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▶ **REFUGEE TECH IN THE EU**

A SCOPING STUDY OF ICT TOOLS FOR LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2015-2016 exodus of (mainly) Syrian refugees towards the EU has left a deep mark not only on EU's understanding of migration flows, but also on the way in which Information and Communications Technology (ICT) developers and innovators understood and still understand their call to action. In that period, an unprecedented wave of civic solidarity, together with the need of many organisations to find new solutions and tools to answer to refugee' pressing needs, triggered a sudden increase in ICT solutions for every stage of refugees' journey towards Europe (Benton and Glennie, 2016).

The idea behind this surge in "refugee tech" is that technology can help to mitigate some of the challenges that forcibly displaced people face (Culbertson et al., 2019), starting from pre-departure and journey arrangements to their socio-economic inclusion in destination countries. This sudden increase in ICT solutions for refugees has created a sort of "refugee tech bubble", which has now left, on one hand, a "digital litter" of failed apps and software, while on the other hand some developers have gained the experience and understanding (of both refugees', host communities' and local systems' needs) to create ICT solutions that are more fit to answer to refugees and, even more broadly, to migrants' problems.

The scoping report of the Expert Group on Skills and Migration[1] of the LABOUR INT 2 project builds on the research and work done in the framework of the first edition of the project and on the lessons generated by LABOUR INT pilot actions.

Our specific focus is on ICT-based practices devoted to facilitating labour market inclusion in European host countries of people who are experiencing the refugee gap. The aim of the report is to present the main results of an exploratory study conducted between February and November 2020, which mapped more than 40 ICT solutions for labour market integration. The scoping exercise was conducted through a review of the literature coupled with the input from the LABOUR INT Expert Group on Skills and Migration (June 2020) and with in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with ICT developers and innovators around Europe. The research was slowed down during the first lockdown months in Italy due to the Covid-19 pandemic (March-May 2020) but resumed at intense pace in the summer.

The exploratory study highlighted that the ICT experiences developed in the field of labour market integration for refugees and third country nationals (TCNs) who are experiencing the refugee gap cover an array of issues. These range from IT and specialised language training (e.g., Hack your Future, Code Your Future, Powercoders) to skills assessment and skills certification (e.g., EU Skills Profile Tool for TCNs, European Qualification Passport for Refugees, SkillLab, blockchain and open badges technology), but also job coaching and job matching (e.g., Action Emploi Réfugiés, Workeer). Some of these ICT tools also help newcomers navigate local services, like the apps developed (or currently being developed) by the Horizon 2020 projects SIRIUS and MICADO.

Since 2015, and after many failed apps, the ICT community has been changing its approach towards the issue of integration of refugees and migrants. The most interesting and promising examples of ICT solutions for labour market integration of people struggling with the refugee gap are now developed with a view to, first of all, consider the centrality of the human factor, and, secondly, the need for a systemic approach to labour market integration.

The human-centric approach is reflected in a number of ICT-based practices that try to address issues that were overlooked during the booming phase of refugee tech (in the period 2015-2016) and which were the causes of failure of many start-ups in the field of refugee tech. Promising ICTs for labour market integration today respond to real refugees and migrants' needs, by connecting refugees and tech entrepreneurs and experts while also training refugees to become part of the solution (e.g., Techfugees, Powercoders). Secondly, tech solutions take increasingly into consideration the need of social workers to be supported in their everyday work, for example when trying to assess and validate refugees and TCNs skills. Skilllab is one of these solutions and it is testing its mobile application for autonomous skills assessment with employment and career services in Amsterdam and in other European cities to ensure that the app really simplifies their work instead of adding a further layer of complexity. In discovering the need to deal with the human factor, some ICT-based practices are striving to ensure that the ICT solutions developed are accessible to everyone, not only to high-skilled but also low-skilled and illiterate people, as well as to small enterprises that do not know how to deal with refugees, by providing an off-line/in person service. As an example, the start-up Action Emploi Réfugiés has created a job-matching platform, which connects local businesses (both big and small) with refugees (and vice versa) while also providing an off line service to refugees (to write an effective CV and to prepare for a job interview) and to businesses.

Regarding the systemic approach to asylum seekers, refugees and TCNs' labour market inclusion, ICT-based practices, like MyGrants and Konexio, and the EU project NADINE are jointly addressing several barriers to labour market integration. As an example, MyGrants' app not only provides information, training, and skills assessment through a carefully constructed methodology based (among other things) on the gamification of the learning and testing experience, but it is also about to launch a job-matching platform, and another tool to support the creation of a credit line for the users of the app.

In sum, in an EU where the labour market integration of TCNs is a priority and where the Covid-19 pandemic is accelerating digitalisation processes (but also deepening pre-existing inequalities), the refugee tech can continue to offer promising solutions. Asylum seekers and refugees certainly remain a particularly vulnerable group, with specific needs and barriers hampering their satisfactory and sustainable access and inclusion in the labour market. However, being "the most tech-savvy population of migrants in history … with smartphone penetration rates of up to 90%" (AbuJarour et al. 2019: 2), they also represent a huge untapped potential. Therefore, they can be (and should be seen as) not just targets and beneficiaries of innovation, but also catalysers and co-creators of ICT-based policy solutions scalable and transferable to other groups at risk of socio-economic marginalisation.