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# 'As Important to Me as Water': How Refugees in Rome Use Smartphones to Improve Their Well-being

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Tanya Vivienne St George

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## Abstract

Mobile phones and smartphones have been hailed as instrumental in assisting migrants and refugees to make the perilous journey to Europe. Civil society groups and humanitarian agencies are responding by developing a plethora of technological aid initiatives to assist refugees and asylum-seekers - a phenomenon dubbed "ICT4Refugees". However, without a sound understanding of smartphones enable people to *be and do*, such well-intended projects may fail. Within ICT4D the Capability Approach has become a popular conceptual tool for analysing and discussing the role of technology in improving the well-being of the poor and disadvantaged. Proponents argue it is not access to technology that matters; it is how people use it to enhance their capabilities and achieve valuable lives. Therefore, this thesis investigates how refugees in Rome, Italy, use smartphones to improve their well-being and whether, according to the Capability Approach, smartphones can expand refugees' capabilities, choices and freedoms. The research is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with refugee guests and staff at a refugee centre in Rome, conducted in May 2016. Findings were analysed using an evaluative framework based on capability models created for ICT4D settings, which provided an ecological view of the different factors which influence smartphone use. Overall, the findings indicate that smartphones are critical to the psychological well-being of participants – "as important as water" for their survival - as they enable them to connect to friends and family conveniently and at little or no cost, providing they have access to the Internet. Frequent contact helps replenish participants' resilience in an otherwise hostile environment. However, owning a smartphone has not improved the informational capabilities of all participants in this study. Thus, refugees may require support to develop the necessary digital and informational literacies needed to participate in an Information Society.

**Key words: Capabilities, refugees, ICTs, Italy, smartphones**

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I dedicate this thesis to my late brother Paul, who embarked on a similar academic journey many years ago and who has been ever-present in my thoughts these past 12 months.

*He waka eke noa: We are all in the same canoe.*

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## Picture

**Cover:** Refugees jubilant to be in Greece with Turkey behind them. Images like this one drew negative comment in news media in Europe in 2015. **Reproduced with permission from Paul Donohoe of the International Rescue Committee, August 2015.**

## List of Abbreviations

AIDA	Asylum Information Database
App	Application or software program
ECRA	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
ICT4D	Information and Communications Technology for Development
ICT4Refugees	Information and Communications Technology for Refugees
JNRC	Joel Nafuma Refugee Center
OHCHR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SMS	Short Message Service or text message.
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WiFi	Wireless internet network

# CHAPTER 1 Introduction

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*“The phone is as important to me as water”.*

**Drisia from Mali, refugee and study participant.**

## 1.1 Background

At the time of writing, thousands of migrants and refugees were crossing the Mediterranean Sea into Europe each day, fleeing conflict, violence, persecution and poverty. Many arrive in Italy with little more than the clothes they are wearing, but among their most precious possessions are their mobile phones or smartphones. On any given day, in every corner of the Joel Nafuma Refugee Center (JNRC)<sup>1</sup> in Rome, refugee guests<sup>2</sup> can be observed “plugged” into their smartphones. Even those playing table soccer have at least one earphone in place, and their phones in their pockets. Why is this technology so important and how is it making life better for these refugees? These questions provide the starting point for this thesis.

Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)<sup>3</sup> have become defining features of contemporary international migration (Opas & McMurray, 2015; Ros, Gonzalez, Marin & Sow, 2007) and mobile phones the basis for one of the greatest expansions of human capabilities in known history (Smith, Spence & Rashid, 2011, p.77). Smartphones have been hailed as a new tech revolution (PCmag.com, 2016). A smartphone is defined as, “A mobile phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, typically having a touch screen interface, Internet access, and an operating system capable of running downloaded apps,” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Recent media stories and research reports have highlighted the significance of smartphones in helping Syrian refugees and migrants make the perilous journey to Europe (e.g. Brunwasser, 2015; Dubinsky, 2015; Graham, 2015; Koslowska, 2015). Useful features include GPS, compass and mapping applications (apps) help with navigation, social media sites provide information on the journey and the destination, while video calling and

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<sup>1</sup> American spelling is used only when referring to the centre by name.

<sup>2</sup> This is the term that JNRC staff use to refer to refugees using the centre.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this study, ICTs are defined as “information-handling tools...used to produce, store, process, distribute and exchange information” (UNDP, cited in UN ICT Task Force, 2003, p.4). These include smartphones, which combine information-processing and communication features.

messaging apps enable people to stay in contact with family and friends. Civil society groups and humanitarian agencies are responding by developing a plethora of technical aid initiatives for refugees, including applications, help websites, SMS group services, map tools, online databases, and WiFi hot spots; a phenomenon dubbed “ICT4Refugees” (Mason & Buchmann, 2016). Recent research reports claim most of these initiatives are inadequately resourced and unsustainable (Gillespie, Ampofo, Cheesman, Faith, Iliadou, Issa & Skleparis, 2016). The challenge for those in the ICT4Refugee community is to understand what smartphones enable people to *be and do*. In the absence of this information, and without attending to the barriers or obstacles to technology use, such well-intended projects may fail.

Within the field of Information and Communications for Development (ICT4D) the Capability Approach has become a popular conceptual tool for analysing and discussing the role of technology in improving the well-being of the poor and disadvantaged. Proponents argue it is not access to technology that matters, it is how people use it to enhance their capabilities and achieve “lives of value” (Sen, 1999, p.18). As a “human rights-informed theory and set of methodologies” (Carpenter, 2009, p.354), the Capability Approach has proved influential in human development since the late 1990s. However there appear to be few academic studies which adopt a Capability lens to examine the use of smartphones by refugees. This research addresses that gap.

This chapter introduces the topic for study and sets out the research aims and questions. The research approach, methods and field site are described, and the structure of the thesis outlined. A critical methodological and conceptual issue is also addressed: how the terms “refugee” and “migration” are understood in this thesis.

## **1.2 Research Aims, Questions and Approach**

This study aimed to investigate how refugees use smartphones to improve their well-being by undertaking an in-depth qualitative study of guests at the Joel Nafuma Refugee Center in Rome. A second, related aim was to explore whether, according to the Capability Approach, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can expand refugees’ capabilities, choices and freedoms. These aims are interrelated and are expressed in terms of the following research questions and sub-questions:

## Research Question

## Sub Questions

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1. How do refugees in Rome use smartphones to improve their well-being?</p>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What do participants regard as important to their well-being?</li><li>• How prevalent is smartphone use among participants?</li><li>• How do participants use the different features of the technology?</li></ul>   |
| <p>2. Can Information and Communications Technology (ICT) expand refugees' capabilities, choices and freedoms?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do smartphones contribute to people's capabilities to achieve well-being?</li><li>• Which capabilities are most important and what are the factors critical to acquiring and using these capabilities?</li><li>• What does this mean for refugees' digital inclusion?</li></ul> |

### Approach

A full account of the methodology and methods adopted for this study is provided in Chapter 5. A qualitative research approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with 12 refugee guests from the JNRC: 11 men and one woman. Participants were selected using convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Interviews were conducted at the centre in May 2016. An interpreter assisted with interviewing participants who did not speak English. Questions broadly covered (a) participants' information needs and (b) access and use of smartphones – features and purposes, and (d) participants' plans for the future (see Appendix 1). These data were supplemented with interviews with two staff at the centre and informal observation of JNRC guests to gain a more comprehensive view of participants' use of technology. Findings were further analysed by mapping themes against a conceptual framework based on the Capability Approach, as outlined in Chapters 2 and 6. This approach provided a systemic view of all the factors shaping participants' ICT use and indicated some areas for intervention.

## **Selection of the Field Site**

Refugees are “hidden” in research (Bloch, 2004, p.139). They are hard to identify, locate and to draw a representative sample from. Research must often take place in hostels, deportation centres, detention centres, urban centres or informal places of sanctuary (Voutira & Dona, 2007). The JNRC is one such sanctuary, and is run by the St Paul’s Episcopalian Church based in the United States. It is the only day-facility in Rome and caters for up to 150 refugees a day. The centre is staffed largely by volunteers who provide language, computing, and art therapy classes. Staff also assist new arrivals with immigration advice, and the medical and legal appointments required for integration. My interest in this research stemmed from my work at the centre as a volunteer. I worked behind the scenes to promote the activities of the JNRC to the wider public. I do not perceive a conflict of roles in undertaking this research as I was not involved in any decision making processes and was not privy to any private information about guests. In approaching participants I was careful to explain my role at the centre and my interest in undertaking the research. The project was welcomed by the centre management as potentially helping them to tailor support services to the needs of their guests.

## **1.3 Rationale**

The research is both topical and timely. First, the study aims to address the need for in-depth qualitative research on the ICT behaviours of a population that is potentially vulnerable (Marlowe, 2015) and relatively under-researched. While much attention has been paid to the links between migration and ICTs, fewer academic studies have been undertaken on refugees’ use of ICTs (Leung, Finney Lamb & Emrys, 2009), including their use of smartphones. As forced migrants living precarious lives, refugees rely on their mobile phones as technological safety nets (Hamel, 2009). The multi-functionality of smartphones may create new possibilities for refugees’ communication and information-gathering. For instance, in humanitarian disasters and for hard-to-reach populations, smartphones have an advantage over other forms of ICT, as disadvantaged groups will often use them to access the internet (Benton, 2014). The technology’s potential to address social challenges such as public health (Bert, Giacometti, Gualano & Siliquini, 2014) and education – or mLearning – is also well-documented. Further, the proliferation of smartphones is also driving the development of smart cities around the world where urban services, transport and other infrastructure are becoming increasingly networked. Some cities in North America and Europe, for example, are introducing apps to improve services particularly for immigrant populations and are providing training and

information to guide them and encourage their civic participation (Benton, 2014, p. 2-3). In light of these developments and the growing interest in providing tech support to refugees and migrants, the topic warrants further research.

There is no doubt that such support, technological or otherwise, is urgently needed to improve the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Europe. In 2015, more than one million refugees and migrants reached the continent by sea (Clayton & Holland, 2015). With the recent closure of the Balkans route, Italy is now the main entry point by sea. One-fifth of refugees coming into the country reach Rome where they struggle to meet even their most basic needs. Tech initiatives may help address these problems but they need to start with sound research and observation of refugees' technology practices. It is hoped that this thesis may also help address this current gap in research.

Secondly, I have strong personal reasons for wanting to undertake this research. I wanted to dig deeper, beyond the refugee statistics and stereotypes in news reports of Europe's migrant crisis, to understand more about newcomer refugees and how they are negotiating the realities of life in Rome. My interest was triggered by the public reaction in Europe to media stories of refugees' smartphone use in September 2015. That refugees were taking "selfie" pictures with their iphones seemed to spark outrage. This media comment well illustrates public attitudes at the time:

Are these happy young men really timid souls fleeing war and persecution? They aren't quite the heart-rending image of dishevelled, traumatized refugees fleeing the horrors of their war-torn home country one might expect ("Migrant Crisis", 2015).

The assumption here is that smartphones are a luxury item, not for the poor and the desperate, and so these must be fake refugees. Similarly, when refugees in a residential centre in Italy staged a protest for better living conditions, including access to the internet, many Italians were outraged ("Refugees in Italy", 2015). This reportage demonstrates societal attitudes toward refugees and conceivably contributes to their marginalisation and social exclusion.

My perspective, like that of Fortunati, Pertierra and Vincent (2012), is that I see refugees, like other migrants, as "playing a more or less powerful role in the co-construction of contemporary societies," (p.3). As a volunteer at the JNRC I have observed that centre guests face tremendous difficulties in accessing information, services and support. As this thesis will show, refugees in Rome must deal with a sluggish and sometimes overtly hostile bureaucracy and the lack of a joined-up reception system which demands proficiency in Italian to negotiate,

and considerable time and effort to access. However, refugees are not always powerless in the face of such obstacles and portraying them otherwise only reinforces stereotypes of refugees as victims. In undertaking this research perhaps some practical outcomes might result in terms of how government and social agencies can support refugees' digital inclusion and the development of capabilities which enable them to participate actively as citizens of the Information Society.

## 1.4 Defining Refugees

How refugees are defined is a topic of much debate in the literature and there is no clear consensus on what the term refugee should encompass (Black, 2001; Bakewell, 2011; Malkki, 1995; Zetter, 2007). While not wishing to get bogged down in "the froth of terminology" (Bakewell, 2011, p.19), it is important at this early stage to be clear about what is meant by refugee and what is meant by migrant in the context of this study. Migration is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the "movement of people to a new area or country in order to find work or better living conditions" (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.). At face value this definition would seem to include refugees. However, the UNHCR would argue most emphatically not: the terms migrant and refugee have distinct and different meanings, and confusing them leads to problems for both populations (Edwards, 2015). Refugees are people fleeing armed conflict or persecution who are defined and recognised by states, UNHCR, and other organisations, as entitled to special protection. The cornerstone of this protection is Article 1(A) (2) of the 1951 Convention that defines a refugee as a person who:

... owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 2010).

The UNHCR argues that refugees are not migrants, because migrants *choose* to move, mainly for work, education, family reunion, or other reasons, and may return to their countries at any time. The organisation says using the terms refugee and migrant interchangeably jeopardises the safety of refugees and the special legal protections they require. Several scholars disagree. Jorgen Carling (2016) argues that separating migrants and refugees makes as much sense as talking about fish and salmon. Using the term migrants inclusively and ensuring the welfare of

migrants who need protection as refugees is not contradictory. “The circumstances of refugees are specific ones – but so are those of victims of trafficking and undocumented migrants, for instance,” (Carling, 2016).

The classification of migrants and refugees is further complicated by current migration patterns which have been described in terms of “mixed flows”. They include refugees and asylum seekers (those who seek but have not been granted refugee status) but also irregular migrants, stateless people, unaccompanied minors and others (Stepputat & Nyberg Sørensen, 2016). Thus, singling out refugees for study excludes the experiences of other displaced people. Other authors assert the term refugee is only useful for governments trying to regulate the entry of different classes of migrants (Zetter, 2007) and the term assumes that people’s status will not change over time. Malkki (1995) points out, refugee is merely a broad legal term that “includes within it a world of socio-economic statuses, personal histories and psychological and spiritual situations”.

The term forced migrant has been taken up by refugee studies scholars as a broader more inclusive category that better reflects the complex causes of migration (Shacknove, 1985). Yet such terminology also has its critics. In particular it fails to show people as purposeful actors “embedded in particular social, political and historical situations” (Turton, 2003, p.19). Categorising migrants in terms of the amount of choice open to them also underestimates their agency: “Even in the most constrained of circumstances human beings struggle to create and maintain some area of individual decision making” (Turton, 2003, p.22). How much agency refugees actually have is a question that is central to this thesis.

The terminology is particularly problematic in this research as the term refugee, as defined in the 1951 Geneva Convention, is too narrow a term for those at the JNRC who include refugees, asylum seekers and those who have been declined protection, as well as other undocumented migrants. Many of the guests there are in transit or itinerant, not just in terms of their physical journeys, but in their life journeys as well. They are mainly young men seeking to improve their life prospects which may, or may not, involve seeking asylum or settling in Italy. Their time in the city varies from a few months to a few years. Therefore they cannot be categorically classified according to the phases of migration described in the literature, such as pre-migration, post-migration and settlement (see Hiller & Franz, 2004; Kennan, Lloyd & Thompson, 2011). Thus, theorising refugees in this way presents challenges.

Staff and volunteers at the JNRC, conscious of the power dynamics in the relationship and the political dimensions of the terminology, describe those who use the services of the centre as “guests”.

For the purposes of this study, however, I use the term refugee, but following Leung’s definition of refugees as:

All people who are exposed to refugee-type experiences and may include displaced people, asylum seekers and resettled refugees who have been granted residency (Leung, 2010, p.1).

This is an umbrella term but it does not assume that the experiences of refugees or participants in this study are homogenous (Malkki, 1995), nor does it imply that some people are more or less worthy of protection than others because of choices they have or have not made. It acknowledges that refugee participants have been displaced from their home countries for a range of reasons, including poverty and persecution, and that their status as refugees, asylum seekers or unregulated migrants may at times be fluid.

## 1.5 Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured into eight chapters.

This chapter (**Chapter 1**) has introduced the topic for study and described the research aims and questions, approach, methods and field site. A critical methodological and conceptual issue is also addressed: how the terms refugee and migrant are understood in this thesis.

**Chapter 2, Conceptual Framework: The Capable Refugee** starts with a discussion of Amartya Sen’s (1999) capability framework. According to Sen the aim of human development is to enhance people’s well-being by enhancing their freedom of choice and thus their agency to achieve a life of value (p.18). Capability theorists are interested in how people use resources — such as technology — to achieve desired capabilities and functionings. The second part of the chapter looks at how the Capability Approach is shaping ICT4D thinking, where technology has been viewed as a capability-enhancing freedom for the poor. Two approaches to operationalising the Capability Approach in development settings are examined, elements of which are incorporated into a new evaluation framework specifically developed for this study.

**Chapter 3, Literature Review: The Connected Refugee** situates refugees’ use of smartphones within the context of the Network Society in which ICTs enable migrants to communicate and share information transnationally and translocally. Refugees have been largely invisible in this literature, yet studies show they face significant issues in accessing reliable information for

their journeys and in their host countries. They are also disadvantaged by inequities in their social, personal and environmental resources, compounding their social exclusion in host societies. Some authors see the increasing availability of smartphones as creating new possibilities for communication and information-gathering. The chapter concludes by examining one of very few studies on how ICTs may help refugees achieve information and communications capabilities leading to their social inclusion.

**Chapter 4: Context: Italy’s “Unfreedoms”** provides background for the current study by drawing on research reports and academic studies to describe the broader environment or opportunity structure in which refugees in Rome must function. Mobility is a capability that is both intrinsically and instrumentally important for human development, leading to improvements in people’s earning capacity, health, education, and their self respect (de Haas, 2009). However the capacity of refugees in Italy to exercise this capability and achieve these elements of well-being may be severely constrained by their environment.

The research methods and methodology adopted for the study are explained in **Chapter 5, Methodology: Researching the Hidden Group**. Small scale, qualitative research may have its limitations in terms of validity and generalisability, but it is well suited to the study of refugees. The many methodological and ethical issues in conducting research with refugees are discussed. An appropriate methodological framework which is both ethical and practical is required when working with a population that is also difficult to find and identify.

**Chapter 6, Findings: Stories of Connection and Disconnection**, presents the results of the study in terms of the broad themes that emerged. In Rome participants experienced significant economic and social hardship and found it difficult to access information and support to meet their basic needs. Far from being a luxury item, smartphones were an essential communications tool that enabled participants to tap into social networks of family and friends locally and around the world for support and information. Participants visited news websites to keep up with international current affairs, but information gathering using apps and websites was not common. Most participants relied instead on their social networks — online and offline — to find out about work opportunities and where to go for shelter and food.

**Chapter 7, Discussion: What do Smartphones Enable Refugees to *Be* and *Do*?** analyses the findings in more detail, using a Smartphone Evaluation Framework (SEF) to understand better how participants use smartphones to achieve valuable capabilities and functionings. Starting with participants’ well-being outcomes, the structural conditions shaping people’s smartphone practices are examined along with their personal assets or resources (which include

smartphones) and the capabilities that may result from smartphone use that contribute to participants' well-being. Taking a systemic or ecological approach to analysing refugees' smartphone use helps to identify levers for change, in the form of policies and programmes to support the digital inclusion of refugees.

**Chapter 8, Conclusions: Connected and Capable** distils the empirical findings and draws on the discussion to answer the research questions. The study finds that smartphones can enable participants to improve their psychological well-being but whether smartphones give participants the freedom to achieve well-being outcomes or functionings is less clear. Questions of agency and empowerment are examined in light of the evidence. Differences in refugees' personal resources, such as digital and information literacy, may have important implications for the development of digital policies and resources to support refugees.

# CHAPTER 2 Conceptual Framework: The Capable Refugee

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## 2.1 Introduction

The central aim of this study is to investigate how refugees in Rome use smartphones to improve their well-being. The dictionary definition of well-being is: “The state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy” (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.). Thus well-being is a mental state and something that most of us would likely aspire to. But what is well-being in the bigger picture of human development and why does it matter? For economist Amartya Sen, well-being comes from being *free* to choose how to live a valuable life. Freedom is the means and end of development which should be focused on expanding people’s capabilities to lead the kinds of lives they value (Sen, 1999, p.18). Sen’s Capability Approach has drawn much attention in the last decade as a way to investigate and discuss matters of justice and development (Oosterlaken, 2012, p.3). This chapter outlines the major tenets of the Capability Approach as the conceptual framework for this study, in which capabilities, choices and freedoms are key to evaluating human well-being. The approach has been taken up by scholars in the field of Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D), who argue that tech projects for the poor or disadvantaged should move beyond simply providing access to technology, to supporting people’s capabilities to use it effectively. Despite the appeal of the approach and its suitability to ICT4D contexts, few studies seem to have applied the Capability Approach to evaluating the use of ICTs by refugees. One reason may be that crucial aspects of the theory, such as capabilities and functionings, are unspecified, making it difficult to operationalise the approach in the field. The chapter concludes by looking at two evaluation frameworks developed for ICT4D settings, elements of which will be employed in evaluating refugees’ use of smartphones in this study.

## 2.2 Freedoms and Well-being

The Capability Approach challenges traditional views of development that are focused on economic growth by advancing the idea that development should be “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen, 1999, p.3). Freedom is “a person’s ability to get systematically what he would choose, no matter who actually controls the levels of operation” (Sen, 1992, p.65). Sen identifies five types of freedom instrumental in advancing human development: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency

guarantees, and protective security. Development also requires removing sources of “unfreedoms” including poverty, tyranny, social deprivation, and poor economic opportunities. Adopting the Capability lens, the objective of poverty reduction should be to expand the freedom of the poor to enjoy valuable “beings and doings”: that is, to access the resources they need and to make the choices that matter to them (Alkire, 2005, p.117).

The approach has been elaborated on by a number of authors, including Sen himself and has given rise to a huge body of literature (Alkire, 2005). However, the core concepts of the theory remain the same: freedoms (as discussed), functionings and capabilities. **Functionings** are “the various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen, 1999, p.75), such as being nourished, being confident, being able to travel, or participating in the life of one’s community. Sen does not specify which functionings are most valuable as he argues that no single set will do for every evaluation (Alkire, 2005, p.119). **Capabilities** refer to a person’s opportunity or freedom to achieve various combinations of valuable functionings. Again, Sen does not identify which capabilities matter on the basis that selection and prioritisation will depend on the research or policy context. Endorsing one predetermined list of capabilities is problematic and should be decided more democratically (Robeyns, 2005). Martha Nussbaum on the other hand, believes Sen’s approach requires a list of the most central capabilities essential to a life of dignity, “even one that is tentative and revisable” (Nussbaum, in Agarwal et al., 2005, p.38). She argues that social justice depends on a willingness to make claims about people’s fundamental entitlements. The focus, then, becomes whether people have the means and the resources to exercise their capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011, p.96). The ten individual capabilities Nussbaum outlines have some appeal as a universal set.<sup>4</sup> They include achieving a normal life expectancy; bodily health and integrity; freedom of imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason — including the ability to make life plans; to live in affiliation with others; and to have control over one’s environment. Thus, while Sen’s approach is founded on enhancing individual freedom, Nussbaum’s theory is founded on respecting human dignity.

How is well-being to be defined and understood in the context of the current study? According to Sen, “The central feature of well-being is the ability to achieve valuable functionings” (Sen, 1985, p.200). He distinguishes between the well-being aspect of a person (mental state) and their well-being freedom, which is their freedom to achieve various functionings. Thus evaluating whether a person is achieving well-being calls for dual accounting. One must assess whether someone has the freedom to achieve what they value as well as whether they are actually achieving it. Sen also makes the point that it is not enough to evaluate people’s

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<sup>4</sup> Although authors like Risse (2009), question how “neutral” Nussbaum’s choices are.

welfare based on how satisfied or happy they are. Focussing just their well-being aspect overlooks the fact that people's choices are often restricted or that they may exhibit "adaptive preferences", adjusted to their deprived or restricted circumstances (Nussbaum, 2003). Whether they have *agency* is key, as will now be discussed.

## 2.3 Agency and Empowerment

With its focus on personal choice, the Capability Approach aligns well with empowerment approaches to development that have emerged in recent years. Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) define empowerment as the extent to which people can make effective choices and turn them into desired actions and outcomes. Whether people are empowered depends on their agency (the capacity to make purposeful choice — their assets) and opportunity structure (the institutional context in which choice is made). Assets may be psychological, informational, organisational, material, social, financial, or human. Opportunity structure includes laws, regulatory frameworks, and behavioural norms (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, p.4). Similarly, Sen argues that freedom (which can be seen as empowerment) requires choice, and the efficacy of people's choices depends on the kinds of social structures within which they operate and is linked to their personal traits. A person may have strong physical and mental resources, but these require personal, social, and environmental conversion factors to turn them into capabilities and functionings (Sen, 1992). Sen highlights the crucial role of people's agency in development, but he accepts that there are structural constraints they must negotiate (Kleine, 2013; p.28).

Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) argue people are disempowered by processes of social exclusion. These processes involve collective social actions that aim to control people's access to assets and resources including laws and policies, prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes, or bureaucracies which inhibit people from seeking and obtaining health, education, or financial assistance. Understanding the power dynamics at work is crucial to understanding what it is to be a refugee or forced migrant in society (Jacobsen, 2014, p.101). The close relationship between agency and capabilities (as they are understood in Sen's approach) and the concept of empowerment has provided a strong theoretical basis for some authors to apply the approach in ICT4D settings, as will now be addressed.

