

Tech Localisation

Why the localisation of aid requires the localisation of technology

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Introduction

On March 21st, 2021, a large fire devastated a Rohingya refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. It was just the latest in a series of fires, which killed 15 people and displaced tens of thousands of refugees, once again, while at least 400 are still missing and presumed dead. Many of the images shown in international media covering this disaster were cell phone videos taken by Rohingya refugees, showing people trapped by a razor wire fence and a fire rapidly spreading throughout a camp which was already in a bad condition.¹

At first glance, this seems like a success story in digital democratisation in a humanitarian setting –the idea that technology is enabling affected communities to finally participate in shaping the narrative around the response that impacts their lives, as well as raising awareness of the squalid living conditions in the camps. What isn’t immediately obvious is just how difficult it was for the Rohingya to take these videos and upload them to social media.

Firstly, is the challenge of lack of connectivity and accessing internet-capable devices. Factors such as economic status, gender identity, disability, and age affect both access to and ownership of such devices, contribute to uneven access to connectivity, and position the device holders as information brokers in the affected community.²³⁴⁵ For Rohingya speakers, there is very little

¹Paul, Ruma. “Devastating fire at Rohingya camp in Bangladesh kills 15, leaves 400 missing - UN”. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-rohingya-fire-un-idUSKBN2BF15G>

² Poole, D. (2018). Refugee Connectivity: A Survey of Mobile Phones, Mental Health, and Privacy at a Syrian Refugee Camp in Greece. Data & Society.

³ Hannides. T., Bailey. N., and Kaoukji. D. (2016). Voices of refugees: Information and communication needs of refugees in Greece and Germany. Retrieved from BBC Media Action: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/research/voices-of-refugees-research-report.pdf>

⁴ Dragana Kaurin, “Space and imagination: rethinking refugees’ digital access,” (UNHCR Innovation Service, The UN Refugee Agency, April 2020) https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Space-and-imagination-rethinkingrefugees%E2%80%99-digital-access_WEB042020.pdf

⁵ For example, one study showed that refugees in transit who were digitally connected to refugees who had already completed the journey, were less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse because they were able to acquire information about who to trust

local content available online, very few digital tools and resources available in their language and, therefore, not many opportunities to create content and engage in discourse online.⁶

Until last year, Rohingya refugees were facing an internet blackout in the camp, and a ban on mobile SIM cards under Bangladesh law. In September 2019, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission directed mobile phone carrier companies to stop selling SIM cards and data to Rohingya, in an area which already had poor telecom infrastructure, creating both political and structural obstacles to connectivity in the camps.⁷

There are also major challenges in institutional trust, digital security, and data protection for this population. For years, Facebook has targeted users in Myanmar, a country only recently digitally connected, through its Free Basics programme, later admitting its platform was used to incite offline violence against the Rohingya, which they did little to prevent.^{8,9,10} There would naturally be apprehension in using the same social media platforms, which is exacerbated by a lack of trust in the host government and the UN, as many refugees don't feel their rights are protected by either.^{11,12}

Most alarmingly, a recent report by Human Rights Watch confirmed what many have long feared: a detailed database of Rohingya refugees – including biometric information – had been handed over to Myanmar, the country from which they had fled genocide.¹³ The report details how the agency from which this database originated failed to get informed consent from most of the refugees interviewed, fueling a mistrust of the UN agency tasked with their protection. The agency in question subsequently denied the allegations in a public statement, claiming refugees were “expressly asked whether they gave their consent to have their data

and how to navigate the journey. Those who were not well connected in this way were more likely to trust smugglers (Hannides, Bailey, and Kaoukji, 2016).

