

# Enabling the Economic Integration of Refugees: Lessons learned on refugee employment and employability from the rapid response to Ukraine

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## The war in Ukraine and the economic integration of refugees

Since 24 February 2022, nearly 8 million refugees from Ukraine have crossed into neighbouring countries. The war is widely recognized as the worst conflict in Europe since the Second World War and adds to the estimated 32 million people worldwide who have been displaced across borders (UNHCR, 2021).

At the end of 2020, the number of active conflicts around the globe reached a record high, more than at any time since 1945 (UNHCR, 2021). Investing in durable solutions in countries of origin is an imperative, yet government, business and civil society leaders must also enable economic opportunity for forcibly displaced populations, supporting those who flee while converting potential challenges into opportunities for host countries.

There is an opportunity to learn from the government policies and business practices applied in responding to the refugee crisis in Ukraine to motivate progressive and equitable solutions for the economic integration of forcibly displaced populations globally.

In May 2022, the World Economic Forum launched the Refugee Employment and Employability Initiative to accelerate global support for the economic integration of refugees. This brief builds on the initiative's high-level dialogues and the lessons learned across the business community and other stakeholders from the rapid labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees. It includes insights gathered from:

- The World Economic Forum's Community of Chief Human Resources Officers, which includes 140 CHROs from leading multinational companies in over 20 industries, spanning North America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia
- A survey of companies participating in the Refugee Employment and Employability Initiative
- Consultations with international organizations and civil society partners

A collective understanding of what worked in the rapid integration of Ukrainian refugees to host-country labour markets and a consensus on implications for the future are critical to building capability and resilience for future responses.

## Four takeaways on accelerating refugee employment and employability

The workplace acts as an important avenue through which refugees contribute to and integrate into the broader social fabric of the host community (UNHCR, 2020). However, legal barriers to accessing the labour market, language and recertification requirements, challenges matching talent to appropriate vacancies, and social and cultural factors are consistently cited as key constraints to the successful labour market integration of refugees and forcibly displaced populations.

The following sections explore each factor in turn, articulating what the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis has revealed and what the global community could consider in its future responses to refugee crises.

### 1. Ensure legal and timely access to local labour markets

On 4 March 2022, the European Union enacted its 2001 Temporary Protection Directive, a legislative instrument applied to provide protection in the event of an influx of displaced persons from non-EU countries who cannot return to their country of origin (European Commission, 2022). This historic gesture provided the legal grounds for those fleeing to access socio-economic support as well as employment opportunities and was the framework within which EU countries adapted national legislation to accommodate Ukrainian refugees.

Poland removed all requirements for a work permit for Ukrainian refugees and their partners and guaranteed access to the labour market. Employers in Poland were required to notify the local labour office upon hiring a refugee from Ukraine.

In other countries, the extent of legal facilitation varied, but employers responding to the crisis were confident of the legal provisions and consequently motivated to act. The strength of the European business community's direct employment support for Ukrainian refugees was unparalleled and demonstrates the centrality of clear legal access to the labour market.

Beyond the EU's response to Ukraine, Colombia provides a notable example of legal facilitation of labour market access for refugees. In February 2021, the Colombian government announced a 10-year Temporary Protection Status (TPS) for over 1.7 million Venezuelans already displaced in Colombia, as well as to those newly entering ([OCHA, 2021](#)).

This landmark decision was taken with a view to ensure refugee protection while safeguarding the administrative systems in the host country and, uniquely, applied retrospectively. Providing refugees with legal access to host-country labour markets will be crucial in addressing refugee crises successfully in the future.

Additionally, policies that work in conjunction with a country's existing asylum system are an equally important area of focus to enable the economic integration of refugees in the long term. In Germany, a scheme enacted in 2016 allows refugees to access educational and vocational training and stable residence permits in the process, while those who find employment have the right to remain in Germany for an additional two years ([UNHCR & OECD, 2018](#)).

## 2. Prioritize skills-first approaches and reduce reliance on language in hiring

Language is one of the most important aspects of integration and dictates employment prospects to a large extent. Many fleeing Ukraine had to learn new working languages or apply them professionally for the first time, including Polish, German, Czech, Bulgarian, English, among others. Employers offered language support in response, often working in partnership with civil society organizations to deliver programming. For example, prior to the war in Ukraine, IKEA conducted interviews in the candidate's preferred language in a number of countries. In responding to the crisis, the company leveraged this existing practice with [IKEA Poland](#). At IKEA Switzerland, in lieu of a formal interview, job suitability is assessed over a five-day trial period. Workplace initiatives such as language buddy programmes can be leveraged in parallel to support in-work language acquisition.

In addition to language support, recognition for skills and qualifications plays an important role in ensuring displaced talent is recruited at the appropriate levels. The [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees \(EQPR\)](#) was used to activate broad support for the recognition of Ukrainian credentials, with online training on Ukrainian credentials held for evaluators. Implemented in 2017 by the Council of Europe, the EQPR enables refugees to have their qualifications assessed and validated in the absence of full documentation. The global application of this effort to recognize displaced persons for their existing skills and qualifications is reflected in the [UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants](#). To globalize such efforts, both in refugee situations and more widely, the [World Economic Forum's Global Skills Taxonomy](#) enables industry convergence on a global skills dictionary.