## 2.4 Technology as Freedom

The Capability Approach provides a “framework of thought” that counters simplistic views that the diffusion of ICTs automatically alleviates poverty and deprivation (Zheng, 2007). It has been adopted by many ICT4D scholars<sup>5</sup> who view ICTs as commodities or resources that are only meaningful in terms of what they allow people actually to be and do (functionings) and the capabilities that people can generate from using them (Robeyns, 2005). The appeal of Capability theory is that it is people centred, not technology centred. ICTs give people the power to collect, store, process and disseminate information; to communicate across time and space; and to generate and diffuse knowledge (Zheng, 2007). Furthermore, new technology, primarily the internet-enabled mobile phone, is taking ICT4D into a new era, enabling the poor to achieve different capabilities and functionings. Thus, during the early phase of ICT for Development, often referred to as “ICT4D 1.0”, international development organisations and NGOs focused on applying technology to meeting the Millennium Development Goals. However, within the current era of ICT4D 2.0, the poor are now active producers and active innovators and ICTs provide the platform for development (Heeks, 2009, p.28). Today it is i-development that matters: development that is “information-centred, integral to its environment, integrated with development objectives, intermediated, interconnected and indigenized” (Heeks, 2002, p.10).

By focusing attention on what people can do with technology, the Capability Approach offers a counterbalance to “superficial indices of access and usage” adopted for many ICT development projects (Garnham, 1999, p.120). However, technology is never neutral, but is embedded in the broader social and material context of society (Johnstone, 2012). As with other resources or commodities, the use of ICTs to create new capabilities and functionings is also shaped by people’s “conversion factors”: people’s own resources, their mental and physical health, levels of literacy and their age or gender; social factors, such as norms, rules of behaviour, social institutions, IT policies and power structures; and environmental factors like digital infrastructure, resources, and public goods, such as free WiFi. There may be interpersonal differences in conversion factors, and these are framed by the characteristics of the opportunity structure within which a person operates. Thus, evaluating what resources or goods (including technology) can *do* for people requires accounting for people’s circumstances, and not just assessing the utility of the goods in themselves (Risse, 2009).

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<sup>5</sup> See Aricat, 2015; Garnham,1999; Mansell,2002; Gigler, 2011, 2015; Madon,2005; Alampay, 2006; Johnstone, 2007; Kleine 2010,2013; Zheng, 2007; Oosterlaken,2012; and Smith, Spence & Rashid,2011.

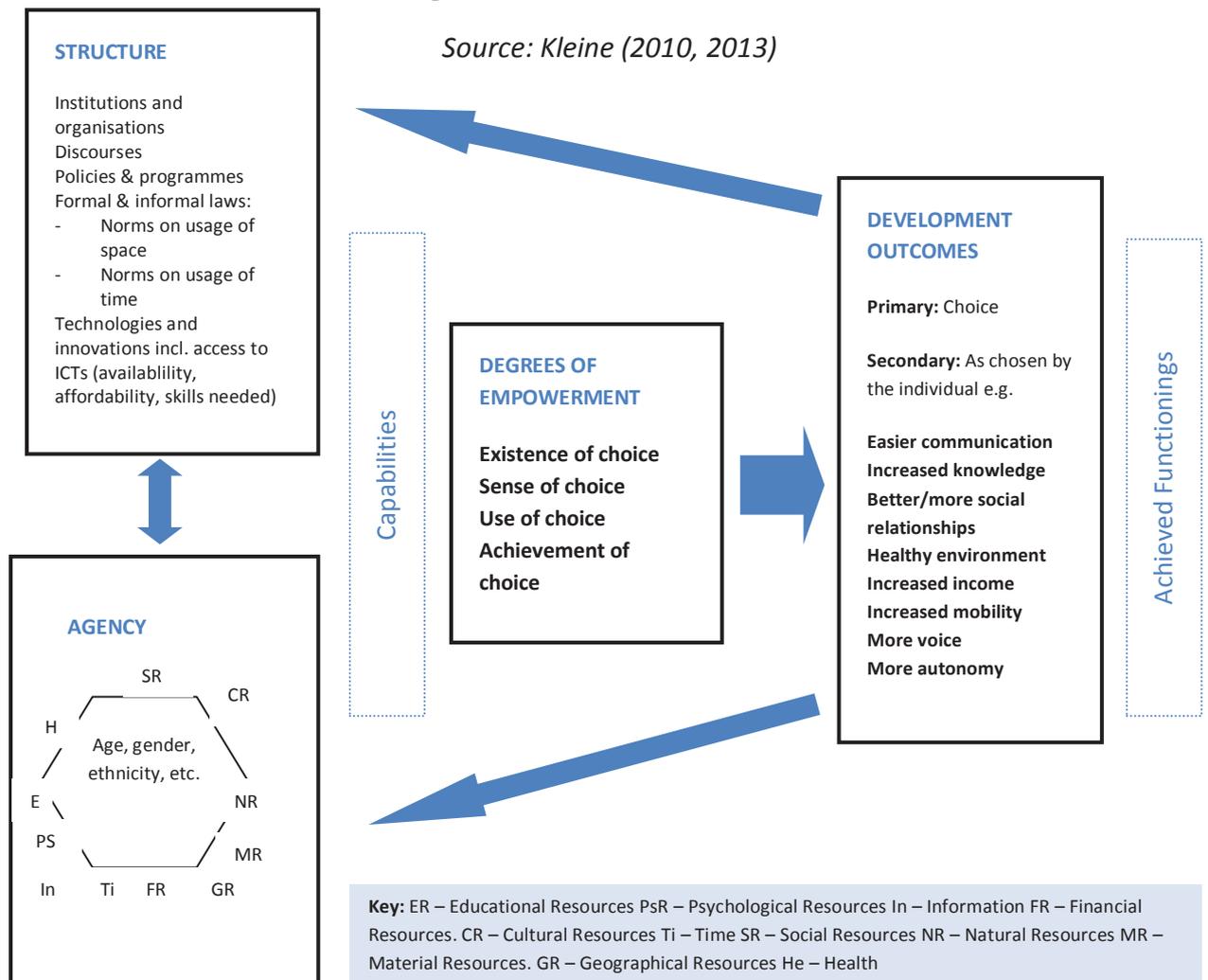
As a holistic approach emphasising the importance of choice, Capabilities theory is well-suited to analysing people's use of technologies and the choices they may give people in the economic, social and political spheres of their lives. Bjorn Soren-Gigler (2011, 2015) and Dorothea Kleine (2010, 2013) are two ICT4D scholars who have attempted to apply the approach to understanding how ICTs can enhance the well-being of poor communities. The next section of this chapter will look at the utility of these frameworks for the purposes of this study, beginning with Kleine's Choice Framework.

### **Kleine's Choice Framework**

Dorothea Kleine (2010, 2013) developed the Choice Framework as a way systemically to analyse the effect of ICT policies on local livelihoods in Chile. She argues it may also be used as a "living tool" to analyse development processes and the planning and assessment of development activities within these processes (Kleine, 2010, p.679). The framework (see Figure 1) brings together elements from the literature on empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005) and sustainable livelihoods (Bebbington, 1999), to provide a holistic view of all the factors that shape ICT use in a development context. These include structure (societal) and agency (people's resources), linked by capabilities to degrees of empowerment (choice) which lead ultimately to development outcomes and to achieved functionings. An explanation of the different components of the framework follows, beginning with development outcomes, in the box on the far right of Figure 1, followed by degrees of empowerment, agency and structure. According to Kleine, the primary development outcome for an individual is choice, which she says aligns with Sen's idea that choice is both the aim and the means of development. Secondary outcomes are chosen by the individual and depend on what they value. They can include easier communication, increased knowledge, more social relationships and more autonomy as well as increased income. The outcomes reflect the achieved functionings (on the far right), that result from a person's choices.

**Figure 1: The Choice Framework**

Source: Kleine (2010, 2013)



In analysing the process of development, it is necessary to work backwards from the development outcomes, from right to left.

As can be seen from Figure 1, Kleine adds “sense of choice” to Alsop and Heinsohn’s (2005) degrees of empowerment (the existence of choice, the use of choice, and the achievement of choice), as she argues that people have to weigh up whether to use/not use before moving to the next dimension, actual use. For Kleine, it is the resource portfolio (bottom left) which is the basis for agency. This includes people’s material resources (e.g. computers), financial resources (cash, savings, ability to get credit), geographical resources (location and proximity to services and IT infrastructure), human resources (health, education and skills), psychological resources (self confidence, tenacity, optimism, creativity and resilience), information (access being the first step to attaining meaningful knowledge), and social resources.

Structures (top left) which help or hinder the exercise of individual agency in an ICT context include aspects of access such as availability, but Kleine also includes “discourses” as think spaces in which policies are conceived, and the formal and informal rules which dictate how people can use their space and time. There is a complex relationship between these factors and a person’s resource portfolio.

As a “simplified picture of reality” for evaluating people’s ICT use (Kleine, 2013, p.51), the Choice Framework has much to recommend it, particularly as development outcomes are chosen by the individual, which drive research, evaluation and planning. However, Kleine’s model does not specify which capabilities may be valuable in achieving development outcomes, unlike the Alternative Evaluation Framework developed by Gigler (2011, 2015), as will now be discussed.

### **Gigler’s Alternative Evaluation Framework (AEF)**

Bjorn Soren-Gigler also sought to operationalise the Capability Approach to show how the uses of ICTs can enhance poor people’s individual and collective capabilities to achieve lives they value (Gigler, 2015, p. 15). However, Gigler’s approach differs from Kleine’s in that he sees empowerment as the ability of the poor to negotiate with the formal institutions of the market, civil society and the state (2011, p.5). Central to this process is the acquisition of *informational capabilities*: the ability to transform informational capital, such as access to ICTs and information from state and community sources, into human agency and real opportunities in society to achieve the things a person values doing or being (2011, p. 8). Gigler sees the role of information as central, as is a person’s ability to analyse information critically and place it in his or her own socio-cultural context. Just as when a person’s writing and reading skills are enhanced, improved access to information and enhanced informational capabilities can enhance people’s ability to make important life choices, leading to their empowerment. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, refugees may face significant problems in access and using information on their journeys and in settling in host societies. Gigler’s specification and description of informational capabilities make aspects of the AEF particularly useful as a framework for this study.

Gigler argues that individual empowerment is the only “dimension in which the use of ICTs can directly enhance people’s well-being” (2011, p.21). Within the process of individual empowerment, he distinguishes between informational, psychological, social, economic, political and cultural dimensions, which enhance people’s human capabilities in different ways.

He asserts that the potentially positive impact of ICTs on the psychological empowerment of the poor can lead to improved agency and self esteem which can enhance, for instance, the ability to find a job, thus improving the economic aspects of one's life. Gigler points out that improved access to information through ICTs has a mostly indirect effect on the poor: it is a complex, multidimensional process and there are no direct cause and effect relationships between ICTs and information, human capabilities and people's well-being (2011, p. 13). Gigler's Alternative Evaluation Framework (Figure 2) unpacks the indirect effects of the technology on well-being. It also uses participants' own perceptions of the impact of ICTs on their lives — in all their dimensions — as the main criteria for analysis. The key elements of Gigler's AEF are now described.

Drawing on Capability theory, Gigler views the lives of poor people as embedded in a broader socioeconomic, political and cultural Context which is external to their capabilities (Kleine calls this structure but also includes institutions and organisation, policies and processes, laws etc). Belonging to a specific marginalised group can significantly constrain access to key resources such as education or electricity, healthcare, or employment, independent of people's individual characteristics which lead to "unrealized functionings" and "unfreedoms". Gigler includes demographics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, in this area, whereas Kleine sees these as personal resources influencing people's individual agency. Livelihood Resources (second from left in Figure 2) are the different types of human capital available for people to transform valued functions into realised functionings. Like Kleine, Gigler draws here on Bebbington's (1999) Sustainable Livelihoods approach. Social capital is an important resource.<sup>6</sup> Informational capital can play an important agency role in expanding poor peoples' human and social capabilities, so it is critical to assess existing informational assets (or capital) before looking at effects of any ICT intervention (as explained in the Stages of ICT Programs, also in Figure 2). Within institutional processes, which include existing social structures and information systems, Gigler sees intermediaries, organisations or individuals who support local communities to use and adopt technology, as critical in helping communities overcome barriers to information access and use. Intermediaries can help people to acquire basic ICT capabilities and may provide them with as many of the resources in an information chain as possible: not just technology, but the economic, social and action resources needed to turn

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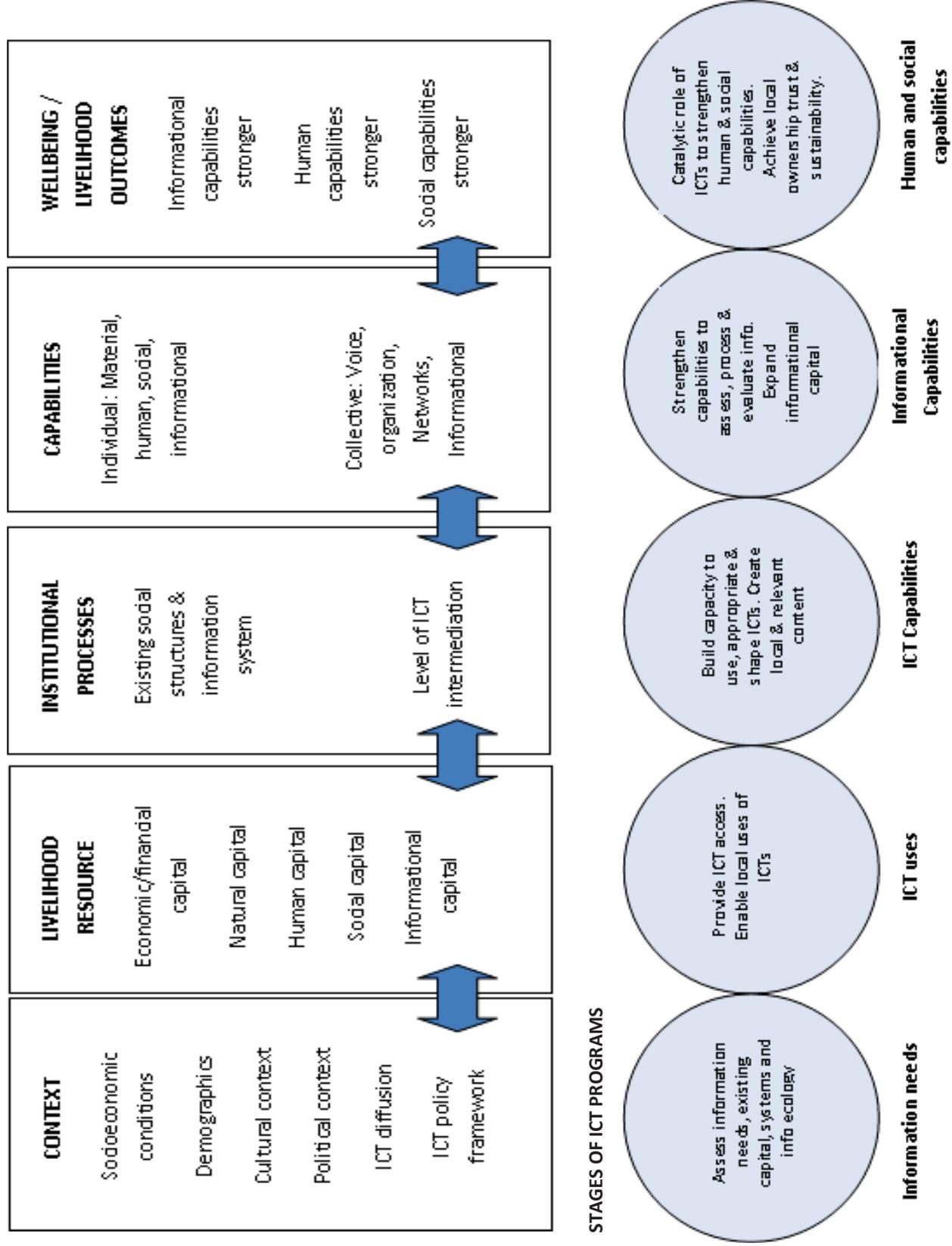
<sup>6</sup> The concept of social capital is explained in Chapter 3, but at this point can be defined as: "...the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (Bourdieu, in Szeman & Kaposy, 2010, p.86).

data into learning decisions and actions of value (Heeks, 2002, p.8). By including capabilities in the impact chain, Gigler acknowledges it is the “capability divide” (ibid, p.4) rather than the digital divide, that warrants attention in development programmes. Technological interventions must address the gaps in individual resources (material, human, social, informational) and in the collective resources of the group or community (voice, organisation, networks, informational). As explained earlier, the extent to which ICT programmes enhance people’s *informational capabilities* is most critical in determining the impact of ICTs on their well-being outcomes.

Informational capabilities refer to a person’s capability to use ICTs in an effective manner (ICT capability); to find, process, evaluate and use information (information literacy); to communicate effectively with family members, friends and professional contacts (communications capability); and to produce and share local content with others through the network (content capability). Other well-being outcomes include strengthened human capabilities (as previously described) and social (group) capabilities, which include aspects like organisational, social and economic development, political participation and cultural identity. As the “Stages of ICT Programs” shows (circles in Figure 2), to be truly participative and user centred, ICT programmes should evolve, from the information gathering phase, to being locally owned, trusted and sustainable.

To sum up, Gigler moves beyond the existence of choice as a development outcome and the extent to which people are empowered to make choices (measured in degrees in Kleine’s model), to a framework that takes a big picture view of how context, livelihood resources, institutional processes and informational capabilities shape how people use ICTs to achieve well-being. For Gigler, choice leads to empowerment, but for Kleine, empowerment leads to choice. However, what is missing from Gigler’s chain is a clear articulation of what wellbeing/livelihood outcomes actually lead to: what they enable people to achieve. For instance, what do stronger informational, human or social capabilities result in, in terms of what people want to be and do? This is better understood and described in Kleine’s model.

Figure 2: Gigler's Alternative Evaluation Framework. Source: Bjorn Soren Gigler, 2015.



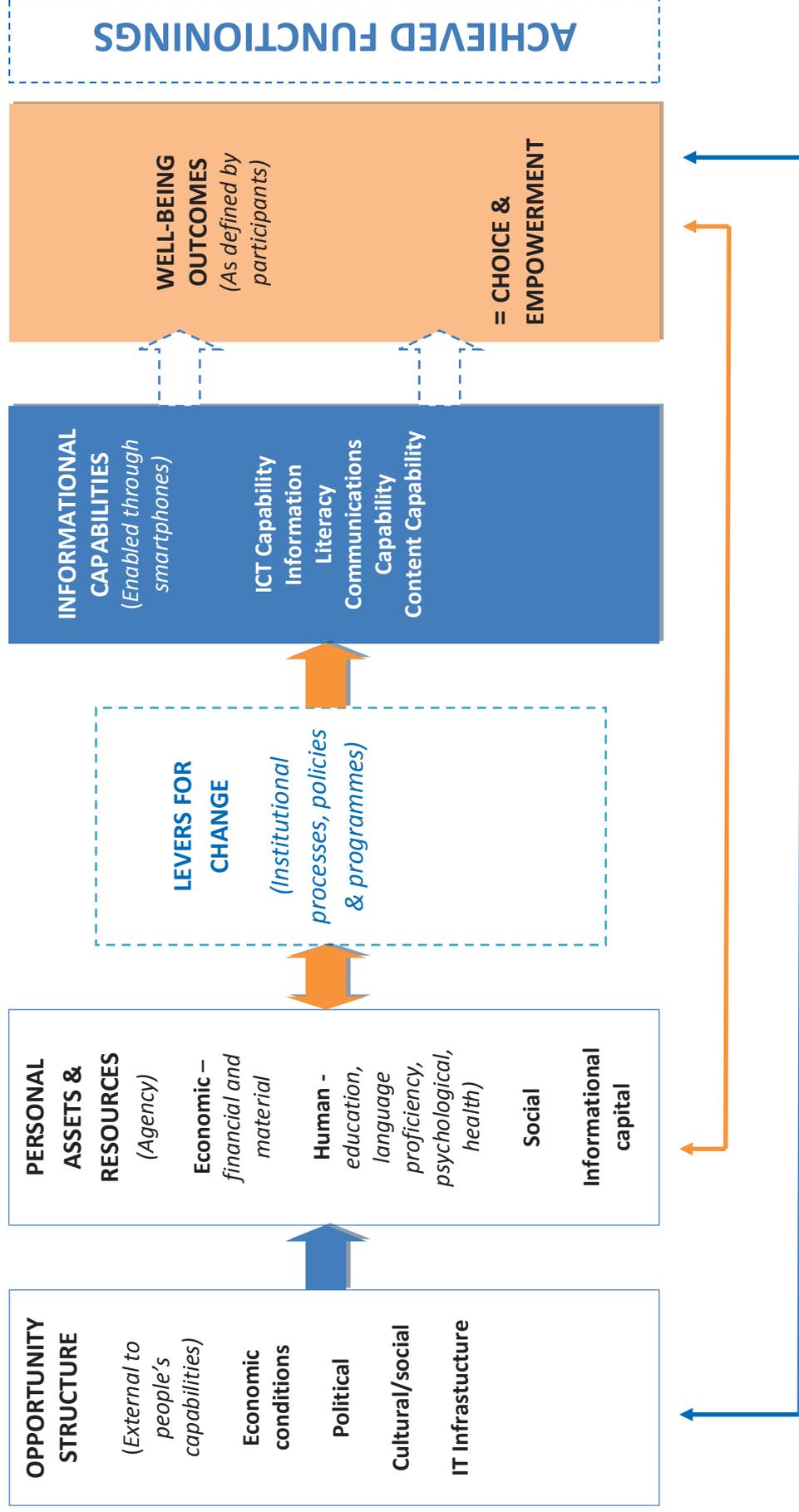
Both Gigler and Kleine have sought to apply the Capability Approach in a practical and systemic way to evaluating the contribution technology makes to enhancing poor people's capabilities to achieve lives they value. However, these are frameworks for evaluating technological development projects in a community setting, in which collective capabilities are important to improving people's economic livelihoods. The fit is a little awkward for this study which is more interested in understanding how and why individuals use a particular form of ICT and the outcomes that may result. The Smartphone Evaluation Framework (SEF) has been developed to analyse the findings in this study. It draws on elements of both frameworks while trying to overcome the limits of each given the current research context, as explained in the following section. Figure 3 sets out the main elements of the SEF.

### **The Smartphone Evaluation Framework**

Like the models developed by Gigler and Kleine, the SEF addresses contextual factors influencing refugees' smartphone use (far left). As in Kleine's model these are conceived of as structural influences which impact on people's opportunity to use ICTs to expand their capabilities. In the second box, I refer to personal assets and resources, and view these as components of agency, rather than as (economic) livelihood resources, as they are defined by Gigler. The third box, in the centre of the diagram, refers to the kinds of interventions or support that may be required from government and civil society to support refugees' technology use: these will be ascertained when the evaluation is complete. In Gigler's diagram these are referred to as existing institutional processes and would be relevant in evaluating existing ICT4D projects. However for this evaluation I am interested in identifying new interventions which will facilitate the use of smartphones to enhance people's capabilities which may include institutional processes, programmes and intermediaries.

Figure 3: Smartphone Evaluation Framework I

Source: Author (2016), following Gigler (2011,2015) and Kleine (2010, 2013).



In the fourth box, and following Gigler, I have identified that informational capabilities are most appropriate in this setting. As explained in the previous section of this chapter, Gigler sees a person's ability to critically analyse and use information as essential to improving their life choices, leading to their empowerment. The literature surveyed in Chapter 3 will show the crucial significance of timely, accurate information for refugees and migrants on their journeys. Gigler's emphasis on informational capabilities is the main reason why I favour his model over Kleine's approach. Kleine's model refers broadly to capabilities but does not specify those that are important in people's use of technology to achieve development outcomes. I also follow Gigler's view of empowerment: i.e., that technology should expand people's choices, empowering them to successfully negotiate with the institutions of the market, civil society and the state (2011, p.5). Kleine's "degrees of empowerment" seems to split hairs, and it is not easy to see the relationship or contribution to people's development outcomes. Interestingly, these development (wellbeing/livelihood) outcomes are not particularly well described in either Kleine's or Gigler's models. Both authors avoid this by appearing to follow Sen in noting that these should be defined by the participants in the evaluation, with which I would concur. Like Sen, I believe that collectively these will be understood as facets of choice and that is why these have been left blank on the SEF at this stage of the evaluation. However, setting this consideration aside, the outcomes identified by Gigler and Kleine after undertaking their evaluations are still very high-level (e.g. Gigler's "human capabilities stronger"). In Gigler's case this may be because he does not see a direct cause and effect relationship between the variables and the outcomes in his framework and so is reluctant to specify what the well-being or livelihood outcomes may be.

## 2.5 Summary

The Capability Approach is a normative approach for evaluating human development that goes beyond utility or economic indicators to look at how people can be empowered to live lives they value. Well-being is understood as both an "aspect" and state of being, but also as the freedom to achieve valuable capabilities: to use the various resources available to them, including technology, to expand their capabilities to achieve various functionings. These functionings may include being nourished, being confident, or being able to travel or participate in political decisions (Alkire, 2005). The aim of human development is to expand people's freedoms and this requires choice. The efficacy of people's choices depends on the

kinds of social structures within which they operate and is linked to their personal traits or material assets, which can include ICTs.

However access to the technology is not enough: the poor and disadvantaged require personal, social, and environmental conversion factors to turn their assets into capabilities and functionings. Several ICT4D practitioners have attempted to map the relationships among context or structure, assets or agency, capability and development outcomes to understand better how technology can help improve the well-being of the rural poor. Frameworks developed by Dorothea Kleine and Bjorn Gigler, which draw on empowerment and sustainable livelihoods approaches, provide a comprehensive ecological view of poor people's technology use and their capabilities to achieve development outcomes. Gigler's emphasis on the importance of acquiring informational capabilities — the ability to transform access to ICTs into real opportunities to achieve the things one values — is particularly relevant to this study. These and other elements from Gigler's Alternative Evaluation Framework are incorporated into a Smartphone Evaluation Framework which will be used to analyse the findings of this research.

Despite the evident strengths of the Capability Approach, however, there appears to be very little research that examines how, or if, ICTs can improve refugees' capabilities. In fact, as the next chapter shows, the topic of refugees' use of ICTs in general seems to be significantly under-researched.