⁶ Hölzl, Verena. "Lost in translation: Language barriers and the Rohingya response" June 25th, 2020. The New Humanitarian. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/06/25/Bangladesh-Rohingya-language-barriers-translation#:~:text=A%20range%20of%20languages%20is,also%20written%20in%20different%20scripts.>

⁷ "Bangladesh: Internet Ban Risks Rohingya Lives" Human Rights Watch. March 26th, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/26/bangladesh-internet-ban-risks-rohingya-lives>

⁸ Mozur, Paul. "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military" October 15th, 2018. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

⁹ McLaughlin, Timothy "How Facebook's Rise Fueled Chaos and Confusion in Myanmar" July 6th, 2018. Wired. <https://www.wired.com/story/how-facebooks-rise-fueled-chaos-and-confusion-in-myanmar/>

¹⁰ Stevenson, Alexandra. "Facebook Admits It Was Used to Incite Violence in Myanmar" Nov 6, 2018. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/technology/myanmar-facebook.html>

¹¹ Thomas, Elise. 2018. "Tagged, tracked and in danger: how the Rohingya got caught in the UN's risky biometric database." *Wired*, March 12. www.wired.co.uk/article/united-nations-refugees-biometric-database-rohingya-myanmar-bangladesh.

¹² Radio Free Asia. "Rohingya refugees protest, strike against smart ID cards issued in Bangladesh camps". 26 November 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c2cc3b011.html>

¹³ "UN Shared Rohingya Data Without Informed Consent" Human Rights Watch. June 15th, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/15/un-shared-rohingya-data-without-informed-consent#>

shared with the Government of Myanmar”.¹⁴ There was, however, plenty of evidence to the contrary that supported the HRW findings, including a 2018 language assessment by Translators Without Borders,¹⁵ and a broader information assessment by Internews from the year prior that found:

- 77% of their sample population reported not having enough information to make good decisions about their family.
- 62% reported they were unable to speak to humanitarian providers.
- 73% self-identified as being illiterate.¹⁶

It’s worth noting that none of the aforementioned reports and statements were made available in Rohingya. It’s also not clear whether this information has been shared with the communities directly in other ways, or even whether the Rohingya refugees who have returned to Myanmar since knew their biometric information was handed over without their consent.

Even in a future in which we can imagine communication not just as aid, but as a right for disaster-affected communities, the Rohingya population is still excluded in every way. Instead of being a success story of digital democratisation, this is an example of communities communicating to the world in spite of the lack of trust in those tools used to share news and images, the bureaucracy, censorship, xenophobic policies, and great economic and cultural-linguistic challenges. This ideal of equal accessibility and engagement through technology is, and will remain, only a myth if none of the supporting systems are designed to work for them.

The Promise and Limitations of Digital Technologies

Digital democratisation can be defined here as empowering local communities to engage in humanitarian discourse through the deployment of ICT – discourse they would normally have been excluded from. It is predicated on a future where soon everyone will have a personal internet connection, a social media account, and therefore will be able to create content, and collectively engage online.

With the COVID-19 pandemic still casting long shadows over travel, many humanitarian agencies have cut staff on the ground, and now rely on digital technologies to maintain control over distant

¹⁴ “News comment: Statement on refugee registration and data collection in Bangladesh” UNHCR. June 15th, 2021. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/6/60c85a7b4/news-comment-statement-refugee-registration-data-collection-bangladesh.html>

¹⁵ “The language lesson: What We’ve Learned About Communicating With Rohingya Refugees” Translators Without Borders Research Brief, November 2018.

¹⁶ Iacucci, A. and Copeland, R. “Information Needs Assessment: Cox’s Bazar - Bangladesh” Internews. November 2017

humanitarian operations. And yet, in spite of hopes of the pandemic forcing the localisation agenda, it's becoming clear that little movement has been made in that direction. In spite of digital communication tools being an integral part of the humanitarian information ecosystem there has been little movement to localise digital tools for diverse communities – translating tools into local languages, designing UX for a diverse populations, and designing tools that are accessible in places with slower WiFi and poorer telecom infrastructures. More critically, localising technology means allowing locals to choose their own tools, on their own terms, instead of expecting them to meet us on the platforms we as international humanitarians are familiar with.

