DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY 2022—2026

Strengthening protection, building self-reliance and optimizing delivery

Contents

Foreword

Digital technology is a great bridge that can help facilitate the world's displaced to learn, to work, to communicate, and access other needs with greater efficiency. But presently it is a rare jewel that not everyone can put their hand to. Where I am, there are a few centres where someone can have access to connectivity but with few tablets and poor connectivity it makes it hard for people to rely on them. So many people don't have a computer at home.

Jessy is a Congolese refugee living in Kenya. © UNHCR/Mike Walton

Coming from a country where my secondary studies were conducted in French, the transition to the English system was tough. I stayed two years without doing anything, until I had the opportunity to join a three-day coding workshop. This opportunity opened my eyes to the potential of digital. Since that time, I kept on building other digital skills and earned a professional certificate in Computer and Data Science. I am currently doing an online Computer Science degree.

With the digital skills learnt, I was able to pilot the first ever Instant Network School's digital bootcamp for girls in the Kakuma refugee camp, passing on the skills I learnt to others. I'm proud to say that with the skills learnt, I got the chance to start my own community-based organization with other passionate and motivated youths in the camp, where we equip youths with in-demand soft and digital skills for them to be self-reliant to better their future.

In Kakuma the importance of digital services is increasing. The "KASI"[1] programme that assists people to book appointments at kiosks, has been a time saver for many people since people come and book for themselves and avoid having a "human intermediary". The system hasn't been extended to mobile booking yet, but once this is done, it will help with queuing and overloading field posts.

There are a number of risks for refugees with technology. Refugees look for a stable life. Several links are online where you will see people offering jobs and this is something displaced people have to be careful of because not all of them are genuine. Misinformation is also common. Recently people received reports of political changes that impact the camps in Kenya via social media. It was hard to see families selling their own items that are a source of income because of these reports which were not true. People getting depressed and losing hope because they didn't have the right information from the right people.

Digital inclusion is a tool that shows us hope to catch up with the outside world. UNHCR's investment in Digital Transformation Strategy gives us hope; and helps ensure our safety. We want to not be left behind, because our future depends on it. We want to progress hand in hand with our peers. There is no solving a puzzle if some pieces are missing. Everyone should be digitally included and should have the opportunity to contribute to the world's digital development.

Jessy is a Refugee Advocate and worked with UNHCR Kakuma as a UNV supporting Connected Education.

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1   The Kiosk Automated Services and Information (KASI) is a kiosk-based tool that enables refugees to send and receive secure messages with UNHCR, update their contact information, and request appointments for services.

Introduction

The growth in the use of digital channels and associated technology offers a wide range of opportunities for the forcibly displaced and stateless but also brings with it new risks. This strategy sets out to address those issues and provide a framework for action to transform how UNHCR works in the digital space.

The communities we serve increasingly rely on digital technology and channels to communicate and access services in urban, rural and camp contexts. In 2021 UNHCR's field trials of new messaging platforms for engaging with communities demonstrated that high impact engagement could take place in situations where in-person dialogue was not possible.[1]

Connected education, building digital skills and digital work all present opportunities to rebuild lives. Since 2016, over 125,000 refugee learners in 23 countries have participated in Connected Higher Education programmes.

However, exclusion still exists, with research showing that the forcibly displaced are still less connected than their host communities especially in rural areas.[2] This strategy recognizes that new digital approaches to meet and serve communities must also meet field realities and complement established face-to-face and telephone channels.

Along with the positive benefits that digital can bring, the protection of those forced to flee is increasingly threatened in the online space and by some uses of digital technology. This includes networks of traffickers operating on social media platforms;[3] border controls becoming increasingly digitized in ways that can put access to asylum at risk;[4] misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic leading to vaccine hesitancy;[5]

disinformation and hate speech stoking racism and xenophobia,[6] which are often root causes of displacement and threaten the safety of the forcibly displaced and stateless.

At the same time, the communities we serve have told us that they increasingly want high quality and easily accessible digital services delivered by UNHCR and our partners. This trend has only been accelerated by the impact of COVID-19 with UNHCR's multi-country research in 2020 and 2021 highlighting the core digital services most in demand. By meeting these needs UNHCR will increase access at the same time as offering new opportunities to strengthen accountability, integrity and efficiency through increased digitalization.

The communities we serve, our partners and donors turn to our digital channels to engage, inform, share, collaborate and access support. An impact-orientated, high-quality online experience is essential to keep audiences engaged and reach our business objectives. Our digital channels (web, social and email) reached over 40 million individuals in 2021. However, audience volume should not be the main measure of successful engagement. The impact of this engagement is also critical.

There are also huge opportunities to change the way UNHCR works. While significant progress has been made, continuing our journey to use innovative digital solutions can increase efficiency and reinvent business processes. This Digital Transformation Strategy aims to help UNHCR improve the way it delivers its work digitally including how we engage, collaborate, share knowledge and implement digital solutions in country operations.

Executive summary

The Digital Transformation Strategy provides a unified vision and approach to realizing the rights of refugees to digital inclusion and protection as well as transforming the way that UNHCR uses digital channels and associated technology to achieve its strategic objectives. It aligns with the United Nations Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation[7] and UNHCR's Strategic Directions 2022-2026.[8]

This strategy also complements UNHCR's Strategies on Data Transformation, Information Technology and Accountability to Affected People. While these strategies have been priority endeavours for UNHCR in past years, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a rapid acceleration in the need and urgency for UNHCR to use digital approaches across all facets of our work.

UNHCR's digital transformation vision

The communities we serve have the digital skills, agency, and tools to safely engage in today's digital world, to access inclusive services, achieve greater self-reliance and protection, and to have a greater voice in the decisions that impact their lives.

To achieve this, UNHCR's supporting vision is to transform the way it works, innovating digitally to create efficiencies, improve knowledge-sharing and collaboration, mobilize resources and increase our impact.

The digital future UNHCR envisions

The opportunities outlined in the strategy will bring about profound changes to how the communities we serve engage in the digital space and how they benefit from the potential it can bring. The longer-term realization of this strategy will mean equal participation in the digital world. They will access, learn and work in a way that is equitable with the communities they are living in.

The communities we serve will be able to easily access online services, engage with UNHCR and obtain the critical protection information they need to find safety and rebuild their lives. They will access these services through a digital services framework that brings together the services and information that they need to access from the moment they are forced to flee to when they start to rebuild their lives.

The digital protection environment will be strengthened. Digital Tech leaders will have put in place stronger measures to ensure their business models and the technology choices they make do not negatively impact on the lives of those we serve.

UNHCR will maximize the potential to engage and collaborate online. Engaging with partners, supporters and other key audiences, we will show the impact of our work and generate more support for the communities we serve. Our global digital channels will be among the leading digital destinations on issues regarding the forcibly displaced and stateless.

UNHCR will transform the way we work, innovating in the field with new digital solutions and finding new ways of delivering more efficiently. We will share knowledge, connect with

partners and collaborate more effectively in the digital space. We will have new business systems in place that streamline previously time-consuming processes. New collaboration platforms will be in place that bring together our internal and external communities of practice to harness the expertise and knowledge of the wider organization.

UNHCR will not achieve this strategy without strong coordination and increased investment. We call on our partners to work with us to achieve this vision. We will work together to mobilize resources, innovate and find solutions to old problems. Empowering and strengthening local partnerships will also be key to realizing these goals.

UNHCR's Digital Transformation Strategy sets out five Priority outcome areas, both externally impacting the people we serve as well as internally impacting our way of working:

A digital future for the communities we serve

Priority outcome #1: Digital inclusion
The communities we serve have equitable access to digital technology and channels and can use them to pursue opportunities for lifelong learning, inclusion in the digital economy, leisure, and solutions;

Priority outcome #2: Digital protection
The communities we serve can exercise their human rights online and are protected from digital risk, enabling them to have access to trusted channels, avoid harm and have agency in decision-making;

Priority outcome #3: Digital services
The communities we serve have access to high quality, efficient and safe digital services from UNHCR and its partners.

A digital future for UNHCR

Priority outcome #4: Digital engagement
UNHCR delivers impact-led Digital engagement strategies that increase audience engagement with our work and strengthen protection, solutions, and resource mobilization.

Priority outcome #5: Working digitally
UNHCR utilizes innovative digital solutions and tools as well as building the skills necessary to transform delivery, collaboration and knowledge-sharing in order to work more efficiently and effectively.

Cross-cutting approaches

While each outcome area is supported by detailed priority actions and expected results, there are a number of cross-cutting approaches that UNHCR will need to undertake to achieve progress on implementing this strategy.

