International Study

2014

REFUGEES & ICT

www.singa.fr
We wish to acknowledge the participation of 23 volunteer researchers in 15 countries who all contributed to the elaboration and production of this international study: Seuwandi WICKRAMASINGHE and Mark PROVERA (Australia), Alessandra VARESCO and Stephan BERBERICH (Belgium), Petra MOLNAR DIOP, Alexandra RUSSELL and Claire TEMPIER (Canada), Ourtane ICHO, Zineb BOUSTIL and Jasur ABDUKAYUMOV (France), Alexander RAPIS (Germany), Anna Lucia CORFATY (Italy), Patricia WARD (Jordan), Dulo NYAORO (Kenya), Martina SMILEVSKA (Macedonia), Ahmed HOSSEIN HAG (Morocco), Abigail ROBINSON and Anja RUPENSINGHE (Norway), Magdalena UCELUSE (Romania), Natasha WARCHOLAK (Tajikistan), Danielle GRISBY (Thailand), Robert HAZIKA and Margaret NAKAWUNGU (Uganda).

We would also like to thank MIGRINTER (Poitiers), the IAFSM (Bogota), the CARFMS (Montréal) and the Refugee Council (Oxford) for their kind invitation to present our results.

Finally, we are proud of our amazing team at SINGA France who made this project a real success: Liz JACKSON, Marion HETZEL, Lavinia PRATI, Alice BARBE, Nathanael MOLLE, James WALTERS, Hazel GUARDADO and Alix HUGONNIER.
INTRODUCTION

SINGA is a global movement of citizens working to facilitate the settlement of refugees in host societies and, in particular, giving the opportunity to resourceful individuals to express their talents or to use their skills and experience in their new environment.

SINGA was born in February 2012 to connect refugee entrepreneurs with their French peers in order to help such refugees create, develop and finance projects that would benefit the whole of society socially, culturally and economically.

We also intended to tackle economic arguments too often used in the public debate about refugees and migrants. It was a way to collect evidence of the success that societies can enjoy if the integration of refugees is perfected in socio-cultural and economic contexts.

After a year, we extended our services to all refugees, and not only entrepreneurial refugees, launching tutorship programs (tuition in French language and culture) and mentorship programs (administrative and emotional support) in collaboration with universities and private enterprises in the Paris region.

The idea was to engage these new actors with French hospitality, especially future leaders and employers. We considered that all parts of society needed to be aware of the situation of refugees in their country. We truly hoped that a better understanding through better information would encourage civic participation and collaborative behaviour.

This collaborative effort with universities and companies led us to discover other fields of
activities where we identified best practices relevant to our work. We decided to explore practices in other countries and other fields in order to improve our own services. That is how we created our Laboratoire, a research & development department.

For our first study, we decided to look into new information and communication technologies (ICT). These technologies are used exponentially by all members of society and have created innovative social interactions. For instance, they can bridge the tyranny of distance between two countries thanks to videoconferencing and instant messaging: an important facility for asylum seekers and refugees.

Moreover, we had noticed that social networking was a great tool to democratise refugees’ assistance in some contexts, namely housing, establishment of a social and professional network, language education and cultural codes. Last but not least, we also knew that the use of ICT represents a specific risk for refugees who often deal with confidentiality matters.

To explore the risks and opportunities of ICT, we launched an international study in 15 countries on “the effective uses by and for refugees of ICT”. We defined “refugee” and “ICT” as follows:

- **Refugee**: a person who is outside their home country because they have suffered (or feared) persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or because there are a member of a persecuted social group or because they are fleeing war;

- **Information and Communication Technologies**: technologies that provide information through telecommunication, namely Internet, wireless network, cell phones and other communication networks. We were particularly interested in mediums such as social networking and instant messaging.

From July 2013 to June 2014, 23 volunteer researchers set out to conduct an extensive
literature review on "Refugees & ICT" in their country, conduct a minimum of 20 interviews with refugees and 10 interviews with social workers or Refugee Serving Organisation (RSO) representatives, and to eventually write a comprehensive paper of 20 pages.

Our research project was designed to be a collective effort and to create a lot of interactions between the volunteer researchers who took part in it. We collected substantial information from almost every country. From 15 articles we intended to produce, only three research teams found the resources to achieve the goal: Canada, France and Kenya. The diversity of these national contexts offers an interesting comparison to review some ICT uses by refugees in the world.

In each of these three articles, researchers have underlined in their conclusions with valuable policy recommendations for the future. These policy recommendations are of great relevance for Refugees, Refugee Serving Organisations as well as public institutions funding projects related to refugee integration.

The results of this international study were disseminated in academic conferences in Poitiers, Montréal, Bogota and Oxford.

Based on the results of the study, SINGA will produce practical and comprehensive guidelines on the use of ICT in a refugee context. To transform research into action, SINGA will also co-organise with Simplon.co and Makesense the first Asylum and Migration Hackathon in France in December 2014.

Bonne lecture!

Guillaume Capelle, co-founder of SINGA and editor of the 2014 International Study
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The purpose of this research is to identify how the actors in the asylum domain use ICT in the Greater Toronto Area and Ottawa Region. In a globalised world where communications are made mainly through the web and telephone, how can these technologies be best used by and for refugees? The first section of the paper focuses on the Canadian context, underlining two projects deeply involved in integration through technology; the second part highlights the use of ICT’s by refugees and by Refugee Service Organisations (RSOs).

The results of this analysis can be used to identify the good practices and bad practices in the Greater Toronto Area and Ottawa Region.
INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected and fluid world, the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) is paramount in the settlement and integration of newcomers. In Canada, 30 000 people arrive as asylum seekers every year, and many of these individuals are already accustomed to ICTs as an integral part of their daily routine. Moreover, asylum seekers require access to technology as they proceed through the often difficult refugee adjudication system and as they resettle in Canada.

This paper explores how ICTs are used by refugee claimants upon their arrival in Canada and while they go through the process of claiming refugee status. We also examine how refugee service organisations (RSOs) use technologies in their daily operations to support their clients and provide their settlement services. As part of the greater SINGA international research project, this paper is a profile of what is happening in the Canadian context, namely in the Greater Toronto Area and the Ottawa Region. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part of this study will first briefly outline the Canadian context of refugee resettlement before highlighting two international initiatives: the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) Project, which relies on technology to set up transnational networks between Canada and the Dadaab refugee camp as tertiary education initiatives are rolled out for the camp residents, and the World University Services of Canada (WUSC), which sponsors refugee university students to come to Canada. The second part of this study explores how refugees themselves use ICTs and how they are supported by RSOs through the use of technology. This paper will conclude by drawing connections between the various actors profiled and will highlight some of the directions that Canada is moving towards in order to offer some suggestions for improving ICT access to refugee claimants in Canada.
1. The Canadian Context

Out of the 7.6 million displaced refugees in the world today, approximately 200,000 refugees are found in Canada,¹ while the vast majority of the world’s refugees are in the Global South.

Once a world leader in refugee protection, Canada is closing its doors and is now a less welcoming country for both Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), as well as asylum seekers. In recent years, refugees have constituted about 10% of all immigrants to Canada. Refugee claims in Canada have dropped dramatically since the introduction of changes to the refugee determination system. There were 4,558 claims referred in the first six months of 2013, compared to 33,970 total claims in 2009 and 20,223 total claims in 2012.²

Refugee advocates say that Canada is turning away from its tradition of compassion and in doing so is violating the Canadian Charter of Rights, mainly through the cuts to refugee health care. In June 2012, the federal government abolished the Interim Federal Health (IFH) Program that has been in existence since 1957 and replaced it with a program that denies basic, emergency, and life-saving medical care to thousands of refugee claimants who have lawfully sought Canada’s protection.³ Canadian doctors and lawyers have come together to challenge the legality of these health cuts to refugee claimants. Lorne Waldman, the President of the Canadian Association for Refugee Lawyers has argued that “the cuts to refugee health care

violates the fundamental human rights of refugees as protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, without any lawful justification."  

MD Matthew Stanbrook, a physician and deputy editor of the Canadian Medical Association Journal, has recently argued that denying health care to refugees because of these cuts to the IFH Program is medically irrational and essentially unfair, calling on the minister of health to reverse the cuts enacted in 2012 because the very decency of Canadian humanitarianism at stake.  

A. The New Refugee System

The refugee process in Canada has been dramatically altered. Newly implemented legislation gravely affects how refugee claimants seek asylum and who gets access to the new Refugee Appeal Division. 

In June 2012, following an initial introduction on 16 February 2012 and an amendment on 9 May 2012, numerous changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act were made by the refugee reform of Bill C-31, Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act. Under the new system, refugee claimants in Canada face accelerated timelines, limited recourse for negative decisions, and restrictive access to safety nets. Furthermore, the new law gives broad powers to the Minister of Public Safety to designate certain arrivals as “Designated Foreign Nationals,” a label that carries mandatory detention, accelerated timelines, restricted access to the refugee system, and imposes draconian conditions on refugees, including a five-year waiting period

between a successful claim and an application for permanent residency. Finally, the new system includes a list of countries that are assumed to be safe for refugees. In 2012, Mexicans were among the top three nationalities by number of refugees accepted in Canada. Despite this, Mexico has been designated by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration as a “safe” country of origin for claimants. This means that refugee claimants from these countries will face accelerated timelines for their refugee hearings and fast removal, no appeal rights, and virtually no health care.

Refugee protection in Canada is thus becoming dangerously vulnerable to political whims, rather than ensuring a fair and independent decision about who is a refugee. The Canadian Council for Refugees is deeply concerned by the negative ways in which refugee claimants are discussed by the government.\textsuperscript{6} Making a claim for refugee status is a legitimate way, in both Canadian and international law, for a person fleeing persecution to seek asylum. Nor is it fair to characterise refused claims as false or abusive. The refugee definition under the 1951 Geneva Convention is restrictive and technical. Many people making claims who do not meet the definition may nevertheless have a genuine fear of persecution. Persistent negative references to refugee claimants and equating them with being fraudulent undermine the independence of Canada’s refugee system and the support of Canadians to those who come to Canada hoping for safety and freedom and to be treated with dignity.

Nevertheless, even in this new climate, refugees have become active members of Canadian communities and have strengthened this country by their contributions.

Social integration is a complex idea with many different meanings. To some, it is a positive goal, implying equal opportunities and rights for all human beings. In this case, becoming more integrated implies improving life chances. To others, however, increasing integration may conjure up the image of an unwanted imposition of conformity. And, to still others, the term in itself does not necessarily imply a desirable or undesirable state at all. It is simply a way of describing the established patterns of human relations in any given society.⁷

Resettled refugees comprise two groups, convention refugees abroad and humanitarian protected persons abroad. There are two types of resettled refugees in Canada: privately sponsored refugees (PSR) and government-assisted refugees (GARs).

