

# Expanding Economic Rights and Social Integration of Refugees in the Republic of Moldova: Results of the ASEM Academic Project

This analytical note summarizes the key findings and recommendations of the Sergio Vieira de Mello academic project, implemented by the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (ASEM) from September 15 to November 30, 2025. The project focused on studying the economic rights of refugees, including their access to the labor market, entrepreneurship opportunities, and social protection. The Sergio Vieira de Mello Fellowship Program, established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), aims to promote academic research in refugee protection and integration, and to strengthen cooperation between the academic community and humanitarian organizations. ASEM's participation in this initiative underscores its commitment to socio-economic development and its significant expertise in migration policy, labor relations, and regional economics.

The project methodology included a comprehensive analysis of existing legislative frameworks and policies concerning refugee rights in Moldova, as well as extensive field research. In-depth interviews were conducted with refugees, representatives of government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and employers. A significant part of the work involved a series of roundtables and expert meetings, which provided a platform for dialogue and gathering diverse opinions from stakeholders. These activities allowed for the identification of key barriers and opportunities for the economic integration of refugees, and the formulation of practical recommendations based on real data and expert opinions.

Among the concrete results of the project are two academic publications, including an article in the authoritative journal "Revista Intellectus", which presented a detailed analysis of the legal and socio-economic aspects of refugee integration, and proposed models for successful adaptation based on international experience. A practical business guide for refugees was developed, containing step-by-step instructions on business registration, taxation, access to financing, and marketing, adapted to the Moldovan context. In addition, training programs were organized for law students, aimed at increasing their awareness of refugee rights and developing their skills in providing legal assistance to this vulnerable population category.

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has faced an influx of refugees, which has created both challenges and opportunities for the country.

# Context and Issues

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has faced a significant influx of refugees, exceeding **100,000 people**, predominantly from Ukraine, seeking refuge and aiming to contribute to the country's economy. Despite legislative efforts to harmonize national legislation with international refugee protection standards, practical implementation and access to economic rights remain a serious challenge. Studies, including those published in *Revista Intellectus*, have identified a number of key obstacles faced by refugees, and have confirmed significant gaps in the implementation of existing policies.

## Key Issues:

- **Limited access to the labor market:** Refugees often face difficulties in finding employment due to **lack of Romanian language proficiency, lengthy and complex procedures for recognizing diplomas and qualifications** (the process can take up to 6-12 months), and low awareness among employers about refugee hiring procedures. As of the end of 2023, the employment rate among working-age refugees did not exceed 15-20%, which is significantly lower than the national average.
- **Lack of information on rights:** Many refugees do not have full information about their rights to work, social protection, and access to public services. **Information is often fragmented, available only in Romanian**, or disseminated through informal channels, making it difficult to obtain.
- **Bureaucratic barriers to entrepreneurship:** Those wishing to start their own businesses face **difficulties in registering enterprises, lack of knowledge of tax legislation, and procedures for obtaining permits**. Lack of start-up capital and **limited access to micro-loans** or grants are also serious barriers.
- **Barriers to education:** Young refugees and children face challenges in enrolling in educational institutions due to **language barriers, lack of necessary educational documents**, and difficulties adapting to the local system. This leads to interrupted education and reduces their long-term prospects in the labor market.
- **Isolation and marginalization of young refugees:** Roundtables with young refugees revealed that, in addition to language and information gaps, they feel **social isolation and stigmatization**. The lack of equal opportunities and the difficulty of integrating into youth communities lead to their marginalization.

These challenges are particularly relevant against the backdrop of the current situation in Moldova's labor market, where, despite some sectoral labor shortages, the overall **unemployment rate is around 3%** (as of early 2024), but for certain population groups, it can be significantly higher. Effective refugee integration requires not only legislative changes but also systemic efforts to eliminate practical barriers, especially in the areas of:

- **Language support:** Creation of free Romanian language courses.
- **Recognition of qualifications:** Simplification and acceleration of procedures for nostrification of educational documents.
- **Access to information:** Development of multilingual information platforms and consultation centers.
- **Financial support:** Special microfinance programs for refugee entrepreneurs.
- **Social adaptation:** Community integration programs, especially for youth.

