

# AREA-BASED LIVELIHOODS ASSESSMENT

EAST AMMAN, JUNE 2017

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## Introduction

As the crisis in Syria enters into its seventh year, 657,000 Syrians are registered as refugees in Jordan<sup>1</sup>, around 177,000 of whom are living in Amman governorate<sup>2</sup>. With voluntary return unlikely to offer a feasible solution for the majority in the short to medium term, the humanitarian community's focus has shifted to seeking durable solutions for refugees in the host country, which it hopes to achieve through livelihoods initiatives that centre on enhancing economic resilience and self-reliance. However, this comes against a backdrop of strained public services and rising unemployment in Jordan; official figures show the unemployment rate reached 15.8% in the third quarter of 2016, two percentage points higher than in the third quarter of 2015.<sup>3</sup> Further, Syrians and employers looking to hire them continue to face restrictions in the formal labour market. Since the announcement of the Jordan Compact<sup>4</sup> in February 2016, approximately 40,000 work permits have been issued to Syrian refugees<sup>5</sup>, a figure still well short of the initial target of 200,000. The overall dynamics of the labour market, combined with the depletion of Syrian refugees' savings after years of exile, force the most vulnerable to adopt severe coping strategies such as taking informal, dangerous or exploitive jobs.

In order to better understand these labour market dynamics, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and REACH have piloted the Area-Based Livelihoods Assessment (ABLA) in East Amman, a new approach to livelihoods research in the context of Syrian refugees in Jordan. By first identifying the overall geographic area within which Syrians and Jordanians are able to travel for sector-specific work opportunities and the mobility-related factors that impact this ability, the ABLA can inform humanitarian actors according to combined area and sector-specific nuances. Further, by exploring the challenges faced by employers in hiring and retaining staff within these areas and sectors, the assessment seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the actors and mechanisms across the labour market supply chain, as well as the dynamics between them.

This study was designed to test the assumption that mobility in terms of physical access to transport services is the key determining factor in accessing livelihoods opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Moreover, it sought to understand the extent to which other environmental, individual and opportunity related factors impact economic mobility, such as nationality, legal status, age, gender, and skill sets or experience. To this end, the term 'mobility' is taken to refer to two key areas; physical mobility – that is the willingness and ability of individuals to travel to sites of work – and also mobility within the labour market itself, in terms of individuals' skills and abilities allowing them to move between jobs. Complex and overlapping mobility challenges can impact individuals in diverse and difficult to predict ways, therefore a nuanced and multifaceted definition of mobility is required not only to allow an assessment to fully engage with the topic, but also to facilitate an adequate response by service providers.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, official figure as of 15 March 2017: 657,000

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, official figure as of 15 March 2017: 177,070

<sup>3</sup> Department of Statistics, 2016 third quarter press release, October 2016

<sup>4</sup> The Jordan Compact was announced several days after the London Conference on "Supporting Syria and the Region" in February 2016, initiating a lifting of legal barriers for Syrian refugees seeking employment. As part of the Compact, the Government of Jordan vowed to issue work permits and to waive the permit application fee for Syrian refugees in the country.

<sup>5</sup> International Labour Organisation, official figure as of 11 March 2017: 40,318

Data collection for this assessment took place between 9 February and 16 April 2017. Overall, 19 focus group discussions with Syrians and Jordanians living in East Amman, 16 key informant interviews (KIIs) with business owners, and eight KIIs with livelihoods stakeholders were conducted. It should be noted that in this context, the majority of those actively seeking work opportunities are males. In an attempt to focus on individuals the most likely to generate sustainable income for the household through wage employment, priority was given to this demographic during the data collection process. Findings should be considered as indicative only.

## Key findings

The key findings of the assessment are as follows:

- **A lack of mobility is a barrier to accessing work opportunities. Level of mobility is very much determined by the specific circumstances of the individual.** Factors such as family responsibilities, nationality, age and income levels impact the distances that Syrians and Jordanians are willing to travel for work and therefore in the end the work opportunities individuals are able to access.
- **Employers are already applying measures to overcome mobility challenges.** Despite an overall preference for hiring locally, some employers have the means and willingness to provide transport and accommodation for employees when they deem it necessary.
- **Difficulties in obtaining work permits are a primary barrier to mobility for many Syrians.** In certain sectors, restrictions on the provision of work permits limit the opportunities available to Syrians and mean they often have no choice but to work informally in order to secure resources. This restricts the geographical area Syrian respondents are willing to travel to for work as they face the fear of being caught working without work permits.
- **Low wage levels represent a key barrier to mobility for Jordanians by restricting their ability to afford travel for work opportunities.**
- **There are sector-specific variations in the distances that individuals must travel in order to access work opportunities.** Construction sector opportunities, for example, tend to be located in West Amman or on the outskirts of the city, requiring those living in East Amman to travel greater distances to access work.
- **Smaller businesses face greater challenges in providing work permits for Syrian employees.** Owners of smaller businesses noted that a lack of administrative and legal capacity hinders their ability to stay up to date with the requirements for work permits. Larger businesses, on the other hand, tend to have dedicated human resources departments that makes it easier for them to handle these processes.

# Methodology

## Objectives and rationale

The primary objective of the assessment was to determine the factors that define mobility for Syrians and Jordanians living in East Amman, specifically with regard to accessing work opportunities. Programmatic observations by DRC and REACH teams found that users of job matching services in East Amman frequently stated opportunities did not offer high enough wages to justify transportation costs, particularly as many opportunities were located far from their homes, while businesses engaging in such programmes experienced high level of staff turnover. The assessment therefore sought to test the hypothesis that access to transport services is the main barrier faced by Syrians and Jordanians in securing income generating opportunities, while also identifying other environmental, individual, and opportunity related factors that impact economic mobility. To this end, the assessment serves to support humanitarian and development actors implementing livelihoods programmes in the East Amman area, as well as providing a sound theoretical basis for the definition, development, and refinement of livelihoods programming throughout the country.

