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Digitalization and forced displacement: How addressing access, online behavior, and privacy issues can lead to better digital solutions

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Digital technologies provide new opportunities for development and humanitarian organizations in their support for displaced people. Development agencies in the Group of 20 (G20) countries that fund and support humanitarian response can improve digital humanitarian responses by addressing technology access issues in displaced communities. They can work with United Nations (UN) agencies to develop digital tools that meet displaced peoples' specific needs and implement comprehensive privacy and data protection policies in the programs they support. This policy brief draws on policy-relevant empirical findings on displaced peoples' digital behavior and inclusion to develop recommendations for the G20 Development Working Group.

Challenge

Meeting the immediate needs and supporting the long-term integration and livelihoods of forcibly displaced people is an ongoing challenge facing humanitarian and development agencies represented within the G20 Development Working Group. To use digital technologies sustainably in refugee and displacement responses, three challenges must be addressed. The first is addressing the problem of access. While access to mobile Internet and smartphones has indeed increased globally, forcibly displaced people often do not have ready access to these services. The second is understanding how forcibly displaced people already use digital technologies so that new tools and services fill the gaps. The third is data protection and privacy. Forcibly displaced people, in particular, need to be sure that their data is secure, as it will contain details on their protection status, health, and family details.

Recent research on access has demonstrated that in both urban and camp settings, there is mobile data access and, to a lesser degree, wired Internet. The problem is that costs, especially data bundles, are too expensive for displaced people. G20 development agencies should facilitate partnerships between humanitarian organizations and private sector Information and Communication Technology (ICT) providers to subsidize data costs. In many cases, private sector actors are willing to partner with refugee and humanitarian agencies to provide free or highly subsidized Internet access. To help bring displaced people online, G20 development aid should be directed toward increasing displaced peoples' knowledge of digital services. This can be done by funding community-level training events and using signage in high traffic areas, such as registration centers.

Displaced peoples' socio-technical behaviors are also central to using digital channels to share information and identify gaps where a new app or tool could be useful. In many cases, development agencies do not need to build something new but instead can leverage relationships with community leaders to share information via channels that people already use, such as WhatsApp and Viber. Finally, privacy and data protection are central to any sustainable digital solution for displaced people. G20 countries' development and humanitarian funding agencies have a responsibility to make sure that open communications on social media do not put people at risk. Apps or platforms that collect registration or identity data must be secure. This can be accomplished by making funding for digital projects contingent on implementing partners hosting sensitive data in countries with robust digital privacy rules.

This topic is relevant not only to Task Force 9 but also speaks to challenges that will be addressed by Task Force 6. Digitalization can provide the infrastructure to support reunification, continuing education, and access to new labor opportunities for displaced people. However, to achieve these outcomes, development agencies in G20 member states must work to make sure basic access and privacy issues are addressed before taking steps to deploy a digital solution for displaced people. This includes coordinating with the private sector, international organizations, and local regulatory actors.

Proposal

Digitalization and greater access to Internet-connected technologies create a variety of new opportunities for development and humanitarian agencies to support displaced populations and refugees (Martin-Shields 2017). There are examples of governments from municipal to national levels in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries supporting digital programs to help refugees and displaced people integrate into their adoptive communities. However, there has been less research on how to maximize the positive effects of digitalization in developing countries, where the majority of displaced people and refugees are hosted. Recent research has aimed to address this gap, identifying challenges related to technology access, the ability of refugees and displaced people to use new technologies, and privacy and data protection issues. This proposal will summarize these findings and make actionable recommendations that can be taken into consideration by the G20 Development Working Group.

Access challenges for displaced people and refugees

In middle-income countries with large refugee populations, the key challenge to accessing the Internet has been solved. Mobile phone-based Internet is generally available in urban, camp, and often rural settings. Furthermore, connectivity is increasing via fiberoptic cable. This reality was underlined in June 2018 when a TEDx event was live-streamed from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya's rural Turkana County.[1] Indeed, high-speed mobile data coverage is broadly available in Latin America, East Africa, and Southeast Asia, regions where governments have been, and continue to deal with high levels of internal and cross-border displacement. With many refugees reporting having access to smartphones on which they use apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook (Culbertson et al. 2019), increasing global access to high-speed mobile Internet bodes well for refugees and displaced peoples' digital inclusion. However, even as the capacity to connect to mobile data networks increases, refugees and displaced people face both economic and policy issues that prevent them from fully benefiting from digital connectivity.