Refugees often face greater challenges to integration, due to the fact that their departure from home countries is forced rather than planned, often involves devastating loss of property and family separations, and leads to a more troubled and challenging integration in Canada. Most refugees and immigrants entering Canada settle in a few large urban centres, which profoundly influences their integration. Most current examinations of the phenomenon suggest that integration is a mutual process between new home society and newcomers, though some models do assume a more assimilationist process of adaptation on the part of refugees.

In 2010, the Government of Canada decided to increase the size of its resettlement program by 2,500 spaces in both the government-assisted and privately sponsored categories. The federal department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) takes integration seriously as a policy goal. In its 2010-2011 Report on Plans and Priorities for Citizenship and Immigration Canada, CIC lists its Integration Program as one of seven program activities with the stated outcome that newcomers contribute to the economic, social and cultural development needs of Canada.  

### C. Canadian Project Highline

**An Example of Refugee Integration: Student Refugee Program of World University Services of Canada (WUSC)**

The student refugee program has been helping young refugees achieve their dreams. Through a unique youth-to-youth sponsorship, World University Services of Canada (WUSC)’s student refugee program helps student refugees achieve their educational goals in three ways: firstly, by building the capacity of young Canadians to sponsor refugee students to their university and/or college; secondly, by providing student refugees with an opportunity to pursue their education at a Canadian university and/or college as permanent residents; and thirdly by supporting sponsored students to adapt and succeed in their new environment in Canada.

From countries of origin as diverse as Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Burma and Afghanistan, most have successfully completed their

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studies and are now active Canadian citizens making valuable contributions to their communities.  

D. International Links: Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project (BHER)

Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) is offering blended/hybrid post-secondary education (online and onsite) to students from the refugee and local communities in Dadaab, Kenya. These programs are fully accredited university certificate, diplomas and degrees. The uniqueness of the model in the camps is in the “stackable” design of the programs. All students enter one of two streams: primary education or secondary education. Following their completion of either a Certificate in in Educational Studies/Diploma in Teacher Education (Primary) or Diploma in Teacher Education (Secondary), students will have full accreditation for those years spent in study and they can use those credits towards a full degree that may include Education, Health, Business, Equity Studies, and Public Policy, although specific programs are yet to be confirmed. The online portion of the program makes pursuing a full degree flexible and transportable in the case of resettlement, repatriation and/or the unstable reality of living in an area of conflict and insecurity, as is the case in Dadaab. BHER students are currently enrolled in InSTEP (Increased Access and Skills for Tertiary Education Program). This is a pre-university preparation program focused on research skills, academic English and ICT training. BHER has launched a pilot project online to offer additional academic and social support involving BHER participants and volunteer community members internationally. This online forum is designed as a community of practice with the shared goals of supporting higher education for refugees and participating in an intercultural and transnational knowledge

9 More information on WUSC can be found here: http://wusc.ca/.
exchange. The focus of the pilot project is on women enrolled in BHER to mitigate the many ongoing gender inequities prevalent in the Dadaab camps. Building on this pilot project with women, the program hopes to expand the online community to be available to all BHER participants (women and men) before the start of the first year of academic courses later in 2014.¹⁰

2. Study of Refugee Use of ICTs in Canada

A. Methodology

Our study of the Canadian context adopts a qualitative methodology and is meant as a case study of ICT use by refugees and asylum claimants in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Ottawa Region. Due to financial and time constraints, it was not possible to engage in a broad national survey as was first intended and thus this study serves only as a snapshot of the GTA and Ottawa refugee settlement sectors. A total of 10 interviews with refugee claimants from various countries were conducted and 10 RSOs, government bodies, and refugee activists were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted with a mix of open-ended questions and a standardised SINGA questionnaire for some of the RSOs and community activists. The refugees who agreed to participate in this study ranged from 17 years old to 60 years old and their countries of origin were as diverse as Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Afghanistan, among others. Most were newly arrived in Canada, while one has been resettled for six years. The

¹⁰ More information on the BHER project can be found on their website: http://crs.yorku.ca/bher.
RSOs profiled were three refugee settlement organisations, providing services such as lodging and shelter, language classes, assistance with housing and providing referrals to medical and legal services for asylum seekers making a refugee claim here in Canada. A doctor providing free refugee health care through a community clinic and a community activist were also profiled. It is important to note that the refugees who agreed to be interviewed for this study are autonomous asylum seekers, and the RSOs provide services primarily to this group of refugees. While some RSOs in Canada also provide services to Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), this group of refugees will not be discussed here.

**B. Refugee ICT Use**

Access to technology and the internet varied greatly between the refugees profiled. This largely depended on which settlement organisation they were living at or if they had enough disposable income to supplement the limited access to technology that some organisations provided.

The differences between the RSOs were rather stark in term of providing access to technology. One organisation did not provide Internet access to refugee claimants and had three public landline telephones that they could use during set times each day. There was also a small computer lab but it was not operated regularly and was unavailable to refugee claimants on most days. The people staying at this organisation expressed dismay in not being able to check their email on the computers and tablets that many had brought with them from their countries of origin. One young woman from Colombia stated that she was quite worried that she was not able to check her email more regularly and could not afford to pay for time at an internet cafe on a regular basis. This young woman indicated that she regularly got emails from the Toronto Health Department, her social worker at another agency, as well as emails from her English school. She said that she also wanted access to websites outlining social programs in
her community, but was unable to access them regularly and thus felt isolated from the wider community. She stated: “When we come to new country, we don’t know language, people, internet would help!”

On the other hand, other RSOs have started to provide wireless internet to their residents, which greatly improves access to information and made refugee claimants feel more at ease with the difficult process of trying to gain refugee status in Canada. As one family from Lesotho indicated, "living in Canada without internet would be a dark time." Clearly, many of the refugee claimants came to Canada with their own devices, such as laptops, iPads, tablets, smart phones and cell phones and there was an expectation among many that they would have access to the internet. The director of an RSO which provided regular access to the internet was keenly aware of how access to information can empower refugee claimants and that it can allow them to gain access to further settlement services and aid in their integration.

There was a wide variety of responses to questions concerning access to internet in the home country of the refugee claimants. While some refugees, particularly from certain parts of South America did have regular, if limited, access to the internet at home, many from the Middle East and parts of Africa did not and had mostly relied on their mobile phones. Many expressed surprise at how expensive and inflexible cell phone plans were in Canada. One middle aged woman from Albania recounted how she had to meet with her provider on four separate occasions to bring the price of her cell phone plan down to what she could afford while on the Ontario Works social assistance program. Since doctors’ offices, lawyers, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada often require phone numbers, refugees without regular access to telephones would seem to be at a disadvantage and many spoke of procuring a cell phone as soon as possible upon their arrival to Canada. A young woman in her mid-twenties from Afghanistan stated that “our uncle [living here in Toronto] gave us one cell phone [the Blackberry] to communicate" and she recognised that it was very important to have access to a telephone in order to begin the refugee claim process.
C. Connecting with Communities in Home Countries

One of the primary uses of ICTs was reaching out and connecting with families and communities in the refugee claimants' home countries. Every refugee claimant that was interviewed for this study spoke about how important it as to remain connected to family at home, and many spoke with their families at least once a day, with some connecting multiple times a day. Cell phone calling cards were used by those who did not have regular internet access, while Skype and messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Blackberry Messenger were being used by those who can rely on routed wireless internet connections. Facebook and other social media sites such as Twitter were also used to regularly communicate with family and friends.

Keeping connected with family and loved ones was repeatedly stated as being paramount to one's wellbeing and integration in Canada during what was a very difficult and uncertain time for many as they waited for a decision from the Immigration and Refugee Board. A 17 year old woman from Colombia stated that she uses Skype everyday for at least 15 minutes and that she talks to family, as well as with her boyfriend who is currently living in Mexico City and whom she hopes to one day bring to Canada. Others indicated that they regularly search for news from their home countries, especially if there is a conflict going on and their loved ones may be in danger. In a striking transnational example, it is clear that technology connects people together, as one young woman from Colombia in her mid twenties stated: “Last year, I met a friend. She is Arab. She went back to her country, Saudi Arabia. We use BBM and practice our English together.”

Use of technologies and ICTs can also be viewed as returning agency back to refugee claimants as they navigate a difficult resettlement system in a brand new country. As one man from the
DRC explained: “My brother who is also learning English told me: ‘when can you talk on the phone, you are ok.’ He explained excitedly: “I can make an appointment with a doctor now!”

For some who have been in Canada longer, it has become apparent that access to technology has increased. A woman who has been resettled from Colombia for six years (six years ago) told us how difficult it was when her family first arrived because her shelter did not have internet. She also found that it was important to be able to access ESL (English as a second language) websites, programming for new immigrants and refugees, and community events. She believes that her integration process would have been much easier had her family had regular access to the internet (she even made complaints about the lack of internet to the shelter, but to no avail). She stated that “Here, everything was by email, internet. In my country, you need to go everywhere by person. Here, it’s ‘apply online, apply online!’ Resumes online, not in paper.” In her opinion, the “Government should make it mandatory for organisations to have access to internet. Not just for resources and information, but proof of legal cases, family communication.” Having trained as a nurse in Canada, she has had the chance to observe others go through the resettlement process, and stated that she noticed that many newcomers do not know about community events. According to her, especially in winter, many newcomers get depressed because they think that there is nothing to do. However, there are many events, but newcomers just do not have access to them as much as they should. When thinking about immigration, this woman stated that "people are not releasing stress! They are always thinking ‘why isn’t immigration calling me?’"
claimants, both for their social wellbeing and health as they try to remain connected to their communities at home, as well as for gaining access to information while claiming refugee status in a difficult system. Generally, besides a few exceptions, the settlement sector seems to be behind the times in using and providing technology access. As one woman and her family from El Salvador explained, "How much easier would it be if we all has access to translators on phones? We could communicate easy with everyone!".

However, besides the many positives that ICTs bring, when trying to bring in new technologies to a sector working with a particularly vulnerable population, we must also be aware of the negative effects that increased reliance on technology can bring. As one doctor that primarily treats refugee claimants who have been denied health coverage in Ontario stated, issues around confidentiality and documenting conversations arise particularly with patients around clinical issues. While this doctor regularly will use Twitter to share information, this is personal and not representative of the clinic. Web based social media platforms have been used to connect refugee health care providers across Canada and the US but these connections have not been established with the refugee population itself. Also, it was suggested that as more RSOs roll out programs that allow increased access to technology to refugee claimants, classes and directed training should be developed to increase computer literacy and avoid refugee claimants falling victims to scams such as fraudulent immigration consultants or phishing schemes sent through email.

Importantly, the presence of technology is steadily increasing in the settlement sector and more and more organisations are finding ways to provide access to the populations they serve. Importantly, as Wilding argues, ICTs can be seen as a way to combat negative stereotypes
surrounding refugees.\textsuperscript{11} Increasing access to technology can allow for critical dialogue between refugee claimants and the various services they access, returning voice and autonomy to an often disempowered group.

