

Offering virtual consultative services to improve lives of refugees awaiting resettlement at camps

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The authors call on the Group of Twenty (G20) leaders to advocate for Virtual Consultative Services to be offered to refugees in host countries. This can be done through proposals that address challenges the refugees encounter while awaiting resettlement process at camps, including, but not limited to, their safety and security, legal assistance, healthcare, psychosocial counselling, education, and vocation. This policy brief suggests possible approaches the G20 could take to extend virtual platforms, improve Internet connectivity at refugee camps, and build partnerships with development actors, UN agencies, private-sectors, NGOs, and international organizations.

Challenge

The issues of human migration are a multi-dimensional and complex process that may entail legal and psychosocial considerations. Although UN agencies and NGOs pay significant attention to the plight of refugee resettlement, services offered during this process are overlooked as the main priority of resettlement remains refugee camps. In these camps, the shelter provided is intended to be temporary, pending a resettlement process to a third country or integration at the host country, but often these temporary settlements become long-term fixtures. Therefore, refugee aid is being centralized with hundreds of refugee camps globally (Lanzarote Committee 2017; UN 2018; IRAP 2019).

Migrant crisis has not always been the topic of Group of Twenty (G20) discussions but has been dominating the meetings in the past few years. This began with the 2015 refugee crisis when migrants took dangerous journey through the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. The G20 leaders' declaration committed to achieving resettlement solutions for refugees in the long-term. However, commitments in terms of services provided in the overcrowded refugee camps need to consider that resettlement may span from a few years to a lifetime, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic (Greco 2017; UNCHR 2020).

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports more than 70 million people being displaced worldwide, with 25.9 million refugees. Only 92,400 refugees have been resettled (De Costa 2006). Challenges faced by this vulnerable group of migrants at refugee camps are not concealed from the international community and are a matter of critical concern to humankind. Collaborative efforts from global leaders are needed to address their circumstances, including safety and security, legal assistance, healthcare, psychosocial counselling, education, and vocational opportunities (De Costa 2006; UN 2018).

Significant generosity from host countries and donors has been witnessed over the last decade. However, there is still an imperative need for more burden and responsibility sharing by states toward accommodating and supporting global refugees. The United Nations General Assembly has confirmed the Global Compact on Refugees, a framework for more predictable and equitable sharing of responsibilities utilizing existing resources. (De Costa 2006; UN 2018; UNHCR 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered societies, economies, healthcare, and education systems globally, and has further exacerbated the refugee crisis as most refugees live in countries less prepared or equipped to combat the outbreak. As host countries continue to take unprecedented measures to combat spread of the disease, while tackling its pernicious effect on the economy and predictions of worst. there will be a delay in resettlement departures making refugee camps their homes for an unpredictable future (UNCHR 2020). This is particularly true in the developing world and in countries that have been weakened by conflict and political instability. It is the responsibility of the international community to support the most vulnerable with broadened and deepened partnerships from development actors to UN agencies, private-sectors, NGOs, International organizations.

Proposal

The 1951 Geneva Convention remains the most relied upon international instrument when it comes to respecting the rights of refugees, integration rights of recognized refugees in particular. This is further complemented by international human rights laws that apply to all individuals, regardless of their legal status, as outlined by the Human Rights Committee (HRC) and the UNHCR's Executive Committee (ExCom) (De Costa 2006).

As a first step in the resettlement process, individuals are relocated to refugee camps. These are often built very quickly to serve immediate needs for those being forced to flee. The numbers of refugees often grow from hundreds to thousands of displaced people awaiting a lengthy resettlement process (UN 2018). Refugee families flee with next to nothing; the UNHCR provides shelter in the form of tents and plastic traps, as well as access to water and sanitation kits, essential supplies, and food. In alliance with the local authorities from host countries basic medical care is provided along with an immunization program, but access to psychological support and education is limited (UN 2018). Although the "new" homes are safer than the refugees' native homes, they often come with living conditions that may not immediately restore their personal security, dignity and privacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new type of virtual community without any formal transition or substantial change in mindset. All sectors of life ceased to exist in a physical sense as the practice of social distancing was adapted to curb the spread of disease. Online video and phone communication replaced in-person contact. This introduced a new set of challenges and risks at refugee settlements as in-person efforts for resettlement were also halted. It is time that we stop considering refugee camps to be temporary solutions and start exploring innovative outreach concepts that could facilitate and improve access to services for refugees during their resettlement or integration process.