## CHAPTER 3 Literature Review: The Connected Refugee

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### 3.1 Introduction

Reports of Syrian refugees and migrants using smartphones to get to Europe seemed to come as some surprise in 2015, but the link between migration and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) has been the focus of academic attention for years, and both are seen as globalising forces in the mainstream literature (see Castells, 2000). Contemporary migration is “embedded in the dynamics of the information society” (Ros et al., 2007, p.6). Consequently, ICTs are viewed as critical to the multidirectional flow of information and resources among members of that society, wherever they are and wherever they may go. However, within this literature refugees are largely invisible. There is minimal focus on the specific importance of ICTs to refugees who, like migrants, are also affected by issues of migration and marginalisation (Leung, Finney Lamb & Emrys, 2009). “Cyberia”, the brave new world of information and communications technologies described by Arturo Escobar<sup>7</sup> would appear not to include the displaced. There are even fewer studies that adopt a Capabilities lens to consider how refugees or migrants use ICTs. Thus, understanding how the role of ICTs in refugees’ lives has been studied and theorised requires casting the net wider to include studies of transnational migrants’ information and communications practices, as well as those which focus on themes pertinent to refugee contexts, such as information precarity, and social exclusion.

### 3.2 The Network Society

We live in a Network Society interconnected by power, wealth, management and communication networks in which distance is irrelevant and we experience “timeless time” (Castells, 2000). Social structures and practices are organised around microelectronics-based networks of information and communication. New communications technologies, modern transportation, and social changes linked to ICTs are validating and reinforcing human capabilities of rapid information sharing (ibid). Within the mobile Network Society, people may

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<sup>7</sup> Return to Cyberia: technology and the social worlds of transnational migrants, was focus of the entire April 2006 issue of the *Global Networks* journal. Taking Escobar’s cue, a range of authors including Wilding and Benitez looked at the impact of ICTs on transnational migrants.

be connected to more than one network or household as networked individuals, separately operating their own networks to get information and support, to collaborate, to socialise and to gain a sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001, p.16). Wellman describes these social activities across borders as “glocalised networks”, comprising communities of shared interest rather than communities of shared kinship or locality (ibid, p. 13). These concepts of interconnection and networked individualism, facilitated by new communications media, are important in understanding the role of technology in the lives of migrants and refugees.

Within the Network Society, migrants create social fields that connect and position them in more than one country at the same time. Social fields are defined as “a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed” (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992, p.1). These ideas and practices constitute social capital<sup>8</sup> which can make the process of migration easier, helping migrants to manage the associated risks and costs. Migrant networks provide the infrastructure and ICTs provide the means to transmit capital. Transnational approaches to migration describe how social, political and economic practices and resources are exchanged across national borders, although some authors argue that translocal better describes the physical, geographic dimension of cities and the social relations within and beyond them (Appadurai, 1995; Sinatti, 2006). Based on her study of Senegalese diaspora<sup>9</sup> in Italy, Sinatti shows that migrants tend to congregate in urban settlements that become “collective modes of reference”, or translocalities (Sinatti, 2006, p.30). However, ICTs play a positive role in both transnational and translocal contexts, facilitating the communication processes through which migrants come to integrate and assimilate in their host societies, while enabling them to maintain their long distance and social networks (Komito, 2011, p.1077). As Diminescu observes:

The paradigmatic figure of the uprooted migrant is yielding to another ... a migrant on the move who relies on alliances outside his own group of belonging without cutting his ties with the social network at home (Diminescu, 2008, p.567)

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<sup>8</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, This study follows Pierre Bourdieu who defines social capital as: ...the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition — or in other words, to membership in a group — which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, in Szeman & Kaposy, 2010, p.86).

<sup>9</sup> Diaspora are described as “the spread of migrant communities away from a real or imagined ‘homeland’” (Van Hear, 2014, p.176). Within transnationalism, studies on “diaspora” have shed light on the social reality of migrants (and refugees) in host societies and the role of ICTs (see also Wahlbeck, 2002).

Migrants in the Network Society may use a range of ICT media and platforms to communicate and share information across networks of family, friends and acquaintances. A number of transnational studies highlight the importance of such connections for people spread across geographies, separated by time and space, described as a “culture of bonds” (Diminescu 2008, p.565). Given the dearth of empirical research on refugees’ ICT use, such studies provide useful insights as to how refugees might employ ICTs to maintain long distance relationships, as will now be discussed.

### 3.3 The Culture of Bonds

The proliferation of mobile phones and prepaid calling cards has resulted in an “explosion” of affordable cross-border communication between migrants and their families and friends (Vertovec, 2004, p.219). Today, there are almost as many mobile cellular subscriptions as there are people in the world; seven billion and rising (ITU, 2015a, p.2). The ubiquity of mobile phones in migrant settings has led to a number of studies, mostly on their contribution to maintaining personal relationships and the psychological and emotional well-being migrants derive from this (see Aricat, 2015; Madianou & Miller 2011, 2012; Marino, 2015; Horst, 2006; Thomas & Lim, 2011; Vertovec, 2004; Wilding, 2006). Email, instant messaging, social networking sites, webcam and texting are also revolutionising the way transnational families and friends communicate (Madianou & Miller, 2012). In Raelene Wilding’s (2006) study of migrant families in seven countries, participants spoke of the “miracle” of cheap and easy communication by telephone, email and fax, which enabled them construct or imagine a connected relationship with families at home. Email, in particular, allowed participants to transcend time and space, and the fact of communicating was just as important as its content (Wilding, 2006, p.132). However, particular media may be selected by migrants because of the different intimacies they afford. For instance, before the rise of Skype and Facetime, Salvadoran migrant families in one study favoured teleconferencing because they could see, hear and speak to several family members at the same time (Benitez, 2006). Among transnational Jamaicans, the mobile phone was favoured over other forms of communication because they could hear their loved one’s voices (Horst, 2006). Similarly, Madianou and Miller (2011) found that UK-based Filipino mothers favoured mobile phones to communicate with their children because of the “emotionality of voice communication” ( p.467). The mothers also felt that the phones improved their ability to parent at a distance. In a more recent study of Filipino migrants in the UK, Madianou (in Kilkey & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2016) observed that

Skype provides a vehicle for emotional support to close family members. Phones and Skype were also the most popular communication methods among Brazilian, Moroccan, and Ukrainian migrants, followed by social media and email, in a study by Dekker, Engbersen and Faber (2016). The findings of these more recent studies highlight that communication practices are changing as a result of the rapid pace of technological development. Madianou and Miller (2012) observe that transnational family communication no longer takes place using a single technology but that families can now choose among a variety of media, or polymedia, via devices like smartphones. Prerequisites to using polymedia include access to a wide range of mobile and internet based media, digital media literacy, and cost free infrastructure (Madianou & Miller, 2012, p. 126). The choice of media in managing relationships becomes significant in situations of polymedia. For example, when a person chooses email (asynchronous), over calling or video calling (synchronous) it may be to distance themselves in the communication (Madianou, 2016).

### **Well-being**

These studies highlight the crucial importance of being connected and being able to communicate to migrants' well-being. Whether forced or voluntary, the process of migration, and the need to adjust to new social norms and traditions, is stressful. However, refugees and asylum seekers in particular, are likely to have experienced persecution, extreme stress, deprivation and trauma as a result of their displacement (Marlowe, in Stone, Dennis, Rizova, Smith & Hou, 2016). Strong social support can improve the psychological emotional well-being of refugees (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). A study of refugees' communication and information experiences in Greece and Germany confirms the psychological importance to refugees of being connected and online (Hannides et al., 2016). Participants who stayed in contact with other refugees and who had wide networks of family and friends (via mobile networks and social networking sites) were likely to be more resilient than those less well connected. These networks enabled them to access information to help them understand their situation and make critical decisions (p.25). Refugees in a UNHCR study living in ten different countries identified communication with friends and family as the most important need from connectivity (UNHCR, 2016, p.16). Social media played an essential role in keeping refugees connected with their loved ones. The social media most often used by participants were Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, Viber and Gmail. In Mason and Buchmann's study (2016) Facebook and WhatsApp, were most used to keep in touch with family but Viber, Telegram,

Line and WeChat were also used by refugees. Voice calls and voicemail were widely used, in part due to illiteracy or an inability to type in Arabic.

Thus ICTs such as smartphones can enhance the “culture of bonds” between migrants and refugees and their families and friends, facilitating the flow of information to reduce the financial and emotional costs of being apart. Mobile phones and smartphones enable people to access psychosocial support as well as need-to-know information essential to their journeys, as will now be discussed.

### **3.4 Information for Survival**

The literature on migrants’ use of ICTs indicates that different media may be used at different times to share information. Hiller and Franz (2004) found that internet searches, email, bulletin boards and chat rooms were used to develop new social ties and nourish old ones in different ways in pre-migration, post-migration and settlement phases. Many studies point to the importance of social media as a source of social capital: information that can help lower the costs and risks of migration. Social media are defined as: “Online applications containing user-generated content which are part of an open (or semi-open) network infrastructure enabling social networking”, (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p.403). Social media encompass blogs, collaborative media like Wikipedia, social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, content communities like YouTube, and even virtual social and gaming worlds. They enable the “many-to-many” sharing of media-rich content (Dekker, Engbersen & Faber, 2016, p.540).

According to McGregor and Siegel (2013), social media can actually trigger and facilitate migration. The work of Dekker and Engbersen (2013; 2014) supports this finding. The authors claim social media create “a deterritorialized space” that facilitates migration by maintaining strong ties with family and friends, and weak ties with acquaintances that may be helpful in migrating or settling in a new place. Social media also help establish latent ties useful to these processes that migrants may call on at a future date. Social media provide migrants with insider knowledge or “backstage” information that is discreet and unofficial. Information on laws, jobs, accommodation or illegal ways of crossing borders can pass quickly among migrant networks and influence people’s plans. “One can view this both as the democratization of knowledge for migrants and as a form of silent resistance to restrictive immigration regimes” (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p.414). At the same time however, social media can also be the source of false or unrealistic information, promoting nonexistent jobs and other opportunities.

The authors note that people's motives to exchange information or assistance on social media are less likely to be altruistic and more likely to help serve their personal or financial interests. Weak ties might provide more information, but are not reliable as strong ties (p.413). This is evidenced by numerous media reports on the use of social media such as Facebook by people traffickers and smugglers (see Grossman, 2014).

Several studies have shown that ethno cultural diasporic communities actively use the internet to connect, to share information and for social mobilisation (Bernal, 2006; Borkert et al., 2009; Norris, 2001; Panagakos & Horst, 2006). In doing so, these groups create communities of choice, rather than communities of place. These spaces of "digital togetherness" make integration less traumatic (Marino, 2015, p.6). There is some debate among scholars as to whether these kinds of transnational activities may impede migrants' integration into their host country (Snel, Engbersen & Leerkes, 2006). The question also arises as to whether being online to friends and family at home, comes at the cost of "proximate relationships" in one's new country (Panagakos & Horst, 2006, p.112). Among students of migrant backgrounds in New Zealand, however, social media were used to maintain and augment relationships across family networks around the world, while *simultaneously* creating or intensifying local relationships and influencing a sense of belonging within increasingly diverse societies. (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2016, p.3).

In sum, the studies surveyed here show how, in the lexicon of the Capability Approach, migrants are using ICTs to build their human, social and informational capabilities (Gigler, 2011, 2015). The literature on diasporic communities referred to above suggests they may also use ICTs to enhance their collective capabilities: their voice, organisation, networks, and the informational capabilities of their ethno-cultural groups. Scholars of refugees and migrant studies have tended to focus on the effects of these transnational activities on integration into host societies. The notions of belonging and social inclusion are particularly problematic for refugees, as people who have been displaced, and technology may play a significant role in this regard, as supported by the following section of this literature review.

### **3.5 Social Exclusion as an Information Problem**

Wilding (2009) notes that refugees are largely defined by their forced displacement, prompting social researchers to reconsider issues like community and belonging. Belonging often relates to ideas of "home", but can also be understood as a feeling of familiarity, security and connectedness, rather than as a fixed abode (Marlowe et. al, p.4). Such feelings are essential

to people's well-being. Studies by Marlowe et al., (2016) and Gifford and Wilding (2014) show that the connections that ICTs facilitate among people, across space and time, may lead to a new understanding of belonging in which technology is essential. Belonging, then, is understood as resulting from social connection and social inclusion, while marginalisation and alienation arise from social exclusion, which is a significant issue for refugees.

Social exclusion describes the ways in which people "might be prevented from fully participating in the societies in which they (were) living" (Wilding 2009, p. 161). It results in the "fencing in of opportunities" by states, institutions and civil society who control access to resources (Jacobsen, 2016, p.101). Some authors posit that social exclusion can be seen as an information problem made all the more difficult because of refugees' social, cultural and ethnic diversity and differing levels of literacy and ability to access technology (Hannides et al., 2016). A number of studies highlight that as displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers face considerable information and communications challenges both during their journeys and in establishing themselves in a new country (Caidi & Allard, 2005; Hannides, Bailey, & Kaoukji, 2016; Gillespie et al., 2016; Leung, Finney Lamb & Emrys, 2009; Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson & Qayyum, 2013). For example, refugees travelling to Europe, those in camps in Greece, and those arriving in Berlin considered themselves to be in transit at all times, so their greatest need was for timely and reliable information as to what to do next. They were unsure about their rights and status and did not know which sources to trust. Information from official sources was often inconsistent and inaccurate. Changes to national asylum policies and border status also made it hard to access timely and accurate information (Hannides et al., 2016). Gillespie et al., (2016) found that Syrian and Iraqi refugees travelling through Europe also experienced problems accessing up to date information on asylum seeking procedures, transportation, translation and communication, health and social services. Without reliable, accurate digital information they had to depend on unreliable sources of news and information — particularly from smugglers. News was trusted when it was vetted and shared by friends and family through social media or sourced from international news channels. This situation has been described as information precarity: "the condition of instability that refugees experience in accessing news and personal information, potentially leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumors (*sic*) that can affect their economic and social capital" (Wall, Otis Campbell & Jabek, 2015, p.1). The authors found that Syrian refugees at a camp in Jordan experienced several forms of information precarity including limited technological and social access to news and information, the circulation of irrelevant and sometimes dangerous information, and surveillance by the state. Social media were seen as

sources of misinformation. Participants trusted only information provided by people with whom they had a personal connection.

Language and literacy barriers, and an inability to understand the cultural dimensions of communication and information can lead to disempowerment or social exclusion (ibid, p.138). For example, Lloyd et al. (2013) describe the social exclusion of refugees settled in Australia as arising from their inability to recognise and understand important sources of information that enable them to deal with everyday situations. To compound matters, agencies' use of digital technologies assumed refugees had access to ICTs and knew how to use them. However, participants did not turn to the internet for information because of issues with language and literacy and the costs of buying a computer and an internet connection (Kennan, Lloyd, Qayyum & Thompson, 2011). This finding highlights a significant issue for refugees: that digital solutions to situations of information poverty and precarity are problematic for people with limited resources and in this regard, refugees may also be significantly disadvantaged, as illustrated by the following studies.

### **Digitally Disadvantaged**

Within Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D), scholars and practitioners have tended to focus on social exclusion mainly in terms of unequal access to technology and infrastructure in developing countries (Mansell, 2002). But as Wilding (2009) notes, this "digital divide" does not really address the complex relationships among technology, society, and people's marginalisation (p.162). Access to ICTs does not mean people will engage with them more or feel more socially included as a result (Panagakos & Horst, 2006). A more nuanced explanation is proffered by Guillen & Suarez (2005) who describe the divide as: "Inequities in the access and use of ICTs across geography and within communities, shaped by the economic, political and sociological context in which it occurs", (ibid, p.683). The inequities that refugees encounter are now described.

For refugees from the global South, differences in internet access between their countries of origin and settlement undoubtedly influences their ability to use ICTs, and their familiarity with technology, but also how they communicate with friends and family at home. For example, while more than 80 percent of people in developed countries use the internet, just 20 percent do so in Africa (ITU, 2015b). A study of young Eritrean refugees in Norway illustrates the effect of this digital divide. Participants relied on the internet to keep in touch with networks of friends around the world, rather than people in their home countries because of the

unreliability and poor quality of internet access in their home countries (Brekke, 2008). There may also be inequities in access to technologies within societies, between refugees as displaced people and the rest of the population, as highlighted by the UNHCR report on refugees and connectivity (2016). While 93 percent of refugees live in places where there is at least a 2G network, they are half as likely as the general population to have an internet-enabled phone. Refugees are often living without the connectivity they need to access information and basic services or to communicate with loved ones. According to Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: “The digital revolution transforming the world is leaving refugees behind” (UNHCR, 2016, p.5).

Refugees’ limited financial resources are a significant barrier to connectivity. They may spend up to one third of their disposable income on staying connected and this will often take priority over education, clothing and healthcare. Also, mobile data plans are complicated and many refugees will avoid buying them (UNHCR, 2016). Syrian refugees in the study by Wall et al., (2015), opted to keep a cellphone at the expense of other needs. Khorshed and Imran (2015) found significant inequalities among refugee groups not just in access and in their ability to use the different technologies effectively, but also to pay for services, compared with other migrant groups. Refugees in one Australian study preferred to use their mobile phone but their communications practices were shaped by cost as well as the quality and reliability of services and coverage (Leung et al., 2009)

Refugees’ abilities to use ICTs may be shaped by demographics like age, gender, class and education (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). The authors found that migrants over the age of 60 tended not to use online communication and more educated migrants had better internet skills. In the UNHCR study (2016), poor literacy was the second most significant factor affecting technology use. The study also showed there were variations across age groups, and backgrounds. Younger people and those from urban settings had higher levels of digital literacy than those from the country. Use of the internet by refugees in New Zealand depended on their levels of education, language skills, and computer experience (Kabbar & Crump, 2006). Leung, Finney Lamb and Emrys (2009) observed that poor literacy and English-language skills made it hard for refugees in Australia to learn new technologies, especially those that require written language skills, such as SMS, email and the internet.

Thus, while digital infrastructures can be a significant factor in refugees’ use of ICTS, refugees’ limited personal “resource endowments”, in the form of money, literacy, language and computer skills, may inhibit their use of technology (Heeks, 2002) and contribute to their social exclusion in host societies. Recent research on refugees’ use of smartphones indicates this

polymedia technology may help overcome some of these barriers, although informational and technology literacy may still be an issue for some refugees, as will now be discussed

### **Smartphone as Silver Bullet?**

Harney (2013) noted that mobile phones are “indispensable for the social and economically dispossessed” (p.547). Smartphones bring together all the functions of a PC with mobile telephony and internet connectivity, creating an environment of “polymedia” (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Where once smartphones may have been considered luxury items, surveys by telecommunications provider Ericsson indicate that today about 45 percent of all mobile phone subscriptions around the world are for smartphones. By the end of 2016 the number of smartphone subscriptions was predicted to surpass those for basic phones. Limited access to fixed broadband means that for many people the smartphone will provide their first experience of the Internet (Ericsson, 2015).

For migrants and refugees, smartphones are like technological Swiss army knives equipped with GPS, mapping, translation, messaging and video calling apps which enable them to access essential information for the journey and communicate with family and friends (Brunwasser, 2015; Dubinsky, 2015; Graham, 2015; Koslowska, 2015). Several recent research reports confirm that smartphones or internet-enabled phones are popular among refugees and are widely used. For example, a study of young people in the Zatari camp in Jordan revealed 86 percent owned a mobile handset and more than half used them to access the internet at least once a day (Koons, 2016). More than half the refugees in camps around Attica had used a smartphone on their journey (KAPA research, in Gillespie et al., 2016). Smartphones may be more prevalent among some ethnic groups than others. Younger, wealthier Syrian refugees may be more likely than other refugees to have access to smartphones (Hannides et al., 2016). Several authors insist that smartphones are vital for the current movement of refugees travelling Europe, and thus the digital infrastructure of websites, applications, messaging and voice call platforms is “as important as the physical infrastructure of roads, railways, sea crossings and the borders controlling the free movement of people”(Gillespie et al., 2016, p.2). Yet, owning a smartphone may also have a paradoxical presence in refugees’ lives. The digital traces they leave behind can make refugees the target of surveillance and intimidation (p.5). Harney (2013) observes that securitisation and control are key features of migration regimes in Europe (ibid, p.542). State surveillance has increased in recent years due to concerns about

possible links between irregular migration, terrorism and crime. A fear of surveillance may also be a barrier to using smartphones or internet-enabled phones.

Further, the barriers to refugees' ICT use identified in the previous section may also impact on their smartphone use. For example, many refugees surveyed by Mason & Buchmann (2016) in Jordan, Turkey and Greece owned smartphones but their levels of technology literacy were low (They did not use their smartphones to search for information and resources: information flows were mostly peer-to-peer. Downloading new applications was not a common behaviour. Few people "surfed" the web, and some were not familiar with the concept of a website. The authors also surmised that refugees may have a mistrust of traditional and media sources in their home countries. While there were some "outlier" individuals using a broader range of services for more sophisticated purposes, refugees mainly used social messaging apps to stay in contact with friends and family. The study indicates that smartphones are not the technological panacea for all refugees' ills, at least in part because refugees may not be able to develop the kinds of media literacies or *capabilities* they need to find and access the information they need on their journeys.

While the literature surveyed in this chapter may not use the discourse of the Capabilities Approach, it has shown that inequities in refugees' personal resources can impact on their ability to use technology to achieve valued functionings, including their social inclusion. Yet ICTs may still enable refugees to remove the unfreedom of social exclusion by facilitating social and cultural connections that result in capabilities that contribute to their social *inclusion*, as the following study by Andrade and Doolin (2016) shows.

### **3.6 A Capabilities Approach to Social Inclusion**

Andrade and Doolin's (2016) study of refugees settled in New Zealand is one of very few which draws on the Capability Approach to show how refugees' ICT use can build the informational and social capabilities that help them to lead valuable lives. The authors' understanding of social inclusion is consistent with Sen's (1999) notion of individuals having the freedom to live lives that they have reason to value: "to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be" (Robeyns, 2005, p. 95). For people who have experienced significant disruption, social inclusion is about ensuring they can effectively participate in their new society and regain control over their lives. Like other authors (Caidi et al., 2010; Lloyd et al., 2013), Andrade and Doolin view social exclusion as an information

problem that ICTs can help solve, but they argue that ICTs can also enable people to access social and support networks leading to their social inclusion.

The authors claim that ICT constitutes a resource from which a set of five valuable capabilities is derived: (1) participating in an information society (2) communicating effectively (3) understanding a new society (4) being socially connected and (5) expressing a cultural identity. For example, as part of the Information Society, participants used the internet to pay bills, look for work, shop and solve everyday problems. To communicate effectively in their new culture they chose the asynchronous, typed communication of email as an alternative to face-to-face or telephone conversations because they did not speak English. To understand their new society, participants relied on New Zealand news and information websites and internet searches to read about current affairs and political history, and the housing market. Participants remained socially connected by emailing others in their ethno cultural group in New Zealand and overseas. Social media were used by one particular community which had its own Facebook page. Otherwise people used Facebook to track down old friends to check on their welfare. Skype was used for family connections. As part of an ethno cultural network participants could use ICTs to “reaffirm who they are and where they are,” (Andrade & Doolin, 2016; p.411). For example, watching news online in one’s own language helped enhance a sense of cultural belonging, while using Facebook enabled participants to express their cultural identities. The authors conclude that, in mediating these capabilities, ICTs contribute to refugees’ social inclusion by expanding their opportunities to participate in society and providing some control over their circumstances.

The literature surveyed in the latter part of the chapter has highlighted the many disadvantages faced by refugees in accessing information and using technology; as a result there may be a temptation to slip into a kind of deficit thinking. However, as Andrade and Doolin (2016) observe, ICTs enable refugees to actively “mediate communicative and expressive activities that repair disrupted social and cultural lives” (p. 406). Social inclusion is not something that is *done* to refugees: it is a dynamic process in which they can participate equitably and thus exercise agency. In this regard, the study illustrates why a Capabilities Approach to evaluating ICT in development contexts is so important: it is not just access to the technology that matters; it is what people do with it to help themselves. The five capabilities refugees derive from using ICTs, like Gigler’s list of capabilities, encompass both informational and communications capabilities but also those related to social cohesion and cultural identity. So while social exclusion may be viewed as an information problem, it also has social and cultural dimensions, which ICTs also have the potential to address.

### 3.7 Summary

This chapter began by situating refugees' use of smartphones within the context of the Network Society in which ICTs enable migrants to communicate and share information and social capital transnationally and translocally to lessen the risks and costs of migration. Studies of transnational families and communities show how migrants use different ICT media to manage remote relationships and help them to create a culture of bonds. Refugees have been largely invisible in this literature, yet they face significant issues in terms of social exclusion and in accessing reliable information. They may also be digitally disadvantaged by differences in their social, personal and environmental resources. The increasing availability of smartphones, with their array of media affordances is creating new possibilities for communication and information-gathering, although refugees may not have informational or digital literacies to harness the full potential of the technology. The disadvantages faced by refugees in accessing information and using technology should not, however, overshadow the fact that people can use the technology to achieve valuable capabilities, as the study by Andrade and Doolin (2016) shows.

In identifying these themes, this literature review has provided important context for this study. It has also highlighted the role of people's social, personal and economic resources in converting the technology into the capabilities they need. As explained at the start of this chapter, there may be interpersonal differences in conversion factors which are framed by characteristics of the opportunity structure within which a person operates. In Italy this structure can be describe as an environment of unfreedoms (Sen, 1999), as will be explained in Chapter 4.



## CHAPTER 4 Context: “Unfreedoms” and Constraints

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### 4.1 Introduction

Amartya Sen argues there are five types of freedom instrumental in advancing human development: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. Development also requires removing sources of “unfreedoms” including poverty, tyranny, social deprivation, and poor economic opportunities. (Sen, 1999). The literature shows refugees living in Italy experience these unfreedoms on a daily basis. The situation for them is so marginal, it has been described as “La Strada dell’ Oblio” or “the way of oblivion” (Capussotti & Ellena, 2003). The purpose of this chapter is to provide context for this study by drawing on the available research reports and academic studies to describe the environment in which refugees in Rome must function. When viewed through a capabilities lens, refugees’ efforts to achieve well-being in Italy are highly constrained by an environment of bureaucracy and control; the lack of a coordinated reception system, integration policy and support for resettlement; poverty; and a lack of employment opportunities. The flow of migrants and refugees into Italy does not look likely to abate any time soon, while the country’s deteriorating economic situation means that conditions for refugees may worsen. Viewed as a capability mobility can be seen as both intrinsically and instrumentally important for human development (de Haas, 2009). However the capacity of refugees to exercise this capability may be severely constrained by their environment.