CONCLUSION

In this brief case study, we have outlined how refugees are using ICTs in their daily lives as they navigate the difficulties of integrating into Canadian society and progressing through the asylum determination system in Canada. We have also examined how RSOs use technologies in their operations to support their clients and provide their settlement services. We argue that there appears to be a disconnect between the way that the settlement sector in Canada is responding to the increased dependence on technologies by those who seek asylum and that there is much improvement to be made in order to provide regular access to ICTs for refugee claimants. We posit that the use of ICTs by refugees and refugee claimants provides a framework for discussing the various responses that host countries take when dealing with the settlement and integration of refugees and we hope that this brief case study can add to SINGA's international comparative analysis of how host countries are coping with the ever present influx of refugees and refugee claimants. It is clear that access to technology is necessary in order for people to feel connected both to their new communities as well as their countries of origin, and more access to ICTs can work to improve the autonomy of refugee claimants and empower them to work through the difficulties that they encounter on their journey for a life in Canada.

\textsuperscript{11} Wilding, Raelene. "Refugee youth, social inclusion, and ICTs: can good intentions go bad?." \textit{Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society} 7.2/3 (2009):167
Suggested readings and sources


Local and global challenges around ICT and refugees

FRANCE

Alix Hugonnier

The following research explores the specific problems addressed by refugees in the use of ICT in France. It was conducted between the second semester of 2013 and fall 2014. This qualitative study highlights the uniqueness of the French position through an analysis of both organisations working with refugees and refugees as well as online websites and structural constraints. This article not only demonstrates the importance of ICT to refugees as a way to cling to their country of origin, to maintain links, to create new links and to orientate oneself in the host country, but it also discusses the security issues specific to the question of ICT and the difficulties those technologies might bring to some people. The conclusion makes suggestions for organisations dealing with asylum issues both in France and internationally.
I would like to thank all the people who contributed to this study, in France and internationally. Special thanks go to refugees who kindly agreed to spend some time with us and let us use their testimonies in this study: it wouldn’t have been possible without them. We would also like to thank France Terre d’Asile and especially the 18e district of Paris CADA for their help and contribution to this work. Thanks also go to the entire SINGA team for their help and interest in the project.
The integration of exiled populations is a major issue faced by many countries around the world. It raises moral, social, humanitarian and diplomatic issues. In 1951, the Geneva Convention sat the legal framework for the acquisition of refugee status, allowing people fleeing persecution to seek refuge and protection in countries that had signed and ratified the Convention. The Universal Declaration of Human rights, by its Article 14, had already established and recognised the right to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. These initiatives were influenced by many factors and mainly discussed within the Western framework and within Western-led institutions. The institutionalisation of the refugee status coincides with the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust that had caused millions to flee their countries. It quickly became clear that the initial work to recognise the status of refugees by the League of Nations in 1922 was insufficient not only to host a large number of refugees but also to insure their protection in host nations. The question of refugee rights also coincided with the Cold War and the growing disagreements between the West led by the United States of America and the East led by the Soviet Union. It was justified as a need to offer protection to any person fleeing communist territory. The year 1951 also marked the beginning of the European economic recovery as an important workforce was needed and host countries perceived the arrival of refugees as valuable. This situation was considerably changed by the various economic crises and continued up to the 1980s. One must not forget the impact of decolonisation and of the tensions that rose between ex-colonial countries and their

13 144 states are currently Parties to the convention
14 A Nansen « passporte » was created after the Geneva convention of 1922 for Russian refugees fleeing the sudette conflict.
15 From 1948 to 1951, Western Europe’s GDP per capita rose by 32% (from 120 billion to 159 billion), and it’s industrial and agricultural production rose respectively by 40% and 11% (« 60 years ago : the Marshall Plan », Échos des USA, no 8, mars-avril 2007, p.7)
ex-colonies: during the 1960’s France also faced massive immigration due to the flight of its ex “pieds noirs” on the one hand and the arrival of millions of people brought to the continent by massive industries as Renaud [Renault?] on the other. Furthermore, in France, for instance, the oil crisis of 1979 marked the end of 30 years of economic growth, full employment, and an important demographical growth. This situation has considerably affected the countries’ immigration and asylum policies and in 1986 the Pasqua law is adopted to tackle the question of illegal migration. This law also modified asylum procedures, making them stricter and instating new procedures to identify and deport illegal migrants accused of trying to hide behind the refugee status.

It is important to point out in this introduction, that there is no such thing as a refugee identity; under this purely administrative and legal designation, there is in fact a wide range of personalities, nationalities, origins, languages, and experiences, that all have their singularity. There is however a “refugee situation” which refers to the many phases which refugees have to go through from fleeing their countries to the moment they arrive in another.

However, things have evolved, and refugees nowadays no longer have to live through the radical separation which others did in the past. The development and democratisation of various means of communication has considerably affected the lives of refugees even more so since, unlike other migrants, they are unable to return home.\footnote{Refugees are usually constrained to stay in their host country for they usually have no way to go back to their former country.} The telephone and, more recently, the internet have substantially modified the perception of distance.

This international study focused on the use of Information and Communication Technologies by refugees (ICTs) and on the many challenges raised by this situation on the local but also international perspective. We started from the premise that these ICTs were valuable tools and
presented opportunities not only in order to reduce the traumas and difficulties caused by the violent displacements and separation suffered by refugees but also to assist them in their socio-economic and cultural integration in host countries. Our objective was to analyse refugees’ level of access to these technologies, the way they use them and the difficulties they might encounter in France. Our research adopts a qualitative approach in the sense that our fieldwork consisted of: interviews conducted with statutory refugees, an evaluation of existing communication tools on the internet (websites and apps) and physical tools (such as computers and telephones) to which refugees have access. In order to have access to this information, interviews with various organisations sheltering and assisting refugees have been conducted. Overall, over 30 interviews of refugees have been conducted from the second semester of 2013 to fall 2014 in safe environments which facilitated communication. The selected refugees chose the place and time of their interviews and were guaranteed their anonymity in advance. The objectives of the interviews were also carefully explained to the different interviewees.

This research also includes results gathered by previous studies on the broader perspective of migration.

Before addressing the question of ICT and their use by refugees, this study will explain the nature of asylum in France. The study will then be presented in three parts: firstly, we explore on the claims and goals of ICTs in a globalised world as well as the constraints and specific risks which refugees encounter; secondly we examine the issues of access to technologies practically (such as cost of connexion and equipment) and culturally (alphabetisation and mastery of

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18 SINGA France, a non profit organisation participating to this research and working on the socio-economic integration of refugees has put the researchers in contact with their beneficiaries.
19 The refugees had previous existing relationships with SINGA and were able to choose the environment and time of the meeting.
20 We are here referring to French author Abdelmayek Sayad’s works on migration from the 1990’s or to Diana Diminescu’s more recent researchs of on-line diasporas
technologies); thirdly, we analyse the practices of refugees in their use of ICT, the risks they face in their use and their means of avoiding those dangers.

**Contextualisation: Asylum in France**

The right to asylum was conceptualised in the 18th century in France with the 1978 Constitution but was only actually applied in 1946 with the preamble of the 4th Republic’s constitution.\(^{21}\)

“Any man persecuted in [by] virtue of his actions in favour of liberty may claim the right of asylum upon the territories of the Republic.”

Asylum then became part of what is commonly known as the Constitutional Bloc which regroups the Constitution of 1958, the Environmental Charter of 2004, the Preamble of the Constitution of 1946 and the Human Rights Declaration of 1789 which gave its supremacy to common law.

France also ratified the Geneva Convention of 1951 on the 23rd of June 1954, as well as the Protocol of 1967 on the 3rd of February 2005, which both indicate the status of refugees. It also introduced the CESEDA (Code de l’Entrée et du Séjour et Etrangers et du Droit d’Asile) which came into force in 2005.

**Asylum figures in France**

France receives the second highest number of asylum requests in Europe after Germany. In 2013 there were 66 251 asylum seekers in France: a 7.8% increase over the previous year. The recent 2014 figures have shown that the number of asylum seekers in the country has stabilised. However, it is important to note that 80% of asylum seekers find refuge in

\(^{21}\) Constitution du 27 Octobre 1946, Paragraphe 4
developing countries: Europe hosts only 15% of refugees of which 1.7% are in France.\textsuperscript{22} According to France Terre d’Asile,\textsuperscript{23} the ratio between the number of asylum seekers and the number of inhabitants is 0.9 asylum seekers per 1000 inhabitants, thus making France the ninth highest country of asylum registration in the European Union.

In France, the primary applicants essentially come from Africa and East Europe. Asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of Congo represent the highest number of applicants in France with 3 966 applications in 2013, followed by those from Kosovo (3 514 applications), Albania (3 288 applications), Bangladesh (2 921 applications), Russia (2 609 applications), China, Guinea, Sri Lanka, Georgia and Pakistan.\textsuperscript{24}

Asylum applications are very localised in France, with over 66% of them made in the five following regions: Île de France (with over 40% of all asylum applications); the Rhone Alpes Region (11%); the Outre Mers (5%); and the Alsace and the PACA Region (Provence, Alpes, Cote d’Azur).\textsuperscript{25}

However the increase in asylum applications has not been followed by an increase in asylum grants.\textsuperscript{26} France is one of the European countries with the lowest number of grants in first instance with a rate of 9.4% in 2013 and a ranking of 21\textsuperscript{st} in the EU. Indeed, 56% of refugee statuses were granted in France by the National Court for Asylum (CNDA), the second instance court. Despite an upcoming legal reform supposed to simplify and make the right to asylum


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{23}France Terre d’Asile is one of French main association to work with refugees. It was created in 1980 and helped to reorganize the national reception system in 1990. The association has since been struggling to welcome and help refugees and asylum seekers.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24}UNHCR, “UNHCR Asylum trends 2013“ web, \url{http://www.unhcr.org/5399a14f9.html}, 25 august 2014.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{25}All figures are from the 2013 OFPRA report, web. \url{http://www.ofpra.gouv.fr/documents/OFPRA_BD_28-04-2014.pdf}, 25 august 2014.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{26}This has been criticized by number of non-profit organizations providing assistance to refugees and asylum seekers, including France Terre d’Asile in its proposition within its 2013 report, p 7.}
more swift, the access to asylum is made difficult by complex procedures, the latter being reinforced by a strong number of appeals to specific procedures (priority procedures).

