope to tap into this growing global platform economy. According to the Online Labour Index, which tracks the supply and demand of online freelancing, the utilisation of online labour has grown steadily, and by 45% between 2016 and 2019 alone.²⁹ Although concerns have been raised about the potential for the exploitation of workers in developing countries, many governments, third-sector organisations, and private sector actors continue to see a significant developmental potential in digital labour: “Jobs can be created for some of the world’s poorest by taking advantage of connectivity and the willingness of an increasing number of firms to outsource business processes.”³⁰ Yet, major problems that have been highlighted are an over-supply of cheap labour and a resulting race to the bottom of the earnings pyramid, a lack of bargaining power, alongside dynamics of exclusion and discrimination, as well as exploitation by intermediaries and a tendency to do low-skill tasks.

27 Berg *et al.*

28 ILO, “World Employment and Social Outlook: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work.” (Geneva, 2021), https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2021/WCMS_771749/lang--en/index.htm.

29 “The Online Labour Index,” Oxford Internet Institute, <http://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>.

30 Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta, “Digital Labour and Development: Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods,” 138.

The prevalent form of refugee-specific platform work takes place through social enterprises that aim to shield freelancers from the fierce competition of the market. Examples are social enterprises that employ refugees in language services, such as *Natakallam*, or in image annotation for the training of artificial intelligence data, such as *Humans in the Loop*. By committing themselves to fair working conditions as they mediate between clients and workers, they aim to foster a supportive environment even if the reality of low payments and insecure employment is often far from ideal. However, the full extent of refugee platform work is not known because the larger global freelancing platforms do not provide data that quantifies the share of refugees and other migrants.

3. Digitized work in various sectors of the economy

The applications of digital skills go beyond work in the platform economy and include jobs in sectors that have not traditionally been associated with digital work, but have often included refugee populations, such as manufacturing, agriculture, or the service sector. This alternative route appears especially important in legal regimes that restrict refugee work to certain sectors in order to protect local labour markets, as in Lebanon or Jordan. Skills assessments in Lebanon have shown, for example, that agriculture, manufacturing and construction are all in need of digital skills.³¹ These can include skills in operating software for machines, online marketing skills, as well as basic skills in data entry and data management. Digital skills programmes that focus on preparing refugees for work in industry, agriculture, or manufacturing must often collaborate with formal vocational training institutions and labs that provide the necessary machinery and expertise.

This ties into a general trend of digitization across all sectors of the economy. Europe's Digital Economy and Society Index estimates that 35% of European Union residents lack basic skills required for new jobs. The Brookings Institute notes a disparity between the value of digital skills and the base of skilled workers: while the digital economy is responsible for 6% of the GDP, digital jobs only account for 3.3% of the workforce;³² some 43% of the EU population had an insufficient level of digital skills, implying a serious risks of digital exclusion in a context of rapid digitisation, according to a survey by the European Commission.³³ As some employees become displaced by AI, many university graduates lack STEM and technology skills, prompting some to speak of a rise in "digital economy refugees" in the global economy at large.³⁴

While digital work in developing countries may often look towards digital freelancing as a viable alternative to the absence of skilled IT jobs in their region, graduates of digital skills programmes in technologically advanced economies, such as Germany, tend to avoid freelancing and platform work. Instead, they strive to meet the high demand for skilled IT workers to fill empty chairs in offices of start-ups and technology companies. Although their work in the formal IT sector is often digital, as in software engineering, such work is different from platform work as it tends to be more decent and offers a long-term career perspective in the host country. The stark differences between host countries in what refugees can achieve with digital upskilling underline that the regulatory and legal regimes that govern labour market access, alongside the demand for IT specialists in the local economy, are often the crucial factors that determines the possibilities and limitations of digital livelihoods.

31 ILO, "Labour Market Information: Review and Analysis. In-Focus on North Lebanon" (Beirut, 2017); Leaders Consortium, "Skills Gap Analysis for Improved Livelihood Sustainability in Lebanon: Competency Needs and Skills Gap Analysis of the Private Sector in Mount Lebanon, Tripoli and the Bekaa" (Beirut, 2017).

32 Richard Wang and Forbes Technology Council, "The Rise Of Digital Economy Refugees," Forbes, March 3, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/03/03/the-rise-of-digital-economy-refugees/?sh=2e897b4b67c5>.

33 European Commission, "Human Capital: Digital Inclusion and Skills. Digital Economy and Society Index Report 2019."

34 Wang and Forbes Technology Council, "The Rise Of Digital Economy Refugees."

4. Digital entrepreneurship

A culture of entrepreneurship is seen as a key economic achievement of displaced Syrians around the world, although this varies significantly from country to country. Indeed, “refugees make great entrepreneurs and workers, if only they are allowed to.”³⁵ While Lebanon categorically restricts business activity for Syrians (although many run them informally), Turkey saw a total of 8,367 new Syrian companies founded in 2017. In the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan there were more than 3,000 Syrian-run businesses with a total value of US\$13 million per month, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF).³⁶

Refugee entrepreneurs can be supported by a range of local and global initiatives. One example is *Techfugees*, a global organisation nurturing a sustainable ecosystem of tech solutions supporting the inclusion of displaced persons through entrepreneurial initiatives. Other important supporters of refugee entrepreneurship include *Spark* alongside numerous training programmes and seed-funds. Despite this growing support, refugee entrepreneurs in host countries continue to face a number of specific challenges, including travel restrictions, complex regulations, restrictions on banking and financial services, financial risks, limited funding and investment options, language and cultural barriers, psychosocial trauma, social exclusion, unfamiliar business environments, and uncertain futures.³⁷

Women entrepreneurs often face additional challenges and follow their own professional trends. A study that surveyed 39 “technological social innovations” ran by women in the MENA region found that these focused mainly on e-commerce and education, as well as healthcare. E-commerce remains one of the key enablers for small business run by women in the Middle East. Some of the main challenges that were identified for women in the region were difficult bureaucracy, political instability, limited access to funding, lack of sufficient expertise, unsustainable cash flows, and the marginalization of rural areas.³⁸ Moreover, recommendations highlight the importance of emotional and financial support, as well as access to resources including skilled workers, mentors, and entrepreneurial workshops. There are further gaps in national ecosystems that make it harder for women to succeed. As one report puts it:

“Interviewees identified gaps in the ecosystem, such as mechanisms to train and locate tech talent, mechanisms to identify suitable and affordable mentors and consultants, and entrepreneurial workshops or programs that provided training and evaluation of identifying a real problem with a scalable solution accompanied by a long-term business model.”³⁹

Similar to entrepreneurial approaches more generally, e-commerce is a tempting mode of intervention because it promises the ability of beneficiaries to create their own businesses online, theoretically from scratch and from home. Yet, as with all start-ups, the success of e-commerce businesses in the humanitarian context is far from secure and often ends up being a significant time-investment by individuals without major financial gains. As the chief operating officer at an e-commerce platform in Lebanon put it: “the process of creating an online store may seem like a simple feat. However, running an e-commerce business (...) can be one of the trickiest tasks.”⁴⁰

35 The Economist, “Refugees Make Great Entrepreneurs and Workers - If Only They Are Allowed To,” The Economist, November 21, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/business/2019/11/21/refugees-make-great-entrepreneurs-and-workers>.

36 The Economist, “The rise of the refugee startup,” a April 2018, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-p8nRI6pyKg>.

37 Ahmad Sufian Bayram, “Entrepreneurship in Exile: Insights into Syrian Refugees Startups in Host Countries,” 2018.

38 Joyce Hallak, Jennifer Ventrella, and Grace Burleson, “Women in Tech: Social Innovation in MENA,” 2019, <https://www.engineeringforchange.org/research/women-tech-social-innovation-mena/>.

39 Hallak, Ventrella, and Burleson, 7.

40 Philippe Abdeni, “The Trials of Operating an E-Commerce Business in Lebanon,” Wamda, 2020, <https://www.wamda.com/2020/01/trials-operating-e-commerce-business-lebanon>.

► Migration, displacement, and digital economies

Although the digitization of work has been a global development that affects almost all sectors of the economy, digital jobs and digital livelihoods have played a particular role for migrants and displaced persons of various statuses in recent years. While it is crucial to understand the specific implications of digital livelihoods for refugees, it is important to take a step back and analyse the relationship between digital connectivity, digital work, and migration more broadly.

Digital work and learning matters for migrants and refugees at least in the following specific ways:

1. Migrants and refugees often face barriers to social mobility in traditional labour markets of host states that the digital economy sometimes promises to circumvent.
2. One of the main barriers to working in local labour markets for migrants and refugees is mastering the local language. Work on digital labour platforms often promises inclusivity and fewer barriers to entry in terms of language and qualifications.
3. Refugees and migrants must often interrupt their education or fail to accredit their pre-existing qualifications in the host country, increasing the need for short-term work to get by and lending significance to ‘tech’ as a possible fast-track route to a new profession.
4. A plethora of initiatives by states, civil society, and the private sector has offered opportunities tailored to the needs of migrants and refugees that aim to reach positive development outcomes and economic integration by digital means.

The study of platform-mediated digital labour has not devoted much attention to the role of migrants, while data remains scarce. However:

“From New York to Melbourne and from Bogotá to Cape Town and London, it is clear that migrant workers provide a large share of the labour power behind a range of gig economy services; (...) It can thus be argued that migrant labour serves an infrastructural role for these platforms – one that is as vitally important to their business model’s viability as the steady influx of investment capital.”⁴¹

The direct correlation between migration, displacement, and digital work is determined by the fact that migrants and refugees often inhabit particular margins in formal national economies, must often prioritize informal work due to this marginalization, and face a range of barriers to social mobility that are partly remedied by the ostensibly inclusive character of digital technology. Part of this assumed inclusive character are widespread ideas of techno-optimism that suggest that the internet allows anyone to work from practically anywhere, as long as they learn skills and have a computer and internet connection.⁴²

41 Niels van Doorn, Fabian Ferrari, and Mark Graham, “Migration and Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy: An Intervention,” 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3622589.

42 Dragana Kaurin, “Space and Imagination: Rethinking Refugees’ Digital Access,” UNHCR Innovation Service, 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Space-and-imagination-rethinking-refugees-digital-access_WEB042020.pdf.

Platform labour is particularly popular among low-wage migrant workers who have traditionally been excluded from standard employment, making digital work simultaneously a site of degradation and one of opportunity for those who have little viable alternatives.⁴³ In a paper that explores the important relationship between migration and gig work, Van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham identify why this is the case, arguing that:⁴⁴

- The onboarding process for work platforms is low threshold and often resembles how many migrants have already experienced informal work; and these onboarding practices are ostensibly indiscriminate.
- Online platforms are often “lax with respect to their enforcement of formal requirements”, such as background checks or business licenses of freelancers.
- The ability to work through platforms in English offers additional inclusive potential compared to the often more demanding requirements of local labour markets.
- Some app-based platforms in delivery or ride-hailing allow migrant workers flexibility in cashing out money and offer a degree of autonomy in deciding when to work and when not.
- The inclusiveness of these jobs comes with a reclassification of work as non-standard employment and freelancing, which is generally associated with the degrading of labour standards but simultaneously offers opportunities for those migrants who generally experienced formal labour markets that are protected by standards as limiting and exclusive.

The particular experience of refugees mirrors some of these aspects while challenging others, with often diverging experiences between one host country to another. The frequent categorical financial exclusion of refugees makes “cashing out” payments from work difficult and the ostensibly “indiscriminate” onboarding onto digital platforms does not apply to refugees in the same way. They may lack documentation to verify their identity or find their IP addresses and profiles blocked from platforms, due to international sanctions against financial transactions with certain nationalities. Prominent digital payment mechanisms, such as PayPal, do not operate in some refugee host countries.

The problems Syrians encountered in trying to access digital platform work are well illustrated by a question a user called “Hussein” posted in the community forum of Upwork, one of the largest freelancing platforms:

“Hello, I’m a Syrian but I live in Lebanon, currently I’m trying to verify my account and I have 2 issues: Syria is not listed in the dropdown menu when I try to select the ID issue country. There is only one accepted, the passport, but I don’t have that, I have a birth certificate paper, I can’t get the passport because of the war there. I hope you consider my situation, thank you.”⁴⁵

These experiences of restricted access provide an important commentary to some of the conclusions that are often readily made about the inclusive dimensions of digital economies. At the same time, the evidence we provide about the barriers and obstacles to decent digital livelihoods among refugees provide entry points for international and local actors to push for a more inclusive future of digital work.

43 van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham, “Migration and Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy: An Intervention.”

44 van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham, 4–5.

45 Upwork community forum, at <https://community.upwork.com/t5/Admin-Support-Specialists/ID-verification-Syria-is-not-listed/m-p/549134>, accessed 12 May 2020.

► Access and the digital inclusion of refugees: Moving beyond connectivity

One basis for digital livelihoods to become widely feasible is internet connectivity. Access is “the foundational layer of the digital inequality stack” and it is increasingly recognized as a human right, for example by key institutions such as The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) and the International Telecommunications Union’s (ITU) Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development.⁴⁶ Under the label “connectivity as aid”, global efforts seek to provide Internet connectivity to displaced communities.⁴⁷ Yet, connectivity alone does not provide access to digital livelihoods and digital work, which are governed by their own set of inequalities and barriers.

In the low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) where most of the world’s refugees live, issues of network availability and affordability hinder widespread mobile phone adoption and use. Making effective use of connectivity often requires skills and an understanding of the safety and security implications it has for refugees and marginalized communities alike. Challenges specific to refugees, such as the need to provide identification to obtain a SIM card or internet connection, must be taken into account.⁴⁸ In the face of these challenges, realizing the potential of digital technology to contribute to refugees’ livelihoods has been a difficult task.

A UNDP project⁴⁹ recently explored whether digitalization may open up or enhance livelihood opportunities for refugees and migrants, including those who are generally excluded from such opportunities in host or transit countries. The research mapped and analysed digital livelihoods for “people on the move”, finding that digital work offers a set of unique benefits for displaced people, including access to new opportunities, markets, and networks for those “marginalized from mainstream economic avenues by virtue of their displacement.” However, the study also highlighted key barriers and gaps in current practices, as well as potential risks. Current digital livelihoods practices were found to be fragmented and unstandardized in ways that present systemic barriers to scaling up.⁵⁰

Moreover, financial institutions exclude the majority of refugees from bank accounts and payment methods that can be essential for success in the digital economy. According to UNHCR:

“Self-reliance is often contingent to the ability of forcibly displaced to have access to financial services such as loans and credit lines, savings accounts and payment services. Most forcibly displaced, in particular refugees, are today excluded from the formal financial sector, which means they lack a safe place to save and receive money, affordable ways to make payments, and access to loans to invest in a business activity or to smooth their consumption needs.”⁵¹

46 Robinson *et al.*, “Digital Inequalities 3.0: Emergent Inequalities in the Information Age.”

47 Eleanor Marchant and UNHCR, “Internet Governance in Displacement,” 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Internet-Governance-in-Displacement_WEB042020.pdf.

48 Carleen Maitland, “Access and Agency: Digital Refugees and the Future of Protection in the Context of Ubiquitous Connectivity,” UNHCR Innovation Service, 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Access-and-agency_WEB042020.pdf.

49 Easton-Calabria, “The Migrant Union: Digital Livelihoods for People on the Move.”

50 Easton-Calabria.

51 UNHCR, “Advancing the Financial Inclusion of Refugees through an Inclusive Market System Approach,” AFI blog, 2018, <https://www.afi-global.org/newsroom/blogs/advancing-the-financial-inclusion-of-refugees-through-an-inclusive-market-system-approach>.

Forced displacement involves a number of losses that bring about certain socio-economic or political vulnerabilities, such as poverty, susceptibility to exploitation, categorical discrimination, and deportability. While workers on digital labour platforms based in developing countries often highlight the positive aspects of this alternative source of livelihood,⁵² assessing the benefits for refugees requires a deeper analysis. Including refugees in digital economies and the ‘gig economy’ has only been openly encouraged if strong protection measures and other employment options are available.⁵³ A focus on connectivity and digital access alone could therefore pose a possible pathway to exploitation and precarity. Whether digital skills and digital work opportunities can facilitate decent working conditions is heavily dependent on national refugee regimes and the way they determine legal status, access to work, financial inclusion, and digital access.

In relatively enabling policy environments with a high demand for IT specialists, where refugees have the right to work, such as Germany, digital skills trainings advance economic integration and social mobility, if only for a limited number of motivated individuals.⁵⁴ In countries such as Lebanon, which has the highest per capita refugee population in the world, legal restrictions and barriers to digital and financial access strictly limit the feasibility of digital livelihoods. Despite the creation of benefits to some, digital tools and digital connectivity have simultaneously contributed to new digital divisions of labour.⁵⁵

The specific circumstances of each host location and group of displaced persons challenges widespread ideas that digital technology transcends boundaries and offers a ready-made solution for all. Although digital economies increasingly operate on a planetary scale, this ‘planet’ often looks very different from the perspective of the global margins. Indeed, workers may in theory be able to sell their labour power globally, but they are still “tethered to the locales in which they go to bed every night”.⁵⁶ Digital technologies are no silver bullet for advancing refugees’ economic inclusion, and whether they can help promote and facilitate decent work for refugees and migrants depends on how the technology is designed, implemented, and used.⁵⁷

52 Richard Heeks, “Decent Work and the Digital Gig Economy: A Developing Country Perspective on Employment Impacts and Standards in Online Outsourcing, Crowdwork, Etc.,” Working Paper, 2017, 8, http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/gdi/publications/workingpapers/di/di_wp71.pdf.

53 Abigail Hunt *et al.*, “The Gig Economy in Complex Refugee Situations,” *Forced Migration Review Online* 58 (2018): 48.

54 Ben Mason, “Tech Jobs for Refugees: Assessing the Potential of Coding Schools for Refugee Integration in Germany” (Washington, 2018), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/tech-jobs-coding-schools-refugee-integration-germany>.

55 Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta, “Digital Labour and Development: Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods,” 153.

56 Mark Graham and Mohammad Anwar, “The Global Gig Economy: Towards a Planetary Labour Market?,” *First Monday* 24, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i4.9913>.

57 ILO, “Digitalization to Promote Decent Work for Migrant Workers in ASEAN: Thematic Background Paper for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML)” (Geneva, 2019), 1.

► From digital livelihoods to decent work: Towards a coordinated framework of action

In their Memorandum of Understanding, UNHCR and the ILO seek to promote employment opportunities for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons.⁵⁸ The Memorandum recalls that “the right to engage in decent work is integral to human dignity and that its exercise is essential to other human rights and enables individuals and families to maintain livelihoods, to plan their futures, and to contribute to the development of their community.” Moreover, it recognises that “for refugees and other persons of concern, safe and dignified work that permits self-reliance and active participation in community life can also be a pathway to a comprehensive durable solution.” The Memorandum features eight common priorities, including the promotion of comprehensive durable solutions and the protection of the rights of refugees to decent work in accordance with relevant international labour standards, human rights, and humanitarian law. The common priorities further aim to ensure that displaced persons have access to secure decent work and are equally treated in labour markets and in labour mobility.

The research in this report will show how these principles and emerging standards matter from the perspective of refugees in digital work and digital skills programmes. Importantly, looking at digital livelihoods for refugee populations from the angle of decent work and human rights means that employment is primarily an issue of social and economic justice: it should include social protections and it should be dignified. At the same time, many digital livelihoods programmes were designed as a response to immediate humanitarian needs. The specific needs of displaced persons and their exclusion from important legal and economic protections can mean that norms around decent and fair conditions are easily eroded because poverty and a lack of alternatives makes any work in suboptimal conditions desirable. Many refugees in search of work may feel that economic survival is an urgent concern that does not allow them to reject digital labour opportunities because of their insecure conditions or low pay. In a similar vein, social enterprises that connect refugees to digital freelance work must often prioritize their aim to support livelihoods over the long-term promotion of decent work. But as displacement situations become prolonged and refugees remain in a given host country for five years or a decade, the need for transforming digital livelihoods as humanitarian relief into a sustainable form of dignified employment becomes ever more pressing. **The gap between humanitarian relief and dignified employment is perhaps where international coordinated action is most urgently needed: to transform digital livelihoods into decent digital employment through economic, legal, and political interventions.**

Many of the existing frameworks that advocate access to equal and decent work operate under the presumption that the legal and socio-economic conditions among displaced persons make decent work possible and desirable. Yet in reality, decent digital work is a distant goal for those who do not have sufficient digital skills and face obstacles to accessing digital economies. In its 2019-2023 Global Strategy Concept Note, “Refugee Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion”, UNHCR aims to “enhance the enabling environment such that refugees have legal and de facto access to decent work (such as through rights to work, own a business, access financial services, land/property ownership, and freedom of mobility).”⁵⁹

Whether or not the environment is “enabling” is indeed often a decisive factor: refugees granted the legal right to work in any sector of the economy can be supported officially through a variety of initiatives and institutions. But countries that outlaw refugee work in certain sectors while excluding them from access to bank accounts already pre-determine that digital livelihoods will be informal and largely invisible forms of work. This invisibility, in turn, increases the risk of exploitation. While the Global Compact on Refugees calls for the enhancement of refugee resilience and self-reliance, in part through digital upskilling, it has to be seen how successful digital livelihoods are in facilitating such self-reliance.

