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## Engaging with innovation among refugees and IDPs

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**Traditional humanitarian actors should develop mechanisms to support innovation by displaced people. Two cases of technological innovation developed by Syrian refugees illustrate the point.**

Innovation and technology are increasingly recognised as important elements in the humanitarian system. However, innovation and use of technology by displaced people themselves also happen alongside the traditional actors operating in the humanitarian system. Mobile technologies, in particular, are central to the lives of forced migrants: important resources for economic survival, maintenance and development of social networks, and the navigation of migration routes. It is unsurprising, therefore, that refugees and asylum seekers have started engaging creatively with mobile technologies to meet their own political, social and economic needs. What is surprising is the delayed response on the side of the humanitarian system in recognising and supporting these uses.

Refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and asylum seekers are using technology to build their own virtual communities, connecting with family and friends, documenting their personal migratory experiences and providing advice to other displaced people around the world.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, they are identifying challenges unique to their communities, and developing products and services to overcome these challenges, often without the support of traditional humanitarian actors.

### Dubarah

Dubarah is an online network which helps Syrian refugees and asylum seekers find job opportunities in countries to which they have relocated. Dubarah was founded in 2013 by Ahmad Edilbi, who was working at a mobile communications company when the Syrian conflict broke out. He was subsequently forced to flee Syria, moving to Dubai while the rest of his family relocated to Lebanon or Turkey. In the year following

his relocation, Ahmad both witnessed and experienced the loss of purpose, dignity and the negative perception of being a refugee. Inspired by his experience, and recognising the power of the Syrian diaspora, he launched Dubarah as a tool to help refugees play an active and productive role in society.

Dubarah creates a virtual community for Syrians fleeing from the conflict who are relocating to countries in which they have little experience or connection. It shares information about work vacancies, scholarships, education, investment opportunities, legal advice and housing assistance. The platform also provides a guide which explains living conditions in 32 different countries, as a means to increase refugees' cultural understanding of their current host countries and potential future host countries. Dubarah also strives to provide psychological support for the members of the online network by connecting refugees with Syrian expatriates and other members of the Syrian diaspora in order to gather and share resources which are tailored to the specific cultural, social, political and economic needs of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers.

In 2013-14, Dubarah provided "an average of 500 solutions and consultations ... per day with a total of 25,900 opportunities secured between jobs, investments, start-up advice, housing, legal consultations, and educational opportunities."<sup>2</sup> Having started as a web platform, Dubarah has now expanded to include a mobile application and a global directory of Syrian professionals.

### Gherbetna

Gherbetna is a smartphone app and website for refugees from the Middle East. Gherbetna – meaning 'exile' in Arabic – helps refugees and asylum seekers adapt to life

in countries of relocation. Users can access tips for settling in countries including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Algeria, Germany, Austria and Sweden, and can also ask questions on topics ranging from official registration to the best local food options.

Gherbetna was created in 2014 by Mojahed Akil, a young Syrian software developer who fled to Turkey in 2011 while his parents and siblings fled separately to Saudi Arabia and Dubai. This meant that he was trying to navigate the political and economic hurdles posed by the Turkish government alone. "I would have to go to government offices every day to find out information about what are my rights in [Turkey]".<sup>3</sup>

The application provides news about migration routes, such as which border crossings are open and which areas are safe, as well as providing an online forum for jobs and educational opportunities and a general discussion section where users can post questions. Due to Turkey's large population of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, the app also features a significant number of Turkey-specific tutorials which provide a step-by-step guide for navigating government services in Turkey such as the process of applying for Turkish residence permits. There are similar tutorials for other countries too.

## Conclusions

Key to the appeal and success of both applications has been their ability to facilitate interaction among refugees sharing common experiences. Additionally, these platforms have been able to tap into the knowledge and resources of diaspora communities.

Absent from the design of both Dubarah and Gherbetna, however, has been the targeting of the specific needs of women and girls. At the time of writing, there has been little public discussion on either platform of women's needs: women's and girls' gendered experiences of migration, their specific protection needs and opportunities to address them, or the challenges that women and girls face in accessing public services such as education or health services. Additionally, by their very nature neither platform takes into account the

fact that women globally have less access to mobile phones or computers, and what access they do have is typically monitored by fathers, husbands or male siblings.

Innovative uses of technology have helped displaced people contribute to the resilience of their communities in displacement. Traditional humanitarian actors can and should better support this type of innovation. Increased investment in innovation incubators can better enable refugees and IDPs to use their talent, skill and creativity to the advantage of their communities.

Constraints on and opportunities for innovation will vary by context. In order for the humanitarian community to support displaced communities, they must first understand the social, political and economic barriers to innovation which displaced populations experience. These include xenophobia and discrimination; lack of access to finance, banking, housing and the right to work; and loss of assets. By understanding these constraints – and the potential catalysts – humanitarian actors could better target their resources towards innovation. In doing so, the humanitarian community can better help refugees and IDPs to help themselves.

In the design and implementation of every innovation, regardless of context, the demographics of the end-users should be considered. This includes differences in gender but also in age, religious affiliation, race and ethnicity, among other considerations. Crucially, the humanitarian community – which should understand the gendered and other impacts of migration, displacement and technology – must develop mechanisms which take steps to address those impacts while supporting technologies originating in the community.

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