DoT.Mig

In Brief

Digital Livelihoods for Refugees – Examples, Challenges and Recommendations

DIALOGUE ON TECH AND MIGRATION

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About DoT.Mig

The **DoT.Mig In Brief** paper series is part of the The Dialogue on Tech and Migration, DoT.Mig.

DoT.Mig provides a learning platform to connect the dots between digital technologies and their use and impact on migration policy, as well as connecting relevant stakeholders. The **DoT.Mig In Brief** paper series highlights debates and concepts relevant to navigate the emerging field of Tech and Migration.

DoT.Mig is a forum by the Migration Strategy Group on International Cooperation and Development (MSG). The MSG is an initiative by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Bertelsmann Foundation, and the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Key Takeaways

1. Digital livelihoods in a refugee and migration context must set realistic and attainable targets for training, upskilling, and employment. Given the competitive state of the digital economy, it is critical to equip refugees with basic skills, diversify their income streams, and identify promising projects that can compete in a regional or international market.

2. Digital livelihoods—both for refugees and donors—are perceived as a 'quick fix'. For refugees, they are seen as a way to connect to a modern world, generate a source of income, and avoid having to adopt less desirable 'traditional' livelihoods. For donors and governments, it is a means to promote virtual and dematerialized integration which while in theory is a good idea, is far more complex in practice.

3. Challenges facing refugees in digital markets are numerous, spanning poor infrastructure and Internet connectivity, lack of access to personal devices, limited market access (through social or professional networks), and poor working conditions, while women face additional sociocultural and practical challenges.

4. Policymakers' top-down approach to digital markets frequently negates the needs of vulnerable communities, including refugees. This practice must evolve to consider refugee perspectives in order to improve their integration into the market.

5. Whether assessing digital skills or technical and vocational education and training more broadly, the measurement of success must extend beyond the material benefits of high-paid employment to include its contribution to participants' social, mental, and societal well-being.

6. Recommendations to address these challenges include improving the quality and relevance of trainings for refugees, harnessing technology to better connect job-seekers and employers, and increasing refugees' competitiveness through skills improvement.

Introduction

Digitalization is rapidly changing the character of work globally, creating new forms of livelihoods for people who have often been excluded from digital advances and the formal labor market. In recent years, digital livelihood programs focusing on employment and vocational training for displaced populations have expanded in refugee camps around the world. To ensure refugees have equal access to digital work and all that the digital economy has to offer, we need to understand the opportunities and limitations of digital livelihoods, specifically for vulnerable populations.

1. What are digital livelihoods?

The International Labour Organization (ILO) officially defines digital livelihoods to broadly include four aspects of digital work and learning: 1) digital educational efforts and digital skills training; 2) work practices on digital work platforms and for remote employers such as home-based freelancing and micro-working; 3) work that uses digital skills but takes place locally outside the digital economy; and 4) small-scale digital entrepreneurship that uses digital tools and e-commerce platforms to run and develop businesses, often from home.

Actual skills range from basic computer skills, micro-working skills, and advanced skills in web development, programming, and data science to soft skills, language skills, and business coaching. Refugees find digital skills training courses attractive due to the assumption that these courses provide transferrable skills as well as access to various professional networks.

Beyond this concrete, nearly programmatic description, the term 'livelihoods' must also be considered. The UNHCR defines livelihoods as "a means of subsistence that enables people to secure their basic necessities of life, such as food, water, shelter and clothing." The idea of digital livelihoods may therefore seem paradoxical since it combines subsistence and survival with modern technologies which are usually associated with more advanced needs and innovation. This presents a challenge, as more than income generation, what is needed is the inclusion of socially, economically, and also legally and politically excluded communities within contemporary digital networks of information and innovation.

To meet this challenge, certain prerequisites are necessary for refugees to function within the digital economy: the development of basic digital knowledge, skills-based training, access

to markets and social and economic networks, reliable Internet connectivity, computer and mobile hardware, payment infrastructure, knowledge of national and international laws and regulations, and the understanding of the different contexts of each place and refugee population that mediate refugees' digital access. Only by identifying these challenges one by one can we turn a few success stories into a sustainable model.

2. What is the meaning of digital livelihoods in the refugee and migration context?

Based on the broad definition of digital livelihoods, there are two major risks to refugee populations when discussing potential actions and opportunities. First is the risk of false expectations among refugee youth that any type of digital employment is attainable—the digital sector is extremely competitive and earning a living from digital work can be challenging. Any communications regarding opportunities for refugees must be feasible, realistic, and sustainable.

