

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **Urban refugee protection in Cairo: the role of communication, information and technology**

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## **Introduction**

The sharing of information about asylum – its rules, rights, processes and privileges – is an inherent part of refugee protection and service provision. With the rise of new technologies, research and policy has paid increasing attention to the use and potentials of changing channels of communication. Refugees increasingly live in urban settings in the global south. Yet little is known about how communication about asylum happens in such cities, or what kinds of issues need to be navigated to effectively deliver information to diverse and dispersed communities within them.

Cairo, Egypt, with its large population of refugees from Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia amongst others, is a significant case. Over nearly a decade, demonstrations by refugees at UNHCR have thrown up issues of urban refugee protection, and the political and civil unrest of 2011-12 has presented further problems. The Arab Spring brought communication's importance in Cairo to a global stage. This paper explores circulation of information about asylum in the city, barriers that have blocked and capacities that might expand its way, based on ethnographic research in Cairo in 2011-12.

The research explores two related themes. First, what have been the dynamics, gaps and constraints of asylum-related information delivery in Cairo, and what impact have they had on refugee protection and service provision? Second, how are communication channels being used to provide information to refugees and asylum seekers, and what capacities and cautions should be considered for each? The paper first reviews related research, project methodology and Cairo's refugee context. Then it attends to the two research themes, highlighting the role of information in refugee protection, the potential for new and old technologies to help, and the importance of attention to matters of clarity, language and audience.

## **Information and technology in urban refugee settings**

Within the broader policy and literature context, this paper has three aims. The view of refugees as isolated in camps has been expanded by increasing attention to their presence in urban centers in both countries of first asylum and of resettlement, and to the ties they maintain across geographically-dispersed social networks. There is growing policy and research analysis of urban protection and services, and how people who seek asylum in cities cope and survive. New technologies are critical channels in transnational communication, and research has started to examine their role in refugees' lives. Corporate and philanthropic interest in information and communication technology (ICT) initiatives aimed at social problems is also high. But as *The State of the World's Refugees 2012* states, "refugees and displaced people increasingly live in cities rather than in camps, and are harder to reach" (UNHCR 2012, description).

The first aim of this paper is to provide an insight into the dynamics of information delivery in refugee protection and services in cities in the global south. Increased recognition of the importance of refugee input into effective urban policy has led to research into the channels of their participation (see for example Calhoun 2010, Kaiser 2004, Rempel 2010, Wilber 2011). Yet there is limited study of outward communication between service providers and populations of

concern, although the topic arises repeatedly in reviews of UNHCR's urban refugee policy (see for example Bottinick and Sianni 2011, Rosi et al. 2011).

UNHCR's urban policy names interaction with refugees and community orientation as key principles (UNHCR 2009: 13), but the content, approaches and impacts of such interaction beyond face-to-face meetings remain largely unexamined (Morris 2011). The community outreach efforts of single programmes or organizations have been profiled, drawing attention to good practices (Campbell 2010, Le Roch et al. 2010). But in complex urban settings, information about asylum moves through multiple media and institutions. In light of increased awareness of the significance of channels of communication, this paper explores how information about asylum circulates in the city, and its impact on refugee protection and services.

This paper's second aim is to bring more attention to uses of information and communication technologies in urban refugee settings. Research on technology and refugees has emerged as a growing field, populated primarily by studies of refugee mobile phone and internet use in camps, detention centers, and resettlement countries, with less evidence from urban settings in the global south (Leung 2011, Leung 2011a, Leung et al. 2009, Leung et al. 2010, Panagakos and Horst 2006, Prejato and Molina 2010). Attention has focussed on communication over distance and between sending and receiving countries.

The role of information technologies within countries of first asylum, and their cities, has been neglected. Since many of the world's refugees live in cities and have social ties to refugees in other settings, a view of their uses of technology provides an interesting counterpoint to existing knowledge. In urban centers in the global south, questions of access and literacy are paramount, and communication channels may not necessarily use new technology. This paper contributes an initial exploration of modes of communication used by and for refugees in this particular setting.

The third aim is to bring the study of information technologies to bear upon research on urban refugee protection and services in the global south. Given growing attention to the significance of transnational social relations, refugee-related technology studies have thus far centered around communication between refugees (Berg 2011, Bernal 2006, Georgiou 2002). Communication between refugees and service providers raises a different set of questions about how information is delivered and received, given variations of culture, institution, power, language and literacy that it must negotiate. Initial studies have profiled ICT interventions in refugee service provision, reflecting its growing significance in the humanitarian aid sector, but have largely focussed on single programs or on camp, resettlement or emergency settings (see Bertout et al. 2011 and others in *Forced Migration Review* 38 – the Technology Issue, Caitlyn 2011, UNHCR 2010, UNHCR 2011, UNHCR 2011a, UNHCR Bulgaria 2010). How ICT might help in urban situations in the global south has yet to be examined in depth or breadth, although such use has been recommended (see for example Zetter and Deikun 2011). This paper addresses these gaps by exploring, through the case of one city, how communication about asylum is or may be shaped by changing technologies.

## **Research methodology**

The pilot research for this paper took place in Cairo between July 2011 and March 2012. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an initial overview of the parameters of the topic and assess whether more extensive, quantitative study was warranted.

Twenty-four in-person, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, recorded and transcribed, form the main body of material from which this paper draws. Those interviewed were selected based on their professional and personal experience in refugee service provision and self-assistance. Participants were contacted through personal networks and UNHCR Cairo's 2011 *Referral Guide for Refugees and Refugee Service Providers*: 9 people working in service providing organizations (SPOs), including UNHCR, and 15 refugees, 13 of whom were affiliated with community-based organizations (CBOs) from the major national groups in Cairo (Sudanese, Somali, Iraqi, Eritrean, Ethiopian). The research is limited by the absence of input from Egyptian government officials, who I was unable to reach.

The services of professionally trained interpreters were used for around half of the interviews. In line with its focus on the broader issues under study, this paper has anonymised both the organizational and personal names of research participants.

The interview schedule contained open-ended questions covering the content, channels and efficacy of current information about asylum in Cairo; barriers and capacities around communication, including participant estimates of literacy, mobile and web use prevalence; and discussion of potential future communication and information strategies. Some participants raised problems in the interviews beyond the scope of the research, such as security problems, the need for better access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo and bureaucratic hurdles to healthcare. When appropriate I referred to existing services.

The research additionally draws from field notes from 11 informal conversations with researchers, service providers and refugees in Cairo and participant observation of a training, two workshops and three presentations relevant to the topic at hand. The project was also informed by my own research on the refugee situation in Cairo from 2005 and desk review of existing published and unpublished reports (some of which were provided by research participants), online sources and UNHCR documents related to communication and outreach with urban refugee and asylum seeker populations.

## **Refugees and asylum in Cairo**

At the start of 2012, 44,670 refugees and asylum seekers were registered with UNHCR's Cairo office<sup>1</sup> (UNHCR 2012: 1) This number represents some living in Alexandria and smaller towns in Egypt, and new asylum seekers who fled from the 2011 unrest in Libya to the border town of Saloum. The total does not include Palestinians living in Egypt, who do not receive assistance

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' to refer to people recognised as such by UNHCR, with the knowledge that matters discussed could be relevant to a wider population. It uses 'refugee communities' to refer to populations of people with mixed migratory and legal statuses who originate from refugee sending countries.

from UNHCR; people who have not sought recognition as refugees; people whose applications for refugee status have been rejected but continue living in Egypt; or some asylum seekers who have passed through the Sinai in an attempt to reach Israel.

Of the total population of concern to UNHCR in Egypt, most have sought refuge in its capital. Approximately 56% are from Sudan, 17% from Iraq, 16% from Somalia, 4% from Eritrea, 4% from Ethiopia, and 3% from other countries (UNHCR 2012: 1).

The languages and literacy rates of refugee communities in Cairo are under-researched. An initial study from 2003, prior to the influx of people from Iraq, found more than 30 first languages and dialects spoken by refugees of the six nationalities surveyed (Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Burundian and Sierra Leonian), with many speaking various levels of multiple languages (Calvani 2003: 2-3, 9). The major dialects of Arabic relevant to refugee communities in Cairo (Sudanese, Fur, Egyptian and Iraqi) differ significantly, and are not mutually well understood. Many refugees for whom Arabic is not a mother tongue reject the learning or speaking of Egyptian Arabic (Calvani 2003: 38).

In terms of education and literacy, a 2009 UNHCR survey of 376 Sudanese, Iraqi, Somali and Ethiopian refugees and asylum seekers found that 38% had attended or completed technical or university education, 29% had attended or completed secondary education, 10% had attended or completed primary school, and 22% had not received formal education. Of those surveyed, 15% were illiterate (Moghaieb 2009: 14-15). Participants interviewed for this paper estimated similarly that education and literacy levels in Cairo's refugee communities vary widely, and tend to be lower for women.

Egypt is signatory to the 1951 Convention, the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and has ratified other human rights conventions. However, refugee protection in the country is limited by its reservations on the 1951 Convention and a Memorandum of Understanding it signed with UNHCR in 1954 which further restricted refugee rights (Kagan 2012).

UNHCR carries out all refugee status determination procedures and registration of asylum seekers, and works in partnership with other organizations to support local services, resettlement and voluntary return to countries of origin.<sup>2</sup> Services for refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo include limited education, financial, material, legal and health support. These are provided by some Egyptian government agencies, UNHCR, community-based organizations and local, international and sometimes religiously-affiliated non-governmental organizations, all of which have differing eligibility requirements, target populations and fees for services.

Cairo's poverty, authoritarian governments past and present, global position and political upheaval significantly curtail the parameters for refugees and those who work with them. The government's position and policies on refugees precludes local integration and places responsibilities on UNHCR beyond its mandate, resulting in the creation of parallel systems and a cycle of dependency. Refugees are not in practice permitted to work, so must enter the tenuous and potentially exploitative informal market (Kagan 2011: 18-19, Jureidini 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> See pp. 9-20 of Kagan 2011 for a more detailed overview of the current practice of refugee protection in Egypt.

Visible minorities, especially sub-Saharan Africans, face discrimination, harassment and abuse in streets, workplaces, hospitals, government institutions and police stations. This creates mistrust amongst refugees of Egyptians and of institutions in Egypt. Cairo-based embassies of refugee-producing countries, most notably Eritrea, reportedly harass co-national refugees. During an interview when I stated in passing that "many refugees find life here hard", the refugee I was speaking with interrupted me: "It's not some of them, it's all of them."

Framing this hardship is the tenuous state of Egypt itself: refugees live, as a service provider research participant stated, "in a developing country with chronic problems where the nationals themselves struggle to live with dignity". The outcome of the overthrow of the Mubarak regime has yet to be seen, and the bigger socioeconomic picture remains bleak, especially for refugees. Livelihood difficulties are compounded by security problems. Legal recourse is frequently undermined by discriminatory police responses. Insecurity has risen since the 2011 revolution. Increased street crime has disproportionately disrupted the lives of minorities in poor areas, and civil unrest has resulted in frequent and unpredictable closures of service provider offices.

