



Social enterprises: Supporting and safeguarding refugees

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By the end of 2018, unprecedented [70.8 million individuals](#) around the world have been forced to flee their homes because of conflict, persecution, violence or human rights violations.

All of these individuals face challenges in addressing basic needs, such as shelter, access to education and healthcare. These challenges are magnified in countries that have not acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. In such countries, refugees are not guaranteed right to housing, to education, to healthcare, to work, to official documentation for identity purposes. Yet, some of these countries can offer safety for refugees due to physical proximity to their home countries, recognition of passports issued by certain authorities, and social and religious commonalities, particularly when other countries are closing their borders. At the same time, the experiences of refugees in these countries are relevant for understanding the experiences of [climate crisis migrants](#) (or “climate refugees”), whose numbers are increasing. While climate crisis migrants are displaced due to the violent impact of the climate crisis, they are not recognised by international law as refugees and thus lack protection.

In this context of missing institutional support for refugees, social enterprises, often started by young people, are finding creative ways to support refugees. Social enterprises use two main mechanisms with a transformative power for the lives of refugees: *sustainable income through decent and safe work* and *meaningful human interactions*.

Very often, social enterprises adopt a [strengths-based](#) or asset based approach focusing on an individual’s strengths rather than their deficits to provide opportunities for [safe and work](#) with sustainable income. They provide access to markets for refugees to create and sell products and services based on their intangible heritage, such as handcrafts and cuisine. For example, [EarthHeir](#) works with refugees to make artisanal products, such as jewellery, while [PichaEats](#) specialises in catering, meal delivery, and food experiences with delicacies from the homelands of their refugee chefs – from Iraqi falafel and Palestinian hummus to Afghani dumplings and Syrian sweets.

Sustainable income through decent and safe work is invaluable for refugees for three main reasons. First, sustainable income enables access to housing, education, and healthcare. Second, decent work reduces the risks of exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking. Indeed, due to their vulnerable position across multiple categories, refugees face high risks of being victims of human trafficking in countries where their rights are not protected and they lack official documentation for identification purposes. Finally, decent work is a source of dignity because, like it or not, our identities and self-esteem are often linked to our work and role in society as contributors.



Photo Credit: Claudine Imelda

Beyond sustainable income, the work of social enterprises enables refugees to engage in meaningful interaction and build connections with a long-term impact on refugees' lives. Meaningful human interactions enable refugees to tell their own stories, to share their cultures. Interactions facilitated by social enterprises between refugees, for example through training or working together, and between refugees and natives, through trading activities, enable refugees to build relationships and reduce the loneliness that comes with the stigma and safety issues they face on a daily basis. Indeed, loneliness may be particularly salient for individuals who've suffered multiple displacements and identify with multiple cultures, but may not be accepted by either culture. For example, an Afghani woman who grew up in Iran and currently resides in Malaysia may not feel welcomed by the Afghani or Iranian communities in Malaysia, nor by natives in the country. Human interactions and relationships are essential for changing mainstream society's attitudes toward refugees and for refugees to be seen as human beings willing and able to contribute to communities, an image very different from what we usually see in the media and in common stereotypes.

While social enterprises develop creative ways to support refugees, their work is challenging. To support refugees through sustainable income and human interactions, social enterprises also face challenges in safeguarding refugees and maintaining their financial sustainability that are often in tension with each other. For example, social enterprises need to create smooth customer journeys that meet the expectations of customers, while also safeguarding refugees by minimising harm, often with paperwork and limitations for customers. Social enterprises support families by creating income generating opportunities for women. Yet, those income generation opportunities may also put some women at risk in their own homes by challenging traditional gender norms of who the breadwinner in the family is and the potential conflict that arises from this challenge. Social enterprises need to promote their products and services created to increase the income for refugees. Yet, they also need to avoid exploiting refugees' narratives and identities for marketing purposes. It is a continuous balancing act.

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