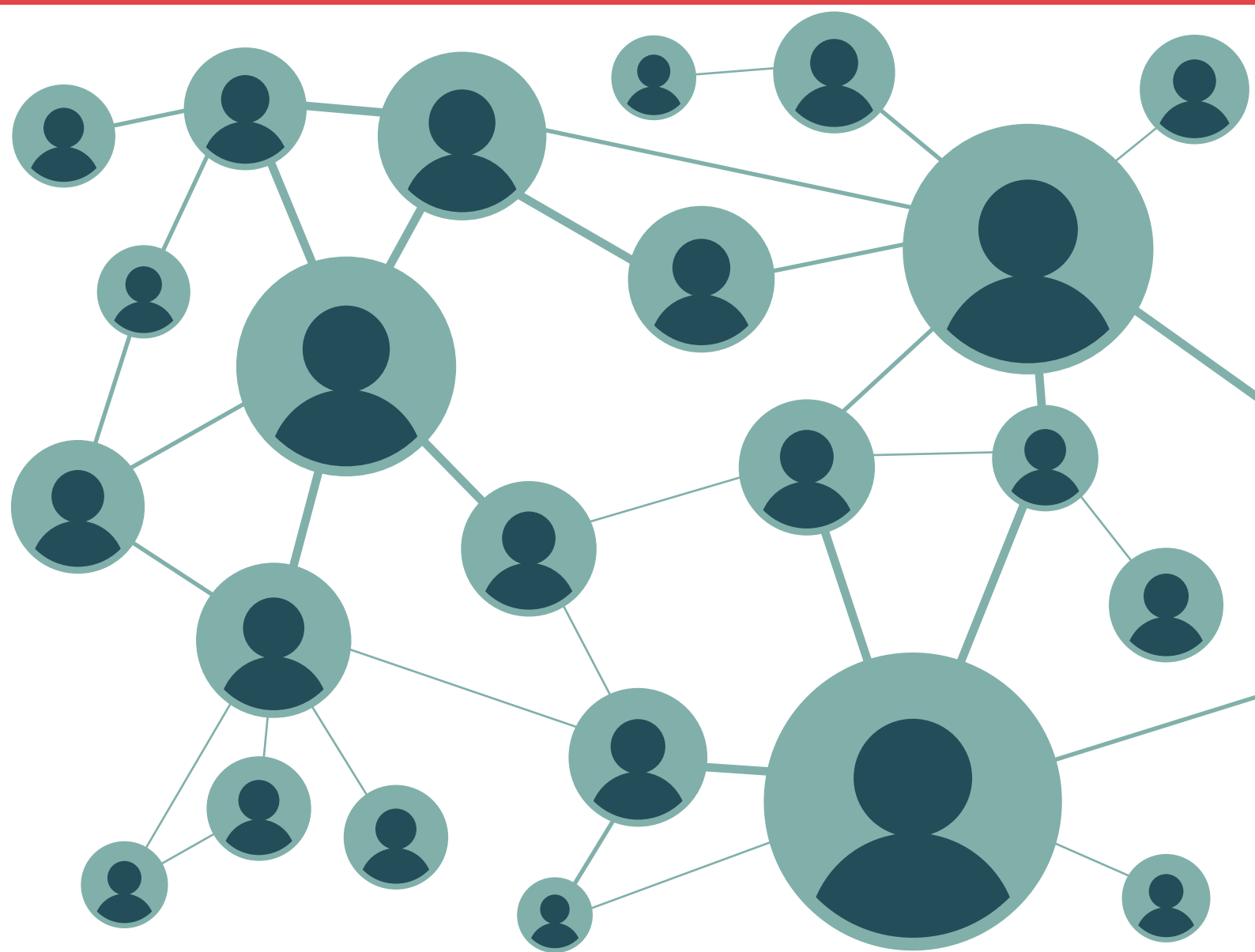# Social media and inclusion in humanitarian action – the case of refugees in Uganda

Chris Dolan, David N. Tshimba and Gilbert Nuwagira

REFUGEE LAW PROJECT

HPG
Humanitarian
Policy Group

ODI

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Acknowledgements

About the authors

Chris Dolan is Professor in Global Sustainable Development at Warwick University, with extensive experience working with forcibly displaced populations. He was involved in this study in his previous capacity as Director of RLP.

David N. Tshimba is Senior Research Fellow at RLP, and lectures in the master's programme of Refugee and Migration Studies at Uganda Martyrs University. His research interests include (political) violence, (forced) migration and (social) justice, with particular focus on Africa's Great Lakes region.

Gilbert Nuwagira is an economist and early-career researcher with research interests in data, digital spaces and knowledge production within broader migration contexts.

Contents

Acronyms

FGD	focus group discussion
GoU	Government of Uganda
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
ICT	information and communication technology
IDI	in-depth interview
KII	key informant interview
NITA-U	National Information Technology Authority – Uganda
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PIN	personal identification number
RLP	Refugee Law Project
R/S	refugee settlement
RWC	Refugee Welfare Council
TASO	The AIDS Support Organisation
UCC	Uganda Communications Commission
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VPN	virtual private network

Introduction

This paper, written by Refugee Law Project (RLP) at Makerere University's School of Law and produced in collaboration with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI, reflects on a research project that examined the relationship between social media and inclusion in humanitarian action in Uganda's forced migration context.

Claims about the potential of social media to change the nature of humanitarian response date back to at least the 2010 Haiti earthquake (IFRC, 2013). Since then, various actors – including government and non-governmental disaster management agencies, humanitarian organisations, emergent groups of 'digital volunteers', and affected populations themselves – have been experimenting with new opportunities offered by social media to communicate, mobilise and make sense of crises as they emerge and develop. In particular, a number of agencies have tried to use social media to improve meaningful two-way conversations with affected populations, especially in cases where conflict/catastrophe, distance or sociocultural barriers make individuals or groups harder to reach. Examples include the development of partnerships with social media influencers to 'signal boost' important messages beyond the traditional reach of humanitarian agencies (Lüge, 2017); the use of messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger to broadcast information and facilitate discussion (Oren et al., 2017); or using social media as one component of multi-platform information campaigns with interactive elements to respond to peoples' specific concerns and inquiries (Fluck, 2019).

However, there are relatively few examples of widespread or systematic use of social media as a component of humanitarian responses (Lüge, 2017). At the same time, there is a substantial body of evidence documenting the extensive and varied ways that displacement-affected populations use social media to navigate the heightened uncertainty of crises and disasters (Culbertson et al., 2019). These may include sharing and/or seeking information on access to services, maintaining connections with contacts at home while forging new ones with hosting communities, and the 'collective sense-making' of processing and triangulating information (Jung and Moro, 2014; Madianou, 2015; Casswell, 2019). In this respect, the apparent gulf between social media use by humanitarian actors and the online lives of the people they are trying to support and empower remains a cause for ongoing concern (Madianou, 2015; Iacucci, 2019).

While some have claimed that social media could 'democratise' humanitarian responses and fix power imbalances (IFRC, 2013), the impacts of its use in practice on the inclusion of displaced persons in spaces of relevance to them are unclear. It has been argued that crisis-affected people's ability to access and use social media effectively is limited by two kinds of 'digital divides.' First-order divides relate to people's ability to access social media in the first place: populations living in marginal, circumscribed spaces such as refugee settlements or urban slums may be passively or deliberately excluded from electricity and internet provision (Weidmann et al., 2016). Limited livelihood opportunities and high costs may further prevent people from being able to afford

smartphones, and these dynamics may in turn disproportionately impact women, girls and elderly men in particular when inflected through conservative social norms (Casswell, 2019). By contrast, second-order divides relate to people's ability to navigate and use social media effectively: research has shown that people with higher access to material and social capital lead richer and more diverse digital lives, while those with less capital may lack the skills or the confidence to effectively engage with humanitarians or other service providers (Madianou, 2015). Meanwhile, toxic group dynamics on social media platforms may work to actively silence the voice of particular groups (Amnesty International, 2018; Mercy Corps, 2019).

In addition to these digital divides, the ways in which humanitarians currently handle and use social media data open new questions about who gets to have their voices heard, and on what terms. At the most basic level, there is a likelihood that humanitarians will risk exacerbating digital divides and the power dynamics that underlie them: if some individuals or groups cannot use social media effectively, then the absence of their voices will produce biased data, potentially resulting in exclusionary programming decisions (Mulder et al., 2016). Concerns have also been raised about a range of more specific social media use cases. For example, is there a risk of privileging shorter and more legible feedback via platforms such as Twitter over more complex face-to-face engagement (Madianou et al., 2016)? Is the use of algorithm-driven, big-data analysis likely to drive top-down approaches to decision-making, harvesting data from affected populations while giving them no say in how it is used (Madianou, 2019)? At the same time, however, expanding rates of smartphone penetration and social media access worldwide also underline the risk of excluding people as a result of over-cautious or weakly elaborated social media strategies (Lüge, 2017).

Both scholars and practitioners in the humanitarian sector increasingly underscore that we live today in a hugely 'mobilised' world as estimates put mobile phone subscriptions at more than 6 billion globally by 2020, with at least 75% of these in the Global South (Ally and Prieto-Blázquez, 2014; Mohamed and Avgoustos, 2014). In 2017 alone, it was reported that some 5 billion people were connected to mobile phone services, where the growth in the sector was driven by countries in sub-Saharan Africa (GSMA, 2018).[1] This trend in mobile phone subscriptions in sub-Saharan Africa has ushered in opportunities for increased social media use in the region. GSMA's 2020 study on smartphone adoption rates highlights youths as the most regular users. The emergence of such a connected mobile society with numerous information sources available at work, home and in the community has raised interest and challenges in equal measure among both the forcibly displaced and their humanitarian care-providers, to either control or harness the potential and capabilities that these mobile technologies offer for inclusive and equitable humanitarian action in particular, and to improve the lives of displaced people in general.