One approach is to extend virtual consultative service platforms into the forced displacement context by taking an integrated approach through a collaborative framework of existing resources and partnerships, including private, governmental, and endowment:

1. Improving connectivity services at refugee camps

Establishing a virtual program will require better Internet connectivity, which is systematically outlined in the report from the Rand Corporation (IRAP, n.d.). Drivers for evaluating the application of a technology solution in refugee settings are endorsed based on the report. These include market-based available systems, NGOs and/or agencies working in this space, volunteers and open-source developments, and private industry, government, and agency partners (IRAP 2019). Community network models in the context of refugee settlements are attracting an increasing interest in areas lacking traditional infrastructure as networks can be customized to support the needs of refugee communities (UNHCR 2020).

1.1 One approach that the G20 leaders could exercise is persuading member states to capitalize on community network technologies through low-cost Wi-fi routers. They could use license exempt radio frequencies at resettlement sites through public Wi-Fi hotspots on a per-user basis, as well as mobile networks.

1.2 To identify key global and regional partners, the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IMO) should collaborate in raising awareness and support for community networks in the forced displacement context.

1.3 The licensing burden for community networks should be subsidized by creating new license categories with minimal fees, taxes, and other licensure burden applied to non-profit networks.

1.4 G20 members could leverage telecommunication and tech companies to support community networks at refugee settlements by

1.4 G20 members could leverage telecommunication and tech-companies to support community networks at refugee settlements by ensuring spectrum access (3G, 4G-LTE, and 5G) is available and affordable. The possibility of incentivizing company contributions through state-contracts could be explored through a legal framework.

2. Building partnerships

Global Refugee Forum (GCR), in collaboration with UNHCR, has outlined the role of the Global Compact on Refugees in keeping with their key principles. These include burden and responsibility sharing and protection as well as recommending multi-stakeholder and partnership approaches in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, designed to support the most vulnerable, both now and over time (UNCHR 2020).

2.1 Member states of the G20 constitute about 85% of the world's GDP and host all five UN permanent security council members. This gives the G20 an opportunity to involve UN agencies, International Organizations (IMO, OECD), the private sector, NGOs, academics, civil society, refugee-led organizations and others in solutions. The B20 has recommended responsible and inclusive digitization. It has committed to and accelerated governments' digitalization efforts in public services. It has advanced digital education through innovative methods to reform education systems. It has also committed to renew the moratorium on custom duties on electronic transmission at the World Trade Organization (WTO) (B20 2020). Coordinated inclusion efforts by the G20 for refugee settlements would support the proposed virtual consultative program.

2.2 The World Bank Group president stated on June 8, 2020, that "Policy choices made today—including greater debt transparency to invite new investment, faster advances in digital connectivity, and a major expansion of cash safety nets for the poor (UN News 2020). In response to the pandemic, the World Bank approved USD 14 billion to be fast tracked and disbursed to countries, including to countries that host large numbers of refugees. Additionally, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the European Union developed packages of USD 10 billion, USD 20 billion, and EUR 15.6 billion respectively to help vulnerable populations in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America (UNCHR 2020).

2.3 The Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, and the World Bank are committed to working together to improve financial support and technical assistance for education delivery to refugees and host communities (UNCHR 2020). This pledge during the pandemic could result in a more holistic approach to funding education, include refugees in sector plans, and encourage development partners to consider funding the same projects.

2.4 Technological partnership is of critical importance to aid refugees. One example of a successful partnership was between the UNHCR, Microsoft, the William H. Gates Foundation, and six other companies, to develop portable registration systems during the Kosovo crisis in 1999. A similar approach could be taken by the G20 to collaborate with tech companies by providing incentives through state-owned contract and/or subsidies.

