CANADIAN ORIENTATION ABROAD | ORIENTATION CANADIENNE À L'ÉTRANGER

DIGITAL INCLUSION OF REFUGEES RESETTLING TO CANADA: OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS

IOM UN MIGRATION

COA OCE

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is now broad recognition that connectivity and access to digital tools and services are fundamental to inclusion and participation in society. More specifically, research has shown that for refugees, they can be an essential lifeline in their journey, with many identifying smart phones and internet as important for a sense of safety and security as food, water and shelter.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized the necessity of digital access and digital literacy as so much of life has had to move online. Yet, as the evidence base grows around digital inclusion of refugees, it shines a light not only on the benefits that digital technology can bring, but also on the persistent and new barriers to usage among refugees that must be considered and addressed to prevent exacerbating the digital divide.

Against this backdrop, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Canadian Orientation Abroad Programme (COA) is evaluating the opportunities and limitations of digital technology to enhance and extend its Pre-Departure Orientation Training (PDO). Through a survey of over 300 refugees and a combination of primary and secondary research, this report provides insight into how refugees who participate in the COA Programme are currently using digital tools, and what challenges they face in doing so. The findings highlight that while 80 per cent of survey participants own mobile phones and 70 per cent always or often have reliable internet access, barriers such as cost, and lack of digital literacy and skills, combined with factors related to disability, location, individual context and gender need to be carefully considered and addressed to avoid the risk of excluding the most vulnerable as more digital approaches are adopted. The research also reminds us that there are critical human elements needed to support COA participants that technology cannot replace, and this reality should remain at the forefront of programme design and execution.

The report recommends awareness-raising, investment, and continued research and evaluation, in combination with capacity-building to enhance the digital literacy of refugees coming to Canada. This will help ensure that digital tools are accessible, impactful and inclusive alongside the continued provision of the in-person pre-departure training.

A COA facilitator is conducting a pre-departure orientation session for refugees bound to Canada. The 3-day orientation session includes information on travel, such as what to pack and not to pack, as well as information about services, housing, health, education, employment, budgeting, and transportation in Canada. © IOM 2019/Muse MOHAMMED

[1] Accenture and UNHCR. Connected Refugees: How the Internet and Mobile Connectivity Can Improve Refugee Well-being and Transform Humanitarian Action. 2016 www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/9/57d7d4478/mobile-connectivity-lifeline-refugees-report-finds.html.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

COA	Canadian Orientation Abroad Programme
Digital Divide	The gap within and between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities.[2]
Digital Inclusion	Ensuring that all individuals and communities, including the most vulnerable have access to, and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).
Digital Literacy	The ability to use digital technologies and the internet to find or create information and communicate.
Digital Skills	A range of capabilities and skills to use and navigate specific digital devices, communication applications and the internet.
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GSMA	Global System for Mobile Communications Association (formerly Groupe Spécial Mobile Association)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
PDO	Pre-Departure Orientation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; also referred to as the UN Refugee Agency

[2] OECD Understanding the Digital Divide OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 49, 2001 OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/236405667766.

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began implementing the Canadian Orientation Abroad (COA) Programme to provide information and orientation to refugees at the pre-arrival stage to help prepare them for the experiences of travel, arrival, and settlement in Canada. In its first year, COA supported pre-departure orientation for 773 participants. In 2019, this number grew to over 14,000 refugees who participated in training. This growth sits against a backdrop of surging humanitarian need and a global refugee crisis. As of June 2020, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that there were 26.3 million refugees, out of a total of 80 million people forcibly displaced around the world.[3] As host countries, humanitarian organizations and refugees themselves seek to cope with this reality, a movement towards incorporating digital tools and innovative technology has taken hold, reflecting the fundamental importance of connectivity for people who have been forced to flee.

While the number of refugees has grown exponentially, so has our interconnectedness and dependency on digital technology, fueled by the rise in mobile phones and internet connectivity. In 1998, the first year COA began its programme, there were 100 million GSM (mobile) connections globally.[4] At the end of 2020, this number of mobile phone users stood at over 5 billion, with almost half of the world's population now using mobile internet.[5] There is now broad recognition that connectivity and access to digital tools and services are fundamental to inclusion and participation in society. More specifically, research has shown that for refugees, they can be an essential lifeline in their journey, with many identifying smart phones and internet as important for a sense of safety and security as food, water and shelter.[6] Yet, as the evidence base grows around digital inclusion of refugees, it shines a light not only on the benefits that digital technology can bring, but also on the persistent and new barriers to usage among refugees that must be considered and addressed to prevent exacerbating the digital divide.

Within this context, COA is evaluating where and how digital technology can be integrated to support and enhance existing methods of pre-departure orientation training (PDO) in the resettlement phase. As such, this research study situates itself in a continuum of services for refugees who have been selected to resettle to Canada and who will be accessing services after arrival to facilitate their settlement and integration. The objectives of this research are to provide a deeper understanding of the barriers and enablers that have a direct impact on the digital access and digital literacy of refugees in the pre-departure phase to inform how COA can move forward in developing targeted interventions that support the digital inclusion of refugees.

This report provides an overview of the key themes and trends related to the digital inclusion of refugees based on existing research: macro and system-level trends such as the broader movement towards digital humanitarian assistance across the sector, to more individually experienced barriers facing refugees such as affordability, digital literacy and access to connectivity. It then provides a snapshot into the digital inclusion of refugees participating in the COA Programme, exploring through primary research their ability to own, access and use digital devices and their preferences, behaviours and obstacles in doing so. Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from refugees' own experiences, as well as input from COA facilitators and other pre-departure orientation providers paint a varied landscape of digital inclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to digital and highlighted promising opportunities to harness digital technologies to support refugees. At the same time, important questions are raised about how far these digital tools can take us, and what needs to be considered as they are increasingly integrated into humanitarian and development contexts. The report provides a discussion of lessons learned and areas for further exploration and concludes by offering considerations and recommendations for the COA Programme and other stakeholders as they move forward in serving refugees in the digital age.

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[3] UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/.
[4] GSMA, Brief History of GSM, www.gsma.com/aboutus/history.
[5] GSMA, State of Mobile Internet Report 2020, www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GSMA-State-of-Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-Report-2020.pdf.
[6] Accenture and UNHCR. Connected Refugees: How the Internet and Mobile Connectivity Can Improve Refugee Well-being and Transform Humanitarian Action, 2016, www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/9/57d7d4478/mobile-connectivity-lifeline-refugees-report-finds.html.

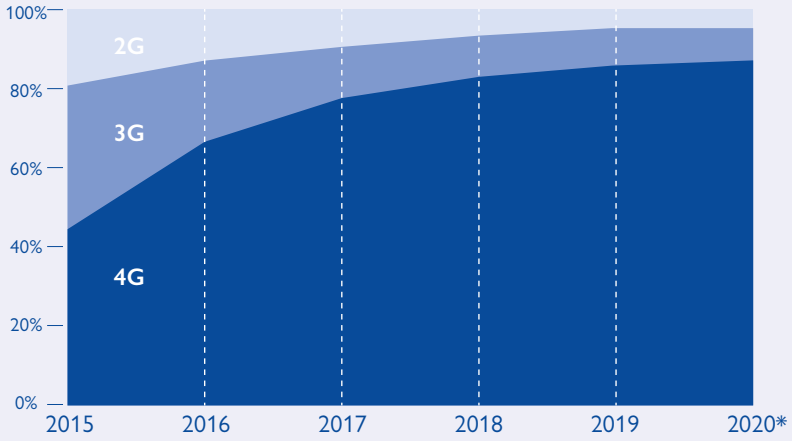
SYSTEM LEVEL TRENDS

This section presents a summary of trends and key themes that have emerged from recent literature focused on the digital inclusion of refugees. It considers opportunities and barriers that are likely to influence the direction of refugee services' digital programming. While these themes have been generalized across geographies, it is critical to note that they will manifest differently depending on context, as well as the unique experience and journey of each refugee.

Broader Digital Connectivity Landscape

The exponential growth in connectivity globally has ushered in vast change and vast opportunity. Yet this growth is not happening evenly or equitably. Despite the strides made in connectivity around the globe, with almost 85 per cent of the population covered by 4G (Figure 1), half of the world's population still lacks access to the internet, and for the first time in history, cellular (mobile) subscriptions declined in 2020.[7] According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), in 2019, close to 87 per cent of individuals in developed countries used the internet, compared with only 19 per cent in the least developed countries and there remains a significant rural and urban divide.[8] Access to connectivity and internet alone does not guarantee digital inclusion, and issues related to affordability, access to electricity, the ability to purchase airtime and data and register a SIM card all need to be addressed to drive adoption and usage.[9]

Figure 1: Population Coverage by Type of Mobile Network, 2015–2020



Globally, almost 85 per cent of the population willl be covered by a 4G network at the end of 2020.

Between 2015 and 2020, 4G network coverage increased two-fold globally.

Annual growth has been slowing down gradually since 2017, and 2020 coverage is only 1.3 percentage points higher than 2019.

Ninety-three (93) per cent of the world population has access to network, less than half a percentage point higher than a year ago.

Source: ITU
*ITU estimate.

[7] International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Measuring Digital Development. Facts and Figures 2019 (Geneva, 2019).
[8] International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Measuring Digital Development. Facts and Figures 2020 (Geneva, 2020).
[9] GSMA, #BetterFuture Accessibility and Affordability, www.gsma.com/betterfuture/accessibility-affordability.

Movement Towards Digitalization of Humanitarian Agencies Serving Refugees

In the last few years, humanitarian agencies, including those serving refugees, have ramped up efforts to not only incorporate digital solutions to enhance their own operations, but also in the delivery of services they provide. UNHCR, International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) are just a few examples of organizations that have launched Digital Transformation Strategies. For its part, IOM has recognized the value and importance of digitalization and migrants' digital inclusion in both its operational and advocacy work, and placed an increased focus on tracking digital innovation as it relates to their mandate, such as through the Data Innovation Directory and the global DISC digest on digitalization of the Joint Global Initiative on Diversity, Inclusion and Social Cohesion (DISC).[10]

Roll-Out of Digital Humanitarian Assistance

In addition to strengthening strategy and setting a vision for incorporating digital solutions into operations, many refugee-focused humanitarian organizations are also adopting new digital modalities to provide assistance. For example, organizations such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) are delivering cash digitally in over a third of the countries in which it operates,[11] while the World Food Programme (WFP) is expanding the use of blockchain through its Building Blocks Programme to enable Syrian refugees in Jordan to have more choice over where and how they spend their cash benefits.[12] Digital modalities such as Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) have been leveraged to reach groups with low literacy levels and enhance two-way communications, such as the COVID-Infoline rolled out by IOM in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh. Across the broader spectrum of organizations supporting refugees from development agencies, humanitarian assistance and resettlement, COVID-19 has accelerated the integration of digital tools that can be used to enhance psychosocial support, livelihoods, education and healthcare. For example, IOM Germany has launched an innovative digital counselling platform, providing critical mental health support and trusted information,[13] while UNDP has launched Aspire to Innovate (a2i) to connect migrants and refugees to job opportunities.[14]

IOM, in close collaboration with government and local actors, began using an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) mass communication tool to disseminate key information and collect community feedback throughout the crisis. © IOM 2020/Abdullah Al MASHRIF

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[10] International Organization on Migration (IOM), DISC Initiative The Power of Digitalization in the Age of Physical Distancing: Strengthening Social Connections and Community Cohesion Through the Digital Inclusion and Connectivity of Migrants DISC Digest 4th Edition, 2020, www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/disc_digest_4th_edition_digitalization_and_migrant_inclusion_final.pdf.

