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UNHCR Case Study: Digital Inclusion for Refugees - Responses to COVID-19

From UNHCR's experience in delivering interventions that support connectivity to refugees, a strong and committed multi-stakeholder alliance is key to success. In response to a global pandemic, leveraging comparative advantages across partnerships and developing effective, efficient collaboration is more vital than ever. The Broadband Commission's Agenda for Action has been a powerful vehicle for bringing together government representatives, the private sector, international organizations, and UN Agencies such as UNHCR to build not only a consensus of the challenges faced in maintaining digital services in times, but building strategies and practical solutions to expand such services to marginalized populations such as refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, so they are not left-behind.

Much included under the three pillars of the Agenda for Action speaks to the connectivity challenges refugee communities face. Specific reference is made to enhancing resilience of networks in refugee hosting locations. Ensuring resilient connectivity is vital as refugees are 50% less likely to have access to connectivity in rural locations compared to their hosting communities.¹ Furthermore, research² undertaken by the GSMA in partnership with UNHCR demonstrates that refugees face many barriers to access. It is in these contexts where networks and access are fragile that there is the highest chance of disconnection or increasing barriers for already underserved populations, who may be the most vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19. These barriers also extend to affordability – another provision of the Agenda for Action – which is most frequently cited as one of the key barriers to digital access for refugees, specifically being less likely to afford devices or airtime. With respect to safe use of online services for informed and educated societies, access to digital technology presents vast opportunities but is not without risks; protection is not something that manifests only in the physical world but also in the digital one. Many assessments of the information and communication needs of refugee populations demonstrate a significant gap in both vital information as well digital literacy barriers.

Reflecting on UNHCR's efforts to support the Agenda for Action

UNHCR has an extensive presence of staff in refugee hosting locations, densely populated camps or in poorer urban areas, that have inadequate health infrastructure and WASH – water, sanitation and hygiene – facilities. One of the first principles of the UNHCR response is to stay and deliver. Continuation of humanitarian assistance means community members can get the support they need to stay safe and healthy, minimizing risk of infection but also to meet their basic rights and needs in turbulent times. UNHCR has been continuing service delivery to refugee populations and their hosting communities and across the organization country teams are adapting to social distancing measures and other restrictions specific to each specific context.

In support of the Agenda for Action, UNHCR has taken measures to advance digital access and inclusion for refugees to ensure they are not left behind. Supported by the government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, UNHCR has opened a dedicated call for proposals to its country operations seeking to address barriers to digital access for the most marginalized community members less likely to be included such as people with disabilities. UNHCR has issued guidance on interventions to enhance digital inclusion of refugees and their hosting

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5770d43c4/connecting-refugees.html>

² <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Digital-Lives-of-Refugees.pdf>

communities in response to COVID-19³ and in key programmatic areas such as connected education and cash assistance. Local teams are devising approaches to both re-purpose existing interventions and devise innovative solutions. Specifically, focus is being paid to the most vulnerable community members least likely to have access to digital channels to ensure that no community members regardless of age, gender or disability are left behind.

Where connected centers have been a common modality for providing connectivity for refugees - also in connected classrooms - this is shifting in light of COVID-19. From research we've conducted alongside the GSMA, we know device access remains low in many refugee hosting communities. UNHCR is providing information on good practices when sharing devices to ensure this is done safely but maximizing the benefit of what few devices exist within these communities - in particular smartphones. Specific interventions are being explored to enhance device access, but this relies also on support from donors and industry, given the scale of the challenge.

For engaging with communities and providing information about not only COVID-19 but on continued support provided by humanitarian organizations, UNHCR is maximizing the potential of mobile and internet-based communication channels such as contact centers, web platforms, social media channels and messaging apps. Teams are working to make these as inclusive as possible and coordinating with other actors including *inter alia* the WHO, other UN Agencies and the Red Cross to align messaging and ensure our collective accountability to our constituents when remote engagement becomes the norm.

Continued investment in operational activities to support digital access and inclusion

UNHCR through its Innovation Service operates a specific programme seeking to enhance the digital inclusion of forcibly displaced persons and their hosting communities. Through this initiative, again supported by Luxembourg, UNHCR develops institutional approaches to digital inclusion founded in learning from work at national level. Beyond project funding, the programme aims to generate learning and build out UNHCR's capacity to programme digital inclusion interventions at country level providing technical support to teams. Further the learning agenda also encompasses research into emerging issues from community-networks to digital risk and innovative last-mile access models, in partnership with specialists in these areas. Specific attention has been given to understanding⁴ and facilitating enabling regulatory environments for inclusion. Specifically, in Uganda, UNHCR has been supporting the government to create a more enabling regulatory environment. Following a directive last year allowing acceptance of refugee ID's and technical efforts supported by UNHCR, Mobile Operators are now electronically authenticating refugees' identity credentials and providing a legal pathway to getting connected. As such, SIM card registration amongst refugee communities has increased significantly with preliminary internal data demonstrating at least a 50% increase in mobile subscriptions among the refugee adult population.

Humanitarian cash assistance is a quick and efficient means of getting assistance to people quickly, empowering families to deal with the crisis and meet their basic needs, mitigating some of the negative socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in communities. UNHCR is maximizing the potential of connectivity to provide cash assistance to refugees and other displaced populations. Some 80% of UNHCR's cash is now being distributed through bank accounts or mobile money and over a third is digital. UNHCR is also seizing opportunities to further improve refugee's and other displaced population's legal access to digital financial services, as COVID-19-related restrictions open up space in the area of digital cash, liaising with central banks and telecommunications authorities. UNHCR is also topping up cash grants with allocation for connectivity and airtime, to ensure communities are able to afford vital communications services and access e.g. digital learning opportunities.

