



## ► Policy Brief

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# Protecting the rights at work of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons during the COVID-19 pandemic

## Recommendations for Policy-makers and Constituents

► *As the pandemic and the jobs crisis evolve, the need to protect the most vulnerable becomes even more urgent*

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### ► Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold worldwide, with direct effects on peoples' health and deepening socio-economic impacts. A number of countries have begun lifting lockdown and containment measures but these continue to affect large numbers of workers, significantly reducing economic activity and working time.<sup>2</sup>

Refugees<sup>3</sup> and other forcibly displaced persons<sup>4</sup> are facing many of the same challenges as national workers in providing for themselves and their families. But they also

experience additional challenges linked to their precarious legal status, the associated restrictions on their mobility, and the physical and mental distress stemming from forced displacement from their home countries. This makes it more difficult for them to obtain and maintain a job that is decent, let alone benefit from social protection. These factors exacerbate the effects of the pandemic on them, while reducing their access to the coping strategies that may be available to nationals.

<sup>1</sup> ILO (2020), [COVID-19 has exposed the fragility of our economies](#) Director General Comment, 27 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> ILO (2020), [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work](#), Fourth edition.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this briefing, the term 'refugees' should be understood broadly, as defined in international and regional instruments, particularly the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and include refugees who are recognized and granted a lawful status to stay in the host country as well as refugees who have not yet been recognized but who seek international protection.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'other forcibly displaced persons' should, in the context of this briefing, be understood to include persons who are outside of their country or origin and in need of international protection and who may face existential threats, but who do not qualify as refugees under international or regional law. The term 'displaced persons' is referred to in ILO instruments, including ILO C.97 and R.086. Unless otherwise specified, the word refugees is used generically through the brief to include both refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. Internally displaced persons are not covered by this brief.

This supplement to the **ILO Policy Brief “Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic”**<sup>5</sup> provides an overview of the current situation of refugee workers<sup>6</sup> within the context of the COVID-19 crisis and offers policy recommendations for protecting their rights

at work based on international labour standards and emerging country experiences, with the understanding that the situation is changing rapidly.

## ► Refugee workers in light of COVID-19

At least 134 countries host refugees, all of which are currently affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> However, 86 per cent of refugees are hosted by low and middle-income countries, where some of the greatest losses in employment and working time are reported by the ILO. Workers employed in the informal economy, a major source of jobs in these countries, particularly for women, are expected to suffer the greatest income losses due to the interlocking effects of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown and containment measures.<sup>8</sup>

Refugee workers mostly live in urban areas,<sup>9</sup> side by side with host communities, and are largely concentrated in informal economy jobs. Despite growing global consensus on the importance of facilitating refugees’ access to labour markets,<sup>10</sup> a combination of legal and regulatory restrictions, together with practical constraints, such as language barriers and administrative hurdles, continue to severely limit refugees’ access to formal jobs and learning opportunities in most refugee-hosting countries.<sup>11</sup> COVID-19 has exacerbated these constraints even further.

Gender and skill level also influence refugees’ labour market outcomes, with workers in low-skilled jobs often being among the most disadvantaged. Although refugees have a variety of skills and often work in countries with labour shortages, they often find it difficult to get recognition of their skills, qualifications and diplomas acquired in their home countries. As a result, they are

more likely to take up jobs below their skill levels.<sup>12</sup> While women refugees face many of the same barriers as men, they are at greater risk of multiple discrimination with regard to pay, access to employment and livelihood opportunities, vocational training, or services. As gender inequalities have been accentuated by the COVID-19 crisis,<sup>13</sup> women refugees are placed in even more vulnerable situations.

The depth and extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees and other forcibly displaced persons varies across regions and over time, but labour market impacts have already been documented in a number of areas.

### Loss of income and jobs

Already, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, refugee workers were susceptible to earn less than nationals in the same occupations, leaving them much less prepared to face income loss, rising prices of daily commodities or unforeseen health costs. In some cases, loss of livelihoods has exacerbated food insecurity and put continuous education for children at risk. For example, in a study conducted in Peru in 2019, Venezuelans salaried workers reported that, unlike their Peruvian peers, they did not receive bonuses or other compensations that could have allowed them to cope with such a crisis. This is mostly because they are in undeclared work and paid through

<sup>5</sup> ILO (2020), [Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), ILO Policy Brief.

