EMPOWERING REFUGEES THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

BACKGROUND GUIDE
CHALLENGE TOPIC #4

The [MUN Refugee Challenge](#) is an initiative launched by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates.

Merinas, Mumina and Mary walking with their classmates and tablets through the Angelina Jolie Primary School in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. © UNHCR/Hannah Maule-ffinch

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THE CHALLENGE

Since the turn of the 21st century, technology in its different shapes and forms has become the bedrock of our society. From driving with a GPS to tracking weather patterns and connecting with friends on social media, many aspects of our lives are influenced by technology.

Although technology is by no means a solution for all the needs of refugees, it can enhance their wellbeing and even save lives. The three most important items refugees take with them when they are unexpectedly forced to leave their homes are water, food and their phone, according to a 2017 survey conducted with Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

For refugees, a working mobile phone and internet connection can mean increased access to a safe home and refuge for their family. Refugees also depend on technology to keep in touch with relatives who might be in a position to help them. Furthermore, information about services offered to asylum-seekers and refugees by governments and UNHCR is easily available online. Technology also allows many refugees, who would otherwise have trouble accessing quality education, to study online.

Yet, despite the democratization of technologies, refugees are still 50 percent less likely than the general population to have an internet capable phone and 29 percent do not own a phone at all. Refugees often spend up to a third of their disposable income on staying connected - which highlights the main obstacle to refugee connectivity: cost.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS?

"By helping refugees maintain social networks and access information and essential services, mobile phones and internet access are as critical to refugees' safety and security as are food, shelter, and water."
—UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi

Refugees can use technology to overcome the obstacles that accompany forced displacement. Refugees can find their way during their journeys thanks to online mapping tools, store important documentation on online cloud storage and access information about their rights, asylum process and the services available for them. Technology can also allow refugees to access electronic cash assistance, find jobs or complete their education via online learning programmes.

The Global Compact on Refugees outlines a blueprint on how technology can help ease pressure on hosting communities and countries as well as help refugees become more self-reliant and integrated within their host societies.
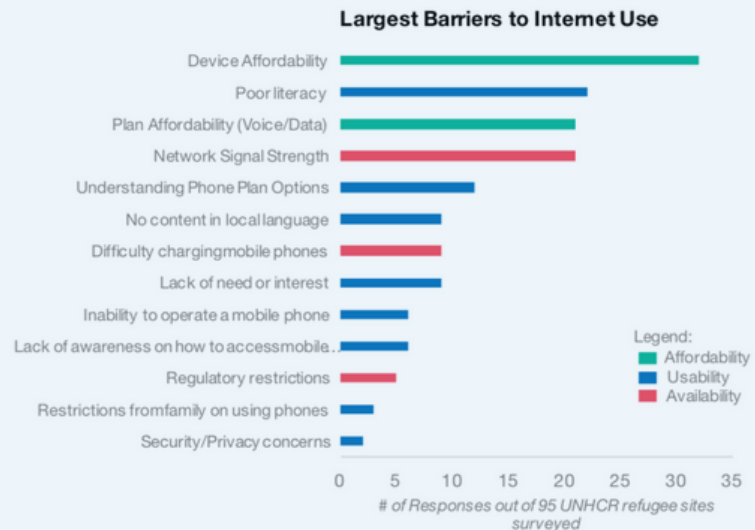
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HOW CAN
TECHNOLOGY
EMPOWER REFUGEES?

Internet Connectivity

Without proper connectivity, programs that provide tablets and mobile phones are of little use. The issue of connectivity needs to be tackled before devising other innovative technology solutions.

Rural refugees often have less access to connectivity than the urban population. Only 17 percent of rural refugees live in areas with 3G coverage, compared to 29 per cent of the global rural population. 20 percent of rural refugees have no mobile network coverage at all, compared to 10 percent of the global rural population. For urban refugees, accessibility to an internet network is less of an issue, but affording connectivity is a challenge.

"Reliable internet, continuous electricity supply, access to smartphones, and affordable data plans all have to come before the unusable tablets or the one-off online services."
— Christine Ro, Forbes

Largest Barriers to Internet Use

	# of Responses out of 95 UNHCR refugee sites surveyed
Device Affordability	
Poor literacy	
Plan Affordability (Voice/Data)	
Network Signal Strength	
Understanding Phone Plan Options	
No content in local language	
Difficulty charging mobile phones	
Lack of need or interest	
Inability to operate a mobile phone	
Lack of awareness on how to access mobile...	
Regulatory restrictions	
Restrictions from family on using phones	
Security/Privacy concerns	

Legend:
- Affordability
- Usability
- Availability

0   5   10   15   20   25   30   35

# of Responses out of 95 UNHCR refugee sites surveyed

Digital Identity

The 2018 Global Compact for Refugees stresses the need to ensure access to identity documents, such as birth certificates and ID cards for refugees. Having an ID document is often key to accessing services, including digital ones. For example, many governments require a proof of identification in order to activate a SIM card.

New technologies are helping to improve refugees' access to a legal and digital identity. Biometric registration was introduced by UNHCR in 2002. It consists of recording refugees' fingerprints and running iris scans. It enables more secure identity documents and allows to distribute humanitarian aid more efficiently. However, storing and protecting the digital data of refugees can present challenges. It is key to ensure data security and check who can access it and obtain informed consent from refugees on the data collected from them.