58 UNHCR and ILO, “Memorandum of Understanding Between The Director-General of The International Labour Organisation and The United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees.”

59 UNHCR, “Refugee Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion 2019-2023 Global Strategy Concept Note,” 2019.

This report argues that a concentrated global effort is needed to work towards a future of decent digital refugee work, and this effort will need to integrate at least the following interlinked goals:

1. Improve refugees' access to the internet and to its economic and employment related dimensions.
2. Deepen efforts to build a variety of digital skills among refugees that increase their employability in a digitized future of work, while cooperating with relevant employers and sectors of the economy to match skills with demands.
3. Work towards improved and more decent working conditions for refugees in digital freelancing and entrepreneurialism, while strengthening the institutional protection mechanisms available to them.
4. Support existing remote employers of refugees with financial and technical assistance, including social enterprises and social impact work platforms, in achieving better working conditions and higher payment levels for their employees or freelancers.
5. Specifically address barriers and obstacles to digital livelihoods posed by legal and political refugee regimes through high-level advocacy and policy innovation.

Furthermore, this report puts forward 12 additional objectives for ensuring better access and more decent and fair conditions for refugee workers and entrepreneurs in the digital economy. For decent conditions to fully materialize, action is needed in order to:

1. Deepen the connection between digital skills trainings and employers and thereby improve enhanced employment outcomes for graduates.
2. Address problems with internet and mobile connectivity among refugees and incentivise operators to lower the costs of digital access.
3. Pressure states that categorically deny refugees access to mobile sim cards and the internet.
4. Address deficits in the current working conditions of digital refugee freelancers, through increasing payment levels, addressing irregular work and income patterns, and by increasing social protection, autonomy, and bargaining power.
5. Raise awareness among employers about the feasibility and social impact of hiring refugees remotely.
6. Revise freelance payment mechanisms and contracts that result in unfair hourly or monthly pay, with the aim to work towards decent employment conditions.
7. Provide refugees with financial inclusion, including access to bank accounts and other digital payment mechanisms, while pressing for a revision of exclusive international and national policies that exclude refugees with certain nationalities from digital economies.
8. Support home-based digital refugee workers and entrepreneurs in establishing a safe and supported place of work with suitable hardware and an adequate environment.
9. Establish initiatives that increase information sharing, mutual support, and collective organising among refugees and migrants engaged in digital work and digital skills.
10. Integrate current efforts invested by governments into preparing citizens for the digital economy with efforts to upskill refugees and migrants, in order to increase social cohesion and ensure that no one is left behind.
11. Strengthen networking and information sharing among initiatives and actors involved in the design and implementation of digital livelihoods, while doing more to establish international policies and norms that can guide and integrate the largely disconnected efforts currently underway.
12. Integrate "world of work" actors, such as governments, employers, the private sector, and workers organizations, more deeply into the design and implementation of digital livelihood programmes.⁶⁰

60 ILO, "Employment and Decent Work in Refugee and Other Forced Displacement Contexts: Compendium of ILO's Lessons Learned, Emerging Good Practices and Policy Guidance" (Geneva, 2020), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_763174.pdf.

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Digital refugee
livelihoods in
global comparison:
Case studies



The following eight sections provide diverse research evidence and experiential insights that offer opportunities for a grounded international comparison of the limits and opportunities of digital refugee livelihoods. Each case study is authored by researchers and practitioners who are experts in their respective fields, employing a variety of methods and approaches in their research. These methods cover qualitative and quantitative methods, including online and field surveys, interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observations, and reflexive analysis of practitioners who were involved in building and implementing digital skills programmes. Incorporating evidence and recent experience from some of the world's most important refugee contexts, the case studies combined offer an unprecedented comparative perspective on the present and future relevance of digital work and digital livelihoods in situations of displacement.

The eight case studies are structured in three sections:

-  **Part 1** focuses on the role of digital skills training as a pathway to decent work for refugees and migrants in Lebanon and Germany. The first case study reflects on the implementation and outcomes of the Digital Skills Training (DST) programme at the American University of Beirut. The second case study explores the pathways of refugees and migrants who attend coding schools in the city of Berlin.
-  **Part 2** discusses digital livelihoods and connectivity in refugee camp settings. The first case study examines the barriers to accessing the internet and mobile phone use among refugees in Kakuma, Kenya, and Nakivale in Uganda. The second case study explores digital access and ICT-driven entrepreneurship among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.
-  **Part 3** puts the spotlight on the experience of refugees in the digital economy. The first two contributions focus on the role of the gig economy for refugees in Jordan, with particular focus on gender and decent work. A third section presents research on social enterprises that hire refugee freelancers remotely over the internet, including in fields such as image annotation and language services. The final section in this part looks at the role of the private sector in hiring refugees remotely.

Part 1

Digital skills as a pathway to decent digital work?

► Digital skills training in Lebanon: Reinforcing resilience in a restrictive environment

Rabih Shibli, Sarah Kouzi, Brooke Atherton El-Amine

Globally, Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees in relation to its population⁶¹ with an estimated 1.5 million Syrians alongside more than 200,000 Palestinians.⁶² Lebanese labour law restricts work for Syrian refugees and the government has clamped down on informal work, closing Syrian businesses and fining Lebanese businesses found in violation.⁶³ Lebanon's economy is weak and previously existing inequalities and poverty have been exacerbated by the Syrian conflict, a prolonged economic crisis with triple-digit inflation suffering under the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁴ The destruction of large areas of Beirut by a massive explosion in August 2020 accelerated the economy's free fall.⁶⁵ Due to this economic context and a highly restrictive refugee regime, Lebanon is a challenging testing ground for the feasibility of digital livelihoods. Nevertheless, since 2016, diverse initiatives have aimed to increase Syrians' and disadvantaged host community members' access to digital work in Lebanon, including digital skills trainings, (digital) entrepreneurship initiatives, as well as job-matching and online work platforms.

61 UNHCR, "Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019" (Geneva, 2020), <https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37/>.

62 Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, "November 2020 Statistical Dashboard," December 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-inter-agency-coordination-2020-november-statistical-dashboard>.

63 International Crisis Group, "Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit", June 2020, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/214-pulling-lebanon-out-of-the-pit.pdf>; Ahmad Sufian Bayram, "A World of Limited Possibilities Refugee Youth and Job Opportunities Within the Lebanese Law and Market," 2019, https://spark.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Annex-4-c-LMA_A-World-of-Limited-Possibilities_Lebanon.pdf.

64 International Crisis Group, "Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit"; World Bank, "Lebanon Economic Monitor: The Deliberate Depression", Fall 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34842/LebanonEconomicMonitor-Fall2020.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

65 Hannes Baumann, "How Beirut's Port Explosion Exacerbates Lebanon's Economic Crisis," The Conversation, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-beirut-s-port-explosion-exacerbates-lebanons-economic-crisis-144040>.

The Digital Skills Training (DST) programme

The Digital Skills Training (DST) programme in Lebanon has been described as applying “the power and promise of technology and partnerships to the potential of the emerging youth workforce” in the MENA region.⁶⁶ During the period covered in this case study, DST aimed to equip Syrian refugees and Lebanese young adults (ages 18-35) from marginalized communities with digital skills, as well as English and soft skills for enhanced livelihoods, while promoting social, educational, and economic inclusion. With the support of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) – which refers to DST as one of its Empowerment in Action (EMPACT) programmes – and funding from the German government (BMZ), the American University of Beirut (AUB) has grown the programme from an on-campus pilot of 100 participants in 2016 to a nationwide programme that reached more than 2200 young adults (1498 unduplicated) over 24 cycles of training by 2019.

In Beirut, Aley, Bekaa, Tripoli, and Saida – areas of Lebanon with high concentrations of Syrian refugees and underserved Lebanese host communities – DST training centres were equipped with laptops and internet connections in partnership with local NGOs such as Kayany Foundation, Ruwwad, and Lebanese League of Women in Business (LLWB). In response to outreach activities, potential participants were invited to attend an information session, provide documentation of eligibility (financial need for Lebanese and refugee status for Syrians⁶⁷), and take a placement test that prioritized participants with the lowest levels of digital literacy that still demonstrate capability to complete the curriculum. Many DST participants had not had opportunities to use computers prior to the programme. In one cohort more than half of participating women had never used a PC before joining the programme.

During three consecutive 12-week cycles of 145 hours of training, students could advance from Basic Digital Skills and basic English to intermediate level courses. Basic Digital Skills covered operating a computer, utilizing email and the internet, MS Office, Google Aps, as well as introductions to microwork and online learning. Intermediate digital skills tracks have included front-end web development (Java and WordPress), advanced Excel, SQL, and Python. In 2017, supported on-site microwork internships were offered. Supplementary soft skills workshops and facilitated MOOCs were provided on “open lab” days.

Methods

This case study of the DST programme over a period of three years aims to inform future efforts to link marginalized refugee and host community young adults to the digital economy. Participant feedback was gathered through anonymous surveys during each training cycle. Feedback from instructors, field coordinators, and faculty experts were systematically documented. Interviews, focus groups, and follow up surveys were conducted with DST participants regularly by AUB-CCECS or WFP. A situational analysis in spring 2020 by the editor of this report, Andreas Hackl, included interviews with graduates, field coordinators, faculty experts, and other digital skills initiatives in Lebanon.

66 No Lost Generation, “NLG Tech Summit Featured Solutions,” 2019, <https://nlgedtech.com/main-stage-solutions>.

67 Due to the limits of the mandates of UNWFP and UNHCR and how that impacts funding mechanisms, only Syrian refugees on record with UNHCR in Lebanon could participate in the programme. This unfortunately excluded the large numbers of displaced Syrians in Lebanon not recorded by UNHCR as well as Palestinian refugees under the mandate of UNRWA.

From microwork to holistic digital skills

When the DST pilot, then called “Tech for Food”, was launched in 2016 by WFP’s Innovation Accelerator in partnership with AUB, it focused narrowly on preparing participants for online microwork. By early 2017 – in response to participant and instructor feedback, as well as challenges faced related to the local policy context and securing microwork opportunities for graduates – the programme evolved, adopting a more holistic, student-centred, and reflexive approach. The aim became empowerment of marginalized young adults on three fronts: providing transferable skills for enhanced employability and lifelong learning; building resilience through increased self-confidence and motivation; and facilitating social cohesion among refugees and host communities.

The realization that microwork was not a feasible quick-fix solution for unemployment triggered a shift that manifested in changes in administration, curriculum and the organization of the learning environment. Reflexivity became a core programme management principle. Through regular feedback mechanisms, the DST team identified and carried forward actions for improvement. In the 2016 pilot, curriculum and instructors were provided by a microwork training non-profit organization from outside Lebanon, which had been contracted by WFP. After assessing the pilot, WFP and AUB agreed on the need for bespoke bilingual Arabic and English digital skills and English language curricula to be developed and regularly updated by AUB. The resulting curricula have been designed with a student-centred approach. Instructors are expected to engage participants as active learners in an academically challenging yet supportive atmosphere. Digital Skills courses are taught and assessed in both Arabic and English, acknowledging the importance of utilizing participants’ native language for understanding while building students’ English proficiency.

Other changes to the programme included establishing the roles of training centre coordinators to manage both the logistical and human aspects of maintaining a conducive learning environment and developing a community among student cohorts and instructors. Various barriers to participation were addressed systemically, including provision of a small stipend (‘food assistance for training’) linked to daily attendance and paid at the end of each month through WFP’s e-card system,⁶⁸ as well as organized transportation. Ad-hoc childcare arrangements were occasionally provided. Women in particular provided feedback about the enabling effect of this programme support. In one case, a 22-year-old Syrian participant in Bekaa explained that the stipend was a significant factor in overcoming her parents’ initial reluctance to let her join the programme.⁶⁹ Finally, the programme adopted explicit anti-discrimination policies and procedures which were communicated with participants and staff through orientation sessions and codes of conduct.

68 Isabelle Pelly and Helene Juillard, “Lebanon One Unified Inter-Organizational System for E-cards (LOUISE) - Learning Review”, UNICEF, April 2020, <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/lebanon-one-unified-inter-organizational-system-for-e-cards-louise-learning-review>.

69 Andreas Hackl, “Situational Analysis: Digital Skills Training and Livelihoods for Marginalized Youth in Lebanon,” 2020, 68, Unpublished manuscript.

Insights from programme evaluations

Participants' views were primarily assessed through completion rates and anonymous survey feedback. DST cohort completion rates were 90% and more than 98% of graduating participants had high expectations that the training would help them in the future. Digital skills, when combined with ICT access and affordability, can contribute to increased social inclusion and social capital for refugees.⁷⁰ DST participants' high expectations – and the premise upon which the programme was designed – mirror the effects of powerful “techno-optimistic” beliefs “that technology has consistently improved our lives for the better and is likely to do so in the future.”⁷¹ However, the restrictive environment in Lebanon poses severe challenges to the hope that digital technology can transcend the legal, economic, and political exclusion of refugees.

Although satisfaction with the digital skills curriculum and teaching methods were evaluated positively by 98% of participants, this did not often transform into real job prospects. Before discussing the challenges in detail, we will summarize the wider positive effects of the training described by participants including increased self-confidence, renewed motivation and abilities to continue their education, development of lasting friendships, better understanding across boundaries of nationality and gender, and to a limited extent enhanced employment.

The opportunities

Self-confidence

In end-of-program surveys, 91% of DST participants in 2018/2019 reported increased self-confidence as an outcome of the training, often directly linked to newly attained digital skills. One participant from the Bekaa area could not operate a mouse on his first day of training; six months later he was showcasing his web development project to visitors from Silicon Valley. Another participant, Nour Mghames, described feeling frustrated and humiliated as a parent because she was out of touch with technology; she graduated from the top of her DST cohort and encouraged other women to “seek an opportunity, earn it and above all to keep faith in their abilities.”⁷²

Continued education

For many participants, the programme served as a catalyst to continue their education as a result of increased motivation, information shared about training and scholarship opportunities and support with applications, and perhaps most importantly through gaining digital skills and language skills that enabled participants to seek out information and complete application processes on their own. One young Syrian woman reported that, following years of being socially disconnected and depressed after a divorce, DST inspired and enabled her to enroll in a one-year Office Management certificate and a technical course in Accounting. Mohammad Al Kamel, who left Syria at the age of 14 and had to work

70 Khorshed Alam and Sophia Imran, “The Digital Divide and Social Inclusion among Refugee Migrants A Case in Regional Australia,” *Information, Technology & People* 28, no. 2 (2015): 344–65, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-04-2014-0083>.

71 Dragana Kaurin, “Space and Imagination: Rethinking Refugees’ Digital Access,” 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Space-and-imagination-rethinking-refugees%E2%80%99-digital-access_WEB042020.pdf.

72 “Digital Skills Training Programme – Lebanon”, YouTube, 22 July, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NxmqF79ByQ&feature=youtu.be>.

before finishing high school in Lebanon, used skills gained in DST to secure a scholarship to continue his education in Canada through the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) resettlement programme.

“Social cohesion”

Another aspect of DST that has been described as beneficial by more than 90% of programme participants has been the development of lasting friendships with peers of diverse backgrounds. From the first orientation day of each training cycle through daily interactions, DST staff and participants created respectful and close-knit communities across nationality, religion, political affiliation and gender. A 2017 WFP assessment based on 16 focus group discussions found that participants reported having built lasting friendships and “felt social cohesion between Lebanese and Syrians.”

Dignified work?

Despite these positive outcomes of the training, only a small minority transitioned into more desirable work opportunities after graduation. In a 2019 follow-up survey among 542 Syrian and Lebanese DST participants who had participated in trainings during the preceding 12 months, only 13% reported being currently employed. This low percentage is mirrored by a recent post-graduation survey conducted with Syrian and Lebanese university scholarship recipients in Lebanon, which found only 16% of graduates to be employed.⁷³ The known cases of enhanced work entailed utilizing computer digital skills in traditional industries, for example as office workers, cashiers, or inventory managers, or in NGOs. For example, Houssam el-Ali, a Syrian participant in Bekaa, described his employment trajectory as follows: “When I arrived to Lebanon, I worked in everything, from carpenter to driver to guard (...) Thanks to the programme, now I am working on outreach for two NGOs.” Another participant in Aley, Balkis, who was working as a salesperson in a shop when she joined DST was able to secure work as a secretary in a Real Estate company utilizing Excel skills gained in her first cycle of DST.

Microwork

A smaller number of participants are known to have successfully engaged in online microwork and image annotation for limited periods. The vast majority were participants who engaged in virtual microwork internships commissioned and managed by WFPs Innovation Accelerator in 2017. This included image annotation for private companies and in-house projects for WFP, like non-sensitive data cleaning and contributing to the successful WFP application Dalili.⁷⁴ Graduates of Basic Digital Skills could join microwork projects in the training centres with the support of an instructor. Payments were made by WFP through the same e-card mechanism as the training stipends. Although these microwork internships provide some indications of how to facilitate online work for refugees, they were not continued for reasons to be discussed in the next section.

73 Walbiner, Carsten. ““HOPES-LEB: Needs and Priorities.” Lecture, HOPES-LEB, Beirut, Lebanon, July 2, 2020.

74 The Dalili app was designed to help Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese families receiving WFP food assistance via electronic cards, by scanning shops for best offers. More at WFP: <https://www.wfp.org/news/new-wfp-app-empowers-shoppers-and-helps-them-get-more-their-money>.

The wider challenges

Despite the benefits to participants described in the previous section, DST has faced significant challenges in linking large numbers of participants directly to employment. This is not anomalous, as the vast majority of refugee-focused livelihoods projects since the 1920s have failed to enable “large-scale self-reliance of refugees” due to primarily structural barriers including “reduced opportunities for legal pathways to work, [and] poor host economies.”⁷⁵ The promise of sustainable online work has remained elusive. The complex (un)realities of linking refugee young adults in restrictive host country contexts to decent work through online labor platforms is laden with risks and contradictions,⁷⁶ as “few initiatives effectively connect the private sector and displaced people en masse due to the time and resources needed to gain employer trust, the ‘bottom line’ of profit and the corresponding skills threshold.”⁷⁷ This assessment aligns with the DST experience, in addition to interrelated challenges particular to the Lebanese context.

A restrictive legal context

Lebanon is not a signatory to international refugee conventions and Syrians in Lebanon are legally limited to working in agriculture, construction, and environment, which includes cleaning services.⁷⁸ In practice, the vast majority of Syrians in Lebanon live and work on the margins without legally recognized residency or employment due to mutually reinforcing policies and economic conditions.⁷⁹ Online work for displaced people has been advocated as a way to overcome “local work restrictions and enable people to bypass informal work barriers like xenophobia.”⁸⁰ This hope was a driver in the establishment of DST in Lebanon, particularly because online work for companies outside of Lebanon is not explicitly legally forbidden.⁸¹ Efforts made by WFP to seek governmental endorsement of online work for displaced Syrians in Lebanon in the context of developing a new industry for Lebanese and refugee employment were not successful. WFP and AUB could not institutionally operate in a legal grey area, so DST focused on providing training and information about digital work without employment-related follow up for Syrian participants. Unfortunately, in 2019 government authorities expressed concerns to WFP about providing vocational digital skills trainings to Syrians with the ensuing negotiations resulting in the programme being restricted to Lebanese participants in 2020.

75 Evan Easton-Calabria and Naohiko Omata, “Panacea for the Refugee Crisis? Rethinking the Promotion of ‘self-Reliance’ for Refugees” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 8 (2018): 1459, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1458301>.

76 Andreas Hackl (ed.), “Refugee Work in the Digital Economy Challenges and Opportunities A Workshop Report” (Edinburgh, 2019), https://refugeework.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Workshop-report_Refugee-work-in-the-digital-economy_edited-1.pdf.

77 Evan Easton-Calabria, “The Migrant Union: Digital Livelihoods for People on the Move,” 2019, <https://www.catalyst.undp.org/content/catalyst/en/home/what-we-do/migrant-nations-initiative/>.

78 Karim Makdasi *et al.*, “MENARA Working Papers: Exploring Refugee Movements in The Middle East Regional Context: Responses to the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon and Turkey,” 2018; Bayram, “A World of Limited Possibilities Refugee Youth and Job Opportunities Within the Lebanese Law and Market.”

79 UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF, “VASyR 2019 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon” (Beirut, 2019), <http://ilebanon.unhcr.org/vasyr/>; Salem Ajluni and Mary Kawar, *Towards Decent Work in Lebanon: Issues and Challenges in Light of the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, 2015, www.ilo.org/publns.