Asylum actors in France and procedures

The right to asylum in France is granted by the French Office of Protection for refugees and apatrides (l’Office Français de Protection pour les réfugiés et apatrides” (OFPRA)) which makes first instance decisions on the status of refugee. In case of refusal (as stated above, only 9.4% of requests for asylum are granted in first instance), the asylum seeker can appeal to the “National Court of Right to Asylum (Cour Nationale du Droit d’Asile (CNDA)), which can then rule out the decision made by the OFPRA. The asylum seeker submits his demand upon his arrival on the territory. This requires the state to issue a temporary short-term resident permit in order to allow the asylum seekers to wait during the time of the procedure. The complexity of these procedures usually calls for an important support of asylum seekers by refugee assistance organisations (such as associations, housing centres for asylum seekers). In addition, the violence of the auditions with the OFPRA, the difficulties of adaptation for people having had potentially traumatic experiences can also represent another difficult experience.

Some asylum seekers in France are supported by the Centre d’Accueil pour Demandeurs d’Asile (CADA - which are institutions supported by the State and usually managed by organizations such as France Terre d’Asile) which offer them administrative help, a monthly allocation of subsistence (AMS in French) and housing during the asylum claim procedures. In the event of a refusal by the OFPRA and later by the CNDA, the CADA ends its financial and material support.

27 This is according to the report made by France Terre d’Asile in 2013, although it is also according to testimonies made by refugees collected during our work or during interviews with officials of this sector.
28 This refers to the sociological studies of Carolina Kobelinsky (2010) who drew out for her thesis an ethnography of life in CADAs.
These CADAs also include social workers helping asylum seekers in the process of their request and statutory refugees after they have left the CADAs. This help is in the form of providing assistance in finding accommodation (they offer apartments) and a job. Asylum seekers can also attend French classes, the limit of those lessons being of 400 hours. However not everyone obtains this help. Indeed there are currently only 24 500 spaces in CADA for 62 000 asylum seekers. In addition, this does not take into consideration the transition period once the request has been granted which usually makes the housing situation and manageability even more precarious.

### Rethinking socio-economic insertion in host countries

However, there is more to integration in a host country than a grant of refugee status as the outcome of an administrative process. Integration is a long and challenging process for both the refugee and the host community, and cannot be reduced to the ability of a person to find a job and/or accommodation. Statutory refugees and holders of the subsidiary protection have to decipher their host country both from an economic point of view (obtaining employment or entering university) and a social point of view (to learn the language and socials codes, to struggle to find housing, and overtaking a potentially traumatic experience). Many obstacles, such as the lack of diploma recognition, cultural differences, difficulties learning the host languages, etc.

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29 Statutory refugees can be redirected to Center of temporary housing, CPHs (“Centre provisoire d’hébergement”, a temporary shelter). The distributions of refugees into these are done at a national level and are accorded to statutory refugees or beneficiaries of the subsidiary protection.

30 Once they acquired the status, refugees must find new housing. If associations usually help them doing so, the transition period closes dormitory to other asylum seekers on the one hand, and people usually have trouble finding new flats due to their condition, the fact they do not necessarily have a job, or do not enjoy the place the association proposed them, etc.

31 A Person eligible for subsidiary protection is a person who does not qualify for refugee status but otherwise satisfies the rules regarding international protection.
country’s language, studying at university, racism and discrimination, economic instability, social atrophy, are still faced by refugees after they obtain their refugee status.\(^{32}\)

Therefore, when considering the integration of refugees in France, it is essential to view both the administrative obstacles to their integration as well as the socio-cultural aspects. It is however difficult to compare the current situation with the uprooting of the past immigrants, refugees and stateless persons. This report aims to show firstly, the potential of ICT to tackle the various obstacles faced by refugees; and secondly, to understand how those technologies are used as well as how they are accessed by and for refugees.

**ICTs: High Stakes in a Globalized World**

The field of technological innovation is one of the most dynamic economic sectors in the world. According to the review carried out in 2014 by the ITU (International Telecommunication Union),\(^{33}\) the rate of usage of ICT\(^{34}\) is increasing (multiplied by five in six years for mobile phones). However, there are major differences regarding connectivity between developed countries and developing countries. In Africa, the rate of mobile usage reached 20% in 2014 from 2% in 2010, compared to 64% in Europe and 59% in the Americas. The development of the internet has also been extremely fast. Today, 40% of the world population uses the internet although the rate of usage varies a great deal between developed countries (78%) and developing countries (32%). Differences in connectivity are also to be seen due to the

\(^{32}\) In this sense it seems relevant to analyse the refugee condition by including the question of uprooting dear to authors such as Abdelmalek Sayad, who established in his work the condition of immigrants, particularly through Algerian immigrants. His analysis offers important keys to understanding the refugee condition.

\(^{33}\) All the following statistics are taken from this report, available at the following address: http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2014-e.pdf, 3 July 2014.

\(^{34}\) Here is included all the ICTs such as mobile telephony, computer equipment and the Internet.
technological equipment available from Wi-Fi Hotspots to the distribution of fixed-line phone relays.

According to the results of the Research Centre for the study and the observation of living conditions (Credoc in French) published in 2013 about the usage of ICT in French society, 35 four out of five people in 2013 had access to the internet at home, 83% of French people had at least one computer at home and 89% of them had a mobile phone. These results varied depending on social inequalities (graduate people with high incomes tend to be more connected), and particularly on age since people’s habits evolve in accordance with their age groups (Credoc study, 2013, p. 179).

Therefore, the stakes of the use of ICT by refugees in France cannot be analysed the same way as in countries with less connectivity and where the use of ICT has a less important role in social and economic interaction. The use of ICT is indeed essential to almost half of French companies: 46% of workers use computers daily at their workplace and almost “two people out of five use them for professional purposes out of their working hours” (Credoc, 2013, p. 180). This brings to French legislators the matter of excessive use of ICT in regard of the national and international labour law.

The study of the transition from a world of long-lasting communication towards a world where communication is less time-consuming is therefore affected by a number of factors, both national and individual. ICT - and most particularly the spread of the internet - entirely reconfigures the concepts of work and communication. This shift thus influences the way refugees will be able to integrate their host country on the one hand and the way they will cope with moving from their native country on the other.

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Still, these inequalities are at the core of this study. The variability in connectivity from one country to another, the cultural and economic situation of refugees and of their families back home obstruct their access to ICTs thus reducing their possibility to communicate with each other.

These technologies not only shorten distances but they also mostly generate a free flow of information. The use of mobile phones and internet is crucial for refugees: it shortens distances between the latter and their home country and provides a possibility to reduce social isolation in different ways. Though ICT can be used to look for information on the asylum process, route and address searches and act as a way to reduce social isolation (information on the host country, self-education via internet, job research) they are in fact far more intricate. ICT is not perfectly adapted for refugees as the latter can trust them only partially (for anonymity and security reasons, for instance) and consider them as an obstacle for their integration due to the technological gap between their host and home country.

The use of ICT (mostly internet use) by refugees and asylum seekers for their integration is mainly focused on online platforms which will now be explored below.

1. Refugees and Online Institutional Platforms

One of the advances in hosting asylum seekers and refugees seems to be the setting up of platforms designed for them. This study on refugees and ICTs is divided in two subsections: one part focuses on the use of information technologies by refugees based on interviews (analysis available below); the other deals with the means refugees have at their disposal. This survey was carried out by way of online research on websites intended for refugees and by way of interviews with heads of reception centres for asylum seekers (“CADAs”).
A. Websites are dedicated to asylum stakeholders, not refugees

The research conducted online focused on websites dedicated to refugees. However, it seems that these websites do not quite exist. Instead there seems to be a gap between the means of organisations and asylum stakeholders in general, and the way they consider their work with refugees. Although some organisations and CADAs mentioned that they communicate via email with their beneficiaries, stakeholders of asylum admitted that traditional means of communication such as physical appointments or phone calls were mainly used, giving only virtual calls when exceptionally needed. The hosting process for asylum seekers and later on for statutory refugees and beneficiaries of the subsidiary protection functions were conducted in the same way. Indeed, these people rarely communicate directly with the OFPRA (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless persons) or the CNDA (National Court for the Right to Asylum) nor with “Pole Emploi” since social workers play the most important role in the socialisation of refugees and asylum seekers.

Though professionals tend to use very regularly ICT, their beneficiaries do not benefit from them. Other reasons explaining the dependence of refugees on these organisations is the complexity of refugee claim procedures and the difficulty to find global information on the subject both online and offline (which implies going to the OFPRA, the local authorities or the CNDA, for example). Thus this forms a barrier for refugees to enter the French territory and limited access to important information jeopardises Human rights.

Indeed, all websites related to asylum rights are designed for asylum operators, both national and international rather than for refugees themselves. Organisations dedicate their online platforms to communicate with other asylum related organisations or institutions rather than the people they help and work directly with. The need for refugees to be informed is clearly not taken into account. First, most of these websites use a complex judicial vocabulary which makes
it difficult for asylum seekers to understand. Moreover, platforms are almost never explicitly dedicated to refugees.\textsuperscript{36} Finally, there are only few translated websites and are usually limited to English for international websites, the national being exclusively in French.

The UNHCR website exemplifies these problems. The HCR is one of the major international organisations helping refugees. However, its website only gives information about its activities and not about the procedure for asylum claims. The website extensively sets out its activities (publications, key statistics, pictures, documentation on countries) but nothing explaining the procedures to follow or listing the people entitled to claim for asylum is indicated. In addition, the website is entirely in English.

In the same way, websites of the OFPRA, the CNDA, or most of the RSOs, including SINGA, are only available in French. These websites require a good knowledge of the judicial vocabulary in order to understand the ins and outs of documents and are mainly directed towards operators of asylum.

In the case of France Terre d’Asile, a tab “Contact” links to a scroll down menu to reach “Job offers”, “Become a Volunteer”, “Membership and subscription”, “Follow us”, “Contact us”. Only in this final tab can asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors and statutory refugees can contact France Terre d’Asile. Journalists, social workers and others working outside asylum organisations have to go through the same process. Moreover, access to the translated versions of the website is hardly visible.

\textsuperscript{36} This is seen on websites of the HCR, the OFPRA, and organizations such as France Terre d’Asile. There are neither tabs dedicated directly to refugees nor a clear presentation of relevant information. Information for refugees and basic questions like “How to claim for asylum? Who can I contact?” etc... are only available on the OFPRA website under the FAQ tab.
Access to information for refugees is therefore watered down on these websites: it is presented in a very formal and complex way and is hardly translated into English.

B. The obstacles in accessing ICTs in reception centres for asylum seekers

The lack of information dedicated to refugees is not the only problem that refugees face regarding ICT. The difficulties in accessing intelligible information due to the language it is written in increases the dependence of refugees on social workers. Besides, it is also difficult for refugees to access computer equipment. Although all CADAs are equipped with computers, there are only intended for professionals instead of making them available for asylum seekers or statutory refugees. The latter have only limited access to computers at fixed hours and for a limited period (usually two hours, two days per week). Although CADAs are equipped with a fixed-line telephone to call mainland France (and not abroad) they do not supply Wi-Fi because it is costly and, according to France Terre d’Asile, they want to ensure fair and equal conditions in all CADAs. According to the organisation, access to computer courses is only given following a request from refugees and assessed on a case-by-case basis. Refugees are usually unaware of the courses offered for a low price by Town Halls\(^\text{37}\) and other organisations.