## Objectives

The specific research objectives of the assessment were as follows:

- 1) Develop replicable assessment tools and methodology for collecting the following data:
  - Data to provide a nuanced and comprehensive, but also practical and workable, definition of mobility that can be used by actors in the Jordanian context
  - The area within which individuals are able and willing to travel for work opportunities (economic catchment zone)
  - The challenges faced by business owners in finding staff to meet their needs and employers' preferences for hiring individuals
  - The roles played by external actors in improving access to work opportunities
- 2) Test and adapt the assessment tools and methodology and produce a recommended toolbox for these types of assessment
- 3) Collect and analyse data on Syrians' and Jordanians' labour market skills and the livelihoods opportunities available to them in East Amman

## Approach

In order to meet these objectives, a qualitative area-based approach was used, with the East Amman area as the target unit. Data collection took place between 9 February and 16 April 2017 and was primarily conducted through multiple phases of qualitative methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) with Syrians and Jordanians living in the East Amman area, key informant interviews (KIIs) with business owners, and KIIs with various livelihoods stakeholders. As an exercise for piloting and developing an innovative methodology for assessing livelihoods, flexibility was embedded into the approach, which was iterative in nature and featured the adaptation of tools throughout the data collection process. Findings should be considered as indicative only.

### Phase I: Focus group discussions

The first phase of data collection sought to identify the overall economic catchment zone for Syrian refugees and Jordanians living in the East Amman area. The aim was to understand where working age Syrian refugees and Jordanians are able to travel to in order to access work opportunities and the factors that limited this mobility, such as the availability of transport services, the cost of transport services and the duration of journeys.

In order to capture the geographic information for identifying the economic catchment zone, a participatory mapping approach was initially used, whereby FGD participants were asked to identify the areas that they were able and willing to travel to as well as the areas in which they were aware of work opportunities.

This participatory mapping element was adapted after it became clear in early FGD rounds that the economic catchment zone was not defined as an overall geographic area but more in terms of transport routes and sectors of trade. Accordingly, the focus groups were tailored to draw out the primary transport hubs and corridors within Amman to see how proximity to specific transport links contributed to mobility and accessing certain areas and sectors for work. Preliminary FGDs also found that there were significant variations in the areas identified by individuals according to different work sectors. A sector-based approach therefore became an integral part of the methodology used.

Overall, 19 FGDs were conducted with 6 to 10 participants aged between 18 and 50 in each. The participants were identified with the assistance of community based organisations (CBOs) operating in the East Amman area and other key community contacts identified by REACH field coordinators. The FGDs were disaggregated by sex and nationality, with the breakdown shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Breakdown of FGDs by sex and nationality of participants**

Gender	Syrian	Jordanian	Total
Female	2	0	2
Male	8	9	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>19</b>

## Phase II: Key informant interviews

The second phase of data collection consisted of KIIs with business owners and stakeholders. In total 16 KIIs were conducted with business owners (or human resources managers in larger organisations) and 8 KIIs were conducted with livelihoods stakeholders in East Amman. Although KIIs were initially intended to occur subsequently to FGDs, the method was adapted during data collection so that there was an alternation between KIIs and FGDs. This integrated approach, whereby the same core field staff were used for data collection, allowed for each data collection phase to inform the other. To this end, a high level of granularity and comparability across the two data collection methods was achieved.

### Key informant interviews with business owners

The purpose of the KIIs with business owners was to collect information on the demand side of the labour market. The business owner KIIs sought to understand employers' challenges in hiring staff, preferences in terms of skills sets and profiles for specific work roles, and propensity to provide training and other benefits to employees. The information was then analysed in conjunction with the supply side data collected in the FGDs. Both FGD participants and KIIs were categorised into five previously identified livelihood sectors: construction, food processing, restaurants, retail and services. This disaggregation into sectors was made to ensure that employers in a range of sectors were interviewed, to understand some of the key requirements and challenges of employers within the sector and to make comparisons between them. Table 2 shows the breakdown of business owner KIIs by each of these sector.

**Table 2: Business owner KII breakdown by sector**

Sector	KIIs conducted	Description
Construction	3	Construction businesses (high skilled and low skilled)
Food processing	3	Businesses related to the preparation and sale of food but not restaurants (bakeries, butcheries, etc.)
Restaurants	3	Restaurants and cafes
Retail	4	Retail shops and stores selling non-food items
Services	3	Businesses providing services (barbers, repair shops, mechanics etc.)

### Key informant interviews with livelihoods stakeholders

The stakeholder KIIs were conducted to understand the roles and responsibilities of different external parties, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government, contractors and community leaders, in improving access to livelihood opportunities. The KIIs were identified using a number of methods; first, desk research was conducted to establish associations, government agencies, and humanitarian and development organisations engaged in livelihood activities

in East Amman. In addition, a snowball approach was taken, whereby business owner KIIs were asked to name any such actors that they were aware of or had interacted with. Also, stakeholder KIIs were asked to identify any other individuals or organisations that they believed could provide valuable input to the research.

**Table 3: Stakeholder KII breakdown by type**

Type	KIIs conducted
CBOs/NGOs	2
Government/municipal government	2
Business associations	4

## Challenges and limitations

During data collection, the following challenges were experienced:

- **Business owner KII respondents:** On a number of occasions, employer KIIs were disrupted because the interviewees had various issues that they had to respond to (phone calls, customers etc.). Where possible, field teams ensured that interviews were conducted during quiet business hours, where participants were able to remain engaged in the discussion.
- **Female FGD participants:** The majority of the FGDs were conducted with male participants because a higher proportion of males in East Amman are actively seeking work opportunities than females. In the female FGDs that were conducted, participants mostly spoke about the male members of their families rather than about their own experiences. Accordingly, the findings outlined in this report largely focus on males.

The following limitations have been identified with this assessment:

- **Lack of statistical significance:** As a primarily qualitative exercise, the data collected is not statistically representative of the populations or areas assessed. Although the target number of FGDs and KIIs was calculated to prevent a disproportionate level of importance being placed on anomalous information, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than statistically representative.
- **Lack of secondary data:** Due to the focused nature of the research, a lack of secondary data was available for the triangulation and comparison of findings. This places a high reliance on respondents to provide accurate information.

# Findings

This section of the report presents the main findings from the assessment. It examines how mobility in terms of access to work opportunities for Syrians and Jordanians living in East Amman is determined by:

- Physical factors including access to transport services, in terms of costs of transport, modalities of transport and preferences of employers
- Factors affecting individuals' ability and willingness to travel for work, such as nationality and associated issues such as work permits, as well as family structure
- Labour market mobility in terms of individuals' skills and experience

## Access to transport services

A lack of financial resources relative to the costs of transport is one of the key factors in limiting where individuals are physically able to travel to for work opportunities. For many people who are willing to travel significantly further than Amman for work, the provision of transport or a transport allowance is required with the job because they cannot cover the costs by themselves. To this end, the cost of transport as a factor limiting mobility is closely related to income levels. According to several KI stakeholders, the majority of workers' salaries is allocated to covering the costs of transport. FGD participants were largely able to identify additional income requirements that would justify travelling further for work opportunities. For the most part, income levels would only need to be higher if participants were required to travel outside of Amman; they would need between 50 JOD (70 USD)<sup>6</sup> and 150 JOD (211 USD) on top of the base monthly salary, or transport would need to be provided.