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1   The number of subscriptions to date appears to be slightly below the projections, currently at 5.3 billion (GSMA, 2022).

This study's qualitative field research involved refugee populations in a variety of settings (self-settled urban and settlement-based rural) in Uganda, and humanitarian workers delivering different types of assistance to these refugee populations. We drew on both the findings from this qualitative research and an in-depth understanding of the particular context faced by refugees (both settled and self-settled) in Uganda, to arrive at a set of recommendations for humanitarian actors working in this particular space. These recommendations take into account the benefits and risks of social media use in a humanitarian context, allowing for the complexities faced by both humanitarian actors and their persons of concern to be mitigated. This study also complements a parallel piece of research conducted in Venezuela. Together, the two projects look to feed into a wider HPG-led project examining the humanitarian 'digital divide' and how the wider use of digital technology has facilitated or hindered humanitarian commitments to impartiality and inclusion.

Contextual background

Digitisation in Uganda

Over the past three decades, Uganda has witnessed a host of information and communication technology (ICT) transformations. The ICT policy reform of 1996 led to the liberalisation of the telecommunication sector, thereby allowing more telecommunication players in the ICT industry (Ssewanyana, 2007). Subsequently, Uganda experienced a substantial increase in the subscriber base for both fixed and mobile phone subscriptions. By the end of 2020, mobile phone subscription stood at 27.69 million.[2] Within this uptake in usage, however, there is a location bias, with more urban people owning mobile phones than people living in rural areas, where the country's refugee settlements are located. Furthermore, statistical data across the country (for nationals and non-nationals) reveals that there is a significant gender bias with more males (81.6%) owning mobile phones than females (18.4%) (NITA, 2018).

To regulate ICT integration, access and usage, Uganda has enacted several legal frameworks, including the Access to Information Act 2005; National Information Technology Authority – Uganda (NITA-U) Act 2009; Electronic Signatures Act 2011; Electronic Transactions Act 2011; Computer Misuse Act 2011; and the Uganda Communications Act 2013. As described by Nampijja, 'These acts seek to prevent unlawful access to and misuse of information systems, to regulate for use, security and facilitation, and to improve the capacity to conduct electronic business' (Nampijja, 2021: 23).

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2   See www.statista.com/statistics/501155/number-of-mobile-cellular-subscriptions-in-uganda/#:~:text=Number%20of%20cellular%20subscriptions%20Uganda%20 2000%2D2020&text=The%20statistic%20depicts%20the%20number,Uganda%20was%20at%20 27.69%20million (released 11 November 2021).

In 2017, the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance launched the Digital Uganda Vision initiative that 'aims to leverage technological innovations to meet various national and international goals including universal inclusion, sustainable development, economic progress, and poverty eradication' (NITA, 2018: 35). This digitalisation initiative responds to current global digital trends, which in countries in the Global South aim at technology-based empowerment through fostering relevant ICT use. While the overall trend has been towards improving digital access, the government has nonetheless shown its own unease with such processes at times of political tension. In the January 2021 elections, for example, the internet was almost completely shut down just prior to voting day – most social media platforms were closed for nearly a month (and Facebook was still severely affected one year later). The introduction of a 12% internet tax starting in the 2021/22 financial year further exemplified the Ugandan state's articulation of 'cyber sovereignty', as well as highlighting the fragile and contingent nature of Uganda's digital space.

Refugees and social media

As host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world (and the largest in Africa), Uganda's experiments in refugee protection and management are pertinent globally, involving both mass influxes and protracted stays. As of 30 November 2021, Uganda was host to 1,563,604 refugees.[3] About 60% of these refugees are under the age of 18, with the majority (92%) hosted in rural settlements alongside local communities, while 8% are hosted in urban centres, primarily Kampala (UNHCR, 2020). The country is located within a long-standing armed conflict quadrangle in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa. It is estimated that nearly three-quarters of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR)'s persons of concern found in Africa are located within its Great Lakes region – with events in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan precipitating ongoing forced displacement. How this large, youthful and disrupted population is included in and makes use of digital media is thus of considerable importance, but the research on this is lacking. For example, while there is growing evidence that access to smartphones can improve the livelihoods of small-holders and other poorer populations through informing their economic decision-making (Nampijja, 2021), there is little evidence of how such dynamics might play out in refugee populations.

In 2018, in the wake of a mismanagement scandal involving both the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the UNHCR Uganda Office (a mismanagement that was reported in an audit in November 2018 by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services), Congolese self-settled refugees in Kampala made use of a WhatsApp group to engage in a heated contestation about the number of recognised refugees in the country's official records (The Monitor, 2018). And yet, UNHCR itself gives no information on providing access to digital media in its country response plan (UNHCR, 2018) or on the 'Uganda comprehensive refugee response portal'.[4]

3   See https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/uga.

4   ibid.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which prompted two total lockdowns of the country by the Government of Uganda (GoU),[5] upended conventional humanitarian working methods and highlighted additional areas in which digital access was increasingly important. Movement and in-person meetings of any kind were prohibited across the country. Uganda was plunged into generalised enforced quarantine, except for the movement of goods and personnel deemed essential by the National Covid-19 Taskforce. Uganda's refugees experienced grave losses of livelihood and income (in terms of cash and rations): World Food Programme rations and UNHCR cash transfers were cut by 30% (Khan, 2020). Humanitarian staff access to refugee settlements was highly restricted, with agencies compelled (sometimes for the first time) to explore the possibilities offered by digital technology. For example, RLP counsellors began conducting telephone counselling. Emergency cash distributions were made using mobile phone money transfer systems. Where recipients did not correspond to the names the phones were registered to, many steps had to be put in place to ensure adequate accountabilities to donors, bureaucratic hurdles that in many ways epitomise the realities of a digital divide and the need to find ways to overcome it.

These simple examples highlight the growing importance of virtual communications and social media use for Uganda's forced migrants: hard choices reside at the meeting point of their needs for access to direct livelihoods and for access to social media for voicing crucial humanitarian concerns. There is therefore a growing requirement for enhanced attention to how digital technology and social media platforms are accessed by displaced persons and deployed by humanitarians as part of their working methods.

Methodological choices and ethical considerations

This study tackled the overarching research question: to what extent does access to and use of social media impact the inclusion of people in humanitarian settings of forced displacement? The first major methodological decision related to qualitative compared with quantitative methods; we chose qualitative due to the resource constraints on the time and scale of the study. The second major methodological issue concerned the selection of respondents, and here purposive sampling was used to maximise the depth of responses and minimise ethical concerns.

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5   From 31 March to 4 June 2020 and from 14 June to 31 July 2021.

Methods

Ten focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted between April and June 2021. These allowed respondents and investigators to examine and contrast collective and individual perceptions of why and how some people have been included or excluded through the use of social media in humanitarian intervention in the context of forced displacement.

Nine of the FGDs included, in total, 64 forced migrants of all genders – both settlement-based upcountry and self-settled in Kampala. A tenth FGD involved four RLP staff of RLP's Media for Social Change programme, both citizens and refugees. Some respondents (forced migrants and humanitarian workers) were relatively older (between 45 and 65 years old), others were younger (between 18 and 35 years old); some were married (with dependent children or non-dependent adult children), others were unmarried (widowed or single). All FGDs were conducted in-person under strict observance of Covid-19 standard operations procedures: 6–8 people each, with social distancing, mask-wearing and hand-sanitising all observed.

FGDs were complemented by in-depth interviews (IDIs), also conducted between April and June 2021. These IDIs were conducted as follow-up conversations with people who, in the format of an FGD, could not fully explore and articulate their understanding of the issues under discussion. IDIs therefore allowed for a deeper reflection on individual experiences of how social media is being used by forced migrants and humanitarian workers for greater protection and care. Some IDIs and key informant interviews (KIIs) – especially those with selected humanitarian workers – were conducted online via Zoom.

In a number of instances in which key informants could not be identified in advance of the fieldwork, they were instead identified during the FGDs and approached immediately thereafter. The humanitarian workers who gave KIIs were based in refugee settlements in which fieldwork was conducted.

In addition to these primary data collection methods, secondary data was collected through a thematic review of scholarly and policy literature.

Procedural ethics

Research clearance for this study was sought and obtained from both the Research Ethics Committee of TASO (The AIDS Support Organisation) Uganda and from its accrediting authority – the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology. Do-no-harm principles were strictly observed as follows.

1. All respondents, regardless of their identity and status, were informed of the nature and scope of the data collection process in a jargon-free language, such that they were able to understand their sought-after participation in the study and so give their informed consent to participate either in writing or verbally.

2. Confidentiality and privacy mechanisms to protect the rights and interests of participants were guaranteed, including the processing and storing of primary data. Audio recordings (consented to) and investigators' notes from the IDIs and FGDs were assigned codes, such that they could not be directly identifiable, nor linked to the written informed consent documents or to the personal details of any participant.

3. Given that some aspects of this study also concerned sensitive topics such as cyber harassment/assault/bullying and scamming, all the forced migrants who participated in IDIs and FGDs were assured of their right to refuse to answer any question, or to withdraw from the data collection process altogether at any time, and/or to halt the conversation with no consequences for them or their access to RLP services.

Sampling

All forced migrants who participated in the study via FGDs and IDIs were selected purposively, namely identified from RLP client databases. Respondents consisted of clients with whom RLP already had well-established relationships of trust and confidence, both individually and collectively. In the main, they were RLP-trained basic video advocates and English-for-adults learners.

