PERCEPTIONS

Policy Brief

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Migrants & ICTs

How to Use Digital Tools and Digital Media to Reach Migrants

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Executive Summary

This policy brief provides developers of ICT4RM (information and communications technology for refugees and migrants) solutions, tools and resources with practice-oriented recommendations on the process of designing, implementing and evaluating digital products. It does so with a view of engaging target user bases sustainably, efficiently and successfully. The brief presents the most common use cases of ICT4RM to demonstrate the breadth of utility of those solutions. It also raises awareness on key challenges that have a bearing on creating digital tools for migrants.

The spread of mobile tech, and the preference of migrants prior to, during and after their migration journeys for this type of smart devices, open a vast discussion about the uses of digital tools and media to reach and engage migrants. The policy brief builds on the considerable work done under the PERCEPTIONS project. In the first substantive section, a spectrum of use cases for ICT4RM are described and backed by real-life examples, illustrating that ICT solutions can fill vital niches in service provision for refugees and migrants in an impactful and meaningful manner. The second section offers a succinct summary of enabling and prohibitive factors, risks and challenges related to ICT4RM. The goal is to enhance knowledge on the importance of designing responsive and ethical innovations. Finally, the recommendations offer a pathway to designing and implementing successful, efficient and engaging digital solutions in the area of migration and integration through human rights based and participatory perspectives.

Introduction

As smartphones and a diverse spectrum of mobile tech become increasingly widespread, so do the uses of those devices in everyday life. In the realm of migration and integration, the utility of mobile solutions, their convenience and ease of access bring about a generation of **"smart" migrants and refugees** (Dekker et al., 2018). Enabling an interactional and dynamic state of play among many interested actors (migrants, NGOs, service providers, host societies, public bodies, private companies, etc.), mobile ICTs have a variety of uses before, during and after a migrant's journey – from asylum processing and reunification to livelihood and social cohesion. However, reaching migrants through ICTs successfully and efficiently and engaging them in the long run also depends on a set of factors such as the availability of sustainable funding, the achievement of adequate scale of implementation, the building of trust, and the safeguarding of migrants' rights and freedoms by default and by design. Hence, it is crucial that in responding to migrants' needs, ICT solutions in the realm of migration and integration are created upon a firm foundation of **comprehensive needs and risks assessments.**

Key Issue:

- *ICT4RM solutions have wide applicability, yet must be created in consideration of key enabling and prohibitive factors.*

Common ICT4RM Use Cases

This section deals with some of the most common use cases of ICTs for refugees and migrants, commonly abbreviated to ICT4RM.

Asylum Processing

Among the most classic uses cases of ICT4RM is asylum processing, including both receiving information about the process of filing for and receiving asylum online, and completing this process itself on the web. Asylum-seekers are able to interact with NGOs offering advice and information, public bodies, other migrants, etc. from any point of the migration journey, regardless of temporal and locational factors.

Asylum processing can be **a challenging and confusing ordeal** for migrants. However, this is a process that can be systematized and even simplified though providing online asylum-related services. There are numerous examples of in support of this – from using Skype for asylum application registration appointments, which leads to diminished waiting times, to receiving legal advice over SMS, and accessing information about asylum procedures through a targeted online platform. Access to such resources can have a positive impact on asylum-related migrants – **extended preparation time, better awareness of administrative and legal requirements, saving time and efforts**, etc.

Reunification

It is well-established that migrants benefit from ICTs to keep in touch with family and friends, to establish new relationships in the host countries and participate in social life. However, ICT-enabled reunification entails **tracing**

lost family members in an innovative way. Platforms such as ICRC's Trace the Face and the non-profit REFUNITE rely on social media to assist refugees to reconnect to family members. Both platforms have **significant social media presence**, allowing them to reach migrants in a space that is already preferred and trusted (Merisalo and Jauhiainen, 2021).

○ Information Collection and dissemination

ICTs offer a modality of interconnectedness spanning from keeping in touch with family, to building a new network in the host society, and information sharing among a vast and diverse social network. ICT4RM platforms and resource hubs that collect and curate information for migrants can assist in overcoming access hinders such as language barriers, convoluted bureaucracies, unavailability of certain resources on official governmental webpages, etc. The significance of this ICT4RM use case is evident prior, during and after the migration journey, as it has value for both gathering information on asylum procedures, safe passage, and available services and resources, and receiving integration and social inclusion assistance and support. Refugee.Info and UNHCR's Refugee Assistance and Information System (RAIS) are examples of online information hubs and databases with the goal of **facilitating access to information and services** for refugees and migrants.

A more complex case is information collection and dissemination through **social media**. Migrants are said to regularly use social media to gain information (Alencar, 2017). Making sense of the information communicated through social media may be a considerable effort, as **deciphering "truthful" messages** among a vastness of points of view and potential misinformation could pose a significant challenge on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Viber, WhatsApp, etc. Seeking and imparting information about transition and host countries is likewise common, while it remains prone to risks such as bias, creative retellings of personal stories, subjectivity and so on. Regardless, migrants are more likely to **trust "user-driven" information** from personal or lived-experience sources than such from official public sources (Frouws et al., 2016). Hence, the significance of social media for reaching migrants must be acknowledged, as is done by numerous platforms that have extensive social media presence.

