



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

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## **Executive summary**

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 languages they used and their phone and internet use. 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. On arrival in multi-ethnic Malaysia, they 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 mainstream education 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 checking on the wellbeing of family and friends.

Beyond this, there was considerable variation in phone use. Those able to read BM and English used them 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 are also used for leisure activities such as playing games, 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.

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, including those which relate to ID. Collective models of public access, for example through community centres, which are inclusive of refugees, can also significantly increase accessibility to online services.

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.

## **Introduction**

Rapid advances in technology have resulted in the increasing use of mobile phones and computers in multiple spheres of activity. In parallel with this, war and political conflicts in many parts of the world have forced people to move. In 2018, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 70.8 million people had been forcibly displaced from their homes. For such people, mobile phones not only enable communication with family and friends in their country of origin and other parts of the world, but often serve as the primary or only means of accessing web-based services. The internet is not only a vital source of information; it is also increasingly a site of service provision, consumption and sale of goods, and a medium for social action (Loeurs, 2017). Further, as analysts have observed, the use of online platforms and services is increasingly implicated in what it means to be socially, economically, culturally and politically involved (Broadbent and Papadopoulos, 2017). In the case of refugees, the internet also facilitates their involvement in transnational networks (Donà and Godin, 2018). Access to wifi and electricity for refugees is increasingly being recognised as important as food, shelter and protection (UNHCR and Accenture, 2016). 'Digital humanitarianism' – the provision of technology-related services - now constitutes an important form of aid (Donà and Godin, 2018). Indeed, a growing body of research has begun to investigate the usage of phones by refugees who are on the move (Gillespie et al, 2016) living in camps (Leung, 2011) or in urban areas (Harney, 2013; Martin-Shields et al, 2019), including for the purposes of political representation (Godin and Donà, 2016; Graziano, 2012).

However, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of language in using such technologies, including both the languages which individuals bring with them from their countries of origin or transit as well as those of their new contexts. This is surprising since few would deny the centrality of language in influencing the ways in which refugees navigate their physical and virtual environments. Similarly, little is known about attitudes towards language-learning or opportunities for such learning and how this relates to phone use. The ways in which language use is mediated by mobile phone use is largely unexplored territory, with even less attention paid to the ways in which this is influenced by gender, age, length of residence in the host country, education and employment.

The current study aimed to examine the access and use of smart phones by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia within the context of their experiences of migration and their language use and to explore how such phones may be used to increase the opportunities available to them. This paper reports on our work and analysis to date in order to communicate 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 produce other reports of further analysis.

## **Social, political and linguistic context**

Malaysia presents an important context for investigating access to and use of smart phones. Like most South East Asian countries (except the Philippines and Cambodia), it is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention. Refugees in the country lack legal status, including the right to work and the protection of the law. They do not have access to

employment in the formal economy or mainstream education in government schools. They have only limited access to health services.

In recent years, Malaysia, along with Thailand and Indonesia, has increasingly experienced the effects of forced displacement of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, especially following a fresh outbreak of violence in 2017. In 2018, the UNHCR estimated the number of registered refugees from Myanmar in Malaysia as 141,780 with the number of those unregistered being unknown.

Literacy rates within the Rohingya community are reported to be low (Tay et al, 2018). This may be attributed to a variety of factors, including lack of access to education in many parts of Myanmar. The Rohingya language is also mainly an oral language, with no internationally recognised and standard script. Instead, various scripts have been employed to capture the language in written form, including Arabic Urdu and Rohingyalish, which uses Latin letters to communicate a Rohingya script (Tay et al, 2018). The Burmese alphabet has also been used as a written form for Rohingya, adding to the challenge of learning to read the language. Further, arrival in multi-ethnic Malaysia, poses fresh linguistic challenges in terms of the variety of languages spoken there. While Bahasa Malaysia is the official language, English is also important, as an international language and as a legacy of the country's colonial past. Models of collaborative and participatory research that recognize the linguistic rights and scope for empowering Rohingya refugees can potentially play a useful role in informing the development of new digital tools. These tools can help conserve the Rohingya language as well as play a useful role in enabling refugees to learn the dominant languages of their new environment.