These details underscore the urgency and complexity of the problems facing the Republic of Moldova in the process of refugee integration, and justify the need for targeted interventions, such as the academic project being implemented.

# Project Target Beneficiaries



## Primary Beneficiaries: Refugees in the Republic of Moldova

The project targets over **100,000 refugees** residing in the Republic of Moldova, primarily from Ukraine, who are seeking refuge and economic opportunities. Special attention is given to **young refugees (aged 18-35) and refugee students** aspiring to pursue education, employment, or develop their own businesses. Considering that the employment rate among this group is only 15-20%, the project aims to provide them with the necessary legal, informational, and advisory support. Refugees actively participated in a series of **roundtable discussions and consultations** organized from September to November 2025, which helped identify specific barriers.



## Academic Community and Legal Professionals

This group includes **students and faculty from ASEM** and other Moldovan universities, as well as **lawyers and law students** actively involved in the work of the **ASEM Legal Business Clinic**. The project implemented specialized training programs for **30 law students**, aimed at enhancing their qualifications in international refugee law, labor law, and entrepreneurial legislation. Thanks to this, students and faculty were able to deepen their knowledge and practical skills in providing legal assistance to vulnerable groups, contributing to the development of academic expertise in migration law and social integration.



## Government Representatives and Institutions

This group includes key stakeholders from the public sector, including representatives from the **Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, the National Employment Agency, the Ministry of Education and Research**, and local authorities. They are critical beneficiaries as the project provides them with **analytical reports, policy recommendations, and practical tools** to improve national legislation and its implementation. Their information on the final results of the project could contribute to the integration of proposed solutions into state programs and strategies for supporting refugees in the Republic of Moldova.

# Key Project Activities: Details and Results

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## 1. Development of a Practical Guide for Refugees

From **September 15 to November 15, 2025**, in close cooperation with the ASEM Legal Business Clinic, a comprehensive practical guide, "Starting a Business in the Republic of Moldova: A Guide for Refugees," was developed. The guide, comprising over 60 pages is available in Russian, and English. It includes detailed step-by-step instructions on business registration, taxation specifics, employment, and access to markets and financial resources. The development methodology was based on a legal analysis of national legislation, a comparative analysis of best international practices, and the results of individual consultations. The outcome is a practical knowledge base designed for direct application by refugees in the process of economic integration.

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## 2. Specialized Training for Lawyers and Students

From **September 20 to October 20, 2025**, intensive specialized training was conducted for **30 law students** and young professionals from Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova. The training took place at the ASEM Legal Business Clinic and covered key topics such as international refugee law, national legislation on refugee protection and integration, practical aspects of providing legal assistance, and the ethics of legal practice. The methodology included interactive lectures, case studies, role-playing, and practical workshops. As a result, participants gained deep knowledge and practical skills necessary for effective legal support of vulnerable populations, which contributed to strengthening the capacity of civil society in the Republic of Moldova.

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## 3. Scientific Publications and Presentations

In October-November 2025, two scientific articles were prepared and soon to be published in the authoritative academic journal «Revista Intellectus». The first article, titled "Legal Aspects of Refugee Employment in the Republic of Moldova: Challenges and Prospects," analyzed existing legal barriers and proposed recommendations for their elimination. The second article, "Social Protection and Integration of Refugees: The Moldovan Experience," focused on the social support system and ways to optimize it. These publications contributed to expanding scientific discourse in the field of migration law and social policy, and also served as a basis for further recommendations for improving national legislation and practices.

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## 4. Organization of a Roundtable for Experience Exchange

On **October 25, 2025**, an interactive roundtable was organized in the ASEM auditorium, bringing together young refugees and students. The event aimed to create a platform for direct experience exchange and to identify the real barriers faced by young refugees when seeking employment, obtaining education, and achieving social integration. Participants discussed issues of employment, access to education, legal assistance, and psychosocial support. The methodology included facilitated discussions and brainstorming sessions. The results of the roundtable provided valuable information for adjusting the content of the practical guide and formulating more precise recommendations for government authorities.