### Jordanian respondents

Many Jordanians noted a willingness to travel anywhere in Jordan for opportunities that offered sufficient terms; this generally meant competitive wages of at least 350 JOD (493 USD) per month, social security, medical insurance and transportation allowances. For places that are too far to travel in one day, such as Ma'an or Aqaba, they would require transportation and accommodation provided while working.

The increasing number of Syrian workers on the labour market is a growing concern for many Jordanians. As Syrians are more willing to work longer hours or for lower wages, Jordanians perceive them to be favoured by employers. This places downward pressure on wages, in some cases to the point where the costs of transport to work cannot be covered.

<sup>6</sup> 1 JOD = 1.41 USD as of 12 June 2017

<sup>7</sup> The servis taxis in Amman are shared taxis that follow specific routes.

### Syrian respondents

Although the cost of transportation is a concern shared by Syrian respondents, there are other factors that must also be considered in this parallel, such as work permits. These issues are further explored later in the report.

### Frequency of pay and transport costs

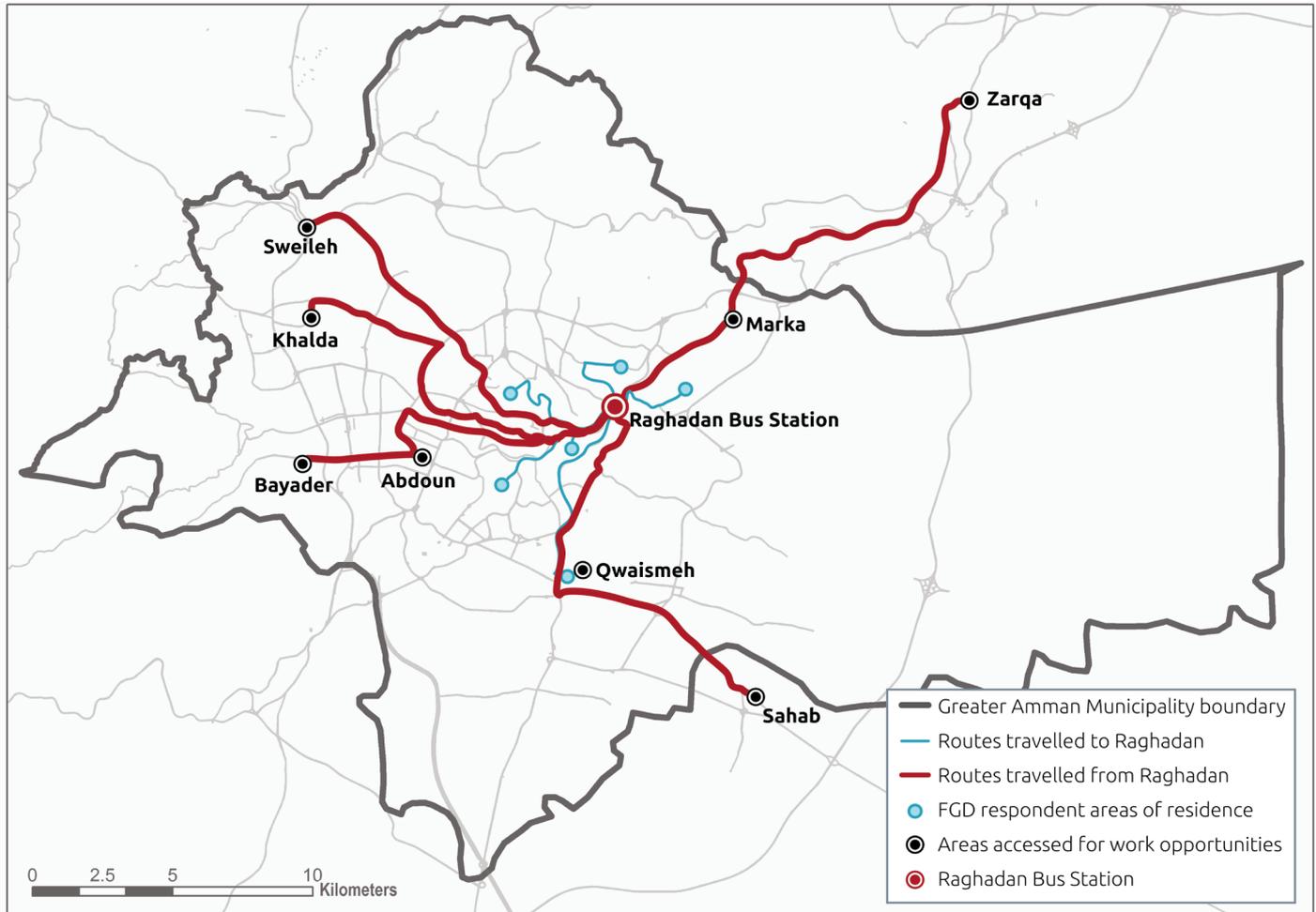
Respondents note that if they are paid on a monthly basis, they are sometimes unable to cover the costs of transport for the first month. In an extreme case, an FGD participant was unable to attend a job interview due to the costs of travel. Employer KIIs indicated that this is something that they consider – several noted their willingness to provide the salary on a fortnightly basis rather than monthly, to support those with short-term cash flow challenges. Nonetheless, if this is not built into the equation when deciding pay levels and regularity of work, it could lead to workers actively seeking daily opportunities over more regular work.

### Primary transport modalities

The cost of transport not only impacts whether individuals are able to access transport services, but also the transport modalities that are available to them. Findings suggest that the main types of transport that individuals are financially able to access are public buses and *servis*<sup>7</sup> taxis, although many respondents still noted that these modalities are costly to use. The main transport terminal through which people travel is the Raghadan Bus Station, which, for those who do not live within walking distance, is accessed by the servis network. From Raghadan, public buses are used to travel to places within Amman, including areas such as Sahab, Marka, Khalda and other parts of west Amman. Further, Raghadan serves as the hub for travel to other urban centres outside of Amman, such as Mafraq, Madaba or Zarqa. Although transport services are relatively accessible, there is evidence of bottlenecks and inefficiencies that impede mobility for those living in specific areas.

