Interviewer
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Guest
Nicholas [Nick] Oakeshott, Senior Identity Management Officer at UNHCR

Intro	*You're listening to the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme's podcast.*
Yiannis	Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation podcast series, you're listening to Episode Five. We will be talking about the importance of digital identity to refugees, and more specifically, how it can impact their ability to access mobile services, including mobile money services. My name is Yiannis Theodorou, I'm the Senior Policy and Advocacy Director for the GSMA's Digital Identity programme, as well as the Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme. Today, I'm very happy to be joined by our guest, Nick Oakeshott, who is a Senior Identity Management Officer from UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency. Welcome, Nick, it's great to have you with us. Can I first ask you to say a few words about yourself?
Nicholas	Sure. Hi, Yiannis. Thanks for having me on the podcast. I work in UNHCR's data service and I coordinate our work on digital identity and inclusion for persons of UNHCR's concern. That's to say, refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced people and also people who are at risk of statelessness.
Yiannis	Thank you very much. So just before I pose the first question, I just want to set the scene for our audience. So the value of mobile to refugee lives is undisputed, and actually it's something that has been covered in previous podcasts. However, the GSMA estimates that more than 80% of all refugees reside in countries where proof of identity is required to register for a mobile SIM card or to open a mobile money wallet in their own name. But given the circumstances under which refugees flee their countries of origin, they may lack the necessary ID credentials, such as a passport or an ID card from their country of origin, and are therefore, unable to access mobile services in their own name. In other words, they are unable to be digitally or financially included via mobile, in their own right.

Very often, UNHCR issues refugee IDs, but host country governments may not recognise those IDs as legally valid for accessing mobile SIM cards or other mobile services in that country. And this is actually one of the key regulatory barriers that the GSMA and UNHCR have agreed to try and mitigate through engagement with host country governments.

Given this context, let me turn to you for my first question.

Can you tell us a bit more about the different roles that UNCHR plays in issuing refugee identification, vis-à-vis the host country government?

Nicholas   Yes, Yiannis. Let me first explain the importance of refugee registration and ID.

It's in many ways the foundation for protection and solutions for refugees, but also making sure that humanitarian agencies like UNHCR can give life-saving humanitarian assistance to those that need it.

We have over 60 years' experience at the UN Refugee Agency of undertaking work on behalf of governments to register refugees. That's usually in circumstances where governments are unable or unwilling to do that themselves. For example, where there's a mass influx of refugees and government simply doesn't have the capacity or expertise to manage that.

Currently, we have the highest numbers of displaced people since the Second World War recorded globally, with over 25 million refugees and asylum seekers reported at the end of 2018. And as you rightly said, the majority of countries in the world now register refugees themselves. It's the state authorities that do that.

And UNHCR still provides a surrogate role, and undertakes that in some circumstances, but the other thing that we do is provide technical advice to governments about how they should do refugee registration safely and well. But we also let governments, with our permission and with suitable agreements in place, use UNHCR's digital systems to register and enroll refugees.

Currently, over 8 million refugees have been enrolled in UNHCR's digital systems, which are known as PRIMEs, the Population Registration and Identity Management Ecosystem. And the 8 million refugees that have been enrolled in our systems have the potential for a protected identity, which can not only protect them, allow them to access humanitarian assistance, but we hope in the future will be recognised more and more, in order to access key services like mobile, but also to facilitate increased financial inclusion through, for example, access to mobile money accounts where they can receive vital lifesaving cash based intervention.

In many ways, a recognised digital identity for refugees can be a golden thread that links effective emergency response to protection and durable solutions to refugees, but also facilitates greater self-reliance through increased financial inclusion.

