



Digitalisation and Flight: How Can Donors Leverage Digital Technologies to Support Refugees?

Summary

Increasing global access to digital technologies is creating opportunities and challenges for donors and the humanitarian agencies with which they work to support people fleeing from war, massive human rights abuses and other emergencies. Digital tools make it easier for refugees to reach out to each other and humanitarian agencies, and can support greater efficiency in institutional efforts to provide essentials like medicine, food and money.

However, the effective use of digital tools to support refugee processes comes with a set of challenges. The key question for donors is: What are the existing approaches to digitalisation in refugee response, and the lessons learned, that donors can use to inform how they support digitalisation in refugee processes? To address this question, there are three things donors should focus on when developing a digital strategy for supporting refugees:

- Donors must avoid the problem of “technology looking for a problem to solve”; knowing how refugee communities already use digital tools is the best way to avoid this. Generally, refugees themselves will have found innovative ways to meet their information needs, and donors can provide financial and technical assistance to support access to the existing technologies.
- Building digital tools from scratch is an option when there is no existing tool available to meet the needs of refugees or workers in the field. Custom tools are often best deployed at

the organisational level for managing information or resources. Donors should look to innovation and technology hubs, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) Innovation Service, to organise partnerships between United Nations (UN) agencies, refugee-focused NGOs and technology firms.

- Donors must be realistic about what to expect from a digital solution. Technology can be useful, but it is not a silver bullet for solving every information management challenge. Ethics and safety issues must be central in the design of any digital intervention. Donors must take responsibility in making sure the partners they work with can meet the data protection and privacy standards outlined by the International Committee of the Red Cross’s (ICRC) handbook on digital data protection.

This policy brief provides a review of how refugees use digital tools, gives examples from organisations deploying digital technologies in the field, and discusses the effectiveness of and the ethical issues surrounding the use of digital technologies to support refugees. By putting the needs of refugees at the centre of their digital strategies and working with implementing organisations, such as UNHCR and Mercy Corps, to develop technology solutions that meet the needs of refugees and field staff safely and ethically, donors can get the most out of digital tools for supporting refugees.

Digital tools used by refugees

Digital tools and increased access to information influence individual refugees’ decisions about how to stay safe and seek shelter, access services in camps and transit points, and integrate when they arrive in a camp or safe place. Mobile phones have come to play a crucial role in all these phases of a refugee’s journey, acting as a single platform on which apps, video, and SMS text messaging can filter through. When refugees resettle, programmes that support access to computers and internet can help with integration.

There is significant evidence that refugees use mobile phones during flight to gather information on threats and identify the safest routes to camps. Data gathered by UNHCR (2016) shows that refugees use mobile phones to gather information on safe places to settle, and to alert family and friend networks if they are detained, or if there is a risk of raids or attacks on fleeing populations. Once refugees reach camps, they are finding ways to use digital technologies to maintain public goods such as education. Students are more likely to access information using smartphones than they are with desktop computers. This has led to teachers in refugee communities taking up their profession in camps, and organising lessons and resources using software platforms like WhatsApp. This allows them to connect with students, and network with other teachers and organisations that support education and schooling in camps.

For those refugees that settle in a new country, evidence shows that access to computers and the internet can play a key role in helping settle into a new community. In New Zealand and Australia, researchers have found that government sponsored programmes that subsidise access to the internet and computers significantly increase integration (Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Alam & Imran, 2015). Refugees use the internet for translating, finding social services, and maintaining contact with family elsewhere. The success that Australia and New Zealand have experienced with their

e-government programmes provides lessons that can be applied in developing country contexts. To work around a lack of wired internet, donors can subsidise mobile phone-based internet access. Online tools and resources accessed via mobile phone can aid in the process of integration, which is stressful under the best of circumstances. By making it easier for individuals to access online translation tools, stay in contact with family, and develop social or professional networks in new settings, donors’ support will help refugees access social and economic support networks during the flight process.

Existing digital approaches to refugee response

The UN and many NGOs, like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Mercy Corps, have put significant resources into developing apps for refugees. Private sector companies are also finding ways to be involved, developing apps for individuals and humanitarian agencies. Going beyond apps, agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) have found innovative ways to use mobile money transfer systems to ensure that refugees can buy food and other goods. The examples below could guide donors who are thinking of supporting either a passive information app, or doing something more direct, like using mobile phone-based cash transfer software.

Refugee.info, a project delivered by the IRC and Mercy Corps, includes a website and an app that provide up-to-date, geographically-relevant information to refugees when they arrive at camps or new locations. The IRC and Mercy Corps worked with Google, Microsoft, Trip Advisor, Cisco and Twilio to develop the app and corresponding website, which register a user’s location and provide updated information about legal procedures, where to seek services, and conditions in the local area. The app provides information in English, Arabic, and Farsi. This app’s value is that it provides refugees with information that is useful when engaging with various types of services and agencies in different

Figure 1: How does a mobile phone aid the flight process?

	Departure	Transit	Arrival
Smart-phone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information on threats gathered across social media and SMS text messages Access to crowdsourced data on risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Map applications aid in navigation Collection of information using social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Web applications, such as info.eu, aid in filing refugee status requests and gathering local information
Feature phone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information about threats gathered either by voice call or SMS text message 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather basic data for registration via SMS survey software Phone can facilitate cash transfers

Source: Author

countries. While this app is built for use across Europe and requires input from several large NGOs and private sector companies, there is a network of smaller start-ups that are developing localised digital tools for refugees that can be accessed at different stages of flight.

