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The Role of Technology in Supporting Refugees and Displaced Populations



Introducing HumTech for Refugee Management

For the first time on record, the number of forcibly displaced people surpassed 100 million, propelled by conflict, hunger, unemployment, and climate change.

Supporting and empowering these populations will increasingly be part of governments' realities and responsibilities. More needs to be done to increase operational and digital resilience.

Technology can play a role in improving the lives of refugees, from more efficient identity verification and better access to information to facilitating better access to schools, health care and employment.

This eBook provides examples of how humanitarian technology (HumTech) can be leveraged to support displaced populations.



1 in 78 people

have been forced to flee their home

Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, June 2022

21.5 million

people on average are displaced by
weather-related disasters per year.

This is expected to rise to 1.2 billion
by 2050

Source: IEP, 2022

Globally, the Number of Refugees Continues to Rise

At the end of 2021, the UNHCR (UN's Refugee Agency) estimated that the number of people forcibly displaced stood at 89.3 million, including 27.1 million refugees.

Since then, the war in Ukraine and the deteriorating situation in Myanmar and Burkina Faso has led the number of displaced people to reach 100 million for the first time on record.

The number of people displaced by weather related disasters, famine and unemployment is also rising. The Institute for Economic and Peace (IEP) estimates that the annual average of people displaced as a result of weather-related disasters is 21.5 million and is expected to rise to a massive 1.2 billion by 2050.

"By working together to build urban resilience, we can reduce our reliance on crisis as a driver of change and proactively plan for a future that is bright for all migrants and residents living in our cities"

The Russia-Ukraine War has Triggered the Largest and Fastest Refugee Movement in Europe since WWII

The number of Ukrainian refugees forced to flee their homes reached over 6.5 million, this far supersedes earlier predictions of how the crisis would unfold. This is larger than the population of Denmark.

Poland has received the largest number of refugees - 4.1 million and counting - with the population in Warsaw increasing by 17% in just a month. Many will move on to other family and friends living across Europe, and some have started braving the journey back home, but a large number will also stay in these neighbouring countries. This is putting enormous pressure on host countries to provide the necessary support, services, and security.

Countries with the highest influx of Ukrainian refugees

4,146,144	Poland
1,305,018	Russian Federation
691,412	Romania

Source: Arrival Statistics from UNHCR June 28, 2022

"Most of the administrative burdens associated with this care are being dealt with by local authorities. We are responsible for registering refugees, which includes assigning them identity and social security numbers and for distributing government stipends to those hosting them. Warsaw is slowly becoming overwhelmed."

Rafal Trzaskowski, Mayor of Warsaw

Digital Technology is More Important than Ever for Refugees and Migrants

Most refugees access information about the services and resources available to them via online platforms, access funds digitally, and stay in contact with loved ones at home through social media. Research by the UNHCR shows us the extent to which technology is critical for refugees: they found that refugees living in Tanzania and Malawi sacrificed significant portions of their food rations to buy mobile data.

Supporting and empowering refugee populations will increasingly be part of governments' realities and responsibilities. Yet, the response mechanisms and systems put in place for refugee management are often responses to individual crises rather than proactive approaches to a perennial challenge.

Tech firms and other stakeholders are asked to help respond to a crisis rather than an ongoing situation. They are also usually approached as part of a CSR engagement rather than being brought on board as a partner to deliver sustained services.

For a sustainable approach to managing mass migration, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and governments need to strategically invest in the systems, safety nets, and technologies that we know will be needed.



"It is time we phased out improvisation and instead created a strategy for coping and appropriate systems for helping refugees."

*Rafal Trzaskowski
Mayor of Warsaw*

Refugee Crisis Management: Navigating and Accessing Services and Resources

Refugees need support and resources at each step of their journey.

Short-term, refugees, many of whom arrive without identity papers, need to be granted access through border control. Their next checkpoint is typically a reception centre, government or NGO-led, where they can register and access food and shelter.

These short-term humanitarian needs then morph into a longer-term reality that centres on access to the healthcare, the labour market, welfare and social services, education, and community integration.

Technology can play a role in each of these steps. Take, for example, telehealth services to provide access to specialists, chatbots to ameliorate language barriers, automated online transfers of welfare payments, and online platforms where refugees can access information about local services.



Technology is Being Used to Help Tackle the Key Challenges, Including:



Identifying individuals



Accessing relief



Providing welfare



Accessing medical services



Keeping refugees safe





Access to Any Service, for Any Life Event Starts with Each Individual Being Identified

CHALLENGE

“Many [refugees] flee their homes without formal identification, and many more have their identification documents stolen or destroyed during their journey.”