Yiannis	**Thank you, Nick. Recently, the UNHCR launched the Global Summit on Digital Identity for Refugees supported by the Canadian government, which we're pleased to have contributed to. Can you tell us a bit more about the summit and how it relates to PRIMEs and the other digital identity work that you're working on?**
Nicholas	Well, we really welcome GSMA and other partners' engagement in the summit. The key underlying theme was that the world is undertaking a rapid digital transformation, and we need to see how we can give refugees and other displaced people the opportunity to access new services online, such as online education or even in the future, online working.
	These opportunities also come with challenges or risks. For example, refugees' personal data is particularly sensitive and requires new consideration of how it can best be protected online.
	The purpose of the summit was to discuss with key stakeholders, ranging from refugees themselves to private sector partners, like GSMA, to development partners, such as the World Bank's ID4D Programme, to consider how refugees can have a digital identity that on the one hand, empowers them and allows them to access the digital ecosystems that are being built presently, but also a digital identity that protects them and recognises the special considerations that come with refugees and their situation.
	We received over 90 written submissions to the summit. And we held three online events, which are available in recordings on our website, as well as hosting with the Government of Canada, a final workshop in Ottawa.
	I think the key messages that came out from this consultation is well, first of all, digital ID is a complex issue, providing, as I've said, both opportunities, but also risks that need to be managed in terms of refugee protection.
	One of the key ways to navigate through that will be making sure that the global standards and standards at other levels, which are being established, reflect the unique circumstances of refugees. So making sure that refugees don't have to contact their country of origins to prove who they are, which could potentially put them or their families at risk.

UNHCR itself needs to align our systems and approaches with the global digital ID standards, technical standards that are being established, to ensure that our systems are trusted and that there is strong integrity throughout them. And that that integrity continues to be maintained. And that UNHCR itself should think about what are the standards that should be set from a protection perspective to ensure that in the online world, refugees are protected?

UNHCR, under its protection mandate, should also set out standards on digital identity for refugees with a particular focus for states and the private sector. So for example, standards that help mobile network operators make sure that their systems and processes are refugee ready. So that refugees can benefit from the services operators offered.

Yiannis	**Thank you, Nick. So I'd like to turn towards the role of mobile.**
	Obviously, mobile is often seen as a lifeline for forcibly displaced persons because it offers the ability to communicate with loved ones, access financial services or use pay-as-you-go for water, energy and sanitation services through mobile money, and so on.
	And mobile subscription is also becoming increasingly important, because it is changing the way humanitarian assistance is delivered to refugees. Can you tell us about how UNHCR is currently using mobile technology to serve refugees and other displaced persons?
Nicholas	Yes, Yiannis, I think the fact that mobile is crucial to refugees is summed up in a story that the High Commissioner Filippo Grandi held. He mentions how he was on the shores of the Greek island, talking to refugees who'd just come off inflatable boats coming from Turkey, Syrian refugees. And he asked them, when was it that you were scared during your journey to Greece?
	And the answer that they gave was surprising to him, was that the refugees he talked to were the most frightened when they were on the seas between Turkey and Greece, and they no longer had the mobile signal. They weren't able to be connected. They felt at their most vulnerable at that point.
	And I think that underlines the importance of mobile in connecting refugees to families and making sure that they feel protected and feel safe, even in the most precarious of situations. And one of the things that we are looking to do more and more in UNHCR is to see the ways in which we can use mobile to communicate better and more effectively with communities.

So for example, in Turkey, we use mobile to provide refugee communities with notifications of important news, for example, changes in the legislation that the government has adopted, which may affect them. Or, to conduct surveys with refugees to understand the challenges that they're facing, or where there are improvements or good practices that we can learn from.

In Lebanon, Jordan and in Kakuma camp in Kenya, we're using WhatsApp trees to pass crucial information down to refugee communities. But we're also seeing how we can facilitate mobile to increase UNHCR's two-way communication with refugees.

We're looking to develop an app in Lebanon, that will be given to refugees that they could download once they've been registered with us, so that they are able to get information on the services that we provide and to provide us with feedback to ensure that we're meeting their needs as best we can.

I think, Yiannis, you are also right to say that mobile is crucial to the actual delivery of humanitarian assistance now. We're seeing a very large change in the humanitarian community between the delivery of humanitarian assistance in kind, to the delivery of cash based interventions. This can provide more dignity to refugees and displaced people, because it allows them to choose what they will spend their assistance on.