[11] International Rescue Committee Navigating the Shift to Digital Humanitarian Assistance 2019, www.rescue.org/resource/navigating-shift-digital-humanitarian-Assistance.

[12] World Food Programme, WFP Innovation, Building Blocks, Blockchain for Refugees, https://innovation.wfp.org/project/building-blocks.

[13] IOM DISC Initiative, The Power of Digitalization in the Age of Physical Distancing: Strengthening Social Connections and Community Cohesion Through the Digital Inclusion and Connectivity of Migrants DISC Digest 4th Edition. 2020, www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/disc_digest_4th_edition_digitalization_and_migrant_inclusion_final.pdf.

[14] *UN News*. Migrating online: The Digital Tools Preparing Refugees and Migrants with an Economic Lifeline, https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084552.

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Investments in Building Refugee Digital Skills and Literacy

At the same time, and in recognition of the range of potential benefits that digital tools can offer refugees, increasing investments are being made in initiatives that support building digital skills and literacy among refugees in a variety of settings. Targeted programmes such as the IOM Tech-Heroes programme bring youth together to solve community problems through technology innovation,[15] while TF4Women Programme hosted by Techfugees supports women refugees in digital upskilling (building capacity in the use of digital tools) and finding employment opportunities in the tech community.[16] More broadly, coding training programmes for refugees have become a more common phenomenon, offered in both camp and urban settings,[17] and private sector companies such as Microsoft have developed tools to build refugees' digital literacy and computer science skills. Without investments in building digital skills, digital tools risk exacerbating existing inequalities and leaving behind marginalized groups.

Greater Advocacy for the Digital Inclusion of Refugees

More recently, there has been a greater focus on advocacy towards governments and the humanitarian and private sectors to ensure that digital inclusion of refugees is prioritized, and to urge different actors to develop policies, regulation and services that support this. For example, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which the Government of Canada is one of the Champion countries of, makes significant references on digitalization and pre-departure orientation.[18]

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15 See further: IOM Tech Heroes, http://tech-heroes.org.
16 See further: Techfugees, https://techfugees.com/fellowship-tf4women/.
17 See further initiatives such as Code Your Future or UNHCR's App Factory.
18 United Nations, Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, 2018, https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/gcm-n1845199.pdf.

Broader advocacy efforts have also focused on linking the digital inclusion of refugees to contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, SDG 9 (Target 9, c.) explicitly calls for increased access to information and communication access technology and universal, affordable access. Other examples include the UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation,[19] the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development's Open Statement on Broadband Connectivity for Refugees,[20] UNHCR, GSMA and other stakeholders have issued calls to action, such as through the Global Refugee Forum and offered recommendations for inclusive regulatory frameworks,[21] expanded infrastructure and partnership between the private sector, government and humanitarian communities.[22]

Increased Partnership with the Private Sector

Despite this momentum, many organizations focused on supporting refugees do not yet have the expertise or funding in-house to deliver new digital technology solutions at scale. While some, such as WFP run innovation challenges to source and adopt new digital approaches from within, most digital solutions rely on partnership with private sector actors, ranging from Mobile Network Operators (MNOs), to app developers and tech companies. These partnerships may be built on different models, ranging from agreements supported by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funding to large scale commercial agreements. More mature partnership models are evolving within and between the humanitarian and private sectors to deliver digital technologies at scale for refugees, however defining and securing these partnerships requires significant time and effort, as does achieving alignment between commercial and humanitarian realities and mitigating the risk of exploitation by commercial entities.[23]

A Growing Body of Evidence and Evaluation

The concept of connectivity and communication as a form of assistance started gaining greater traction in 2012,[24] as different NGOs and humanitarian agencies sought to strengthen accountability and two-way communication with people affected by crisis. As the sector evolves and continues to embrace digital technologies, there is a need for a stronger evidence base of the impact these technologies are having. There have been some notable efforts in the past few years[25] to build the qualitative and quantitative evidence base of how refugees are interacting with digital technology, to understand their preferences and concerns around adopting digital tools and services. There has also been important critical analysis of our assumptions around the benefits and potential of digital technology for refugees, reinforcing the need to focus on local context, consider unintended consequences and risks and to ensure impact is being measured.[26] A recent study evaluating the digital divide in the COVID-19 context, by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), highlights that most of the digital tools that have been successful in the COVID-19 response thus far are those that were already proven to work at scale, such as digital cash transfers, while highlighting that "the increased and rapid uptake of digital tools clearly increases the potential for digital harm," which must be addressed by the organizations seeking to use them.[27]

In addition to these systemic trends, the existing literature identifies recurrent themes at the operational and end-user levels which impact the ability of refugees themselves to access and meaningfully engage with digital technology.

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19 United Nations, Secretary-General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation, 2020.

20 Broadband Commission on Sustainable Development, Open Statement on Broadband Connectivity for Refugees, 2020, www.broadbandcommission.org/Documents/BroadbandConnectivityOpenStatement_.pdf.

21 UNHCR, Displaced and Disconnected, 2019, www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Displaced-Disconnected-WEB.pdf.

22 UNHCR, Global Refugee Forum, 2019, www.unhcr.org/global-refugee-forum.html.

23 Overseas Development Institute Humanitarian Policy Group, Bridging Humanitarian Digital Divides During Covid-19, 20201. P. 6, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Bridging_humanitarian_digital_divides_during_Covid-19.pdf.

24 See further: BBC Media Action Commisaid, CDAC Network, GSMA Disaster Response, Nethope.

25 UNHCR, Connecting Refugees, 2016. & GSMA, The Digital Lives of Refugees,2019.

26 See further: UNHCR, Connectivity for Refugees, What Have We Learned, https://medium.com/unhcr-innovation-service/connectivity-for-refugees-what-have-we-learned-58c72dae38c2; Benton, Meghan. Digital Litter: The Downside of Using Technology to Help Refugees. Migration Policy, June 2019, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/digital-litter-downside-using-technology-help-refugees and UNHCR, Space and Imagination, Rethinking Refugee's Digital Access, 2020, www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Space-and-imagination-rethinking-refugees%E2%80%99-digital-access_WEB042020.pdf.

27 Overseas Development Institute Humanitarian Policy Group. Bridging Humanitarian Digital Divides During Covid-19, 2021.P. 6, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Bridging_humanitarian_digital_divides_during_Covid-19.pdf.

OVERARCHING BARRIERS TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

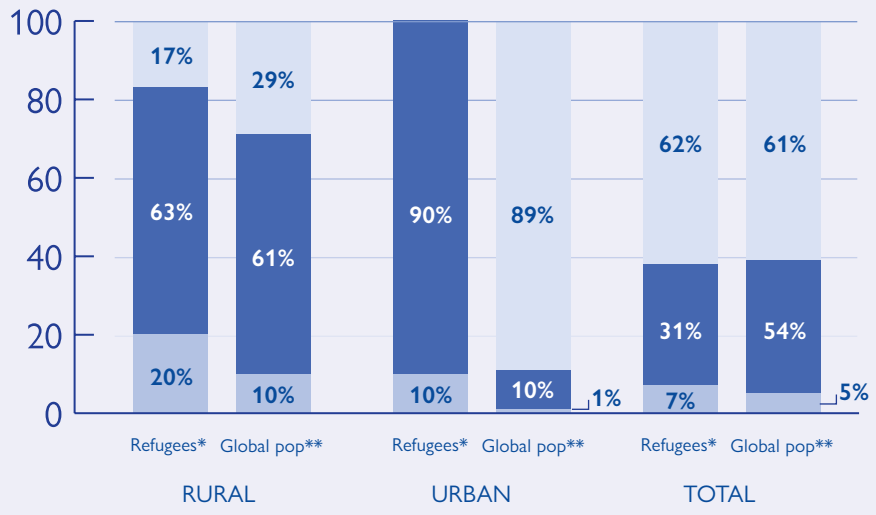
Affordability

The cost of mobile devices and adjacent services (such as SIM cards, air time top ups, data (mobile internet) packages, and battery charging) is regularly cited as a primary barrier to ownership in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs).[28] The same is true for refugees. In a 2016 global survey, UNHCR found that refugees may spend up to a third of their disposable income on connectivity, citing cost as the primary obstacle for usage.[29] More recent research from the GSMA which surveyed refugees in camp settings in Jordan, Rwanda and Uganda found that the cost of a phone handset, and the cost of airtime were the predominant barriers to phone ownership.[30] While the average cost of an entry level internet-enabled device in LMIC's dropped from 44 per cent of monthly income in 2018 to 34 per cent in 2019,[31] the cost remains prohibitive for many refugees in precarious financial situations and with limited livelihood opportunities.

Access

Even where a mobile device is owned, access to connectivity is not guaranteed. While the vast majority of the world is now covered by mobile broadband networks,[32] access remains uneven due to a combination of factors including a lack of digital infrastructure and disparities between rural and urban areas. UNHCR research indicates that while refugees in urban areas have access to 2G or 3G coverage, up to 20 per cent of those in rural areas have no access to connectivity. This aligns with recent research from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), which found that in least developed countries (LDCs) connectivity gaps are particularly acute, with 17 per cent of rural populations living in areas without any mobile coverage at all, and 19 per cent of the rural population covered only by 2G networks.[33] Innovative partnerships between MNOs and development and humanitarian organizations such as the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) and MTN's partnership in Northern Uganda have demonstrated the potential of new modalities of financing digital infrastructure to serve refugees, but the coverage gap remains a significant obstacle.

Figure 2: Refugees versus Global Population: Mobile Network Coverage.



Source: UNHCR Connecting Refugees.[34]

[28] GSMA, The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity, 2020.
[29] UNHCR Connecting Refugees 2016, www.unhcr.org/5770d43c4.pdf.
[30] GSMA The Digital Lives of Refugees, 2018, www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/the-digital-lives-of-refugees/.
[31] GSMA The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2020, www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GSMA-State-of-Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-Report-2020.pdf.
[32] Ibid.
[33] ITU, Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures, 2020, www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/pages/pr27-2020-facts-figures-urban-areas-higher-internet-access-than-rural.aspx.
[34] UNHCR, Connecting Refugees, 2016. P. 7, www.unhcr.org/5770d43c4.pdf.

