

# Feasibility study for hospitality training and recruitment for Syrian refugees in Aqaba



## Summary

This project aimed to explore how Syrian refugees could be effectively integrated into Aqaba's hospitality and tourism sector to meet the region's growing recruitment needs. Building on a successful training and employment initiative in Amman, the Aqaba-focused phase assessed the feasibility of scaling the model to this region. By engaging stakeholders including employers, training providers and refugees themselves, the project laid the groundwork for integrating Syrian refugees into Aqaba's workforce.

## Background

Since 2016, People 1st International has collaborated with the EBRD to create employment opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan. This effort began with a pilot programme in Amman, which extended a training initiative for Jordanian youth to young Syrian refugees. After six months of feasibility studies, curriculum development and trainer preparation, the first cohort of trainees graduated in July 2017 and successfully secured employment.

Jordan's hospitality and tourism sector relies heavily on foreign workers to meet labour demands. This reliance highlights a significant opportunity for Syrian refugees to fill much-needed skills gaps in the market. However, the employment of refugees remains a complex and sensitive issue, requiring a nuanced understanding of employer needs, worker readiness, legal regulations and contextual challenges such as mobility, living conditions, and societal perceptions of certain jobs.

## Our solutions

The project implemented a multi-pronged approach to address the feasibility of integrating Syrian refugees into Aqaba's hospitality workforce:

- **Clarification of work-permit processes:** Meetings were held with key officials from the Aqaba Economic Development Agency (ASEZA) and the Ministry of Labour (MoL) to clarify the requirements for Syrian refugees to obtain work permits. This included an assessment of permit quotas, employer allocations, renewal processes and associated costs. These discussions also identified sectors and roles open to refugees, such as housekeeping, food and beverage services and garment manufacturing. We also engaged with other relevant organisations including UNHCR and the ILO to identify regulatory as well as other challenges related to the formal employment of refugees in the target sectors.
- **Research and stakeholder engagement:** Primary research involved interviews and focus groups with 98 Syrian refugees. These sessions examined refugees' skills, interest in hospitality jobs, and the barriers they faced, such as mobility challenges, living conditions and cultural perceptions. It also assessed the specific challenges that female refugees may face in accessing such job opportunities. In addition, employers were surveyed to understand their needs and willingness to hire refugees, uncovering both opportunities and misconceptions about the hiring process.

- **Outreach and awareness building:** Efforts to inform refugees about work opportunities included myth-busting sessions addressing misconceptions about work permits and employment rights. These sessions were conducted in collaboration with partners such as UNHCR and Tamkeen, ensuring accurate and accessible information for both refugees and employers.
- **Continued support for development of Ayla Skills Academy:** During the project we continued to work closely to finalise the development of the Ayla Skills Academy. We undertook an evaluation of the first two pilot programmes for Syrian refugees delivered in Amman and offered a series of recommendations. This helped ensure that the academy was equipped and ready to offer hospitality training to Jordanian youth, and in the future, to Syrian refugees.

## Outcomes

The project provided valuable insights into the feasibility of integrating Syrian refugees into Aqaba's hospitality workforce.

The research confirmed that Syrian refugees were highly interested in pursuing careers in Aqaba's hospitality sector, highlighting the potential of this workforce to fill existing labour gaps. The findings also highlighted the barriers refugees face, including mobility issues, skills gaps and cultural challenges.

While there was clear interest from refugees, the political focus temporarily halted plans to deliver training to Syrian refugees in Aqaba. However, during meetings with officials funding was confirmed for a pilot programme to sponsor 50 Jordanian youth for new job opportunities at Ayla in 2018. Whilst the training for Syrian refugees at Ayla Skills Academy was delayed, Ayla's investment in the academy continues, and the addition of a new training manager has expanded the department's capacity. This expansion ensures that Ayla can better support future training needs.

The ongoing dialogue with the Ministry of Labour highlighted the importance of promoting inclusive hiring practices. Despite current policy challenges, these conversations established a foundation for the inclusion of refugees in broader sectors, such as hospitality, where workforce shortages remain significant.

## About People 1st International

People 1st International is an industry-led skills expert. We support businesses in the UK and internationally to build, develop and retain skilled workforces.

We're a trusted partner to employers, industry bodies, skills organisations, donor funders, NGOs investment banks and governments, with over 50 years' experience in skills development and technical vocational education and training.

Our practical, employer-led solutions are created in response to industry needs, using our unparalleled insight into the current and future skills priorities. We're passionate about transforming skills and our experts work collaboratively with industry, governments and stakeholders to provide tailored support and facilitate responsive solutions to workforce challenges.

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