



Digital transformation with and for refugees

Group of Friends - Global Refugee Forum 2023

Version: 16 December 2022

Background

The growth in the use of digital channels and associated technology offers a wide range of opportunities for forcibly displaced people, but also brings with it new risks. At the Global Refugee Forum in 2019, sessions highlighted the importance of connectivity, digital inclusion and how a robust, protection enhancing digital identity for refugees can enhance achieving the goals of the Global Compact. Pledges were made by States and from private sector partners in these important areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of digital channels and services worldwide and underlined the growing importance of considering the role digital technology in realising the goals of the Global Compact on Refugees. It has become crucial that organisations working to improve refugee inclusion, protection, and services take full account of the digital space: both to leverage its potential to enable greater access, impact and efficiency, but also to find effective measures to address the risks that it brings.

Refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people increasingly rely on digital technology and channels to communicate and access information and services in urban, rural and camp contexts. Digital participation increasingly provides an important route to broader socioeconomic participation and inclusion.

In line with these developments, research conducted by UNHCR in 2020-21 with the communities we serve shows that they increasingly expect high-quality and easily-accessible digital services from UNHCR and our partners. In 2021, UNHCR's field trials of new messaging platforms for engaging with communities demonstrated that high impact engagement could take place in situations where in-person dialogue was not possible. Connected education, building digital skills and digital work all present opportunities to rebuild lives.

On the other hand, exclusion still exists, with research showing that forcibly displaced people are still less connected than their host communities, especially in rural areas. In addition, within displaced communities, already vulnerable groups, such as women, the elderly or people with disabilities, also face greater challenges in accessing digital platforms and services.

In addition, alongside the positive benefits that digital can bring, the protection of those forced to flee is increasingly threatened in the online space and by some uses of digital technology. This includes networks of traffickers operating on social media platforms; border controls becoming increasingly digitized in ways that can put access to asylum at risk; misinformation with real consequences for access to protection and solutions; and disinformation and hate speech stoking racism and xenophobia, which are often root causes of displacement and threaten the safety of the forcibly displaced and stateless.

Within this context, UNHCR has launched a Digital Transformation Strategy 2022-26 which provides a **unified vision and approach to realizing the rights of refugees to digital inclusion, protection, and services**. The Strategy identifies the following priority areas for digital transformation:

1. **Digital Inclusion:** The communities we serve have equitable access to digital technology and channels and can use them to pursue opportunities for lifelong learning, inclusion in the digital economy, leisure, and solutions.
2. **Digital Protection.** The communities we serve can exercise their human rights online and are protected from digital risk, enabling them to have access to trusted channels, avoid harm and have agency in decision-making.
3. **Digital Services.** The communities we serve have access to high quality, efficient and safe digital services from UNHCR and its partners.

In addition, to ensure UNHCR is equipped to support these priority outcomes, the Strategy identifies opportunities to further increase the efficiency and impact of our own work through the following areas:

4. **Digital Engagement.** UNHCR delivers impact-led digital engagement strategies that increase audience engagement with our work and strengthen protection, solutions and resource mobilization.
5. **Working Digitally.** UNHCR utilizes innovative digital solutions and tools as well as building the skills necessary to transform delivery, collaboration and knowledge-sharing in order to work more efficiently and effectively.

Objectives

With the Digital Transformation Group of Friends, we propose to form a group of stakeholders committed to driving forward the above outcomes, both through their own activities but also by supporting other stakeholders to the broader Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in incorporating a thorough consideration of digital opportunities and risks in their planning.

The group aims to:

1. **Amplify the voices** of forcibly displaced and host communities regarding Digital Transformation. For example, supporting technical experts from refugee communities to take a leading role in the Forum.
2. **Secure pledges** in support of Digital Transformation. For example, pledges supporting how digital can help to increase protection, inclusion and solutions for forcibly displaced and stateless people.
3. **Function as a resource** for other Groups of Friends by providing inputs to their work. For example, how digital technology can support pledge areas such as Health, AGD, or Education.
4. **Advance policy change** supporting Digital Transformation. For example, addressing regulatory barriers to digital inclusion or ensuring that refugee protection standards are reflected in the new legal frameworks enabling eGovernment or the Digital Economy.
5. **Establish sustained commitment, dialogue and sharing of knowledge and good practice** on digital transformation to increase protection and solutions for forcibly displaced people. This would include helping to inform the development of the [Global Digital Compact](#).

Workplan

Activities in 2023 will include:

- Establishment of platform for exchange
- Engagement with communities for feedback
- Thematic workshops on each priority outcome to take stock on the theme and work on new pledges.
- Preparatory meetings for the Forum

This workplan will be developed and specified further with the members of the Group once established.

Communications and engagement in the Global Refugee Forum

Leading up to the forum in 2023

In advance of the Digital Transformation sessions at the Global Refugee Forum, the workstream will be active in providing opportunities for building out a broad community around Digital Transformation with and for refugees. Activities will include but are not limited to:

- Virtual events and discussions on priority thematic areas.
- Developing, securing and advocating for pledges within the above priority areas of the group.
- Digital Transformation website with background on the UNHCR strategy and detail on communities of practice to facilitate discussion and collaboration.

At the Forum itself

Over the course of the Global Refugee Forum, a series of events around Digital Transformation will be held, as a parallel track to the main GRF spanning all five pillars of the Digital Transformation Strategy.

In addition, one key event will be included in the main agenda of the GRF on Digital Transformation.

Governance and Stakeholders

The Digital Transformation workstream under the GRF will be co-chaired by UNHCR along with 2-3 other stakeholders to be confirmed at a later date. Throughout 2023, the co-chairs will have regular coordination calls to keep track of activities. In addition, wider preparation meetings open to all stakeholders will be held remotely several times through the course of the year.

Additional discussions will be scheduled around specific outcome areas of UNHCR's Digital Transformation Strategy on an ad-hoc basis, led by UNHCR, also potentially with one or more other partners.