

The Story of a Soap





This policy brief sheds light on refugee entrepreneurship in Jordan inspired by a success story of a Syrian refugee entrepreneur. It provides an analysis of the context and challenges she faced on her way to entrepreneurship. The brief puts forward key policy recommendations responding to these challenges and shows the importance of host community's role in integrating and supporting refugees.

The WANA Institute envisions that the research could lead to governance and policymaking recommendations on the national level for Jordan as well as on the regional and international levels.

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1. Executive Summary

“I never thought that 20 JD and a can of olive oil will change my life”.

This is what Najwa Mohammad, a soap-making Syrian business owner said describing her journey since she fled war-torn Syria in 2013. Najwa and her family came to Jordan with a wound that will never heal caused by the death of her son who was shot during the war. However, she decided to rebuild a life for her family and started a small business with help from a Jordanian community-based organisation whose small donation changed Najwa’s life.

As a Syrian entrepreneur, Najwa faced and still faces many challenges such as; legal challenges pertaining to registering her own start-up, financial difficulties, lack of business management and marketing skills, and the absence of local economic networks. These challenges did not stop Najwa. Instead, they made her more determined to fight for her business in order to give her family a better life, to be independent and gain control of her own life and empower other women to do the same.

This policy-brief highlights Najwa’s success story and provides an analysis of the context and challenges she faced on her way to entrepreneurship. The brief puts forward key policy-recommendations responding to these challenges, such as business owners and local corporates receiving tax incentives when cooperating with Syrian entrepreneurs. It will also shed light on the economic contribution of these entrepreneurs to Jordan’s economy should the policy makers ease the registration regulations of start-ups.

2. Introduction

Year 2021 marks the 10th consecutive year of the Syrian crisis. The challenges imposed on Syrian refugees in the world worsen during these years, especially within the last 2 years due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Jordan, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an economic crisis as a result of the closure of industrial activities and suspension of work in the public and private sectors for months.¹ Since Jordan is hosting the second highest number of Syrian refugees per capita in the world,² they have become part of the Jordanian social fabric; thus, their livelihoods were also affected by this economic crisis.

When they first arrived to Jordan, Syrian refugees started seeking employment in the Jordanian labour market and were willing to accept lower wages than Jordanian workers. This led to tensions between Jordanians and Syrian refugees.³ Responding to the Syrian refugee influx, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation in Jordan issued a comprehensive response plan for the

¹Istaitieh, R. (2020). The economic impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees in Jordan. https://wrmcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Jordan_Economic-Impact_Istaitieh_WRMC_Nov2020.pdf.

²UNHCR. (2021). Factsheet, Jordan: February, 2021. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Jordan%20country%20factsheet%20-%20February%202021.pdf>.

³ILO, Fafo. (2015). Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_364162.pdf

Syrian Crisis for 2016-2018 in order to respond to the impact of this crisis without jeopardising Jordan's development.⁴ Furthermore, a set of decisions were taken by the Ministry of Labour in order to make it easier for Syrian refugees to participate in the labour market such as the circulation (No. 394/2018), which exempted employers from work permits and health certificate fees when hiring Syrian employees. The fees exemption was set for one year only (until December 13, 2019).⁵ It should be noted that the Ministry of Labour aiming to boost Jordanian's participation in the labour market⁶ also announced decision (9/2019) under the labour code (No. 8/1996), which indicates that only 15 professions, including but not limited to, sales works, administrative, accounting, and secretarial jobs were closed to foreign workers⁷ since there was a high demand and availability of qualified Jordanian workers in these sectors. However, existing problems such as recession and unemployment in Jordan hindered the success of these measures.

Today, Jordan hosts 666,692 Syrian refugees, 23.9% of them are women between 18-59.⁸ In 2019, the WANA Institute conducted a study that focused on the Syrian refugee participation in Jordan's labour market and found that 55% of Syrian refugees are active in the Jordanian labour market, with a participation rate of 85% for men and 30% for women.⁹ However, the average unemployment rate reached 25%; 23% for men and 46% for women.¹⁰ Which is an indicator of an opportunity lost for the Jordanian economy. Promoting entrepreneurship is thus important to support the employment, innovation, and utilisation of skills and abilities of the Syrian refugees in support of the Jordan economy.

3. Context

In 2013, Jordan registered the highest number of Syrian refugees' fleeing to Jordan of whom 49.1% came seeking refuge.¹¹ One of these refugees is Najwa Mohammad, a 44-year-old woman who fled the conflict in Syria after losing her 16-year-old son. Her son was shot and killed in their

⁴ Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. (2016). Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2016-2018. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/JRP16_18_Document-final%02Bdraft.pdf.

⁵ Ministry of Labour. (2018). Extension of exempting employers from work permits fees when hiring Syrian employees.. http://www.mol.gov.jo/EBV4.0/Root_Storage/AR/EB_Info_Page/%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF_%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A1_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9.jpg

⁶ ibid.