○ Accessing Public Services

A further use case is ICT4RM that allow, facilitate or access to public services by migrants. Government **bureaucracies can be a challenging aspect** of resettling and integrating in the host society. ICTs have improved this process by increasing accessibility and offering guidance on how to handle administrative tasks. Examples of grassroots ICT solutions for navigating public bureaucracies are the German app Bureaucrazy, the UK Mobilearn system, and the Canadian Botler platform. Innovations such as **AI-powered chatbots and interactive mobile platforms** can provide support and **personalised assistance** to migrants at every step of the process. Depending on their complexity ICT4RM that offer access to public services may include passive information (addresses, opening hours, contact information and responsible persons, document templates, practical guidelines, advice and support hotlines, etc.). Alternatively, they may also include listings and dynamic information for education and training, employment, housing, healthcare, social inclusion, and so on.

○ Education, Training and Employment

Skills development and education do not only constitute meaningful and beneficial activities for migrants, but also have the potential to promote professional development. Searching for opportunities online has long been **a go-**

to method for starting one's journey towards securing employment or partaking in education and training. Educational programmes may be implemented **even among undocumented migrants**, providing a constructive undertaking for migrants on job hunts. Examples of such ICT4RM in this area of life are the Germany-based Integration through Qualification (IQ) network, the Italian CREER project, and the Bulgarian social enterprise Humans in the Loop, the latter currently responding to the Ukrainian crisis by offering employment for crisis-affected individuals. Tailored approaches to providing education, training and employment for migrants can be **highly impactful**, yet must take into consideration factors such as digital literacy, access to desktop devices, and the availability of Internet connection on the move.

○ Healthcare

A much less well-explored use case of ICT4RM is related to healthcare. A growing number of countries have introduced online GP appointments under **digital shifts towards e-health**. Healthcare information can be provided on designated ICT4RM platforms and resource hubs, through specialized apps, and online services. Digital innovations such as the UK-based Ssyla Digital Therapy Platform, which connects migrants and mental health professionals, MedShr, which links European doctors with health professionals in camp settings, and HABABY, which addresses maternal-child health are just some examples.

○ Business and Livelihood

Smartphones are essential to livelihood creation, especially in relation to building and maintaining social and professional networks: e.g. **staying in touch** with previous employers; **managing monetary transactions**, spending and savings; as well as **finding employment opportunities** through formal sources and informal networks. Online platforms and apps may collect and disseminate information about labour market issues that might hinder displaced people in getting a job, provide insight into creating businesses, start-ups and other enterprises in the host country, and point migrants to further resources that may help them in **building sustainable livelihoods**. Some examples include mentoring websites for business creation, the German incubatory platform CUCULA, RefugeesWork, which targets refugees with programming skills, and Chance-for-Success, a platform for the academic job market.

○ Social Integration

A final use case of ICT4RM addresses social integration in the host country in a wide sense that includes getting to know one's physical surroundings, finding places of business and leisure, wandering and browsing, partaking in events such as concerts, job fairs, conferences, informal meetings, locating places of religious worship, etc. The usage of **locative technology** such as Google Maps, **business search tools** like Yelp and TripAdvisor, **location-based networking apps** and other platforms that offer access to information about a particular place, reviews, and navigation have a broad utility in fostering migrant social integration, albeit not necessarily being geared towards migrant users specifically. In this sense, information shared on social media by persons with which a migrant user may self-identify can become **a vital source of support and guidance on social integration**, while fostering a sense of belonging to a likeminded network.

Factors for Successful ICT4RM Solutions

Apart from the many use cases of ICT4RM, it is crucial to briefly outline some of the most prominent challenges inherent to technological innovations in the field of migration.

Funding for Sustainability

At the forefront of the discussion about preclusive and enabling factors before ICT4RM stands sustainable funding. Revenue may originate from a diversity of sources such as government budgets, donations, inputs by foundations, grant-making bodies and private corporations, and own financial gains from subscriptions and membership plans. Project-based ICT4RM solutions, with many of the examples discussed in the previous section falling in this category, are **at the inherent risk of unsustainability** due to the time-bound nature of their funding mechanisms. Many initiatives suffer economically when the initial demand spike passes (e.g. in the aftermath of a migration crisis), while other innovations focus on singular issues that may not persist in the longer term. Resolving this challenge is particularly difficult, and one solution that has come to the limelight is **entrepreneurial incubators** and **hack-a-ton type events** (Bock et al., 2020).