In theory, refugees who neither able to return to their home countries nor to integrate in their present location are eligible to be resettled to a safe third country. Until 2004, a large proportion of refugees recognized by UNHCR in Cairo were resettled (Azzam 2006: 8). However, following the 2004 Comprehensive Peace Agreement in southern Sudan, UNHCR began to give asylum seeker status rather than RSD to new arrivals from Sudan while waiting to see how the situation in southern Sudan would develop. As a result, southern Sudanese seeking asylum in Cairo were ineligible for resettlement except in exceptional cases (Kagan 2011: 13).

The history of resettlement has created wide-reaching transnational social networks that contribute to the perpetuation of cycles of hope for resettlement (Crisp 1999; Fanjoy 2005; Koser and Pinkerton 2002; Van Hear 2003). In light of continued instability in countries of origin – new South Sudan included – and increased insecurity in Egypt, resettlement remains most Cairo refugees' best hope.

However, resettlement countries and UNHCR allot limited resettlement spots for refugees from Cairo (Kagan 2011: 29). Furthermore, the processing of RSD applications and resettlement places is lengthy and undefined, entailing coordination between multiple local and international bodies, all of which have their own sets of checks, processes and screenings.

Refugees expecting resettlement are unable to effectively plan their lives due to not knowing if or when they will leave Egypt (see Mahmoud 2009). An Iraqi refugee research participant described this experiences as "truly a slow death, because you are waiting and waiting and waiting, and a lot of people, if they didn't get psychological problems from being threatened or kidnapped [in their home countries], they got psychological problems here in Egypt, because of waiting, and the pressure about it."

## Communication dynamics in urban asylum

From the turn of the millennium, studies of refugees in Cairo have highlighted communication and information as a critical problem. Misinformation, rumours, mistrust, and the repeated protests they helped fuel have contributed to the arrests, injury and deaths of refugees, and to repeated closures of UNHCR's Cairo office.

Multiple research efforts, having found information gaps to contribute to difficulties faced by both refugees and service providers, have emphasized the need to improve access to information. UNHCR has repeatedly named improved communication with the communities with which it works as a primary objective in annual Country Operations Plans. This section sets out the dynamics, gaps and barriers that constitute the problem at hand, showing why and how information impacts the functioning of refugee service provision and services in Cairo.

### *Early rumours and information vacuum*

As early as 2002, UNHCR Cairo acknowledged that misinformation was serving as an obstacle to protection. The office attributed a drop in their rate of recognition of refugees to poorly presented RSD applications, which they in turn linked to rumours circulating in refugee communities (Kagan 2002: 12). According to legal aid workers in 2002, applicants waiting for their RSD interview (for an average of nine months from initial contact with UNHCR) were exposed to:

a great deal of misguided and often damaging 'advice' [including] advice to submit untrue claims to UNHCR, advice to submit short claims that leave out key facts, and spreading of baseless rumors that UNHCR staff discriminate against applicants or somehow conspire with governments that people flee. (Kagan 2002: 17)

Such stories did double damage: on the one hand, they eroded asylum applicants' trust of UNHCR and the RSD process, and on the other, they meant that people in need of protection and qualified for it under international law may have failed to gain recognition as refugees, living at risk of *refoulement*, with all that entails, as a result (Kagan 2002: 11-12).

Such misinformation was not solely the result of the rumour mill in refugee communities. A review the same year found that "critical information" about the RSD process was not given to applicants (Kagan 2002: 16). Asylum seekers reported "difficulty obtaining routine information from UNHCR Cairo about the status of their applications", and that they were often

unable to ask simple questions of UNHCR about procedures, for instance about how to add family members to an application. [...] On some occasions, applicants and recognized refugees have been refused at the UNHCR-Cairo gate when trying to submit requests or inquiries in writing. (Kagan 2002: 20)



This inaccessibility of basic information was, not surprisingly, “a source of frustration and anxiety for applicants” (Kagan 2002: 20). Several years later, this frustration, joining with others, would come to a head. Reflecting on this era, a service provider said:

I think that in a way the damage was done before Mustafa Mahmoud [demonstration in 2005], when there wasn't the willingness and the openness to transmit that information. And that information or the way it was transmitted was what caused Mustafa Mahmoud, and it's still causing a lot of problems, I think.

UNHCR Cairo gained a reputation for reticence that, despite ongoing efforts to counter it, was to have enduring effects.

### *Misplaced expectations and confrontation*

In autumn 2005, several thousand Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers staged a sit-in demonstration at the UNHCR office. It would last for three months before its violent end at the hands of Egyptian authorities. The protest was held in Mustafa Mahmoud square, the public park that doubled as a reception and waiting area for UNHCR. Participants called on UNHCR and the international community to pay attention to and solve the problems of Sudanese seeking refuge in Egypt, preferably by relocating them elsewhere.

These problems included barriers to healthcare, education, housing and work; insecurity in Cairo's workplaces, streets and hospitals; and grievances with UNHCR's policies and practices, including perceived pressure to repatriate (one banner hung at the park stated: “We are the victims of mismanagement”) (Danielson 2008).

Given the difficulties of life in Cairo for Sudanese refugees, the protest did not come as a surprise for local service providers. However, its high numbers were at least in part driven by rumours about the benefits of participation; UNHCR Cairo's report about the protest detailed 21 such rumours that its staff had heard at meetings held over the three month sit-in (UNHCR RO-Cairo 2006: 18-20).

Information failure and poor communication between UNHCR and refugee communities were cited as major issues underlying the demonstration (Azzam 2006: 16, 59). Refugees in Cairo were found to face “a glaring absence of reliable and trusted sources of information, and they often d[id] not know what assistance is available.”

UNHCR Cairo was criticized for guarding information about its processes with a ‘fortress mentality’ that had contributed to a relationship of mutual distrust (Azzam 2006: 16, 59). UNHCR acknowledged that the “lack of dialogue between UNHCR and the refugee and asylum seeker communities” was “extremely regrettable”. The office stressed the “need to enhance the availability and dissemination of credible information” (UNHCR RO-Cairo 2006: 26, 29).

The Cairo office closed during the demonstration due to its occupation of the park that had served as its reception, and “for fear of endangering any persons approaching the office” (UNHCR RO-Cairo 2006: 8-9), so asylum seekers who arrived in Cairo during that time

remained unregistered and at risk of imprisonment and *refoulement*. After releasing initial press releases that attempted to discredit the demonstrator's claims to refugee status, UNHCR engaged in negotiations with a shifting group of people identified as protest leaders. These negotiations ultimately failed when a proposed agreement led to fractures amongst those in the park.

When the demonstration was evicted by Egyptian security forces, at least 27 of its participants were killed, many more were injured, and survivors were all removed from the park and bussed to prisons in and around Cairo. Chaos ensued in the next two months, as "most parties did not know where detainees were located, who died or was injured, and what emergency aid was available and where" (Azzam 2006: 57). In the absence of communication channels between service providers and refugees, the task of tracking, reuniting and assisting the injured, arrested and missing was massive.

The demonstration became known as a "tragedy of failures and false expectations" (Azzam 2006) – false expectations based on "lack of understanding on what UNHCR can and cannot do" (UNHCR RO-Cairo 2006: 6). Protesters placed their hope in the hands of UNHCR and the international community, but the responsibility for the problems they protested lay largely with the Egyptian government, and their hopes were violently dashed.

A report about the Mustafa Mahmoud demonstration put the need for "adequate, thorough, and helpful information for asylum seekers and refugees in Egypt" at the top of its list of recommendations. Such information would include:

where to access services, [...] trustworthy details on resettlement prospects[,] the implications of various authorities' decisions[,] the policies of resettlement countries, the political dynamics developing between Egypt and Sudan as well as Egypt and UNHCR, and developments in relations between UNHCR and the population of concern (Azzam 2006: 58).

To mitigate the difficulties of the diverse urban setting, the report suggested service providers make regular community visits to assess and address information needs, provide information in multiple languages, take advantage of the internet and, in "accessible and straightforward language", publish and disseminate answers to questions frequently asked by refugees (Azzam 2006: 59).

After the protest, UNHCR moved its offices from its central location to the satellite called 6th of October, which made accessing it more difficult and was widely perceived as a move to prevent further refugee protest. On the other hand, it started to implement improvements to information delivery. Staff distributed a new, 80-page version of its information booklet and a brochure about how to file a complaint with UNHCR, each published in English and Arabic, to those who approached its offices, improved its system of reception, developed its community outreach strategies and held regular meetings with refugee community leaders (UNHCR RO-Cairo 2006: 26-31).

Challenges met these efforts, however, and were to continue to the present. The negotiations and violent end of the demonstration only damaged the relationship between UNHCR and refugees. UNHCR already faced the problem that it is "difficult to overcome existing misinformation,

particularly when someone has believed something to be true for a substantial period of time” (UNHCR RO-Cairo 2006: 29). This became exacerbated by greater refugee mistrust of the office. Sporadic protests continued in the following years. Meetings with unelected leaders who, it was hoped, would spread the information shared with their communities were troubled by the problem of representation, as leaders were “often seen not to represent full views and interests of the community” (Grabska 2006: 50).

### *Information blackout and new protests*

The 2011 revolution became another crisis of communication for refugee communities and service providers in Cairo. During the 25 January - 11 February uprising, mobility within the city became dangerous and tightly restricted, both by soldiers and by neighborhood patrols. Access to internet and mobile phone networks was shut off at government orders. UNHCR and many of its partners closed their offices, with some staff evacuated and others working from home. Refugees could not go to work, access services, cash assistance or subsidized healthcare, and faced greater than ever insecurity in the streets as the outgoing government released agents and prisoners into the city.

In the weeks during and after Egypt’s revolution, the ignorance of soldiers about the special legal status of refugees resulted in multiple arrests. Staff from one NGO said that from the end of January to the end of March 2011:

Many refugees that were arrested because the army was stopping refugees. First question: ‘Where is your passport?’ Because usually they don’t have any information about UNHCR. This made many problems for refugees . . . we had more than 133 cases, especially Sudanese and Eritreans who were arrested because they were walking in the street and didn’t have a passport.

Had refugees been warned that such arrests were occurring, where, and why, or had those in a position to spread such messages known the extent of the problem, these arrests may have been avoided or abated. But channels of emergency communication to between service providers and refugees and asylum seekers that did not require in-person presence had not yet been established.