⁷ Ministry of Labour. (2019). Closed professions in Jordan.

http://www.mol.gov.jo/EBV4.0/Root_Storage/AR/EB_Info_Page/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AF%D8%A9.pdf

⁸ UNHCR. (2021). Operational Data Portal: refugee situation. Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response.

<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36>.

⁹ WANA Institute. (2019). The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Its Impact on the Jordanian Labour Market.

https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/3_SyrianRefugeeCrisisImpactJordanianLabourMarket.pdf.

¹⁰ Fafo Foundation. (2019). The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/67914.pdf>.

¹¹ UNHCR. (2021). Registered persons of concern refugees and asylum seekers in Jordan.

[file:///C:/Users/GTS/Dropbox/My%20PC%20\(DESKTOP-KIDD6EA\)/Downloads/External%20Statistical%20Report%20on%20UNHCR%20Registered%20Syrians%20as%20of%2031%20May%202021%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/GTS/Dropbox/My%20PC%20(DESKTOP-KIDD6EA)/Downloads/External%20Statistical%20Report%20on%20UNHCR%20Registered%20Syrians%20as%20of%2031%20May%202021%20(1).pdf).

hometown, Dara'a. Moreover, her husband was imprisoned by the Syrian regime and upon his release his health condition deteriorated as he had serious injuries that rendered him disabled. In addition, their home in Dar'a was completely destroyed as a result of the conflict. Najwa and her family had nothing left in Syria so they decided to cross the border to Jordan. Arriving in a bad psychological state, Najwa, her husband, daughter and mother-in-law settled in Za'atari Camp for 13 days, but later moved to the city because of her husband's bad health condition, as he was suffering from broken ribs, back, and knee that required special medical attention. He was moved to a hospital in the city of Zarqa (Islami Hospital).

An association that aims to help refugees, especially those who lost loved ones, offered them assistance by giving them a place to stay outside the camp, in Amman. They stayed for 16 months but the transportation was a challenge as her husband needed to constantly go to his appointments at the hospital in Zarqa. Once he showed signs of recovery, he was able to find a job opportunity in Zarqa which made them all move there, however soon after, her husband could not resume his work because of his health condition.

As strong as she is, Najwa decided to start looking for a job despite her bad psychological condition. She did not want to rely on others and become a burden. She wanted to provide for her family and create a better life for them.

She had a passion for soap-making, which is a skill she learnt in a workshop when she was in Amman, thus she decided to start her own business in soap-making. She started looking for associations or organisations that could help her start this project. Her neighbours told her about the Zarqa Life Centre, which is a community-based, women-led, organisation that supports refugees and women from the host community in Zarqa by offering a safe space for them to seek psychosocial help, and job opportunities.¹² Najwa met with the Head of the Centre, Ms. Trudy, who saw the potential in Najwa and helped her to combine her love for soap-making and her love for life in order to put it into her products.

Ms. Trudy gave Najwa 20 JD and a can of olive oil encouraging her to start making her soap out of organic ingredients from Jordan, crafted by a skilful Syrian hand. Najwa made soap at home and sold it at the Zarqa Life Centre and different local bazars, she said that most of her customers were tourists or foreigners. Her first contribution in a big bazaar was at the Embassy of Pakistan, which was a break for her as she made around 380 JD. She was able to access a fund with the help of Ms. Trudy from an organisation called ZOA, which is an international relief and recovery organisation that supports people affected by conflicts, to give training to Syrian and Jordanian women on soap-making.¹³ This workshop was a chance for her to expand and create a team of 2 Syrian refugees and 2 Jordanian women as part of her belief that she should give back to the community that helped her, and empower women who fled Syria. In 2016, their business grew and needed a bigger working-space, which the Zarqa Life Centre provided.

In 2017, they were able to rent their own space and secure their first order from China again with the help of Ms. Trudy, who helped promote their work among her professional network. This

¹² Zarqa Life Center. <https://www.zarqalifecenter.org/>.

¹³ ZOA. <https://www.zoa-international.com/about-zoa/>.

order was significant (3,000 bars of soap) and this is when they knew that they must obtain a license in order to deliver such shipment and start exporting. So, she needed to get the “Investor’s Card” specifically category (B – Syrian Nationals). According to the Jordan Investment Commission (JIC) instruction (No. 9/2017), obtaining this card requires having shares that are no less than 50,000 JD¹⁴. Moreover, she needed approvals for her product before exporting and delivering the shipment to China. This was too challenging, that she thought about giving up, but Ms. Trudy helped her by registering the company in her name, since registration regulations are easier for Jordanians. Later, she faced another challenge pertaining to obtaining a health certificate for export purposes, which required testing the soap’s chemical properties. She tested the soap in Amman at the Royal Scientific Society (RSS)¹⁵ but the pH turned out to be high according to the RSS so she tried to reduce it. She repeated the test 4-5 times within four months but the test results showed that the pH level was still high. She did her own research in order to know about balancing the pH level in her soap and to improve the quality in general. Finally, she found out that using the cold process instead of the hot process in making soap and using a certain type of mineral water got her the right pH level. So, she tested her soap again. The pH was balanced and she obtained the certificate.

Disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected her work. In March, 2020 she was preparing for a big shipment to Italy, through the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) who had a partnership with a shop in Italy to sell soap but it was cancelled due to the pandemic. Najwa stopped producing soap for almost a year, in early 2021 she resumed production but the demand is not as it used to be, since tourism has been disrupted and Jordan witnessed zero tourists’ arrivals¹⁶. Najwa and her team tried to find ways to target more local customers but under the harsh economic conditions, the local community found her products expensive, as she uses costly raw organic materials. So, marketing became her main concern. UNIDO helped her develop a [website](#) and create accounts on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Pinterest](#) in order to make it easier for her to sell and market her product, but her lack of digital marketing and computer skills remained a challenge.

4. Approach and Results

“Refugees did not just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they had put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day.” - Nadia Hashimi

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis and the refugee influx to Jordan, different humanitarian organisations (national and international) channelled funds and created programmes in order to create an effective response to this crisis through development, financial and humanitarian

¹⁴ Jordan Investment Commission. (2018). Syrian investor guide. <https://www.jic.gov.jo/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Syrian-Investor-Guide.pdf>.

¹⁵ Royal Scientific Society. (2019). Testing Services Catalogue. https://www.rss.io/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Testing_Services_Catalogue.pdf.

¹⁶ Jordan Strategy Forum. (2021). Jordan’s Tourism Sector – Post COVID-19 Road Map for Recovery. <http://jsf.org/sites/default/files/Road%20map%20for%20Recovery%20of%20Jordan%27s%20Tourism%20Sector%20Post%20COVID-FINAL%20%281%29.pdf>.

assistance, and services such as healthcare, food, water and sanitation, education, psychosocial support. In Najwa's story the host community played the most important role in ensuring that a refugee feels integrated.¹⁷

Acceptance of Najwa and her family by the host community empowered her. She thought not only about supporting herself and her family, but also supporting and empowering women from both the host community and the Syrian refugees to help them build a better life for themselves and their families. Najwa believed that women are capable of rebuilding their lives and their communities if they received the appropriate support.

Another thing that made Najwa overcome the challenges she faced was the support of the community-based organisation, Zarqa Life Centre. She is grateful for Ms. Trudy who believed in her project and offered a helping hand by providing the raw materials and then by registering the company in her name, giving them a space at the centre and by helping her obtaining funds and market her products.

UNIDO also helped her under the project "Irth Collective", which is financed by the Austrian government. This project helped her develop her work in terms of giving her the chance to train more women on soap-making, providing her business with more visibility by creating a website to sell and display the products as well as creating social media outlets.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Najwa is one of many other refugees who came to Jordan hoping to rebuild their lives and recover from traumas caused by the conflict in Syria. Luckily, she found someone to support and believe in her, not many find this support and thus struggle to support their families. Therefore, and based on Najwa's experience, this paper introduces the following policy recommendations:

- 1- **Big business owners to cooperate with Syrian entrepreneurs** in return of tax deduction. In order to exchange experience and support their businesses as well as provide them with marketing training and ways to expand their professional network to access further business opportunities. Constant guidance and counselling for start-ups is encouraged.
- 2- **Building the capacity of entrepreneurs in digital marketing** as social media platforms and websites are important to promote businesses. However, it would only be helpful if the entrepreneurs learn how to use them. Organisations that support entrepreneurship are encouraged to train small start-up owners to better use technology for their benefit, especially that the power of technology grew quickly and abundantly due to the mobility restrictions imposed by the COVID-19.
- 3- **Shed the light on the positive economic contribution of Syrian entrepreneurs to the Jordanian economy** by building the knowledge base as well as using media to promote

¹⁷World Bank Blogs. (2016). Building Contact between Immigrants and Host Communities is Vital to Integration –And Should be a Central Goal of the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/building-contact-between-immigrants-and-host-communities-vital-integration-and-should-be-central>.

this contribution. This will open more opportunities for Syrian entrepreneurs and potential partnerships with Jordanian entrepreneurs, which will eventually benefit the economy as a whole.

- 4- **Devising regulations that facilitate the registration of businesses and start-ups**, through issuing the “Investor’s Card” with an amount less than 50,000 JD¹⁸ to enable and incentivise more refugees to start their own businesses.

¹⁸ Jordan Investment Commission. (2018). Syrian investor guide. <https://www.jic.gov.jo/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Syrian-Investor-Guide.pdf>.



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