

Guidance Note - Connectivity for Refugees COVID-19

Supporting Persons of Concern's digital access and inclusion to facilitate UNHCR's Risk Communication and Community Engagement

This guidance note on Connectivity for Refugees is intended as a quick reference tool to support colleagues working directly with populations of concern in response to COVID-19. It complements the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) guidance and highlights issues related to connected communication channels, internet access and modalities for delivery.

Operational Context

Given the speed of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is important that UNHCR utilises the different communication channels available to effectively communicate with Persons of Concern (PoCs)¹ on the evolving situation. Furthermore, UNHCR needs to ensure that PoCs without access to digital channels, specifically relied upon in the current context, are not left behind. UNHCR needs to maintain communications with PoCs remotely regardless of age, gender or other diversity. Access to Internet connectivity - and in particular mobile telephones - varies dramatically per country and per region. Research by UNHCR demonstrates that PoCs are less likely to have access to connectivity than their hosting populations, specifically half as likely in rural areas.² The global trade association for mobile network operators - the GSMA - has found that there are substantive differences in levels of access, and unique barriers to access, based on age, gender and diversity of the population in question.³ Specific barriers include lack of access to devices, digital literacy, lack of access to energy to power devices, and absence of cellular networks.

UNHCR should maximise the reach and level of engagement with individuals remotely, leveraging connectivity where feasible. Measures should be taken to minimise the number of individuals with no or limited access directly, pivot existing activities to adapt to social distancing requirements, and support public health goals by encouraging refugee inclusion in national telecommunications frameworks and as a focus population segment for public health campaigns undertaken over digital channels.

Key Considerations

- ***Understand existing connectivity access and needs.*** To gauge appropriate support interventions in light of COVID-19 it's important to first understand existing community preferences, levels of connectivity, and potential barriers to access.
 - Where possible, leverage existing Information and Communication Needs Assessments to understand existing dynamics of digital access inc. phone ownership, access to connectivity, and 'digital divides'; and
 - Use available data (specifically from Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) and the telecommunications regulator) -i.e. cellular coverage and grid power availability.
- ***Legal barriers to connectivity hinder remote engagement.*** In many countries, telecommunications regulations mean that PoCs face barriers in accessing SIM cards and

¹ Refugees, Asylum-seekers, IDPs and stateless persons

² Connecting Refugees <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5770d43c4/connecting-refugees.html>

³ The Digital Lives of Refugees

<https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Digital-Lives-of-Refugees.pdf>

registering them in their own name.⁴ Engage with the local telecommunications regulator to explore options for opening legal pathways to access. Advocacy points relating to the COVID-19 situation include:

- Exclusion encourages non-remote information sharing thus presenting a public-health risk to refugees & hosting communities;
 - Access to services inc. Mobile money / wallets reduce the need for face-to-face services, and reduce cash handling;
 - mHealth systems for remote healthcare are of limited use when communities are unable to register mobile services in their own name; and
 - Informal workarounds to access rely on face-to-face interactions that present a public health risk.
- ***Avoid use of Connected Centres.*** Connected centers (such as youth / community centres, and educational facilities) are designed to provide equitable access to digital resources and connectivity when individual device ownership is low. These facilities are often oversubscribed which make it difficult to maintain social distancing, and furthermore sharing devices enhances the likelihood of virus transmission. **Their usage is not encouraged during COVID-19 responses.** However, in line with local and national directives regarding quarantine and isolation, centres and their equipment could be repurposed to maximise the potential of these facilities however with caution and observing the following guidelines:
 - Determine who'd benefit most from usage of such facilities with a clear targeting protocol.
 - Clarify restrictions and put in place measures to maximise social distancing. I.e limit usage to extremely few, or even one at a time, disinfect devices before / after use etc.
 - Where facilities have printers, these can be put to use, printing information for sharing to those without their own devices to be consumed in their own homes
 - Explore the opportunity for repurposing hardware for private use by the most vulnerable.
 - For more information relating to continued provision of educational services, please see the [Connected Education guidance note](#) for more details.
 - ***Supporting individual level access as an alternative to communal connectivity facilities is recommended.***
 - *Enhance individual level Device Access.* Consider immediate targeted distribution to specific groups or people with specific vulnerabilities exacerbated through social distancing i.e. people with disabilities. It is also possible to support local wholesalers / facilitating supply chains and work with device manufacturers / MNOs to ensure strong local markets for affordable devices. Finally, given refugee's often lack the ability to meet upfront costs, consider working with NGO partners or other third parties to facilitate flexible payment plans for devices
 - *Consider distributing SIMs registered by humanitarian organisations for vulnerable persons or those with specific community functions.* As a temporary measure and where regulatory barriers exist, UNHCR could distribute SIM cards registered by the organisation with liability mitigation mechanisms in place to limit repercussions of misuse. This should be implemented with caution and under the guidance of Legal Affairs.
 - *Devices charging.* UNHCR can address barriers to charging through providing mobile charging devices such as solar lamps / wind up radios with a charging function.

