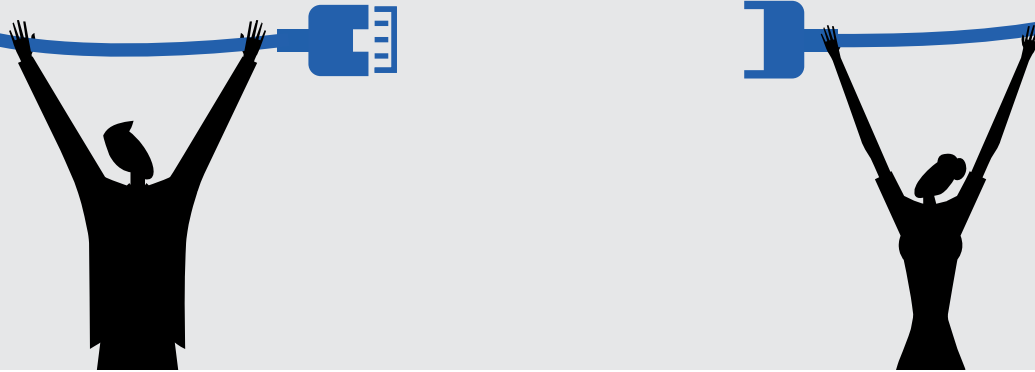


Community-Led Connectivity Solutions



Introduction

Through UNHCR's Connectivity for Refugees initiative, assessments have demonstrated that one of the key barriers to refugees' digital inclusion is a lack of connectivity services available in refugee hosting locations. While efforts to enhance service provision commonly rely on commercial providers such as mobile network operators or other internet service providers, in certain locations it is challenging to find a viable business model for provision of services commercially. As such refugee and hosting communities lack the ability to access connectivity, a gateway to vital services and a tool to support community self-reliance.

UNHCR Innovation Service has been exploring alternative options for connectivity service provision in such environments and specifically has been exploring 'Community networks' as a model to address this gap, having recently released the report '[Community-led Connectivity](#)' that explores their potential application in forced displacement settings. This and broader community-based approaches to connectivity help address these challenges and develop more sustainable, locally owned connectivity solutions.

Context

Community networks are decentralized networks which leverage the potential for low-cost communication technology to support affordable, locally owned and managed communication infrastructure. Rather than centered in private enterprise, they are driven by local community members who take the lead in the deployment, governance and maintenance of physical communications infrastructure.

They usually provide small-scale public networks based on WiFi, or sometimes cellular mobile services or fiber connections. The number of fully fledged Community Networks in the world is still relatively small, mainly due to limited awareness of these new opportunities to self-provide communications infrastructure, but also due to regulatory barriers and human capacity constraints that are present in many countries, especially in the global South.

Scope and Objectives

Community networks and community-led connectivity solutions can play an important role in meeting the needs of refugees for better connectivity, as they provide an opportunity to emphasize the communication needs of excluded groups, specifically marginalized community members less likely to adopt technologies i.e. older persons, people with disabilities etc.

The potential to encourage self-provision of infrastructure also matches the aims of the Global Compact on Refugees - one of its four key objectives is to “enhance refugee self-reliance”. In this respect there are a number of additional potential benefits to community-based infrastructure deployment that may be particularly appropriate in forced displacement and other similar resource-low contexts, encouraged by the close physical proximity and tight social relationships between the members of the local community and those involved in the network. These include:

1. Local control over how the network is operated and the types of content that are provided over the network. This can allow the use of the network to more closely reflect the needs of the communities served, provided there is representation of different groups in the design.
2. Creation of local opportunities for jobs and fostering entrepreneurship, not only in support of the network directly, but also in the use of the connectivity by local enterprises.
3. Retention of more funds within the community resulting from the low usage costs and the income generated by residents working to support the network.
4. Fostering a sense of agency within the community which can amplify their sense of capability in being able to help to improve the quality of life of community members. This may also then encourage other types of collaborative efforts to improve local livelihoods.

Challenges to Enabling conditions

While there are many potential benefits to establishing community networks, the primary restriction to the development of community networks is the lack of conducive regulatory environments. A few countries have adopted a licensing framework which includes provision for community operators, such as Argentina, Brazil and recently, Uganda. In general, license fees and the reporting requirements of the license are too onerous for small networks. However, a telecommunications regulator may be open to taking such an approach with the right conditions in place relating to its implementation.

A community-based approach

There may be some challenges to the community network approach in areas of forced displacement. Although there are insufficient examples in developing countries to draw firm conclusions, it appears that community networks have emerged more strongly where there are close knit social structures with a culture of self-organization. This may not be the case where communities comprise a mix of long-standing residents along with more recent and transient refugee arrivals. However, this is also an opportunity to forge community resilience and peaceful coexistence, though these benefits can take some time to mature.

Application

As Community networks are a relatively new phenomenon in developing countries, there is little experience of their application in forced displacement contexts. Therefore, to gain experience of community networks, the Innovation Service would like to make funds available to support operations in pursuing the implementation of a community network programme.

Given this area of focus is relatively new, we are keen to hear from operations in pursuing the implementation of a community network or even connectivity solutions that have a strong community dimension to them. The application should be based on data and evidence that demonstrate the potential success of such an approach. This would include but not be limited to data related to the information and communication needs of communities, lack of infrastructure in the specific locations, an openness with the relative authorities to support such an approach, not to mention existing inclusive community engagement mechanisms

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