



GRANT PROJECT LESSONS AND OUTCOMES

REFUNITE LevelApp

GRANT PROJECT DATES

June 2018 to January 2020

REFUNITE is a grantee of the Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Fund.

REFUNITE is a non-profit technology organisation helping refugee families that have lost contact with each other during escape from conflict. They empower displaced people to take the search for missing loved ones into their own hands, whether through a mobile phone, a computer or a helpline.

REFUNITE received a grant from the GSMA to pilot LevelApp, a new venture, aiming to increase the financial resilience of displaced populations.

LevelApp provides users with supplementary income for labelling and categorising images on their smartphones¹. This activity 'trains' machine learning algorithms to categorise similar images automatically. Users receive payment via mobile money transfers based on the volume of images that they process.

The GSMA funded grant project aimed to provide upwards of 5,000 refugees in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement and Kampala, Uganda, with a new supplementary source of income. It aimed to prove its potential as a global data annotation tool and achieve commercial sustainability through bringing on private sector clients with large datasets that could be categorised by LevelApp's users.

The project was initially implemented in partnership with Malet Labs and a payment aggregator.

¹ Note to follow on smartphone penetration in the settlement and understanding the user.

KEY STATS

APP USERS

28,664
DOWNLOADED AND USED LEVELAPP
WITH A FURTHER
18,000
ON THE WAITING LIST



MORE THAN
30%
OF USERS WERE WOMEN

USER ACTIVITY



CATEGORISED MORE THAN
230m IMAGES
WITH AN AVERAGE OF
97% ACCURACY

INCOME GENERATED

MORE THAN
£120,000 GBP WAS PAID TO USERS

DEMOGRAPHICS

100%
OF SURVEYED USERS SAID THAT THEY EARNED MONEY THROUGH LEVELAPP





Ali*

CASE STUDY

Ali is a Congolese refugee currently living in the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. For Ali LevelApp provides a much needed form of supplementary income whilst allowing him the flexibility to continue his studies. Ali finds that living in a refugee settlement can be very stressful as there are lots of people and limited reliable ways to earn money. Ali saw an advertisement for LevelApp on Facebook and although initially unsure he decided to try it out. He now worries less about being able to afford day-to-day essentials such as food, power or medicine as he can use earnings from the app to help cover those costs. Having this additional source of income also means he has been able to focus more on his education, as he has recently started a course at Makerere University.



Phillippe*

CASE STUDY

Phillippe is originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but is currently a refugee in Uganda, living in Kampala. Phillippe was invited to try LevelApp when it initially launched by a local refugee organisation. Phillippe was glad to be able to earn some additional money to help support his family but says that it also helped him to improve his English. When he arrived in Uganda he only spoke French and Kituba but as the tasks required him to match English words to pictures it built up his vocabulary. He feels that he learned quicker as the potential financial award was a good motivation to remember new words. Although it can be frustrating when the app does not work, or there are no tasks available, he still encourages his friends to try it too.



Ayen*

CASE STUDY

Ayen is originally from South Sudan and currently lives in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement with her family. She was told about LevelApp by a friend who showed her the money she had made from the app and explained how it worked. Before using LevelApp Ayen had to leave her home every day to look for work which was tiring, unpredictable and she often felt unsafe. She felt much more secure earning money on her phone and has introduced a number of her friends to the app too. Even those previously unable to work due to family commitments have found time to use the app and together they saved up their earnings to open a craft business. She feels bad that her friends without smartphones are not able to benefit from the app like she is.

Project Outcomes & Lessons

OUTCOME

LevelApp provides a viable source of supplementary income for users

The majority of interviewed users earned between 500 and 200,000 Ugandan Shillings (0.10 to 40 GBP), paid directly to their mobile money accounts. The full earning potential will likely be much higher once REFUNITE brings on commercial clients.

App users were very positive about the fact that it enabled them to rapidly earn small sums of money. This was especially important for those users without alternative sources of income, as it allowed them to cater for immediate needs (users most reported using the money for mobile data, airtime and groceries). Users also reported spending some of their earning on family and friends (a potential 'spill-over' effect within communities).

The evaluation study did not find any notable differences in earnings or use of money based on gender or nationality of users.

"LevelApp has helped me provide food for me and my siblings, I buy a sack of maize flour and more. Now I am even working to pay school fees for my younger sisters."

Olive*, Female, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

OUTCOME

LevelApp provides social and entertainment benefits to users

Whilst not an objective of the project, the evaluation and user feedback discovered that many LevelApp users gained social and entertainment benefits from using the app.

Users reported feeling that the app was a 'game' (many spoke about 'play' as opposed to 'work') that was a constructive use of their time. This was not just because they were earning money; a number of users felt that the app gave them new knowledge (as some of the data sets they were categorising included subject matter they were unfamiliar with). A smaller number also reported forming new social connections with other app users.

"It has helped us connect with other refugees. We started as friends - now I have a group I am going to meet, they are mixed, Congolese and Rwandese. We are going to make a group to help each other, even those who do not have smart phones we can collect money and buy smart phones for our friends."

Luce*, Female, Kampala

LESSON

The delivery mechanism needed to be kept under review to make it feasible for users

A number of LevelApp users initially reported (when the service was delivered through a web browser) that they were spending more on mobile data than they could earn, making it a poor income opportunity.

As a result, the team pivoted to an Android application, which reduced the data consumption by a factor of ten. It also meant the application could be shared through the Playstore, accessing new users.

Whilst a number of users still report that they spend a lot of airtime, since the change has been made the number of users has grown exponentially (growing from a few hundred to 16,000 in four months), with most users being satisfied with the service. Organisations wanting to replicate the model may want to investigate a zero-rating agreement with local mobile operators to make it even more beneficial for users.

LESSON

A successful app will likely see a great degree of organic growth as users recommend it to others

LevelApp was originally launched in Uganda through REFUNITE's local partners and the team also promoted it through paid adverts on social media. However, the majority of users surveyed (86%) discovered LevelApp through friends and family. Many had it forwarded to them on platforms such as Xender, Bluetooth or posting on a WhatsApp group.

Virtually all of the users interviewed for the evaluation had already recommended LevelApp to someone close to them, hoping that they could also earn additional income.

The active referral by users led to a great deal of trust amongst users in Uganda (where scams can be common, making people more hesitant to use new systems) and eventually meant the REFUNITE team had to create a waiting list for those wanting to access the service.

NEXT STEPS

LevelApp: The future

LevelApp can be made available anywhere where people have smartphones and a mobile network connection and in its current version it's particularly appealing to poor populations residing in remote locations with little access to paid work.

After the successful pilot, funded through the GSMA grant, the REFUNITE team is looking to bring on commercial clients in order to scale and sustain the service. This will allow the service to leverage the power of mobile technology to provide sustainable income to a great number of people affected by crisis. This is a critical step, as without commercial clients along with datasets requiring categorisation there are no tasks for users of LevelApp to complete and earning potential drops.

Whilst securing a sustainable source of clients is key, the market for data annotation tools is expected to reach 1.6 billion dollars by 2025, meaning that the potential impact of LevelApp's micro-tasking model is immense.

DATA SOURCES

- REFUNITE project reporting
- - LevelApp sign-up survey (11,317 respondents)
- - Early-stage evaluation of LevelApp conducted by The Research People in July 2019 (individual interviews and focus groups with 97 LevelApp users)