



Interviewer

Jenny Casswell, Acting Research & Insights Director at GSMA

Guests

Peter Batali, Executive Director at CTEN - [Community Technology Empowerment Network](#)

John Warnes, Innovation Officer on [Connectivity for Refugees at UNHCR](#)

Intro *You're listening to the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme's podcast.*

Jenny Welcome everyone to our podcast series on mobile connectivity and innovation in the humanitarian space.

My name's Jenny Casswell and I'm the acting Director of Research and Insights here on the Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation team.

Today's episode celebrates two years of our M4H programme at the GSMA. We've achieved a lot in a short space of time and so far, we've impacted over four and a half million people through our work leveraging mobile technology for humanitarian assistance.

This work wouldn't have been possible though without our incredible partners across the mobile and humanitarian sectors, and of course, crisis affected populations themselves. And so, as we reflect on the past two years of our work, I want to take us back to one of the core objectives of our programme, which is ensuring that displaced populations are able to make meaningful use of the benefits that mobile connectivity can offer in order to improve their lives.

There's no one better to explain the role that mobile is playing in the daily lives of refugees than Peter Batali, CEO of CTEN, which is the Community Technology Empowerment Network.

He joins us from Northern Uganda, and we're really delighted to have him here with us today to share his reflections and experiences on this topic. So welcome, Peter.

Peter Thank you.

Jenny And we're also joined by John Warnes, who's the Innovation Officer within the UN Refugee Agency, that's UNHCRs Innovation Unit.

UNHCR has been a core humanitarian partner for our programme over the years, most recently working with us on our flagship report, the [Digital Lives of Refugees](#).

I'm really excited to hear John's perspectives on the report, as well as his views on the partnership that we've developed. So good to have you with us here today John.

John Thank you very much, Jenny.

Jenny So Peter, you founded CTEN in 2016. Can you share with listeners some background about yourself and also about your organisation CTEN?

Peter Thank you Jenny. My name is Peter Batali. I am a refugee from South Sudan. I got settled here in Uganda in 2016 after the uprising in South Sudan that started in Juba.

I am quite unique among all refugees because I was born as a refugee South Sudan in '86. I grew up mainly between the border areas of South Sudan and Uganda. I studied mainly in Uganda from primary school up to secondary level, and I got a unique opportunity through the UNHCR and the government of Uganda, who supported me, and I went to the UK.

And from there, I studied in City and Islington College, I also went to University of Westminster, and I became a British citizen along the way. But just around the 2009, I came back to South Sudan and then not long, the uprising started in 2013, and then 2016 I am back as a second time refugee.

My background is mainly on ICT. I graduated in a course called Computer Communications and Networks, and my passion has been to utilise ICT to transform lives and to transform our country.

But now, we are directing all our energy in the refugee settlement to utilise technology to transform the lives of the refugees and host community here in Northern Uganda in a refugee settlement called Rhino Camp. But our services have so far extended to Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement, and this year, 2020, it's extending to a Kiryandongo.

CTEN in brief, Community Technology Empowerment Network, is refugee led. Myself and the co-founder called Taban James, we started it just on the onset we arrived in Rhino Camp. We set up a Refugee Information Centre under a tree, and we bought some gadgets, a medium generator and twin speakers, and that was how we started the CTEN initiative, and we are happy that the initiative was very, very effective.

When UNHCR and the OPM, the government of Uganda were doing their field trip monitoring, they found us busy with the refugees, and within no time they recognised the initiative was good, and they asked us to write a proposal, which we did. By 2017, we officially became an implementing partner for UNHCR, something that I'm very, very honoured and happy to be linked to.

Jenny

Wonderful. Thank you Peter, and given your background and amazing work with refugees and the communities that you live in, I'm particularly interested in hearing from you about your experience of why mobile connectivity is important for people who've been displaced, and whether you can share some of the examples that you've seen in your own communities?

