# UNHCR Ideas: an online platform for change

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**'UNHCR Ideas' aims to enable collaborative problem solving and idea generation among an online community.**

In August 2013, UNHCR's Innovation team launched the UNHCR Ideas platform – an online crowdsourcing tool[1] that enables members of the humanitarian community to put forward and develop innovative solutions to challenges in refugee protection and assistance.

Each Ideas initiative – or 'Challenge' – presents a particular issue that refugee or humanitarian communities face, either global in nature or specific to a certain region, operation or population. Viewing, comments and votes on ideas are registered by the crowdsourcing software, and the most popular ideas are automatically filtered up through the system to different stages including an 'expert rating' and a final Leadership Committee review. When an idea is chosen by the Leadership Committee, it becomes an active project pursued by UNHCR Innovation and collaborating offices or organisations. Since the platform's launch, three global UNHCR Ideas Challenges have taken place, each proving the power of the crowd in humanitarian problem solving.

### The first Challenge

The first problem statement posted on the Ideas platform was: "How can access to information and services provided by UNHCR and partners be improved for refugees and people of concern residing in urban areas?" Participants in the Challenge posted 114 ideas, voted over 430 times, and made over 1,200 comments on the online discussions over the six-week pilot period. Participants were mainly UNHCR staff (78%) from over 50 countries but also included a handful of representatives from partner and refugee organisations. The winning idea is being implemented as a project in UNHCR for 2014.[2]

In an organisation that is often thought of as hierarchical or bureaucratic, UNHCR Ideas provides a possibility for staff in the field and around the world, no matter what their rank or job, to engage in the problem-solving process. Ideas progress through the system based on community response and merit rather than by who came up with them. Additionally, the ratings of each idea are visible to all participants on the platform, allowing members to better understand how the final ideas are chosen, and giving participants a feeling of ownership and engagement throughout the whole process. Surveys after each Challenge have shown that the flat structure and transparency of UNHCR Ideas are major advantages of the initiative.

*"...it's a fascinating application – the fact that it allows people with little authority, who are usually filled with ideas, to express their ideas along with more senior staff and receive equal consideration."* (participant)

*"Finally, there is a place where you can share your ideas and those ideas can be commented [on], improved, and utilised!"* (participant)

From the beginning, UNHCR Ideas has also presented an opportunity to involve refugees in problem solving and programming. In the first Challenge, for example, one of the most active participants was a refugee who tapped into his community in Kampala to add their expertise and feedback to the discussion. However, it has been difficult to make the platform open and widely accessible, with issues of internet connectivity, computer access and other barriers such as language, literacy rates and lack of awareness preventing widespread participation by refugees, and our experiences have shown that a blending of technology with traditional off-line solutions is necessary to make each Challenge more widely accessible. In the most recent Challenge, focus groups in Zambia and Kenya generated ideas and

solutions that were then introduced onto the platform; this dual approach is proving effective in enabling broader conversations.

UNHCR Ideas was created through a number of private partnerships. The platform and concept were created through a close working relationship between Mindjet, the software

company that built the crowdsourcing tool, and UNHCR Innovation – a good example of private sector culture successfully meshing with nonprofit culture. To date, funding from the IKEA Foundation and the Hunter and Stephanie Hunt 'Return on Innovation' project have enabled us to launch Challenges with a pledge to pursue the winning ideas – which is felt to be essential to the success of the initiative.

### Forthcoming Challenges
In the second half of 2014, UNHCR Ideas will launch Challenges on sexual and gender based violence, energy, livelihoods and education. The 'Safe from the Start' Challenge will run from mid-August until early October 2014 and asks participants to find solutions to the question: "What innovative energy and/or livelihoods programmes can most effectively protect persons of concern from sexual and gender-based violence at the onset of humanitarian emergencies?"

www.unhcr.org/53f31d739.pdf

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1. Using Mindjet software and powered by SpigitEngage.

2. For more information about the first Challenge and a review of the initiative, see Bloom L (2014) *UNHCR Ideas: Open innovation inspiring collaboration and new ideas within the UN: Independent review of an online platform pilot used for collaborative innovation within and beyond The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)* http://tinyurl.com/HIP-UNHCRIdeas-review-2014