Proceeding with such targeted sampling methodology, levels of disclosure – and hence the quality of data – were high. While the research team observed that the starting point of respondents in most FGDs was to express appreciation and what they thought the researchers wanted to hear related to the programming they had personally benefited from, it was also possible to quickly move beyond that and to get into a deeper and more meaningful discussion.

An additional element of RLP's methodology is to engage staff as respondents. The sampling here was of those who have worked on the issues under study for a long time and have considerable insight that is otherwise not directly tapped into.

Research sites and data processing

The study's fieldwork covered four sites, all of which are fields of RLP's programmatic interventions: Adjumani, Kiryandongo and Lamwo districts, as well as Kampala. These sites offered distinct forced-displacement experiences, perspectives and humanitarian programming profiles key to the aim of this study. Kampala, for instance, is home to self-settled urban refugees, who are mixed in nationality and occupation as well as with varying durations of stay. Kiryandongo District is also host to a multinational settlement-based refugee population, while Adjumani and Lamwo districts predominantly host South Sudanese refugees. Adjumani, particularly Maaji II Refugee Settlement (R/S), had in late 2019 been earmarked for a pilot project on increased internet connectivity in Uganda's refugee settlements under the auspices of the UNHCR and in partnership with Avanti, a telecommunication company based in the United Kingdom and specialised in V-SAT wireless technologies.

Primary narrative data processed from transcribed FGDs and interviews were thematically analysed in line with the study's key questions and juxtaposed with the reviewed literature. The thematic analysis here draws out the intersectional elements of the vulnerabilities and agencyof displacement. It thus offers a nuanced account of the ways in which access to and use of social media in such humanitarian contexts of forced displacement shape the inclusion of beneficiaries in humanitarian action.

Interpretation

Simultaneous interpretation by RLP-trained interpreters was used during FGDs with respondents less confident with or conversant in the English language. All informed consent forms were translated into local languages of all non-English speaking respondents. Because the subject matter of this study included experiences or attempts of engagement online in contexts of forced displacement, it was anticipated that it could potentially trigger varying degrees of discomfort on the part of participants. Investigators thus ensured that participants were provided with information on accessing relevant support services as stipulated in the formulated humanitarian referral pathways, starting with RLP's own psychosocial and mental health programmes whose trusted counselling staff were on-site throughout the data collection process.

Respondents were assured that the final study's report will also be available for dissemination in languages other than English (including in Congolese-Swahili, Juba Arabic, Acholi and French).

Limitations

This study had a limited budget, and this shaped the methodology and methods selected:

- The number of respondents (humanitarians and forced migrants) who participated in this study was limited and does not permit us to make any claims about quantitative representation of the humanitarian landscape.
- The field sites were limited and did not include refugee settlements in the west and south-west of Uganda. Although the fieldwork in Kampala gave some access to varied nationalities (i.e. Burundians, Congolese, Eritreans, Rwandans and Somalis), the fact of being in an urban area inevitably shaped the profiles of those respondents compared with refugees in the larger rural settlements.

Findings

The eagerness of forced migrants to connect and stay online

In an FGD with eight forced migrants previously trained by RLP on social media and basic video advocacy for greater refugee protection, one young refugee woman spelt out the different social media platforms she is connected to and their rationales:

> Forced migration, bad as it is, has not in any way taken away our desire to be connected on social media and stay online. In fact, being a refugee has actually amplified this desire. And we connect to different social media networks for different purposes. I for one have been on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat and even TikTok. I use Facebook, especially Facebook Messenger, to keep in touch with my other relatives in my country of origin and friends abroad. WhatsApp is mostly to stay in touch with my new contacts here in the settlement, and it served me so well as a learning tool since the Covid-19 outbreak. YouTube is for my own innovative learning, while Twitter is for targeted direct messaging to those with some degree of influence about our lives here in the settlement [Kiryandongo R/S]. I go on Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok for fun, but also for some business advertising whenever I have a product for sale (FGD/SM F&M English, Kiryandongo RLP Office, 10 May 2021).

This use of different platforms for different purposes goes in tandem with Casswell's revelation that messaging apps are the most common use of mobile internet across all settings globally, forced migration included. Voice calls and messaging over social media are considered particularly important for bringing a sense of connectedness and togetherness to refugees who are separated from friends and family (Casswell, 2019). In a different FGD with a mixed group of relatively older refugees, one male participant echoed this sentiment:

> We've been on a learning curve and this Covid-19 pandemic pushed us further and faster. I had to download and install Zoom on my phone, not to miss those online meetings leaders like me had been invited to (FGD/SM F&M English/Juba Arabic, Kiryandongo RLP Office, 10 May 2021).

Such statements depart, in some respects, from Weidmann et al.'s (2016) notion that the socioeconomic background of individuals will affect their access to and usage of the internet. It seems that, socioeconomically challenged forced migrants are going to great lengths, and against multiple odds, to get and stay online. In the aftermath of the January 2021 general elections, the GoU sustained a total social media shutdown, in addition to maintaining an internet tax known as over-the-top tax (OTT). This tax was rescinded in the new financial year starting July 2021. Even then, as one young adult refugee noted:

> those refugees with smartphones learnt of VPN as a way to dodge both OTT and the ban on social media ... people here [Palabek R/S] have mastered ways to get connected on social media by all means (FGD/SM F&M English/Acholi, Palabek RLP Office, 19 May 2021).

As of December 2021, many refugees and hosts were still using virtual private networks (VPNs) to access Facebook, which was still banned by the GoU nearly one year after the completion of the elections. However, as Bouffet (2020) points out, such use of a VPN can drain a phone battery, may incur additional data charges and will significantly slow down navigation – particularly in older generation phones with limited processing power. These assorted encumbrances that come with VPN use further feed into the infrastructure of exclusion from access to social media for a great many refugees in Uganda's refugee settlements.

In another FGD with seven refugee women who participated in a parallel study on gender in settings of forced displacement, one participant revealed: 'smartphones, thanks to social media, are now the active mediators for fixing marriages in this refugee settlement [BidiBidi]'.[6] She elaborated saying that, whereas under 'normal' circumstances prospective brides and bridegrooms would be brought in person to interact with potential in-laws, some of these interactions were being substituted through the exchange of photos and videos on WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger.

Refugee deployment of social capital in the humanitarian context is no doubt central in (re)building relationships that underpin social cohesion and exchange. Social media assists insofar as it enables refugees to go online and stay connected even when geographically separated. Furthermore, it offers the potential to expand pre-existing social capital as it can enable direct engagement vertically with humanitarian agents, in addition to existing horizontal engagements with fellow forced migrants.

During an interview with a humanitarian worker invested in ICT-related programming, this eagerness by forced migrants to be and stay online was captured in the following terms:

> Our ICT programming package, which includes training in and use of social media platforms for refugee protection and assistance, also targets 70% persons of concern (forced migrants) and 30% hosts. And it is not just the youth who have kept interest in these internet-enabled social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Skype and now Zoom. We're now seeing at our ICT lab an increasing number of older persons, although the male gender is still predominant. Of the six days of the week when our ICT lab is accessible, five are allocated to persons of concern and only one to hosts. But even then, we still see these refugees coming in numbers for access to the lab on that one day allocated to hosts. They just can't let an opportunity to get connected and access social media pass them by. For those with their own gadgets, they're ever hanging around our hotspot areas to tap into free Wi-Fi. Voicing out their concerns via social media to whom it may concern is certainly high on these refugees' list of needs (IDI/SM M English, Organisation in Kiryandongo R/S, 12 May 2021).

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6   FGD/GiD F English/Juba Arabic, BidiBidi RLP Office, 31 May 2021.

Connecting on social media serves multiple purposes, as emphasised by a young male refugee:

> Many of us [young refugees] have been on constant lookout for promotional offers from various network companies in an endeavour to secure smartphones and internet bundles at the lowest cost possible. ... To me, I can say with certitude that people here [refugees in Kiryandongo R/S] are not on social media just for family- and friends-contacting. Nor are they there just to get in touch with authorities from the OPM, UNHCR or other partner organisations in the settlement. Being a refugee in this settlement is in itself a great deal of stress. So, getting connected on social media platforms somewhat consists of a stress-reliever. People often go on social media to take some bit of leave from the daily real stresses of life as a refugee in this settlement. While there, they at least catch up with the growing entertainment and fun industry and so forget for the time being the hardships they face...(IDI/SM M English, RLP Kiryandongo Office, 13 May 2021).

Another participant in a different FGD concurred with this view, adding that access to social media in such situations of protracted forced displacement is, in many respects, therapeutic: 'Having myself been born into a refugee household in northern Uganda, I'm a social media user to break out of the isolation in this refugee settlement.'[7] During an FGD with some young RLP-trained basic video advocates, one male participant underscored the following:

> To begin with, WhatsApp is widely in use here [Palabek R/S] together with Facebook Messenger because the two are much more user-friendly and economical in terms of internet data bundles. But even with those clear benefits from WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, we still go on Instagram and YouTube mainly for advertising and wider dissemination purposes, and also on Twitter to tag some key influential authorities in our refugee lives for attention. Social media for us is like a very big, endowed forest in which one has to know where to find what for the forest to be really beneficial to them. Instagram and YouTube have their wonders different from WhatsApp's and Facebook's, and again different from the wonders of Twitter. We therefore approach social media bearing in mind such need for selection according to purpose (FGD/SM F&M English, RLP Palabek Office, 18 May 2021).

