



Innovation in the Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN)

Synthesis Report 2019 – 2020



THE B TEAM ▶



TENT

Acknowledgements

Written by Eleanor Paton with input from companies and colleagues at the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

With particular thanks to the following for sharing their experience and expertise for this report: Daphne Jayasinghe, IRC, Rebecca Baron and Niels Tigges, Ben & Jerry's, Laetitia Devant, Levi Strauss & Co., Aline Sara, NaTakallam, Matthias Stausberg, Virgin Group, Mark Kwami, UNHCR MADE51, Anna Gowdrige, Virgin Unite, Scarlet Cronin, Tent Partnership for Refugees, Callie Strickland, The B Team, Farooq Ullah, The B Team, Francesca Henbest, IRC and Emily Boniface, IRC.

We are also grateful to the following businesses and organisations for their input at the Business Refugee Action Network's (BRAN) workshops:

Allianz
Ben & Jerry's
BQ Portal
Boston Consulting Group
Business and Human Rights Resource Centre
Citi
Deutsche Industrie- und Handelskammer
DLA Piper
Goldblatt Partners
GSMA
Hanken School of Economics
Hanken & SSE Executive Education
Hilton
Inditex
Ingka Group (IKEA Retail)
JOBLINGE
Lush Fresh Handmade Cosmetics
Monese
Oliver Wyman
PwC Netherlands
Siemens AG
Syrian Feminist Lobby
Tent Partnership for Refugees
The Adecco Group
The B Team
University of Cambridge
UNHCR
Virgin Management
Virgin Unite
WeWork

Innovation in the Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN): Synthesis Report 2019 – 2020

Introduction	2
Context	2
Innovation in the Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN)	3
Ben & Jerry's: Ice Academy	4
Levi Strauss & Co.: Porto Alegre	6
NaTakallam: remote working	8
Virgin Group/Virgin Megastore Middle East: MADE51	10
Key lessons learned and next steps	12

Executive summary

The humanitarian landscape is changing – crises have become more protracted and complex, characterised by greater barriers to humanitarian assistance and an increasing variety of needs.ⁱ Business-led innovation has been identified by the Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN) as one promising route to improving the economic wellbeing of refugees. To this end, a group of businesses in the network have implemented new approaches. The areas explored have been: integrating refugees into supply chains, opportunities for entrepreneurship and facilitating remote work for refugees.

This synthesis report explores the innovative approaches implemented by Ben & Jerry's, Virgin Megastore Middle East, Levi Strauss & Co. and the social enterprise, NaTakallam. It draws on the feedback and analysis of these innovative approaches generated by wider BRAN membership during BRAN's workshops conducted during 2019 – 2020, and reflects on the impact of COVID-19 on businesses trialing new approaches.

COVID-19

The network found that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the operation of all the innovative approaches outlined above and generated learnings for the future. Some common themes are outlined below.

- The pivot to digital – whether through strengthening e-commerce opportunities or delivering training online, investing in this space has been key to the delivery of these innovations.
- Altered capacity of the programmes – for instance, production lines were impacted by social distancing and the reassignment of refugee tailors to make masks. This led to the review of anticipated timings and quantity of refugee made products.
- Impact on employers and the private sector – while the innovations explored here have proved flexible and resilient, it was noted that the private sector as a whole has been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and this has affected opportunities for innovation.

Opportunities for replication and scale

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, business appetite to scale new approaches in support of refugees' economic wellbeing remains strong among BRAN members. Themes identified as key to driving replication and scale were:

- Generating higher levels of demand for refugee made products or services;
- Increased collaboration between corporates and value based social enterprises/NGOs;
- Identifying and securing financial models that ensure the sustainability of the innovations.

Next steps

BRAN has identified the following as next steps:

- To facilitate the collaboration and exchange of expertise between businesses and other organisations in the network to support the expansion or replication of these initiatives;
- To facilitate the exploration of new ideas and the business-led identification of pilots. This could be done through the network developing a 'BRAN Lab' with its members.