Advocating - Advocacy with governments and regulators for more inclusive and protective digital environments and approaches for the people we serve, alongside host communities, and with the private sector, including frank dialogue with technology industry leaders to ensure platforms and new digital solutions promote protection and avoid new risks.

Partnering - Stronger technology-related partnerships with governments and the private sector with a focus on resource mobilization, co-creation, shared-value projects and access to expertise. Agile local partnerships will help to meet field needs.

Investing in a digital gateway and local services - By investing in local and national digital solutions, while also strengthening UNHCR's digital identity management capacity to enable access to core online digital services (provided by UNHCR or other key service providers), the people we serve

will have more opportunities to obtain information, find safety, access humanitarian assistance and rebuild their lives.

Investing in the adoption and promotion of digital tools and solutions - UNHCR teams will be empowered to communicate, work and protect more efficiently through targeted investments. Pilot projects will be supported and coordinated across the organization. In addition, a Digital Innovation Fund will catalyze field-first local and national digital projects that accelerate digital solutions at an operation level. Both global and local approaches will be centrally tracked, provided with investment and technically supported.

Building capacity within UNHCR and with key external stakeholders - This will include developing skills and bringing in additional expert human resources in focus areas. Capacity-building activities will be focused both internally and externally and delivered through a 'Network of Excellence'.

Strengthening our evidence base - Researching and increasing evidence in all focus areas will provide the foundation for the change UNHCR wants to create and ensure progress can be effectively measured. Robust research and analysis will help us to design, utilize and implement appropriate digital services, inclusion and protection strategies and frameworks.

Guiding principles

UNHCR will implement the strategy in line with the following guiding principles:

Accountability to Affected People framework - UNHCR will ensure our Accountability to Affected People commitments are embedded across all strategy areas, with a focus on participation and inclusion, co-design, communication and transparency, feedback and response and organizational learning and adaptation

Protection, rights and ethics - UNHCR will promote the increased protection of the people we serve online, including the prevention of online abuse and harm that can spill over into the offline world. This also encompasses their right to equally be part of a connected society and their right to privacy, including in their online activity and in the digital processing of their personal data by UNHCR and other actors.

Communities will be supported and empowered to manage digital risks, so they can connect with confidence. UNHCR's use of digital technology will meet international human rights and ethical standards, with a focus on high-risk technologies, uses and contexts. The further strengthening of UNHCR's capacity to apply emerging digital technologies consistent with emerging ethical, human rights due diligence and protection principles will be a priority. UNHCR will ensure increased investment in cybersecurity and the protection of the personal data it processes. By working with governments and private sector partners, UNHCR will promote full consideration of the impact of technology solutions on the communities we serve, particularly in high-risk contexts.

At the same time, digital technology provides new means to advocate for, defend and exercise rights. The strategy aims to empower the communities we serve, UNHCR and its partners to seize these opportunities.

Accessible to all - UNHCR will work with its technology partners to ensure all internal and external digital services and platforms are accessible to everyone regardless of age, gender, disability, race, socioeconomic, sexual orientation, gender identity, and diverse characteristics. Content created will be optimized and assessed for accessibility. Accessible communication services will be put in place such as closed captioning and signing so that online meetings and town halls are fully accessible.

Digital efficiency - To best manage the organization's resources and to reduce duplication of effort, UNHCR will look for digital efficiency by reusing solutions and designing business processes to deliver our work more efficiently and cost effectively. UNHCR will monitor new digital solutions that are developed in the field to identify scope for scalability to other operations and avoid duplication. Where possible UNHCR will reuse and improve digital solutions already developed by partners and other agencies. This will prevent unfettered proliferation of digital tools and platforms which are not interoperable and encourage innovation and scalability. Where appropriate UNHCR will use open technical standards, including for data security and biometrics, and digital public goods to ensure maximum benefit to those we serve.

Environmental sustainability - How UNHCR uses digital technology has a major impact on the organization's environmental footprint. This can be both positive and negative. UNHCR will put in place checks and balances to ensure the Digital Transformation Strategy reinforces the objectives of the Strategic Framework for Climate Action.[9]

Preservation of and continuous access to digital content and data - UNHCR will ensure that content with long-term value is preserved and securely accessible for use and re-use. Digital content preservation means mitigating against in-built obsolescence in systems and solutions. This includes avoiding system lock-in and threats to continuity-of-access.
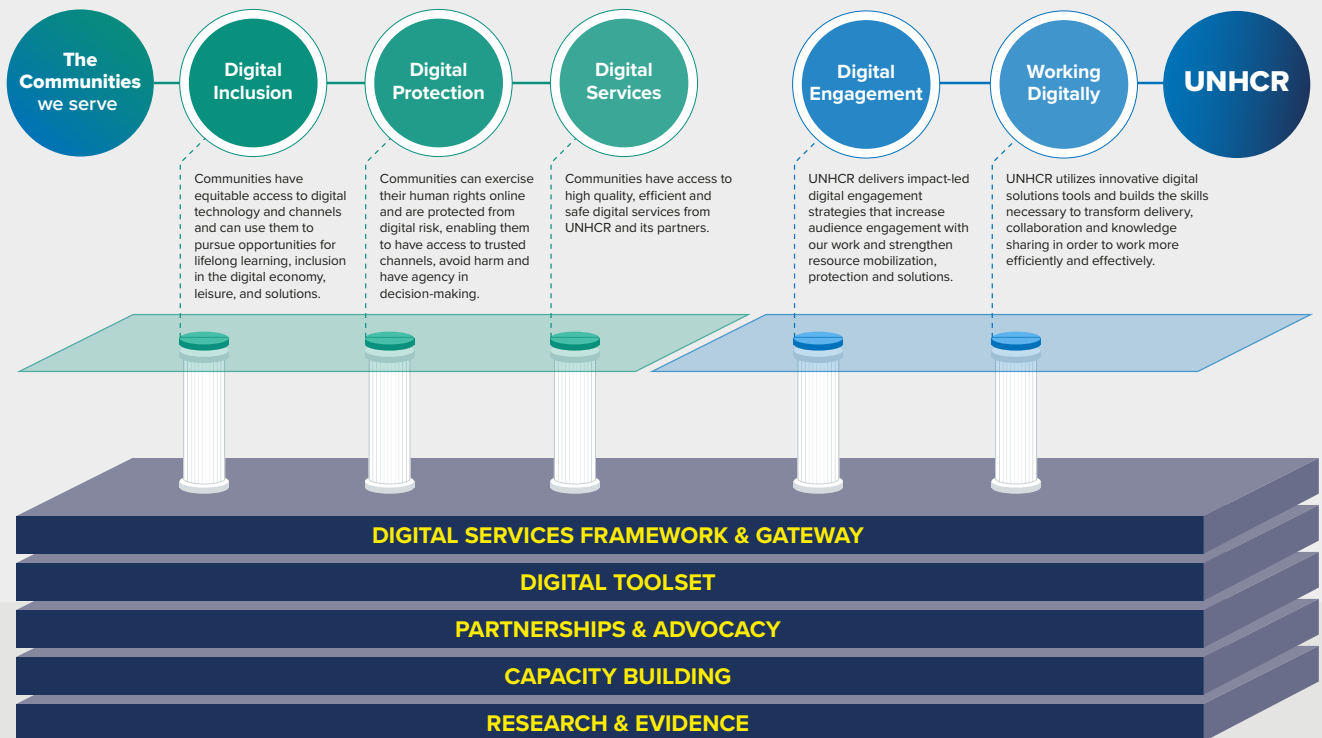
Digital Transformation Strategy

Vision

Communities have the digital skills, knowledge, agency, and tools to safely engage in today's digital world to access inclusive services, to achieve greater self-reliance, protection, and to have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

Goal

UNHCR will transform the way it works, innovating digitally to create efficiencies, improve knowledge sharing and collaboration, mobilize resources and increase our impact.

The Communities we serve

Digital Inclusion — Communities have equitable access to digital technology and channels and can use them to pursue opportunities for lifelong learning, inclusion in the digital economy, leisure, and solutions.

Digital Protection — Communities can exercise their human rights online and are protected from digital risk, enabling them to have access to trusted channels, avoid harm and have agency in decision-making.

Digital Services — Communities have access to high quality, efficient and safe digital services from UNHCR and its partners.

Digital Engagement — UNHCR delivers impact-led digital engagement strategies that increase audience engagement with our work and strengthen resource mobilization, protection and solutions.

Working Digitally — UNHCR utilizes innovative digital solutions tools and builds the skills necessary to transform delivery, collaboration and knowledge sharing in order to work more efficiently and effectively.

