



Luxembourg-UNHCR-Skype synergies

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A recent strategic partnership between UNHCR, the Government of Luxembourg and communications software provider Skype is keeping UNHCR staff in hardship locations in touch with their families and friends. The partners are now considering how the technology might be adapted for use by other humanitarian organisations.

Some 44% of UNHCR staff work in the field, often in remote, 'hardship' duty stations. They may be separated from their families and friends for months at a time, sometimes at very short notice, and have limited or occasionally no opportunities for communication. UNHCR is concerned – and has a responsibility – to address staff isolation and stress, not only for the sake of staff well-being but to ensure staff productivity and, ultimately, the quality of UNHCR's operational response.

In late 2008 UNHCR decided to invest internally in measures to improve living and working conditions in remote field duty stations – measures ranging from revised policies for work-life balance and team-building retreats to the introduction of technology support. One such measure was the proposal to enable staff to use Skype to keep in closer touch with their colleagues, families and friends by being able to talk with them.

Skype software enables families, friends and colleagues to get together for free with instant messaging, voice and video over the internet. At low cost they can also call landlines or mobiles almost anywhere in the world. It is one, maybe the largest, of such companies enabling communication over the internet.

Partners and connections

UNHCR needed a customised version of Skype to provide free or low-cost voice and video calls over the internet that worked on low bandwidth connectivity to avoid jeopardising existing UNHCR business applications

and that could be fully integrated with UNHCR's firewalls and other security aspects. Skype had been developing the technology to offer this and was keen to support the humanitarian community; in return, Skype would gain visibility and a huge testing ground for innovative applications in both remote areas and difficult conditions.

The Government of Luxembourg is a longstanding partner and donor of UNHCR's. It has also become increasingly involved in promoting synergies in the humanitarian community to enable better use of innovative solutions – including promoting telecommunications and information and communications technologies – to improve humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations.

In early 2009, the Luxembourg Minister for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs brought together Skype and UNHCR to further explore the possibilities of a joint partnership, including the launch of an initial fully operational 'staff welfare' project. With a strong commitment by Skype's leadership to this project and the successful first pilot phase, the Government of Luxembourg agreed to fund the first phase of the staff welfare project and hence the joint Luxembourg-UNHCR-Skype partnership was launched.

The UNHCR customised version of Skype was tested and was shown to work in six trial locations. By August 2011 Skype had been rolled out in 118 hardship locations in UN compounds across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Oceania and Europe benefitting 3,068 members of UNHCR staff. It is anticipated that by the end of 2011 – under

Phase II of the project – this version of Skype will be provided to all UNHCR's hardship postings.

"Skype is the main mode of communication to keep in touch with my family," says Haridass Sriram, UNHCR field protection officer in the UN compound in Aweil, South Sudan. "Every day I call them using Skype. I can see my twins who are now four and a half months old and talk to my wife every day." He laughs. "If not for Skype, my wife would have left me by now!"

Simplice Kpandji works for UNHCR in its base in Goma, eastern DRC. "My family lives in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. I see them every eight weeks," says Simplicie. "Between visits, I use Skype to communicate with them. My children can talk to me and ask me questions about what I have done during the day. They also talk about their activities and their friends. Through Skype, I see them playing and joking around. It is so important to us."

"We are a company dedicated to using our software to enable the world's conversations and effect social change. Our partnership with UNHCR delivers on this mission in a most extraordinary way." Tony Bates, CEO, Skype

Expanding applications

Given the popularity of the scheme among UNHCR staff and following a needs assessment, UNHCR, Skype and the Government of Luxembourg are now looking into the possibility of extending the use of Skype to staff located in non-hardship but remote areas. They are also contemplating the feasibility of rolling out Skype in staff guest houses in hardship posts as well as making the technology available to refugees and IDPs in designated camps.



Other humanitarian organisations, such as ICRC, are showing an interest in potential applications of Skype in the field. ICRC still relies heavily on pen and paper for its reunification work, for example, and for putting families in touch with detainees. In Kandahar in 2010, however, ICRC staff were able to put families in touch with detained family members via video calls, and are keen to expand this capacity using low-bandwidth Skype facilities. The Government of Luxembourg, which is also a long-term partner and donor of ICRC's, including of its protection activities, recently announced that it is contemplating a possible new joint partnership with ICRC and Skype to develop an appropriate platform to meet this need.

Further discussions are taking place between Skype and the Government of Luxembourg over a possible partnership within the framework of the recently launched Luxembourg-funded 'emergency.lu' project.¹ Emergency.lu is a satellite-based communication platform aiming to provide connectivity and coordination services to the humanitarian community both in disaster settings and in non-emergency humanitarian operations. This initiative is currently being implemented in close collaboration with the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster and will be operational in 2012. The improved connectivity to be provided by emergency.lu could well benefit and enhance future developments of the joint

Luxembourg-UNHCR-Skype partnership.

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1. <http://emergency.lu/> See also the article by Mariko Hall pp9-11.