If you would be interested in participating in either of these next steps, please contact us at business.refugees@rescue-uk.org.



The humanitarian landscape is changing – crises have become more protracted and complex, characterised by greater barriers to humanitarian assistance and an increasing variety of needs





Introduction

The humanitarian landscape is changing – crises have become more protracted and complex, characterised by greater barriers to humanitarian assistance and an increasing variety of needs. New challenges call for new approachesⁱ and with that in mind, business-led innovation has been identified by the Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN) as one promising route to improving the economic wellbeing of refugees. To this end, a group of businesses in the network have implemented new approaches. The areas explored have been: integrating refugees into supply chains, opportunities for entrepreneurship and facilitating remote work for refugees. This synthesis report explores the innovative approaches implemented by Ben & Jerry's, Virgin Megastore Middle East, Levi Strauss & Co. and the social enterprise, Natakallam. It draws on the feedback and analysis of these innovative approaches generated by wider BRAN membership during BRAN's workshops conducted during 2019 – 2020, and reflects on the impact of COVID-19 on businesses trialing new approaches.

Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN)

The International Rescue Committee (IRC), Ben & Jerry's, Virgin, the Tent Partnership for Refugees and The B Team established BRAN to improve the lives of refugees globally through the influence, action and innovation of European businesses. We're supporting refugees by:

- **Incubating, experimenting and innovating** – we're creating a business community that fosters innovative approaches to improving the lives and economic opportunities of refugees;
- **Advocacy** – we're increasing refugees' opportunities by mobilising business to influence key national, regional and global policy debates.



There is an opportunity for business to shape an inclusive approach that supports refugees in adapting to loss of income and accessing the new global economy.



Context

Today, refugees are displaced for a decade on average – and that average more than doubles for refugees who have been displaced for five or more years already.ⁱⁱⁱ Most refugees reside outside of camps, living in urban and rural areas next to host communities. They require longer term, more sustainable ways of rebuilding their lives through income generation opportunities, skills development and livelihoods. The private sector has a key role to play in improving economic opportunities for refugees and forming part of a comprehensive response to global displacement. Indeed, the [UN Global Compact on Refugees](#) recommends that the private sector contribution is maximised by exploring a range of measures including, but not limited to, job creation, investment and greater access to financial products.^{iv} There is also a strong business case for investing in refugees with research demonstrating positive outcomes for a company's brand image, retention rates and performance.^v

The advent of COVID-19 has changed the landscape for action by the private sector. On the one hand, action by business is even more critical – refugees are more likely to work in sectors financially impacted by the pandemic, and refugee-hosting countries were projected to experience slower growth in 2020 compared with other developing nations and world averages.^{vi} On the other, the pandemic's economic disruption has affected business' profitability with sectors such as aviation, hospitality, tourism and insurance particularly impacted.^{vii} Research has highlighted that a focus on core business and crisis response has constrained opportunities for innovation in the immediate term.^{viii}

However, as the international community develops its mid to long-term COVID-19 response, there is an opportunity for business to shape an inclusive approach that supports refugees in adapting to loss of income and accessing the new global economy. Business-led innovation can highlight new ways of accelerating economic inclusion for refugees in the future and point to new opportunities that build better outcomes for this group. This paper highlights promising examples of business-led innovation within BRAN and identifies opportunities for scale.

Innovation in the Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN)

In 2019, BRAN identified innovation as a strategic priority and defined its overarching aim as to:

Create a business community for innovative approaches to improving the lives and economic opportunities of refugees. This will be done by: a) identifying relevant opportunities for experimentation and piloting b) facilitating business-led incubation c) sharing the findings across the network.^{ix}

While several definitions exist in relation to the concept of innovation, the network has drawn on the definition used by UN's report on Humanitarian Innovation: The State of the Art as the 'best fit' for BRAN's innovation work. Here, innovation is defined as '*a means of adaptation and improvement through finding and scaling solutions to problems, in the form of products, processes or wider business models.*'^x

BRAN designed workshops in 2019 and 2020 to explore: new approaches that companies are using to integrate refugees into business models; the implementation of these approaches; the impact of COVID-19 on this work; findings from the projects and opportunities for replication and scale.

