



Siraj Centers

COMMUNITY-LED ECONOMIC RECOVERY
AND RESILIENCE



The Near East Foundation (NEF) works with civil society organisations (CSOs) in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria to strengthen the livelihoods of refugees, members of their host communities, and returnees. NEF and its CSO partners offer livelihood services through community hubs, known as Siraj Centers, which operate under the Siraj Center “brand”. By providing trainings, resources and referrals, NEF is supporting community-driven opportunities for safe and productive income generation. *Photo: Participants in NEF’s business development training at a Siraj Center in Taanayel, Lebanon.*

Overview

The Near East Foundation’s Siraj Centers serve as one-stop shops to help vulnerable people start home-based income generating activities or find employment in communities that host large numbers of displaced people. They function to help vulnerable people build their economic resilience and achieve self-reliance through training, access to resources, and peer networking.

Using the Siraj model, NEF partners with local Community-based Organizations (CBOs) to provide the CBOs with a standardized set of operating procedures, branded information products, training, and ongoing support. NEF trains and certifies key members of their staff to become master trainers in entrepreneurship.

Through the Siraj Centers, NEF partners to support refugees and vulnerable local citizens learn how to create and manage small enterprises, develop work skills tailored to the labor market, access financial and non-financial resources

to start income-generating activities, access the market, and gain skills and information to cope with displacement.

The success and sustainability of the Centers is founded on strong relationships with local communities. The Siraj Centers use a micro-franchise model, supporting existing CBOS to adopt standardized training curricula, information products, and operating procedures and quality standards. The microfranchise model builds Siraj as a brand – with connotations of refuge, a beacon of hope and rebuilding the future – and facilitates replication in new communities.

Results

In 2015, NEF developed a model for community-based livelihoods hubs, Siraj Centers, to deliver inclusive and integrated livelihood and protection services in hard to reach communities. This includes business development and acceleration tools/services, employment readiness and placement, and agricultural development training. As of 2021 NEF has 15 Siraj Centers in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Syria, and helped 26,500 refugees, IDPs, returnees



Ali started a beekeeping business in Iraq with support from his local Siraj Center.

and vulnerable community members access services and information, gain new skills and create a safe, sustainable livelihoods opportunities.

In Jordan and Lebanon, 4,409 beneficiaries received business development support and 3,609 received cash grants to start/expand their businesses or income-generating activities. In 98% of cases, training/grants led to business creation/expansion and 70% of grantees surveyed reported an increase in household income. Siraj Centers in Syria have supported 1,687 individuals (1,447 farmers and 240 food processors), indirectly benefitting approximately 10,172 individuals. And in Iraq, Siraj Centers will provide livelihoods support for more than 1,000 internally displaced people and returnees with a focus on micro- and home-based enterprises, vocational and employability training, and agricultural livelihoods support.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, NEF rapidly adapted the model to an interactive e-learning platform: Siraj Digital. Siraj Digital's on demand, self-directed courses and services are delivered online and through accessible mobile messaging apps. Siraj Digital enables aspiring entrepreneurs to grow and sustain their businesses through tested courses, one-on-one mentoring, and networking opportunities. Since April 2020, Siraj Digital has graduated 3,372 entrepreneurs in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, working with 11 local partner organizations to co-deliver services.

Siraj services are being further strengthened through Siraj Networks, peer business support networks and peer-to-peer mentorship, as well as Siraj Finance, community-embedded access to finance/lending programs that make revolving funds available to Siraj graduates.

Services

The Centers are open to the community and offer safe access to training, information, and referrals while also fostering interaction, sharing, and social cohesion. These services include:

1. **Information** on demand-driven employment opportunities, the work permit process, refugee rights, business formalization, and potential risks and protection strategies in informal work.
2. **Training** in financial literacy and life skills related to livelihood activities and economic empowerment. Trainings include savings and resource management, negotiation, management skills, career guidance etc. When needed, vocational training is provided to help improve participants skills to maximize the success of their chosen business.
3. **Entrepreneurship and employment support** that is market-based, results-driven, and innovative. This support readies participants to create viable business plans and to start micro and small businesses or to find traditional employment.
4. **Resources** and materials on business planning and management, employment opportunities and job readiness, and a platform for matching service providers with opportunities. The business development curriculum includes methods in developing a business plan, determining profit/loss, marketing and branding.
5. **Business acceleration services** that help clients expand existing businesses. Services include mentorships, network building, small-group coaching, job growth, market access, and product and service upgrades. This component not only helps with business sustainability, but also encourages opportunities for participants to partner with each other.



Tamam at work in her kitchen she updated with help from her local Siraj Center and financial support from Siraj Finance.

6. **Referrals** to other service providers, vocational training programs, education programs/schools, and NGO programs in other sectors (e.g. winterization, education, microfinance resources).
7. **Support for women and youth** through awareness raising about issues associated with poverty, such as child marriage, the negative impact of leaving school, and workers' rights. The Centers also provide targeted training on social empowerment, bargaining power, agency, and financial resource management.

Value Added

By addressing life skills, career counseling, and business planning in safe environments, the Siraj Centers present an integrated approach that is expected to yield improved long-term economic and social well-being for both displaced populations and their host communities. The Siraj Centers offer a model that is:

1. **Replicable:** a community-managed, low-cost model.
2. **Responsive:** delivers sustainable support that is responsive to needs prioritized by local communities.
3. **Results-driven:** integrates proven methods and tools developed by NEF and its partners.
4. **Transferable:** develops skills that are portable and can be used to support livelihoods in Jordan, Lebanon, other resettlement countries, or upon return to Syria.
5. **Inclusive:** supports men, women, and adolescents with a focus on those considered most vulnerable.



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