



The Jordan Compact

Lessons learnt and implications for future refugee compacts

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February 2018

Key findings

- In February 2016, a new approach to dealing with protracted displacement was signed: the Jordan Compact. In return for billions of dollars in grants and loans and preferential trade agreements with the European Union (EU), Jordan committed to improving access to education and legal employment for its Syrian refugees.
- The Compact showed that, by building on existing political capital between donor governments, international organisations and host governments, as well as economic and political incentives such as trade deals, a restrictive policy environment can be opened up and funds can be mobilised in a short space of time.
- While considerable progress has been made, challenges remain:
 - The Compact design did not integrate refugee perspectives at the outset; as such, it has been slow to improve their daily lives.
 - Financial support has increased school enrolment, but large numbers still remain out of school due to financial barriers and the quality of services provided.
 - Progress has been made in work permits issued, but critical sectors and self-employment remain closed to refugees.
 - Indicators measuring progress should focus on the extent to which they improve the lives of refugees.
- Donor governments, host governments and international organisations currently considering new refugee compacts should start with what refugees need and want, and be realistic about what such arrangements can achieve.

Introduction

More than five million people have fled the civil war in Syria since 2011, with most settling in neighbouring countries. Jordan alone is home to more than 650,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2017), most of them in host communities rather than camps (UNHCR, 2017). Countries neighbouring conflict accommodate the largest number of refugees, many of whom stay for decades (Crawford et. al., 2015). These countries are also struggling with economic development. Recognition of this twin reality has given rise to a new policy model – so-called refugee compacts. The Jordan Compact, signed at the high-level London Conference in February 2016, aspires to turn ‘the Syrian refugee crisis into a development opportunity’ for Jordan by shifting the focus from short-term humanitarian aid to education, growth, investment and job creation, both for Jordanians and for Syrian refugees (Government of Jordan, 2016: 1) (see Box 1).

Two years on from the signing of the Compact, this policy briefing considers the lessons emerging from the experience. Although considerable progress has been made in opening up an increasingly restrictive policy environment for refugees, and there are now more Syrians in education and formal employment, challenges remain. While more time is needed to see whether the Compact really can lead to tangible changes in refugees’ lives, similar models are now being proposed in other countries, including Ethiopia, Lebanon and Turkey, warranting an early evaluation of the Compact’s development and implementation. However, before these are rolled out we need to understand the Jordan Compact’s origins and implementation. As the Jordanian government and the international community continue to fine-tune delivery of the Compact, it will be particularly important to consider the aspirations and needs of Syrian refugees to ensure that Compact implementation can enable significant improvements in their daily lives (Bellamy et al., 2017; Barbelet and Wake, 2017b).

This policy briefing draws on two studies conducted by ODI with Syrian refugees in Jordan in 2016 (Bellamy et al., 2017; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017), interviews with key informants and recent literature on the Compact. Across the two studies, we interviewed close to 200 Syrian refugees, living in urban locations in Irbid, Amman and Zarqa. In the interviews, we drew out Syrians’ own aspirations and the factors influencing their livelihood decisions. This policy briefing sets these findings against the design of the Compact, allowing us to suggest some lessons and policy implications for similar compacts elsewhere.

The Jordan Compact: an innovative approach to addressing large movements of refugees

What triggered the Compact?

The negotiation and drafting process of the Compact owes its success to the right combination of people and ideas in the right place at the right time. Strong personal connections were used to broker the negotiations and align the interests of the various actors involved in an almost serendipitous way. While the process was rapid, the thinking underpinning the Compact had been developing for some months. For the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it was clear that situations of protracted displacement such as the Syrian crisis required new responses to refugee integration. In late 2015, the WANA Institute (a Jordanian think tank) submitted a White Paper to the Jordanian government on the potential contribution of Syrian refugees to the Jordanian economy. Around the same time, Paul Collier and Alexander Betts, both professors at the University of Oxford, published an influential article proposing pathways for Syrians into the Jordanian labour market (Betts and Collier, 2015).