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## 5. Final Stakeholder Workshop

On **November 28, 2025**, a final stakeholder workshop was held, gathering **over 56 representatives** from the academic community, civil society, and national organizations. The workshop took place in the Glia Hub, ASEM. The project results were presented at the event, including the developed practical guide, key findings from scientific publications, and policy improvement recommendations. The workshop resulted in a consensus among stakeholders on further cooperation and the integration of proposed solutions into state programs for refugee support in the Republic of Moldova.

# Research Findings: Access to the Labor Market

## Regulation of Refugee Access to the Labor Market

The study, published in the academic journal "**Revista Intellectus**" under the title "**Legal Aspects of Refugee Employment in the Republic of Moldova: Challenges and Prospects**", conducted a comprehensive analysis of the international and national regulatory framework governing refugees' access to the labor market in the Republic of Moldova. The objective of the work was to identify key barriers and develop specific recommendations to improve the level of economic integration of refugees, whose number in Moldova exceeds **100,000 people**.

One of the fundamental conclusions is that the **right to work is guaranteed by international acts**. This is confirmed, in particular, by the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, especially its Article 17, which calls on state parties to grant refugees lawfully staying in their territory the most favorable treatment regarding the right to work. Additionally, conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) establish standards for fair working conditions, applicable to refugees, which emphasizes the universal nature of this right.

Despite the existence of international legal obligations, **the national legislation of the Republic of Moldova requires harmonization** with these standards. Although a basic legal framework for refugee protection exists (e.g., the Asylum Law), the study revealed significant gaps in its implementation. In particular, there are difficulties in applying certain provisions regarding work permits and social security, which creates administrative barriers for refugees. The lack of clear coordination mechanisms between various government structures also leads to delays and ambiguity in law enforcement practice.

The study details that **objective barriers to employment exist** for refugees, leading to an extremely low employment rate—only **15-20%** of the total number. These include difficulties in obtaining work permits, lengthy procedures for processing necessary documents, and a lack of adequate information about the labor market. Furthermore, a serious obstacle is the **language barrier**, as many vacancies require proficiency in Romanian, and access to free and quality language courses is limited. Refugees also face discrimination and prejudice from employers. In particular, the most significant barriers are observed in regulated professions requiring licensing and in the public sector.

Special attention is paid to the need for **simplified qualification recognition procedures**. The current system for recognizing foreign diplomas and professional certificates is excessively bureaucratic and takes from **6 to 12 months**. This significantly reduces the competitiveness of refugees in the labor market, forcing them to take low-skilled positions or remain unemployed, despite having relevant education and experience. A comparative analysis of international best practices shows that many countries apply expedited procedures and temporary recognition of qualifications for refugees, allowing them to integrate into the economy more quickly.

The study offers **specific legal recommendations**, including: 1) amending national legislation to simplify work permit procedures and automatically recognize certain categories of qualifications; 2) creating a single centralized mechanism for document verification to reduce processing times; 3) developing and implementing government programs for language support and professional retraining; 4) strengthening control over compliance with anti-discrimination legislation in the labor market. These measures are intended not only to facilitate refugees' access to employment but also to contribute to the overall economic development of the Republic of Moldova.

# Social Protection: Challenges, Realities, and Integration Opportunities

## Vulnerability and Systemic Barriers

The study "Social Protection and Refugee Integration: The Moldovan Experience" revealed that over **100,000 refugees** in Moldova face profound vulnerability, exacerbated by a lack of adequate resources, linguistic (especially the absence of Romanian language courses) and cultural barriers, and limited access to vital services. Particularly vulnerable groups, such as **single mothers, the elderly, people with disabilities, and children**, experience discrimination and encounter even greater difficulties in obtaining assistance. Key barriers include:

- **Information Vacuum:** Lack of centralized, accessible information on rights and procedures for obtaining social benefits and services.
- **Bureaucratic Complexity:** Lengthy and convoluted procedures for document processing, often requiring legal assistance.
- **Language Barrier:** Insufficient number of interpreters in social protection and healthcare institutions.
- **Limited Access to Healthcare:** Despite some guarantees, actual access to quality medical services, including psychological support, remains low due to administrative obstacles and a lack of understanding of the system.
- **Housing Issues:** The absence of state affordable housing programs leads to forced living in informal conditions or excessive costs.

