

6th rebuilding IGNITE futures conference

• new stories

28th November
2018

Report



6th rebuilding IGNITE futures conference

• new stories

SPARK's 6th annual IGNITE conference on 'Rebuilding Futures' brought together almost 400 stakeholders to discuss entrepreneurship development and higher education in fragile states. Our key partners from the private and public sector - the Islamic Development Bank, International Finance Corporation, Al Fakhoora, IKEA Foundation and the City of Amsterdam - made the whole event possible and highlight the need for more East/West, cross-sector collaboration. The Young Advisory Group, Ink Strategy, Jusoor and the African Tech Roundup brought the conference to life by partnering with us on key elements, such as the Startup Roadshow competition, a 7-part podcast series and the visualisations of lessons learned throughout the day.

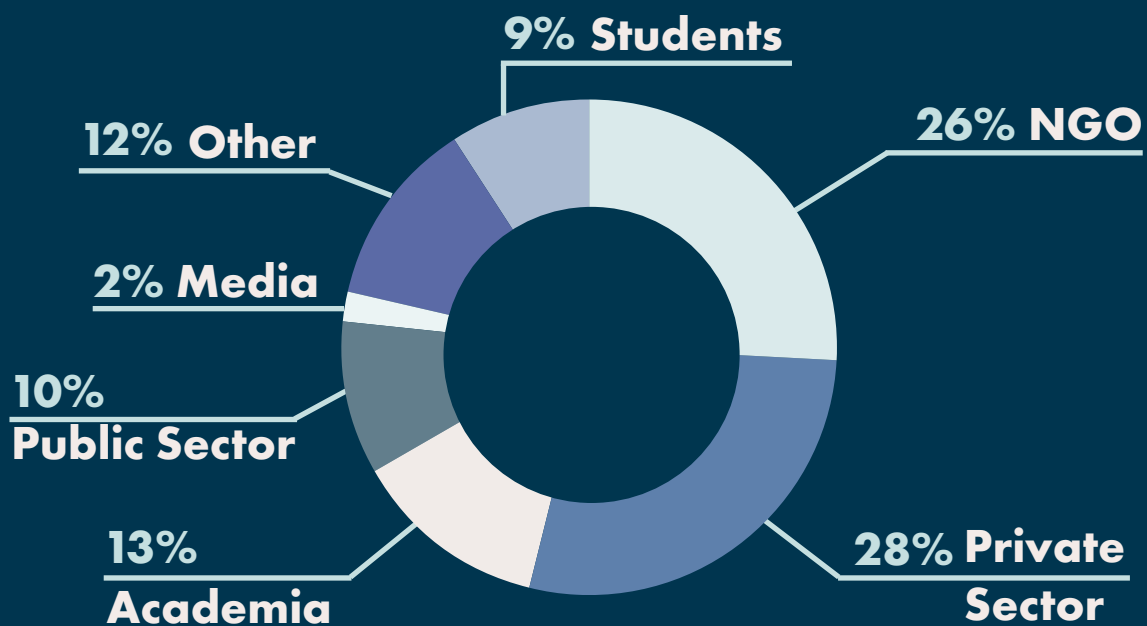


Click on the image to watch the IGNITE 2018 video.

IGNITE 2018

in numbers

Keynote speakers: **6**
 Workshops: **14**
 Visitors to IGNITE: **400** (28% private sector, 26% NGO)



Startup Roadshow:

5 finalists (1st prize: \$8000; 2nd prize: \$4000; YAG Audience Award: €3000)

Pre-IGNITE

Public lecture with Alexander Betts: **230** people (sold-out)
 Donor meeting: **30** participants
 ANDE/SPARK Networking Reception: **60** participants

IGNITE 2018:

Conclusions

Certain themes dominated this year's event. Firstly, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between higher education and employers in fragile regions. For example, SPARK is currently offering up to 10,000 scholarships to young Syrians & Palestinians, as well as the vulnerable youth of the host communities. The first students are graduating with limited labour market prospects. The next steps are to utilise the talents and skills of these young people by improving their soft skills, providing trainee/internships, creating opportunities to work within the private sector, engaging them in entrepreneurship, and helping them start their own business.



Secondly, there is a need for the private sector to support the reframing of refugee camps as marketplaces, and refugees as valuable economic contributors, by lobbying for refugee work rights and flexibility to travel. The skills of refugees can be utilised to support host country economies, rather than inventing new strategies to cope with the 'burden of refugees'. These sentiments were echoed throughout the day by Alexander Betts (University of Oxford), Musa Sillah (Islamic Development Bank), Michel Botzung (IFC), Mercedes Gutierrez (IKEA) and Patricia Atkinson (IKEA Foundation), as well as representatives of Ben & Jerry's and other private sector corporations.



Finally, the importance of collaboration between East and West when dealing with challenges in fragile states was reiterated time and again. Sharing knowledge and information on context specific ways of working is imperative to achieve sustainable impact. The pre-IGNITE technical meeting of donors and stakeholders from East and West included the Islamic Development Bank, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Al Nouri Society, African Development Bank, IKEA Foundation, among others. Such collaboration can lead to more successful partnerships, better access to beneficiary target groups and better relationships with local governments. In brief, it can substantially improve the impact of programmes.

