



**Geneva Trade
Platform**

UNLOCKING TELEWORK FOR REFUGEES

**Eight multi-sector policy
recommendations**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This 8-month applied research project explored the viability, challenges, and opportunities remote work could offer refugees in Geneva, and beyond. Through interviews and exchanges with refugees and a diverse set of stakeholders who are active in this space, the research uncovered an untapped opportunity for digital employment for refugees in Geneva with appropriate capabilities, as well as significant interest amongst this group in working remotely.

The research also identified challenges in the institutional frameworks, support schemes and incentives for refugees to take up on digital livelihood opportunities. To tackle these challenges, the project resulted in **8** actionable policy recommendations addressed to **4** key actors involved in this space:

- the Swiss government,
- NGOs,
- the private sector, and
- International Organizations.

Building on the digital work transition

The global pandemic of 2020 triggered a seismic shift towards remote work, unveiling the potential for digital work to span international borders. This shift raises the question of whether and how this digital-first landscape could empower and benefit refugees by unlocking alternative sources of income, opportunity, and dignity.

United Nations bodies including, but not limited to, the [United Nations High Commission for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#), the [International Trade Centre \(ITC\)](#) and the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#) have increasingly introduced digital livelihood programmes in countries hosting large numbers of displaced populations. In terms of democratising access to telework for refugees, there is also a perceptible growing interest amongst the four actors defined above in the promise of digital livelihoods.

Engaging a diverse stakeholder landscape

The researchers worked with over **25** organisations and **15** Swiss-based Ukrainian refugees to map out policy recommendations and initiatives, and foster dialogue, exchanges and collaboration amongst the broader community of stakeholders, advocates, and practitioners working towards telework pathways for refugees.

Rooted in a human-centred design approach, the research project uses community-informed methods through an iterative process, allowing for feedback, reflection, the formalization of best practices, and implementation proposals at each stage.

To stimulate meaningful insights and dialogue among participants, the project convened one-to-one interviews, piloted digital upskilling and individual coaching sessions for Switzerland based Ukrainian refugees, and held two workshops during the [Future of Work Summit 2023](#) and the [Geneva Trade Week 2023](#).

The primary objective across activities was to collaboratively confront challenges, pinpoint solutions, and collectively formulate policy recommendations, ultimately helping to unlock access to digital livelihoods for refugees, both in Switzerland and beyond.

Concrete outcomes of the project benefiting refugees in Switzerland

- 15** Remunerated interviews with Switzerland based Ukrainian refugees
- 4** Translation projects
- 7** Workshop participants introduced to the possibilities of digital platforms and remote work
- 4** Participants in an online peer-to-peer pilot mentorship-programme
- 2** Ukrainian refugee personal testimonies delivered at international panels during annual forums
- 1** Peer-to-peer career coaching

Challenges and actionable policy recommendations: An overview

Although each of the stakeholders engaged channels unique expertise and resources towards providing access to digital livelihoods for refugees, their efforts remain parallel and often fragmented as each actor faces a set of challenges that greatly hinder inclusive access to digital livelihoods. The research sheds light on a set of **8** challenges and **8** corresponding policy recommendations.

Actor	Challenges	Policy Recommendations
Swiss Government	Lack of avenues to connect refugees to further upskilling and training opportunities.	1. Expand upskilling programs to include digital upskilling that encompasses both technical expertise and essential soft skills.
Swiss Government	Lack of practical understanding of how to provide refugees with access to gainful digital employment opportunities.	2. Enhance workforce inclusion by expanding existing job matching schemes to include remote employment opportunities.
Swiss Government	Unclear local legal framework and regulations, inducing fear of potential financial repercussions e.g. loss of state provided benefits, tax implications	3. Increase transparency and accessibility of information including financial benefits and legal consequences of remote work earnings.
NGOs	Lack of dedicated spaces for exchanges and integration via digital livelihoods programs.	4. Create or expand a space dedicated to co-working, training and exchange for refugees.
NGOs	Lack of awareness of the value added by existing programmes supporting digital livelihoods for refugees.	5. Empower and strengthen NGOs working for digital livelihoods for refugees.
Private Sector	Missing recognition of foreign qualifications, soft skills, professional and lived experiences.	6. Implement a skills-first approach and broaden Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) hiring practices.
International Organizations	Complex and/or prohibitive hiring practices.	7. Facilitate refugee inclusion through online work opportunities with the UN Headquarters in Geneva
Cross-Sectoral	Fragmented and/or parallel efforts amongst actors working on digital livelihoods for refugees.	8. Create a collaborative cross-sector ecosystem for digital livelihoods for refugees.

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The project has been initiated and inspired by Richard Baldwin, former Emeritus Professor of International Economics at the Geneva Graduate Institute and former Co-Director of the Centre of Trade and Economic Integration (CTEI) and supervised by Tamara Pironnet, Managing Director of the Centre of Trade and Economic Integration (CTEI), Kitrhona Cerri, Executive Director of the Thinking Ahead on Societal Change (TASC) Platform and Dmitry Grozoubinski, Executive Director of the Geneva Trade Platform (GTP).