Second is the tendency of donors, UN agencies, and NGOs to put forth a few success stories that oversimplify program impact for the majority of participants. This can lead to lower quality programs (as positive stories reduce the imperative to improve) and discourage the target population. For programs to be truly effective, it is important to be modest about what can be achieved. **We are not setting out to create a new Silicon Valley in Zaatari, Dadaab, or Rhino Camp, but we can equip as many people as possible with basic skills, diversify the income streams of some youth, and identify a handful of promising projects that can compete in a regional or international market.**

3. Pilot projects and research on digital livelihoods for refugees

To continue with the idea of the challenge and the paradox of digital livelihoods, it is important to look back at experiences that allow us to discern both the opportunities and the limitations. This makes it possible to see what the future of the sector might look like. **While digital freelancing represents a possible alternative in a legal grey area, refugees also face significant barriers to entry.** These include a widespread struggle to meet the basic prerequisites for accessing digital livelihoods: a computer, reliable Internet access, and digital literacy. Any digital training initiative must also contend with the idea of the refugee entrepreneur who gets rich by creating a revolutionary app and selling it to Google: This belief is unavoidable but also dangerous, as it diminishes the dividends of any training and subsequent employment. In this sense, it is important to broaden the measure of success for an intervention—such as digital skills or technical and vocational education and training more broadly—to include its contribution to the social, mental, and societal well-being of participants. The term livelihood should extend beyond income to include more positive externalities in psychosocial and societal terms such as social integration and cohesion, increased self-confidence, and post-traumatic recovery. Although aspirational stories (found on TEDx) of refugees going from 'camp to sunshine' are important, alternative measures of success are necessary and fundamental to programmatic success.

4. What are the challenges of digital livelihoods in refugee camps?

A lack of infrastructure—Internet connectivity issues, poor electricity supply, and poor WiFi coverage—is the most common challenge to digital employment for refugees. Added to this are the initial start-up costs, including for smartphones and computers, required for training or employment.

The issue of market access must be noted as many refugees do not have the necessary social

capital or sufficient diaspora links to enter and remain in a highly competitive, fast-moving, and often unregulated market, where operating codes are complex. Working conditions, including employee benefits, protection from abuse or exploitation, and the right to claim wages, are also difficult to enforce within the sector, particularly for refugees who may work in restrictive legal environments in their host communities. As an ILO report on digital work concludes: "Online self-employment training operates under the somewhat problematic assumption that individual refugees must be willing to take risks and pursue the goal of self-employment without the security of returns."

Finally, access to digital livelihoods for women is generally more difficult because of sociocultural stigmas against working women, safety issues (online harassment or physical harassment if women have to use public centers due to low Internet connectivity), and a lack of time (much of which is dedicated to caring and other unpaid responsibilities).

With technology often seen as a male-centric industry, girls are also less likely to engage in digital livelihoods from a young age. Just as with gender issues, little attention has been paid to the difficulties faced by refugees with disabilities when actively participating in the digital economy.

For political actors, as the ILO has found when looking at the digital economy, the narrative is largely top-down, focusing on the perspectives of the main actors involved (whether national or international, governmental or non-governmental), and fails to take into account the perspective of refugees, asylum seekers, displaced people, and, more generally, the most disadvantaged populations. This narrow understanding of the market leads to the exclusion of these populations. Additionally and from an ethical perspective, the lack of regulation in the sector, particularly for freelancers, contributes to exploitation of the workforce.

5. How can these challenges be addressed?

This is obviously the most important question, given the actors involved in the sector span governments, donors, NGOs, training institutes, and also private sector businesses. In particular, there are a number of general but actionable lessons to be learned from the various evaluations conducted by Samuel Hall in environments as diverse as Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Nigeria. Through our contribution to the ILO study Digital refugee livelihoods and decent work:

Towards inclusion in a fairer digital economy, we suggest the following recommendations:

It is important to improve the quality of education and vocational training so that they equip young people with the marketable skills that employers need. **Training providers need to go beyond imparting digital skills and focus on preparing refugees for the market. Training content is often inadequate**—further research is needed to

determine which skills are the most marketable for refugees and training should be universally adopted by training providers and deliberately geared towards developing these skills. Correspondingly, training must be formally recognized by employers (for example, through the adoption of a centralized accreditation system) for maximum impact. **Finally, training staff must undergo continuous professional development to ensure that the skills being taught are in line with market requirements and the needs of participants.** Similarly, former trainees need technology access in the short term to avoid the depreciation of skills over the long term. This would mean restructuring the technical ecosystem of the sector, moving away from a basic supply vs. demand logic to thinking about the digital skills market as a whole in order to create a supportive community and digital network for participants.