Due to the high volumes of passengers that travel through Raghadan, bus services are full to capacity for the majority of the journey, meaning that even those living on the bus routes must first travel to the Raghadan bus terminal before continuing back past their place of residence, adding to the time and cost of journeys. This issue is particularly acute for those living in Salheyyet Al Abed, who, despite living relatively close to Sahab, must first go to Raghadan because there is no space on the bus elsewhere along the route. The lack of public transport in Abu Alanda (near Salheyyet Al Abed) is even seen as the primary reason for unemployment by some of the Jordanians living in the area. Map 1 illustrates some of the routes taken by FGD participants in order to access work opportunities.

Map 1: Examples of bus routes taken from Raghadan Bus Station to access work opportunities



### Employer preferences for local staff

On the demand side of the labour market, most employers seem to prioritise finding staff who live locally and definitely consider this as a factor during the hiring process. Employers are concerned that if staff have to travel far or for a long time to work, this will impact their punctuality and their commitment to the work, especially as travelling further generally costs more money.

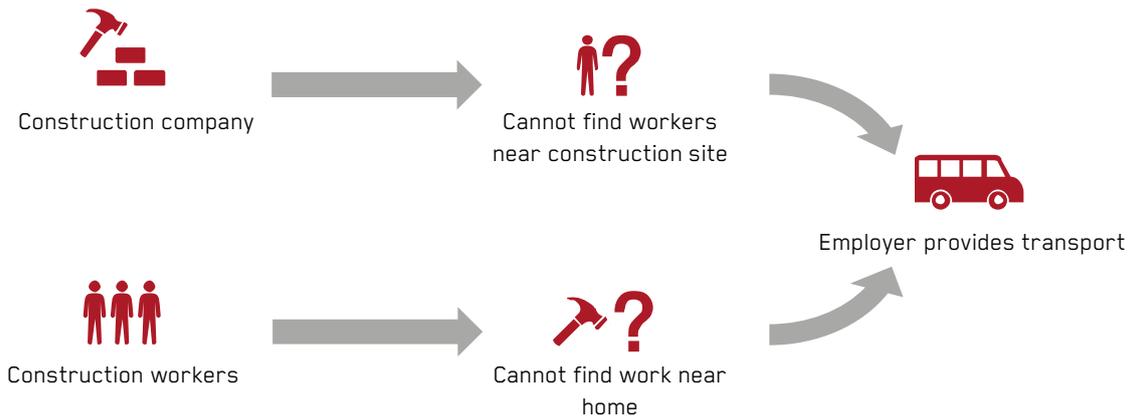
From a programmatic perspective, improved provision of reliable transport options could ensure that employer’s preferences are met while prospective employees are able to access jobs located further from where they live. On the other hand, developing a job referral system at the neighbourhood level would potentially offer benefits on both the supply and demand side of labour.

**Employers in restaurants, retail, food processing and services sectors** offered transport arrangements, although this depended on the size of the business and such arrangements are mostly put in place for those working night shifts.

**Construction sector snapshot**

The type of work opportunity accessed also influences directly the means of transport chosen by individuals. Some occupations require a bulky equipment that can only be transported by taxis. This seems to be limited to jobs in the construction sector, whereby workers need to bring their own equipment to the work location. In the construction sector, the mismatch between the place of activity (new neighbourhood of Amman) and the job preferences of the people living in those areas means that the majority of workers must travel from other parts of the city (such as East Amman) each day. This led employers to engage in transport service provision, something that external actors could engage with and capitalise upon. While this approach secures transport for the employees, it also ensures that all workers arrive to work at the same time.

Figure 1: Construction sector example of a strategy deployed by employers to improve employee mobility