UNHCR

DIGITAL SERVICES FRAMEWORK & GATEWAY

DIGITAL TOOLSET

PARTNERSHIPS & ADVOCACY

CAPACITY BUILDING

RESEARCH & EVIDENCE

Assessment, co-design and feedback – Applying AAP principles

UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity Policy (2018) outlines UNHCR's mandatory commitments under the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework. The main principles – participation and inclusion, communication and transparency, feedback and response, organizational learning and adaptation – underlie the Digital Transformation Strategy. UNHCR's activities, interventions and products under the strategy will be shaped by meaningful dialogue with the forcibly displaced and stateless to ensure they are in line with what they prefer and need. Furthermore, UNHCR will strive to identify and pursue actions under the strategy in partnership with, and being accountable to, the communities we serve.

Participation of the forcibly displaced and stateless of all ages, genders and diverse characteristics in activities under the strategy must be meaningful in all stages from assessment and design to implementation, monitoring and review.

By working directly with the forcibly displaced and stateless to understand the priorities of various community groups, as well as their existing skills and capacities, including digital literacy, UNHCR can design solutions with technology partners and the community to meet their needs, desires and ambitions.

Involving the forcibly displaced and stateless and welcoming their leadership in the design of programmes is crucial, as communities are best placed to find local solutions, test assumptions and recommend changes or additions to the service that will suit them, respect their culture and be relevant. UNHCR and partners should lead by example adopting best practice by co-designing with communities from the outset of any digital initiatives. This will encourage other industries and sectors, including technology firms, connectivity providers, digital content and platform creators, to consider co-designing as the default approach. UNHCR must take into account the concerns of low-income or marginalized users from the start of the design process.

Listening to and acting upon the feedback, priorities and needs of the forcibly displaced and stateless are also key. When communities are involved in monitoring and evaluating digital initiatives, the sustainability and local adoption of these solutions grow. It also helps us assess whether they have reached the intended communities with the desired results.

Ensuring diverse perspectives are heard and the communities we serve participate and have meaningful engagement in decisions that affect them through all stages of programming will be central to the Digital Transformation Strategy. This will mean ensuring pathways for participation – including through digital channels – are accessible for all ages, genders and diverse characteristics.

Tools to assist with meeting our commitments under the AAP framework can be found in UNHCR's Operational Guidance on AAP and the Gender Equality Toolkit. The Help website, which provides translated essential information on protection, services, rights and responsibilities to individuals in 97 operations is one way in which UNHCR is already applying these principles in the digital sphere.

Priority outcomes to achieve a digital future for the communities we serve

This section of the Digital Transformation Strategy looks at how digital technology can be a catalyst for positive change for the forcibly displaced and the stateless.

It looks at their journey of interactions with digital technology beginning with increasing understanding, access and adoption of digital technology and channels, and how they use this to access vital services and information to rebuild their lives. Becoming active participants in the digital world brings with it new protection risks. UNHCR's protection mandate is equally relevant in the connected world whether through direct action as an organization to promote an enabling environment that protects or by empowering these communities to be agents of their own protection in digital spaces.

Children in a classroom in Inke camp, Nord-Ubangi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, take part in a lesson that uses electronic tablets. The project, run by UNHCR's partner ADSSE and funded by the Vodafone Foundation, aims to provide digital literacy in camps for refugees who have fled the Central African Republic. © UNHCR/Hugh Kinsella Cunningham

Tom Remo, a South Sudanese refugee and businessman, at his mobile phone shop at Rhino Camp Settlement, northern Uganda, where internet connectivity is changing lives. © UNHCR/Michele Sibiloni

Digital inclusion

Outcome

The communities we serve have equitable access to digital technology and channels and can use them to pursue opportunities for lifelong learning, inclusion in the digital economy, leisure, and solutions.

To achieve this Digital Inclusion vision, UNHCR has developed the following supporting outcomes – linked closely to identified challenges – that underpin it and contribute to its realization. This means the communities we serve:

- are meaningfully integrated into national strategies and frameworks for digital inclusion and universal access and digital gender, age and disability gaps have been dramatically reduced,

- have access to learning environments that prepare students, and their communities, to meaningfully engage within a connected society and make informed choices,

- can safely engage in the digital economy,

- have the skills available to use and contribute to the creation of not only basic but advanced digital services for whatever purpose they choose.

By achieving these outcomes, communities will be able to build their own pathways for meeting personal goals and achieving their ambitions. Not only will digital inclusion support their access to humanitarian assistance and support them to achieve goals spanning education or economic opportunity, but also extend to supporting their overall wellbeing by enabling communication with family, friends and loved ones, or increasing access to leisure and entertainment. It will empower them to participate in developing sustainable solutions that support their self-reliance and financial inclusion.

These outcome areas are linked closely to UNHCR's existing work around Community-based Protection, Connected Education and Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion and respective strategies and approaches.

Current context

UNHCR recognizes digital inclusion as the equal right for forcibly displaced and stateless people to fully take part in a connected society in line with their hosting communities. Within this strategy, UNHCR is framing digital inclusion in a broad sense, spanning the steps from the most basic access to an internet connection through to full digital participation in their communities and key societal structures linked to education, livelihoods and more. Ultimately, it is vital for empowering refugees to be self-reliant and actors in their own protection.

The UN Secretary General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation specifically highlights the challenges refugees face to their digital inclusion, emphasizing Principle Two of the UN SDG Universal Values to 'leave no one behind' and the call in the Global Compact on Refugees to 'closing the technology gap'.

The Digital Inclusion Roundtable under the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation defines digital inclusion as:

"Digital Inclusion means providing, through intersectional, human rights-based, and whole-of-society policies and programmes, equal, meaningful, and safe access to and use of digital technologies and opportunities in the digital space for everyone, everywhere, without leaving behind those in vulnerable positions or traditionally marginalized and equity-seeking groups…."

This definition is supported by UNHCR and emphasizes ethical dimensions critical to inclusion, alongside an unconditional approach to inclusion – supporting the vision that all the communities we serve can contribute to and benefit from a connected society.

COVID-19 has accelerated efforts to increase digital inclusion and brought greater focus and priority to the issue. The challenges that the communities we serve face in realizing the potential of the digital world are varied and complex, specifically:

Policy and regulatory environments are a 'hard stop' to getting connected as in many countries, policies, laws and regulations effectively exclude individuals from digital life, often due to a lack of trusted identity credentials, but also in national strategic planning for example around education.

Many forcibly displaced people are 'priced-out' of inclusion as they often have lower incomes than their host communities. Many live in rural areas or remote settlements where access to hardware and services is both difficult and costly.

Infrastructure and technology barriers still exist such as a lack of reliable power and bad cellular coverage, or limited speed connections preventing meaningful connectivity. Rural locations are unattractive to the private sector and digital hardware and technology such as computers in schools, may be unobtainable because of problems with supply chains.

Limited knowledge of the tools and the benefits of digital access and inclusion means communities cannot access the associated opportunities. Digital skills and the needs of communities will vary depending on age, gender, and diversity. People with disabilities may lack access to assistive technology and the specific skills required to use them. Low levels of digital literacy threaten to pigeon-hole the people we serve as passive consumers of technology rather than active creators and contributors to a connected society.

Lack of relevant content and use cases can lead to low levels of adoption and disappointment at what the connected world offers. This covers the ability to access the internet in their own language, access content relevant to their needs and desires, and limited availability of accessible content for people with disabilities.

These challenges to digital inclusion are not things that can be addressed overnight. Concerted efforts are required from a wide range of stakeholders to effect and facilitate change.

Five-year results

Within a five-year timeframe, real results will be achieved for forcibly displaced and stateless communities. Through these actions and investments, by the end of 2026, UNHCR will:

- have the capacity at country and regional level to lead on digital inclusion issues working closely with multi-functional teams and government, private sector, partners and communities;

- work in a coherent, coordinated and systematic way with partners to promote digital inclusion;

- leverage cutting-edge research and data to inform programme related to digital inclusion;

- undertake meaningful but targeted activities to reduce digital divides;

- have an established process for identifying, understanding, and acting on emerging issues, leveraging innovation methodologies and approaches;

- provide leadership within the sector demonstrating principled and systematic digital inclusion.

Priority actions

To achieve the outcomes outlined above concerted action is required to equip UNHCR to address barriers to digital inclusion. Over a five-year period, UNHCR will invest in transformation, strengthening and consolidating existing workstreams on digital inclusion and initiating new ones as applicable.

Based on existing practice and consultation across the organization, priority actions have been identified that will help UNHCR to most effectively contribute to realizing the digital inclusion vision.

Strengthening partnerships

- Convening relevant stakeholders, including the communities we serve, at country, regional and global level through action-oriented working groups in support of digital inclusion.