Keynote Speeches

Femke Halsema, Mayor of Amsterdam

Femke Halsema delivered an inspiring opening speech, in which she stressed the need for new ideas to deal with societal challenges that humanity is facing today, emphasizing the importance of creativity and adaptability. She concluded that one way of accommodating refugees in fragile states is to provide access to higher education and entrepreneurship, which is in line with SPARK's core mission. Femke expressed her gratitude for choosing to organize IGNITE in Amsterdam, a city that has been "inherently" connected to the world for centuries. The conference, she shared, enables the city to emphasize the common commitment of its inhabitants in their contribution towards a fair and inclusive environment here and elsewhere. She wished for IGNITE to be the source of new ideas that are needed to tackle today's challenges.



Sigrid Kaag, Dutch Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation

Host, Femi Oke, held a candid interview with Sigrid Kaag in which the topic of migrants and refugees in the Netherlands was discussed. Kaag outlined that the conversation has become instrumentalized and heated, and recommended that a calm look at the facts and figures can lead to the right policies as many of the numbers are conflated. She underlined the importance of providing quality support and opportunities to refugees, rather than just humanitarian aid, in order to secure their individual development. Kaag believes that especially entrepreneurship is important as this creates much needed jobs for youth.



Alexander Betts, Professor and Director of Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford

Alexander Betts highlighted the capability of refugees in contributing to societies, outlining that businesses are the drivers of job creation and entrepreneurship and that refugees need autonomy to participate. Betts outlined the guiding principles for businesses to create an enabling environment for refugees and hosts. As the majority of refugees (85%) are in low and middle income countries more of the business focus has to be in those regions. In his research Alexander Betts compared the Ugandan refugee model with the one in Kenya. The assistance model in Uganda differs as it is characterised by freedom of movement and work for refugees. This fruitful model was moved across the border and a new settlement called Kalobeyei which is a market-based model was founded. Betts emphasised among other principles that businesses should be driven by their core business, use a human-centred approach, and build economies. Betts believes that a “good refugee policy is a good host community policy”. Refugees should be an empowered part of the global economy.



Musa Sillah, Senior Director General at Islamic Development Bank

Musa Sillah pointed out that the majority of IsDB member countries, especially in the MENA region, are currently facing a critical development challenge caused by fragility and conflict. The IsDB is heavily involved in tackling those challenges and building resilience in destructed countries through supporting entrepreneurship, creating job opportunities, economic empowerment, improving access to education, and by partnering with international NGOs such as SPARK. Sillah emphasised that not a single organisation or state will be able to address the challenges of today by acting alone, as there is a deficit in “investing in fragility and the adverse of conflict”. Therefore, he underlines the readiness of IsDB to “actively support the resilience building of countries affected by fragility and violent conflict” by collaborating with development partners in order to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals.



Joachim Rücker, Consultant and Former German Ambassador

Since the majority of refugees stay within Africa, Rücker stressed the need to support and strengthen stranded refugees and host communities equally. This sustainable development of host societies and migrants is addressed in the Global Compact for Migration - a UN global agreement on a common approach to international migration. If there is a reliable institutional framework, stressed Rücker, private investment can lead to growth and jobs for both migrants and host societies. Unfortunately, countries with an unreliable institutional framework (fragile states) receive almost no investment from the private sector and therefore "sustainable development cannot take place in the place where it is most needed". Rücker introduced the concept of Sustainable Development Zones (SDZ) as one solution that can manage migration and solve this dilemma by creating geographical "islands of good governance" that utilise transparent legal frameworks. The SDZ offers a bottom-up approach to "encourage the economic activity of both locals and displaced populations through specialised administration, laws and services". However, Rücker emphasised, without private investment those SDZ cannot get started.



Dania Ismail, Co-Founder of Jusoor

Dania Ismail is the co-founder of Jusoor, an NGO - and a partner of SPARK's - that harnesses the potential of Syrian youth through education, career development, entrepreneurship and community engagement, was sharing an impressive new story about one of their Syrian scholars who recently graduated with distinction from the university of Sussex in England after struggling to get to study there. As Jusoor is aware of the plenty of challenges Syrian youth is facing on their way to success, those success stories embrace them to keep going. Moreover, their entrepreneurship program has proved to be successful as 150 entrepreneurs have been trained in the last four years and 40 % of the businesses are still actively running. She concludes that by investing in education and empowerment of Syrian youth they can constitute "agents of positive change in their own communities," wherever this may be. Jusoor hopes to ignite a multiplier effect in their youth and to empower them to have a positive impact on Syrians society by rebuilding the country one day.



Talk of the Day

An Interview with Patricia Atkinson (IKEA Foundation) and Marcel Smits (Economics and Peace)

Smits presented the latest research from the institute, which identifies several key factors that influence and facilitate peaceful environments: well-functioning government, sound business environment, equitable distribution of resources, free flow of information, low levels of corruption, acceptance of the rights of others, high levels of human capital, and good relations with neighbouring countries. Smits emphasised that certain factors matter more than others: "Education is necessary but political stability is more important as a starting point". Patricia Atkinson introduced IKEA Foundation's new strategy, which is based on IKEA's vision to create a better everyday life. The interventions, she stressed, will focus on key areas such as skill-based employment and entrepreneurship, as well as agricultural livelihoods, which have a deep and long-lasting impact.



