UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

Connectivity for refugees

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Key points

- UNHCR can improve the well-being of forcibly displaced people and its own response by facilitating refugee connectivity alongside partners spanning national authorities, private sector, development actors and civil society
- Find out what laws and regulations govern the access of refugees to SIM cards and advocate where there are barriers to inclusion
- Liaise with mobile network operators and other internet service providers in the early stages of an emergency. Make them aware of hosting locations and numbers hosted. This will enable them to assess the commercial viability of expanding infrastructure
- Make targeted investments in connected facilities such as community centres and schools – consider how financing initial infrastructure and consolidating expenditure may reduce overall costs over time, enhancing sustainability
- Programming decisions and actions should consider current and projected connectivity and take into account the expressed priorities, needs, capacities, and views of the communities, particularly marginalized groups such as women and girls, people with disabilities, the elderly et al
- Build off lessons learned from previous emergencies and operations. There are strong platforms for support available such as the Multi-stakeholder Connectivity for Refugees global initiative

1. Overview

"Connectivity is not a luxury. It is a lifeline for refugees."

(Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017)

In times of crisis, being able to connect with friends and family members both in one's country of origin and in one's destination country, and the ability to access information and digital services, is becoming increasingly important for refugees and asylum seekers all ages, genders, and demographics. It is also no less important for IDPs or stateless populations. In many emergencies, refugee populations are not in local urban centres but in rural locations that lack infrastructure – including mobile networks and connectivity. This infrastructural deficit is an additional barrier on top of other associated challenges, including a lack of devices, affordable internet services, and the digital literacy required to take advantage of connectivity.

There are, however, pathways toward addressing connectivity challenges, with an increasing number of actors – spanning governments, private sector, international organisations, NGOs and community organisations, including refugee-led organisations – invested in ensuring universal meaningful connectivity. As such, and building off prior efforts within and outside UNHCR, there are measures that can be taken in an emergency to advance connectivity even in challenging circumstances. These measures lay the groundwork for a connected and digital-ready response in the longer term and there are support lines available inside and outside of UNHCR to help your operation in delivering this.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

UNHCR is well placed, given its leadership role in refugee emergencies, to help re-establish connectivity by partnering with mobile network operators, internet service providers, other private sector actors, and connectivity-focused NGOs and community-based organisations. Following an assessment of the connectivity needs and status of a given area or community, through information sharing and advocacy, it may be possible to facilitate the establishment of networks where there were none previously, where they were offline, or dedicated 'connected' facilities, such as community centres. Once connectivity is established, digital services and activities that rely on networks (from cash transfers via mobile money, for instance, to digital education and digital employment) can then be capitalised on to deliver a more efficient and effective emergency response, not to mention the wider direct benefits to communities themselves.

3. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

UNHCR is committed to modernising humanitarian service delivery and taking innovative and forward-thinking approaches to delivering assistance. This includes – although it is not limited to – making full use of available technology as outlined in UNHCR's strategic directions that note the importance of delivering digital transformation in exercising the agency's mandate.

In 2022, UNHCR launched its first ever Digital Transformation Strategy. The ability of forcibly displaced communities to access connectivity is a central focus of that strategy, and a prerequisite to many other aspects of the strategy, spanning digital protection to digital services.

In 2023, UNHCR together with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), GSMA, and the

Governments of Luxembourg and Spain, kicked off a transformative initiative to advance the connectivity of over 20 million forcibly displaced people and their host communities by 2030. The Connectivity for Refugees initiative is a multi-stakeholder platform linked to the Global Refugee Forum. It spans all elements of a refugee response – including emergency phases – to ensure that forcibly displaced people and the communities that host them are not left out of our connected society. This initiative supports wider digital transformation in humanitarian response, serving as a foundational element to the Digital Transformation Strategy.

This transformative agenda builds on UNHCR's previous efforts around connectivity, and advances the ambitions of the 2016 'Connecting Refugees' report, which set out UNHCR's vision for connectivity for affected populations.

The Connectivity for Refugees initiative is supported within UNHCR by the Innovation Service, from which field operations can receive:

- Technical advice and support for strategic, contingency and operational planning.
- Support in connecting with initiative partners and global technical specialist networks
- Training and capacity-building for UNHCR and partner staff.
- Financial resources to undertake connectivity assessments, leading to the design and development of long-term strategic solutions.
- Coordination and advocacy support.
- Support in identifying and recruiting skilled technical experts.

Moving forward, country-level approaches, lessons learned, improved capacity building materials and more will be shared through the Connectivity for Refugees website.