G20 development funding agencies should continue working with mobile network operators (MNOs) to subsidize data and airtime costs for displaced people. While mobile Internet transmission is expanding and smartphones are becoming cheaper, the costs of buying data and airtime are still relatively high for refugees and displaced people. Survey research by Hounsell and Owuor (2018) in Nakivale and Kakuma refugee camps in Uganda and Kenya demonstrated that one of the biggest limitations refugees faced in accessing mobile Internet were the costs of data. Data packages in the 300–500 Kenyan Shilling (KES) range (approximately 3–5 Euro) that come with 2–3 gigabytes of data are relatively affordable for the average consumer in countries like Kenya. However, Eppler et al. (2020) learned from structured interviews and participant observation that refugees in Kenya would only buy 50–100 KES worth of data per week. Refugees reported that this was the range of data they could afford every week. While these interviews were not probabilistic, they reflect the representative survey data collected by Hounsell and Owuor in the same camp setting. This volume of data would be enough to connect and send messages on a messaging service such as WhatsApp but would be insufficient to use streaming services such as YouTube or make voice-over-IP (VoIP) calls using WhatsApp's voice feature. Thus, while connectivity is available, and many refugees can use mobile Internet services, airtime and data costs still constrain full digital inclusion.

G20 member countries should work with multilateral agencies and refugee host countries to ensure that refugees have access to legal identities and that these identities are sufficient for accessing the Internet and mobile phone services. Globally, for security reasons, there has been a shift in policy toward requiring higher levels of identification to purchase a SIM card.[2] For displaced people who cross a border, purchasing a new SIM card can be a challenge. Until they have a new SIM card, they do not have a local mobile phone number, which means they cannot use a mobile phone or must pay roaming charges if they brought a mobile phone with them that has a SIM card from a foreign country. This is not merely an economic question. If aid agencies shift to transferring cash using mobile phone-based cash transfers, there is a risk that displaced people who cannot access a local mobile phone could be financially excluded. Regulations around identification also limit the degree to which refugees can take advantage of digital services. For example, Malaysian law requires all people who sign up to use ride-hailing apps such as Grab to submit a scan of their national

ID or passport for identity verification (Chu 2019). For the nearly 100,000 refugees in the Greater Kuala Lumpur region, this can mean not being able to use Grab, where prices are transparent, and having to rely on taxis that often engage in price gouging.[3] G20 countries, given their central position in funding humanitarian responses, should take the lead in developing transportable digital identity documentation for displaced people.

The complexity of the access to digital technology for refugees and displaced people has moved beyond basic connectivity, which is good. However, to continue increasing displaced peoples' digital inclusion, development and humanitarian agencies need to engage with regulators and MNOs. They must ensure the costs and regulatory rules are not exclusionary, by omission or commission.

Understanding technology in end-user's daily lives

While improving access to digital technologies and the Internet is a necessary condition for displaced peoples' digital inclusion, it is not on its own a sufficient condition. Understanding how displaced people use technology in their daily lives, and what technology means to them when trying to navigate administrative processes, is central to implementing successful digital inclusion programs.

This is harder than it might seem; researchers and international organizations recognize that a large proportion of displaced people use mobile phones and social media to stay in contact with family and friends and that even those who do not own their own smartphone often have access to one in the household or through neighbors.[4] Indeed, the need to connect with family and friends is often the core reason displaced people go online (UNHCR 2016; Leung 2011). Development and humanitarian agencies in G20 countries also want displaced people to use digital technologies for administrative purposes, such as registration and records management. So how do these agencies support this kind of technological behavior?

One approach is for G20 countries to support technology access for refugees at the municipal level. Case studies from New Zealand, Australia, and the United States illustrate that municipal projects that support digital connectivity can help with a wide range of social and administrative integration for refugees (Kabbar and Crump 2007; Siddiquee and Kagan 2006; Evans, Perry, and Factor 2019). Solutions that are developed and supported at the local level, particularly by municipal authorities, will be locally relevant and help displaced people connect to the town and region they have settled in. Thus, a starting point is the localization of digital services. However, as Martin-Shields et al. (2019) point out, these examples are based on situations where there are a limited number of refugees and a relatively high level of municipal capacity to keep them engaged and informed about the technology available to them. How can G20 countries foreign and development ministries support the conditions for displaced people to engage with administrative processes digitally when there are many people in need and limited administrative resources?

G20 countries' donor agencies can start by being more selective about funding new apps and websites. Culbertson et al. (2019) point out that many organizations create a great deal of "digital litter" (p., xi); these include apps and software that do not get updated, are forgotten by the developers, or no longer link to useful information. One well-developed app that meets a tangible need for a displaced person is far more valuable than multiple apps that provide disparate information with varying levels of quality. The tangible need is key; in multiple interviews with refugees in Kuala Lumpur, respondents explained that an app that had basic information was good, but to use it regularly, they wanted something they could log into and use to schedule appointments (Martin-Shields and Munir-Asen 2020). However, it is difficult to build a high-quality app that syncs efficiently with a centralized database and can be used in multiple languages and by people who may not read and write. Additionally, G20 countries that are supporting ICT access for displaced people need to be prepared to invest significant financial resources not only in software and app development but also in ongoing tech support.

