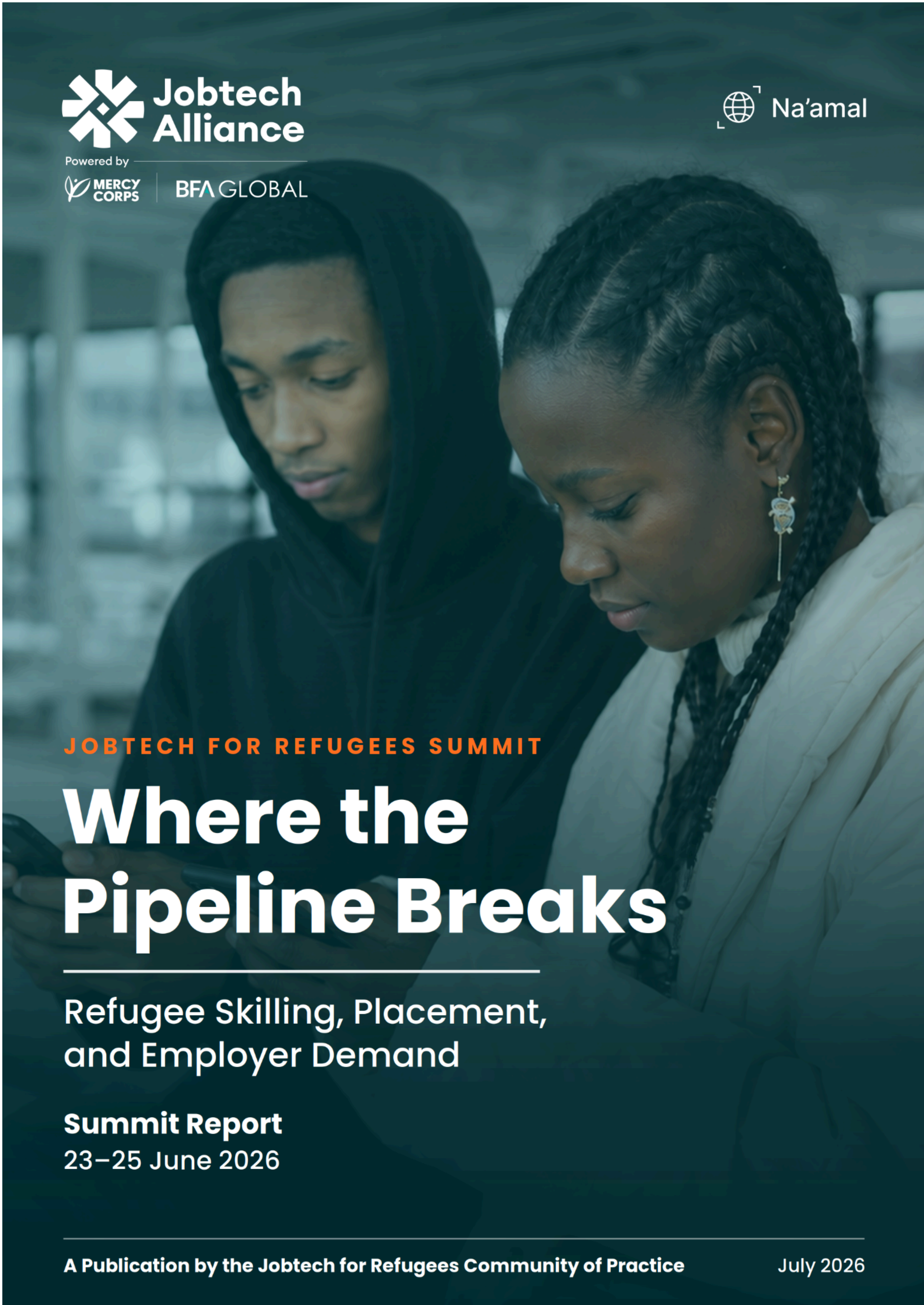

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JOBTECH FOR REFUGEES SUMMIT

Where the Pipeline Breaks

Refugee Skilling, Placement, and Employer Demand

Summit Report

23–25 June 2026

A Publication by the Jobtech for Refugees Community of Practice

July 2026

Contents

Executive summary

The Jobtech for Refugees Summit set out to answer one question: **what does it take to turn opportunity into a sustained livelihood for a displaced person?** Across three sessions, one answer held. Access to work requires ecosystem orchestration, and no single actor, whether a training provider, employer, platform, funder, or intermediary, can produce it alone.

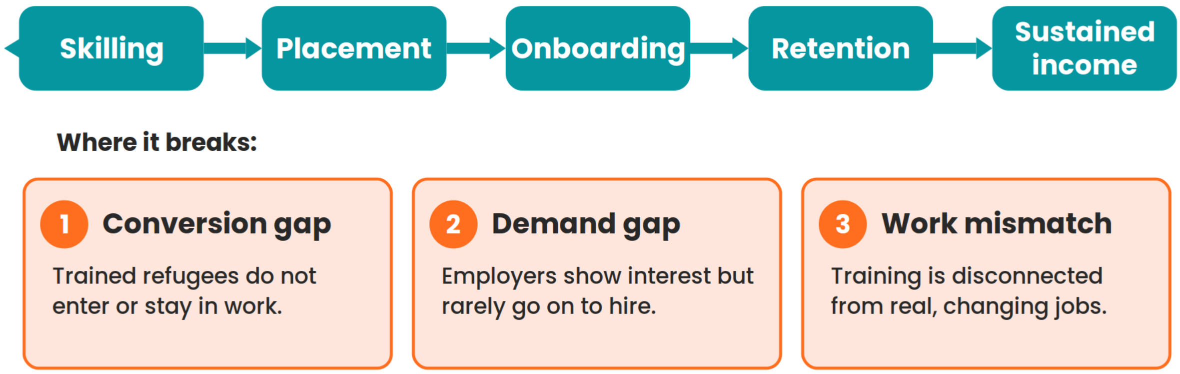
The refugee employment pipeline does not break in one place; it breaks in the spaces between ecosystem actors.