Here the respondent is effectively describing what Madianou conceptualises as 'polymedia', which refers to how people weave together a wide range of platforms and media in a more or less seamless way (Madianou, 2015). But as a refugee, our respondent challenged Madianou's thinking that 'those with access to and skills to navigate a polymedia environment have a greater chance to benefit from life-enhancing opportunities' (ibid.) and are mainly middle-class rather than poorer people with lower social capital and resources.

One member of the RLP staff, invested in the Media for Social Change programme with Uganda's forced migrants, further concurred with this view during an FGD:

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7   FGD/SM F&M English/Ma'di, RLP Maaji II Office, 27 May 2021.

> I see the internet through social media platforms making it possible for forced migrants to echo their previously marginalised voices, to tell their narratives the way they feel it fit, uncensored, unedited – this in itself is potentially revolutionary for humanitarianism in contexts of forced migration (FGD/SM M English, RLP Gulu Office, 30 May 2021).

Certainly, it is the case that, with developments in communication technology – particularly the capacity of smartphones to document through photos, videos and sound recordings – the locus of narrative control has shifted in a way that reduces the gatekeeper and filtering role of humanitarians and professional media alike.

In addition to these therapeutic and emancipatory purposes, one of the respondents went on to elaborate the ways in which social media was also an important adjunct in developing his livelihood:

> And remember, the refugee fan base is big as well. For instance, I for one am a musician and DJ, and often I post my new releases on social media. My fans, who largely consist of refugees in this settlement [Kiryandongo R/S] and elsewhere, promptly go online and stay there to view my new releases. That's another important story of social media here (IDI/SM M English, RLP Kiryandongo Office, 13 May 2021).

Interestingly, this articulation resonates with the argument that there is a digital 'leisure divide' in terms of how the use of ICT is conceptualised in the Global North and in development/ humanitarian settings, underpinned by the 'belief that a good digital life for the poor would be based in work and inherently utilitarian' (Arora, 2018). The interviewee's statement reveals how social media in such a context of forced displacement is used not only for work (as music is the respondent's livelihood), but also for leisure.

The pitfalls of refugee lives online

Social media, one interviewee reminded us, can turn into 'the opium of the masses'.[8] If this claim holds true for many Ugandan hosts suffering high levels of un- and under-employment, it is even more true for Uganda's forced migrants, especially those in rural-based refugee settlements, whose lives are regimented by routinised humanitarian action. The longing of forced migrants to connect with folks back home, in the words of that same interviewee, 'ironically pulls some triggers of trauma and re-traumatisation as these refugees in their place of asylum seek for therapeutic revival in reconnecting online with those who never left'.[9]

Besides this potential for re-traumatisation, there is a host of further risks that already traumatised lives may encounter when online on social media platforms. The inundation of

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8   IDI/SM M English, online interview via Zoom, 18 June 2021.

9   ibid.

social media postings – the mixture of information, misinformation and disinformation, as well as opinions and rumours – already makes it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction. Both humanitarian workers and forced migrants who participated in this study pointed out various risks and actualities that they had previously faced due to their presence on digital spaces: cyber harassment/bullying, online pornography, digital human trafficking, e-scamming among others. As one participant during an FGD recalled:

> A dear friend of mine who resides in the neighbouring zone was once excited about a new friendship he'd established with someone through Facebook. That online friend of his, going by the profile picture, was a young white lady. She told my friend that she is from Canada and she's so much desired to be in love with someone from Africa, a tall and strong black man like him. They kept exchanging Facebook Messenger and their online exchange grew so intense that my friend now started telling me about his re-settlement plan to Canada. I one day cautioned him to go slow and be extra careful with those Facebook people, but he just couldn't listen a word. He in fact became very bitter with me for what I said to him, and our friendship was on the verge of collapsing. I left him alone for some time ... A short while later, I heard that his Facebook friend had sent him some package via DHL to Entebbe airport. He was later told to send some UGX 250,000 to some MTN number via Mobile Money in order to clear his package. Then someone from DHL office in Kampala phoned him and told him to come pick up the package physically. They'd refused to put it on the bus to Palabek, insisting that it required physical presence. My friend then mobilised some money and then jumped on a bus from Palabek Kal all the way to Kampala, with great excitement for his gift from his Facebook Canadian girlfriend. Upon reaching Kampala, and robbed of all the remaining money he had, he later realised that it was a well-planned scam. No more could he hear from his Facebook girlfriend. Even the phone numbers he was communicating with never went through again. He later reported the case to police there, and later OPM Kampala helped him travel back to Palabek. That's how the whole story miserably ended (FGD/SM M&F English/Juba Arabic, Palabek RLP Office, 19 May 2021).

Mercy Corps (2019) states that the design of social media inherently begets selective exposure, information bubbles, homogeneous echo chambers, confirmation bias, and hyper-personalised and hyper-insular information environments that reduce one's cognitive capacity to objectively evaluate information. This is true not just in situations of security-related anxiety, but also in settings of forced displacement conjoined with the acute anxiety and vulnerability of forcibly displaced people, and compounded by the lack of fluency in English, in which social media applications are almost exclusively configured. They are, furthermore, vulnerable due to a relative lack of exposure to the extended ramifications of having a digital presence that is impossible to erase from the broader digital ecosystem. As one interviewee put it:

> It is worth noting that social media here in Uganda is a hugely anglophone space, that is, meant for the English literati, of whom majority of the refugees are not. This in itself disempowers a great deal of refugees as it limits their effective use of social media applications while in

> Uganda. I've not heard or seen the option of WhatsApp Arabic or Somali or Lingala or even French as option for download at Google Play Store or Apple store here in Uganda. I think the fact that Uganda is an officially anglophone country makes those options unavailable. This means a lot of the refugees here with no knowledge, let alone mastery of the English language, can't even understand well how these sophisticated social media apps operate due to the English language in which they're configured. This leaves many running the risk of being easily deceived or scammed in part because of the language issue. Yet, neither the UNHCR Uganda nor the OPM Department of Refugees has a deliberate scheme to turn these non-anglophone refugees in Uganda ... into being English-proficient for enhanced protection during their period of asylum in Uganda (IDI/SM M English/French, RLP Kampala Office, 17 June 2021).

Casswell (2019) too notes that overcoming digital literacy issues is dependent on having some real-world social networks/social capital in terms of getting people to explain things to users. A humanitarian worker based in Maaji II R/S put it succinctly when he observed that 'social media is, in so many ways, addictive. A mere exposure to it, especially for those not well prepared mentally and emotionally, can beget a series of negative effects, including laziness.'[10] Equally worrisome is the prospect of many young refugees in rural-based refugee settlements being lured into unregulated or non-contract labour markets in Uganda's urban areas, as well as outside the country. As another humanitarian worker argued:

> Access to social media for forced migrants, with all its empowering possibilities, remains a double-edged sword: if well harnessed, it does unlock the potential of amplifying refugees' voices in humanitarian programming and so enhance their protection in the country of asylum. But, at the same time, the very access to social media platforms for refugees in this challenging, much less endowed settlement does expose them to terrible negative forces out there. Digital conmen and con-women, online abusers, cyber hackers, human traffickers in virtual spaces, all these keep a close watch awaiting the earliest opportunity to prey on these vulnerable lives in settings of forced displacement ... For some time now, some young male and female refugees are said to be disappearing from this settlement [Palabek R/S], allegedly finding their way to Kampala and other urban centres for work. Only God knows what kind of work they're finding over there. But all this is happening because of their presence on social media ... (FGD/SM M English, Don Bosco Vocational Training Centre – Palabek, 18 May 2021).

Marchant (2020) records potential risks for refugee lives online include exposing forcibly displaced communities to dangerous content (such as terrorist propaganda) or harmful content (such as pornography), hostile actors (such as traffickers, fraudsters, or hostile governments or militias), and mental health risks (such as addiction or social isolation). To add to these digital risks, a forced migrant shared with us the following anecdote:

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10   IDI/SM M English, online interview via Zoom, 18 June 2021.

> Social media here [Kiryandongo R/S] has brought about some havoc among young refugees, male and female alike. The biggest expenditure for the youth here rotates around smartphone and internet data bundles. Young people like me here are ready to do anything, engage in any endeavour, including illicit things such as theft and treachery, to have their smartphones running and access social media. Older people are not understanding what we the young people are up to, and we too are not understanding what they're up to with us. Total friction both within the household and in the community simply because of the drive by many young people to access social media platforms by all means, hook or crook. Yet, the levels of depression and anxieties are now high among us [young refugees in Kiryandongo R/S]. The other day, a young female refugee was contemplating suicide following a picture of hers which she posted on Facebook. Bullying comments came from all corners and as a consequence she almost lost it. Another friend of mine, a young male refugee, posted something on Instagram but it never received the likes he had anticipated. The boy [young refugee] was terribly depressed. This was depression [from lack of likes] on top of depression [from being a forced migrant in a settlement] (FGD/SM M English, Kiryandongo RLP Office, 13 May 2021).

Simply being a refugee in a regimented humanitarian setting can be a source of anguish. This is likely to be compounded in the first instance by anxieties related to a lack of access to social media, as well as, potentially, by concerns arising from the risks inherent in getting and staying online. Cerf (2011) suggests that those who make and operate the internet and its applications have an ethical responsibility to take steps to improve the ability of internet-related technology to protect users from harm, to warn them when they are at risk, and to advocate for domestic and international regimes to provide recourse when harms particular to the internet environment occur. The implication for such ethical accountability no doubt extends to both non-governmental humanitarian aid/service providers under whose direct care the majority of Uganda's forced migrants survive, and the GoU, which regulates the access and use of internet-based technologies under its Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) and NITA-U.

Difficulties sustaining social media engagement with forced migrants

Mobile technologies, particularly since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, have become ubiquitous. It is also widely assumed that social media networks facilitate dialogue, which enhances collective knowledge sharing. But this has not been the case for many humanitarians caring for refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda.