An Interview with Syrian student and prospective entrepreneur, Hasan Skeiker, alongside successful Syrian businessman, Ayham Maksoud

Maksoud first started his steel company in Syria but was forced to close it due to the war. He reopened again in Libya but business was hampered again when the Arab Spring led to conflict. Finally, he re-started his company for a third time in Turkey, where he is now based. If anyone knows about doing business in fragile states, it's him. Hasan, who plans to start a tech company, was keen to gain some insights and spoke of the challenges of being a young refugee in Lebanon without much access to the labour market. They also emphasised the need for support from local communities to hear them and help them succeed.



Startup Roadshow

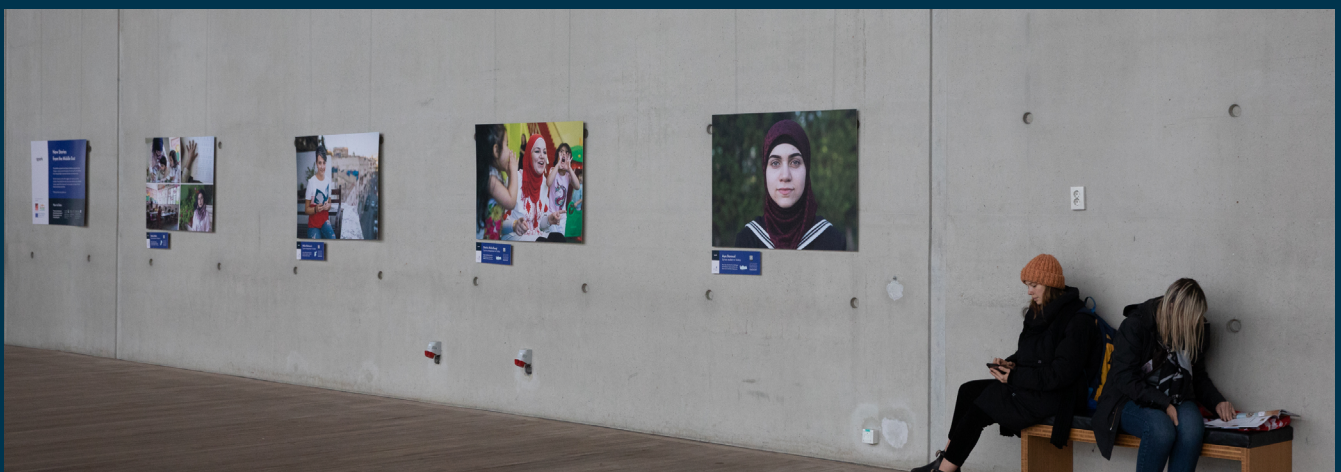
Five finalists of the Startup Roadshow by SPARK & Jusoor pitched at IGNITE and the winners were revealed. The top prize, \$8000, went to Shiffer, a peer-to-peer shipping platform. Azhar Al Madani, a Syrian entrepreneur based in Erbil, KR-Iraq, delivered the team's winning pitch.

Second place was awarded to FadFed, a health tech startup that offers users mental health support via an app's chatbot. The Syrian founder, Ibrahim Ahmed, is based in Jordan and took home \$4000 to get his product to market.

The IGNITE attendees awarded the €3000 Young Advisory Group's Audience Award to Sharqi Shop, an e-commerce platform for Middle Eastern crafts founded by Saleem Najjar, a Syrian entrepreneur in Jordan.



Exhibition: New Stories



The audio visual exhibition of SPARK students and entrepreneurs from across the Middle East reiterated the importance of inclusion of refugees in the policies and programmes that support them. During the conference, attendees were able to take a moment to hear the stories of the people in the photos using their smartphones.

Podcasts

Subscribe to the African Tech Roundup podcast by Andile Masuku to hear 7 exclusive episodes created during IGNITE! The first is a discussion between Prof. Alexander Betts and SPARK Director, Yannick du Pont, on innovative foreign aid strategy and constructive refugee interventions (click "Play" to listen).



[Subscribe on iTunes](#) | [Subscribe on Spotify](#)

Illustrations

Ink Strategy created visualisations of IGNITE's new stories and facilitated 4 workshops throughout the day with on-the-spot illustrations on the topics of vocational education for rebuilding Syria, Syrian entrepreneurship outside of Syria, how to bridge the gap between graduation and employment in the Middle East region, and how businesses can better support refugees. Click on the image for full size.



Workshops

Startup Roadshow: get to know the finalists

Led by Ahmad Sufian Bayram (Jusoor), five Syrian finalists from the Startup Roadshow competition by SPARK and Jusoor, had an intimate discussion with participants about their biggest challenges and solutions in launching startups in the Middle East. Topics ranged from the difficulty in registering businesses for refugees; employment laws in Lebanon that prevent Syrians from working or owning businesses; getting into the market. It is important for entrepreneurs to find local supporters of their business and to share problems and information among each other. The finalists went on to pitch their business ideas to the IGNITE audience in the afternoon.



