

Phoning home

Linda Leung

Simply having access to technology does not resolve the problem of communication between displaced people and their families.

The telephone is the most critical piece of technology for resettled refugees' connection to family members in terms of availability and familiarity. However, it is not without challenges – such as the limited communication technology choices back 'home' and the costs involved.

Prompted by the paucity of studies that deal with the key role of telecommunications technologies in maintaining relationships between refugees and displaced family members abroad, researchers at the University of Technology Sydney decided to research refugees' and asylum seekers' use of communications technology across the contexts of displacement, detention and resettlement. The outcomes were published in 2009 in a report entitled *Technology's Refuge*.¹

At a follow-up workshop,² refugees, advocates, international NGOs, resettlement services and researchers highlighted issues relating to the challenges of sustaining contact with displaced family members from the country of resettlement, in this case resettled refugees in Australia keeping in touch with displaced relatives in Africa. They also generated a multitude of recommendations and project ideas although the feasibility of these could not be assessed at the time.

While refugees resettled in Australia had many technology options open to them, they were constrained by the limited technologies that were accessible to those with whom they wanted to stay in contact. If telephone services were available, the quality of the landline or mobile coverage might be poor, and the cost to the user in Australia tended to be high. Technology choices were a negotiation between what worked best for the family members who were displaced, and what suited the person in Australia in terms of frequency and affordability.

In some areas of Africa, there is no telecommunications coverage. Workshop participants commented that where it does exist, phone connections are regularly cut off, and some of them had also experienced intrusion in communication such as crossed lines. The strength of the

a camp. She sent money to him to buy a phone but other people in the camp would also use it, leaving her often waiting for hours to get in touch.

Cheap options such as email, voice-over-internet or instant messaging may not be accessible or affordable, and access to the internet in Africa is very expensive. Furthermore, displaced family



Mbororo refugee children in Gbiti, Cameroon, play with their 'mobile phones'. The closest phone connection is almost 20 km away and the network is often down.

network signal overseas is weak, and the lack of a reliable or steady source of electricity in a recipient's country can be a major problem, although this varies by region. Growth of populations in some areas weakens network strength, due to the drain on power. Individuals may also have difficulty accessing electricity to charge their mobile phones.

Matching technology to family

Finding the best technology to use for different family members can be difficult, particularly if they themselves are displaced, because of factors such as the variety of available services, whether the family member could afford them and whether they have the skills to use them. One participant observed that the majority of their family members overseas needed to access communication technology through others. One participant described the difficulties she had in contacting her husband in

members overseas may not know how to use these facilities.

Those who had resettled paid for most of the communication with relatives who were displaced or in refugee camps, usually by initiating and paying for calls to relatives. However, some people preferred to send relatives money so that they could phone Australia, as this was in some cases the cheaper option.

Communicating with family overseas was expensive for many resettled refugees, who had trouble identifying cheap and appropriate options for their particular region of Africa from among what they identified as too much choice in the telecommunications industry, as well as inconsistent service from the providers. Participants proposed that better accountability mechanisms for mobile phone and phone-card providers be



established through an appropriate regulatory body. Specifically, they called for a watchdog on phone card services, so that a minimum level of quality can be ensured.

Mobile phones or phone cards were the most commonly used means of communication, although this varied from region to region. Resettled refugees often utilised multiple service providers for different services in order to reduce costs – and it soon becomes common knowledge within the community if a particular service provider has a cheap option.

Training in communication technology for those in refugee camps as well as for those who have been resettled needs to incorporate information on the ways in which refugees can, in some situations, more cheaply contact family overseas, for example through the use of voice-over-internet or chat. Few newly arrived refugees know how to take advantage of these new communication technologies.

Participants suggested that an official source of up-to-date information about options for communicating with family overseas would be a helpful resource. Information could be sought from key people in the community, telecommunication service providers, and migrant organisations with market

and anecdotal knowledge. The information would need to be disseminated throughout refugee communities, possibly by appropriate community members, volunteers or workers.

Sponsorship for a website could be sought from telecommunications companies who have a presence in the African telecommunications market for providing resettled refugees with options for communicating with family members and friends living in Africa.

Another idea was that a social network 'chat room' could be set up to provide an online forum for refugees to discuss communication challenges and to identify the best options for communicating with family who are displaced or in refugee camps. Such an online interactive forum would help refugees avoid the pitfall of relying on out-of-date information. However, participants also noted that computer literacy in communities from Africa is low, and few people are likely to know how to use online social networks.

One particular fear among some refugees was that they will be traced by the government they had fled, and therefore they find it difficult to talk about "exactly what's on the heart" with friends and family. There is strict scrutiny over communication into some countries, with phones being tapped.

Conclusions

Workshop participants confirmed the observation of the report that refugees' overall emotional well-being and capacity to settle are highly dependent on sustaining their communication networks with family members for knowledge and assurance of their whereabouts and safety. Communication technologies that enable refugees to find lost family, communicate with them, inform family and friends of their needs and receive financial assistance can act as a vital lifeline.

This process can be made easier by organisations providing orientation in communication technology products and services, as well as training in the use of those technologies. Organisations could also do this by facilitating informal networks within and between refugee communities. The telecommunications industry also has a role in providing consumer education, information and services suited to this market segment.

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1. Leung L, Finney Lamb C and Emrys L, *Technology's Refuge: the Use of Technology by Asylum Seekers & Refugees*. 2009. Sydney: UTS ePress. Available at <http://utsescholarship.lib.uts.edu.au/dspace/handle/2100/928>
2. The report of the workshop is at www.shopfront.uts.edu.au/news/images/Refugees_and_Communication_Technology.pdf