### **Research approach and methods**

The research adopted an inter-disciplinary participatory approach, with the research team comprising of specialists in the fields of migration, computer science, languages, gender equality and cross-cultural issues in both Heriot Watt University and Universiti Sains Malaysia. The team worked closely with Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign (PSHTC), a non-governmental organisation based in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia to recruit and carry out workshop activities. In planning the workshops, key priorities involved ensuring compliance with the Universities Codes of Ethics as well as the PSHTC's Core Principles. The latter emphasise community empowerment and self-determination, gender equality, inclusivity, refugees' right to information about themselves, legal status and the importance of fighting xenophobia and other forms of discrimination.

A total of four workshops were organised in PSHTC's premises. Workshop activities explored participants' migration background, use of languages, experiences of living in Malaysia, and use of phones. Participants were also invited to design new applications and tools which could be used to help them and other refugees. To maximise engagement and openness, two single sex workshops were organised: one for young men (13 -25) and one for older women (up to the age of 45) to encourage openness. One workshop was organised for a mixed group of young female and male refugees. This is consistent with research which has found that participatory design methodologies, including co-designing solutions, are

particularly effective when working with people with low levels of literacy or digital skills (Lalji and Good, 2008).

Each group was co-facilitated by researchers working with multilingual community workers to interact with participants. Female members of the local Rohingya community co-facilitated the women only and mixed sex workshops. The main language spoken by the participants was Rohingya while the researchers spoke either BM or English. Transport was organised to and from the venue and lunch was provided. In each workshop, participants were divided into two groups to encourage deeper engagement in activities. Every effort was made to keep the sessions as light and informal as possible.

Prior to the first three workshops, the PI met with as many participants as possible to build rapport and trust and obtain informed consent. Anonymised personal background information relating to age, gender, where they had come from, length of residency in the country and languages spoken, read and written was collected.

Following each workshop, participants were given a pack of materials to take away. The materials elicited information on their migration journey and use of web-based applications. These were collected, with the help of PSHTC, after a week. A very high return rate of more than 95 percent was achieved.

In the final workshop, the initial research findings were fed back to a selection of participants who had attended the earlier workshops to validate and refine the findings and explore proposals for moving forwards. The research was also informed by a two-day stakeholder consultative workshop comprising refugee community organisations across Malaysia, individual refugees, government representatives, UNHCR, academics and representatives from key humanitarian organisations in Thailand and Indonesia.

### **Overview of workshop participants**

A total of 54 refugees were involved in the workshop activities, of whom 27 were female and 27 male. The majority had migrated from Myanmar, two had moved from Thailand while eight were born in Malaysia. Their ages ranged from 13 to 45. Their length of residence in the country ranged from 1 to 16 years, highlighting the protracted nature of the displacement for many. Significant diversity emerged in terms of participants' ability to read and write; exposure to education and languages spoken, including Rohingya, Burmese and Urdu. Proficiency in BM and English varied considerably.

Language use appeared to be influenced by both gender and age. For example, among male participants and older female participants, the most widely spoken language was Rohingya. In contrast, the most common languages spoken by younger female participants were BM and English. These differences may be partially explained by the higher levels of participation in education among young female participants. Younger participants were also more likely to be able to read and write in BM and English compared to the older adult women.





## **Main Findings**

### ***Drivers of Migration***

Most participants reported that they had been forced to move to Malaysia due to war and persecution in Myanmar:

*'Because of the violence in the country where we had you know the house of the people burnt and you know people were killed.'*

*'We were not allowed to continue living in our country.'*

Older male participants reported finding it difficult to get work and earn enough to support their families. Consequently, many had experienced economic hardship. They had also found it difficult to move freely, access educational opportunities and find employment:

*'There was no access to education, no freedom to move, no opportunities ahead.'*

*'Cannot work and the Buddhist come and kill us just because we are Muslim. Yes, that's the big thing we decide come to Malaysia'*

Some participants reported that they had chosen Malaysia because others were going there, or they had relatives there. They also believed that it would be safer in Malaysia and easier to get jobs compared to, for instance, Bangladesh:

*'We have Bangladesh and other countries near our place but the life in those countries are not as safe as in Malaysia for our people.'*

*'Because at Myanmar got someone say if come to Malaysia, here got UN, got people to help and live in harmony in Malaysia'*

*'In Malaysia there is no disturbance and can learn.'*

Others recounted that they had no choice since they had been forced to flee from Myanmar.