Access to Electronic Cash Assistance and Financial Services

Giving cash to refugees rather than providing in-kind aid such as food or blankets, is a great way to help them rebuild their lives with dignity and to be more independent. Electronic payments or "mobile money" allow refugees to receive a SMS message from UNHCR and withdraw cash from a phone shop or pay goods directly with their phones in local stores. Connectivity can also allow refugees to access other financial services - for example, to open and manage their bank accounts. However, many host countries prevent refugees from accessing these services. In Jordan, where refugees are not allowed to open bank accounts, UNHCR introduced mobile wallets not only to provide cash assistance, but also to allow refugees to make transactions, savings, payments and credit.

Digital literacy and IT

Digital literacy refers to the ability to use and understand technology, such as navigating a website, using social media and sending emails. It can also refer to having marketable software skills, such as coding websites and apps and creating blogs. Digital literacy opens a wide array of opportunities to refugees. It can allow them to find job offers online but also makes them more employable in most industries. Additional training in computer science can also give them access to work in the fast-growing field of telecommunications and IT.

Remote and Digital Education

Refugee children in many parts of the world face discrimination when it comes to education. According to UNHCR, 3.7 million refugee children are out of school and the spread of COVID-19 has exacerbated the situation as many countries are forced to close schools and limit numbers in classrooms. Access to remote and digital education can help bridge the educational gap for refugees. Digital education can be in the form of online education via laptops and tablets or through radio and TV.

UNHCR

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

- Through websites and social media platforms in multiple languages, UNHCR and partners provide important information to refugees about asylum applications, local policies and the services available to them.
- UNHCR is ramping up tools like biometric registration to provide refugees with more secure identity documents, and electronic cash assistance to allow refugees to become more independent.
- UNHCR builds partnerships with refugees, host communities, host governments, businesses and NGOs to give refugees access to available, affordable and usable mobile and internet connectivity.

Tech Companies and Other Businesses

- Businesses can help power refugee camps. For example, the IKEA Foundation's Brighter Lives for Refugees campaign allows UNHCR to provide sustainable electricity to 20,000 Syrian refugees in Azraq camp. This allows families to connect a TV, have light inside their shelters and charge their phones, which is critical for ensuring connectivity and keeping contact with their relatives abroad.
- Telecom operators can improve the quality and speed of the internet in refugee communities. Telecom operators such as Airtel and Vodacom are setting up 3G towers in regions that host temporary refugee settlements.
- Tech companies can boost refugees' digital literacy. For example, Microsoft signed an agreement with UNHCR to establish two facilities, in Kenya and Russia where refugees learn computing and software skills. Microsoft also provides free resources to help refugees gain computer skills.
- Businesses can provide online education to refugees. For example, Vodafone has partnered with UNHCR to establish the Instant Network Schools, which provides internet access and digital learning content to marginalized refugee communities in Africa.

Governments

- Host governments can offer incentives to the private sector to provide connectivity solutions.
- Host governments can identify and invest in improving digital infrastructure in their countries for their general populations and the refugees they host.
- Host governments can give refugees access to a legal and digital identity to allow them to access local services by including them in their national identity systems.
- Host governments can set national legal frameworks governing the use and access of technology and data relating to refugees. For example, the European Union has enacted the General Data Protection Regulation, which keeps refugee data private and Turkey limits access to refugee data to the Turkish government and the UN.

Refugees

- Refugees can develop skills and in turn create innovative technological solutions. For example, a team of robotics-trained Syrian refugees in the Za'atari camp in Jordan designed a Lego robot which dispenses hand sanitizer in the camp.
- Refugees can create support platforms for other fellow refugees on social media. For example, the "I am a Syrian in Lebanon" Facebook group has gained 30,000 members seeking tips on enrolling in school, reporting assaults and much more since its launch in 2014.
- Refugees can use technology to enhance the wellbeing of fellow refugees. For example, in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, Amina, a refugee teacher, started broadcasting lessons to her students on a community station called Radio Gargaar when schools had to close. Radio lessons helped support over 100,000 students who attend the camps' schools.

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ReDI, a Berlin-based non-profit school, is offering free coding and digital courses to women refugees. Students stand to gain more than just new skills. The school offers access to a network of women working in technology, contacts that have led to job offers for former students.

Fifteen per cent of people worldwide have a disability, and this percentage is even higher among refugees. UNHCR strives to provide digital accessibility for refugees with disabilities. For example, UNHCR provides laptops specifically designed for people who are blind or visually impaired to Burundian refugees studying with DAFI scholarship at the University of Rwanda in Rukara.

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Questions to Guide the Debate

○ How can we address the different connectivity needs of rural and urban refugees?

○ How can we ensure the issue of connectivity is addressed before devising digital products?

○ How can we incentivize the private sector to bring connectivity to refugee communities?

○ How can we best use technology to help refugees access job and education opportunities?

○ How can technology help tackle new challenges faced by refugees due to COVID-19?

○ How can technology be used to boost refugees' local integration?

○ How can we enhance the digital literacy and computer skills of refugees?

○ How can technology help refugees at different stages of their journey?

○ How can we ensure information about refugees is safe and their data rights are protected?

Useful Resources

○ [UNHCR: Connecting Refugees](#)

○ [UNHCR: Connectivity for Refugees](#)

○ [UNHCR: Internet and Mobile Connectivity for Refugees – Leaving No One Behind](#)

○ [GSMA: The Importance of Mobile for Refugees](#)

○ [Financial Times: Telecom Operators Dial in to Refugee Markets](#)

○ [Forbes: When It Comes To Tech, Refugees Need More Access, Not More Apps](#)