### Staffing challenges faced by businesses

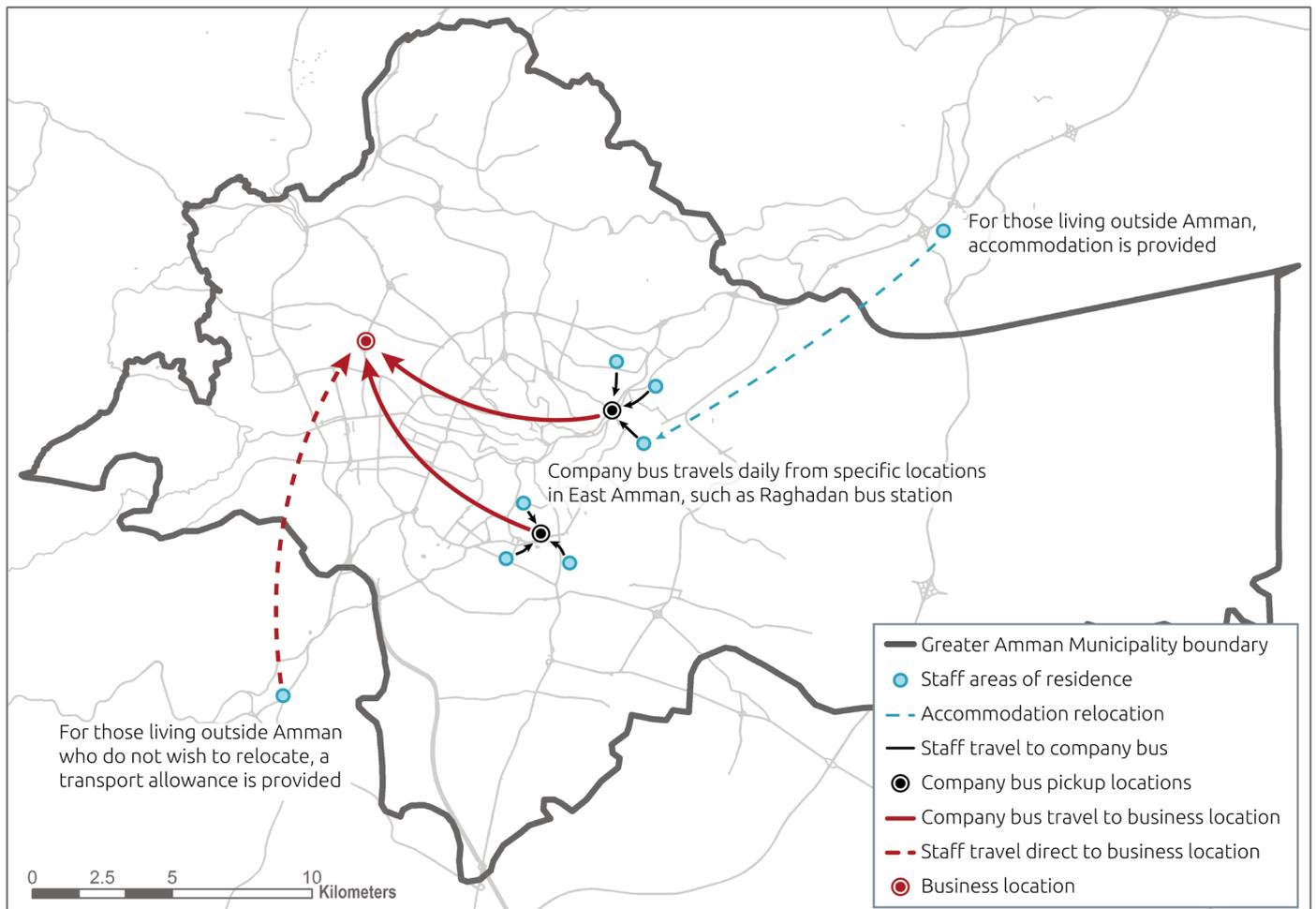
#### Income and monetary benefits

One of the primary difficulties reported by employers that predominantly employ on a wage labour basis is finding staff with high levels of commitment. Although daily work is not necessarily consistent with irregular work, by definition it means that employees are not tied to specific job for extended periods of time. Longer-term salary agreements are not certain to increase employees' commitment levels though, as

some workers feel it limits their ability to meet their daily needs and leaves them susceptible to working for longer periods and receiving less than the agreed salary level (whereas with daily work, if the agreed salary payment is not made, workers can stop working for the employer immediately).

In an attempt to address this issue, monetary benefits such as performance bonuses and annual salary increases are used by many employers across all sectors.

Map 2: Example of transport and accommodation benefits offered by an employer



### Other employee benefits

In addition to transport, some employers are prepared to provide accommodation or accommodation allowances in order to ensure that staff do not leave the job (Map 2).

Many business owner KIs also indicated that they provide training for staff, particularly new employees. In many cases, this is in the form of ad-hoc training for skills specifically related to the role or project. In large businesses, employers also noted that they send staff to participate in official external courses (such as courses of management, communication and sales provided for free by the Industry and Trade Chamber), for learning both soft and technical skills.

Furthermore, most employers also described how they provide social security contributions for workers, although only the largest businesses are able to provide health insurance.

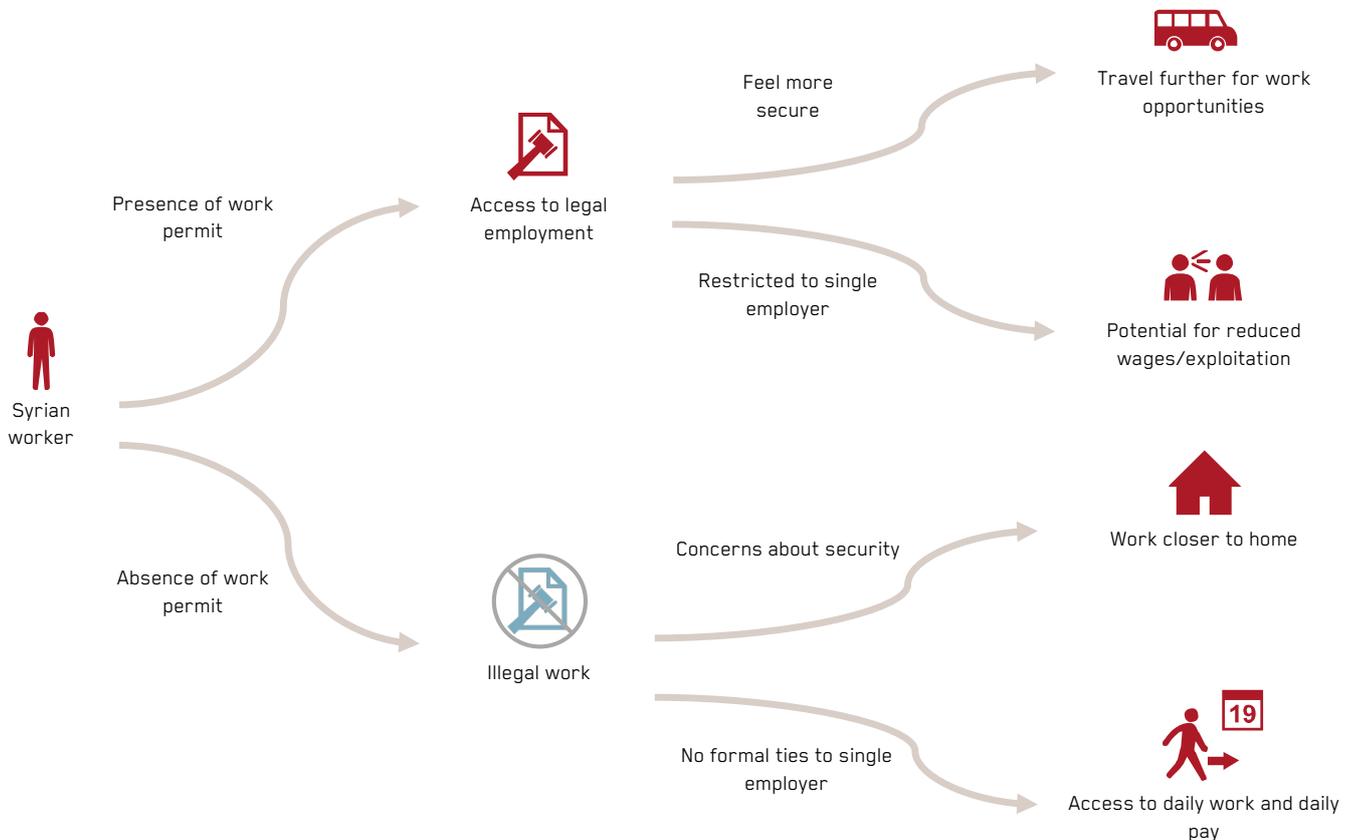
Overall, these findings indicate that while employers are fairly easily able to find new staff, they prefer to retain staff and provide opportunities for advancement internally. Employers appear to generally favour longer-term staff placements and are prepared to provide various benefits to their staff in order to achieve this.

