

Governance Through Uncertainty: Implications for Refugee Labour Market Integration

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Support for labour market entry and a focus on self-sufficiency are central components of many countries' refugee reception strategies. In both the Global North and South, labour market policies are increasingly shaped by ideas of self-reliance, resilience, and economic inclusion (Omata, 2023). Similar principles also underpin the Global Compact on Refugees – a UNHCR initiative aimed at creating a more predictable and equitable system for responsibility-sharing among countries. In the Global South, self-sufficiency is a recurring theme in negotiations between host states and international donors. In the Global North, this approach coincides with broader welfare transformations, marked by a shift toward activation policies (Lidén et al., 2019) and a growing convergence of asylum and labour market policies (Fontanari, 2022).

Despite extensive efforts to support refugees' labour market integration, many continue to face lives marked by uncertainty. This is often due to precarious or informal employment, poor working conditions, and a failure to recognise their skills and qualifications (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Erdoğan et al., 2021; Şahin Mencütek & Nashwan, 2021).

A key explanation for this uncertainty lies in how labour market integration is governed. In addition to challenges such as limited access to language learning, discrimination, and structural labour market barriers, the design of integration governance itself often contributes to maintaining conditions that obstruct refugees' entry into the workforce. This is not simply a matter of a gap between policy intentions and outcomes – governance structures can, in fact, work against the very goals they are meant to achieve (Jung and Spehar, 2025).

This policy brief highlights how current governance models in Turkey, Jordan, and Sweden create barriers to labour market integration for refugees. The analysis draws on a comparative study of the experiences of Syrian refugees in Adana, Irbid, and Gothenburg.

Governance of Labour Market Integration in Three Different Contexts

Turkey: Labour market integration for Syrian refugees is regulated at the national level but implemented locally, resulting in variation across municipalities. Although refugees have the right to work permits under the Temporary Protection Regulation, few gain access to formal employment. The process requires employers to initiate the application, which in practice is hindered by bureaucratic obstacles and employer reluctance. As a result, refugees are often directed toward informal work in agriculture and construction. Municipalities have been given increased responsibility for integration but lack the resources and clear mandates to fulfil this role. This has led to skill loss, labour exploitation, and significant uncertainty about the future.

Jordan: The Jordan Compact (2016) has shaped refugees' access to the labour market through a system in which work permits are granted in exchange for international aid and trade benefits. While the policy appears progressive on paper, it is restrictive in practice. Syrian refugees are only allowed to work in certain sectors, and many professions remain closed to them. Responsibility for implementation is often delegated to international NGOs, resulting in poor coordination. Vocational training programmes are more often guided by donor requirements than by the actual needs of refugees. This has contributed to continued informal employment, mistrust in training initiatives, and a formalised form of skills devaluation.

Sweden: Over the past 15 years, labour market integration in Sweden has primarily been centrally governed by the Swedish Public Employment Service, in line with the Establishment Reform of 2010. The model emphasizes activation, individual responsibility, and self-sufficiency. In practice, however, support is limited by insufficient resources, high caseloads for caseworkers, and standardised procedures. Many refugees – including those who are highly educated – end up in low-paid jobs or internships far from their areas of expertise. Digitalisation has further hindered access to support, particularly for those with limited language skills or digital literacy. The result is a lack of individualised support and a sense of being left to navigate a complex system alone.

Shared governance-related barriers to refugee labour market integration.

Despite differing institutional and political conditions in Turkey, Jordan, and Sweden, there are several clear similarities in how labour market integration is governed in ways that negatively affect refugees' access to employment:

- **Strategic uncertainty:** The right to work exists formally, but its implementation is often unclear, inconsistent, or bureaucratically inaccessible.
- **Fragmented responsibility:** Local actors are assigned responsibility but lack resources and mandates, leading to poor coordination and implementation.
- **Activation without support:** Self-sufficiency is expected, but actual opportunities for qualified employment, recognised education, and relevant guidance are limited.
- **Skills devaluation:** Previous work experience and education are rarely recognised, forcing many to accept jobs far below their qualification level.
- **Work-first logic:** In Sweden in particular, there is a strong emphasis on rapid labour market entry, even when sustainable employment opportunities are lacking.