- Working with relevant ministries and authorities to ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless communities are included within government strategy, planning and budgeting across key issues ranging from broader technology access to specific sectors such as education and health.

- Accelerating Private Partnerships, moving beyond traditional partnership modalities to new and innovative arrangements designed to strengthen digital inclusion, improve access to jobs, technology, knowledge, and guidance.

- Promoting community-led approaches and local ownership of digital solutions by working with refugee-led and community-based organizations.

Strengthening capacity

- Strengthening UNHCR's internal capacity at regional level to lead on digital inclusion issues and supporting country teams on planning processes and partner mobilization.

- Developing and deploying a training and capacity building programme on Digital Inclusion targeting all staff within UNHCR and relevant partners to strengthen overall response capacity.

Strengthening systems and processes

- Adapting planning processes to facilitate access to financial resources for digital inclusion initiatives with minimum regional envelopes.

Strengthening understanding and evidence-based advocacy

- Mapping digital inclusion initiatives across all regions and undertaking digital inclusion assessments that include digital skills mapping, socio-economic data, data on digital rights, device availability, mobile money transfers, as well as on education and livelihoods dimensions, etc. where appropriate.

- Advocating for enhanced infrastructure and support its deployment – working with industry to make the business case to address infrastructure gaps.

Enhancing its ways of working

- Exploring emerging issues, experimenting with new approaches to determine viability and develop critical learning and evidence for strategically addressing long-term challenges.

- Document innovation or experimentation at country and regional level, making it available to all actors considering digital inclusion interventions.

Taking action

- Working with communities, specifically youth, to enhance digital inclusion and break down social and cultural barriers through community-based approaches.

- Implementing targeted digital inclusion interventions aimed at marginalized groups such as women and girls, the elderly or people with disabilities.

Specific results, work areas, approaches and activities will be further outlined in forthcoming Digital Inclusion Operational Guidance, prepared by the Division of Resilience and Solutions and the Innovation Service, in liaison with other UNHCR entities as applicable.

Special focus: Connected education

UNHCR aims to ensure that all forcibly displaced and stateless people, as well as their host communities, have equal access to relevant, accredited, quality learning, supported by connectivity and digital resources.

Education is a human right and for UNHCR, an essential protection tool. Yet challenges have for decades plagued education for the people we serve, as well as for many host communities. They still face barriers to accessing quality early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as lifelong learning opportunities. However, the global education landscape has changed with the advent of new digital tools. These resources can make core educational components available, while also enhancing quality and access, even in the most remote corners of the world.

The barriers to connected education are substantial. Beyond policy, infrastructure and capacity challenges mentioned in the Digital Inclusion section, connected education faces additional obstacles related to the sourcing appropriate digital content and courses, ensuring scale and sustainability, providing equitable access, and ensuring digital safety for students engaging online.[10]

Over the past 10 years, in a select number of contexts, UNHCR has worked with partners to demonstrate the viability and value of investing in connected education. As the world becomes ever more digitally dependent, these investments need to be scaled to ensure all forcibly displaced and stateless and their host communities can develop their digital skills along with basic literacy, numeracy and broader life skills.

When connected education is aligned to support national systems, it can aid in supplementing core elements of education where there are gaps, while also expanding access and improving the overall quality of education for the forcibly displaced, stateless and their hosts.

Connected education can help students and teachers by delivering learning via alternative means. For example, it can increase access to textbooks, curricula and teaching materials through cost-effective digital versions. Educational data can be collected in a timely and reliable way with digital tools. And teachers can enrich their skills with blended training or online mentorship.

Connected education can also support continuous learning during school closures, and across different levels. In early grade learning, connected education programmes have shown how games can promote foundational literacy and numeracy while at the other end of the continuum, thousands of higher education and professional development opportunities have been created through blended or online certified programmes from universities and course providers.

The use of digital tools can also improve the quality of learning. For example, videos and interactive simulation can aid comprehension and bring important concepts to life. More advanced digital tools can help learners with disabilities, while also providing personalized support to all students by tracking their performances and suggesting topics for revision.

By investing in connected education, communities can gain more equitable access to digital literacy in environments that encourage exploration and critical thinking while remaining safe. However, to achieve UNHCR's connected education aims, a holistic approach must be taken, bearing in mind infrastructure and power requirements, while focusing on broader educational components to strengthen the national system.

Priority actions

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees and actions outlined in the digital inclusion section, UNHCR will mobilize a network of partners to include the forcibly displaced and stateless in digital life and bring them in to connected education:

- Through sustained advocacy, UNHCR will **promote the inclusion of refugee-hosting schools and communities in national and regional digital policies, planning and budgets**, encouraging actors to design for the most remote communities and locations from the onset.

- UNHCR will work with donors and partners to **ensure predictable financing is available to support governments and partners to expand impactful connected education programming** in a sustainable manner; prioritizing inclusion of a greater number of refugee-hosting communities.

- UNHCR will **maintain a role in supporting implementation efforts with partners**, demonstrating that investments in and for refugee-hosting contexts are not only feasible, but hold broader value for designing inclusive educational approaches that can meet the needs of all learners.

- UNHCR will partner with strategic actors to **ensure that the capacity of students, educators, communities, partner staff, governments and UNHCR teams is gradually increased to support the meaningful integration** of connectivity and digital approaches to enhance education quality at the school, community, national, and regional level.

- **Evidence and data will inform UNHCR's connected education investments, and those made across the sector**, including through the harmonization of indications across programmes. This will help to improve understanding, as well as the viability, sustainability and expansion of initiatives to benefit a greater number of learners.

- UNHCR will **ensure digital awareness and protection programming is incorporated into all connected education programming** it supports, to increase understanding and agency of refugees and host communities who engage online.

- UNHCR will work with Ministries and content experts to ensure that educators, refugee-hosting schools, and communities have **increased access to a larger number of quality digital learning materials that are aligned to national curricula**, respond to local context and needs, and are available in local languages and languages of instruction.

Rohingya refugees fleeing from Myanmar to Bangladesh in October 2017. © UNHCR/Roger Arnold

Digital protection

Outcome

The communities we serve are protected online by the application of international protection principles, shielding them from digital risks, such as online misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, exploitation, privacy threats and fraud. Equally, they are empowered to identify and manage digital risks themselves and have access to life-saving information through preferred, trusted and inclusive digital channels and increased agency in decision making, through digital feedback and response mechanisms.

UNHCR's own use of digital technology will continue aiming to increase protection and align with international human rights and ethical standards. These standards will also be promoted with States and the private sector, with a focus on high-risk technologies, uses and contexts.

UNHCR will support the use of digital technology to strengthen asylum, resettlement and related processes and in States' initiatives to establish inclusive civil registration and national identity systems, which prevent and reduce statelessness. UNHCR will promote protection considerations, such as avoiding the risks of entrenching the exclusion of the people we serve.

Current context

Increasing protection challenges and opportunities: The people we serve are increasingly connected and online, accessing digital content and services. Alongside these opportunities, they also face new digital risks that have a profound impact both online and in real life. They include but are not limited to threats to the fundamental right to privacy and the increased processing of personal data in digital systems.[11] The online targeting of people on the move for exploitation add to the digital risks also faced by host communities, such as fraud. Toxic online narratives and hate speech are both a root cause of forced displacement and a protection threat to

the stateless and the displaced. UNHCR's developing work in partnership with the communities we serve to monitor and respond to hate speech, misinformation, disinformation and to empower them to connect with confidence provides a basis for strengthened responses.[12]

Strengthening digital access to life saving protection information and feedback, complaints and response mechanisms: Traditional channels of communication with the people we serve remain important. However, multi-channel contact centres, digital platforms and social media are increasingly used to engage with UNHCR and our partners. Digital channels provide the opportunity to further strengthen accountability to affected people and access to protection information and services, as long as any protection risks are identified, assessed and managed.[13]

New digital technologies and their uses: Civil society, watchdogs, and academia have highlighted how the digitalization of border control risks putting lives at risk and preventing access to asylum. It is increasingly recognised that the conception, design, use, development and deployment of digital technologies, including by the private sector and governments, must respect the principles of the international protection framework.[14] Dual-use digital technologies, such as facial recognition, require careful and measured protection impact assessments and rigorous safeguards. Rapidly emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence must also be developed and used in ways which align with international human rights and protection principles and outcomes, including the right to seek asylum. At the same time, digital technology provides new opportunities to increase protection, from strengthening the enjoyment of data subjects' rights to new approaches to protection monitoring.