Typically, humanitarian digital engagement starts with solutions needed for digital engagement, capacity building and bridging the digital divide. However, such technosolutionism assumes technology can solve deeper social problems that cause exclusion and can compensate for a lack of political will for challenging the status quo. We are such a long way from this imagined future of equitable access, and a lot of effort and political will is needed to first democratise the humanitarian system to allow for that kind of digital engagement.

In many instances digital technologies have actually improved aid efforts, in particular communication within it:

“The change we have seen in the last year or so is the willingness of our colleagues to explore and use new engagement channels with the community because our ability to have face-to-face interaction was reduced. What we are seeing is that the most effective communication channels aren't so because of the tools themselves but because of the pre-existing relationship with the community. Your tools are only as good as your network. Building a trusted relationship with the community is the foundation of our community engagement work, so there will always be a certain privilege of face-to-face interactions. Most information needs assessment show that this is also the preference of communities we work with.” – Indu Nepal, Community Engagement Lead, ICRC¹⁷

Others have also shared how new applications of digital technologies offered anonymity to aid users during the pandemic lockdowns, exposure of which had formerly prevented individuals from accessing in-person cash aid:

“We did a pilot project with CARE International, providing seamless access to funds to those who are in more desperate situations in a more dignified way while addressing

¹⁷ Interview with Indu Nepal from ICRC on March 23rd, 2021.

challenges of identification and cost reduction. One of the things the recipients praised was 'Look, I didn't have to queue, it was more dignified. I was at home looking after my animals and the money came straight through my account.' They didn't have to go queue for aid and be identified in the community as someone who has to receive funding support" – Mahamud Abdirahman – Director, Business Development and International Relations Division, Telesom¹⁸

It's important to note here that Mahamud describes a successful deployment of technology in a community that has a high level of social trust and accountability; and any deployment will also be limited by such factors. It's also critical to look at the demographics of these mobile users, ask who is excluded, and address how people who don't have access to technologies get the same access to aid.

If there is no trust, there is no access

In any disaster-affected community, misinformation can grow rampantly when there is insufficient or conflicting information coming from official sources, or worse, when official sources are deemed untrustworthy by the affected population. Refugees, minorities, and other vulnerable communities are often most affected by this crisis of information. It leads to distrust among minorities in vaccines and public health directives, and has even resulted in refugees burning off their fingerprints instead of complying with EURODAC border procedures out of fear of what will happen to their data.^{19,20} Disaster-affected communities will not trust those official sources online they don't trust in person, which is a seemingly obvious limitation of digital technology:

"Could it be that the barrier may not really be the trust of the affected population towards adopting a new technology, but the barrier may well be towards the people or the organisation behind it? When we have a life crisis, who will you listen to? Someone that you know already and trust, or someone new? It's very difficult to build trust during a crisis. Building trust itself is a long-term game, and long-distance relationships aren't as easy to maintain as face-to-face. If we have to do it remotely then, can we develop it through the local partners that the local population already trust? However, we should also be careful not just to burden the local partners, but also equipping them and

¹⁸Willitts-King, Barnaby. "Covid-19 and the future of digital humanitarianism" ODI Live Event. Overseas Development Institute. February 23rd, 2021. <https://odi.org/en/events/covid-19-and-the-future-of-digital-humanitarianism/>

¹⁹ PBS "how connectivity is implemented, and the potential risks to further marginalize refugees on lines of gender, age, ability, status, and health, thereby reinforcing and/or exacerbating existing inequalities." October 6h, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-ongoing-american-battle-against-pandemic-misinformation>

²⁰ Crossing the Digital Divide Applying Technology to the Global Refugee Crisis https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4322.html

supporting them. Treat them as partners, not as contractors. It's not really the technology that we're offering—it's trust"²¹ – **Adelina Kamal, Executive Director, ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre)**

In a panel discussion titled “COVID-19 and the future of digital humanitarianism” Adelina questions the compatibility of digital humanitarianism with trusted local networks and existing accountability mechanisms, and traces such challenges to resistance to changing the business model of the humanitarian system and challenging power dynamics. When asked “Why hasn’t COVID-19 disrupted the humanitarian ecosystem the same way it has just about every other sector?” Adelina points out that: “not everyone is comfortable with challenging the status quo.”