The summit surfaced three connected gaps. A conversion problem, where trained refugees do not enter or stay in work. A demand problem, where employers who express interest in refugee hiring rarely follow through. And a work mismatch problem, where training is disconnected from the jobs that exist and from the capabilities that will hold their value as AI reshapes what work is available. Together they describe an ecosystem organised around activities rather than pathways, one that keeps producing courses, certificates, and pilots while too few people reach a sustained livelihood.

The summit's main finding is that more training alone will not deliver refugee employment. The ecosystem needs stronger pathways: from readiness to work, from employer interest to commitment, and from participation to sustained income. For funders, that means paying for the connections that make work possible, including employer engagement, placement, documentation support, finance, retention, progression, and market access. For skilling providers, it means designing backwards from real opportunities rather than from the curricula they already have. For employers and platforms, it means moving past expressions of support to hiring, contracting, and procurement pathways that someone inside the business owns. The ecosystem's task now is to turn skills into work.

What learnings the summit surfaced

The employment pipeline — and where it breaks



It also breaks for women, when pathways ignore care, safety, time, mobility and device access.

Access to work requires ecosystem orchestration

Refugee employment cannot be solved by **any single actor**. Training providers, employers, platforms, funders, refugee-led organisations, intermediaries and policymakers each control part of the pathway, but none controls the whole system. When no one is responsible for connecting these pieces, the ecosystem produces activity without outcomes: refugees complete courses, employers express interest, platforms open opportunities, but too few people move into sustained income.

Work becomes possible only when demand, preparation, placement, legal pathways, finance, devices, mentorship and retention support are deliberately aligned. The shift needed is therefore from isolated interventions to connected employment systems that are designed to convert readiness into real work.

The refugee employment ecosystem has a conversion problem

Session 1 focused on the conversion gap: the distance between completing training and earning sustained income. It showed that placement does not happen **automatically** once training ends. This is the part of the pathway most programmes are not built to cross. Placement is a distinct function requiring Placement is a distinct function requiring employer relationships, practical screening, work simulations, documentation pathways, asset support, finance, mentoring and follow-up.

Too many refugees complete training but do not enter work because training programmes have not been designed around a functioning pathway that carries a ready person into sustained work. Training does not match platform or employer requirements. Documents are not accepted. Participants lack a capable device, data, transport or a safe place to work. Even when opportunities exist, refugees may not have the confidence, mentorship or market knowledge to compete. And even after onboarding, they may leave if the work does not generate enough income or if they are not supported through the critical early weeks. So the real test is **whether the pathway around the training works**, carrying a ready person through to sustained work.

<15% of trained refugees

In early placement efforts, fewer than 15% of trained refugees entered work (African Youth Action Network).

Employer interest is not demand

Session 2 focused on the demand gap. Employers say they support refugee inclusion. Whether they hire is a different question, shaped by role availability, documentation, compliance, payment systems, internal approvals, budget, speed, and perceived risk. Moral commitment rarely changes hiring behaviour on its own.

Elewa's experience illustrated the problem clearly. The company had trained around 50 people in Kakuma, but only one transitioned into work with the company. Elewa receives more than 500 applications for five junior positions every quarter. **Refugee candidates are competing in saturated markets** where employers have many simpler hiring options.

Refugee employment programmes work best when they start with the business problem. The strongest demand-side example came from Amazon Web Services (AWS), where the programme began with a real operational need: rising task volumes and a quality-assurance gap. AWS matched refugee workers to that need and placed them in real business teams, while EqualReach took on the contracting and payment complexity. No one lowered standards. AWS matched skilled people to real work and built the structure for them to succeed.

The AWS case also showed how much invisible institutional labour is required to build a new hiring pathway. Refugee inclusion required internal champions, approvals, coordination and operational support across different parts of the business. It cannot remain unpaid, informal side work carried by committed individuals.

Employers hire solutions to problems. Refugee talent becomes compelling when it is connected to business value, supported by trusted intermediaries and made easy for employers to act on.

The work mismatch is widening as work changes

Session 3 showed the mismatch widening. Training keeps expanding, while the work it is meant to prepare people for keeps moving. Too much skilling is shaped by what can be funded, delivered, and measured at scale. The test that matters is different: what employers hire for, what platforms absorb, and what workers need to stay competitive. The result is programmes that scale **training without scaling employment**.

AI makes the mismatch more urgent. Some entry-level tasks are being automated or changing fast. New opportunities are opening around AI-assisted work, quality assurance, multilingual verification, contextual judgement, and responsible tool use. Training needs tighter feedback loops with employers, platforms, and workers. It should lead to a credible work pathway rather than end with a certificate.

Training everyone is not an employment strategy

One of the summit's most provocative themes: refugee employment programmes are often **training the wrong people for the wrong opportunities**. People facing greater barriers should still get support, but the ecosystem has to stop treating every form of support as if it should lead to the same outcome. A broad training programme designed around inclusion and access is not the same as an employment-conversion programme designed to move people into specific income opportunities.

The humanitarian instinct is often to train as many people as possible, particularly those facing the most barriers. But a programme designed to maximise participation will not necessarily maximise placement. If the objective is sustained work, programmes must begin with the opportunity and work backwards from what that work requires.

When funders expect a single short-term training intervention to reach people facing the greatest barriers, produce high completion numbers and deliver employment outcomes, implementers are placed in an impossible position.

Refugees are not just workers-in-waiting

The Summit also challenged the narrow framing of refugees only as workers waiting to be placed into jobs. **Refugees already participate in markets** as entrepreneurs, customers, agents, suppliers, freelancers and business partners. Models presented by Inkomoko, EzyAgric and Ecoplastile showed that market inclusion works best when programmes build around the economic roles refugees already play, rather than assumptions about what refugees should do.

The examples showed that refugee livelihoods should not be reduced to training people for jobs that may not exist. Inkomoko highlighted the role of capital, business support and confidence in strengthening refugee-led enterprises. EzyAgric treated refugees as customers and Digital Agriculture Champions who could distribute products within their communities. Ecoplastile showed how refugees could move through a value chain from collectors to agents, super-agents and processing partners when logistics, devices and working capital were built into the model. The lesson is that programmes should begin by asking which market role is most viable in a given context: worker, entrepreneur, agent, supplier, customer, freelancer or business partner.

