In refugee camps, access to internet supports research during the coronavirus pandemic

January 26 2021, by Negin Dahya, Cansu E. Dedeoglu, Laurie Decarpentrie and Olivier Arvisais

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Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the world is in an unexpected moment of global uncertainty and change. Countries, cities and communities

worldwide are moving through rotating economic lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. At this time, the divides and potential benefits of digital technology are ever more apparent.

Qualitative research that involves working directly with remote communities is always difficult to undertake, and even more so right now. Digital research tools like mobile phones and tablets, which are wireless and connected to the internet, make it possible.

Using mobile phones, our team is working with community-based researchers in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi to explore how refugees in Dzaleka use, teach and learn technology.

Remote data collection methods were built into our [research design](#) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to minimize the impact of international research partnerships on [local communities](#), including the challenges related to research travel into camps.

The presence of outsider researchers can be costly and add to the workload of community partners. There are also health and safety concerns for everyone involved when conducting research in areas of conflict and crisis. In these ways, our project was designed to focus on digital data collection before the pandemic made physical travel difficult.

Gathering data

Technologies including [initiatives that distribute iPads to those who need them](#), [community radio programs](#), [solar power systems](#) and [e-commerce](#) are increasingly prevalent in Dzaleka, as they are in many camps. Humanitarian aid organizations, private sector philanthropic groups and governments are all looking for technology solutions to support refugees.

There is a gap in research related to how people teach and learn with available technology in refugee camps, particularly from a community-based perspective. Our project explores how refugee communities teach, learn, troubleshoot, problem solve, adopt and adapt available technologies in ways that support their lives and aspirations.

Community researchers are compiling audio recorded field notes, making illustrations, taking pictures and videos and capturing sound recordings of individuals and the environment using technology in the camp. All of this data, along with audio recorded interviews, will be used to create descriptive multimedia portraits. These portraits will show how people in Dzaleka use technology.

Using video conferencing tools like Zoom, we are building relationships with our community researcher colleagues. We are exchanging data and information using instant messenger chat groups and sharing files using cloud services. We are establishing a shared agreement in testing remote data collection systems to support community-engaged, collaborative work.

Technology in refugee camps

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 26 million refugees worldwide. Ten percent of these individuals live in formal camps managed by the UNHCR. The UNHCR supports efforts to keep refugee communities connected to the internet.

Camps are often geographically and socially isolated places. They typically lack material and technological infrastructure. And yet different types of technology continue to infiltrate their borders. This reality makes technology education and understanding local teaching and learning practices important work.

[Technology in forced migration](#) is widespread. This includes the collection of biometric data such as [retinal eye scanners](#) to buy groceries in camps and [big data analytics](#) related to food security. Technology enters refugee camps as health initiatives, legal processes related to migration and [family reunification](#), [education](#), communication and [leisure](#).

In refugee camps, [mobile phones are the prevalent technology](#) in the hands of community members. [Phones connect people](#) in the camps with each other, with family and friends globally, and to important information online and through social networks.

Research in fragile settings

Understanding how local communities build and share knowledge about how to use tools, ranging from computers to apps on mobile phones and radios, is important for community self-reliance. Strengthening technology access and education through research can establish more consistent and autonomous [pathways to information](#) for people living in refugee camps.

Our research will contribute to better decision-making about technology and education in camps. The study will inform what types of technology are relevant for community use. Study outcomes will also be used to show what types of local curriculum design and pedagogy can support the successful deployment of those tools.

Research findings from this study will also be used to refine collaborative digital data collection methods in camps. It is our goal to create meaningful contributions to the practice of digital and remote research. And we are working towards positive social change for, by and with community members as partners.

Citation: In refugee camps, access to internet supports research during the coronavirus pandemic (2021, January 26) retrieved 10 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2021-01-refugee-access-internet-coronavirus-pandemic.html