3. Extending Virtual platforms to refugee settlements

Examples of virtual consultative services with potential to be adapted and extended into the forced displacement context are being presented to G20 leaders:

3.1 Virtual legal counsel services available in native languages that address the overwhelming concerns of migrants, including economic and socio-cultural aspects of the host county and their local integration into the society or resettlement procedures. The International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) has created a "virtual public interest law firm" that is not limited by geographical boundaries and delivers high-quality representation to people fleeing from war, persecution, and political unrest worldwide. Thousands of volunteers, including law school students and pro bono attorneys, participate. IRAP has an impressive portfolio of assisting thousands of refugees and displaced people on urgent resettlement. The G20 should enter into a pro bono partnership with similar firms equipped to provide legal portals for the proposed virtual consultative service, while endowment measures from states, philanthropist and legal firms must be sought to financially support the programs.

3.2 Virtual psychosocial counselling services to ease the high-level of mental distress experienced by refugees and asylum seekers. This will minimize or eliminate mental health conditions in this vulnerable group of individuals, especially in children and women (Turrini et al. 2019). The American Psychological Association reports a growing trend of online therapy offered through video conferencing, allowing individuals to access therapy from their homes. This is suitable for a generation that is more accustomed to interacting with people using technology (Novotney 2017). The G20, in collaboration with WHO, should establish a structured partnership with associations and service providers who

offer this service. The G20 should coordinate with volunteers and obtain funding from UN Goodwill Ambassadors whenever possible. There is compelling evidence of the psychological impact displacement has on the mental health status of individuals. Post-traumatic stress disorders, anxiety disorders, and depression are the most common conditions observed amongst refugee children. The primary prevention of these psychological morbidities could take place in the schooling context (Fazel and Stein 2002). There are compelling accounts for urgent attention to the mental health of this vulnerable group. There have been an increasing number of cases of sexual assault, suicide attempts, self-harm, and having suicidal thoughts amongst child refugees from Greece (Nye 2018).

3.3 Virtual telehealth services capable of providing general and sub-specialized medical consultations assisting in diagnosis, treatment, and mobilization of resources should be explored. For example, the Australian government introduced Medicare options for telehealth consultation, adding a new component to the mode of healthcare delivery for the refugee and immigrant patient population settling in the regional areas. However, the group carefully points out the required funding to allow sufficient administrative support imperative to the program's sustainability (Schulz et al. 2014).

3.4 The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants outlines education as a critical element of the international refugee response. UNHCR partners, with governmental and international organizations, make every effort to ensure education for refugee children and young people. But more outreach efforts are warranted. This is because host countries are often low- and middle-income countries that are making substantial contributions as they address evolving economic, political and developmental challenges (UNHCR 2019). Virtual education and vocational training services are required to boost morale of migrants. These can provide young individuals with occupational prospects. It also gives them a sense of belonging and future in the new environment. As the world battles the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems globally have adapted virtual education services through videoconferencing software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This is the sort of learning for migrants that this policy brief suggests. When "life as we knew it" ceased to exist, online learning kept the doors to learning open in the form of online education. This acknowledged education as a basic right for every child, irrespective of one's living condition. Building on that sentiment, the same could be achieved through virtual classrooms for migrant children. An example of the feasibility of this strategy is the Varkey Foundation Teach to Reach Remote Classroom project (TRC), funded by the UNHCR. This became the first satellite enabled live distance learning program for children living in resettlement camps in Western Ghana. Lost cost-computers were installed to receive lessons through solar-powered satellites links; qualified teachers supported the program from their studios (Bonasio 2017). We propose adapting a similar teleconferencing model based out of the UNHCR headquarters that could enable virtual exchange through international exchange programs. This could assist young people with cross-cultural connections, education, and social learning. Legal aid and vocational training could be provided to adult refugees (Bonasio 2017).

This policy brief shows that a coordinated approach between the G20 countries could develop partnerships with the UN and other actors, experts, and stakeholders to implement and standardize videoconferencing. This would allow for the sharing of technological advances and experience. A virtual portal could be launched that would facilitate the UNHCR, IMO, and other non-governmental organizations to register refugee settlement. G20 regional coordinators could then facilitate the requested services.

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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