Access to ICT and internet is also limited due to budgetary constraints (all the refugees interviewed owned a mobile phone, whether it be a smartphone or not). Although some of the people interviewed owned a computer, others were unable to purchase one and were therefore unable to access information. For example, a 38-year-old Nigerian refugee admitted in her interview: « I here (use it)...every time.. a lot of people use internet. You cannot live without internet here... it is not easy ». This shows that the importance of ICT use in French society can represent an additional barrier to refugees.

\(^{37}\) For example, Paris’s Town Hall gives the possibility to take French courses and computer courses as does the “Espace 19 numérique” organization which offers computer courses for affordable prices.
2. Refugees and their access to ICTs

A. Accessing computer equipment

In addition to the difficulty of refugees to access the online network, it is also difficult for them to obtain computer equipment.

As seen later, refugees tend to have a better use of traditional ICT, such as mobile phones, compared to their use of social networks. It is indeed difficult for a refugee to access a fixed-line telephone or an internet connection due to his situation.

The price for an internet connection or a fixed-line telephone is not excessive as it is actually less expensive than having a mobile phone but this means of communication depends on an access to housing. In France, access to an internet line or a personal fixed-line is determined by the acquisition of a housing which is a complex issue for refugees. Therefore it is impossible for asylum seekers and statutory refugees living in CADAs to get a personal connection because they do not enjoy the status of legal tenant.

Indeed, telephone agencies require refugees to prove that they are owners or tenants in order to obtain a personal connection. Access to reliable technology is therefore determined by obtaining owner or tenant status which only occurs a few months after getting the statutory refugee status or subsidiary protection status.

An Iraqi refugee explained his housing issues and his social isolation as a consequence of it:

« Yeah Freewifi. So I haven’t a network now... Because I have problems with the housing. I’ve been busy until now. I said busy because I am now an illegal sitting apartment which belong to France Terre d’Asile. We have a problem with the housing, we wanted an apartment according to our situation because we are refugees and in France Terre d’Asile...»

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they told us that the government would offer us an apartment and that you have the right to choose between three housings and refuse two of them but the third is compulsory to accept. I don't know… for the first one we said no, they ended the contract and they said you have to leave the apartment ».

Access to Wi-Fi Hotspots: Libraries and Internet Cafés

Considering the administrative difficulties to obtain fixed-line telephones and personal internet connection, some refugees and asylum seekers looked for intermediate solutions. Thanks to community solidarity some of them are able to benefit from connections though it does not provide the quality and the comfort of a private connection. Still, some refugees use Wi-Fi Hotspots such as libraries and internet cafés, although they do not enjoy much privacy\(^ {38} \) and are limited in time as in CADAs. A twenty-year-old Nepalese refugee living in a CADA told he was going to the library on a daily basis after his classes in order to communicate with his friends. As he does not have a job, he has no means to buy a computer but told he was planning to do so as soon as he would get a job.

« Interviewer: Don’t they have the internet in the foyer (*CADAs)? Or a computer you can use?
S: No, so I’m using the internet in bibliothèque (*libraries) after my courses, one or two hours.
Interviewer: Ok and what do you do with it ?
S: Communication, reading news, emails...
Interviewer: You use networks...
S: Yes, email, Facebook and news… Youtube… »

\(^ {38} \) Whether it is for written social networks (chat rooms or written discussion) or oral social networks such as Skype the use of a computer in a public place does not allow the same liberties as in private places. Although computer screens can be isolated it is usually difficult to have an oral conversation in public places, either because it is forbidden (in libraries) or because of noisy environments (in cafés). Public places also tend to restraint private conversation.
Moreover other refugees admitted not being aware of these free Wi-Fi Hotspots and instead were going to internet cafés, resulting in costly access.

**Exchange of Wi-Fi passwords**

As a last means of overcoming the difficulties of connecting to the internet, some refugees are able to exchange informally Wi-Fi passwords of French public networks like SFRwifi and FreeWifi thanks to the solidarity of relatives. These networks are easily accessible in most houses and public places but are hardly reliable since the login information (usually borrowed from individuals) can expire or be changed. In addition, networks are rarely of good quality which makes browsing difficult and does not resolve in any way the need of a fixed-line telephone.

An Iraqi refugee explained how he could not get a fixed-line telephone connected to his housing.

« Yeah I must have contract on behalf of my name to get the internet. So because of this I can't have it. With the help of my friends (I have five or six French friends) I was able to get an access, a password to the internet but the problem is... sometimes this access stops so I have to find another one. This is my problem now... one month ago, they changed it. I think they changed the password and because of that I have no internet anymore, so I only check the emails with my telephone, just the emails because it costs me a lot if I use the internet on my mobile. »

Access to ICT is thus determined by a refugee’s budget and thus may be limited in his or her purchase of technological devices and his or her access to networks. Refugees also face difficulties in accessing networks in part due to their cultural endowment [meaning? do you mean “cultural background”?] and their familiarity with new technologies.
B. A question of skills and knowledge

The use of new technologies raises the issue firstly, of language and secondly, the requirement of specific knowledge. Refugees deal with new technologies in the same way the global population deals with it: that is to say depending on their age group, their sociocultural backgrounds and also their home country.

Though neither systematic quantitative analysis nor general conclusions can be drawn, it is obvious that younger generations seem more comfortable with new technologies. They seem indeed to be very active browsing on social networks rather than on e-mails and seem keener on online communication rather than communicating via telephone.

Older people are more comfortable with telephones than with computers and prefer more “classic” means of technology. They are generally less active on social networks but more comfortable with emails and less up to date concerning new technologies and new networks. Refugees’ relationships with new technologies also vary according to their previous profession.

Downward social mobility is indeed a very important issue in the study of refugees’ itineraries. As an example, a Syrian refugee who was journalist explained she used the internet daily and was forced to leave her country partly because of her online publications. Another refugee from Iraq also tells of his daily use of his computer either for emails, social networks or article publications.

Other people whose professions required only minimal use of new technologies and who came from countries where ICT, especially online networks, is less available, explained that they were looking for training in IT in order to avoid social isolation. This is particularly important in France since a significant amount of information is only available online.
3. Social concerns at various scales: how are ICTs used?

The first barrier for refugees to using ICT is access which is determined by financial, cultural and structural aspects. These technologies also act as invaluable tools for socialisation: refugees use them strategically in different situations. ICT enables them to create and keep contacts both in their host and home country. In this section, the different situations and the structural limits which they may encounter are explored.

ICTs play a social role in two ways. Firstly, they enable refugees to integrate into their host country. Secondly, these technologies maintain a connection between refugees and their home country though they often face structural challenges.

A. Understanding and getting on well with the host country

The refugees interviewed use ICT both as an education tool and as a means to communicate and familiarise themselves with their new environment.

Situating oneself in a new environment and acquiring knowledge

The internet allows refugees, either through the use of a smartphone or a computer, to discover (geographically) where they are in their new environment. Some interviewees revealed that they regularly use GoogleMaps or RATP.fr (the study was conducted in Ile de France) to discover their location. They described these habits as essential to their well-being. A refugee from Sri Lanka said for example:
Interviewer: What do you think could have been useful websites or applications for you when arrived here? What kind of things were you looking for? Housing maybe, a job or learning French? Do you have something in mind that is more important?

Respondent: I am learning French on a smartphone. I also use it as mobile phone and internet. I really like something that if you say “Ok Georges come on I am waiting in this place, just in front of marché or shop” and then you can really go. It really shows you exactly where you are and that’s one of the good things that I really, ho my god, ok, let’s go. Even if you’ve never been to that place, you have the confidence that ok, and it’s every location. You can go there”

These technologies give people a better understanding of where they are located in an area. They are self-placement tools that also help people reach places that they could not otherwise reach. Beyond self-placement in geographical areas, some interviewees confided using the internet to get a better understanding of their host society. Translation tools are also used on a daily basis both for language education and spontaneous website translation, whether they be informative or educative.

Tools such as Google Translate allow refugees to collect information about their host country and to break the pattern of exclusion due to lack of knowledge in French. Others use the internet in order to access to professional training thereby avoiding travel and enrolment costs.

The example of Céline (pseudonym), a refugee from Nigeria who wishes to set up a restaurant in France, is typical of this use. Even though she admits to not having a good command of computers, she still intends to use the internet to improve her knowledge of cuisine. In this way, she uses search engines to find new recipes or new information for her company. She explains as following:

“Respondent: I use it most of the time websites about my business.. For the past two years..

Interviewer: Ok! So it would be for example how to write business plan or to...
Respondent: How to write a business plan how to get suppliers, those things. Chamber commerce, I read a lot of things there, but.. I have been able to establish my business on websites...

Interviewer: And do you read them in English or...

Respondent: I translate them, my computer automatically...

Interviewer: Translating...

Respondent: Instantly”

Another refugee, from Sierra Leone, uses her computer for the purpose of self-education:

“Respondent: The professional accounting courses that I take. I go on the websites of schools like Oxford University or London School or the ACA site (Association of chartered accountants) and I download the books that I need and all that..and I read them...

Interviewer: Ok.

Respondent: And now I’m preparing myself to take the exam in December and I already downloaded that...sometimes on the metro...well if I have the time, I read.”

Fighting against social isolation and allowing empowerment

Interviewees also explained they were using new technologies in order to emancipate themselves from social assistance provided by professional organisations or State institutions like Pôle Emploi. On the internet, they can find job opportunities, including undeclared work. Though the majority of people interviewed indicated communicating with organisations primarily by telephone or in person (and having entered in contact with them through word of mouth), it is not uncommon to exchange between social workers and beneficiaries. However, according to both the social workers and the refugees, these cases do not constitute an established practice but rather an exception.
A Kenyan refugee has identified various websites to earn a living. She takes advantage of her English language knowledge to address a specific public. In this way, the internet is used to build an informal economy of casual jobs to subsist. She described her approach as follows:

“Respondent: Now that I have my paper, I need to work and so I will look for a job. I use websites like Fusac...

Interviewer: Fusac?

Respondent: Yes, it’s for babysitting jobs and other things... there are a lot of them for babysitting...

Interviewer: This is very interesting.

Respondent: There is also Anglo Info.

Interviewer: Anglo Info?

Respondent: People are looking for someone like me for their babies, or working at the restaurant for the night.”

Such networks, be they legal or not, can help refugees to overcome obstacles they have to face in more classic employment procedures. The following conversation, overheard during the tutoring program provided by SINGA, illustrates the difficulties that refugees run into:

“Refugee: Employment, what does that mean?

Interviewer: Employment, it means work, it’s a synonym.