In an FGD with five young South Sudanese refugees, one female respondent stated emphatically:

> Humanitarian workers here [Maaji II R/S] are definitely on social media platforms. We know it for sure because they sometimes get in touch with some of our RWC [Refugee Welfare Council] leaders. But, in all actuality, these humanitarian workers don't interact with us directly via social media. Even when you chance to get one of them online on WhatsApp and drop him or her a WhatsApp message, he or she just goes mute. No reply, no acknowledgment,

> nothing. I think they just see themselves as a different class of human beings and us belonging to another lower class of human beings with whom they can't interact directly via social media … (FGD/SM M&F English, RLP Maaji II R/S Office, 27 May 2021).

Another male participant in the same FGD added:

> I sometimes think these humanitarian agents serving us here [Maaji II R/S] are just old-school people. They mostly hail from an analogue generation, with a strong belief in paperwork, megaphone meetings, paper-and-ink as well as mouth-to-ear approach to communication. For us, we've really moved on, yet they still want to tether us to analogue information and communication means. Let them go back to school and catch up with new ways of interacting with young people like us. If theirs is an agenda to control us by only reaching to us indirectly via our leaders using old means, then they should better know that it's very hard to control a society when it goes fully online. It's high time that these humanitarian agents find us where we truly like to belong – that is on social media (ibid.).

As Sandvik (2015) argues, humanitarians interact among themselves and with other actors through a host of means, including via social media. However, these remarks suggest that the social media interaction between humanitarians and those they are supposedly working for are somewhat wanting, and that this is quickly interpreted by refugees themselves as a sign of indifference. Interestingly, the above remarks came from Maaji II, the settlement in which UNHCR is piloting a digital connectivity project via VSAT with Avanti. The fact that the refugee sees 'indifference' despite this investment suggests perhaps a failure by UNHCR and its partners to see how such connectivity could fundamentally change top-down communications modes in humanitarian settings and shift them towards more complex, two-way processes.

Nowhere was the perception of indifference by humanitarian workers in exchanging with their persons of concern (refugees and asylum seekers) better emphasised than during an FGD with six male and female refugee youth leaders self-settled in Kampala:

> To get a good-enough smartphone under the circumstances we live in is itself a challenge. Loading that smartphone with sufficient internet data bundles is another serious challenge. Getting the contacts and handles of those humanitarian agents whether from the Department of Refugees at OPM, the UNHCR or other refugee partner organisations is yet another enormous challenge. But even after we'd gone ahead to surmount these important challenges and so attempt to reach out to these humanitarian agents expected to care for us, many of them simply ignore our messages. Many times, I have tagged high-profile humanitarian officials in my Twitter posts to solicit their reaction, but to no avail. I can only recall one or two names from the humanitarian sector who ever reacted to my social media postings, yet I've been doing these for five years now. Many, I think, have simply chosen to stick to the traditional logic of communication exchange, to remain pre-digital in relating with us (FGD/SM F&M English, RLP Kampala Office, 18 June 2021).

The Department of Refugees at OPM and its close partner UNHCR Uganda are singled out for maintaining what is perceived by refugees as a remarkably aloof stance in relation to communication via social media with their persons of concern. One interviewee noted that humanitarian workers from those two important refugee institutions 'are totally disinterested by refugees with an amplified voice by social media; it is as if they are simply contented with the voices of refugees confined onto traditional means of communication'.[11] Another refugee youth leader self-settled in Kampala reinforced this critique:

> To my best recollection of all the five years I've been in Kampala as a refugee, I can say that the UNHCR's preferred mode of communication with us, whom they call 'persons of concern', has remained impersonal SMS and direct call via their toll-free number. [Them using] social media with us is essentially a no-go area. In fact, once registered as a refugee here [Kampala], OPM and the UNHCR both close their eyes, ears and mouth to all issues of concern we deem pertinent to share with them via social media, since we know that accessing anyone from those two offices is another tug of war, now especially since the Covid-19 outbreak. I can excuse OPM a bit because they've actually done their part to let us seek asylum in this country. But the UNHCR's indifference to our pleas via social media is just inexcusable. In giving us a non-response, the UNHCR here resembles the very government from which we fled for asylum in the first place (FGD/SM F&M English, RLP Kampala Office, 18 June 2021).

Perhaps it is the ease with which people can now raise their voices in public forums, coupled with the 'approachability' and corresponding expectation of availability and responsiveness that social media offers, that humanitarians shun. As Sandvik (2015) lucidly puts it, this potential approachability conferred by direct social media engagement can turn into a means of strengthening demands for accountability and transparency, and thereby challenging the legitimacy of these humanitarian organisations in the name of the persons of concern for which they ostensibly exist. Throughout the data collection for this study, both forced migrants and humanitarians pointed out only a few names of humanitarian organisations that were interested in integrating social media into their respective humanitarian interventions. The manner in which UNHCR, for instance, is perceived to have shied away from directly emphasising social media inclusion in refugee protection and care, notwithstanding all the resources at its disposal, puzzled one humanitarian worker:

> At one point in 2018 or perhaps early 2019, the UNHCR donated some smartphones to RWC III and II leaders. These smartphones were Microsoft Windows-operated devices and unlike the Android-operated smartphones, they were very much user-unfriendly to those who received them. No social media apps could easily be installed onto them and higher was their energy consumption. These donations therefore turned into some sort of a white elephant in the hands of those RWC refugee leaders … No wonder, it didn't take long before these UNHCR-donated smartphones found their way into the market for sale. Was it an inadvertent or

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11   IDI/SM M English/French, RLP Kampala Office, 17 June 2021.

> intended outcome? I don't know. But what's for sure is that this UNHCR move was a total flop and continues to corroborate UNHCR's shy stand on social media for inclusion in dealing with persons of concern (online interview via Zoom, 18 June 2021).

Another humanitarian worker, whose organisation was quite invested in social media in humanitarian action, also underscored the following:

> Ever since we launched this training course, and especially our computer literacy lab in November 2020, bigger are the numbers of applicants we keep receiving … Just to illustrate, last intake we received over 300 applications for this training, but only enrolled 20 applicants. This is not due to our own liking or a wish to deal with very fewer numbers. Our resource envelope for this important course training is just minimal. Talk of social media literacy for refugees and you'll soon turn into a lone voice in the desert. There's no substantial and sustainable funding from bigger humanitarian organisations out there for this kind of intervention. But as soon as one brings up some patchy proposal for SGBV [sexual or gender-based violence] or WASH [water, sanitation and hygiene], you then see an array of funders jumping on it …(IDI/SM M English, Don Bosco Vocational Training Centre, Palabek, 18 May 2021).

One youth refugee leader of an RLP-initiated refugee support group based in Kampala summed up this apparent indifference of humanitarian workers in relation to social media engagement in the following terms:

> As Rendez-vous Refugee Support Group, we don't have a permanent physical office of our own. And as such, our office space is virtual. We're essentially permanent online. Yet, many refugee-focused humanitarian organisations, which say they exist for our own good sake, are much more obsessed with reporting back to their donors, and much less with communicating directly with the beneficiaries they claim to serve. In the end, these humanitarian agents end up almost always taking important decisions about us [refugees] without us. All this is because they're social media-phobic in relating with us, the beneficiaries! To me, the more frequent communication via social media there is between humanitarian agents and refugees, the less important the urge to always look forward to such one-off annual commemoration days such as World Refugees' Day (IDI/SM M English/French, RLP Kampala Office, 17 June 2021).

The perceived indifference of many humanitarian organisations operating in settings of forced migration in digital programming and social media engagement with beneficiaries is potentially counterproductive. While many humanitarian agencies give rhetorical weight to humanitarian principles of inclusion, participation and equity in their programming, there appears to be little or no commitment to tapping into the potential of social media for greater inclusion in humanitarian designs and actions. This gap between rhetoric and reality is also counterproductive because it paves the way for humanitarian programming emptied of the real needs and aspirations of those for whom it is intended – needs and aspirations that could have been captured via candid

social media engagement with the intended beneficiaries. It is indeed true that social media can facilitate information and communication overload (e.g. more messages than can be addressed) and generate extreme reputational risks with real-world consequences. But it is still uncreative for humanitarians to shy away from direct social media engagement with their beneficiaries simply because any anonymous person can post false information on Twitter or Facebook regarding the scale or impact of a crisis, and about the response or failure to respond of the government or the humanitarian community (Sandvik, 2015).

Ironically, at the same time as many refugee-focused humanitarian agencies in Uganda appear to shun social media engagement with their direct beneficiaries in whose names they draft their project proposals for funding, they actively engage various social media platforms to showcase their initiatives (even those still in the offing) to other similar or even competing humanitarian agencies, but most especially to their direct benefactors.

Systems underutilising the emancipatory potential of social media

The 'emancipatory' potential of social media functions at multiple levels. It includes being able to project 'voice' and critical experiences into multiple spaces – and on multiple issues – from which forced migrants are otherwise generally debarred. Within the humanitarian setting specifically, it holds the potential for a fundamental shift in the nature and balance of communications between refugees and humanitarian workers, and thus for more democratic governance practices.

While the emancipatory potential of social media is thus considerable and indeed is acknowledged by humanitarian workers, the systems for realising this potential are possibly unwanted, and certainly underdeveloped and underutilised, as alluded to in an online interview with a humanitarian worker:

> I should say most of the content of our interaction with them online is for accountability purposes to our higher offices and donors. Oftentimes, these refugees like to engage with us a lot online. Like me, I have grown so much fond of them – this being my second year based in Maaji – and so those who have my WhatsApp number always like to chat up with me. Should they spot me online, whether office or past office hours, they will engage with you almost non-stop, including raising some critical question pertaining to programming. But as an institution, we still prefer to exchange with them the analogue way. That is, information reaching down to them through the existing leadership structures (from RWC leaders, cluster leaders to bloc leaders) and other non-digital means such as noticeboard, loudspeakers, or radio (online interview via zoom, 18 June 2021).