Box 1 What is the Jordan Compact?

- Signed in February 2016 at the London Conference hosted by the UK, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations.
- Brings together international humanitarian and development actors under host country leadership.
- Combines humanitarian and development funding through multi-year grants and concessional loans, with pledges of \$700 million in grants annually for three years and concessional loans of \$1.9 billion.
- Payment of grants and loans is linked to specific targets.
- One of these targets is related to formal labour market access. Jordan is to issue 200,000 work permits for Syrian refugees in specified sectors.
- Commits the EU to relaxing trade regulations to stimulate exports from 18 designated economic zones and industrial areas in Jordan, in return for employment quotas for Syrian refugees in these businesses.
- Stipulates that Jordan will institute reforms to improve the business and investment environment and formalise Syrian businesses.
- Commits Jordan to providing school places to all Syrian children, and some vocational training opportunities.

Previous iterations of Jordan response plans for Syrian refugees were not attracting enough funding or making much progress on longer-term integration. It was time to try something new. In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees were making their way to Europe over the course of 2015, thousands of whom were dying on the journey, prompting European policy-makers to look for new ways to address migration from the Middle East and North Africa. For the Jordanian government, the process offered an opportunity to negotiate more favourable trade arrangements with the EU (expected in turn to lead to increased investment), as well as an aid package and, crucially for a country with high levels of debt, loans at a concessional rate. Even so, opening up job opportunities to refugees in a context of high unemployment and debt was not an easy political message. The WANA Institute provided intellectual support for the Compact, and Prince Hassan's association with the Institute helped to strengthen domestic political support.

The main principles of the Compact were agreed between King Abdullah of Jordan, World Bank President Jim Kim and then UK Prime Minister David Cameron at the UN General Assembly in 2015. Three representatives were tasked with taking the negotiations forward: Imad Fakhoury, the Jordanian Minister of Planning; Shanta Devarajan, the World Bank's chief economist for the Middle East and North Africa; and Stefan Dercon, the UK Department for International Development (DFID)'s chief economist, representing the British government and the EU. Personal relationships, friendship and trust between the main participants were key to the success of the negotiations. Collier's long-standing influence in British government circles and his advisory role at the WANA Institute, Fakhoury's links with the King, WANA's connections with the Royal Court and the personal and professional relationship between Devarajan and Dercon all contributed to a successful outcome that all respondents agree would not have been possible under different circumstances. The Dutch government also played an important role in keeping political momentum going and mobilising political leaders on the regional and international levels, as well as donors and international institutions. The Compact was officially announced just six months later, at the London Conference in February 2016.

Although some respondents told us that there was an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, the negotiation process largely did not include actors bringing humanitarian and refugee perspectives. This means that the Compact was not as comprehensive and inclusive as it might have been. For instance, the UN was not involved (although UNHCR was consulted in the final stages), and refugee representatives, civil society, the private sector and trade unions were also not included. Respondents largely agree that choices about who to include had to be political and pragmatic to make the process work. Given the sensitivities around the topic domestically, and the complexity of Middle Eastern

politics in general, it would have been difficult to broaden participation in the negotiation of the Compact.

What makes the Compact different from previous responses?

The implementation framework for the Jordan Compact brings together the humanitarian and development sectors, creating the potential for a more effective response to protracted displacement. The involvement of development partners in the Compact has changed the nature of the refugee response in several ways. First, the scale of development finance far outweighs humanitarian funding. The London Conference resulted in pledges of \$12 billion in grants and more than \$40 billion in loans for the region up until 2020 (CGD and IRC, 2017b; IRC, 2017), compared to \$3.2 billion for the humanitarian response inside Syria and for refugees in the region (Supporting Syria and the Region, 2017). Second, these funding mechanisms offer unique incentive structures (such as new trade agreements) and come with development plans and reform agendas agreed by Jordan and development partners such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, including pre-identified targets and objectives that unlock the next funding tranche.