When the UNHCR office reopened it was met by protesting refugees angered by what they felt was their abandonment during the crisis. Their numbers swelled to around several thousand within several days (Farag 2012). Subsequent efforts by high-ranking staff to address their concerns through meetings intended to deliver information to the broader community were marred by the resurfacing of the problem of representation. As a service provider explained:

It became quite clear during the revolution that the so-called community leaders are not necessarily representative of or taking information back to their communities ... There were all these people claiming to be representative of such-and-such community, negotiating face-to-face with [the UNHCR Representative]. And [he] was out there, he was meeting people ... but then this information was either not getting passed on, or was getting passed on inaccurately. What basically happened was there was a huge - the second day that UNHCR opened - there was

a huge - like 2000 people turned up. And it looked potentially violent, and Dairy said, 'alright, send me 20 people to represent you.' And you were getting to a stage there when people were saying 'Well, this person doesn't represent me, why are you taking him, why aren't you taking me, he's a liar.'

Another service provider charged that those who participated in the discussions at UNHCR with Dairy were not leaders in Cairo's refugee communities at all, but rather "random people who have decided they are leaders." The demonstration was abated, but the following months would see repeated protests by groups from each of Cairo's major refugee communities, some fueled by rumours of increased resettlement spots which were in fact aimed at refugees from Libya. These protests resulted in several periods of closure of the UNHCR office over 2011 (Jensen 2011).

### *Enduring gaps: services, timing and general information*

Despite efforts by UNHCR and other service providers to improve information programs in the years after the Mustafa Mahmoud demonstration, significant gaps have remained. First, information about services is still insufficiently known. An indicative example is survey research commissioned by UNHCR into refugee livelihoods in Egypt, which found that "refugees and asylum seekers lack information about most of the vocational training programs targeting them" (Moghaieb 2009: 30):

Organized programs are not well announced and marketed among [refugees and asylum seekers] as they know about it after it starts and sometimes after it finishes. They get the information through informal channels such as friends or relatives from their community ...etc, [sic] however, rarely from any CBO or NGO and not even from UNHCR. It appears that invitations to participation in vocational training courses are sent to certain people who have direct connections with the management of the CBOs or NGOs organizing the event. (Moghaieb 2009: 27)

A coalition of service providers that held focus group meetings with 58 refugee community members in 2009 found a similar lacuna:

The overwhelming majority of the participants knew only of two or three services [...] Some knew only of UNHCR. This was particularly surprising because many of them have been in Cairo for four or more years. Because they do not know of any other services, they tend to go to UNHCR whenever they have a problem and, of course, UNHCR's mandate and resources do not allow them to respond to all of these problems, so refugees often find themselves with nowhere to turn. In general, those who did know about organizations other than UNHCR had learned about them from members of their communities [...] When they or someone close to them are arrested, they do not know what to do. None of them knew about the two major NGOs that offer free legal aid. (HEAR 2009)

Refugees thus not only lack help and protection when they need it, but UNHCR's Cairo office also fields more requests than it might have were the range of services available in Cairo more widely known.

A second gap is too little communication between UNHCR and refugees and asylum-seekers about the resettlement process. Despite reduced resettlement opportunities, the move to another country remains the highest goal of many refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo. The rules surrounding resettlement, however, are not clear, and the processes of both RSD and resettlement are long and undefined.

The UNHCR survey research project, though focussed on livelihoods, identified insufficient communication about these processes as "the most significant problem" from which refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt suffered, as it placed them "in an unstable situation through which they cannot plan for their future" (Moghaieb 2009: 30). Another, more in-depth research project found that the "devastating state of indefinite 'waiting' in Egypt" caused refugees and asylum seekers "extreme distress" (Mahmoud 2009: 3) as well as anger towards UNHCR (Mahmoud 2009: 95).

Several research participants identified a lack of follow-through communication from the organizations involved in RSD and resettlement, including embassies, as one of the biggest information-related problems refugees face. "People will finally make it to [an] office," one service provider said, "and talk to a nice person who will promise to call and then will never call." She estimated that, of the refugees and asylum seekers she had worked with, more than 80% of those expecting call-backs had not received them.

Acknowledging that this may be due in part to people changing their numbers or missing calls for whatever reason, she wondered if it might not also be due to staff giving up after one attempt or simply not calling. A Somali refugee raised a similar complaint – that staff say, "'We're going to call you back and we shall see your case.' But then it takes two years, or one and a half years, to call back."

A third area of needed information is general clarification about refugee rights, services and protection, and the limitations and processes of service providers. Refugees who contributed to research for this paper, some of whom work at community-based organizations and are in frequent contact with service providers, expressed confusion and frustration about just what their legal status entailed. I did not set out to test legal knowledge, but in interviews, misunderstandings and misperceptions repeatedly surfaced: for example, that refugees have a right to financial assistance, or that refugees have a right to resettlement.

Multiple refugee participants mentioned that service provider staff are taking money that should go to refugees, or are favouring certain nationalities, classes or religions. Such rumours point to a gap in what a service provider participant called "just basic garden-variety public service" information: clarification of what refugees are entitled to have and what service organizations can, cannot and – in the case of corruption charges – do not do.

### *Communication barriers*

The events and problems of information illustrated here are indicative of major obstacles to the free and accurate flow of information about asylum in Cairo. Contextual, psychosocial and organizational parameters restrict clear communication about asylum. Participants to the research named the following barriers as particularly important.

*Lack of time and funds:* Most service provider organizations have little budget for information provision for refugees and asylum seekers beyond individual case management. Service providers were characterized by a research participant as being “stretched to breaking point.” As one staff member stated, “resources – time being the main resource – is another problem in communication from our side as service providers. The will is there, but it doesn’t necessarily get carried through.”

Heavy caseloads not only prevent staff from devoting time to projects to address underlying issues, but can also become justification against the publication of services. One research participant working with both refugee and service provider groups said he frequently hears such reasoning: “We’re already over capacity, so we want people to know about our services – but if everyone knows, we’ll be more swamped.” When organizations have what another participant characterized as an ‘under siege’ mentality due to insufficient resources, information *control* rather than dissemination can become the norm.

Some research participants said that although they wanted to improve or start communication projects, they lacked the time to do so. As this paper will later discuss, two Iraqi refugees who hope to start a website of information for Egypt-based refugees and asylum seekers are struggling to do so because of the time such a project would require, as both are full-time students and hold multiple part-time jobs. A well-documented and researched proposal to create an emergency telephone hotline for refugees in Cairo failed after its 2010 applications for funding were rejected; as one of its service provider initiators lamented, it “just never got off the ground, because nobody gave [it] any money.”

*Temporariness:* High turnover rates at service provider organizations undermined efforts to improve information about asylum in Cairo. Many SPOs employ international workers, volunteers and interns who work for periods as short as six months, and few such staff stay longer than three years. This arrangement frequently results in dropped and duplicated projects, as one who has worked in Cairo for many years explained:

It's really only into when [SPO staff] get into their third year, or maybe the end of the second year, that someone's starting to have enough on-the-ground, built up experience to be able to move things around. They've had enough experience, and seen things, and are oriented enough, have built up enough personal relationships with other workers in other organizations to be able to start to be moving the pieces around on the table. Until then, it's practically impossible to be able to distinguish them from someone who's here for like six weeks. There's a lot of duplication of efforts that gets lead by people who are here than less than a year.

Because it's difficult to have enough time to get a real sense of what's going on on the ground, and implement and leave a legacy, without accidentally overlapping.

The resettlement or otherwise onward movement of people from refugee communities can also disrupt efforts to improve the lot of those who stay. For example, one of the Iraqi refugees who hoped to start a website has been resettled, leaving his colleague to continue the project single-handed.

*Ears that will not hear:* The clash between the hope for resettlement and the reality of limited resettlement places can undermine SPO and CBO efforts to discuss how refugees can realistically make the best of their present circumstances, as service provider explained:

One of the biggest barriers is false expectations and false knowledge that is held by the community. Any [asylum seeker] who arrived here before 2004 and who has a blue card will tell you that they're 'in process', waiting to be resettled. And it doesn't matter how many times that you explain to them that that isn't in fact the case, and that you have to apply for resettlement, and that you have to be in this particular circumstance - they don't believe you ... because that's not what they want to believe and it's not what they want to hear. And that makes communication really, really hard.

Another service provider said that this unreceptiveness explains the charge that refugees do not trust major service providers:

Yes, there is a lack of trust, but sometimes it's unfounded, sometimes it is 'I want it this way, and I don't trust you, because you're not giving me what I want. Even though you've told me you won't, I don't trust you because I don't like what you're saying to me.'

When ears are closed to all but one message, even the best information delivery and most sensitive communication will fail. Research participants stressed that such a lack of receptiveness exists only in a minority of Cairo's refugees and asylum seekers. Nonetheless, it remains a real obstacle to outreach to some.

*Tongues that will not speak:* Reluctance by both Egyptian and international staff to bear bad news also impinges on open communication. Especially given the prevalence of hope for resettlement, 'expectation management' is a necessary topic of discussion. As a refugee CBO staff member said: "Somebody has to tell them the truth. You have [recognition as a refugee] but you're stuck here. You stayed eleven years, you're gonna be eleven years more." Such hard truth-telling, however, poses psychological hurdles for service providers. As one such staff said, when refugees "maintain the expectation, they maintain the hope, the dream, it's hard to get rid of that – and do we really want to? Do I really want to do that to people?"

An Egyptian SPO manager suggested that for Egyptian staff, the tendency to over-emphasize the positive has cultural roots:

Maybe Egyptians get the easy way out by telling [refugees and asylum seekers] anything, or giving them promises they don't fulfill because part of the Egyptian culture is – we think that we are doing a good thing, we are not doing it with bad intentions. We think that if we tell her 'Yes, you will get something', that we are kinder. Yes, you are kinder at once, but she is going to explode, and in a much stronger way, if you didn't fulfill what you said.

Yet international staff face the same problem. A British SPO manager attributed the disinclination to bear bad news to the high turnover rates of Cairo-based SPOs that depend on interns, volunteers and staff with short-term contracts:

I think staff is a big problem, because a lot of people who come here, they come here for six months or a year, maybe two years, and it's really hard to get *hard*, and to be able to say the things that need to be said, in such a short period of time. It's one of the most brutal things having to turn around to a refugee and say 'No, I can't help you.' And you don't learn that in a year – nor should you, for your humanity.

This problem can erode trust and working relationships between SPOs and refugees and asylum seekers. When staff “say anything just to get refugees out of the office,” as a service provider said, refugees feel disrespected. When refugees “do not feel that their coming back means something to you, that they have to leave work, they have to pay money for transportation, if they are coming from long area, that you are not appreciating these efforts”, tension grows. Staff avoidance of the communication challenges of their work can thus conflate with the temporal and financial burdens of site-specific information services to create further obstacles to the mutual respect necessary for effective communication.

*Distrust of staff:* Many Cairo service providers have a mix of Egyptian and international staff, and some are largely staffed by Egyptians. Some research participants cited or exhibited refugee distrust of Egyptian staff. Refugee experience of the darker sides of life in Egypt can inform low expectations of Egyptian service provider staff. One Egyptian service provider drew out the connection between urban street harassment, poor governmental institutions and what he called the “problem of trust” in migrant communities, stating:

... of course [it] has a background. I mean, they have seen a lot. We are in urban community, and they were deceived by some Egyptians when they arrived, on several occasions, so they always take their caution and they don't trust, just their nationals. Also unfortunately, they have to go and deal with some governmental institutions to stamp some papers, and these institutions and these employees treats them very badly, and it's really effecting them.