80 Easton-Calabria, “The Migrant Union: Digital Livelihoods for People on the Move,” 23.

81 Bayram, “A World of Limited Possibilities Refugee Youth and Job Opportunities Within the Lebanese Law and Market.”

Economic and market factors

The MENA region has had the highest youth unemployment rates globally for the last 25 years, and “the inability of MENA economies to create enough decent employment opportunities is arguably the most important factor behind the high rates of youth unemployment and joblessness in the region.”⁸² Upskilling initiatives alone, even those that focus on digital skills for the future of work, cannot overcome these harsh economic realities, which the DST team sees as the main factor influencing low employment rates for programme graduates, alongside restrictions on access to work for refugees.

Microwork’s race to the bottom

Although microwork skills can be attained by people with limited formal education in short periods of time, unsupported entrants to the microwork digital marketplace face steep competition. More than 80% of digital platform workers hold at least a high school diploma and 20% hold post graduate degrees, amidst a precarity of gig-work and a global race-to-the-bottom in terms of wages.⁸³ In focus groups conducted by WFP, DST graduates that attempted to access microwork platforms reported negative experiences for a variety of reasons and discouraged their peers from microwork. In the last year of the programme, there was an attempt to organize another supported virtual microwork internship programme with an outsourcing company, but after the company revealed it planned to pay students less than US\$2 per hour, the DST team pulled out because they did not consider this a sufficient wage for students in Lebanon. Without sustainable partnerships with companies willing to provide decent wages and protections for microwork, DST cannot unlock the potential that microwork may hold for refugees and disadvantaged host community participants.

Lacking competitive skills:

“You are telling me a story but not the end of it”

Highly skilled digital work that is more often associated with better wages– such as web design or data science – is still out of reach for most DST graduates. Dr. Wassim El-Hajj, who led the programme’s curriculum development, pointed to the unrealistic expectation for DST graduates to compete with university graduates seeking employment, stating: “even after their third course, they are not computer scientists yet.”⁸⁴ One student concurred: “You are telling me a story but not the end of it. When we were faced with the labour market we saw how much we were lacking.”⁸⁵

82 Nader Kabbani, “Youth Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Revisiting and Reframing the Challenge,” Brookings Doha Center Publications (Doha and Washington, D.C., 2019), 4, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/youth-employment-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-revisiting-and-reframing-the-challenge/>.

83 Janine Berg *et al.*, (Geneva: International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018), https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_645337/lang-en/index.htm.

84 Hackl, “Situational Analysis: Digital Skills Training and Livelihoods for Marginalized Youth in Lebanon,” 57 Unpublished Manuscript.

85 Hackl, 60 Unpublished Manuscript.

Limited ICT infrastructure and access

Access to a computer and internet is a minimum requirement to engage in digital work or online learning – an ongoing challenge faced by most DST graduates, who do not have computers and whose internet access is limited. The need to provide individual computers has been a common suggestion for programme improvement from DST participants. Lebanon lacks public facilities that offer free computer and internet access, and internet access is notoriously expensive and inconsistent.

Financial regulations and telecommunications

Additional limitations were faced due to financial regulations and telecommunications, whether at the national level or through policies adopted by other governments or multi-national corporations. Payment mechanisms represent a major challenge. One of the main mechanisms for payment from digital labor platforms is Paypal, which does not operate in Lebanon. **Syrians face barriers in opening bank accounts in Lebanon and anyone who does have a bank account in the country may face unwillingness of international banks to transfer funds to Lebanon, on top of internally imposed capital controls as a result of the country's financial crisis.** A number of microwork platforms block all IPs in Lebanon, partly due to US and international sanctions against financial dealings with Syria and individuals or groups deemed to be involved in terrorism or drug trafficking. When DST did manage to plan a collaboration with a major microwork platform willing to transfer payments to Lebanese bank accounts, and whitelisted all IPs used by DST computers, another major issue arose with the way in which IP addresses are administered by the state in Lebanon. Despite interventions by expert computer scientists and contacts within the state telecommunications agency, and flexibility on the part of the microwork platform company, no solution to this issue could be found.

Conclusions

Tech skills training for digital work is now widely advocated as a pathway to enable refugee self-reliance in settings of protracted crisis.⁸⁶ The experiences over three years of the DST programme speaks to a fundamental need to reconsider expectations predicated primarily on “techno-optimism” and donors’ needs for “cost-effective exit strategies from long-term refugee populations.”⁸⁷ **High-quality digital skills trainings conducted with a holistic, student-centered approach in the type of learning environment created in DST build the human and social capital of refugees and represent a long-term investment in human and communal potential and dignity. But without addressing systemic barriers refugees in Lebanon face in accessing and getting paid for digital work, even the best training programmes risk building bridges to nowhere.** Legal restrictions on employment, limited access to computers and internet, and barriers to financial inclusion in banking or online payment mechanisms such as PayPal are major hurdles faced by refugees seeking digital work in the Lebanese context. Furthermore, even if these obstacles are overcome, the work opportunities offered on digital labour platforms that are within reach of trained refugees offer the least in compensation, labor protections, and job security.

Yet, with refugees and disadvantaged host community members living in societies where employment increasingly demands digital skills, a wide range of funders, program designers, and tech companies have an obligation to do what they can to overcome these challenges. For digital skills trainings, this can mean developing robust mechanisms for career guidance and ongoing support in the transition to decent employment for graduates, developing relationships with employers through internship and job placements, and developing advocacy strategies to address structural barriers at individual and societal levels. These improvements necessitate more collaboration among the actors who are working to increase opportunities for digital livelihoods with a focus on refugees and displaced people in Lebanon and internationally, including refugees themselves.

86 No Lost Generation, “NLG Tech Summit Learn to Earn Overview,” 2019, <https://nlgedtech.com/overview-3>.

87 Easton-Calabria and Omata, “Panacea for the Refugee Crisis? Rethinking the Promotion of ‘self-Reliance’ for Refugees.”

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► A fast lane to decent work? From digital skills to digital “integration” in Germany

Philip Rushworth and Andreas Hackl

The tech sector was an important part of the response in Germany to the arrival of around 1.3 million refugees in 2015 and 2016. Among the most enduring aspects of this initial period of energy and creativity have been digital skills training initiatives to equip refugees for jobs in the IT sector, such as the ReDI School of Digital Integration, a social enterprise founded in Berlin in February 2016 to teach refugees how to code.

For years, initiatives in Germany have recognised the potential of bringing together refugees and migrants with the jobs available in the IT sector, reportedly 124,000 vacant positions in November 2019.⁸⁸ While high-tech hubs in the Global North have long relied on contracting labour from the Global South,⁸⁹ the recent development of initiatives to train refugees and migrants for work in the IT sector demands critical investigation. We will introduce the opportunities and pitfalls of digital skills training as a pathway for migrants and refugees to “integrate” in Germany, a contested term with multiple definitions,⁹⁰ but one we use here in the narrow sense of integration into the labour market. The tech sector in Germany is a source of high expectations and offers considerable opportunities, especially for well-educated migrants and refugees, but it remains for many an exclusive space. Making the first step, finding a traineeship or junior role, is about much more than learning to code; even getting a first job is not a guarantee of decent work, as graduates confront a similar tension to what has been noted among Indian IT workers in Berlin, in which a powerful “vision of success” through the promise of social mobility for anyone in the tech sector is rarely matched by their individual experience.⁹¹

This section is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Berlin over the course of two research visits in 2019 and 2020 in Berlin. A more extensive discussion of the research results can be found in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.⁹² The city has become a leading hub for tech initiatives for migrants and refugees in Germany and globally. In 2016, 54 out of 106 projects for refugees with an IT focus in Germany began in Berlin,⁹³ which is seen as a tech-driven start-up capital of Europe.⁹⁴ The researchers conducted interviews with 42 students, staff and experts in the field both in person and remotely after the COVID-19 “lockdown” in Germany in mid-March 2020. Alongside interviews, we conducted participant observation at ReDI School, including attending coding classes and career workshops. We also collaborated with the ReDI School in a short alumni survey that was distributed in July 2020, which received 101 responses.

88 Bastian Pauly & Judith Steinbrecher, “Erstmals mehr als 100.000 unbesetzte Stellen für IT-Experten,” Bitkom, November 28, 2019, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.bitkom.org/Presse/Presseinformation/Erstmals-mehr-als-100000-unbesetzte-Stellen-fuer-IT-Experten>.

89 Biao Xiang, *Global, Body Shopping: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

90 Evan Easton-Calabria & Jennifer Wood, “Bridging, Bonding, and Linking? Syrian Refugee-led Organisations and Integration in Berlin,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2020): 1-19.

91 Sareeta Amrute, *Encoding Race, Encoding Class: Indian IT Workers in Berlin* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

92 Philip Rushworth and Andreas Hackl. “Writing Code, Decoding Culture: Digital Skills and the Promise of a Fast Lane to Decent Work among Refugees and Migrants in Berlin.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1893159>.

93 Ben Mason, Lavinia Schwedersky, and Akram Alfawakheeri, *Digital Routes to Integration-How Civic Tech Innovations are Supporting Refugees in Germany* (Betterplace Lab 2017). <https://www.betterplace-lab.org/en/digitale-wege-zur-integration>.

94 Suzanne Bearne, “Berlin’s Startup Scene is Knuckling Down to Business,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2015, accessed on May 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2015/oct/22/berlins-startup-scene-is-knuckling-down-to-business>.

The focus here is on both refugees and migrants, commonly referred to as “newcomers” in the digital skills training sector in Berlin. This reflects the fact that while many coding schools started with programmes aimed at refugees, they have broadened their intake and no longer differentiate between the two. Using the term “newcomers” allows us to focus on the shared experiences of predominantly highly-educated, middle-class migrants and refugees, while remaining attentive to the implications of different legal statuses and diverse experiences of migration. The vast majority of surveyed students at the ReDI School came from Syria, followed by Palestine, Egypt, Afghanistan and Brazil, among other countries.

The promise of learning to code for “newcomers”

Given the high numbers of people who come to coding schools with high educational qualifications, it is ironic that one of the often-repeated advantages of finding work in tech for migrants and refugees in Berlin is that it is a profession that does not care much about “fancy degrees”, to quote one HR expert we interviewed. Among students at ReDI School during spring semester in 2019, for example, 32% of their intake were university students at the time, and many others had already graduated with a bachelor or master’s degree. What coding promises, however, is a “fast lane” to decent work opportunities for those unable to pursue their previous careers.

For many migrants and refugees, this is highly appealing. Salim⁹⁵, for example, came to Germany from Syria determined to use his degree in law but after struggling to find anything other than a six-month administrative role at a law firm, while finding the journey to practising law in Germany too daunting with its requirements for professional accreditation and further training, he decided to look into coding, a career that promised high pay and respectability in a short time. The unique dimension of the IT sector to absorb newcomers who are willing to learn quickly is reflected in the Skilled Immigration Act introduced on 1 March 2020 in Germany, in which IT specialists are not necessarily required to show evidence of formal qualifications.⁹⁶

One of the main issues for migrants and refugees is the difficulty of finding work without being fluent in German and the IT sector’s many opportunities to work in English are thus key to its appeal. This is what Farid Bidarel, founder of the online digital skills teaching initiative, CodeDoor, identified as the main advantage of a career in tech:

“For a migrant from Syria who used to be a teacher, there is no way that you can be a teacher here unless your German is perfect. This is just the way it is here. The same with doctors. Software developers, you can; it’s an amazing potential.”

Students often framed this as a choice between learning to code or the long process of learning German while re-training, because their qualifications are not recognised. Joining classes at coding schools was therefore closely bound-up with the barriers they experienced in other skilled sectors of the economy in Germany.

⁹⁵ We use pseudonyms for all coding school students and graduates in the article.

⁹⁶ “Moving to Germany as a Skilled Worker,” Federal Foreign Office, December 29, 2020. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/skilled-worker-immigration/2304796?openAccordionId=item-2304812-7-panel>.

At the same time, coding schools offered an opportunity to prepare for admittance to an apprenticeship scheme (*Ausbildung*) for software developers. Migrants and refugees have faced particular challenges in accessing apprenticeships in Germany's well-protected labour market.⁹⁷ This well-protected skilled labour market is defined by a dual education system, which combines apprenticeships in companies with vocational training in professional schools. Allowing immigration by competing professionals from elsewhere has long been actively resisted to protect the national labour force and the value of qualifications. The new Skilled Immigration Act, effective since March 2020, now aims to attract highly skilled migrants and those with tertiary education. Some prospective skilled migrants who can show that they underwent professional training abroad that is equivalent to a German degree, such as those acquired in the dual education system, can now qualify even without higher education.⁹⁸ Migrants with significant work experience in the IT sector can qualify as skilled and obtain residency without a degree because IT specialists are particularly sought-after. However, refugees and migrants who would be eligible for a skilled workers visa but are already in the country cannot apply.⁹⁹ Coding schools therefore play a crucial role in reskilling migrants and refugees outside of such skilled immigration schemes. While many of their students hoped to avoid the barriers to accessing the German-speaking vocational training and job market, some saw the schools as a stepping-stone towards pursuing an apprenticeship with the promise of an income from day one, a recognised qualification, and work experience.

Regardless of their background or aims for the future, students in coding schools were often attracted by the simple appeal, as the sector articulated it, that anyone can become a coder and earn a decent salary as long as they have the desire and commitment to learn. This low barrier to entry was emphasised by Aimee Nortje from the language-learning company Babbel. Key to the success of candidates in job interviews is a display of what Aimee termed a "learning culture". Employers in "tech" look for people with an appetite to learn and an ability to deal with unfamiliar challenges.

This inspired hope among migrants and refugees: the prospect of decent work in a career where success is defined by an ethic of hard work and a desire to learn, and not who you know or where you studied. Especially the experience of forced displacement and migration was seen by some to make them uniquely well-suited to excel in digital skills training and the IT sector. Hanan came to Germany in 2018 from Syria hoping to find a job in the insurance industry where she had worked for some years in her hometown, and she felt that her experience as a Syrian prepared her well for the IT sector: "Syrians are used to transformations", she explained. "If someone says this is very complicated and you will need two months to complete it, I will get it done in one month." In other interviews, students emphasised the need to "love what you do" as the source of success. Wael, who is from Syria and was one of the first students to join the programme at ReDI School in 2016, explained that what sets those who succeed apart from others is "passion". When asked if he thought anyone could become a coder, he responded: "Not really, if you don't really like it [...] A lot of people should have the chance to get to know the field, only the ones who love it should stay in this field."

It is clear that for many migrants and refugees, learning to code holds the promise of well-paid work in a sector of the economy that is set to grow in the future. With the right attitude and commitment, it was often said, anyone could help to fill the many vacancies in the sector. But to what extent does this promise translate into realistic opportunities for all?

97 OECD, "Migration Snapshot of the City of Berlin," in *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees in Berlin* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), 28.

98 Daniel Thym, "The German Migration Package: A New Deal on Labour Migration?," *EU Migration Law Blog*, October 1, 2019. <http://eumigrationlawblog.eu/the-german-migration-package-a-new-deal-on-labour-migration/>

99 Gröll, Philipp. "Germany's Skilled Immigration Act: Who will benefit?" Euractiv, 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/germanys-skilled-immigration-act-who-will-benefit/>

Opportunities and obstacles in finding decent work

The high demands for entry-level jobs

“124,000 open IT jobs in Germany” flashed up on the screen at an evening workshop at the ReDI School titled, ‘Start Your Career in Tech’. This ought to have been welcome news to the approximately thirty students. Yet in spite of the charisma of the presenter, Fabienne Schlangen, who works at a tech-specialist HR firm in Berlin, something was amiss. The class started to dissipate before the end of the presentation and the trickle became a flow during the Q&A.

The response of the class was a revealing indication of the gap between the promise of abundant jobs in the IT sector, and students’ actual experience of looking for work. This tension was put forward by one articulate attendee who complained that the list of requirements on job adverts for junior roles includes “CSS, JavaScript, UX design...”, and “you look at the list and you just have one line!” **Many students saw a wide gulf between their beginner skillsets and the expectations and demands of employers hiring coders for junior positions.**

Matching the steep requirements of job adverts was only the first step. Laith, who is from Syria and in his early thirties, was stuck in a job at a company that provides assistance with IT problems. At a meeting in Berlin he described the challenge of becoming a software developer when asked if he thought anyone could become a coder. He said that it “takes a particular way of thinking” and a “particular intelligence”, and he was sceptical about the promises of bootcamps and coding schools. To prove his point, he took a piece of paper and drew out a complex “coding challenge” he had spent the last week working on. “Doing coding challenges is a difficult skill”, he cautioned. Many candidates failed to succeed in the competitive hiring processes.

A survey ReDI conducted in collaboration with the authors in July 2020 showed that refugee alumni had lower full-time employment rates than migrants with other legal statuses, while more time passed since graduation among students meant higher chances of employment. Overall, 40% of 101 alumni respondents stated they were working full-time and 8% part-time, while 20% were not working (5% did an internship, and others were freelancers, entrepreneurs, or students). This data included alumni who graduated from ReDI courses between 2016 and 2019. Among those 37 respondents who finished their last course in 2019, the share of those who didn’t work rose to 18 percent, while the share of those who worked full-time fell to 35% (another 8% worked part time). Among the 51 respondents with refugee status, the share of those working full-time was only 29% while 25% were unemployed (another 6% worked part-time and 8% did internships). A closer look at graduates’ jobs shows that while the majority of the employed worked in digital fields such as software engineering or network administration, some also worked in unrelated fields, as ‘social worker’, ‘shop assistant’, or ‘delivery driver’.

The diversity deficit in the tech sector

Even with the experience and skills offered by a degree in computer science, the process of finding a job can be difficult. Aarif, a volunteer teacher at ReDI School, came to Germany from Syria in 2013 to do a master’s degree in computer science and afterwards applied to jobs online. “I applied to 348 jobs”, without success, he said matter-of-factly. He had been accepted as a junior developer at Microsoft, an impressive accomplishment that he took as vindication of his skills. “Online applications never work” for non-Germans, he explained. Many of the replies he received would be addressed “Frau” (Miss/Mrs), despite the fact that he included a picture of himself on his CV, indicating for him that companies had not even looked at his application:

“They post the job ad and then they receive applications, they receive thousands. Whenever they see small problems, they just throw it away. This guy is a foreigner and they are difficult, that’s one less application.”

Such concerns about discrimination were commonplace. A question for Fabienne at the career workshop from a young black student asked if it was really necessary to include a photo of herself on a CV, because of fears that it would lead to discrimination.

This challenges perceptions about the tech sector in Germany as being open-minded and cosmopolitan, where the kinds of constraints and discrimination that might be experienced in other sectors of the economy mattered less. A similar perception was widespread among the city’s start-ups, whose progressive reputation could mask their failure to include under-represented groups. As Nakeema Stefflbauer, founder of FrauenLoop, a social enterprise in Berlin that seeks to facilitate women’s entry into the IT sector, explained:

“These companies are doing terribly on diversity. They still think diversity is one white woman [...] the fact that there are no Turks in any of these companies, when how many Turks are there in Berlin? No one is asking that question.”

Some indications of this “diversity problem” become evident in data from a 2018 report on London, which revealed that a mere 8.5% of senior executives in technology companies are from a minority background.¹⁰⁰

The sector’s problem with diversity is reflected in the culture of networking events that are key to finding jobs in the tech sector, such as “Meetups”, consisting of late-evening pizza and beer evenings. Although anyone can join these meetings, Meetups are not accessible to everyone in the same way. Figures from 2018 indicate that only 22% of participants of tech-related Meetup events in Europe were women.¹⁰¹ Nakeema Stefflbauer described how these events often did not appeal to women, and especially women from diverse backgrounds. She contrasted the Meetup scene in Berlin with London, where she cited the example of “liqueur-less” gatherings as being more inclusive, something she described as “unthinkable” in Berlin.

Getting a foot in the door of companies through an internship or traineeship brings its own challenges. A number of interviewees described how they agreed to low paid work on the assumption that it would lead to better opportunities in the future, but were left disappointed when this never materialised. Wael, who we introduced above, felt strongly that he was “used” by the small marketing agency where he worked as an unpaid intern for seven months, despite being a fully integrated member of the team. Even when he became a paid junior staff member, he was paid less than other colleagues on the same level. Others described how they felt let down when the promise of a traineeship or junior role after an unpaid internship did not materialise, despite working long hours.

100 “Inclusive Tech Alliance,” *Inclusive Boards*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.inclusiveboards.co.uk/tech-report-launch>.

101 “The State of European Tech 2018.” *The State of European Tech*, 2018. <https://2018.stateofeuropeantech.com/chapter/diversity-inclusion/article/weve-got-problem/>.

Although these experiences spread uncertainty among aspiring coders, their hope was sustained by regular accounts of individuals entering well-known, Berlin-based companies such as Zalando or Delivery Hero. Paul, who is in his early thirties and from Nigeria, was battling the odds applying for a role as a junior software developer with only intermediate-level knowledge of Python programming. He explained that his decision to apply was inspired by his friend, Leo, who is also from Nigeria and got a job in the IT sector after a single course at ReDI School. “Now I can believe much more that I’m in the right place and I have hope”, Paul explained. A few months later Paul told us that he had found work as a data analyst for a media company outside of Berlin. Despite the difficulties of entering the tech sector, examples such as Leo raise the spectre of opportunities for newcomers to find decent work quickly.

