Desk review – internet access challenges are leaving people behind

Background

In the light of COVID-19, the already existing inequalities and gaps is our societies are not only becoming more apparent, but also increasing. The digital revolution is transforming the world but still, people are being left behind, especially vulnerable groups, such as refugee populations, internally displaced persons and migrants, young people with disabilities, rural youth, and LGBTQI young people .

In the "Connecting Refugees"[1] report, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees stated in the preface that:

> *"Connectivity has the potential to transform how we communicate, the way in which we respond to the protection needs of displaced people, and our delivery of humanitarian services. Most significantly, better connectivity can promote self-reliance by broadening the opportunities for refugees to improve their own lives. Access to the internet and mobile telephone services has the potential to create a powerful multiplier effect, boosting the well-being of refugees and of the communities that host them".[2]*

Having to live offline means that contact and communication with loved ones is difficult and often impossible. Lack of internet access also means that youth and adolescents that are enrolled in education are left behind, due to many online learning platforms and opportunities are dependent on access to the internet. Additionally, access to reliable, up-to-date and often life-saving COVID-19 information is vanished due to lack of internet access.

In Za'atari Camp and Azraq Camp in Jordan, the growing role that connectivity plays in refugees' lives also gives rise to new risks and vulnerabilities, particularly around cybersecurity, privacy and implications for the determination or acceptance of their refugee status.[3]

It is of the utmost importance that online information must trickle down to the offline spaces, while acknowledging the on-going work of local communities, youth groups and youth networks and grass-root organizations and support creativity in their outreach to young people who are at risk of being left behind due to the internet access challenges.

The below recommendations and practices have been collected from the COVID-19 response but also during other pandemics the world has faced, with the aim to inform youth workers, humanitarian actors, youth leaders, youth groups and networks on the innovative ideas that have been adopted worldwide where internet connectivity remains inaccessible. Additionally, the below information is mainly applicable assuming that strict moving and gathering restrictions will continue to be in place due to the COVID-19 which will affect the traditional ways of engaging with young people through face-to-face interactions.

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[1] *Connecting Refugees - How Internet and Mobile Connectivity can Improve Refugee Well-Being and Transform Humanitarian Action*, UNHCR, Geneva (2016).
[2] Ibid, page 5.
[3] *Connecting with Confidence - Literature Review*, UNHCR (2020), page 9.

Good practices

Radio and Television are alternative ways for those who do not have access to the internet with interactive elements.

For example, **Columbia** has begun broadcasting educational programs on both public radio and television for students from primary to middle school across the country, in coordination with teachers and educational institutions.[4]

In Argentina, the program "Seguimos Educando", developed by the Ministry of Education and the Secretariat of Media and Public Communication, began broadcasting educational content from April 1, 2020.[5] Seguimos Educando airs 14 hours a day of television content and 7 hours a day of radio content specially produced for students as a result of school closures. For both radio and television, each lesson broadcast will have the presence of a teacher and a conductor (journalist, artist, scientist), in addition to the dissemination of teaching materials. The television broadcasts premiered on the public channels and are also broadcast by private, provincial, university, cooperative and community channels. Radio Nacional and its 49 subsidiaries throughout the country have been broadcasting 7 programs daily of 1 hour each. For students without access to technology or connectivity, this television and radio programming is supplemented with 'notebooks' packed with learning resources that have been delivered to homes of these students. 9 notebooks have been developed for this purpose: 2 notebooks are for pre-primary levels, 4 for primary levels, 2 for secondary level and 1 for the family.

The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Advancing Youth Project during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Liberia disseminated literacy and mathematics lessons through radio broadcasts to support learning for young people in isolation.[6]

The NRC South Sudan EMPOWER project is broadcasting messages to young people through radio stations. The project, a collaboration with BBC Media Action, transmits information pre-approved by WHO and the Ministry of Health.[7] The project is also engaging youth through its existing EMPOWER project Facebook page.

War Child Holland in the Occuipied Palestinian Territory has supported a youth-led radio programme to raise awareness abouth COVID-19 and mental health.[8]
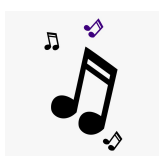
Young artists from Goma, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are mobilizing to protect their city and educate young people about COVID-19 through this music video.

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[4] *How countries are using edtech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic,* The World Bank (online), last accessed: 26th of May 2020, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic

[5] Ibid.

[6] *COVID-19: Working with and for young people*, Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action (2020), page 17.

[7] Ibid, page 26.