The taxonomy is accompanied by a Skills-First Playbook that encourages industries and employers to focus directly on skills,

recognizing skills-based credentials such as micro-credentials and professional certificates. The Global Skills Taxonomy and accompanying Playbook both work towards preferencing skills and acknowledging alternative forms of granting credentials to expand access to global labour markets.

## 3. Create visibility for job openings and proactively support job matching

Across governments and the private sector, a recurring theme in the response to the Ukraine refugee crisis was creating visibility for vacancies. The [Adecco Group's Jobs for Ukraine Platform](#) and the Portuguese government's [Portugal for Ukraine Platform](#) both centralized employment and employability opportunities. Nevertheless, as data from the Adecco Group's portal suggested, skills mismatches were a challenge. Many applicants on the portal had skills in administration, customer services, sales and trading and hospitality, while vacancies were concentrated in information and communication technologies, insurance and finance, legal and human resources and engineering.

Such mismatches can be addressed in part through more proactive talent matching. [ManpowerGroup](#) adapted jobs to the skills of Ukrainian refugees and interviewed candidates to facilitate job matching. They created a public utility firm via [Welcome.US](#) to host job postings and worked with employers under the Welcome.US umbrella to run job fairs in targeted communities. Similarly, [SAP](#) developed a bilingual platform where interested candidates could register their interest in applying for a job within SAP's ecosystem and speak to an adviser accordingly.

Employers also considered that many of those fleeing Ukraine, often women with children, planned on returning to Ukraine and therefore did not necessarily want permanent roles, particularly at the onset of the crisis. Many companies therefore provided a variety of contract types to successfully match talent while leaving flexibility for both parties.

## 4. Drive public-private partnerships that combine social and employment support

A number of companies took a holistic approach in responding to the crisis in Ukraine, mobilizing financial support and connecting with local community-based partners to support refugees in finding housing, navigating administrative processes and accessing psychological support. [bp](#), for example, complemented its \$20 million contribution to relief effort by partnering with refugee-serving civil society organizations to create and pilot recruitment outreach events. bp further provided toolkits for hiring to line managers and created tailored onboarding processes for refugees hired into the organization.

Similarly, [Agility](#) works in partnership with UNHCR to support skills development, job readiness, education and direct assistance in multiple countries. In Malaysia, the company supports a UNHCR-run community centre that brings together over 50 Malaysian community organizations to provide health, education and employability services, while in Jordan, it supports skills and job-matching programmes.

An integrated social and economic approach to support reflects the totality of one's circumstances and often proves more effective as a result. The [Swedish Establishment](#)

[Programme, Etableringsprogrammet](#), is another example. The programme provides language support, access to internships and a civic orientation course over 24 months while providing financial support to meet the living costs of participants, in some cases including support for housing and childcare.

The [Limak Group's](#) collaboration with the Atlantic Council in Turkey to produce a documentary on Syrian refugee women who established livelihoods as entrepreneurs in Turkey is one final illustration of how economic integration and social and cultural integration mutually reinforce each other. Partnerships that offer broad support while enabling workplace exposure are particularly promising.

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## Towards alignment and preparedness for future crises

The key takeaways highlighted in this paper are a starting point for business and government action on the economic integration of refugees. Ukrainian refugees primarily fled to neighbouring European countries, many of them advanced economies. However, according to the latest data from the UNHCR, it is low- and middle-income countries that host the

largest proportion of the world's refugees. Global resource collaboration, such as the [Global Concessional Financing Facility](#), which provides development support on concessional terms to middle-income countries impacted by refugee crises, is therefore critical. A collaboration between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan to activate the [Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees](#) provides an additional example of international political and financial collaboration across a region to support solutions at the country of origin in conjunction with host communities.

Refugees' economic integration demands more than financing, political and legal mechanisms. Maintaining the skills and motivation of refugees in host countries is critical for future livelihoods. Multinational businesses and their subsidiaries can play an important role in supporting the employment and employability of those displaced for continued human capital development. Irrespective of the length of crises or displacement, an investment in human capability is timeless and can generate value for host communities and countries of origin.

The crisis in Ukraine invoked exemplary humanitarianism in the public and private sectors. The lessons derived point to strategies for refugee employment and employability that can and must be globally applied to provide support to the millions displaced globally.



The [Refugee Employment and Employability Initiative](#) aims to create visibility for the policies and pathways most effective in enabling refugee employment and employability and convenes global leaders in government, business and civil society to take action.

The Refugee Employment and Employability Initiative includes:

- Agility
- APCO Worldwide
- bp
- Deutsche Post DHL Group
- IFRC
- Ingka
- Kale Group
- Limak Holding
- ManpowerGroup
- Flex
- GEP
- SAP
- The Adecco Group
- The Tent Partnership for Refugees
- UNESCO
- UNHCR