



How digital identity can enable the Global Compact on Refugees

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The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) highlights the importance of registration, identity management and inclusion of refugees in host States' civil registries, including the key role that digital identification and biometric technologies provided by UNHCR can play. The opportunities that new technologies and innovations can offer refugees to contribute to their new communities, such as online education and livelihood opportunities, are also highlighted.

UNHCR in partnership with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada undertook in 2019 a broad online stakeholder consultation to envision the role that digital identity for refugees can play in enabling the GCR.

The consultation included a call for written submissions with 90 submissions received from refugees, researchers, civil society, innovators, entrepreneurs, the private sector and humanitarian and development actors, contributing their experiences, perspectives and expertise on this fast-developing area. Three virtual thematic events allowed the authors of the shortlisted papers to present to a wide online audience. The Summit concluded with a workshop in Ottawa, Canada and a set of conclusions and recommendations were published, alongside other materials, on the project's website

The importance of digital identity

As digitalization increases in all sectors of life, refugees will increasingly require a trusted digital identity if the GCR's goals are to be realized across the full spectrum of displacement. A digital identity can facilitate life-saving assistance, protection and solutions, cash-based interventions, access to financial services and economic inclusion, increased self-reliance as well as contributing to durable solutions to displacement.

However, it is essential that refugee protection also extends to the digital world. The potential risks of the misuse of digital identity systems for tracking, monitoring or surveillance need to be considered. Privacy and data protection should be safeguarded and the risk that digital systems will be used for exclusion and limitations on access to services must be considered.



Conclusions and recommendations

1. Defining Digital Identity

Digital identity has many different meanings. It would therefore be valuable for UNHCR to adopt a consistent definition. For example, a trusted digital identity can be understood as the electronic representation of a person, used exclusively by that same person to receive valued services, and to carry out transactions with trust and confidence. A trusted identity can facilitate access to services in the digital world, without the need for face-to-face contact, opening up new opportunities for both refugees and host communities alike.

2. Principles, standards and practical guidance on digital identity and refugees

The identity challenges relating to refugees, are in many ways unique. Many refugees do not possess any identity credentials when they arrive in a host State. At the same time, refugees require special protection which includes, for example, preventing the authorities of the country of origin from being contacted to verify a refugee's identity, without consent and with due attention to any risk of harm.

It is essential that the unique considerations that apply to refugees and their identity be reflected in legal and regulatory standards that are being developed on digital identity, including trust frameworks by, for example, international and regional organisations, States, and financial and telecommunications regulators.

3. Privacy and data protection

UNHCR should consider establishing principles, standards and practical guidance on digital identity and privacy and data protection for all stakeholders that process refugees' personal data, including States, humanitarian organisations and the private sector. They could build on the foundation of the Policy on the Protection of the Personal Data of Persons of Concern to UNHCR and other international standards, including international human rights law.

4. UNHCR's role in registration and identity for asylum seekers and refugees in the context of the GCR

As States increasingly develop digital identity ecosystems, UNHCR should consider how its tools should be developed to work as part of the Host State's digital ecosystem, for example, by interoperability with host States' digital identity systems, where there is an appropriate enabling environment in place.

UNHCR should also consider how its systems, policies and practice, and technical support provided to host States, could be aligned with international digital identity standards to facilitate greater recognition of refugees' identity to facilitate access to services. For example, the Agency could consider how its identity system's capacity for digital identity authentication could be strengthened to facilitate onboarding for financial services or SIM card registration, alongside other integral elements of the digital identity lifecycle.

5. The design and development of the humanitarian digital identity ecosystem

The further design and development of the digital humanitarian ecosystem should be standards-based and adopt a "people-centred approach" and be developed in consultation with the refugees whose lives it will impact. This should accommodate the full range of age, gender, disability, and diversity amongst refugee communities.

6. Implications of new technologies and approaches

UNHCR should engage technologists and developers to ensure that refugee protection is considered in the development and application of new technologies. For example, UNHCR could support the establishment of a multi-stakeholder technology ethics board to screen and give guidance on emerging technologies and their application.



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More Information

More information about the consultations, including recordings of the virtual events and the full report, can be found on unhcr.org/idecosystem

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