The next section explores innovative approaches implemented by Ben & Jerry's, Levi Strauss & Co., NaTakallam and Virgin Megastore Middle East by drawing on the analysis and experience of the businesses themselves and the reflections, feedback and input of workshop participants.



Ben & Jerry's Ice Academy products. © MCaleffi/PLACE Network Paris.

Ben & Jerry's: Ice Academy



Ben & Jerry's Ice Academy participants. Photo provided by the Ice Academy, DELITELABS Rotterdam.

Ben & Jerry's has developed a dual track programme of employment and entrepreneurship training through its Ice Academy, a programme co-founded by Ben & Jerry's and The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network (TERN). During BRAN's workshops, 2019 – 2020, Ben & Jerry's discussed implementation, the impact of COVID-19 and opportunities for replication and scale with other participants.

Opportunity

The Ice Academy is designed to help and empower entrepreneurial refugees to develop their business ideas. The programme has been running since 2017 and was designed in response to low rates of employment amongst refugees and asylum seekers across Europe. To illustrate, at the start of the programme, unemployment rates among participants averaged 66% and nearly a third of 2020's participants were unable to meet their basic needs. Recognising that employment is a primary factor in driving integration, Ben & Jerry's identified an opportunity to support refugees' entrepreneurial talent through the Ice Academy.

Implementation

In 2017, Ben & Jerry's teamed up with The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network (TERN) to launch the Ice Academy with, in the first year, 8 aspiring entrepreneurs who arrived as refugees in the UK. The programme combines a 4-month business training and mentoring programme with part time employment. From 2018 onwards, the programme has expanded year on year to empower people in the UK, the Netherlands (DELITELABS), Germany (leetHub) and France (PLACE). The total number of alumni is almost 200 and the class of 2020 consisted of 69 entrepreneurs.

Ben & Jerry's have highlighted some of the challenges and successes experienced during the Ice Academy's implementation.

The following factors were identified as critical to the programme's success:

- Drawing on the expertise of local partners;
- The dual approach of training and employment which meant that participants could gain useful skills while working for partners of the Ice Academy e.g. in customer service, which might help them once they launch their business;
- Building in a tailored approach for each individual that includes one-on-one mentorship and a buddy system.

The following factors were identified as challenges:

- Crafting the right funding model to make the programme more efficient and self-sustainable year on year;
- Seeking more diverse employment partners beyond the hospitality/food and refreshments sector for participants seeking to set up businesses in other sectors;
- Ensuring equal access to the programme for all people with refugee status, regardless of gender, race or circumstances. Over the project period, the Ice Academy has made adjustments in set-up and recruitment to ensure a wide range of nationalities are represented and to achieve gender parity.

Impact of COVID-19

Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 has impacted the Ice Academy on several fronts. Most of the project's employment partners are based in the hospitality industry which has been severely impacted by the pandemic and many businesses have spent much of the year closed. In response, the team organised Industry Insight Days where Ice Academy participants could shadow those working, for example, at outdoor markets in central London. On the training side, this year's programme had to pivot to digital learning. At first, this presented a significant hurdle as participants do not typically have access to the necessary equipment. To address this, the programme's kick-off was postponed to allow enough time for IT training and facilitation. Whilst product pitching and testing was more difficult online, there was a clear increase in the engagement rate because of the easy access to digital learning tools, combined with reduced travel. Despite these challenges, the programme grew in 2020, with almost 70 graduates across three countries and many proceeding to incubator programmes where their business ideas have been prepared for launch in 2021.

The pandemic noticeably impacted both the current cohort and alumni many of whom have experienced challenging personal circumstances. In response, NGO partners such as TERN were required to make a greater number of interventions, providing both financial and mental health support to participants. Overall, the Ice Academy found that although there was still a drop in unemployment amongst its 2020 cohort, this decrease was lower than in previous years. Finally, the pandemic also impacted previous graduates of the programme as many entrepreneurs were forced to stop trading or have not been able to proceed to launch.