### ***Experiences of living in Malaysia***

Positive experiences of living in Malaysia included the freedom to move, access educational opportunities, worship openly, and participate in social events:

*'It is better than the life we had in our country...we have freedom to move around and we have access to education. And we are able to have access to our livelihood.'*

*'We are able to do things here that we were not able to do in Burma, like earning a livelihood and accessing education.'*

However, many negative experiences were also reported. These included being separated from family and loved ones, being exploited by employers, and insecurity of employment. A major difficulty was lack of legal status, including the right to work:

*'We are not allowed to work here. It is not easy for us to find a job. And also not able to move freely because we don't have passport.'*

*'One of the most important thing that we don't have is that strong document because of which we can't easily find a job and it is also difficult for us to move around.'*

*'We cannot work ... cannot work to feed our family. It's difficult to get a job.'*

This makes individuals vulnerable to exploitation or detention. Possession of the UNHCR card, which signalled that their status as refugees had been recognised by the organisation was seen to have limited use. Its main benefit was perceived by participants to prevent arrest and indefinite detention by the police.

Some participants had also experienced harassment from locals living in the area:

*'Well, in Malaysia...sometimes this happens to our children, if they are going somewhere to play...the boys...say this is not your place, just go back to your country. It's like negative for the kids.'*

Intimidation and extortion by the police were also reported, adding to participants' sense of insecurity. Many were also concerned about their safety and their freedom to move around, a fear which was attributed to their lack of legal status. These findings reinforce the need for a strong legislative and policy framework for the protection of refugees in the country. Other negative experiences included financial hardship; the difficulty of accessing affordable health care; and a sense of hopelessness about the future.

### **Language use**

The Rohingya language was an important means of communicating with family and friends in Malaysia, Myanmar and other places. At least one participant linked the use of the language to her identity as Rohingya and her wish to communicate and help others in the community:

*'I learnt because it is important, right, we are Rohingya. We should learn Rohingya language so we can understand, talk with people and can know their problems.'*

This indicates the importance of the language as a glue which helps individuals feel a sense of belonging and solidarity as they adapt to their surroundings. BM and English were widely spoken among those attending refugee schools, but others reported limited opportunity to learn these languages due to the lack of access to formal classes. Some individuals reported acquiring proficiency to BM through their workplace or through carrying out activities which increased exposure to the language, such as shopping or socialising with Malay neighbours.

BM was viewed as an 'everyday language' which was used in a variety of daily contexts, with friends, or while working. However, English was reported to be the most important language to learn due to the employment opportunities that it opened:

*'English is important because if you want to work, they also always speaking.'*

It was also viewed as important because, in contrast to BM, it could be widely used outside of Malaysia:

*'I feel English is important. Because wherever we go they will speak English. Bahasa Malaysia is everyday language, easy to talk with friends.'*

This suggests that, despite the low numbers of refugees who are resettled, at least some participants were hopeful of opportunities for onward migration.

### **Access to services**

School-going participants reported benefiting from primary education. Apart from this, participants reported receiving only limited help. An example of this which was quoted was the distribution of food during the Ramadan (fasting) period. The main health services used were pharmacies, private clinics and services provided by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Many workshop participants lacked knowledge of existing sources of information and help including on refugee rights, safe and non-exploitative employment opportunities, health needs and other available services. Little information appeared to be available on promoting health and wellbeing, including in areas such as family planning.

Gaining access to (further) education was a priority:

*'That is most important for us. Having a secondary school for us, for students who attend the primary school and finished and for them there is no way to continue pursuing a higher education.'*

The quote above, from a participant who had benefited from attending primary school education, should be viewed in the context of the low proportion of refugees in Malaysia who had access to any form of education at all. Participants felt that refugees should have equal access to education as Malaysians, regardless of age and gender.