Embracing good practice: The United Nations and other standard-setting bodies are concentrating more and more on ethics and the protection of rights in the digital world.[15] The application of ethical and international human rights standards provides a guiding framework for UNHCR's own use of digital technology, especially high-risk technologies, uses and contexts and for its engagement with partners. For example, the protection sensitive digitalization of asylum, resettlement and family reunification procedures has the potential to increase access and the quality of process and decisions while aiming to avoid any related risks.

New legal and regulatory frameworks for digitalization are being set: Protection safeguards for the communities we serve are required to enable their safe digital inclusion, as host States, regional and global standard-setting bodies are establishing new legislative and regulatory frameworks to enable eGovernment and the digital economy, including crucial digital financial services.[16]

Ending statelessness and closing the identity gap: The digitalization of host States' civil registration and national identification systems often aim to close the identity gap, which currently leaves many undocumented citizens as well as forcibly displaced and stateless communities without the trusted identity credentials needed to access mainstream services. As these trends continue if the root causes of exclusion remain unaddressed, UNHCR's goals of identifying, preventing and reducing statelessness and increasing the protection of the people we serve may be jeopardized, with existing informal coping mechanisms closed off. Resolving discriminatory legal frameworks relating to nationality and civil registration and deepening data and analysis on the impact of digitalization on stateless communities will help to avoid these risks.

Five-year results

The communities we serve are increasingly able to manage their digital footprint effectively to mitigate risks as well as exercise their rights as data subjects online. This will include the prioritized rollout of UNHCR's existing guidance on managing digital risks for the communities we serve and in using social media in community-based protection, as well as the development of a digital toolkit for engaging with communities on their preferred and trusted channels.

Secure two-way digital channels have been integrated into UNHCR's broader service delivery ecosystem, so the communities we serve can safely and confidentially engage with UNHCR online, access information, raise concerns and complaints and inform programme design and strategy. These channels will also enable confidential referrals to protection partners.

Information and communication needs assessments have been undertaken for key country operations and contexts to grasp the digital preferences and capacities of communities and strengthen UNHCR's planning on Digital Inclusion, Digital Protection and Digital Services. These will have been built on the methodologies developed for UNHCR's assessments conducted in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Mali and the inter-agency assessment undertaken for the Venezuela Situation.[17]

UNHCR has established legal and policy positions in priority areas identified by the field on the application of protection principles in digital contexts. These positions have been set out field in practical and user-friendly guidance, which will consider the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors, ranging from host States to the private sector.

UNHCR has increased advocacy and strengthened partnerships with the private sector, including technology and social media companies, at local, regional and global levels to address protection risks such as trafficking networks operating online and online hate speech and disinformation that can stoke racism and xenophobia. This will also include promoting safe online humanitarian spaces as well as the respect for protection and accountability principles.

UNHCR has also increased focused advocacy on other key digital protection issues including the use of surveillance technology and the increasing digitalization of border control. Key areas will include the promotion of protection-sensitive digitalization of asylum, resettlement and related procedures and avoiding the significant risks related to automated decision-making and the use of artificial intelligence in asylum procedures and other rights sensitive contexts that affect the communities we serve.

UNHCR's capacity in digital protection has been strengthened, with skills, tools and agile and accessible training in place.

States, regulatory and standard-setting bodies in key countries will have received technical advice from UNHCR on the application of protection principles for the people that we serve in new legal frameworks that enable the digital economy and eGovernment, including realizing their right to privacy and the protection of their personal data.

UNHCR will be leading the coordination of humanitarian agencies in digital engagement with the communities we serve, under our protection mandate. This includes coordinating efforts to establish/strengthen collective digital feedback and response mechanisms.

Priority actions

Addressing prioritized digital protection risks: UNHCR will strengthen its approach to online protection threats such as misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and the real-world impacts on the people we serve, working with a broad range of partners, including the humanitarian actors, States and regulatory authorities and social media companies. This will also include promoting the application of international protection principles with the private sector, increasing access to reliable online protection information for people on the move and exploring opportunities to co-develop safe humanitarian digital spaces with the communities we serve.

Digital engagement will be strengthened: Further information and communication needs assessments in the field will be completed to support the development of digital solutions for community engagement on their preferred and trusted channels and to strengthen planning. These solutions will aim to increase communities' capacities to identify and manage the digital risks, increase access to reliable and trusted online protection information and provide more opportunities to raise concerns and complaints. Existing and emerging good practices in this area will be identified alongside pathways to scale solutions safely and securely.

Research and analysis: Baseline legal and policy research will be completed on thematic digital protection priorities identified in consultation with the field ranging from the protection impact of digitalization on access to asylum and the protection of refugees to the consequences for stateless communities, including the contributions digital approaches can make to ending statelessness.

Guidance and tools: UNHCR's existing guidance on managing digital risks and the use of social media in community-based protection will be rolled out with partners and communities and their impact evaluated to inform the development of minimum standards. Further tailored practical guidance and tools will be developed and promoted in priority areas, including:

- **For UNHCR and partners' staff:** to enable protection risk assessments in respect to digital technologies, including as part of due diligence processes and data protection impact assessments. This will include global resources to enable consistent approaches by analysing common themes, such as the operational use of social media platforms and messaging apps and specific high-risk technologies, uses or contexts.

- **For businesses, including technology companies:** as the driving force of the digital age, often moving in advance of regulation, guidance on the application of international protection principles is required, including in their adoption and implementation of the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights.[18]

- **For States, regulators and standard-setting bodies:** on good practices in applying the international legal protection framework as they put in place the foundations for digitalization.

Capacity strengthening: A capacity-building plan will be put in place to support UNHCR's protection experts and managers, along with our partners, in meeting the challenges of protection in the digital age.

Digital protection strategies: Country operations will be supported by Regional Bureau Protection Services and HQ to develop and implement digital protection components of their multi-year Protection Strategies.

Special focus on digital Accountability to Affected People (AAP): Engagement in two-way communication

UNHCR needs to continue to modernize to meet communities safely "where they are" in the digital space and integrating with existing offline channels. While UNHCR operations have made great strides in improving communication with communities, digital AAP must go beyond giving information to enabling meaningful two-way conversations with them.

We aim for all our operations to be adequately staffed and resourced to modernize the digital AAP space, ensuring communities can communicate with us on the digital channels that they prefer and trust. This may include using existing social media channels or new digital communication methods that they have helped design. Individuals can safely talk and refer confidential issues online whilst mitigating any protection risks and access trusted protection information and available services as found on help.unhcr.org.

Equally, engaging online carries certain risks with regards to protection and security of personal data – specifically the use of tracking technologies and the ability for malicious actors to target the vulnerable online. It is critical to ensure the security of platforms and to empower individuals to manage the use of their personal data and online behaviour.

A positive example came during the COVID-19 pandemic response which increased the need for fast, reliable and trusted two-way online communication. UNHCR worked across operations to build on existing initiatives and try a more systematic and scalable approach for engaging communities on messaging apps.

While operations did previously use messaging apps, at the onset of the COVID-19 response, many started widely adopting apps to communicate quickly and 'en masse' with the communities we serve about COVID-19 restrictions and changes to services. While there were immediate benefits, they also faced constraints in being able to respond to or follow up all messages individually and taking informed steps to ensure the safety and protection of the communities we serve in their digital environments.

To address these challenges, in coordination with target operations, UNHCR launched the pilot of its messaging service, which offers automated responses that are constantly updated by UNHCR, referrals to specialized staff when specific need for support is identified, and clear information on how to use the tool safely. The pilot was first launched in Ecuador in 2020, where the operation was already engaging communities through a messaging app which was trusted by the community. The new service enabled the communities we serve to access information not only on COVID-19, but also on how to contact UNHCR and partners to report incidents of violence or abuse. During the initial three-month trial, UNHCR, partners and around 12,000 users exchanged over 200,000 messages.

The main findings of an independent assessment of the pilot in Ecuador included that the feedback loop between the communities we serve and UNHCR significantly improved, that the tool helped field staff save time, and that the operation was able to better understand the needs of the communities we serve through the initial communication and subsequent referrals. At the same time, the findings showed there remained challenges for UNHCR in using such platforms and apps. The main challenges related to mitigating the digital risks that the communities we serve face from their own information environments; the two most urgent threats in this regard were online fraud or exploitation, and misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, which are key learnings feeding into this strategy.

Yesmin Akter, a member of the host community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, receiving cash support from UNHCR during the COVID-19 pandemic.
© UNHCR/Hasib Zuberi

PRIORITY OUTCOME 3

Digital services

Outcome

The demand for UNHCR to provide high quality online digital services is met and access, efficiency and integrity are increased. Where possible, UNHCR's digital services, especially cash-based interventions, are delivered in ways that facilitate inclusion.