### 4.2 Perilous Journeys

Refugees arrive in Italy as asylum seekers and undocumented migrants from Nigeria, Mali, Gambia, Pakistan, Senegal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Ghana, Ukraine, the Ivory Coast, Guinea and Somalia (Ministero Dell’Interno, 2015). Driven out of their countries by war, conflict, violence, persecution and poverty, many risk their lives to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy. The journey is fraught with danger: on the way to Libya’s sea ports people experience abuse and ill treatment from smugglers, security forces and armed groups. Those who manage to negotiate passage across the sea are packed into overcrowded rubber dinghies or unseaworthy boats. According to the United Nations, 1.02 million people made the crossing in 2015; but 3,771 did not survive the journey (Smith-Spark, 2016). For those refugees who make it to Italy, the effects of such high levels of trauma can

take a terrible toll, leading to mental health problems and impacting on their ability to adapt to life in a new country (Lie, 2002). This situation does not improve much on arrival in Europe where refugees are likely to encounter a lengthy and bureaucratic asylum application process, a lack of coordinated reception and support, poor and overcrowded living conditions, and widespread discrimination and prejudice, as will now be discussed.

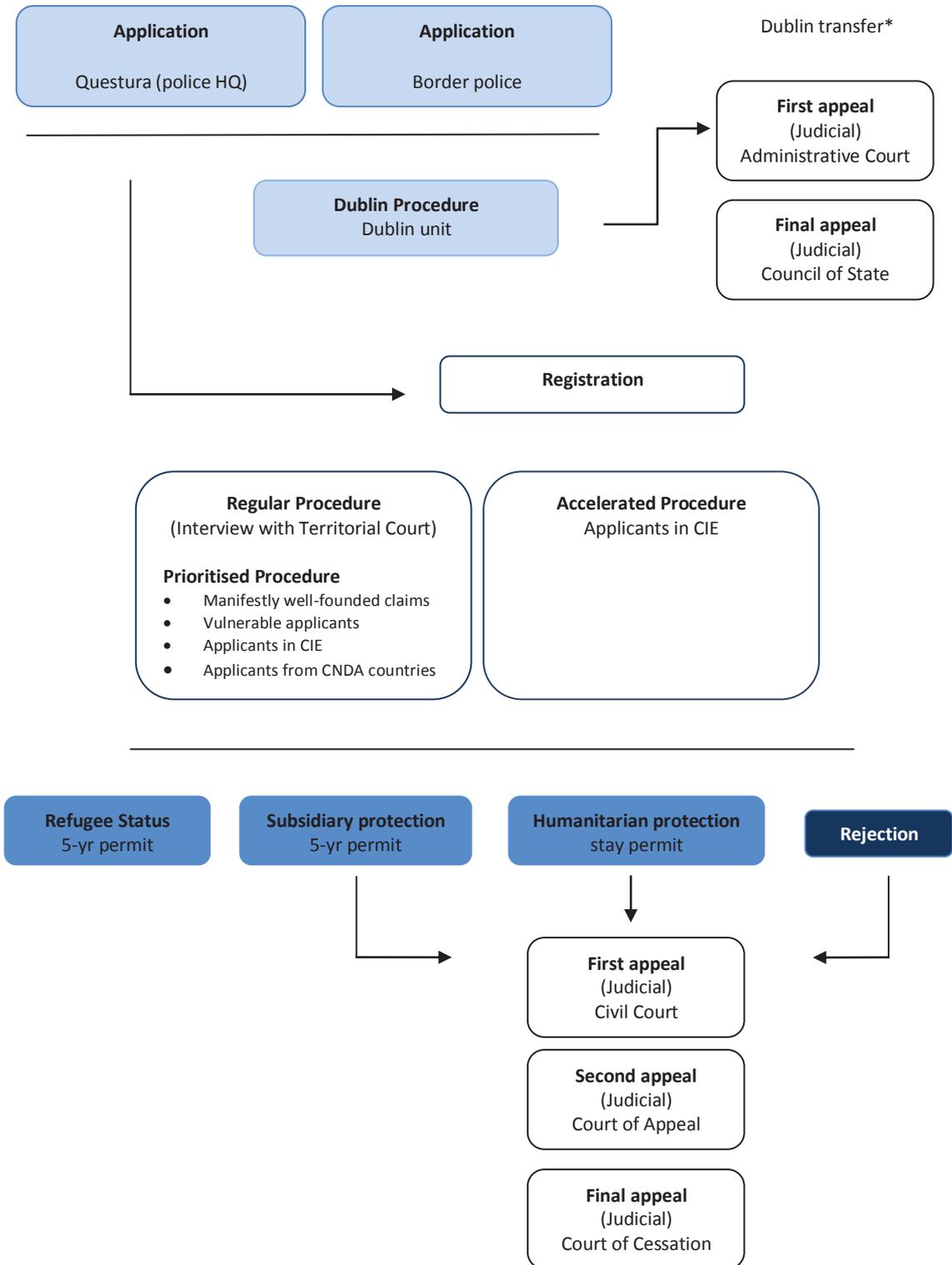
### **4.3 Bureaucracy, Surveillance and Control**

Asylum seekers in Italy enter an environment of surveillance and control where their mobility becomes severely restricted. Those seeking asylum must lodge a formal request either at the border police office or, at the provincial police station (Questura), where they are fingerprinted, photographed and registered. The application is then sent to the Territorial Commissions or Sub-Commissions for International Protection, located throughout Italy. Interviews are supposed to take place within 30 days from the date of the claim and the Commission must make a decision within three working days after the interview. In practice, however, the procedure usually lasts at least several months, and can take up to 18 months if the Commission cannot make a decision, needs more information, if the issues are complex, or if a number of claims are made at the same time (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2015). The Commission may grant one of three types of protection: political asylum, subsidiary protection, or humanitarian protection. Those with political asylum or subsidiary protection have the right to stay in Italy for five years before renewal. Humanitarian protection can be provided for up to two years and is granted to those with serious reasons for seeking protection who do not qualify for other forms of protection. The procedure is explained in Figure 4.

As shown in Table 2, less than half of applicants for asylum in Italy actually receive any form of protection. Of the almost 60,000 people who applied in 2015, only 5.6 percent were granted refugee status. Nearly 16 percent were given subsidiary protection, 23.4 percent were granted humanitarian protection, but more than half of applications were rejected. The odds of getting any form of protection are not good for people from Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mali, Ghana, Senegal or Gambia. At the time these statistics were compiled, more than 50,000 people were still waiting to have their applications processed. Many will languish for months in substandard residential centres, only to be told they have not been granted protection and that they have just 15 days to leave Italy.

**Figure 4: Italy's Asylum Procedure**

Source: AIDA (ECRE 2015, p.16)



*\*Dublin transfer under the Dublin Convention: The regulation, adopted in 2003, determines which state is responsible for examining an asylum application – normally the state where the asylum seeker first entered the EU. Refugees will be returned to the state where they first arrived for processing. See Section 4.6*

**Table 1: Applications and granting of protection at first instance**

Source: AIDA (ECRE, 2015, p.6)

	Applicants in 2015	Pending applications in 2015	Refugee status	Subsidiary protection	Humanitarian protection	Rejection <sup>1</sup>	Refugee rate	Subs. Prot. rate	Hum. Prot. rate	Rejection rate
<b>Total</b>	59,165	50,460	2,480	6,975	10,330	24,240	5.6%	15.8%	23.4%	55.2%

Breakdown by countries of origin of the total numbers

Nigeria	12,530	10,975	225	685	1,570	5,135	2.9%	9%	20.7%	67.4%
Gambia	6,365	5,365	170	130	1,770	3,490	3%	2.3%	31.8%	62.9%
Pakistan	5,830	5,360	270	1,090	940	2,690	5.4%	21.8%	18.8%	54%
Senegal	4,970	3,930	65	105	915	2,130	2%	3.2%	28.4%	66.4%
Bangladesh	4,390	4,450	80	70	600	1,995	2.9%	2.5%	21.8%	72.8%
Mali	4,260	4,040	45	445	1,400	3,940	0.8%	7.6%	24%	67.6%
Afghanistan	2,860	2,045	215	2,005	95	70	9%	84%	4%	3%
Ghana	2,455	2,260	20	40	425	1,030	1.3%	2.6%	28%	68.1%
Côte d'Ivoire	2,390	1,925	40	170	405	695	3%	13%	30.9%	53.1%
Guinea	1,185	995	20	50	320	260	3.1%	7.7%	49.2%	40%
Syria	365	160	175	40	0	30	71.4%	16.3%	0%	12.3%
Eritrea	265	190	210	190	15	60	44.2%	40%	3.1%	12.7%
Somalia	550	340	125	595	15	40	16.1%	76.7%	1.9%	5.3%
Kosovo	210	190	0	20	5	35	0%	33.3%	8.3%	58.4%

Source: Eurostat (rounded).

## 4.4 Patchy Reception

For those who achieve some form of protection, their reception in Italy is far from ideal and support to integrate is almost non-existent, as will now be discussed.

Reception is defined by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) as encompassing material conditions (housing, food, clothing, vouchers, financial allowances), as well as health care, employment and education. In addition to their obligations to protect refugees, EU countries must also provide adequate reception which, according to special directives, guarantees their subsistence and protects their physical and mental health (ECRE, 2016). The lack of a coordinated reception system, integration programme and support for resettlement in Italy have been cited as major issues for refugees, causing significant hardship and creating structural barriers to their social inclusion (Brekke & Brochmann, 2014; Korać, 2003; and Puggioni, 2005). In 2012, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe reported that accommodation in Italy was overcrowded and the standard of information and support services varied widely (cited in ECRE, 2016). The UNHCR has commented on the

absence of standard disembarkation and first reception procedures (Spindler, 2016). There are also delays in accessing reception facilities weeks or months after people apply for asylum (UNHCR, 2013). Laws enacted in 2015 may have improved conditions, although life in the Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers (CARA), the large centres used for first reception purposes, remain notoriously difficult according to ECRE (2016).

Italian politicians of the far right, from the Northern League party, portray asylum seekers as living a life of ease at the taxpayers' expense, yet nothing could be further from the truth. In Italy, refugees may stay in these centres for up to 18 months waiting for their asylum applications to be dealt with. During this time, they cannot leave the area for more than a few days without forfeiting their place. This prolonged encampment (Bakewell, 2016) in residential centres and migrant accommodation and long periods of displacement can be a serious physical and psychological constraint for refugees, undermining people's sense of identity and self worth (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007). In addition, according to those working with the country's refugees, organised crime groups are profiting from refugees' misery, hosting them in private shelters but without gas, water and food (Kirchgaessner, 2015).

## 4.5 Work and Welfare

It is extremely difficult for refugees to find work in Italy. Even if they receive their *Permesso di Soggiorno* (permit to stay), economic conditions, language barriers, the remote location of the accommodation, and the lack of general support make it very difficult to find jobs (ECRE, 2015). Refugees and migrants are often forced to consider illegal work (called *Lavoro Nero*) to make ends meet. This involves serious risks and exposure to exploitation (Castles et al., 2012, p.144), making refugees vulnerable to "capabilities damage" by eroding their rights, job security and personal safety (Gasper & Truong, 2010). The low status of the jobs that some refugees take on further penalises them, according to Fullin and Reyneri (2011). As one author notes: "In Italy it is almost easier to obtain regular employment status through the economic route of regular work than through the political route of applying for asylum" (Ambrosini, 2014). The situation of undocumented or irregular migrants in Italy is even worse than that for refugees and asylum seekers, as will now be discussed.

## 4.6 Irregular Migrants

Irregular migration occurs when a person enters or lives a country of which he or she is not a citizen, in violation of its immigration laws and regulations (Castles et al., 2012, p.117). This is a significant problem in Europe as the Dublin Regulation places a major constraint on the mobility of asylum seekers in Italy and Europe. The Dublin Regulation determines that examination of an asylum claim in Europe should be undertaken in the first country where the person entered. It causes serious problems for refugees, delaying the examination of asylum claims and often resulting in the excessive use of detention to enforce transfers of asylum seekers (Brekke & Brochmann, 2014). Many of those arriving in Italy will deliberately avoid registration so they can move on to other European countries to look for work or reunite with family. They become undocumented or irregular migrants, without protection, or support. Of the 131,233 migrants arriving by sea in Italy in 2015, less than half (59,165) applied for asylum (ECRE, 2015).

Rejected asylum seekers may also be considered irregular. As an unregistered or irregular migrant in Europe, day to day existence is precarious to say the least. In several cities in Italy, including Rome, groups of Somali, Eritrean, Afghan and homeless refugees find shelter in abandoned buildings and squats without electricity or running water. They are seen by authorities and the community as “a source of illegality, urban decay and a risk to the safety of residents” (Ambrosini, 2014, p.242). Without documentation they are excluded from looking for work, from accessing health and support services and even from banking services (Castles et al., 2012.) Stateless, without nationality or citizenship, irregular migrants are not entitled to any kind of protection or associated rights. As a result, irregular migrants are more likely to experience social deprivation, leading to lower educational achievement and higher levels of crime, resulting in “segmented assimilation” within host societies (Portes, 1997).

In sum, the literature paints a grim picture of the reception given to refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants in Italy. Yet they may also exercise considerable resourcefulness or agency in the face of such adversity. For example, research by Maya Korać (2003) suggests despite the lack of a reception system refugees “make do”. Refugees in Korać’s study were still able to engage in spontaneous and personalised encounters with people in their communities which strengthened their adaptability, their feeling of social inclusion and their agency. The question, remains, however, how much agency do refugees in Rome have given such difficult circumstances? Hein de Haas asserts that mobility is a capability essential for human

development – but to what extent can refugees in Rome exercise this capability and thus their agency? This is the focus of the following section of this chapter.

## 4.7 Migration as Freedom?

De Haas has written extensively about migration and the Capability Approach (see de Haas, 2009; 2014; de Haas & Rodriguez, 2010). He asserts that the capability of mobility is fundamental to human development. Expanding this capability also expands the choices open to individuals and therefore their freedom (de Haas & Rodriguez, 2010) and is one of the reasons why mobility is intrinsically important for human development. At the same time movement can enable people to improve other dimensions relevant to their capabilities, such as their earning capacity, their health, their education and that of their children, and their self-respect. Mobility is thus instrumental to development. Enhancing people's capabilities in this way may lead to increased capabilities in other people, through the transfer of remittances to the home country, as well as migration information and social capital (de Haas, 2009).

De Haas argues that all migrants, including refugees, are people with agency, although in migrating they may face tremendous structural constraints, including family and community networks and culture, which affect the social, economic and human resources available to them to migrate (de Haas, 2014). Migration is a continuum of constraints, with refugees at one extreme of the continuum and economic migrants at the other. Forced migrants, such as refugees, exercise their agency as far as possible "in the face of appalling circumstances" (de Haas, 2009, p.3). However, if freedom is "a person's ability to get systematically what he would choose," (Sen, 1992, p.65), refugees' involuntary movement due to conflict or resettlement, expresses a *lack* of freedom and can result in a real decrease in people's well-being (de Haas, 2009, p.23). The situation for refugees in Italy would suggest that leaving their home countries has not resulted in their improved well-being and that they experience considerable unfreedoms which affect their capacity to exercise their capabilities to live lives they value. Thus, mobility as a capability has not enhanced the freedom of refugees in Italy.

## 4.8 Summary

This chapter has provided context for this study by describing the opportunity structure in which refugees in Rome must function. This includes an environment of bureaucracy and control, the lack of a coordinated reception system, integration policy and support for

resettlement, poverty and a lack of employment opportunities. Many refugees in Italy are in transit: on their way to other parts of Europe, travelling under the radar to avoid being processed in Italy. Stateless, without nationality or citizenship, irregular migrants cannot fall back on any kind of protection. Meanwhile, the flow of migrants and refugees into Italy continues, stretching reception facilities to breaking point. Mobility may be intrinsically and instrumentally important for human development, (de Haas, 2009). However it is questionable whether this capability has led to positive development or well-being outcomes for refugees who seem constrained by a society which is unable or unwilling to provide the support they need. As Capussotti and Ellena (2003) observe: "Refugees are like ghosts in the Italian public space and discourse; their fate seems to be entrapped between their representation as an anonymous mass that threatens Italian borders and their oblivion as individual subjects and citizens." (p.151). The extent to which these factors limit the capabilities and functioning of refugees in Rome will be explored in Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis. In the meantime, the methodological approach for undertaking the research is the subject of Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5 Methodology: Researching a “Hidden” Group

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### 5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Rome’s refugees use smartphones to improve their well-being. This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in collecting and analysing data. Essentially this study applied a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with refugees and staff at the Joel Nafuma Refugee Center (JNRC) in Rome. These data were supplemented by informal observation of refugees’ use of smartphones in the centre. Qualitative research is an approach that is well suited to the study of refugees because it views people’s behaviours in context, and delves into the meanings they attach to their experiences (Omidian, in Ahearn, 2000). Yet, there are a number of methodological and ethical issues which must be carefully considered in conducting qualitative research with refugee populations, particularly in terms of relational power and positionality and the need to minimise risks of harm to participants. Refugees have tended to be overlooked in research: they are difficult to identify and to locate (Bloch, 2004). This requires an appropriate methodological framework which is both ethical and practical.

### 5.2 An Interpretivist Lens and a Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research begins with interpretive theoretical frameworks to address the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. In approaching this study I adopt an interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. Interpretivists are interested in the varied and multiple meanings of things, “leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas,” (Creswell, 2012, p.24). Much information systems research in developing countries adopts an interpretive approach, as many of the research questions and challenges do not lend themselves a positivist methodology (Walsham & Sahay, 2006). Research techniques that focus on proportionate relationships in data cannot capture the different dimensions of people’s communication and information seeking behaviours. Furthermore, for the purposes of this study, a purely quantitative focus is neither adequate nor appropriate for interacting with refugees whose rich experiences should not be reduced to numbers or categories. They must be given an opportunity to tell their stories. The adoption of Capabilities theory as a Conceptual

Framework for this study also demands a qualitative research approach. As explained in Chapter 2, Capabilities theory is focussed on understanding the extent to which people can exercise choice in pursuing lives of value, and the factors which may shape their choices. The Smartphone Evaluation Framework, presented in Chapter 2, aims to broadly map the different dimensions affecting people's technology use: their opportunity structure, personal assets and resources, their informational capabilities and how these may shape their wellbeing outcomes. It is not concerned with proportionate relationships in the data. Thus, for this reason and for those outlined above, this study draws primarily on a qualitative approach.

## 5.3 Data Collection

### The Field Site

Refugees are a hidden group in research: a population whose members are difficult to identify and locate and to draw a representative sample from (Bloch, 2004). This has become even more difficult in recent years with increasing migrant flows and the securitisation of migration in response to states' fears of terrorism. Voutira and Dona (2007) note that global trends from permanent to temporary protection and the rise of detention as a migrant management strategy, mean that much research now takes place in temporary places: hostels, deportation centres, detention centres, informal places of sanctuary, or urban centres. The JNRC — the field site for this research — can be described as an “informal place of sanctuary”. The JNRC is the only day facility for refugees in Rome and is a warm, safe place to come to for a few hours a day, especially if guests have been living on the streets. Located in the basement of St Paul's Within the Walls,<sup>10</sup> it offers refugees assistance and support regardless of their ethnicity or faith. The centre is staffed largely by volunteers who provide breakfast, clothing and basic necessities for up to 150 guests a day. In 2014 the centre registered migrants from 42 different countries. Language, computing, and art therapy classes, movie screenings and other recreational activities are offered. Staff assist new arrivals with immigration and the medical and legal appointments required for integration. Two in-house psychotherapists are on call to help guests cope with what is often a chaotic and traumatic journey between their countries of origin and Rome. The JNRC was an appropriate site for this research as it was a convenient, safe place to recruit and interview participants.

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<sup>10</sup> The name of the Episcopalian church where the JNRC is located.

## Participants

Participants in this study comprised 12 centre guests — 11 men and one woman — who currently owned, or had owned a smartphone. Two staff were also interviewed: the centre administrator and the former computer tutor. As shown in Table 2, participants came from Afghanistan (4), Pakistan (2), Senegal (1), Gambia (1), Mali (2), Turkey (1) and Liberia (1). Participants were recruited by personal approach with the help of my translator. This was a form of convenience sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling<sup>11</sup> where some individuals were asked to encourage others to take part in the study. Snowball sampling is appropriate for groups that are difficult to locate, such as homeless individuals, migrant workers or undocumented migrants (Babbie, 2015, p.188). As a sampling technique, snowball sampling can also reach more respondents and penetrate further into communities (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Because almost all of those attending the JNRC are male, the selection of participants is strongly gender biased and does present a male-centred perspective. One woman was included, although this did present a dilemma. My reasons for including her were that while her smartphone practices were similar to those of other participants, there were aspects emerging from her interview data – such as lower levels of literacy and education, that may indicate gender difference, and which may warrant further research at some future point. The participants ranged from 20 to around 35 years of age, and had different socioeconomic statuses, from farm workers, to economics undergraduate students. Some were highly educated and some had little education. Many spoke several different languages. All participants met criteria for inclusion in the study as refugees, as defined at the start of this thesis, that is, **“All people who are exposed to refugee-type experiences and may include displaced people, asylum seekers and resettled refugees who have been granted residency,”** (Leung, 2010, p.1). In this sense, refugee is an umbrella term acknowledging that participants have all been displaced from their home countries for a range of reasons. One participant had come to Italy as a “regular” migrant looking for work. However, he described himself as “living like a refugee” and in discussion revealed that circumstances of extreme poverty forced him to leave his home in Pakistan. While those participants coming from the same country may have left for similar reasons (Afghanistan for instance), the research confirmed that refugees are by no means a homogenous group when it comes to their experiences, stories and identities, or their goals.

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<sup>11</sup> Snowball sampling is defined by Babbie (2015) as a nonprobability sampling method, often employed in field research, whereby each person interviewed may be asked to suggest additional people for interviewing.

Four participants did not speak English and required a translator. While the data from these interviews was not as rich in detail, without translation I would not have been able to access these stories at all. Some researchers have noted, different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can prove problematic and the use of interpreters is not always straightforward (Pernice, 1994). Disparities in power between interpreters and the newly arrived can skew responses and confidentiality is not always assured (Block, Warr, Gibbs & Riggs, 2013). However in this task I was ably assisted by a guest at the centre who had taken part in the study and was familiar with the material. As a friend of some of the participants no power differential was observable. He also helped to recruit participants for the study. He willingly signed a confidentiality agreement.

**Table 2: Gender, nationality, age and length of stay of participants**

*N=12*

<b>Gender</b>	Male	11
	Female	1
<b>Nationality</b>	Afghanistan	4
	Pakistan	2
	Senegal	1
	Gambia	2
	Mali	1
	Turkey	1
	Liberia	
<b>Age range</b>	20-34 years	
<b>Length of time in Rome</b>	3 month - 3 years	

### **In-depth Interviews**

Face to face interviews were favoured because the subjects of my research had varying levels of literacy and English language skills, making a printed survey unsuitable. Given the increasingly securitised environment in Europe currently, and because some participants were

undocumented, it was important to gather data using a personal approach which enabled me to build rapport. In undertaking these interviews I was interested in “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience,” (Seidman, 2013, p.9). Thus, my interview approach was less scripted (semi-structured) and more conversational. Interviews of up to 50 minutes in length, based on a broad interview guide, were conducted in May 2016 at the centre, during operating hours. My question guide (in Appendix I) broadly covered (a) participants’ information needs and sources (online and offline) and challenges in accessing information (b) access and use of smartphones – which platforms, apps, social media, websites, and telephony were used, for what purpose, and (d) participants’ plans for the future. Demographic information (age, country of origin, place of residence, education, length of time living in Rome etc), was also collected. Two centre staff were interviewed about their observations of ICT use, including smartphones, their roles as technology intermediaries, and contextual factors influencing technology use.

I used a dictaphone app on my iPhone to record the interviews rather than taking notes, as I did not want to impede the flow of discussion. Permission to do so was sought from participants. Verbal consent to use the data was obtained on tape at the conclusion of the interview (the reasons for this are addressed below, under the heading “informed consent”). An honorarium in the form of a 10-euro phone card was given at the end of the interview to thank participants for their time and cooperation.

### **Informal Observation**

Participant observation is a technique widely used in ethnographic and anthropological studies where the researcher “embeds” themselves in the day to day lives of a group of people to learn more about them and how they relate to each other. Non-participative observation, on the other hand is described simply as “Observation in which the observer is not directly involved in the situation to be observed” (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 1993). I adopted this approach to my research. At the beginning of each day in the field I observed how many guests use smartphones and other types of mobile phone over the duration of the fieldwork, while being sensitive to participants’ fears of surveillance. Guests were aware of my presence as a researcher from flyers around the centre so this practice did not seem to cause alarm.

## 5.4 Ethics

### Power and Vulnerability

The methodological and ethical issues that can arise during research with refugees are well documented (Bloch, 2004; Block et al., 2013; Hugman, et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Pernice, 1994). Ethical issues arise from the combination of refugees' precarious situations and the inevitable disparities in power between researchers and participants (Block et al., 2013). Questions of social power are embedded in all research relationships (Hugman et al., 2011, p.1284). The process of research may even inflict "symbolic violence" as a result of misunderstanding or misrepresentation of participants because of the different positions of the researcher and the researched (Bourdieu, 1996, p.19). The risks are higher when working with people who have been forced to leave their countries and who have few resources when they arrive. While the principle of "do no harm" may be the starting point for social research, it becomes meaningless if refugees are put at further risk by the research process (Hugman et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003).

In undertaking this research I worked with my supervisors to address the general and ethical risks as outlined in Massey University's Ethics Committee Process. This project was also evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. The ethical principles embodied in the *Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants*, provided me with a moral and ethical touchstone during the course of the fieldwork (Massey University, n.d.).

