



# Recommendations for Social and Digital Inclusion for Refugees Seeking Workforce Entry

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 global pandemic highlighted the importance of digital connectivity and its role in refugee social and workforce inclusion. Refugee workforce entry remains a central policy goal of receiving countries. As receiving countries move towards workforce entry it is essential to identify challenges experienced by refugees to ensure policy success. Insight into managing multiple obstacles that potentially inhibit vocational functionality and labor integration is critical to reaching policy goals.

Active social integration (ASI) and leveraging digital inclusion is identified as a model to mitigate labor entry obstacles. It is a method in line with the call by the United Nations Development Programme (2022) on Digital Inclusion (DI) for the removal of social, technological, economic, and cultural barriers to accessing digital environments. Recommendations emphasize the importance of community centered approaches and refugee co-creation of digital equity projects to systematically address program gaps in practice, delivery, and policy.

## Introduction

The UN University Centre for Policy cites seeking work as the largest motivation for migration, particularly from the Global South. Decent Work and Economic Growth are among the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, as well as a fundamental human right.

Workforce entry is an outcome sought by refugees and receiving countries, yet falls short of reaching targeted indicators, even with the implementation of gold standard Scandinavian integration programs. In particular, the lack of refugee workforce policies fails to take social inclusion for refugees seriously, particularly in the Global North (Ramírez Bolívar and Corredor Villamil (2022)).

Integration programs impact refugees' workforce readiness by shaping their capability to create online/offline networks and acquire the skills and competencies necessary for greater success in social integration and entry into the workforce. There is much social policy work that needs to occur to make labor markets more favorable to refugees and other migrants.

## Policy Goals and Barriers

Refugees face numerous barriers in accessing formal labor markets in Norway. In 2019, 63 percent of Norwegian refugees were employed in full time work, versus 74.2 percent among the total wage-earning population (Statistics Norway 2021). Dissimilar to the overall population, refugees remain overrepresented in entry level and low wage jobs (Statistics Norway 2021). Syrians in Norway are the most recent arrivals and have yet to gain a strong foothold in the job market and remain greatly impacted by the time barrier and biases, particularly Islamophobia and historical biases. (Abeytia, 2020) Women who wear hijab face the most discrimination in labor entry (FRA 2017).

A comparative study of promoters and barriers to work between immigrants and refugees found refugees were twice as likely to be unemployed, citing lack of access to adequate language skills and biases as the primary barriers (Jamil, et. al 2012). Time of stay is a barrier to refugee workforce entry, that diminishes after a decade, but proves a significant obstacle since it is tied to language acquisition and network creation, (Gerickea, Burmeisterc, Löwea, Dellera, Pundt, 2018). Abeytia (2019a, 2019b) identified ASI as an approach that may decrease the impact of the time of stay barrier and biases through interaction between local populations and refugees.

And asylum seekers, of course, are the most vulnerable with the least access to workforce readiness schemes, as they ordinarily do not have the right to work or recourse to public funds. Where they are granted the right to work, the policy recommendations set out in this paper certainly applies to them as well.

## Active Social Integration

ASI leverages the participation of multiple stakeholders and digital environments to improve the integration of the most vulnerable migrant populations to optimize workforce entry by emphasizing local, refugee inclusive program design. ASI promotes the use of digital environments by addressing skill and access barriers. Access to digital environments provides refugees with greater agency in accessing online resources for self-integration. ASI grants greater participation by local communities and refugees in co-creating integration programs.

Social media platforms, most notably, Facebook Refugee Welcome Pages, were utilized in Europe and served to bolster and expand network reach, particularly in Norway where resettlement dispersal patterns placed refugees into rural communities. Large organizations like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) are investing in locally led digital inclusion (DI) programs to augment offline social integration efforts. Additionally, a study conducted by Potocky (2021) found that digital skills are essential to refugee integration and identified the move of IRC programming online as boosted participation by women. The utilization of ASI can address the UNDP's call for the removal of social, technological, economic, and cultural barriers to accessing digital environments.

## Implications

Labor market entry is a major priority for receiving countries and refugee populations. However, despite efforts and funding to promote successful, long-term employment, reaching this policy objective remains challenging.

Multiple factors contribute to barriers and obstacles encountered by displaced populations in workforce entry.

Research conducted by Abeytia (2020, 2022, 2023) and Diaz (2021) among diverse refugee populations offer insight, applicability, and measurable indicators to support policy initiatives to reduce inequalities, increase gender equity and the right to decent work.

Social inclusion is a community effort requiring robust local participation. ASI increases the potential of refugee population's ability to acquire precursors to seeking employment and can be used as a measurable indicator. Addressing biases within policy and administrative structures by eliminating passive operative language can be identified and augmented through the co-creation of programs. Adoption of this approach may prove useful in mitigating obstacles that inhibit workforce entry by reducing:

- **Societal biases**
- **Time of stay barrier**
- **Inadequate language acquisition**

Leveraging online tools, DI skills and DI equity programs can increase offline and online social inclusion for increased social inclusion, independence, and workforce entry.

## Recommendations

The rupture in the national bureaucratic flow of service delivery and program implementation allowed for greater involvement by local populations and refugees in designing ad hoc integration approaches. ASI provides a modular framework to fulfill the UNDP on Digital Inclusion's calls for the removal of barriers to accessing digital environments.

The removal of digital barriers and a focus on local social inclusion can be accomplished by implementing the following recommendations:

### **Supporting community centered integration policy**

Implement a strong national integration policy focused on digital equity to promote social inclusion for entry into the workforce. Encourage the development of DI programs, and provide funding for staffing, strategic planning, program management, and implementation of multilingual digital navigator projects. Establish working groups at the local level among, local government, community anchor institutes, nonprofits, educational institutes, cultural organizations and libraries to develop DI asset maps and identify community needs.

### **Implementing active social inclusion to reduce social biases and challenges.**

ASI can be an effective strategy in workforce entry. Adoption of a social inclusion approach including government agencies, educational institutions, local populations, refugees, and civil society to foster language acquisition, network building and reduce the time barrier in workforce and higher education entry.

### **Fund research to support policy initiatives that promote and share best practices.**

Support research, particularly Participatory Action Research (PAR), to identify and address critical gaps and challenges in program curriculum and implementation of digital equity to bridge the gap.

### **Use of a co-creation approach.**

Local and national governments should encourage the co-creation of digital literacy programming to identify best practices rooted in IRC's [What Works](#).

Promote and encourage the use of a co-creation approach that allows for ASI to be implemented within digital inclusion projects. Co-creation invites displaced populations to actively participate in addressing critical gaps in the practice and implementation of DI programs to achieve meaningful solutions for greater success in policy. Thus reducing biased and passive operative language within policy and administrative structures.

### **Expansion and funding of digital inclusion programs and devices.**

Increase refugees' access to digital environments by offering free hybrid classes to teach digital skills necessary for both computer and smartphone use. Women and working parents benefit from the online delivery of programs and classes reducing multiple barriers to education. Access to devices including laptops and Chromebooks to accommodate multiple learning levels, and access to digital navigator programs.

### **Access to high-speed internet.**

Internet access should be viewed as critical infrastructure and is required to ensure digital equity. Broadband, Wi-Fi, hotspots, and fiber access are necessary for the continued growth and development of digital skills.



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