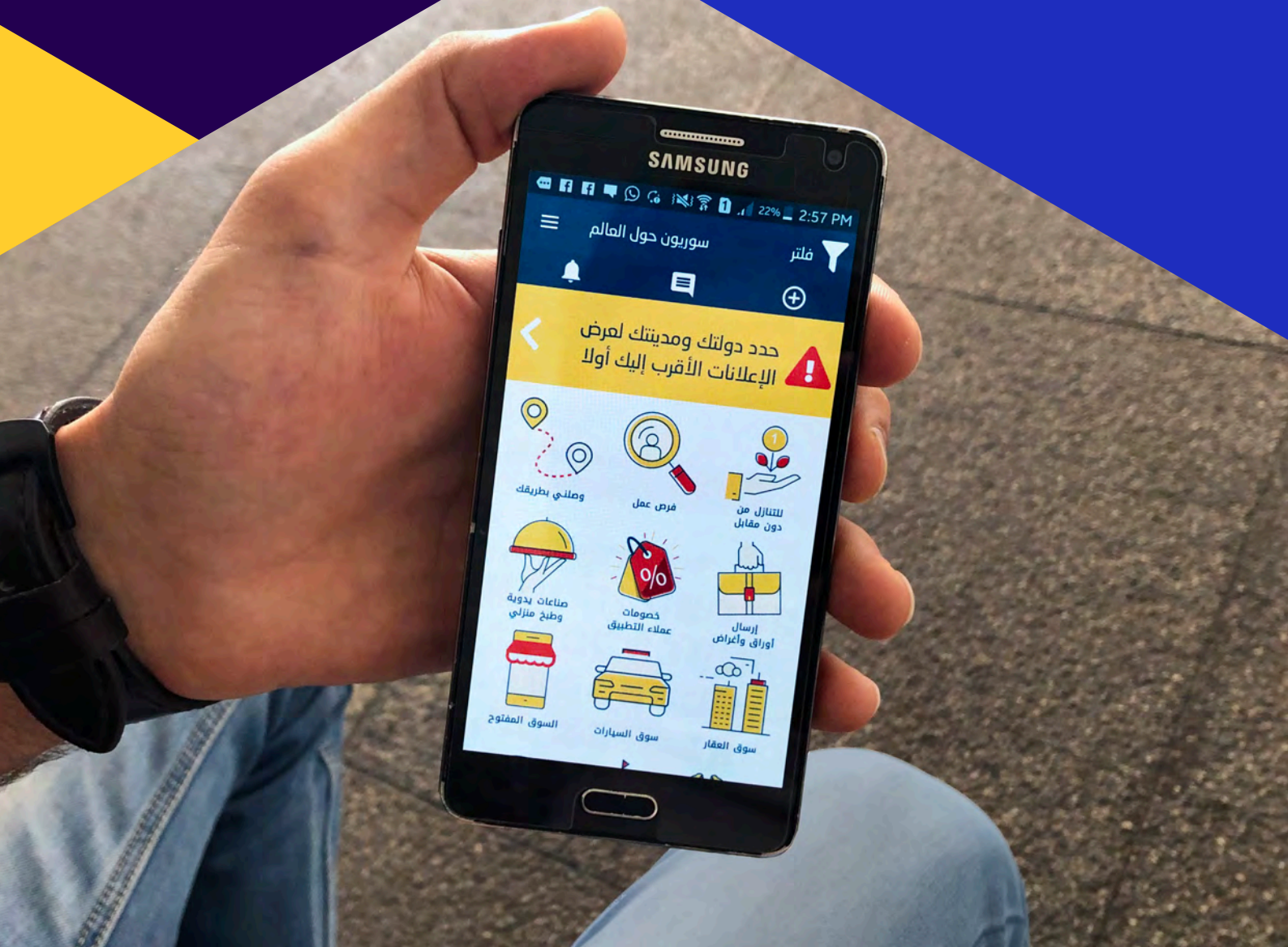International Labour Organization

# ▶ Digital refugee livelihoods and decent work

Towards inclusion in
a fairer digital economy

# 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 stategies. 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.