Conclusion: From digital skills to decent work?

Finding a role in the IT sector offers opportunities that are not available elsewhere in Berlin, especially for well-educated, English-speaking migrants and refugees. In contrast to the challenge of learning German and navigating often complex and inflexible procedures of certification to enter other sectors of the knowledge economy, the promise of commitment and study as the pathway to respectable and well-remunerated work is appealing. Yet this optimism for the integrative potential of the tech sector is often subdued by a more sobering reality. The promise of thousands of jobs waiting to be filled in Berlin did not ease fears of discrimination among refugee and migrant “newcomers”, nor did it erase the extended periods of exploitative, low-paid work that are characteristic of “aspirational labour” in the digital economy.¹⁰² For those who do succeed eventually, entering “tech” not only involves significant risks, detours, and unpaid or underpaid labour, but also requires a process of socio-cultural adaptation to the tech “working culture”. Employers and coding schools often express this in the name of “soft skills”: working hard, learning fast, and trying to blend into the tech scene. Nonetheless, the shortfalls of the tech industry and barriers to entry seem, on the whole, lower than in other skilled sectors. Learning to code for many refugees and migrants in Germany offers cautious optimism for well-paid decent work in the future.

What stands in the way of digital skills being turned into decent work and careers for graduates?

Among the main obstacles we identified are discrimination and an often challenging application process. Discrimination sometimes happens indirectly, though excluding candidates with no “local” work experience, for example. Another barrier is the knowledge of and capacity to network in the tech community. This relates to tech culture’s embeddedness in young, white, male culture, as reflected in “pizza and beer” tech-related Meetups. For “newcomer” coding school graduates this is only one example of the need to develop the right “soft skills”.

Many migrants and refugees also had limited expertise in advanced digital skills: the aspiration to become a coder after a short course does not hold true for most people. Achieving this goal entails considerable commitment over a long period. The intensity and commitment needed to succeed can be difficult to sustain for those who must also earn a livelihood next to their studies, only to end up in un- or underpaid internships and low-paid work without immediate career progression. Attractive junior positions in the tech sector are also very competitive and even highly talented and promising coders, including volunteer teachers at the ReDI School, faced challenges accessing trainee programmes.

102 Duffy, Brooke Erin. “The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (February 25, 2015): 441–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877915572186>.

What is specific about the experience of refugee and migrant “newcomers” with digital skills and digital careers?

Unfamiliarity with established workplace norms disadvantages some migrants and refugees that are new to the sector, including a lack of knowledge about the application process, CV writing, and using web platforms like LinkedIn effectively. Almost by definition of their recent arrivals, refugees and migrants come to the IT sector without a network or useful contacts. Another disadvantage is that many of their pre-existing qualifications and work experience from unfamiliar institutions are not recognized or accredited. This, in turn, pressures them to fill the perceived gap with extraordinary efforts and hard work, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

Recommendations

Among the concrete recommendations we propose is the need to promote opportunities for people to get work experience and do internships as early in the digital learning process as possible. Moreover, career-oriented training should be better embedded in skills training, to ensure that graduates come out with decent, employable skills and knowledge of what to expect in the process of applying for jobs. Lastly, there is a need to engage in awareness-raising in firms and HR departments about the exclusionary practices that directly or indirectly affect minorities, including refugees and migrants and women from diverse backgrounds. A stronger focus needs to be put on widening-participation activities and promoting culturally sensitive opportunities to network that are inclusive of all.

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Part 2

Digital livelihoods and digital access in refugee camps

► Digital access among refugees in East Africa: Implications for digital livelihoods provision

Hervé Nicolle and Jared Owuor

Abdullahi was born in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, 17 years ago. He is as frustrated as he is ambitious and determined:

“Give us the same tools. Give us the tools we need to succeed. And then get out of our way and come back in six months. We are ten times more eager to learn and change our lives than anyone else. But how can you become a professional coder without decent internet access.”

The reality of digital barriers and opportunities in refugee settlements and camps in Sub-Saharan Africa needs to be recognised to work towards a more inclusive and enabling framework. Digital services, especially those accessible on smartphones, have become essential in the daily lives and journeys of refugees worldwide. However, there are significant differences in the access to mobile internet and smartphones depending on locations and socioeconomic and societal status, as refugees are not a homogenous group which is waiting to tap into the labour opportunities of the gig economy.¹⁰³

Despite the increasing flows of intraregional refugee movements in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Eastern Africa,¹⁰⁴ research on displaced persons’ use of smartphones and the internet focuses mostly on migration journeys to Europe,¹⁰⁵ with little information about refugees travelling to, from and within East Africa. Similarly, mobile solutions for refugees are developed mostly in the global North and contextualised to communities there which not only points to a digital divide between refugees hosted

103 UNHCR, “Connecting Refugees: How Internet and Mobile Connectivity Can Improve Refugee Well-Being and Transform Humanitarian Action” (Geneva, 2016).

104 Loren B. Landau *et al.*, “Free and Safe Movement in East Africa Research to Promote People’s Safe and Unencumbered Movement across International Borders” (New York; Cape Town: University of the Witwatersrand; Open Society Foundations; Samuel Hall, 2018).

105 Amanda Alencar, Katerina Kondova, and Wannex Ribbens, “The Smartphone as a Lifeline: An Exploration of Refugees’ Use of Mobile Communication Technologies during Their Flight,” *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 6 (September 2019): 828–44.

in Sub-Saharan Africa and those living in the North, but also a knowledge gap in understanding how mobile technology can support refugee livelihoods in other locations.¹⁰⁶

Such under-researched locations include Kenya and Uganda which have been playing an important role in hosting refugees from neighbouring countries across the region for decades. Looking at digital access in East Africa, limited mobile connectivity, lack of access to smartphones and low levels of technical literacy have all been cited as factors that restrict the use of mobile internet-based services¹⁰⁷. However, researchers and policymakers have provided limited data to determine the extent to which these factors influence access to smartphones and mobile internet once refugees reach settlements, and if other factors such as age, gender, income and/or education, which are often key indicators of digital access, also play an influential role.

To fill this knowledge gap, Samuel Hall conducted a study in two refugee settlements in Kenya and Uganda in 2017¹⁰⁸ which represented the first attempt to understand the use of mobile technology and the internet within refugee populations in the region. **The data showed that age, gender and education influence digital access barriers in both locations with the male, younger, and educated refugees being most likely to access smartphones and mobile internet. The most significant barriers have proven to be structural inefficiencies of poor digital literacy, limited awareness on digital opportunities, poor connectivity and electricity as well as the high costs of mobile data and devices.** These results were also confirmed by follow up interviews undertaken by Samuel Hall in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya in 2020 which will be discussed in the conclusion section.

Data collection

The study examined the barriers to accessing the internet as well as the levels of mobile phone access and ownership, and how age, gender, education and income influence those. Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya and Nakivale refugee settlement in South Western Uganda were selected as both host a diverse range of nationalities from across the region, namely South Sudan, Somalia, Congo, Burundi and Rwanda. Primary data collection included a quantitative survey, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews and case studies. Refugees were purposefully selected based on nationality, age, gender and population distribution. The quantitative data included 696 surveys in Kakuma and 669 in Nakivale (1365 in total), with a larger percentage of respondents aged between 25 to 44 which reflects a relatively young population of refugees in both areas. The proportion of men and women interviewed reflects the relative gender balance that exists in the surveyed locations. A total of 10 FGDs with six participants, each representing the nationality, gender and age distribution in the locations were conducted.

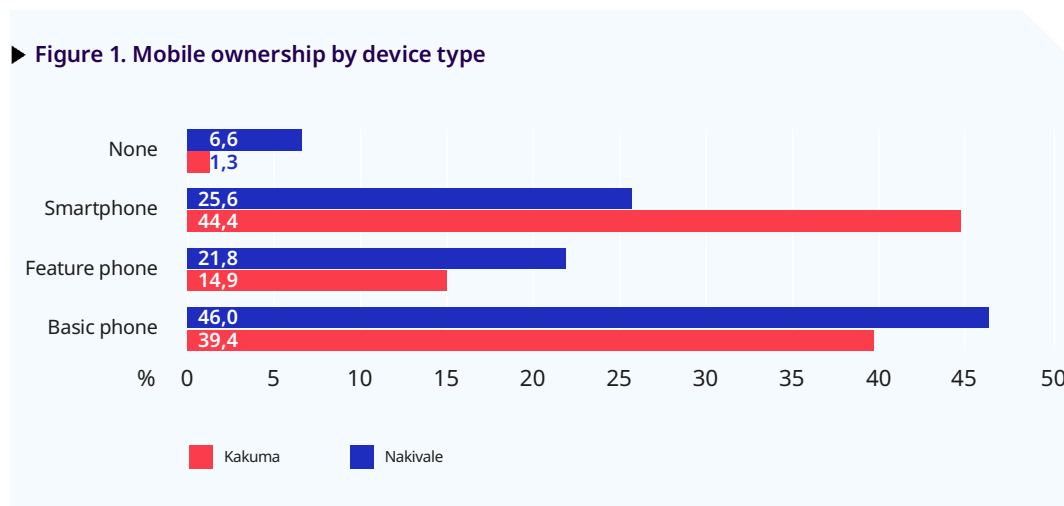
106 GSMA, "The Importance of Mobile for Refugees: A Landscape of New Services and Approaches" (London: GSMA Disaster Response, 2017).

107 Bram Frouws *et al.*, "Getting to Europe the Whatsapp Way: The Use of ICT in Contemporary Mixed Migration Flows to Europe," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2016. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2862592.

108 Samuel Hall, "Innovating Mobile Solutions for Refugees in East Africa: Opportunities and Barrier to Using Mobile Technology and the Internet in Kakuma Refugee Camp and Nakivale Refugee Settlement," 2018. https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Innovating_mobile_solutions_Report.pdf

Study Results

The evidence proved that basic access to mobile internet, a prerequisite for most digital refugee livelihoods, is limited due to technical barriers and the high costs associated with mobile data and smartphones. The responses pointed to a high penetration of mobile device ownership, but there are variations in terms of the type of device as Figure 1 shows.



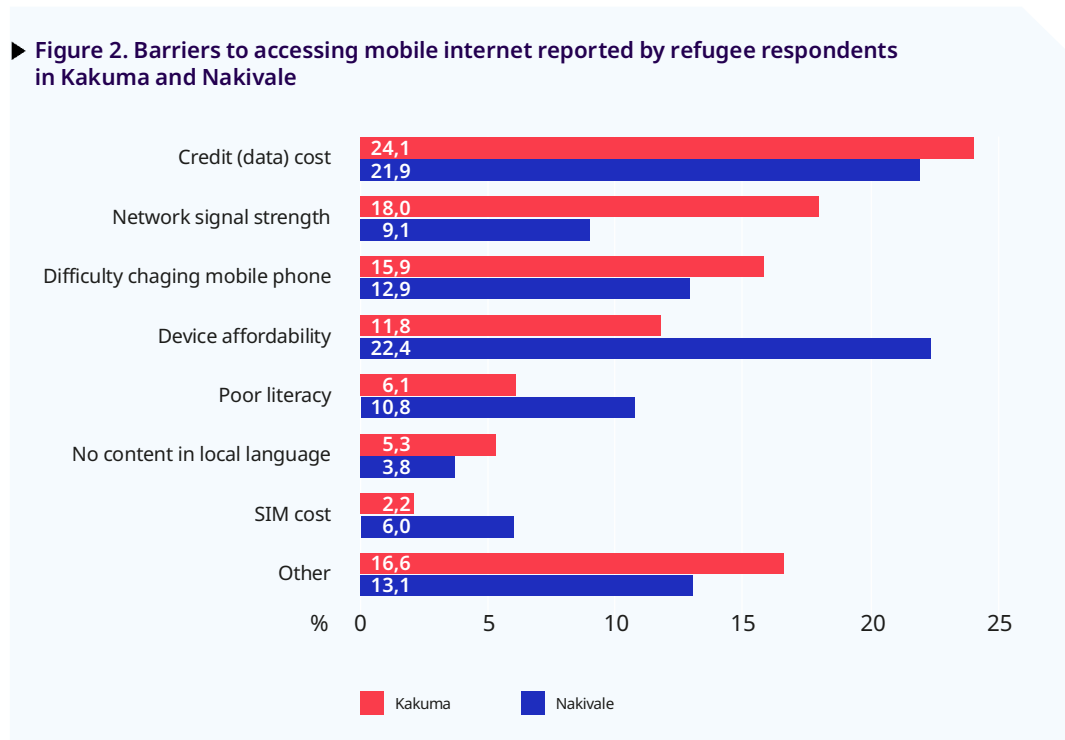
The data revealed significant differences in the smartphone ownership between Kakuma and Nakivale, which might be related to decreased demand and/or income to purchase devices in the latter. This is relevant, as only a smartphone is adequate to access 3G internet connection and applications required for digital livelihoods on a mobile device. During our study, the median monthly income for refugees in Kakuma was equivalent to USD 50,¹⁰⁹ and the average was around USD 42 in Nakivale.¹¹⁰ To test the assumption that a higher income is equivalent to the type of mobile device ownership, the study assessed the daily income of respondents and the way the phone was attained. The majority of refugees in Kakuma (59,9%) and in Nakivale (56,4%) purchased their mobile phone device, but a significant number in Nakivale (42%) and in Kakuma (37,6%) had it given to them. In Kakuma, 41% of respondents who purchased a smartphone earn less than 1 USD per day with the majority (60%) of smartphone owners spending over USD 80 on the device. In Nakivale, only 18% of the comparative income group purchased a smartphone, while the majority (60%) of smartphone owners spent between USD 25 to 60 on the device. Data from both settlements proved a correlation between a higher income and smartphone ownership as 57% of those earning between USD 1 and 5 in Kakuma purchased a smartphone compared to 33% in Nakivale. However, results showed that income does not have a direct influence on smartphone ownership, instead they prove the importance of smartphones for refugees and the financial commitments they are willing to take for mobile internet access.

Even when refugees are in a position to own a smartphone, limited financial resources and inadequate phone signal coverage in the Kakuma camp and Nakivale settlement are hindering access to mobile internet. Refugees in both surveyed locations relied mostly on 3G connection to access the internet

109 Helen Guyatt, Flavia Della Rosa, and Jenny Spencer, "Refugees Vulnerability Study, Kakuma, Kenya" (UNHCR, Kimetrica, WFP), accessed 6 October 2020. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/refugee-household-vulnerability-study-kakuma-refugee-camps>.

110 World Bank Group, "An Assessment of Uganda's Progressive Approach to Refugee Management" (Washington: World Bank, 2016). <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/24736>

as WIFI was very limited. To better understand the barrier in accessing mobile internet, respondents identified the top three barriers they face (See Figure 2).



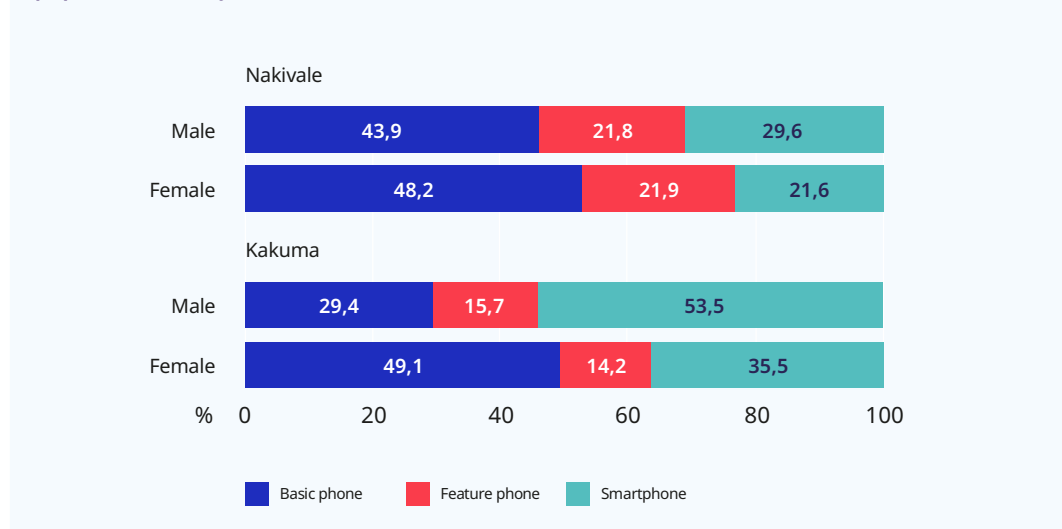
Financial constraints to acquire mobile data and a smartphone were the most significant challenges identified. The majority of refugees in Nakivale (78%) and Kakuma (82%) reported to spend up to USD 2.50 per week on accessing mobile internet through buying credit which represents a significant drain on personal resources with almost 3/4 of refugees stating no personal income, or earnings of less than USD 1 per day. The purchased data is mostly used for messaging services to maintain social networks outside the camp and settlement, as using applications or downloading photographs and videos takes a larger amount of data. One South Sudanese refugee working as a primary school teacher in Kakuma stated: “I spend around 200 Shillings a day buying mobile data, which is around half of my daily income. It’s not cheap, but it’s a life-line to the world outside”. Other barriers worth mentioning included E-mail access as a barrier and a lack of awareness of existing mobile-based services or agencies using mobile phones to deliver services.

Apart from the financial challenges in accessing mobile internet, the third most cited barrier is related to network signal strength. While the two surveyed locations are both located in isolated regions, there is a significant variation in the signal coverage reflecting the different geographic, urban and telecoms infrastructures. During the data collection in 2017, Kakuma had almost complete mobile phone signal coverage and 40% of it with 3G connectivity. In Nakivale, 3G access was found in the majority of signal covered areas, while 11% of the settlement had no cell phone coverage at all. To complement network data, which showed a scattered coverage in both locations, respondents were asked how they perceive the phone signal within their community and whether they need to walk to find a signal. In contrast to the structural differences in Kakuma and Nakivale, over three-quarters of the respondents in both locations assessed their signal to be either average or poor with over 20% needing to constantly or regularly walk

from their home to have a signal. The identified barriers prove that structural inefficiencies of weak phone signal and affordability of digital access are significantly hindering refugees from using mobile internet and consequently adopting digital refugee livelihoods.

When looking more closely at the data on the identified barriers, it shows how gender, age and educational background determine refugee's access to mobile internet and device ownership. There is almost complete gender parity in owning a mobile device, with 98,8% of women and 98,6% of men in Kakuma, and 91,7% and 95,3% in Nakivale respectively. However, men are more likely to own a smartphone in both locations (See Figure 3) which also aligns with a general gender discrepancy in smartphone ownership and mobile internet use in Sub-Saharan Africa¹¹¹.

► **Figure 3. Mobile device ownership amongst men and women as percentage of refugee population surveyed**



In contrast to the gender discrepancy in ownership, the average age of smartphone owners being 28 years in Kakuma and 30 in Nakivale is almost similar for both genders and shows a correlation between age and smartphone ownership. Apart from age and gender, education and literacy were strongly correlated with ownership and the usage of mobile applications. Respondents with a university degree were most likely to own a smartphone followed by secondary school graduates. However, even when women own a smartphone and have the skills to use it, the low phone signal coverage has a gendered dimension as a case study with a 22-year-old refugee living in Nakivale shows. The young woman stated that walking to higher grounds to get a better connection is "... very dangerous at night because as a woman anything can happen. I'm always afraid I might get assaulted". Overall, while limited network coverage and financial constraints are affecting every refugee in the two surveyed locations, young and educated men are most likely to access mobile internet.

111 Oliver Rowntree, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019" (GSMA Connected Women, 2019). <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-gender-gap-report-2019/>.

Conclusion

When taken as indicators for the barriers to digital access, these main findings have important implications for programming aimed at the adoption of digital livelihood provision in refugee camp and settlement settings. By overcoming those barriers, mobile phones could be used for a range of livelihoods improvements, from online marketplaces to financial services and skills development with online courses. **There are several opportunities for policymakers to improve digital access for refugees, by (1) using and teaching information and communications technology (ICT) to enhance education and vocational development; (2) incentivising mobile operators to lower the cost of access to mobile connectivity; and (3) investing more in enabling and inclusive infrastructure.** While the findings show a positive correlation between education and smartphone usage, access to education and in particular tertiary education is generally lacking for refugees in settlements and camps. Even though those locations have been refugees' home for decades, they are often seen as a space of temporality among policymakers which fuels the neglect of needed infrastructure investments such as schools and cell towers.¹¹² Actors trying to improve access to digital refugee livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa need to acknowledge the permanency of refugee camps and settlements in the region and contextualise their approaches to the specific challenges and opportunities in refugees' daily lives.