Halmachu! How to Prevent Violent Extremism

The workshop on preventing violent extremism heard from Peter Knoope (ICCT), Brandon Oelofse (RNTC), Simon van Melick and Raheil Aziz (SPARK). Taking the case of Iraq, the speakers outlined the situation and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) projects there, in particular SPARK's role in them. One great example was the Erbil Digital Workforce, which developed the Halmachu campaign. The focus of this campaign is on youth and students; general activities and results of the campaign were presented. A programme on educating teachers about radicalisation was presented. Attendees were split into 6 groups for a brainstorm session on how to build sustainable, grassroots youth movements for conflict resolution and how to mobilise youth to choose non-violence. The groups proposed many solutions including introducing CVE to primary school children; combining CVE with sports; creating more positive messages; economic empowerment; facilitating ideas from people themselves by researching their needs; and stimulating safe community spaces.



Sustainable Development Zones: The Libyan Case

Is it possible to learn a new settlement model? This workshop heard from three experts - Joachim Ruecker (former German Ambassador), Mohamed Al Aswad (Expertise France) and Killian Kleinschmidt (Innovation and Planning Agency, former director of UNHCR Za'atari refugee camp). The workshop addressed how to build local Sustainable Development Zones (SDZ) from the bottom-up, without waiting for stability in the government and by encouraging foreign, private sector investment. The case of Libya was put forward, where the private sector provides only 12% of employment, yet the conditions could be perfect for a SDZ because of relatively available finances, resources and migrant workers. Mohamed Al Aswad cautioned against exploiting oil and water in Libya. Many zones failed in the past due to logistical, geo-political analysis, therefore it was concluded that any SDZ should be designed to fit well within the local context, bringing all relevant stakeholders together.



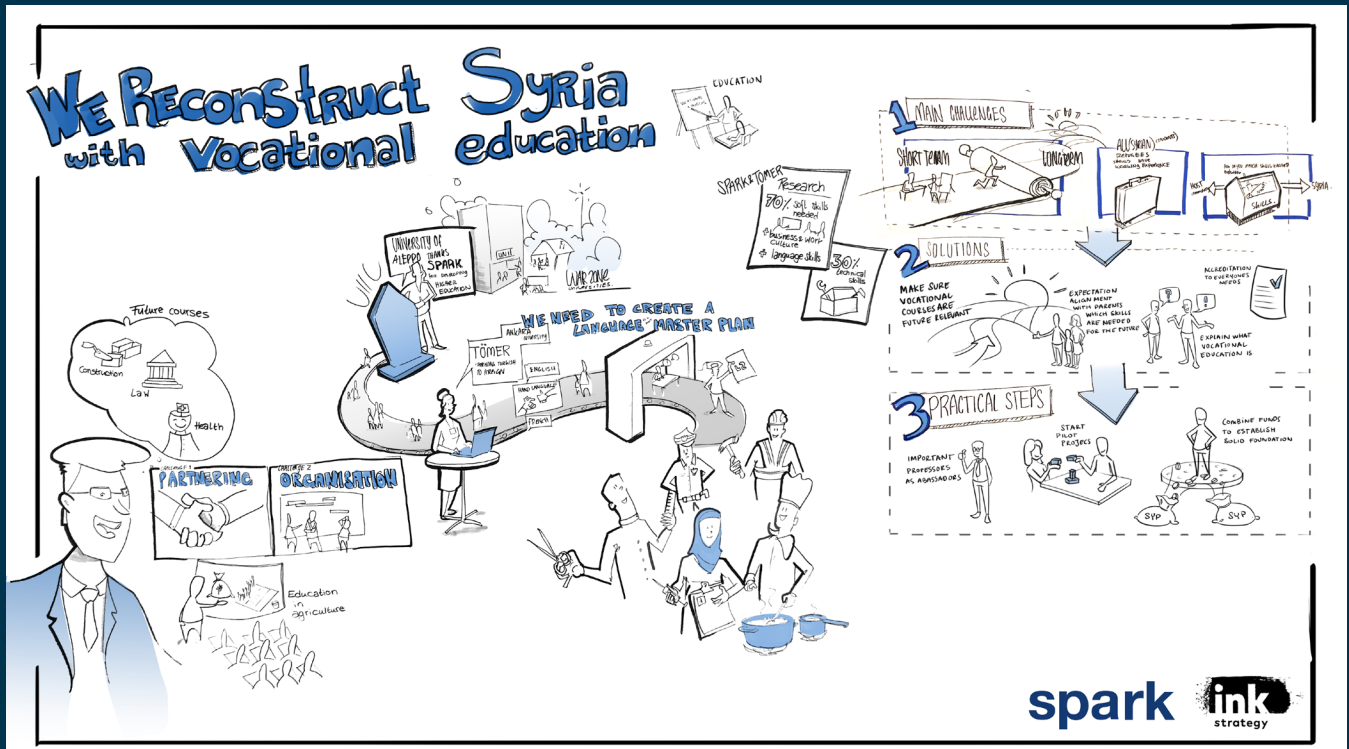
Road to Success: Student Services

"The most important thing I learned in the psychosocial (PSS) programme is that it's okay to not be okay," shared Hasan Skeiker, a Syrian student in Lebanon. Nesrin Mawas, also a refugee student in Lebanon, shared that she fled Syria, a psychologically heavy experience, moved to Lebanon and now works as a language volunteer in refugee camps through the SPARK scholarship. Amanda Aoun, a PSS trainer in Lebanon, opened with the shocking statistic that depression rates among people in the EU are around 4.3% and 53% amongst refugees. Other speakers included Hani Shehada (Al Fakhoora), Gemma Ben-nink (SPARK) and Agatha Abi-Aad (UNHCR). Agatha suggested that there is currently too much weight on the shoulders of higher education to support youth. The conclusion was made that services need to be integrated into the education practices of Middle Eastern countries, in order to provide such necessary student services.