In an internal displacement setting, the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster leads the delivery of connectivity solutions for communities. Depending on capacities between different ETC members and partners, a variety of activities that advance connectivity for displaced communities may be undertaken, some potentially by UNHCR, through coordination via the cluster.

Good practice recommendations

Understanding the legal and regulatory playing field around connecting refugees

Before undertaking any specific action around connectivity for refugees, it is important to get an understanding of the regulatory landscape in country. This includes an assessment of how liberalised the sector is, whether specific funding mechanisms have been set up to support rural access, the number of major mobile network operators or other internet services providers, and the amount and quality of infrastructure available. This assessment should take into account different technologies, including cellular, satellite, fibre and others. Details of different telecommunications regulators can be found through the ITU portal, and specific details of each country's national approach will be available on the website of the relevant national telecommunications agencies. More information, including a Mobile Connectivity Index, is available through the GSMA website.

One important aspect to consider is whether refugees are legally able to access SIM cards.

Relevant factors include whether UNHCR registration or UNHCR-issued documentation is a viable identification format to support SIM Card registration. UNHCR has developed comprehensive reviews of SIM registration requirements across several regions, also covering financial services, through its Displaced and Disconnected reports, where a methodology is also available to support with new analysis.

Understanding communities' communication needs

To develop a deeper understanding of how populations are communicating and the prevalence of connected devices, start by conducting an information and communications needs assessment, Connectivity Needs and Usage Assessment, or equivalent. Emergency responders should consult communities to determine what channels of communication they currently use, what sources they trust, how they would like to talk to humanitarian agencies, and what role mobile and digital technology has in their life and other areas. Connectivity is one aspect of a wider communications 'ecosystem' that will incorporate many 'offline' approaches to communicating with communities. This assessment may be led by UNHCR or undertaken jointly with other humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors. UNHCR participatory assessments can also include specific sections on information and communications.

Mapping connectivity

Relevant information may already be available, so it is important to first check a variety of sources. These include ITU's Disaster Connectivity Maps. To assess the availability and strength of mobile network connections yourself, a number of tools are freely available for download. These include OpenSignal, OpenCellid and CellMapper. At an early stage, even as early as the initial site assessments and stages of the site planning process, 'drive' tests – where an individual drives around capturing cell signal quality - can be undertaken to measure connectivity at key infrastructure locations and across the site. Increasingly, algorithmic tools are being used to map connectivity based on tower data and other variables. Some tools facilitate the creation of an overall connectivity map using data gathered during a drive test. These results can be shared within a multi-functional team to ascertain the potential of using connectivity across the response supporting different goals including education i.e. connected education, livelihoods i.e. online work, protection i.e. engaging with communities through digital channels, and more.

More substantive connectivity assessments require specialised equipment and engineering specialists. The Connectivity for Refugees initiative is positioned to support UNHCR operations with connectivity mapping; so, if the information isn't available, reach out using the contact information provided at the bottom of this page to ask whether there are mapping partners who can support.

Enhancing mobile coverage

After the connectivity gaps have been identified, steps can be taken to enhance the infrastructure across refugee hosting areas. The first step is to liaise with different stakeholders in the telecommunications space and at their intersection with both aid and development activities. This includes liaising with national governments, mobile network operators, and other internet service providers (ISPs) to look at how emergency action might align with longer term

universal access strategies. Through this multi-stakeholder dialogue, insight can be gained as to private sector actors' infrastructure plans, whether they are aware of refugee influxes and plan to respond to these changes. When influxes are larger, it could be appropriate for UNHCR's Representative or Senior Emergency Coordinator to write to a C-level executive within the national provider or subsidiary, or to liaise with HQ colleagues for group level engagement, if the potential partner is multi-national company. In the case of smaller influxes into areas where local providers have a presence, the Head of UNHCR's Field Office could write to regional management or technical teams to facilitate a more operational response.

Looking at a crisis, Mobile Network Operators may see new business opportunities, incentivising them to roll out temporary "Cell on wheels" (COW) infrastructure to determine market viability. If you encounter rural access issues, it may be that the telecommunications regulator or ICT ministry has funding mechanisms available to support rural access, to which you could apply. There are also a number of development actors investing in connectivity infrastructure in several contexts, which may be able to redirect or pivot their activities to incorporate new refugee populations.

