



Forced migration, use of digital tools and role of language

Working Paper on Key Principles and Implications for Policy, Practice and Public Awareness

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Contemporary Issue and Context

Rapid technological changes are increasing the use of digital tools in communication, information provision and delivery of key services. In parallel with this, war and political conflict have forced individuals to flee from their countries of origin in many international contexts, including South East Asia. In aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals of leaving no one behind and promoting holistic and sustainable development, it is important to consider how digital tools can be used to increase refugees' access to key services and enhance their opportunities to gain decent work

Mobile phones are widely used by refugees and in many cases serve as the primary or only means of accessing web-based services. Such devices not only enable refugees to maintain contact with family and friends in their country of origin and elsewhere, but present a vital source of information. The UNHCR (2013) has recognised that access to wifi and electricity for refugees is important as food, shelter and protection and that technology-related services are an important form of aid. Although a growing body of research has begun to investigate refugees' use of phones on their migration journeys, in camps and in urban areas, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of language. The aim of the research project on which this paper draws on was to examine how language shapes refugees' phone use and access to the internet, and to explore the potential to improve their lives through such devices.

Purpose and background

The main aim of this briefing is to highlight key principles and policy implications for advancing the human rights of refugees in South East Asia through increasing their access to and use of appropriately designed digital tools. The paper is based on an interdisciplinary project research which was carried out with Rohingya refugees living in Penang, Malaysia by Heriot Watt University and Kanita at Universiti Sains Malaysia in partnership with Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign. The research was enriched through stakeholder consultation with a wide range of international and local participants, including refugee communities, NGOs, UNHCR, government and academics.

The paper will first outline three key principles which emerged from the study. It will then consider cross-cutting policy implications, followed by a focus on education, health services and employability and enterprise. Finally, it will consider the importance of raising public awareness of the circumstances which have led to the presence of refugees in the country.

Key Principles

Principle 1: Efforts to recognise the legal status of refugees and advance their human rights should continue

The development of digital tools should not be viewed as a substitute for recognising the legal status of refugees and upholding their human rights. Neither should such tools be used as a substitute for providing key services such as support with language learning and education. Rather, these tools should be viewed as a means of enabling them to live independent and fulfilling lives *in parallel with* efforts to strengthen these rights within the ASEAN region. Alongside this, there is a need for continuing efforts to raise public awareness of the specific circumstances which have contributed to the presence of refugees in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and other South-East Asian countries.

Principle 2: Digital tools should be designed in collaboration with refugee communities

Digital tools and materials should be designed and developed through close consultation with refugee communities and those who work with them not only to ensure their inclusion in such processes but to optimise the use of such tools in these communities. Our work enabled us to gain some insights into differential access and use of the internet within the Rohingya community, their priorities for the use of such services and areas for further development and research.

Principle 3: Digital tools should be designed with due regard for the safety and wellbeing of refugee communities

Our study found a high degree of insecurity within the refugee community. This was related to their lack of legal status, which increased their vulnerability to hostility, exploitation, arrest and detention. Consequently, it is important for digital tools to be designed with due regard for anonymity, security and privacy.

Cross Cutting Policy Implications

Two cross-cutting policy implications emerged from our study: the role of language and literacy and the need for affordable access to web-based services.

Role of language and literacy

The study found that the languages used by refugees played a major role in their access to, and use of the internet. For instance, while the Rohingya language was widely spoken within the community, school-going young people were more likely to read, write and speak Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and English than older people. This enabled them to use a wide range of applications and web-based services. In contrast, older peoples' lower levels of proficiency in English, posed a barrier to their use of the internet.

Policy implication: The design and development of digital tools and materials for refugee communities should be linguistically sensitive. It is not sufficient for such tools and materials to be designed simply to accommodate the wide range of languages spoken within refugee communities. Awareness is also required of varying levels of proficiency in these languages as well as individuals' varying use of different languages depending on context.

The study also evidenced internet use as a vehicle for gaining greater proficiency in BM and English. For instance, Google Translate was used to translate BM into English and vice versa. However, while such applications may be useful in the absence of other forms of language support for simple daily communication, better tools which are peer developed, monitored and sustained are needed

Policy implication: Support for developing applications which can support language-learning and social interaction between refugees and other communities by, for instance, enabling translation from Rohingya into Bahasa Malaysia or English, should be considered. Such an approach can usefully be integrated with applications designed to signpost individuals to key services and agencies. This would be particularly beneficial for refugees when they are new to the country.

Our study also found that levels of literacy varied widely within the Rohingya community, with literacy levels being higher among younger people than older people.

Policy implication: It is important to support the development of digital materials and tools which can be used by individuals with varying levels of literacy. Examples of this might include

applications which use visual and audio means of communicating information as well as, or instead of, text.