Reconstructing Syria with Vocational Education

The case of vocational education for Syrian refugees in Turkey was explored during this workshop. Based on labour market research conducted by SPARK, soft skills are more in demand (70%) than hard skills (30%). In Turkey, Ali Sariisik, Rector of Harran University outlined the 44 vocational education courses that the university offers, mostly agriculture-focused. Rejhan Rahman (Harran University) emphasised that NGOs are particularly vulnerable in Turkey so partnership with universities is particularly important. He added that for reconstruction, the focus should be on inclusion, especially in agriculture, construction, law and health.



Sila Senlen Guvenc (Ankara University), who offers language training, shared the importance of tailored solutions that benefit the host community by incorporating language and vocational training (testing in business English + Turkish). The following problems were identified and conclusions were drawn with the attendees: Firstly, how do you use skills relevant to the host community back in Syria? Secondly, how can Syrian students get work experience (in host countries that may not allow employment)? The conclusions were to design and model courses based on accreditation systems; provide short term courses and raise awareness of the relevance of vocational education to the job market; education and employment (digital/mobile) must be flexible; accreditation should be thought through well. Finally, it was concluded that good refugee policy includes a good host community policy.



Data for Education and Entrepreneurship

Speakers of the workshop - Robert Fadel (MIT), Yvo Hunink (Blockchain enthusiast) and Jan Vos (MoneyPhone) - were joined by moderator, Francois Lenfant, founder of CARPA (Crowdsourcing App for Responsible Production in Africa) and lecturer at the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management (CICAM). They each emphasised the importance and innovation that technology can bring to education and entrepreneurship, in particular to support refugees. To the question whether technology would eventually cut out middle-men, speakers believed they wouldn't disappear, but change their roles. Governments going from regulators to facilitators. Universities shifting their focus from teaching to more research. NGOs retaining value by acting as knowledge brokers, and network builders. Issues were raised about data collection transparency, and it was argued that new transparent models are built on the failures of predecessors. The new divide that technology is able to create between those with access and those without again emphasizes a role for governments to cater to the poorest of the poor, by protecting public values. The increased need for use of data for fragile regions and vulnerable groups is apparent, and this will entail not a decreasing but a changing role for current key actors.



No Internet: Mobile Solutions for Entrepreneurship

Speakers Jovani Ntabgoba from N-Frnds Rwanda, Mustafa Othman from Shaqodoon, and Abdulladif Roble from SAMS (both Somalia) outlined the new, (simple) mobile solutions available for farmers in their countries that are used to address the exploitation by middlemen, inaccurate prices in the market and lack of infrastructure surrounding agribusiness. These include market information via an app without the need for internet (35% of farmers are using this app) and SPARK's Irish Potato Value Chain Financing (IPoVaF) programme, which has 'digitised' 64 Irish potato centres by training them in the use of mobile apps. Training is key to building capacities of rural farmers, who in most cases have access to electricity and possess (non-internet) mobile phones, which mostly use the solar system. The conclusions were that creative solutions to overcome challenges showcase that sustainability and profits are interrelated.