Achievements and remaining challenges

The Compact has led to considerable improvements in education and labour market access for Syrian refugees, though challenges remain that will need to be tackled through targeted interventions. Taking refugee aspirations into account will help to ensure that the Compact leads to tangible improvements in the daily lives of refugees.

Education

Even prior to the Compact, the Jordanian government had been working to provide universal education to Syrian refugee children – mainly by expanding the use of double shift schools, with Jordanian children attending in the morning and Syrian children mostly attending the second shift in the afternoon. The Compact pledged that every Syrian refugee child would be in school by 2016–17, alongside a promised investment of \$97.6 million to open and run an additional 102 double shift schools. Other education-related measures include (limited) access to vocational training.

'I was helped when they accepted my daughters in school, when they have spaces they help, they are encouraging children's entry into schools.'

—Male respondent, Abu Alanda, in Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017

The Jordanian Ministry of Education reports that, in the last academic year (2016–17), 126,127 Syrian refugee children were enrolled in public schools and certified

private/NGO schools in camps and host communities (Education Sector Working Group, 2017). This is a considerable improvement in school enrolment – in June 2014, less than 45% of Syrian children (43,791 girls and 41,740 boys) were in school (Education Sector Working Group, 2015). Despite these efforts, around 75,000 children are still out of school, and many who do attend do so part-time (Van Esveld, 2017). Schools are often some distance from children’s homes, and costs associated with transport, as well as school supplies, can be a deterrent to attendance. Parents are concerned about the safety of female children, and may be more reluctant to send them to school when it gets dark in the afternoons; afternoon shifts are also perceived to be of lower quality (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017; Abu Hamad et al., 2017). Attending afternoon shifts also identifies pupils as Syrians, making them vulnerable to physical and verbal harassment (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017). Harassment, combined with the need to earn an income for their households, means that boys of secondary school age are more likely to be taken out of school by their parents, or voluntarily drop out (ibid.).

The financial support provided through the Compact has been vital in increasing school enrolment. However, policy-makers also need to consider the underlying reasons why children do not attend school, and put in place specific measures to tackle them (for instance ensuring that children living far from schools can attend morning shifts).

Labour market participation

Prior to the Compact, Syrian refugees had to apply for the same work permits as labour migrants. The high fees and administration involved, including official documentation that refugees often did not have, meant that only around 3,000 permits were issued to Syrians annually (Kelberer and Sullivan, 2017). The Compact

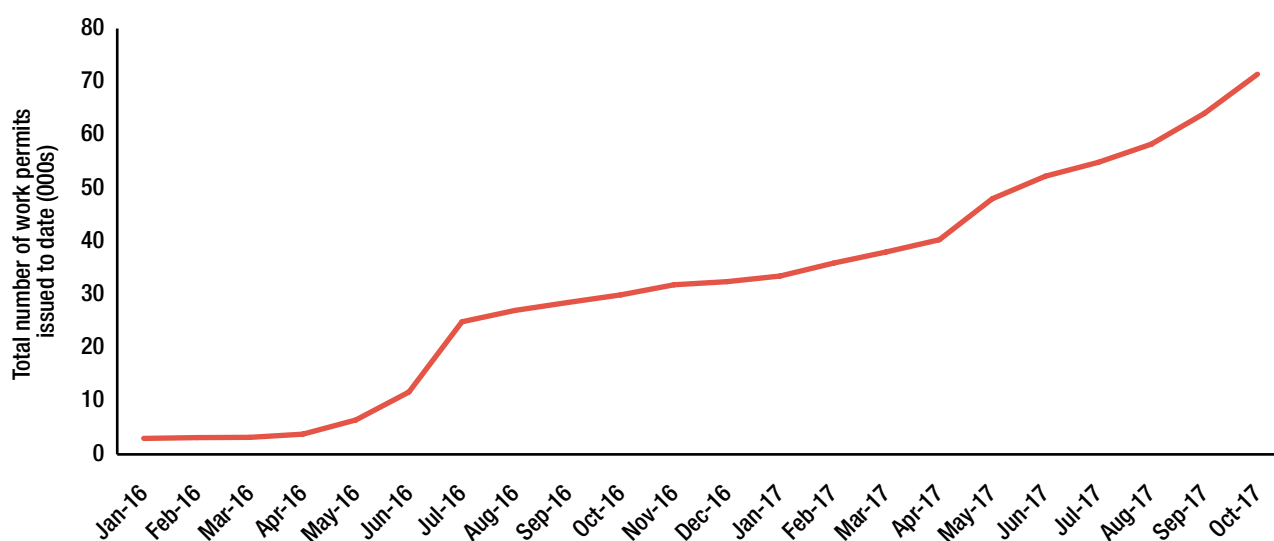
has opened up a route to legal work for Syrian refugees living in Jordan, pledging jobs to refugees in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and giving Syrian refugees the right to work in specific sectors through work permits.