The existence of digital infrastructure or access to connected devices does not deliver equal and even access on its own. The risk of digital exclusion remains high for many refugees, particularly for women who face a persistent gender gap related to access, ownership and digital literacy when compared to men. For example, in the 2019 research in Bidi Bidi Settlement in Uganda, women were 47 per cent less likely to own a mobile phone when compared to men.[35] Recent research has also begun to uncover the digital exclusion faced by refugees with disabilities.[36]

Digital Literacy

Another significant contributing factor to digital exclusion is digital literacy. Building awareness of digital tools and services as well as the skill set and confidence to use them is critical. A global survey has found that a lack of digital skills was the primary driver for why people do not engage with mobile internet, followed by affordability, however this varies greatly for refugees depending on context.[37] For example, Syrian refugees in Jordan were reported to have smart phones and generally high levels of digital literacy when compared to other settings in Rwanda and Uganda.[38] For refugees with lower levels of education, literacy or language barriers, engaging with digital technology can be even more challenging. Research has shown that comfort and familiarity with different apps and services, passwords and PINs also varies greatly among refugees,[39] limiting the functionality of digital tools and the impact they can bring if digital skills and training are not included as part of programming.

This growing body of evidence points to the potential for digital tools to exacerbate or reinforce existing power dynamics or inequalities if intentional actions to overcome these challenges are not taken. Differences within and between groups of refugees, such as those residing in the same place but coming from different countries of origin must also be considered. This reinforces the need to evaluate context specific digital realities, as well as the potential for digital approaches to produce unintended consequences such as contributing to further exclusion of vulnerable groups within refugee contexts.

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[35] GSMA, Digital Lives of Refugees, 2019. P. 31.
[36] GSMA, Bridging the Mobile Disability Gap in Refugee Settings, 2019.
[37] GSMA, The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2020, www.gsma.com/r/somic/.
[38] GSMA, Digital Lives of Refugees 2019, www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/bridging-the-mobile-disability-gap-in-refugee-settings/.
[39] Ibid. and SAP Canada & ISSBC, Leveraging Technology to Support in the Middle East and East Africa, Youth and Technology, 2018, https://issbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Refugee-youth-and-technology.pdf.

Trust

Trust in digital technology and online information has been challenged by inaccurate and poor-quality information spread online and concerns about online surveillance, fraud and scams. Following a proliferation of new platforms, online maps and apps to support refugees during the height of the European refugee crisis, many of these sites and services have been left to languish, without updates or accurate information, creating new challenges and risks around misinformation.[40] This sentiment was echoed in research that surveyed refugee youth, noting that "misinformation about re-locating in other countries is often spread through networks and on social media."[41] Additionally, as more humanitarian assistance is provided to refugees online, steps must be taken to ensure there is trust in the broader digital ecosystem to ensure adoption of these digital approaches. For example, MTN, together with the GSMA has invested in rolling out training of a Humanitarian Code of Conduct for Mobile Money agents who facilitate digital cash distribution to ensure they are upholding protection standards when working with refugees and host communities.[42] Issues relating to trust in digital technology is inextricably linked to perceptions around data privacy and security.

Privacy and Security

As many NGOs and humanitarian agencies move service provision online, concerns about data privacy and protection have come to the fore. While these concerns are relevant beyond refugee populations, they are amplified among refugees who are already vulnerable and may be fleeing persecution, and who may not have full control over their personal data as they go through their asylum and resettlement journey.[43] Risk mitigation and protection of privacy are priorities for organizations working with refugees and organizations such as IOM have been investing in creating principles and policies that seek to limit harms and ensure that privacy, data protection and consent are embedded across all activities. As digital solutions such as biometrics are increasingly used for verifying the identity of refugees, and more personal data is collected and stored digitally, questions around how this data is protected and managed become paramount.

Policy and Regulation

An often-overlooked challenge to the digital inclusion of refugees is the prevailing identification requirements to acquire a SIM card in many host countries. These countries have adopted policies known as mandatory SIM registration, requiring that approved identification must be presented and verified to register and activate a mobile connection. However, many refugees are not able to meet these requirements due to a lack of accepted identity documents, or may be reluctant to share this information due to privacy and security concerns. SIM registration is now mandated in over 120 countries and in many of these, identification issued by UNHCR or other NGOs may not be accepted as valid forms of ID.[44] In countries such as the United Republic of Tanzania, Turkey, Chad and Kenya, refugees will only be able to legally obtain a SIM card registered in their own name once they have been granted refugee status by the host government and issued the requisite credentials.[45] This can present a significant barrier to basic access as well as the range of digital services that could be provided to refugees.

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40 Benton, Meghan. Digital Litter: The Downside of Using Technology to Help Refugees. Migration Policy, June 2019, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/digital-litter-downside-using-technology-help-refugees.

41 SAP Canada & ISSBC, Leveraging Technology to Support in the Middle East and East Africa, Youth and Technology, 2018, https://issbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Refugee-youth-and-technology.pdf.

42 GSMA, Mobile Money Agent Training on the Humanitarian Code of Conduct, 2019, www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/mobile-money-agent-training-on-the-humanitarian-code-of-conduct/.

43 World Refugee Council. Data Protection and Digital Agency for Refugees, 2019, www.cigionline.org/publications/data-protection-and-digital-agency-refugees.

44 GSMA, Refugees and Identity: Mapping Access to Identity: A Landscaping Report, 2017.

45 Ibid.

"A refugee who cannot legally activate a mobile connection, open a bank account or access a mobile money wallet in his or her own name may become further marginalized and disempowered as access to information, communication, and financial services, including cash assistance and transfers, is severely limited. What is at stake in enabling access for displaced persons includes self-reliance, resilience, financial independence, social inclusion, and protection." — **UNHCR Displaced and Disconnected**[46]

The importance of enabling regulatory environments has led to broader advocacy, including the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development issuing an open statement calling on regulatory bodies to support policies in recognition of the "vital lifeline" that broadband connectivity plays for refugees.[47]

These trends will have varying degrees of influence on digital inclusion depending on context, location and the specific circumstances of individual refugees. Additionally, specific barriers within and between groups and locations must be considered to reduce the risk of marginalizing or excluding the most vulnerable. It is important to note that digital access is not only about technology and introducing new digital opportunities for programming. It also offers a way through which refugees can exercise and stretch the boundaries of their agency in terms of accessing information to inform decisions and planning for movement or departure, learning and educational opportunities and supporting a sense of well-being and connectedness. Primary research undertaken from this report provides evidence of these trends and concepts in action and deeper insights into how they are impacting access to and use of digital technology by refugees.

© 2015/NASA

[46] UNHCR, Displaced and Disconnected, 2019. P. 5.

[47] See further GSMA, Mobile is a Lifeline, 2017; GSMA Digital Lives of Refugees, 2019; UNHCR and Accenture, Connecting Refugees, 2016 and Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development. Statement on Broadband Connectivity for Refugees, 2018.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Methodology

The research for this study features a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. This included a survey of 326 refugees over the age of 13 (the age eligibility requirement for COA) who had received their travel bookings and would soon resettle to Canada. The survey was translated from English into 15 languages and piloted across a test group of 18 participants to test for clarity and flow before being rolled out across all 12 COA permanent sites over a four-week period in February 2021. The survey was conducted telephonically across 22 countries due to COVID-19 restrictions and enumerated by COA facilitators and interpreters who received training prior to administering the survey. The objective of the survey was to provide a baseline dataset to understand digital access and usage among refugees resettling to Canada in the pre-departure phase. All survey results were recorded anonymously and participants were given an overview of the purpose of the survey, any personal data being collected, and were required to provide informed consent to participate. Out of 326 individuals surveyed, 16 people declined to participate. The survey was administered in accordance with IOM's data protection policy.

Additionally, three regional telephonic Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with refugees approved to come to Canada, supported by COA facilitators across all 12 COA permanent sites to provide greater depth into attitudes and behaviours related to mobile phones and the internet, and the related barriers of, and preferences for usage. Interviews were also conducted with key informants from within IOM and partner organizations to capture lessons learned and any emerging best practices related to integrating digital tools into pre-departure orientation training.

Limitations and Research Notes

This research into digital access and digital literacy in the pre-departure context was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic between January and April 2021. Due to restrictions around travel and physical distancing, all surveys and focus group discussions and expert interviews were conducted remotely. The sample for the baseline survey was reduced and limited by international travel restrictions and border closures due to COVID-19 which impacted the sample size (typically anticipated to be approximately 600 refugees over a one-month period). Additionally, the sample is reflective of refugees who took part in COA pre-departure briefings and were approved by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for travel to Canada within a period of one to three weeks. As such, the location, gender and age of refugees was reflective of this cohort. Therefore, it should be noted that the results from the survey and associated analysis are not representative of refugee profiles/distribution at large, but specific to the demographics of refugees pre-approved for travel to Canada during the period of research. Findings across research sites and participants present strong signals related to digital access, digital literacy and digital behaviour and have been generalized to inform the results and recommendations. Given the time and access limitations, it should be noted that this research is not exhaustive or reflective of all of COA participants' experiences. Finally, IOM policies around data protection and privacy limited the use of online tools to IOM approved channels which informed the data collection tools and platforms available through which to conduct the research.

Senegalese migrants who returned home from Algeria, Mali and Libya interview one another about their migration experiences. The initiative is part of IOM's Migrants as Messengers project, which uses peer-to-peer messaging to fill gaps in information and ensure people are better informed about the risks of irregular migration. © IOM 2018/Julia BURPEE

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In order to build an informed picture of the digital inclusion of refugees and complementary digital tools and channels that could be considered for implementation by COA, the research sought to understand the existing picture of ownership, access, and usage among refugees as they awaited their departure to Canada. This data is presented below, with a discussion of key considerations and implications.

