



## Economies rights and access to work

This **Editors' briefing** provides an overview of the content of FMR 58's feature theme, with links to the relevant articles.

Economic activity, in the broadest meaning of the term, is one of the fundamental aspects of human society and human activity.

When people are forced by conflict or other circumstances to leave their homes, they usually also leave behind their means of economic activity and subsistence. In their new location, they may not be able, or permitted, to work to support themselves. This has wide-ranging implications not only for people's immediate earning capacity and well-being but also for community relations, economic development and the capacity of future generations to lead fulfilling lives.

In the main feature on **Economies** in FMR issue 58, published June 2018, authors explore the complex interactions of the constraints and opportunities involved, drawing on case-studies from around the world and highlighting the roles of new actors, new technologies and new – or renewed – approaches.

The feature on Economies comprises 22 articles whose authors represent a range of non-governmental organisations, UN and intergovernmental agencies, and research institutions.

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### Constraints and challenges around the world

The first article in the issue ([Zetter-Ruadel](#)) provides a broad overview, with examples from around the world, of the constraints on refugees' rights and access to work, outlining the challenges involved and examining how some governments, international organisations and NGOs are beginning to tackle some of the constraints.

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees accords refugees the **right to work** and the **right to fair conditions of work** but many host countries are reluctant to allow these rights – and it is important to note that practice around work rights is not necessarily better in signatory States than non-signatory States. This reluctance reflects varying concerns including a country's capacity to absorb new labour, the crowding of certain sectors, impact on availability of jobs for citizens, reduction in wages and decline in working conditions. Host governments may also be swayed by popular opposition to refugee rights to work and by security concerns about large-scale refugee populations settling and working. Worldwide, women are additionally affected by the prevalence of gender stereotypes, discrimination and violence.

A number of articles ([Zetter-Ruadel](#), [Ayoubi-Saavedra](#), [Kattaa-Byrne](#), [Hunt-Samman-Mansourille-Max](#)) point to how lack of formal access to labour markets inevitably leads to a growth in the **informal economy**, with all the disadvantages and hazards that informal working may entail – limited livelihood sustainability, marginal wages, lack of decent work, and exploitation.

There are examples worldwide of positive practices – e.g. 'out-of-camp' policies, language and education provision, market integration, work permits – and potential for other proactive policies. Overall, however, there appears to be little consistency in implementing the right to work, and new approaches to tackling constraints are proving patchy and unsystematic. Furthermore, it is evident that providing the legal right to work – and to **decent work**, moreover – is insufficient without attention to compliance and enforcement mechanisms ([Zetter-Ruadel](#), [Kattaa-Byrne](#)). Host countries need to assess the potential for opening their labour markets to refugees, while also enhancing access to decent work.

### Varying opportunities for hosts and displaced

Where countries allow or encourage early insertion into the host country labour market, the advantages may be numerous ([Ayoubi-Saavedra](#)). Case studies from Uganda and Rwanda provide evidence of **positive impacts** on both displaced people and the host communities ([Omata](#), [Bilgili-Loschmann](#)), stimulating both economic activity and positive

relations between the different groups; the Rwandan case suggests, however, that the economic benefits may predominantly favour the host community – and highlights improvements that could be made in terms of standardising refugees' identity documents and ensuring that host communities are better informed about refugees' rights to work. A further case-study from Syria ([ALAJlan](#)) echoes the **economic opportunities** that internal displacement may bring to host communities, though these may of course only be temporary.

Turkey, which hosts some 3.3 million registered refugees, has passed a regulation to allow Syrian refugees to obtain formal work permits. However, economic development varies widely across Turkey and many areas have high unemployment. In these circumstances, and with other barriers to refugees' access to employment (such as lower education levels and lack of recognised or documented skills), Turkey, the World Bank and the European Union are collaborating to **adapt services** that are already available to Turkish citizens in order to support Syrians ([DelCarpio-Seker-Yener](#)).

