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1.3 Digital connectivity and digitalisation

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred governments and the international community in general to use new technologies in the field of asylum to ensure a continuity of service provision. It also offered a new impetus to the discussions on digitalisation and digital connectivity in migration and asylum, building on progress made over the past years. The discussion is by no means new and centres largely around two interlinked and complimentary dimensions: i) increasing efficiency in the functioning of asylum and migration systems, as well as accessibility of services to asylum applicants, refugees and migrants by introducing electronic/remotely-accessible technical solutions; and ii) promoting digital connectivity among refugees and migrants to ensure access to digital public goods and to foster an inclusive digital economy and society. Still, digitalisation can lead to unexpected impacts and, thus, disadvantages and advantages, threats and opportunities need to be further explored.

New technical solutions have been introduced over the past years in a number of steps within the asylum procedure, for example electronic registration of asylum applications, software for language assessment and dialect recognition assistance, remote interpretation during asylum interviews, electronic notifications to applicants on the status of their application, virtual counselling and legal advice, delivery of educational services to refugee children, pre-departure support to refugees selected for resettlement,[54] and online registration for ad hoc services, such as emergency assistance.[55] One of the first areas where new technologies were introduced was the provision of information to refugees and migrants to provide assistance in navigating through the – often – complex system of asylum and migration processes. To increase outreach and provide easy access, a vast amount of information on the asylum procedure was moved online, material and applications were published online in different languages and diverse audio-visual media was tailored to the needs of the intended audience.[56] Such information activities also target professionals and volunteers working with populations of interest to ensure that they are better prepared to cater to the specific needs of refugees and migrants.

Governments and NGOs have also leveraged technology to optimise service delivery on integration. Online tools (websites, videos and apps) have assisted in providing access to public services, such as education, health care and housing. Technical solutions often include interactive online courses, apps to help newcomers learn the local language, employment assistance platforms, tools to assist in preparing for tests and more, with the overall aim to assist migrants and refugees in key elements of the integration process.[57] Digital technologies have also helped to counter xenophobia online and create positive, inclusive narratives toward refugees and migrants, promoting messages of empathy, solidarity and tolerance.[58]

An important precondition for digital services is for the target audience to have access to the Internet and possess the necessary digital literacy. While increasing connectivity and access to services, digital innovation may also have the potential to exclude already-marginalised groups, such as migrants and refugees, if the benefits of innovation are not equitably distributed.[59] Indeed, access to Internet connectivity and digital channels are not a reality for everyone. Substantive differences in the levels of access seem to exist between different areas of the world, as well as based on age, gender and the diversity of populations.[60], [61] Key barriers to connectivity may include a lack of access to devices, a low level of digital literacy, a lack of access to energy to power devices and an absence of cellular networks.[62]

Acknowledging the fast pace in which new technologies are developed and implemented and the important implications this evolution has for the ways in which societies connect at a global level, the UN Secretary-General launched a High-Level Panel for Digital Cooperation in 2018. Through multi-stakeholder consultations during 2018 and 2019, in June 2020 the UN Secretary-General presented a Roadmap on Digital Cooperation, which includes recommendations for enhancing global connectivity, promoting digital public goods in an equitable way, ensuring digital inclusion for all, fostering digital cooperation and ensuring the protection of human rights in the digital era. The roadmap acknowledged that migrants and refugees are among the groups that face the risk of being left behind as digitalisation progresses. It also highlighted that prompt action is needed to ensure that current barriers to digital inclusion do not layer up on top of existing obstacles that these groups already face.[63]

Indeed, refugees often reside in areas that lack digital networks and infrastructure or where connectivity, when available, is expensive. Better access to the Internet and mobile services can create a multiplier effect, broadening the opportunities refugees have toward self-reliance.[64] Research performed under the umbrella of UNHCR's Global Strategy for Connectivity for Refugees has indicated that improved mobile networks may have a positive impact on the lives of both refugees and host communities. To this end, making connectivity affordable, for example by offering reduced prices and mobile broadband, is critical. Refugees can have better access to protection and services by leveraging technology and connectivity.[65] For example, under the coordination of UNHCR, the Connectivity for Refugees project engages multiple stakeholders, including refugees, host communities, local authorities and governments, NGOs, the private sector and donors to connect displaced populations and host communities in strategic investments and frameworks; provide services and affordable access to Internet connectivity; and provide legal pathways for refugees and displaced persons to access connectivity.[66]

Discussions have also centred around the possibility to use digital technology to establish unique, digital identities for refugees. Given the extreme circumstances under which asylum seekers are forced to flee their homes in search of safety, they often may not possess identity documents[67] from their country of origin. In other cases, refugees may originate from a country where state authorities have collapsed and there is no or limited capacity to acquire identity documents. Stateless persons face the same predicament. The lack of documents creates additional challenges and delays when trying to register with national authorities or humanitarian organisations or access services, such as mobile connectivity, financial services, education, health care or employment.[68] Groups that are already vulnerable and marginalised, coupled with lacking a documented identity, face a plausible risk of transgressing the line between legal and illegal.[69]

As countries around the world proceed with the digitalisation of civil registries, opportunities arise to create legally-recognised digital identities for displaced persons living on their territory. Digital identities may increase efficiency in refugee registration and enable authorities to verify the identity and eligibility status remotely, while facilitating cross-organisational data-sharing.[70] It will also foster the digital inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons and other displaced populations, thus empowering them by facilitating access to employment, web-based economic activities, income and remittances, and online learning.[71] Digital identities can offer new potential for service delivery. In the context of humanitarian interventions, for example, a digital identity can allow for the dispersal of cash-based aid through mobile money platforms and relief accounts that show entitlements in a transparent manner.[72, 73]

While the benefits are clear, attention has been drawn to the potential of such technologies to add a new socio-technical layer that may exacerbate existing biases, discrimination or power imbalances. These concerns are related to ensuring meaningful consent from refugees on the use of their personal data; increasing trust among refugees on technical solutions to encourage their use; and addressing bureaucratic biases that may impede fair development and integration of digital identity systems.[74] As work toward digitalisation progresses, these concerns must be addressed accordingly.

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