

What mobile phones mean for refugees

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Credit: Leiden University

What do refugees use their mobile phones for? And what does it mean for aid workers in reception camps? The Leiden Centre for Innovation studied this issue together with researchers from Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Data & Society.

Many refugees today have access to a mobile phone. They use their phones to stay in touch with family members in their country of origin, look up information on asylum procedures and to transfer money electronically. But what effect do mobile technologies have on migrants, in a positive and a negative sense?

Until recently, little empirical research had been conducted on this

question. The Centre for Innovation at Leiden University has addressed this knowledge gap with survey research on a sample of 135 out of the 750 Syrian migrants who were living in Ritsona, a refugee camp about 80 km north of the Greek capital Athens. Leiden researchers Jos Berens and Melissa Amorós Lark conducted the research together with Danielle Poole from the Signal Program on Human Security and Technology (Signal Program) at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Mark Latonero from New York City-based Data & Society Research Institute who is also a Fellow at Leiden's Institute for Security and Global Affairs.

Their findings show that over 80 per cent of the migrants believe it is important to own a mobile. They use their phones for WhatsApp (94 per cent), Facebook (78 per cent), Google Translate (38 per cent) and Google Maps (idem). They also indicated that a mobile phone is vital for contact with the outside world and the research pointed towards use of a mobile phone correlating with a reduced susceptibility to depression in the unadjusted analysis. This is an important issue because two in every five migrants living in the camp could be classified as suffering from moderate to severe depression. It may be that better access to mobile telephones could help avoid some of these instances of depression.

The study also showed that ownership of a mobile [phone](#) is unevenly distributed. Whereas no fewer than 94 per cent of men own a mobile, this figure is only 67 per cent for women. "When a family owns a mobile, it is often the man who controls its use," says Amorós Lark. "Imagine that [aid workers](#) want to get in touch with the women in the camp, they can't always rely on a [mobile phone](#) to do so. This could have an impact on mobile apps designed to provide information relating to women's health or safety."

Finally, it seems that refugees – just like many Dutch citizens – are concerned about their privacy. Aid organisations need to be more aware of digital privacy and data protection. At the end of last year, strong

concerns were raised as to the security and ease to breach data held by NGOs and the UN. Amorós Lark recommends taking a look at these articles published by DEVEX and IRIN news to find out more about this topic. Such vulnerability meant that there was a potential for sensitive data such as personally identifiable information to end up in the public domain. As some migrants are being pursued by dictatorial regimes, this represents a danger to their personal safety. Amorós Lark: "For refugees, too, we must respect and protect their fundamental right to privacy before we start to collect and use their data."

Provided by Leiden University

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