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From the Swiss Government	Sylvain Lehmann, Chargé de projet, Bureau de l'intégration des étrangers (BIE) Florence Sechaud, Communication Coordinator – Solidarité Ukraine, Hospice Général Monica Verin, Project manager for interpretation, State Secretariat for Migration (SEM)
From NGOs	Lorraine Charles, Founder of Na'amal-remote work for refugees Emmanuelle Werner Gillioz, Founder, Yojoa Christian Hirsig, Co-Founder and CEO, Remotecoders Oxana Kozbar, Vice President / Communications with media, the Geneva Branch of Ukrainian Society of Switzerland Linus Murbach, Program Manager, Powercoders – Coding Academy for Refugees Pauline Savelieff, Team coordinator, Caritas Genève Daniel Stein, co-founder and president of Cuisine Lab Raphael Strauss, Swiss Refugee Council
From International Organizations	Halkano J. Boru, National Coordinator Kenya, International Trade Centre Hovig Etyemezian, Head of Innovation Service, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Jakub Michalak, Lead, Partnership Development, Reporting and Communications Raimund Moser, Chief, Women, Youth and Vulnerable Communities, International Trade Centre (ITC) Maryna Sydorenko, National Project Manager Ukraine, International Trade Centre (ITC) Nishkan (Mai) Usayapant, Programme Development and Coordination Consultant, International Trade Centre (ITC)
From Academia:	Prof. Dr. Tobias Fritschi, Bern University of Applied Sciences, School of Social Work Claudia Seymour, Head, Applied Research Projects and Practices, Geneva Graduate Institute The Graduate Institute Migration Initiative team: María Emilia Ismael, Master in International and Development Studies (Mobilities, Migrations and Boundaries) Xinyu Liu, Master in International and Development Studies (Mobilities, Migrations and Boundaries)

INTRODUCTION

Methodology

The Unlocking Telework for Refugees project employed a human-centered methodology that included:

1. A Refugee-Led Approach:

- **Refugee interviews:** one-on-one deep dive interviews of over **60** minutes with **15** Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland
- **Workshop pilot:** a hands-on digital upskilling workshop for refugees in Geneva
- **Coaching pilot:** individual job and career coaching sessions for refugees in Switzerland looking to find digital employment opportunities

2. Multi-Stakeholder Engagement:

- Informal exchanges and stakeholder interviews with over **25** organizations, including International Organizations, NGOs, researchers, and Swiss state representatives
- Curation of and participation in **2** workshops held during the Future of Work Summit 2023 and the Geneva Trade Week in 2023.

Navigating uncertainty: Ukrainian refugees' quest for stability in the Swiss job market

Anastasia is a public administrator, Ivan is a technical translator, Martina is pharmacist, Igor is an entrepreneur, Valentina is a barista [1].

Each of the **15** refugees interviewed through this project have one thing in common: they were forced to flee their country of origin and start their lives over in Switzerland. Despite having settled in Switzerland over a year ago, the majority continue to face challenges in securing employment. They aspire to pursue careers in their respective fields of expertise, however, after more than a year of unsuccessful job hunting, individuals like Ivan, Anastasia and Martina are now open to considering any job, whether it's working as a technical translator, a bus driver, or cleaning apartments.

Refugees interviewed reported desperation, structural indifference, bureaucratic burdens and an agonizingly slow process of inclusion. These challenges are compounded by disillusionment with the few opportunities awaiting them in the traditional job market.

What adds onto these structural challenges is a personal sense of instability and insecurity. This feeds into the broader uncertainties of the situation in their country of origin, the constant fear of losing family members and friends, and insecurity about whether their presence in Switzerland is temporary, long term or permanent - depending on the renewal of their residency permit.

This context overwhelmingly impacts these refugees in their search for jobs, raising questions such as:

"Should I fully invest?"
"Can I stay next year in Switzerland?" "Should I build a professional network?"
"Will my social benefits be cut off?"

As of June 2023, over **80'000** Ukrainians have been granted "S" protection refugee status in Switzerland and **17%** of working-age Ukrainians are employed. Although the system has worked well overall, there is room for improvement [2].

In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine displaced over **12 million** people across Europe, and Switzerland found itself hosting over **65,000** Ukrainian refugees as of November 2023 [3]. Recognizing the urgency of this humanitarian crisis, Switzerland swiftly prioritized support for Ukrainian refugees by granting them the "S" protection, a status that has never been granted before.

This included expediting work permits, technically eliminating all legal barriers for Ukrainian refugees to find employment in Switzerland.

However, over a year into the conflict, a national survey revealed a stark reality: while **70%** of Ukrainian refugees were actively seeking employment or were open to working, only **15%** of them succeeded in finding gainful employment [4].

The Unlocking Telework for Refugees project explores the potential of digital livelihoods as a contributor towards closing this gap.

¹ All names have been changed to respect the confidentiality of the interviewees.

² Escape from Ukraine. That's how well the protection status S has proven itself (04 July 2023), SRF: Swiss Radio and Television, originally in German, retrieved from: <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/flucht-aus-der-ukraine-so-gut-hat-sich-der-schutzstatus-s-bewaehrt>

³ War against Ukraine - measures taken by the Confederation since 24 February 2022, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, retrieved from: <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/dossiers/krieg-gegen-ukraine.html#>

⁴ Tobias Fritschi, Peter Neuenschwander, Debra Hevenstone, Olivier Lehmann, Jodok Läser & Alissa Hänggeli: "Arbeitsmarktrelevante Merkmale von Personen mit Schutzstatus S", Berner Fachhochschule, Department Soziale Arbeit, (05 January 2023)