Widening access to the internet

Given the low levels of income within the refugee population, affordability of internet access was a key issue.

Policy implications: In line with growing recognition that such internet access is a human right, it is important to consider pro-active measures to increase universal access to web-based services. One means of doing so is to provide free wi-fi access in public locations which are inclusive of refugees. Another means of increasing access to the internet could be through creating free ‘hotspots’ in local areas where refugees reside perhaps in collaboration with an NGO which is working with the community. This is an area currently being progressed by the research team in collaboration with Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign. Yet another important area to address is the requirement to produce formal identification (ID) in order to purchase a phone SIM card. Since mobile phones are the main devices used by refugees for internet access, refugees’ lack of legal status presents a considerable barrier to them independently purchasing such cards.

Policy and Practice implications for Education

Refugees have no access to government schools in Malaysia and educational provision by NGO schools is uneven and limited to certain local areas, with demand for such provision far out-stripping supply. Digital education is therefore a potentially beneficial area for development.

Digital education can also play an important role in enabling adult women and men to gain access to education in a flexible and cost-effective way. For example, the provision of digitalised courses would enable them to organise their study time around work and childcare responsibilities and reduce transport costs. Providing accreditation for educational courses is likely to increase their uptake and potentially provide a route into employment. However, developing digital education requires funding and resources, including to train and appoint instructors and develop the curriculum.

However, in line with the principle already stated above, any potential initiatives to make digital education available to refugee communities should not be viewed as a substitute for enabling children and young people within such communities to attend school. Rather, they should be viewed as means of supplementing current efforts to increase access to education for children and young people within a classroom setting. Blended forms of education, comprising digital provision in combination with more conventional forms of school-based education, would constitute a major step forward.

Policy and Practice implications for Health

Two key areas emerged in considering the implications of the study for increasing access to health services: the development of a digitized patient held **health records** for Rohingya and other refugee communities and the development of **mobile health apps**. Such records could provide a reliable mechanism for Rohingya and other refugee communities to document and carry their medical history and records. This would minimise the risk of loss of information during their migration journeys and ensure continuity of care. It would be important to ensure the data security of such information to prevent misuse.

The need for a strategic approach to the development of mobile health applications within refugee communities also emerged as a key area for policy development. Mobile health applications can play a variety of roles in improving the health of refugee communities. Firstly, they can enable individuals to access and locate key health services in their local area. Secondly, they can be used to raise awareness of health and wellbeing within refugee communities, as in the RefCare application which is used by the UNHCR. They can also provide information on common illnesses within refugee communities. Medical Terms/Glossary Apps that communicate in multiple languages, including English, Bahasa and Rohingya, could also play a useful role and be linked to social media to assist in health literacy information accessed through YouTube videos and other websites.

Policy and Practice Implications for Employment and Enterprise

Since refugees do not currently have a legal right to work, much depends on government policy for advancing their rights here. Potential areas for development include the creation of digital platforms or portals for recruitment using a sectoral approach, for instance, to advertise vacancies within the manufacturing or construction sector. Such platforms can serve to encourage and support good practice among organisations working within the sector and ensure consistency of approach. Another potential strand of action would be the identification of organisations in the private sector with an interest in supporting refugee employment in safe and non-exploitative workplaces. Employability initiatives which support refugees to become web developers or programmers is another area that is worth supporting in order to build capacity within refugee communities. Research into the skills, experiences and aspirations of refugee women and men may also play a useful role in understanding and increasing employment opportunities for such communities.

On enterprise, with approval by government, refugees can be supported through developing pilot projects with key government agencies, NGOs and the UNHCR. Other areas for development may include setting up centres for training on entrepreneurial ventures or small businesses and raising awareness of existing digitalised marketplaces such as *Lazada* and *Lelong* which can facilitate the sale of products and services by the refugee community. Digital tools here may include the creation of applications for individuals to promote their products and services and supporting home-working by parents and care-givers.

Implications for Public Awareness

Currently, even though Rohingya people have been described as “the most persecuted minority in the world” (OHCHR, 2017), public awareness of the forced circumstances which have led this community and other refugee communities to migrate to Malaysia and other South East Asian countries is low.

The press and digital media have a vital role to play in countering negative stereotyping, prejudice and xenophobia. Initiatives designed to support the inclusion of refugee communities within the mass communication and creative industries would help to sensitise and increase the capacity within them to promote wider public awareness.

Refugee-led festivals, exhibitions of arts, crafts and photography, documentaries and cultural events can all play a useful role in promoting refugees positively and raising public awareness of their situation. Set up sensitively, such events can also provide opportunities for refugees to collaborate with others working in the creative and mass communication industries using

vehicles such as Youtube and Instagram. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp can play a useful role in publicising such events and initiatives.

References

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