Apps are not the only digital tools that can help refugees in daily life. The WFP has implemented a cash transfer programme in refugee camps in Cameroon using mobile money technology to facilitate the cash transfers. Mobile money is a technology that allows cash value to be transferred by SMS text messages that link to virtual accounts held by the mobile phone users. Users receive a code via text message and can then either cash out at a kiosk or use text messages to transfer money to vendors when shopping. In Cameroon, the WFP's cash transfer programme focuses on single women, allowing them to shop for food and goods at their convenience and to save money in their mobile money accounts. This kind of tool is useful not only for people in camps, but also allows WFP to more effectively track the distribution of resources and improve its monitoring and evaluation.

Using digital technologies effectively and ethically

A general challenge facing donors, especially those that do not have staff expertise in the technology space, is how to efficiently, ethically, and safely support the use of digital tools in the refugee process. While there are good examples of how individuals and agencies have successfully used digital tools, there are also risks and challenges that donors should be aware of.

Risk #1: Technology looking for a problem to solve

It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing a new, exciting digital tool, and then go looking for a way to use it in refugee response. This rarely leads to sustainable outcomes. Instead, donors should focus on the problem and then identify the

most technologically simple solution for solving it. If the majority of people have smartphones, for example, then building an app that allows people to fill out registration forms in their native language, or setting up secure contact channels through which refugees can reach out to each other and humanitarian agencies directly, are practical solutions. If there is no internet access in a camp, but there is cellular coverage, bulk SMS text messaging could be a practical way to quickly disseminate information or transfer cash.

Risk #2: Getting in over your head

Developing an effective digital solution is difficult. A well-designed app is often the result of hundreds of hours of work, involving specialised expertise in software development and social science. A practical solution for a donor agency would be to work with UN and NGO innovation services to develop digital tools. UNHCR's Innovation Service has acted as a hub for developing digital tools to aid in the refugee process, as well as providing opportunities for refugees themselves to engage in the technology development process. Innovation offices in UN agencies and large NGOs often have the unique mix of technical and policy knowledge that may not be readily available in donor agencies, and thus make good partners when developing digital tools for managing refugee processes.

Risk #3: Underestimating the complexity of data protection and duty of care

While digital tools, when effectively deployed, can make communication with refugee communities more efficient, any organisation that uses these technologies must address the complex ethical and legal issues that come with handling the personal data of vulnerable populations. When messages are sent on platforms like Facebook, or as SMS text messages on a cellular carrier's network, that data is owned by Facebook or stored by the cellular carrier. Depending on the host government's privacy laws, this can

	Forms and documentation	Data collection	Resource management
Smartphone/tablet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile phone-friendly web forms can be used to register new arrivals • Data can be stored on cloud servers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data can be collected using SMS and integrated voice recognition software • Opportunities to use apps like WhatsApp, to do outreach with refugees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to cloud services across institutions • Allows staff to access data across multiple camps
Feature phone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registration and individual information can be gathered using SMS surveys or integrated voice recognition software 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMS surveys and integrated voice recognition software can be used to gather data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feature phones are ubiquitous in developing country settings • Mobile money technology makes tracking cash disbursements easier and predictable

Source: Author

put people at risk of surveillance. Human traffickers and other criminal organisations can also use digital tools, especially social media, to target refugees. Donors must make a legal and ethical determination about whether implementing organisations have the resources to safely manage data provided by refugees, and whether the sensitive nature of their work means it is safer to do offline. The current edition of the ICRC handbook on digital data protection in humanitarian action can serve as a resource for donors (Kuner & Marelli, 2017).

Recommendations

Digital technologies provide many avenues for increasing the impact of donors' refugee support programmes. While they are not a silver bullet, digital tools make it easier for refugees to reach out to each other and to humanitarian agencies, and can support greater efficiency across institutional efforts to provide essentials like medicine, food and money.

Often the best innovations come from within refugee communities. Donors can avoid the trap of "technology looking for a problem to solve" by understanding how refugees already use digital tools in their daily lives, and understanding how they are already innovating without donor help. In many cases, refugees are already meeting

their needs with available digital technologies, and donors can focus on providing financial and technical resources to scale existing efforts.

This kind of local-level knowledge is also necessary when institutions build tools from scratch. Partnerships between NGOs and technology firms can lead to the creation of highly effective, scalable applications. Donors can use UN and NGO innovation offices as hubs for linking NGOs and technology firms, taking advantage of the unique technical knowledge that these kinds of offices have on hand.

To get the most out of digital tools however, donors must be realistic about programme implementers' capacities to develop and use new technologies ethically and safely. If a donor is funding a third party to implement a project, the donor needs to make sure the third party can provide data security and duty of care for the people using the app or digital tool. In some cases, a digital solution will not be appropriate from an ethical or legal perspective.

The opportunities to improve the lives and experiences of refugees with effective use of digital technologies are myriad. By being prepared to manage the complex issues that arise when working with digital tools, donors can play a significant role in scaling innovations developed in refugee communities, and supporting larger digital policy efforts across UN agencies and NGOs.

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