Fundamental barriers to refugee employment

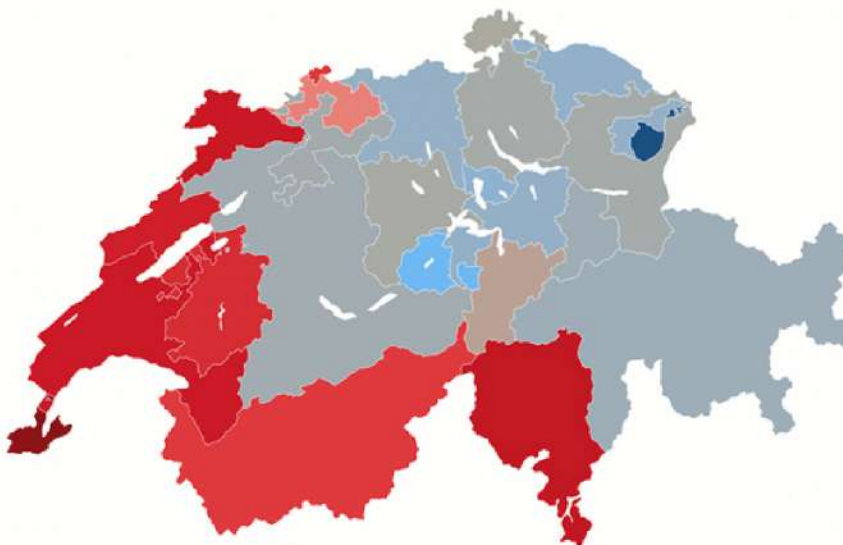
Language barriers

An important factor behind these insecurities resides in language barriers. In every interview conducted with refugees in Switzerland, language barriers were consistently identified as one of the main challenges for finding work in Switzerland and a priority for the interviewees to address before exhaustively applying for positions. In their experience, proficiency in English is considered insufficient for being competitive in the Swiss job market, even for jobs that do not require proficiency in a local language. Beyond limiting competitiveness and successful interviewing, language difficulties can make it challenging to find information regarding the Swiss labour market and opportunities therein.

Language courses offered to refugees in Switzerland vary by municipality and residency status. For instance, the status for Ukrainians 'aiming at protection and not integration for a long time' - a type of residency permit in Switzerland that provides immediate refuge for the duration of the conflict only - did not include a program for free language classes.

Protection status S in Switzerland

Employment of refugees from Ukraine



As of mid-June

Graphics: mcep • Source: State Secretariat for Migration (SEM)

Map from: Escape from Ukraine. That's how well the protection status S has proven itself (04 July 2023), SRF: Swiss Radio and Television, originally in German, retrieved from: <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/flucht-aus-der-ukraine-so-gut-hat-sich-der-schutzstatus-s-bewaehrt>

Lack of networks

Professional networks that allow for informal pathways to employment are often missing when arriving in a new country.

There is very little information on how to access informal or formal networking events.

As the diploma recognition and translation from foreign qualifications into Swiss standards is generally complicated, these informal ways of accessing the labour market could be a valuable entry point where people are given opportunities by their skills, experience and human qualities rather than their diploma.

Main challenges to refugee employment in Switzerland

- Uncertainty: short-term residency permits, instability in the country of origin, difficulties in navigating new contexts
- Language barriers
- Lack of first work experience in Switzerland
- Legal barriers to employing refugees
- Difficulties in recognition of diplomas & qualifications

In the face of complex challenges and uncertainties encountered by refugees navigating the Swiss job market, telework emerges as a potentially transformative solution.

By transcending language barriers and offering remote opportunities across borders, telework provides a pathway for refugees to showcase their skills on a global stage without fully depending on their location. Beyond the limitations of traditional networking, online platforms open avenues for building connections and accessing employment opportunities based on merit and experience rather than locally-recognized qualifications, empowering refugees on their quest for stability and meaningful employment in a new homeland.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Digital work, telework and telemigration: Opening pathways to prosperity

The World Economic Forum's future of jobs report in 2023 [5] points out the need for businesses to adapt to technology, identifying it as the key driver for business transformation in the next five years. With growth in jobs forecast at approximately 4 million digitally-enabled roles, the opportunity of remote work is clear.

In 2022, the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights [6] highlighted the importance of a technologically up-skilled workforce, broader labour access, and fortified social cohesion especially in the context of green and digital transitions.

Within this digital future of work, statistics show that telework has a significant role to play:

- Globally, **16%** of companies are fully remote according to an Owl labs study. This same study found that about **62%** of workers aged **22 to 65** claim to work remotely at least occasionally [7].
- In Switzerland, remote work surged from less than **1%** in 2001 to **50%** during the pandemic, with predictions of **40%** continuing to work from home in the future.

In addition, the rise of "telemigration" as described by Richard Baldwin [8], Emeritus Professor of International Economics at the Geneva Graduate Institute, represents an evolution in the global work environment, particularly relevant in the context of refugees' digital livelihoods. Enabled by enhanced telecommunications and machine translation, skilled digital workers are able to provide their services across borders and language barriers.

These trends highlight the necessity of a radical approach towards digital labour inclusion and in turn incentivizes the private sector to invest in a digitally enabled workforce. Tapping into the unexplored pool of refugee talent is one avenue towards generating talent beyond borders, and driving enhanced inclusion in an increasingly digital future of work.

Navigating transitions: The potential of remote work for Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland

At the time of this research, over 50% of the Ukrainians interviewed were still working remotely for a company based in the Ukraine [9].

This surprising number is to be read with nuance. For some refugees, remote work acts as a psychological as well as financial lifeline. For others, spending **8** hours a day working remotely for a Ukraine-based company runs the risk of becoming a hindrance to dedicating appropriate time towards integrating in their host country.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the Ukrainian refugees interviewed in this project had shifted to remote work, which made their jobs digital and transferable. Some Ukrainian companies facilitated the transition of their contracts. To some, this continued job was a welcome transition when arriving in Switzerland and a rewarding source of income.

For some, remote work with a Ukrainian company hindered their engagement with the local context and language, pushing them to seek new employment, whether remote or in-person. A low salary and job insecurities under Ukrainian employment made dignified living in Switzerland challenging for interviewees, motivating them to explore alternative opportunities.