To realize these objectives the communities we serve will be offered, through a digital gateway, a suite of accessible and inclusively designed core digital services alongside accurate and up-to-date online information, appropriate to the local context. These digital services will be identified, co-designed and developed in partnership with the communities we serve, meeting the diverse needs and the varying requirements of the local situation. Their design will also be informed by the good practices of leading eGovernment States and the private sector and accompanied by data-driven assessments of the enabling environments in host States (including connectivity, device access and regulatory frameworks).

A key enabler will be for individuals registered in UNHCR's Population Registration and Identity Management Ecosystem (PRIMES) to be able to access a "good digital identity"[19] giving secure and trusted access to online services, as well as further strengthening the integrity of humanitarian services that are delivered offline. The communities we serve will increasingly be able to digitally exercise their rights as data subjects, including greater user-control of their personal data and digital identity.

Current context

Demand: UNHCR's 2020-21 research on digital services showed the growing demand among the people we serve. It included online surveys with UNHCR Help website users, in-depth interviews with forcibly displaced and stateless people and UNHCR frontline staff in 12 countries and a review of existing sources. The conclusions were that connected individuals want high-quality digital services that can be accessed easily, increasing

their ability to transact and engage directly with UNHCR. The communities we serve want UNHCR and its partners to provide a better digital experience enabled by a clearer unified gateway to information and services. At the same time, UNHCR serves diverse populations who are not all connected or exclusively looking for digital services underlining the importance of user choice.

The online services prioritized by communities included remote pre-registration, RSD processing and appeals, applications for assistance (both cash and in kind), updating personal and family information, appointment scheduling, identity document issuance and renewal, healthcare requests, and queries, complaints and feedback.

COVID-19 response and field initiatives: Field responses to the pandemic showed how increasing online services can overcome physical barriers to accessing UNHCR services. These lessons apply equally to places where UNHCR has no or limited field presence. UNHCR's emergency responses to COVID-19 increased the use of remote service delivery using digital channels and telephone helplines.

Existing service delivery models: UNHCR's service delivery models have primarily been based on face-to-face interactions. Prior to the pandemic some field operations had already developed websites and digital kiosks for core services that build on existing in person services, such as appointment booking, and robust digital systems have been used including the remote delivery of cash-based interventions. However, they remained the exception.

UNHCR PRIMES: UNHCR's global digital tools have mainly been designed for the purposes of strengthening efficiency and integrity of assistance and service delivery in face-to-face contexts. As a result, UNHCR's digital identity systems do not yet provide registered individuals with the opportunity to authenticate their identities online, or other key functionalities required to access digital services and transact online. Strengthening the capacity of PRIMES in these areas will empower registered individuals by increasing their access to online digital services, their control of their personal data processed by UNHCR as well as enabling them to digitally exercise their rights as data subjects.

Response to queries: Overlapping digital communication channels (e.g. email, telephone helplines, social media) can create confusion and risk inconsistent responses without strengthened coordination. The communities we serve are asking UNHCR to provide strengthened consistent and coherent user experience online.

Cash: Digital cash assistance and financial services are also in demand. UNHCR's objective is to use cash-based interventions to increase their access to bank accounts and mobile money as a pathway to their financial inclusion. In 2016, where UNHCR provided cash assistance, the forcibly displaced were only able to access bank accounts, mobile money or other digital payments in a few contexts. But by 2020, these services had been established in 47 countries, of which 32% had set up mobile money. UNHCR's digital delivery of cash assistance will continue to further this trend where opportunities exist, including by increasing digital payments. In addition, digital tools such as CashAssist are designed to improve the process and provide robust data on payments made. They are increasingly used by UN partners to enable their delivery of cash assistance through financial service providers.

Five-year results

Access to core UNHCR digital services is increased: Inclusively co-designed priority core digital services are available via an online digital gateway in focus country operations. User-experience is assessed and communities' use of these services are monitored and evaluated for optimization and to inform their improvement and

support the co-design of further services. Existing in-person services will be built on to avoid the risks of exclusion and provide options to those who are not comfortable using digital services.

Inclusion enabled: More individuals who access UNHCR and UNHCR-facilitated digital services do so in ways that increase their digital and financial inclusion.

Digital identity: Registered individuals will increasingly be able to use a "good digital identity" provided by UNHCR's PRIMES, enabling access to online services, the digital exercise of their rights as data subjects and increased user-control of their personal data.

New framework for digital service delivery is established: UNHCR and the communities we serve will have collaborated to re-imagine and re-configure UNHCR's overall service delivery ecosystem covering the spectrum of face-to-face, kiosk, telephone, mobile and web-based service delivery. The framework will consider good practices in digital services, set out enabling guidance to strengthen access, quality, efficiency and integrity. It will include back-up plans for offline service delivery in case of system failure and be accompanied by training and other measures to strengthen UNHCR's capacity.

Business process redesign: UNHCR has re-designed business processes to enable the delivery of priority core digital services, including consideration of providing predictive services.

Technical standards and interoperability: Technical standards relating to key areas such as digital identity and data security are established and agreed with partners to increase interoperability across the humanitarian digital ecosystem and, where appropriate, to facilitate digital inclusion.

Data protection and security: Personal data will be processed as part of digital service delivery in line with strengthened UNHCR Data Protection policies and accompanied by renewed efforts to address emerging cyber-security risks.

Optimization and planning: The data generated by digital service delivery will be analyzed to optimize the quality of services and to inform humanitarian response and development planning, consistent with data protection, human rights and ethical standards.

Priority actions

Costing: The strengthening of digital identity systems and the development of UNHCR's digital gateway and locally appropriate core digital services, communication and online information provision will be costed, to underpin a multi-year development and implementation plan.

Digital services framework: Research and partnerships will inform the development of a new framework to provide the foundations for UNHCR's digital gateway and services.

Digital identity: UNHCR's PRIMES will be strengthened to provide access to a "good digital identity", which is standards-based, increasingly interoperable, provides for more user-control and increased capacity to digitally exercise data subjects' rights as well as increased online and offline functionality.

Piloting: UNHCR will design and pilot selected new core digital services in partnership with the communities we serve in selected field contexts.

Rationalization: UNHCR's approach to responding to queries across multiple online, telephone and face-to-face channels and using multiple systems will be assessed with solutions identified to improve efficiency, quality and consistency through the digital gateway and locally appropriate services.

Special focus: Digital identity

Trusted digital identities and robust digital identity systems are the foundations for accessing secure online digital services and significantly contribute to strengthening the integrity of the delivery of face-to-face services. Those interviewed for research undertaken in 2019-20 told UNHCR that they want it to provide more identity services and to continue to securely process their personal data.

UNHCR's PRIMES, including its biometrics systems, were developed for the crucial protection processes of refugee registration, providing identity documentation, refugee status determination, child protection, sexual and gender-based violence interventions, legal and physical protection, resettlement and voluntary repatriation of refugee registration and delivery of assistance.[20] By December 2021, 117 UNHCR operations were using its core casework database, which contained live records for over 12.3 million registered individuals from among the communities we serve. By the same time over 9.7 million individuals had been biometrically enrolled in UNHCR's systems in 80 countries.

Refugees face unique challenges establishing their identities because they often lack valid documentation from their country of origin which can be safely verified. Where appropriate, UNHCR uses biometric technology to help secure unique identities within PRIMES databases and mitigate the risks of identity fraud, duplicate entries, substitution and identity theft. Biometrics are also used in some contexts to authenticate refugees' identities to higher levels of assurance, widening access to services such as resettlement travel and cash and in-kind assistance distributions. This has contributed to significant impacts, with on the one hand, UNHCR having provided over 3 billion USD in cash-based interventions to over 25 million people in a total of over 100 countries between 2016 and 2020. On the other, the risks of leakage in assistance distributions caused by duplicate registrations and other integrity risks have been plugged allowing humanitarian assistance to flow to refugees.[21]

Building on the wide usage and extended global coverage of PRIMES in supporting the digitization of refugee information, UNHCR is poised to draw on this comparative advantage and lessons learnt from the pandemic to engage remotely with refugees. Defining new policies and implementing them alongside existing "privacy by design" standards when we upgrade the existing ecosystem and develop new applications is crucial. The goal is to provide the communities we serve with a digital identity and credentials, which are robust and trusted, give access to more online services and provide them with greater control of their personal data. UNHCR's global guidance indicates that communities' preferences should be considered and that the provision of humanitarian assistance does not require as a matter of course mandatory biometric enrolment.