## Understanding local contexts and market forces

Authors discuss the need for external actors to understand **local contexts and market forces** when planning interventions designed to support crisis-affected populations ([Hemberger-Muench-Purvis](#), [Omata](#), [Bilgili-Loschmann](#), [Ayoubi-Saavedra](#), [Hays](#)). In northern Uganda ([Hemberger-Muench-Purvis](#)), aid organisations' continuing free provision of food assistance and seeds and tools can contribute to undermining local businesses, counteracting the positive repercussions on the local economic environment of

the spending power of large numbers of refugees; a new project partnering with local agro-dealers highlights the need to reduce in-kind aid distribution and move towards investments that strengthen the **capacity of local market actors**. Elsewhere in Uganda, the interplay of commercial interactions between refugees and the host community (both local and national) is examined ([Omata](#)); evidence suggests that in protracted displacement situations, some refugee settlements have become embedded not only in local economies but in regional commerce, playing a positive role in revitalising host communities. In contexts such as Rwanda ([Bilgili-Loschmann](#)), freedom of movement and the right to work encourage both economic and social interaction between the refugee and host communities, to their mutual benefit.

The importance of understanding **market dynamics** is underscored; an article by UNHCR ([Ayoubi-Saavedra](#)) discusses the need to encourage humanitarian actors to shift from positioning themselves as market actors and to instead focus on **enabling** direct access of refugees and vulnerable host community members to market opportunities (and to financial services). This is further reflected in a case-study on Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia ([Mallett-Hagenzanker-Cummings-Majidi](#)), where refugees reported little significant or longer-term impact resulting from the skills and vocational training that they had received. These forms of livelihood support tend to address the symptoms rather than the underlying structures of poverty and economic marginalisation facing Eritrean refugees. Ethiopia is currently developing a new approach to refugees' right to work, introducing a Jobs Compact, industrial parks and work permits for refugees; the details of how these will be implemented, and what monitoring mechanisms will be put in place, will be key to whether these interventions actually improve the lives and livelihoods of refugees and host communities.

## Impact of asylum dispersal to rural areas

Two articles ([Ledstrup-Larsen](#), [Whyte-Larsen-Schaldehose](#)) focus on the positive contribution of refugees and asylum seekers in **rural areas** in Denmark including far-flung islands, enabling falling populations to recover somewhat, communities to gain skilled labour, and community assets such as shops and schools to stay viable. The placing of asylum centres in such communities can be a major asset to the communities – including through offering employment opportunities for locals – but this can only happen if the asylum centres operate in close relationship with the community rather than in isolation.

## Entering the labour market: skills assessments and verification of qualifications

A number of researchers based in Denmark, Germany and Norway discuss the impact of the arrival of refugees in these European countries and difficulties around their **insertion into the labour market**



Fresh produce exporters load the chilli peppers they have bought from Congolese refugee farmers at Rwamwanja settlement in Uganda.

([Ledstrup-Larsen](#), [Whyte-Larsen-Schaldemose](#), [Ekren](#)). Denmark's strategy includes increasingly focusing on involving larger companies in offering employment opportunities and on fast-tracking skills assessments in preparation for work ([Ledstrup-Larsen](#)).

In order to be able to validate their qualifications, highly educated refugees have to be in physical possession of their qualification certificates. Many, however, have lost part or all of their certificates in flight, and obtaining new certificates is difficult or impossible. The **verification of refugees' qualifications** emerges as a pressing issue in several articles ([Namak-Sahhar-Kureshi-ElRayess-Mishori](#), [Mozetič](#), [Ekren](#)). One article, co-authored by five medical doctors who are themselves refugees or immigrants (or with immigrant or refugee backgrounds) ([Namak-Sahhar-Kureshi-ElRayess-Mishori](#)), focuses on the constraints that refugee/asylee doctors in the US have faced in practising medicine, and the cost, time and frustration involved; the US and the UK offer a number of examples of initiatives aiming to better enable refugee doctors' insertion into the host health-care system. Although the US initiatives are all small-scale, they have involved constructive elements such as employing refugee doctors to serve in rural/under-served areas, initially under supervision; placing multilingual refugee doctors in areas with large immigrant/refugee populations; and funding provision of career guidance, assistance with obtaining documentation/licences, and opportunities for further clinical training/experience.

Other examples of good practice relating to employment for **highly qualified refugees** come from the UK, Sweden and Turkey ([Mozetič](#), [Namak-Sahhar-Kureshi-ElRayess-Mishori](#), [DelCarpio-Seker-Yener](#)). Examples include running language training, internships and other training simultaneously rather than consecutively; and drawing on external subject-specific expertise and home-country knowledge to assist in verifying refugees' educational backgrounds and capacities.

## Personal support alongside employment support

Alongside the need for opportunity and documentation is the need for informed, sympathetic, practical support – providing refugees with the tools to navigate the employment market in a way that leads to **sustainable personal development**. A case-study from the UK ([Belghazi](#)) discusses managing refugees' expectations and providing long-term support in many areas, including mentoring, language and mental health, and working to open up local employment opportunities for refugees.