### Nationality

Many employers highlighted specific roles that they believe individuals of particular nationalities are more suited to, according to their skills and experience. Positions requiring technical skills are more commonly assigned to Jordanian (assumed as being more educated than Syrians or Egyptians) while those involving extensive soft skills such as communications or hospitality skills are assigned to Syrians. This “division of skills” across nationalities was confirmed by a key informant working at the Greater Amman Municipality. Employers also expressed preferences in terms of nationality for reasons beyond skills and experience. For example, some employers explained that they choose to hire Syrians for “humanitarian” purposes, while others choose not to because of trust issues.

Business owners indicated willingness to hire Syrians provided that their quality of work is high enough and they display the right level of commitment. Saving in salaries is also likely to be one of the factors taken into account by business owners. Indeed, besides the fact that the minimum wage is set to be lower for foreigners than for Jordanians, the latter might potentially require high wage level to meet their needs as they do not receive any assistance. As a result, Jordanians and Syrians do not have the same cost-benefit calculation. This could partly explain why many Jordanians reportedly refuse to work in low-skilled sectors, which offer low wages.

Figure 2: Work permit considerations faced by Syrians



**Sector snapshot**

- **Retail employers** exclusively hire Jordanians for positions requiring managing money (such as cashiers) due to trust concerns with foreign workers as well as legal restrictions.
- **Employers in the restaurant and retail sectors** prefer hiring Syrians and Egyptians, as they reportedly handle better the pressure of long and intense work hours.
- **Employers in construction, food processing, and retail** usually prefer foreign workers to Jordanians due to their higher commitment levels.

**Syrians' perspectives on work permits**

Working without permits<sup>9</sup> is a perceived security risk for Syrian refugees. Many Syrian respondents stated that if they received work permits, they would feel more secure, although for many securing income remains essential so work is undertaken in spite of this risk. In these cases, compromises are made to minimise this risk; there is a preference among Syrians to work close to the home, either in the neighbourhood that they live in or in adjacent neighbourhoods. This is primarily to avoid the risk of being in trouble because of their illegal work.

Syrians also feel safer in areas that they are geographically familiar with and where they have contacts and networks within the community. The great majority of Syrians stated the fear of being caught as one of the primary factors they would take into consideration if they were offered a job opportunity requiring to travel further than they currently do. Few participants even mentioned that this risk was great enough to ensure that they will not travel far for work regardless of the income. A number of Syrian respondents with work permits noted that work permits do not necessarily reduce their susceptibility to exploitation by employers (being underpaid and overwork).

**All in all, for these respondents in East Amman work permits should not necessarily be seen as a guarantor of decent work but rather one component that opens up more work opportunities by facilitating mobility.** For some respondents, it appears to be optimal to work without a permit (Figure 2), however this could be a misinformation issue exacerbated by a handful of individuals sharing details of their bad experiences. On the other hand, it could be derived from broader issues with the mechanisms of issuing work permits, abuse of the system by employers, and an overall lack of appropriate incentives for Syrians to obtain work permits.

**Employers' perspectives on work permits**

KIIs suggested that smaller employers face more difficulties obtaining work permits for Syrian workers than larger employers. This is because larger companies are more likely to have dedicated human resources and administrative staff, who are able to stay up to date with legislation developments regarding the employment of Syrian refugees.

Smaller companies, on the other hand, are generally less aware of the requirements for Syrian workers and struggle to stay

to date with regulations. This poses a challenge for smaller employers, because it seems more preferable for Syrians to work locally than it is for Jordanians, which often entails working in smaller businesses.

Business owners also discussed the challenges of managing employee ratios. There are a minimum number of Jordanian workers (four) required for each foreign worker – for some, it is therefore optimal to hire Syrians on a daily basis so that they do not need to hire more Jordanian staff simultaneously. Jordanians lack of commitments with regard to certain job positions and/or sectors makes the challenge of hiring a Syrian with a permit unrelated to the Syrians themselves, but rather the Jordanians that would also have to be hired. This issue was also raised by the key informant from the Jordan Restaurant Association, who believed that the work permit quotas for Syrian should be increased in this field. This is a potential issue that could be addressed through advocacy channels, particularly if it is a challenge faced by a large number of Jordanian employers. One potential option could be to alter the required ratio depending on the size of the business, to ensure that smaller employers are able to find the best staff to match their needs.

**Family commitments**

For single males, the time travelled to work appeared to be less of an issue due to the absence of home responsibilities (Figure 3). Men with families largely identified between one and two hours as the maximum time spent travelling to and from work opportunities (between two and four hours travelling per day). An important consideration here is that while it is mostly males with families who are concerned about journey time, the number of hours worked per day are not by any means uniform. To this end, the actual metric of concern is the total time spent away from the family, rather than purely the duration of the journey.

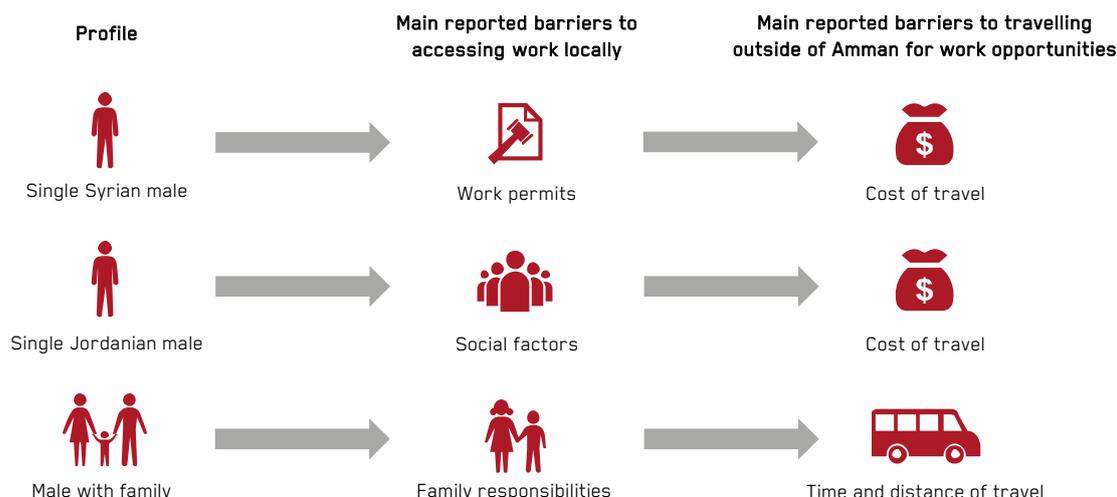
A number of respondents, both Jordanians and Syrians, provided these figures, ranging from 12 to 14 hours spent away from the home per day. Interestingly, family commitments seemed to be more of a determinant of where Jordanian participants were able to go, rather than for the Syrians, where it was more of a determinant of where they were willing to go.

