Background

The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan: Since the start of 2011, almost 640,000 Syrians fleeing the conflict in their homeland have been welcomed into Jordan. It will take decades for Syria to recover from the destruction wrought during the conflict, and it is unclear how long the refugee crisis will persist. Syrians living in urban and rural areas across Jordan are facing increasingly desperate conditions, with around 90% living below the national poverty line. For many Syrians, risking a return to war-torn Syria or moving on to Europe, despite the inherent dangers, now represent more attractive options than remaining in Jordan without work or the possibility to provide for their families. It is therefore imperative that creative livelihood solutions are identified that contribute to a sustained improvement in living conditions for both Syrians and their Jordanian hosts.

The Jordanian Apparel Industry: The apparel industry accounts for 17% of Jordan’s total exports. According to the Department of Statistics, apparel exports, mostly to the United States, exceeded $1.5 billion in 2015 and this figure is projected to increase by 10% in 2016. The industry has enjoyed enormous growth since 1996, when garments manufactured in Jordan were first granted preferential duty free and quota free access to the USA under the terms of a Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) Agreement. In 2001, a Free Trade Agreement between Jordan and the USA came as a further boost to the sector.

Most apparel factories are situated in 14 QIZs. The industry employs approximately 60,000 workers, three-quarters of whom are migrants (the majority coming from South and South-East Asia), with women making up 69% of the workforce. However, the apparel sector can also be contributed to by Syrian refugees living in Jordan – UNHCR registration data reveals that there are at least 2,500 refugees with direct work experience in the industry and many more (up to 200 thousand refugees above 18) who could be trained to fill specific jobs.
The Work Permit Pilot Project

UNHCR joined forces with ILO to arrange for 2,000 work permits to be issued to Syrian refugees, to work in Jordan’s apparel sector. In order to achieve this, the Agency is collaborating closely with the Ministry of Labour (MoL), Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC), JGATE (the main Jordanian apparel sector association), Chamber of Commerce, apparel manufacturers, and other agencies. UNHCR will cover 100% of the cost of work permits for the first year to encourage employment of refugees.

Work permits: Following discussions with UNHCR, the MoL has agreed to ease work permit requirements for Syrian refugees who have entered the country illegally and are without a valid passport. The new MoL requirements enable Syrian refugees use their UNHCR registration document and a valid ID card issued by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) instead of a passport. Where the refugees’ MoI ID cards are less than a year old, the MoL will waive the requirement for a health certificate.

Contracts: Discussions are underway to include Syrian refugees in the government’s unified contract for migrant workers, which harmonises recruitment and employment policies for migrant workers of different nationalities. Syrians cannot be, for example, sent back to Syria in light of their refugee status. Syrian refugees should be able to choose between Jordan workers’ employment conditions regarding salary and transportation, or the migrants’ benefits, which include accommodation and food.

Pilot factories: To date, six factories in Jordan have been contacted to explore the possibility to employ Syrian refugee workers. These factories belong to the government’s factory golden list, which only includes workplaces with a solid human rights record. The companies have asked UNHCR to select Syrian refugee workers, both male and female, to be employed in different parts of their production process. The ILO’s Better Work Jordan (BWJ) programme and buyers contacted by UNHCR have welcomed the pilot project and pledged to support its implementation.

Job fairs: UNHCR is committed to hosting job fairs for Syrian refugees starting from the first week of April. Syrians are invited to apply for jobs that best match their existing skills. Refugees with previous work experience in the garment sector are given priority. The job fairs will be held at the UNHCR co-funded local community centres and undertaken in cooperation with local sewing training providers. ILO/BWJ has produced a video as a part of its awareness campaign to show Syrian refugees the workings of Jordan’s textile sector and to help the understanding the new workplace. Recruiters from factories will be invited to follow up with interviews directly after the initial presentations/discussions. Larger job-fairs to facilitate recruitment of both Jordanians and Syrians are planned in the near future.

Child facilities: Many potential female employees (both Syrians and Jordanians) have raised the need for on-site child care facilities. UNHCR believes that retention rates amongst Jordanian workers in particular could be improved by the provision of good quality facilities. This issue is being discussed with factory owners and the management of industrial zones to identify possible solutions.