THE technology ISSUE

The effects of changes in technology – particularly in communications technology – on displaced people and those who work with them are unevenly understood and appreciated. Inside we look at some of the changes and their implications...

Plus articles on: Migrant deaths at sea, fleeing from Cairo, language training for refugees, refugees after the Japanese earthquake, a strategy for urban areas, partner violence, transitional justice in Kenya, and local integration.

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

REFUGEE STUDIES CENTRE

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refugees to provide as little or as much information as they are comfortable with – is still something that needs to be better communicated.

RU informs refugees throughout the process of signing up what the organisation provides and does not provide. Namely, if people are contacting you with offers of assistance, employment or other 'benefits', it is a scam and should

be reported to RU. RU utilises its own encrypted messaging system internal to the site, where refugees can be guided through the process of responding to messages.

The platform should be considered as supplementary to other existing tracing methodologies and activities. RU also stresses that the tracing project is not meant to cover all refugee groups. If signing up could

potentially place a refugee or family in any form of danger, people are strongly advised not to sign up.

There have been some teething problems. Most refugees have mobile phones but the majority of their handsets are not WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) enabled. A planned text service is yet to be implemented in Kenya.

The Refugees United Project is currently being rolled out across other parts of East Africa, with UNHCR testing the service in northern Uganda and various entities working with the platform in North Africa. More than 4,500 new refugees are coming on board every month.

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A success story

In 1991 Ahmed Hassan Osman* fled the conflict in Somalia, leaving his family in Kismayu, and made his way to Kenya in search of asylum. Ahmed lived for a while in Ifo refugee camp before being resettled to Colorado in the US where he was granted full US citizenship.

In 1992, his cousin Abdulahi Sheikh arrived in Kenya in search of support. Granted refugee status, Abdulahi ended up in Dagahaley camp in Dadaab. He believed Ahmed was either in Dadaab or had been there but his efforts to find him were unsuccessful and he soon gave up hope of ever finding him. In fact, Abdulahi believed Ahmed had gone back to Somalia.

In early 2011 RCK employed Abdulahi to assist the RU project in Dagahaley refugee camp. Abdulahi registered with the tracing project and began a search for missing loved ones. Coming across a name that was familiar, he contacted the person through the RU message system. When he received a reply he realised that, after 20 years of separation and search, he had found his beloved cousin. They exchanged phone numbers and Ahmed called, breaking 20 years of silence. Today, the two keep in touch regularly and both Abdulahi and Ahmed continue to search for more friends and family members.

*Not his real name

Technology and engineering to support work with refugees

Stephanie Hunt and Geoffrey C Orsak

New partnerships are being forged to encourage young engineers to use their skills in the service of refugees.

We have all benefitted from the remarkable global transformation brought about by the work of engineers and innovators. What was once science fiction is today commonplace. None of this would have occurred had there not been engineers and companies motivated by the challenge of the problem paired with the potential for commercial gain.

Meeting the needs of refugees and other marginalised people, however, requires us to find ways to attract crucial engineering problem-solvers

to humanitarian work where the profit motive is not a primary driver.

Attracting a new generation
The engineering salaries of recent university graduates rank at the very top of the pay scale. To attract these individuals to careers that provide direct humanitarian benefits, they must therefore be inspired to a higher goal than simple monetary gain. Engineering has a history of solving problems for the general good – and with so many active conflicts around the globe, there is an opportunity to reframe the myriad challenges

associated with supporting refugees as a worthy effort in that great engineering tradition.

Many young engineers today are in search of inspiration. Unfortunately, their limited understanding of the global problems of refugees comes primarily from mass media, which often paints the picture as hopeless and driven by political squabbles – not effective messages for recruiting talent. To address this problem, the Hunt Institute for Engineering and Humanity at SMU has been working with teaching staff across the Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas to augment its engineering programmes with

a range of global development programmes that explore the cultural, financial, legal and of course technical challenges faced by those in the Global South, including refugees in camps. Students who were once intent on gaining engineering skills for a life in commerce can now make informed choices about pursuing an alternative vision for engineering.[1]

An early success story

Engineering innovation should not be limited to engineering professionals; students and non-engineers can also provide creative solutions. At the Hunt Institute's first Engineering and Humanity Week held in April 2011, interdisciplinary student teams competed to develop a complete micro-business to provide clean water and cell phone recharging services from within a temporary refugee shelter. Competing teams formulated detailed business plans that dealt not only with product innovation but also with marketing, sales and distribution challenges. Creative concepts included leasing advertising space on the exterior of the shelter to market to those queueing for services, as well as accepting payment via cell phone for water or phone recharging. The resulting ideas were inventive, practical and, according to the competition judges, viable.

This small-scale competition successfully demonstrated how effective cross-discipline collaboration can be in addressing well-defined challenges with immediate benefit to specific local communities.

Field innovation centres

In August 2011, UNHCR and the Hunt Institute for Engineering and Humanity at SMU signed an agreement establishing a framework for increasing the role of engineering and innovation in support of refugee camp operations. This agreement calls for the organised engagement of universities, government-run research institutes and corporations to work together to address the most pressing technical and infrastructural issues faced by UNHCR in assisting refugees in relation to water, sanitation, shelter, communications and health care.

One key element of this plan is to collaboratively develop and deploy Field Innovation Centres in a number of locations within or adjacent to refugee camps and urban slums. These research and development sites will allow for researchers, engineers, innovators and graduate students to work side by side with those working and living in the refugee camps. These Field Innovation Centres, staffed by experts seconded by their organisations, will expose engineers and scientists to the complexities of actual problems faced within the camps, thus increasing the likelihood of real advances.

Importantly, the Field Innovation Centres will directly engage the refugee communities themselves in the development and testing of solutions, particularly those refugees who have engineering skills. This will help ensure that solutions meet

SMU-Hunt Institute/ Robert Greeson

Innovations at the first SMU-Hunt Institute Engineering and Humanity Week, April 2011.

the local cultural and technical needs of the community while in turn providing opportunities to develop a specialised workforce within the camps for maintaining and protecting these new assets.

Furthermore, creating an international base for technical innovation within the refugee communities we serve will provide a strong humanitarian motive needed to attract the best problem solvers in the world to the service of those with some of the greatest needs.

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1. The new programme elements were introduced in 2011.

Mobile technology in emergency response

In determining whether and how to use mobile technology (in particular, SMS) in emergency response, factors such as customs around the use and control of mobile phones, the state of the national mobile market, and the condition of the network are all important considerations. infoasaid and partner Frontline SMS (www.frontlinesms.com) have developed a checklist of factors to be aware of in assessing the mobile context.

infoasaid (http://infoasaid.org/) is a consortium of Internews and the BBC World Service Trust, funded by DfID. This initiative aims to enhance the quality of humanitarian assistance through improved information exchange between disaster-affected populations and aid agencies. infoasaid is developing a range of tools and resources for improving preparedness for communications in emergencies and is also working in partnerships with selected aid agencies to inform and support their communications responses in emergencies. See http://tinyurl.com/infoasaid-checklist

infoasaid's YouTube clip, called 'Communication is Aid', can be viewed at www.youtube.com/user/infoasaid