The scale is really quite significant. In 2018, the last year for which I have figures available, UNHCR delivered $568 million in cash based interventions. Between 2016 and 2018, the total was $1.8 billion delivered in cash based interventions to our populations of concern.

And what we'd like to do is to see these cash based interventions delivered through mainstream services, rather than parallel humanitarian systems that are set up. And mobile money is a key way in which cash based interventions can and are being delivered, and can facilitate one of our other goals, which is greater financial inclusion of refugees, allowing refugees to become more self-reliant and contributors to the host communities that they live in.

Yiannis	Thank you, Nick. I think it's great to hear that mobile is becoming a core element to improve humanitarian assistance delivered by UNHCR.
	However, as I mentioned earlier, in most refugee hosting countries, we see mobile operators being subject to mandatory SIM registration obligations, which essentially require them to demand customers' formal ID documents before registering a SIM card. And this obviously affects refugees' ability to access life enhancing services.

A few telecoms regulators within host refugee countries allow refugees to legally register for a SIM card using their refugee ID cards that UNHCR issues. Yet, a key barrier to accessing such services for many refugees is their lack of the required official documentation that these governments ask for.

So how does this problem resonate with what you're hearing from your country offices?

Nicholas   It is a real problem. You're right Yiannis. And you know for us it's not just a problem around using mobile to facilitate humanitarian assistance, it's also a major challenge for refugees. Refugees, as we were talking about, they want to be connected, they want to be able to access connectivity to keep in touch with their families and to be included in the societies in which they're living in.

It's a trend which is a relatively recent. When we were talking to our country operations about this recently, they said that this was a challenge which is something which wasn't there in the past, but it's becoming more and more prevalent now.

And it's a real challenge because often, refugees, because they want to be connected so much, will find workarounds to try to ensure that they're able to have a mobile connection. So they may be forced to pay an extra supplement to someone who will give them a SIM card and a mobile phone at an extra cost, that leaves them at risk of being exploited, and can obviously create challenges that are standing in the way of connectivity.

So what's the answer? I think that real thinking about what are the reasons which are underlying these barriers to connectivity, as a result of refugee ID is crucial. And UNHCR has done, with GSMA in partnership, some research to identify what the challenges are and what the ways forward are.

I think that these strict ID requirements, which haven't considered the situation of refugees are a real challenge, and the answer is primarily to work with regulators and mobile network operators and others, to try to ensure that, you know, a well-balanced regulatory regime is put in place, which ensures that on the one hand, refugees have a trusted ID, which can facilitate access to services. But on the other hand, regulators and others concerns about the integrity of refugee ID, and making sure that it is one which comes from an appropriate and trusted source, can also be addressed.

Yiannis	Thanks, Nick. So are there any particular solutions, or ways forward that you think might be sort of followed to address this problem?

| Nicholas | I think raising awareness with regulators at global, regional, national levels is crucial, and we very much welcome our partnership with GSMA in doing that.

Increasing trust in refugee ideas, I said there are specific measures that UNHCR can put in place within its own systems, which are, as I say, often used by host states. For example, the capacity to digitally authenticate identity, to ensure that refugee ID is trusted when they onboard for mobile services is a key step that can be taken.

Building the capacity of MNOs to be refugee ready is also important, so that we, MNOs, are able to understand what are the important considerations that ought to be taken into account, where refugees are their customers.

And for financial products such as mobile money, looking at how risk mitigation measures can be put in place by the financial service provider to ensure that regulatory concerns can be met in respect of refugee ID, without cutting off access to services is another key step that can be taken. |
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| Yiannis | Thank you, Nick. I think you touched on trust and the issue of trust in your answer. So let's dive in a bit further on that.

So I think it's a fair assumption to make that actual or perceived risks to people's privacy may adversely affect their willingness to use digital services, including registering for a SIM card in their name or signing up to a mobile service using their identity.

So is the UNHCR conducting any work within this space, and what is UNHCR's approach to ensuring that the privacy of persons of concern is safeguarded? |
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| Nicholas | I think you're right, Yiannis, that trust is not just a one-way street. It's not just about the trust that the end users of identity, of refugee ID have in the ID. It's also about the trust that refugees have in the bodies that register them and provide them with ID, like UNHCR or host states.