In June 2020, Innocent N. Tshilombo who set up Kakuma Ventures,¹¹³ a company providing affordable access to WIFI in the Kakuma refugee camp, confirmed these results: "I know developers who need to get access to digital tools to sell their products, but they do not have the required support. Most of these initiatives can only be accelerated if there is an infrastructure in place." This key informant interview was part of Samuel Hall's own assessment on "*Technology in disrupting existing inequalities among refugees in Kenya amidst COVID-19*" as a follow up to the study in 2017. Similar to our case study data, Innocent N. highlighted a lack of adequate education and awareness about digital livelihoods opportunities among the youth: "There are opportunities, but they are not many or known to the majority of those who should be benefiting."

Besides structural inefficiencies, the voices of respondents emphasise the need to look at societal barriers along gender, age, income, and/or educational background shaping digital access from an intersectional perspective. Instead of addressing every social category on its own, an intersectional approach¹¹⁴ analyses how societal hierarchies are intertwined and interact with each other. An intersectional lens in the context of refugee camps and settlements is also needed to take stock of the gendered risks experienced by women in those situations, including when searching for a phone signal outside their homes.^{115,116}

To conclude, the close correlation of findings between both locations suggests that key trends may apply to other refugee settings with similar characteristics, and that further research is needed to contextualise interventions and better understand the living realities of refugees and their digital aspirations to work towards an inclusive enabling framework. What is needed is a holistic approach that enables refugees to tap into digital opportunities by overcoming structural inefficiencies, and societal and socioeconomic barriers. Developing a contextualised inclusive enabling environment for refugees in East Africa and beyond is the first step to allow forcibly displaced persons to contribute to the gig economy and benefit from digital transformations shaping employment around the world.

112 Simon Turner, "What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2016): 139–48.

113 Visit the website for more information: <https://www.kakumaventures.com/>.

114 Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, 'Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (1 June 2013): 785–810.

115 Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, 'Intersectionality and Durable Solutions for Refugee Women in Africa', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 11, no. 3 (September 2016): 53–67.

116 Eileen Pittaway and Emma Pittaway, "Refugee Woman": A Dangerous Label: Opening a Discussion on the Role of Identity and Intersectional Oppression in the Failure of the International Refugee Protection Regime for Refugee Women', *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 1 (June 2004): 119–35.

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► From persecution to “prosperity”? Struggles, aspirations, and innovations among Rohingya refugees in digital entrepreneurship

Faheem Hussain

This case study focuses on the ongoing struggles, survival strategies, and frugal innovations initiated by Rohingya refugee entrepreneurs using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and relevant skillsets. One of the key insights from this research is about how the exclusion of refugees from digital access can sometimes give birth to unexpected spheres of informal work and entrepreneurship. At the same time, even though the digital workarounds and innovations bear the proofs of innovation and digital resilience, such “data work” and hardware services also highlight the very systematic exclusion they are circumventing.

All the first-hand accounts and field data presented in this case study were collected during field research missions between 2017 and 2019. We started collecting data in November 2017, a couple of months after the latest exodus of the Rohingya population took place from Myanmar, followed by several additional field trips until the middle of 2019. The research used in-depth ethnographic data collection, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and observations.

Who are the Rohingyas?

Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted populations in the world.¹¹⁷ They are an ethnic minority from Rakhine state, Myanmar. Rohingyas are predominantly Muslims and the majority (around 860,000)¹¹⁸ are living in Bangladesh as refugees, after having fled the atrocities committed by Myanmar’s army and local militias.¹¹⁹ Approximately 600,000 Rohingyas are living inside Myanmar as a stateless, internally displaced population (IDPs).¹²⁰ For decades, Rohingyas have been consistently discriminated by the army-led administrations in Myanmar with very limited access to education, health, and other basic citizen rights. A systematic campaign of dehumanization eventually resulted in violent ethnic cleansing operations against the Rohingyas. The situation did not change under the civilian and democratically elected government, run by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy. Within Myanmar, Rohingyas did not have equal access to education, healthcare, and political activities. Rohingyas are also one of the most marginalized groups in the world when it comes to formal internet access, due to the dual exclusion from sim cards and reliable internet, both at their country of origin (Myanmar) and their present host country, Bangladesh.¹²¹

117 The Economist. *The most persecuted people on Earth?* 2015, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2015/06/13/the-most-persecuted-people-on-earth>.

118 “Refugee Response in Bangladesh,” UNHCR, 2020. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar_refugees.

119 Strategic Executive Group, “Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis 2018,” 2019. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/JRP%20for%20Rohingya%20Humanitarian%20Crisis%20-%20March%202018.PDF>.

120 Joanna Tan. “From stateless to displaced, the Rohingya are still searching for hope years after fleeing Myanmar.” CNBC. July 3, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y3ab3qrk>.

121 Faheem Hussain *et al.* “Infrastructuring Hope: Solidarity, Leadership, Negotiation, and ICT among the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh.” In *Proceedings of the 2020 International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD2020)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 12, 1–12. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3392561.3394640>.

State of access to information and communication technology in Rohingya camp areas

The Rohingya have been prohibited from conducting business and from using different digital platforms.¹²² According to one of the middle-aged male Rohingya we interviewed:

“In Burma (Myanmar), we were not allowed to carry or use smartphones. The police used to beat us up mercilessly and fine us heavily if anyone of the Rohingyas was captured to be in possession of any smartphone.”

In Bangladesh, it is legally required to provide official identification documents as well as biometric information to buy any mobile SIM card.¹²³ Rohingyas do not have any officially recognized and biometric information enabled documents, which eventually resulted in their exclusion from the legal SIM market in Bangladesh. The quality of the currently existing connectivity is also very poor, severely hindering humanitarian interventions using digital technologies. However, our research team found that in different innovative ways, numerous digital platforms including illegal SIM cards have become the integral parts of the daily lives of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. A 19-year-old unemployed Rohingya male respondent shared:

“I know I am using illegal SIM cards. And I know I paid a lot more to a local vendor to get it. But what to do? I need to be in touch with my other family members, who are located in other refugee camps and outside Bangladesh.”

We observed similar kinds of desperation among other Rohingya who struggled to stay connected. Gender disparity with regard to mobile use among the Rohingya refugees is significant. We found that inside the camp areas the majority of the women have access to mobile phones, although this does not include a recognition from the Rohingya patriarchy and the clergy that they are free to use it as they please. Their access is implicitly restricted because smartphones are often in family ownership, borrowed from neighbors, or used as shared phones at community access points. The Rohingya patriarchy in general did not support women’s use of different digital services. As a 40 year-old male Rohingya explained: “It is forbidden in our religion to be fed by the earning of the women. So we do not want them to work or go outside. And our women are not allowed to use any phones.”

These gender-specific barriers to digital connection combine with the overall exclusion of the population from sustainable internet access. Yet, there has been a huge demand among different demographic and socio-religious groups within the Rohingya refugees for digital connectivity in terms of:

- Accessing local, administrative, and international news in the Rohingya language.
- Communicating within and outside the camp areas among different Rohingya communities.
- Using communication networks to access educational micro-videos made in Rohingya language, for example to learn English and acquire health skills such as first aid.
- Using financial resources for acquiring illegal SIM cards and mobile data packages to ensure better accessibility.
- Ways of collaborating with host communities to open up information and communication services.

122 Azmina Karim and Faheem Hussain. “When Will You Start Teaching the REAL Curriculum?: Challenges and Innovations in Education for Rohingya Refugees.” In *Information and Communication Technologies for Development. Strengthening Southern-Driven Cooperation as a Catalyst for ICT4D*, Petter Nielsen and Honest Christopher Kimaro (Eds.). Vol. 551. Springer International Publishing, 675–686. 2019. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18400-1_55.

123 GSMA. “Mandatory registration of prepaid SIM cards: Addressing challenges through best practice,” 2016. https://www.gsma.com/publicpolicy/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/GSMA2016_Report_MandatoryRegistrationOfPrepaidSIMCards.pdf

Offline digital enterprises: Information and communication networks as commodities

As a natural reaction to the demands for digital connectivity, we observed the initiation of an array of local innovative entrepreneurial ventures. These ventures focused on addressing the scarcity of legal, stable internet connections, and the general willingness among refugees to pay for better access to localized information and to a digital communication network.

A black market of SIM cards

The first reaction to the blanket banning of mobile phone and internet usage among Rohingya refugees was the rapid rise of the illegal SIM market. The majority of the Rohingyas procured Bangladeshi SIM cards through the black market, with the help of brokers who can provide internet and phone access. The majority of these brokers are ethnic Rohingyas but took Bangladeshi citizenship over the years. Refugees have consistently received poorer services than an average Bangladeshi for accessing any mobile data or voice telephony. This means that the systematic exclusion from formal digital access exacerbates economic inequalities through the higher costs of informal access. Moreover, in the camps near the border of Myanmar, a significant number of the refugees had to carry multiple active SIM cards with them, both for Bangladesh and for Myanmar. This is because the signal strengths of Myanmar's telecom companies are stronger in those regions.

The alternative digital network

In the greater Rohingya refugee camp area, we witnessed the development of a mobile phone repairing and recharging ecosystem, which can be understood as **informal ICT work**. These ICT-related services have thrived despite and partly because of the ongoing legal restrictions. They are primarily provided through numerous small shops, managed by young Rohingyas and financially supported by local entrepreneurs. Our interviews with the owners, salespersons, and customers of 15 different shops in four major camps showed that a typical mobile shop primarily offered two or three services: Mobile phone repairs for both smart and non-smart phones, mobile phone recharging, and audio-visual data and file transfers from a shop's laptop or phone to the client's memory card or phone. On average, a mobile repair and recharge shop owner earns between BDT 12,000 (approx. US\$ 142) and BDT 20,000 (approx. US\$ 236) per month. Such earnings on a regular basis from the informal ICT work sector allow for a relatively solvent life for any Rohingya family within the refugee camp area.

Mobile repair shops

We found that most shopkeepers managing the mobile repair services had prior technical training. They stressed the importance of having ICT skills for running such businesses successfully. Such pre-existing technical knowledge enabled them to serve their own community and earn money amid a challenging environment, where scopes for legal entrepreneurship and revenue generation are very limited. The average price for their services is around BDT 200 (US\$ 2.5).

Inside a typical mobile repair shop in a Rohingya camp



Photo:
Faheem Hussain.

These shops sell other products as well: refurbished mobile phone sets, memory cards, earphones, mobile chargers, other mobile accessories, small and medium sized solar panels, solar lamps, and more. Photocopy, scanning and printing, as well as laminating are some of the other services lately provided by some of the shops. Because there is no electricity grid in the camp area, each shop had multiple power supply sources, including solar panels, car batteries, and diesel-powered generators.

A mobile repair shop



Photo:
Faheem Hussain.

Mobile recharge shops

Without electricity in camp areas, recharging mobiles poses problems for the population. On top of that, the majority of solar lamps used for domestic purposes became too weak to charge phone sets during the monsoon season, due to lack of sunlight during daytime. Consequently, recharging mobile phones became a critical service to be provided by the shops. The price for a full phone charge was around 12 US cents.

Offline digital file transfer and informal data work: A sustainable ecosystem of localized & customized audio-visual content

Informal data work primarily takes place within the premises of mobile repair and recharge shops in a Rohingya refugee camp area. Due to the many restrictions on accessing mobile phones and the Internet among Rohingyas, there is a huge demand for accessing good quality information and entertainment. Very popular were short videos that contained any type of English language learning or healthcare-related content. These were mainly disseminated using memory cards, file sharing applications, and social media platforms. This informal data work has a significant effect for the skills building of some refugees: after learning English through data obtained from shops, some male Rohingya are now successfully working with local and international NGOs.

It is worth noting that the Rohingyas do not have any official script, based on which newspaper, books, or other literary materials can be written. Hence, the importance of an audio-visual medium among this forcibly displaced community has become significant.

Laptops with content on demand

The humanitarian agencies working for the betterment of Rohingyas mostly prioritized services on health, hunger, and shelter right after the latest exodus of 2017. They have largely ignored the creation and supply of news and entertainment content, customized for the Rohingya's consumption. Mobile repair and recharge shops identified and filled this gap organically and rapidly, creating a new form of digital refugee work and entrepreneurship.

Each of the shops we surveyed was on average equipped with one laptop. The hard drives connected with these machines are loaded with a wide variety of content, including short audios or video clips on Rohingya related news. An organized network of digital audio-visual content providers facilitates the supply of new and relevant content. This network is mainly comprised of Bangladeshi entrepreneurs who first download the content in demand by using high-speed internet outside the camp areas in bigger cities like Cox's Bazar and Chittagong with better connectivity. This data is then gathered and transferred to shops at the outskirts of the camp that then redistribute the content.

According to our observation, a 500 GB hard drive, filled with downloaded audio-visual entertainment, news, or religious sermons, can cost around US\$ 5 to purchase for a shop owner. They usually collect these hard drives between one to four times per month. The shopkeepers choose content based on the popularity of certain media among the refugees. A Rohingya customer would then usually buy a memory card with a maximum capacity of 8 GB for between 2-5 US\$ and then transfers the content of his choosing onto that card. Each such transfer incurs a fee of around US\$ 0.5.

Illiteracy and the struggle for digital upskilling

Since the latest exodus of Rohingyas in August 2017, their struggles with education has become particularly evident: according to the UN, only around 5–17% of refugees have some level of literacy.¹²⁴ A 25-year-old Rohingya mother shared her frustration about the existing education service for her kids in the camp: “My husband went to the school (where our children go) here in the camp and asked the teacher, ‘When will you start teaching the real curriculum?’”¹²⁵

The informal data work taking place through the mobile shops addresses this ongoing educational challenge of the Rohingyas with some level of success. The respondents from several focus groups noted the popularity of several YouTube based channels for learning English.¹²⁶ When we asked about the reasons behind such demand for English education, one 20 year-old male Rohingya said: “English is the key to a better job. If we know English, it will help us to earn money and change the lives of our families. We do not have internet. However, these short videos help a lot!”

Within the camps, we found many short videos containing educational instructions in Rohingya language, covering issues such as how to open a new social media account, and videos on various healthcare topics. These videos are predominantly made by the Rohingyas living in western countries, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia, which underlines the transnational connectedness of local informal data work. Through media redistribution by local shops, informal ICT entrepreneurialism has the potential to upskill the refugee population.

Brokers and the popularity of “local” content

We further observed a strong demand for digital content that is created within the camps by the refugees themselves. Such content is distributed using the same network of shops and informal data work. A close-knit group of gatekeepers and brokers are engaged in working with audio-visual contents for Rohingyas, in a sense stepping in as mediators to bridge a gap left behind by the absence of the Internet. **In the absence of online connection, informal intermediary networks take on functions of brokerage between the internet and the disconnected Rohingyas.** For a population persecuted for decades, and for whom the regular internet or mobile network is officially illegal, this brokerage is highly welcome. One user of traded media content, a 24-year-old Rohingya male, said: “We can access the songs and videos we like from this shop and then can watch those with our family. I don’t have access to the Internet. But I am using my smart phone and memory card to get what I want from this shop. I am happy.”¹²⁷

124 “Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis,” 2018.

125 Azmina Karim and Faheem Hussain. “When Will You Start Teaching the REAL Curriculum?”

126 Faheem Hussain *et al.* 2020. “Infrastructuring Hope: Solidarity, Leadership, Negotiation, and ICT among the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh.” In *Proceedings of the 2020 International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD2020)*, Association for Computing Machinery, Article 12, 1–12. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3392561.3394640>.

127 Faheem Hussain, P.J. Wall, Richard Heeks. “Digital Innovations by Displaced Populations: A Critical Realist Study of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh.” In *International Conference on the Social Implications of Computers in Developing Countries*, 54–65. 2020.

Conclusion

In summary, several key issues emerge from our research on digital innovation and connectivity among Rohingya refugees. **This research shows how the exclusion of refugees from digital access can sometimes give birth to unexpected spheres of informal digital work and entrepreneurship.** While the data work and hardware services local shops and brokers provide are proof of innovation and digital resilience, they also underline the very exclusion from the internet and SIM cards they are designed to circumvent. Nevertheless, the case study also suggests new spheres of possible future intervention: building digital skills and ICT knowledge among refugees clearly has benefits and creates entrepreneurial opportunities, even in restrictive environments. Moreover, it becomes clear that this entrepreneurial data work can become a stepping-stone for refugees to acquire English skills and other employment related capacities through digital learning. The mobile shops and the data workers that drive them forward become intermediaries between the internet and those who are excluded from it.

The case study has two important implications for future interventions: it enables us to further help the Rohingyas to enhance their barefoot digital innovations and entrepreneurship initiatives, such as informal data services and locally innovated ICT solutions; and it encourages us to share the lessons learned with other displaced populations in need for digital access, potentially innovating somewhat similar forward-looking initiatives.

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Part 3

Digital work and the refugee “gig economy”

► **Work as a means for self-reliance: The prospects of online and offline work for Syrian refugees in Jordan**

Maha Kattaa and Meredith Byrne

Even prior to the outbreak of the crisis in Syria and the subsequent inflow of Syrian refugees, Jordan suffered from pre-existing labour market weaknesses. Poor job growth and a labour market that struggled to match workers' skills with available job opportunities resulted in unemployment rates that were highest among educated populations and youths. Migrant workers were an important source of labour to fill positions that were otherwise undesirable to Jordanians. Since 2013, Syrian refugees have increasingly filled these positions, mostly in manufacturing, construction and agriculture.

To alleviate skills mismatch, the digital economy in Jordan has been promoted by the Government, and in particular by the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, as a potential solution to tap into underutilized human capital. Its expansion has mainly been envisioned for Jordanian youth, however, INGOs and international agencies have equally promoted digital livelihoods for refugees. The global experience in digital employment, such as platform work, has shown benefits for workers that require flexible, short-term and additional income opportunities. However, questions about working conditions and the application of protection are reasons for concern, particularly when considering its suitability for refugees.

While Syrian refugees are most often found in sectors with considerable decent work deficits, platform work introduces additional sets of challenges to decent work. This article uses three domains of decent work, based on the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and Richard Heeks' analysis of decent work in the digital economy,¹²⁸ to compare offline and online work opportunities for male and female Syrian refugees in Jordan. This comparison draws on field experience with refugee workers and builds on global research on decent work in the web-based gig economy. A gender specific analysis complements the decent work approach applied in this article in the preceding section, *Digital livelihoods, decent work, and the gig economy in Jordan*.

Aspects of decent work in the gig economy

Working conditions

In his 2017 working paper on digital gig economies in developing countries, Richard Heeks uses three different domains to analyse employment and decent work. The first of these domains are working conditions, which reflect the adequacy of earnings, the work process, working hours, as well as health and safety. These areas are central to the ILO's mandate and drive its work with Syrian refugees to enhance all workers' access to decent work. The ILO's experience with Syrian refugees in the non-digital labour market in Jordan showed that they usually earn the minimum wage or less than that.¹²⁹ The Jordanian Labour Code stipulates sectors and occupations where foreign workers are permitted to work, most of which are low-wage and fail to provide adequate income to cover basic needs. This is compounded by the fact that over 80% of Syrians in Jordan live outside camps, where they have to pay for rent, utilities, and for other basic needs.¹³⁰

Informal employment was found to be widespread among Syrian refugees in Jordan. The level of informal employment is exhibited by the type of employment contract, duration of contract, and social security coverage that the workers have. Fifty-five per cent of surveyed workers in Jordan reported that they had short term employment agreements. The precarious type of work including temporary, seasonal and irregular, is more prevalent among Syrians (69 per cent) compared to Jordanians and negatively impacts job security.¹³¹ **The recent assessment conducted by the ILO and the FAFO Research Institute demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated trends in precariousness among Syrians. One-third of all surveyed Syrian refugees who were employed prior to the pandemic, were out of work permanently after the outbreak, compared to 17 per cent of Jordanians.**¹³²

In the face of these difficulties, platform work can be an appealing option to earn extra income, but global experience shows that typical earnings of platform workers are not enough to be a standalone income source, and are usually combined with other forms of work.¹³³ In the Jordanian economy, Syrian refugees face seasonal fluctuations in working hours in the two sectors where they are more heavily concentrated.

128 Richard Heeks, "Decent Work and the Digital Gig Economy: A Developing Country Perspective on Employment Impacts and Standards in Online Outsourcing." *Development Informatics Working Paper* no. 71, 2017.

129 Åge A. Tiltne, Huafeng Zhang and Jon Pedersen. *The Living Conditions of Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Results from the 2017-2018 Survey of Syrian Refugees Inside and Outside Camps*. Fafo Institute, Government of Jordan, 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/living-conditions-syrian-refugees-jordan-results-2017-2018-survey-syrian-refugees>.

130 UNHCR. "Operational Update: Jordan." January 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/73847.pdf>.

131 Tewodros Aragie Kebede, Svein Erik Stave and Maha Kattaa. *Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan and Lebanon*. FAFO Research Institute and ILO. Beirut, 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749356.pdf.

