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**School of Computing and Informatics (SCI)**

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**Social Business 1**

**SOCIAL BUSINESS DESIGNING AND MANAGEMENT TO ADDRESS SOCIAL ISSUES**

**- Project Title -**

**Empowering Refugees Through Employment: A Social Innovation for Sustainable  
Livelihoods**

**Group Members**

Name	Student ID
Naing Naing	AIU 23102101
Myat Min Khant	AIU 23102103
Shokhjakhon Shermatov	AIU 23102136
Ye Min Myat	AIU 23102132
Zayar Linn	AIU 23102140

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## **1. Project Background**

### **1.1 Project Name**

Empowering Refugees Through Employment: A Social Innovation for Sustainable Livelihoods

### **1.2 Project Description**

The project is a social-enterprise approach to providing the refugee communities in Malaysia with formal employment. It provides job-matching services online, vocational education, specialized to the skills of the refugees, and collaborations with employers who are socially responsible. Advocacy with a view to ensuring legal right to employment of refugees is also put in place in the initiative. It is an incorporated approach that will provide economic independence, social inclusion and comply with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 8: decent work and economic growth.

### **1.3 Targeted Issues and Problems**

About 180 000-182 000 refugees registered by the UNHCR—primarily Rohingya and the representatives of other Myanmar ethnic groups 116 118 118 Refugees are therefore likely to be employed in informal 3D work so that they get no contracts, legal safeguards, or remunerations (Ghazali et al., 2020). The undocumented status of refugees has also been reported by Nasir (2022), as systemic exploitation in the shape of wage theft and forced labor.

Economic modeling shows that introducing formal work rights would have a sizeable potential: it would increase GDP by more than RM 3 billion by 2024 and potentially over RM 6,5 billion by 2040, with educational improvements; moreover, reforms would yield between RM 50-250 million in annual tax revenue yet generate thousands of jobs among Malaysians (Todd et al., 2019). The World Bank notes that the inclusion of refugee labor will benefit the refugees and the host economies globally because it assists in reducing labor mismatches and poverty (World Bank, 2024; UNHCR, 2023). Summary of the Problem: Refugees in Malaysia are caught in both economic and legal no-man land where they work in an informal sector under exploitative conditions and cannot contribute to economy. This initiative will directly address these issues with the help of legal advocacy, a scalable technological solution to match job entry with vocational skills training and organized cooperation with employers that begin in Malaysia and are planned to be replicated in other comparable settings.

## **2. Social Issues**

### **Key social issues and importance**

In the global setting, refugees are largely restricted in terms of pursuing formal work due to legal confinements, discrimination, unformalized labour exploitation, poverty and inadequate access to education and skills development (UNHCR, 2022; ILO, 2021). According to UNHCR, different types of refugees roughly number 183,000 in Malaysia, and they receive little access to the formal labor market because of being rather ill-legally employed (UNHCR, 2022). Refugees are inclined to find low-paid jobs that are unsafe in terms of working conditions and wage theft and work informally in so-called 3D (difficult, dirty, dangerous) occupations (Wake & Cheung, 2016; Ghazali et al., 2020).

The situation is further aggravated through discrimination and social exclusion. According to refugees, they have experienced harassment, racism, and social stigma when trying to get work or attend the services that they need in the country (Ghazali et al., 2020). They also do not include refugees (particularly females and younger generations) in vocational training programs that would positively affect their employment success (Krause & Schmidt, 2020).

Economically, the elimination of formal jobs to refugees results in failure to utilize human potential. The International Labour Organization (ILO) believes that the economic growth and tax base of host countries are benefited by the inclusion of refugees in the labor pool (ILO, 2021). In Malaysia, it was found out that with legal work access to refugees, more than RM 3 billion in terms of GDP contribution and employment opportunities to Malaysians could be created (Todd et al., 2019).

These problems are not only a question of morality but also an economic opportunity to solve them. Work enhances self-reliance and lessens reliance on humanitarian aid as well as the creation of societal connections in refugees (World Bank, 2023). Refugees who are economically active could boost the labor market of Malaysia and contribute to the areas of shortage.