So for us, as UNHCR, we have a data protection policy in respect to persons of concern to us. That policy was the first one adopted, as I understand it, by a UN agency. And it contains specific recommendations about how we can ensure that refugees' personal data is appropriately protected. |
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In developing systems, we're encouraged to use privacy by design technique. Where we are going to share data with other parties such as humanitarian service providers or host states, we need to undertake data protection impact assessments to check what the risks are, and how they can be mitigated and managed.

We're also looking more and more at how we can do end user research with refugees to understand how they feel about enrollments in UNHCR systems, or with the states. So that we can improve those systems and make them stronger.

This was one of the recommendations from the summit, the Global Summit that we talked about earlier on with the Government of Canada. Making sure that refugees' views are considered in the development and the implementation of digital identity systems.

Yiannis	Let's talk about partnerships now.
	So do you think humanitarian development organisations and the private sector can collaborate to navigate identity related barriers? What do you think needs to be done?
Nicholas	I think that partnerships are absolutely key to refugee protection and empowerment going forward.
	Indeed, at the end of 2018, the UN General Assembly endorsed the Global Compact on Refugees, which sees a much more dynamic and partnership driven approach to addressing situations of displacement, particularly encouraging the private sector to work with humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR, to realise the Compact's goal.
	I mean, I think that specifically in this area, UNHCR occupies an important catalytic role, but also a vital standards setting role under our mandate that was given by the UN General Assembly to us in 1950, to increase the protection of refugees and to facilitate durable solutions. So, one of the things that we can do in this area is to develop standards with expert partners that could be applied to the private sector and to states and regulators, to ensure that refugee protection was there across the piece.
	I think joint awareness raising and advocacy, working in partnership with GSMA but other private sector partners will also be crucial, because providing protection for refugees is a shared responsibility. It's not only the responsibility of UNHCR or states or governments, it's also the responsibility of communities. And we really welcome the input of the private sector in this regard.

I also think that, you know as I mentioned earlier on, one of the key things we need to think about is how to make sure that refugees are not inadvertently excluded, as digital ID ecosystems are developed. So making sure that those ecosystems provide protection on the one hand, as well as facilitating inclusion is a key balance that we'd like to strike with our partners.

I think that the opportunity that you as the GSMA have to leverage your membership of mobile network operators is something that we really appreciate. And working together with regulators to think through, and to address these challenges about refugee ID and how to navigate an appropriate path forward is really a key aspect.

The fact that we're able to work together, as we have done, to do joint research on these issues, there was a report published at the beginning of 2019 by UNHCR, in collaboration with GSMA called [Displaced and Disconnected](#), where we looked at these issues around refugee ID and access to mobile, and access to financial services. I think that that was a great example of how the collaboration can work and how we can leverage each other's comparative advantages.

So for us, it's a wonderful opportunity and we hope to move forward in finding new areas of collaboration, to realise sort of our goals on refugee empowerment, inclusion, protection and increased self-reliance going forward.

Yiannis   Thanks, Nick and the feeling is absolutely mutual.

So to my final question, what would you like to see on refugee digital identity by year 2025?

Nicholas   I think the most important thing is that we'd like to see more refugees who had a good digital identity, that facilitates access to connectivity and financial services. We'd like to see that as being a cornerstone of how we can address displacement across the whole continuum, from emergencies to transitions, to longer, more protracted situations of displacement, to the finding of durable solutions.

How digital identity can facilitate increased self-reliance for refugees, so that they can contribute more to their host communities economically and otherwise, I think is a wonderful opportunity.

And mobile is really a key litmus test of that, allowing refugees to be able to access connectivity in a way where they are protected, on the one hand, but they can also feel safe and communicate with their family members and with the humanitarian community, and make sure that they receive the services that they need to try and reestablish their lives. That would be the goal that I'd like to see by 2025.

Yiannis   Nick, thank you very much for your time. That was very insightful, and we look forward to our continued cooperation in addressing these identity barriers that millions of refugees still face.