Women perform strongly, but systemic barriers block access

Gender was identified as part of the employment system, not a side issue. **Women represented only around 7% of refugee earners** on participating jobtech platforms, yet those who entered **earned more than twice as much as men** and **remained active at approximately three times the rate**. Women who reach these platforms do well. What holds their numbers down is a pathway that too rarely lets them start, and it has to be designed so they can enter, earn, and stay.

2× earnings 3× retention

Women were only ~7% of refugee earners on participating platforms, yet those who entered earned ~2× more than men and stayed active ~3× longer.

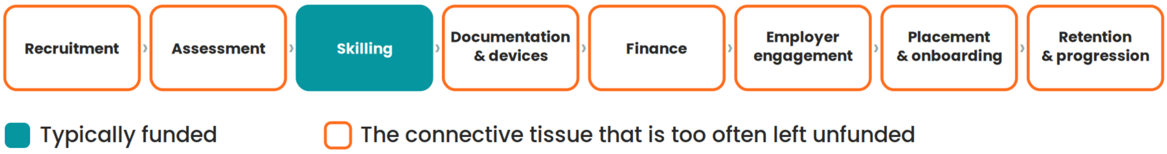
Women's lower participation in digital platform work is shaped by barriers that appear before work begins: unpaid care responsibilities, mobility constraints, safety concerns, limited control over time, weaker access to devices and fewer networks through which to hear about opportunities. Ethiopia Friends Foundation's experience showed that practical design choices, such as providing childcare and prioritising more flexible forms of digital work, can make participation more realistic. Gender-responsive design should not be treated as an add-on. Childcare, flexible work design, safe spaces, device access, peer support and targeted outreach are part of the employment infrastructure that makes pathways work for women.

Recommendations

Together, these takeaways point to one conclusion: **the refugee employment ecosystem needs stronger pathways from readiness to work,** from employer interest to commitment, and from participation to sustained income. The ecosystem has to build the conditions that make conversion possible.

Fund the whole pathway — not one segment

The full pathway from recruitment to sustained income determines employment outcomes.



Donors

Fund full pathways from recruitment to sustained income, not isolated training; assessment, skilling, documentation, devices, connectivity, employer engagement, placement, onboarding, retention and progression.

Measure success through earnings, retention, business survival and progression, not completion alone.

Avoid enrolment targets without evidence of market demand, fund refugee-led organisations as strategic partners, and review grant rules that prevent responsible collaboration with businesses while demanding sustainability.

Training organisations

Start with the opportunity and work backwards: begin design with the roles, platforms, buyers or enterprise markets that actually exist.

Build in practical assessment, work simulations, portfolio-building, apprenticeships, externships, commercial awareness, communication practice and exposure to real work conditions.

Be explicit about whether a programme is designed for foundational learning, direct placement or entrepreneurship; each requires a different model.

Employers and platforms

Move from interest to concrete pathways; refugee inclusion lasts when it is connected to business performance.

Identify business problems refugee talent can help solve, use proof-based assessments, and review whether verification processes unnecessarily exclude displaced candidates.

Test pathways through paid internships, pilot teams, apprenticeships, partner-payroll models or supplier relationships.

Intermediaries and ecosystem actors

Build the connective infrastructure between talent and work: shared referral systems, trusted talent pools, common guidance on legal and contracting requirements, and clearer handoffs.

Share more honest evidence on where participants drop off.

Treat childcare, finance, devices, connectivity, documentation and professional networks as employment infrastructure, and budget for them accordingly.

Refugee-led organisations

Resource RLOs as strategic actors, not only community access points.

Involve them from the beginning in programme design, segmentation, delivery, placement and retention; they understand the local constraints and realities that determine whether a pathway is viable.

About the summit

The Jobtech for Refugees Summit was held online from 23 to 25 June 2026 and convened by the Jobtech for Refugees Community of Practice, led by Na'amal and the Jobtech Alliance.

▸ **Watch all three sessions on the** Jobtech Alliance YouTube playlist.

106	86	92
attendees · Session 1	attendees · Session 2	attendees · Session 3

The summit deliberately brought different parts of the employment ecosystem into the same conversation. Contributors included businesses, digital platforms, lenders, training providers, refugee-led organisations, community-based organisations and intermediaries supporting access to work.

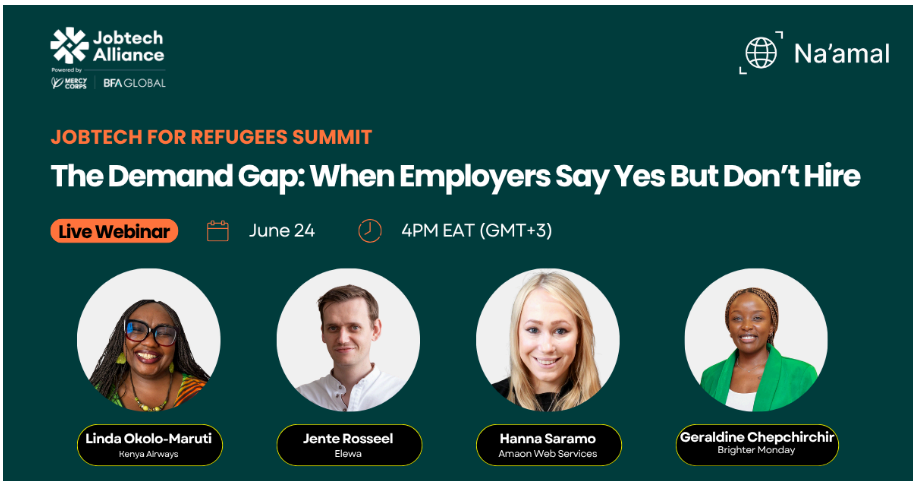
The discussions were marked by unusually candid accounts of programmes that had not converted as expected, workers who had dropped off platforms, employers that remained uncertain about refugee hiring, and funding structures that unintentionally reward training activity rather than employment outcomes.