### **Process of Design Thinking**

This project used the approach of Design Thinking in order to immerse in the problem and address it thoroughly:

**Empathize :** This activity involved having interviews and collecting the stories of the refugees, NGOs and community leaders. In particular, the refugees stated that they were paid less in construction and food

services industries due to working long hours (Ghazali et al., 2020).

**Define:** We identified exactly the problem: There are no legal ways of employment by the refugees in Malaysia, which results in systematic exploitation and inability to become a part of the formal economy.

**Ideate:** The ideas that we brainstormed included job-matching platforms, vocational training specific to each individual, and legal advocacy programs based on examples of other countries (World Bank, 2023).

**Prototype (Developed):** We have come up with a prototype of a refugee-centered employment platform consisting of training provisions and business alliances. We also played around with small pilot initiatives like the one that Malaysia introduced in the year 2016: the Rohingya work pilot (Wake & Cheung, 2016).

**Test:** We also consulted members of the refugee communities and NGOs on the ideas and viability of the proposed solutions and this allowed us to narrow down on the platform to fit better to the language and cultural needs of refugees.

### **Social Mission, Problem Statement and Beneficiaries**

**Problem Statement:** Malaysian refugees are not receiving legal acknowledgment and access to secure and just employment and are respective to exploitation, poverty, and financial marginalization.

**Social Mission:** To enable UNHCR-registered refugees to gain lasting access to the world of work thanks to the establishment of sustainable employment channels, better access to training in skills, and fairer rights to work.

The main beneficiaries will be the refugees and asylum seekers within Malaysia (about 183,000) (UNHCR, 2022), especially the adults and the young people currently working.

### **3. Solutions**

The project "Empowering Refugees Through Employment" addresses the issue of marginalization of refugees in Malaysia by linking refugees with formal employment, vocational training and legal advocacy. The social solution we propose is based on the project framework, to create a sustainable and inclusive model for refugee employment in the Malaysian labour market. This solution will be developed in four areas: job-matching platforms; vocational training; partnerships with employers; and legal support.

### **i. Job-Matching Platform For Refugees**

A digital job-matching platform specifically for refugees which will connect employers with refugees seeking employment. The platform will:

1. Profiles Of Refugee Skills: When refugees sign up, their skills, language skills and work experience are registered so that employers can find appropriate matches.
2. Employer Engagement: Employers that demonstrate social responsibility will be asked to join the platform to hire refugees providing that the employment will involve formal employment and pay fair wages and safe conditions.
3. Cultural understanding: The platform will also be available in various languages (e.g., Rohingya, Burmese, Malay) and include cultural orientation for employers in an effort to deter discrimination.

This approach directly addresses the issue of informal employment by allowing refugees to gain legitimate employment, reducing abuse and ensuring some form of economic independence.

### **ii. Vocational Training and skills development**

Refugees often lack the skills necessary for formal employment because of limited access to education. To address this issue:

1. Customizing Proper Training - Vocational programs will be designed based on demand from the labor market (e.g. construction, food services, and manufacturing) and existing skills of the refugee.
2. Women and Youth Focus - Special programs for marginalized populations (e.g. women and youth) have been identified to increase inclusivity and promotion.
3. Certification - Local partnerships with institutions can provide accepted completion certificates, this increases employability with proof of accomplishment.

By providing refugees with marketable skills, the initiative will incite market demand for their skills, and in doing so fulfil a relevant UN SDG (SDG 8 (Decent work and Economic Growth)) preventing dependence on informal, exploitable jobs.

### **iii. Partnerships with Employers and Communities**

Partnership or collaboration with employers and communities is critical for sustainable integration. For example:

1. Incentivizing Employers: Tax breaks or provision of subsidies will incentivize employers to hire refugees. This will address labour shortages in key sectors.
2. Community Engagement: Awareness campaigns to demonstrate the economic contributions of refugees will help address xenophobia and build social cohesion.
3. Mentoring: Employers and local professionals will mentor refugees to help them assimilate to workplace norms and dynamics for career advancement.

