The role of technology in family tracing in Kenya

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Capitalising on the spread of mobile phones and the internet, new digital tools can help refugees trace missing family members. Security of data is a vital aspect of any such tools.

A new initiative allows refugees and NGOs to register a search for missing loved ones through internet-enabled mobile phones or the internet, and tools for smartphones are currently being developed. These tools mean that basically any phone anywhere can be used to submit data on separated families and help them reconnect. Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK), in partnership with Refugees United (RU), has rolled out the tracing project – known as the Refugees United Project (RUP) – through its three offices in Nairobi, Kakuma and Dadaab.[1]

How it works

Refugee families are often separated as they flee across borders to different countries and continents. Attempts to heal the distress refugees undergo are pivotal in pursuance of key universal rights, such as the right to enjoy community and the right to family life.

An RCK/RU assessment had established that 80% of respondents wanted to trace a loved one and that refugees within Nairobi, Dadaab and Kakuma had difficulties tracing and reconnecting with one another. During the twelve months of operation since its launch in July 2010, over 46,000 refugees in Kenya registered with the RUP (slightly more than half of all the clients that RCK served within the same period).

The success of this project is dependent on the size of the RUP database. RCK has stepped up its RUP awareness and sensitisation initiatives, hoping to bring information about the service to all refugees in Kenya and other parts of the world through RU's growing partner network using web- and non-web-based activities to expand tracing services in East and North Africa, Western Europe and the US.

Using any of the available platforms (mobile browser, internet, Android), refugees register their search in a globally promoted database, designed (with security in mind) to hold only what the refugee in question is willing to disclose. Refugees may expand their basic 'profile' to include specific information deemed recognisable only to family and friends, such as nicknames, physical descriptions and shared moments and/or secrets, coupled with a birth village, a preacher's or teacher's name, the place where they had last been with family, etc. Many refugees choose to sign up with their full name but not to disclose their physical whereabouts.

Once they have created their profile with as much or as little data about themselves as they feel comfortable making publicly available, each refugee can then search for family and friends by name, age, gender and other information. The personal information in a profile allows the refugee to distinguish between people with similar names and actual family members. After finding someone who might be a family member, messages can be exchanged to confirm the identity of the two parties. Refugees can send each other messages within the site using the RU platform itself and thus do not need to have an email account or a mobile phone, although having such tools does increase the user friendliness of the system.

Security

RUP attempts to maintain a secure database, and does not store information about location, beyond the country of the refugees using the system. Access to the database is granted through a software interface to selected partners (such as Ericsson, the mobile phone company with which the mobile tools were developed). The rules governing use of RUP are transparent and refugees are at all stages informed about the nature of the programme, and where their information is held and displayed.

Much lies in the education of the users so that even people with only a basic understanding of technology can make educated decisions about how to use the platform. RCK conducts workshops and community awareness forums in both refugee camps and urban settings for people to understand how the platform works and to have their questions answered. At these forums staff carry laptops and offline registration forms to register those who are interested. Once registered they are able to visit the RU platform to see if there are others looking for them or to upload more details to increase their chances of finding their loved ones. It is emphasised that those refugees with serious security concerns should not register themselves on the RU site and this is also on the FAQs page on the RU website. Refugees who feel that being on the website will put them at risk will not register.

Some choose to register with a 'changed' name to safeguard against future identification by persons interested in tracing them with malicious intent. The possibility of remaining anonymous on the platform makes it easy for a refugee to stay hidden from view. Some refugees are concerned that their governments or other actors may use the facility to jeopardise their security or seek to repatriate them. Some fear that various political or armed groups may try to recruit them. So people often choose to give their name but not disclose their physical location, making such recruitment very difficult.

Some refugees, especially those without valid identification documents, are unwilling to sign up for fear of being exposed to the authorities. The potential for anonymity in the service – allowing

refugees to provide as little or as much information as they are comfortable with – is still something that needs to be better communicated.

RU informs refugees throughout the process of signing up what the organisation provides and does not provide. Namely, if people are contacting you with offers of assistance, employment or other 'benefits', it is a scam and should be reported to RU. RU utilises its own encrypted messaging system internal to the site, where refugees can be guided through the process of responding to messages.

The platform should be considered as supplementary to other existing tracing methodologies and activities. RU also stresses that the tracing project is not meant to cover all refugee groups. If signing up could potentially place a refugee or family in any form of danger, people are strongly advised not to sign up.

There have been some teething problems. Most refugees have mobile phones but the majority of their handsets are not WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) enabled. A planned text service is yet to be implemented in Kenya.

The Refugees United Project is currently being rolled out across other parts of East Africa, with UNHCR testing the service in northern Uganda and various entities working with the platform in North Africa. More than 4,500 new refugees are coming on board every month.

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A success story

In 1991 Ahmed Hassan Osman* fled the conflict in Somalia, leaving his family in Kismayu, and made his way to Kenya in search of asylum. Ahmed lived for a while in Ifo refugee camp before being resettled to Colorado in the US where he was granted full US citizenship.

In 1992, his cousin Abdulahi Sheikh arrived in Kenya in search of support. Granted refugee status, Abdulahi ended up in Dagahaley camp in Dadaab. He believed Ahmed was either in Dadaab or had been there but his efforts to find him were unsuccessful and he soon gave up hope of ever finding him. In fact, Abdulahi believed Ahmed had gone back to Somalia.

In early 2011 RCK employed Abdulahi to assist the RU project in Dagahaley refugee camp. Abdulahi registered with the tracing project and began a search for missing loved ones. Coming across a name that was familiar, he contacted the person through the RU message system. When he received a reply he realised that, after 20 years of separation and search, he had found his beloved cousin. They exchanged phone numbers and Ahmed called, breaking 20 years of silence. Today, the two keep in touch regularly and both Abdulahi and Ahmed continue to search for more friends and family members.

*Not his real name