Next steps and opportunities for scale

Based on Ben & Jerry's experience so far, the Ice Academy plans to build on the success of the digital learning and offer blended and flexible training going forward. To grow the impact of the Ice Academy, Ben & Jerry's seeks to widen the pool of employment partners, diversifying beyond hospitality and food/refreshments. The programme has proved itself to be robust and ready to scale further. Discussions at BRAN's most recent workshop identified the following as key factors in scaling up:

- Secure new Ice Academy employment partners in various sectors to support the programme by providing part-time employment opportunities;
- Build out funding and the employment model further for scaling;
- Further explore ways of setting up financial support for launching businesses, for example through seed capital or loans;
- Support refugee entrepreneurs' access to e-commerce via platforms such as the [Anqa Collective](#);
- Draw on the expertise of other businesses within BRAN to further refine support for refugee entrepreneurs.

Levi Strauss & Co.: Porto Alegre

The Levi's® brand has trialed a pilot to integrate refugees into its supply chain by partnering with the Porto Alegre Cooperative in Italy to create and sell products. During BRAN's workshops, 2019 – 2020, Levi's® discussed the implementation of the pilot, the impact of COVID-19 and opportunities for replication and scale in partnership with other values-based social enterprises and cooperatives.

Opportunity

Levi Strauss & Co. is committed to delivering positive change in the communities where it has a business presence and since 2016, the company has implemented a refugee programme to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Europe. Actions taken include supporting employee volunteerism, philanthropic grant making, product donations and capacity building. The partnership with the Porto Alegre Cooperative reflects the company's desire to leverage its core operations and drive a more sustainable approach to supporting refugee livelihoods.

Levi's® has worked with the Porto Alegre Cooperative based in Rovigo, Italy, to create and sell products made by refugees and asylum seekers. The collection is made of handmade, recycled denim products. The first collection launched in December 2019, and the second in December 2020.



A tailor at work in the Porto Alegre Cooperative. Photo provided by Levi Strauss & Co.

Implementation

To ensure that the Porto Alegre Cooperative would meet Levi's® standards for inclusion in its official suppliers' list, both parties invested in building the Cooperative's capacity by expanding its workshop, updating its equipment, and supporting the development of their tailors' skills. Levi's® also adapted its usual ways of working by integrating buffers directly into its production timing, allowing greater time for the tailoring workshop to manufacture the items. The Levi's® x Porto Alegre line was priced slightly higher than comparable Levi's® accessories. But a thoughtful pricing strategy ensured that Levi's® fans could still afford to purchase those products. A meaningful marketing campaign was put in place so that consumers would understand the 'giving back' aspect of this collection as 100 percent of the net proceeds from this line are donated back to Porto Alegre so that they can further invest in their capacity to support the vulnerable populations they serve.

The collaboration between Levi's® and Porto Alegre in 2019 resulted in a number of benefits. At the Cooperative, the tailors were able to develop their professional skills and networks further, but also increased their language proficiency.

The launch of this capsule collection was supported by a successful marketing campaign centered on collaboration with the Cooperative and on the refugees who made the products. Levi's® created a range of tools and assets, including a promotional video, a microsite and emails to its consumer base to promote the collection. The video attracted over 1.5 million views on Levi's® website and the email campaign drove traffic to their website and stores. Sell through rates for this collection were higher than any comparable Levi's® items at the same time of the year and the line was sold out online only a few weeks after launch.

The Levi's® team found that the concept behind this line resonated with their consumers by giving them a way to support the refugee cause, and generated some brand loyalty.



The partnership with the Porto Alegre Cooperative reflects the company's desire to leverage its core operations and drive a more sustainable approach to supporting refugee livelihoods.



