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Promoting Decent Work for Refugees: Practical Tips for Employers

Introduction:

This living document is the outcome of a workshop led by UNHCR, ILO and Ingka Group in November 2025, which convened a broad range of over 40 different stakeholders. The goal was to explore practical ways for businesses to strengthen decent work for refugees in compliance with international labour standards and refugee law.

Drawing on the discussions that took place at the workshop, the document aims to offer insights for companies that intend to recruit or have already hired refugees, either directly or through their supply chains. It explains why refugee inclusion matters from a business risk perspective and introduces practical actions to facilitate fair recruitment and promote decent work conditions, thus strengthening overall compliance with labour standards and human rights due diligence. The recommendations are also informed by the findings of UNHCR's livelihoods and economic inclusion study spanning across 60 countries.

When refugee workers are excluded from decent work protections, companies face predictable and preventable risks, including legal, operational, supply chain, and reputational risks. In contrast, companies that proactively adapt their systems:

- ✓ Strengthen workforce stability and productivity
- ✓ Improve talent retention and skills utilisation
- ✓ Demonstrate credible leadership on responsible business conduct

The tips and recommendations focus on what companies can control, influence, or mitigate, even in restrictive legal or operating environments. These actions should be embedded into human resource, procurement, and supplier management systems and reviewed regularly as part of human rights due diligence and operational performance audits. They are a foundation for continuous improvement, not one-off compliance.

Business Risk Mitigation Framework:

Companies can manage risks and promote decent work for refugees through five integrated action pillars. These pillars apply to direct operations and wider supply chains.

Pillar 1: Fair Recruitment & Wage Protection

Key risks: Forced labour, debt bondage, wage theft, and discrimination

Specific vulnerabilities that refugees may face:

- Limited access to formal work permits (legal constraints and high admin fees)
- Financial exclusion, including limited access to formal bank accounts and access to credit
- Non-recognition of prior skills and qualifications
- High dependence on informal brokers
- Complex or opaque recruitment processes
- Discrimination as refugees

Measures employers can put in place to reduce risks:

- Identify and map where refugees are employed in operations and supply chains
- Map specific challenges faced by refugees in the recruitment process, based on local context
- Simplify recruitment steps and provide clear, accessible guidance for refugee candidates
- Do not charge refugees any recruitment or permit fees
- Accept alternative or refugee IDs wherever legally possible
- Vet and monitor all recruitment intermediaries to prevent exploitation
- Issue written contracts and ensure they are in a language that the refugee understands and that terms are

clearly explained

- Pay wages in full, on time, and through traceable systems
- Prohibit retention of refugees' identity documents
- Offer language support and ensure inclusive and accessible recruitment channels and digital platforms
- Sensitize and equip HR managers and suppliers to identify refugee vulnerabilities and adapt recruitment processes accordingly
- Recognize refugees' heightened vulnerability during pre-employment and onboarding, and guarantee rights awareness and access to grievance mechanisms
- Co-design recruitment with refugees and maintain regular feedback loops after onboarding

Pillar 2: Occupational Health & Safety (OHS)

Key risk: Workplace accidents, liability, operational disruption

Specific vulnerabilities that refugees may face:

- Concentration in hazardous, informal, or subcontracted jobs
- Lack of access to personal protective equipment
- Language and literacy barriers to safety training
- Fear of reporting hazards, injuries, or incident of violence and harassment
- Exclusion from national OHS protections and insurance schemes
- Lack of trusted ID or documentation for accident coverage

Measures employers can put in place to reduce risks:

- Map specific OHS risks and vulnerabilities for refugees based on local context
- Provide OHS training in languages refugees understand and use visual formats for clarity
- Supply free, appropriate Personal Protective Equipment, ensuring gender-sensitive design
- Extend safety audits to subcontracted worksites to protect refugee workers
- Establish confidential reporting channels for accidents, hazards, and harassment
- Include refugees in occupational accident coverage and insurance schemes
- Ensure refugees have access to medical care and injury compensation
- Address gender-based violence (GBV) risks explicitly in workplace safety protocols

Pillar 3: Social Protection & Access to Services

Key risk: Workforce instability, absenteeism, crisis-driven disruption

Specific vulnerabilities that refugees may face:

- Exclusion from public social security systems
- Informal employment and lack of registration
- Limited access to healthcare, childcare, and mental health services
- Legal and administrative barriers to contributory schemes (e.g., ID requirements)
- Gender-specific barriers (childcare responsibilities, cultural norms)

Measures employers can put in place to reduce risks:

- Formalize employment and register refugee workers wherever legally possible
- Provide transitional employer-funded health and accident coverage for refugees until they have access to formal social protection systems.
- Ensure protection for sickness, maternity, and workplace injury for refugee workers
- Offer transitional employer-funded health and insurance coverage, where needed
- Offer income-support measures for refugee employees, including freelancers and contractors, in times of crisis or shocks
- Facilitate access to services such as language training, childcare, and psychosocial support
- Advocate for inclusion in national social protection schemes where necessary

Pillar 4: Worker Voice, Grievance & Remedy

Key risk: Hidden abuses, escalation, reputational damage

Specific vulnerabilities that refugees may face:

- Fear of retaliation when making complaints, linked to (precarious) job or legal status
- Language barriers and lack of rights awareness
- Exclusion from unions or worker representation
- Lack of access to grievance platforms (including digital access)
- Barriers to access legal support programs

Measures employers can put in place to reduce risks:

- Clearly communicate rights and obligations to refugee workers
- Establish anonymous, multilingual grievance channels accessible to refugees
- Communicate and enforce a clear non-retaliation policy to all workers
- Integrate refugee-sensitive reporting and response mechanisms
- Ensure grievance access for informal and subcontracted workers
- Provide offline and mobile-friendly options for digitally excluded refugees
- Track grievances, remedies, and systemic issues to improve practices

Pillar 5: Skills Recognition & Career Development

Key risk: Talent shortages, low productivity, high turnover

Specific vulnerabilities that refugees may face:

- Non-recognition of qualifications and prior learning
- Interrupted education and missing documentation
- Limited access to training and work-based learning
- Legal barriers to diploma recognition and licensing for regulated professions
- Gender and diversity gaps in access to TVET and apprenticeships

Measures employers can put in place to reduce risks:

- Conduct skills mapping and competency-based assessments for refugee workers
- Apply Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approaches wherever possible
- Offer job-specific language and vocational training adapted to refugee needs
- Provide paid apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities
- Establish transparent career pathways and mentorship programs for refugees
- Partner with accredited bodies to fast-track diploma and credential recognition
- Integrate digital and green skills training to future-proof refugee talent

This is a living document. If you wish to provide feedback or share suggestions for improvement, please contact privatesectorpartnership@unhcr.org.