A tech-savvy South Sudanese refugee noted the following:

> I can send for them what I want. For example, if they put a post about a particular event, I can go and add my voice in the comment box because I know at the end of the day, they will read

> the comments and they get to know what people are saying and know what people want or that they are supposed to act in a certain way. So, social media is important. I can use it to pass out information targeting them and many people will see. Like if I am to talk to UNHCR, I can do a video or writing. So, if something is concerning refugees, I can make a video about it and post it on any platform I know they can get access to (IDI/SM M English, RLP Kiryandongo Office, 13 May 2021).

An organisation focused on digital literacy described intentional resource investment to curate and manage digital spaces that they had established and through which they engaged with forced migrants. We asked our respondent whether they have a day in their working schedule where they check what is happening on their virtual space and respond accordingly.

> We do it regularly. Usually, we are all into that platform and look at the opportunities and think logically. If it is in line of health, the person concerned about health comes in and we share ideas. If it is in the line of business, we do it the same way, if it is in the line of peace-building, we get into that. It keeps going on, it is kinetic. We play a very big role and have so many events we have sponsored and some of our youths go to international platforms. Some of these international platforms invite them to participate, so we help them to get these travel documents like visas. Once they come back, they share what they learned from outside with the youths who have not been able to go outside. Every year we send youths outside the country (IDI/SM M English, Organisation in Kiryandongo R/S, 12 May 2021).

The establishment of appropriate protections for humanitarians who, particularly if beneficiaries become 'polymedia' savvy, risk being unable to set boundaries for their work is an important consideration when thinking through the development of the systematic use of social media and the ways in which refugees and humanitarians can both see it as productive rather than an additional burden for humanitarians.

The multiple challenges articulated above were well captured during an FGD with four RLP staff in the Media for Social Change programme:

> A transition has surely taken off – from analogue to digital communication. Yet, this transition is no doubt costly for both (and perhaps most especially) forced migrants and humanitarians expected to serve them. These costs include the purchase of devices and gadgets, competing basic needs vis-à-vis infrastructural investments for technological transition, and above all ICT-related literacy … By and large, change in adaptability to digital technology is not yet commensurate to the technological change being advanced. A great many humanitarians operating in refugee contexts, for instance, still do not appreciate that refugee WhatsApp groups have now substituted physical gathering for experience-sharing, advice, psychosocial support and even opportunity-sharing. I think there's an urgent need for a fully fledged ICT-integrated response plan in refugee settings. In this plan, humanitarians should be seen as proactively setting up Social Media Working Groups in refugee settlements as is the case with

> the many other working groups in operation. That, for me, is currently the missing link (FGD/
> SM M English, RLP Gulu Office, 30 May 2021).

Infrastructures that underpin social media exclusion

Refugees' perceptions of humanitarian reluctance and/or indifference towards the more systematic use of ICT and social media in their interactions are undoubtedly compounded by the technical challenges of establishing stable and secure communications, and by an apparent lack of priority given to solving them.

It is one thing to acquire the appropriate device (whether smartphone, tablet or laptop) and quite another to have such devices fully functional as a tool to access social media. While scholars of digitisation have observed that the most widely spread ICT across the world today, including in regions of the Global South, is the mobile phone (Furuholt and Matotay, 2011), it should be noted that traditional basic-level phones that are mainly used for calling are the most common. These phones, also known as 'small-end' or 'button' phones, are cheaper to buy and maintain but have limited or no internet capability.

Throughout the fieldwork for this study, forced migrants and humanitarian workers alike pointed to some key prerequisites for access to social media platforms. In this briefing note, three such prerequisites are discussed: sim card, electric power and network signal.

Sim card

Key to the functionality of mobile devices is an active sim card. Given the critical role an active sim card plays in determining internet connectivity, the telecommunication companies issuing such cards, and the government authority in charge of determining parameters of registration, have introduced stringent regulations.

In 2018, the Ugandan government moved to regulate mobile phone subscriptions through national campaigns of mandatory individual registrations of sim cards. There followed a noticeable decline in mobile subscriptions (Nampijja, 2021). Many mobile numbers were disabled because their owners failed to register fully. The presence of many non-English-literate host Ugandans and refugees contributed to derailing this registration process as many people could not easily understand the English required. This registration process was debilitating for Uganda's forced migrants. As one female respondent put it during an FGD with six young adult refugees:

> Getting a sim card here, especially from MTN, is a real tug of war. First of all, customer service
> people at MTN shops never understand our documentation papers. You present them with a
> refugee ID card or a temporary asylum seeker certificate and [they] tell you that the system
> cannot register and activate the sim card with such kind of documentation. It is as if their sim
> cards were only meant for nationals. So, one had to go to the OPM camp base for a letter of

recommendation for sim card, then to the police station for another clearance letter and back to the telecommunication company. But even then, one would still get a sim card that will never get activated. That's why many of us simply resorted to going through nationals in order to access a fully registered and active sim card. This left you at the mercy of that national. It is as if you were renting to be online. You have to pay that national who agreed to assist you, otherwise he or she may decide to recall that sim card which is registered in his or her names … This hustle of getting an active sim card has actually contributed to a relatively smaller number of refugees here joining social media (FGD/SM M&F English/Juba Arabic, Kiryandongo RLP Office, 10 May 2021).

It is worth noting that non-Ugandan forced migrants (both settled and self-settled refugees) with smartphones are relatively few in number, especially in rural-based refugee settlements. As such, having the fully registered and active sim card that is required for full access to social media remains the realm of the lucky few. Another male participant in the same FGD explained:

The reason why many of us here [Kiryandongo R/S] have Africell[12] phone numbers is precisely because Africell was the very first telecommunication to reach to us with no stringent procedure in order to acquire their sim cards. Within a few minutes after presenting your documentation ID and a payment of UGX 2,000 only, one is able to acquire an active sim card ready for use. The only challenge is that Africell mobile money services are almost inexistent here. Also, their network coverage is still much limited to the trading centre [Bweyale] and a few clusters of the settlement. Otherwise, in the event that Africell addresses those challenges, everyone here will join their network. For, with them, the hustle is minimal, and as such, many who had previously found difficulty with accessing a line [sim card] would now be in position to get one easily and so access social media (FGD/SM M&F English/Juba Arabic, Kiryandongo RLP Office, 10 May 2021).

In an IDI with a humanitarian worker involved in the inclusion of forced migrants in humanitarian programming, the interviewee narrated the embedded challenge of access to an active and fully registered sim card in the name of the immediate user:

You [the interviewer] will recall that in the aftermath of a series of high-profile killings in Kampala starting in 2017 the [Ugandan] government banned the sale of airtime vouchers. As such, telecommunication companies were mandated to sell their airtime and internet bundles via mobile money services. This development brought the issue of PIN [personal identification number] in the limelight of everyday life for people with mobile devices, whether smartphones or otherwise. And as you know, PIN code and name identity are tagged to sim card registration. So, for all those refugees and asylum seekers, who are in thousands with sim cards registered in other persons' identities, the privacy of the PIN code they use is not guaranteed

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12   Africell has since exited the Ugandan market (www.independent.co.ug/africell-to-exit-ugandan-market-after-7-years/).

> ... We've heard and seen increasing cases of cyber theft via mobile money transactions pitting refugees against their hosts. Many refugees have ended up abandoning those registered sim cards they acquired with assistance from their Ugandan hosts, and frustratingly dropping offline ... This issue of sim card registration which has only privileged holders of national IDs has had devastating effects on access to social media for many with no national IDs. [It has affected] refugees and asylum seekers squarely included (IDI/SM M English, Don Bosco Vocational Training Centre, 18 May 2021).

In Uganda, digital and financial inclusion is inextricably linked to the use of social media. Airtime and internet bundles are both purchased through mobile money that is entirely controlled through the handset. Mobile money systems allow users to store values in an account accessible by the handset, convert cash in and out of the stored value account, and transfer value between users by using a set of text messages, menu commands and PINs (Aker and Mbiti, 2010). To date, almost all sectors of the economy have integrated mobile money transactions into their daily operations (Mirbargkar et al., 2020).

Electric power

The internet cannot be accessed in any reliable and stable way without the requisite electricity infrastructure. Despite being feted internationally for its warm welcome to refugees, Uganda's 'national grid' does not extend to its refugee settlements. This 'national grid' nomenclature underpins an understanding of electric power as a commodity meant for nationals and professional non-nationals in the country on legal residency (such as members of the diplomatic corps or professionals with work permits) and exportable to nationals of other countries on a clear export tariff. Uganda's settlement-based refugees fall outside this logic.

While refugee settlements across the country are not physically demarcated spaces separate from host villages, electric power lines from the national grid conspicuously mark this separation. Host villages themselves are poorly electrified so access to electricity in these rural-based refugee settlements is therefore rare. Only base camps and their neighbouring trading centres are officially electrified. Outside those spaces, access to electricity is mainly provided by generators, recharging batteries, solar panels, or, as one respondent during an FGD revealed, illicit connection to the national grid's power lines from Ugandan hosts.[13] The issue of sufficient electricity supply therefore imposes itself as a first-order priority for access to social media. As one participant during an FGD put it:

> Here [Palabek R/S] you can be in possession of a very good smartphone, knowing a good spot for reliable network signal, and even have enough data bundles loaded on your phone, but you can still fail to access social media from your phone simply because of power. Charging places are quite far from where we live. And even upon reaching there, it is possible to find all [power

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13   FGD/SM M&F English/Juba Arabic, Palabek RLP Office, 18 May 2021.