Impact of COVID-19

The success of the 2019 Porto Alegre collection inspired Levi's® to go further on this partnership. Initially aiming to launch the new collection in June 2020, the kick off was rescheduled to December 2020 to respect the national health and safety regulations. COVID-19 impacted the production capacity at Porto Alegre, with fewer tailors working in the workshop, and some of the workforce redeployed to make masks for their community. This meant that the product line was not developed further as the company originally envisaged, although the quantity of products made available for purchase to consumers in the 2020 collection still doubled from previous year. With a lot of its stores closed across Europe in December, Levi's® also had to adapt to new ways of selling its products. Fortunately, the e-commerce potential of the product is strong, and the release of the product line in December generated great storytelling around meaningful gift giving.

Levi's® also expanded the number of channels through which the collection was sold in 2020 by identifying new partners, such as Zalando. Consumers buying their Levi's® x Porto Alegre products from Zalando also contribute to the Porto Alegre's work and mission as 100 percent of the net proceeds go back to Porto Alegre.

Next steps and opportunities for scale

Having achieved proof of concept, Levi's® is keen to build on that business model and scale it up in the future. Levi's® distribution channels cater to multiple countries and there is potential for tailoring this concept to different social enterprises in Europe. However, doing so will require increased capacity. Discussions at the BRAN workshop identified the following as key factors in achieving scale:

- Drawing on the experience and knowledge of other BRAN members to connect with different social enterprises across Europe;
- Exploring the potential for other Levi's® suppliers to employ refugees.

Workshop participants also identified an opportunity for Levi's® to address refugee employment beyond the Porto Alegre innovative approach, by looking into hiring refugee employees into their store networks.

NaTakallam: remote working

NaTakallam's innovative model facilitates remote employment opportunities for refugees in activities such as translation and language services. This is achieved through accessing the global economy and partnering with companies such as WeWork and Hilton. During BRAN's workshops, 2019 – 2020, NaTakallam discussed implementation of their initiative, the impact of COVID-19 and opportunities for scale.

Opportunity

Over the past five years, NaTakallam – 'we speak' in Arabic – has offered a number of high-quality language, translation and tutoring services through the digital economy. By harnessing refugees' skills and remote working opportunities, NaTakallam provides access to the professional world and a source of income for refugees who are often excluded from labour markets. In connecting refugees to students and employers worldwide, who may not have other opportunities to meet with people experiencing displacement, NaTakallam also seeks to combat negative narratives around refugees and displaced people.

Implementation

NaTakallam's first remote language learning programmes were delivered in Arabic and over time the social enterprise has expanded its portfolio so that services are available in French, Kurdish, Persian, Armenian and Spanish too. Translation services delivered by refugees are utilised by both individuals and companies globally while NaTakallam also offers academic exchange programmes where refugees teach at universities. Since 2015, 1,000,000 USD has been earned by refugees and 30% of the refugee workforce have found further employment or resettlement through NaTakallam's networks.^{xi} Recently, the social enterprise has opened up remote employment opportunities to host communities as well.



Every week through NaTakallam, London-based Megan connects with her Beirut-based Syrian instructor to learn Arabic online. NaTakallam connects skilled refugees to individuals and organizations worldwide, for language tutoring, cultural exchange and translation services. *Photo provided by NaTakallam.*



By harnessing refugees' skills and remote working opportunities, NaTakallam provides access to the professional world and a source of income for refugees who are often excluded from labour markets.



NaTakallam has highlighted some of the challenges and benefits experienced in implementing their programmes:

Benefits for refugees and employers:

- NaTakallam's role as an intermediary streamlines the process for businesses seeking to employ refugees remotely and enables companies to create greater social impact through their employment practices;
- Refugees are able to access the global economy and generate an income, in contexts where they often face barriers to accessing the local labour market;
- Remote working affords flexibility, enabling refugees to work around other commitments such as caring for family members.

Challenges in implementation:

- Transferring payments to employees in hard to reach areas;
- Gaining access to corporates as potential employers and customers;
- Demonstrating the qualifications of NaTakallam's refugee workforce.