Panellists

Session 1

Moderator: Michelle Hassan- Jobtech Alliance. **Panellists**: Niranthi Nanayakkara- Accion International; Christian Wamambe- SafeBoda; Marot Touloung- African Youth Action Network (AYAN); Fabien de Castilla- Konexio Africa; Eyoeal Kefyalew- Afriwork; Monica Njoroge-Ndoria- Inkomoko; Shadya Abduljabbar- Ethio Friends Foundation for Refugees (EFFR); Zilla Arach- EzyAgric; Franc Kamugyisha- Ecoplastile.

Session 2



Moderator: Geraldine Chepchirchir- BrighterMonday. **Fireside chat 1**: Jente Rosseel- Elewa. **Fireside chat 2**: Linda Okolo-Maruti- Kenya Airways. Employer success story: Hanna Saramo- Amazon Web Services.

Session 3

Moderator: Nhial Deng. **Panellists**: Bahana Hydrogene- SIR Africa; Craig Heintzman- Arifu; Michael Niyitegeka- Refactory; Nova Arkney- Resilient People; Daisy Bartlett- Amahoro Coalition.

SESSION 1

The conversion gap

WHY MOVING DISPLACED PEOPLE INTO WORK IS HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

The first session opened with a challenging question: **why does completing a training programme so rarely lead to paid, sustained work?** The answer was structural. Across the refugee employment ecosystem, training is often treated as the primary intervention, while placement, onboarding, early retention, finance, market access and ongoing support are treated as follow-on activities, provisioned partially or not at all. Yet these are the functions that determine whether a trained person enters work, earns consistently and remains employed.

Converting learning into income requires deliberately built infrastructure. **A refugee may complete a course, receive a certificate and meet basic eligibility criteria, yet still fail to enter work** because the next steps have not been designed or resourced. Training may not match platform or employer requirements. Documentation may not be accepted. Participants may lack a capable device, mobile data, transport or a safe place to work. They may lack the confidence, mentorship or market knowledge to compete. And once onboarded, they may still leave if the platform generates insufficient income or does not support them through the early weeks. The question for the ecosystem is therefore whether employment programmes are building complete pathways from learning to income, designed honestly around what it takes to move different refugee segments into different forms of work.

Placement is a distinct function, not a follow-on activity

One of the clearest messages from the session was that **placement cannot be treated as a natural next step after training**. It is a distinct function requiring its own systems, relationships and capabilities. Training organisations are typically funded and measured on enrolment, completion and certification. Employers make decisions based on demonstrated competence, documentation, communication, speed and the ability to solve a business problem. A certificate may signal participation, but it does not prove that someone can perform in a real work environment.

The African Youth Action Network's experience illustrated how quickly this gap accumulates. In early placement efforts, **fewer than 15 out of every 100 trained refugees entered work**. Training did not fully match what platforms needed. Some participants lacked valid documents, capable devices or a safe place to practise. Some declined available assignments because they did not believe they could compete, even when opportunities had been reserved specifically for refugees. After participants were introduced to tools such as Canva and AI-enabled design applications, several said that this was the training they had needed earlier. Yet onboarding still did not guarantee success. Some who joined platforms left within days or weeks because they lacked mentorship, integration and a clear understanding of how the company operated.

Effective placement, therefore, requires clear opportunity criteria, practical screening, employer relationships, work simulations, portfolio-building, documentation pathways and structured follow-up. Without these, the system produces graduates but not necessarily earners.

Entry support is not the same as staying power

SafeBoda's experience showed that removing barriers to entry is necessary but not sufficient. Refugee riders received the phones, helmets and equipment needed to join the platform, but many still struggled to remain active. Once onboarded, they had to navigate a live marketplace: seasonal demand, customer behaviour, language, location and platform rules. Refugees who already had community networks in the city fared better than those who arrived without them.

The initial mentorship model also produced an unexpected finding. **High-performing drivers were not always effective mentors**, as their priority was maximising their own earnings. Pairing new riders with peers at a similar stage proved more effective than assigning top performers. SafeBoda's assessment was direct: the programme had concentrated on getting people onto the platform, but had not invested enough in keeping them there.

Accion identified liquidity as a further structural gap. Workers may have the skills and motivation to work but lack the financial buffer needed to begin. Transport, data and equipment costs arrive before income does. Asset finance, flexible working capital and earned-wage access can bridge this gap, but only when embedded in a wider pathway that includes demand, onboarding and retention support. Finance alone cannot compensate for a platform that does not generate sufficient work.

Not everyone is suited to every pathway

A more uncomfortable but necessary insight also emerged: **programmes need to be clearer about fit**. No one is excluded from support, but different outcomes require different models, and the ecosystem should stop treating them as the same thing. A broad learning programme designed to expand access is not the same as an employment-conversion programme designed to move people into specific income opportunities. Both are valid, but they should not be treated as interchangeable, and funders should not expect a single short-term intervention to achieve both simultaneously.

If the goal is sustained work or income, programmes need to start with the requirements of the opportunity and work backwards: what skills, documents, assets, language, mobility, time and support does someone need to succeed in this specific pathway? Some participants may be ready for immediate placement. Others may need a longer preparation route, or may be better suited to entrepreneurship, agency models, offline platform work, agricultural value chains or supported micro-enterprise. The better question is which pathway this person is best positioned for, and what would make that pathway lead to income.

This was one of the session's most provocative propositions: refugee employment programmes may be training the wrong people for the wrong opportunities. Humanitarian programmes are frequently designed around inclusion and vulnerability, with an instinct to offer training as widely as possible. While this makes sense in terms of donor priorities, it can conflict with the requirements of a market-facing employment programme. A programme designed to maximise access will not necessarily be the same programme needed to maximise placement. When funders expect both objectives to be delivered through a single short-term intervention, implementers are placed in an impossible position.

Training providers and employers operate in separate systems

A second structural problem is the distance between those who train and those who hire. Training is frequently delivered by NGOs, RLOs and INGOs, while employment decisions are made by businesses. These actors often operate under different incentives, use different language and meet only after a programme has already been designed.