For Syrian respondents, family concerns were generally a main factor in limiting where they are willing to travel to in order to access work opportunities. This could be related to the fact that Syrians have less well-established family networks than Jordanians, meaning that they cannot rely on one of their extended family to take care of their immediate family during their absence. The KI working for the Greater Amman Municipality reported that people with families have commitments that do not have single men, which gives greater work opportunities to the latter. As they do not mind living at their work sites, the distance they agree to travel for a work opportunity is bigger.

The traditional assumption is that family commitments are primarily an obstacle to women participation on the labour market. However these findings reveal, albeit in a fairly non quantitative way, that family commitments are actually just as

<sup>9</sup> Further information on work permits and the application process for work permits can be found here: [The Work Permit Maze, Jordan INGO Forum, December 2016](#)

Figure 3: Challenges faced in accessing work opportunities by nationality and family status



much of a concern for men and should not be discounted. Furthermore, men with families have more dependents than single men, which means that being engaged in economic-generating activity is all the more a priority for them.

## Skills and experience

While a high level of mobility increases the number of work opportunities that an individual might be able to access, the individual still needs to meet the requirements of employers in terms of profile, skills and experience

The following section considers individual level factors related to skill sets and experience that restrict impact access to work opportunities.

### Syrian respondents

One of the primary challenges with accessing work opportunities identified by many Syrians is that their skill sets and employment experiences are not aligned with the opportunities available to them. This is not surprising in the current context and unlikely to change in the near future, given the significant restrictions on the sectors that Syrians are legally able to work in.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of the challenges with finding work that matches their skills and experience, the vast majority of Syrians have no choice but to seek work in order to meet their basic needs. Syrian FGD participants regularly communicated their willingness to learn new skills or work in new job types.

For some educated Syrians, aged in their late thirties and forties, not being able to work in their own fields is enough of a reason to not work at all. Because of their experience, they will only work in positions that they believe they deserve.

While this finding is perhaps something of an outlier – many Syrians are in a position where they must accept work regardless of the sector – it highlights the loss of dignity experienced by many who must work in jobs that they perceive to be below

their capabilities. This is a potential issue for humanitarian actors to consider with regard to the sustainability of longer term livelihood schemes. It also has broader implications for policies on Syrian employment, because even if the work sectors available to Syrians are expanded, some will not work unless they can access specific jobs. Lastly, it entails a loss of human capital and growth potential for the Jordanian economy in the long run.

For those who managed to find work in their field of experience but had to change their status from business owner (in Syria) to employee (in Jordan) because of Government restrictions, the main concern is to be underpaid and exploited to do work which they feel they have a certain level of mastery in.

These findings indicate that the sectors available to Syrians may not always match with the labour supply, presenting a barrier to full-time formal employment for many Syrians. However, Syrians are clearly willing to adapt to this context and there should be a focus on ensuring this is accomplished in a manner that grants access to decent work.

### Jordanian respondents

Despite the fact that Jordanians have access to a broader range of work sectors than Syrians living in East Amman, there are some specific similarities between the two population groups. Several Jordanian participants, particularly those with university level education, also reported severe difficulties in finding work in their preferred sectors (field they have been graduated from). This corroborates the findings from the KIIs with stakeholders, which suggest that the education system should place more emphasis on vocational skills training to adequately meet labour market demand.

The provision of vocational training courses, which can be easily accessed for those living in the East Amman area, could therefore be valuable in equipping Jordanians in particular with additional and relevant skills to find work.

<sup>9</sup> Further information on the sectors closed to migrant workers in Jordan can be found here: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=12986>

Overall, there is a mismatch of skills on the labour market. Syrians cannot necessarily access the sectors they have experience working in due to Government restrictions and are often forced to look for lower-skilled jobs. As a result, low-skilled Jordanians are in direct competition with foreign workers on the labour market and this drives wages down. Further, many educated Jordanians struggle to find opportunities because of the poor condition of the labour market and the high skilled job saturation in Jordan. In the end, a large proportion of the working-age population is in a position of vulnerability on the labour market.

### Individual preference on the labour market

Employers noted that even in East Amman, they face difficulties in finding Jordanian workers who live locally. Due to the negative social connotations associated with working in lower skilled sectors (construction, food processing and retail sectors), Jordanians working in these sectors reportedly prefer to work in areas where they are not interacting with their friends, families or neighbours.

Although these topics were not mentioned by the Jordanians, this sentiment from business owners highlights the fact that access to work opportunities is to some extent determined by preferences of the individual even if this does not align with the preferences of the employer, which perhaps brings about mobility issues that could otherwise be avoided. While the social stigma associated with this type of work presents a further obstacle, information sessions that explain the possibilities for progression within these sectors and longer term career opportunities could start to address this.

### Demographic factors interacting with skills and experience

The high supply of labour means that employers can fairly easily find staff to replace those who leave and also allows them to be relatively selective in doing so, especially for lower-skilled skilled positions. To this end, business owners are able to make demographic preferences when considering candidates; overall, only 3 out of 16 business owner KIs stated that they have no demographic preferences when hiring staff in terms of age, nationality and disabilities. Unlike skills and experience, these factors are inherently much more difficult for individuals to control for.

#### Age

While older individuals are generally less willing and able to learn new skills, they tend to have higher levels of experience and commitment, both of which are traits that numerous employers look for.

This is potentially an important consideration for external actors providing livelihoods support; for older individuals, finding work opportunities that are more closely matched with prior experience or providing trainings in skills that quite closely complement their existing skill sets would be most effective in improving access to work.

Younger individuals, on the other hand, tend to be more

enthusiastic about learning new skills but are often looking for new opportunities, so employers face difficulties with staff commitment and retention. From KIs with business owners, employing young staff (in the age bracket 20 to 35 years old) appears to be a particular preference held by employers in the retail sector, who place less emphasis on technical skills or experience and more on soft skills such as communication, enthusiasm and customer service. Employers in this sector add that for these reasons, they often employ university students, although this leads to high staff turnover as the students quit the work or return to their studies once they have earned enough to cover their fees. Younger individuals (in the age bracket favoured by employers), who are able to commit to the work for longer time periods, could therefore be well matched to working in this type of work.

