Background Note

Digital Access and Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Introduction

An estimated 10.6 million persons with disabilities are forcibly displaced as the result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and climate-induced displacement. In addition, several million are thought to be displaced but often remain invisible within uprooted communities. Many of these community members face communication challenges and while technology has become more ubiquitous in people's lives, those with such challenges face a digital divide that is present due to a lack of accessibility considerations within the digital ecosystem. Affordability and accessibility of technology products as well as digital literacy are the main barriers affecting their digital access and inclusion.

In April 2020 UNHCR's Innovation Service jointly with the GSMA M4H programme undertook research to address the issue of lack of access to digital services, - with the aim to understand and address barriers in the access and use of mobile technologies for persons with disabilities, and maximize opportunities for social and economic inclusion. The main findings of this research were that refugees with hearing and visual impairments face challenges of communication, social exclusion, high level of dependency and lack of information about available services. According to the survey carried out jointly by UNHCR and Latin American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of Persons With Disabilities and their Families (RIADIS) in the Americas in December 2020, the main access barriers identified were affordability of services and devices, limited digital skills and content not available in an accessible format.

As a protection agency, UNHCR is responsible for promoting a meaningful participation and leadership of people with disabilities through their engagement in the development and implementation of an inclusive and universally accessible response. In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, improving the access to digital services for refugees and other forcibly displaced with disabilities can promote self-reliance and inclusion. Digital inclusion can also present an important opportunity for people with disabilities since they are increasingly enabling persons with disabilities to get access to education, financial services, skills development and employment. Digital technologies can enable persons with disabilities to receive information and content in the format that they can and prefer to access.

Context

The evolving humanitarian landscape lately marked by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the relevance of connectivity in accessing relevant information and remote assistance mechanisms by UNHCR´s persons of concern. For the most marginalized groups like refugees with disabilities, their digital inclusion represents more than ever a gateway to efficient access to vital protection services, participation in humanitarian programming, increasing livelihood opportunities and facilitates integration.

The Innovation Service, through its Digital Inclusion Programme, is committed to ensure a meaningful, safe and inclusive online engagement of particular vulnerable groups at heightened risk of exclusion. As such, we are launching a challenge within the Call for Proposals that seeks to test initiatives and solutions to address some of the specific challenges faced by people with disabilities in displacement contexts.

Scope and objectives

Interventions will take into consideration the specific barriers faced by people with disability such as communication challenges or lack of digital literacy, as found in the GSMA study[1]. As such proposed interventions might address some of the following priorities (but not limited to):

1. **Tackling access and affordability roadblocks**: Persons with disabilities usually have lower income than their non-disabled peers; thus, in many cases, the cost of a device and connectivity services can be burdensome. There may be other access issues relating to devices covering both hardware and software. Exploring initiatives with local service providers and phone manufacturers can provide opportunities to facilitate access to connectivity.
2. **Accessible information and engagement mechanisms**: To guarantee effective information-sharing among people of concern with disabilities, content has to be developed, presented and shared through modalities and channels preferred by this vulnerable group. Making vital protection content and participation methods accessible across all disability constituencies ensures an accountable humanitarian response.
3. **Building digital skills**: Many persons with disabilities, their families and disability service providers, especially in low and middle income countries, are not aware of the range of accessible online tools available and how these can be used. Ensuring that persons with disabilities can effectively make use of them is paramount to ensure a meaningful online engagement.
4. **Enhancing livelihoods opportunities**: The global digitalization trend of the labour market can positively impact the access of refugees with disabilities to job opportunities. Connectivity can underpin the promotion of income generation activities online to achieve independent living, social and economic inclusion for persons with disabilities.

Application

Given the relative lack of evidence around levels of digital access and inclusion of people with disabilities in displacement contexts, nor in specific interventions that support this, the Innovation Service is including this challenge in its call to provide financial support to operations seeking to address the issue.
We're keen to hear from operations who have invested time in thinking about this issue and are seeking to pursue a project to address such challenges. While the Expression of Interest will not require a fleshed out proposal, it 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, ongoing initiatives with national and local organizations in addressing such issues with hosting communities, and support of other third party organizations such as mobile operators or technology companies.

To submit an Expression of Interest to this challenge click the Apply Now button.

(*You will need to login to your UNHCR account*)

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1   Based on findings from the research conducted by UNHCR and GSMA in Kenya (April 2020)