Refugee: Ah, no, that’s not possible, I’ve been at Employment Center (Pôle Emploi) for six months, it doesn’t mean work!”

More generally, it is obvious that the use of ICT by refugees is focused on information research, rather than communication if we consider the way refugees use it when it comes to their host country. Indeed, if refugees admit to using online resources for international means, these usages remain mostly centred on information research and hardly on communication within the host country. It is important to recall the earlier parts of this paper analysing the lexicon and structure of asylum websites, which mostly target institutional actors, as well as language
barriers. Even if refugees use the internet to search for employment and their geographic location, they tend not to use modern communication means like social networks and email to communicate within the host country. To communicate with people in their host country, including close friends and family who live here, they mainly use phone calls. Refugee support organisations also admit they prefer this mode of communication, presented as easier and more human. In the end, traditional modes of communication seem to be used for local communication.

Moreover, though a consistent part of interviewees have admitted to being present on social networks, it is important to note that the usages of these networks are primarily international and are focused on maintaining ties with absent others rather than with the host country (even when certain refugees themselves gave very passionate speeches about the importance of these new technologies in their integration). Refugees are thus not connected to the online networks of their host society, or at least only sporadically. They are not familiar, for example, with the online activity of the organisations which help them. Even if the organisation SINGA undertakes a large online awareness effort and organises events specifically for refugees, it is rare for refugees to stay up to date on these events via the internet.

There is a paradox concerning the use of ICT by refugees because it can be perceived as a “violence” if you don’t use them or an important to fight against the boredom that Carolina Kobelinsky describes so well (2010, p.167). ICT can be described both as indispensable and isolating, and it is sometimes described using an extremely personified tone [not sure what is meant here], as a profound moral and psychological aide against isolation and boredom. A refugee from Sierra Leone thus spoke about the importance of the internet and social networks to fight against his social isolation and integrated thoughtful questions about French cultural practices:
“Respondent: For language and to meet people (he responds to the interviewer’s question about the benefits of the internet for him). Because it’s very difficult in France, if you don’t speak French and you don’t know someone here. It’s hurts.

Interviewer: Well yeah, you meet people in a professional setting or in university or in clubs. Personally, I met my close friends in university or at work, and here obviously, in this association.

Respondent: It’s in France that it’s like that. To meet people on the street, it doesn’t work.”

Another refugee, about 30 years old and from Syria, used strong language to describe her attachment to the internet and her incapacity to live without it:

“Respondent: I’m really comfortable with the Internet, to the point that if I spend two hours without Internet, I feel like I’m in prison!”

Just as ICT can allow refugees to thrive socially, they can also become, in the absence of skills and training, an additional barrier to their integration in a host country that is one of the most connected in the world. It is even more true in France where the entry is not only obstructed by structural and financial constraints but also by the difficulties of finding out about these online networks, which are seen as impermeable and difficult to access, communautarist [I have no idea what is meant by that word] and hardly welcoming due to the language barrier and social uses. As the sociologist Antonio Casilli showed (Casilli, 2010, Les Liaisons numériques), there is a certain porosity between online and offline networks, with online networks often being nothing more than an extension and representation of preexisting offline networks: to thrive online, it is necessary to thrive offline.39 Online networks, and the internet in general, allow refugees who have access to them to feel that they exist socially, to maintain ties with their country of origin, to receive news from their country of origin, to feel that they are part of social events, and to

39 The following assertion is a rough summary of the works of Antonio Casilli, which are in reality subtler.
belong to a community even if they are, in reality, excluded for brutal, radical reasons [are these brutal, radical reasons in France or in the country of origin?]

B. Maintaining ties with the country of origin and the political community

The use of ICT is therefore oriented towards the international network or mutual aid in communities. It can be analysed through a geopolitical perspective including security reasons and economic inequalities. A two part analysis is presented below: the first part presents the obstacles that one can face using ICT and a more general analysis on the phenomena of rupture, isolation; the second part presents the important role of online diasporas.

Communicating internationally: practices and challenges

The use of ICT as presented in this study is constrained by refugees’ knowledge and access to ICT, as well as by the connectivity of their country of origin, the skills of the people with whom they are trying to get in touch, and security concerns.

Structural constraints: connectivity of the country of origin

Although new technologies offer inexpensive ways to communicate with their close family and friends, this opportunity can be negated by their friends’ and family’s lack of access to the internet in their country. This said, we noticed that refugees in France extensively use Skype (even those who are illiterate), Facebook, Email accounts and smartphone applications such as WhatsApp. Videoconferencing on Skype allows refugees to maintain stronger ties than traditional telephone calls and it keeps families closer together.
Certain people are nevertheless restricted to classic telephone calls because of the absence of networks or internet connection in their country of origin, or because of the financial insecurity of their friends and family who cannot afford a computer. A refugee from Mauritania complained in this way about the costs of communication by telephone with her family and shared her wish to send a computer to her family as soon as it is possible for her:

“Respondent: I need to buy a computer, and I’m going to send it. But I don’t have money for the moment.”

So, the financial resources of the interlocutor, the local access to Internet but also the time difference can alter the communication. A refugee from Sri Lanka describes as follows:

“Interviewer: Do you call them? Do they call you?

Respondent: They are calling me.

Interviewer: But you don’t use things like, you know, Facebook or Skype...

Respondent: Skype, yes: I am talking with my husband and some relatives.

Interviewer: On your brother’s laptop?

Respondent: Yes. But just a little bit. Not much. We don’t have time. I don’t have time. Because of, you know, the time difference. Now I am free and now they are going to sleep. It’s four hours and a half.”

**Communication and risk-taking: the security of refugees at stake online**

The use of ICT by refugees can also be constrained by security issues. Even if the majority of the people that were interviewed did not seem to worry about the way they use conventional telephone calls or social networks, others spoke about using pseudonyms in order to avoid being found and put in danger. This is particularly the case for political activists. A Sri Lankan refugee whose wife stayed in Sri Lanka with their children thus collectively described the difficulties of connecting and the risks that he takes by communicating with her and his
children, as well as the importance of video conferences in maintaining ties with his family and his children who are growing up far away from him:

“Interviewer: I’ll ask you a last question about this... It's really... Do you use for example video conference like Skype, and things like that? Something like that to keep in touch with people in Sri Lanka (agreement mmm mmm) Same question, Are you careful when you are using this, with your name?

Respondent: Yes, I totally have a different name which is... even sometimes my wife doesn’t know them, or who’s name is that?

Interviewer: Are you changing sometimes.

Respondent: Yeah yeah. It's a very different name nobody knows it. The reason I really wanted to go to Skype, is that it's cheap, you don't have to pay but though, my wife on the ground, she has to pay for it. For us it's ok if you go to into the computer and you can talk for hours and hours. But my wife, she has to pay there because she doesn’t have her own computer she has to pay for the hour. She has to pay a communication because she doesn’t have Skype at home so she has to go to the communicator

Interviewer: So it’s gonna be registered Yes. So are you careful about what you say?

Respondent: Yes. I’m really so the problem is the reason I want to really keep the talks in Skype, to see my children on the Skype because they want to know what Skype is because one day they go to hand up here, they are going to come with me, I mean, to me. They are so small and it’s better to say “Oooh I can see my daddy” so this is my intention but on the other hand it’s cheap and it’s also very good for my children to see

Interviewer: yes it’s more visual and more interactive

Respondent: because I miss them a lot. I am not worrying about my older son he is ok he is 8 years old he can say “Hi papa” Ok, good but I am really worried about my second son who loves me a lot. so even my daughter she is so small, I am using Skype but I m really really very careful when I converse with my family.”
Refugees are sometimes unaware of the danger to which they can be exposed online or by telephone, namely death threats or bribery. It is obvious that certain acts of violence towards refugees or their relatives were perpetrated after tracking them online. Blogs, websites, social networks constitute new spaces to extend or enhance the political struggle of some refugees: through classical activism or cyber-criminality. Some interviewees admitted to continuing the “battle” through the internet by relaying information or participating to virtual attacks.

**Challenges for online Diasporas: rethinking isolation**

New communication and information technologies, and particularly the internet, allow refugees to maintain concrete and active ties with their community and country or origin. By weakening the geographic barrier and the feeling of distance, ICT has literally changed the issues at stake. Refugees use them both for communicating with their relatives and to read the news about their country of origin. A Syrian refugee is, for example, using social networks to stay in contact with his family in order to check if they “are still alive”.

Whereas twenty years ago it would have been impossible or extremely difficult for refugees to get information about their close relatives or to hear some news about their country of origin, today it is the other way around: there is a proliferation of private or institutional information networks, which break isolation and allow them to maintain close links. The following account of an Iraqi refugee gives a better understanding of the informal structures:

“Respondent: Yeah, so Facebook is more useful for me. To go with friends. Actually other things are unique for Iraqi people. After what happened in Iraq especially for Christians we were distributed in the entire world. So you can see family consist from sisters and
brothers. You can see maybe a family in.. in 5 or 6 places in the world. So for us... I am here.. my sister is in Germany.. and our cousins are in America and we have a cousin in Australia.. And we have also a cousin in Holland.. we call him...

Interviewer: Holland?

Respondent: le mot français?

Interviewer: In France we call it Holland but there is another world called "Pays-Bas".

Respondent: Pays-bas.

Interviewer: it's not exactly the same but I don't know the real difference

Respondent: Pays bas.. oui.. hum.. So me and as well as we have my brother, two brothers in Iraq, one brother in North on Iraq, the other in the middle of Iraq, so we can't use the .. mobile to call because it would cost a lot. So the internet maybe it's less expensive.”

Sayad’s work in the 90s on communication with absent others revealed the use of registered tapes and letters as well as emissaries to establish a link between the expatriate and his or her relatives in the country of origin. These communications occurred over a long period of time and included the transit time during which the information was relayed, no matter what the medium was. Even if ICT is not uniformly spread throughout the globe, its expansion tends to transform the notions of exile and of communication with absent others. This is even more true for refugees because going back is not an option, even punctually. In their situation, communicating with relatives and getting some news becomes even more important. The works of Diana Diminescu concerning the modelling of online diasporas allows a visualisation of the establishment of these virtual connections and of the creation of communities in the virtual spheres. It gives a better understanding of how information exchanges are created and how families remain in contact even when they find themselves spread out across the globe. Even if these technologies, including telephone calls, do not fundamentally change refugees’ social isolation, they restructure the notions of isolation and attenuate its effective impact. For
refugees, they can sometimes constitute a powerful psychological support: they keep in touch with their relatives, remember their identity and can perpetuate it. Additionally, they make it possible to maintain ties to the community of origin and to continue participating in it (certain people interviewed confided to participate in the life of their home country by campaigning online, while others participate in conflicts by being a part of cyber-activity groups).