<sup>6</sup> Refugee workers refer here to refugees and asylum seekers seeking employment or currently employed, or working for their own account, irrespective of the formal or informal character or the legality of the activity.

<sup>7</sup> According to [UNHCR](#), 134 refugee hosting countries are reporting local transmission of COVID-19.

<sup>8</sup> ILO (2020), [ILO Monitor: COVID 19 and the World of Work](#), Third Edition.

<sup>9</sup> According to [UNHCR](#), as of 2018, 61 per cent of the global refugee population was concentrated in urban, non-camp settings.

<sup>10</sup> See for example ILO (2016), [ILO Guiding principles on the access of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons to the labour market](#).

<sup>11</sup> Zetter and Ruadel (2016), [Refugees’ Right to Work and Access to Labor Markets – An Assessment](#).

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO (2018), [What a waste: ensuring migrants and refugees’ qualifications and prior learning are recognized](#), Policy Paper No. 37.

<sup>13</sup> ILO (2020), [The COVID-19 Response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work](#).

informal means.<sup>14</sup> In Kenya, most refugees in the camps are employed informally without regular contracts, often receiving below the national minimum wage.<sup>15</sup>

Gender is another source of disadvantage for refugee workers. In Turkey, for example, according to an ILO analysis of national labour force survey data, Syrian men workers earned 95 per cent of the minimum wage, while Syrian women made only 77 per cent of it prior to the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> Informal work arrangements and limited bargaining power can also put refugees, especially women, at higher risk of being laid off or seeing their wages cut during the crisis. Trends from previous crises show that, when workers are laid off in response to contracting economies or firms' downsizing, women are often the first to lose their jobs. This can be because of the significantly greater care demands on women and reduced time available for paid work, leading them to take up non-standard forms of employment, such as part-time work. Women's over-representation in the informal economy, notably in the services sector which has been hit particularly hard by the crisis, also contributes to keeping them out of jobs.

Syrians refugees in Turkey and across the Middle East have been particularly hard hit by layoffs induced by the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. A study by the Turkish Red Crescent found that between 69 and 87 per cent of surveyed refugee households had experienced a loss of employment.<sup>17</sup> In Jordan, a rapid assessment conducted by the ILO, in collaboration with Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, found that Syrian refugees, who were less likely to have a contract of employment prior to the crisis, experienced greater loss of income and were twice as likely to lose their jobs permanently than Jordanian workers.<sup>18</sup> Results of a second rapid assessment conducted by the ILO and Fafo

in Lebanon found that 60 per cent of the Syrian refugees covered by the survey were permanently laid-off as a result of COVID-19 measures compared to 39 per cent of Lebanese.<sup>19</sup>

And like migrant workers, loss of employment or income for refugee workers reduces the amount of remittances they are able to send to families who may still be living in crisis situations in their home countries or are seeking asylum in other countries.

### Economic impact on enterprises and entrepreneurs

Lockdown and other containment measures have been particularly problematic for refugee entrepreneurs with micro, small- and medium-enterprises (MSMEs) and for own-account refugees. These are important sources of livelihoods for refugees, particularly where opportunities for waged employment are limited.<sup>20</sup> Small business development is already suffering from limited access to finance, land and property ownership. With low rates of savings and investment and limited cash reserves, they are more susceptible to economic shocks.<sup>21</sup>

Due to COVID-19 some of the once thriving businesses owned by refugee entrepreneurs are having difficulties in accessing required licenses to start up new enterprises and to rent retail space.<sup>22</sup> The pandemic has also made it more difficult to access finance and to repay pending loan payments. Lebanon is a case in point where the increasingly deteriorating economic and financial situation since 2019 has taken a heavy toll on MSMEs, which constitute 90 per cent of enterprises in the country prior to COVID-19 and where many refugees are employed.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Koehlin Costa et al (2019), *Impacto de la inmigración venezolana en el mercado laboral de tres ciudades: Lima, Arequipa y Piura*, OIM; OIT, Ministerio de Trabajo del Peru and Antonio Ruiz de Montoya University, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> ILO/UNHCR (2019), *Doing Business in Dadaab*, ILO, Geneva.

<sup>16</sup> ILO (2020), *Syrians in the Turkish Labour Market – Data from TURKSTAT Household Labour Force Survey (HHLFS) 2017*.