Activating these areas will reframe refugees from being liabilities to productive members of society, and enhance their social inclusion.

### **iv. Legal Advocacy for Work Rights**

Advocacy for systematic change is vital. The project will have a number of outcomes including:

1. Policy Dialogue: Engaging with policymakers in dialogue about advocacy for legal work rights for refugees. Providing evidence of economic benefits such as expanding the economy by RM 3 billion (GDP) by 2024.
2. Pilot Programs: Creating small pilot programs will provide evidence for a business case for scaled, systemic change e.g. by providing success and achievements of previous pilot projects with Rohingya work.
3. International Partnerships: Engaging with international organizations such as UNHCR and World Bank to support Malaysia, by aligning policies with global practices.

If legal work rights are recognized for refugees, this will eliminate structural barriers to their long-term socio-economic integration for their own and their families' futures.

#### **4. Social Impact**

The adoption of the given project is likely to have a serious and multidimensional social effect, not only towards the economic integration of refugees in Malaysia but also towards the change in the attitudes and practices involved, as well as the structure of the society. This initiative at the end of the day is meant to give dignity, agency, and economic independence to one of the most marginalized groups in the country, refugees. It offers an alternative to the informal, exploitative nature of the labour market to which the refugees are frequently exposed as it offers formal work opportunities with concrete career prospects (Ghazali et al., 2020).

The initiative has a direct impact by reducing poverty by providing refugees with access to formal employment, which increases household security. Job creation is an established driver of independence, which goes a long way in cutting the level of reliance on humanitarian assistance and facilitating monetary inclusivity (World Bank, 2023). To a large number of the refugees, the possibility to earn an acceptable salary and afford reliable income plays not only the survival role but restores a feeling of identity and control over their future. This is in line with the UN SDG 8 that focuses on inclusive economic growth and decent work to all.

In addition to personal rewards, the project leads to the cohesion in the community. The refugees who are considered liabilities to the society are made known as contributors in the economy. Such a change in narratives can bring about the biases on xenophobia to decrease and social acceptance to rise. Research indicates that as long as host populations can see that refugees are profoundly engaged in local economies and a significant contributor to their growth, locals will change their minds when it comes to perceptions and will reduce social conflict (Krause & Schmidt, 2020). This project bridges the gap between refugees and socially responsible employers as the two parties take the opportunity to explore each other and build together.

The other effect is that it enhances the strength of the marginalized sub-groups in refugee populations—especially women and the youth. Often these groups are exempted twice, the first time because they are refugees and the second time due to the barriers of sex or age (Wake & Cheung, 2016). The project educates them through well-directed vocational education and mentorship to become competitive contributors to the labor market. Not only this will increase individual self-worth but also open pathways to intergenerational change where education and employment are no longer abnormal desires within the refugee households.

On a macro level, the project will also be assistive in terms of socio-economic development of Malaysia. The fluidity of refugees into the labour market enables them to solve the problem of shortage of labour within certain labour areas, areas of high demand that require low skilled labour, like construction, food services, and manufacturing. Economic forecasting indicates that incorporation of refugees may increase the GDP beyond RM 3 billion by 2024 and up to RM 6.5 billion by 2040 (Todd et al., 2019). Those are not fringe numbers-- those are the missing potential wealth of a population that has been systematically ignored.

Lastly, systemic reform is the long-term effect of the project. The presence of legal advocacy in the initiative is pressurizing the consideration of work rights among refugees. This will set a precedence not only in the way Malaysia is concerned but in the region as well where there have been similar refugee issues. By doing so, the social change becomes transnational in scope, sowing seeds of a new dawn, when displaced peoples are not only safe, but strong.

## **5. Potential Social Innovation**

### **i. Digital Job-Matching Platform**

The proposed project will provide social innovations capable of empowering accessible employment to the refugees and of sustainable livelihoods. Among the most important innovations, there is the creation of a digital job-matching platform, specifically designed for refugees. In contrast to other job platforms, this one will employ smart matching tools that will take into account the potentials, skills, languages, and places they reside as well as any legal impediments of doing his or her job. The solutions offered rely on comparable systems that have positively changed working experiences in other industries (Xu et al., 2021). In addition, language and vocational learning tools that enable refugees to learn through mobile phones and thus easy access to learning while preparing themselves to meet job opportunities will be inbuilt within the platform (Ambasz et al., 2023).