Nationality-based mistrust, however, may be more complicated than it first appears. Two research participants argued that, at UNHCR specifically, the mistrust barrier may be a case of ‘face fatigue’ – overexposure to specific staff members who happen to be Egyptian. One said:

The people [UNHCR] use as their communication points tend to be the people who have been around for a long, long time. Some of those people are people I



have the utmost respect for, but a lot of the refugees only see them as old faces that have been here for a long time and don't care.

It should also be noted that some SPOs with largely Egyptian staff do function without such mistrust undermining their professional communication.

*Misunderstandings due to language diversity:* While many service providers employ formal interpreters and some distribute written information in multiple languages, much information remains passed through informal oral conversation between speakers of different languages, both by service providers and within and between refugee communities. Misunderstandings inevitably arise. A service provider explained:

I watch constantly the spreading of inaccurate information due to language. Someone says one thing and two people who are not speaking the language together that's either one of their first or best languages . . . people misunderstand each other. Someone says, 'you cannot do that', and someone didn't hear 'not', because they don't speak the same language. I see it with my own people, all the time. I'm talking even about informal conversation – in the informal network, of people speaking languages together, that they really don't always understand each other – just constant mistakes, constant mistakes. I think people underestimate the issue of living in a world where people are speaking multiple languages.

In many urban refugee contexts, linguistic diversity and widely varied fluency levels are the norm. When much information is spread, as it is in Cairo, through formal or informal oral means – in workshops, meetings or through word-of-mouth– it is constrained by the incompleteness and inaccuracies inherent in communication across language differences.

*Lack of institutional attention to language matters:* Not all service providers in Cairo have interpreters on staff, and some do not see the need to, despite the linguistic diversity amongst refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo. Service provision is offered primarily in Arabic or English. A program to train interpreters to work in refugee services has help bridge language differences in RSD and resettlement interviews, but the program has not been invited to provide interpreter technical assistance in any of the health services for refugees in Cairo. This is a worrying indication, since in daily and emergency healthcare, mutual comprehension can be a matter of life or death.

One research participant with experience in the interpretation field called language a “tremendous barrier” to not just access but also to knowledge of the very existence of services. She pointed out that some service providers simply do not realize the difference that interpretation could make:

You only end up hearing about what's there from the same word-of-mouth channels. . . . I don't think it's because they [service providers who do not provide interpretation] don't care, I think it's because they don't have the framework to get that this is even a need. 'How could it possibly be different from what we're already doing.'

As a result, instead of offering of information in multiple languages, some service providers manage with a casual or *ad hoc* approach to language matters.

Such an approach is illustrated by the explanations of one research participant who manages a service providing organization. The organization is staffed mostly by Egyptian nationals and serves all refugee communities in Cairo. He acknowledged that, given the limited Egyptian Arabic spoken by some Southern Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers, communication problems that can arise:

The Southern Sudanese, most of them do not master the Arabic language very much. And if they have not lived in Egypt for quite some time, we have difficulty understanding their Arabic slang, and they have difficulty understanding what we are saying to them.

The approach of his organization to overcoming the language barrier is repetition and persistence, as well as occasional use of *ad hoc* interpretation by fellow nationals who happen to be in the vicinity:

One of my recommendations to my staff is always to repeat, and repeat, and repeat. And never give up. And never let a refugee leave the office unless he fully understands what we are saying to him or her. Most of the time it succeeds but sometimes yet it does not, and they understand something else entirely. And sometimes we take their permission to take some community help. If we have for example a Somali who is impossible to communicate with because they don't speak anything but Somali, we ask if we can get some help from outside, from a Somali who can speak a little bit of Arabic. If they agree they interpret for each other it makes it easier.

With Sudanese refugees, on the other hand, they rarely recruit even casual interpreter help: “With Sudanese, if they don’t speak good Arabic, they might speak a little English, so we get along, in the end.”

Insufficient attention is given to the differences between spoken Sudanese, Iraqi and Egyptian Arabics. As an Iraqi refugee participant pointed out:

There is a big difference between [Egyptian Arabic and] the Iraqi accent, the Iraqi slang. The refugees, they use Iraqi slang, even if they have lived here for five or six years, especially women, because they can’t leave the house a lot. Like my mother for example, she doesn’t speak Egyptian Arabic.

This can cause serious misunderstandings in communication when service providers who do have staff interpreters use Egyptian interpreters to interpret between Iraqi Arabic and the native language of their staff.

In addition to problems of confidentiality, trust, and accuracy arising from the informal use of untrained interpreters, an absence of interpreter staff can cause serious miscommunication between service providers and refugees and asylum seekers. Be it due to lack of funding or to

simply not seeing the need for the employment of professional interpreters, SPOs that do not give institutional attention to language matters as an imperative part of the provision of services are inherently constrained in their ability to communicate effectively.

*Paper-based service provider record systems:* A further barrier to communication about asylum in Cairo is that at least one service provider lacks a computerized record system. The majority of refugee participants and some SPO participants mentioned having experienced or knowing people who had experienced referral-related trouble or processual confusion with this organization, such as being told to go to another organization which then sent them back to the first one, or having to produce paperwork from other institutions repeatedly.

When the organization, which provides financial and medical assistance, had to close in an emergency last year, its paper-based system became what one participant who helped during the closure called a “huge problem.” Around 800 vulnerable families or individuals receive funds directly from the organization. In order to communicate with them, other service providers “had to go to [the organization] and go through their filing system to find the phone numbers of those people. In many cases there weren’t phone numbers, and then [they] had to go to [another NGO] and go through their records with the names of these people to find the phone numbers.” A paper-based record system limits and slows the efficacy of communication with those receiving services, both in daily operation and in emergency situations where quick interagency coordination is crucial.

*Exploitation within migrant communities:* As Cairo’s recent history shows, understanding of asylum in Cairo is sometimes undermined by exploitative behavior by people within migrant communities. As one Somali refugee contributor said, “there are people in the community who have misled the community for their own interests.” Such misleading was apparent in the series of demonstrations at UNHCR in 2011. A service provider interviewed while one such demonstration was underway said that “there are really vulnerable clients who are being exploited or caught up in it and who really shouldn’t be there – really sick clients, or clients with security situations.” A Sudanese refugee participant charged that leaders and educated people in refugee communities sometimes accept money to help people without knowledge of the RSD process navigate the system.

Such exploitation can also fuel what one service provider called the “huge gossip and rumour mill” that continues to haunt Cairo:

There seem to be people of leadership that seem to help to facilitate the spreading of bad information. You'd like to believe that community leadership shouldn't be spreading bad information, but there seems to be sometimes community leadership wanting to destabilize and keep refugees angry, keep refugees hoping, keep refugees at UNHCR complaining. So I think sometimes there's almost intent involved in keeping it bad.

This phenomenon, he emphasized, only happens “sometimes, with some communities” and tends to be one of the communication barriers most discussed amongst service providers in Cairo, whereas others, like language issues, are overlooked – but is worth attention as a constraint that refugee communities themselves ought to address.

*Representativeness:* Although many community-based organizations have formed along national, tribal and regional lines, and Cairo's smaller Eritrean community has managed to elect a representative council of elected elders, most refugee communities in Cairo do not have officially elected representatives. Until they do so, and likely even if they do so, oral information sharing will be constrained by problems of representation and trust. Self-selected messengers may have varied motives for engagement with service providers, including the hope of gaining attention to their own case.

Refugee messengers, such as those who tend to attend workshops aimed at education and awareness-raising, are sometimes a self-selected group, as a facilitator of such workshops explained. "You have set people. If I do a workshop here I know the same group will be there when I do it in two months." This is not a problem if such people are trusted members of their communities who will accurately relay the information they receive. However, this is not always the case.

Oral information dissemination amongst Iraqis in Cairo, the only refugee group in Cairo without co-national community-based organizations, is fraught by the fractured community's mistrust and internal divisions. An Iraqi participant explained that although people are recruited from refugee communities "to give information to their communities, those social workers are untrusted people ... [Service providers] trust people from communities that refugees can't trust." As a result of this mutual suspicion, word-of-mouth networks do not function and crucial information is not shared: "There are no connections between Iraqi refugees here, so even when something bad happens to an Iraqi refugee, and there are resources for support, like medical support, they don't know about it."

The dynamics of communication between service providers and refugees in Cairo illustrate how rumours, withheld information and unaddressed expectations can lead to misunderstandings, protests and hardships for both service provider and refugee communities. Despite efforts to rectify this history, gaps of information about services, the timing of legal processes and the general functioning of refugee service providers and protection remain.

The list of barriers to effective communication about asylum in Cairo is long and embedded within larger issues: time and funding shortages; high turnover of those involved; reluctance to hear or bear bad news; distrust; misunderstandings due to linguistic diversity, and insufficient attention to it; out-of-date filing systems; exploitative characters; and trouble selecting appropriate messengers.

### **Communication channels in urban asylum**

Although urban community communication is barred by considerable obstacles, the Cairo case also shows the existence of effective information provision and capacities for improvement. Service providers are increasingly sharing information about asylum through face-to-face, printed, phone, and online channels, and, as research participants repeatedly emphasized, trying hard to improve how they do so. This section will highlight good practices and limitations of the

respective channels and identify areas with further potential for expansion. Three kinds of evidence are examined to perform this initial assessment of the use, interest and capacities of each channel: participant assessments of existing capacities, previous communications projects (each of which had a research component) and current practices.

### *Site-specific communication*

In-person, site-specific communication is the primary medium for asylum information delivery in Cairo, through individual case management, community meetings and workshops, and formal and informal outreach work by refugees and service providers. Although face-to-face communication has its shortcomings, especially in a situation of power imbalances like those inherent in humanitarian aid provision, it is the fundamental mode of human communication and relationship-building. Research participants reported that its increase in recent years has improved the circulation of accurate information and in some cases helped address the concerns of people protesting at UNHCR, thereby preventing the growth in time or numbers of demonstrations.

The primary site of communication and information provision between service providers and refugees in Cairo is the service provider office, which refugees visit for individual case management or to make queries or complaints, often with the assistance of an interpreter. Office visits offer multiple opportunities for communication and the provision of information. They can be a key location for the dissemination of more passive information: tables could be laid with brochures and booklets of printed information that people could look at while they wait and take with them if they wish; walls can be covered in posters and fliers; wall-mounted televisions could show short informational videos.