132 *Ibid.*

133 Berg, Janine et al. *Digital labour platforms and the future of work: Towards decent work in the online world* (Geneva: ILO, 2018). https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_645337.pdf

In construction and agriculture, work hours peak in the spring and summer and slow or cease in winter months, leaving workers without income for several months each year. Supplementary income through online platforms could provide an alternative livelihood-generating opportunity, however, the profiles of workers that most often fill seasonal positions are not necessarily well matched with the demands of competitive online gig work. Only 15% of Syrian refugees over the age of 20 in Jordan finished secondary school and 26% did not finish primary school.¹³⁴ Many also lack the means to access platform work, with only 4% of all Syrian refugees having internet at home.¹³⁵ These sobering statistics fundamentally challenge the widespread idea that freelance work on digital labour platforms is universally accessible by anyone from anywhere in the world.

Moreover, the Jordanian Labour Code limits work days to eight hours over a maximum of six days a week. This creates difficulties for seasonal and project-based work that may require long working hours for several weeks or months a year, followed by periods of inactivity. Online freelancing and platform work is not clearly addressed in the labour code. The situation of workers on location based on-demand platforms, such as those on Uber or Careem, have not yet been reflected in the labour code. Workers would typically be classified as self-employed, although their dependence on the platform for income would make the actual relationship that of an employer-employee. Workers are often left to determine their own work hours and the resulting scenario is not dissimilar to the agriculture sector, if workers are driven to work long hours to earn more income on low hourly, daily or task-based rates.¹³⁶

In both offline and online work, refugees face similar situations of precariousness as they enter into employment relationships that are not clearly defined and regulated. This problem is complicated further by intermediaries that disconnect workers from employers. Agricultural workers and day labourers often find work through sub-contractors or informal brokers. Over sixty per cent of surveyed Syrian workers had found work in the agriculture sector through an informal broker, and some never had contact or met the farmer whose fields they worked.¹³⁷ On digital labour platforms, refugees would be using the platform as an intermediary, often to perform services for a third party. In both cases, brokerage and intermediation diminishes accountability under the labour code and responsibility for work rights.

Accessibility, employment, and career development

In his analysis, Heeks further considers six different areas of employment: the accessibility of opportunities, career development, stability of employment, employment status, discrimination and respect at work. In this domain, there are clear disadvantages to both online and offline forms of refugee work in Jordan. While work in sectors such as agriculture, construction, service and manufacturing may be more accessible based on the skills and connectivity of most Syrian refugees,¹³⁸ there is little room for upward mobility or career advancement. In theory, work over the internet presents opportunities for a limited number of refugees who do possess the skills and digital infrastructure that is needed to access and succeed in often highly competitive digital labour markets. However, digital labour markets often lack regulatory frameworks for career progression and skills recognition, due to unclear or absent accreditations, lacking skills recognition, and obstacles to skills transfer across platforms.

¹³⁴ Åge *et al.* *The Living Conditions of Syrian Refugees in Jordan*, 2019

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ ILO. *Decent Work and the Agriculture Sector in Jordan. Evidence from Workers' and Employers' Surveys* (Beirut: ILO Regional Office for Arab States, 2018). https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_646170.pdf.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Åge A. *et al.*, 2019.

When reviewing eligibility requirements for refugee workers on web-based platforms created specifically for refugee freelancers, the criteria indicate additional barriers to consider beyond education, language and connectivity. Some platforms may require valid national identification (UNHCR or Ministry of Interior Cards for Syrian refugees) and obtaining payments for digital freelance work usually requires some access to financial infrastructure (bank account, mobile wallet or proximity to partnering NGOs where cash can be collected). If access to digital work for a social enterprise that is explicitly dedicated to supporting refugees already involves challenges, access to large corporate platforms does even more so. Larger on-demand corporate platforms, such as Uber, feature a large pool of non-refugee competitors, with additional barriers to access. These platforms are not tailored to the specific needs of refugee workers, who have specific documentation and legal realities that differ from workers in their host communities.

Syrian refugees are not permitted to open bank accounts in Jordan, and it is unclear if Syrians could obtain work permits that would allow them to openly work through digital labour platforms. Most occupations in Jordan's IT sector are closed to foreign workers, as are specific professions such as drivers and teachers. Without work permits, the employers of foreign workers are typically fined, and in some cases shut down. However, without a clear employer, it is not apparent how the infraction would be punished and this could leave Syrian refugees vulnerable.

The employment context: Social protection, freedom of association, collective bargaining

Finally, and of critical interest to the ILO, is the employment context. By this, Heeks refers to social protection coverage, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. These three elements are absent for Syrian refugees in both offline and online work. In Jordan, refugees have restricted trade union rights and the occupations they are permitted to work in often fall outside of social protection systems. For instance, under the Social Security Law, employers are required to register all workers that they employ for 16 days or more in a month.¹³⁹ Seasonal or project-based work is rarely consistent and employers have been known to limit work days to avoid registration requirements. In the case of freelance work on digital platforms, there is no employer and therefore it is unclear who has the responsibility for registration. For self-employed or own-account workers, there is the possibility to pay contributions to social security on a voluntary basis, but unstable work and low wages prevents most self-employed workers in Jordan from registering voluntarily.¹⁴⁰ The lack of accountability and space to voice their grievances are another critical concern for Syrian refugees who would engage in online work. In a global survey, nine out of ten platform workers had been denied payment for work they completed.¹⁴¹ These workers were not able to appeal and as a result, lost part of their income. Outside of the digital economy in Jordan's local labour market, 16 per cent of Syrian workers in agriculture had experienced similar forms of non-payment. However, intermediaries and community representatives could hold these employers responsible, through dialogue and Ministry of Labour grievance mechanisms.¹⁴² It is unclear whether digital platforms and international buyers of online freelance work could be held accountable in any effective way.

139 Law No. 1 of 2014 on Social Security Law. Prime Minister, The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. <http://pm.gov.jo/newspaperSubjects/5599/5599.html>.

140 Based on the 2018 Labour Force Survey, Syrians comprise only 1% of all Social Security subscribers. A 2020 World Bank assessment estimated that between 4 and 8% of Syrian work permit holders were registered in social security. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/new-economic-opportunities-jordanians-and-syrian-refugees>.

141 Berg, et al. *Digital labour platforms and the future of work*, 2018.

142 Åge A. et al., 2019.

Conclusion: From essential need to decent work?

Our work with Syrian refugees in Jordan made apparent that most are primarily concerned about meeting their basic needs and the prospect of decent work is seen as a luxury not many can afford. Moreover, accessibility, flexibility, and ease of earning money are three characteristics that are highly desired and these preferences would be in line with some aspects of platform work. Some refugees nevertheless express frustration with the quality of work and the dead end of work opportunities in the sectors they are able to work in. Syrians inside refugee camps sometimes consider the cost of leaving a camp to outweigh the benefits of the low wages they could get. We argue that beyond the ability “to meet essential needs”¹⁴³ refugee jobs should also provide a path to a better quality of life. It is not only a matter of access to work, but access to work that is productive, well protected, delivers a fair income and presents opportunities for personal development. In Jordan, national labour legislation limits how far refugees can progress. This is similar in the digital economy. Most task-based platforms provide mundane tasks, without an avenue for progression. This is why online work in the digital platform economy is thought of in terms of jobs, and not careers.¹⁴⁴

When considering the similarities between various forms of work that are accessible to refugees, whether online and offline, it seems that both have their shortfalls and reflect larger labour market weaknesses. As previously noted, Jordan suffers from poor job growth and struggles to create adequate jobs, even for its own citizens. While ICTs and a growing digital economy promise solutions for some Jordanians, the majority of Syrian refugees do not have the skills, knowledge, and technology to participate. Further questions about accountability for work rights and the legality of Syrian refugees’ participation would need to be addressed before considering how platform work can benefit refugees in Jordan.

143 UNHCR. *Resilience and self-reliance from a protection and solutions perspective*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2017. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/58ca4f827.pdf>.

144 Richard Heeks. “Decent Work and the Digital Gig Economy: A Developing Country Perspective on Employment Impacts and Standards in Online Outsourcing.” *Development Informatics Working Paper* no. 71, 2017.

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► Digital livelihoods and decent work: The refugee gig economy in Jordan

Emma Samman, Dina Mansour-Ille, Abigail Hunt

As elsewhere in the world, the gig economy – in which companies develop mobile digital platforms bringing together workers and the purchasers of their services – is fast taking root in Jordan. As demonstrated in the previous section, *Work as a Means for Self-Reliance: The Prospects of Online and Offline Work for Syrian Refugees in Jordan*, the digital economy in Jordan is being promoted and supported by the Government, particularly the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, as a possible means to provide job opportunities to Jordanian and Syrian youth. This case study aims to distil key lessons from our work interrogating the gig economy's potential to provide economic opportunities to Syrian women refugees.¹⁴⁵ On the one hand, in the face of persistent challenges to entering the labour market in Jordan, the gig economy may offer these women expanded options for paid work in a context of limited access to economic opportunities. On the other hand, the gig economy does not – as it currently stands – offer decent work as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO), suggesting that improving access to livelihoods in sectors which offer opportunities for a more stable income, coupled with better working conditions, is critical. However, the gig economy is still nascent in Jordan and there has been relatively little study to date of its impact upon vulnerable communities, including refugee women. Building on the previous discussion of (in)decent work in the online and offline economy for refugees, this case study therefore aims to contribute to the empirical evidence on gender and gig work in complex refugee situations.

► What is the gig economy?

The gig economy refers to labour-market activities that are coordinated via mobile platforms, which are increasingly bringing together workers and purchasers of their services locally and globally. Digital platforms enable businesses to order timed and monetised tasks from an available worker, with a fee or commission commonly charged to the worker or client by the platform. Workers take on particular 'gigs' without any guarantee of further work and are typically classified as self-employed or independent contractors by gig economy companies.

The operating model of gig economy platforms can be divided into 'crowd work' and 'on-demand' work. Crowd work refers to tasks which are commissioned and carried out via the internet using suitably skilled 'crowd workers' located anywhere in the world. On-demand tasks are carried out locally, assuming close physical proximity of service purchaser and provider.

Source: De Stefano 2016 ¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ The case study draws on research conducted in collaboration with The International Rescue Committee (IRC). See Hunt, Abigail, Emma Samman and Dina Mansour-Ille. 2017. "Syrian women refugees: opportunity in the gig economy?" London: Overseas Development Institute. www.odi.org/syrian-refugees-jordan-gig-economy.

¹⁴⁶ Valerio De Stefano, *The rise of the 'Just-in-Time Workforce': on-Demand Work, Crowd Work and Labour Protection in the 'Gig Economy'* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2016).

The Jordan Compact

The opportunities open to Syrian women refugees in Jordan are shaped by the specifics of their forced displacement and Jordanian law governing employment, against the dynamic backdrop of the 2016 Jordan Compact, an agreement between the government and international actors aiming to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees into the country's labour market in return for concessional finance and trade. Four years on, authorities have issued or renewed upward of 153,000 work permits to Syrians (such that 45% of working-age Syrian refugees are in receipt).¹⁴⁷ However, by and large, work permits have been issued for work in three sectors: construction, agriculture and manufacturing. This means that many jobs and professions remain fully or partially closed to foreigners, including Syrian refugees, by law, and many Syrians continued to work in the informal sector without labour protections. The Compact has been periodically revised, to expand the areas in which Syrian refugees are permitted to work, make permits more flexible in some respects, and as of November 2018, allow the registration of Syrian refugee home-based businesses in food processing, handicraft and tailoring.¹⁴⁸ However, this shift to legalise home-based work, which might provide an entry-point for formal sector work in areas in which refugee women are active, has so far had a limited impact: in December 2019, the first Syrian-owned home-based business became registered.¹⁴⁹ This is likely in part because the barriers to entry remain formidable, including significant financial outlay and the need to satisfy requirements such as securing landlord approval.¹⁵⁰

Under the Compact itself, refugees' legal rights to take on the new opportunities the gig economy offers are unclear. Moreover, the Compact makes no mention of promoting gender equality in accessing the labour market nor does it provide any guidelines on overcoming practical barriers to women's employment. As of October 2019, fewer than 5% of the work permits that had been issued went to women.¹⁵¹

Methods

Our analysis is based on primary and secondary research. The primary research consisted of four focus group discussions with 36 Syrian women refugees that The International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted in four Jordanian cities (Irbid, Mafraq, Al-Ramtha and Amman) in April 2017; eleven key informant interviews, including six representatives of gig economy companies (not all currently active in Jordan); and a mapping of the gig economy in Jordan through internet searches in English and Arabic. Our secondary research involved analysis of the available evidence base (including peer-reviewed, company and grey literature, and available data) on the gig economy overall and in Jordan; the legal framework and policy surrounding refugee employment in Jordan; the situation of Syrian refugees in the country, particularly in relation to the labour market; and the adoption of mobile telephony and the internet, and banking through formal and informal channels.

147 Rana Hussein. "Syrian refugees issued over 153,000 work permits" *The Jordan Times*, Oct 7, 2019, www.jordantimes.com/news/local/syrian-refugees-issued-over-153000-work-permits.

148 Cindy Huang and Katelyn Gough, "The Jordan Compact: Three Years on, Where Do We Stand?", *Center for Global Development*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/jordan-compact-three-years-on>

149 Pickle Power, *First Syrian Refugee-Owned Home-Based Business Registered in Jordan* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2019). <https://www.unhcr.org/jo/12391-first-syrian-refugee-owned-home-based-business-registered-in-jordan.html>.

150 Huang and Gough 2019.

151 Hussein 2019.

The potential of gig work for Syrian refugee women

Syrian refugee women tell the same story as elsewhere – some 60% of those not currently in employment expressed a desire to undertake paid work.¹⁵² Nonetheless, in Jordan only 7% per cent of Syrian refugee women are economically active, compared with 51% of men.¹⁵³ The barriers refugees face include a lack of economic opportunities, challenges in accessing work permits and a lack of networks that would either provide work or access to timely and reliable information about available opportunities.¹⁵⁴ This is particularly true for women. In the words of one focus group participant in Irbid, “men have better access to the traditional job market due to having a wide social network and friends.”

Women face additional constraints linked to limited mobility, a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, and a lack of opportunities deemed suitable for them in the face of restrictive socio-cultural norms and associated occupational segregation – amplified by the restrictive legal framework in which work permits are largely tied to opportunities in agriculture, manufacturing and construction, all male-dominated sectors.

Overall, our study concludes that the gig economy in Jordan offers some promise to provide work to Syrian women refugees, especially by providing wider markets to women who are already economically active on a small scale. Because the gig economy is a legal ‘grey area’ characterised by ambiguous legislation, gig-work companies do not view work permits as necessary and workers do not perceive gains from formalising their participation by registering a home-based business or pursuing a work permit.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, owing to social and cultural factors, notably women’s responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, home-based work appears to be an attractive option for many Syrian women refugees, and some forms of ‘gig work’ offer paid activities which can be carried out in the home. In principle, this could offer greater flexibility than a conventional job with fixed hours. Furthermore, the use of mobile technology to connect workers and clients helps to circumvent various barriers to their entry into remunerated activity, notably in accessing clients.

Our evidence suggests that localised ‘on-demand’ work may be more relevant than online ‘crowd work’, largely due to uneven rates of digital access among Syrian women refugees and a skills mismatch with available crowd work opportunities, partly because globally most crowdwork requires some level or proficiency in the English language. The on-demand opportunities most accessible to Syrian women appear to be in fields in which they are already skilled, and in many cases active informally, including home catering, beauty services, and to a lesser extent, domestic work. Focus group participants in Ar-Ramtha, for example, explained that they were engaged in home-businesses, such as baking and cooking, and one reported that through NGO workshops, she had acquired the necessary skills to start a home-based beauty salon for women.

At the same time, the gig economy overall remains nascent in Jordan. Our 2017 data suggested that on-demand gig work involved a few hundred Syrian refugee women at most. One implication is that the gig economy is not established enough to offer large numbers of sustainable livelihoods, particularly for vulnerable workers. Its impacts are not fully understood and therefore it may not be a good candidate for development and humanitarian resources. Nonetheless, while the majority of refugees who participated in our focus groups claimed not to fully understand what the gig economy was, a few expressed some familiarity with some online apps such as Careem and reported using social media to promote their home-businesses.

152 UN Women, *Women Working: Jordanian And Syrian Refugee Women’s Labour Force Participation and Attitudes Towards Employment* (Amman: UN Women and REACH, 2016). www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20jordan/attachments/publications/jordanian%20and%20syrian%20refugee.pdf?la=en&vs=1300

153 UN Women, cited in Jordan INGO Forum Briefing, “How to ensure the inclusion of women, youth and refugees,” *Jordan INGO Forum Briefing*, 2019, http://jordaningoforum.org/testsite/wp-content/uploads/LayoutLondonInitiative_IIFBriefingFINAL.pdf

154 Catherine Bellamy, Simone Haysom, Caitlin Wake and Veronique Barbelet, *The lives and livelihoods of Syrian refugees: A study of refugee perspectives and their institutional environment in Turkey and Jordan* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2017). www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11343.pdf

155 As per one of our informants, “we don’t really care that they [workers registered on the platform] have work permits or not”.

The challenges posed by gig work for refugee women

Whether or not the gig economy begins to operate at scale in Jordan, it nonetheless raises some concerns relating to work quality, given that the gig economy, as elsewhere, is largely unregulated in Jordan. This is particularly concerning given that refugees are often in a very precarious economic situation, so supporting their increased involvement in the gig economy must take care not to promote poor quality job opportunities which can further exacerbate this.

Critically, access to gig work in the first place may not be straightforward. Many workers in Jordan do not use smartphones and may not have high levels of digital literacy. In both camps and urban areas, refugees also have limited internet access and poor network coverage. For women, gendered social norms further constrain their digital access. Indeed, as one focus group participant in Mafraq emphasised, “families are generally quite protective of women and girls,” where she noted that her family monitored her internet usage and only allowed her to use Viber to chat with family and friends in Syria. This adds an additional barrier for women in accessing job opportunities, both offline and online. As companies move platforms entirely online – and away from SMS or telephone-based communication – this may limit refugee women’s abilities to use them.

A second set of concerns relates to the type of work platform companies facilitate. Most on-demand models are designed to enable companies to respond to fluctuating demand at minimal cost (underlying the engagement of workers as independent contractors, rather than employees).¹⁵⁶ Proponents of ‘gig work’ argue that this operating model allows them to provide more work – i.e., paid work opportunities in contexts where other likely alternatives (e.g. casual, informal work) are likely to be no better, or indeed, worse, because there is no third-party to mediate between workers and clients.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, they often highlight the potential that gig work offers for flexible working arrangements which may be particularly beneficial to women balancing paid work and unpaid care – although this promise has been shown to be limited in other contexts.¹⁵⁸ At the same time, from a ‘decent work’ perspective and as demonstrated by Kattaa and Byrne in the previous section, *Work as a Means for Self-Reliance: The Prospects of Online and Offline Work for Syrian Refugees in Jordan*, gig work falls short in some important respects. It can be argued that it is qualitatively different from informal work in that a lack of stability and protections are ‘designed in’ to the operating model, i.e. based on the exploitation of gaps in legislation, rather than a lack of regulation alone.

156 See Abigail Hunt and Emma Samman, *Gender and the gig economy: critical steps for evidence-based policy* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2019). www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12586.pdf.

157 See Abigail Hunt, Emma Samman, Sherry Tapfuma, Grace Mwaura and Rhoda Omenya with Kay Kim, Sara Stevano and Aida Roumer, *Women and the gig economy: Paid work, care and flexibility in Kenya and South Africa* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2019). www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/women_in_the_gig_economy_final_digital.pdf.

158 *Ibid.*

Three concerns about gig work among refugees in Jordan

Gig workers are typically classified as independent contractors and as such lack workplace protections like paid maternity or sick leave. This makes them and their families vulnerable to economic shocks and an inability to participate in labour markets during life events common to women such as childbirth. A second challenge relates to the limited potential for collective action, which history shows has been critical in improving conditions in the informal economy in many settings. However, gig workers often have difficulty organising and advocating for themselves because they are often highly dispersed and face limitations on collective bargaining. This is particularly relevant to refugees in Jordan, who are not formally allowed to associate.¹⁵⁹

A second set of concerns relates to 'on-demand' service-based employment that takes place either in client homes (e.g. beauty supply, domestic work) or in workers' own homes (e.g. catering, tailoring, laundry). The former raises safety concerns, especially given the vulnerable position of many refugee women. The second, homeworking, also involves well-documented challenges, including isolation, poor working conditions and difficulties in linking and organising with other workers.¹⁶⁰ Further, their 'hidden' location and lack of representation or inclusion in policy processes means they are often invisible to policymakers, prolonging precarious working conditions. Critically, the isolating nature of much gig economy work, where workers engage alone through digital platforms rather than at a workplace, risks further exacerbating these challenges.