Snapshot of Research Participants

Figure 3: Overview of Survey Participants

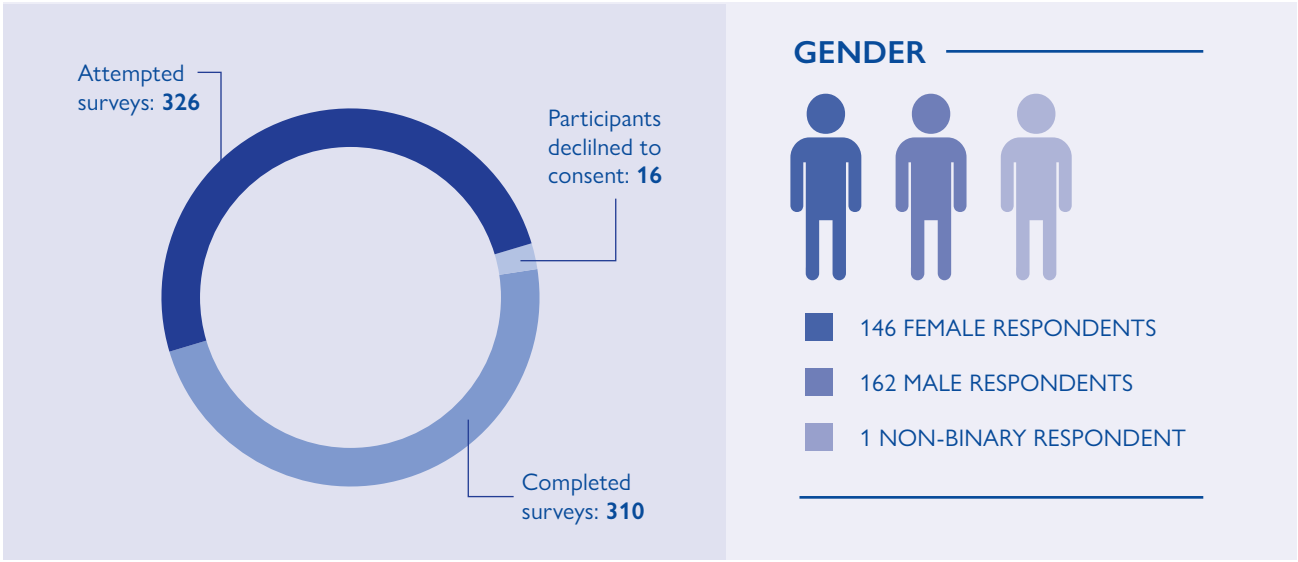
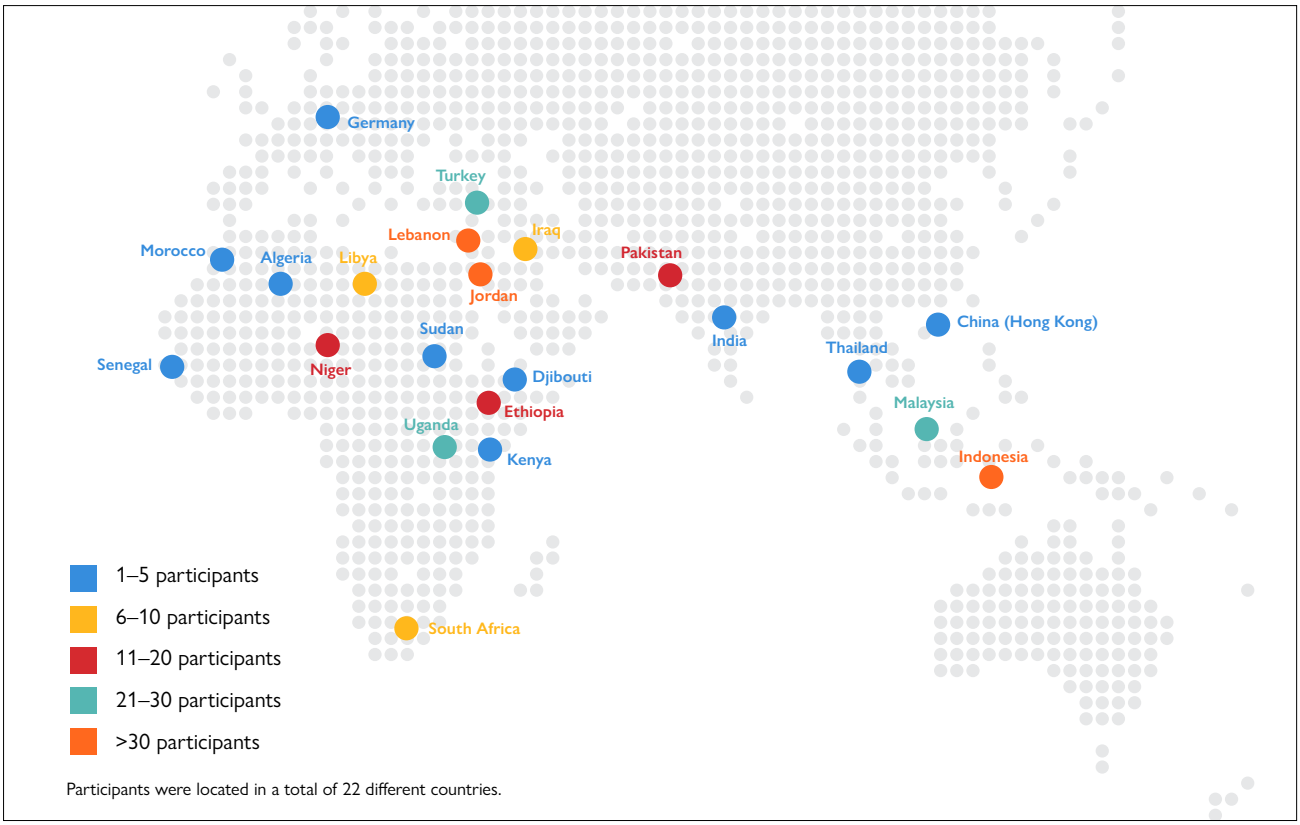


Figure 4: Breakdown of (309) Participants by Location (Country)



Participants were located in a total of 22 different countries.

Access to Digital Devices

The research explored ownership of, and access to digital devices, including mobile phones, laptops, tablets and desktop computers. Echoing the trends around greater access to connectivity broadly, mobile phones were the predominant device both owned and accessed by refugees, with 80 per cent of respondents reporting that they owned their own phone. Of those who did not own their own phone, 95 per cent reported having access to someone else's phone. These are encouraging statistics that reinforce the broader research that shows that refugees are prioritizing connectivity.[48] It also highlights the opportunity of leveraging mobile channels and platforms to complement and enhance the delivery of COA pre-departure orientation training.

Figure 5: Mobile Phone Ownership

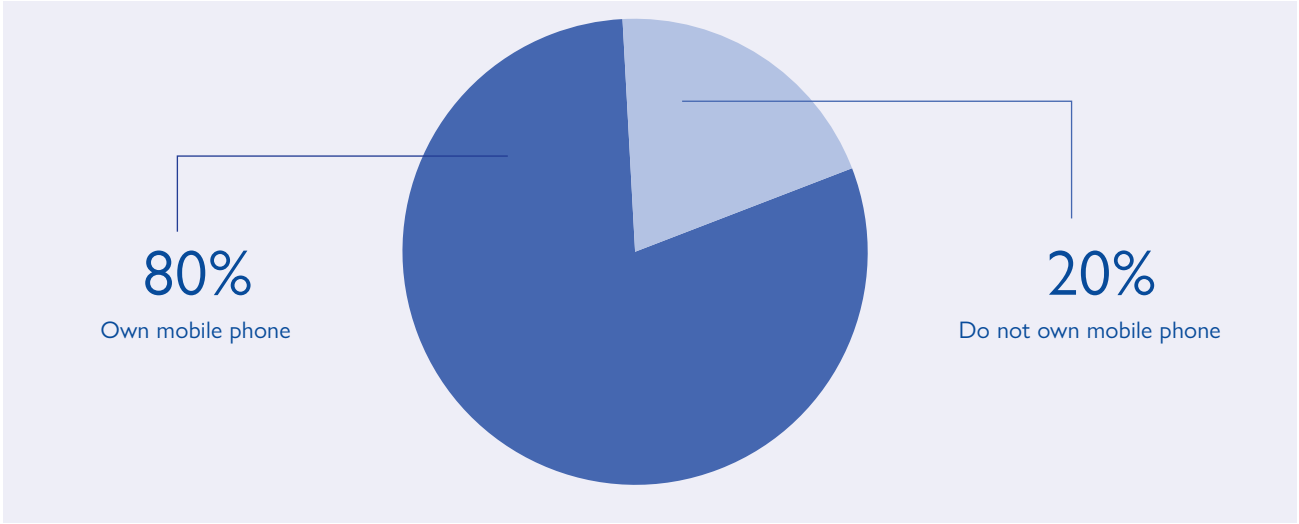


Figure 6: Mobile Phone Ownership by Gender

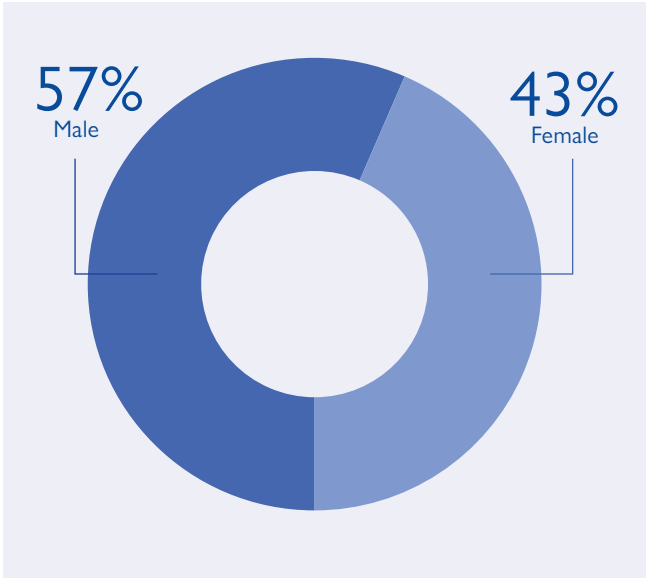
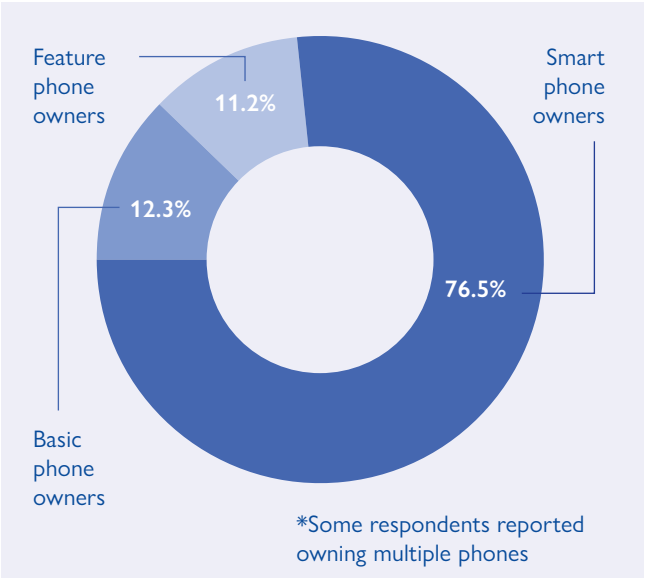