⁴ Displaced and Disconnected <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/displaced-and-disconnected/>

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UNHCR, March 2020

- *Public Wifi.* UNHCR can partner with MNOs to establish public wifi hotspots and use these to disseminate relevant COVID-19 materials. Where UNHCR is providing Wifi through access points, these could be extended but with caution. Access at hotspots can lead to people congregating and steps to encourage social distancing should be established to limit risk of exposure. Splash pages should include relevant information / guidance on COVID-19 as well as other resources such as educational resources / health information.
- *Targeted top-up interventions.* Consider conducting targeted top-up interventions for the most vulnerable for voice and data connectivity. Furthermore community roles such as health volunteers often lack resources relating to airtime and data and allocations should be made to ensure they can work effectively.
- **Explore options for low-tech Connectivity.**
 - *Blend with offline solutions.* Creative solutions can be put in place to share online content between devices and then through paper / printed modalities, for those without access. Operations can provide guidance to those with access to their own device to support sharing with others, to safely allow them to access personal services.
 - *Using technology that is widely accessible.* Technologies such as USSD (dialling a code into a basic phone such as *100#) can be used to provide information to communities without access to a smartphone. UNHCR can partner with either with MNOs directly or third party companies who broker such services, such as [Viamo](#).
 - *Explore alternative technologies that support social distancing, specifically Radio.* Solar radios can be used to support education continuity, provide health information etc..
- **Explore opportunities for partnerships with MNO and Telecoms Regulators.**
 - *MNOs.* MNOs are setting up initiatives to help ensure communities remain connected. MNOs may offer specialised pricing to support vulnerable persons during this time period. UNHCR should aim to have PoCs included in such schemes. UNHCR can also negotiate line dormancy periods with MNOs, to extend the length of time a line is active without top up. Local agent networks will be under new instructions given the outbreak. UNHCR should engage with MNOs to better understand what the implications might be for PoCs.
 - *Regulators.* Some regulators are taking measures to ensure connectivity as demand increases. In Kenya, the government has authorised deployment of balloons that allows for blanket connectivity to be provided in partnership with an MNO (in this case Telekom). UNHCR should leverage existing initiatives with regulators to support PoCs' access.
- **Other Considerations**
 - *Undertake specific interventions to support digital inclusion of vulnerable persons.* Vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, women, people with physical or mental disabilities or ethnic minorities are at the risk of being further excluded once social distancing measures have been put in place and digital communication is encouraged. With limited budgets, specific interventions should be undertaken to target the digital inclusion of these groups if evidence points to their likely exclusion.
 - *Cash-Based Interventions through digital channels.* Where 'know-your-customer-requirements allow for it, CBIs can be pursued through digital channels such as mobile money or mobile wallet. In parallel operations should both use the current climate as an opportunity to engage with the regulators who might be in a position to put special

measures in place or implement tiered KYC, given the public health dimension. For more information consult UNHCR guidance on KYC/CDD issues in CBIs⁵. In parallel, operational workarounds leveraging digital technology will be required to keep cash operations underway. As above, workarounds include UNHCR playing a more active role in providing access. Closed loop systems like Bamba Chakula⁶ present opportunity to utilise digital connectivity to support cash delivery where regulatory restrictions prevent pursuit of approaches that encourage true digital and financial inclusion.

- *Using connectivity to facilitate remote data collection mechanisms.* To overcome data collection challenges, remote assessments and self-administered questionnaires can leverage existing connectivity interventions provided by UNHCR and partners, specifically through captive portals that provide a gateway to access.

UNHCR Resources:

- [COVID-19 Operational Guidance](#) (inc. [Connected Education](#), [Cash](#), [Community Engagement](#))
- [Connectivity for Refugees Planning Checklist for Managers](#)
- [Connectivity for Refugees Operational Checklist for Practitioners](#)
- [Use of Radio](#)
- [Use of SMS:](#)
- [Mobile Phone Distribution](#)
- [Device Sharing Guidance](#)
- [Connectivity for Refugees - Emergency Handbook](#)

External resources:

- **ITU:** ITU has set up a Global Network Resilience Platform (REG4COVID) platform: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Pages/REG4COVID.aspx>
- **Broadband Commission:** A BC Working Group is providing guidance on supporting connectivity operations in times of pandemic: <https://broadbandcommission.org/workinggroups/Pages/Epidemic-Preparedness.aspx>
- **NetHope** is aggregating resources from its member framed toward assisting during the COVID-19 pandemic: [NetHope COVID-19 Resources Page](#)
- [Connecting Africa - What African operators are doing to help during COVID-19 outbreak](#)
- [Country Responses regarding Internet access during COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Useful Contacts and Further Support

UNHCR Innovation Service is able to provide further advice regarding Connectivity for Refugees planning and programming in response to COVID-19. To complement this, discrete financial support is available to support interventions piloting and experimenting with solutions that enhance digital access and inclusion. You can also contact UNHCR colleagues for additional support, to raise questions or provide feedback:

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⁵ Guidance is available in [English](#), [French](#), and [Spanish](#)

⁶ <https://www.wfp.org/publications/bamba-chakula-vouchers-food-assistance-kenya%E2%80%99s-refugee-camps-may-2015>