Permission to undertake the study was obtained from the director and management of the centre before commencing fieldwork. I took a number of steps to ensure that the purposes of my research were clearly communicated to participants through information forms and posters promoting the study, which were also translated into Italian and French. In the interests of distributive justice I explained that by taking part, participants would be helping to enlarge the knowledge about how refugees use ICT. I ensured participants had access to summary results of the study on the JNRC's website. In the interests of doing no harm, individuals were identified only by pseudonym. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable about, and I was prepared to stop the interview if the participant was upset by the questioning, but this situation did not eventuate.

### **Positionality: “Where One Stands in Relation to the Other”**

The ethics process provided useful guidelines for observing research integrity. But to attend to “ethics in practice”, and to respond to “ethically important moments” during the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004)<sup>12</sup>, involves “active and methodical listening” to participants (Bourdieu, 1996). Because research is the construction of knowledge (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), it also demands continuous reflexivity, as “one’s self can’t be left behind” (Stanley & Wise, cited in Hugman et al., 2011). At all stages of the research I was conscious of my power and positionality, from data collection, to interpreting the findings. Positionality is closely related to power and describes how researchers are located in the research: “Positionality is ... determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’” (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee et al., 2001, p. 411). Positionality describes the phenomena where “a researcher’s characteristics affect both substantive and practical aspects of the research process—from the nature of questions that are asked, through data collection, analysis and writing, to how findings are received” (Carling, Birand Ertal & Ezzati, 2013). My positionality in this research derives from my ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. This position can shift, depending on context, but as a well educated, relatively well-off Caucasian woman undertaking research with young, poor, male participants, I felt very much an “outsider” in both the methodological and political senses of the word. This may have led to some resistance to participating in this research, or perhaps to unreliable responses. However, my position as a New Zealander, outside the Italian system, and as someone who is herself a migrant (albeit a temporary and privileged one) may have helped me to occupy a “third position”. I made a point of telling participants where I was from, why I was in Italy, about my involvement in the centre and why I wanted to do the research. Sharing relevant information about ourselves should not be dismissed as manipulative or deceptive, as long as what we say is truthful (Carling et al. 2013, p.17). In this case my openness was well received by participants.

### **Informed Consent**

Power disparities between researchers and participants are important at all stages of the research process, but become more acute when it comes to the notion of informed consent (Block et al., 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Hugman et al., 2011). Refugees’ participation in research has sometimes resulted in misuse of their information and misunderstandings about

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<sup>12</sup> Defined as; “The difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research” (Ibid, p. 262)

the nature and purpose of the research. Insisting on formal written consent seems sensible, ethically and practically, but written consent becomes problematic when working with marginalised groups (Hugman et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Landau 2003; Pernice, 1994). The procedure aims to protect refugees' rights, but protection only works if participants can exercise those rights (Hugman et al., 2011). Cultural differences and participants' lack of familiarity with the research process also make obtaining written informed consent difficult. In Western countries people are often well accustomed to being surveyed, whether for market research or the census, but this is not the case for refugees who may view such interrogation as threatening. Any assurance of anonymity would seem to be contradicted by the requirement for both a full name and a signature. Omidian (in Ahearn, 2000) found that Afghani refugees who had given verbal consent to research felt that being asked to provide a signature implied they were not to be trusted. I was very conscious of this issue during the fieldwork for this study. Accordingly, I adopted a different protocol, based on that developed by Block et al. (2013). Timing is everything, and the authors found that seeking consent from young refugees in Australia *before* undertaking research left them confused and struggling to understand the significance of the activity and reaffirmed the power imbalance between researcher and participants. By asking for consent *after* the activity, having carefully explained how the data would be used, the authors argued that they had boosted the autonomy of participants by empowering them to make informed decisions.

In approaching participants and preparing them for interview, I was assisted by my translator and by the centre administrator who were both well known to the guests. They helped explain the research process to participants including measures to protect their identity and the integrity of the data. I asked participants if they wished to take part and, *at the end of* the interview, asked them to give their consent for their data to be used for the study. This was provided verbally (recorded using a dictaphone app on my smartphone).

## 5.5 Fieldwork Experience

I had been volunteering at the centre for some time, and the experience of spending one-on-one time with participants and hearing their stories was extremely powerful and moving. I heard some very sad stories, and while I took care not to delve too deeply into their reasons for leaving their home countries, many of my participants willingly, and of their own volition, shared this information with me, helping me to get a more complete picture of the hardships and constraints they had to endure to get to Rome. I kept a personal journal during fieldwork

which was useful in debriefing at the end of each day. As anticipated, the increasingly securitised environment in Rome meant that some of my questions about technology use were at first met with some suspicion and participants were initially reluctant to give away too much information. In fact I had to abandon the idea of asking to see participants' apps on their smartphones as I felt this would have been construed as a step too far. However, by the end of the interview each seemed more at ease and happily gave their consent to use of their material.

During the interviews, and when writing up the findings, I was very aware of my positionality as an outsider. When speaking with young male Muslim participants, for instance, I was pleased to have the assistance of my young male translator as an intermediary to put them at ease.

## 5.6 Data Analysis

Each interview was fully transcribed for collation and analysis. In writing up the findings I adopted a thematic approach, using a combination of established and emergent themes from the literature. This involved some cross-case analysis (Babbie, 2015) in which I looked for patterns in my observations of different participants' experiences. Interviews were marked up for particular themes or categories as these were discovered in the observational data. I also used memo-ing to make notes on how codes and concepts were defined. Concept mapping – using the Capability Approach as the basis – helped to clarify ideas and theories for the purposes of analysis and discussion (Babbie, 2015). Findings were further analysed by developing an evaluative framework – the Smartphone evaluation framework – based on those created by Kleine (2010,2013) and Gigler (2011, 2015) to provide a more systemic assessment of refugees' smartphone use and the factors influencing that (see Figure 5).

## 5.7 Limitations

### **Reliability and Validity**

As previously discussed, academics have long debated the merits of qualitative versus quantitative techniques. It is not my intention here to traverse all viewpoints, except to say that on the one hand qualitative research is usually seen as less rigorous, valid and reliable but on the other, it can be the best way to undertake this kind of research (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p.498). Sample size and representativeness have nothing to do with the underlying logic

of qualitative study. The main objective of in-depth interviews, for instance, is to gain insight into people's experiences and to produce concepts and theories that make sense of them.

Qualitative research, logistically, requires small samples:

The work of linking interview accounts – continually analysed – and conceptual frameworks – under construction throughout the research – clearly requires small sample sizes so that all the emerging material can be kept in the researcher's mind as a totality under investigation at all stages of the research. (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 495)

For this reason I would have struggled to analyse the data from in-depth interviews with many more participants.

According to Patricia Omidian, a psychologist who has worked extensively with Afghan refugees, qualitative techniques are well suited to the study of refugees because they enable the researcher to view people's behaviours in context, and to delve into the meanings people attach to their experiences (Omidian, in Ahearn, 2000). In light of my experience in undertaking this study I would agree. Qualitative research techniques have enabled me to get much more contextual, meaningful data about the lives of participants, but the small sample size means I have had to take care not to generalise the findings. They are but a snapshot in time, albeit a picture others researching this field may find useful.

## 5.8 Summary

In undertaking this qualitative research study I have adopted an interpretivist or constructivist approach, which is consistent with similar studies on information systems and is most appropriate given the nature of this study and its participants. Research methods included semi-structured interviews and informal observation, and participants were recruited using a combination of personal approach and snowball sampling techniques, consistent with research approaches which involve populations which are difficult to locate. Some authors claim that qualitative research is usually seen as less rigorous, valid and reliable but others argue it can be the best way to undertake this kind of research. I follow the view that sample size and representativeness have nothing to do with the underlying logic of qualitative study. In the context of other studies, I hope the results of this study provide some useful insights on a topic that is still nascent. Throughout this research I have been conscious of the ethical issues that can arise in this type of research – including issues of social power and positionality. The University's ethics guidelines have provided a touchstone for my conduct as a researcher, and I have been conscious to maintain a reflexive approach during all phases of the study.

## CHAPTER 6 Findings: Stories of Connection and Disconnection

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### 6.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 explained the possibilities of technology to enhance the capabilities of the poor and disadvantaged to “lead the kinds of lives they value” (Sen, 1999, p.18). It also showed that well-being is multi-dimensional – not based only on income, but taking account of the nonmaterial aspects of human life: the social, cultural and political aspects as well. Further, as authors like Kleine and Gigler have sought to demonstrate, it is not just access to technology that matters, it is people’s ability to use ICTs and other resources to transform capabilities into functionings and the impacts that can have on the many dimensions of their lives. The preceding chapters have therefore “set the scene” for the current study, laying out the conceptual, theoretical and methodological foundations for the next step, which is to begin to address one of two central research questions: “How do refugees in Rome use smartphones to improve their well-being?”

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on fieldwork conducted at the Joel Nafuma Refugee Center in Rome in May 2016. As explained in Chapter 5, semi structured interviews were conducted with 12 guests at the centre aimed at answering the broader research questions, including what participants regarded as important to their well-being; how prevalent smartphones were among participants; and how they used the different features of the technology for different purposes. Staff were interviewed on their observations of smartphone use in the centre. The chapter begins with participants’ observations of daily life which confirm many of the themes identified in Chapter 4, and that they experience a number of unfreedoms in Rome, including information poverty, discrimination, exploitation and social exclusion.

Pseudonyms are used to identify all interviewees throughout this thesis. The quotes have been extracted from transcripts made from recorded interviews and edited for clarity while still aiming to convey something of the voice of each person. The three point ellipsis “...” is used to indicate where sentences have been abbreviated.

**Table 3: Study Participants**

<b>Hassan (24)</b>	A college student from Gambia. He had permission to stay in Italy for two years on humanitarian grounds. Hassan's smartphone (his second) was sent to him by a friend in Germany.
<b>Drisia (27)</b>	From Mali. He came to Italy to get his documentation before moving on to find work in Spain. European asylum regulations require him to return to Italy to renew his documents. He has had a smartphone since before he left Africa.
<b>Salif (23)</b>	From Mali. He came to Rome two years ago with friends from Libya. He was homeless and had no documentation. He owned his smartphone for eight months (it is his second).
<b>Ibrahim (25)</b>	Was a political science student and a journalist from Pakistan. He arrived in Rome in January 2016. He had to leave his smartphone behind fearing the authorities would use it to track him. He had a basic phone.
<b>Ashiq (age not given)</b>	Was studying psychology at university in Kabul, Afghanistan. Having been denied asylum in Norway he had come to Rome get his documentation. Ashiq had a smartphone.
<b>Shahid (30)</b>	Came to Italy three years ago from Pakistan looking for work, so was not a refugee as defined by the Geneva Convention, but still fits the definition adopted for this study on the basis that poverty had compelled him to leave for Europe. Shahid was given an iPhone by an Italian family.
<b>Malik (26)</b>	Fled Afghanistan for Belgium but was sent back to Italy where his documentation was first processed. He had been granted asylum for five years. His smartphone was stolen but he was buying another.
<b>Aimal (20)</b>	Left Afghanistan when he was 13 and was given asylum in Norway. When he turned 18, he was told to leave to return to Afghanistan. He came to Rome 18 months ago seeking documentation. Ashiq got his smartphone in Norway in 2011.
<b>Yusef (34)</b>	"Political problems" in Turkey sent Yusef travelling around Europe for the last 20 years, looking for work. He came to Rome (alone) about a year ago and had documentation for the next two years. He has a smartphone.
<b>Titus (age not given)</b>	Formerly a farmer in Liberia, Titus had been on the road for about 14 years. He had been in Rome for the last year and a half. He had documentation and was looking for work. He bought his smartphone so people could call or message him about work.
<b>Marie (age not given)</b>	The only woman in the study. She came to Rome 10 months ago from Senegal. She had her documentation. Her son sent her a smartphone from Senegal.
<b>Abdul (25)</b>	From Afghanistan. Abdul sought asylum in other European countries before being returned to Italy. Abdul had his smartphone for two years.

## 6.2 "The Way of Oblivion"

In Chapter 4, the situation of refugees in Italy was described as "the way of oblivion" (Capussotti & Ellena, 2003, p.149). Participants' comments in this study confirm that life in

Rome is difficult for newcomer refugees. The lack of a coordinated reception system, inadequate housing and welfare services, difficulties in finding work, and discriminatory attitudes on the part of authorities and employers, elicited feelings of frustration and anger among many participants, as will now be discussed.

### **Information Poverty and Precarity**

The lack of information on how to access services and support, particularly when first arriving in Rome, was a major source of frustration for some participants. For example, when Hassan was released from a detention centre in Sicily, he was put on a train to Rome without any information about where to go to find shelter and support. When he found the office of the government housing agency, he was told that the residential centres were full and he would have to stay on the streets for three weeks before a place became free. During this time he met another migrant who told him about the JNRC.

Even when participants found a place in a residential centre, staff were not forthcoming with information or support, as Malik explains:

Seems like they are not helping us. If you have refugee status they have to protect you, financially, economically, like with housing or food. We have staff and I try my best to ask them: "I want to work somewhere". (They say) the government will find a job for us... normal work... but they always used to lie to us... "blah, blah, blah". So I will go find (work) myself.

Malik had concerns about the support provided by the reception centres, and he did not trust the information they provided. In this the JNRC played an important and valued intermediary role, by assisting guests with advice and support. Hassan heard about the JNRC from a friend while he was staying in the park. Centre staff had been helpful and supportive assisting him to negotiate the bureaucracy of getting his documentation.

The people here are very, very kind, they... provide us with services that... right now where I am living right now those services need to be provided by our operators but like it's very hard to deal with them so we come over to the centre for them to help us with a lot of information... they help us to navigate some of the problems in Rome. (Malik)

## Poor Welfare Support

In the absence of adequate or joined up welfare support, participants had to devise creative strategies or workarounds to meet even their most basic needs, as Ashiq explained:

When we arrived new here we struggled to find a place to go and eat... we came to the JNRC for breakfast here and then some friends (told us)... you take the bus to Caritas. They give us lunch... and then (you go) somewhere else and take a shower... and somewhere you can wash your clothes for free... so all of our day was like this for us.

Hassan also described a regimented daily routine which started at 6 am, when he left the residential centre to take a train and a bus to the JNRC for breakfast, where he could attend Italian and English language classes and play table football. When the JNRC closed at around 2.30 pm he went to another centre to get lunch, and another to get dinner, then attended night classes before returning to the centre at around 8 pm.

Centre staff estimated around half of guests are living on the streets. Salif (23), for instance, came to Rome two years ago fleeing conflict in Mali. "Where (I) come from there is no peace in Mali. (I came) to find a better place of life". As an irregular migrant with no documentation Salif lived "under the radar", going from place to place, and avoiding detection by the authorities.

For those who have already experienced significant psychological trauma, the lack of housing and welfare support and the seemingly callous attitude of the authorities, compound their distress. Ashiq's story exemplified this well. In Afghanistan, Ashiq had been kidnapped, tortured and beaten. When he went to the police, his kidnappers retaliated by murdering his father, brothers and sisters. When Ashiq arrived in Rome, he had to live in a tent in the park for three months during winter before getting a place in a camp, only to find that conditions there were not much better:

(I was in) a tent, in a park so it was just Pakistan and Afghani and Iranian refugees were there about 2–300 people were in the tent sleeping and the weather was cold... At night it was impossible to sleep because the wind was coming.... During the day, if it was sunny we went to the park and slept in the chairs because we couldn't sleep at night... we went to the Questura (police station) and asked for (help with) the housing... we waited three months (outside).... Even when we got to the camps (residential centres) it was not a very good place... we were sleeping ten people together in a very small room – it was better than a tent. But every bed had bed bugs... we were always scratching ourselves... when we wanted to take shower the water was cold and the food was not good.

Ashiq's circumstances have improved since then, and he has found casual work helping out at the centre. However, it was clear throughout the interview that, despite being in the city for almost two years, he did not feel "at home" in Rome and he had experienced discrimination and prejudice as had many other participants, as will now be explained.

### **Exploitation and Discrimination**

A common complaint from participants was that they felt that people were out to profit from their situation. As explained in Chapter 4, many of Italy's residential centres are run by providers contracted or subsidised by the government. For example, Yusef, from Turkey, had been living in a park for the last two weeks when he spoke to me, but was in a centre (which he refers to as "camp") before that. He described a situation where centre managers were happy to take the government's accommodation grants but left refugees to fend for themselves:

The camp... it was the worst place I ever seen in my life... the food we had, the place we were sleeping.... They kicked me out from the camp the day I got my Permesso di Soggiorno. Italy is a humanitarian business... they makes a business out of you and there is no help, there is no nothing.

Yusef also felt that refugees were taken advantage of by would-be employers. Yusef had been looking for work in local restaurants, through the informal labour market, known as Lavoro Nero or "black work". This usually entails working for low pay, without a formal contract, doing menial sometimes degrading work. Yusef explained:

But Italia not good; so difficult to find a job. Especially if you don't speak Italian... especially people like us. They try to give us 500 or 600 euro per month... which is not fair, you know? Everybody likes to use everybody, that's the problem.

This quote, particularly the reference to "people like us" illustrates how many refugees feel a sense of alienation in Italy. They regularly experience discrimination, including from the authorities. For example, Yusef spoke of how local police would harass him for being in the city, telling him to go to Germany to find work:

Three... four nights ago I was sleeping in the park and the police come and tell me "why you here? Go to Germania... why are you staying here?" There is no job, there is nothing.

Aimal also experienced harassment from local police. He described being repeatedly detained by the city's police who, when he asked them why, told him it was simply because he was "unlucky".

The government in Italy does not follow the rules. They do what they want.

This quote exemplifies the feeling expressed by many participants that there was one rule for Italians and another for them, and that their rights, as refugees, were not being respected. They felt unwelcome in Italy. At best, they were ignored by the authorities and left to get on with making their own way or, in the case of Yusef and Aimal, they were harassed. These feelings of alienation and frustration were compounded by the lack of job opportunities. Several participants expressed feelings of uncertainty, while others were trying to make the best of their situations and were focused on the future, as will now be discussed.

### **Uncertainty**

For those who had documentation, their primary goal in Rome was to find work to support themselves. However, given Italy's relatively high unemployment rate (officially 11.4 percent, but around double that for those under 25) even casual jobs are hard to come by. For example, despite having his Permesso di Soggiorno and a good education, Shahid (30) from Pakistan was struggling to find work:

In the morning I (look for) a job and in the evening I take a lesson in Italian because (I have) no friends, no relatives to help me... I make a (CV) and start to find a job. Four months I looked but nothing. Sometimes I worked cleaning cars on the road, and sometimes I worked in the car wash for a few days I worked evenings giving out flowers. After I met one Bangladeshi friend... we went to the beach to sell some drinks and... seven days I am (trying) to speak but I have no experience. He told me "you call loudly 'water, coca cola, and sprite!'" but I felt too much shock. I have eleven diplomas and now my situation is very bad.... When I lived in Pakistan (it was) another life... when I come here it's another life... a totally other life. Completely... it's very difficult.

Shahid had sought to escape his impoverished existence in Pakistan by coming to Italy. He had worked hard to obtain a range of qualifications to make him more employable. However, despite this, Shahid was only able to find menial work. This embarrassed him. Ashiq also felt that life in Italy had little to offer refugees, but he had his documentation and this at least meant he was safe:

As long as you are here... you can't make a better life here. But at least we are happy that they gave us Italian documents... at least our life is safe, no one can send us back to Afghanistan. But there is no future in Italy... we need to go to other countries to find a better life, some other places.

Some participants felt they were in a state of limbo and could not make plans. Sulif, for example could not decide whether he would stay in Rome or move on. Yet other participants did not see themselves as entirely powerless and expressed clear goals for the future, both short term and longer term. Hassan, for example, wanted to find a job and stay in Italy, but not before finishing his economics degree:

I want a job, but I want to get my education first. I have a (long-term) plan... to get a job is second plan.

Hassan was taking Italian classes to help him settle in Italy and had enlisted the help of JNRC staff to help him access study. Abdul was also hopeful of finding work, which would be the first step to finding a place to live and financial security.

I would like to go somewhere where they can give me a good job. Because the important thing is the job. If I have a good job I can rent a home, I can buy food for myself, I can buy everything for myself....

Thus, finding work was the key to securing a better future. Aimal's goals were also clear: to get his documentation, his driver's licence, become proficient in English and to return to Norway to his fiancée and his life there. Titus, Drisia, Abdul and Marie were all looking for work in Rome, but were also prepared to move on if they did not find it. Clearly, while participants were keenly aware of their deprivations, they did not see themselves as entirely powerless and still felt that they could move on to better prospects if they needed to. Malik's story is a case in point.

### **Case study: Malik**

Malik was also looking for work but, even with his education (a college diploma in computer science) and his work experience, he felt he was making little progress. Malik was working in logistics with the American army in Afghanistan when he became the target of unwanted attention from people who threatened him and his family unless he helped them to enter the army base where he worked. He had to leave quickly and used a fake passport to escape Afghanistan, which drew the attention of the Italian authorities when he arrived. Police

fingerprinted him and registered him on a European database of refugees. Because economic conditions were better in Northern Europe, he travelled on to Belgium to seek asylum, but was sent back to Italy a year ago (under the Dublin Convention – see Chapter 4). He had been granted asylum for five years. He was learning Italian because he wanted to find work in Italy, but he was also prepared to move on:

There is no opportunity for me... (I'm) just here just waiting for my passport and my travel documents. I have nothing here.

Malik, like many people at the centre, was living in a kind of limbo constrained by asylum laws, and by his status as a refugee.

Much of what has been described in these findings tangibly illustrates the situation described in Chapter 4 where people have been able to exercise mobility, as a fundamental human capability, but within such constraints that it has not necessarily led to their improved well-being. In this environment social connections and support become essential in helping refugees cope with their isolation and displacement and, as the next section of the findings demonstrates, smartphones are instrumental in helping participants access this support.

### **6.3 Have Smartphone, Will Travel**

Most guests at the JNRC had smartphones. Staff estimated around 80 percent had a mobile phone and around 75 percent owned smartphones. Informal observation during fieldwork confirmed this. On some days in the centre, of the 30 or 40 people there, almost everyone either had a phone in their hands, conversing with someone on the other end of the line, listening to music using their earpieces, or texting furiously. The centre administrator said getting a phone is a high priority for new arrivals in Rome: “probably the highest”. He had seen a huge increase in smartphones in the previous twelve months and observed several people with ipads. Second hand phones are cheap and easy to buy on the black market. Of the twelve people interviewed for this study, ten had smartphones and all had owned a smartphone at one time (some were onto their second devices). Some had bought their smartphones on arrival in Italy, as the phones they had were stolen or lost. Others had been forced to leave their smartphones behind while they travelled because of fear of surveillance. Hassan’s German friend sent him his smartphone after his first phone was taken by a guard in Libya. Marie’s son in Senegal sent her a smartphone so she could stay in touch with family.

Most participants emphasised that their smartphones were their most precious possessions and that they would be “lost” without them. As quoted at the title of this thesis, one participant, Drisia, went as far as to say: “The phone is as important to me as water”. So why did participants value smartphones so highly and go to such lengths to obtain them?

Partly it’s their utility and multifunctionality: a few participants, including Yusef commented on the features and convenience of their phones:

Of course (I have a smartphone) you have everything in your pocket... well, I use Facebook to communicate with friends, WhatsApp, and Viber. I watch videos on YouTube. I love to listen to Jamaican music... my phone is full of Jamaican music....

However, as the remainder of this chapter will show, the main reason that participants in this study had a smartphone is because it enabled them to connect with family and friends all over the world at little or no cost, via the internet. Participants used a range of apps to send messages and make voice and video calls to their loved ones, including WhatsApp, Skype, Tango, and Viber, Facebook and other social media sites. This online connection to friends and family, and the well-being that participants derived from that, is why smartphones were so highly prized by participants.

## 6.4 A Pocketful of Well-being

For most participants, it was the ability to communicate with family and close friends, and the social support they gained from that, that was valued most. This is not surprising given that most have been forced to uproot themselves from their countries, often in traumatic circumstances, to come to a country where they have few if any social contacts or networks. Abdul, for instance, liked the convenience of being able to contact his family at any time of the day or night:

When I have the smartphone I keep it in my pocket, so at midnight, one o’clock, two o’clock, three o’clock my family can call me because another thing is the time change. My country is four hours different.

Abdul used voice or video calling on WhatsApp, Skype or Viber, as his family was not literate and could not manage text-based communication such as email or messaging services. Thus, a smartphone is invaluable in situations where literacy may be a problem for either the person sending the message or the recipient. However, it was seeing the faces of his family that was

vitaly important for Abdul, much more so than having the latest model of smartphone, as he took great pains to explain to me:

That you have web cam... it's important if you are using Skype, so you have a front camera to watch your family ... and your family can watch you and it will be like normal.... Maybe two GB internet on it to see your family and to talk clearly.... If I am out of my country it's the only (thing) I have to use because I cannot go in the air to see my country so I have to see my friends and family, my sisters, brothers... everyone... at least I have to see them in the camera.... it's very, very important.

The key part of this quote is *"and it will be like normal..."*. This is because, forced to flee his country, Abdul could not travel home and so video calling was considered the next best thing to meeting face to face. He saw this function as restoring a sense of normality to his life. Video calling was also important for Marie, from Senegal. She kept in daily contact with her family there using WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook. But Skype was most important because she could see her daughter:

My phone is VERY important, it is this phone which helps me to keep in touch with my family and if I don't have any credit, I feel I will go crazy!

The intimacy that video calling provided was so important, Marie felt she would become distressed or unhinged without it. These quotes from Marie and Abdul really reinforce the importance of online connections with family and friends for one's psychological well-being. Interestingly, the centre administrator surmised that smartphones played a peacekeeping role in the centre. Being able to connect to catch up with family and friends and to go online to find out what is happening at home, helped alleviate boredom and diffused tensions and feelings of aggression. Having a smartphone restored a sense of normality in an otherwise abnormal situation. Furthermore, a smartphone can also help maintain routines, including religious prayers. It can even help locate the direction of Mecca, as Shahid explained:

Every day I read Koran, my holy book – I download on the internet. Internet automatically to starting my prayer time my phone to signal me with an alarm... and when I need to find a direction (for Mecca) my phone helps me to find a direction (compass).