<sup>17</sup> Turkish Red Crescent (2020), *Impact of COVID-19 on Refugee Populations Benefiting from the ESSN*; Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM) (2020), *Sectoral Analysis of the Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Refugees Living in Turkey*; and Refugee Support Center (MUDEM) (2020), *Situation Analysis of Refugees in Turkey During Covid-19 Crisis*.

<sup>18</sup> ILO (2020), *Facing Double Crises: Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers in Jordan*.

<sup>19</sup> ILO (2020), *Facing Multiple Crises: Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers and small-scale enterprises in Lebanon*.

<sup>20</sup> *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and World of Work*, Second Edition.

<sup>21</sup> ILO (2020), *ILO Enterprise Brief: Interventions to Support Enterprises during COVID-19 Pandemic and Recovery*.

<sup>22</sup> World Economic Forum (2020), *Refugees are on the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic. Let's give them the rights they deserve*.

<sup>23</sup> ILO (2020), *Facing Multiple Crises: Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers and small-scale enterprises in Lebanon*.

## Limited access to social protection

Many countries have extended social protection coverage to counter the effects of COVID-19 for nationals.<sup>24</sup> Yet access to income support, social health insurance, paid sick leave, and other forms of social protection can be contingent on requirements that effectively exclude many refugees and their families, including conditions of nationality, having a valid work permit, or being formally employed. Refugees have been found to be less likely to be subscribed to social security<sup>25</sup>, and women refugees are less likely to be registered because of discrimination and the type of jobs they have.<sup>26</sup> In Turkey, the government eased the application criteria for a short-term work allowance (equivalent to 60 per cent of the minimum wage) to protect workers and employers. However, as the vast majority of refugees have been working informally, they do not qualify for this support.<sup>27</sup>

In the current context, procedures for obtaining or renewing documentation or work permits may also be suspended, leaving refugee workers with precarious legal status. Moreover, in various countries, lockdowns and curfews have interrupted or reduced the limited social protection benefits enjoyed by refugees. In these cases, the loss of income might force refugees to work with ill health, with potential health risks for others.<sup>28</sup>

## Challenges in applying COVID-19 related workplace protection measures

For refugees and host community workers who continue to be employed – or when ceasing all forms of work is simply not an option – social distancing measures may be difficult to apply at work, and access to personal protective equipment can be limited. This is particularly the case in informal contexts as well as in certain occupations where refugee workers can be concentrated, including restaurants, meatpacking plants, care work, and transportation. Information about preventative safety and

health measures at work may not sufficiently reach refugee workers.

## Erosion of working conditions and weakened social cohesion prospects

In the medium to long-term, the socio-economic effects of the pandemic can lead to declining working conditions and wages overall.<sup>29</sup> For refugee workers, particularly those without recognized legal status or a valid work permit, negotiating power is and will be limited. Lessons from previous economic crises indicate that a degrading economic situation overall means reduced formal job opportunities, which may push greater numbers of both national and refugee workers into the informal economy. As formal job opportunities dry up, competition can heighten for poor quality jobs among nationals, refugees and migrants.

The crisis can ignite or exacerbate grievances, discrimination, mistrust and sense of injustice over access to health services, decent jobs and livelihoods, which are potential conflict drivers that could undermine development, peace and social cohesion.

## Risks of gender-based violence, forced labour and child labour

Vulnerable refugee populations, especially those without access to added services, food or income sources are at risk of exploitation. With such populations likely to contract debts to survive, there is a risk of increasing debt bondage. In Turkey, for example, 76.7 per cent of refugees benefitting from the Emergency Social Safety Net were found to be in debt.<sup>30</sup> Criminal networks may actively use this global crisis to exploit vulnerabilities to further restrict the freedom of victims and increase the financial profit that forced labour and human trafficking generates.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Gentilini et al World Bank.

<sup>25</sup> ILO (2020), [Impact of COVID-19 on workers in Jordan, Rapid Assessment](#); ILO (2020), [Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers and small-scale enterprises in Lebanon, Rapid assessment](#).

<sup>26</sup> Oxfam GB and Issam Fares Institute of American University Beirut (2016), [Poverty, Inequality and Social Protection in Lebanon](#).

<sup>27</sup> Refugee Support Center (MUDEM) (2020), [Situation Analysis of Refugees in Turkey During Covid-19 Crisis](#).

<sup>28</sup> United Nations (2020), [Policy Brief: COVID-19 and People on the Move](#).

<sup>29</sup> ILO (2020), [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work](#), Third edition.