‘They don’t give us permits easily, I heard it costs JOD 700 (around \$980) to get a permit; can you think of any Syrian who has that kind of money?’

—Male respondent, Abu Alanda, in Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017

Work permits are the most prominent element of the Compact. By October 2017 some 71,000 had been issued (Figure 1). Even so, getting refugees into formal jobs has proved challenging, and Syrians – like Jordanians – are still overwhelmingly employed in Jordan’s large informal sector. A recent International Labour Organisation (ILO) study suggests that as little as 13% of the Syrian working-age population has a work permit (Amjad et al., 2017). Our research showed that bureaucratic obstacles (including having the right documentation and the need for an employer to act as a guarantor, depending on the sector), high costs, limited knowledge of the process and mistrust of official institutions deterred both refugees and employers from applying. The informality of Jordan’s economy, together with slow growth rates, a poor foreign investment climate and high unemployment, have made the creation of formal jobs all the more challenging (IRC, 2017). Employers not registered with the authorities may be reluctant to act as official guarantors (Lenner, 2016; Bellamy et al., 2017), and there are disincentives for employers to formalise the employment of Syrians, including higher costs (for instance because of social security contributions) and the greater likelihood of

Figure 1 Work permits issued across all sectors



Source: Hamdan, 2017

official inspections. Work permits are restricted to sectors that do not align with the typical skills profile of Syrian refugees; for example, tertiary-educated Syrians cannot access permits in their occupation. Being tied to a particular employer is at odds with the casual, often seasonal, employment available to Syrians. Many rely on a portfolio of jobs to make a decent living, but it is impossible to obtain a permit for each job (IRC, 2017).

Over the past two years, the Livelihood Working Group, comprising government and international actors, has sought to address these challenges, including through tweaking the application process for work permits and the sectors covered so ‘they more closely reflect the reality on the ground’. In the agricultural sector, cooperatives have been set up to enable refugees to move between different employers, leading to a substantial increase in work permits in agriculture (around 28,000 have been issued) (Hamdan, 2017). In August 2017 a similar arrangement was made for construction. Four ‘grace periods’ were also introduced during which application fees were waived and other exemptions put in place (ibid.). As shown in Figure 1, around 71,000 permits had been issued by October 2017, though there is no data on how many still remain active.

Progress in expanding access to work in industrial zones has been slow. To date only six companies have been approved by the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Supply to export to Europe under the new EU–Jordan Association Agreement (Amjad et al., 2017; EU Commission, 2017). Only two are exporting under these regulations, in negligible quantities. Our interviews with key informants also suggest that external investment in Jordanian industry remains low as Jordan is not seen as a business-friendly environment. While the low supply of jobs may be one explanation, Syrian refugees have also on the whole not been attracted to SEZs, which are mostly located at a distance from the urban centres where the majority of Syrians live, with poor transport links and prohibitive commuting times. Wages are generally lower than in the informal economy, and working conditions are poor (including long working hours), creating a further deterrent to refugees (Amjad et al., 2017).