Some participants leaned towards traditional work settings, valuing the social interactions and motivating atmosphere it provides, while others favoured online work, citing benefits like increased independence, flexibility, time and cost savings, and improved work-life balance.

Digital livelihoods are not a cure-all, especially in the context of a globalized workforce, but they represent a promising avenue, particularly when other opportunities for gainful employment are limited.

Examples of upskilling initiatives in Geneva

A first example of programmes in digital formation offered in Geneva is [#formationdigitale](#) by the Geneva-based NGO Réalize.

Another initiative by the Geneva state is the all-encompassing [pilot project in collaboration between the private sector and Hospice Général](#) introduced in spring 2023. This programme showed how, despite the successful upskilling of participants, the job-matching that was aimed for was harder to achieve.

In addition, the Hospice Général concentrated its efforts in supporting Ukrainian refugees in Geneva through the main portal [Solidarité Ukraine](#).

⁹ which can be explained with the call for interviewees which directly addressed refugees working online or being interested in working online

CHALLENGES ACROSS KEY ACTORS IN IMPLEMENTING TELEWORK FOR REFUGEES

While telework holds the potential to address a number of issues faced by refugees seeking employment, it also encounters specific dynamics and challenges in relation to the actors facilitating its feasibility. The following outlines the nuanced complexities and areas requiring attention for effective engagement by four core actors – the Swiss Government, NGOs, the private sector, and International Organizations – in harnessing digital employment for refugee populations.

To address the challenges faced in leveraging digital livelihoods for refugee populations in Switzerland, this research paper endeavours to propose a series of pragmatic solutions through a sectoral approach addressing the actors defined above – government, the private sector, NGOs and International Organizations – to delineate a roadmap for an inclusive digital workforce for refugees.

The policy recommendations are defined to address the most relevant actors, bearing in mind that these are not the only ones advancing digital livelihoods for refugees. These actionable policy recommendations are also not an exhaustive list but revolve around the most urgent challenges and proposed solutions.

Challenges for the Swiss Government

Main challenges identified:

- Lack of avenues to connect refugees to further upskilling & training opportunities.
- Lack of practical understanding of how to provide refugees with access to gainful digital employment opportunities.
- Unclear local legal framework & regulations, inducing fear of potential financial repercussions e.g. loss of state provided benefits, tax implications.

Digital upskilling

When looking at Switzerland and, more widely, the Global North, there are fewer programs focusing on digital livelihoods for refugees compared to countries hosting large numbers of refugees in the Global South.

Geneva is a very specific place with regards to remote work. It is often administratively challenging to access existing programmes in Switzerland as information is difficult to come by. Most interviewees did not know of any initiatives offering upskilling courses or digital work opportunities and appreciated learning about them through this research project.

The current upskilling offerings primarily focus on traditional employment skills such as general CV writing and interview preparation, often neglecting digital upskilling. These opportunities are often limited due to staffing capacity, while they also overlook digital platforms and global employers that are vital for accessing digital livelihood opportunities.

The exhaustive list of institutions currently in charge and working on employment for refugees in Geneva can be found on the [website of the state's social services: the Hospice Général](#). These initiatives offer valuable integration skills, from day-to-day living to how to find employment.

At the moment there is no specific organization dedicated to digital livelihoods for displaced populations in Switzerland. The exchanges carried with the Hospice Général demonstrated a readiness to expand their current programmes by including digital upskilling programs. The structural challenges of funding, human resources and knowledge however remain a bottleneck.

Lack of financial and legal transparency

Throughout the course of this research project each of the 15 Ukrainian refugees interviewed unanimously shared a sense of insecurity and uncertainty when it comes to gainful employment via digital work. The general fear was that with every additional income, coming from any source, this will impact their welfare entitlements provided by the Swiss Government.

The Swiss Government endeavors to provide fairness and flexibility when it comes to supporting refugees. This is illustrated by the detailed support available on the [SEM website](#). With regards to financial support, the Q&A page dedicated to Ukrainian refugees mentions that: "Social welfare support serves to secure a livelihood. Consequently, people who can fully cover their own living expenses through paid work do not receive social welfare support.

However, if their wages are not sufficient to cover their living costs, they receive supplementary assistance."

As financial benefits regulations for refugees are under the responsibility of each individual canton, the wording remains vague and open to interpretation. This has resulted in the Ukrainian refugee community adopting a blanket approach of not seeking paid work that may be part-time, temporary or free-lancing as these short-term employment opportunities will not be sufficient to cover their basic needs. The Hospice Général on the other hand insisted that there is no penalty for earning additional income (up to a certain amount) via short term work as long as the beneficiaries are transparent with their respective case workers as each case is assessed and treated individually.

At this stage of the project, there remains a landlock in terms of what exactly are the legal requirements, its different interpretations, and its impacts when earning digital livelihoods by refugees in Switzerland. This is why it is imperative for the Swiss Government to increase transparency and make the concrete legal and financial regulations accessible to the general public by expanding on their current research as well as publishing their internal overview of Cantonal allowances on their websites.

Actionable policy recommendations for the Government

The Swiss Government has not only an interest in but also a responsibility for the labour market inclusion of refugees in Switzerland. In 2019, over one-third of all asylum seekers and refugees in Switzerland were employed, according to State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) figures [10].

However most of the jobs carried by refugees are precarious, and do not match their skills, qualifications or expertise.

With regards to Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland, a Swiss-wide survey provides a deeper insight into respondents' professional situation, with **36%** saying that they were looking for work and another **36%** interested in working. Still, only **15%** of respondents were gainfully employed in Switzerland.