When everything else is so uncertain, familiar religious routines clearly provided comfort for participants. The ability to connect with social networks near and far was also important to, as discussed in the following section.

## Transnational and Translocal Friendships

With limited social contacts and networks in Rome, being able to communicate with friends elsewhere in the world was very important to many participants. For example, Hassan used his smartphone to communicate with family and friends in Europe, Africa, and America. He used at least four different apps to communicate because not everyone used the same service. As he explained: “We all have different tastes”. Titus, who had travelled around Europe before coming to Italy, had one family member in Liberia with whom he regularly communicated, but he had a large network of friends in Switzerland and Italy. He used WhatsApp, Tango and Facebook, and Viber to keep up with local friends. Indeed, Facebook was used by most participants to maintain their friend networks, including to nourish translocal connections, within Rome. For example Shahid did not know anyone when he came to Italy but he had met people from Pakistan at the Mosque and he kept up with his new friends on social media and via messaging or chat apps. When Shahid and his friends in Rome were too busy to meet face to face, they could catch up virtually:

Some friends are working – they are very busy — and we don’t have time to meet.... now we have Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber and we are talking on Facebook and Skype.... When I am cooking or when I am laying on the bed: “Hello how are you... what are you doing? What about your work and family?” .... (It’s easy).

Ashiq, through his work at the centre, was building a wide social network of Facebook friends in Barcelona, Rome and other places. Aimal posted pictures and updates on this activity’s content to his Facebook page every day. But not everyone enjoyed using social media. Abdul, for instance, regarded such activities as “time wasting”.

I cannot give all my time to Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber. All this snapping selfies... every time I put it in my pocket because I don’t like it. I just like it to talk with my family, because (a) mobile (phone) is not for wasting time, mobile is just to keep in touch with people... I have mobile just for my family and my friends and whoever wants to contact me about any work or something.

Abdul’s views are not surprising: many people will admit to feeling such ambivalence about social media, but for many refugees, apps such as Facebook are critical to their ability to build and maintain social networks both across the world and within Rome. The social benefits they obtain from the connections and contacts they make may far outweigh the importance of the smartphone as an information gathering and processing tool, as will now be addressed.

## 6.5 Information Gathering

While media reports have highlighted the different ways Syrian refugees rely on smartphones for information on their journeys to Europe, for the refugees in this study, information gathering takes second place to the emotional and psychological benefits they derive from hearing their loved ones' voices, seeing their faces using video calling, or catching up with friends on Facebook and other social media sites. Only three or four participants seemed regularly to use the internet based information features or apps of the phone, such as the Google search engine, Maps, Translate, Compass, GPS, and currency conversion. While possible reasons for this will be discussed later in this chapter, this section looks more broadly at the information gathering practices of participants.

### **Coming to Italy, Navigating Life in Rome**

As discussed in Chapter 3, the role of diaspora and transnational migrant networks in helping to facilitate migration is a major theme in the literature. However, most participants in this research came to Italy alone, of their own volition (though as a result of their displacement), or with one or two friends. Few knew anyone from their home countries already living here. One exception was Aimal, from Afghanistan, whose friends in Rome had told him it was easier to get documentation in Italy than in other parts of Europe. He found a Persian Facebook page set up to help new migrants and he was able to ask people living in Rome about what to expect before he arrived. Before Drisia came to Rome from Mali via Libya, he was one of the few who used the internet to find out about Italy (on a PC). Hassan had only one friend in Rome that he knew from Gambia. He researched Italy on the internet but did not feel encouraged by the information he found, as he explained:

There was a time I had to go through the Internet to find news about Italy – what the situation is like in Italy. I did that on my own, but the way I found things, actually, (didn't give me) peace of mind. But I just had to come because there was no other option.

Thus, in a situation where Hassan felt he had few choices, the information he found about Italy was not inspiring but at least he knew what to expect: forewarned is, to some extent, forearmed. Other participants, like Abdul, from Afghanistan, had to leave their home countries quickly, fearing for their lives, with no time to research their destination.

As the findings indicate, locating information to help navigate life in Rome can be difficult. For the most part, when participants arrived in the city they relied on word of mouth information

from other migrants and refugees they met on the streets around the main railway station, Termini. Salif and Ibrahim for instance, were told to go to the JNRC by someone they met on the street. However, a few individuals like Hassan and Shahid, seemed quite adept at searching the internet once they were in the city and were comfortable using their phone features to find what they needed:

Most of the time I just write “migrants” or “information on migrants” – oh and I use Wikipedia. I use Google Maps, Google Translate.... (Hassan)

Shahid was fully conversant with the information features of his smartphone and used them for many activities in his daily life. He often visited the Stranieri Italia website for foreigners in Italy, and he bought bus and plane tickets online, checked transportation timetables, and used Google Maps and Translate (to help with his lessons) every day. Yusef also used Google to search for information but was a little sceptical of the quality of the information available:

If I want to know something, if I’m stuck, I will Google it. At the same time, I don’t believe that much of (what I read on) Google as well.

As this quote shows, whether such information is trustworthy or reliable takes on greater significance for people who literally have to live on their wits. When it came to looking for work, however, several participants in this study relied on information from their social networks – offline and online – rather than from the internet, as will now be explained.

### **Looking for Work**

Few participants used employment or government websites to find work, but usually relied on information from friends via calls and texts or messages. For example, the main reason Titus bought his phone was so that people could contact him about work. While Drisia was in a refugee camp in Cantania, he found out about work in Spain when calling his friends there. They later formed a WhatsApp group so that they could share information and tips about work. Ashiq relied on word of mouth to get work, but he also used the internet on his phone to find out about places where there may be jobs. Abdul, however, preferred to look for work in the local jobs paper that came out each week, and did not visit employment sites like Subito.it<sup>13</sup>. Friends also messaged him about work opportunities. Thus, the information capital that is most reliable in this situation is that which comes from friends and acquaintances.

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<sup>13</sup> The equivalent of New Zealand’s TradeMe website.

## Keeping Up With the News

Many participants said they used their phones to visit mainstream news websites to keep with current events in their home countries. Ibrahim, from Afghanistan, borrowed a friend's iPad to follow the news from home every day. Shahid watched international and Pakistan news bulletins on sites like Rai, Pakistan Live, BBC, and Arrow news. Otherwise participants used social media to keep up with current events. For example, Salif could not find much about Mali on internet news sites and so relied on Facebook. To find out what was happening in Afghanistan Malik also visited a news page on Facebook as well as BBC, CNN and Fox news websites. Hassan relied on his friends' Facebook postings to find out news about Gambia:

(I follow) news from my country, because I am on Facebook and most of the time my friends will see articles on Facebook about our country and how people are living there so I read a lot of those things through the Internet.

For people whose political convictions have resulted in their forced evacuation from their countries, their interest does not wane simply because they have left the country. On the contrary: for example, Hassan, a former university student from Gambia, who was forced to leave after he took part in a demonstration against the government there, used Twitter to post about the political situation in his country regularly:

That's the most important thing to me... because the country there is unstable and then people living there don't know... there is news that they themselves, living there, don't know about. For example I get this kind of news and I just create awareness....

Hassan took it upon himself to ensure his networks were informed and up to date. In this respect he may have enjoyed more political freedom living in Italy than he would have in The Gambia.

Some participants found it painful to read about the situations, the people and the country they left behind. Ashiq, a political studies student and writer from Afghanistan, still followed current events in his home country closely and posted about them to Facebook, although it made him sad:

Sometimes my country news makes me sad and I just refer to that expression, "No news is good news" – it's better not to (go looking for news). But anyway I have liked some pages in Facebook and any time things happen in Afghanistan... I share with other friends... for example American friends, European friends that I have on Facebook so that they should also know about what is going on in my country.

Like Hassan, Ashiq's use of social media has a political dimension to it. Abdul, however, had no interest in keeping up with the news of Afghanistan or the world:

I'm not interested in the news... I am just interested about my life. I don't like news. I (am) upset by bad news every day.

Many people might understand this sentiment, but the comment takes on special poignancy for people who have had to flee war and conflict leaving their loved ones behind and with no prospect to return in the near future.

### **Distractions: Good and Bad**

In other respects, participants use their smartphones in much the same way as most other people: for entertainment and to relax. For example, Salif watched American and Chinese action movies on YouTube. He played some games and listened to music on his smartphone. Abdul played card games on his phone to pass the time and listened to reggae music. He used the internet to look for movies and songs and loved watching wrestling programmes, Indian dramas, and English and Indian music clips on YouTube. Such distractions surely provide a welcome respite from the harsh realities of being a refugee in Rome.

However Yusef and Abdul made some interesting observations about the potential uses and misuses of the technology. Abdul, in particular, seemed to have some misgivings about its power and potential:

Smartphone have two ways. You can use it for the technology, you can use it for the information. You can use it for bad things, you know what I mean, but for good things also. You can watch on it, you can abuse people on it and you can make friends also. You can watch things and you can learn on it.... The smartphone is not good for underage boys, but at least they have to know what's going on in the world. So they can learn and use it for the school... for the college.

Abdul did not go on to explain his reference to "bad things", but Yusef also had his doubts about the technology, perhaps more in terms of it providing unnecessary distractions from real life:

There are too many things inside the phone. It could be used the right way. It could be used the wrong way. You could lose yourself in the phone.

In this regard, Yusef and Abdul share the same concerns as many other people around the world. As these findings have shown, a smartphone can be an invaluable tool — for staying connected to social networks at home and abroad, for tapping into the social capital that generates to find work, and for keeping up with the news from one’s home country. But access to the technology is not enough to ensure its effective use and sometimes significant obstacles need to be overcome, as will now be discussed.

## 6.6 Obstacles to Using Smartphones

Charging phone batteries, accessing WiFi and phone credit were major issues for participants and they would go to great lengths to keep their phones charged and to ensure a reliable phone or data connection. For example, Salif’s phone was so important to him, that his daily routine was organized so that it was always charged. He came to the JNRC as soon as it opened at 8.30 am to charge his phone and to get some breakfast. He used the free WiFi at the centre until it closed at 2.30 pm. He had three hours of battery life until he moved on to another centre to recharge his phone. At the weekends, when the centres closed, he would go to video clubs to watch the football matches and to recharge his phone. Yusef also described routines which involved going from place to place to keep his battery charged:

When you sleep outside you have to run from church to church. So now I am in this church I just fill up my battery and at three o’clock I have to go somewhere else to charge up my battery.

Informal observation confirmed that keeping one’s phone charged were concerns for many guests at the JNRC. When the centre hosted a special lunch to mark the end of Ramadan, the first thing guests did after finishing their meals was to make for the nearest power point so they could recharge their phones.

The availability of free WiFi around the city was a major issue for participants. The residential centres and camps do not typically provide free WiFi (it is password protected) and the WiFi at Termini is only accessible by registering, something which participants seemed reluctant to do. Ahmed explained:

If you got money, you put on internet. If you haven’t got money you go free WiFi.... I try to go free WiFi (in Termini). They ask for registration but it’s not really free – if you (have to) register for something it’s not really free.

The quote implies that surveillance may have been a concern for Ahmed, an issue that is examined later in this chapter.

Ashiq would go to the library to use the WiFi, but rather than relying on this charging source he generally bought data credit. Like the task of charging batteries, the pursuit of free WiFi can also dictate how participants spend their day.

When they could afford to, participants would buy prepaid phone and data cards simply so they could guarantee connection day or night and wherever they may be in the city. I was told that a five euro card (about NZ\$9.00) will buy a gigabyte of internet which can last up to a month. For example if Drisia had work, he chose to spend his precious euros on data/calling cards, rather than looking for free WiFi, because he wanted a reliable connection to family in Mali. Abdul, from Afghanistan, bought his smartphone two years ago because he could not afford to keep paying the two euros a day to use the internet at the local internet cafe to call his friends and family. He used free WiFi where he could find it but also bought cheap phone credit to make calls. On the other hand, Ashiq, who had been in Rome longer than most of the participants, said that since having a smartphone he never had to use credit to call friends in other countries; he may have come to know where the free WiFi spots were, but his job at the centre and his accommodation there also guaranteed a free connection. However, the restricted availability of free WiFi in the city was a significant constraint for most people.

## **Theft**

Theft of smartphones was also a constant concern. Three participants had their phones stolen either in Rome or on the way to Rome. There is a thriving black market in smartphones in Rome, so while this means phones are relatively cheap to purchase, they are also much sought after. Participants most fear losing their phones because phones hold all their personal contact information. The following incident, relayed by the centre administrator, illustrates just how important the smartphone is to people with few other resources.

One day a guest's phone was stolen while he was at the centre. It was a basic Nokia mobile but it contained contact details for all his family and friends in Afghanistan. Two days later an African man turned up with the phone. When questioned, he claimed he had bought it for five euro at the railway station. Things became very tense between the Afghans and the Africans and the incident could have quickly escalated were it not for intervention of the centre administrator who managed to talk the Afghani man down, reasoning that anyone who stole a phone would not be so foolish as to turn up with it at the centre two days later. The Afghans

came up with a solution. They collected enough money between them to repay the African man for the phone, while the Afghani man transcribed all the contacts that the African man had loaded onto the phone onto paper and gave it to him. As the Administrator explained: “Everyone was happy. It seemed like a lot of trouble for the phone but the contact with family in their country – it has no price.”

### **Fear of Surveillance**

Comments by some participants indicated that the risk of surveillance was a concern. For instance, Ibrahim had to leave his smartphone in Iran as he, and the people who brought him to Italy, were concerned about being found by the authorities. As noted earlier, he and Yusef were both suspicious of having to register to use the free WiFi at the railway station. Because of his forced flight from Afghanistan, Malik would only Skype call his family as he believed this was safest as calls cannot be traced.

My family is still in Afghanistan... sometimes it is difficult. I am afraid of (the) people who were forcing me to help them get inside the American military base.

Ashiq said phone surveillance was a problem in Norway when he was living there. As these quotes show, the mobile phone can be empowering, providing convenient access to one’s personal networks and to information, if you know where to find it. But it can also be a threat to one’s safety and security. This is a theme that has also emerged in recent smartphone studies.

### **Technology Literacy**

One reason why participants did not generally use the information finding features of their smartphones may be a lack of familiarity with the technology – described in the literature as digital literacy. Hassan, Shahid, Yusef, Malik and Ashiq were all relatively well educated (to college level or above) and all used their phones for a range of information related uses. Hassan had taught himself to use all the features on his phone by reading the manual.

Malik liked the multifunctionality of his smartphone and had no problems using it:

The smartphone is the easiest thing... if you want to go somewhere you can search (for) it (directions)... if you want to text someone but you don’t have balance, you can (use the)

internet to text (message). The smartphone can (help) me with translation because I can read... it can help keep (me) updated on the news, the jobs, like everything.

Malik's quote also indicates that general literacy — the ability to read and write — may also be a factor for some participants, when he says: "The smartphone can (help) me with translation *because I can read...*". For instance, Salif used the phone only for calling friends and family, for videos, games and music. Marie used her smartphone mainly to call her family but sometimes checked a Senegal website for news, and watched films on YouTube. She did not know how to use Google Translate — she did not understand how it worked. She said it might have been something that the centre's computer teacher had talked about. Titus struggled to understand the concept of apps dedicated to providing information for new refugees in Rome. Low levels of computer or technological literacy may be due to lower levels of education: Marie, Salif and Titus had not finished primary school.

When the centre was running computer classes, Titus would visit various websites on the internet. The presence of an intermediary influence like a tutor or coach would tend to suggest that they play an important role in facilitating information literacy. The computer studies tutor commented that computer literacy among centre guests was "typically below average" and that they were far more comfortable using smartphones than lap tops or desktop PCs. He explained further:

We would do typing, Google and email. Many of the students knew how to use Facebook for example, but would perhaps not understand the difference between using a search engine and using the address bar with www. Of course, there were some students who were familiar with this and who would have had a decent level of literacy but on the whole... (it was) below-average. There was a big difference across many of the students. Some would be quite good and use the class for job search, sending emails with cover letter and CVs and others would be typing and I would help them create their email accounts or Facebook.

The tutor said sporadic attendance of classes was an issue and made it difficult for guests to advance their skills. This may be a significant challenge to providing services to an itinerant population in Rome; nevertheless, the findings indicate that some sort of intervention may be required on the part of an intermediary such as JNRC to try to improve people's technological and information literacies.

## 6.7 Summary

Participants in this study explained how they must negotiate a difficult and challenging environment on a daily basis. The lack of a coordinated reception system in Rome, a lack of information, inadequate housing and welfare services and difficulties in finding work were major constraints. Yet many participants showed considerable resilience and had set clear goals for themselves. These included sorting out their documentation, finding work, becoming self-sufficient, obtaining their drivers' licence, learning Italian and English, leaving Italy, and staying in Italy. Almost every participant had acquired a smartphone, either purchasing them in Italy, or elsewhere in Europe or they had been given one by family or friends. Smartphones are highly prized over ordinary mobile phones because they enable participants to communicate cheaply or freely with their friends and families in Rome, in Italy and around the world. These connections are viewed as critical and participants will prioritise funds and adopt creative strategies to stay online. Smartphones also help participants to build and maintain *local* social networks. They may use a mix of SMS messages, calls, WhatsApp and Facebook to exchange information about work or where to go for food or shelter. Participants kept up with the news via news websites and social media. Two participants were able to use their phones to generate and share news content with their social networks. In this way smartphone use takes on a political dimension – although not in terms diasporic social activities. Despite the device's array of media affordances, most did not use the information processing tools in their phones (e.g. Google Maps, Google Translate, internet searches etc). Limited Italian language skills and IT literacy issues may limit these uses. Not unexpectedly, refugees also use the phone for entertainment: games, YouTube movies, TV and music to provide a distraction from their difficult daily lives. Technical barriers that participants encounter using their smartphones, are difficulties in charging batteries, accessing WiFi and being able to pay for phone credit. Theft and the risk of surveillance either in the city or at home were also of concern to some. These issues may further compound participants' feelings of precarity.

In sum, these findings confirm that the smartphone is a lifeline for refugees in Rome. But simply owning a smartphone does not automatically enhance people's agency or lead to improvements in their lives. Other factors come into play. By analysing the findings within the conceptual framework of the Capability Approach these issues may be better understood and appropriate supports or interventions identified. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 7 Discussion: What do Smartphones Enable Refugees to Be and Do?

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### 7.1 Introduction

The findings presented in the previous chapter shed light on how participants use (and do not use) the different features of smartphones for communication and information gathering and the psychosocial well-being they derive from this. The results provide evidence for a number of themes identified in the literature review in Chapter 3. For instance, participants seem very much part of the Network Society, as individuals operating their own transnational and translocal networks to obtain social support and information. Cheap or free calling means participants can tap into these social fields whenever they need to, providing they have WiFi or phone/data credit and their phones are charged. Connection with family, in particular, is viewed as critical and participants will prioritise funds and adopt creative strategies to maintain this. The findings also support some of the themes outlined in Chapter 4: that refugees in Rome must deal with a disjointed reception system, inadequate housing and welfare services, and difficulties in finding work. Taken at face value, the findings have gone a long way in answering the first research question, “How do refugees in Rome use smartphones to improve their well-being?” In order to answer the second question of whether Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) can expand refugees’ capabilities, choices and freedoms, we must dig deeper into the research. This is the main focus of this chapter.

As explained in Chapter 3, the strength of the Capability Approach is that it can help provide a holistic view of all the factors that might shape ICT use in a development context. Accordingly, to interpret the findings of this study I have developed a Smartphone Evaluation Framework (SEF), based on models developed by Kleine (2010, 2013) and Gigler (2011, 2015)<sup>14</sup>. This analysis begins by considering possible Well-being Outcomes for participants, based on preferences expressed during the interviews (Figure 5, orange box on far right). Collectively they can be said to represent participants’ *choices*, or the freedom to choose, which is the ultimate goal of human development according to Sen. In this situation, where research is to some extent participatory, Dorothea Kleine recommends that the analysis should work backwards, from the outcomes, to look at how these are achieved (Kleine, 2013, p.45). The ability of participants to achieve these outcomes depends on the other elements of the

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<sup>14</sup> The structure and elements of the Smartphone Evaluation Framework are fully explained in Chapter 2.

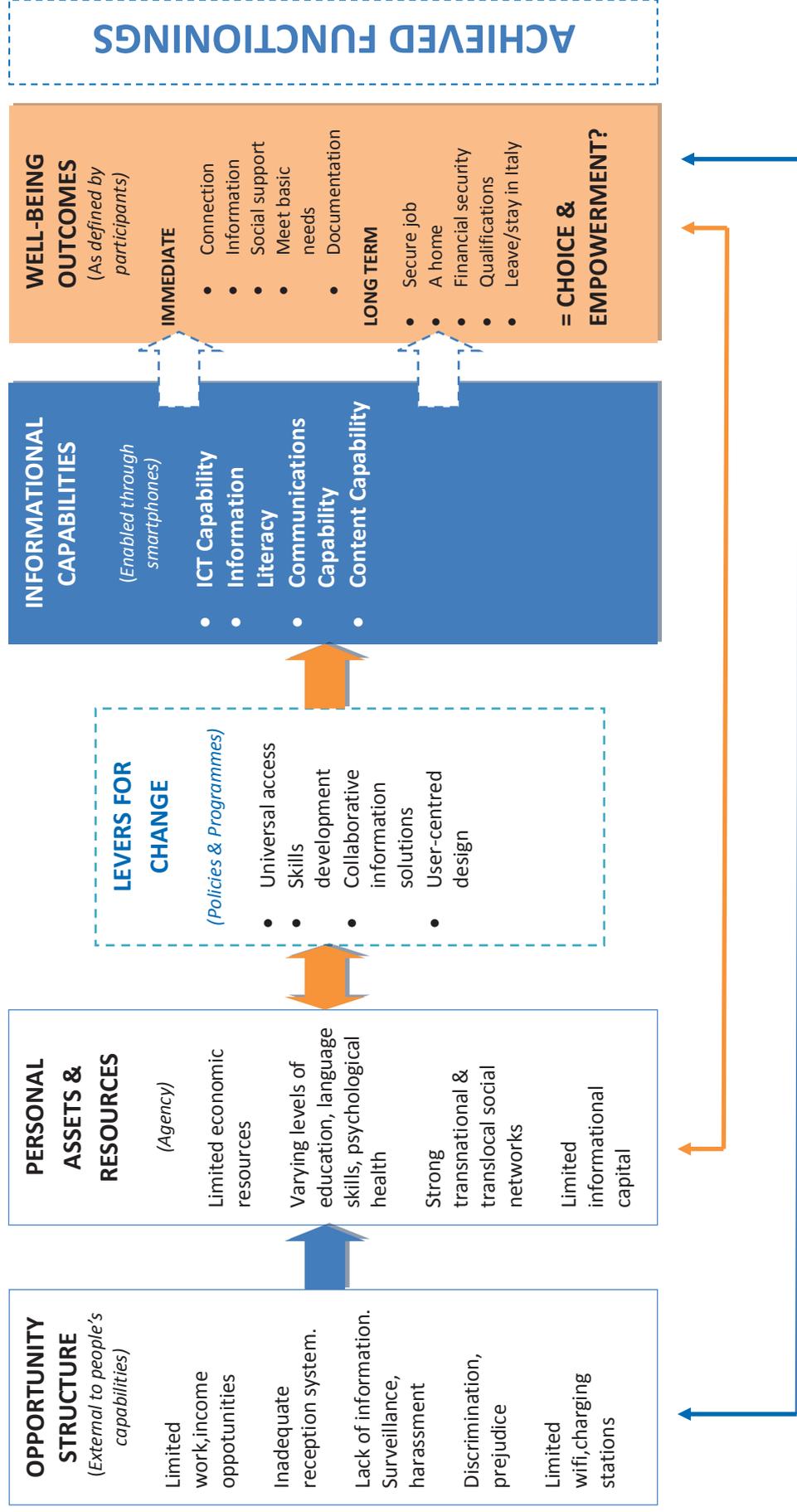
framework: the nature of the Opportunity Structure in Italy — societal and environmental factors influencing ICT use; participants' Personal Resources or agency, as they have been observed in this study; and the different types of Capabilities that smartphones enable them to develop in order to achieve Functionings in the form of the Well-being Outcomes. Within this discussion, themes that emerged from the literature review will be revisited, such the nature and role of transnational and translocal networks, notions of empowerment, information poverty and precarity, and social inclusion. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Levers for Change: policies and practices that may help support the development of refugees' capabilities to use smartphones to achieve well-being.

## 7.2 Well-being: Journey or Destination?

Central to the Capability Approach is the notion of freedom; that is, “a person’s ability to get systematically what he would choose, no matter who actually controls the levels of operation”, (Sen, 1992, p.65). Judging by participants’ experiences in Rome it is hard to see what freedoms they are achieving systematically. If poverty, tyranny, and lack of economic opportunities are all unfreedoms (Sen, 1999; p3), then refugees coming to Rome have left one situation of unfreedoms only to encounter another. Even if we adopt a utilitarian view of development, with its emphasis on meeting basic needs and achieving satisfaction, not one of the participants expressed any sense of satisfaction with their lives. The findings of this study confirm that refugee life in Italy is precarious and uncertain (e.g. Hannides, Bailey, & Kaoukji, 2016; Harney, 2013), so much so that some JNRC guests taking part in this study felt they could not plan beyond the next day, as illustrated by Ashiq in Chapter 6 when he said, “There is no future in Italy... we need to go to other countries to find a better life, some other places”.

This is an interesting quote, however, for while it indicates Ashiq’s dissatisfaction with a situation in which he feels his options are limited, he still considers he can go elsewhere. Several of the participants mentioned that moving on was a possibility for them. Aimal wanted to go back to Norway as soon as his documentation was through; Drisia may go back to Spain; and Yusef will go wherever there is work. Mobility is a capability or choice that participants in this study still felt they could exercise and the networks they formed in their travels made this idea more feasible (Brekke, 2008).