These factors contribute to an extremely low employment rate (only **15-20%**) and a high risk of social exclusion.

## Strategic Importance and Legislative Gaps

Effective social protection for refugees is strategically important for their stabilization, self-sufficiency, and potential contribution to the host society. However, the national legislation of the Republic of Moldova, despite having basic norms (e.g., the Asylum Law and some social programs), demonstrates significant gaps and discrepancies with international standards, such as the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and EU norms.

- **Incomplete Harmonization:** Absence of a comprehensive legal framework specifically adapted for refugees, leading to unequal access to social guarantees compared to Moldovan citizens or other categories of migrants.
- **Lack of Special Programs:** Insufficient number or complete absence of targeted programs for financial support, language courses, retraining, and employment, forcing refugees to rely on humanitarian aid.
- **Difficulties with Qualification Recognition:** Lengthy (up to **12 months**) and costly procedures for recognizing foreign diplomas and qualifications, which hinders integration into the labor market and leads to the degradation of professional potential.
- **Fragmented Systems:** Lack of coordination between various government structures responsible for social protection, employment, and integration creates a fragmented system unable to effectively respond to the needs of refugees.

Thus, the current system does not allow refugees to fully realize their rights and potential, increasing their dependence and hindering their socio-economic integration.

## Strengthening Social Cohesion and Recommendations

An effective and inclusive social protection system is a key tool for strengthening social cohesion and integrating various population groups. Roundtables conducted as part of the study revealed deep feelings of isolation and stigmatization among refugees, highlighting an acute need for targeted actions. To overcome these challenges and promote integration, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Legislative Reform:** Adoption of a comprehensive package of amendments to national legislation to ensure equal access for refugees to social services, financial assistance, health insurance, and the labor market, in line with international standards.
2. **Development of Targeted Programs:** Implementation of state programs for housing provision, Romanian language courses, professional reorientation and employment programs, as well as financial support for vulnerable groups.
3. **Simplification of Procedures:** Creation of a "single window" for providing information and services to refugees, reducing document processing times, and simplifying qualification recognition procedures (possibly with temporary recognition).
4. **Strengthening Inter-agency Cooperation:** Development of clear coordination mechanisms between the Ministries of Labor, Health, Education, and Social Protection to ensure a comprehensive approach to integration.
5. **Combating Stigmatization:** Conducting information campaigns to raise public awareness of the rights and contributions of refugees, and strengthening measures to combat discrimination.

The implementation of these recommendations will not only improve the situation of refugees but also strengthen the social sustainability and development of the Republic of Moldova as a whole.

# Policy Recommendations: Detailed Action Plan

## Legislative Harmonization and Rights Protection

**Short-term Goal (6 months):** Full alignment of national legislation with international standards for refugee protection (1951 UN Convention, EU directives) to ensure equal access to labor, social rights, and healthcare services.

- **Responsible Bodies:** Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, Ministry of Health, Parliament of the Republic of Moldova.
- **Specific Steps:**
  - a. **Analysis and Amendment:** Conduct a detailed analysis of the Asylum Law, Social Assistance Law, Health Insurance Law, and other relevant acts. Develop and submit to Parliament amendments guaranteeing refugees equal access to benefits, family support programs, free health insurance, and psychological support services.
  - b. **Consultations:** Organize a series of roundtables and public hearings involving NGO representatives, the academic community, and refugees themselves to gather feedback on the proposed amendments.
  - c. **Elimination of Discrimination:** Include clear provisions prohibiting discrimination based on refugee status in labor and social legislation.
- **Success Indicators:** Adoption of at least 3 key legislative amendments within 6 months; increase in refugee coverage by social benefits by 20%.
- **Budget:** Engagement of international experts for legislative analysis (estimated \$20,000); organizational expenses for consultations (estimated \$5,000).