Employers do not generally hire because a participant has completed a certificate. They respond to **job readiness**, **proof of competence**, **communication skills** and the **ability to solve a business problem**. Employment pathways therefore cannot simply be declared in programme proposals. They have to be built through sustained relationships with employers, platforms and buyers. Without those relationships, training providers are effectively producing talent without knowing whether there is sufficient demand to absorb it.

Konexio emphasised that employers often need people immediately. A platform or business may ask for ten workers to be available the following day. Training organisations therefore need verified pools of production-ready talent, not only lists of graduates. This requires practice under conditions that resemble real work, including simulated assignments, internships, workplace sandboxes and AI-simulated work environments that demonstrate whether participants can follow instructions, meet deadlines, communicate with supervisors and meet quality standards before placement.

Competitive markets require persistence and social proof

Afriwork described the discouragement that can follow repeated applications with no response. Refugees may have the technical skills and digital access to apply, but they enter highly competitive markets where many candidates possess similar capabilities. After several unsuccessful attempts, applicants may conclude that they are not qualified or that the opportunity is not genuine.

High-touch guidance can help people continue applying, improve the quality of their applications and interpret rejection as part of a competitive process rather than as proof that work is inaccessible. Success stories also provide social proof that the pathway is achievable, particularly in settings where people have participated in many programmes but seen few tangible employment outcomes.

Refugees are not just workers-in-waiting

The session challenged the assumption that refugee livelihoods should be framed primarily around wage employment or digital freelancing. Many refugees are already entrepreneurs, suppliers, distributors, customers, agents and business partners. The experiences of Inkomoko, EzyAgric and Ecoplastile reinforced that **market inclusion can take multiple forms** when models are designed around the economic roles refugees already play.

Inkomoko, which works with more than 120,000 displacement-affected entrepreneurs across five African countries, showed that **access to capital materially improves enterprise outcomes**: receiving a loan made refugee entrepreneurs approximately twice as likely to launch a business; participants receiving training and capital generated around 1.5 times more revenue than those receiving training alone; and supported businesses had a survival rate of approximately 90%. EzyAgric treated refugees in Uganda's West Nile region as customers and Digital Agriculture Champions who could purchase products in bulk and resell them in their communities, with credit structured around the agricultural calendar. Ecoplastile integrated refugees as micro-entrepreneurs and supply-chain partners, creating around 100 agents in six months, providing smartphones where needed, establishing pre-processing hubs near settlements, and building progression from collector to agent, super-agent and processing partner.

These examples show why **the sector needs a deliberate shift in language and mindset**: from treating refugees as beneficiaries to recognising them as economic participants. The question should not only be what assistance should be delivered, but what products, services and market relationships refugees can participate in on viable terms.

Women perform strongly, but systemic barriers block access

Women's lower participation in platform and digital work cannot be explained by skills alone. Data presented from the Jobtech for Refugees lessons report showed that

women represented only around 7% of refugee earners on participating platforms. Those who entered, however, **earned more than twice as much as men** and **remained active at approximately three times the rate**. The issue was therefore not that women were less capable, but that the pathway was not designed in a way that allowed enough women to enter, earn and stay.

Women face barriers before reaching platforms: unpaid care responsibilities, mobility constraints, safety concerns, limited control over time, lower access to devices and fewer networks through which to hear about opportunities. The RLO, Ethiopia Friends Foundation for Refugees, highlighted women's double burden of earning income while managing unpaid household and care responsibilities, particularly for single mothers.

Its response included providing daycare during training and prioritising more flexible forms of digital work, including digital marketing and social commerce. The gender lesson was not simply to include more women, but to redesign the pathway so women can realistically participate. Childcare, flexible work design, safe spaces, device access, peer support, targeted outreach and control over time are part of the employment infrastructure, not optional additions.

What needs to shift

Session 1 pointed to a clear conclusion: **the refugee employment ecosystem needs to treat income conversion as the goal**. When a programme is presented as an employment intervention, it needs a credible route from learning to income. That route must include demand-informed design, participant segmentation, practical readiness support, employer relationships, documentation pathways, asset and liquidity support, mentorship, and gender-responsive retention systems. The ecosystem's task is therefore not only to train more refugees, but to build the connective tissue that allows training, demand and livelihoods to meet.

SESSION 2

The demand gap

TALENT EXISTS, BUT EMPLOYERS HAVE LITTLE INCENTIVE TO ACT

The second session shifted the focus from whether refugees are ready for work to whether employers are ready to hire them. The answer, again, was structural. Across the refugee employment ecosystem, employers frequently express support for inclusion; they attend events, join conversations and endorse the value of refugee talent. However, when the conversation moves from interest to actual hiring, contracting or procurement, a different set of questions takes over: what role is available, what documentation is accepted, who handles compliance, how will payment work, and why should this employer choose this route when other candidates may be simpler to hire? The session made clear that moral commitment rarely changes hiring behaviour on its own.

Refugee talent does not lack value; the pathway into work has to be made easier, clearer and more commercially relevant. **Employers need confidence that candidates can perform**, **that the legal and administrative process is manageable**, and **that hiring refugees helps solve a business problem rather than creating an additional one**. The strongest illustration came from Amazon Web Services, where refugee hiring succeeded because it began with a workforce gap the company needed to fill, not a commitment to inclusion in the abstract. The programme required significant internal effort, but it could demonstrate performance because refugees were doing work in business teams.

The question that matters for the ecosystem is therefore whether demand is being built deliberately or assumed. If hiring refugees remains harder than hiring anyone else, most employers will default to the easier option even when they support inclusion in principle. Instead of asking how refugees could become more employable, the session asked what would make companies commit to hiring them.

Refugee employment works when it is built around a business problem

The summit's case for hiring refugees came from Amazon Web Services. Beginning in 2023, the AWS representative developed a refugee digital-work programme alongside her existing sales role. The first cohort entered work in March 2025, following approximately a year of internal approvals involving finance, social impact, public relations, business operations and public policy.

There was no existing model, designated headcount or established institutional pathway. The programme was initially led by volunteers. Crucially, it began with a business problem rather than a social-impact target. A European technical-operations team had experienced an increase from 16 to more than 70 tasks alongside a quality-assurance gap. It needed skilled people who could be matched to specific work.