**Figure 5: The Smartphone Evaluation Framework II**  
 Source: Author (2016) Adapted from Kleine (2010, 2013) and Gigler (2011, 2015)



Korać (2003) observes that when refugees in her study were talking about the losses involved in their journeys, these could always be seen as losses of economic welfare or as uncertain prospects for the future, and not really as a loss of personal agency or of social contact, leading to social isolation. Therefore the distinction between well-being and agency is important. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sen argues that human development should not be assessed just on welfare and well-being, as this may fail to reflect the fact that people's choices are often restricted. What is important is people's agency: their ability to set and pursue their own goals, which may include well-being (Agarwal et al., 2005, p.19).

Looking at the well-being outcomes (orange box, Figure 5) participants have set and are pursuing their own goals: they are agents in their own development. But are they empowered? More specifically, are refugees empowered by their smartphones to achieve these outcomes? Partially: it depends how empowerment is evaluated. In Chapter 3 empowerment is defined as the extent to which people have the power to make effective choices and turn these into desired actions and outcomes. In Rome, as we have seen, refugees' choices are limited, but participants are making progress toward their outcomes. For instance most had their documents but had not found work; most had achieved strong social connections, but still struggled to meet their basic needs. Kleine (2010, 2013) tries to overcome this issue by evaluating participants based on their "degrees of empowerment" comprising a spectrum of choices (specifically in using ICTs), in which they weigh up whether or not to use technology before moving to the next dimension: actual use. As discussed in Chapter 4, de Haas (2009), too, considered that all migrants have some agency, although refugees' choices are highly constrained and they may occupy the upper end of the capability continuum. In the current analysis, it may make more sense to assess participants' well-being outcomes as short term or long term goals. So Hassan, Malik, Abdul and Aimal were clear that, in the longer term they wanted a steady job, to become financially secure, support their families, obtain a drivers' licence, learn Italian and English, leave Italy, and stay in Italy. In the immediate or short term, participants were focused on keeping in touch with family and friends, finding out where to get work, food and shelter and getting their papers in order. Some were achieving these outcomes, some were not.

Participants' smartphones were instrumental in achieving some short term well-being outcomes, as long as they could find a WiFi connection and a place to charge the phone battery. For example, cheap or free, convenient connection (the first outcome) is why participants in this study chose to own (or aspired to own) smartphones rather than ordinary

mobile phones. They would go to great lengths to achieve this outcome and were largely successful in this. Drisia would spend whatever income he received on data/calling cards to ensure reliable connection to family and friends. Salif's daily routine was built around charging his phone. Smartphones empowered participants to stay connected to their networks, from which they derived psychosocial support and general information. However most people were less successful in using the technology to access official information about their entitlements and to meet their basic needs. As discussed in Chapter 3, information poverty and precarity leading to social exclusion, are key themes in the refugee studies literature (Caidi & Allard, 2005; Hannides, Bailey, & Kaoukji, 2016; Harney, 2013; Kennan, Lloyd, Qayyum & Thompson, 2011; Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson & Qayyum, 2013; Wall, Otis Campbell & Jabek, 2015). The lack of official information on how to access services and support was a problem for some like Ashiq who explained how his entire day was configured around finding food and somewhere to wash his clothes. Gigler views empowerment as the ability of the poor to negotiate with the formal institutions of the market, civil society and the state (2011, p.5). In this regard, smartphones did not empower most participants who relied on their networks of other migrants and refugees for information.

One might, at this point, ask how useful is "partial" empowerment? If we consider that well-being is not absolute, but is a journey requiring many steps then a finding of partial empowerment is more palatable. For example, with information, participants can start to rebuild their lives and to work towards attaining the other outcomes that are important to them such as work and financial security. Like capabilities, some Well-being Outcomes may be instrumental in achieving other outcomes. For instance, connection, with family, friends, transnationally and translocally, enables participants to access information and **social** support. To an extent it also enables them to meet basic needs for shelter, food and state support. Getting one's documentation might lead to the longer term outcomes of permanent work, financial security, educational qualifications, or the means to travel further afield. For example, in Chapter 6 getting a job was the key to autonomy for Abdul: "If I have a good job I can rent a home, I can buy food for myself; I can buy everything for myself". Aimal wanted his documentation so he could return to his life in Norway; Malik wanted his papers so he could leave Italy. I suggest that achieving these first level outcomes contributes to achieving longer term outcomes or functionings, including the freedom to move to other parts of Europe to pursue a life of value. That is not to say that participants must pursue these objectives sequentially, or that these outcomes are valued by all participants equally. This list of outcomes attempts to reflect the expressed and implied preferences of 12 different

participants. Collectively they represent choice, or the freedom to choose, which is the ultimate goal of human development according to Sen. However, as already noted, the ability of participants to exercise agency to achieve these outcomes depends on the other elements of the framework: the nature of the opportunity structure in Italy in which participants become embedded, their personal resources, and their capabilities. Each of these elements will now be discussed in relation to the findings of the study.

### 7.3 Limited Opportunities

Refugees' capabilities to achieve well-being in Italy are highly constrained by socioeconomic, political, cultural and other structural factors. These include the lack of a coordinated reception system, integration policy and support for resettlement (see Brekke & Brochmann, 2014; Korać, 2003, and Puggioni, 2005). The findings of this study confirm how, collectively, these factors contribute to the social exclusion of participants through the "fencing in of opportunities" (Jacobsen, 2016). As many of these factors have already been described at some length in Chapters 3 and 4, this discussion will look briefly at how economic, environmental political and social factors within refugees' Opportunity Structure may affect participants' use of smartphones. (Figure 4, first box on far left.)

All participants indicated that they were struggling to make any kind of economic progress in Rome because of their status as documented or undocumented refugees, and the restraints placed on their movement and participation in the labour market by asylum laws and regulations. In very tight economic conditions, participants in this study engaged in creative workarounds to manage expenses (like phone credit and data usage) and to access WiFi and battery power. When refugees cannot connect because of unreliable access to power or internet, this impacts negatively on their network capital<sup>15</sup> (Gillespie et al., 2016).

In this study, the lack of free WiFi around the city was a major issue for participants. The residential centres do not typically provide free WiFi (it is password protected) and participants were reluctant to register for the WiFi at the main railway station. Ashiq would go to the library to use the WiFi there but rather than relying on this, he generally bought data credit. As well as keeping one's phone charged, accessing free WiFi around the city also required some creative strategies. Thus Rome's IT infrastructure also has a direct bearing on

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<sup>15</sup> A concept analogous to that of social capital considered essential to a mobile life. It includes documentation for safe movement, social contacts who can offer hospitality, information and contact points, communication devices, meeting places, and time and resource to manage a system failure (Urry, 2012).

participants' ICT practices and their ability to achieve the kinds of capabilities they need to use their smartphones effectively. As Gillespie et al. (2016) point out, digital infrastructure is as important to refugees as physical infrastructure of roads, railways, sea crossings and borders.

The political environment in Italy may also shape participants' ICT practices. For example, tighter security in the city due to terrorism concerns may heighten fears of surveillance and limit the use of phones. As the literature shows, mobile phones may be a "paradoxical presence" leading to surveillance and intimidation (Gillespie et al., 2016; p.5). In this study, Ibrahim and Yusef were both suspicious of having to register to use the free WiFi at the main railway station in Rome. Malik would only Skype call his family as he believed this was safest as calls cannot be traced. Ashiq said phone surveillance was an issue when he was living in Norway. Harney (2013) describes how securitisation and control characterise migration regimes in Europe, in which terror and crime are putatively linked to migration. But in the face of this juridical and political insecurity, migrants' mobile phones became a tool for survival, as they are also for refugees in Rome. Several participants – Malik, Hassan and Ashiq — expressed frustration at the lack of official information on how to access support and find accommodation and work. For example, Malik felt that the staff in the reception centres were deliberately unhelpful and even lied to him about helping him find work. The lack of official information available to asylum seekers in Italy may have a political dimension to it (Gillespie et al., 2016, p.2.). The authors argue that governments and news media are endangering the lives of refugees by failing to provide adequate, reliable and timely information for them as they make their way through Europe and are in breach of their obligations under the UN Refugee Convention (pp5-6). Information is seen as a fundamental human right.

The findings of this study also indicate that refugees experience prejudice and discrimination in Rome which compounds their social exclusion and makes it difficult to access the resources they need. This firsthand account by one of the centre guests illustrates this well:

Outside, I feel looked upon as an unwelcome stranger. When I'm on the bus the people next to me secure their wallets and close their purses. I don't know how to behave to prove that I am not a thief. The refugees that I know are good people from good families. Even if they don't have money or beg on the street, they would never steal. This is what we face as refugees every day in Rome ("I was a stranger", 2015).

This quote describes the invisible, intangible cultural and social barriers to refugees' participation. Participants in this study considered themselves as "strangers" in Italian society who were not treated well by the authorities or would-be employers. As a result they might

seek belonging elsewhere and in other ways, using their smartphones to connect with friends and family and access the social support they need. This is discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

As this part of the discussion has served to emphasise, participants in this study operate within a constrained Opportunity Structure in Rome which limits their smartphone practices. This includes limited economic opportunities, a digital infrastructure that largely excludes them, and a political and social climate in which refugees are viewed with suspicion and are subject to surveillance.

#### **7.4 Asset-rich or Asset-Poor?**

As discussed in Chapter 2, (and illustrated in the second box on the left side in Figure 4), differences in people's knowledge, skills, money and power may also influence their ICT capabilities (Heeks, 2002, p.8). Participants in this study had limited economic resources. Several participants were homeless, others were living in crowded accommodation with limited facilities, surviving on a few euro a day. Their most valued material resource was their smartphone or phone but being able to pay for calls and data was a significant problem. For example, Ashiq and Drisia chose to spend what little cash they did have on phone credit, ahead of other goods. This finding aligns with those of several other studies and attests to the priority participants put on connection ahead of meeting their own material needs (UNHCR, 2016, Wall et al., 2015).

Participants' human resources, as identified by Kleine (2010), include psychological assets (self-esteem, problem solving, and sense of inclusion in the modern world), skills, knowledge (education) and health. As outlined in Chapter 6, many of the centre guests indicated they had experienced significant psychological hardship in coming to Italy, because of the circumstances in which they were forced to leave their countries, the perilous journey they had to make to get there, and/or the situation of deprivation in which they then found themselves. Some remained positive and upbeat, others were matter of fact about their situations, and others were angry and despondent and felt excluded from Italian society. In talking to them about their smartphones, however, it was clear that they took great comfort in being able to speak frequently with family and friends. The psychosocial connections that smartphones facilitate may help bolster participants' psychological resilience and their social inclusion, a finding that is also in keeping with those of other studies (Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Hannides, Bailey, &

Kaoukji, 2016), leading to a strengthening of psychological assets. This is addressed in more depth as part of the discussion on Capabilities later in this chapter.

Skills, knowledge and education varied greatly among participants in this study. It is hypothesised that this had a direct bearing on the use of smartphones by participants. For example, Hassan, Shahid, Yusef, Malik and Ashiq were all relatively well educated (to college level or above) and used their phones for a range of information related purposes. They were the “outliers” identified in the study by Mason and Buchmann (2016) who used their smartphones in more sophisticated ways to find information needed to navigate their daily lives. Whereas Titus and Marie, who had only a few years’ primary school education, relied on their phones mainly for communication. Difficulty with the Italian language is an obstacle that several participants were trying to overcome through language classes. This is consistent with studies by Leung et al (2009) and others who have shown that poor literacy and language skills can make it hard for refugees to learn new technologies, especially those that require written language skills, such as SMS, email and the internet. The small sample size of this study makes it difficult to draw emphatic conclusions, or to rule out other variables, such as the length of time participants have owned their phones, their ages, or socioeconomic status. The influence of skills and education in people’s technology use is further discussed in the context of Informational Capabilities later in the chapter.

In regard to **social resources**, participants indicated that, within Rome, these were limited, especially when they first arrived, when they had to rely on their wits and on word of mouth information for people they met in the street. Yet, participants were increasingly becoming part of Castell’s Mobile Network Society using their own networks to access social resources, to collaborate, gain information and a sense of belonging. They were not part of one defined ethnic or cultural group or diaspora, but were members of many different informal groups (e.g. family, friend networks – in Rome, in Italy, in Europe, at home, JNRC guests, or artisans). As discussed in Chapter 2, these social activities across borders may be described as “glocalised networks” comprising communities of shared interest rather than communities of shared kinship or locality (Wellman, 2001, p. 13). Some of these networks had a translocal aspect (Appadurai, 1995; Sinatti, 2006) and comprised acquaintances and friends across the city. Participants seemed to “dip” into various networks as they needed information and social support. For example, when Salif had to go somewhere new he would call one of his Italian speaking friends to go with him to translate, in case language was an issue. Shahid had built up a friend group of local people he had met at the mosque that he liked to meet up with face to face or, when this was not possible, he would chat to on Facebook. Participants could also

access transnational networks of family and friends extending around the world and including people they had met on their journeys.

The importance of these translocal and transnational networks will become clearer in the ensuing discussion of how participants' use smartphones to convert such resources to create valuable capabilities. In the meantime this discussion has served to highlight that participants' personal resources are generally limited in terms of what they can bring to bear in negotiating daily life in Rome. However, they are not helpless. Their most important material resource is their smartphone and, as will now be discussed, this is instrumental in helping them to strengthen and enhance their social resources and to access social capital to achieve the Well-being Outcomes important to them.

## 7.5 Informational Capabilities

Development outcomes are the aggregate of different capabilities, the things participants can be and do, leading to people's achieved functionings (Kleine, 2010). Borrowing from Gigler (2011, 2015), participants may use their smartphones to achieve four interrelated *informational capabilities* that contribute to their Well-being Outcomes (Figure 4, blue box, far right).

- **ICT capability** – effective use of all the features of the technology.
- **Information literacy** – finding, processing, evaluating and using information to solve problems.
- **Communications capability** – communicating effectively with family members, friends and professional contacts.
- **Content capability** – producing and sharing local content with others through their networks.

Such capabilities may be intrinsically valuable in themselves, or instrumentally valuable in that they may enable other “beings and doings”, as will be discussed.

Does having a smartphone enhance participants' ICT capability? The findings show participants made effective use of the communications features of the phone in using the various voice, messaging and video calling apps as well as social media such as Facebook. As will be elaborated, this enabled participants to build and maintain social networks that provided social support as well as information on work or where to find shelter or food. Many used the phone's entertainment functions to watch movies or TV programmes online, to listen to music

or to play games, providing much needed distraction and release and enhancing their feelings of well-being. However, only a few participants used the device's information-seeking functions to find and evaluate information from external sources. They included Hassan and Shahid, who used Google Maps, and Google Translate and could perform internet searches when they needed information. But others, like Salif and Marie, did not generally use the phone's information features and seemed unfamiliar with the concept of apps. The Capability Approach de-emphasises the role of technology as a tool; nevertheless, given the transformative role that multipurpose technologies can play in a person's life and the choices they offer, being able to use the technology effectively matters. The findings of this study regarding ICT capability align with those in a recent report which showed refugees in Jordan, Turkey and Greece did not use smartphones to search for information and resources and that information flows were mostly peer to peer through social media (Hannides et al., 2016). The authors surmise that different levels of personal resources such as language and literacy proficiency may affect levels of both ICT capability and the capability of information literacy, which will now be discussed in more detail.

### **Information Literacy is Key**

Information literacy has been defined as the development of practices and skills to analyse information and its sources critically (Kennan, Lloyd, Qayyum & Thompson, 2011, p.125). As explained in Chapter 3, Gigler (2011, 2015) sees information literacy as an aspect of ICT capability which not only encompasses the ability to read and write, but to use multimedia to solve information problems, and to operate a computer (smartphone in this case). The findings of this study indicate this capability varied widely among participants. Few refugees used their smartphones to access employment or government websites to find work, and usually relied on tips from friends through calls and texts on their phones. Observations by the former computer tutor confirmed that IT literacy among those guests he taught was "below average", although he also confirmed that many of those taking part in his classes were quite adept at using their smartphones for social uses. These findings are similar to those of Mason and Buchmann (2016) who found that many refugees in Jordan, Turkey and Greece owned smartphones but that their levels of technology literacy were low. They did not use their phones to search for information and resources or to download apps.

To be able to achieve the capability of information literacy people need education and language proficiency. This is illuminated by numerous studies, including Kabbar & Crump's

(2006) study on refugees in New Zealand, which linked information literacy to levels of education, language skills, and computer experience. In the UNHCR study (2016) poor literacy was the second most significant factor inhibiting technology use. The study found variations across age groups and backgrounds. Younger people and those from urban settings had higher levels of digital literacy than those from the country. In the BBC Media Action report, Syrian refugees who were young and wealthy were more likely to have smartphones and were confident in using the internet (Hannides, Bailey, & Kaoukji, 2016). Participants were almost all under 34 years of age, which tends to suggest that, in this study, age may not have been a factor determining levels of information literacy. However education may well shape information gathering practices. Five of the 12 participants were relatively well educated and used their phones for a range of information related purposes. Interestingly, the media coverage of refugees' smartphone use that sparked this research focused mostly on Syrian refugees' use of smartphones for different functions including navigation, money transfer and internet searches. According to the International Organization of Migration, 40 percent of Syrian refugees are tertiary educated and many are from the middle class (IOM, 2016, p.39). Syrian participants in the work of Gillespie et al (2016) were mostly well educated and digitally literate. These factors may account for differences in information literacy of participants in the current study (and therefore smartphone use) and warrant further research.

### **Connected and Resilient**

In this study, smartphones enhanced participants' communications capabilities, by giving them the means to convert their social resources into valuable functionalities. The smartphone as polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2012) offers many communications possibilities which participants in this study made full use of. This aligns with findings by a number of other studies which have shown that migrants will use different media to connect with family and friends, to seek and obtain information about loved ones, and to engage with others from similar backgrounds in social and support networks (Andrade & Doolin, 2016, p. 412). These transnational ties provide comfort and support (Benítez, 2012; Caidi et al., 2010; Hiller & Franz 2004). To be able to communicate with family and friends, affordably and conveniently, is what mattered most to participants in the current study and this they did using internet-based text, messaging, voice and video calling apps.

The literature suggests that migrants' media use is shaped by differences in knowledge and skills (Hamel et al., 2009). This was also evident in this study. For example, for Hassan's friends,

it was a matter of different preferences or “tastes” as to which apps he used to contact them, however, for Abdul’s family, who could not read, text based communication was out of the question (suggesting information literacy on the part of the *recipient* of communications is also a factor shaping ICT practices). The findings in this study also confirm that people will choose different media to communicate because of the different intimacies they might afford (Benitez, 2006; Panagakos & Horst, 2006). Abdul and Marie both favoured video calling because they could see their families and experience a more intimate connection. As Abdul said in Chapter 6, “That you have web cam... it’s important if you are using Skype, so you have a front camera to watch your family... and your family can watch you and it will be like normal...”. In this way smartphone technology can reduce the emotional costs of migration, and help refugees to replenish their emotional and physical resilience in an otherwise difficult situation.

Well developed communications capabilities also enable participants to maintain links with people outside their immediate circle of family and close friends, on whom they may call for assistance or for information or help. Social media were instrumental in building and nurturing these links. For example, Ashiq, through his work as a presenter at the centre, was building a wide social network of Facebook friends—in Barcelona, Rome and other places—who might one day be useful to him in his travels. Several participants spoke of how friends in other countries had encouraged them to go to Italy as it was easier to get one’s documentation there. This finding confirms the importance of transnational exchange of information identified by Korać (2003). Most participants used social media, particularly Facebook, to maintain their friend networks but also to share information about work opportunities and news about their countries. This finding aligns with research by Dekker and Engbersen (2014) who claim social media create “a deterritorialized space” that facilitates communication among people who are geographically dispersed. The authors assert social media encourage people’s mobility by strengthening existing ties and establishing new ties to people who can help with support to integrate. Hannides et al., 2016, found that refugees’ social networks gave them access information to help them understand their situation and make critical decisions. Gillespie et al. found that refugees used Facebook to “crowd source” journey information such as maps, contacts and advice, in both public and private groups.

However, Ashiq’s friend networks also provided him with virtual companionship: someone to share his photos and personal news with; and an audience for his posts on Afghanistan and a sense of belonging in a society where he otherwise felt marginalised. Several authors have discussed the importance of ethno-cultural or *intra-ethnic* connections in creating a sense of

community for refugees where people form relationships with people from their own backgrounds (Marlowe, 2014). In this study, however, participants' online and offline networks seemed to comprise other migrants and refugees, although not always from the same countries, as well as people they had met on their journeys and in Rome. Rather than considering themselves as part of a defined community, participants operated as networked individuals (Wellman, 2001). Thus, with a smartphone or internet enabled phone, belonging need no longer be about *place*, but about creating *spaces* of "digital togetherness", that make integration less traumatic (Marino, 2015, p.6). The capacity of the phones to store contact information for hundreds of people makes them a huge asset to refugees, as was evidenced by the story of the stolen phone in Chapter 6.

### **Authors of Their Own Stories**

The ability to produce and share local content with others through social networks – content capability – is important to refugees for a number of reasons. According to Gillespie et al., (2016), news is trusted when it is vetted and shared by friends and family. Information flows between refugees are mainly peer to peer (Mason & Buchmann, 2016). The ability to produce and share information would seem a very useful informational capability for refugees, one which would help them to enlarge their reserves of social and informational capital. However the findings of this study suggest this capability is not well developed among all participants, with the exception of Hassan and Ashiq who felt a responsibility to keep their networks updated of news in The Gambia and Afghanistan using Twitter and Facebook. This finding also indicates that content capability may be instrumental in enabling free political expression, a fundamental human capability identified by Nussbaum (2003) as central to a life of dignity. In this respect, some participants' use of smartphones takes on a distinctly political aspect, reminiscent of some of the ICT enabled transnational activities attributed to diaspora in Chapter 3 (Bernal, 2006; Borkert et al., 2009; Norris, 2001; Panagakos & Horst, 2006). This finding also supports Wahlbeck's (2002) assertion that refugees forced to flee from their country of origin have a strong political orientation, expressed as political activism, toward their home countries. However, the findings in this study do not support the existence of delineated "transnational communities" in which participants engage in the kinds of cross border economic, political, social and religious exchanges described by Vertovec (1999). Some individuals like Hassan and Ashiq felt a responsibility to keep political information flowing to friends in their home country, but for the most part participants were just focused on meeting

their day to day needs. Nadge, Black and Koser (2001) contend that refugees need the time, space and capabilities to develop transnational activities. It is the process of consolidation in a host country that provides refugees with the political, social or cultural space to develop transnational activities (ibid, p.597). Like those refugees in the study by Hannides et al. (2016) most of the participants in this study regarded themselves as in transit, on the way to other places.

There is another reason why content capability may be important to refugees. Wall et al. (2015) observe that information precarity has another side to it: the sense by refugees that information about them is not available to the rest of the world, or is ignored or distorted in some way. The situation is made worse by the tendency of refugees to be “silenced” by the language of relief, policy science and development (Malkki, 1996). Thus refugees need the capability to tell their own stories.

To sum up, just as they are for migrants, global and local social networks were vital to refugees in this study. They were able to use their smartphones to convert social resources into valuable informational capabilities. Participants are part of Diminescu’s “culture of bonds” (2008, p.565), but with one subtle distinction: unlike economic migrants, they remain uprooted (sometimes violently so), while still being connected to social networks at home and abroad. Several authors have noted the importance of mobile phones to refugees’ well-being (Leung et al., 2009; Harney, 2013; Wilding 2009). This study follows that of Andrade and Doolin (2016) in suggesting that ICTs (smartphones) are a resource from which refugees can derive particular capabilities that contribute to their well-being. However, as has discussed, whether people can actually achieve these ICT enabled capabilities depends on the social arrangements and environmental conditions within which refugees must function. Interventions, in the form of policies and programmes, may be required to improve people’s assets and opportunity structure, as will now be addressed.

## 7.6 Levers for Change

It is at this point that the concept of agency intersects with that of structure, and notions of social justice enter the discussion. The Capability Approach acknowledges people are responsible for their own development, but as a theory of social justice (Nussbaum, 2011) it also puts some onus on the State and – to some extent – civil society to support people’s capabilities. In fact, Martha Nussbaum describes the Capability Approach as a “species” of human rights approach and says that “fundamental rights are only words unless and until they

are made real by government action” (Nussbaum, 2011, p.2 and 65). This study identifies four “levers of change” that can be manipulated to reduce digital inequalities and build refugee’s informational capabilities: (1) Universal access to the internet (2) Tuition and training to boost refugees’ IT skills (3) Collaborative information solutions, and (4) Research led and user centred tech initiatives.

## **Universal Access**

The internet remains “the fabric of contemporary life” (Castells, 2001), so much so that internet access is now recognised as a basic human right, as evidenced by remarks made to the UN General Assembly in 2011 by the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression. He emphasised the “unique and transformative nature of the internet” to enable people to freely express themselves and to exercise a range of other human rights, as well as helping society to progress as a whole. Ensuring universal access needed to be the priority of all states. Further, the Rapporteur urged that where the infrastructure was present, states needed to support ways to ensure online information could be accessed: “in a meaningful way by all segments of the population, including persons with disabilities and persons belonging to linguistic minorities” (UN General Assembly, 2011, p.22). The universal right to access the internet must also, therefore, be extended to refugees. According to the UNHCR, when refugees are connected they have a voice and can become self-reliant and able to create more opportunities to improve their lives. “Unless mobile and internet access are available and affordable, innovative digital apps and services will not have a truly transformative impact.” (UNHCR, 2016, p.20).

Digital infrastructure is an element within participants’ opportunity structure that is within the gambit and control of the Italian Government and the private sector. In Ericsson’s Networked Society City Index (2014), Rome ranks 21 out of 40 cities for ICT infrastructure performance. Access to city services via the web is classed as very good yet it is doubtful whether the city’s refugees are able to access these services and thus are likely to be disadvantaged by this apparent digital divide. Providing free Wifi access in every residential centre would be a good start (as well as battery charging stations), although providing free WiFi across the city (that does not require registration) would also improve refugees’ and migrants’ access to information (and benefit the millions of tourists coming to Rome each year). However, as has been explained (Chapter 2), any ICT intervention or project for the poor needs to address the

development of people, their skills and capabilities, rather than just providing access to the technology (Heeks, 2002, 2008, 2009; Gigler 2011, 2015).