Organizations such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have to deal with a very large population of refugees with limited resources. Investing in developing a robust app that solves one tangible problem for refugees is a starting point. To prevent it from turning into "digital litter," there needs to be funding for ongoing maintenance, coordination across UNHCR offices to make sure information is up to date, and institutional efforts to make sure refugees know about the app and how to use it. Ongoing funding for support and maintenance beyond a one-year budget cycle is critical. With these baseline factors covered, it then becomes possible to build a wider information ecosystem that refugees will value and trust.

Data protection and privacy issues

The most important part of building and maintaining trust in a digital tool, especially one where sensitive data such as UNHCR meetings or identification documents may be available, is having robust data protection and privacy protocols. Displaced people are generally aware that

they have a higher level of vulnerability when it comes to online security than the average person (Culbertson et al. 2019, xii). Subsequently, G20 countries need to make sure any digital services they provide to refugees they host are secure. G20 countries' development and foreign ministries must also make sure any ICT tools they fund in developing countries meet global standards for data protection and security.

G20 development agencies have a responsibility to do everything possible to make sure that their data protection and privacy protocols are robust. For organizations that are new to the digital space, there are existing standards for digital data protection that can be used to get started. The International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action (2017) provides standards for data collection and protection, as well as special sections on digital data handling procedures. Along with technical standards, ethical data collection and privacy procedures in humanitarian settings are provided in the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's Signal Code (Greenwood et al. 2017). The Signal Code provides researchers and humanitarians with guidelines for ethical, cooperative procedures for data collection in post-disaster and crisis settings. These can be used to inform an organization's data collection, data sharing, and informed consent processes when developing a digital tool for displaced people.

Having baseline standards for data protection and ethical processes in place is the starting point. G20 funding agencies will have to decide whether they insist that partner agencies keep things such as data storage in-house, or if they contract a third party for this kind of work. As mentioned in the previous section, a digital tool such as an app is an investment that includes maintenance. Budgeting for server space, maintenance, and security updates is a cost that continues over the life of the app or tool and is central to maintaining data security and privacy. If any part of this work is contracted out, G20 development agencies must ensure that contractors are carefully vetted.

G20 development ministries that are planning to support the development of digital tools or apps have a responsibility for protecting the data that displaced people provide. Doing so effectively is not just a function of following technical protocols. It is also a process of making sure that displaced people play a role in setting the terms of how their data is used, and that organizations are transparent about who their partners are.

Recommendations

This policy brief outlines three core areas that recent policy-relevant research has indicated as fundamental to the effective digital inclusion of displaced people. These recommendations are best addressed by the G20 Development Working Group as they would be implemented at the development ministry or agency level within G20 countries.

1. Accessibility challenges

a) G20 donor agencies should work with multilateral and private sector actors to defray the costs of mobile data and airtime costs for displaced people. Displaced households may be financially constrained in unique ways that make market-cost mobile data and airtime too expensive. To help bring displaced people online, G20 development agencies and humanitarian organizations should subsidize the costs of data packages or make arrangements with MNOs to subsidize the costs of data when using specific apps.

b) G20 countries should develop a standard identity system for refugees with cooperation from UNHCR and the World Food Programme; these IDs should be globally accepted for purchasing SIM cards and establishing bank accounts.

2. Technology in displaced peoples' daily lives

a) G20 donor agencies should provide humanitarian agencies with the funds to communicate information about digital solutions to displaced populations. The best app is useless if the agency that develops it cannot communicate its existence to the displaced people it works with.

b) In developing country contexts, the demand for services is very high. Funding agencies in G20 countries should focus on supporting digital solutions that solve basic problems and ensure that those apps receive full lifecycle funding.

3. Privacy and data security

a) G20 development agencies need to make sure they have protocols in place for both data protection from a technical perspective and an ethical protocol for obtaining consent from displaced people who will be providing any identifiable data on a digital platform.

b) Many security and privacy issues can be solved by G20 development agencies requiring UN agencies and non-governmental organizations to host sensitive data in Europe or other countries with strong data protection laws.

Disclaimer

This policy brief was developed and written by the authors and has undergone a peer review process. The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the authors' organizations or the T20 Secretariat.

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Appendix

[1] . More about this event can be found at: https://www.ted.com/tedx/events/21032.

[2] . A SIM card is the identification module in a mobile phone and connects it to a mobile network.

[3] . Refugee numbers in Malaysia are available at: https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance-in-malaysia. html

[4] . See Smets et al. for more on social media use among refugees, and see Eppler et al. 2020 and Hounsell and Owuor 2019 for the development practice angle on this topic.

Existing Initiatives & Analysis