In order to increase these numbers, the first three actionable policy recommendations are addressed to:

- The Swiss government, particularly the [State Secretariat for Migration SEM](#) in Switzerland
- The Cantonal authorities such as the [Bureau de l'intégration des étrangers](#) in Geneva
- The Cantonal Employe office such as the [Office Cantonal de l'Emploi OCE](#) in Geneva
- State Social Services such as [Hospice Général](#) in Geneva

Main actionable policy recommendations identified:

1. Digital upskilling: Expand upskilling programs to include digital upskilling that encompass both technical expertise and essential soft skills.

2. Job matching: Enhance workforce inclusion by expanding existing job matching schemes to include remote employment opportunities.

3. Financial and legal transparency: Increase transparency of financial benefits, legal consequences of remote work earnings and greater accessibility of information.

Digital upskilling

These programs should seamlessly integrate into existing job inclusion programs, like the services offered by chômage in Geneva. By expanding these programs to incorporate digital working opportunities, and addressing skills crucial for navigating the digital workforce, a more comprehensive support system for job seekers can be provided.

The skills to be taught should encompass an understanding of digital employment platforms, proficiency in freelancing work, and the ability to price services competitively.

To implement these changes, it is essential to foster collaborative multi-sector partnerships. Engaging industry experts, digital platforms, and experienced practitioners such as [Réalize](#) and [Na'amal](#) in curriculum design is paramount. This collaboration will enable the development of a curriculum that places a strong emphasis on remote work proficiency, ensuring that job seekers are well-prepared to meet the evolving demands of the digital job market.

Job matching

To facilitate seamless inclusion of digitally upskilled refugees into the global digital labor market, the research recommends expanding existing job matching schemes within the unemployment schemes delivered by the respective Cantonal Employment Offices.

As such, the Government plays a pivotal role, as exemplified by Switzerland's practice of initially posting new job positions that are particularly affected by unemployment rates on its chômage database for a minimum of one week before advertising them more broadly [11].

To effectively implement these recommendations, the research proposes expanding work insertion and job placement partnerships to create direct connections between refugees who have acquired digital skills and online work opportunities. This expansion entails:

- Establish networks with employment agencies' refugee employment schemes such as [Adecco](#), [Manpower](#), and [Randstad](#).
- Establishing robust professional networks on global digital platforms, such as [Upwork](#), [Fiverr](#) or their local equivalents.
- Fostering collaborations with global remote HR companies such as [remote.com](#).
- Building relationships with global companies offering work opportunities for refugees as encouraged by the [World Economic Forum \(WEF\) Refugee Employment Alliance](#) and [TENT Partnerships](#).

¹⁰ More asylum seekers find work in Switzerland, (28 April 2019), SWI - swissinfo.ch, retrieved from: https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/employment_more-asylum-seekers-find-work-in-switzerland/44926114

¹¹ Job registration requirement, work.swiss, retrieved from: <https://www.arbeit.swiss/secoalv/en/home/menue/unternehmen/stellenmeldepflicht.html>

Challenges & actionable policy recommendations for NGOs

Main challenges identified:

- Lack of dedicated spaces for exchanges and integration via digital livelihoods programs.
- Lack of awareness of the value added by existing digital livelihoods for refugees programs.

One key argument uncovered in this research against refugees engaging in remote work as a source of livelihood is the concern that online work may hinder their social integration within host communities and possibly lead to isolation. Additionally, obstacles including, but not limited to, access to digital tools, such as computers and internet connections, as well as suitable workspaces and peer interactions, further impede refugees' participation in the digital job market.

NGOs are at the frontline of democratizing access to digital livelihoods for refugees. The following two actionable policy recommendations are dedicated to organizations ranging from local NGOs to international programmes:

- Local NGOs working on job inclusion for refugees such as [Yoojoa](#) and [Réalize](#) in Geneva.
- National umbrella NGOs dedicated to refugees in Switzerland such as the [Swiss Refugee Council](#).
- International NGOs delivering digital livelihoods for refugees programmes such as [Na'amal](#).

Main actionable policy recommendations identified:

4. Digital work local hub: Create a space or expand a co-working space dedicated to co-working, training and exchange for refugees and other individuals in Geneva.

5. Inclusive digital livelihoods: Empower and strengthen NGOs working for digital livelihoods for refugees.

Digital work local hub

Bearing in mind the need to support and secure mental health and wellbeing as well as the right to autonomy of refugees, one of the findings of the research is to expand and/or create co-working spaces dedicated to digital livelihoods for refugees.

Such a co-working space could provide:

- upskilling trainings
- job and career coaching
- job matching support
- dedicated online work spaces
- communal spaces for informal exchanges and networking

Inclusive digital livelihoods

NGOs dedicated to providing refugees with access to digital livelihoods, like Na'amal, are vital partners in the journey toward refugee empowerment. Collaboration, support, and strengthening of such experienced organizations should be a priority.

They often run comprehensive programs informed by the refugees' needs, from digital upskilling to job matching, ensuring that refugees are well-equipped for the digital workforce. This includes advocating for the unique skills refugees possess, promoting diversity and expanding the talent pool accessible to employers. The advocacy should resonate across all sectors, including International Organizations, governments, academia, and the private sector.

In addition, advocating for the inclusion of refugees in online work platforms and global companies must also be expanded on the agenda of NGOs working with displaced populations.

This advocacy should emphasize the unique skills and talents refugees bring (skills-first approach), thereby promoting diversity and expanding the talent pool available to employers. The unique position of NGOs enables them to address all sectors, provided that the adequate platform is available to do so.