Labour market participation of women is also lagging behind compared to men. While most women say they want to work, many are unable to do so because of social and practical constraints (Hunt et al., 2017; UN Women and REACH, 2016). Only 4% of work permits have been issued to women (Hamdan, 2017), and the sectors the permits cover are largely dominated by men. Given societal attitudes, women have a strong preference for work in or close to their homes, such as sewing, cleaning and catering (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017; Ritchie, 2016). The Compact’s focus on work permits means that self-employment is a neglected area, with no clear regulations or support.

Despite these challenges, the Compact has been a game changer for Syrians in Jordan, with refugees able to access the formal labour market to a much greater extent than previously. Substantial progress in issuing work

permits and improving the process have been made, though there are time limits on many of the exemptions and barriers remain, including disincentives for employers and widespread employment in the informal economy. Increasing the economic opportunities open to Syrian women requires specific, targeted efforts to overcome gendered barriers. Putting in place policies that foster self-employment would be a pragmatic first step, and encouraging employment outside the home requires measures to address harassment and abuse in public spaces and workplaces, as well as tackling the gender discrimination that limits women’s access to work.

Refugee perspectives and aspirations

Our research showed that refugees’ main concerns were reaching safety, obtaining the means to sustain themselves and their families and securing a better future for their children (Bellamy et al., 2017; Barbelet and Wake, 2017b). To that extent, the Compact’s focus on widening access to work and education broadly reflects refugees’ own aspirations. Nevertheless, recent studies including ours found that the Compact has been slow in improving the daily lives of refugees (IRC, 2016; Bellamy et al., 2017; Barbelet and Wake, 2017b). Our analysis shows that consideration of refugee voices and perspectives could help shift this.

Our research showed that refugees’ *perceptions* of policies and programmes are often quite different from their official design and implementation (Barbelet and Wake, 2017). For instance, refugees felt uncertain about and held negative views of the work permit scheme, and often had limited knowledge of how it worked in practice. Fast-changing policies in Jordan since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis left refugees unsure whether the scheme would be reversed, making them reluctant to apply for permits and draw attention to themselves. More generally, the Compact does not look at wider issues of refugees’ rights, such as freedom of movement and non-refoulement. These issues are beyond the scope of this policy briefing, but are further discussed in Barbelet and Wake (2017a; 2017b).

While compacts aim to bring different perspectives and expertise together, the Jordan Compact was an agreement between the government, other states and development partners, with little space for local NGOs or for the perspectives of refugees. This resulted in government interests being at the forefront, with little attention on the needs and aspirations of refugees or the specific constraints facing refugees and host communities. It has also resulted in a preoccupation with output indicators – i.e. the number of work permits issued – rather than socio-economic indicators which would measure outcomes for Syrian refugees. Putting in place additional monitoring mechanisms that measure improvements in the daily lives of Syrian refugees, for instance the proportion of households living below the poverty line or perception surveys where refugees can identify improvements, would help reveal refugee perspectives and help policy-makers assess the Compact’s achievements and remaining challenges.

Lessons from the Jordan Compact

This final section sets out recommendations for the Jordan Compact, and for the design and implementation of future national refugee compacts and policies.

The Jordan Compact is a unique example of how a focus on incentives and coalition-building can open up an increasingly restrictive policy environment for refugees, replacing short-term humanitarian support with efforts towards longer-term sustainable livelihoods. It is the first example of such an experiment on a considerable scale, and policy-makers designing other refugee compacts (in Ethiopia, Turkey or Lebanon), or thinking about how to widen access to livelihoods in situations of protracted displacement, can build on its lessons. Considerable progress has been made in Jordan: more Syrians are now in education and formal employment. Yet, unsurprisingly given the speed with which the Compact was designed and rolled out, challenges remain in ensuring widespread access to quality education, sustainable livelihood opportunities, and securing tangible improvements in the daily lives of Syrian refugees.