A precedent involving refugee workers improving accuracy through Amazon Mechanical Turk in the United States led to a partnership with the agency EqualReach. EqualReach employed and paid the team, removing much of the contract and payment bureaucracy that could otherwise have prevented participation.

100% contract-extension rate

A year after the first cohort began, the AWS programme had achieved a 100% contract-extension rate. The AWS example showed what happens when refugee talent is matched to a real business need, supported by an intermediary, and integrated into business teams.

These results did not emerge from lowering standards or creating charitable roles; refugees were integrated into business teams solving real customer problems. The initiative was deliberately called a "digital work programme," rather than a refugee programme, to **keep the focus on performance and commercial value**.

The case suggested several requirements for scaling refugee employment inside large companies. First, the programme must be integrated into business strategy rather than confined to corporate social responsibility. Second, employees need the authority to develop initiatives as meaningful stretch assignments. Third, refugee inclusion should be reflected in performance systems and company culture. Fourth, external partners can absorb contracting, payroll and administrative complexity. Finally, skills must remain current, including through continuous learning and AI-related development.

The case also demonstrated how much invisible institutional labour is required to establish a new pathway. The initiative had no dedicated implementation team and depended on an internal champion working alongside her core role and on a network of volunteers. This model is difficult to sustain if inclusion work remains discretionary and unrecognised; refugee-employment initiatives should be reflected in employees' objectives and performance evaluations. The programme also faced constraints: Amazon's return-to-office policy reduced the range of roles available to remote refugee talent. Even successful initiatives remain vulnerable when wider company policies are not designed with distributed and displaced workers in mind.

There is no general shortage of junior talent

Elewa, a Nairobi-based technology agency serving European clients, had previously run a bootcamp in Kakuma that mirrored its Nairobi programme. Around 50 people were trained, but only one transitioned into work with the company. The difficulty was partly operational: Elewa's work is highly collaborative and benefits from teams being physically together, making remote placement from Kakuma challenging.

500 : 5

Elewa receives more than 500 applications for roughly five junior positions every quarter. The gap is not a lack of talented people: it is a lack of opportunities.

Refugee candidates are competing in a market already saturated with qualified local applicants. Unless an employer has a defined business reason or an intermediary removes the additional friction, hiring a refugee becomes an extra administrative step with little commercial incentive.

Employers should not be expected to solve the legal pathway

Elewa identified **regulatory uncertainty as one of its most significant barriers**. The company was unclear about what it could legally offer a refugee, including whether the appropriate route was a work permit, employment contract or freelance arrangement. Reliable information was difficult to locate.

The request to training and intermediary organisations was explicit: employers need the paperwork, process and legal options presented clearly. A company receiving hundreds of qualified applications will not usually undertake extensive research to resolve the legal status of one candidate. This means documentation and regulatory navigation should not fall primarily on the employer or refugee. Intermediaries must translate legal frameworks into practical hiring processes and, where appropriate, provide payroll or contracting mechanisms. In highly competitive entry-level markets, where firms already receive hundreds of qualified local applications, regulatory friction can make formal refugee employment extremely difficult to justify.

Employers hire evidence, communication and value

Elewa emphasised the importance of soft skills, particularly the ability to hold a genuine professional conversation, question assumptions and push back constructively. These attributes were followed by proof-based technical assessments rather than reliance on certificates.

The company also described intermediate mechanisms between training and conventional recruitment. Its 'externship model' exposes early-career candidates to real, open-source challenges, with payment attached to successful solutions. Its junior hires typically enter through two-year apprenticeships. These models allow employers to observe performance over time and give candidates a way to build evidence of competence before competing for permanent roles.

Elewa also advised training and intermediary organisations to lead with the business problem rather than with the identity of the talent. The company wins work by explaining the problem it can solve and the value it can create; the delivery team comes second. Refugee employment initiatives should adopt the same approach. Selling "refugee talent" without first establishing the commercial proposition places the social objective ahead of the buyer's need. Demand is more likely to be created when a capable team is presented as the solution to a defined business challenge.

Large employers require internal pathways

Kenya Airways described refugee hiring as an "elephant in the room": an issue that had been acknowledged but not intentionally acted upon. Potential barriers included qualification and document verification, work permits, the Form 25 labour-market test, language and cultural fit and background checks. As a listed company, Kenya Airways also operates under formal controls over headcount and budget, meaning every recruitment decision must be justified.

Nevertheless, several possible entry points emerged. Kenya Airways confirmed that all of its internships are paid; **a partner-funded contribution could increase the stipend or make it easier for a business unit to test refugee inclusion without the full initial cost falling on the company**. The Kenya Airways Academy offers IATA- and ICAO-certified qualifications, which could give refugee candidates recognised aviation credentials. Supply-chain opportunities, including the upcycling of aircraft materials, might also connect refugee-owned enterprises to the company without beginning with direct employment. The discussion also identified potential commercial value in the cultural and linguistic knowledge refugees may bring: candidates with knowledge of countries and communities served by the airline could strengthen customer understanding, communication and innovation.

The company representative committed to investigating whether refugees had previously applied, whether they had been rejected and on what grounds, and how the relevant labour-market documentation works. This represented an important shift from discussing perceived risks to examining the actual process.

> ## Employers hire solutions to problems
> Refugee talent becomes compelling when it is connected to business value and made easy to act on.

What needs to shift

Session 2 pointed to a clear conclusion: **employer interest will not translate into hiring without deliberate effort to make the pathway easier**. When a programme is presented as an employment intervention on the demand side, it needs a credible route from employer interest to actual hiring; one that starts with business needs rather than social commitments, reduces friction across documentation, compliance and contracting, provides proof of candidate readiness in formats employers trust, and positions intermediaries as active participants rather than referral agents. The ecosystem's task is to build the conditions that make following through on that conversation the path of least resistance.

SESSION 3

The work mismatch

SKILLING REFUGEES FOR THE RIGHT JOBS

The third session went straight to the question underneath the whole summit: **are refugees being trained for the right work?** The answer the session offered was largely no: programmes produce graduates while the market requires something else. Across the ecosystem, training is frequently determined by what can be funded, delivered and measured rather than by what employers are actually hiring for, what platforms are absorbing or what capabilities workers need to remain competitive in a market that keeps changing. The space between those two realities is where employment breaks down.