Through the process of this research project, the depth of interest across all stakeholders in the topic of digital livelihoods for refugees became apparent. This brings with it the responsibility to keep on researching and setting the topic on the global agenda to shape an inclusive future of work.

NGO spotlight: Na'amal

While researching NGOs in Switzerland and abroad dedicated to digital livelihoods for refugees, one of the key organizations is [Na'amal](#), an organization dedicated to preparing refugees for the global workforce that has been at the forefront of advocating for an inclusive future of work.

One of the first projects implemented by Na'amal was launched in 2020 at the height of the global pandemic, both in Lebanon and Jordan, and online with a global cohort of learners from 29 countries.

Challenge & actionable policy recommendation for the private sector

Main challenge identified:

- Missing recognition of foreign qualifications, soft skills, professional and lived experiences.

While the private sector is rallying to address employment challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees with international employment agencies such as [Adecco](#), [Manpower](#) and [Randstad](#) opening job advertisements for Ukrainian refugees, the current employment market often fails to recognize these skilled workers. Addressing this challenge necessitates a multi-sectoral approach and a commitment from all sectors to diversify the workforce.

There is no inclusive future of work without involvement of the private sector. The following recommendation is addressing actors such as:

- Corporations and companies, especially those who are already actively involved in the hiring of skilled refugees through initiatives such as [TENT Partnership for Refugees](#)
- Private sector initiatives such as the [World Economic Forum's Refugee Employment Alliance](#)
- Global and local employment agencies such [Adecco](#), [Manpower](#), [Randstad](#).

Main actionable policy recommendation identified:

6. Implement a skills-first approach and by broadening diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) hiring practices.

Skills-first approach

To unlock the full potential of a diverse and talented remote workforce, this research encourages a skills-first approach in hiring policies. A concrete example of a skills-first, immediate-term consultancy type of employment is translation in local, foreign language for suitably skilled refugees. Such an approach can be applied to such short term, small scale tasks to longer term projects.

A skills-first approach requires prioritizing the hiring of individuals based on their skills, lived experiences, professional expertise and transferable qualifications, irrespective of their formally recognized qualifications such as specific diplomas, degrees and/or certificates. This approach is akin to the principle of hiring based on skills regardless of legal status, ensuring to tap into a broader talent pool and promote diversity within companies' workforce.

Practical recommendations

In practical terms, an effort to provide skilled displaced individuals with opportunities, in turn requires broadening hiring criteria by recognizing, converting, or adapting a range of foreign qualifications to local standards.

Additionally, this also requires considering equivalent experience or skills in place of formal qualifications. Practical expertise gained in various contexts is valuable, enabling skilled displaced individuals to secure their first online working experiences in or from the host countries.

A concrete step to open doors for the professional inclusion of refugees via remote work is to offer digital internships, traineeships and work experiences for refugees based on their skills and (in)formal experience.

These roles are often a stepping stone to translate practical skills into formal recognition, crystallized in a broader professional network and validated thanks to a letter of recommendation. This recognition opens doors to more substantial and sustainable positions and provides an inclusive pathway for displaced individuals to enter the digital workforce.

Remote work and the impact of DEI

In the quest for a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable workforce, the private sector can truly benefit from reviewing and expanding its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies to incorporate and embrace refugee populations.

By assessing current internal policies, organizations can identify and eliminate potential barriers to refugee employment, rectify discriminatory clauses, and promote equal opportunities for all, regardless of refugee status.

This inclusive approach can strengthen corporate values and enhance team productivity by drawing from a diverse talent pool. It fosters a work environment that values skills and diversity, furthering the goals of both the company and the individual.

A concrete example of the skills-first approach

For instance, this research paper was able to conduct its first rounds of interviews following a call for participation shared on LinkedIn translated in **4** different languages:

- Ukrainian
- Arabic
- Farsi, and
- Tigrinya

The entire process was fully remote from hiring to remunerating the refugees.

Challenge & actionable policy recommendation for International Organizations

Main challenge identified:

- Complex and/or prohibitive hiring practices.

While a quick internet search showcases over a dozen digital upskilling programs for refugees are being promoted by International Organization such as the [Refugee Employment Skills Initiative by ITC](#), the [REMI program by ITC](#), the [Digital Learning for Refugees by UNICEF](#), the [UNDP Digital Work Programme in Jordan](#), the [UNHCR and ITU Digital Connectivity Programme](#) to name just a few. However, there is a systemic barrier for the inclusion of refugees when it comes to remote work within the International Organizations themselves. Although each of these provides some respite to the plight of refugees, these programs also run the risk of being fragmented and/or redundant.

Home → Frequently Asked Questions

UN Geneva

FAQ categories

- The Palais des Nations
- UN Geneva
- UN Family in Geneva
- Library & Archives
- News & Media
- Delegates
- Conference Management
- Civil Society

Employment & Training

I have refugee status in Switzerland; may I be considered for employment with the United Nations?

No, unfortunately we are not in a position to consider you for employment if you have a refugee status in Switzerland.

Related information

[Employment](#) [Training](#) [Work](#) [Internship](#) [Staff](#) [Refugees](#)

Currently the [Q&A section of the United Nations Office at Geneva](#) stipulates that employment opportunities at the UN are not available for Swiss refugee status holders. There are potentially exceptions when it comes to consultancies, however the concrete procedural requirements to obtain gainful employment remain unclear.

