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Apping and resilience: How smartphones help Syrian refugees in Lebanon negotiate the precarity of displacement

Mobile phones are widely used by Syrian refugees in Lebanon where over ninety percent of refugee households have access to a mobile phone, in many cases an internet-enabled smartphone. This high degree of digital connectivity has given refugees a new tool for managing their precarious environment. This policy brief argues that smartphones are a key instrument for helping refugees revive, maintain and leverage social capital in ways that support their livelihoods. Drawing on the concepts of *bonding and bridging social capital*, it considers three ways in which smartphones do play this role: 1) by helping refugees to resuscitate and leverage old social networks; 2) by helping refugees to maintain and leverage contacts with potential employers; 3) by helping refugees to maintain and leverage other external support networks, such as connections with aid agencies. It also highlights high usage costs as a major obstacle to optimising refugees' use of mobile phones in Lebanon. Urging international and Lebanese stakeholders to take steps to support the use of mobile phones as livelihood tools among Syrian refugees, this policy brief outlines measures that may cushion the impact of the high costs and allow for easier connectivity.

Connected refugees

Mobile phones are widely used by Syrian refugees in Lebanon. A 2017 UN vulnerability survey (VASyR) found that 86% of Syrian refugee households in Lebanon own a mobile phone.¹ Another 6% have access to one. The prevalence of mobile phones has underpinned a growing digitalisation of refugee aid in Lebanon, with aid agencies

increasingly relying on digital instruments, including messaging programmes such as WhatsApp, to interact with Syrian refugees.

If mobile phone technology has changed the aid landscape in Lebanon, it has also increased the ability of refugees to cope with an environment of precarity. Economically excluded and legally disempowered, most Syrian refugees lead an uncertain existence on the margins of Lebanese society. Mobile phones grant them a degree of flexibility and agency in face of this vulnerability.

By most measures, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are worse off today than they were four years ago. Their food security

¹ *United Nations*, "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon 2017" (VASyR 2017). Available online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vasyr-2017-vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon>, p. 95.

has decreased, their levels of debt have increased and their degree of employment appears to have fallen.² As has been noted in a related CRU (Conflict Research Unit) Policy Brief, “The untapped resource: Protecting and leveraging refugee social capital in protracted displacement”,³ refugees’ social capital seems to be the only asset that has remained stable or even grown over this period. As time has passed, refugees have expanded their networks. They have reconnected with family members and friends who have fled to Lebanon; some have established contact with relatives who have lived in Lebanon since before the war, or with Lebanese friends and employers they met in the past, when many among them were guest workers in the country. They have also gradually forged new connections with Lebanese neighbours, medical staff, taxi drivers, aid workers and others.

Social capital is difficult to quantify, but its value in protracted displacement is increasingly well documented by researchers and operational agencies⁴. Social connections ease access to jobs, aid and valuable information. They facilitate collective action in communities. They can prove crucial during emergencies, when the ability to mobilise a support network may spell the difference between salvation and disaster.

2 William Spindler, 2018, “Survey finds Syrian refugees in Lebanon became poorer, more vulnerable in 2017”, UNHCR 9 January. Available online: <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548d174/survey-finds-syrian-refugees-lebanon-poorer-vulnerable-2017.html>; *United Nations*, “Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon 2014”; VASYR 2017.

3 Ana Uzelac, Jos Meester, Willem van den Berg and Markus Göransson, “The untapped resource: Protecting and leveraging refugee social capital in protracted displacement”, CRU Policy brief, *Clingendael Institute*. July 2018. Available online: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/protecting-refugee-social-capital-protracted-displacement>.

4 For a more detailed literature review see International Rescue Committee, 2013, *Urban Refugee Research and Social Capital: A Roundtable Report and Literature Review*, Available at: https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/urban-refugee-research-analytical-report-february-2013_0.pdf.