Peter

To begin with, when we crossed the border into Uganda, I remember I had this smartphone, Samsung Galaxy S5, that is the most important tool I had. I used that for, number one, communicating on voice, making phone calls, and then when we started the Refugee Information Centre initiative, it was this mobile phone that I credited airtime and I used it for accessing social media, and that is Facebook in particular.

The first few days when we started, I was able to use the Facebook Live too where my co-founder, James, when he was busy teaching, providing a technology class to over a hundred people who were sat under a UNHCR carpet. I used that to show to the rest of my network or my friends all over the world that we are now in Rhino Camp, and we are trying to transform

ourselves, giving people access to information, but also passing this information about the community to the wider audience.

So I realised that mobile phone was my first tool actually, that when I now thought of buying a generator and the twin speakers, it was basically to reinforce what we started using - a single mobile phone - and that is the Samsung Galaxy S5.

Since then, I've used this for Gmail communication, Facebook chatting and communication, storage of crucial critical pictures and videos that I was capturing. So I think that that ability to connect to the internet through the mobile phone is one thing that can save lives.

Although the network in the area was sporadic, we put it on top of a tree and I was now able to do this Facebook Live and the Facebook communication mobile. So, mobile connectivity is indeed lifesaving as we came to realise, and I'm very happy that up to now, I am still using this very same phone for continuing to popularise the work that CTEN is doing here on the ground.

Other examples, we have been able to talk, connect refugees to see themselves. We have connected several, those who thought that they were already separated, they never knew each other. When we shared their information on Facebook, they were able to say, "Oh, this is actually my friend. This is my sister. This is my father." We made them to talk to each other through Facebook Live. That was very incredible.

One of the examples is a son in Ireland, Northern Ireland, connected to a father who was ill in a hospital, in a rural regional hospital. That alone was too much to bear for the son, and after that, he received a lot of support, lot of support, and he was discharged from hospital within weeks.

Another examples are things to do with sharing information through social media, that some people got scholarships, and up to now they become the followers, they become the people who are talking about CTEN.

Yes, mobile connectivity is very, very critical to saving and transforming lives, especially in the refugee context.

Jenny

Thank you, Peter. Those are some really amazing and fascinating stories. And it also seems that your phone has been serving you pretty well, seeing that it has lasted you all these years.

We've also seen many examples of how mobile can be an incredibly powerful tool for accessing and sharing information, communicating with loved ones, accessing financial services, and the list goes on, and that's really reflected in some of the examples that you've shared, so thank you for that.

I've been hearing from my colleagues in our strategic partnerships team that last month, the first refugees and host community members graduated from your ReHope bridge programme. And this was actually also one of our first strategic partnership projects, so a really important milestone for us as well.

Just to provide some context to our listeners, ReHope equips the youth with digital literacy skills, improving their employment opportunities. We've been working with you, Peter, with CTEN, on this project alongside other stakeholders including UNHCR and Mercy Corps and others. Can you share with us some of the key lessons that you've learned from delivering this project?

Peter

Oh, thank you Jenny. The graduation that we conducted recently in January, it was one of the biggest in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement, because we graduated over 320 students who did different courses, but nevertheless they learned critical skills. One of the skills is on film production, computer graphics, they learned data collection and analysis, and Cisco IT essentials.

It was exciting, and it was a ride that is memorable because we started from scratch, and then we never knew that we could graduate that many within a short period of time, just over 10 months.

One of the biggest lesson we learned is the demand. The demand really shocked us. We never knew that refugees and the local citizens would enroll in that number, we surpassed ... we actually enrolled people more than the target group. Mercy Corps and us set a target that we train 500 people, but we ended up enrolling over 600 people in the database. That to us is a serious lesson.

But the other thing that we learned is we set a tight criteria, that only 18 to 35 years old could be the people we want to enroll. But people who were over 35 turned up in actually record number, record number, and that pleased us. We could not, again, deny them and say because of this criteria, we cannot enroll them.

We consulted Mercy Corps, and eventually, we enrolled them, and actually, their aptitude was very, very good. They leaned very fast. Age didn't seem as a factor in their ability to learn the skills, and so they graduated in the same fashion as the youth that we targeted, 18 to 35.