The following policy recommendation is addressing the United Nations organizations and bodies in Geneva at large, specifically the three main international stakeholders striving for digital livelihoods for displaced populations:

- [UNHCR Innovation Unit](#),
- [ITC Women, Youth and Vulnerable Communities](#), and the
- [ILO Prospects](#)

Main actionable policy recommendation identified:

7. Facilitate refugees' inclusion through online work opportunities with the UN Headquarters in Geneva.

The United Nations must embark on a journey of transformative change, adapting its policies and legal framework to enable the hiring of refugees within its Geneva headquarters while embracing online work opportunities.

This therefore necessitates a comprehensive review of existing labor laws and regulations, with the express goal of fostering an environment that not only accommodates but actively promotes the sustainable and inclusive employment of displaced individuals within the United Nations.

Central to the core values of international organizations is the commitment to integrate the communities they serve at every level of their organizational structure. A fundamental aspect of this vision, particularly when working with refugees, is to ensure the meaningful inclusion of displaced individuals within the workforce of these International Organizations.

This approach should emphasize a skills-first orientation, wherein refugees are evaluated and employed based on their capabilities in areas including but not limited to:

- translation,
- digital document drafting and design,
- digital communication encompassing social media,
- graphic design, and content creation,
- IT infrastructure support, website design,
- and management, among other relevant skills.

Cross-sectoral recommendation: An emerging community of practice

Moving from a sectoral perspective, there is a necessity for a global and cross-sectoral approach to address the interplay between actors that can actively shape and implement an inclusive and dignified digital future of work for all.

Main actionable policy recommendations identified:

8. Create a **collaborative cross-sector ecosystem** for digital livelihoods for refugees

A collaborative process

The research process allowed for the emergence of an organic ecosystem of thematic stakeholders, each dedicated to the empowerment of refugees through digital livelihoods. Due to the fragmented character of current initiatives and programmes, the stakeholders that were approached quickly sought cross-sector collaborations.

Practitioners ranging from the Government and private sectors as well as NGOs and International Organizations recognized the necessity for a dedicated space that facilitates the exchange of ideas among various practitioners.

This underscored the importance of initially pinpointing gaps in each sector as carried out by this research project, understanding their respective strengths and weaknesses, and subsequently bridging these gaps by connecting with the four main sectors that excel in addressing those gaps. Those connections translated into the two workshops delivered at the Future of Work Summit and the Geneva Trade Week 2023.

An iterative process: research, collective feedback and implementation

The human-centered design approach of the research project and its community-informed approach brought forward the wish for the creation of a greater, formalized, community of practitioners that operates through an iterative process allowing for:

- feedback,
- reflection,
- formalization of best practices,
- and implementation at each stage.

A cross-sectoral approach

This research project underscores the importance of strengthening the emerging ecosystem of digital livelihoods for displaced populations programmes with a more inclusive and sustainable approach - one that places dignity and opportunity at its core, prioritizing the well-being of affected individuals.

Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that many organizations working in this field lack fundamental support, including financial resources, human resources, and public knowledge and exposure. To bridge this gap, these organizations need robust funding, networks and resources that enable larger organizations like UNHCR, ITC, and ILO to easily connect with them.

Collaborative efforts with grassroots organizations are crucial as they ensure that programs are centered around the specific needs of refugees, thus enhancing the likelihood of successful and impactful outcomes by offering refugees a pathway to global digital employment. By doing so, organizations contribute to an inclusive future of work and open doors for refugees to access a wide array of international opportunities.

In this pursuit, it is imperative that like-minded organizations engage in greater meaningful exchanges, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing to prevent the repetition of initiatives and to anticipate previous shortcomings.

The research project initially set off to formalize policy recommendations to provide greater access to digital livelihoods for Ukrainian refugees in Geneva. Quickly the research findings emphasized the need for a robust risk assessment and harm reduction strategy which in turn required identifying gaps in current initiatives and strategizing on how to bridge them.

This is why cross-sectoral collaboration is essential, with a need to unite the main four sectors - government, the private sector, NGOs and International Organizations, keeping the goal of empowering refugees and providing dignified digital livelihoods at the forefront of our efforts.

CONCLUSION

A human-centered approach

This report summarizes the 8-month applied research project which aimed at exploring the viability, challenges, and opportunities of digital livelihoods for refugees in Switzerland and beyond. The critical nature of researching human livelihoods affected by global conflicts not only requires applying research methodologies and academic approaches but furthermore urges that affected individuals, their lived experiences, shared knowledge and hopes for the future are at the heart of the research.

A responsible approach

With the growing interest of the four sectors to facilitate the remote employment of refugee talent, there comes a responsibility and need to establish comprehensive policy frameworks that:

- foster awareness,
- provide necessary training,
- encourage policy adoption,
- and streamline access to work opportunities for refugees.

The iterative process allowed for the formalization of policy recommendation and the creation of best practices has been possible due to the strategic position of a city like Geneva. The initial mandate of the research project was to focus solely on Ukrainian refugees in Geneva. This quickly evolved due to the presence of the headquarters of International Organizations such as the UNHCR, ITC and ILO.

The geographical proximity to the main stakeholders from each organization allowed this research project to gain not only in-depth knowledge but also global insights to the plight of refugees. The research project was then able to open its scope of review from the localized context of Geneva to beyond its borders, hoping to have a more broader impact.

Setting a global agenda for digital livelihoods

This research project underscores the depth of interest across all stakeholders in the field of digital livelihoods for refugees. Fostering digital opportunities for refugees is more than a fleeting trend, it is a call to action.

Yet, while the potential of digital livelihoods for refugees is recognized, it remains under-explored, particularly in the context of the Global North. Creating an inclusive telework ecosystem will require collaboration, inclusivity, and concerted efforts to address barriers such as language, access to technology, and the impact of AI.