Mobile phones and social capital

This policy brief identifies three main ways in which smartphones support social capital:

- 1) By facilitating the revival of disrupted social networks;
- 2) By helping refugees search for work and maintain contact with employers;
- 3) By enabling refugees to maintain and leverage extralocal networks.

In line with the policy brief, “The untapped resource”, this paper distinguishes between two forms of social capital:

- *Bonding social capital* refers to socially and economically valuable connections between refugees who live in the same locality.
- *Bridging social capital* refers to connections that refugees have with refugees in other localities or with people in the same or other localities who have a higher socio-economic status.⁵

The evolving use of phones

The findings of this brief are informed by six weeks of research in Lebanon, including five weeks in informal tented refugee settlements in the Akkar and Beka’a Governorates and one week in the cities of Beirut and Tripoli.⁶ Very few of the Syrians who were interviewed during this time said they had

5 For a more detailed discussion of social capital and its importance for livelihoods, see *The untapped resource*, pp. 4–5.

6 The research focused on informal tented settlements, which consist of makeshift housing usually located on the periphery of towns or in the countryside. The research was guided by the assumption that precarity and geographical isolation are stronger in these settlements, which comprise some of the most vulnerable and marginalised refugees in Lebanon. The research partially confirmed this precarity, but also added nuance to our understanding of it by showing the relatively strong relationships of cooperation that exist in many tented settlements.

owned smartphones when they crossed into Lebanon. Many explained they had purchased them after their arrival for the purpose of keeping in touch with relatives in Europe, Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East via WhatsApp.⁷

Yet, as time passed, and as Wi-Fi became more common in camps, phones acquired a wider range of functions and started to play a bigger role in the lives of many refugees. What was first acquired as a tool for reconnecting with lost relatives is now used for finding work, gathering information, liaising with aid agencies, accessing entertainment and numerous other functions.

The usefulness of the phone has its limits. High costs and weak internet restrict usage. Like most Lebanese, Syrians tend to prefer the internet-based messaging service WhatsApp to the costlier Lebanese mobile network. Some households do without phones altogether, borrowing one from a neighbour or relative when the need arises. Others may not be able to afford sufficient credit or internet data to do much more than receiving incoming calls and texts, including from UNHCR, which sends SMSes through Lebanon's mobile network. UNHCR sends SMSes, among other reasons, to confirm refugee registration, to provide information about possible financial assistance, and to inform individuals about the status of applications for resettlement to third countries.

Despite obstacles to using it, the phone is a key asset for refugees, helping them to address and cope with a number of important challenges. It is striking that participants in focus groups interviewed for the policy brief "The untapped resource" all listed their smartphones as among their most important material possessions.⁸

Reviving social networks

The flight from Syria disrupted established social networks, as relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues dispersed. Many Syrians, especially those who lived close to Syria's western border, escaped to Lebanon. However, in many cases, they took refuge in different parts of the country, being drawn to available jobs and housing and to localities they had visited before the war. This resulted in a dramatic decline in their bonding capital, as they lost contact with people who had provided support in Syria but became scattered in exile.

After arriving in Lebanon, many Syrians used their phones to resume contact with friends and relatives. Through mutual acquaintances and at social gatherings such as weddings, they located each other and exchanged numbers. In some cases, they had the phone numbers of relatives who had fled to Lebanon before them and contacted them when they arrived in the country. Facebook, too, played an important role in connecting refugees. Several respondents said they first resumed contact with people on Facebook. Once they were connected there, they exchanged phone numbers and continued to keep in touch via WhatsApp.

Reconnecting with family and friends was important for emotional wellbeing but could also bring tangible benefits. Many refugees who had been separated from their friends and family when they left Syria tried to move closer to them after coming to Lebanon. In one camp near Halba in Akkar, the members of all but one household were related to each other and had lived in the same village near Homs in Syria before the war. Living close to trusted individuals gave refugees access to solidarity networks who might pool resources and lend mutual support. In many camps, people shared shelter, revenues, expenses, professional networks, household duties and other activities. In one case, an extended family provided small loans to each other, helping each other to even out cash flows.⁹

7 No Syrian refugee has been mentioned by their real name in this policy brief.

8 *The untapped resource*, pg. 5.