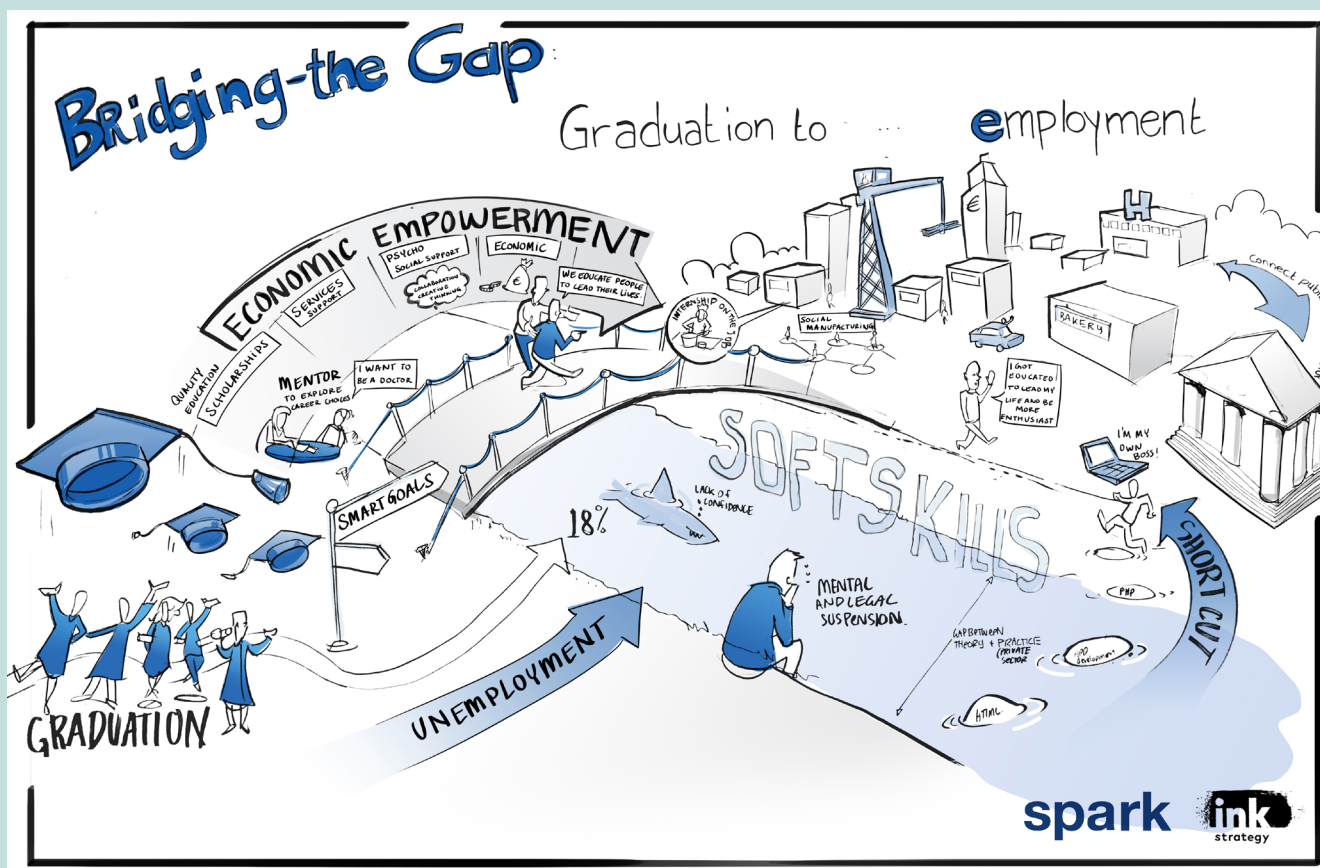


Unlocking Investments for SME's in Fragile States



The key question: how to connect businesses and investors? The workshop outlined how SMEs are important drivers of growth in economies across Sub Saharan Africa, accounting for about 90% of all businesses. IFC's research shows that over 17 million SMEs in developing countries have unmet financing needs. The workshop brought together Jacob Cusack (CrossBoundary), Natascha Korvinus (Triple Jump), Samuel Akiyanu (IFC), Ben White (VC4A) and Jussi Ojala (Finn Church Aid) to discuss solutions for SME financing. The speakers outlined that since SMEs are often too large to be served by microfinance institutions, yet too small for commercial banks, they require 'Risk Capital' - forms of finance that have a higher risk tolerance than bank loans. Risk capital is particularly scarce in fragile and conflict-affected countries because Investors are wary of these markets due to weak governance, poor infrastructure, unreliable energy supply, physical safety concerns etc. Yet, risk capital is most needed in these countries, where SMEs can have enormous impact on job creation and economic growth, and investment, rather than grants. With access to the right kind of capital, local entrepreneurs in fragile countries would be able to expand their businesses, create a significant numbers of jobs, and provide essential goods and services. The workshop explored lessons from various venture programmes and funds that invest in SMEs in FCS. The session's solutions included making support services more available to SMEs, such as better knowledge of key local implementers with relevant expertise, the importance of blended investment and mentoring young entrepreneurs. The workshop also emphasised the importance of telling stories (about the community and how to connect to them) as well as the need for overall transparency that is difficult to obtain due to legal "incompetence".