The moderator, Nhial Deng, brought direct experience of the problem. After growing up in Kakuma and completing multiple courses without a clear route to income, he eventually secured remote work as a social-media coordinator for a United Kingdom company by building on his storytelling and social-media capabilities. His experience illustrated the summit's central tension: people in refugee settings may complete certificate after certificate, but the transition to paid work remains uncertain.

AI added urgency, as entry-level work is changing and employer expectations are shifting. Skills that were previously marketable are in some cases already being automated away. For people in refugee settings navigating interrupted education, weak professional networks and limited access to advanced tools, these changes already determine what market-relevant skills need to look like. The session's conclusion was that training, as currently designed and funded, is not keeping pace with the market it is supposed to serve.

The NGO skilling trap

Solidarity Initiative for Refugees (SIR) argued that **the mismatch begins before curriculum development**, with who participates in programme design. Donors can establish programmes, budgets and enrolment targets without sufficiently involving the refugee-led organisation expected to implement them or the young people expected to participate.

This creates what was described as the "NGO skilling trap." Young people move from one course to another: computer basics, digital marketing, graphic design, data annotation and web development, because each programme offers hope. Yet the courses are not connected to a coherent pathway into work. The result is a double mismatch: participants are selected without reference to the opportunity, and training is designed without a credible pipeline to income.

Learning has real intrinsic value: skills, knowledge, and access to information can expand freedom and personal agency. The problem comes when training is funded and presented as an employment intervention but is not designed to produce employment.

Curriculum should be co-created with industry and tied to real opportunities

Refactory described an approach based on developing programmes with employers and adapting them as market information changes. Its model emerged from a contradiction: graduates struggled to find work while technology firms said they could not find suitable talent. Refactory therefore co-created curricula with industry and used working professionals as facilitators, ensuring that training reflected current practice rather than static course design.

> **AI note**
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> AI is already changing entry-level work and raising the bar on what readiness means. The lesson is not that every programme should become an AI programme, but that skilling must move learners beyond task execution. Programmes need to build domain expertise, judgement, quality assurance, communication and responsible use of digital tools, so learners can adapt as tasks change rather than be trained only for work that may soon be automated.

Arifu's experience reinforced the same point from a different angle. Its earlier programme reached 8,000 learners, including 5,600 refugees, but many participants were pursuing entrepreneurial rather than employment outcomes. This underlined the importance of understanding what learners are trying to achieve and connecting training to the conditions that make skills usable.

Evidence from the session suggested that training is more likely to improve income and business performance when it is bundled with access to jobs, digital tools, finance or specific market opportunities. Arifu's newer approach is more direct: identify specific opportunities in the AI economy, match them to individuals, and train those individuals for the actual work. This creates a visible line between learning and income rather than relying on the hope that market demand will absorb graduates.

Commercial and professional readiness remain underestimated

Resilient People argued that the most significant gap is often not technical capability but commercial understanding. Participants may know how to perform a task but be unable to explain why a company needs it, how it creates value or how it contributes to revenue.

One trainee from Kakuma had primarily encountered companies through their philanthropic work in the camp. As a result, his understanding was that businesses existed "to help more people." This was an understandable interpretation of his experience, but it did not prepare him to operate inside a commercial organisation. There can also be a substantial gap between expectations of employment and the routines of a professional workplace. Working set hours, communicating through a hierarchy, meeting deadlines, sending follow-up emails and responding to feedback may appear basic to experienced professionals, but they are learned norms rather than universal knowledge. These capabilities cannot be developed through a one-off workshop; they require practice, feedback, supervision and consistently enforced standards.

Funding models can work against employment

Amahoro Coalition highlighted that the way programmes are funded can unintentionally weaken the pathway into work. Training programmes often cover transport, meals and stipends so that participants can attend. This support is important, but it can also create an unintended comparison between being paid to learn and accepting a low-paid first job.

In one example, 100 women were trained as tailors. When a mattress company later needed sewing workers, the daily wage was around half the amount participants had received while attending training, before transport costs. From the participant's perspective, declining the job and waiting for another donor-funded course was economically rational. This illustrates how well-intentioned programmes can distort the pathway they are intended to support.

The deeper issue is measurement. When success is defined mainly by the number of people trained, implementers are incentivised to maximise enrolment and completion, while the harder work of helping participants enter and remain in paid work may fall outside the grant period, the budget or the organisation's contractual responsibility.

The expectations between NGOs and businesses are often unclear too. Businesses may assume that NGOs are bringing funding for internships or placements, while NGOs may question why they should pay companies to access work opportunities. Without clear agreements on who funds training, stipends, supervision, compliance and early-stage productivity costs, partnerships can stall even when all parties express interest.

Some grant rules can make market engagement harder by limiting activities that may directly benefit commercial partners, while still expecting programmes to become sustainable. This creates a contradiction: sustainability depends on viable commercial relationships, but implementers may not be able to invest in the market relationships that create work.

> **Scale can mean scaling training without scaling employment**
>
> Large enrolment targets can reduce the resources available for assessment, employer engagement, mentorship, devices, legal support, childcare, finance and retention.

Scale targets can undermine market alignment

The summit closed by confronting the tension between scale and conversion. A market-driven programme may identify 50 or 100 people with the appropriate starting point, train them for a defined opportunity and provide high-touch support until they are established in work. The same model cannot automatically be expanded to 10,000 people a year when the corresponding jobs, contracts or enterprise opportunities do not exist.

Large enrolment targets push programmes towards broad recruitment and standardised content. They reduce the resources available for assessment, employer engagement, mentorship, devices, legal support, childcare, finance and retention. They can also pressure implementers to admit participants whose starting point is too far from the opportunity available. Under these conditions, “scale” can mean scaling training without scaling employment. Donors therefore play a decisive role: implementers need the space to challenge unrealistic targets, adapt programmes in response to evidence and decline projects where the pathway from learning to income has not been established.