While participants were of the view that on-line resources would be useful, physical materials such as books, and the opportunity to attend classes, including for adult education, were also important. However, as with low income migrant groups in other contexts, major barriers to attending classes include earning a living, lack of alternatives for childcare other than that provided by the family, lack of language-learning provision and the timing of classes (Netto et al, 2019). Two other priority areas identified were support with finding jobs and accessing health care, with the cost of the latter being a formidable factor.

### **Access to and use of mobile phones**

Most participants had their own mobile phone, while a few young people had access to one owned by their parents. Significantly, and in contrast to other studies which have investigated refugees' use of phones in their migration journeys (Gill individuals had only acquired their phones on arrival in Malaysia. This was explained by the lack of affordability of such phones in Myanmar. However, interestingly, some participants reported that when they had first arrived in Malaysia, they had contacted relatives by phone, with the support of others, such as bus ticket sellers. Phones were very important for communicating with family and friends in Malaysia as well as Myanmar, Bangladesh and other parts of the world. This is consistent with research which has established the vital role of the phone for staying in contact with the family during conflict and displacement (Leung, 2014). Since phone calls

were mainly made through web-based applications, access to the internet was very important.

Individuals also used their phones to keep abreast of current political developments, including through news channels which used the Rohingya language, such as Rohinyga Vision. Phones also played an important role when individuals were confronted with dangerous situations:

*'Get to call mother when emergency...like if there is someone bothering me or anything, I could just straight away call my father.'*

The languages that participants were able to speak and read and write strongly affected their phone use. For example, those who could read and write in English and Malay could both send and receive messages in these languages. As research carried out in other contexts has found, they also used their phones to *learn* languages (Abujavour and Krasnova, 2017), for instance, by using the Google Translate application to translate from English and Malay and vice versa:

*'They say something that we know in Malay but don't know in English. That is when we use Google Translate.'*

*'I was in hospital and wanted to talk something I know in English and I need to talk in Malay, and that is when I use it to translate from English to Malay.'*

These findings provide valuable insights into how individuals use online services to facilitate offline social processes while they are still acquiring the dominant languages of their new context.

### ***Literacy, language and use of phones***

The ability to read and write strongly influenced phone use, with those with low literacy using them mainly for conversation. Those who were able to read and write did so in English since Rohingya was used mainly as a spoken language (rather than a written one):

*'Since we don't have a written language, we use mainly English... some type through I-Mo.'* (an application for free video calls, chats and messaging)

Since English appeared to be the main language used in applications, lack of knowledge of the language was a major barrier for some participants:

*'Basically we use for phone calls. For the functions we need to read in English.'*

However, others reported being able to use Facebook in Malay and Burmese as well as English. The use of 'voice notes' also helped communication among those who could not read or write.

### ***Access to and use of the internet***

Access to and use of the Internet differed considerably in terms of age, gender, languages spoken and ability to read and write. Young people used a wide range of applications, most of which were free to download. The internet was also seen as important for keeping up

with current events relating to the Rohingya community in Myanmar, Malaysia, Bangladesh reinforcing the importance of maintaining contact with transnational family and other social networks. It was also used for accessing transport through Grab, a popular ride-hailing application; information-finding for education, health and other needs; obtaining directions to new places and spending leisure time by watching films, playing games, and socialising. Use of the phone for getting from one place to another was important since refugees are not allowed to obtain driving licenses and public transport is limited. Phones were also used to support religious activities such as praying ('doa'). Evidence also emerged of phones being used to document and communicate group activities, such as those of a local refugee football club.

In contrast, use of the Internet appeared less common among older women. For instance, not all of them had heard of Google. Some women reported using a phone for learning new skills in cooking or sewing or watching films. For those who were unable to read or write, the phone was used mainly for calls. These findings reinforce the need to ensure that different levels of access to the internet do not reinforce existing power imbalances (Loeurs, 2017). Significantly, phones were not used for finding employment or for purchasing or selling goods.