Technology must be harnessed to connect employers and job seekers and stimulate growth. The ability to leverage technology depends on access—which most refugees and host community members have difficulty obtaining, and which remains a significant barrier to entry. Infrastructure issues become prohibitive for those at the beginning or end of their journey into the digital labor market. Areas with the lowest levels of infrastructure encourage people to self-select out of engagement with the digital economy—this is particularly pronounced for women and people with disabilities. The areas with the most developed infrastructure are often not stable enough to offer trained and enthusiastic people the opportunity to find sustainable employment. These young people are also likely to face high initial costs to entering the market. Access to technology is unevenly distributed, with host communities often less well served than refugees, and women needing

additional support to take advantage of existing opportunities (such as safe attendance at training centers or Internet cafes). On the question of the market, we need to get away from the idea that trainees will automatically be employed. This is often not the case, as they do not always have the access or the contacts and are often less competitive than other digital workers with more established social capital.

Create, develop and cultivate refugees' skills so that they are competitive in the market, regardless of their status. This would probably be the best demonstration of success. A phased approach must be adopted: a trainee who is certified or has graduated today is probably not yet ready to embark on a first professional experience or negotiate rates, services, deadlines, and payments. Failures can both discourage employees and prevent employers from hiring them again. Setting up 'collectives' (such as the Dadaab Collective in Kenya) connects refugees with mentoring partners in academia, NGO. or the private sector, and can provide a foothold and guarantee a progressive learning process. Job-seeking often depends on an employment pipeline that does not yet exist but must be cultivated by service providers and employers: One option could be a system of incentives for employers to hire refugees. Employers often tend to overestimate the barriers to hiring refugees—legal requirements, hiring processes, access issues—and so communicating information through an incentive program is also essential. This first encounter with the labor market is often decisive: psychologically and to continue seeking employment, refugees (as anyone) must feel that their efforts in training and skills development are not in vain. This stage must not be missed and everyone can help.

6. Recommendations to political actors

The top-down perspective by political actors towards the digital market needs to shift towards the perspective of refugees, asylum seekers, displaced people, and, more generally, the most disadvantaged populations—what is truly feasible for them, from their perspective and with the challenges they face. Once this change is made, there will be room for two major transitions which refugees need help to make. First, is the need for upskilling in digital literacy and the provision of connectivity and access to devices. Second is the transition from informal to formal employment; the provision of decent working conditions and protection, and the change from small-scale, informal entrepreneurship to sustainable formal businesses.

Policy actors should broaden their perspective from a narrow understanding of the market to an integrative ecosystem—this means looking beyond the simplistic understanding of supply and demand which does not reflect the reality that most refugees face in their journey towards decent livelihoods. Focusing on a variety of digital skills among refugees increases their employability in a digitalized work future, while cooperating with employers and relevant sectors of the economy helps match skills with demands. We must therefore adopt a different market scale, in terms of space and time. In terms of **space**, we need to look beyond the camps and settlements to academic partners in the region to promote links with the diaspora and organize meetings with institutional and private players in the places where innovation is created. It is the role of policymakers to make this possible. In terms of **time**, we need to think in terms of the quickest route to market, especially for a sector that is constantly evolving. It sounds paradoxical, but without regulation and an encouraging political and institutional context, refugees will be further marginalized. Fighting against this is often politically motivated.

Policymakers should also, from an ethical perspective, improve working conditions for refugees while strengthening the institutional protection mechanisms available to them. There are two obvious avenues for regulations and legal practices: it is essential to better financially include refugees, including providing access to bank accounts and other digital payment mechanisms, while pushing for a revision of exclusive international and national policies that exclude refugees. Similarly, international organizations can lobby states that categorically deny refugees mobile SIM cards and Internet access and integrate ongoing government efforts to prepare citizens for the digital economy by improving the skills of refugees and migrants, in order to increase social cohesion and ensure that no one is left behind.