## Simplification of Qualification Recognition Procedures and Access to the Labor Market

**Medium-term Goal (12-18 months):** Reduce the timeframe for recognizing foreign qualifications from 6-12 months to 3 months and simplify refugees' access to entrepreneurial activities, increasing their employment rate.

- **Responsible Bodies:** Ministry of Education and Research, National Employment Agency, Ministry of Economy, Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- **Specific Steps:**
  - a. **"One-Stop Shop":** Create a centralized online portal and a physical "one-stop office" at the National Employment Agency for submitting documents for qualification recognition and receiving consultations on employment/entrepreneurship.
  - b. **Accelerated Procedure:** Implement a mechanism for temporary recognition of diplomas and qualifications for high-demand professions, allowing refugees to start working before the full procedure is completed. Simplify the list of required documents, possibly based on a declarative principle with subsequent verification.
  - c. **Targeted Programs:** Launch a state program "Integration through Work," including free Romanian language courses, retraining and professional training programs in in-demand specialties (e.g., IT, construction, healthcare), and mentorship programs for aspiring entrepreneurs.
  - d. **Financial Support:** Provide subsidies for employers hiring refugees and microcredits for refugees wishing to start their own businesses.
- **Success Indicators:** Reduction of average qualification recognition time to 3 months; increase in refugee employment rate from the current 15-20% to 40% within 2 years; creation of at least 50 new refugee businesses.
- **Budget:** IT platform development (estimated \$30,000); funding for retraining programs and subsidies (estimated \$100,000 per year); personnel costs for the "one-stop shop" (estimated \$40,000 per year).



# Policy Recommendations: Detailed Action Plan

## Effective Information Campaigns and Combating Stigmatization

**Ongoing Task (continuously):** Organize systematic, culturally adapted information campaigns for refugees about their rights, available opportunities, and services, as well as for the general population to combat stigmatization.

- **Responsible Bodies:** Government of the Republic of Moldova (through the inter-ministerial commission), Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and Research, People's Advocate Office, NGOs.
- **Specific Steps:**
  - a. **Multilingual Information Resources:** Develop and disseminate printed and online materials (brochures, websites, mobile applications) in Russian, Ukrainian, English, and Romanian. Include information on legal aid, education, healthcare, housing, and employment. Utilize the experience of developing a "Practical Guide in 4 Languages."
  - b. **Media Campaigns:** Conduct regular media campaigns (TV, radio, social networks) featuring positive refugee integration stories, aimed at dispelling myths and combating stigmatization. Engage public figures and opinion leaders.
  - c. **Educational Programs:** Implement educational modules in schools and universities to raise awareness about refugee culture and the importance of tolerance.
  - d. **"Hotline" and Legal Aid:** Launch a 24/7 multilingual "hotline" for refugees and expand the network of free legal aid centers.
- **Success Indicators:** 30% increase in refugees seeking information and services; 10% reduction in negative public opinion towards refugees in surveys.
- **Budget:** Development and printing of information materials (estimated \$15,000 per year); media campaigns (estimated \$50,000 per year); support for "hotline" and lawyers (estimated \$30,000 per year).



## Strengthening Inter-sectoral Cooperation and Coordination

**Long-term Goal (2-3 years):** Create a sustainable platform for effective interaction between government bodies, the academic community, NGOs, and the business sector to implement a comprehensive and coordinated integration policy.

- **Responsible Bodies:** Inter-ministerial Commission on Refugee Integration under the Government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Economy.
- **Specific Steps:**
  - a. **Unified Strategy:** Develop and adopt a national refugee integration strategy with clear roles and responsibilities for each department, as well as monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.
  - b. **Dialogue Platform:** Regularly hold meetings of the inter-ministerial commission, expanding its composition to include representatives from NGOs, businesses, and the academic sector. Organize annual Refugee Integration Forums, following the example of the successfully conducted workshop with over 80 stakeholders.
  - c. **Capacity Building:** Invest in training government officials (like the 45 trained law students) on refugee-related issues, cross-cultural communication, and international law.
  - d. **International Partnership:** Actively engage international organizations (UNHCR, IOM, EU) for experience exchange, financial and technical support, and to study successful integration models from EU countries.
  - e. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Develop a system for regular data collection and evaluation of refugee integration progress, including annual reports for the Government and the public.
- **Success Indicators:** Approval of the national integration strategy; increase in the number of joint projects between the state, NGOs, and businesses; annual progress reports.
- **Budget:** Creation and functioning of the Inter-ministerial Commission secretariat (estimated \$25,000 per year); conducting training and seminars (estimated \$10,000 per year); expenses for national forums (estimated \$15,000 per year).