What needs to shift

Session 3 reached a clear conclusion: **skilling more people is not enough when what is taught is disconnected from the work that actually exists**. The ecosystem must move from supply-led training to demand-informed skilling, starting with the market and working backwards from the roles that are growing, the capabilities employers need and the conditions required for people to succeed. Programmes should be designed with refugees, refugee-led organisations, employers and intermediaries in the room, not around them. They must also go beyond technical instruction to build commercial awareness, professional readiness and an understanding of how work actually operates. A certificate should not be treated as the endpoint, but as one step in a credible pathway to sustained work.

AI adds urgency: it is already changing entry-level work and raising the bar on what readiness means, and programmes that are not updating to reflect that are preparing learners for a market that has already moved on. The ecosystem's task is to build skills that are designed around where work is going, not only around what programmes are able to teach.

Recommendations in full

The refugee employment pipeline does not break in one place; it breaks in the spaces between ecosystem actors. The summit points to a clear shift in how refugee employment programmes need to be designed, funded and delivered towards stronger pathways from learning to income.

For donors: fund full pathways, not isolated interventions

- Fund complete pathways from recruitment to sustained income rather than isolated training: recruitment, assessment, skilling, documentation, devices, connectivity, finance, employer engagement, placement, onboarding, retention and progression. These are frequently treated as additional costs, but they are what determine whether a programme produces employment outcomes.
- Do not set enrolment and completion targets without evidence of equivalent market demand. Where the objective is employment, measure success through earnings, retention, business survival and progression, not training completion alone.
- Fund refugee-led organisations as strategic partners in programme design and delivery, not only as recruitment channels. RLOs understand community realities and need the resources and decision-making authority to play a stronger role in placement, follow-up and market linkage.
- Review grant rules that prevent responsible collaboration with commercial actors while simultaneously requiring sustainability. Avoiding businesses produces training that is disconnected from the institutions that create work.

For refugee-led organisations: resource RLOs as strategic actors

Fund and involve refugee-led organisations from the beginning in programme design, segmentation, delivery, placement and retention. RLOs understand the local constraints, participant realities and informal dynamics that determine whether a pathway is viable. They should not be treated only as recruitment channels or community access points.

For training organisations: start with the opportunity and work backwards

- Design programmes around the opportunity: practical assessments, work simulations, portfolio-building, apprenticeships, commercial awareness, communication practice and exposure to real work conditions.
- Where the goal is employment or income, begin with the market. What roles exist? What are employers or platforms actually looking for? What tools, portfolios, behaviours, language skills and standards are required?
- Be explicit about what programmes are designed to achieve. A foundational learning programme, a direct-placement programme and an entrepreneurship programme each require a different model; conflating them creates expectations no single intervention can meet.
- Assess participants against the requirements of the opportunity while providing alternative pathways for those not yet ready.
- Use practising industry professionals and employers to design and deliver relevant content.
- Go beyond technical competence: participants need to understand how work is found, secured, delivered and retained, and, in an AI-shaped labour market, how to use tools, evaluate output quality and stay adaptable as tasks change.
- Create simulations, apprenticeships, externships and real-work practice before placement, and continue supporting participants after placement while tracking why people leave work. The first weeks are often where conversion succeeds or fails.

For employers and platforms: move from interest to concrete pathways

- Identify business problems that could be solved through refugee talent rather than beginning with a corporate-social-responsibility commitment. Refugee hiring is more likely to be sustained when it is connected to business performance.
- Use practical, proof-based assessments and review whether existing verification processes unnecessarily exclude displaced candidates. Documentation requirements, payment systems, work-history conventions and location constraints can block capable candidates before their skills are assessed.
- Test hiring through paid internships, defined pilot teams, apprenticeships, partner-payroll arrangements, supplier relationships or targeted business units while building internal confidence and processes.

- Share anticipated skills needs with training organisations before programmes are designed, so they can design preparation around the roles, skills and standards actually required.

For intermediaries and ecosystem actors: build the connective infrastructure

- Organise the ecosystem around a single question: what will it take for this specific pathway to lead to sustained income? The strongest opportunities often fall between institutions, and the ecosystem needs better mechanisms to connect them rather than leaving each actor to work within its own boundary.
- Share evidence more honestly. There is too little visibility on where participants drop off, which placements fail and why programmes do not convert as expected; reporting selectively on success makes it harder for the sector to improve.
- Create trusted referral and verification systems: shared referral systems, trusted talent pools, common guidance on legal and contracting requirements, and clearer handoffs between training providers, refugee-led organisations, employers, platforms and funders.
- Treat childcare, finance, connectivity, devices, documentation and professional networks as employment infrastructure. They determine whether people can access work, remain in work and progress, and they belong in programme budgets.

Conclusion

The Jobtech for Refugees Summit showed that the refugee employment pipeline breaks in the spaces between ecosystem actors.

Across all three sessions, the **same pattern surfaced** from different angles. **It breaks between training and placement**, when learners complete programmes but no one has built the route into work. It breaks between employer interest and actual hiring, when goodwill meets legal, administrative and commercial friction. It breaks between skilling and the market, when programmes prepare people for work that is too limited, too saturated or already changing. And it breaks for women when pathways are designed as if time, safety, care responsibilities, mobility and device access do not shape who can participate.

The summit's central message is that **refugee employment is not a supply-side problem alone**. It is not enough to prepare refugees better, make stronger appeals to employers or deliver more relevant courses; the real test is whether the ecosystem can build the conditions that allow talent, demand and support to meet

This requires a different operating model for the ecosystem. Funders need to pay for the connective work that sits between training and income. Employers and platforms need practical pathways that make refugee inclusion easier to act on. Training providers need to design backwards from real opportunities. Intermediaries and refugee-led organisations need to be resourced to do more than mobilise participants; they need to help convert readiness into work and work into sustained income.

The next frontier is stronger employment systems: demand, placement, documentation, finance, devices, mentorship, market access, gender-responsive design, retention and progression.

The question after this summit is not whether displaced people can contribute to the future of work; they already do, as workers, entrepreneurs, customers, agents, suppliers and business partners across markets that too often fail to recognise their full value. The real question now is whether the ecosystem will move beyond disconnected activity and build pathways strong enough to turn that contribution into dignified, sustained livelihoods.

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