



International Labour Office

Systemic Approach to Inclusive Markets

Factsheet – Tunisia

Background

Tunisia currently hosts 771 refugees (as of 2017), nearly 50 per cent of whom live in the Tunis Region. The majority of refugees are from Syria, with a minority from Palestine, Sudan, and Iraq. Despite having maintained a relatively open *de facto* policy toward refugees and asylum-seekers, the country lacks a comprehensive legal framework regarding the status of refugees and asylum-seekers. The Government is continuing to work with UNHCR to develop such legislation but thus far, refugees and asylum-seekers are broadly governed by the laws that more generally determine foreigners' rights in the country. As such, informal work is punishable and refugees are required to obtain a work permit prior to employment.

The country's economy is concentrated around Tunis, with 94 per cent of businesses larger than six employees located in the Greater Tunis area. The overall economy is growing moderately, with positive growth projections. Unemployment is stable at roughly 15 per cent, primarily due to a shortage of employment opportunities for qualified labor. Conversely, a substantial number of positions for low skilled labor remain unfilled, particularly in the areas of commerce, services, and construction. Many enterprises therefore offer apprenticeship programs and internship schemes to facilitate entry into the labor force for unskilled workers.

Problem Analysis

Of the refugee and asylum-seeker population in Tunisia, 75 per cent are of working age. The majority have a primary level of education, with 15 per cent having attended university. A survey-based analysis of the target population revealed that most refugees are employed as low skilled workers in the construction industry as well as the hotel and restaurant sector. The working conditions are precarious. Over 70 per cent of those employed do not have a contract and work as temporary or seasonal workers without basic social security coverage. Most secure their employment through personal and community contacts. Only a small number have started their own businesses, impeded by access to finance and limitations on refugee's legal status.

A substantial barrier to decent employment is the opaque legal situation regarding refugees' work permits. Although refugees are able to obtain work permits, information on the process is often not available to refugees. Similarly, in many cases, potential employers are unaware that refugees are allowed to work and unfamiliar with the subsequent hiring process.

A further significant barrier to refugees' entry to the labor force is language, as most speak only Arabic excluding them from apprenticeships and vocational trainings, which are predominantly in French. The diplomas obtained from vocational trainings, however, substantially increase the chances of being selected for stable and decent employment. Nonetheless, many refugees are hesitant toward vocational training because they see little need to work given the humanitarian support they receive and due to an information deficit regarding the importance of vocational training.

Recommendations

The recommendations developed from the survey-based analysis of refugees' employment situation focus on the construction sector, which exhibits a shortage of unskilled labor and simultaneously offers more stable employment than the seasonal opportunities in other growth sectors such as the hotel and restaurant industry.

A major barrier to employment are communication deficits regarding **refugees' legal status and eligibility for work**. Moreover, the survey revealed that very few refugees start their own businesses, in part also due to knowledge deficits regarding the legal procedures. Targeted communication campaigns for refugees seeking employment or planning to start their own business as well as for potential employers could help reduce such information asymmetries.

A second inhibitor are language barriers. Refugees and asylum-seekers in Tunisia predominantly speak Arabic, only few have French language skills. With overall demand for unskilled labor and the availability of a broad range of professional development programs, refugees are largely held back by their often rudimentary **French language skills**. Tailored French language training for Arabic native speakers would thus help enhance refugees' accessibility of employment and professional development offers.

Third, most refugees are low skilled workers with large potential to enhance their employability prospects through **professional competency building**. Refugees currently lack information about the availability of such opportunities and the potential professional gains from them. Information campaigns targeted at refugees and explaining the different courses (short-term, long-term, diploma-based) available would facilitate the mainstreaming of refugees into existing programs.

Finally, the report recommends to particularly support the **personal development of young refugees** to facilitate their integration into Tunisian society. Although language courses are also key here, this involves supporting young refugees in obtaining coveted positions in apprenticeship programs and graduate schemes. Young refugees would also benefit from opportunities to enhance their soft skills, for example through workshops and interactive learning programs. Moreover, the development of vocational training aimed at sectors with high growth potential, such as the construction sector, would benefit both, young refugees and members of the host community.