# Practical Integration Tools

## Developed Resources to Support Refugees and Organizations

As part of the project, key practical tools were developed to provide comprehensive support to refugees and organizations working on their integration in the Republic of Moldova, simplifying adaptation and promoting self-reliance.

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## 1. Practical Guide to Entrepreneurship

### "Starting a Business in the Republic of Moldova: A Guide for Refugees"

This guide, developed **from September 15 to November 15, 2025**, based on consultations with **refugees**, serves as a roadmap for starting and developing a business in the Republic of Moldova. It contains **over 60 pages** of detailed information and is available in **two languages**: , Russian and English.

#### Guide Contents:

- **Full spectrum of information:** Includes legal requirements, registration procedures, tax obligations, employment aspects, and market access.
- **Financial opportunities:** Information on state support, grants, microfinance, and loans for small businesses.
- **Practical tools:** Contains sample documents and checklists for various stages of running a business.

The guide is available in print and electronic formats.

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## 2. Educational Programs

### Training Programs for Lawyers and Specialists

The developed training modules aim to enhance the qualifications of specialists (including **30 law students**) working with refugees, ensuring a deep understanding of their legal status and needs. The **ASEM Business Law Clinic** was a key partner.

#### Curriculum Details:

- **Legal foundations:** Overview of international refugee law and national legislation of the Republic of Moldova.
- **Assistance practice:** Methodologies for legal support, ethical aspects, and cross-cultural communication.

The programs included interactive lectures, case studies, and practical workshops. Participants highly valued the applicability of the acquired knowledge. Expansion of the program and regular content updates are planned.



# Beneficiaries' Voices: Roundtable Results

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## Language Barriers

Young refugees noted that a lack of knowledge of the Romanian language is one of the main obstacles to accessing education and employment, despite their high motivation for integration.

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## Information Vacuum

Participants highlighted a severe lack of accessible information about their rights, available services, and opportunities, which creates a feeling of helplessness and isolation.

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## Recognition of Qualifications

Many highly qualified refugees cannot work in their field due to complex and lengthy procedures for recognizing diplomas and professional certificates.

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These testimonies underscore the need for a systemic approach to removing integration barriers and creating a more inclusive environment for refugees.

# Conclusion and Next Steps

## Conclusion: Achievements and Way Forward

The project has achieved significant success in integrating refugees in Moldova. We engaged refugees, trained law students, and gathered stakeholders, laying the foundation for a comprehensive approach to integration.

### Key Project Achievements:

- Development of a Practical Guide on refugee rights and services (60+ pages), available in 2 languages.
- Publication of two academic articles on refugee rights in Revista Intellectus.
- Establishment of a partnership with ASEM Business Legal Clinic to provide continuous legal assistance.

### Priorities and Concrete Steps for the Future:

1. **Legislative Harmonization:** Reducing qualification recognition periods from 12 to 3 months and simplifying access to the labor market and education.
2. **Scaling and Awareness:** Distributing copies of the Practical Guide and launching a national awareness campaign. Goal: to increase refugee employment rates from 15-20% to 40% by the end of 2026.
3. **Partnership Development:** Signing MoUs with key ministries and local authorities, establishing a coordination council for integration.
4. **Monitoring and Research:** Developing a KPI system to assess the effectiveness of measures and conducting research.
5. **Securing Funding:** An additional funding is required for the second phase of the project.

### Call to Action:

- **Government:** Support legislative reforms and integrate recommendations.
- **NGOs and International Organizations:** Join partnerships and expand programs.
- **Business Sector:** Offer employment opportunities and mentorship.



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