Refugees
Indispensable for aid organizations
Biometric registration of refugees has come under criticism. Wrong: Digital processes are the safest, most efficient and cheapest of all.

In a crisis, one of the first tasks of the UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, is to provide water, food and shelter to vulnerable people - and to register them. At first this sounds like bureaucracy, a triviality. But the opposite is the case.

Without a proof of identity, no child can attend school, no adult can get a legal job, go to the doctor, buy a phone or even land. Without legal documents, nobody succeeds in escaping poverty. ID cards are normalcy in affluent industrialized countries, and most citizens also have credit cards, loyalty cards, membership cards, driver's licenses. Every day they use them.

But several hundred million people on this planet don't have this option. They have no documents, their identity has never been officially established. This also applies to many refugees. That's why it's so important to register. And that's why, facing hardship, they often insist on being registered quickly. Because only then they exist for state authorities and aid organizations in the asylum countries. Then they are entitled to legal residency, to water and food, to medical help and to education - and demand to be taken into account and no longer be ignored.

In the digital age, identification only works digitally. Paper is the exception. Digital registration is easier, more reliable, more international - and above all, it can be done when talking about the millions of people in less developed regions of the world who need help quickly.

We live in dramatic times: more than 65 million people are on the run worldwide. At the same time, we are witnessing the dawn of a new digital age. We feel the consequences of change, and at the same time we are pushing for it.

Digital transformation must also benefit those who have virtually nothing. What if you could digitally store identity papers and a person who lost their papers in a war zone could identify herself in the asylum country by accessing the cloud? Often, documents are lost in war and crisis areas, civil registry offices and school archives in flames. If, in addition to traditional methods, online archives, data, and bank accounts could be used to restore identities and CVs, that would be a dramatic improvement for the situation of millions, perhaps hundreds of millions of people. Often the war breaks-up families. Digital identities can help bring together separated families.

Especially in developing countries vaccinations are important. However, vaccination certificates are not always correctly issued or lost during flight. No problem - if there is a copy in the cloud. Millions of children would benefit if a digital vaccination certificate provided for the retrospective issue of a birth certificate.

UNHCR registers millions of refugees on behalf of governments around the world. Refugee ID cards are no longer printed on paper but are often issued on counterfeit-proof plastic cards. Biometric systems have become international standard. It's the safest, most efficient, and least

expensive method - not unimportant for an agency funded by the tax payers and individual donations - to solve an important problem.

The risks of digital transformation should not be underestimated. However, it would be equally negligent to emphasize only the dystopian elements. We work to use new opportunities of the new digital age in order to find new solutions to both old and new problems. This is particularly true of refugees who too often have to persevere on the margins of society.

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About the author
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http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2018-01/asylverfahren-unhcr-registrierung-fluechtlinge-digitalisierung