Impact of COVID-19

NaTakallam's model already facilitated remote working and so was well suited to functioning during the changes wrought by COVID-19. With the onset of the coronavirus lockdowns, there was a three-fold increase in demand for NaTakallam's language learning services and the platform has also been able to diversify its range of translation services, with so many conferences now being delivered online. These developments have doubled the total income generated by refugees whilst enabling the workforce to remain connected and avoid increased isolation during the pandemic.



With the onset of the coronavirus lockdowns, there was a three-fold increase in demand for NaTakallam's language learning services



Next steps and opportunities for scale

Based on NaTakallam's experience and success in delivering remote work for refugees so far, the social enterprise seeks to offer a wider range of language services and develop a 'NaTakallam for Kids' programme.

Discussions at BRAN's most recent workshop identified the following as key factors in scaling up:

- Investments in technology to increase the capacity of NaTakallam's platform;
- Generating higher levels of demand for NaTakallam's remote services by reaching key decision makers in companies with the potential to employ refugee translators;
- Translation and equivalence of qualifications to demonstrate the high quality of services provided by the platform;
- Flexibility on the pricing of services could enable more companies to utilise NaTakallam's platform but the group noted that it would be important not to compromise refugees' access to decent work by doing so.

Virgin Group/Virgin Megastore Middle East: MADE51

Following up on Virgin's long history of advocacy on refugee inclusion, Virgin Megastore Middle East has trialed a pilot to integrate home accessories and other items made by refugee artisans via UNHCR's MADE51 model into its product offering. During BRAN's workshops, 2019 – 2020, Virgin discussed implementation of the pilot, the impact of COVID-19 and opportunities for replication and scale with other participants.

Opportunity

Virgin Megastore Middle East, a large retail business in the Virgin Group, has integrated refugee-made, high-quality home accessories into its product portfolio via UNHCR's MADE51 initiative. MADE51 is the world's first ecosystem that delivers a viable route to the market for refugee artisans, thereby furthering the economic inclusion of refugees (particularly women). Pre COVID-19, market research had shown that the handmade sector was growing, with a market size of USD 36 billion. The model is designed to support refugees harness their skills, culture and heritage to generate income and rebuild livelihoods. Virgin Megastore Middle East identified an opportunity for their business model to support refugees' entrepreneurial activity and to expand the work the Group had already been doing to support refugees through selling MADE51 products at one of their flagship stores in Dubai and online.

Implementation

The MADE51 model is implemented via number of partnerships. Social enterprises link with refugee artisan groups to ensure production standards, design, quality and export of goods. Through collaboration with the World Fair Trade Organisation, MADE51 ensures that UNHCR's protection principles are applied to a business context and refugees are able to engage in a fair working environment. By engaging in strategic partnerships with businesses such as Virgin, MADE51's products can be sold on the global market. In 2019, 2700 artisans earned an income via MADE51 and 10,000 dependents of refugees benefitted.

Initially, Virgin assessed its own operations across the Group to see where it could support the MADE51 model and identified Virgin Megastore Middle East, with over 50 outlets in nine countries, as a potential partner. Virgin Megastore's



MADE51 launch at Virgin Megastore, Dubai. Photo provided by Virgin.

“

Through collaboration with the World Fair Trade Organisation, MADE51 ensures that UNHCR’s protection principles are applied to a business context and refugees are able to engage in a fair working environment.

”

management supported the idea early on, recognising that many of their employees and customer base were in some way linked to the refugee crisis, notably the conflict in Syria and its impact on neighbouring countries. The collaboration between Virgin Megastore, UNHCR and MADE51 addressed delivery, timing, pricing and other aspects of retail supply chain management.

Process and Challenges

From initial conversations to the official launch of the MADE51 showcase at Virgin Megastore’s Dubai Mall store, the project took approximately 15 months of planning. Teams were keen to ensure a reliable product supply for store and online sales.