“Having a trusted, robust and secure digital identity is a necessary enabler to access online digital services – whether that is UNHCR’s services, eGovernment or online banking”

UNHCR

GOOD PRACTICE

- **Poland** has provided PESEL identity cards to over 1.1 million Ukrainian refugees in the first month after the start of the war.
- **In Estonia**, once refugees and asylum-seekers are enrolled in the national identification system, they have the option to apply for a digital ID which allows them to access different eservices. Refugees have equal access to eservices as citizens.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **People** – Refugees need to be made aware of their digital rights to provide informed consent and understand the implications of not being registered.
- **Process** – Intermediaries (e.g., NGO) should be involved to facilitate data collection, but national and international governmental institutions should define and audit policies and processes to enforce data protection, data lineage, data interoperability guidelines.
- **Technology** – Solutions should bring together convenience for the user (e.g., access through mobile phones) with security across the entire architecture (biometric data capture, access devices, registries, etc.).



Offer Relief Services as a Lifeline

CHALLENGE

“I needed to know what the registration procedure was in the camps we moved through, what documents I needed to support my asylum application, which agencies can provide food, healthcare and places to stay,” he says. “There’s lots of information but nothing is trustworthy, and no-one knows the truth.”

A Syrian refugee living in Stockholm after traveling through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, and Germany.

GOOD PRACTICES

RefAid is a software platform that consists of Content and Communication System (CMS) and a mobile app to help refugees across Europe.

- The CMS enables the refugee aid organizations to manage their services by type and location.
- The RefAid app uses geolocation to show migrants, refugees, and aid workers a map of the closest services for food, shelter, healthcare, legal help, and more, within a radius of 180 kilometres.

There are over 400 non-profit organizations using the platform.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **People** – Combine digital solutions with help desk to provide counselling to refugees, and to refer them to specialized services for vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied children, people with disabilities, refugees from the LGBTI+ community, or women experiencing gender-based violence.
- **Process** – User-centric front-end services must be supported by back-end data and content management processes and tools that avoid inconsistent, duplicate, or out-of-date information across the whole ecosystem of relief service providers.
- **Technology** – Leverage natural language processing capabilities to ease access for refugees speaking different languages or having different literacy levels.



Provide Welfare Assistance as a Key Step Towards Inclusion and Dignity

CHALLENGE

“Our fridge is empty, so we need to buy food. Some people have tried to give us food, but I feel ashamed. I want to buy it myself.”

Ukrainian refugee in Poland

GOOD PRACTICES

The World Food Program has partnered with credit card companies to provide Syrian and Afghan refugees with vouchers and ecards that help deliver aid to vulnerable families almost immediately, expand the dietary diversity and restore dignity and choice for families purchasing groceries.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **People** – Pay context-sensitive attention to gender and vulnerability in designing and implementation of programs, so that cash assistance can empower the whole society.
- **Process** – Work with local producers and traders, so that these become accepted methods of payment and help grow the local economy too.
- **Technology** – Solutions should bring together convenience for the user (e.g. credit and bank card that they already own, or mobile wallets) with security of transactions (e.g. two factor authentication and recording transaction metadata in distributed ledgers).



Implement Telehealth to Speed up Access to Medical Services, Without Overwhelming National Health Systems

CHALLENGE

“Equitable access to vaccines is a right for all, no matter where they are. Vaccination against diseases such as COVID-19, measles, and poliomyelitis (polio) is especially important for the population groups most at risk of severe outcomes.”

Dr Siddhartha Datta, Regional Advisor for WHO/Europe's Vaccine-preventable Diseases and Immunization Programme

GOOD PRACTICES

Working with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Digital Health and Patient Safety, SAVD Videodolmetschen [video interpreting] and Philips, MedUni. Vienna has launched a telehealth project, in which specialists from more than 20 disciplines, such as dermatology, paediatrics or internal medicine, make themselves available for one hour a day for specialist medical online consultations for refugees on the island of Lesbos.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **People** – Train medical professionals and cultural mediators that can support patients to get the best value out of telehealth.
- **Process** – Telehealth can be used for diagnoses, triage and follow ups, but cannot be a standalone tool. It must be integrated with the end-to-end patient journey to improve patient outcomes and help the health systems cope with the increased volume of patients.
- **Technology** – Ensure connectivity, access to video capable and data capture devices (e.g. blood pressure and glucose meters) and security by design.



Use Technology to Keep Refugees Safe

CHALLENGE

“As a result of the pandemic, many of those displaced are now faced with increased poverty, destitution and widespread protection risks, from exploitation, trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence, child labor, early marriage, to arrest, detention, deportation, and refoulement.”

UNHCR

GOOD PRACTICES

- NGO Thorn has partnered with technology companies to develop a software tool that is being used by over 4000 law enforcement officers in North America and has helped rescue 6,000 sex trafficking victims, a third of whom are children, between 2014 and 2017.
- Europol monitors social media to both prevent and investigate criminals involved in people smuggling and trafficking.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **People** – Train public safety officers and investigators to use technology to increase their productivity, not replace their expert judgement and human empathy with the victims.
- **Process** – Design policies that limit the use of data collected for public safety purposes (e.g. identification of individual victims, retention, deletion, analysis and sharing) to be reused in other contexts, so that vulnerable people are not targeted for political purposes.
- **Technology** – Implement capabilities that enable to collect, aggregate and interpret data from multiple (e.g. social media, satellite, drones) to achieve more accurate intelligence about events and patterns.