9 Interview with Syrian refugee in Akkar, 17 September 2017. Cf. *The untapped resource*, p. 7.

These examples illustrate the importance of bonding capital.

Restoring social networks also helps to channel information about work, affordable accommodation, cheap food, available aid and other opportunities for material improvement. This represents a form of bridging capital, as refugees use their contacts to access new opportunities (see Box 1). Certainly, without the smartphone and internet-based social media and messaging applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp, Syrians in Lebanon would have found it harder to re-establish their social networks.

Box 1: Improving lives by phone

Abu Khodor fled to Tripoli in 2013 but knew no one there. He moved into an expensive apartment and took a job in construction, a difficult job for a former schoolteacher in his 50s. On Facebook, he reconnected with an old neighbour from Homs who had settled in a camp in Akkar. The neighbour told Abu Khodor that he could get cheap housing in his camp and a good job as a teacher in a local school for Syrian children. Abu Khodor moved to Akkar, improving his job situation and slashing his rent. Three years later, his phone helped him to climb another rung on the work ladder. One day he was chatting on WhatsApp with an old friend from Homs who was living in a village in a different part of Akkar. The friend told him he had been selected for a relocation programme to Europe and that the job he held as a principal in a foreign sponsored school for children would become vacant. The friend asked Abu Khodor if he wanted the position, to which Abu Khodor agreed.

Finding and maintaining work

If smartphones have helped refugees revive elements of their social support systems, they have also enabled them to find and

maintain work in a situation of isolation and marginalisation. This is true for both men and women, albeit for different reasons.

Syrians in Lebanon, particularly men, face heavy legal restrictions on their movement. Bureaucratic hurdles and exorbitant fees for renewing residency permits have led to a situation where seventy-six percent of Syrian refugees over the age of fourteen lack legal residency.¹⁰ Men are especially vulnerable to harassment by security forces, who routinely stop and arrest them on grounds of residing illegally in the country.

Fearing arrest, male respondents told us they tended to avoid leaving their camps. If they did, many said they turned back and retraced their steps if they spotted a checkpoint or a patrol. Several men reported that they had been detained by security forces. Many were afraid of arrest.

Military checkpoints gridlocked Syrian men in small geographical localities, cutting them off from potential workplaces. This was particularly true for informal settlers who tended to live at some distance from larger centres. They struggled to find and hold down jobs because they risked arrest if they ventured too far from their camp.

If men avoided leaving their camps out of fear of arrest, many women were tied to their homes by household and child-minding duties. Women who lived alone with small children, in particular, had little possibility to work unless they received help with childminding.

The smartphone assisted refugees in dealing with both these challenges. Many male refugees used their phones to look for work. This spared them the need to leave their camps, reducing the risk that they would be detained by the Lebanese army.

In many cases, refugees who had work used their phones to communicate with their employers. Employers could inform workers

¹⁰ VASyR 2018, preliminary results, presented in Beirut on July 23, 2018.

Box 2: The importance of childminding

Khadija, a mother of five, lived alone with her children in a tent after her husband had disappeared while attempting to flee from Syria. She used to work, earning three dollars a day by cleaning houses in the local village. One day she had come home from work and found that her toddler daughter had put a pebble in her ear and had to be taken to the hospital. “I paid so much money,” Khadija said. Now she is afraid of leaving her daughter at home. “I don’t have anyone who helps me...I can’t keep my little girl alone at home. She needs someone to watch her.”

of changes to their work tasks or schedules, while refugees could tell their employers if they were prevented from going to work.

Box 3: It’s mostly about the work

“Most of the communications on the phone, like 80%, are for work... like if there are any changes at work, like if they request some things at work, and I’m at home, [my manager] calls me to inform me, like today there is not work, take the day off.”