[8] Ibid.

War Child Holland in South Sudan is collaborating with the local artist Check-B Magic to produce this music video in Juba/Arabic on COVID-19.

YouTube Channels are broadcasting lessons for students to which teachers and professors can themselves upload the educational content. In the West Bank and Gaza, an educational portal accessed through the Ministry of Education website, contains a variety of educational materials, interactive educational games, and a link to the central YouTube channel.

Free Wi-Fi hotspots for learners and supporting the creation WhatsApp groups to provide additional support. In the Washington state, public-private partnerships seek to bridge the "digital divide" by providing free broadband access to all residents through community drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots.[9] It was highlighted that access to the internet is an "equity issue" which is intensified by the crisis. This also highlights the importance of collaborating with the private sector to combat the challenges faced in communities due to the pandemic.

Phone based learning can support in bridging the education system gaps and support those who lack access to the internet. Telecommunications companies are providing free Internet access (via SIM cards) to pupils who come from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds and areas and updating young people and parents over daily phone calls.

In Egypt, there is an arrangement with the Ministry of Communication and IT and mobile carriers to make available SIM cards at no cost to students if they have a device.[10]

War Child Holland in Uganda is working with rural refugees and host communities on the border with South Sudan.[11] Young people previously involved in advocacy and employability programmes have been retrained to inform their communities about COVID-19. Young volunteers circulate their phone numbers through local leaders/radio/ flyers, asking community members to reach out if they have questions. Youth are trained to refer cases to specialized service providers when needed.

Home delivery. For children and youth who face challenges in connecting to online learning platforms, delivery of paper documents and materials are being coordinated. Such delivery methods must however take into consideration safe handling and distribution. Creating and disturbing physical packages, paper worksheets and books are key ways of making remote learning more accessible, especially in the light of the movement restrictions due to COVID-19 and the closure of public establishments.

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[9] *Drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots launch statewide push for universal public access broadband*, Washington State Department of Commerce (online), last accessed: 26th of May 2020, https://www.commerce.wa.gov/news-releases/community-programs-facilities/drive-in-wi-fi-hotspots-launch-statewide-push-for-universal-public-access-broadband/

[10] See footnote 4.

[11] *COVID-19: Working with and for young people*, Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action (2020), page 25.

Recognizing the importance of television in Costa Rica, as not all families have internet access, they are using public media to broadcast educational programs (for students, parents, and teachers) about different subjects.[12] Virtual content for teachers (a virtual classroom, a guide for autonomous work, etc.) is also being developed. They are planning on distributing this in hard copy formats for families with no internet access. Recognizing the need to protect students learning online, they are also working on creating content related to cybersecurity for young people.

Soap and hand washing are life-saving but not available to many. War Child Holland has started to distribute hygiene kits in selected country offices.[13] Kits include soap and hand sanitizer along with reading materials and information on homeschooling, COVID-19, and psychosocial support for children, young people, and their caregivers.

School buses have multiple purposes. In Washington State, drivers in many districts continue to travel their regular routes, delivering meals and homework at their stops.[14] For families living in rural areas who are unable to make the trip to designated pickup sites, students rely on the food and paper packets delivered to their driveways.

School buses have also been converted into mobile hotspots to offer free broadband.[15]

Activities on Chromebooks. For students that do not have online access, the usage of Chromebooks to continue learning through capturing and editing photos and videos to take notes use Google Keep app.[16] Offline options are available for teachers to create alternate activities and projects for students without internet access on the Chromebook App Hub or Chrome Web Store, such as Screencastify and Soundtrap for Education. Here, you can access a two-pager with details for teachers and students using Chromebooks offline, including a list of apps that work without internet connection.

Reading books in an effort to minimize screen time. In the US, public libraries are providing curbside delivery of books to support such efforts, and many schools and districts are offering a free book pickup service with the help of local literacy groups.[17]

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[12] See footnote 9.

[13] See footnote 10, page 15.

[14] *How to reach students without internet access during coronavirus? Schools get creative,* NBC News, last accessed: 26th of May 2020,
https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/how-reach-students-without-internet-access-during-coronavirus-schools-get-n1186251

[15] *School buses to become Wi-Fi hotspots for NC students lacking internet access,* WRAL TechWire, last accessed: 26th of May 2020,
https://www.wraltechwire.com/2020/05/06/school-buses-to-become-wi-fi-hotspots-for-nc-students-lacking-internet-access/

[16] *Continuing Remote Learning for Students Without Internet,* EdTech, last accessed: 26th of May 2020,
https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2020/04/continuing-remote-learning-students-without-internet

[17] See footnote 14.