> charging] sockets at the trading centre taken up and be told that your phone will be on queue for later charging [still] at a fee …
>
> The UNHCR implementing partner here installed some power charging booths to help us [refugees] access energy for our phones. But still, the location in which those few charging booths are found is very inconvenient for many of us. For instance, I reside in Zone 8 of this settlement and the nearest charging booth to me was put at the extreme end of Zone 5 – a distance of almost one hour on foot. Boda boda riders will charge you UGX 3,000 to reach that cost-free charging booth of the UNHCR. How cost-free is that really? Yet in the trading centre, which is a bit nearer, they'll charge less than that amount for a full battery charge.
>
> Because of this electric power challenge, only rarely do you see people here being online at most times. It is not only the use of data bundles that is economised; people here also have to economise on battery energy as well (ibid.).

Another participant in a different FGD emphasised that phone charging is itself expensive given the financial destitution of many rural-based refugees in Uganda:

> Here [Kiryandongo R/S] they charge UGX 500 for those button [small-end] phones, UGX 1,000 for touchscreen [smartphone] phones, and UGX 2,000 for tablets. In the event of power blackout, when generators or solar panels are used, just double these prices and you will now see how expensive it gets for us [refugees] to use the apps on our phones (FGD/SM M&F English/Juba Arabic, Kiryandongo RLP Office, 10 May 2021).

An even more pointed expression of frustration came from an FGD with seven young adult South Sudanese refugees. Smartphones, one participant echoed, are gadgets for a select few, 'those connected to state power back home [South Sudan]'[14] and getting these smartphones daily charged for use is another expense 'only those very few lucky ones can afford'.[15] In the ensuing heated conversation about the difficulty with access to electric power for phone charging, another participant voiced the following:

> For us here [Maaji II R/S], we are mostly online during the dry season; with the rains, we hardly get power to charge our devices. This is because we only get to charge our devices from those UNHCR charging booths, which are powered by solar panels (ibid.).

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14   FGD/SM M&F English/Ma'adi, Maaji II RLP Office, 24 May 2021.

15   ibid.

Network signal

Network signal was reported as the third important prerequisite infrastructure, which shapes the contours of exclusion from access to social media for many settlement-based refugees. During an FGD with young adult South Sudanese refugees, one participant made the following revelation:

> There is one particular tree in my settlement zone – and everyone there knows it so well – around which the MTN network picks up a little bit well. Besides that specific spot, finding a good network signal for MTN remains a big challenge. It is for fetching, going round and round in order to access it. Airtel is a lot easier to fetch in my zone, but I'm told by my friends in other settlements that there too Airtel poses serious challenges. So, one can possess a smartphone, sacrifice to have it battery-charged, load enough data bundles for internet surfing, but he or she will still be let down by a poor or simply lack of network signal and so fail to connect to social media platforms (FGD/SM M&F English/Juba Arabic, Palabek RLP Office, 19 May 2021).

Another participant in a different FGD reiterated the deficiency of the network signal in the refugee settlement, testifying that 'many a times, phones are simply placed at specific spots all day long to pitch for network access'.[16]

An advocacy video documentary titled Network, produced by RLP-trained basic video advocates, captures the predicament of poor or no network signal in many refugee settlements across the country,[17] and highlights how this issue marks the difference between those who truly belong to the republic's fold and those at the periphery of or even excluded from it. This finding echoes Weidmann et al.'s (2016) finding of political bias in internet service provision across various ethnic groups in a country. In short, politically excluded groups suffer from significantly lower internet penetration rates compared with those in power, an effect that cannot be explained by economic or geographic factors. This holds true for Uganda's forced migrants, especially those residing in refugee settlements. Here, the discourse of 'liberation technology' – much vaunted in the internet literature since the Arab Spring – is deeply challenged, in that governments and the contracting telecommunication companies still play a key role in the availability of the network signal and hence the allocation of the internet. Whether intentionally or not, they can sabotage the internet's liberating effects.

Despite a slogan suggesting otherwise ('everywhere you go'), major network provider MTN is almost nowhere in the Kiryandongo District R/S. Around four years ago, an interviewee told us,

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16   FGD/SM M&F English/Ma'di, Maaji II RLP Office, 27 May 2021.

17   See www.refugeelawproject.org/index.php?option=com_yendifvideoshare&view=video&id=130:the-network.

MTN conducted a market survey in the R/S, the findings of which revealed that the R/S held great clientele potential for the company. Swiftly, MTN sought to boost its network coverage across Kiryandongo R/S in order to tap well into the growing refugee customer base:

> Equipment for masts were brought in and placed at Kiryandongo base camp, as the technical MTN personnel was to finalise arrangements with the OPM. We were later told that such an arrangement had to be cleared with UCC first and foremost and then down to the OPM Kampala Head Office before the masts to boost network coverage could be erected. The talks hit a snag and the masts' equipment started deteriorating in vain. Finally, MTN decided to call out the project and that's how Kiryandongo R/S missed out on the opportunity to be well covered by MTN (IDI/SM M English, Organisation in Kiryandongo R/S, 12 May 2021).

The relatively recent development by the UNHCR–Avanti partnership to tackle the issue of poor network signal and hence internet connectivity in Uganda's refugee settlements has promoted Wi-Fi hotspots as a workaround. This intervention used a 'top-down' approach to bring about internet access to Uganda's rural refugees. In the words of Kaurin (2020), such an approach undergirds 'manipulations of space and time through the power of ICT, lacking full consideration of the people at the receiving end of these information flows'. The absence of government action to bring about internet access speaks to how questions of 'internet governance' (Marchant, 2020) relate to broader questions of governance and control over particular subpopulations. It perhaps also says something about the reality of refugee impoverishment that Uganda's own telecommunications providers have not seen the settlements as an economic opportunity, let alone a matter of rights of access to information.

The pilot project in Maaji II R/S uses VSAT connectivity and 'its signal too is hard to get in cloudy days ... and seem to only pick up well at night'.[18] The resultant pattern of access to internet and social media being better during the night has a number of implications for refugee protection. For example, users who live in areas of the settlement that are remote from the hotspot are less likely to access it, as they may not wish to travel across the settlement at night. The lack of designated spaces for men and women, or for the youth and elderly, forces a mingling of people that could be seen as culturally inappropriate. Familiarity and ease with these communication technologies is further structured by age, literacy and language. While the founding ethos of the internet was a network where access to information could come with ease (Marchant, 2020), the current trend in humanitarian settings, especially with regard to displaced communities, perpetuates restrictions and control, and fails to take into account the specific needs of sub-categories of the general population who may need well-targeted support if they are to overcome the hurdles outlined.

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18   IDI/SM M English, online via Zoom, 18 June 2021.

Discussion

Increased access to and use of social media in humanitarian contexts of forced displacement presents challenges to traditional power relations on the one hand, and opportunities for new forms of interaction and more equal power relations on the other. It is clear that an intentional deployment of social media to enhance leadership and accountability requires new modalities and *modus operandi* in humanitarian action. The importance of this has only been reinforced by Covid-19 exigencies such as social distancing, teleworking, vaccine mandates and lockdowns. While both humanitarians and their beneficiaries need to adapt, the work of finding and developing those modalities has yet to be done, and these delays are now being experienced by beneficiaries as indifference on the part of humanitarians.

Some refugees are eager to stay online at all costs

This study finds that there is a causal relationship between the protracted nature of refugeehood for many of Uganda's forced migrants and their desire to get and stay connected via social media. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted how people could socialise, further sharpened this eagerness for online presence. The number of smartphones in the refugee settlements in which the fieldwork for this study took place increased. In no FGD, regardless of demographic, was a smartphone totally absent: during breaks, participants would reach for their smartphones, whether for audio calls, video calls, or to take advantage of the relatively better network signal in the area in which FGDs took place. It was also not uncommon during fieldwork to see instances of smartphone sharing, to enable those with no device to gain social media access. Our observations are in line with Casswell (2019) who explains that internet-enabled communication via social media, especially audio and video calls, is critical for bringing a sense of connectedness and togetherness to refugees who are separated from friends and family. This therapeutic potential of social media apps for refugees caught in protracted humanitarian settings should not be ignored.

The pitfalls of staying connected

The very social media platforms that offer therapeutic opportunities for refugees in protracted displacement settings can also traumatise. Cyber criminals at various levels take advantage of vulnerable refugee lives online. The eagerness of a great many refugees to get and keep online via social media – as an escape from the constrained parameters of life in confined refugee settlements – provides fertile ground for cyber criminality and cyber violence. Examples of online scams as well as cyber bullying and harassment are common. Furthermore, in settings of protracted refugeehood, the lines of misinformation (incorrect information spread without intent) and disinformation (incorrect information spread deliberately) are often difficult to decipher. Mercy Corps (2019) states that the inherent design of social media begets selective

exposure, information bubbles, echo chambers, confirmation bias, and hyper-personalised, hyper-sensory and hyper-insular information environments that often reduce our cognitive capacity to objectively evaluate information.

Therefore, in protracted refugee settings characterised by multifaceted anxieties, social media can easily facilitate and accelerate potentially destabilising rumour-mongering. For rumours – especially if they conform to pre-existing worldviews and emotionally loaded narratives, and especially if audiences are repeatedly exposed to them – can perpetuate unfounded threat claims, amplify in-group/out-group tensions, and motivate rational actors to engage and justify collective violence in the name of self-defence (Mercy Corps, 2019). In the case of the South Sudanese refugees, who constituted the largest proportion of respondents in this study, conflict dynamics along ethnic lines that conditioned their forced displacement into Uganda reportedly continue to play out in virtual spaces – on WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook (using VPN), among other platforms.