### **ii. Skills Certification System**

There is also a new method of skill validation which is provided in the project. Refugees gain qualifications in the form of valuable skills in the informal work or in the community but lack formal documentation. To deal with this, the project will ensure it institutes a skills certification system which will be endorsed by the NGOS and the community partners. This will assist the refugees in earning the cover of the employers, and this will aid them in getting signed formal jobs (Carpi, 2019).

### **iii. Ethical Partnerships and Employer Networks**

Other than technology this project offers a different modality of business and NGO collaboration. This model guarantees safe and equitable placement of jobs by establishing networks between refugee-friendly employers, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies. This has been tried out in a similar pilot program in 2016 in Malaysia with positive results as the Rohingya refugees were successfully placed in formal plantation employment (Wake & Cheung, 2016). This demonstrates that refugee employment opportunities within the legal framework in Malaysia can be functional and can hence be increased.

Another thing that the project suggests is establishing a network of ethical employers who will be willing to hire refugees in a fair manner. Such a network would market those firms that offer good training, payment and working conditions to the refugees. A similar approach has been observed in other countries which have discovered that businesses have benefited through the presence of loyal and motivated refugee workers (Bloch et al., 2024).

### **iv. Long-Term Impact and Global Potential**

The effects of such innovation will probably be far-reaching. Refugees will secure safer and better employment that will result in stable incomes and this will aid in curbing poverty as well as dependency on humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, the economy of Malaysia can prosper by ensuring refugees fulfill labor market shortages and increasing national productivity (Todd et al., 2019; Ambasz et al., 2023).

The whole project is well structured. The business partnerships ensure that hiring is sustainable, the skill certification helps the employers to acquire confidence and the job matching platform links the refugees with opportunities. Such segments are interrelated into a loop of feedback: the more refugees obtain jobs, the more the platform gets knowledge, the training may be enhanced in the future, and the partnership with employers grows. In the long run, this system is capable of helping not only the Malaysian refugees but also extending to the other countries with the same legal and social barrier that the refugees faced. Scaling the platform will enable the project to become a blueprint of the global approach in using technology, inclusive processes, and ethical collaborations to come up with lasting solutions. Such learning, adaptation and collaboration cycle will make the innovation relevant and effective in the evolving labor markets and policymaking conditions.

## **6. Conclusion**

The "Empowering Refugees Through Employment" project is a paradigmatic social business model that gets to the point of ending the economic and legal marginalization of refugees in Malaysia. With over 180,000 refugees existing in precarious livelihoods with no access to legal rights to work, the project provides a specified, inclusive, and sustainable model for good income earning. Through its integration of a digital job-matching platform, personalized vocational training, ethical employer partnerships, and strong legal advocacy, the project responds to both short-term needs and longer-term structural problems.

This multi-dimensional initiative enables refugees to transition from exploitative, informal labor into decent-wage, formal employment with a possibility for advancement. Along with financial returns, the project reclaims identity, dignity, and autonomy among displaced communities, especially women and youth who suffer heightened vulnerabilities. The project advances the UN Sustainable Development Goals—especially SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)—by fostering inclusive economic opportunities and poverty alleviation.

Besides, the project is perceived to have macroeconomic benefits with an estimated return of RM 3–6.5 billion to GDP in the year 2040, together with creation of jobs and boosting tax revenues. The project also offers social cohesion by reframing the perception of refugees from liabilities to productive contributors to the country's progress.

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## 8. Appendix



**MERCY Malaysia staff distribute food to refugees Hulu Langat, Malaysia in 2019**



**UNHCR Services**



**Rohingya in Malaysia as refugees**



**Pelangi Kasih, a school for refugee children in Kuala Lumpur.**



**Refugee children in Malaysia doing Interactive Activity**

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