**CONCLUSION: THINKING IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD**

ICT transforms refugees’ paths by redefining the notions of isolation and transforming the paradigm of double absence defined in Sayad’s work. However, they integrate and create specific concerns. The studies of Diana Diminescu (2010/1) show that the appearance of ICTs creates a new epistemology of dispersion and connection (she speaks of “fluid modernity”). While ICT allows the diminution of isolation, to fight against boredom and the permanent wait typical of the condition of asylum seeker and of refugee they can, in the case of people who have never used them before, constitute an additional factor of isolation and will not remove the frontiers between the cultural practices of the country of origin and the host country. Far from being only enriching and allowing for a diminution of the trauma that comes with asylum, they can also constitute a supplementary barrier to habituation and settling down in the host country. Additionally, it is important to note that the population that has been studied has specific needs; education, language, learning of socio-cultural codes, economic precarity and a lack command of information technology as well as security are all equal barriers to using ICT positively and effectively. Although it is difficult to imagine acting directly on the host countries of refugees, an interesting policy would be to take into account the specificity of this population in the context of protection of their physical integrity and their online safety which asylum is supposed to guarantee.
A first step would be for actors in the field of asylum to put together online databases which would be destined for the primary people concerned and to undertake massive translation work which is necessary for a better circulation of information, especially when only a part of asylum seekers and refugees benefits from help in shelters.

ICT also constitutes new areas of risk in terms of public security, especially for refugees who can be sought out and who are not necessarily up to date or aware of protection measures for online and telephonic security (such as risk of their conversations being intercepted and overheard or risks associated with using their real name when on online networks or through email). It is the responsibility of the concerned actors to remind people of the dangers to which they may be exposed and to protect them. Those actors also have the power to report on the importance of these technologies in the daily life of asylum seekers, refugees, or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, both for maintaining ties with their community of origin and for getting accustomed to their host country.

It is up to the host society to take advantage of the opportunity presented by these new technologies and to address the specific needs of refugees while taking into account the structural constraints previously described. In a society where these technologies are omnipresent and regulate a large part of social and economic life, it is unthinkable that they constitute an additional barrier to the reconstruction of lives where instead they could be a powerful tool for education (particularly language), social integration (integration on digital networks and the creation of networks of mutual aid), and economic integration as well as for raising awareness in the host society.
**Suggested reading and sources**


As a part in the SINGA’s international research, this paper addresses the prevalent relation between refugees and technology in Kenya. This research highlights the importance of ICT in order to empower refugee communities and shows how refugees in Kenya possess the know-how to use ICT in order to improve their quality of life. The first section assesses the accessibility of ICT to refugees and their different uses second section examines what types of ICT Refugee Support Organisations (RSOs) use in their dealings with refugees. The results highlight how the main tool to use technology in Kenya is the mobile phone and that the main obstacle for refugees to access the internet.
I wish to acknowledge the role of the SINGA team who put together this wonderful concept of assessing how ICT can improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable group of people in the world; those who have been forcefully uprooted from their normal homes and countries. Besides, the team prepared useful research instruments that allowed field researchers to conduct similar field work even if there are some variations. Secondly I wish to acknowledge the tremendous effort put in this work by my able research assistant Victoria Ominde. And finally I thank my Colleague, Dr. Ken Oluoich for agreeing to read and critique this work.
Refugees and ICT project, assessment, opportunities and risks sought to answer one simple but fundamental question: how can ICT be best used by and for refugees? This may sound an idle question to many people who are not directly involved with refugee protection, humanitarian assistance and its challenges, since it is taken for granted that ICT has become part and parcel of the present world. But for refugees, especially in most parts of Africa, ICT may just make the difference between starvation and remaining alive, of knowing where your relatives are as well as accessing opportunities that were hitherto unavailable. Given that we have over 35 800 000 people of concern to the UNHCR, of whom 10.5 million are refugees around the globe with varying difficulties and opportunities, the use of ICT by refugees and Refugee Support Organisations (RSOs), understanding the opportunities and risks in order to adapt the best practices while minimising risks is a service to a big portion of humanity.

This research report is part of SINGA’s international research project, which aimed to answer the above question. It is divided into two major sections with various subsections. After a brief discussion of the refugee situation in Kenya and the research methodology, the first section assesses the accessibility of ICT to refugees and the different uses refugees have for ICT as well as the opportunities and the difficulties they face. The second section examines what types of ICT RSOs use in their dealings with refugees and also among themselves. The argument made here is that ICT use depends on the mandate of the particular RSO as well as prevailing contextual circumstances. The final section entails conclusion and recommendations.

40 UNHCR, 2014-2015 Global Appeal. [http://www.unhcr.org/528a0a244.html](http://www.unhcr.org/528a0a244.html)
1. Kenya Country Profile

As one of the East African countries which border the horn of Africa to the North East and Southern Sudan to the North West, Kenya has been inextricably linked to the political events occurring in these neighboring countries. Due its relative political stability, Kenya has to play host to hundreds of thousands of refugees from the region including South Sudanese, Somalis, Rwandese, Ugandans, Ethiopians and Congolese. Currently the UNHCR estimates that Kenya hosts about 1.05 million people of concern with refugees constituting 625 250\(^{41}\). If this were to be correct, with a population of approximately 40 million, one person in forty is a refugee. While for a long time the Kenyan government’s attitude towards refugees was fairly ambivalent, the rise of international terrorism has necessitated a change in thinking and the government is now actively engaging the UNHCR in registration and status determination of refugees. While some people think that government involvement in refugee affairs is overdue, other people think the reason and the timing is suspicious. We shall return to these opinions later.

People of concern in Kenya can be divided into three categories based on their residence and legal status; the first and by the last category are camp refugees who according to the UNHCR constitute about 650,000 to 700,000. In 2012 registered refugees numbered 630,097. \(^{42}\) Dadaab refugee camp alone hosts approximately 480,000 while the rest are in Kakuma refugee camps to the North West of the country and a smaller number in small transit camps. The second category is the urban people of concern which are estimated between 100,000 to 150,000 in

\(^{41}\) This figure is always subject to intense controversy which simply underscores the difficulties of counting ‘moving targets’.

number. However even this number is not entirely exact. The third category is the unregistered or undocumented refugees from the refugee producing countries. This is a group that prefers to remain anonymous or hidden which is partly attributed to the Kenyan government’s long standing policy that requires all refugees to be in the designated refugee camps. Deeper analyses of these categorisations however reveal interesting patterns and relationships between these groups, which the present essay is unable to address.

The last thing to say about Kenya is its ICT policy, which is relevant and important to the present study. Since 2002, the Kenya has activity embraced ICT in public life. The country is ranked as one of the top countries in terms of ICT penetration. For example it is estimated, that 20 million people own mobile phones in Kenya. The country boasts three under-sea fiber optics. The Kenyan government has also actively implemented e-governance. By far, the novel use of internet, which Kenya is leading, is mobile phone banking spearheaded by the M-pesa mobile services. This platform allows people to deposit money in their phones, transfer, pay bills and even receive money. This liberal ICT policy has had a great impact not only in the lives of ordinary Kenyans but refugees as well as will be demonstrated later in this work.

**Research Methodology**

This study largely adopted a qualitative research methodology as recommended by the general guidelines of the project. A quantitative study would have entailed much more respondents than have been used here. Given that this is a global study, this therefore forms a case study of refugees and refugee support organizations in Kenya only. Two groups of respondents were identified for the study. The first group of respondents is the RSOs who were purposively

43 Although such categorisation does not fall under the normal definition of refugees, field experience has shown that their number to be substantial to ignore them.
identified according the services they provided. Through this sampling method seven respondents were identified. The second group of respondents was refugees themselves. In the camp, the RSOs were useful because they kept contacts of refugees especially those who occasionally worked for them or those who provided services to other refugees. Some RSOs provided educational services, which allowed the researcher to access them while they were using the internet. Through this method, 20 refugees were interviewed in the camp.

In Eldoret town, where urban refugees were interviewed, the researcher used known contacts that used a referral system to get other respondents. Ten urban respondents were interviewed in this way. It is worth pointing out that there is always bias and other limitations with such methods. For example, most of the respondents were young males both in the camps and urban areas. However, given the nature of the study this limitation does not invalidate the results.

The research instruments used were open-ended questionnaires and they were administered face to face both for refugees and the representatives of the RSOs. This is largely due to difficulties with sending questionnaires to be self-administered. In humanitarian situations, especially in Africa, the rate of return would normally be extremely low.

2. Accessibility, Use of ICT, Opportunities and Difficulties of Refugees

A. ICT Accessibility

Most refugees interviewed have access to ICT infrastructure such as cyber cafes for internet and computer use. However the mobile phone by far dominates as the most accessible form of ICT. This really reflects what pertains in the whole country even among Kenyans themselves as a result of government’s friendly policy towards ICT. However those in the refugees’ camps complain about interruptions and unreliability of the network. This is true because the camps
are situate in the least developed parts of the country, they are a considerable distance from the major owns and have a low population density which has not encouraged service providers to invest in such areas. Some refugees also have laptops and modems that they use to access the internet; however these are not many because of the economic situation of refugee camps that hardly permits for gainful employment or viable economic activities. In urban areas, the internet is easily accessible because cyber cafes are almost everywhere. In the refugee camps the cyber cafes are few and far between.

Because of the few cyber cafes and poor network in the camps some people have to wait until night when lines are not congested to access the Internet. Apparently there is also limited understanding of what ICT really entails. Some respondents when asked whether they use the internet, they reply on the negative but asked what they use their mobile phones for they contradict themselves by mentioning internet browsing, calling and even getting entertainment. This is especially true for the older respondents i.e. those in their mid-thirties and above. A number of respondents also have affiliations with RSOs through which they can access internet, landlines and computers although these are in the minority.

The easy accessibility has, however, come with its own risks. The first is that there has been an increase in the amount of online fraud affecting both refugees and Kenyans alike. People have lost money and fallen prey to human traffickers who use ICT especially mobile phones and the internet to lure desperate and unsuspecting victims to join fraudulent employment schemes. The Kenyan police, for example, have several traced online scums operated from Kenyan prisons. While this poses a challenge, the government is enlisting the support of service providers to ensure all SIM cards are registered and any transaction can be traced.
The second and more ominous risk is that of the infiltration by terrorist affiliated individuals and groups. Easy access to mobile phones and internet pose serious security challenges both to refugees, aid workers and Kenyans generally. Because of its versatility, the mobile phone can be used to take photos, monitor people’s movement and record conversations and it is easy for people to communicate with those outside the camp and share information. On several occasions, there have been deaths in refugees camps attributed to terrorist activities. Unsubstantiated allegations are that, refugee camps also serve as recruitment platforms for criminal elements. To overcome such risks, collaboration between security agents, refugee communities and RSOs is absolutely necessary.