Research participants mentioned that shaking hands, friendliness, introducing ones' self, making eye contact and admitting mistakes or limitations help establish mutually respectful communication. One service provider manager, whose reform of procedures has resulted in the eradication of office-based incidents of shouting or violence in the last year, explained:

We try to deal with [clients] with dignity and respect. When you talk to him when you are look at papers, they are offended – they think that you don't care to even look at them while you are talking, or you are not shaking hands with them because they are black. So you should be aware of the details, because you have to let them feel that they are heard, that they are responded to. That will make them go back to their seats and wait for your response. The interviewer comes outside, shakes hands and introduces himself and takes the refugee to their office for the interview; responding to their needs in a professional manner; responding to their questions. It might seem really small and detailed, but it matters to them.

As well as staff attitude, she outlined material and physical changes to the office that have improved staff-refugee communication:

We keep a clean bathroom, with soap and tissues, for them to use, and we have a cooler for cold water in the summer with plastic cups for hygiene. They

appreciate these things. Sometimes we get some sweets from our individual money to give to children because we have a kids area here, and let the children play. We have tried to create an atmosphere of warmth and connection.

This kind of atmosphere, she explained, has helped build a good long-term relationship with clients and has given the organization “credit” so that staff errors are more quickly forgiven.

In addition to their capacity to establish a professional atmosphere, office waiting rooms are a good place to gather feedback from those waiting for meetings. One service provider manager who takes advantage of this time and space explained, “We always do questionnaires, when refugees are in the office – about the service, and what do they suggest to make it better, and what is the best means of communication with them.” This practice conveys the message that client needs, concerns and feedback are taken seriously, helping to build a relationship of mutual respect, and can also be a means to ensure contact information is up to date.

Despite such efforts, however, offices can become places of confrontation, as the recent history of protests at UNHCR’s Cairo office shows. Multiple conflict prevention and resolution techniques can help dissipate and address such confrontations. Research participants mentioned a few practices that have helped deal with situations of communication breakdown.

One service provider recommended training staff “never to take anything personally, and to consider the background and psychosocial aspect when communicating with refugees.” His organization set up a system within its staff hierarchy for dealing with conflicts that might arise, and do not address clients who are acting in an aggressive manner towards staff:

You just let them finish, and keep working, and when they are calmed down, you start to talk to them again. When all the time we maintain a professional attitude and don’t reply back or do anything, they come and apologize for any misbehavior. When we started to apply this [system] we had no more shouting at the office because they all understood that shouting at the office will not get you anything.

Another good practice is enlisting the help of refugees themselves. In Cairo, several service organizations have refugee outreach workers on staff. One organization has formed specifically to train and place refugee psychosocial workers in organizations and communities throughout the city. These employees are well networked, knowledgeable about services and processes for refugees and are able to go out into neighborhoods where refugees and asylum seekers live to spread this information, pass out their mobile number and invite their co-nationals to workshops and meetings. This approach has built on trust between co-nationals, helped bypass language barriers and fostered links between refugees and service providers. It was credited by several research participants as being the biggest single improvement in the regular spread of accurate information amongst refugee communities in Cairo.

Refugee outreach workers have been instrumental in helping to counter recent false rumours spread to call people to protest at UNHCR, and in helping resolve those protests that do happen. The head of a SPO with refugee outreach workers said:

Every time somebody sleeps outside of UNHCR, UNHCR calls us, after hours. We send somebody there, to talk to them, try to help them to put their life together. There are some people who reject us, but the majority of people who end up at UNHCR sleeping outside are helped by [a refugee outreach worker], who help them move into a life again, and provide them with support.

Such face-to-face interventions have helped prevent the growth of demonstrations by addressing protester concerns quickly, personally and in their native language.

Refugees who have formed community-based organizations or are employed by service providers often spread information informally as well, as they become known as trusted and knowledgeable in their communities. The offices of community-based organizations and businesses catering to refugee communities – restaurants, cafes, bakeries – are additional key sites of in-person information sharing.

Service providers in Cairo have expanded face-to-face communication beyond individual case management and into larger meetings and workshops that take place both in service provider offices and in the neighborhoods where refugees live.

The creative efforts being made to improve meeting-based communication and successful interagency cooperation in doing so is illustrated by the evolution of UNHCR community meetings, which the organization started holding regularly with refugee groups following the 2011 revolution. After initial meetings were dominated by requests by participants for resettlement, UNHCR and several service providers took a different approach, expanding them into a series of meetings: an initial, participatory identification by refugee participants of community (rather than individual) problems and their roots; a second meeting to discuss possible solutions; and a third meeting attended by key invited partners where solutions are proposed and action plans set, with the whole process documented and reported back to respective communities.

This example raises the challenge of such meetings: they can become what one research participant called ‘community venting sessions.’ However, they are an auspicious start to improving communication between refugees and service providers, and indicate an area where refugees themselves can contribute to improved communication by focusing on community rather than personal issues and by identifying clear and strategic goals to raise with relevant partners.

In addition to meetings, many service providers including UNHCR regularly put on workshops for refugees and asylum seekers. Topics in 2011-12 have included life after the revolution, psychosocial issues, migration to Israel, domestic violence, conflict resolution, community awareness, health, family planning, sexually transmitted diseases, community and personal safety, refugee rights advocacy and human rights. Such workshops have reached thousands of refugee and asylum seeker participants.

A 2011 day-long conference brought refugees, service providers and government officials into fruitful dialogue (Arab Coalition for Darfur 2011). The Centre for Migration and Refugee Studies at the American University in Cairo’s weekly Wednesday public seminars used to be a

similarly lively site for exchange between refugees, academics, students and service providers. However since a shift in the university's priorities, its move to a campus inaccessible to refugees and recent disruptions at its downtown campus, the frequency and attendance of the seminars have diminished.

Meetings and workshops were identified by several research participants as a cornerstone of good information provision in the city, especially when held in "the neighborhoods where refugees live." A participant who regularly puts on such events suggested that their efficacy and attendance numbers can be enhanced by taking a creative approach to their planning, as he does: "Theatre, drama, role play – I think that's what works. Make it fun, make it something [people] want to participate in."

In-person meetings can help ensure that information is not just offered but also received. This is especially important in terms providing information about the complex rules and rights of refugeehood. One service providing research participant explained why:

To understand the nexus of the five grounds of the Convention is not an easy thing. It's not an eighth grade level concept. The best means to communicate complicated ideas is through oral workshop, back-and-forth explaining and talking, not just handing them a book – they're not going to understand it. That's like teaching someone to play football by handing them a book. It just doesn't work.

Oral communication, with its opportunity for exchange, emotional connection and verification of understanding, can thus help overcome the wide range of education and literacy levels amongst Cairo's refugees and asylum seekers.

Meetings and workshops, although well underway, have the capacity for growth. An SPO participant argued, "There should be so many 'know your rights' workshops that it should be like overkill. I don't understand why that's not happening to a ridiculous amount. There should be three a day." Another service provider echoed his hyperbole:

I think there just needs to be this never ending flow of ways to have people come together, community encounters, discussions, creative ways of sharing and talking. UNHCR keeps having these meetings, and they have to. We have to. We have to keep having awareness-raising. A never ending flow of information sharing.

Although meetings and workshops can be time-intensive – or, as a Sudanese community-based organization manager put it, "the long way around" – aside from labour they can be low or free of cost to hold. A service provider participant explained of her workshops: "We do them at community centres, we don't pay anybody, we don't bring anything. For a while we put together tea and things, but we even stopped that." Despite this stripped-down approach, the workshops are largely well-attended.



Cairo is also rich in human resources – a large volunteer pool composed both of university students and refugees and asylum seekers seeking experience, training and activity. The same service provider stressed the benefits of taking advantage of this pool:

The people we have who are doing the workshops are community people. That makes all the difference – if a guy from their church says, ‘Please, I’m going to have a workshop, please come.’ That’s what I recommend. Recognize that people who are refugees and asylum-seekers themselves have plenty of capacity, and use that. It’s harder, but you’ll get more participation.

Training student and refugee volunteers in workshop planning, outreach, logistical support or facilitation can be a mutually beneficial way of building both their skills and organizational capacity for the expansion of information dissemination efforts.

Despite the successes of site-specific information provision, it also has drawbacks, as one service provider pointed out:

A refugee can't know the information unless he pays a visit, a physical visit to the place, and this is a great burden and it's really getting on the refugees' nerves, because they deal with so many entities, different services.

Such a building up of resentment can become a barrier to communication in itself, as costs increase the stress levels of refugees who arrive for services.

When refugees, asylum seekers and prospective asylum seekers need to visit an office to seek or receive information, or make an appointment for such an inquiry, the urban setting poses intersecting challenges: cost of transportation, long travel times, incompatible working hours, and insecurity (as it does for refugees accessing services in Nairobi, Kenya; see Anderson 2012). Such barriers also confront service providers who wish to communicate or share information through site-specific channels: posters or posted notices, workshops, meetings, distribution of printed materials, and even mobile clinics or community outreach visits.

Cairo is the largest city in Africa and tenth largest urban area in the world in terms of both population and area (Demographia 2012), and is known for its overcrowded streets and traffic jams. Refugees and asylum seekers live throughout greater Cairo, and the city’s refugee service providers are similarly dispersed. Travel by minibus, bus, taxi or the metro rail system pose considerable levels of cost, time and hassle. A Sudanese refugee participant specifically contrasted Cairo to a camp setting while linking together difficult barriers of travel to UNHCR, located in the outlying area called 6th of October:

It’s difficult for refugees to go to 6<sup>th</sup> of October. Because if you want to go there, you need between 5 to 10 Egyptian pounds [US\$1 to \$2]. Because the place is far, sometimes there is so much traffic, and sometimes you go there and you arrive late. Here refugees live amongst Egyptians - there is no refugee camp. It is so difficult for refugees to go there, and some of them do not have enough money to go there.

Many Iraqis have settled in 6<sup>th</sup> of October, which has the benefit of proximity to UNHCR and Iraqi businesses – benefits that those who live elsewhere may miss out on, as one man explained:

Most Iraqis who live in Egypt live in 6th of October city, and there are Iraqi bakeries and Iraqi restaurants. So those Iraqis who live in 6th October, they are getting information from each other. But other Iraqi refugees who live in Nasr City [a neighborhood of greater Cairo], Alexandria and other places, they don't know anything about UNHCR and things like that.

Most of Cairo's refugees and asylum seekers live at a considerable distance in neighborhoods like Giza, Ain Shams, Hay el Ashera or Maadi, from which can take an hour or up to two hours to reach UNHCR and other service providers, depending on traffic and location.

Such travel can be daunting for the young and able-bodied but difficult or impossible for the elderly, chronically ill or those with physical disabilities. A refugee participant, from Iraq, told an illustrative story:

But other Iraqis, they – one day I saw an elderly woman who came from Alexandria, and waited in front of UNHCR for seven hours, just to know where is the hospital that gives free medical support to Iraqis, which is like two blocks from UNHCR. So she waited seven hours just to learn about a place that is two blocks away from UNHCR.

While refugees who live close to service providers – and to other refugees – may gain from relatively easy access to information about services, others may expend considerable time and money to gain it, or miss out on access to services or protection altogether.