Figure 7: Types of Mobile Phones Owned

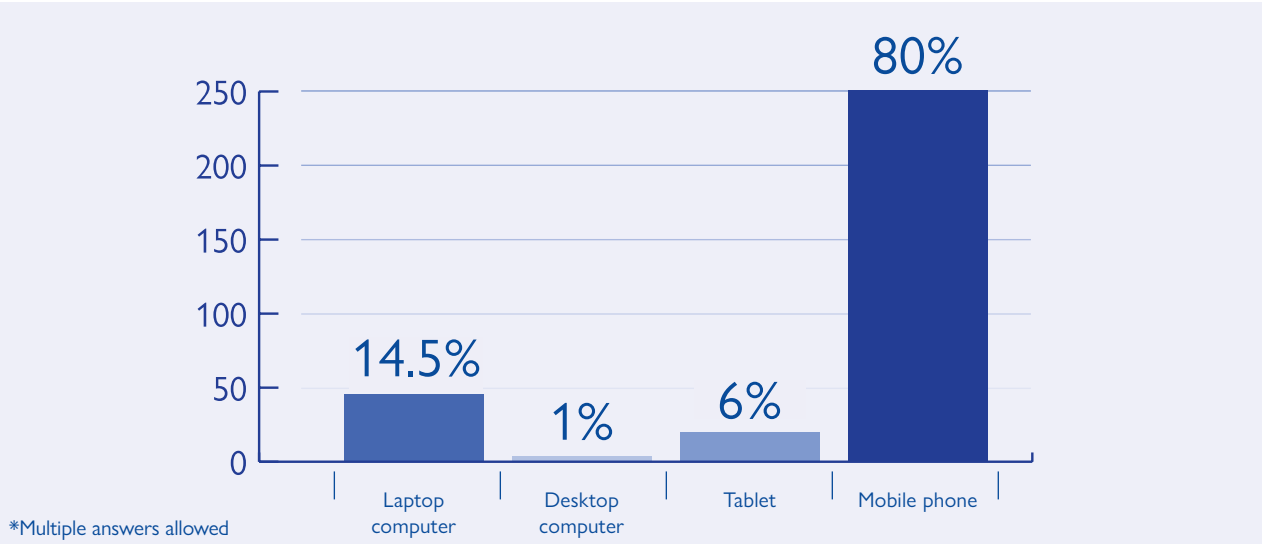


[48] Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development. 2018. Broadband Connectivity for Refugees.

A Syrian refugee shows his home town of Hama on his phone while en route to Canada. © IOM 2015/Muse MOHAMMED

While the proportion of respondents who owned their own mobile phones, and who owned smart phones were high overall, only 6 per cent of men, compared with 12 per cent of women reported not owning a phone, highlighting a gender gap in ownership between men and women. Additional barriers to ownership were reported, with cost being the most cited, followed by a lack of reliable connection, perceived relevance of a mobile phone, digital literacy and concerns about privacy. An additional challenge reported by several respondents was that despite owning a device, they were unable to use it due to it being broken.

Figure 8: Ownership of other Digital Devices

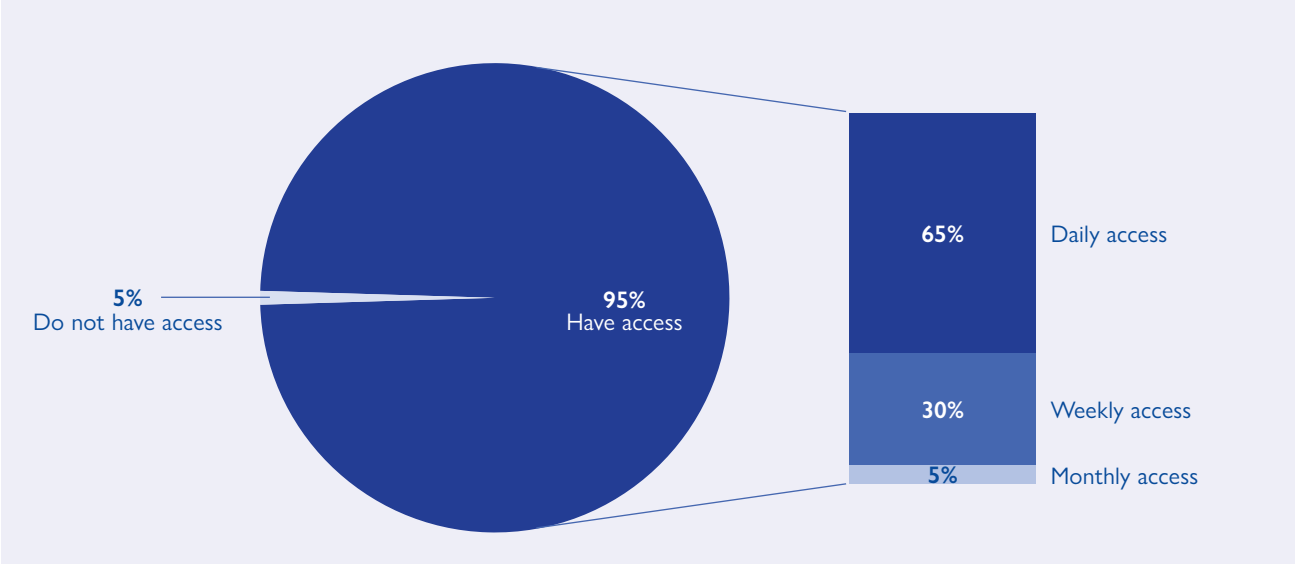


Ownership of, or access to digital devices is undoubtedly a crucial factor in driving equitable and inclusive access to digital services. However, further consideration should be given to the barriers that shared devices and dependency on others for connectivity present. Research has shown that the benefits of connectivity are not fully realized when devices are shared or are not registered in one's own name.[49] This reality was echoed by refugees as well as COA facilitators and other pre-departure orientation providers who cited examples of competition in phone usage when a device was not owned and had to be shared among family members. This has been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic with so much of learning and services being delivered online. Examples were given of parents prioritizing the use of a device for their children's online schooling at the expense of their own online English language training. Having to schedule the telephonic COA training outside the hours when the male head of house was engaged in income-generating activities to be able to reach the family was also cited as a challenge. A shared device, while providing some form of digital inclusion, does not guarantee equal access, a reality noted by COA facilitators who observed challenges with equitable participation in families where only one phone was used. Anecdotally, either the male head of house, youth with a higher level of digital literacy or the strongest English-speaker might dominate the telephonic briefing session, making it harder to engage other participants when compared with in-person orientation.

> "I borrow my colleagues' phone. I need to ask my friend for reading information in English and for help when receiving and sending email. I would like to own a mobile phone; I'm saving money to buy one soon." **(Female refugee, 49, Indonesia)**

[49] GSMA, Access to Mobile Services and Proof of Identity, 2019, www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/ProofOfID_R_WebSpreads.pdf.

Figure 9: Access and Frequency of Access to a Device Belonging to Someone Else

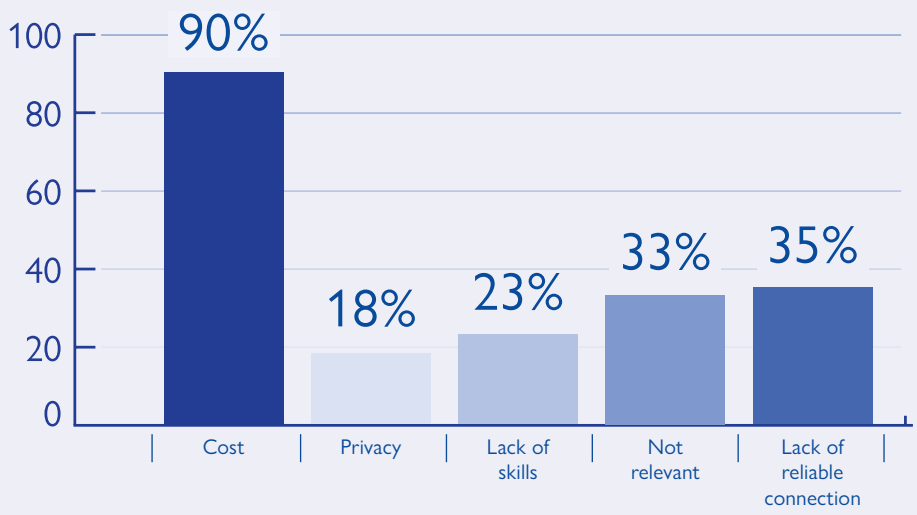


Some refugees who did not own mobile phones or other digital devices expressed aspirations about owning mobile phones, or having smart phones:

> "I have been living in this camp for 5 years. We rely on this phone for contacting our family. I wish I have a better phone when I go to Canada and can afford to buy an extra phone for my wife." **(Male refugee, 33, Indonesia)**

> "I can't afford my own phone… I use my cousins' phone whenever necessary. A phone costs a lot and you need a lot of money to keep using it."
> **(Male refugee, 31, Uganda)**

Figure 10: Reported Barriers to Phone Ownership



Connectivity

Access to both 2G and 3G+ networks was high among survey participants, with over 80 per cent reporting that they always or often have access to a reliable signal, and over 70 per cent always or often having access to a reliable internet connection. However, this access was not even across geographies, with refugees in Thailand, Senegal, Libya and Kenya reporting lower access, particularly to internet connectivity. The 30 per cent of respondents who reported "sometimes", or "never" having access to the internet was split equally across male and female respondents. For those without reliable access to the internet, cost was the highest reported barrier, followed by privacy, relevance and digital literacy.