<sup>30</sup> Turkish Red Crescent (2020), [Impact of COVID-19 on Refugee Populations Benefiting from the ESSN](#).

<sup>31</sup> ILO (2020), [Covid-19 Impact on child labour and forced labour: The response of the IPEC+ Flagship programme](#).

Women refugees can be faced with increased exposure to gender based violence, domestic violence and a general lack of personal space due to confinement measures. At the same time, access to services, such as health and child care, and domestic violence support and other protection services, can be reduced during confinement periods.

Refugee children are one of the groups most vulnerable to child labour and at particular risk in the current crisis. Households may resort to child labour in order to cope with job loss and health shocks associated with Covid-19, especially if children are not in school. Children, in particular girls, can be burdened by increased domestic chores and caring responsibilities and be at increased risk of child marriage.<sup>32</sup>

## ► Policy recommendations and practices

As policymakers continue to develop and adapt measures to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that refugee workers are integrated in recovery and development strategies as full participants to ensure cohesive, sustainable recovery. The crisis also offers an opportunity to value the important contribution of refugee workers to societies and economies, while reconsidering the structural barriers to their labour market integration.

### Protecting refugees in the workplace

It is essential that all actors, including governments, employers', and workers' organizations ensure that international labour standards are at the centre of COVID-19 responses. They contain specific guidance for safeguarding decent work in the context of crisis response, including guidance that can be of relevance to the evolving COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>33</sup>

#### Identify and monitor refugees' specific needs

The short and long-term impact on refugees in the workplace may be difficult to ascertain at a national level or may not be recognized in national-level analyses unless specific studies on their particular situation are carried out. Conducting rapid assessments can provide a useful

starting point to identify and provide visibility to the specific needs and priorities of refugee workers within a given context and to inform the design of adequate policies. To the extent possible, assessments should disaggregate impacts across refugee and host populations, indicating how the different types of groups are impacted, including children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. It is crucial that such assessment give due consideration to the relevant gender dimensions of the impact of the crisis.

The ILO has recently published the key findings of a rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers in Jordan<sup>34</sup> and Lebanon.<sup>35</sup> Rapid assessments covering both migrants and refugees are also underway in IGAD countries, SADC countries, Tunisia and Pakistan.

#### Facilitate procedures to obtain or renew work permits

Ensuring that procedures to obtain or renew work permits continue to be accessible, or introducing greater flexibility or special measures to avoid refugee workers from slipping into irregular status, is a key aspect of ensuring protections of refugees' rights at work. Already, the governments of Portugal, Italy, Ireland and Poland have taken steps to extend the validity or automatically renew documents related to residence or asylum status during the peak months of the crisis.

<sup>32</sup> The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2020), [Technical Note: COVID-19 and child Labour](#).

<sup>33</sup> ILO (2020), [ILO Standards and COVID FAQ](#) - Key provisions of international labour standards relevant to the evolving COVID-19 outbreak, v. 2.1.

<sup>34</sup> ILO (2020), [Facing Double Crises: Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers in Jordan](#).

<sup>35</sup> ILO (2020), [Facing Multiple Crises: Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers and small-scale enterprises in Lebanon](#); a similar assessment in Iraq is forthcoming.

## Ensure fair wages and access to justice

Ensuring that refugee workers are not unduly targeted by wage reductions linked to economic slowdown is important. Where refugee workers are laid off or have their working time reduced, it is important that they have access to mechanisms to claim outstanding wages or entitlements, regardless of their legal status during or after the employment period. This can entail providing information to refugees about means of redress for violations in a language they can understand.<sup>36</sup>

## Enable voice and representation

Providing a voice to refugees by guaranteeing their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining is essential to negotiating fairer working conditions. Employers' and workers' organizations can play an essential role in the labour market integration of refugees. They can potentially mobilize in favor of continuity of the workforce in times of crisis and to act quickly to safeguard refugee workers' rights. The European Trade Union Confederation, in a statement on the "European refugee and asylum seekers emergency, and on integration of migrants in European labour markets and society", has made clear it "considers the integration of asylum seekers and refugees as essential, as is the integration of migrants in general."<sup>37</sup>