The long working hours of many refugees and their coincidence with service provider office hours are an additional barrier. Refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo mostly do informal work, making time off or skipping work particularly difficult. As one refugee stated, some service providers “are only open 8am to 4pm, and refugees *work* here.” A SPO staff member acknowledged that the timing of informational activities like workshops is crucial, but even so, “there are people we miss because of time.” As he explained:

, but there's a percentage of people who don't send their children to schools. The problem is that a percentage of the refugee population works very long hours, and will never come to anything. So you have to also do it in the schools

His reference alludes to a further barrier to site-specific communication, namely insecurity in Cairo.

Even before the revolution some refugee and asylum seeker parents would not allow their children to leave the house for fear of harassment or abuse (Grabska 2005: 73). With the increase of crime and insecurity since the 2011 revolution, even more refugee and asylum-seeker children miss school. One organization that provides them education reported in spring 2012 having “only about half our children at school because of parental fears about sending their children out and about in Cairo at the moment” (St Andrew's Refugee Services 2012: 1). Although schools can be

a good site for information provision, their efficacy is limited to those families who are able to overcome the city's increasing insecurity barriers.

When queries at offices are fulfilled on a first-come, first-serve basis, the quest for information can be further blocked by long waiting times. At UNHCR Cairo, for example, appointments are based on the distribution of tokens to the first fifty people who arrive at the office, based on a list that those waiting write up. Participants said that people arrive as early as three o'clock in the morning to wait in the street in front of the office, and sometimes camp out the night before in order to ensure they are able to speak with someone. Both refugee and service providers participants to the research mentioned wait times at UNHCR Cairo's reception offices of five to six hours, which are sometimes entirely unsuccessful if the person seeking information does not arrive early enough, or if the relevant staff member does not appear.

This system can result in frustration, loss of time and potential income, and security risks that may serve as deterrents to quests for information or communication in the first place, especially for vulnerable migrants. As a service provider asked, "What about the weak, the disabled, those with quiet voices who can't push to the front of the line?" A service provider who provides legal aid said that his organization had worked with multiple people who had been arrested and imprisoned for sleeping in front of the office, not in protest but to ensure their access to the office the following morning. Site-specific information that is accessed on a first-come, first-serve basis can thus be barred not just by long wait times but by security concerns as well.

The prevalent model for information provision in Cairo requires the physical presence of refugees and asylum seekers to receive it, and has been a key way of building better relationships between service providers and refugees. In refugee service provision, as these examples show, face-to-face communication encompasses more than just the interaction between two people. Office location, community visits and appointment systems for the large numbers of people who come to offices can itself improve the relationship between refugees and service providers, conveniencing both parties and improving the atmosphere for the interactions to follow – or, conversely, creating problems before the essential exchange has even taken place. Although site-specific communication has many advantages, its limitations suggest the importance of simultaneously pursuing more passive ways of sharing information.

### *Printed material*

Printed information about asylum in Cairo is underutilized, and tends to be overly long and complicated. However, good practices exist, and short, multi-language print is a channel with the capacity to overcome existing education, language and literacy barriers.

Current printed material about asylum in Cairo include distributed letters, posted results listings, information booklets, posters, and occasional brochures. Sometimes, such as in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, or when a major office has an emergency closure, UNHCR and other major service providers send announcements in the form of letters attached to emails, usually in Arabic and English, delivered electronically to community-based organizations and service providers.

UNHCR uses posted notices to communicate about the process of individual RSD cases, which are likewise emailed to, printed and posted by service providers. These notices list asylum applicants' case numbers and result, usually instructing applicants to visit the UNHCR office between 8:00am and 11:00am on a specific date. Service providers sometimes use posters to publicize details of their services or programmes at their offices, and one international organization, Refugees United, which uses an online database to try to connect separated refugee families, has distributed and posted large, full-colour posters in English and Arabic, at various Cairo-based service provider locations.

The most authoritative form of printed information about refugee services in Cairo is the *Referral Guide for Refugees and Refugee Service Providers*, printed annually by UNHCR's Cairo office. The 2011 version is 96 pages long and lists the street addresses, hours, websites, phone numbers, email addresses, neighborhoods, closest metro stations, contact persons, emergency hours, referral processes, fees, target populations and activities of NGOs, CBOs and governmental institutions providing services for refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo.

The *Referral Guide* is comprehensive and useful, but limited in language to English and Arabic, and limited in distribution. Two refugee research participants who work at service providing organizations had not seen it before their interview for this project. Another participant, an Iraqi who had first encountered it shortly before her interview, said:

I read it, and I discovered that there were service providers that I never heard about, and this book hasn't been distributed to all refugees here. There was a service for Iraqi refugees specifically, a free medical service for all Iraqi refugees, in the same area as UNHCR. No one knew about it. So I wrote a brochure to say that there's a medical service for Iraqi refugees here, and put the brochures wherever there is an Iraqi bakery or Iraqi restaurant.

Her actions show how refugee initiatives to spread information can extend the reach of official documents, but also that refugees may be missing out on access to services due to the limited distribution *Referral Guide* itself, perhaps due to its length and the expense of its printing.

Another service provider produces a printed booklet, every few years, for its clients; the booklet, 47 pages in its most recent form, provides an overview of how refugee status determination works, of frequent legal problems, of psychosocial and health services available in Cairo, of information for unaccompanied children and young people and sexual and gender based violence in Egypt, and of the resettlement process and programmes. It is published in the languages of Cairo's five predominant refugee communities, and distributed at the organization's office and by its community outreach workers.

Although such efforts are formidable, they may be overly so. Long and complicated documents were cited by multiple research participants as doing nothing to aid understanding of the processes, rules, services and rights of asylum and refugee protection. An Arabic-speaking refugee said that when she first arrived at the Cairo UNHCR office to begin her RSD process she was given a print copy of the 1951 Geneva refugee convention in Arabic, but did not understand how its rules applied to her situation.

Research participants described existing booklets as “never ending”, “not ‘friendly’”, “unwieldy” and “too complex, too detailed.” This problem reflects the complexity of the issues and systems governing asylum, an education and knowledge gap between many service provider staff and some refugees and a focus on information provision that inadequately considers audience.

In contrast, an innovative use of printed information is the brochure used by another service organization. The brochure was designed to overcome confusion and miscommunication about the organization’s services, the requirements for which were previously explained only orally and therefore vulnerable to misinterpretation or inconsistency between staff members. The brochure outlines the details and requirements of its services in simple, clear language. Printed in colour on a single thick page folded into three panels, an envelope is affixed to the central panel which contains the appointment time of each refugee who applies for the service.

This simple technique ensures that each refugee receives the basic information about the service and has overcome the communication problems faced previously at the organization, as a manager explained:

One of the problems we had before with communicating with refugees was that they claimed that they didn’t know, that they weren’t told. So by forcing them to come to the interviews with the appointment *and* the brochure, this claim was not valid anymore. It makes them less tense and has saved us a lot of problems. Instead of saying, ‘The tall blonde girl didn’t tell me’ or ‘The guy with glasses didn’t tell me’, now this is our reference.

This written reference system has been largely successful despite the brochure being available only in English and Arabic:

It’s going very well, and we hear lots of positive comments from refugees. They feel like they have the same and equal treatment, that they’re all required to deliver the same papers and documents, without any discrimination or exceptions.

Printed information is now a key component of the smooth and fair operation of the organization’s services, and its manager is adamant that their previous orally-based communication system was deficient: “You cannot just let it all depend on the talk.”

Although this example shows that print can be a successful channel, the use of short, simple, easy-to-distribute brochures and flyers is not common in Cairo and has capacity for major expansion. The majority of printed information about asylum in the city is either site-specific, like printed notices and letters which are posted in offices and businesses frequented by refugees and asylum seekers, or lengthy, with limited distribution. Some research participants were incredulous at the medium’s underuse.

A good practice was described by a service provider who received an email from UNHCR during the revolution with attached announcements in English and the major languages of the city’s refugee communities. The email requested that its recipients – every refugee service provider and CBO in Cairo – print the announcements and hang them in a prominent place in their organizations, which the service provider did. He said:

We were in a Sudanese restaurant in Ardelewa, and they had the [announcement] on the wall as well. We asked them about it and they said, ‘Pretty regularly in this last year, UNHCR come and give us stuff to put on the walls.’ I think that’s really great, and they should do about fifty times more of that . . . There’s just some simple public service communications that should be done. You can whip together a pamphlet on an A4 piece of paper on Microsoft Word and print a bunch of them on white paper, so people know what is going on.

Such printed material can then be distributed in person or through email to different organizations for printing.

One participant suggested that each service provision organization in Cairo have a short flier or brochure that briefly describes how to access their services. During discussions in regular interagency meetings, all participants could stuff bags or envelopes full of one of each brochure. The sacks could then be distributed at every workshop, community meeting, theatre performance or other event that refugees are expected to attend:

Everything that they do, they would just carry bags with them. ‘We’re expecting a hundred people tonight? Take a hundred bags. You don’t need it, you already have five copies? Give it to your friends.’ Do regular information dumps at all of the CBOs.

Since brochures, or bags of brochures, could be easily passed along from person to person, overcoming the need for a person to attend the event to receive one.

Another strategy suggested to improve printed information is to create documents with basic information in cartoon form so that children or people who are illiterate can benefit from it, as well as those who can read.

Printed materials offer a way to reach people who, for whatever reason, do not or are unable to make office visits or seldom attend events for refugees – for example, people with illness or disability, or what one research participant called the “whole group of women who work seven days a week into the evening”. Cartoons, comics and shorter and simpler forms of print information could address the varying literacy and education levels of Cairo’s refugee communities, and increase comprehension and efficacy of the documents being distributed.

### *Telephone*

Service provider use of telephone hotlines and SMS messaging to provide information about asylum in Cairo has grown in recent years. Efforts to improve telephone information, reports of ubiquitous mobile phone use in refugee communities, and telephonic channels’ abilities to bypass geographic limitations make them another channel for further development.

Following the revolution, UNHCR has introduced a phone hotline by which refugees and asylum seekers can make inquiries and appointments in their native language. As a Somali research participant commented, this initiative has eased access for refugees: “I think it’s a very good step forward. It saves cost, it saves time.” He also noted that a friend had successfully made an appointment through the hotline without either English or Arabic.

The benefits, strategies and interest in expanded phone use for asylum information are illustrated by a recent Cairo initiative. In spring 2010, a coalition of service providers acting under the name ‘Helpline Egyptian for Asylum seekers, migrants and Refugees’ (HEAR) took initial steps in the creation a volunteer-staffed telephone hotline that aimed to address information and communication gaps regarding asylum in Cairo. The helpline would allow people to call in and ask questions, for help with problems or for referrals from its trained volunteers, who would have a full guide of details of service and healthcare providers at hand.