Figure 11: Access to Reliable Internet and Mobile Connection

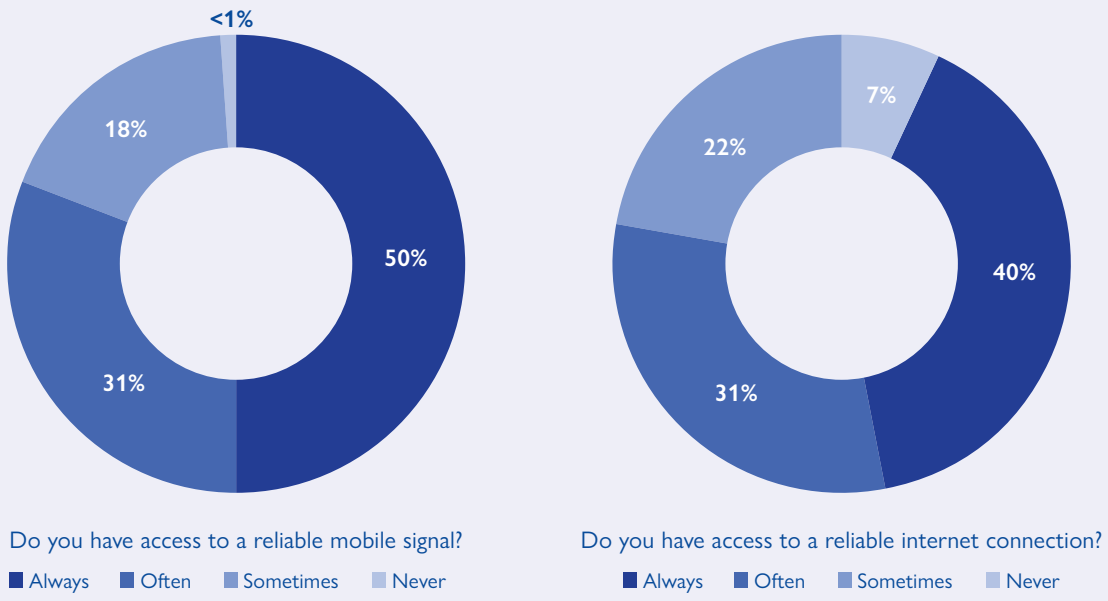
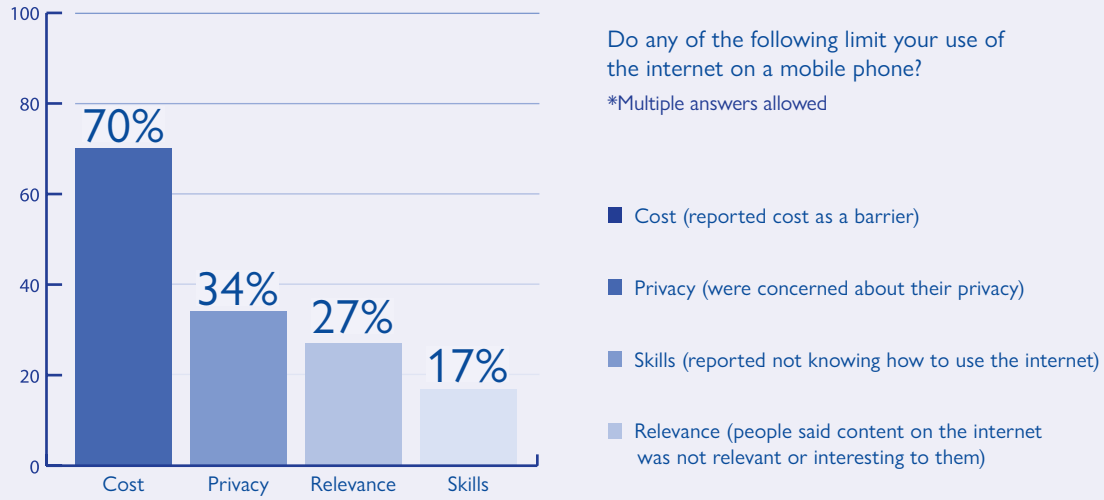
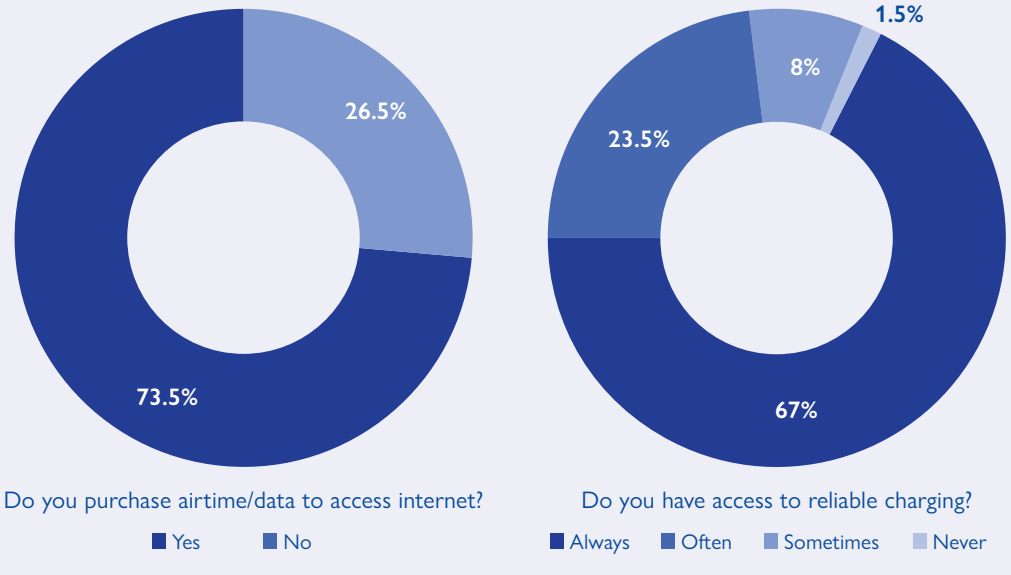


Figure 12: Barriers to the Use of Mobile Internet



Another key determinant of connectivity is the ability to charge the battery of devices and "top up" or load credit onto a device for pre-paid service. While global electrification rates have been rising, an estimated 18 per cent of populations in rural areas lack access to electricity.[50] Encouragingly, the majority of respondents (90.5%) reported having access to reliable charging. The few who reported never having access to charging their batteries were located in East Africa, while those who responded "sometimes" were spread across other regions. The ability to purchase credit is also important for mobile users in predominantly pre-paid environments. Just under 75 per cent of respondents said that they purchase credit in order to be able to access the internet.

Figure 13: Access to Airtime and Data Top-up and Mobile Phone Battery Charging



[50] The World Bank, Access to Electricity Rural 1990–2018, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.RU.ZS.

Digital Skills and Usage

Participants were asked about both their ability to use, and behaviour when engaging with digital devices and online platforms. The vast majority of participants (97%) reported knowing how to make and receive calls and text messages (SMS). Positive response rates were also high (75%) for use of social media platforms, being able to open a link to a file and topping up airtime. Seventy (70) per cent of respondents reported knowing how to navigate to specific websites. The most significant gap in digital skills was related to email use, with just under 50 per cent of respondents reporting that they had an email address, and just over 50 per cent reporting that they do not know how to send and receive emails. This lack of use and skills surrounding email presents a number of challenges and considerations for programming. The reported high rates of usage for social media accounts, many of which require an email to register, means that refugees are likely either having accounts set up on their behalf, or are creating and abandoning email accounts – a phenomenon observed by some COA facilitators and partners. This has implications for using email as a channel for reaching refugees, which are further compounded by the preference for communicating and sharing information through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

> "I cannot use my mobile to browse and I am not smart in using it. If there will be anything interesting, I will ask my husband to help me in using my mobile."
> **(Female refugee, 40, the Sudan)**

Figure 14: Access to Email

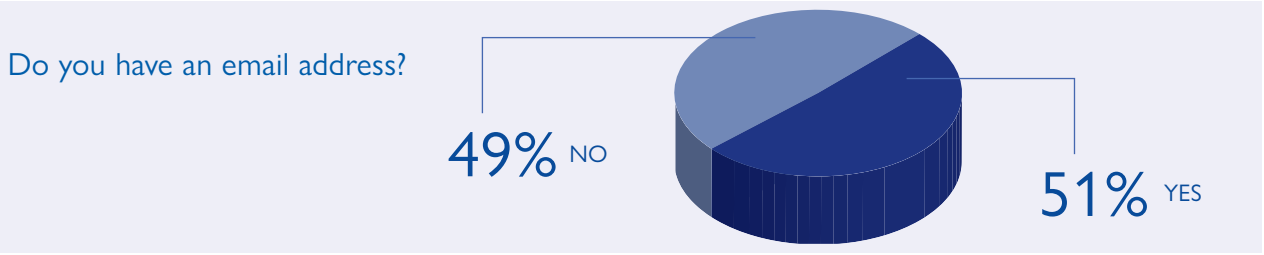
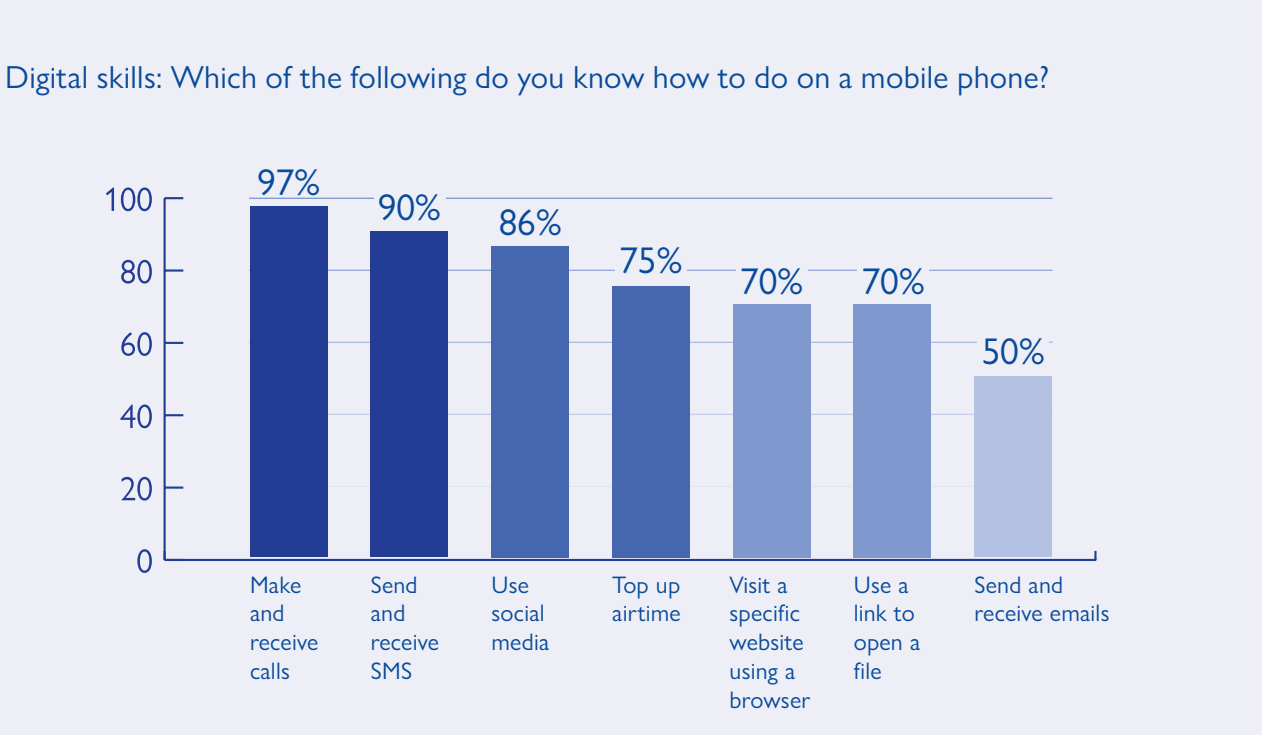