The inclination to hire younger staff is not, however, applicable to business owners in all sectors. Employers who place a higher level of importance on experience when recruiting new employees may view older candidates more favourably than those who have only spent a few years developing their skills in a certain task or role. KIs with business owners suggested that employers in the food processing sector favour this type of profile; for example, the owner of a bakery stated that when hiring chefs, a minimum of five years of experience is required, and added that older men also tend to be more committed because they have families to provide for.

# Conclusion

The Area-Based Livelihoods Assessment in East Amman has sought to advance new methods for understanding the approaches that can be taken by individuals, businesses and key stakeholders in improving access to income-generating opportunities for both Syrians and Jordanians living in the East Amman area. The assessment findings indicate that the barriers to labour market access are often linked to mobility, not only in terms of physical access to work opportunities but also to multiple factors affecting the individuals' ability and willingness to travel for work (income and frequency of pay, nationality, family structure), as well as their mobility on the labour market (skill sets and experience). This implies that a multidimensional approach is needed not only to improve access to work permits but also to encourage Syrians into work once they have a work permit.

For Syrians, working closer to home is a general preference due to personal security concerns around movement and the costs of transport, although this is not possible in all sectors. In construction, for example, work opportunities tend to be located in areas outside of East Amman. While many Syrian respondents reported that work permits offer the opportunity for increased mobility, some reported that there has been little impact on working conditions and work permits can in some cases restrict mobility by tying individuals to a single employer. In this sense, work permits do not really reflect the flexibility and dynamism of the sectors for which they are available. Further, only a limited range of occupations, that does not necessarily match with Syrians skills sets and experience, are currently available for Syrians in Jordan. This means that work permits are not necessarily a preferable solution for all Syrians in their current format. In view of these findings, support is needed beyond assistance in accessing a work permit. Indeed, the ultimate goal of projects should not necessarily be to obtain a work permit, but rather to obtain sustainable livelihoods, for which work permits are just one part of the pathway.

Jordanians, on the other hand, appear to be more prepared to travel further from where they live to access work opportunities, but the influx of Syrian workers into the labour market has driven down wages and rendered transport to certain areas unaffordable. Further, the frequency of pay can hinder the mobility of individuals who cannot afford to advance transport expenses. The difficulty of the present education system in meeting labour market needs as well as the high skilled jobs saturation in the country, means that even highly qualified Jordanian workers struggle to find opportunities that match their education and expertise. Meanwhile low-skilled Jordanians are in direct competition with foreign workers on the labour market and may require higher wages than their Syrian peers, as they do not benefit from assistance. This could explain why employers noted a lack of commitment among Jordanian workers, especially by comparison with Syrians and Egyptians. Jordanians workers, especially the low skilled, should thus be provided with tailor-made programs allowing them to differentiate themselves from their foreigner peers on the labour market.

Family structure has in general a significant impact on individuals' ability and willingness to travel for work, single men being more mobile than people with families. Providing family support is thus essential not only for women, as it is generally accepted, but for men as well.

Staff retention in general appears to be a concern for business owners, despite facing few challenges in hiring the staff to meet their needs. To this end, finding employees locally is of preference, given this typically leads to higher levels of commitment. In some cases, business owners are prepared to provide benefits to employees, such as transport and accommodation, in order to mitigate the impact of long journeys on staff commitment. This is especially true for business owners in the construction field.

With the Amman public transport system unlikely to experience drastic improvements in efficiency in the near future, finding localised work opportunities should be a real priority, especially for those with family responsibilities and Syrians in general. The supply of work opportunities is limited though so this may not always be possible; livelihoods programmes therefore need to be accurate and thorough if long-term sustainability is to be achieved. Moreover, programmatic decisions need to be flexible enough to capture the nuances at the individual level while also encapsulating the overall dynamic between the work opportunity, the employee and the external environment.

## Recommendations

Based on assessment findings, the following recommendations can be formulated :

- **Skills-matching programmes should start at the neighbourhood level.** By initially conducting skills matching at a highly localised level, the mobility challenges that arise from travelling long distances to work can be minimised. The geographic focus of such programmes can then be gradually expanded according to ongoing requirements and skills gaps.
- **Livelihoods programmes need to account for high staff turnover.** A high number of individuals in the labour market are working outside of their skill sets and preferences resulting in high staff turnover. In the short term, a high level of flexibility and specificity is required in livelihoods programmes for the needs of both employers and prospective employees to be met. For longer-term sustainability of livelihoods programmes, methods should be found to improve staff retention and ensure individuals are equipped with the right skills to match the need of the market.

- **Existing measures made by employers to improve employee mobility should be supported and replicated elsewhere.** By further understanding the existing approaches taken by business owners to improve the mobility of staff external actors can support the improvement of these services and encourage their implementation elsewhere. A cost-benefit analysis of methods such as providing transport could serve as a useful tool for advocating other businesses to follow suit. Moreover, these strategies could be adapted according to the needs and resources of employers; for example, pooled transport could be considered for staff of different businesses operating in the same area.
- **Financial support should be considered for those who are unable to cover transport costs during the first months of employment.** Those who are unable to cover the costs of transport to work opportunities are often the most vulnerable and most in need of support. Financing schemes, such as transport vouchers or loans for transport fares, would reduce the immediate financial burden of travelling to work during the first months of employment.
- **Support should be provided to smaller businesses who lack the financial or staffing capacity to stay up-to-date with regards to work permit legislation.** Assistance could be provided in the form of training, the provision of regular information updates, or direct support for HR, administrative and legal processes. Support for the development of formal and organised small- and medium-sized business associations or cooperatives would be an additional option for allowing businesses to pool resources and reduce the impact of legal and administrative costs on salaries.
- **Efforts should be made to ensure Syrians are well-informed on issues related to work permits. Ongoing monitoring of the working conditions of those with work permits should be considered.** This would allow for a better understanding of impact of work permits on reducing exploitation by employers and improving job security. Work permits should not be seen simply as an end in themselves, or a quota that should be met, but rather as a path to securing improved livelihoods and protection outcomes for those who have them. Syrians need to be more reassured that getting a work permit actually translates into more protection in the workplace than is currently the case. This could be in the form of information campaigns and community sessions that seek to provide Syrians information on current work permit requirements as well as receive ongoing feedback from those facing work permit-related challenges.