## Provide the necessary means and accessible information to apply workplace safety and health measures

Specific workplace protections, health and hygiene measures to control the spread of the virus should be applied equally to all workers, regardless of status, including testing. The ILO's *Employers' Guide on Managing Your Workplace during COVID-19*<sup>38</sup> provides specific guidance to employers in this regard. Moreover, an ILO estimate indicated that, testing and tracing might reduce the working hour losses by 50 per cent.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, to limit exposure to contagion at the workplace, occupational safety and health regulations and guidelines should be made available in a language refugee workers can understand, and on job sites where refugees are employed, including informal economic units. In Italy, a multi-lingual information portal 'JUMA' provides refugees and asylum-seekers with access to information on COVID-19 in 15 different languages, including health advisories, administrative procedures and other available services.<sup>40</sup> In Denmark, the Danish Refugee Council in collaboration with the Danish Health Department is providing COVID-19 related information in 25 languages.<sup>41</sup> In Turkey, the Directorate General of Occupational Health and Safety of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services with the support of ILO, translated occupational safety and health guidelines for bakery workers, call centers, construction and agricultural workers into Arabic.

## Take measures to counter discrimination, violence and harassment at work

National authorities should make every possible effort to ensure that refugees and other forcibly displaced persons are not being subject to xenophobia, stigmatization and discrimination in their workplace based on their country of origin, occupation, travel history or skin color or ethnicity. The widely ratified ILO [Discrimination \(Employment and Occupation\) Convention](#), 1958 (No. 111) applies to all workers, including refugees, and aims to promote equality of opportunity and ensure protection against discrimination with respect to access to education and vocational training, access to employment and to particular occupations, as well as terms and conditions of employment, on the grounds set out in that Convention.

The principle of equality of treatment and non-discrimination is also embedded in the ILO migrant workers instruments, which apply to refugees to the extent they are working on in a country other than their own. The need to combat discrimination, prejudice and hatred is a guiding principle when adopting measures on

<sup>36</sup> [Recommendation No. 205](#), Paragraph 34 (a).

<sup>37</sup> [ETUC Statement](#) adopted 25 June 2018.

<sup>38</sup> ILO (2020), [ILO's Employers' Guide on Managing Your Workplace during COVID-19](#).

<sup>39</sup> ILO (2020), [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work](#), Fourth edition.

<sup>40</sup> UNHCR (2020), [Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

<sup>41</sup> European Website on Integration (2020), [Denmark – New hotline in 25 languages about coronavirus](#).

employment and decent work in response to crisis situations arising from conflicts and disasters.<sup>42</sup> The ILO Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Development Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205), in its Part V, provides detailed guidance on how member States can respond to such discrimination.

Consistent with this guidance, Members should promote equality of opportunity of treatment for refugees with regard to fundamental principles and rights at work and coverage under relevant laws and regulations. This include in particular enabling participation of refugees in representative organizations of employers and workers, and adopting appropriate measures that combat discrimination and xenophobia in the workplace and highlight positive contributions of refugees, with activity engagement of the social partners and of civil society.<sup>43</sup>

Special attention is required for women workers as COVID-19 disproportionately negatively impacts their economic situation.<sup>44</sup> It is particularly important to promote the recognition of the increasing unpaid care work of women, especially regarding children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. Promoting measures to reduce and redistribute this care work, developing information campaigns on the equitable distribution of care responsibilities and actively involving all members of society to address this amidst COVID-19 remains vital.<sup>45</sup> The recently adopted ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) and Recommendation No. 206 also recognize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment.<sup>46</sup>

## Ensuring inclusive and sustainable recovery

### Recognize refugees' skills and positive contribution to recovery

Job loss has been staggering across a number of sectors of the economy. But the crisis has also created a surge in demand for workers with a range of skills and experience – in medical professions and emergency services, but also in agriculture, food retail, logistics and cleaning services.<sup>47</sup> Refugee workers have been at the frontlines in many of these occupations. As countries emerge from the crisis, lifting restrictions on access to employment and recognizing the value of refugee workers' skills and qualifications would enable them to contribute more fully to crisis response and long-term recovery.

As the pandemic has unfolded some countries have already softened restrictions on foreign-trained and-born health workers in a number of refugee-hosting countries to cope with the crisis.<sup>48</sup> In Germany, refugee doctors who have not yet obtained a license to practice, have been called on to participate in the COVID-19 response.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, across South America, Venezuelan medical doctors have been authorized to practice medicine in Chile, Peru, and Argentina without formal recognition of their diplomas as part of extraordinary crisis response measures.<sup>50</sup> In Spain, the government has announced measures to fast-track accreditation of foreign doctors and nurses.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond temporary waivers of accreditation requirements, systematically improving and facilitating access to regular skills recognition mechanisms - at all skill levels - is essential to addressing structural skills shortages in the medium and long term. Employers' organizations can play a key role in these processes by participating in identifying

<sup>42</sup> [Recommendation No. 205](#), paragraph 7(f).