Scale for Success

Research shows that highly innovative apps developed by NGOs specifically for refugees may gather **few actual users** (Dekker et al., 2018). This suggests that awareness of these apps or tools is limited or underdeveloped, or that the preference of refugees and migrants for first-hand information outweighs the willingness to rely on official or NGO-sourced insight. This is a challenge that arises at the cross-section of a number of other underlying factors such as the level of digital literacy among target users or the availability of digital literacy improvement courses offered in host countries, the level of trust in digital solutions by the target group, the ease of access to the Internet and to smart devices, the overall utility and accessibility of the innovation for a wide user base, the resources and effort invested in promoting and disseminating the ICT4RM solution and its general visibility. Hence, a successful service must be **embedded in the local conditions** and **take into account at least most of the risks** and hinders that may preclude utility.

Participatory Approaches

It is valuable to involve end-users in the process of setting up an initiative to ensure it is user-friendly and appropriate for the target group, yet this is not yet a common practice. **Needs assessments** prior to designing and implementing an ICT4RM solution are crucial for uncovering the precise format that the innovation ought to take as to be responsive to the needs, wants and preference of its target group. Participatory approaches to the creation of ICT4RM products and services that have **an element of empowerment**, i.e. allowing migrants and refugees to have a say in the specifications of what is developed for them as the main audience, can ultimately **improve the success and efficiency of the digital solution**, while also flagging any underlying risk factors.

○ Mobile Solutions

A recent small-scale study points out that **migrants' primary device** during migration was overwhelmingly **a mobile phone**, while the desktop personal computer was chosen by a significantly low number of migrants prior to their migration journey and none during the journey (Dekker et al., 2018). Similar research done under the Horizon 2020 MIICT project found that between 68% and 87% of migrants in three host countries prefer to access resources through their mobile devices (MIICT, 2022). Factors such as operational costs, connection issues, slow Internet speed, and unavailability of data plans during the migration journey are all important precursors to a digital innovation falling short of reaching its target audience. **Mobile applications**, full-bodied **mobile website versions**, and **offline information accessibility** are vital aspects for overcoming barriers to utility.

○ Trust in Information

Having already discussed the preference for social media and network-sourced insights by migrants, trust not only in the accuracy, but also the utility of information provided under ICT4RM innovations is a factor that can determine the success of a given digital solution. While information shared on social media platforms can be misleading, and some portrayals of the migration experience might be glorified and exaggerated on social media, **assurances in the quality, adequacy and usefulness** of the resources, tools and services offered by ICT4RM platforms, apps, and websites have to be robust enough **to mitigate backsliding into more informal sources** as the default option. **Trust-building** can be achieved both through **participatory approaches** to design and implementation, and through **community-based modes** of digital solutions' maintenance over time.

○ Misuse and control

Finally, **government surveillance and control** exist in a self-perpetuating cycle with migrants' increased usage of ICTs (Nedelcu and Soysuren, 2019). Governments' use of surveillance to monitor migration flows can put individuals' **privacy at risk**, eroding trust in digital solutions, specially such that require personal data or entail location services. **An ethical human-rights approach** to formulating and implementing ICT4RM solutions is thus crucial in addressing and overcoming this challenge.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward to developers of innovative digital tools in the sphere of migration and integration:

ICT4RM solutions ought to be responsive to the precise needs, wants and preferences of their target groups. This can be achieved through in-depth preliminary needs assessments and through holistic engagement of end-users in the design and implementation of a given solution.

ICT4RM solutions must correspond to migrants' preferred devices for accessing the Internet and services and resources offered online. This entails prioritizing the creation of mobile apps and websites/platforms accessible through a smartphone.

ICT4RM solutions must take into consideration the inherent risk factors and challenges that arise from the environment in which they are designed and implemented. Comprehensive risk assessments must be carried out prior to designing and developing a digital solution together with robust mitigation strategies embedded in the design.

ICT4RM solutions ought to take up an ethical and human rights based approach by default and by design as to effectively counteract any violations of users' privacy and other fundamental rights. This includes the enforcement of substantial ethical protocols and abiding by the highest available standards under applicable law.

ICT4RM solutions should consider engaging end-users in the ideation, implementation and evaluation stages of product development. An empowerment element to this participatory approach is highly desirable with the end goal of allowing users authority and decisive say over the design and functionality of solutions that target them specifically and exclusively.

ICT4RM solutions ought to be created with sustainability as priority. Sustainability must be viewed holistically, inclusive of issues related to funding, scale, reach, long-term engagement, maintenance and key stakeholder support.

ICT4RM solutions must build trust and effectively counteract mis- and disinformation among migrants. A highly complex risk, successful digital innovations ought to afford sufficient resources and effort into ensuring that the information they collect and disseminate is correct, useful, adequate and verified.

ICT4RM solutions should address a real issue, problem or phenomenon as experienced by migrants in their diversity. Intersectional perspectives to problem-solving and service provisions should be included in the design of digital innovations, especially where the latter addresses highly vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors.

Key recommendations:

- *ICT4RM solutions ought to be needs responsive.*
- *Mobile solutions must be prioritised.*
- *Participatory approaches to ICT4RM creation should be implemented.*

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