At the same time, States have diverse approaches to the registration, identity management and digital identification of the forcibly displaced and stateless. UNHCR will continue to have a unique operational role in supporting States, particularly in emergencies and situations of mass influx and in cross-border contexts such as voluntary return and resettlement. Increasingly States are using their own digital identification systems for the forcibly displaced and stateless, with many investing in universal systems aiming to cover the whole resident population and new legal frameworks for the digital age. These growing opportunities for inclusion could help stop the forcibly displaced and stateless falling into the identity gap. To achieve this, UNHCR is working with a broad range of partners, including host States, experts from leading digital nations and regional organizations, the World Bank's Identity for Development Programme[22] and UN partners, such as the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda and UNDP. Encouragingly national and global regulators are also addressing exclusionary risks that refugees often face.[23]

Priority outcomes to achieve a digital future for UNHCR

A displaced Venezuelan woman takes part in user research interviews, showing UNHCR colleagues how she researches education and employment opportunities in Boa Vista, Brazil. © UNHCR/Gisele Netto

Lailet Chávez and Yeraldine Cabrera, Venezuelan refugees, practise using a UNHCR WhatsApp channel during a workshop in Quito, Ecuador.
© UNHCR/Jaime Giménez

Digital engagement

Outcome

The communities we serve enjoy improved protection environments, services and solutions as the result of impact-led digital strategies to engage donors, partners and the public and increase their support for our mission.

UNHCR's external digital engagement is based on audience insights and oriented towards achieving concrete impact against our resource mobilization and advocacy goals.

Current context

Digital developments have transformed the behaviours and expectations of UNHCR's external audiences – whether those be governments, partners, individual supporters or others. By leveraging digital tools and approaches to improve how we engage with our audiences, we can achieve greater impact. COVID-19 has only further highlighted the agility and resilience that a strong digital response can bring to our external communications.

Currently, our offices vary significantly in their capacity to digitally engage with their audiences. UNHCR communicators consistently express the need for (1) **access to best-in-class digital infrastructure and platforms** and (2) **building digital skills and capacity**. These are especially relevant in the following areas:

Audience analysis and insights: Most offices have basic tools to monitor the performance of their channels. However, regions highlight the need to generate richer insights, through investment in audience analysis tools and training in audience research techniques.

Interactive data: Research shows that our audiences consider us an authoritative source of data about the communities we serve. However, they seek enhanced ways of interacting with the data we offer, ranging from simplified summaries and visualizations to raw datasets. Regions and country offices want the tools and skills to offer their audiences interesting, interactive data products, catering to local needs but comparable in quality to global output.

Seamless and satisfying digital experiences: Currently, UNHCR manages a diverse portfolio of external websites, social media accounts and digital communications products. Regional and audience feedback tells us that such a fragmented digital presence makes it harder for our audiences to find the content they are looking for. We have an opportunity to improve access to the wealth of data and content we already produce, by creating coherent, seamless and satisfying digital journeys for our priority audiences.

Local relevance: While country offices publish their web and social media content in local languages, they highlight the need to design content from the start for local engagement. This applies to content gathering and production, the ability to extract and showcase locally relevant data, and working with local digital content creators.

Collaboration with partners: Digital communication partnerships can have huge benefits; they can lead to greater creativity, expand audiences and secure funding. This has been demonstrated in our past collaborations with large digital partners, influencers and creators.

Two-way communication: On digital channels, audiences no longer want to be passive consumers of content. They expect to choose content, ask questions, give feedback and otherwise engage interactively. How responsive an organization is to its digital audiences has repercussions for its reputation, as well as for the success of its engagement efforts.

In recent years, UNHCR has incorporated two-way communication into some areas of Digital engagement. These include increased community management on social media, enhanced donor care programmes, email preference centres and some testing of chatbots. Increased staff capacity and training will allow us to build our effectiveness in this area.

From measuring engagement to measuring impact: Currently, the teams managing UNHCR's digital channels are equipped to monitor basic performance metrics through the native analytics tools of each platform. To achieve the next level of effectiveness, regions want more robust methods to measure results and the impact of our Digital engagement.

Five-year results

- UNHCR is able to mobilize increased resources more efficiently and from a broader range of sources.

- UNHCR is reaching and engaging new audiences to generate increased support for a more positive protection environment for the communities we serve.

- UNHCR is providing our key audiences with seamless, relevant and accessible digital experiences, including timely and actionable information.

- UNHCR partners are able to more easily access the data, guidance and other resources they require from UNHCR to provide support and services to the communities we serve.

- UNHCR is positioned as a forward-leaning, agile and effective organization, strengthening our ability to attract and enable strong partnerships across all areas of the strategy.

Priority actions

- Strengthen our access to, and use of, digital audience insights to generate a deeper understanding of our key audiences and inform our communications approach.

- Digital channel managers consistently conduct joint planning and reporting to ensure we are providing seamless, cross-channel journeys.

- Enrich our storytelling with data in engaging and interactive formats.

- Leverage partnerships to co-create content, increase the reach and impact of our communications, and expand and influence audiences.

- Where it will enhance our effectiveness, we engage in two-way communication with our audiences.

- Ensure country offices have the digital skills, capacity and tools to deliver engaging, locally relevant and impactful digital engagement while maintaining access to the efficiencies of shared platforms, common standards and content, where useful.

- Mainstream an impact-led approach to digital engagement, developing a robust methodology to establish clear performance indicators to go beyond outputs and engagement to measure the tangible outcomes of our digital engagement activities as well as their impact on key strategic objectives.

Special focus: Connectivity

UNHCR's vision on connectivity is two-fold: for communities to have accessible and affordable connectivity so that they are digitally included and can access digital services, and for the humanitarian community to have the connectivity it needs to transform digitally.

Building on its 2016 Connectivity for Refugees strategy and its Refugee Emergency Telecommunications Sector (RETS) mechanism, UNHCR notes the underlying importance of connectivity for achieving all pillars of the Digital Strategy. This applies both to UNHCR staff, partners and the humanitarian community, and access to connectivity for the people we serve and their host communities.

UNHCR will strengthen its coordination efforts around connectivity through the Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation Global Connectivity Pillar, where UNHCR will actively contribute.

While connectivity is a matter broader than humanitarian response or UNHCR's work, there are strategic actions that UNHCR can take to both ensure internet access for staff and responders, and further efforts to ensure that communities have connectivity available to them:

1. **Gather baseline data on connectivity needs and enhance connectivity mapping:** UNHCR and its partners will systematically assess connectivity needs across operations, covering requirements from staff and responders, including different humanitarian digital services, but also community connectivity needs. UNHCR will seek to map, or advocate with partners to include within their mappings, available infrastructure, telecoms landscape, etc., to highlight connectivity availability in refugee locations that can be used to inform digital programming. Furthermore, such data

would support industry and national regulators (through universal access strategies and programmes) to address connectivity gaps. This will be undertaken alongside partners and the private sector, as well as consortia initiatives such as GIGA.

2. **Develop stronger relationships with the private sector to deliver sustainable connectivity solutions:** UNHCR will seek to build stronger relationships with mobile network operators, satellite companies, other ISPs and technology companies more broadly to provide connectivity services safely and reliably. These relationships may deliver a range of small-scale local solutions to large and complex networks in locations hosting forcibly displaced communities. This will include identifying 'win-win' scenarios where connectivity needs of communities match a viable business case for connectivity service providers.

3. **Strengthen links with development finance to ensure inclusion of forcibly displaced people in large scale infrastructure investment supported by development banks and multilateral organisations:** UNHCR will seek to build stronger relationships with these actors and links with their associated financing mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of the people we serve in broader telecommunications investment at national level spanning high-level through to local infrastructure.

Members of the local community install network equipment for internet connectivity in Uribia, La Guajira, Colombia, in December 2021.
© UNHCR/Angela Mendez

4. **Explore innovative and transformative models of extending connectivity in hard-to-reach refugee-hosting areas:** In order to extend connectivity to last-mile areas, UNHCR will – together with government, industry and other stakeholders – explore alternative and innovative business models to establish sustainable connectivity, considering inter alia de-risking mechanisms, shared capital investment, etc., building off its own expertise in delivering safe and secure last-mile connectivity to the response community. UNHCR will also explore options for community-led approaches, such as Community Networks, that leverage the skills and capacities of the forcibly displaced and communities that host them to build out connectivity infrastructure locally, ensuring sustainability of interventions.

5. **Coordinated connectivity in emergency preparedness and response:** UNHCR will continue – through the Refugee Emergency Telecommunications Sector (RETS) – to coordinate connectivity solutions with partners and to coordinate the delivery of connectivity services in refugee situations. UNHCR will deliver connectivity support as part of its emergency preparedness and response activities to ensure comprehensive protection and assistance support to actors on the ground in refugee situations. Activities will span the items covered above ranging from liaison with industry and governments, to mapping as part of emergency preparedness.

