



FORCED MIGRATION, USE OF SMART PHONES AND THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This summary presents our work and analysis undertaken to date in order to continue to engage with a wide range of stakeholders in a timely manner and to allow others to build on our work. We are likely to either revise this paper or to produce other papers which report on further analysis.

Rapid technological advances have resulted in the increasing use of mobile phones, including by refugees. They represent an important means of keeping in touch with families and loved ones and accessing the internet. Indeed, organisations such as the UNHCR have recognised that along with food, shelter and protection, access to the internet is an important form of humanitarian assistance for refugees. A growing body of research has begun to examine the ways in which refugees use their phones on their migration journeys, and as they settle in urban areas and camps.

However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of language and literacy in refugees' use of phones and the internet, a gap in knowledge which this project addresses through examining the experiences of Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya constitute the largest group of refugees in Malaysia. The Rohingya language is a spoken language, with no internationally recognised written form. Additionally, limited access to education due to persecution and high levels of poverty in Myanmar have present challenges to gaining literacy for some sections of the community. On arrival in multi-ethnic Malaysia, Rohingya refugees face further challenges due to the variety of languages spoken in the country. The official language of the country is Bahasa Malaysia (BM), while English plays an important role internationally.

Like most countries in South-East Asia, Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention. Refugees lack legal status and the right to work, leaving them open to low pay, exploitation in jobs in the informal economy and a sense of insecurity. They have no access to education in government schools and only limited access to health services.

The refugees who participated in the study were diverse in terms of length of time in Malaysia, levels of education, ability to read and write, languages spoken and employment status. In line with earlier research, phones play an important role in communicating with family and friends in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Malaysia and other parts of the world. Phones and access to the internet also enabled them to keep in touch with current developments through news channels, particularly those which use the Rohingya language. Phones were also important for personal safety within Malaysia as well as to check on the wellbeing of family and friends. Despite the vast potential for digital solutions to play a useful role in enabling refugees to lead independent lives, it is important to continue efforts to progress their rights in Malaysia and the wider region.

Beyond this, there was considerable variation in phone use. Those able to read BM and English used these languages to access the internet. This enabled them to obtain information to help with school activities and health needs, learn languages and communicate with others, obtain directions to go to new places and learn new skills, such as sewing and cooking. Phones were also used for leisure activities such as playing games and watching videos, and for prayer. In contrast, those who were not able to read and write in

English or BM used the phone mainly for calls and to watch videos. The use of English in many applications presented a significant barrier to those who did not speak the language. Other barriers were the cost of purchasing data, particularly for those not in employment, and difficulties in obtaining SIM due to the lack of ID.

Among the suggestions offered by participants for developing digital tools was the use of the Rohingya language in applications, and videos for those unable to read or write. Other proposals included an application which translated the Rohingya language into other languages and others which would facilitate access to sources of support, such as NGOs, and information on local facilities, such as clinics and mosques.

The study has implications for a wide range of stakeholders. For refugees, community and humanitarian organisations such as the UNHCR and Médecins Sans Frontières, it provides evidence of the potential for even refugees with limited literacy and digital skills to access vital information and key services, including education and health services, through the internet. For software developers, the research provides evidence of the diversity of linguistic and literacy levels of this group and the need for affordable solutions. For governments, the study indicates the need for policies that reduce barriers to digital inclusion. Collective models of public access, for example, through community centres, which are inclusive of refugees, can also significantly increase accessibility to online services. Other means of increasing digital access are through creating 'hotspots', possibly by working with NGOs which allow free access to the internet.