Bridging the Gap: Graduation to Employment

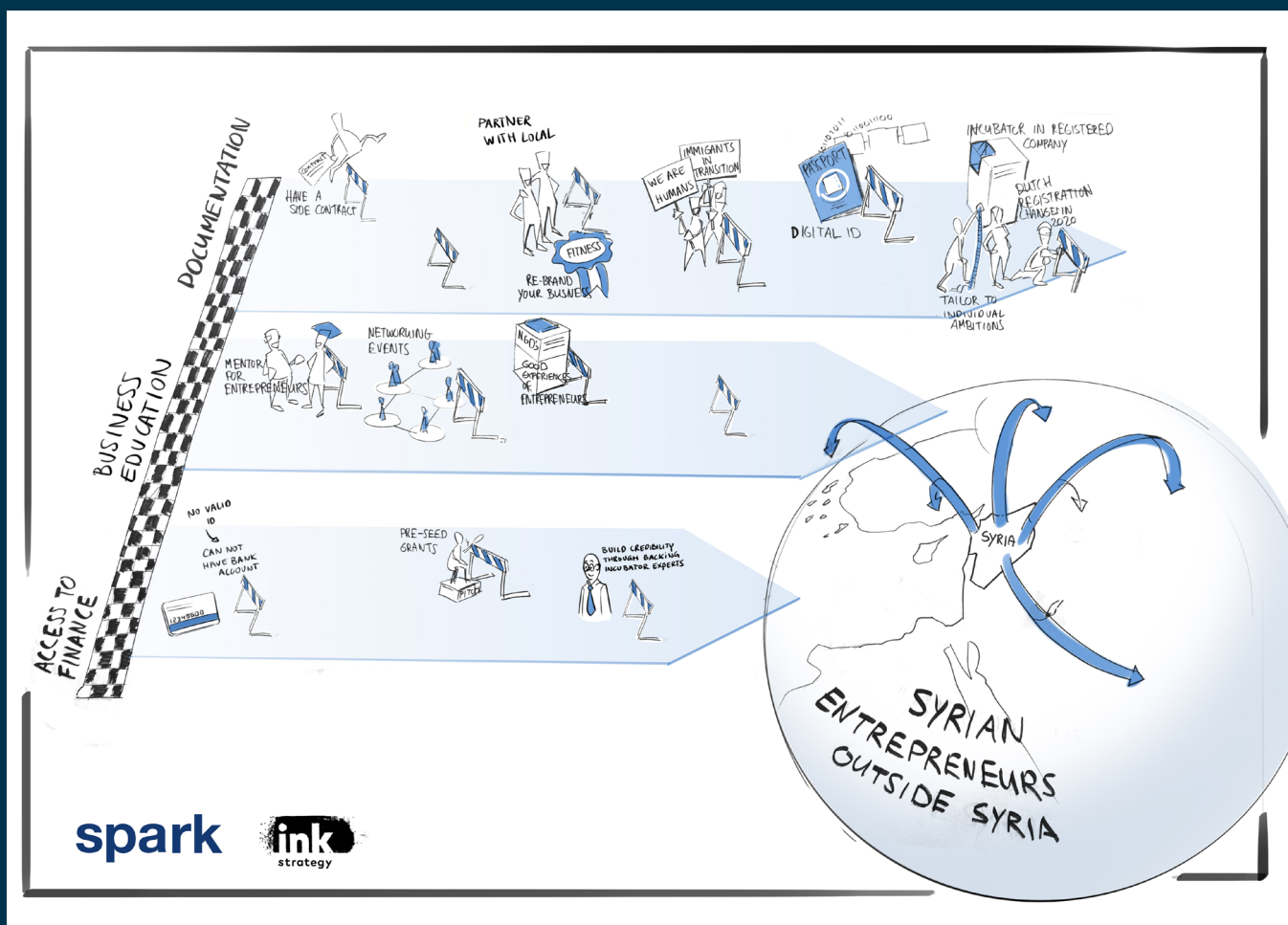
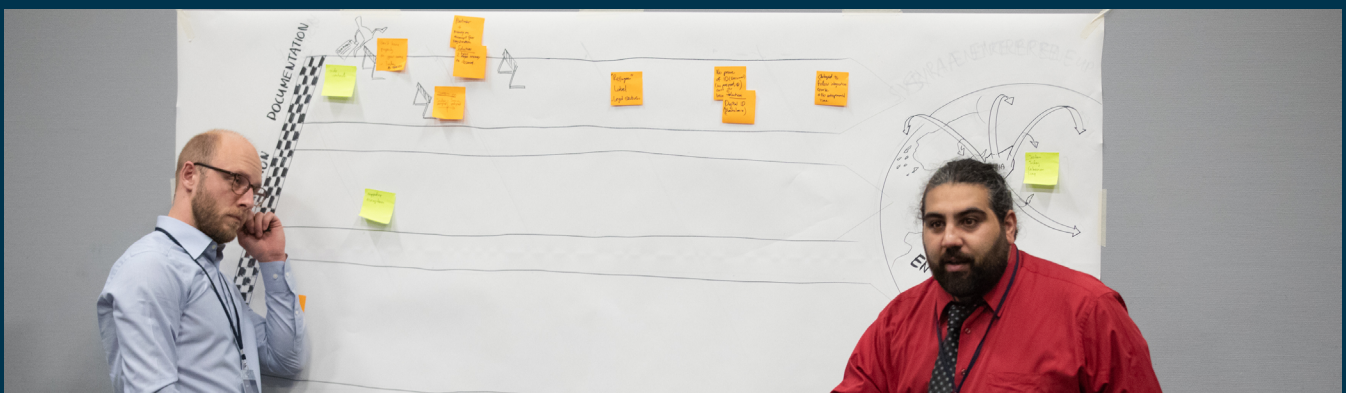


The workshop focused on practical solutions and extra-curricular trainings to support bridging the gap between graduation and employment for Syrians and host community youth in the Middle East. Areej Al-masri, a Jordanian intern and part of SPARK's internship programme, shared that the internship kickstarted her career and enabled her to get a job after her internship. Haneen Alkhatib (SPARK) highlighted how practical experience in the workplace has more impact than theoretical knowledge on employability and career development. Hani Shehada and Shadi Saleh (Al Fakhoora) emphasised the importance of practical trainings while students are still studying in higher (vocational) education institutes, such as Civic Leadership and Economic Empowerment courses. It was also highlighted that providing technical training to teachers too can upscale student's skills. Jamal Alnouri (Alnouri Society - Kuwait), a donor to scholarship and entrepreneurship programmes for refugees, highlighted the benefits of educational exchange programmes to support higher education. The key conclusions were reached through discussion with the participants: more soft skills trainings are needed; extra curricular activities play a role in bridging the gap; designing curriculum considering future skills; using technology for recognition of extra-curricular training.