<sup>43</sup> [Recommendation No. 205](#), Paragraph 34 (b) and (c).

<sup>44</sup> UNDP (2020), [The Social and Economic Impact of Covid-19 in the Asia-Pacific Region](#).

<sup>45</sup> Integration Sector, R4V (2020), [El impacto del COVID-19 en el mercado de trabajo y en las personas trabajadoras refugiadas y migrantes](#).

<sup>46</sup> ILO (2020), [ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 \(No.190\); 12 ways it can support the COVID-19 Recovery](#).

<sup>47</sup> The ILO produced [sectoral briefs](#) in order to advance decent work for women and men in specific social and economic sectors.

<sup>48</sup> Centre for Global Development (2020), [Migrant Health Workers Are on the COVID-19 Frontline. We Need More of Them](#).

<sup>49</sup> [Riham Alkousaa and Paul Carrel](#), Reuters (2020), [Refugees to the rescue? Germany taps migrant medics to battle virus](#).

<sup>50</sup> [La Nación](#) (23 de marzo de 2020); Decreto Oficial 260 (jueves 12 de marzo de 2020). [Boletín Oficial de la República de Argentina No. 34.324](#). Decreto de Urgencia No. 037-202. [El Peruano](#) (Domingo 12 de abril de 2020); [Diario Oficial de la República de Chile](#), 7 de marzo del 2020.

<sup>51</sup> UN Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (2020), [The Refugees At the Heart of the Fight Against COVID-19](#).

skills needs, garnering support for skills recognition and providing practical support to employers hiring refugees. Skills development through training (vocational, language, core skills and on-the-job training) and digitalizing these trainings where relevant, can be useful to fill gaps and to increase employment opportunities for refugees. The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees is one initiative that has been used to facilitate the recognition of refugees' skills and prior learnings.<sup>52</sup> It entails an assessment of refugees' higher education qualifications, providing reliable information for integration and progression towards employment and admission to further studies.<sup>53</sup>

In the agricultural sector of some developed economies, governments have called on refugee workers to fill labour shortages where travel bans and restrictions have prevented seasonal migrant workers to reach destination countries. In Germany, the Ministry of Agriculture and Federal Employment granted asylum seekers, who did not have work permits, permission to take up agricultural jobs for a defined period as a short-term relief for the sector.<sup>54</sup> In France, some regions, such as the Department of Seine-et-Marne, offered refugees contracts paid at minimum wage to take up temporary jobs in the agricultural sector.<sup>55</sup>

Refugee-owned businesses, including food retailers and grocery stores, have been vital to ensuring continuity of food and other basic supplies during the crisis. Affording these enterprises both the required legal protections and access to finance, in order to stabilize their businesses, is essential to enabling refugee businesses to continue to provide much-needed contributions.

Refugees around the world are also producing masks and other personal protective equipment's for medical professionals, refugees and host communities.<sup>56</sup> In Brazil, under the Operação Acolhida, partner members of the Regional inter-agency Coordination Platform (R4V,

Response for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants) are supporting refugees and migrants in the Tancredo Neves shelter in Boa Vista to produce cloth masks for distribution to other sheltered Venezuelans.<sup>57</sup> In Mauritania, with the support of the national government, US Department of State, ILO and UNHCR, tailors from Mberra refugee camp and the surrounding host city of Bassikounou have also reoriented their production towards personal protective equipment. To date, 50,000 face masks and 500 lab coats have been produced.<sup>58</sup>

### Ensure refugees' access to social protection measures

Social protection has proven to be an indispensable element of crisis response.<sup>59</sup> Including refugees in government measures relating to social protection benefits, including social health protection and cash-transfers, is critical to preventing them from slipping further into poverty.

The principles enshrined in international social security standards, such as the [Equality of Treatment \(Social Security\) Convention, 1962 \(No. 118\)](#) and the [Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 \(No. 205\)](#) acknowledge the importance of ensuring that displaced persons and refugees are covered by social protection mechanisms on par with nationals. The Social Protection Floors Recommendation No. 202 encourages Member States to provide basic social security guarantees including to ensure at a minimum that all in need have access to essential health care and basic income security (Para. 4).

