ALLOWING refugees to work can address Malaysia's labour shortages, says the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF).

However, many of the employers interested in employing refugees who are here are wary about doing so as it is considered illegal in Malaysia, says its executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan (pic).

“The MEF is supportive of any move to allow refugees who are here to work since they are not allowed to work formally. It would be much cheaper to hire them compared to bringing in additional foreign workers as there would be no transportation and other costs involved,” he says.
Employers are required to pay a levy for every foreign worker they bring in, on top of the visa, security bond and immigration processing fees. This can cost over RM2,500 and does not include other costs such as insurance, health checks and transport.

Shamsuddin nevertheless stresses that there should be some qualifying conditions for refugees to be given the right to work, such as having been in the country for a few years. This is to prevent some foreigners from trying to make their way here to work, which he says, is not good for the country.

Another concern is the use of fake UNHCR cards, he adds, proposing for a government mechanism to regulate the hiring of refugees. Undocumented foreign workers already pose a problem in Malaysia – it is estimated that for one documented worker in the country, there are 2.5 undocumented workers. As of December 2018, there were 1.76 million documented foreign workers in the country.

Echoing MEF’s stand, business associations interviewed say they are willing to take in refugees to meet their manpower shortage.

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) president Datuk Soh Tian Lai says they generally welcome a move to grant refugees the legal status to work as the industry continues to face shortage of manpower. However, it is crucial that there is proper screening to ensure that the refugees are genuine, having undergone vetting by and registration under the UNHCR programme and issued with a valid UNHCR card, he tells Sunday Star.

“The refugees will also require work and cultural orientation to familiarise themselves with the Malaysian employment environment.

“We believe that many refugees have skills and are able to fill many levels of employment within the industry. Employers also need to have clear guidelines on the procedures of employing refugees,” he says.

Soh also cautions that any move to allow refugees to work could become a backdoor entry for foreign workers who are unable to enter the country legally.

As such, he said the process must be managed well including implementing a proper recruitment and monitoring system to ensure that only genuine and qualified refugees are legalised to work.

“It is also important that all enforcement authorities are briefed thoroughly and recognise the UNHCR documents to avoid unnecessary detention of refugees as well as disruption to business operations,” he says.

For Master Builders Association Malaysia president Foo Chek Lee, while they would agree with the policy of opening up work to refugees, the industry was picky about those they employed.

“We cannot simply take any Tom, Dick and Harry. We want quality and skillful workers who have some background in construction.

“We can’t have crooked structures,” he says.
Noting that there is a shortage of workers in construction since Indonesian and Bangladeshi workers are not coming into the country anymore, Foo concedes that many construction firms are not willing to train new workers as it is costly and time-consuming.

Malaysian Indian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association president Ayoob Khan raises doubt that refugees would want to work in the restaurant industry here.

“We do have a shortage of workers, but I am not sure if refugees wanted to work in our industry.

“If they agree to work there is no problem. But would they want to work here?,“ he says, adding that some refugees had tried working in the industry, albeit illegally, but generally did not stay for very long.

Human Resources Minister M. Kulasegaran in an earlier interview with The Star said one of the biggest challenges he faced since taking office in May last year was the “never-ending issue” of foreign workers.

“This was due to the extraordinary demands from new industries that have emerged in the country.

“It’s a big problem for them as they claim that they need more workers because there are no (locals willing to work) here,” he had said.

However, he did not respond to the Sunday Star’s requests for comments on the possibility of allowing refugees in Malaysia to work to meet the country’s labour needs.