For more information, see "Special focus: Digital in emergency preparedness and response" on page 35.

A South Sudanese refugee collects water at Bidibidi refugee settlement in Yumbe district, northern Uganda. The water delivery system uses a series of networked, ultra-sonic water-level sensors that are installed in the tanks of delivery trucks as well as static water tanks in refugee settlements. The sensors provide real-time data on deliveries and consumption. It is based on the "Internet of Things" – physical objects fitted with sensors in order to connect and exchange data over the internet. © UNHCR/Jiro Ose

PRIORITY OUTCOME 5

Working digitally

Outcome

UNHCR works more efficiently by putting in place the digital tools and skills to transform collaboration, knowledge-sharing and increase business efficiency. Our field operations and partners are empowered to deliver effective field-based digital solutions, tracking and responding to emerging protection issues and emergencies.

Current situation

Digital approaches can transform the way we deliver our work whether in large well-connected offices or remote field locations.

Digitizing business processes: COVID-19 has forced us to adapt our business processes. Methodologies increasingly rely on a mixture of offline and digital techniques. Some business processes have digitized significantly – challenging and changing existing processes.

For example, the use of IoT water monitoring has allowed a remote view of water supply issues across multiple locations. This has the twofold effect of making delivery services more efficient and reducing the need for CO_2-heavy travel. Digital innovation must help continue to enhance the current ways of working.

Business systems: UNHCR has a well-developed programme of work to address the operational efficiency of the organization which will result in business transformation. Starting in 2020, UNHCR has engaged in a coordinated and focused business transformation to optimize processes and systems to deliver better results to the communities we serve. This transformation is increasingly critical, as current systems were designed and introduced when the organization was responding to a far smaller number of individuals and their needs, in less complex operating environments. We are also collaborating with UN partners to develop systems that meet shared requirements, such as collaboration on a UN Payment Gateway.

Collaboration with colleagues and partners: The pandemic accelerated the adoption of online collaboration. This democratized participation but also increased expectations of our digital platforms. We now see greater use of a range of tools from virtual meetings, online training, and ideation platforms. The proliferation of engagement tools can improve our ability to communicate and collaborate effectively. However, the sheer number of tools can lead to some lack of coherence in training and confusion about which tool is right for which purpose.

Inclusive access to the workplace: Although online communication can democratize participation across the organization, inclusion barriers such as disability must be considered when shifting collaboration into the digital space.

Connectivity: Although most offices have strong connectivity, for those in remote locations the experience of online meetings and other digital processes can be frustrating. Mitigation actions may be needed to ensure all colleagues can play an active part in the digital workplace.

"Glocal" solutions: Often regions lack capacity to create a more localized digital workplace experience. This runs counter to the opportunities offered by new technologies, where it is much easier for non-technical staff to create local solutions using low code tools. Global solutions across regions need to be standardized and capacity needs to be in place to develop localized solutions.

Knowledge management: The skills and expertise of our staff are our most valuable assets. Knowledge needs to be preserved, organized and shared across the organization especially in a rotational system where knowledge needs to be frequently passed on. We need systems to capture and organize knowledge at the point of creation and ensure it is easy to access and reuse.

Communities of Practice allow for a wide range of collaboration, from online discussion and digital whiteboarding to skills directories and document-sharing. AI and machine learning, if properly used, could transform knowledge management, with benefits for UNHCR and others outside the organization.

Our business processes have become increasingly digitalized but we have not always been able to retain content in appropriate systems. Procuring or designing new products, we must consider how content can be preserved and accessed over time. Other considerations for preserving data include accessible formats, effective use of metadata and contextual information.

Five-year results

- The Business Transformation Programme (BTP) will leverage cloud-based technology supporting a range of processes including planning, budgeting, reporting, finance and supply chain, human resources, resource mobilization and management, external engagement, and partner project management. The BTP intends to simplify and streamline processes to ensure that UNHCR is equipped to tackle emerging challenges as an agile, efficient and innovative organization.

- Redesigned business systems enable UNHCR to work more efficiently and opportunities for new digital innovation are optimized.

- Staff and partners can effectively collaborate and share knowledge internally and with key partners.

- New digital solutions are identified, assessed and scaled up for global and field solutions with consideration on use of solutions in areas with low/no connectivity and fragile conflict-affected settings. Cooperation with UN partners to develop shared systems to meet mutual needs is increased.

- The workforce have completed the digital training needed to empower them to meet their objectives.

Priority actions

- Finalize roll out of new BTP systems ensuring high-end user experience and interoperability.

- Maximize and strengthen the use of digital collaboration platforms with the focus on knowledge management and sharing between regions, with partners and inter-agency.

- Encourage digital innovation at field level with local investment and support.

- Embed digital planning in national and regional long-term strategies enabled by a Digital Transformation Strategy planning framework.

- Put in place a coordination framework to track the development of local solutions and assess the potential for cross-operational reuse.

- Establish a Digital Network of Excellence with a central digital training programme and capacity-building programme. Develop best practice guidance and common standards.

- Ensure that sustainability and the possibility of preserving the organization's data are considered for all new and existing solutions.

Special focus:
Digital in emergency preparedness and response

Digital plays a vital role in UNHCR's preparedness and response to emergencies, providing access to connectivity, communication, essential analysis and operational tools.

Preparedness: Digital tools and data can help identify signals that can be used for "horizon scanning" of countries at risk of an emergency or further escalation. This works most effectively when data and analysis are consolidated into a single place. Conflict trend data (ACLED), social media monitoring, incident reporting, meteorological datasets, predictive conflict modelling, are among the main data sources in this work. Machine learning predictive analysis could add strength, speed and greater insights.

Digital forward planning: When it comes to emergency response preparedness, there is a checklist of necessary forward planning for digital services. Strengthening the emergency response approach to ensure digital preparedness is a primary consideration at the onset of an emergency and in contingency planning.

Emergency response staffing: Digitally trained staff at field level are critical to successful emergency response. UNHCR keeps rosters of staff who can be deployed quickly when an emergency is declared. The roster needs increasing numbers of digitally trained staff to meet the needs on the ground.

Connectivity: One of the first needs when an emergency is declared is to deploy systems and equipment to enable connectivity. UNHCR works to ensure the establishment of effective information-sharing, collaboration and communication systems. Connectivity means internet-dependent communication services can connect partners and displaced populations.

Collaboration platforms: By its nature, emergency response involves various stakeholders. Evaluations can be made easier by promoting collaboration and information-sharing portals for NGOs and UN agencies. It can be problematic when multiple assessments are made by different humanitarian partners and different platforms are used to share information. Promoting common collaboration platforms and assessment tools will help ensure field data is shared effectively with all stakeholders.

Bridging the gap between on and offline: In crisis situations, we often find gaps in connectivity but still there is a reliance on digital technology to gather information for field services and undertake crucial registration activities. Some applications, such as Kobo, Rapp and BIMS, allow offline mode and remote capture with synchronization when connectivity is achieved.

UNHCR will look for ways to strengthen the rapid deployment of connectivity in emergencies and ensure remote registration tools and offline data capture services that enable online work to continue in unconnected environments. Of crucial importance is developing future digital toolsand platforms that can be configured to work in both online and offline contexts and meet the data security and data protection challenges of fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Conclusion

Implementing the strategy

The strategy timeline for the core actions is 2022-2026 and is aligned with the timeline for the new strategic directions. While areas such as digital inclusion are very localized and will be monitored at an operational level, other initiatives – such as the development of a Digital Services Framework and information technology projects – are more global and will be delivered in phases across the strategy timeline. This strategy is further supported by:

- Implementation plan

- Governance framework

- Digital maturity assessment

- Capacity building framework

- Regional planning tools - Operational guidance, results framework and indicators

The Strategy will be overseen by a digital transformation function that will monitor and coordinate the delivery. The function will report regularly and help deliver areas of the strategy that are cross-cutting such as partnership engagement, research, standards development, capacity building and accessibility.

Endnotes

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19 The Secretary General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation 2020 (UN Doc. A/74/821), paras 46-48 available at: https://undocs.org/A/74/821

20 See UNHCR Registration and Identity Management available at: https://www.unhcr.org/registration.html. Refugee Registration is defined as "the recording, verifying and updating of information on individual persons of concern to UNHCR with the aim of protecting, assisting and documenting them and of implementing durable solutions" see UNHCR Guidance on Registration and Identity Management, Chapter 1 available at: https://www.unhcr.org/registration-guidance/chapter1/introduction-to-the-guidance-on-registration/

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