For three months, with funding from the International Organization for Migration, the HEAR staff and steering committee laid a thorough groundwork for the project: formal recruitment of fifty-four volunteers, oriented them to the helpline, and created a tentative staffing schedule; design of a twenty-hour volunteer training; focus group meetings with 58 people from refugee communities in Cairo, of different ages, nationalities, legal statuses, education and literacy levels, family situations and time spent in Cairo, to assess interest in the helpline and what problems it might address; creation of a reference guide based on older resources and supplemented by visits and discussion with more than 80 relevant service provision and health organizations; establishment of referral contacts at relevant organizations; creation of a website introducing the project to volunteers, funders and forced migrants in Egypt; and submission of applications for long-term funding for the project to six funders.

In focus group meetings, refugee community participants were “without exception” supportive of the hotline’s creation. According to the report of HEAR’s activities, “many [participants] said that they wished such a helpline had opened years ago and noted that it would have been particularly helpful to them when they first arrived in Cairo.” Many of the problems discussed in the meetings were ones that the phone line could help overcome. Participants “repeatedly stressed how helpful and beneficial” it could be, and “many volunteered to help in any way they could to make the helpline a success and offered to spread the word throughout their communities when the time comes for the helpline to open” (HEAR 2009).

Despite its social support and solid organizational foundation, HEAR’s applications for funding were rejected. Lacking funding for staff or the procurement of equipment and hardware, the initiative fell dormant. Nonetheless, focus group participants’ enthusiasm for the project, its success in recruiting a large volunteer pool, and the receptiveness of service and healthcare provider staff contacted during its establishment signal the helpline idea’s feasibility, timeliness and capacity.

Indeed, research participants were unanimous in their assessment that the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo use mobile phones, using phrases like “everyone” and “everybody” to describe how many have mobiles; one service provider said, “I’ve never met a refugee without

one.” In a survey made by an Iraqi refugee in 2007 of 1,320 Iraqi refugees in Egypt, 99.9% said they could be reached by mobile phone (Name withheld 2012).

One Cairo service provider has introduced the use of group text messaging, both for reaching its beneficiaries and for contacting potential new ones, whose names and numbers they get from UNHCR. The SPO subscribes to a group text service with mobile company Vodafone, which provides computer software that allows them to easily send out announcements on a mass scale. The SPO also uses SMS to reschedule appointments, to remind beneficiaries to bring in certain documents, of timing of activities or to renew their membership cards.

The SMS system was used after the revolution when multiple service providers cooperated to distribute a one-off cash payment to refugees in Cairo, and other SPOs have used SMS to communicate about emergency closures in the year that has followed, alongside email notices to other service providers which were printed and posted – using multiple channels to reach the maximum number of people.

Although the SPO stressed that the SMS system is relatively cheap and easy to use, one caveat to the SMS system is the importance of careful drafting of the messages to be sent out *en masse*. The same employee said: “we have to be accurate because sometimes, when you send vague messages, you receives tonnes of telephone calls.” Messages must convey information clearly and concisely in each of the languages to be used, and include a phone number for follow-up calls in case recipients do not understand.

Both refugee and SPO research participants spoke of the SMS system’s success. An employee of the organization said that the system has “impacted on the relationship between staff and refugees when they are in the office. It really has improved.” An Iraqi refugee said that his mother, who receives services from the SPO, has benefited from the text message system: “She doesn’t need to go to [the SPO] every month to check when is the day of payroll. She receives the message every month, and they tell her the exact time to receive the money.” Seeing the success of the system, other service providers have begun to adopt it.

Although it might be expected that the use of new technology such as SMS to communicate with refugees and asylum seekers would be received as alienating and distant, refugee research participants unanimously supported it. The Iraqi refugee participant who told of the old Iraqi woman he knew, who had come to UNHCR’s Cairo office from Alexandria and waited for seven hours to find out about a health service just blocks from the office, argued:

If she had gotten a text from UNHCR or she had a number that she could call and check if there is a service provider that can give a medical support to her, she wouldn’t have come to UNHCR and wait for seven hours. So I think phone numbers, texting, giving refugees more attention than they are giving now, it’s one of the good things, good intentions that they could show to refugees, that ‘We are taking care of you, we are giving you care, we are trying.’

In this framing, service provider communication efforts that harness multiple channels are a way of ‘giving attention’ and conveying effort and respect to refugees and asylum seekers.



SPO participants, too, expressed support for increased harnessing of mobile phone capacities, calling SMS “great” and “terrific”. One pointed out SMS’s ability not only to instantly transfer information, but to provide a record of that transfer, and to be a resource that its recipients can consult repeatedly: “a text message sits in a phone, so people can refer to it, or receive it whenever”.

### *Internet*

Service provider use of websites, email and social media to reach refugees in Cairo is mixed but generally limited. Social media is an unused professional channel. However, refugee support for web-based initiatives, indications of significant web use by refugees and the multimedia capacities it contains suggest it would be a beneficial addition to community communication.

The majority of Cairo’s service provider organization’s websites are donor oriented, describing their work much in the style of an annual report. One service provider acknowledged and explained:

We don’t have a country program website, so there is no access to this information unless [refugees and asylum seekers] come and register at the office and then they take it. But those who come for many years know what they should bring; we haven’t changed many of our requirements.

At least one service provider used to have a section of its website with information targeting refugees, but it is now under construction; one CBO contains a listing of SPOs and CBOs but it is several years out of date. Some service provider websites lack basic information about how to find or contact the organization. Although this was previously the case for UNHCR Cairo, the office has recently updated their site to include its address, hours, email address, phone, fax, location map and directory of partners with their complete contact information as well.

Email is widely used in service providers and community based organizations as the primary mode of interagency communication, followed by phone. Although an ideal tool for referrals between organizations, service providers interviewed for the research said that email is a less effective channel for receiving queries from refugees. Incoming messages tend to be long, difficult to understand descriptions of complicated problems and reasons for resettlement which would be better dealt with an interpreter on the phone or in person.

Outgoing email, on the other hand, has been a successful channel for sending out information. Service providers use email to send letters, posters or announcements in multiple languages to a large list of people and other organizations, which can then pass it on orally or by printing and posting it. As discussed, this method has especially been used since the 2011 revolution to spread word of emergency office closures or situations.

Like the failed HEAR project, two recent web-based initiative from Cairo illustrate the possibilities and local interest in use of such a channel. In spring of 2006, a group of four student and three refugee volunteers for Student Action for Refugees at the American University in Cairo (AUC) began a project to create a website for refugees in Cairo. I was a member of the

group. The STAR web project was launched in response to the problems of information that were revealed during the Sudanese demonstration at UNHCR the previous fall.

The project aimed to create a website, available in the languages of the major refugee groups in Cairo, with information about services, a calendar of events, a forum for skills exchange and classified ads, and special interest sections for women and children. The web project team planned the site, gathered information to include, conducted a paper-based survey at SPOs, created an offline prototype, and held a public seminar at AUC and a focus group for refugees where we presented the idea and collected feedback from participants (Eidenier 2006).

Participants in the feedback sessions expressed unanimous support for the project. One refugee participant said that since UNHCR is limited, people have to help themselves and have hope, and that making this website would help people help themselves and reach other. Another said most refugees' information comes from word of mouth, so a website with reliable information about services is a good idea. Refugees had ideas about how to spread the word about the site's content: one said that since there is some illiteracy, people with web access should inform those without. Another suggested putting the contents of the website into booklet form, to distribute as an announcement of its existence and content.

Academic attendees suggested the website could include, amongst other things, country of origin information, studies of literacy rates, contact information for service providers, news links, visual information for people with lower literacy levels and information for people wishing to volunteer in refugee assistance.

Refugee participants made a wide variety of suggestions for the site: that it include the results of RSD interviews, a place where refugees could share their stories, writing, or art or post events or courses their organizations are hosting, explanations in simple language about detention of refugees, refugee reunification, local integration, Egyptian culture, rights, healthcare, job possibilities, links to websites that showcase the cultures of home countries, UNHCR policies, how to get psychosocial help, education for kids, what resettlement chances are, counselling for newcomers, services organized by neighborhood and that it be accessible to people in conflict zones or IDP camps<sup>3</sup>.

Like the HEAR phone hotline project several years later, the STAR web project never came to fruition despite its initial energy and support. All of the student volunteers left Cairo at the end of the academic year, one of the refugee volunteers was resettled and another started a job in a different country. With its main proponents gone, the project never got off the ground.

The following year, two Iraqi refugees made initial efforts to create an online guide for Iraqi refugees in Cairo. One of them described the impetus for the website:

There's no connection between Iraqi refugees here, so even when something bad happens to an Iraqi refugee – there are resources for support if something happened, like medical support, but they don't know about it. So I thought about how to help my community, and thought, 'Why don't we make a website to put all

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<sup>3</sup> Author's field notes from seminars, 24 May and 5 August 2006, American University in Cairo.

the information that can help the Iraqi refugees here in Cairo, so that whenever they need medical support, or legal support, they can go to this website and know more about the services.’

He and his colleague were inspired in part by a web forum made by a friend in Amman, Jordan that addresses “the kind of questions that refugees ask.” He said that the forum is “a good connection between Iraqis. Without the help of NGOs or organizations like UNHCR, they start helping each other, supporting each other, financially, morally, through that forum.”

Encouraged by this model, the two men discussed the idea with a service provider friend who suggested some steps to take to attract funding to build the website, starting with a study to show its necessity. One of the men was resettled out of Egypt but the one who remained made a survey of 1320 Iraqis, in their neighborhoods and at UNHCR, to see if people wanted a website and to assess the use of different information and communication technologies.

However this project, too, is currently on hold, awaiting time and funding. The progenitor of the website who is resettled is no longer able to work on it, and the one who remains in Cairo is a full-time student and holds several part-time jobs, too busy to single-handedly devote the energy the project requires, although he has still been slowly collecting information for the site and hopes to create it one day.

This initiative and the STAR web project suggest existing interest in web-based information services for refugees in Cairo, and the feasibility of such initiatives, were they funded. Surveys conducted in the initial stages of the projects indicate significant use of the internet amongst refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo. In both surveys, the participant selection was non-probabilistic and convenience-based, so may not be generalized, but is nonetheless indicative.

In the 2006 STAR survey of 162 refugees and asylum seekers of various nationalities, distributed at SPOs and CBOs in Cairo, 152 (94%) reported that they used the internet. 96 of those surveyed said they accessed it in internet cafes, 26 at home, 9 at home or a cafe and 5 at their workplace (Eidenier 2006). In the 2007 survey of Iraqis, 85.7% said they could be reached by email or social networking sites (Name withheld 2012).

Five years after these surveys, research participant interviews largely confirmed their indication of significant internet use amongst Cairo’s refugees. Yet two service providers interviewed discounted the use of email or the internet as a strategy to improve communication about asylum in Cairo because not enough people own computers.