War Child Holland is running a literacy programme for out-of-school adolescents in Lebanon.[18] Teachers distributed books and videotaped lessons to youth without internet access ahead of lockdown. Each teacher follows up with an assigned group of students on a daily basis over the phone.

UNICEF has released a checklist for its staff and others on how to support learning for the most vulnerable children in areas where schools are closed.[19] While remote learning strategies aim to ensure continued learning for all children, we know that the most marginalized children including those with disabilities, struggling learners, children from ethnic minorities, children on the move (migrant, refugee and internally displaced children), children in the most rural hard-to-reach and poorest communities and girls tasked with caring for ill family members may not be able to access these opportunities. The checklist includes the below points:

- ➢ Provision of learning devices/equipment and connectivity;
- ➢ Accessibility of instruction;
- ➢ Language of instruction;
- ➢ Individualized Education Plans (IEP);
- ➢ Caregivers/parental engagement;
- ➢ Structure and routine;
- ➢ Psychosocial support, protection and prevention/management of gender-based violence;
- ➢ Protection and inclusion of children on the move;
- ➢ Communication, sensitization and media campaigns on the value of girls' education;
- ➢ Learning beyond school curricula;
- ➢ Accelerated education, remedial, and catch-up programmes;
- ➢ Build back better.

See reference for more details.

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[18] See footnote 5.

[19] *All Means All – How to support learning for the most vulnerable children in areas of school closures,* UNICEF (2020).

Lessons learned and Recommendations

Humanitarian actors have faced the issue of internet connectivity and access for people on the move for a long time, and the lessons learned and recommendations from such experiences can be a helpful guide at this time. The Ebola virus epidemics in Western Africa and the lessons learned gained from that response can also guide us in combating COVID-19 and how to coordinate our work:

- ➢ Significant barriers to access mobile phones, internet, radio and provision of electricity were listed mainly in poor and rural communities. Rapidly increasing telecommunications could therefore put a strain on already fragile networks. The importance of partnerships with broadcast, internet providers, mobile phone companies and hardware companies should be explored to create strengthened infrastructure and the important role the private sector can play to eliminate cost barriers through in-kind contributions, as seen in the examples above.

- ➢ Singular radio and television provisions which lead to lack of content differentiation by grade level in delivery can result in inaccessible or inadequate content. Solutions must therefore allow for multiple grade levels and age characteristics.

- ➢ Investments are required to ensure that young people have access to multiple forms of communication to connect with each other from local to international level and to make funding available for the purchase of internet credit and phones. A prerequisite to this is that donor funding is flexible to be used for the needs of young people that are exacerbated due to COVID-19.

- ➢ Youth networks and relevant communications and media structures must be inplace before a crisis hits, in order to capitalize on prior work and mobilize quickly, especially youth-led media and communication to maximize outreach in communities. In any response, the potential of community networks in helping to meet connectivity gaps in the population must be taken into consideration and be an integral part of the response.

- ➢ Community networks could play an important role in meeting the needs of refugees for better connectivity, especially, as indicated earlier, because they often focus on supporting the communication needs of excluded groups, such as indigenous people who are usually located in more remote areas without access to traditional infrastructure. Similarly, community networks can be designed to support the needs of the specific population groups more commonly present in refugee communities, such as the high proportion of women and youth.

- ➢ Encourage the development of local content. Help to maximise the value derived from community networks and other connectivity provided in forced displacement contexts by ensuring there are useful local content and applications available (ideally hosted locally), both for the direct benefit of the local population and refugees, and to build demand for community networks, thereby helping to ensure their sustainability. This also includes ensuring applications and mechanisms are available that support communities in producing their own local content.

Conclusion

The internet is a helpful tool to reach as many youth and adolescents as possible, and their ease with technology enables them to enjoy its advantages. However, the internet is a barrier to inclusion, and as humanitarian actors and people of concern are becoming increasingly dependent on the internet, the risk of leaving young people behind. As shown in many of the examples aboves, innovation is not always about inventing something new or to embark on unexplored waters, but it is actually about going back to basics and to the available resources that were used before the digital revolution. Donors, UN agencies, and Humanitarian actors must invest in equal access of adolescents and young people to good quality internet connection, and devices, at the same time by being flexible and innovative to reach the most vulnerable and ensure their active engagement in education, learning and self-development and self-care process.

This desk review was produced by UNFPA Jordan Country Office Youth Team