Patient implementation and adaptation is needed to make this work. The government of Jordan should continue to revise and adapt the Compact to enable further progress:

- On **school enrolment**, this includes putting in place specific measures to tackle the underlying reasons why children are not attending school, for instance ensuring that children living at a distance from schools can attend morning shifts.
- To promote greater **labour market participation**, the government should put in place policies that regulate and support self-employment. Action is also needed to address harassment and abuse in public spaces and workplaces to encourage women to take up employment outside the home.
- Better assessment of the Compact's achievements and remaining challenges could be advanced by putting in place **monitoring mechanisms** that measure improvements in the daily lives of Syrian refugees, for instance the proportion of households living below the poverty line.

Governments designing future compacts can learn a great deal from Jordan's experience. Our analysis points to the following recommendations:

1. **Use political deals to open up narrow policy spaces.** By building on existing political capital between host governments, donor governments and international organisations, and taking economic and political incentives – such as trade deals – into account, a restrictive policy environment can be opened up and funds can be mobilised in a short space of time.
2. **Take an inclusive approach.** While the small negotiation group made a deal for the Compact possible, it resulted in a narrow agreement that does not adequately reflect reality on the ground. From the outset – and when adapting compacts during implementation
 - governments should consult partners across the economic, political, diplomatic and trade sectors. This includes host country ministries (social protection and labour, trade, finance), employers and the private sector, civil society, humanitarian and development organisations and refugee representatives.
3. **Start with what refugees need and want.** Design interventions based on refugees' own aspirations, what refugees are already doing to meet these aspirations and the challenges and obstacles they face. This can be done through in-country research, consultation with refugees during policy and programme development and gathering evidence on refugees' livelihood aspirations and strategies.
4. **Understand structural constraints.** Policies should be consistent with the realities of local labour markets. With informal employment being widespread and employers having strong incentives in favour of informal employment, refugees should not be penalised for participating in the informal economy (as is the case in Turkey, for example; see Bellamy et al., 2017). Where the local labour market is conducive, the sectors of work open to refugees should be better aligned with their skill sets and aspirations. More generally, the overall business environment in Jordan is considered risky in comparison to other countries, explaining why investment in SEZs has been limited. Including labour market and political economy experts in the design of compacts will be key.
5. **Focus monitoring mechanisms on outcomes and use the data gathered to make improvements.** Design monitoring mechanisms that assess the extent to which compacts are improving the lives and livelihoods of refugees and the host community through outcome indicators (e.g. improvement in socio-economic status, number of refugees with sustainable livelihoods) rather than outputs (e.g. work permits issued). Disbursement of loans and grants should also be linked to this mechanism. Data gathered should be used to learn, adapt and improve. As for other intervention, the Compact needs iteration to achieve the best outcomes.
6. **Invest in communications.** To make informed decisions about the options open to them, refugees need information about how to access support and work permits that is transparent and accessible, and shared in a way that is clear and intelligible. This can be communicated through organisations that have trusted relationships with refugees, including refugee organisations, community-based organisations and influential community actors, such as faith-based groups.
7. **Be realistic.** Compacts need to be realistic about what can be achieved in the short run, and need a longer timeframe to tackle underlying structural weaknesses (for instance widespread informal employment or a volatile investment environment). As challenges in the wider environment can limit effectiveness, future compacts need to be part of a broader policy framework promoting reform over the medium to long term, including macro-economic reforms.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Christina Bennett, Helen Dempster, Marta Foresti, Abigail Hunt, Katharina Lenner, Lewis Turner and David Watson for useful comments on an earlier draft of this briefing. For the section on the development of the Jordan Compact, we drew heavily on interviews with Nicholas Crawford (UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Office), Shantayanan Devarajan (World Bank), Erica Harper (WANA Institute), Daniel Howden (News Deeply) and Jeff Tudor (DFID).



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