Targeted investment in infrastructure

As well as working to incentivise the quick roll-out of commercial infrastructure and solutions, you could also explore the possibility of leveraging emergency funding to temporarily make targeted investment in connectivity infrastructure, for instance, connected community centres (previously known as CTAs within UNHCR). While simple conceptually, such centres require dedicated effort to manage and maintain over time. It is crucial not to think of these solutions as a simple hardware deployment, without requiring further staff time or investment; to achieve the goals of these facilities, specific programming needs to be undertaken to leverage them toward a variety of goals, from education through enhanced refugee dignity. Where possible, community members themselves can play key roles in the management and governance of such centres, provided they receive adequate training, guidance and mentorship.

Such training of refugees and host community members to take ownership of the maintenance, management, and governance of facilities can address another key challenge: sustainability. When emergency funding runs out, ongoing costs could be expensive, and commitments hard to maintain. Investing in training, even in emergency phases, can empower community members to maintain these sites over time. Support from global partners is often available to help with setting up such centres in the short term, and colleagues are encouraged to approach HQ counterparts for guidance as to what support is available through the Connectivity for Refugees initiative.

Coordinating connectivity initiatives

Each year, new organisations and consortia are investing in humanitarian technology and connectivity. While this enhanced investment will deliver solutions that benefit refugees, a greater number of actors also requires more concerted coordination efforts. UNHCR wants to ensure that the response community is investing wisely – in other words, in ways that meet the needs outlined in early assessments with communities, avoid duplication of activities, and ensure sustainability.

Considerations for practical implementation

- **Determine responsibility for the issues within the multi-functional team.** There is no standard job profile that is responsible for connecting communities within UNHCR and often it is a topic doesn't sit clearly in any one person's portfolio. Depending on an operation's context and capacities, it may be that ICT officers are responsible for engaging with Mobile Network Operators, given that they may hold corporate contracts with them. Meanwhile – since connectivity is strongly linked to Accountability to Affected People and community-based protection, and facilitates information provision, feedback, and protection services – some responsibilities may be assigned to protection staff. In other cases, this topic might link with livelihoods, education or digital financial inclusion. Senior leadership in the emergency response will have to determine how the different facets of connectivity will be addressed and by whom.
- **Inclusive connectivity.** A key consideration is how the affected population are using available connectivity and what barriers are preventing vulnerable groups from accessing connectivity. Research has shown that women are significant more likely than men to encounter barriers to getting connected. As such, it may be beneficial to have activities specifically targeting women and other marginalized groups – such as people with disabilities or the elderly – to facilitate more inclusive access to connectivity. Care needs to be taken to ensure that activities do not exacerbate existing negative power dynamics, but rather better understand and address existing inequalities.
- **Differentiating between corporate contracts and connecting refugees.** Often, private technology/telecommunications companies – spotting an opportunity to acquire a corporate contract – will begin discussions with international organisations through their corporate account managers or sales executives. This approach is different from UNHCR's ambition to advance Connectivity for Refugees, with community members purchasing connectivity services themselves from companies, without a humanitarian organization as an intermediary. Commercial contracts will often be handled by ICT officers together with admin colleagues, as services are established for staff and partners, but the wider connectivity agenda for communities requires engagement with a multi-functional team spanning protection, education, livelihoods, development, IT and others. Depending on the scale of the situation, this may require UNHCR Representatives or Senior Emergency Coordinators liaising directly with C-level representatives in company counterparts. It is important to note that sometimes crossover exists, and the existence of a corporate contract may help account executives advocate internally for infrastructure enhancement serving affected populations.
- **Avoiding large bills in the longer term.** While initiatives may look compelling on paper, their total cost can often be larger than expected, when factoring in other associated costs, such as maintenance, particularly looking at Operational Expenditure over time. Such costs can potentially be difficult, especially in a constrained funding environment, for an emergency response operation to absorb. Particularly, we have seen that some interventions that are funded in emergency phase decrease in priority over time and end up being difficult to sustain. This is a particularly acute issue when connectivity is provided at heavy expense using often more traditional technologies i.e. some forms of satellite connectivity. Mitigation strategies include determining transition plans with NGOs and implementing organisations, also engaging with private sector providers on potential to switch to market-oriented approaches that leverage existing infrastructure.

- **Leveraging value added service (such as mobile money) to stimulate investment.** Many mobile network operators' business models involve more than the simple provision of basic mobile services. Their portfolios span several areas, including mobile money, which is often a key income generator for operators. If UNHCR is considering using mobile money for cash-based interventions, this may increase a mobile network operator's incentive to extend and enhance infrastructure. Many development actors are also becoming increasingly supportive of digital financial inclusion initiatives and may be open to financially support investment in connectivity infrastructure with this goal in mind.