The use of phones also had a positive psychological dimension:

*If I get the phone I feel really happy because it's like my friend. Before I go to sleep it is there, when I wake up, I find it. Like I can talk to people. I feel happy. Like this phone is important, for me it's important. We want to learn anything just search. If we are like tension, want to listen to music to release tension also here.'*

This is supported by other research which has found that phones may be especially important for the wellbeing of refugees due to separation from family and friends (Leung, 2014). When access to a phone was restricted, participants reported experiencing sorrow, anger, resentment, frustration and boredom.

### ***Barriers to the use of phones***

One of the biggest barriers to phone use and access to the internet was the cost of buying data, particularly for participants who were not in employment. The inability to independently purchase a SIM card was also a barrier, since this required formal ID which refugees were unable to provide. This finding is consistent with research into digital technologies used by urban refugees in other parts of the world (Martin-Sheilds et al 2019). One way of circumventing this obstacle was to enlist the help of a friendly Malaysian citizen. However, this clearly depended on having such social contacts. Yet other difficulties were related to lack of access to electricity, power cuts or loss or theft of the device. An internet shutdown in Myanmar at the time of the fieldwork was also reported to be a major barrier since this effectively resulted in a loss of communication with friends and relatives in the country. Among younger participants, other restrictions arose from parental concerns about excessive phone use.

### ***Proposals for useful tools and applications***

Participants offered several proposals and sketches of prototypes of applications which would be useful to them. These included tools or applications to enable individuals with low literacy skills to access vital information through videos in Rohingya and other languages. Other proposals were applications which could help individuals to translate words from the Rohingya language into BM and English and to access key information about sources of potential help, such as NGOs key services, such as clinics and community centres, such as mosques.

### **Conclusions and Implications of the study**

Our study explored phone use by Rohingya refugees within an urban context in Malaysia, where their lack of legal status played a significant role in how they navigated their virtual and physical environment. It revealed that phone use by refugees in such areas is highly context-dependent, with variations likely to emerge across urban centres in other social, economic, political and linguistic contexts. The study also found that phone use was strongly affected by refugees' language use as well as digital and other literacies.

Many refugees in our study were already using their phones in ways that were creative and empowering. Phones clearly played an important role in enabling connections with existing sources of support on arrival, forging new social connections, and maintaining ties with family and friends transnationally. Their use reduced social and linguistic isolation; enabled refugees to gain fluency in the dominant languages in their new contexts; learn other new skills and navigate their way through their new social, physical and cultural environments. They also enabled refugees to overcome some of the difficulties that are associated with their lack of legal status, such as the ability to obtain a driving license, through access to ride-hailing applications. Due to their lack of security in the country, such devices were also important for helping individuals to keep themselves safe, and check on the safety and wellbeing of others.

However, low incomes and insecurity of employment posed challenges to the affordability of internet access. Further, lack of ID contributed to difficulties in purchasing SIM. Differential access and use of phones and the internet were also evident, with age, gender, language and literacy being major mediating factors. These findings indicate the need for awareness of the potential for digital solutions to reinforce existing inequalities within the refugee community.

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 purposefully designed tools to play an important role in enabling even refugees with limited literacy and digital skills to access vital information and services, including education and health promotion. For developers of digital solutions, the research provides valuable insights relating to the literacy, linguistic and financial needs of this group of refugees and the context in which they reside. Crucially, the digital divides within the community require developers and others to work closely with community organisations and to engage with the social practices of the group over a sustained time period. For governments, the study strongly indicates the need to create and implement

policies that reduce barriers to digital inclusion, including those which relate to ID. Collective models of public access, for example through community centres and ‘telecenters,’ which are inclusive of refugees can also increase accessibility to online services.

However, despite the many potential digital solutions that can be developed to support refugees to lead independent and fulfilling lives, it is important to note the importance of continuing efforts to advance refugee rights in Malaysia and other countries where such rights are lacking. Indeed, it might be argued that were refugees allowed equal access to education, health and other services, the urgency of developing digital solutions would be considerably reduced. This provides a strong case for digital solutions for, by and with refugees to be developed and embedded as part of an overall strategy for advancing their rights and through collaboration with a wide range of organisations.

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