To confirm the limits of digital technologies we need only to ask ourselves how much we have individually taken advantage of these tools to equalise power dynamics in the aid sector in the past year. Due to limited travel during the pandemic, we’ve relied heavily on video calls to run meetings that would have otherwise happened in person – and which exclude local voices because of distance. On the rare occasion that we do invite local actors to participate in high-level discourse in international aid headquarters, they are often the only ones ‘phoning in’ because of lack of travel documents, and difficulty acquiring visas to Switzerland and United States.

Today, in the COVID era, when we are all phoning into these calls, there is a sense of having equalised the discourse. We have to ask how much effort we are putting into meeting people where they are: are we picking communication tools that are technically-compatible in low bandwidth areas? Are we providing interpreters? How ready are we individually to challenge our own systems and workflows to create space for others?

Digital spaces are representative of ontic spaces; the same challenges regarding gender, age, ableism, and discrimination that prevent diverse and representative engagement on the ground are replicated online. Digital democratisation in humanitarian spaces must be addressed as a localisation issue; we cannot talk about democratisation without talking about shifting humanitarian power dynamics.

“The powers that resource us are political in nature. It’s no wonder that those political forces that haven’t necessarily been transformed by what’s happening in the world, and are actually trying to perpetuate that. So, it’s not surprising to me that the voices we hear are the voices that aren’t necessarily challenging those power structures at all. Go and

²¹ Willitts-King, Barnaby. “Covid-19 and the future of digital humanitarianism” ODI Live Event. Overseas Development Institute. February 23rd, 2021. <https://odi.org/en/events/covid-19-and-the-future-of-digital-humanitarianism/>

talk to real people. The most interesting part of my job is talking to people in Iran who are trying to figure out how to communicate better with disaster communities, or the woman in Afghanistan who is looking for a way to use technology to engage women, the person in Bangladesh who is trying to find a way to protecting land property rights for refugees. Amplify those voices, not the people in the home office.”²² – Paula Gil Baizan, Global Manager - Innovation & Digital at Norwegian Refugee Council

This is the localisation of technology in the truest sense of term: improving accessibility and creating opportunities for local individuals, not necessarily to get them to use certain tools or the social media platforms we want them to use because it’s easier for us, but rather to choose the right tools and build their own, in their own language, and on their own terms. Localisation of technology can, therefore, support humanitarian localisation in making communities resilient, instead of reliant on international aid and services that are disrupted by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technology cannot solve social problems rooted in lack of political will and a resistance to change. It cannot promote a change in the humanitarian sector or change the operating power dynamics. But it can allow disaster-affected communities, marginalised groups in particular, who are rarely included in such discourses to tell their own story, contribute new realities, access critical reports about the situation, and contribute to more inclusive futures.

This can only be done with deliberate and intentionally-equitable access, requiring effort to include marginalised groups and design with them. Such efforts are rarely seen in the humanitarian space: even papers like this one likely won’t be available in language other than English, greatly limiting the discourse to a certain subset of humanitarians, and excluding marginalised communities from engaging. Perhaps the change that’s needed isn’t rooted in getting disaster-affected communities to access technology, but rather in democratising our systems, and changing them dramatically so they work for them, instead of us.

²² “Humanitarian Sci-Fi” Meg Satler and Paula Gil Baizan. Trumanitarian Podcast. March 5th, 2021. <https://trumanitarian.org/>