One said, “you can’t use email if you don’t have computers, and poor people don’t all have computers” and the other said “most of the people are vulnerable and they don’t have computers at home; only certain communities might have access to emails, like Iraqis, but never the Somalis nor most Southern Sudanese.” Another, however, said he thought that “one of the things that we [as service providers] underestimate is how much use of the electronic media the refugee population makes.”

Indeed, interviews with refugees suggested that despite low levels of computer ownership and varying literacy and computer literacy levels, internet use is still significant as a household

information and communication strategy across Cairo's refugee communities. Refugee research participants said that although most refugees and asylum seekers in their communities did not own personal computers, many nonetheless accessed the internet through Cairo's many internet cafes, and at service provider and community based organizations that have computers for public use. (As early as 2005, organizations have offered computer use or classes to refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo.)

Those who do own computers often share them with others, becoming hubs of community information, and those who access the internet at cafes or organizations can similarly enable the indirect access of their friends and family. An Iraqi refugee estimated that within his community, "there is one in each family who can use computers. So the son, the father, the mother, one of them, he knows how to use a computer and go to the internet, Facebook and stuff." A Somali research participant estimated that in his community:

Most have access to the internet, but most old people don't know how to use it properly. You may see an old woman, she knows how to speak and read Somali, but unless her child [accesses the internet] for her, it's difficult to understand it. But that's the way they communicate.

The person who is computer literate or multilingual can share information with family members who are not.

Another trend indicated in research interviews was a prevalence of social media use, which is burgeoning in refugee communities in Cairo, especially amongst young people, despite a lack of computer ownership or sometimes even computer literacy. A service provider who works primarily with Sudanese refugee children said, "Every child in this school is on Facebook, every single one. None of them have a computer but they are all on Facebook." An Iraqi refugee said that in his community, "there are people who don't know how to use a computer, but they log in to Facebook."

Several participants attributed a rising popularity of social networking sites to refugees' international social networks. A Somali refugee participant said of his co-nationals in Cairo, "Facebook and Hotmail, they use a lot, and MSN messenger a lot, for chatting and communicating. [...] they want to get information about their loved ones who are back at home, and the current situation of the country, so for these two things they have to get messages from their loved ones back home."

Following on their view of the significant use of the internet by refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo, research participants unanimously supported increased use of the internet to provide information for refugees. One service provider said,

Electronic media is definitely something to be looking at, and a much better means of transferring information than relying on people to give out printed booklets. If someone gives you a 70-page document, are you really going to bother to plough your way through it? Whereas you could just type in 'resettlement' and get one page of information.

A searchable website could thus overcome some of the barriers posed by printed information.

A Sudanese refugee contributor emphasized further possibilities offered by increased use of the internet by service providers. He said that with a website, people in Cairo and other cities could learn about their rights, how to register with UNHCR, what financial, medical or education assistance is available, and the rules surrounding the resettlement process; people outside of the Middle East could learn what is happening with refugees in Cairo; and people considering coming to Egypt or seeking protection could learn about what protection entails, and the roles of UNHCR and the Egyptian government.

He described how Egypt's recent political turmoil brought the internet's benefits to light:

If there is an emergency, and if there is a website, the people know well what is going on. For example, when the Egyptian revolution started, we did not have any website to know what is going on for refugees. Even UNHCR closed, and there was no one with information about how to communicate with UNHCR.

The internet's function in times of emergency was similarly highlighted by a service provider, who said that, in the aftermath of the revolution, "One kid that had a computer in his house, everybody within a half mile radius would go to his house, every evening, to be able to chat with people and see that other people were okay." A single computer became a crucial access point for multiple people within an area – an indication of how, in times of peace or trouble, internet connection may serve to overcome geographic barriers in linking people to information, and each other.

If there were to be increased use of the internet in information provision for refugees in Cairo, what should it look like? Research participants had suggestions. In terms of content, two main visions emerged: first, a system in which refugees and asylum could track their asylum or resettlement case online, and second, a website with information about events, news, services, rights, processes and rules related to asylum in Egypt. This could include a section of 'Frequently Asked Questions' to address common misunderstandings, rumours and complaints from Cairo's refugee communities, as they arise.

The creator of a case-tracking website would necessarily be UNHCR (perhaps with cooperation from resettlement agencies), but research participants offered differing visions of who would best host an information website. Most thought UNHCR would be the logical and most authoritative host, but the Iraqi refugee interested in starting a website for Iraqis in Egypt thought an independent hosting body would be more trusted.

Participants stressed that such a website should be written in accessible language, and in multiple languages. It should, a service provider said, be "really user-friendly – really easy to use, really simple, different languages." In addition, said a Somali refugee, "if the language they use to communicate was the languages people speak, that would be good." Only a multilingual site that moves beyond English and Arabic would be understood by a majority of Cairo-based refugees

and asylum seekers who accessed it.<sup>4</sup> To increase its accessibility across literacy levels, a website could also include video, downloadable audio podcasts, photographs and cartoons.

As well as being created with the literacy and language needs of its users in mind, to remain trusted and relevant a website for refugees in Cairo would need to be continually updated and up to date. One service provider suggested that “each resource organization [be] given a password and code so that you could go in and update your information”, resulting in an online resource directory that reflects changes of location, services and contact information in a timely manner.

Both refugees and service providers suggested a website should be used in tandem other communication channels. Alerts and announcements, for example, could be posted online, sent by email, and, in briefer form, sent by SMS. A Somali refugee suggested that UNHCR should have not just a website but also use Facebook and a Yahoo group as well, including to make appointments, providing all are available in Cairo refugees’ major languages.

A service provider suggested that the website could easily become a printed resource, if service providers or community leaders printed it, or parts of it, up, and posted or distributed it; it could alternately be downloaded and saved for offline access, for organizations or individuals with poor or intermittent internet access. Such an effort, the service provider said, “wouldn’t really be that hard.” With cooperation from agencies throughout the city, its reach could extend offline as well as on.

This section has provided an overview of current use of communication technologies around asylum in Cairo, their limitations, capacities and potentials. It showed that the increase in meetings and workshops has been effective in building communication between service providers and refugees, but site-specific information has limits that necessitate forays into other channels. Printed communication is a promising and underused, especially in short, simple forms in multiple languages. Initial forays into SMS and phone hotlines have been successful and show further capacity to help, and websites, social media and email are similarly auspicious.

## **Conclusion**

This paper had three aims: to provide an insight into the dynamics of information provision in refugee protection and services in cities in the global south; to bring attention to the changing uses of information technologies in urban refugee settings; and to explore changing communication strategies to improve urban protection and services.

The first section of the paper showed how, in Cairo’s recent history, rumours in refugee communities grew unchecked, expectations were misplaced and refugee frustration grew. Protest, closures of UNHCR and the injury, arrests and deaths of refugees resulted. The

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<sup>4</sup> A good model is the Australian website *Asylum explained* (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre 2012), which is offered in English, Arabic, Chinese (simplified & traditional), Dari, Sinhalese, Urdu, Bengali, Korean, Indonesian, Tamil, Vietnamese, Malay, Persian, Thai, and Hindi. The site lists contacts and resources, and covers the topics ‘What is ‘seeking asylum’ in Australia?’; ‘Am I a refugee?’; ‘How do I get protection?’; and ‘I arrived by boat’ (available online at <http://www.asylumexplained.asrc.org.au/>).

emergency presented by the 2011 revolution and subsequent unrest further highlighted the importance of expanded ways of reaching Cairo's refugee population. Despite ongoing efforts, gaps in information remain. Information strategies face barriers related to the local and international contexts, psychosocial tendencies, the city's linguistic diversity and simple lack of time and funds.

The paper's second part addressed the major communication channels used to provide information to Cairo's refugee communities. In-person communication is the major focus of service provider efforts and has helped improve their relationships with refugee communities but requires the expenditure of time, money and energy to access. Existing print information shows effort, but tends to be too complex and lengthy for universal comprehension and is offered in too few languages.

Service providers have recently established a telephone hotline and SMS system, with excellent feedback. Initial research indicates near-ubiquitous refugee mobile use, and enthusiasm for expansion of phone-based communication and information channels. Service provider use of the internet to provide information about their services or asylum more generally is nearly non-existent, yet research participants speak of the web's growing importance for and use by Cairo's refugees.

Three broad conclusions can be drawn from the research. First, information plays a critical role in the protection of urban refugees. Poor or absent communication can heighten security risks, affect access to services, and create serious problems for both refugees and service providers. In the global south, contextual issues impinge on urban refugee protection and services: resettlement expectations, local and governmental hostility or indifference and the difficulty of urban navigation are major challenges.

Communication cannot overcome these barriers but it has the potential to mitigate their effects. Information delivery that conveniences and addresses the needs of refugee communities can strengthen protection, improve access to services and build mutual trust in relationships between refugee communities and service providing organizations.

Second, technology comprises an underutilized group of channels to address some of urban refugee outreach's biggest barriers: geography, languages, rumours and differing literacy rates. Many refugees in Cairo are using new technologies, although not in the ways that might be expected. Unlike resettlement countries where computer ownership is the cornerstone of internet access, in Cairo, internet cafes and service providers serve as the prevalent points of access. People with internet access use it to share information with people without.

Service providers seem to be underestimating refugee use of the internet, and neglecting it as a channel of contact. SMS and phone hotline programs are logical matches to widespread refugee mobile phone use. Less cutting-edge technologies, like print and film, remain important and underused. Refugees in Cairo have repeatedly demonstrated interest in and support for technology-based community communication projects. The multiplication and diversification of strategies to expand the use of passive forms of information can overcome constraints of site-specific and oral communication, bypass the filtering effect of word-of-mouth, counter the

spread of misinformation, and overcome the psychosocial constraints of face-to-face interaction, like mistrust of particular nationalities or institutions.

Third, as well as providing information that is accurate, consistent and regularly updated across all channels, strategies to expand communication with urban refugees beyond face-to-face interactions should consider several key matters. To address varying literacy and education rates in the city's refugee populations, information should be as clear, simple and user-friendly as possible and should be created in shorter forms. It must be delivered in all of the major languages of Cairo's refugee communities. Interpreters are critical and should be more widely used, especially in health services where misunderstandings can be matters of life or death.

Finally, the content of information strategies should be refugee-centred, starting with existing needs, questions and misunderstandings. In Cairo, this includes publicizing services, addressing the pressing need for estimates for wait times regarding RSD and resettlement, and more generally clarifying the constraints on service providers vis-à-vis resettlement, rights and benefits.

The project of communicating with urban refugee populations should receive more funding and attention from donors, governments and international organizations. International philanthropic and corporate interest in ICT's use for social problem should be harnessed for the betterment of refugees. Service providers and refugees have made efforts in this direction but lack the time and funds to make them sustainable. The urban setting's challenges make the expansion of good communication practices for refugees in cities particularly important.

In the growing study of urban refugees, the project of outlining the dynamics of information provision, changing uses of technology, and the parameters that communication must navigate may raise more questions than it answers. It highlights the continued need to consider how intersecting geopolitical and technological contexts impact refugee protection and services.



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