So, I think it is something that we will continue. We will now try to relax the criteria of selecting the target group. But we also noticed that because of the high interest, the time that we set for the programme was not enough. People wanted to continue accessing the internet, continue practicing the lessons that they were taught, but then there came our restriction that by 6:00 PM, the programme ends and then we prepare for another day. So it wasn't good our side, but again, I think it is a lesson that we carry to 2020.

Another lesson we learned is we never thought, you know - people normally think that technology is for men - during the enrollment, we realised that more women actually turned up from the target number that we intended. So out of 500, there was a lot of women, so their aptitude was very, very good, and now we try to plan better that we introduce new courses like coding and 3D animation, we are hoping that that scenario happens, that more women turn up to actually compete with the men and graduate and become successful in the future.

Jenny

Fascinating, thank you so much, Peter. Really interesting to hear that there is huge appetite for this kind of digital literacy programme for both women and older people.

I think it's important to highlight, we've been doing some research recently in Bidi Bidi, where we've found that there are big mobile gender gaps. For example, we found that women are 89% less likely to use mobile internet in Bidi Bidi, and this goes to show, and also the findings from the research in terms of barriers, goes to show that it's not that the appetite is not there. We just need to find better ways to access some people who may be more vulnerable than others.

It doesn't mean they don't have the appetite, we just need to find better ways for them to access these services, and you're doing some really amazing work through CTEN for that, so thank you.

John, we've been hearing from Peter about some of the transformational benefits of mobile phones for refugees and many examples of how, in Peter's own words, mobile connectivity can even be lifesaving. You're working in UNHCR's Innovation Unit and have been focusing on connectivity for refugees for a number of years.

Can you explain a bit more about your mandate, and also share with us how you've been working with GSMA to help meet UNHCR's objectives?

John

Thank you, Jenny. UNHCR is an international protection organisation, and as such, we firmly believe there's a link between having access to mobile connectivity and ensuring the protection of UNHCR's persons of concern, which includes refugees and other forcibly displaced persons.

By providing access to digital technology and mobile connectivity, people have a route towards being more self-reliant. This is a fundamental part of the Global Compact on Refugees, which really highlights the importance of inclusion in national systems and ability to access services that citizens would require in order for refugees to be more self-reliant and support the hosting communities that they're residing in.

Within connectivity for refugees, our journey has actually evolved quite a bit. What stemmed from an understanding that connectivity wasn't only important for humanitarian response actors and the staff working for them, but actually was increasingly in demand from communities, and this began an initiative to bring connectivity through various access points and so on, but has expanded much more towards being an issue of rights. That we believe that refugees and the communities hosting them have the right to be included in a connected society and have access to the digital technology.

So our work has expanded in this space with the generous support of the government of Luxembourg, and we undertake initiatives across a number of different arenas, from the more complex legal and regulatory elements through towards working with technology and infrastructure towards softer components that encourage people's digital access and inclusion.

With the GSMA, we've found a really strong partner who have a very aligned vision towards ours with the understanding of the great impact that mobile connectivity can bring to communities. In many of the areas where UNHCR are present, mobile connectivity is the primary driver of access to internet for our persons of concern. As such, we need to work with industry to ensure that the scope of this connectivity provision is enhanced to the most vulnerable people in most hard-to-reach areas.

Jenny

Great. Thanks John, and one of the things that we've been trying to do in our research and insights division in Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation is shift beyond anecdotal information about the role of mobile technology in humanitarian context to a more evidence based approach.

This is an area that we've been working on really closely with UNHCR who we've found a very similar approach. So one initiative we undertook to generate such evidence was a research project called the Digital Lives of Refugees. In this research, we focus on the ways in which people are accessing and using mobile phones and the nuanced barriers they're facing to both mobile access and use.

And we focused on three refugee contexts in Rwanda, Uganda and Jordan. John as you know, UNHCR were an absolutely core part of this work. Could you share with listeners what your main takeaways were from the report?