In the IGAD region, Health Ministers of IGAD Member States endorsed the outlines of the Regional Response Plan to combat the COVID-19 pandemic on 8 April 2020, which calls for strengthening regional response system by including vulnerable populations, such as refugees, IDPs,

<sup>52</sup> UNHCR (2020), [The Council of Europe and UNHCR support Member States in bringing refugee health workers into the COVID-19 response](#).

<sup>53</sup> Council of Europe, [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees](#).

<sup>54</sup> InfoMigrants(2020), [Germany to allow asylum seekers to work in agriculture until October](#).

<sup>55</sup> Ouest France (2020), [Coronavirus. L'appel aux réfugiés du préfet de Seine-et-Marne pour aider les agriculteurs fait polémique](#).

<sup>56</sup> UNHCR (2020), [Refugee Tailors Switch to Making Face Masks and Protective Gear](#).

<sup>57</sup> See [R4V COVID-19 Update](#), 8 May 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Ongoing activity under the Project [Amélioration de la résilience des populations hôtes et de la cohésion sociale avec les réfugiés en Mauritanie](#).

<sup>59</sup> ILO (2020), [Social protection responses to the COVID-19 crisis: Country responses and policy considerations](#); ILO (2020), [Social Protection Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Developing Countries: Strengthening Resilience by Building Universal Social Protection](#).



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migrants, and host communities.<sup>60</sup> In Turkey, the Transition to Formality Programme, implemented by the Social Security Institution in cooperation with the ILO, is providing incentives to employers to hire Syrian and Turkish workers formally (covering social security contributions and work permit fees). This is of particular importance to support employment retention for both refugees and host communities, given the deteriorating economic conditions as well as ensure social protection coverage for the employed refugee and his or her family.

In Latin America, the Integration Sector of the R4V has been designing programs with national governments through cash transfers to alleviate lack of income among vulnerable refugees and migrants and host communities linked to COVID-19, as well as to prevent situations of violence and harassment which are aggravated by the lack of income within some households.<sup>61</sup>

### Enable refugees with disabilities to participate fully in the world of work

Particular attention should be placed on meeting the health, education and labour-related needs of refugees with disabilities. Refugees with disabilities are a very diverse group, with some persons entering situations of crisis and conflict with disabilities, and others acquiring disabilities during these situations. Estimates vary regarding the number of refugees with disabilities, with some studies suggesting upwards of 22 per cent of refugees in particular settings may have disabilities.<sup>62</sup> If the estimate that 15 per cent of the global population is persons with disabilities<sup>63</sup> is taken as a baseline, then persons with disabilities would constitute a significant part of the refugee population. Measures proposed by the ILO to assist persons with disabilities in the general population during the COVID-19 crisis are applicable to refugees with disabilities, including ensuring disability-inclusive OSH measures, accessible and inclusive working conditions, and social protection measures.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, as all refugees can experience anxiety, depression and fatigue,

it is crucial to attend to refugees' mental health needs, whether related to a particular impairment, the current COVID-19 crisis, or the challenges of the refugee experience itself.

It is important to note that refugees with disabilities can and do meaningfully participate in educational activities and work, and that they can be as productive as persons without disabilities. As such, within the context of the current COVID-19 crisis, it is important to continue challenging unfounded stereotypes that equate disability with an inability to work; and, therefore, refugees with disabilities should be fully included in world of work activities to build back better.

### Include refugee workers and entrepreneurs in economic stimulus measures

National recovery policies and incentive packages should include refugee workers and enterprises. As investments will be made towards economic stimulus it is important that refugees are not left out and that economic support is not only granted to nationals.

Through a "push-pull" approach, refugees and small business owners struggling to recover from the impact of COVID-19 can be enabled to re-orient their businesses toward new opportunities. Specifically, through "push" interventions, such as management and resilience training, refugees and vulnerable MSMEs are enabled to develop the skills and capacities necessary to access emerging opportunities in local markets. In parallel, "pull" interventions can improve the functioning of high-potential local value chains and market systems in order to create sustainable business opportunities for refugees and host communities.

<sup>60</sup> IGAD (2020), [IGAD Ministers call for Action on COVID-19 response; IGAD Executive Secretary Hands Over PPE Kits To Refugee And Cross Border Populations](#).

<sup>61</sup> R4V (2020), [COVID-19 Update](#).