Humanitarians' lukewarm reactions to refugee lives online

Uganda's government is guided by a principle of administrative decentralisation, which applies to policies relating to asylum, especially for Uganda's refugees in rural settlements. Refugee settlements are territorially and administratively structured in a three-tier system of decentralised governance: RWCs at the block level (RCW I), at zone level (RWC II), and at settlement level (RWC III). It is through these RWC structures that humanitarians – whether state, multilateral or non-government – reach out to refugees for purposes of communication and service delivery. Therefore, unrestricted access to social media results in the greater likelihood of established channels of communication – upon which humanitarians bureaucratically rely – being circumvented. This was one reservation some humanitarians we engaged with during fieldwork expressed regarding direct engagement with persons of concern. The few humanitarians who saw an opportunity for greater inclusion and programmatic accountability in direct engagement with persons of concern nonetheless still feared for their own professional wellness: their capacity to meet deadlines, they believed, would be undermined by the sheer volume of information exchange they would have to deal with via various social media platforms. These findings echo those of Sandvik's (2015) study of humanitarian cyberspace in which she discusses some of the 'unacknowledged risks' of greater social media engagement, not least an unmanageable influx of messages, but also dangers of extreme reputational damages with real-world consequences.

Infrastructures of exclusion from refugees' access to social media

A significant majority of Uganda's refugees are hosted in settlements upcountry, away from the country's core urban spaces and from the country's national grid. These earmarked spaces for hosting the majority of refugees, while labelled 'settlements' as opposed to 'camps', have nonetheless been conceived of and managed by the OPM and UNHCR as spaces not just of protection but also of control. These are seen as humanitarian spaces in which residents are subject to sovereign power but experience a state of exception, of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998).

Uganda's refugee settlements hence constitute a kind of apolitical wasteland, in which the availability of the infrastructures upon which access to social media depends – namely, electric power, network signal and sim card access – is explained away as a luxury that non-citizens, whose primary need is protection from persecution or from events seriously disturbing public order in their countries of origin, can do without.

Yet, the lack of such physical infrastructure directly shapes the contours of exclusion from access to social media, which in turn lessens opportunities for these settlement-based refugees to build much bigger social capital or networks in such precarious spaces of protracted refugeehood. The result therefore is exclusion from wider opportunities to participate in public life, and an escalation of the vulnerabilities and precarities that refugees face in Uganda's settlements. Without such important access to physical infrastructure that undergirds access to social media, then concerns for digital literacy, political and cultural sensitivities to cyber etiquette, and accessibility features for persons with disabilities are ultimately in vain (Casswell, 2019).

The latent emancipatory potential of social media for refugees

If social media users are to realise the emancipatory possibilities of those platforms in humanitarian contexts, then stakeholders must recognise the fast-paced rate of technological change. This pace results in difficulties in mainstreaming access to social media that are compounded in refugee contexts by the prior need (even prior to basic digital literacy) to acquire the English language skills needed in digital spaces. In parallel, stakeholders must recognise (echoing Weidmann et al. (2016) and Casswell (2019)) that there are first-order divides related to people's ability to access social media (infrastructures of exclusion). There are also evident second-order divides as suggested by Madianou (2015), such that stakeholders need to recognise that: interest in access to social media is significantly related to generation; upskilling youth alone is likely to leave older generations still unreachable through social media; and although social media platforms are virtual, access to their usage remains a physical challenge in many refugee settings, not least for refugees with physical disabilities. Intentional efforts are therefore required to invest in how we build structures that include rather than exclude, structures that can be curated to communicate across different instances of decision-making in the humanitarian context of forced displacement.

Social media has had a perplexing characteristic of being easily identified yet difficult to define in terms of use. Some definitions have focused on what users expect (Madianou, 2019), and on the benefits (or disadvantages) arising from its access and usage (Kaurin, 2020). Others have focused on its emancipatory potential for supporting livelihoods and human development more broadly (Sandvik, 2015; Maitland, 2020). The findings of this study point to the possibilities of social media both as an asset and as a threat to socioeconomic, psychosocial and political positives, even in humanitarian contexts of forced displacement. At the same time, in such circumscribed humanitarian situations of forced migration where (for example) a social media post by an asylum seeker beneficiary could lead to exclusion from humanitarian assistance or even denial of refugee

status, access to and use of social media by forced migrants as internet-based activists for the betterment of their social condition cannot just be seen as a 'convenient' alternative to more traditional forms of inclusion and participation.

As a system and regime of care, humanitarianism in asylum and refugee contexts will still have to:

1. grapple with the meanings of the economic, psychosocial and political appeal of social media for the beneficiaries they seek to aid/serve
2. identify the range of opportunities and challenges related to social media access and use
3. promote discussion on potential solutions to these challenges.

It will take a concerted effort – certainly not one taking a top-down design, nor an approach that is exclusively bottom-up – that should involve government (central and local), corporations (tech-focused and others), the humanitarian civil society and their benefactors (national and international), and beneficiaries themselves to find ways to respond to the growing puzzle of social media ethics and impacts, especially in such fragile situations of forced displacement.

Conclusion and recommendations

The potential benefits of increased digitalisation to refugees, living in situations where access to information and spaces for communication exchange are of the essence, are yet to be realised.

Uganda's forced migrants, both those in refugee settlements and those self-settled in urban areas, have demonstrated their eagerness to get and stay connected to the internet through social media platforms, regardless of the challenging context. The internet connectivity available to them ranges from cellular networking, wireless local area networking to personal area networking technologies. As communications systems and networks continue to grow and new social media applications are developed, the lives of refugees and humanitarians operating in settings of asylum are increasingly likely to be affected in dynamic ways.

As Maitland (2020) reminds us, connectivity (and its risks) can help overcome or ameliorate some of the sources of vulnerability. The road ahead is paved with complexities associated with refugee protection and inclusion in humanitarian programming in a ubiquitous digital environment, further accelerated by the exigencies of social distancing due to Covid-19.

However, more research is needed on the nature of vulnerabilities of particular subpopulations within the humanitarian context of forced displacement. These include those suffering varying instances and degrees of trauma, those with complex disabilities, and the elderly who are more likely to lack digital literacy. The likely greater vulnerability of the digitally un(der)connected points to a conundrum in the access to and use of social media. This needs to be juxtaposed with

more specific descriptions of the digital landscape created by rapidly evolving technology and uneven levels of access – and what these variations mean for access to information, dialogue and participation, and even social cohesion. Only then can we properly contemplate digital connectivity that is inclusive, accessible and meaningful.

To design these interventions, Kaurin (2020) insists, we first need a clear understanding of how forcibly displaced people get information, where in that ecosystem internet connectivity comes in, and – to the extent that it does – just what it is replacing. The most critical information needed, Kaurin posits, is not just how women, people living with disabilities, the elderly, and others with limited mobility and who are insufficiently digitally literate find ways to go online, but rather how they access different kinds of information in the absence of internet access.

Some have cherished hopes of social media as potentially democratising the humanitarian industry in the field of forced migration. They imagine that increased access to social media among forced migrants could increase the involvement of persons of concern in decision-making processes pertinent to their own protection and assistance. With a constant flow of information trying to bring others to accept one's proposals, social media would enable direct participation of the beneficiaries, the humanitarians and the benefactors in ways that eliminate geographic distances and so reinvigorate real possibilities for a democratised humanitarian action in settings of forced displacement.

This briefing note highlights a disconnect between refugees' expectations of social media on the one hand, and humanitarians' ability and willingness to engage with those expectations on the other. While humanitarians are right to engage with caution given the risks to themselves and to their beneficiaries if they simply rush in, the rapid evolution and usage of social media suggests that humanitarians would do well to adopt more intentional approaches to developing systems in order to use these media to mutual benefit. This has never been truer than during the current pandemic in which the imperatives of social distancing continue to re-socialise refugees and humanitarians and their interactions.

Recommendations

- To realise the potential of refugees' engagement with social media:
  - Integrate digital literacy skills into both informal and formal adult education.
  - Involve refugees in the co-production and development of digital literacy syllabi that can accommodate fast-changing technologies and social media platforms, and that speak to digital security.
  - Invest in non-English language social media.
  - Mainstream the use of social media across existing working groups within humanitarian settings.
  - Incorporate digital literacy and awareness of e-trauma into psychosocial and mental health programming as part of minimising the pitfalls of refugees' lives online.

- To overcome hurdles of engagement for humanitarian actors:
  – Create chat bots in the languages used by refugees.
  – Provide toll-free lines with interpretation in languages used by refugees.
  – Invest in staff positions that can channel and refer digital engagements with beneficiaries.

- To overcome infrastructural difficulties and exclusions:
  – Budget and plan for localised digital information access points (e.g. Wi-Fi hotspots, solar-powered charging points) throughout refugee settlements.
  – Encourage mobile phone networks and telecommunications companies to set up stalls during UNHCR/OPM registration verification processes; this would help to ensure that digital access becomes understood as an automatic component of registration rather than something that has to be struggled for by each individual in turn.
  – Integrate modules on digital rights for forced migrants into broader training for relevant authorities (e.g. police, immigration and communications commissions and the NITA-U) on the rights of forced migrants.
  – Promote access to information as a core component of humanitarian assistance, for example by distributing smartphones and bundles as part of 'Non-Food Items'.
  – Integrate refugee users into internet governance discussions and decision-making.

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