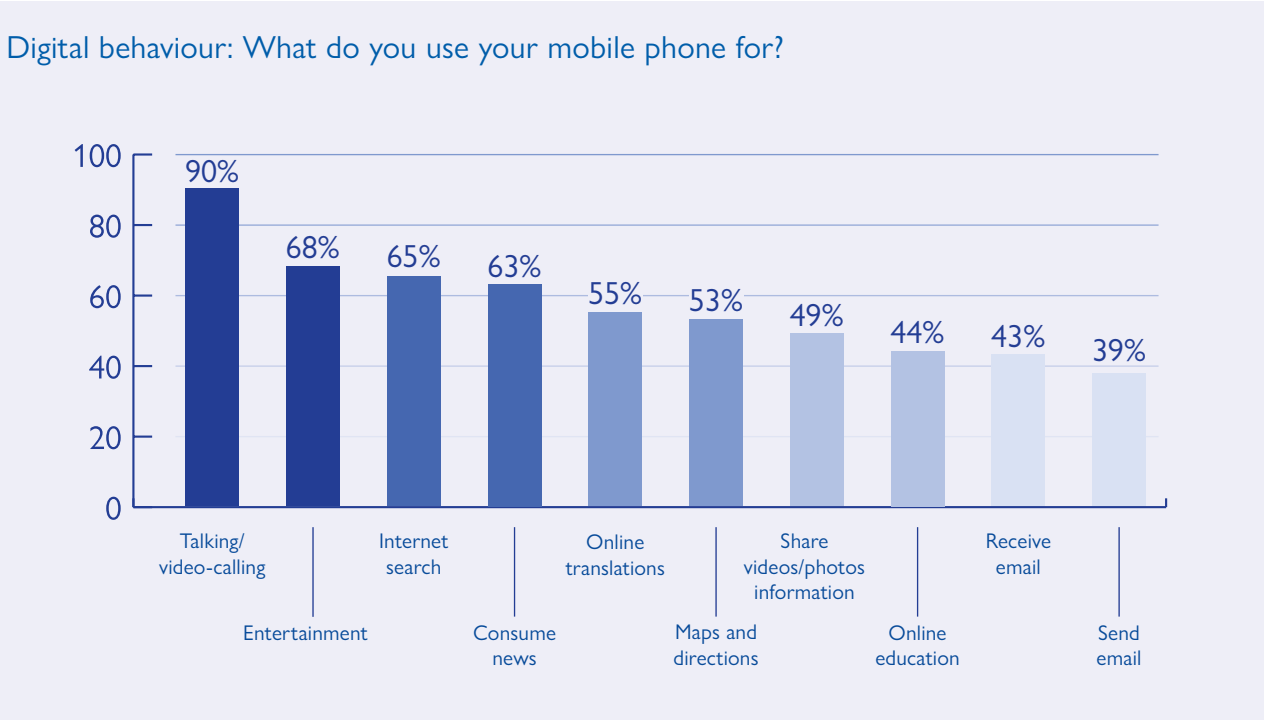
Figure 15: Digital Skills Reported by Survey Participants



Digital Behaviour

Despite a low response rate for the use of email, a number of other functions produced high response rates from participants when asked what they use their mobile phones for. General communication (calling, messaging or video-calling family and friends/others and social media), entertainment, and internet search were the most frequently cited uses.

Figure 16: Digital Behaviour as Reported by Survey Participants

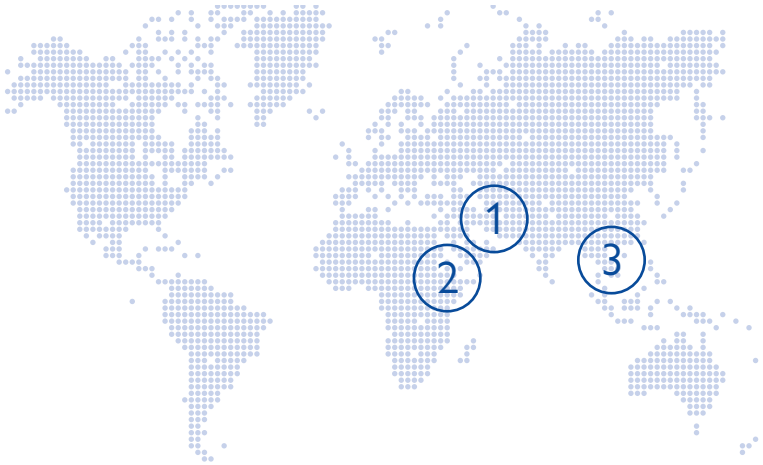


The Importance of Digital Inclusion for Social Connectedness and Well-being

In addition to the quantitative survey data, the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) illuminated the importance of digital technology and connectivity to refugees' sense of well-being and connectedness. The importance of access to online entertainment, social interaction, learnings and individual interests and hobbies should not be underestimated. In Focus Group Discussions, a number of refugees described how they are using their phones to support continued and/or distanced education:

> "(I) have WIFI at home and 4G and data on the phone and use it a lot because my friends are online and that's how they communicate: Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp, I am also taking courses from university for continued education." **(Female, MENA FGD participant)**

1) MENA: Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey
2) East Africa: Kenya, Uganda, the Sudan and Ethiopia
3) Asia: Thailand



Entertainment was also cited as important, with refugees describing watching video clips, movies, religious content and cooking shows on their mobile phones:

> "Yes (he) has internet but shares with his neighbours, his kids use it to learn English and he connects with Facebook, or if he's lost or needs to share location uses the internet to do so." **(Male, MENA FGD participant)**

Context and Variation Within and Between Groups

While ownership of mobile phones and access to connectivity was high overall among research participants, it is important to examine each country and region to ensure that local context and barriers are well understood. For example, during the regional Focus Group Discussions, there were notable differences in digital literacy, skills and usage between regions. For example, in the MENA Focus Group Discussion, refugees all owned their own smart phones, and were engaged online with running businesses, studying at university and exploring information about Canada that would support them in their travel and transition. However, survey data for the MENA region overall indicated that it had the lowest phone ownership rates (77%) when compared to other regions but the highest rate of self-reported social media skills (93%).

> "If (I) didn't have the internet it would be like (I) was living in the Stone Age. I use Facebook and WhatsApp to keep in touch and for watching videos, learning online, looking up all kinds of information." **(Male, MENA FGD participant)**

> "I use it to stay in touch with family and friends and watching cooking shows on YouTube." **(Female, MENA FGD participant)**

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In the East Africa Focus Group Discussion, all participants had phones, but only 75 per cent had access to the internet. The survey data for Sub-Saharan Africa indicated that 85 per cent of respondents owned their own phone, but only 53 per cent reported "always or often" having reliable internet access and 83 per cent reported knowing how to use social media. Within the Focus Group Discussions, comfort and engagement online were varied, with some participants continuing education online, and others unfamiliar with dominant social media platforms:

> "(I) am not familiar with the social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, etc."
> **(Male, East Africa FGD participant)**

In the Focus Group Discussion that took place in Thailand, there was more limited knowledge about the internet (with some conflation between Facebook and the broader internet) and stronger emphasis on barriers to access, particularly related to cost. The survey data indicated that for East Asia and the Pacific, phone ownership was at 80 per cent, with 73 per cent of respondents reporting "always or often" having access to reliable internet.

> "We don't have money to top up the internet and the phone is broken."
> **(Male, Thailand FGD participant)**

In Mae La Oon refugee camp, Mae Hong Son province, Thailand, houses built from bamboo and leaves line dot the hillsides. Some refugees from Mae Hong Son province participated in this research on refugees' digital access and inclusion. © IOM 2008/Chris LOM

Understanding the Risk Factors for Digital Exclusion

While these are generalized findings from a small sample of focus group participants, when combined with the survey data they provide important signals about risks of digital exclusion and the variation of access and digital literacy across different geographies, demographics and contexts. Additional considerations that emerged from comments made during the survey and Focus Group Discussions reinforced the role that age, gender and disability play in further exacerbating digital exclusion. A number of older participants and those with physical disabilities described relying on their children or other family or community members to support them in using digital tools:

> "I am disabled, so I (am) concerned about my learning ability."
> **(Male refugee, 47, Indonesia)**

> "With the help of my son I can have more access and be able to use the applications on my phone." **(Male refugee, 55, Turkey)**

While the gender gap for mobile phone ownership across survey participants was 6 per cent, comments made by a number of female participants offer further insight into the reliance on male family members to facilitate their access:

> "I cannot use my mobile to browse and I am not smart in using it. If there will be anything interesting, I will ask my husband to help me in using my mobile."
> **(Female refugee, 40, the Sudan)**

> "My husband...had the phone and we could only afford one phone. He always uses this phone." **(Female refugee, 23, Pakistan)**

> "I use my husband's mobile phone. I only watch videos on the mobile phone. I know how to pick calls but I do not know how to make calls."
> **(Female refugee, 22, the Niger)**

Finally, some refugees requested that information received online be made available in their native language. A lack of general literacy is further compounded in an online environment, and even more so where much of the content may only be available in English.

> "I would like the pre-departure information to be in Somali."
> **(Female refugee, 45, Uganda)**

> "I can't read and my children always do the calls on my behalf."
> **(Male refugee, 71, Malaysia)**

Perspectives on Trust

As part of both the survey and focus group discussions, refugees had an opportunity to share their views on privacy and trust. Only 11 respondents (seven women and four men) identified privacy as one of the reasons they did not own a mobile phone. Interestingly, eight of those were under the age of 25. However, 34 per cent of refugees (53 male and 51 female) said they were concerned about their privacy online. In the focus group discussions, comments revealed a range of opinions about the trustworthiness of different platforms and sources of information, and concerns about inappropriate content:

> "It's a very important question because a lot of people receive internet information that is wrong. (I) try to get from reliable source. For example, if searching for info about immigration, (I) will go to the IRCC website. If I am reading news, (I) do different research to verify what (I'm) reading. Facebook for example, is people's point of view, rather than fact so you shouldn't take it too seriously." **(Male, MENA FGD participant)**

> "Facebook and YouTube are not trustworthy; you can't believe everything that you read." **(Male, East Africa FGD participant)**

> "Not all platforms have incorrect information, lots of people her age use these sites as a credible source of information." **(Female, MENA FGD participant)**

These varied views and experiences interacting with digital tools highlight that context is essential in establishing levels of digital access, digital literacy and related behaviours and attitudes. General trends and themes can be established across COA sites to inform programming and policy decisions, but continued diligence and flexibility will be required to ensure that risks and barriers are understood and that digital tools and services can be tailored to meet different needs related to language, ability, and access.

CONCLUSIONS

The responses to the survey provide insight into the opportunities and challenges of connecting with refugees in the pre-departure phase. While there is a high level of connectivity overall and strong interest in engaging with digital tools and services, there are challenges presented by familiar barriers to digital inclusion such as cost, location, disability and digital literacy. Importantly, when paired with expert interviews and wider research into the experience of integrating digital tools to support PDO training during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research highlights that it is not only about considering how to reach refugees digitally and with what content, but rather how to build a broader base of digital skills and literacy to empower them to have confidence when interacting in the digital world both pre-departure and post-arrival.

The survey data, coupled with further insights from COA facilitators and COA partners help support the following conclusions:

Digital technologies can offer a range of benefits to strengthen and extend pre-departure orientation services. The opportunities presented by integrating digital tools and platforms are vast. There is high potential for enabling two-way communication between refugees and PDO service providers which can provide a range of benefits. These include creating a stronger feedback loop, extending the reach of PDO services by helping solve the supply and demand challenges, or circumstances where in-person PDO services may not be possible. Integrating digital tools also provides the opportunity to facilitate access to a broader array of content mediums (such as learning apps, videos, audiobooks and other interactive content) and increasing flexibility for providers and refugees are some of the benefits already cited by PDO providers who have embraced digital tools. Importantly for refugees, experience with digital technology through the PDO process will better prepare them for life in Canada, where they will regularly need to interact with the digital world for a range of services.