B. Common Uses of ICTs by Refugees

- **Communicating with relatives and friends.** Virtually, all respondents cited this as one of the most important aspect of ICT in their lives in the camp. The availability of the mobile phones makes this possible for even those who not own handsets themselves as they can borrow and call. This also says something about the camp. It is apparent that not all members of the refugee families are in the same location. Researchers, such as Nora Danielson,\(^ {44}\) have pointed out that this is one way refugees spread risks and enhance their ability of accessing different opportunities for themselves.

- **Information sharing.** Given the transnational nature of refugee families, this is also very important. Refugees are scattered within the region and even those in the same country

\(^ {44}\) Nora Danielson. *Channels of Protection: Communication, Technology, and Asylum in Cairo, Egypt*. *Refuge*. Volume 29.1 2013
may be in different camps or different urban centers or even different parts of the same town as in Nairobi. Although the research did not delve into what type of information is shared, there is likelihood that information concerning countries of origin, opportunities, the progress or situation of other members of the family as well as local development is routinely shared. This way, refugees retain networks over and above the formal limitations of administrative and political boundaries. Such networks remain valuable channels which refugees use to better improve their lives.

• **Doing business.** Refugees in urban areas are actively engaged in the informal and even the formal economy of Kenya. They rely on ICT to source goods, markets and relevant information. This is not to say that camp refugees do not do the same. They do, it is only the scope that differs. Indeed, some of the urban refugees left the camps and still retain links and networks that allow them to access the camps at will. In Kenya for example Somali refugees in urban areas retain strong business links with Somalis in the diaspora especially in Europe, Arab countries and Somalis back at home. ICT helps such businesses thrive even in difficult and hostile environment.

• **Search for employment opportunities.** The younger and literate refugees are constantly looking for employment opportunities within the camp, within the country and even outside. The irony of the Kenyan situation is that a sizable number of refugees have accessed education in Kenya since many of them were born and brought up there yet; government policies restrict them from joining the work force because of the high unemployment rates in the country. A number of refugees have indicated that they have been contracted by organisations to do temporary jobs within and outside the camps.

• **Entertainment.** The need for entertainment among young refugees is as real as any requirement among the normal young people in their teens and twenties. One of the most favourite passtime among refugees, both in urban areas and the camps is watching European football. Enterprising business people acquire pay channels such as DSTV which
allows people to watch football and other forms of entertainment. This helps avoid idleness and the sense of hopelessness that normally engulfs refugee camps. Some respondents indicate that they download music, games and pictures from their phones and cyber cafes.

- **Academic purposes.** The thirst for knowledge and skills is an important driver in the use of ICT. Respondents indicated the ICT allows them access online courses, make quicker and cheaper applications to colleges for admission and scholarships. They are also able to download e-books and reading materials. The Jesuit Refugee Service, which runs a online program, indeed corroborated this assertion. The UNHCR on its part sponsored a study in 2012 to explore better ways of using ICT to improve educational opportunities for refugees.45

- **Getting news both locally and from home country.** Refugees remain anxious to know new developments in their countries of origin and their host countries because such developments will have a bearing on their status in the host countries as well as that of their relatives. Since it is difficult to access information in the conventional ways refugees rely heavily on the internet and mobile phones to access such information. For example, in December 2012, the Kenyan government announced that all urban refugees who wanted to continue staying in Kenya were to relocate to the camps. This information caused uproar among refugees and civil society and became the subject of court action. The social media became alive with comments and opinions among both Kenyans and refugees alike. The court eventually annulled the directive. However it helped underscore the power of ICT even in refugees’ daily lives. Refugees in Kakuma run an on-line monthly publication which although controversial during inception has survived for more than two years.

• **Accessing third country resettlement opportunities.** Previously this was either the preserve of UNHCR and governments of developed countries, now refugees are using the internet to appeal to well-wishers to organize for third country resettlement opportunities on their own. While definitely the UNHCR and the receiving government will be involved at some stage, the initiative has come from the refugee himself, thanks to ICT.

• **Mobile Money transfer (M-pesa).** The mobile money transfer as mentioned earlier is one of the most used money transfer services in Kenya and virtually all the four major mobile phone services have the platform. Many people for a number of reasons prefer this service. It is much easier to access compared to formal banking systems that require a number of official documents before you open an account. To register with the service provider one only needs an identification document such Kenyan ID, a passport or even refugee ID. Secondly the platform allows for transfer or receipt of very small amounts of money such as Ksh. 100 ($ 1.05) with negligible commission. The platform also allows for saving and borrowing. So instead of users putting their money in bank accounts they save in their phones and they can withdraw any time, day or night. It also allows payment of bills such as electricity, water and other purchases. For refugees, this is a lifeline. For example a sizable number of refugees rely on remittances either from abroad or from other regions within the country. Many times this money is received either through Western Union or Money that not all refugees can access. Those who can access such facilities are therefore obliged to withdraw the money and send it to those relatives in the camps or who are unable to access formal money services. The penetration of the mobile money transfer is impressive in Kenya to say the least.

C. Types of ICTs used by refugees

Most refugees use mobile phones. This can be attributed to the fact the landline connectivity in Kenya is very low even in urban areas. Secondly the mobile phone is affordable and has many
more uses than the landline, which is only for voice. The mobile phone, because of its connectivity with the internet is cited as one of the most important components of ICT. Refugees use mobile phones for reading news, money transfers and savings especially because the majority cannot access the formal banking services. Some refugees are able to access online courses.

RSOs also use mobile phones to contact refugees especially those who do volunteer work and those whom UNHCR calls “incentive workers”. Since most of the people accessing internet are young and literate the UNHCR relies on them to do translations or interpretation for those refugees who cannot read or write or those who cannot speak the formal languages used in the camps. Organisations such as Red Cross, Film Aid and IOM provide useful online information for refugees such as tracing relatives and organising reunions.

D. Reliability and Opportunities for Improvement

On the reliability of internet, those in the camps have almost all experienced disconnection or slow services, which translate to high costs. This as mentioned earlier, is as a result of the remoteness of refugee camps and the hesitance of service providers to invest in such places. Improved connectivity would definitely improve services for refugees and related organizations. Refugee respondents say that because of the prohibitive cost the entire Kakuma refugee camp which caters for almost 100,000 people only has three cybercafés which do not function fully. The other problem is unreliable electricity. The camps are not connected to the national grid and have to rely on generators.
3. Refugee Support Organizations

As mentioned in the methodology seven RSOs were contacted and interviewed including one government department that directly deals with refugees - the Department of Refugee Affairs in the Ministry of State for Migration and the Registration of Persons. Others include the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Jesuit International Refugee Service (JRS), FilmAid international, the Kenya Red Cross, Don Bosco, Lutheran World Federation (LWF), who provide interrelated services to the refugee community. The data collected from these institutions provided very important insights in terms of the rapid development of ICT on the one hand and the different uses of ICT deployed by the different organisations on the other. A report done for UNHCR recommends that the UNHCR encourages the use of technology to diversify livelihood options for urban refugees.

A. Types of ICTs

The rapid development of ICT has all but rendered the use of the fax machine irrelevant, almost all the institutions no longer use the fax machine even those who confirmed that they indeed have such machines such as the UNHCR confirmed that they no longer use them. This is partly because the advent of the scanning machine faxing which relied on landline connectivity was very expensive and also because the Kenyan government monitored fax communication. Just like with refugees, these organisations tend to rely heavily on mobile phones and the internet. Unlike the non-governmental organizations, the government department is the last in the uptake and deployment of ICT. This may be attributed to the fact that for a long period of time the Kenyan government left issues related with refugees primarily to the UNHCR, which hindered the development of capacity in terms of personnel and infrastructure.

For example while these organizations use email communication, social media and mobile phones to contact and communicate with refugees, the refugee department does not. The
respondent from the department did concede that they are lagging behind in the use of ICT compared to other RSOs that they cooperate with.

The UNHCR, which has a much broader mandate, seems to employ more varied forms of ICT than others. For example they directly use email to communicate with resettled refugees while also having a Facebook account for refugees where grievances are reported and suggestions made. This is beside the Community Technology access program (CTAP) opened in Dadaab refugee camp, where the UNHCR partnered with other organisations to acquire computers for refugees.46

B. Collecting and Managing Refugee Information

Given the UNHCR’s mandate, the agency is responsible for collecting, storing and disseminating information about individual refugees or a specific group of refugees. For this reason, the UNHCR has developed a huge database on refugees. This information can be shared with other UNHCR offices or with other bodies on request. Indeed Anderson47 found out that where ICT is facilitated by organisations such as UNHCR, it gives better access and is put to better use. However the agency does not just share information with anybody and does not use certain ICT because most of the information it has is confidential and has security bearing. The Lutheran World Foundation has software that they call Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS), which is specifically meant to collect and store information on child protection needs.

C. Use of ICTs on Daily Activities

47 Ibid.
Although UNHCR collects and stores information about refugees, the RSOs that seem to employ ICT more on their daily activities include the Jesuit Refugee Services and the Red Cross. On one hand JRS’ broad mandate is to offer psychosocial and educational services to refugees. The organisation has an online learning program. They also use Skype and video conferencing for educational purposes. The Kenya Red Cross, on the other hand, is involved in tracing and linking refugees and their families also use ICT in their daily activities.

D. Advocacy for Refugees

One of the interesting things about refugee hosting is that information concerning such groups of people, especially the numbers, are always inaccurate depending on the intention of who gives them. It is common that either their number is exaggerated or under reported for various reasons. UNHCR and the department of refugee affairs appreciate this and constantly attempt to give correct information and advocate for refugees. The agency also attempts to work in close concert with civil society and advocacy groups in terms of disseminating correct information in order to avoid subjective reporting. ICT allows instant sharing of large volume of information at minimal cost. Furthermore it is easy to retrieve such information. In Australia, RSO have used the mass media to relay to the public what refugees go through and this has proved effective form of advocacy.\(^\text{48}\)

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to show how ICT impacts lives of refugees living in Kenya both in the camps and urban areas. After assessing the different types of other ICT, the study concludes that the mobile phones remain the most important form of ICT that refugees use although it also poses risks of either being conned or entangled in security issues. Refugees use ICT for many things but the most important is communicating with family members and relatives. Increasingly refugees are also using the Internet to access opportunities, which they cannot access in their host countries, such as higher education or third country resettlement opportunities. In Kenya, the mobile money transfer has enabled refugees to do things that they could not otherwise do such as transfer remittances cheaply and easily. However, the camp refugees still remain disadvantaged due to geographical limitations.

Nevertheless, the RSOs seem to deploy ICT that only serves their mandate. While this action is understandable, it limits the type and volume of information such organisations have or can disseminate. The UNCHR, which is still involved in refugee registration and collection country of origin information, tends to use more ICT. JRS, which offers online education services, only use platforms that facilitate their mandate while the Red Cross, which traces and links family members, also concentrates its main activities in gathering information.
Suggested readings and sources