John

Thanks, Jenny, and this was a really great report to have been part of. As you noted, a lot of the information we get from our field proximity with people. We have an understanding of these issues, but very rarely are we able to bring that together to turn it to something that is providing a blueprint to other organisations and partners working on these issues.

I feel like the Digital Lives of Refugees report is a real milestone for those working in the area of aiming to connect forcibly displaced persons to the internet, and understanding the different dynamics of their internet usage, mobile connectivity and the different barriers they face.

For me, my top takeaways would be probably across the following three areas:

Firstly, what this report managed to do, because of how comprehensive it was, that it really dug into some issues that were perhaps not as prevalent in previous assessments or coming from anecdotal evidence. One of these was around access and digital inclusion of people with disabilities. As part of the research, Washington Group questions were asked within the discussions and surveys with refugees and the hosting members, and we got really deep insights into what these challenges were for this particular population group.

Actually, because of this dimension that came out in the research, UNHCR alongside the GSMA are now working together on a new project to have an even deeper understanding through a user centric research process to co-create solutions with people with disabilities to enhance their digital inclusion. This'll take place over the next couple of months and we're really excited about the outcomes of that.

The **second issue** that I think really came out strongly from Digital Lives of Refugees was the importance of digital literacy.

That this isn't just a matter of bringing mobile and cellular, the single end devices to people, but also building that understanding within communities with a particular focus on acknowledging the different dimensions per demographic that may impact their digital literacy. Whether this is how young early adopters adapt to latest technology that they get their hands on, versus perhaps elderly persons, single mothers or different demographic makeups that impact how they understand technology, what it can mean to them in their everyday life. I think that really came through strongly, and was something ... It was great to get more detail on it, as the UN Refugee Agency.

Finally, building off that, beyond digital literacy, there was other complex challenges and complex dimensions that this report highlighted. This was one of the most comprehensive pieces of research to date on understanding the different dimensions around refugee access to digital technology and connectivity. We got more insights on some of these complex issues. So it wasn't just that oh, there's a lack of devices, but we were able to determine what kind of devices people did have, whether a smart phone, whether a basic phone, and then also whether they even shared devices. Did they keep them? Did they lend them out to friends and family?

All of these different variables gave us a much more colourful picture of what the reality was and the level of complexity within it, which as we're designing solutions, is something that we want to take into account.

Finally, just to note, with all of these different dimensions, UNHCR is taking heed of all of the findings within this, and then not only looking to replicate these types of assessments elsewhere, but also actually build out pilot solutions that aim to address some of these challenges, both with partners such as the GSMA, with other mobile network operators and other partners in the humanitarian aid and development sector.

Jenny **Wonderful. Thanks John, and yeah, we're super excited to be working with UNHCR on this new project, as you mentioned, focusing on persons with disabilities in Nairobi, and we'll be working alongside Safaricom and UNHCR to co-design solutions to ensure that mobile technologies can be as inclusive as possible for people with specific disabilities.**

So I want to end this podcast by asking you both a question.

As we move forward with our M4H programme, we want to understand what you think the main barriers are from preventing crisis affected populations from being more connected?

And as a follow-up to that, what role do you think mobile network operators and humanitarian actors can play in overcoming some of these? So John, maybe we could start with you.

John **Thank you, Jenny. I think one of the things that the report, the Digital Lives of Refugees highlights is that the barriers to access are quite various. They can be very specific depending on what the context is, both in terms of region but also in terms of the demographics of the populations. The barriers that exist for one group of let's say, different age or their gender can be different from the others, and I think that that's where we need to be quite specific around these. However, there are some things that really come forward to me as significant barriers.**

One of the things that we learned through a joint project that we actually did with the GSMA, a report called [Displaced and Disconnected](#), was that legal barriers are often a hard stop for people becoming connected. This is due to the fact that legal and regulatory environments for accessing mobile services often overlook or don't facilitate refugee inclusion. I think that these types of challenges require a broad coalition of actors to shift to an environment where refugees are included in national telecommunications frameworks.