A final concern that is likely to be particularly important for refugees is the detailed data that on-demand platforms hold on their users, including personal data, banking details, and other potentially sensitive information. Many refugees already feel vulnerable in their host communities, so this can raise additional concerns around privacy and security.

Conclusions and ways forward

Advances under the Jordan Compact notwithstanding, it remains the case that many other forms of paid work often available to refugees are highly informal and precarious. It follows that any effort to increase refugee integration into the gig economy should be accompanied by a wider effort to improve conditions within this new form of work so as not to exacerbate their existing marginalisation and economic precarity. There is a need for clarification and consensus among workers, service purchasers, companies and the government around the labour regulations applicable to gig work to ensure a high benchmark for labour standards in the gig economy, including specific provisions within the Compact, as the guiding framework for refugee access to the labour market in Jordan. This is even more critical in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbates the challenges facing gig workers and is likely to increase the number of those seeking paid work on platforms due to the ongoing economic crisis and associated contraction of demand for labour, including in the formal economy.¹⁶¹ However, given the overall economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also possible that in some sectors the size of platforms may contract, meaning less opportunities are available. This remains a key area for further examination as the labour market effects of the pandemic are being identified.

159 Holly Ritchie, *Towards inclusion and integration? Syrian refugee women's fragile new livelihoods in Jordan* (Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, 2017). https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/Towards-inclusion-and-integration_Syrian-refugee-womens-fragile-new-livelihoods-in-Jordan.pdf.

160 Martha Alter Chen, *Informal Economy Monitoring Study Sector Report: Home-Based Workers* (Cambridge, MA: WIEGO, 2014). www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/IEMS-Home-Based-Workers-Full-Report.pdf.

161 As of April 2020, an estimated 35% of Syrians and 17% of Jordanians who were employed before the crisis had lost their jobs permanently.

More broadly, Syrian refugee women seeking home-based work would benefit from further revisions to the Jordan Compact to expand the sectors open to them and to increase possibilities for formalisation – e.g. to enable the registration of home-based businesses in sectors beyond food processing, handicraft and tailoring, and to reduce the currently prohibitive registration costs.¹⁶² They might also benefit from country-wide initiatives to promote female employment: the 2019 London Initiative, which resulted in substantial additional financing commitments for Jordan, also introduced a focus on enabling the participation of women in the labour market (which currently stands at 14%), with the aim to increase it by 5% by 2025.¹⁶³

We highlight that several specific challenges will need to be overcome to make gig work more beneficial, including improving digital access, providing skills training and worker protections, and ensuring safety – especially given the vulnerable position of many refugee women. One major challenge, as also argued by Kattaa and Byrne earlier, is the fact that a significant proportion of Syrian refugees lack the skills, knowledge and the ability to access the technology needed to participate in the gig economy.

In addition, we emphasise that the Jordanian government, civil society and gig economy companies each have a distinct role to play in ensuring that the gig economy develops in a way that fully benefits workers. For example, government policies must continue to promote decent work conditions which should include mechanisms that gradually bring workers into national social protection systems. Civil society could make a critical contribution in facilitating refugee association: Even in contexts in which refugee association is prohibited, refugees are usually permitted to come together for training led by nongovernmental organisations. This could provide a key opportunity to link with (registered) women's rights organisations providing training and support, and to enable them to advance collective action in different areas of their lives, including by carrying out advocacy and developing economies of scale in small businesses.¹⁶⁴ **We recommend that gig companies work with policymakers to adopt elements of good practice (drawing on promising initiatives globally), notably with respect to income level and security, skills upgrading, social protection and recognising worker associations.**

Finally, our research suggests that while the online gig economy may present some increased opportunities to link Syrian women refugees with economic opportunities, the significant challenges posed to workers in terms of overall quality and quantity of work on offer means it should be seen by those seeking to support this group as one element of a wider range of options. These options could include supporting alternative or complementary livelihoods. A comprehensive approach would also foreground efforts to ensure an improved enabling environment for Syrian women's entry into decent work in Jordan, including by addressing restrictive gender norms and the continuing legal limitations on Syrian labour market engagement.

162 Huang and Gough 2019.

163 *Ibid.* The figure on current female labour force participation in Jordan can be found at "World Development Indicators", World Bank, 2020. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.tif.cact.fe.zs>.

164 Ritchie 2017.

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► Digital refugee work: Making a livelihood from home

Andreas Hackl

The seemingly inclusive characteristics of digital platform work have inspired a new generation of social enterprises and international development initiatives that see it as a promising contribution to refugees' livelihoods. These initiatives include social enterprises that hire refugee freelancers remotely for work in fields such as image annotation and language services. On a basic level, platform work can be seen as a form of freelance employment that uses an online platform to match digital workers with buyers of work, thereby connecting supply and demand.¹⁶⁵ **Refugee-specific work platforms often have a social impact mission and focus on connecting the world's most marginalized populations with an increasingly planetary-scale digital economy. In doing so, they highlight important opportunities for inclusion in a digitized future of work. At the same time, this research will show how refugees' experience with platform work reveals the practical limitations of the idea that the digital economy is universally inclusive and a potentially powerful tool for economic development.**

The emergence of a planetary digital labour market has been discussed as a possible contribution to economic development in marginalized regions of the world, by providing access to work opportunities and alternative sources of income.¹⁶⁶ However, workers in emerging nations are most affected by uneven Internet connectivity, time zones, language problems, a lack of security, and inadequate pay mechanisms.¹⁶⁷ As digital inequalities are becoming more ingrained, they threaten to leave those without resources ever further behind.¹⁶⁸ This critique stands vis-à-vis evidence that digitalization has allowed many workers to access new labour markets, while also facilitating new kinds of access to their local market through digital mediums or platforms. Digital labour platforms in developing countries, for example, are often seen as providing an alternative source of livelihood amidst a scarcity of other opportunities.¹⁶⁹

The overall assessment of digital platform work among refugees is that it provides an important source of livelihood and economic survival in many cases, while falling short of transforming the often insecure freelancing jobs into sustainable decent employment. This section will explore digital labour from the perspective of refugees working through three social impact work platforms that have the specific aim of supporting refugees. These platforms operate in two types of digitally mediated home-based work, namely remote language training and image annotations for datasets used in the training of artificial intelligence (AI):

Natakallam ("We Speak") is a US-registered social enterprise that connects refugee language conversation partners to students all over the world, while also offering translation services, academic programmes, and guest lectures. *Humans in the Loop* is another provider of online remote work specifically dedicated to refugees. Initially launched in Sofia, Bulgaria, to source work for the local refugee population, it has expanded into Turkey, Iraq, and Syria in collaboration with partner organizations on the ground. In 2019, they employed a total of 167 annotators. The company primarily sources work in image annotation for

165 Willem Pieter de Groen *et al.*, "Employment and Working Conditions of Selected Types of Platform Work" (Luxembourg, 2018).

166 Mark Graham, Isis Hjorth, and Vili Lehdonvirta, "Digital Labour and Development: Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods," *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 23, no. 2 (2017): 135–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258916687250>.

167 Laura Robinson *et al.*, "Digital Inequalities 3.0: Emergent Inequalities in the Information Age," *First Monday* 25, no. 7 (2020).

168 Robinson *et al.*

169 Richard Heeks, "Decent Work and the Digital Gig Economy: A Developing Country Perspective on Employment Impacts and Standards in Online Outsourcing, Crowdwork, Etc," Development Informatics Working Paper Series (Manchester, 2017), <http://www.gdi.manchester.ac.uk/research/publications/dli/>.

the training of Artificial Intelligence (AI), whereby freelancers annotate and classify objects in images to train algorithms and build datasets for private companies. *Taqadam* is a US-based platform for image annotation and crowdsourced geospatial imagery analysis that has outsourced work primarily to a small crowd of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, alongside a pool of Lebanese citizens. Similar to Humans in the Loop, freelancers working for Taqadam classify and annotate aspects of images to train algorithms, classify objects, and build visual datasets. Together, these three platforms can be seen as pioneers in bringing digitally mediated work to refugees who often face legal restrictions to their right to work, economic hardship, discrimination, and uncertainty.

Methods

This research is rooted in a two-year project on digital refugee livelihoods at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. The methods included ethnographic research and on-site interviews among refugees in Lebanon and Germany. A second phase that was conducted mostly remotely included interviews and surveys among refugees from a variety of countries and locations. These focused on refugee freelancers who worked from home for one of three social enterprises. The total number of surveyed freelancers was 131.¹⁷⁰ Due to the relatively small size of the cohorts that worked through the digital platforms of the three social enterprises, the results gained from the surveys and interviews are only representative of this specific kind of refugee platform work. Yet, because these three platforms have a specific aim of supporting refugees, while mediating between freelancers and the planetary market, the experience of refugees who work on the free market through larger work platforms without such support may diverge in significant ways.

Educational background and age patterns

The level of education among freelancers on the three platforms is rather high, which somewhat mirrors research on the online platform economy more generally.¹⁷¹ At Natakallam, 95% had a background in higher education and attended at least a college or completed a bachelor's degree. A similar picture emerges from the social impact platforms in AI training: 9 out of 17 interviewed freelancers at Humans in the Loop completed a bachelor's degree while another five had at least attended some university, while 84% of surveyed freelancers at Taqadam held a university or college degree.

The particular educational backgrounds were very diverse and included a variety of academic disciplines, ranging from computer science or engineering to linguistics and various areas of the humanities and social sciences. The backgrounds also included those who had come to a host country but were not allowed to practice the profession they were trained in, such as dental practitioners or teachers. Others had professional experience as engineers, journalists, bankers, or biologists, indicating the diversity of skillsets – skills that widely remain untapped in their digital work practices.

170 At Taqadam, 32 Lebanese and Syrian freelancers responded to the online survey in July 2020, all of whom were based in Lebanon. At Natakallam, 82 freelancers responded to the survey and most of them were forcibly displaced persons from a number of countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Burundi, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Venezuela. The research with Humans in the Loop was a collaborative effort with their annual impact assessment in 2020 and involved structured remote interviews with 17 freelancers located in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Bulgaria.

171 Janine Berg *et al.*, "Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work: Towards Decent Work in the Online World" (Geneva: ILO, 2018).

The age of online freelancers varied between platforms, although most freelancers can be described as relatively young. At Natakallam, 54% were between 26 and 35 years old and 37% between 36 and 45. At Taqadam, which included a majority of non-refugee freelancers from the Lebanese host community, the average age was as low as 23 years. Interviews further revealed anecdotal evidence that many of the existing freelancers in image annotation also involved their younger siblings in this digital labour, some of whom are minors.

Barriers to digital access

Refugee freelancers highlighted the lack of a reliable internet connection and a convenient place to work from as a major problem, specifically in locations such as Syria or Lebanon, and especially outside of urban centres. This combined with a lack of good hardware and the problem of electricity cuts in some places to undermine their ability to work efficiently online. As Samer, a 32-year-old Syrian freelancer who was internally displaced to the city of Azaz, put it:

“The difficulties here in Syria are the internet problems. The internet cuts out. We also have electricity problems; it also cuts out. Often there is no electricity. Sometimes they don’t deliver electricity for days, maybe four days without it.”

Some freelancers lamented a lack of suitable hardware. As a 25-year-old Syrian woman in Lebanon, who worked in image annotation, wrote in her survey response: “[This work] is not permanent and I can only work on phone-based projects because I cannot buy a computer.” A 20-year-old Syrian in Azaz, who also worked in image annotation, said in an interview: “The major difficulties I faced in work [are that] my computer is very, very weak. I don’t have money to get a better one. It annoys me a lot.”

Another barrier to accessing digital work in a sustainable way is the housing situation, which is not always ideal for those who are forcibly displaced from their home country. Working from home is therefore a challenge. Although most research participants had access to a private room, some 20% of freelancers at Taqadam and at Natakallam stated they did not have a private room they could work from at home. None of the respondents reported access to any kind of formalized office space.

Economic survival and dependency

For the majority of refugees their digitally mediated labour was their only source of income, not least because of a range of difficulties they experienced in the labour market in their respective locations. In Lebanon, digital freelancing was the only source of income for 24 out of 31 respondents (77%) at Taqadam. Across all three platforms, the overall majority of refugee freelancers did not have any other job and depended on digital work for economic survival. More than two thirds at Taqadam considered their online work as “extremely important” for their economic survival, with the remainder seeing it at least as “very important”. Workers at the other two platforms more or less mirrored this sense of economic dependency and the platforms’ role in supporting their survival. Not only depended the refugee freelancers on digital work, but children and other family members also depended on them: 63% of freelancers at Natakallam stated that between two and four family members depended on their income, while 24% said they supported more than four individuals economically.

Being economically dependent on the often irregular and insecure income from digital work was partly due to the difficulties that refugees experienced in the labour markets of their respective host countries and regions. These included experiences of racism and discrimination, legal exclusion from parts of the labour market, problems with accrediting pre-existing qualifications, and a lack of adequate skills (including in some places language skills). Among those who studied at university, online work often served the purpose of the side-job to cover some of their expenses. Freelancing in image annotation or language training emerges as an important source of supplementary income that often becomes the principal source of income in practice, even though the social enterprises did not intend this work to be their sole economic pillar. As I will show in more detail below, the money was often barely sufficient to cover even the basic expenses of a refugee household, such as rent, food, energy, and water.

Refugees' experience with digital freelancing: The positive aspects

While working from home is not everyone's preference, most refugees working online considered this to be a positive aspect of their labour. More than two thirds of language trainers at Natakallam saw the ability to work from home and use their time flexibly as a positive feature of their work. Working remotely from home was also highlighted as a welcome alternative to the challenges of the labour market in places like Syria, Turkey, Iraq, or Lebanon, among both language trainers and image annotators.

Women especially considered the ability to work from home to be beneficial for their family life and other responsibilities. As one 32-year-old Afghan woman based in Bulgaria said: "I am a single mother and I live here with my two kids. I am the one who works. I don't have any family in Bulgaria. (...) I prefer online work because my son needs constant care." Another refugee woman in Lebanon highlighted the importance of home-based freelancing for "earning more money to live with the economic difficulties that we are facing in Lebanon, especially that I am a divorced mom." Due to social and cultural factors, home-based work in the gig economy is widely seen as an attractive option for women refugees.¹⁷² This positive evaluation simultaneously highlights how the continuities between women's work in domestic and market economies become implicated in platform work, including the celebration of worker flexibility, as in combining taken-for-granted care work and housework with paid digital labour.¹⁷³

Refugees also contrasted what they perceived as relatively secure home-based work with the challenges of working around big cities, which often involves public exposure, exhausting transport, and other risks. Working from home was therefore seen as a convenient and safe alternative. As a 20-year-old Syrian refugee in Turkey explained: "I like online work more because it can happen from the house. I don't feel the tiredness so much [working at home] as I do when I work outside the house, in Istanbul." A language trainer based in Beirut said that the ability to teach students remotely, rather than in town, saved him from the expenses, heat, and pressures of the city's infamous traffic.

Yet, for Syrian refugees in places like Lebanon, which imposes severe restrictions on their ability to work, the preference for home-based digital labour was partly determined by this exclusive regime. Some Syrian survey respondents in Lebanon stated that working in image annotation was simply the only option because they were not legally allowed to work elsewhere in their field, while it also allowed them to avoid local racism and discrimination.

172 Abigail Hunt, Emma Samman, and Dina Mansour-Ille, "Syrian Women Refugees in Jordan: Opportunity in the Gig Economy?" (London: ODI, 2017).

173 Melissa Gregg and Rutvica Andrijasevic, "Virtually Absent: The Gendered Histories and Economies of Digital Labour," *Feminist Review* 123, no. 1 (November 1, 2019): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0141778919878929>.

Other aspects of their work that the surveyed refugees experienced as positive included getting to know new friends and coming into contact with people from all over the world, alongside the fact that “the work is challenging” them on a daily basis. This experience evidently differed between different kinds of work: While image annotation can be particularly repetitive and less social in nature, Natakallam’s language training offered a social and human dimension enjoyed by freelancers. Some 70% of survey respondents in language services saw the ability to get to know people from all over the world as a positive aspect of their work.

Refugees’ experience with digital freelancing: Negative aspects

Most refugee freelancers who worked in image annotation considered their low pay to be a main negative aspect of the work. Bound by market rules and competitive pricing, these work platforms struggled to attract clients who paid more than the low price of the global market. The “planetary” competition that pitches workers around the world against each other contributes to a race to the bottom.¹⁷⁴ Although social enterprises like Humans in the Loop tried hard to ensure favourable working conditions for their freelancers, clients’ demands often pushed the pay downward. This experience was worsened by the fluctuating nature of this work and the tight deadlines of project submission. As one Syrian freelancer based in Azaz, northern Syria, explained in an interview:

“On a long project (...) it was huge. A lot of work – we maybe worked up to 15 hours a day, but at least 10 hours on average, and a minimum of 8 hours a day, over a period of two months. (...) The pay was little, maybe 1400 Turkish Lira,¹⁷⁵ or around 200 dollars for two months of work. That’s very little, but unfortunately there is no alternative, it’s the work I have.”

The irregularity of the workload meant that freelancers often had weeks without work but also months where they worked eight or more hours per day. This was especially the case in image annotation, where large projects had to be delivered at certain times and at pricing that was based on annotated images rather than hours of work. Where annotators made mistakes and submitted low-quality work, they were forced to correct it without extra pay. In order to ensure favourable working conditions for all its refugee freelancers in the future, Humans in the Loop is actively working to enforce its Fair Work Policy, including a commitment that all workers will receive pay that is above the local minimum hourly wage.

Under the often challenging circumstances of online work, fatigue poses another problem: a 50-year-old Iraqi freelancer based in Bulgaria said in an interview, when asked about the difficulties she faced:

“My eyes are getting very tired and I had to go to the doctor. If the work needs to be done, the life requires you to work. The eyes...because the laptop is old, I need to buy a new one with a good screen.”

She was even working during our interview as we spoke, at the sound of constant mouse-clicking in the background, saying that she needed to maximize the time she had. “If the work paid 400 or 500 dollars a month, that would be good. But that’s not the reality”, she said. Asked about the irregularity of the income, she added that within a normal year, she would probably work for three months but spend the remaining nine months with no or very little work.

174 Mark Graham and Mohammad Anwar, “The Global Gig Economy: Towards a Planetary Labour Market?,” *First Monday* 24, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i4.9913>.

175 The Turkish Lira has become a common and trusted currency on northern Syria, not least because the Syrian Pound’s devaluation and fluctuation.

Respondents working in image annotation also stated that they found digital work isolating and lonely despite the benefits of home-based labour. Even in the field of remote person-to-person language training, where many refugees enjoyed getting to know people from all over the world, 43% stated that “working online is socially isolating.” This may have been exacerbated by the lockdown measures of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on mental health. Other reported negative aspects among freelancers in language training were that preparation time was not paid (32%), that online work does not provide security (25%), and that their work often takes place at inconvenient times (25%) due to time differences between their location and the students, many of whom are based in North America.

The negative aspects of digital work highlighted by refugees combine with the structural problem of non-standard freelance employment that is characteristic for digital platforms, which does not provide the social protections of decent work. Whether individual refugee freelancers had access to healthcare, insurance, and social security was therefore largely up to them and was not covered by the buyers of their work. Indeed, freelancers who label data and train algorithms that power AI technology do so mostly without access to a fair wage or basic benefits.¹⁷⁶

Low pay as an economic lifeline

Although intentionally designed by social enterprises as an additional source of income rather than a main job, the digital freelancing of refugees nevertheless becomes a main financial pillar in the majority of cases. How much each individual freelancer earned per hour or per month was rather difficult to determine. The surveys and interviews showed that the amount of work constantly changes while some months do not offer employment at all. Both the surveys and interviews asked respondents for estimates about their average monthly income, as well as their “worst” and “best” months so far.

At Natakallam, refugee freelancers made US\$10 per hour of remote conversation at the time of research, and some also had other income from giving remote lectures or from translation work: 35% earned less than \$200 Dollars a month, 44% earned between \$200 and \$400, while 21% earned between \$400 and \$600 or more. Although this freelance work constituted between 75% and 100% of total income for about a quarter of Natakallam’s freelancers, 30% said it was less than 25% of their total income and another 30% that it was between 25 and 50%. Another job and support from family members were the most common sources of additional income.

At one of the image annotation platforms, the average monthly salary that respondents estimated was around \$270 US-dollars, at an average 35 hours of work per week. Because these numbers are informed guesses taken by the workers themselves, they have to be treated with some degree of caution. Overall, refugee freelancers conveyed a feeling that this kind of work is necessary and sometimes enjoyable, but ultimately not adequately paid. One language trainer based in Lebanon explained that he made \$500 in his best month but usually earned much less. Asked about his view on online freelancing more generally, he said: “Sometimes in online work, the worker will be like a slave. I say, 10 dollars in my situation per hour is great. But at the same time, it also shows that this is not really respectful and decent work. But for me, right now, 10 dollars an hour is great.”

176 Caroline Sindors, “Examining the Human Labor Behind AI,” Mozilla Foundation, 2020, <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/examining-human-labor-behind-ai/>.