Benefits

Virgin Megastore found that the implementation of the MADE51 model had particular benefits: the approach builds in space for global partners to support by bringing their own expertise and infrastructure and the products tell the story of livelihoods rebuilt, which has resonated with consumers.



Sir Richard Branson, Founder, Virgin Group, at the launch of the MADE51 collection at Virgin Megastore, Dubai. Photo provided by Virgin.

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 impacted MADE51, with many retail stores forced to close. In response, MADE51 utilised online trade shows and launched a website on World Refugee Day for consumers to buy artisans’ products. Artisans also pivoted to making facemasks that met World Health Organisation (WHO) standards and MADE51 launched a holiday ornaments campaign.

Next steps and opportunities for scale

To create greater impact, MADE51 needs to be taken to scale. On the supply side, a robust, field-based model means that most challenges can be met to deliver artisanal product lines. However, generating demand is the main challenge. MADE51 needs buyers to place high volume orders and create demand within their customer base. BRAN workshop participants identified the following as key in achieving this:

- MADE51’s corporate partners spreading the word and encouraging other businesses to explore supporting this innovative approach. E.g. Sir Richard Branson’s World Refugee Day post;
- Marketing the collection by communicating more strongly on sourcing and the model’s positive impact on refugees;
- Identifying a target audience to help increase demand e.g. millennials;
- Meeting larger retailers’ concerns as regards small margins and the ability of the model to deliver consistent commercial benefits.

“

MADE51 needs buyers to place high volume orders and create demand within their customer base.

”

Key lessons learned and next steps

The Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN) used its biannual workshops in 2019 to identify new business approaches to improving economic opportunities for refugees, and to discuss the benefits and challenges of incubating these approaches. This synthesis sought to reflect on the progress of business-led innovations implemented by Ben & Jerry's, Levi Strauss & Co., NaTakallam and Virgin Megastore Middle East, understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its members' efforts to deliver these specific approaches and explore opportunities for replication and scale. This section summarises some of the common themes identified in BRAN's discussions and identifies next steps for the network.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the operation of all the innovative approaches outlined above and generated learnings for the future. Some common themes are outlined below.

- **The pivot to digital** – whether through strengthening e-commerce opportunities or delivering training online, investing in this space has been key to the delivery of these innovations. Ben & Jerry's noted an increased engagement from participants in the training elements of their programme and therefore plan to integrate digital learning into the Ice Academy going forward. For a business like NaTakallam that was already facilitating remote approaches, the pandemic generated higher levels of demand and an expansion in services offered.
- **Altered capacity of the programmes** – Porto Alegre found that production lines were impacted by social distancing and the reassignment of refugee tailors to make masks. This led to the review of anticipated timings and quantity of refugee made products. There were similar challenges experienced in the production of MADE51 goods. The closure of key employment partners also impacted the ability of the Ice Academy to deliver the employment track of its programme.
- **Impact on employers and the private sector** – while the innovations outlined above have proved flexible and resilient in the face of challenges posed by the pandemic, it was noted that the private sector as a whole has been significantly impacted by COVID-19. Continued economic uncertainty and barriers to returning to 'business as usual' has affected the ability of companies to invest capacity in developing new approaches during 2020.



Ben & Jerry's Ice Academy. Photo provided by the Ice Academy, DELITELABS Rotterdam.



Business appetite to scale new approaches in support of refugees' economic wellbeing remains strong among BRAN members.



Opportunities for replication and scale

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, business appetite to scale new approaches in support of refugees' economic wellbeing remains strong among BRAN members. This is reflected in the examples shared above and the feedback, forward planning and collaboration of workshop participants. The box below illustrates themes that stood out as key to driving replication and scale.

Securing replication and scale

Generating higher levels of demand for refugee made products or services. Some avenues identified for this are:

- Marketing strategies that share greater information on sourcing from and support for refugee entrepreneurs, artisans or service providers and identifying supportive target audiences e.g. millennials;
- A flexible approach to the pricing of goods and services, that reflects for example, the small margins experienced by large retailers as well as safeguarding refugees' access to decent work.