Access to connectivity and digital tools is strong and growing, but it is uneven. Planning for both low and high bandwidth settings, and recognizing the changing picture of digital inclusion and the challenges this presents across locations will be important in ensuring that there is broad reach and uptake of digital approaches, as well as sufficient flexibility where they may not be feasible, appropriate or accessible. There will inevitably be refugees who are excluded from accessing digital tools as a result of the barriers they face. This reinforces the need to offer multiple channels to reach them, and to continuously evaluate digital initiatives to ensure they are not further marginalizing vulnerable groups and exacerbating the digital divide.

While connectivity grows, digital skills and digital literacy remain a barrier. This presents a challenge in reaching everyone, but also offers an opportunity where COA could focus efforts and play an important role in helping build the capacity of refugees in the pre-departure phase to help familiarize them with some of the digital devices, channels, and concepts which they will need to interact with upon arrival.

Continued assessment is needed to identify and mitigate the risk of digital exclusion, especially related to gender, age, disability and literacy levels. Organizations like IOM and programmes like COA should continue to focus on collecting disaggregated demographic and socioeconomic data that can inform the design of programming and policy to ensure that the introduction of new technologies do not cause harm or leave people behind.

Refugees have views and preferences around the digital platforms and channels they use, including opinions on trust and privacy. Continued engagement on these topics can inform interventions and help ensure that digital tools are meeting their objectives and being designed with the user in mind. COA facilitators and other PDO providers, in addition to refugees themselves, can help inform this. However, asymmetry remains around the platforms where people want to receive information (such as Facebook and WhatsApp as suggested by refugees in this study) and the platforms that partners/IOM can use due to data protection and privacy policies. The platforms that refugees are interacting with most are not necessarily where organizations serving refugees are able to meet them.

Digital channels can help strengthen trust, consistency and credibility. Dedicated apps and/or PDO content portals provide an opportunity to maintain consistency and credibility of information and provide a dedicated space for refugees to access trusted pre-arrival content. It would be beneficial to develop these with a line of sight to supporting resources for the pre-departure and post-arrival phases to support a coordinated approach, reduce duplication and bridge the gap between the pre-and post-arrival phase.

Strong buy-in and adoption of digital tools across organizations is critical to success. Harnessing the enthusiasm of COA facilitators will allow them to bolster their own digital skills, leverage new channels to deliver content, and establish them as intermediaries to support the digital capacity-building of refugees. Ensuring upstream and downstream support and adoption of digital technology and recognition of the importance of digital inclusion of refugees are important foundations for developing successful programming internally, and engaging externally with other PDO providers and a wider range of stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines recommended actions for COA based on an analysis of research findings, broader sectoral trends and the conclusions above. Many of these recommendations may also be relevant for other IOM programmes and service providers working with refugees in the overseas pre-departure context. A combination of awareness-raising, capacity-building, investment, and continued research and evaluation can help ensure that digital tools are accessible, impactful and inclusive alongside the continued provision of the in-person pre-departure orientation training offered, ensuring that COA continues to achieve its objectives.

Recognition of, and advocacy for the fundamental role that digital literacy and skills will play in the success of refugees after their arrival in Canada

Digital skills and digital literacy are no longer optional for participation in today's society. In Canada, as across much of the world, services from both the public and private sectors are being offered online – and in some cases, this is the only way to access them. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend out of necessity, with shopping, learning, socializing, access to government services, financial services and entertainment all moving predominantly online. This trend is unlikely to recede. Refugees who do not have familiarity, skills or confidence interacting through digital tools and channels may face even greater challenges integrating, participating and accessing both essential and non-essential services. Organizations, such as IOM, can play a key a role building awareness of, and championing the importance of digital inclusion for refugees and the necessity of digital skills-training and capacity-building as a fundamental component of pre-departure orientation training. This will contribute to building internal and partner buy-in and external awareness about the importance of ensuring that refugees coming to Canada are equipped with basic skills and knowledge to support their ability to engage in life in Canada.

Integration of digital skills and digital literacy training, including online security, as part of COA development and integration of digital skills/literacy training as part of COA-offered content

In addition to awareness-raising around inclusion of digital skills as part of PDO training, it will be important for COA to consider developing and delivering content that supports digital literacy and skill-building directly as part of the standard curriculum. Refugees who have had limited exposure to digital devices and platforms will have a chance to familiarize themselves with the basics, and be introduced to concepts such as data protection online, password protection and identifying online fraud. For those with more advanced digital skills, it will be an opportunity to understand and feel empowered about the kinds of services they can access online in Canada to support their resettlement. It will be important to strike a balance between achieving individual comfort with, and adoption of digital technologies, and mitigating the risks that can manifest in an online environment, such as identity theft and scams.

Continued assessments of digital access and literacy across sites is important to understand and manage inclusion/exclusion and addressing particular needs

This report has provided a snapshot into the digital access and behaviour of refugees who were part of the COA Programme at the time of research. However, levels of connectedness and digital literacy, as well as perspectives on issues related to data privacy and trust online are not static. They are likely to change depending on the location, composition and context of refugees, as well as broader developments in the digital ecosystem, such as increased broadband coverage and lower cost of devices. As PDO programming incorporates an increasing number of digital tools and platforms, and embraces digital skills training as part of the curriculum, two key elements will be important to success. First, it is critical that an ongoing effort is made to understand the changing landscape of digital inclusion among refugees. Second, new and persistent barriers to inclusion must be identified and addressed.

Identifying base levels of digital access and digital literacy and taking account of variations based on age, gender, literacy and disability through needs assessments, could also help COA facilitators determine whether/what complementary digital tools can be used in different circumstances: briefing sessions; tailoring training sessions to include particular topics around digital literacy; and/or point refugees towards additional credible resources on these topics. It will also provide information to determine whether other alternative channels (such as audio or video) would be more effective in particular instances. The information collected in these needs assessments could also serve an additional purpose by informing post-arrival organizations in Canada with insights regarding the digital needs of refugees they receive.

Prioritizing and investing in pre-departure orientation content that can be shared through digital channels

One of the recurring requests from refugees involved in this research was for a credible online repository of content shared through COA briefing sessions that could be accessed from anywhere. COA facilitators raised the need to be able to update materials shared with refugees in near-real time (for example, information related to COVID-19 quarantine requirements), while other PDO providers spoke of the importance of consistent messaging in PDO training materials. An efficient way of achieving portability, credibility and consistency is through having content in a variety of languages that can be shared and accessed through a trusted online channel and updated digitally.

While the research highlighted that not all content lends itself to being digitized, as well as the importance of building trust to successfully deliver COA training, there are some practical topics that could be effectively communicated digitally.These include, but are not limited to: what to expect at an airport; the weather in Canada; links to sites to find out about accreditation requirements for foreign educational or professional credentials, or public health updates. This information could be offered digitally either in conjunction with traditional orientation training methods, or independently for specific modules, however in the case of the latter, managing equitable access to information for those who don't have digital devices will be paramount. A prioritization exercise to identify content, (such as the COA workbook) that can be shared through digital channels, as well as content delivered around digital skills and literacy will help ensure that the right material is shared in the right formats and reflects time constraints and absorption capacity.

Pragmatic assessment of the digital channels available to reach refugees

One of the priorities of any service is "to meet people where they are." In the context of refugee connectivity, this often means on Facebook and WhatsApp, which this research has shown, are preferred digital channels for many refugees. This presents a challenge for COA and other PDO providers, who are unable to use these platforms due to corporate/organizational concerns and related policies around data protection and privacy. Safeguarding data and user privacy are paramount, and of acute concern for many refugees fleeing persecution; making it essential that digital services are imbued with privacy by design and rigorous data protection. However, alternative platforms approved by IOM, such as Microsoft Teams and Signal are not familiar to refugees surveyed and may require more data/bandwidth and digital skills to use. Understanding the user-experience and preferences across digital channels, and finding a balance between familiarity, functionality and privacy and security should be prioritized as new digital options are considered.

Change management and recruitment to support digital strategy execution

The importance of change management and focused training should not be underestimated. PDO providers and COA facilitators commented on the shifts that accompany the introduction of digital tools and the need for a comprehensive plan to generate buy-in and adoption across the spectrum of service providers involved in pre-departure and post-arrival training. Central to these efforts is capacity-building for COA facilitators to equip them with the digital skills and confidence to be ambassadors for new digital tools and services and act as an intermediary between these tools and refugees. Many COA facilitators expressed optimism about the potential that digital technology offers for their ability to reach refugees that they may not have been able to reach previously, and to have additional options in the "COA toolbox of activities" to deliver their services while building out their own professional skill set. However, being replaced or displaced by technology is a real concern. Clear communication, and an inclusive comprehensive change management plan that defines the benefits, opportunities, roles and processes can help ensure buy-in and adoption across diverse internal and external stakeholders. Finally, consideration should be given to recruiting individuals with technical skill sets that have expertise in executing digital strategies and who can support this process. Linking these efforts to support the digital inclusion of refugees should also be considered within the context of an overall organizational digital transformation agenda to ensure that efforts are well aligned and integrated.

Initiating a Working Group or Community of Practice that spans pre-departure and post-arrival orientation service providers

PDO and post-arrival service providers are at different stages of rolling out digital services due to organizational strategy, resources and varied operational contexts. Many have accelerated their efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE) has been running its Settle In app for US-bound immigrants and refugees since 2018, while the Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS), shifted to online digital content in response to COVID-19. There is a wealth of experience within the sector and an opportunity to ensure lessons learned and best practices are shared through formalizing a working group or community of practice where experiences can be exchanged. Importantly, such a group should span both pre-departure and post-arrival service providers serving refugees to bridge the gap, ensuring that linkages are made and opportunities to enhance continuity of services are not lost.

Emphasis on the role of digital tools to augment and enhance, rather than replace in-person pre-departure orientation training.

Digital technology presents an exciting opportunity to enhance in-person COA training and increase access when and where it is not possible to provide it in-person. Overall, digital access is high and likely to continue improving, while further investment into advocacy, capacity-building and new online offerings will help build an inclusive digital environment for refugees that can be leveraged to support pre-departure orientation training and other stages of their resettlement journey. However, the introduction of digital tools cannot be technology-led, but rather must be grounded in an understanding of the context, strategies to overcome the barriers (such as literacy, trust, affordability, connectivity, disability), mitigation of risks, and a recognition that digital approaches may not be appropriate or accessible in all circumstances.

However, the move to digitization should not come at the expense of continued investment in-person group training which remains fundamentally important for refugees as they prepare for their new lives in Canada. The range of benefits provided by in-person training should not be underestimated. These include the opportunity to socialize and meet other people on a similar journey, developing confidence through immersive learning and role-playing and a group-based environment that can be tailored to psychosocial, learning and literacy needs. These and other benefits cannot be fulfilled by a virtual environment alone. There are critical human elements needed to support COA participants that technology cannot replace, and this reality should remain at the forefront of programme design and execution.

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