New Stories: Syrian Entrepreneurs Outside Syria

The aim of the workshop was not to quickly analyse the challenges of Syrian entrepreneurs and subsequently discuss the solutions for them. The speakers, all Syrian entrepreneurs, outlined the main struggles facing their businesses outside Syria - Jordan, Turkey and USA. They expressed access to finance, documentation, discrimination and a lack of business knowledge and education about the local market as the main obstacles. The rest of the workshop, led by Nicolas Farah (SPARK) and Ink Strategy, focused on interactivity and the attendees were tasked with addressing the challenges with new, practical solutions. These included creating partnerships with locals, strong contractual agreements with partners, business incubators, holistic training/education (tailored to the needs of the individual). The workshop concluded by highlighting personal and professional resilience as key to refugee entrepreneur's success. In many regions there is a wrongful perception of refugees, so the need for a holistic approach to support refugee entrepreneurs with documentation, education and access to finance is paramount.



What Businesses Can Do to Support Refugees

Alexander Betts (University of Oxford) opened by emphasising the need for businesses to engage in a human-centred approach and have an active Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). He recommends they involve refugees in what they are already doing instead of inventing new strategies. He further talked about false dichotomies. The first one being MNCs vs SMEs: one cannot assume that refugees are natural entrepreneurs, a lot of it is survival entrepreneurship. Another key dichotomy is “rich world vs poor world”: refugees reside in lower income countries, where businesses are nervous to invest. The solution to this is SME investment and building incubators. Mercedes Gutierrez (IKEA) discussed IKEA’s strategies to capture refugees’ talents and skills that largely go unused: hiring refugees as suppliers, reframing the narrative of refugees using the IKEA brand. Aouatif Tawfik (Ben & Jerry’s) outlined the company’s plans to introduce the “Ice Academy” to launch refugee startups and the need of the private sector to consider refugee rights. Tapio Vahtola (UNHCR) highlighted the shift from humanitarian to developmental approaches within the UN refugee agency and that for refugees, access to existing infrastructures can be more valuable than finances. Michel Botzung (IFC) outlined the importance of governmental changes to allow work rights and flexibility of travel for refugees. He emphasised reframing refugee camps as marketplaces, and reshaping the way corporate diversity works, noting that the leadership is mainly composed of white men and there should be an ally for diversity to facilitate more inclusion. NGOs need to work more with private sector, while donors need to be more present on the ground because local problems require local solutions.



Migrant Entrepreneurship Matters



Leen Almasri, a Syrian refugee entrepreneur in France, shared why she started her business - an Architectural virtual reality tour of Paris. She hires other refugees, highlighting that refugees want to support other refugees. There needs to be more access to finance, more awareness of opportunities to start a business, training, language skills, networking and support for those integrating into a new country. Sabina Kekic (Municipality of Amsterdam) outlined the opportunities currently offered in Amsterdam: citizenship education, a pilot EU bank to provide micro finance for migrant entrepreneurs, workshops to help migrants apply and develop business plans. Savitri Groag (Accenture) outlined the coding classes offered by Accenture to refugees. They also hire refugees, mentoring them to kickstart their careers. Despite these positive steps, very few women are being hired in general, making it more difficult for women refugees. Discussion with participants outlined three key challenges of refugee/migrant entrepreneurs: money, information and rules/regulations that can all discourage people from getting involved in entrepreneurship. Tools to battle these challenges, such as freedom for entrepreneurs to start businesses and a regulation that obliges companies to hire refugees and migrants were proposed. Key takeaways from group discussions were: create a (online) platform for refugees and entrepreneurs to meet up, undertake matchmaking between entrepreneurs and investors, and emphasise the importance of hiring refugee women especially within accelerators where people can meet and exchange practices and advice.

What Businesses Can Do to Support Refugees

For the second year, IOM have brought their Global Migration Film Festival (GMFF) to IGNITE, this year showing 4 clips from 4 films. GMFF films, *Bushfallers* - depicting the story of a Senegalese refugee entrepreneur in Germany - and *Unbroken Paradise* - the story of Syrian Kurd, Ramman Ismael's refugee experience in France, were shown. Ramman himself was present and interviewed by Georgina Kwakye (*Pimp My Village*) about the reasons for the war in Syria and what it's like to live during war, as well as the challenges refugees face in Europe. Clips from SPARK's film of a Syrian student in Turkey and from IOM's diaspora programme, CDFD, touched on the importance of higher education for refugee and migrant youth to enter into the workplace. IOM's Alain Nkurikiye and Nina Staal were interviewed alongside Jawid Dehpour (Keihan Foundation) about the role diaspora can play in supporting education in their home countries, by bringing skills and knowledge to the table. Discussion with the attendees highlighted the differences between economic migrants and refugees, supporting practical and vocational training. The session concluded with the recognition of every migrant's rights no matter their background.