Increased collaboration between corporates and value based social enterprises/NGOs. For example:

- Corporates identifying and partnering with social enterprises in new locations to deliver the successfully trialed pilot models. Networks like BRAN and the Tent Partnership for Refugees can provide a space for facilitating the exchange of ideas and contacts;
- Drawing on the expertise of other businesses and organisations within BRAN to further refine and strengthen the innovations, as well as diversify partnerships.

Identifying and securing a financial model that ensures the sustainability of the innovations.

This could be done through:

- Thoughtful pricing strategies such as the model implemented by Levi's® for its Porto Alegre range;
- Exploring seed capital or loans to support the launch of refugee led businesses resulting from the Ice Academy model.

Next steps

This synthesis has explored: the progress of business-led innovations implemented by Ben & Jerry's, Levi Strauss & Co., NaTakallam and Virgin Megastore Middle East, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and opportunities for replication and scale. The innovative approaches outlined above have achieved proof of concept and proved to be flexible and resilient in responding to crisis. Moreover, the businesses have emphasised their ambition for further scale of these initiatives and highlighted that they would continue to benefit from BRAN's input, review and support. With this in mind, BRAN has identified the following as next steps:

- To facilitate the collaboration and exchange of expertise between businesses and other organisations in the network to support the expansion or replication of these initiatives;
- To facilitate the exploration of new ideas and the business-led identification of pilots. This could be done through the network developing a 'BRAN Lab' with its members.

If you would be interested in participating in either of these next steps, please contact us at business.refugees@rescue-uk.org.



Ben & Jerry's Ice Academy products. Photo provided by the Ice Academy, TERN London.

Endnotes

- i. Obrecht, A. and T. Warner, A, More than just luck: Innovation in humanitarian action, ALNAP/ODI (2016) <https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/hif-alnap-2016-innovation-more-than-luck.pdf>
- ii. Ramalingam, B. and Mendizabal, E. and Schenkenberg, E, Strengthening humanitarian networks: Applying the network functions approach, ALNAP/ODI (2008) <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/strengthening-humanitarian-networks-applying-the-network-functions-approach>
- iii. International Rescue Committee, The Future of Refugee Welcome in the United States (2017) <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/1872/policybriefthefutureofrefugeewelcome.pdf>
- iv. UN Global Compact on Refugees (2018) https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf
- v. Please see the following for further information: McKinsey & Company, Why Diversity Matters (2015) (<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters>); Tent Partnership for Refugees and the Fiscal Policy Institute, Refugees as Employees: Good Retention, Strong Recruitment (2018) <https://www.tent.org/resources/good-retention-strong-recruitment/>; Deloitte, Unleashing the Power of Inclusion (2017) <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-about-deloitte-unleashing-power-of-inclusion.pdf>.
- vi. International Rescue Committee and the Center for Global Development, Locked Down and Left Behind: The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees' Economic Inclusion (2020) <https://www.rescue-uk.org/press-release/refugees-are-60-more-likely-be-financially-impacted-covid-19-new-research-finds>
- vii. Business Fights Poverty, COVID-19 Response Framework (2020) <https://businessfightspoverty.org/covid-19-response-framework/>
- viii. McKinsey & Company, Investments in innovation have slowed during the pandemic (2020) <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/coronavirus-leading-through-the-crisis/charting-the-path-to-the-next-normal/investments-in-innovation-have-slowed-during-the-pandemic>
- ix. BRAN High-Level Strategy (2019 -2020)
- x. Betts. A and Bloom. L, Humanitarian Innovation: The State of the Art (2014) <https://www.unocha.org/publication/policy-briefs-studies/humanitarian-innovation-state-art>
- xi. This percentage refers to the proportion of refugees working with NaTakallman that have obtained other freelance opportunities through students and clients, as well as refugees that were resettled having been connected to small resettlement programmes by their students.





THE B TEAM ▶



TENT