How Humanitarian Organizations Are Using Technology to Stop the Spread of Misinformation

by Joseph Harrison

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Ayan Mohamed Said is a 37-years-old mother of three living in Togdher Region (Somalia). Drought-affected families like Ayan's, who has lost all their livestock during the drought, will take quite some time to recover and get back on their feet again, but the cash assistance through mobile phones has been a lifeline for them. It addresses their basic needs with dignity and flexibility and also adds value to local trade in areas where markets were functioning, even during the drought. Photo: Abdulkadir/NRC

We have created a new blog series that will focus on how our nonprofit grant recipients are using

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an estimated 82.4 million people have now been forced to leave their homes, fleeing

conflict, civil unrest, persecution, and areas devastated by climate change. This global community of refugees, migrants, and forcibly displaced families comprise one of the most vulnerable population groups.

Amidst a worldwide pandemic, dire circumstances become even more challenging. Many refugees live in under-resourced, urban areas or densely populated camps, making physical distancing difficult. A general lack of access to face masks, clean water, and soap increase vulnerability to COVID-19. Refugees have severely limited access to public health services in host nations where healthcare systems are already strained. Finding work to generate an income to afford medical services in an unfamiliar country is particularly complicated.

Refugee communities, like so many communities around the world, must also contend with an "infodemic," when misinformation and disinformation spread like a virus. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an infodemic is "too much information, including false or misleading information, in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them."

Partnering to offer critical resources

The **Tactical Operations (TacOps)** team, which is part of Cisco Crisis Response, builds networks in refugee camps to ensure displaced people have access to the information they need to survive and thrive. But access to the internet and the wealth of information available online is not enough. That information needs to be accurate, credible, and reliable as well as relevant to their unique circumstances.

In the last year, Cisco donated US $3 million to nonprofit partners that work with refugee populations to ensure the most vulnerable people worldwide have access to the best public health information, including content relevant to the related shutdowns and services, available during this pandemic.

International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s Signpost initiative, Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) Digital Community Hubs (DCH), and Internews' Humanitarian Information Dashboard (HID) all work to debunk myths, identify and dispel misinformation/disinformation, and create reliable informational content for local dissemination. These truth-seeking groups leverage technology to transform communication in refugee communities.

IRC's Signpost makes information clear

Signpost refers refugee clients to a broad range of vital services and follows up on feedback about local services to strengthen accountability mechanisms for the community.

IRC's Signpost partners with organizations in a range of strategic areas: legal information providers and protection agencies, service mapping resources, organizations or spaces that provide access points to the internet, organizations that provide psychosocial support, and health authorities and agencies involved in the COVID-19 response.

IRC is also working with NetHope to install Wi-Fi hotspots in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp. 46 locations have been identified for installation. This free internet access will be linked to Julisha.info. And, upon logging in, the users will be directed to their page, promoting access to the platform. Refugees and asylum seekers receive accurate information through the Julisha.info website and the Facebook page where topics such as COVID-19 vaccinations and mental health are available in English, Somali, Swahili, and Arabic.

Growing the number of Norwegian Refugee Council's Digital Community Hubs (DCH)

NRC channels the sense of urgency Covid-19 has brought to humanitarian organizations toward digital transformation in the last mile of emergency service delivery.

NRC's DCH enables two-way conversations with refugees through helpdesks where people can request and receive critical information they need to survive and thrive.

With funding from Cisco, over the last 15 months the NRC has expanded its DCH from two pilot countries (Afghanistan and Kenya) to 27 countries, by supplying country offices with innovation and design thinking training and expertise to implement their digital communication initiatives.

In Myanmar, NRC leads in Digital Service Integration: Improving beneficiary access to services through the integration of NRC Myanmar's existing digital portfolio into one unified platform using a "one stop" approach. The approach strengthens NRC's accountability to the most vulnerable populations by embedding a community hotline for mainstreamed feedback and data management to ensure data rights protection.

Internews' reliable Humanitarian Information Dashboard (HID)

Internews is an international non-profit that empowers local media to give people the news and information they need, the ability to connect, and the means to make their voices heard.

Internews' HID enables collection, tracking and analysis of community views and humanitarian-related data during crises, providing humanitarian responders insight into community information needs. Their global response to COVID-19 rumors and mis/disinformation in humanitarian contexts was supported with their use of HID, enabling rapid analysis of rumors collected from over 12 countries, helping them to identify global misinformation trends related to the pandemic.

Internews is an active partner in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, inter-cluster meetings, working groups, and consortiums. To ensure that accurate and reliable information gets to people fast before, during, and after a COVID outbreak or climate disaster, Internews forges agreements with local authorities and national governments, and local, national, and international humanitarian aid organizations such as the Red Cross, ActionAid, BBCMA, TWB, NetHope, Mercy Corps, UNHCR, WFP, and IRC.

Cisco Crisis Response and our partners continue to work hard to stop the spread of misinformation that runs rampant alongside the COVID pandemic. But the devastating effects of COVID are only a small part of what impacts our most vulnerable populations. We would like to thank our partners for using technology in a way that benefits others, and we look forward to other ways that this technology can be used to make a difference.

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