

Pilot Apprenticeship Programme- UNHCR and Hilton Hotel Dushanbe, Tajikistan

In September 2017, UNHCR and the Hilton Hotel launched a pilot programme offering apprenticeship opportunities to refugee and local youth in one of the world's most established hotels. Ten young people (five Afghan and five Tajik) went through an intensive four-month training programme on the core aspects of the hospitality industry. Apprentices received classroom and on-the-job training, rotating through front and back of house areas to gain a full understanding of hotel operations. Eight out of the ten apprentices completed the course, and three began working immediately upon completion- two at the Hilton and one at the Hyatt Regency Hotel also in Dushanbe. The apprentices express deep appreciation for the course and the impact it will have on their future.

“When I came to Hilton for the first time, I was amazed with the luxurious interior and furnishings of the Hotel, so like the pictures I’ve seen from abroad. Now I am learning the rules of table setting and serving at the hotel’s restaurant. I have new experiences every day, all of which is helping me pursue a career in hospitality in the future.” (local apprentice)

Background and Description

The pilot programme came about as a result of UNHCR's outreach to the Hilton seeking to diversify its livelihoods interventions for refugees. The programme follows UNHCR's current strategic directions that aim to include refugees in government and private sector development initiatives, while at the same time contributing to Tajikistan's National Development Strategy that urges the private sector to build a workforce capable of sustaining economic growth in sectors such as hospitality and tourism. UNHCR and the Hilton then brought in government partner the Adult Education Center (under the Ministry of Labor, Migration and Employment) to accredit and ensure sustainability of the programme, and NGO partner Refugees, Children and Vulnerable Citizens (RCVC) to help operationalize it.

Prior to signing the Letter of Understanding, UNHCR and RCVC informed the Hilton on details pertaining to refugees' right to work. Tajikistan is signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. The National Refugee Law, enacted in 1994, contemplates the core refugee definition and access to basic rights, including the right to work for both refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR and the Adult Education Center also committed to supporting the Hilton in case of a governmental review of the programme. The four entities jointly developed Terms of Reference, Eligibility Criteria for apprenticeship candidates, and an Action Plan. They publicized the programme widely through social networks, refugee community representatives, local universities and language centers, finally selecting participants based on their knowledge, skills, and capacity for working in the hospitality sector. Apprentices received monthly stipends to cover transportation costs and basic expenses. UNHCR monitored programme implementation, and RCVC was engaged to offer assistance as needed.

Rebranding from Sheraton Hotel into Hilton Hotel

The end of the second apprenticeship programme has coincided with the rebranding from Sheraton Hotel into Hilton Hotel. Notwithstanding extra work, time pressure and overall bustle associated with rebranding, General Manager and all staff of Hilton Hotel have remained committed to fully support and implement this innovative apprenticeship programme. The rebranding phase was completed in mid-November 2018 also resulting to retitling the Sheraton Apprenticeship Programme into Hilton Apprenticeship Programme with subsequent revision of LoU to reflect the change in the time frame and its extension until 31 December 2019.

Results and Lessons Learned

The main objective of the pilot programme was to empower refugee and local youth to increase their competitiveness both in local and global labor markets. The programme also aimed to strengthen peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and self-confidence, especially among young women. Findings of the post-training focus group discussions and questionnaire indicate that the programme achieved these goals and fostered personal and professional growth among all apprentices.

“I thought this is my chance to apprentice at an international hotel. This could open doors for me in the future, maybe even a job in a hotel anywhere in the world. Someday I can help girls like me to get ahead, especially in education. Being able to learn new skills is so important, especially for refugee girls and women.” (refugee apprentice)

The programme offered important lessons for all partners involved. All four invested time, energy, technical and financial resources along with continuous enthusiasm to make it a success. Based on observations, discussions and feedback from participants, the main lessons and recommendations for future programmes are:

- Like many employers in Tajikistan, the Hilton was not fully aware of refugees’ right to work or their potential as a vibrant workforce. UNHCR’s efforts to assist the company navigate the administrative and legislative framework pertaining to refugees yielded positive results. UNHCR should inform and extend this support to other established hotels and seek to expand the apprenticeship programme.
- Exposure to refugees through the selection process changed the employer’s views on their potential- underestimated prior to this experience. This may be attributed to lack of knowledge and information about refugee profiles. UNHCR should demonstrate the outcomes of the pilot programme and its dividends for the local economy with other hotels, government agencies, and companies.
- The programme was the first real working experience for many apprentices. Partners should continue to work with staff to create a welcoming and encouraging working environment, as well as build capacity with apprentices on behavior in a professional environment and work ethics.
- Despite clear explanations of the purpose and objectives of the training programme, some apprentices were not comfortable with activities related to cleaning, bed making and serving in the restaurant. As a result, two apprentices dropped out. It is important to

emphasize specificities of all planned activities to future applicants at the selection interview to ensure that they are informed and committed to the programme.

- At the beginning of the training programme, participants reported that some roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined, creating confusion. These should be clarified, enabling both Hilton staff and apprentices to better carry out their duties.
- Apprentices gained confidence in their abilities and qualifications, and some were disappointed when not immediately offered a position upon completion. The Hilton and UNHCR will ensure that future apprentices understand that the primary purpose of the programme is learning new skills and knowledge, with no guarantee of a job.