In a global labour market, documenting and showcasing refugees' skills can help break down barriers that block refugees from using economic migration pathways to gain access to employment. Through a 'Talent Catalog' ([Nichles-Nyce](#)), refugees can document their qualifications, skills and experience – which are then shared with international employers seeking to fill skills gaps. In addition to the number

of jobs that have so far been offered, there are other benefits to this approach – refugees are receiving advice and assistance in many employment-related aspects which are likely to be of longer-term benefit (CV preparation, interview training, language classes etc.) while international companies are being encouraged to go beyond their usual recruitment approaches.

## Digital empowerment and the gig economy

New forms of economic activity focus on questions of **digital empowerment** ([Peromingo-Pieteron](#)) and the role of the **gig economy** ([Hunt-Samman-Mansourille-Max](#)). Reference is often made to forced migrants' digital literacy, especially their use of smartphones to negotiate journeys, tap into networks and communicate with their families; however, successful participation in society depends more on information navigation skills – that is, being able to formulate queries and filter online information – than operational skills. To enable participation in society and in the workplace, refugees will need digital empowerment and therefore digital skills training at all levels. This discussion is of relevance also to discussions about the potential role of the gig economy – where, instead of a regular wage, workers get paid for the 'gigs' they do, such as a food delivery or a car journey – in creating jobs for displaced people. The opportunity to undertake crowd work (which is not tied to a particular location) and/or on-demand work (which may be home-based) may present new economic opportunities for suitably skilled workers, including for women whose mobility and ability to participate in the workforce may be restricted by cultural and domestic factors. The pros and cons of the gig economy are discussed, with the authors suggesting that the gig economy may be an important route for refugees to generate income in a context of limited economic opportunities but that an appropriate legal framework and robust employment protection measures are critical to ensure the gig economy delivers quality work.



Syrian refugees and Jordanian citizens take part in crowd work, outsourced from Western Union.

Why have we pixelated their faces? See [www.fmreview.org/photo-policy](http://www.fmreview.org/photo-policy)

## Non-economic factors affecting local economies

The importance of understanding the **non-economic factors** at play in terms of constraints and motivations is discussed ([Hays](#)) in the context of the influence of non-State armed actors in Colombia's local economies. External actors may fail to appreciate the many and varied reasons – whether economic, pragmatic or psychological – why IDPs collaborate with armed groups and criminal organisations. Faced with these varied motives, organisations focusing on the economic development of IDPs in Colombia need to adopt an alliance mentality, collaborating with government agencies, non-governmental organisations and faith-based organisations.

## Macro-economic impacts of aid

Much attention has been paid in recent years to the negative impacts felt by the economies of many countries neighbouring Syria, as a result of hosting refugees. However, recent research on the **macro-economic impacts of Syrian refugee aid** ([Schillings](#)) indicates that the international response to the crisis, and in particular the intergovernmental Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), has made a significant contribution to economic growth and job creation in the region – a finding that might be useful to draw on when fostering social cohesion among host communities.

## Investing in people's economic lives

People's lifelong ability to play an active role in the workplace is affected from a very early age ([Mottaghi](#)). **Malnutrition and lack of education** can lead to poorer cognitive development and lower chances of employment. Acute malnutrition is found in many refugee camps, especially in situations of protracted displacement, while the prevalence of anaemia suggests a further serious public health problem with long-term impacts. Displacement exacerbates many of the factors related to employment prospects. Promoting access to quality education and ensuring good nutrition are

investments in future labour productivity – with all its consequences on economic development and the long-term processes of peace, stability and reconstruction.

## Promoting employment at the expense of addressing root causes?

A cautionary note is sounded in the final article in the feature on Economies, with an article questioning promotion of employment as a **durable solution** ([Bardelli](#)). Aid agencies expect forced migrants to be entrepreneurs and become economically self-reliant, putting the responsibility of 'succeeding' onto refugees' shoulders. As well as homogenising people and excluding those who are less able to take up paid employment, this approach appears to reflect a perspective that sees the 'refugee problem' as a matter of access to the job market rather than a political question about inequalities, exclusion and power relations. It also fails to address why people have become refugees in the first place.



A 27-year-old Burundian refugee and former truck driver in front of his grocery shop, Kashojwa village (Nakivale settlement), Uganda.

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