By prioritizing connectivity, upskilling, job matching, and employment rights, stakeholders can collectively pave the way for a regenerative future of work that benefits refugees and society as a whole.

ANNEX: PILOT PROJECTS & WORKSHOPS

Pilot project 1: Onboarding refugees on digital work platforms

Following the initial first three months of the research, in June 2023 a pilot workshop live-tested the feasibility of accessing remote work for asylum seekers and refugees in Geneva, and whether there was an appetite for it at all. Through a series of interviews, word of mouth and online communications such as LinkedIn posts and messaging via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, a first two-hours workshop designed to on-boarding refugees on the online platform [Upwork](#) - a global digital gig work platform for freelancers - took place. This workshop was co-organized with the [Geneva Graduate Institute's student Migration Initiative](#).

Project goals:

The aims and ambitions of the workshop were to:

- Inform of the working opportunities on the platform,
- Create Upwork profiles for each participants
- Flag the risks associated with such platforms, and
- Learn how to navigate the platform
- Appreciate how digital platforms on-boarding is a learned skill

Project results

What became apparent during this workshop, was that there is a need for thematic experts but even more the need for spaces of exchange, to clarify questions and to co-work together and learn peer-to-peer from each other. Not only did every participant create their own profile during the workshop, but also new connections were built and a community of people that are in similar positions.

The feedback was overall very positive. Participants liked the combination of looking at a concrete way of finding work while finding themselves in an atmosphere of exchange and learning.

The question that nevertheless remains open, is to what extent gig economy platforms can provide for a salary that allows one to live in Switzerland. These platforms serve more as bridges to gain working experiences, gain some additional money and to extend one's network than long-term gainful employment opportunities.

To take this pilot forward, there is a need for a dedicated skilled team to upscale and regularly offer such workshops for asylum seekers and refugees in Switzerland. [Na'amal](#) is doing this work for the Middle East and Africa and focuses on the combination of gig work platforms as entry points into the long-term and sustainable labor market for refugees.

Pilot project 2: Online job & career coaching

Another concrete outcome from the refugees interviews allowed for the emergence of an organic network of support when it comes to job searches. A second pilot project tested an online job and career coaching services programme implemented by Victoria Finnegan a Ukrainian Mental Health, Social Support and Integration Counselor living in Switzerland.

Project goals

The aims and ambitions of the coaching pilot project were to:

- Review of CVs and cover letters
- Identify professional aspirations and strategies on how to reach them
- Build self-confidence for the interview process
- Understand the specific demands of the Swiss job market

Project results

The coaching pilot project highlighted how candidates needed to be in a state of readiness: applying for jobs takes much time and capacities for anyone, let alone refugees. Most candidates had many different aspects of integration to solve at the same time such as housing, child-care, and language, to name a few, which makes it difficult to focus on the job search.

The pilot program showed the interest and need for complementary offers to what the state provides. There was a mutually beneficial aspect of learning about the specific Swiss regulations and circumstances that they find themselves in when searching for work and how to navigate these.

The evaluation of the pilot results in a need for supportive integrative coaching with regards to finding gainful employment for refugees in Switzerland, by proposing mentoring programmes that allow for regular exchange working on self-confidence of the candidates and practicing the local language in a professional setting.

Workshop 1: Future of Work Summit 2023

The first workshop took place at the Future of Work Summit 2023, reflecting the goals of Thinking Ahead on Societal Change, a platform focused on the future of work and global challenges.

This hybrid workshop gathered around 40 stakeholders from IOs, NGOs, the state, the private sector, academic researchers, students as well as Ukrainian refugees both from Geneva and beyond. Key insights revolved around the incredible potential of telework for displaced individuals, emphasizing its role in fostering empowerment and integration into host societies.

The transformative power of telework lies in its ability to provide economic opportunities, flexibility, and autonomy, ultimately enabling refugees to rebuild their lives. Dmitry Grozoubinski, the Executive Director of the Geneva Trade Platform summarized the mission statement of the workshop and captured the essence of the research project as follows:

“We are proposing recommendations while managing the challenges identified to achieve the fundamental goal of human dignity and make people feel empowered and welcome.”

In conclusion, the discussion on unlocking telework for refugees shed light on the immense potential of this form of work to empower displaced individuals and foster their integration into host communities.

Workshop 2: Geneva Trade Week 2023

The second workshop was an integral part of the Geneva Trade Week 2023, mirroring the aims of The Geneva Trade Platform, dedicated to simplifying international trade policymaking.

This hybrid workshop, hosted in collaboration with and at the International Trade Centre (ITC), attracted about 60 stakeholders. As in the previous workshop, participants hailed from IOs, NGOs, the state, the private sector, academic researchers, students as well as Ukrainian refugees both from Geneva and beyond.

Beyond being mere knowledge exchange arenas, these workshops illuminated the tremendous potential of forging a unified, impactful community. With the right resources and commitment, such a community holds the promise to reshape the landscape of refugees and digital livelihoods. This was echoed by Filipa Matos, VP of Special Operations at Remote:

“We are envisioning a landscape where inclusivity and diversity are not just buzzwords but elements of the work culture globally. The Universal Right to remote work is not just an idea, it is a movement towards a future where opportunities are not bound by geographical location but by skills and talent.”

The breakout discussions showed the importance of the identified policy recommendations and need for further research on the topic of digital livelihoods for refugees in Switzerland and beyond. Digital trade for sustainable refugee empowerment is an innovative solution for gainful employment of displaced populations with much potential. Nevertheless, only when informed by research and practical policy recommendations, can it serve the needs of beneficiaries. By prioritising collaboration across sectors, the future of work can be made inclusive for people in need of gainful employment opportunities across borders.