Professional futures and career progression

Building on important support mechanisms, the mediating role of the social enterprises includes the aim to promote transferable skills and career progression. **One of the key challenges remains how to turn digital refugee livelihoods into social mobility and increased access to decent work.** The platforms in image annotation held short training sessions before individual projects. In collaboration with partner organizations, some platforms offered longer three-month trainings in web design or other digital skills, alongside English language training. Humans in the Loop, for example, held courses of 16 hours per week across 12 weeks in computer skills and English literacy, alongside shorter trainings in Excel and graphic design. These skills could be transferable into other forms of employment, and social enterprises like Humans in the Loop encourage and support students in these courses to move on to decent sustainable work. However, refugees in many locations faced severe restrictions to their economic activity and the kind of work they could access even if their digital skills were well developed. This is, in part, why many remain dependent on platform work and freelancing as a source of income.

While the overall majority of surveyed freelancers considered their digital work as an important contribution to their economic survival, most did not look at it as a potential source of social mobility and future career progression. Still, a little more than half of the freelancers surveyed in Lebanon stated that they wanted to become a successful freelancer, when asked about their plans for the professional future. Other prominent answers included the aim to continue university studies or learning a new vocation and profession, as well as the plan to learn more digital skills and find secure employment at a local workplace. A third stated that they “plan to move to another country to find employment there.” Among freelancers involved in remote language training, 84% agreed that this work has given them “new professional goals” and built their skills, including translation skills and inter-cultural communication skills.

Refugee online work during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, lockdown measures and an economic downturn gave home-based remote work renewed significance in many places. Refugees who were already involved in home-based freelancing were probably among the luckier ones during the pandemic. Asked specifically about changes in their experience of online freelancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half (45%) of conversation partners at Natakallam stated that, “my income from work online has increased since the outbreak of COVID-19”. Their customers located in the Global North suddenly had much time to fill with language learning while sitting in confinement at home. About half of freelancers on the surveyed platforms agreed that without the income from their remote work, they would not have been able to pay for rent, food, or basic services at that time.

This relevance of digital refugee work as a lifeline appears especially important if we consider the general economic impact COVID-19 had on the households of freelancers. At Natakallam, 35% of freelancers reported that other members in their household lost their job while 22% lost their own local jobs, turning digital freelancing from a side income into their only remaining source of livelihood. Some 29% borrowed money from friends or family, while many struggled to cover rent with income from freelancing alone after they had lost their other job. Among freelancers working in image annotation from Lebanon, some stated that they had to sell personal items for money, had to borrow money from family members of friends, while they or members in their household lost their jobs.

Conclusion: From digital livelihoods to decent work

Digital freelancing offers an important economic lifeline for refugees and vulnerable citizens in host communities – a lifeline that sometimes leads to new skills and positive experiences. Evidence collected from the three platforms in image annotation and language services underlines the potential of digitally mediated remote work to become a source of economic livelihood for refugees. At the same time, low payment levels and insecure work patterns mean that such work is best seen as one of several pillars of economic livelihoods.

The road that would lead from insecure freelancing to decent work is long and full of obstacles. Viewed on its own, digital refugee work represents a set of mostly insecure, badly paid forms of home-based labour that do not offer a pathway to career progression and decent permanent work. The question is whether the need for (any) income in situations of displacement and economic need outweighs the demand for decency of working conditions. In this sense, it matters whether we see this as an important contribution to crisis-stricken refugee livelihoods, or as one particular form of exploitative digital labour in the emerging future of work. The most important question may concern the missing link between them: how can these important providers of digital livelihoods be supported in ways that move refugees' experiences closer towards decent work and sustainable dignified employment? As the next session will discuss, the private sector will likely play a particularly important role in answering this question, given that even the most dignified aims of digital livelihood initiatives will not succeed without someone buying the work that refugees do at a reasonable price.

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► Remote online work for refugees: Private sector perceptions

Lorraine Charles

Introduction

As attention from UN agencies, the EU and refugee hosting countries has become more focused on viable options for refugee employment, the protracted refugee crisis and instability in the Middle East has complicated the push for sustainable livelihoods. Financial pressures, shrinking economies and rising unemployment plague many refugee-hosting countries in the Middle East, meaning that the presence of large refugee populations is perceived as an additional burden. Issues such as difficulties in accessing education and acquiring skills, as well as legislative and structural restrictions pose ongoing barriers to refugee employment. **The rise and spread of digital work now provides an opportunity to develop scalable, sustainable and replicable models for refugee job creation. Technology has the potential to create and facilitate jobs for many, including refugees. Yet, this potential has not been fully realised.**

COVID-19 has caused significant disruption to the world's economies and societies. Most significantly, it has changed the way that the global workforce functions, transforming the employee-employer relationship. It has tested companies' ability to quickly adapt and reconceptualise the way they work. A wider shift to remote work has triggered a perception that employment may no longer be bound by the geographical restrictions of one particular location, amidst digital work opportunities offered by the Internet. Remote work can function with the help of online management and digital payment systems, thereby creating a new way for many individuals to work. Overall, the Internet has expanded the opportunities for companies to hire employees remotely from their homes, allowing them to work and communicate virtually. Indeed, many companies now realise the potential of remote work. In theory, at least, employees can work anywhere: from home, from a café, or perhaps even from a refugee camp?

Based on my experience of facilitating remote work opportunities for refugees, I argue that there is now an unprecedented potential to create a global movement toward remote work that can provide livelihood opportunities for refugees. The focus of this short essay is the private sector as the main actor that can contribute to the remote employment of refugees, while helping to solve structural problems and fund capacity building and digital skills among refugees. My discussion is based on preliminary qualitative research conducted within the wider field of remote work, primarily focusing on companies that operate either partially or fully remotely. I aim to sketch the perspective of the private sector on the question of hiring refugees remotely, focusing particularly on what they perceive to be the main obstacles. Importantly, remote work for refugees should not be confined to freelance work on digital labour platforms but must encompass the large variety of decent remote work options that are available today.

Refugee livelihoods: Challenges and opportunities of remote work

The challenges of integrating refugees into transnational economies in Middle East host communities and elsewhere have been well documented throughout this report. Among them are a lack of local job opportunities, legal restrictions and a lack of political willingness among governments, meaning that the vast majority of refugees are not able to access legal employment and must instead work informally under often precarious conditions.¹⁷⁷

Digital remote work is now widely recognised as a viable employment option for refugees.¹⁷⁸ Many of the present challenges are not specific to refugee contexts but are amplified for refugees working remotely. These obstacles to hiring refugees remotely include legal-political (legislation), socio-economic (labour market characteristics, skillsets) and financial aspects (payment), among others. **While remote work for refugees presents a promising solution to the provision of employment, the fulfilment of this promise largely depends on the willingness of the private sector to hire refugees as remote workers.** One of the key requirements is for greater collaboration between the international development and humanitarian sectors on the one hand and the private sector on the other hand. Moreover, UN agencies and NGOs must work closely with governments to facilitate cooperation among various stakeholders towards creating a remote work ecosystem.¹⁷⁹

For refugee remote work to become a feasible reality, a multi-stakeholder approach requires governments in refugee-hosting countries to change their policy to allow greater access to employment for refugees, particularly supporting remote work. It requires funding from the American and European governments, via their national aid agencies to support capacity building. The private sector is needed to support with capacity building, to hire and to mentor refugees, to fund programmes and also to solve structural challenges, such as financial inclusion. Digital skills training providers are further required to provide refugees with the skills needed to work successfully remotely and compete in a transnational labour market.

177 Katharina Lenner and Lewis Turner. "Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labour Market in Jordan," *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 1 (2019): 65-95; David Anda *et al.* "The economics of the Syrian refugee crisis in neighbouring countries: The case of Lebanon," *Economics of Transition and Institutional Change* 28, no. 1 (2020): 28: 89– 109; Del Carpio, X; Seker, S, Yener, A. "Integrating Refugees into the Turkish Labor Market," *Forced Migration Review*, 58 (2018): 11-13.

178 World Bank, "Jordan: US\$200 million to improve digital services and access to jobs for youth and underserved communities," March 20, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/03/20/jordan-us200-million-to-improve-digital-services-and-access-to-jobs-for-youth-and-underserved-communities>; Lorraine Charles, "How remote work could help refugees," *World Economic Forum*, 22 Nov, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/11/remote-work-could-help-refugees/>; Evan Easton-Calabria. *The Migrant Union: Digital Livelihoods for People on the Move* (New York: UNDP, 2019). <https://www.catalyst.undp.org/content/catalyst/en/home/what-we-do/migrant-nations-initiative/>

179 Lorraine Charles, "Giving Refugees Employment Opportunities Through Remote Work," Centre for Global Policy, January 20, 2021, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/giving-refugees-employment-opportunities-through-remote-work/>.

Methods

The research behind the following insights was conducted virtually between August and December 2019 among twenty companies that work in technology, content creation, digital marketing, learning, training, management consultancy and legal sectors via an online survey using Google Forms. In addition, experts at three companies were interviewed to gain a more nuanced understanding of their perceptions of hiring refugees remotely. These insights are backed up by the personal experience of the author in establishing a social enterprise that provides skills training as well as links to remote employment for refugees: Na'amal.¹⁸⁰ Part of this work has been implemented in Jordan between June and August 2020. Further insight was gained from research that examined the digital skills landscape in Jordan conducted by the author between September and October 2020.

Towards a global remote work network

The idea of working remotely, sometimes called telecommuting, has been around since the 1970s, initially with companies transferring work to lower-wage areas.¹⁸¹ By the early 1990s, the spread of digital connectivity meant that lower-income countries such as India and the Philippines became prime locations for significant amounts of outsourced work.¹⁸²

As more people in low-income countries become connected to the Internet, a different type of "outsourcing" emerged: digital labour platforms. These platforms allow workers to bid for small and large jobs as freelancers, posted by individuals and companies. There has been debate about the equity of digital platforms, with preliminary indications that not everyone can compete equally in digital platforms and evidence that non-Western individuals are disadvantaged,¹⁸³ often with blatant displays of preference for Western workers.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, some research has also pointed to the precarious nature of this work, meaning that workers lack of bargaining power often results in a race to the bottom of wages levels.¹⁸⁵

Even before the shift triggered by the COVID pandemic, the need to access IT talent not bound by geography encouraged a handful of tech start-ups to operate remotely, usually with no physical offices.¹⁸⁶ These companies are often described as "remote-first" or "fully distributed", hiring talent globally and across time zones.¹⁸⁷ Yet, before the pandemic the conventional wisdom in the IT sector had been that offices were still critical to productivity and work culture, and it was expected that talent would move to cities, where companies were located. Nevertheless, recent research has pointed out that working remotely brings significant benefits to companies.¹⁸⁸

180 Further information on Na'amal can be found at: <https://naamal.org/>.

181 Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, "United by a common language? Trade union responses in the UK and India to call centre offshoring," *Antipode* 40, no. 1 (2008): 131–154.

182 Peter Dicken, *Global Shift. 7th ed.* (London: Sage, 2014).

183 Niels Beerepoot and Bart Lambregts, "Competition in online job marketplaces: towards a global labour market for outsourcing services?" *Global Networks* 15, no. 2 (2015): 236–255.

184 Mark Graham *et al.* "Digital Labour and Development: Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods." *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 23, no. 2 (2017): 135–62.

185 Arne L. Kalleberg, "Precarious work, insecure workers: employment relations in transition," *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 1 (2009): 1–22; Gina Neff, *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

186 Prithwiraj Choudhury *et al.*, "GitLab: work where you want, when you want," *Journal of Organization Design* 9, no. 23 (2020).

187 Hugo Trovão *et al.*, "Enabling distributed SME," *2017 12th Iberian Conference on Information Systems and Technologies (CISTI)*, Lisbon (2017): 1–8.

188 Nicholas Bloom *et al.* "Does working from home work? Evidence from a Chinese experiment," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130, no. 1 (2015): 165–218.

As the list of companies announcing that remote working practices within their organisations will remain after COVID is growing, the question remains whether this will become the new norm. Companies that have transitioned to a remote work structure are now supported by a rapidly growing industry and digital ecosystem. This includes innovative online tools for project management (Trello) as well as asynchronous (Slack) and synchronous (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) communication and collaboration tools (Google Suite). There are job platforms that only display remote jobs, such as Remotive and Abdo; there are training and education companies that train workers and leaders how to transition to a remote set-up, such as Workplaceless, while a range of consultants and advisors help companies, cities and entire countries to transition to a remote workforce (see Distribute Consulting or Remote-how). Remote work community groups run on Slack channels underline the intensity of the shift towards a global interest in remote work. These emerging actors and new processes present an opportunity for refugees who work remotely to be integrated into this network, which could not only facilitate employment but also provide training and a supportive community.

However, the integration of refugees into labour markets has generally been less successful than among other migrants.¹⁸⁹ Thus, targeted programmes to support refugee employment will be necessary for sustainable inclusion.¹⁹⁰ It is promising that large companies have recently stepped up to commit to employing refugees,¹⁹¹ as companies such as Oliver Wyman and Starbucks have established programmes that employ refugees, although this has taken the form of traditional location-based employment. In a similar vein, Tent Partnership for Refugees, a coalition of mainly Fortune 500 companies, has been set up to support refugee employment, although it is not clear how many of them would also consider hiring refugees remotely. This may soon change. Now that companies realise the potential of remote work, there is an opportunity for refugees to become part of this new reality. A growing desire among some companies to have a positive impact on the lives of refugees is beginning to warm up to the idea of hiring refugees remotely.¹⁹²

Perceptions of the private sector toward hiring refugees

Overall, while companies expressed a willingness to hire refugees, the main challenges lay in the following areas: legal questions, cultural sensitivity, language and skill gaps, as well as connectivity.

Questions about the legality and the right to work were concerns employers expressed when asked about hiring refugees, with one employer asking: “Will they have a legal status that allows us to employ and payroll them?” This highlights the importance of clarifying the legal status around refugee remote work as well as coming up with a workable solution that would allow companies to legally hire refugees. The fact that the rules for remote work lie in a legislative grey area in many countries, even for native populations, makes remote work for refugees even more complicated. For example, in Jordan, Syrian refugees have legal access to very few sectors of the labour market (agriculture, retail, hospitality and construction). Thus, they cannot work in many professions, including those in the technology sector. At the same time, Jordanian legislation allows home-based businesses, although the law does not specifically state whether refugees can legally work remotely. This has been interpreted as refugees being tolerated to work as freelancers. The rationale is that because Syrians would not be in direct competition with Jordanians for jobs if they freelance online for employers located elsewhere, it is more

189 Zerrin Salikutluk *et al.* “Refugees entered the labor market later than other migrants,” *DIW Economic Bulletin, German Institute for Economic Research* 6, no. 34/35 (2016): 407-413.

190 OECD and UNHCR, *Engaging with employers in the hiring of refugees* (2018), <https://www.oecd.org/els/miq/UNHCR-OECD-Engaging-with-employers-in-the-hiring-of-refugees.pdf>

191 World Bank, “20 Global Companies Announce New Commitments to Help Address the Refugee Crisis,” September 24, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/09/24/20-global-companies-announce-new-commitments-to-help-address-the-refugee-crisis>.

192 Research conducted by the author in Jordan between September and October 2020.

acceptable to the government. There is some indication that the government is turning a blind eye to Syrian refugees working remotely as freelancers, although there seems to be little clarity about the option of them working on a more permanent basis for an overseas employer. Refugees in Lebanon, and to a lesser extent in Turkey, face similar challenges working remotely.

Companies also expressed concerns that refugees should have the cultural sensitivity to work with Western companies and colleagues. As one survey respondent put it: "A lot of the work we do is culture-specific, and they would need to understand Western culture deeply." Respondents were further concerned that refugees would have the appropriate skills to work remotely, placing more importance on soft skills and language ability than on technical skills. Some respondents desired that their employees have advanced communication skills and are fluent in written and spoken English. It is noteworthy that even for companies that are not based in English speaking countries, hiring a multi-national team, English is often the lingua franca and employers expect at least an upper intermediate level of English. Employers also placed importance on other less tangible and measurable skills, attributes which they look for in any potential employee. As one employer explained: "I need my employees to be empathetic, responsive, independent and resourceful." Respondents further wanted employees who had a "grit and growth" mindset, were self-motivated, self-organised and disciplined: a range of soft skills that can sometimes be used to discredit those with different backgrounds.

The importance of finding employees being able to navigate this space was emphasised by one employer: "It is hard to find people who follow directions (...) are good active listeners and that can take and give feedback, have cultural competencies who are self-starters (...) We don't operate in a traditional structure; (...) it's important the person can be self-directed." Remote employers increasingly demand that their workers have highly developed soft skills and cultural competencies, and as the case study on digital work in Berlin indicates in Part 1 of this report, fulfilling these demands for soft skills and culturally specific competencies poses a challenge for some refugees.

► **Spotlight: A company's experience in hiring a refugee remotely**

Shield GEO is headquartered in Sydney, Australia, and employs fifty-four staff located in seventeen countries. In October 2020, the company hired their first refugee, who was based in Malaysia, as an Operations Administrator to work with other team members in the UK and India. Being the first time that the company had hired a refugee, they adapted their recruitment process because they were unsure how best to assess skills. Instead of their regular assessment, they adopted a more flexible approach and the job interview focused on values as well as on technical expertise.

Refugees cannot legally be employed in Malaysia. Therefore, employment was offered on a contractor basis. Employees with the right to work in their resident country are generally employed full-time by Shield and processed through a payroll with tax and social security contributions, but this was not possible in this case.

One of the biggest challenges they faced in employing a refugee remotely has been technology and connectivity. Internet connection among refugee employees has been inconsistent and there have also been issues with the quality of the equipment. According to Shield's CEO, hardware is generally not supplied to contractors. In retrospect, their experience taught them that it should have been provided from the beginning. Despite these challenges, the company underlined that their experience of hiring a refugee remotely has been overly positive.

There is evidently some interest among the private sector in supporting employment for refugees. Apart from structural barriers, “soft skills” were what employers were most concerned about. It becomes clear that private sector companies would hire refugees remotely if it makes good business sense and if their skills are competitive.

Moving forward: Building the refugee remote workforce

Remote work is not a silver bullet for refugee employment, nor will it address all the problems associated with refugee livelihoods. However, it can become a viable option for a large number of refugees who have the aptitude and skills needed for working remotely and in digital fields of work. While my focus has been on companies hiring refugees on a full-time, part-time or consultancy basis, the following recommendations also extend to those working as freelancers on digital platforms:

Further investment in training to support digital livelihoods is needed in order for refugees to successfully work in the digital sector, both globally and locally. There is a particular requirement for technical skills and soft skills, as well as English language skills. More international funding should go to providers that have a track record of successful skills training, with the aim to produce graduates that are globally competitive. While there is an understandable need to scale programmes that train refugees, donors should adopt a diversified approach to their funding, supporting training in low, medium and high skills.

Problems with digital infrastructure need to be addressed in order to support digital livelihoods among refugees, including improving internet connectivity and access to adequate equipment, without which digital employment is not possible. Governments need to ensure that reliable and affordable internet is available to everyone, including refugees in urban areas and in camps. Affordable, well equipped and maintained workspaces and co-working spaces in communities could be set up to support remote work.

Governments and international organisations should review the legal frameworks that govern refugee employment. Further clarification of labour laws is necessary in many refugee hosting countries, so remote employers have clarity over the legal conditions of employment, while giving refugees the necessary protections when engaging in remote work opportunities.

There is an **opportunity to incentivise host governments** with a narrative that remote work for refugees is a win-win solution. Refugees and the host community can be employed and paid by global companies who are in need of talent. This means that refugees in host countries become more financially independent and require less financial assistance. At the same time, foreign revenue flows into the host country via foreign currency salaries paid to workers and host governments contribute to a greater share of income tax.

In order to fulfil the aims of forging decent refugee remote work, **multi-stakeholder cooperation** and coordination is needed between refugee-hosting governments, NGOs and INGOs, as well as the private sector and refugee training providers. This cooperation should aim at changing the infrastructural obstacles while also ensuring that refugees have the appropriate skills that companies need to hire them. Ultimately, there is a need for establishing global norms and mechanisms for refugees to be recruited, hired and paid remotely, and to ensure they are protected by the labour laws of host countries.

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This report explores the growing role of digital economies for refugees from a global perspective. Grounded in the pioneering research of a diverse collective of experts, it offers crucial insights on the risks and opportunities of digital refugee livelihoods at the world's economic margins. Incorporating case studies from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, the research provides for the first time a comprehensive analysis of the inclusion and exclusion of refugees in a digitized world of work. The report covers issues such as digital skills training, ICT connectivity, and entrepreneurialism, while exploring the current relevance of digital labour platforms and the online gig economy for refugees. *Digital refugee livelihoods and decent work* will be of crucial interest to anyone who would like to understand the current and future potential of digital economies for job creation among marginalized populations, and among refugees and migrants in particular.

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