– Hussein, Bekaa.

If phones gave refugees a degree of flexibility in interactions with employers, they also enabled them to keep in touch with their families when they were at work. Many respondents brought their phones with them to work as a safety measure, allowing people to react swiftly if emergencies arose. Maintaining a link to the household was particularly important for working women, who balanced their jobs with household tasks.

In these ways, smartphones helped refugees maintain and use their professional networks in a context of isolation. Put in social capital terms, it allowed them to make better use of their *bridging social capital*, i.e. their connections with employers and others who could help them access paid work.

Box 4: Accessing health

Respondent: I wanted to tell you that I will be late today. I am taking my girls to the eye doctor.

Colleague: Ok good. Why?

Respondent: They have a problem, they need treatment.

Colleague: I take my kids to a really good doctor.

Respondent: Where?

Colleague: ... in front of... The first floor. It’s called... Call their landline, the secretary will reply and give you an appointment. The doctor does not reply to his phone. He is good, he graduated from ...”

– Conversation between a respondent and her Syrian colleague

Refugees who struggled to leave their camps could use their phones to search for jobs, communicate with employers and keep an open channel to their families when they were at work. This helped them to manage and reduce some of the constraints that existed on their movement. In academic literature, much has been made of the “death of distance” caused by the internet.¹¹ In Lebanon, smartphones help refugees not only to bridge geographical distance but also

11 Cf. Emmanouil Tranos and Peter Nijkamp, 2013, “The Death of Distance Revisited: Cyber-Place, Physical and Relational Proximities”, *Journal of Regional Science* 53: 5, 855-873; Frances Cairncross, 2001, *The Death of Distance 2.0: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives* (Texere Publishing: London).

to circumvent physical barriers established by the Lebanese government.

Other networks

In addition to professional ties, refugees maintained other important connections. In their phone books, respondents kept the numbers of a range of people who might be able to lend assistance. Taxi drivers, medical staff, aid workers, foreign volunteers, food suppliers, rescue workers and Lebanese neighbours all counted as valued contacts. In some cases, respondents had met them in real life; in others, they had received their numbers from friends or relatives.

The recommendations of friends, neighbours and relatives mattered a lot. Trustworthiness, competence and affordability were highly prized traits in professionals. Reliable and cheap medical staff were particularly sought after. Refugees shared contacts in person or via WhatsApp. The residents of one camp in Akkar, for example, all used the same Lebanese doctor to circumcise their sons after stories of his adroitness had spread through the camp's grapevine.

Several respondents described approaching their contacts in times of need. The wife of a 30-year-old man from Homs was due to give birth at the time of the interview. He said he arranged the logistics of her delivery over the phone, notifying the hospital in advance and keeping a taxi driver on call.¹² A woman who underwent an emergency surgery on her gland was likewise helped by her husband's phone book. He, too, called a car that took her to the hospital.¹³

In some cases, refugees kept in touch with people they met in Lebanon, using their phones to invest in these relationships. One respondent came to know a Lebanese man who was visiting his camp. They exchanged phone numbers and stayed in contact over WhatsApp, eventually becoming friends. Since then, the Lebanese man has

provided various kinds of assistance to the respondent. Among other things, he has organised a short-term job for him in his village (the conditions of which he informed him of over WhatsApp) and put in a good word for him with an important Lebanese state agency where he had a contact.

Of course, having someone's phone number is of only so much value. As was suggested in the related CRU Policy Brief on social capital, mobilising social support often requires the availability of other assets,¹⁴ including money and personal relationships. One man with good connections with an NGO where he had once volunteered was able to secure help from it after his tent was flooded during a storm. By contrast, another respondent whose tent was similarly damaged by a storm received no help when he phoned the emergency services.

Even so, phones enabled refugees to extend their support systems and call on resources that would not otherwise have been available. In other words, it helped them to build and leverage *bridging social capital*, enabling them to maintain and draw on a series of connections that could prove useful in promoting livelihoods.