In summary, several studies show that all three countries formally aim to include refugees in the labour market, but fail to provide the practical conditions necessary for real participation. As a result, refugees are excluded from formal employment, become stuck in insecure or low-paid jobs, and have their skills overlooked. In Turkey and Jordan, exclusion often stems from legal ambiguity and the dominance of informal economies. In Sweden, it is expressed through standardised procedures, digitalisation, and lack of resources. Despite their different forms, the outcome is the same: refugees are expected to take responsibility for their labour market integration but are not given the support needed to make that a reality.

Towards More Inclusive Governance of Labour Market Integration

To enable refugees' entry into the labour market, policymakers must address the barriers that exclude them from employment or push them into low-paid or precarious working conditions. This is not about making minor policy adjustments, but about implementing more substantial changes to the governance models that currently generate uncertainty and hinder meaningful integration. Achieving this requires a new way of thinking about labour market integration – a shift from fragmented and underfunded systems to well-coordinated, inclusive, and stable structures where individuals' skills and potential are recognised and fully utilised.

Comparative Overview: Labour Market Integration in Sweden, Turkey and Jordan

Aspect	Sweden	Turkey	Jordan
Governance	Centralised model led by the Swedish Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen), influenced by New Public Management logic	National policy with decentralised implementation through municipalities	Centralised model shaped by the Jordan Compact, strongly influenced by international donors
Key Actors	Swedish Public Employment Service, municipalities, private contractors	Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), municipalities, employers	Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC), Ministry of Labour, international NGOs, donors
Access to Work	Full legal access, but conditional on active participation and credential validation	Conditional access via work permits that require employer applications	Restricted access to specific sectors via designated work permits, often linked to aid agreements
Policy Approach	Focus on activation, self-sufficiency, and individual responsibility	Temporary solutions, legal ambiguity, tolerance of informal practices	Formal inclusion in selected sectors, but with sector-specific restrictions and project-based logic
Governance-Related Barriers	Standardisation, digital exclusion, lack of resources, and insufficient individualisation	Bureaucratic obstacles, unclear regulations, employer reluctance, limited local capacity	Skill loss, donor-driven training programmes, weak coordination, and informal labour dynamics
Outcome	Formal inclusion on paper – but practical exclusion and skill devaluation	Informal employment dominates, with widespread exploitation and limited access to rights	Legal access with practical exclusion; refugees often channelled into low-paid or informal work

Policy recommendations

To develop governance models that do not exclude refugees from the labour market – and to make full use of each individual's skills – coordinated efforts are needed at multiple levels. Below are recommendations to strengthen the conditions for long-term and fair labour market integration for refugees:

- **Strengthen institutional capacity:** Ensure adequate staffing, particularly in frontline organisations such as the Public Employment Service and municipal actors. Create opportunities for in-person meetings and individualised guidance, especially during the early stages of the integration process.
- **Individualise support measures:** Reintroduce personalised case management and planning that draws on refugees' prior experience, education, and career goals. Avoid standardised solutions that risk leading to skill loss.
- **Accelerate validation and bridging programmes:** Expand fast-track systems for the recognition of foreign qualifications and invest in complementary education and mentorship programmes across a broader range of sectors – including those beyond traditionally prioritised fields.
- **Design vocational training based on actual needs:** Develop training programmes that align with both labour market demand and refugees' ambitions. Follow up initiatives with a focus on long-term outcomes rather than short-term participation statistics.
- **Address digital exclusion:** Combine digital services with access to personalised, language- and culturally adapted support. Ensure that digitalisation does not become a barrier to participation.
- **Engage employers in inclusive recruitment:** Support employers in applying competence-based and fair recruitment practices. Develop tools and routines that reduce unconscious exclusion and promote diversity in the workplace.
- **Link labour market measures to broader social investment:** View labour market integration as part of a wider system. Invest in parallel in housing, education, language training, and proactive efforts to combat discrimination.

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