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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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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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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 |