Costly connections

Using mobile phones in Lebanon comes with a number of difficulties. Network coverage (especially 3G, less so 4G) is good in many places and Wi-Fi networks can be set up in many parts of the country. Yet the costs are steep, not least because Lebanon's two mobile phone operators, Alfa and Touch, require users to top up their SIM cards monthly on penalty of losing their numbers. Topping up costs a minimum of 9 USD (Alfa) or 11 USD (Touch) but often more. The 2017 VASyR estimated that Syrian refugee households spend at least 23 USD monthly on their phones, a significant financial burden for refugees who already languish in poverty.¹⁵

12 Interview with Syrian refugee in Akkar, 28 August 2017.

13 Interview with Syrian refugee in Akkar, 12 September 2017.

14 "The untapped resource", p. 7.

15 VASYR 2017.

To cut phone costs, refugees employ various strategies. The main one is to communicate via WhatsApp rather than the costly Lebanese mobile network. Another is to share Wi-Fi routers in camps, pooling Wi-Fi costs with other households. A third is to use Syrian simcards when contacting relatives in Syria who do not have access to the internet. Many refugees in Lebanon who live close to the border can connect to the cheaper Syrian network. A fourth is to reduce phone use.

Even so, mobile phones are a financial drain for refugees who are caught between high monthly usage costs and the need to maintain an active line for communications with UNHCR. Excessive pricing of Wi-Fi in some camps increases the burden. If refugees in some settlements pay only 5000 LL (USD 3.3) per device per month for Wi-Fi access, they pay as much as 15 000 LL (USD 10) in others. The smartphone itself is a considerable investment, with the popular Samsung J1 and J7 phones costing anywhere between USD 100 and USD 200 .

The high costs price some of the most vulnerable refugees out of using a mobile phone or a smartphone. A young couple in Akkar did not have a phone, but used the phone of the husband's brother, which complicated communications and was a source of tension between husband and wife.¹⁶ A former cloth seller from Raqqa had sold his phone to pay for rent.¹⁷ Another family only had an old and damaged feature phone they had been given by a Lebanese when they registered with the UN several years earlier. They used it to receive calls and messages from UNHCR.¹⁸

Not having a phone with an internet connection compounds the isolation and vulnerability of some of the most destitute refugees in Lebanon. Refugees without internet access have a harder time re-establishing contact with friends

and relatives from Syria, communicating with employers and maintaining extralocal support networks. They miss potentially valuable information and communicate less easily with aid organisations. Crucially, providing an active phone number is necessary to renew one's registration with UNHCR, while refugees who lose their phone numbers may be de-registered, losing access to potential support. Thus, the lack of an active phone number, internet access or a phone is a sign of great vulnerability and should be treated as such by aid actors.

Conclusions and recommendations

Smartphones support the livelihoods of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in subtle yet important ways. By connecting refugees to the internet and freeing them from the geographical constraints of their places of residence, they permit refugees to revive, maintain and leverage social capital in ways that would not otherwise be possible. They enable refugees to restore elements of their old support networks, utilise valuable connections, look for work, communicate with employers and interact more easily with aid organisations. CRU's Policy Brief "The untapped resource" notes that social capital is the only resource possessed by Syrian refugees in Lebanon that appears to have the capacity to grow and be exchanged for other valuable assets.¹⁹ The smartphone is a crucial instrument in this process, helping refugees to expand and make more effective use of their social capital.

Nevertheless, the importance of phones needs to be kept in perspective. Phones play an enabling role, helping refugees to resuscitate and manage connections forged in other ways but are less useful for making new connections. Likewise, they do little to expand the resources – such as jobs and housing – that are available to refugees. They may even intensify competition for resources, as more refugees can volunteer

16 Interview with Syrian refugees in Akkar, 17 September 2017.

17 Interview with Syrian refugee in Bekaa, 21 September 2017.

18 Interview with Syrian refugee in Akkar, 13 September 2017.

19 *The untapped resource*, pg. 5.

for the same jobs or approach the same trusted medical professionals, bringing down wages or increasing prices. Still, phones are key for accessing opportunities, maintaining support networks and reducing isolation.