### **Skills and Capabilities**

Interventions that might help to achieve digital inclusion of refugees in Italy also include policies and infrastructure that support and encourage the development of the informational capabilities discussed in the previous section of this chapter. E-government programmes, for instance, in trying to improve access to public sector organisations, often neglect people's skills levels, values, beliefs and motivations (Madon, 2009). As centres like Rome move toward becoming smart cities, refugee and migrant integration policies must include a focus on digital literacy and on improving people's informational capabilities to assess, process, and evaluate information using ICT.

Intermediaries, organisations or individuals that support local communities to use and adopt technology, are critical in helping them overcome barriers to information access and use (Heeks, 2002; Gigler 2011, 2015). These include civil society groups, NGOs, humanitarian agencies and so forth. The JNRC, for instance, offers tuition on basic computer skills, such as how to conduct an internet search or use email, word processing and so on. However, discussions with a former computer tutor revealed that a major issue for the centre, which is staffed mainly by volunteers, is the difficulty in recruiting and retaining tutors. Based on the findings of this study, a case could be made for government and/or the private sector to fund qualified computer tutors in residential centres and refugee agencies to provide basic computer training – including how to use smartphones effectively. This would include coaching on how to undertake internet searches, how to access and use government and nongovernmental service portals, apps and websites, how to use translation, maps, and other apps, where to find trusted national and international news, as well as more advanced skills that might lay the foundations for further study or an IT career. At least three participants in this study had computer skills or had been engaged in computer studies in their home countries. During the long wait for their documentation, refugees could be taking state funded classes to help them build basic IT skills so that they can be part of the Information Society – paying bills online, accessing services and information – but also using more advanced skills which enable them to access employment opportunities.

## **Collaborative Information Solutions**

Newcomer refugees need accurate, relevant and accessible information that supports their transition and settlement in host countries. As the research has shown, different kinds of information are needed to survive in Rome including legal information, practical tips for daily life (such as where to access WiFi and electricity), information about transportation, health and social services and support to communicate in the Italian language with officials. As Ashiq indicated in Chapter 6, having access to official information would save participants considerable time and effort in travelling around the city to access what they need. In the absence of a response from the state, however, several European NGOs and civil society groups are collaborating to fill the information gaps for refugees. Yet some studies (Gillespie et al.) suggest that quick technology fixes do not work. Successful solutions must be adequately resourced and sustainable. For example, at the time that this study was undertaken, the JNRC was considering developing an app specifically for refugee newcomers in Rome. The thinking around this is that an online resource would greatly enhance the JNRC's support of refugees. As a charity operating on a very limited budget, putting some of its services online (registration, legal and immigration advice, for instance) could result in greater efficiencies by freeing up staff time. A cursory search of the Internet, revealed a range of similar kinds of apps and websites which purport to help refugees in Europe (e.g. Crisis Info Hub, Infomobile – Welcome to Europe, the Village of All-together, Stranieri.it, or RefugeeApp). Some of these are better than others (see Gillespie et al., 2016). Without access to user statistics it is hard to know whether these apps and websites are actually being used by refugees. As has been shown, few of the JNRC refugee guests in this study were familiar with the apps or websites mentioned here or even with the concept of an app. The information trusted by participants comes from personal contacts via calls, messages, or social media such as Facebook pages. Other studies also confirm that downloading new apps or visiting websites is not common among refugees (Mason & Buchmann, 2016). The report's authors conclude that an important success factor for ICT for refugee projects is to engage with users based on their level of tech or digital literacy, preferably through the channels they are already using. That may mean working with key influencers on social media sites like Facebook to provide factual information; providing resources in audio and visual formats for those who cannot read; or it may mean providing nondigital or hard copy resources such as maps. The findings of this study indicate these may be effective solutions for refugees.

## User-centred Design

Research by Gillespie et al. (2016) also highlights the importance of tech initiatives that are research-led, and which involve refugees in the design, implementation and evaluation of tech resources. This underscores the need to develop refugees' informational capabilities so that they may take part in – if not lead – such initiatives. In the current study, once the concept of an app was explained to participants, several said they supported creating an app for the JNRC and suggested content for it. These included mapping the location of refugee services provided by local authorities, NGOs and private providers. Some participants also thought it important to include information on where and how to find paid work. This kind of participative design is critical for the success of ICT4Refugee approaches. Gillespie et al.'s (2016) research also supports the importance of providing secure and private platforms for refugees to share information. Like the participants from the JNRC, the fear of surveillance was also an issue for those interviewed for Gillespie's study.

Such studies provide invaluable information for agencies and organisations in developing digital solutions for refugees, but more needs to be known about all the information or communications channels – both online and offline – that refugees deem to be reliable, accurate and trustworthy, and more needs to be done to promote them so that refugees and refugee agencies know where to find help.

## 7.7 Summary

The Smartphone Evaluation Framework used to analyse the findings of this study provides a holistic, systemic view of the many different factors that might shape refugees' use of smartphones to achieve well-being in Rome. It maps societal factors and conditions (Opportunity Structure), people's Personal Assets and Resources (Agency), and the different types of Capabilities enabled by smartphones which lead ultimately to achieved functionings or Well-being Outcomes. While participants' empowerment may only be "partial", the findings indicate that, despite considerable structural constraints and limited personal resources, smartphones can help participants achieve immediate Well-being Outcomes. Using their smartphones, participants can maintain strong social connections with family and friends, use their networks to find shelter, food or casual work, or to keep up with the news from their home countries. These outcomes may be considered intrinsically valuable in themselves or instrumentally valuable in that they contribute to higher level outcomes such as finding long term employment, gaining financial security and so on.

The smartphone expands some of the key capabilities that help participants to achieve these outcomes. It enhances people's communications capabilities, although their information literacy and content capability may not be as well developed. The extent to which people can develop these capabilities depends on their personal resources, such as their language proficiency, education and literacy, but also on structural elements such as economic conditions, the political and social environment and the level of IT infrastructure. Thus, there are several interventions that can help ensure the digital inclusion of refugees in society. These include improving internet access and availability; supporting refugees to develop the informational capabilities needed to gather and process information, as well as providing accurate, relevant and accessible information in formats and channels familiar to them. In the absence of adequate digital support for refugees, civil society is rushing to develop a range of tech innovations. This study underscores the importance of researching refugee's information needs and practices – defining the problem before rushing to the solution.

The following and final chapter of this thesis returns to the original research questions, summarises the findings and distils the results. Further implications will be discussed and recommendations for future research will be made. The chapter concludes with some personal reflections on the experience of undertaking this research and its contribution to the subject of refugees' use of ICTs.

## CHAPTER 8 Conclusions: Connected and Capable?

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### 8.1 Introduction

This thesis posed two main questions:

- (a) How do refugees use smartphones to improve their well-being?
- (b) Can Information and Communications Technology (ICT) expand refugees' capabilities, choices and freedoms?

This chapter will distil the findings of the study and draw on the discussion in order to answer the research questions. The implications of the findings will be addressed in terms of the study's contribution to the academic literature and the need for more in depth research on the smartphone practices of refugees, especially given the current migrant and refugee "crisis" in Europe. The chapter concludes with some personal reflections on the experience of undertaking this research which has served to underline the importance of accelerating policies and programmes for the digital inclusion of refugees.

Before addressing each question, however, it may be helpful to revisit the notions of well-being, capabilities, choices and freedoms, which are all core concepts within the Capability Approach, the conceptual framework for this study. As outlined in Chapter 2, according to Capability theorists, the aim of human development is to enhance people's well-being by enhancing their freedom of choice and thus their agency to achieve a life of value (Sen, 1999). Well-being is multidimensional, and encompasses one's economic, political, social and cultural freedoms. It is both an *aspect* of a person (mental state) and their *freedom to achieve* what they value – functionings like being nourished, being housed and being employed. Whether a person is happy is not as important as whether they have *agency* in their lives; whether they can make the most of their capabilities to achieve valuable "beings and doings". ICTs have been viewed as a capability enhancing freedom for the poor and disadvantaged. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 7, technology is embedded in the broader social and material context of society and its use is shaped by people's personal, social and environmental characteristics as well as their opportunity structure. These need to be identified and addressed if people are to be able to use technology effectively to achieve valuable capabilities and functionings.

## 8.2 Smartphones and Well-being

The study finds smartphones are critical to the psychological well-being of participants, or their well-being aspect. Smartphones provide a lifeline in Rome where refugees experience considerable material and psychological hardship. Of the twelve people interviewed, ten had smartphones and all had owned a smartphone at one time (some were onto their second device). Participants used the technology in much the same way as most people – for example for gaming, music, news, and movies. However the main reason for owning a smartphone was because it enabled participants to connect cheaply or freely to friends and family all over the world via the Internet. Frequent contact helped replenish participants' emotional and psychological resilience, a finding also supported by other studies, as outlined in Chapter 3. The smartphone was described by many as their most precious asset, as important to their survival as water. Further, the psychosocial benefits derived from transnational and translocal networks are so important to participants they will go to great lengths to stay online, building their daily routines around charging their phones and accessing free WiFi where they can find it.

Whether smartphones give participants the freedom to achieve their well-being outcomes – or agency – is less clear. Participants' smartphones were instrumental to achieving short-term outcomes, such as cheap and convenient connection, as long as they had WiFi and their phone battery was charged. Smartphones empowered participants to stay connected to their networks, from which they derived other well-being outcomes such as psychosocial support and general information. While a direct causal relationship is difficult to prove, these first level outcomes can contribute to achieving longer term outcomes or functionings. However participants' use of technology did not lead to their full empowerment, as it is defined by Gigler (2011, 2015) in Chapter 2. Most participants in this study did not use their smartphones to access official information about their entitlements or to meet their welfare needs. The lack of official information on how to access services and support was a problem for several participants and was disempowering. Without information, participants may not be able to pursue other outcomes important to them such as finding work, a place to live, financial security, education or to travel further afield.

In the bigger picture the research shows that, despite encountering an environment of considerable unfreedoms in Rome, many participants still felt they were able to exercise some agency. They described goals that were important to them: a steady job, to become financially

secure, support their families, obtain a drivers' licence, learn Italian and English, to stay in Italy or to leave Italy. In pursuing these outcomes participants are exercising some agency, but they may be only partially empowered, because their choices are limited, leading to the partial fulfilment of their goals.

### 8.3 Smartphones, Capabilities, Choice and Freedoms

In answer to the second research question, the study found that smartphones can expand participants' capabilities, namely the *informational* capabilities needed to use the technology effectively. These include the capability to use ICTs in an effective manner (ICT capability); to find, process, evaluate and use information (information literacy); to communicate effectively with family members, friends and professional contacts (communications capability); and to produce and share local content with others through the network (content capability).

However the extent to which participants could use their smartphones to develop these capabilities was constrained by factors in participants' opportunity structure, including a lack of economic opportunities and a digital infrastructure that largely excluded them. Keeping phones charged and accessing free WiFi were major obstacles for participants in this study. The acquisition of informational capabilities was also influenced by participants' levels of personal resources. Economic resources were generally very limited. Several participants were homeless; others were living in crowded accommodation, surviving on a few euros a day. Their most valued material resource was their smartphone or phone but paying for calls and data was a problem. Participants' education, literacy and language proficiency (their human resources) also varied and may have shaped participants' smartphone practices.

For example, owning a smartphone did not necessarily lead to enhanced ICT capability. Participants made effective use of the communications features of the phone and its entertainment functions but only a few used the device's information seeking functions such as Google search, translation, maps and other apps. Participants' information literacy may have had an impact on their ICT capability. Most did not use their phones to search for information and resources or to download apps. In the literature, information literacy has been linked to levels of education, language skills, and computer experience. Those participants who used their phones for a range of information related purposes were relatively well educated, and could speak several different languages.

Smartphones greatly enhanced participants' communications capabilities, giving them the means to convert their social resources into valuable functionings. To be able to communicate

with family and friends, affordably and conveniently, is what mattered most to participants. They used internet based text, messaging, voice and video calling apps. Media use was shaped by differences in knowledge and skills but also by their need for an immediate, intimate connection. Video calling, for instance, provided a real time connection which helped to restore a sense of normality for some participants. Thus some features of smartphone technology can reduce the emotional costs of migration, and help refugees to replenish their emotional resilience in an otherwise difficult situation. Well developed communications capabilities also enable participants to maintain links with people outside their immediate circle of family and close friends, on whom they may call for assistance or for information. Most participants used social media, particularly Facebook, to maintain their friend networks but also to share information about work opportunities and news about their countries. Social media also helped create a sense of belonging in a city where participants otherwise felt marginalised. Thus, participants could use their smartphones to create a sense of belonging that is less about physical *place*, and more about creating *spaces* of “digital togetherness”.

As other studies of refugee ICT use have found, information flows between participants tended to be peer to peer. The ability to produce and share information – content capability – can help enlarge reserves of social and informational capital. However the findings of this study suggest this capability is not well developed among all participants, with the exception of two or three people who used Twitter and Facebook to share news and political views. There was no evidence that people operated as part of delineated transnational communities or diaspora. Most of the participants in this study regarded themselves as in transit, on the way to other places and few knew people already living in Rome.

Whether smartphones can expand people’s choices and freedoms is a complex question and requires a more nuanced response. At one level, the answer is yes: in obtaining a smartphone instead of an ordinary phone, participants have made a choice which enables them to manage their communications costs, maintain crucial links with family and friends, watch a movie or listen to music, if and when they like (provided they are internet connected and their battery is charged). If refugees are looking for where to go to find a place to sleep, somewhere to eat, or for casual work, they can call or message people in their local networks. Thus, having a smartphone can satisfy these more immediate well-being needs. However, as explained in the first part of this chapter, with regard to longer term well-being outcomes or functionings, such as finding permanent work or achieving financial security and self sufficiency, direct contribution is harder to prove. However, the findings in my study tend to lend weight to Sen’s assertions that evaluations of human development need to look beyond whether people have

achieved well-being to whether they have agency: the ability to set and pursue their own goals. This study finds that although participants felt constrained by poverty, their status as refugees or asylum seekers, and their treatment in Italy, many still felt they could make decisions about what to do with their lives. This result tends to support claims by some authors that refugees in situations of hardship do not perceive that they lack personal agency. In this respect smartphones are critical, enabling refugees to transcend time and space, to tap into the social and information capital that allows them to continue to be agents in their own lives.

## 8.4 Implications of Findings

This study makes an important contribution to the academic literature in several ways, while also highlighting the need for more in depth research on the smartphone practices of refugees, especially given the current migrant and refugee “crisis” in Europe.

Firstly, the findings of this study shed more light on the technology practices of a population that has so far been underreported in the academic literature. Approaches like network analysis and transnationalism usefully explain the links between migration and ICTs, and the role of migrant networks in an interconnected world. Participants in this study are networked individuals who operate their own “glocalised” networks to access information and support, to collaborate, to socialise and gain a sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001, p.16). This study supports the importance of ICTs in maintaining migrants’ personal relationships, but it also shows that for refugees, who have been forcibly displaced from their homes with little prospect of returning, smartphones and the connectivity they facilitate, are absolutely critical to their well-being and thus warrant more attention both in terms of research and policy. This is also supported by the recent release of the UNHCR Global Strategy for Connectivity for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016). At the heart of the strategy is the belief that better connectivity is essential for empowering refugees to educate and entertain themselves, and for earning a living, and that it can promote self reliance by broadening the opportunities for refugees to improve their own lives.

Secondly, my study also contributes to understanding how refugees use a particular type of technology – the smartphone – a topic still nascent in academia, despite the rapid uptake of the technology and its utility in a range of contexts, including in education, health, e-government, and humanitarian situations. A handful of studies in the last few years have

highlighted the importance of mobile phones to refugees in managing precarious situations, such as in camps and on the streets. In the last twelve months, research reports published by civil society and private sector groups have also started to emerge on refugee connectivity and smartphone use by refugees on the move, or in camps, but there is still a big gap, particularly in terms of information on newcomer refugees' use of smartphones in urban settings (as opposed to that of settled refugees). While the attention of media and social agencies may be on the safety and well-being of those refugees in transit, this study has served to highlight the issues that refugees face in arriving in a city like Rome and their need for accurate information to meet their basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and support.

My research has also indicated areas where social agencies and governments may direct their efforts in looking to support the integration of refugees. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Capability Approach acknowledges people are responsible for their own development. However, as a theory of social justice there is an onus on the State to support people to develop and exercise their capabilities: to provide the right political, economic and social environment for them to flourish. EU policies on e-inclusion provide a clear mandate for governments to improve immigrants' economic and social participation and integration, creativity and entrepreneurship. That means making sure internet access is both available and affordable (more free WiFi hotspots), and that people know how to use it (skills development). It also requires ensuring that the information people need to make decisions and to participate in their communities is widely available in formats and languages they can understand.

European NGOs and civil society groups are collaborating to fill the information gaps for refugees but few of the participants in this study were familiar with these apps or websites or even with the concept of an app. Thus the findings from this study tend to support those of other studies that ICT for refugee projects should engage with users based on their level of tech or digital literacy, preferably through the channels they are already using. Also, to ensure that such initiatives are truly user centred, efforts must also be directed at engaging refugees in the design process and building their own IT skills and capabilities so they can actively participate in – if not lead – technological innovation that purports to benefit them.

Again, this is where government and or humanitarian agencies and the private sector could be much more active. Several ICT4D proponents (e.g. Heeks, 2002; Gigler, 2011, 2015) argue that intermediaries – organisations or individuals who support local communities to use and adopt technology – play a critical role in ICT4D projects by enabling communities to acquire basic ICT capabilities. Government funded IT tuition in residential centres and by NGO agencies such as

the JNRC could help boost people's skills and capacities and would pay dividends on the investments being made in e-government programmes in Europe.

This focus on people's capabilities is a key strength of this study. In adopting a Capability Approach, I have aimed to contribute a different perspective on refugees' ICT practices, based on a view of human development that sees refugees as agents in their own lives and that the role of technology should be to enable them to develop certain capabilities essential to their well-being. The Capability Approach has provided a useful conceptual lens which enabled me to take a systemic approach to map all the different factors shaping participants' technology use. However, there are some limitations to this approach. Operational frameworks, such as the evaluation framework used in this study (Figure 5), and those of Gigler (2011, 2015) and Kleine (2010, 2013) are well suited to assessing individual capabilities and well-being, but it may be more difficult to take this approach in evaluating a group or community whose members have very different aspirations and whose levels of personal resources differ widely. In my research it was difficult to assess people's information literacy without spending considerably more time with each individual, observing their smartphone practices firsthand or the content of their communications. Intangible resources such as psychological well-being are also hard to measure without subjecting people to a battery of tests. Also, without a lot more information, it is difficult to show direct, causal relationships among structural or environmental factors, a person's resources, their capabilities and their well-being outcomes. Finally there is the notion of choice. Kleine (2010) says the primary outcome of any ICT project should be improved choice, but people can make bad, good or irrelevant choices with no obvious improvement in well-being.

Setting these issues aside, however, the value of the Capabilities Approach is that it requires reflection on the meaning of "development" and how ICT might support refugees to pursue a life that is meaningful to them, as well as how to create opportunities for them to participate in society. Future studies on poor people's technology use may benefit from taking a Capabilities Approach. For example, this study indicates participants' infrequent use of the information gathering facilities of the smartphones may result from inequalities in people's resource endowments: particularly in terms of education literacy and language skills.

Quantitative data in the form of a larger survey of refugees' communication practices would be useful to gauge whether there is any correlation or whether other variables are at work. A gendered analysis of these variables would be particularly useful given the paucity of data in this area. At the same time, much more needs to be known about how refugees access information – offline and online – so as to support them effectively on their journeys and in

their integration in Europe. Without such information, well intentioned efforts to develop apps and websites may miss their mark, resulting in wasted energy and resources.

## 8.5 “Another Life”: My Personal Reflections

Undertaking this research has had a profound effect on me personally in ways that will stay with me for years to come. I learned that there is no typical refugee experience. Twelve different people told twelve different stories of their lives in their home countries, their journeys to Europe and their experiences in Italy. Behind the statistics and rhetoric about the human tide that threatens to engulf Europe, I have found people with skills and experience who just want a better life for themselves and their families. Among the participants in this study were several well-organised, well-educated, articulate young men who had held positions of considerable responsibility in their home countries. They were desperate for an opportunity to make something of their lives, but were frustrated that they could not get the break they needed. As Shahid explained sadly in Chapter 6: “When I lived in Pakistan (it was) another life... when I come here it’s another life... a totally other life.”

The right to asylum from persecution is enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, as are the rights to work, to an adequate standard of living, to education, and to take part in the cultural life of one’s community, including “to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (United Nations, 1948). These benefits include the digital infrastructure and resources that are instrumental in fully achieving one’s human rights and to exercising one’s capabilities to improve well-being. Policies that focus on containment and control overlook the immense human potential of refugees, who bring with them diverse skills and experiences that can help grow economies and enrich the cultural fabric of societies. As this thesis has shown, if refugees are to be part of the information society, active in their own development and that of their communities, they need support to develop their informational skills and capabilities. Given the current political climate in Italy and in Europe, such ideas may seem naive and “techno-optimistic” but surely the benefits of such an approach far outweigh the immense social costs of doing nothing.

# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Question Guide

### **QUESTION GUIDE**

#### *Getting started*

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself – which country you are from, your age, your job in your home country,
2. Why did you come to Rome and how long have you been here?
3. Do you plan to stay here or are you on your way to somewhere else?
4. Have you applied for asylum/got your documentation?
5. Did you come here alone? or with family or friends?
6. Did you know anyone here before you came?
7. How are you able to support yourself financially?

#### *Phone use*

8. When did you get your smartphone? Why?
9. Is having a smartphone important to you? Why / Why not?
10. What do you use your smartphone for? (probe for communication, information; check for apps, games, music, GPS, translation, etc)
11. How do you keep your phone charged? (electricity and funds – prepaid?)
12. How/where do you access Wi-Fi?

#### *Communication*

13. How do you communicate with your family and friends in *your home country* e.g. Call /Email /Skype/ whatsapp/facetime/ Facebook/ txt/ other? Why?
14. How do you communicate with your family and friends *here* do you: Call /Email /Skype/ whatsapp/facetime/ Facebook/ txt/ other? Why?

#### *Information needs*

15. What did you know about Rome/Italy before you left your country? How did you find out information about it? E.g. did you use the internet?
16. How did you know where to go to stay/shelter? Where to get food? About services like those provided by the JNRC?
17. Are there people from your own country here who helped you when you arrived?
18. How important is it to you to find out what's going on (news) in your home country? How do you do this – (calls/websites/apps/social media e.g., Facebook)
19. How do you know what services are available to you in Rome? How do you do this – (calls/websites/apps/social media e.g., Facebook)

20. What websites do you visit? E.g. immigration, refugee information, etc
21. Living in Rome, is language an issue for you? How do you get around this? (do you use Google translate?)
22. Where are you staying now? How did you learn about this place?
23. Where do you plan to go next? What are your plans for the next few months?
24. What are the things that make using your phone (to find out information) difficult in Rome? (probe – internet access, cost, living situation, etc)
25. Do you think there should be more WiFi hotspots around the city?
26. What about the cost of calls?
27. The JNRC is thinking about developing an app to help new migrants to the city. What sort of information do you think would be helpful to have on the app?

***Capacities and capabilities***

28. Education: Did you go to primary school, secondary school, college, university and/or how many languages do you speak?
29. How do you know how to use your phone – did/does someone help you?

*“Thank you very much for your time”; ask if they are happy for this information to be used in the study, reassure about anonymity, “you can sign this permission form, but if that makes you uncomfortable, you can just tell me you are happy for it to be used” – give phone card.*

## Appendix 2: Information Sheet

*(Originally formatted on Massey Letterhead and also translated into Italian and French)*

### The Connected Migrant: How Rome's Refugees Use Smartphones to Negotiate Daily Life

#### PROJECT INFORMATION

Hi! Bonjour! Buongiorno! Salam!

My name is Tanya St George and I am conducting a study into how smartphones can help people who are new to Rome find the information they need, and keep in touch with family and friends. I would like to invite you to be part of my project, which is part of my Master of International Development Degree that I am undertaking through Massey University in New Zealand. I hope that the results of my research may help social agencies in the city improve WiFi access and internet support for migrants.

I would like to talk to JNRC guests with smartphones, to ask you about the challenges of life in Rome, your journey to get here, and how you find out about where to go for shelter, food, clothing, financial support, work opportunities. I am interested in learning about how you use email, apps, instant messaging, social media, websites, video calling etc. I also want to understand what would make life easier for you in terms information and services that agencies could provide.

#### How the project will work

- I will be visiting the centre, over 2-3 weeks, sitting in on computer classes and moving around and talking to people with smartphones.
- I hope to speak to up to 15 people for between 20-40 minutes - the study is relatively small because I want to focus on really understanding how people use technology.
- **Your participation will be anonymous - you will not be identified in the research if you don't want to be.**
- In return for your time, you will receive a phonecard valued at 10 euro.

#### What will happen to your information?

- The information gained from the project will be used to write up my research thesis - or essay, and I may also write a few papers for academic journals and meetings.

- The notes from the interviews will be kept in secure computer files in my locked office and will be disposed of after the study.
- I can email you a summary report of the project after it is finished, or you will be able to access a copy on the JNRC website in December.
- We can use a pseudonym or false first name in my notes to protect your identity if you don't feel comfortable giving me your name.

### **Your rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study within one month of talking to me
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to me to do so;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

**If you have any questions about the project, please feel free to contact me by emailing [tanya.ok.6@gmail.com](mailto:tanya.ok.6@gmail.com) or my academic supervisor Dr Sharon McLennan: [S.McLennan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.McLennan@massey.ac.nz)**

**This project has been approved by Massey University in New Zealand...**

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 86015, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix 3: Consent Form

*(Originally formatted on Massey Letterhead and also translated into Italian and French)*

### The Connected Migrant: How Rome's Refugees Use Smartphones to Negotiate Daily Life

#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me.

My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

.....

**Full Name - printed**

.....



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