<sup>62</sup> See Humanity & Inclusion and iMMAP (2018) [Removing Barriers: The Path towards Inclusive Access Disability Assessment among Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Jordan Report](#) and Humanity & Inclusion and iMMAP (2018) [Removing Barriers: The Path towards Inclusive Access Disability Assessment among Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Lebanon Report](#).

<sup>63</sup> WHO and World Bank (2011) [World report on disability](#).

<sup>64</sup> See ILO (2020) Policy Brief [COVID-19 and the World of Work: Ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities at all stages of the response](#).

## Encourage social cohesion through balanced job generating programs for both hosts and refugees

Although pandemics constitute a distinctive type of crisis, the economic challenges facing vulnerable populations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of promoting market inclusiveness during recovery.

Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a space of inter-group contact for refugees and host communities offer another avenue to promote social cohesion. The ILO's Guide on Promoting Social Cohesion in Fragile Contexts through TVET<sup>65</sup> provides practical guidance for trainers and managers of training centres on how to adjust training delivery to mixed groups, embed skills for social cohesion into training curricula, and create inclusive learning environments.

In responding to the socio-economic impact of the crisis, the ILO recommends the respect, the promotion and the realization of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, other relevant international labour standards, and human rights more broadly. The Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205) calls for a holistic and coherent approach to crisis response, ensuring that no one is left behind. This entails paying special attention to population groups and individuals who have been made particularly vulnerable by the crisis to avoid protracted repercussions on peace and social cohesion.

## ► How the ILO assists

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The ILO continues to support governments in their efforts to include refugees in the COVID-19 response and recovery process to build back better, more inclusive economies and societies, through advocacy and social dialogue with its social partners.

ILO is supporting evidence-based policy-making and crisis response through the adaptation of monitoring and rapid assessment tools to measure the impact of COVID-19 on various countries, sectors and groups, including refugees and other displaced persons.<sup>66</sup> These assessments will seek to understand how the pandemic and government regulations have affected local economies and labour markets, including informal economic activity, as well as inter-community relations, and the emerging needs and expectations of refugees and the communities that host them. The analysis will serve as a baseline for follow-up surveys in the coming months, which will look at the

longer-term impacts of the crisis, as well as to identify opportunities which might be generated around the post-recovery response phase in refugee-hosting areas.

In this context and as highlighted in the ILO's COVID-19 Monitors, development cooperation activities are being reoriented to assist governments in Africa, Asia and Latin America to ensure national health and safety regulations and campaigns, social protection and social security, skills development and recognition, lifelong learning and economic and employment policies are equally inclusive of refugee workers.

Together with other UN entities and ILO tripartite constituents, the ILO is also contributing to joint guidance and operational approaches to address the pandemic in humanitarian and non-humanitarian settings.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Forthcoming.

<sup>66</sup> See ILO (2020), [Generic Terms of Reference for Rapid Assessments of the Impact of COVID-19 on Socio-Economic Environments of Refugee-Hosting Communities](#).

<sup>67</sup> For example, the [ILO has participated in drafting the UN policy brief: COVID-19 and Human Rights](#). See also WHO (2020), [Preparedness, prevention and control of coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) for refugees and migrants in non-camp settings, Interim guidance](#); UNSDG (2020), [UNSDG LAC Joint Statement, COVID-19 must be addressed through international solidarity and cooperation](#).

Under the Venezuela response R4V Platform, the ILO is the joint coordinator of the Socioeconomic and Cultural Integration Sector of the inter-agency response with IOM and has been active under the Issue-based Coalition Working Group for Latin America and the Caribbean. The ILO will continue to work with UN entities, government and social partners to understand the specific impact and needs of refugees and displaced populations during the COVID-19 crisis, and together with UNHCR have developed a set of resources and information for ILO and UNHCR country offices to support joint responses.

It is vital that the pandemic does not lead to the rolling back of some of the significant progress made in recent years in bridging the divide between humanitarian action and development cooperation and supporting inclusive socio-economic growth and cohesive and peaceful societies. Even in situations of crisis, innovation is possible and some interesting avenues of work with significant employment potential for national and refugee workers are emerging both in the private and public sector.

Nevertheless, the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be under-estimated and it is evident that not all workers are equally equipped to face the ongoing crisis. The ILO will thus continue to work closely with sister UN agencies, particularly UNHCR, and other international actors, to support governments, social partners and national stakeholders in their efforts to include refugees in COVID-19 responses and recovery plans, and to build back better, more inclusive and equitable economies and societies.

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