As an example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo UNHCR and its partner INTERSOS have launched cash assistance through mobile money to nearly 6,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) living in the towns of Beni and Butembo in North Kivu, which is the second most affected region in DRC with COVID-19 cases, after Kinshasa. In Rwanda, following Government recommendations to encourage digital channels and contactless payments, over 140,000 refugees in all camps and in urban areas now have access to mobile money in addition to bank accounts and cards. Further, some 40,000 urban refugee households in Kampala, Uganda, are receiving cash assistance through mobile money, to cover for COVID-induced loss of income.

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/guidance-note-connectivity-refugees-covid-19-supporting-persons-concern-s-digital>

⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/displaced-and-disconnected/>

UNHCR is using connectivity to support education continuity in response to COVID-19. As schools are shut, UNHCR is also pursuing alternative options to ensure the continuity of learning through digital channels, aligned to national initiatives. For example, UNHCR is working with ministries to extend national digital resources to refugee and host communities through creative uses of WhatsApp, Kolibri and other adaptive digital platforms. UNHCR is also exploring the potential to repurpose or procure additional connected classroom hardware to ensure refugees have individual devices to connect and learn. In addition, UNHCR is working on robust back-to-school plans that leverage connected education centers and content to support catch-up and remedial programmes for students who may have been unable to continue studying (with a particular focus on women). These back-to-school programmes will also focus on increasing digital literacy to better prepare communities to engage in alternative learning approaches, which is important as schools reopen with phased or staggered admissions. UNHCR is also extending existing and alternative forms of local network infrastructure and working in partnership with MNOs and other internet service providers to support continued delivery, particularly looking to establish pro-rated or free connections to national content platforms. Linked to this, UNHCR is undertaking activities leveraging digital technology to enhance vocational training and online work opportunities.⁵

To ensure that refugees and hosting communities have access to essential information on COVID-19 Risks, Transmission, Prevention and Treatment options UNHCR has scaled Risk Communication and Community Engagement initiatives across all operations. In light of the physical distancing restrictions digital platforms have become an essential channel to communicate life-saving information. Operations have increasingly adopted online tools, including sharing essential information via Facebook, through the establishment of messaging groups (i.e. using WhatsApp and/or Telegram) At a global and regional level, UNHCR has actively engaged in interagency Risk Communications and Community Engagement work sharing organizational learning to develop practical guidance for humanitarian organizations to quickly adapt to online risk communications.

Lessons Learned

Through UNHCR's response and support of the Broadband Commission's agenda for action, there are a number of lessons learned that not only stand to better position UNHCR and other humanitarian responders to prepare for unprecedented crises like COVID-19, but also improve practice in day-to-day humanitarian interventions.

Firstly, COVID-19 has demonstrated how critical digital technology is to humanitarian response. In the last decades it has played an increasingly important and pivotal role. Since 2012 with Nethope providing connectivity to communities in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, through to increasing and more predominant interventions supporting connectivity through the Mediterranean crisis in response to flight from Syria⁶, increasing focus has been given to the topic of connectivity as aid by large humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR, Nethope and WFP (through the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster) to new organizations bringing technologists to humanitarian causes and many private sector technology companies themselves providing support in times of crisis. With COVID-19 it has become clear how foundational it is to humanitarian operations and as a topic has moved from the periphery to being a vital supporting pillar of effective humanitarian aid and development responses. There is a need for humanitarian organizations and government – specifically those entities regulating or promoting digital access – to cooperate to ensure alignment between national plans and humanitarian intervention.

Secondly, communities have the right to be informed about issues and decisions affecting their lives. Information is a form of assistance in itself; access to accurate information allows people to make informed decisions to protect themselves and their families. Connectivity is vital to this effort. UNHCR's Age Gender and Diversity Policy notes the criticality of transparently communicating to refugees in languages, formats, and media that are contextually appropriate and accessible for all groups in a community, including children and persons with disabilities. This increasingly results in using digital channels for engagement as community preferences evolve and illustrates the importance of digital inclusion is to enhancing humanitarian accountability to affected people.

Through the response to COVID-19, UNHCR has operationally made strides forward in learning more about what works and what issues need to be considered when designing and delivering solutions and ensuring equitable access, including for the most marginalized. These issues cover data protection, omnichannel

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/brochures/5ecfacab4/covid-19-emerging-practices-livelihoods-economic-inclusion.html>

⁶ https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Internet-Governance-in-Displacement_WEB042020.pdf

approaches and building meaningful transactions that meet community needs. By putting communities at the center when developing digital solutions humanitarian organizations can better understand which online channels are used, and - importantly - trusted. Working with existing digital channels, for example messaging apps or preferred social media sites, strengthens both trust in information being shared, improves organization's ability to identify rumor and misinformation and leverages existing community capacities.

UNHCR has also seen the importance of ensuring all schools and communities are connected and are able to benefit from the continuous learning initiatives that might be required on account of physical distancing measures, but also as a support to quality education within the classroom. COVID-19 revealed a dramatic digital divide that disproportionately affected marginalized learners, including refugees who on account of limited infrastructure and limited digital literacy were hindered from continuing with their studies at the same pace as their peers. It is likely that education systems will continue to look towards digital and connected solutions in times of crisis, which is why it's vital that the connectivity and infrastructure required to enable access in these communities is prioritized.

Finally, this crisis has demonstrated investments in innovation are well founded. This is not only a matter of enhancing use and application of digital technology in humanitarian assistance, but developing a culture of agility and adaptability that can capitalize on the opportunities it provides and mitigate risks that inevitably emerge. UNHCR has seen its many field teams adapt to changing circumstances, setting up new initiatives in rapid response to changing environments. The ability to pivot humanitarian action in light of unpredictable external factors will be increasingly important in a rapidly evolving connected society.