This means that humanitarian actors need to be a lot more switched on, cognisant of these issues and willing to engage with perhaps government agencies like telecoms regulators that they're less familiar with, or traditionally engaging with.

Similarly, mobile network operators can also be part of that conversation and advocate towards governments and with humanitarians to create that environment for inclusion - that not only benefits refugees by creating those legal pathways, but then can encourage private sector investment in areas that are often maybe rural or distant, so that host populations are also getting connected as well.

Beyond these legal and regulatory barriers to access, we see that there are still many challenges when it comes to devices, networks, more technological challenges that exist. I think this is where often with the humanitarian funding available, we're not really capitalising on this in the most optimal way and the most catalytic way to drive sustainable interventions.

This is where the types of partnerships that need to exist between MNOs and humanitarian actors need to become more creative. We need to think outside the box and leverage what resources that exist both in terms of venture capital, private sector investment, but also humanitarian and development financing to create solutions that drive towards more sustainable environments in the longer term.

Jenny

Wonderful. Thank you, John. I think that this certainly reflects some of the lessons that we've been learning, and that there are a multiplicity of barriers that need to be addressed in a more holistic way if we are going to build a digital ecosystem to ensure that people can be connected.

Peter, I'm going to ask the same question to you. What do you see as the main barriers from preventing people affected by crises from being more connected?

Peter

Another barrier on the ground has been the cultural context, culture. For the first three years at our multipurpose Community Technology Centre, or the innovation centres where we are working in partnership with Mercy Corps, we realised that women still have a tendency of identifying these centres with the boys or men only. They think that when there's a place or a centre with the more men, it is risky for their girls or for their women to join in. Just by the end of 2019, we did our assessment and we found that actually, they are interested to be part of it, but that cultural norm was a barrier.

Now, we are breaking these barriers by introducing courses that are relevant to what the women need, and now it is amazing. In one of our technology centres where we now combine business courses, other technical skills like tailoring together with the digital literacy, and now we're seeing women bursting, women that are coming every day now. It's almost like women are taking ownership of the centre.

Otherwise, John has really mentioned most of the barriers, the biggest one being the legal one, of course, these negotiations, level of investment to have versus the population.

So these are things that we are aware but we only wish for the best. Currently, we are enjoying this connectivity that was provided to us by Mercy Corps, and it produces amazing results. If you go to zone four annex now, it's a city. Actually, it's a city for Bidi Bidi. Thank you.

Jenny

Thank you, Peter, and yes, so it sounds like there are a large number of barriers ranging from digital literacy, to coverage, regulation and cultural barriers.

Interestingly, we didn't hear much around affordability, which we know is a barrier, but sometimes over emphasised, I think and some of the results from our Digital Lives of Refugees research also showed up these key barriers that you've drawn on that we need to hone in on more, especially as we move forward with our M4H programme.

For us, we've seen that inequitable access to mobile phones can present huge challenges. Indeed, the Digital Lives of Refugees demonstrated some really significant mobile gender and disability gaps, and this really highlights that if we, alongside our humanitarian actors and MNO partners don't do more to tackle some of these barriers to digital access and use, we may end up perpetuating inequalities that exist in certain contexts.

This is why inclusivity will continue to be a core focus of our programme as we move forward. To support stakeholders on this mission, we're currently designing a toolkit called the Digital Needs Assessment to enable humanitarian organisations to collect standardised data on mobile access use and barriers, to be able to make more informed decisions about how to design and implement digital interventions. The toolkit is going to be ready later this year, so do watch this space.

Before we go, I want to thank both Peter and John for sharing such fascinating insights. We're really looking forward to engaging more with you and your organisations as we move forward with our mission of accelerating the delivery and impact of digital humanitarian assistance.

If listeners want to find out more about our Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Programme and the work that we're doing with our partners, you can go to www.gsma.com/M4H.

Thank you for joining us today, and do stay tuned for the next episode.