Resources and partnerships

- **Staffing and Partners.** As per the above, there is no specific profile supporting this area of work, yet an operation should find a way of incorporating connectivity into the responsibilities of the multifunctional team. Different parts of the work can be separated out among staff (e.g., ICT liaising with Mobile Network Operators, CBP colleagues supporting connected community centres, Senior Development offices engaging with government authorities and development partners, etc.). Staff with expertise on Accountability to Affected People, a profile that has recently become more defined within UNHCR operations, also often have experience in working with connectivity actors, and there is natural confluence between AAP and connectivity.
- **Mobile network operators and other Internet Service Providers.** Mobile network operators, satellite companies and other ISPs are the gateway to connectivity for many. In many contexts where UNHCR works, wireless technologies having become significantly more prevalent. Many mobile network operators and satellite companies are signatories to the Humanitarian Connectivity Charter or Crisis Connectivity Charter and have made public commitments to support humanitarian organisations in times of crisis. It has been documented that supporting crisis connectivity has helped service providers develop strong relationships with their customers and enhance their reputation overall, leading to greater levels of customer retention.
- **Government (telecommunications regulator, ICT and other ministries).** Ministries for ICT (or other Ministries, such as for the Interior, Science, etc.) often provide direction, but the telecommunication regulator usually oversees the rules of the game when it comes to connectivity provision across a territory, including how different individuals can access services. There may be different modalities for dealing with refugee/migrant/foreign access to telecommunications network as compared to that of country nationals. Regulators both in telecommunications and financial services (as well as other authorities, such as ID agencies or those with such responsibility), are vital counterparts in developing a regime that includes forcibly displaced people. In Uganda, for instance, joint advocacy by UNHCR, UNCDF and the GSMA ultimately led to the issuance of a directive enabling refugees to register SIM cards in their own name.
- **Global Partnerships.** The UNHCR Innovation Service is available to support operations that are interested in harnessing global partnerships and resourcing to advance local action. This can be as simple as brokering contact with the correct teams, delivering technical guidance and advice, or providing in-kind connectivity or connectivity adjacent products and services, or even financial support to support local connectivity initiatives.
- **Communities.** UNHCR operates under the principle of community-based programming, and – although connectivity is quite a technical area – the approach can and should be

considered here, too. Many community members have relevant skills and, rather than outsourcing connectivity-related work to companies, operations could consider training and mentoring refugees to take ownership of local network infrastructure, connected facilities, and efforts to enhance the community's digital literacy.

Post emergency phase

As noted, connectivity has become essential in the 21st century. As connectivity infrastructure is often provided by private sector organisations, it may be that a viable commercial model has been established in the areas hosting forcibly displaced people. However, the roll-out of telecommunications infrastructure and expansion of digital technology adoption among a population is often a longer-term endeavour.

Toward the end of the emergency phase, it is essential to work toward multi-stakeholder dialogue with government, private sector, NGOs, community organizations, civil society and others, to strategize on longer term programming that will benefit not just refugees but their hosting communities. Integrating activities into national planning and – potentially – development efforts within the country may be necessary to reach the requisite scale of investment to make last change. Uganda furnishes an excellent example of this; there, following the emergency phases, efforts were made to advance digital inclusion of refugees and hosts through a World Bank supported Digital Acceleration Program.

Checklist

- Analyse the telecommunications landscape within the country, mapping relevant stakeholders and – specifically – legal and regulatory barriers that might impede refugees accessing commercial connectivity services.
- Include questions around connectivity needs and usage within assessments.
- Consider the needs of diverse population groups – including women and girls, the elderly, and people with disabilities – given the prevalence of digital divides.
- Coordinate across sectors to look at interventions that seek to leverage digital technology and/or connectivity in their delivery. These may include cash transfers via digital platforms/mobile wallets, community engagement leveraging digital channels, connected education, and more.
- Liaise with mobile network operators in the early stages of an emergency to ensure

they are aware of the location of planned settlements and influx numbers, to ascertain commercial viability of infrastructure expansion.

4. Learning and field practices

Collaborating for Connectivity

Community-led Connectivity

Connecting with Confidence

Digital Worlds of Displacement-Affected Communities

Connectivity Needs and Usage Assessment Toolkit

Connectivity for Refugees – Intro Video

Connectivity for Refugees – Ethiopia

Network Guardians

5. Links

Connectivity for Refugees Multi-stakeholder Initiative UNHCR Connectivity for Refugees Portal GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Programme Accountability to affected people (AAP) IT Information Technology (accessible to UNHCR staff only)

6. Main contacts

For support on connecting refugees, contact the Connectivity for Refugees global team in the Innovation Service. At: hqconref@unhcr.org

The Innovation Service can be reached at: innovation@unhcr.org