As is true in other contexts of protracted displacement, the greatest problem facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon is the high cost of buying and using mobile phones. This has many causes, including the government's failure to implement necessary political reforms and lagging investment in telecommunications infrastructure. Any comprehensive solution needs to address such structural problems. In the long term, greater transparency and competition on the Lebanese telecommunications market coupled with overdue infrastructural improvements are likely to bring down prices and remove some of the most predatory commercial practices, which will benefit both Syrian refugees and Lebanese.

In the short term, other measures can be taken.

1) Improve refugees' access to internet-enabled smartphones

One measure local and international NGOs can take is to increase efforts to collect and distribute second-hand smartphones to families who have no phone or one without internet capability. WhatsApp, the principal communication tool in Lebanon, requires internet access. Providing internet-enabled phones may help to reduce the social isolation of some of the most vulnerable refugees. Naturally, this needs to be done in a well-informed and sensitive way to avoid stoking tensions between refugee households.

2) Increase access to free-of-charge wireless coverage for refugees

NGOs and INGOs should also pay more attention to the excessive pricing of Wi-Fi in some camps. The large variation of Wi-Fi prices suggests there are high profit margins in some settlements at a time when steep prices bar many of the poorest refugee households from internet access. Where possible, NGOs may consider setting up more non-profit or even free Wi-Fi hot spots. This would be particularly welcome in areas where many refugees live, and especially

where they have been identified as socially isolated. If done carefully, installing free of charge Wi-Fi hotspots in poorer Lebanese neighbourhoods could also benefit hosting communities and improve social cohesion.

3) Pay attention to inequalities in mobile phone use among refugees.

(1) NGOs should be attentive to refugee households that do not have a smartphone, as it may be a sign of significant vulnerability. Such households are likely to have less access to support networks and employment opportunities and may be in dire economic straits, not being able to afford a tool that has been identified as one of the most important items possessed by Syrian refugees (Cf. "The untapped resource", p. 5). Households without mobile phones may therefore require particular attention. Meanwhile, NGOs should be watchful of their own patterns of communicating with refugees so as not to unduly privilege refugees with better mobile phone access at the expense of others.

4) Negotiate lower mobile phone plans for Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese

UNHCR and foreign donors should work with Lebanon's two telecom companies, Alfa and Touch, to introduce special mobile phone plans for Syrian refugees.²⁰ These plans could include lower or no fees for recharging SIM cards and target both Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese. Lowering the mobile phone running costs will allow more Syrians to keep their phone number and with it their link to UNHCR. Expanding collaboration with public and private sector partners has been identified as a priority intervention for improving refugee connectivity by UNHCR in its report *Connecting Refugees*.²¹

20 According to field interviews, similar plans existed for a short while in the early phase of the response, but were abandoned (interview with UN official in Beirut, 14 September 2017.)

21 UNHCR, 2016, *Connecting Refugees. How Internet and Mobile Connectivity can Improve Refugee Well-Being and Transform Humanitarian Action*. Available online: <http://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5770d43c4/connecting-refugees.html>

5) **Develop a special app
for communicating with
Syrian refugees**

Meanwhile, UNHCR should explore alternatives to using mass SMS communications and phone calls in its communications with refugees. Many refugees maintain an active Lebanese line in order to receive communications from UNHCR while they rely on WhatsApp for other connections. WhatsApp does not require a Lebanese SIM card but can be used with a far more affordable Syrian SIM card and operated through Wi-Fi. By retaining a Lebanese number they do not need for other purposes, many Syrians are effectively paying a monthly fee for the ability to receive SMS messages and calls from UNHCR. Developing an app that enables refugees to interface securely, easily and affordably with UNHCR is one possible solution to this.

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