Governance Mechanisms

Getting the governance mechanisms right is critical to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of initiatives.



Migration is a Complex Issue that Requires a Multifaceted Public- and Private-Sector Response

Getting the governance mechanisms right is critical. This means having an organization in place to lead and coordinate a diverse ecosystem of partners who can bring different skills, tools, ideas, and technologies to the table.

These partners should span the public sector, private sector, community groups, and inter-governmental organizations.

This coordination role is critical. In similar crises, we often see NGOs or companies with valuable service offerings or solutions not knowing who to contact in government.



Getting the Governance Mechanisms Right

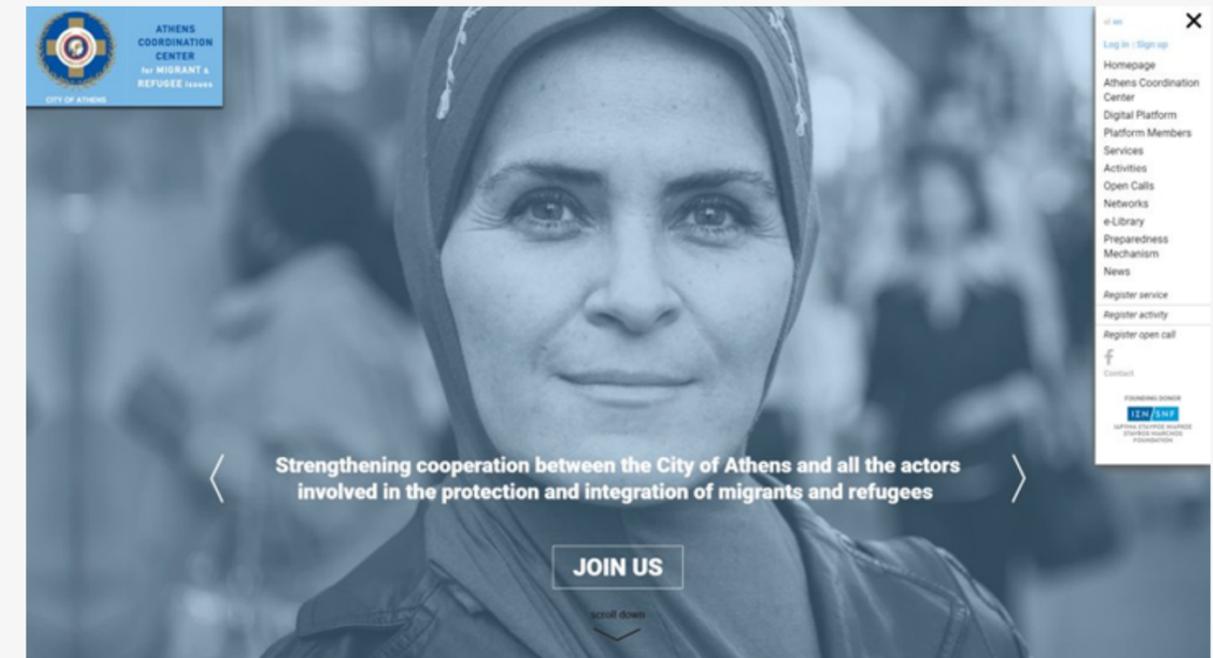
In 2015, the Mayor at time launched the Athens Partnership. This partnership brings together municipal departments, private sector companies, including technology firms, and community groups to help transform municipal services. This network has been held up internationally as an example of best practice.

One of the special projects under the network is the Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee Issues, which was convened in response to the rising number of refugees and migrants fleeing conflict. The organization decided to take a strategic approach and worked together to create an action plan for refugee and migration integration. The partners work together to share data and pilot new ideas and act as a digital hub for information for refugees.

A lot of the projects have been focused on skills development and employment opportunities for refugees, including Refugee Code Week led by tech firms, as well as social and cultural integration and appreciation activities.

The Athens Partnership

Athens Coordination Center for Migrant and Refugee Issues (ACCMR)



92 members



5 Municipal departments



13 Municipalities in the Cities Network for integration

Conclusions

The key areas where technology can support refugees and displaced populations



The Role of Technology in Supporting Refugees and Displaced Populations

Create the right **governance mechanisms**; identify national and local government leaders that can coordinate across the public and private sector and NGOs



Technology can be leveraged at **each stage and life event** of a refugee's journey to strengthen and scale up service delivery

Promote **data sharing** between government institutions, intergovernmental organizations, and the private sector to enable more coordinated services and data-driven insights

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Further research on this critical area:

- [Humtech: How Data and Technology can Help Tackle Humanitarian Crises](#)
- [Aligning Technological Innovation to Humanitarian Purpose: Responding to the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis](#)

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