

SUMMER 2016

HOW CAN TECHNOLOGY HELP IN THE REFUGEE CRISIS?

REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

Technology can help educate, inform and connect refugees, allowing them to integrate in their host countries and contribute to economic growth.

At a Friends of Europe event on 22 June, entrepreneurs and philanthropists set out how innovation was helping people to help themselves.

“This is a human rights issue,” said **Jacqueline Fuller**, President of Google.org and the Google Foundation. “We need to be welcoming as a global community.”

More than a million refugees arrived in Europe last year, most of whom ended up in transit camps, where tech giants such as Google have now begun providing wifi and laptops.

“Refugees need much more than shelter and food distribution,” said **Jérémy Lachal**, Director of Libraries Without Borders, which partnered with the UN’s refugee agency and designer Philippe Starck to create an “ideas box”, a portable library and media centre with its own internet connection and power source.

For Friends of Europe, fresh from launching a paper on how to solve the migration crisis, refugees can bring tangible benefits. “Our position on the issue of refugees and migrants is that they provide a net gain to our societies and communities - they don’t offer a net loss, as some would have us believe,” said Friends of Europe executive director **Dharmendra Kanani**.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS

A record 65 million people worldwide are currently fleeing war, violence or economic deprivation, more than after the Second World War, and millions more are expected to be displaced as a result of climate change over the coming decades.

Since January 2015, 1.2 million people have arrived in Europe, mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but EU governments have struggled to accommodate and integrate them. Several emergency measures have been adopted in the last year, including a relocation and resettlement plan for 160,000 refugees, and a refugee swap and €3 billion financial aid package for Turkey, but human rights groups have hit out at the schemes.

For international financial organisations, there are positives to the crisis. Migration will have a small but positive effect on the EU economy, according to the International Monetary Fund (+0.25-1.1% by 2020), the European Commission (+0.2-0.3% of GDP by 2020) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (+0.1-0.2% in 2016 and 2017). This is particularly important as the EU’s population ages and its working population shrinks. The European Commission estimates that by 2060, over-65s will account for a third of the EU population, while the share of working-age people will shrink from two-thirds to just over half.

One solution, according to civil society and businesses at the Friends of Europe and Google event on 22 June, is technology, which can help harness refugees’ potential to contribute to the EU’s economy.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN NUMBERS

60m	approximate number of displaced people in Europe after the Second World War
65.3m	number of displaced people worldwide end-2015
1.2m	number of refugees that have arrived in Europe since January 2015
17	average number of years spent by refugees in camps worldwide
40%	share of children in the refugee population in Greece
<1%	share of the refugee population that has access to higher education

Source: IOM, Unicef, UNHCR, Libraries Without Borders, Kiron Open Higher Education

“After perilous and often expensive journeys over land and sea to find a safe haven, the first challenge for refugees is overcoming the language barrier and getting basic information about their legal status in their host country. Technology plays a ‘pivotal role’ in helping refugees jump this first hurdle.”

Jacqueline Fuller,
President of Google.org and the Google Foundation

INTEGRATION THROUGH EDUCATION

After perilous and often expensive journeys over land and sea to find a safe haven, the first challenge for refugees is overcoming the language barrier and getting basic information about their legal status in their host country. Jacquelline Fuller of Google.org, the tech giant’s philanthropy arm, says that technology plays a “pivotal role” in helping refugees jump this first hurdle. Her organisation has partnered with NGOs and tech entrepreneurs to roll out wifi in refugee camps and along migration routes, to create a website that provides practical information to around 150,000 refugees (refugeeinfo.eu) and get 25,000 basic laptops to refugees studying in Germany.

Refugees now spend an average of 17 years in transit camps, which poses a second, and even bigger challenge. “In emergency situations, once the basic needs are covered, people need tools to reconstruct themselves, to move forward,” said Jérémy Lachal of Libraries Without Borders. “They need access to quality information, education, training, tools for creativity.”

Vincent Zimmer, Managing Director and co-founder of Kiron Open Higher Education, said technology can be used to provide education for those in need worldwide. Zimmer’s organisation, a social startup that provides traditional and web-based education to refugees, free of charge, and compares the situation of refugees today to that of his grandfather, who fled Germany during the Second World War. “When he tried to enter higher education, he faced many problems: he was lacking his legal documents, he was lacking his legal status, he was lacking financial resources, he was not speaking the language and there was a lack of capacity at these universities,” he said.

Mechanical engineering student **Sajida,** who fled Syria with her family to Germany two years ago, says Kiron has given her the “best chance” of an education. “Moving around from country to country, with no stable life, you can’t have an education,” Taya says. “I would love someday to go back to Syria, and the great thing is I could continue studying even from there.”

Alaa, another Kiron student, explained how technology helped him rebuild his life after leaving behind a successful career in computer science to escape to Europe. “I had finished my studies, I had a career and everything, and suddenly I’m starting from zero, from nothing,” he said. “Kiron was like a huge door opening.”

AUDIENCE POLL

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES WE FACE IN ADDRESSING THE MIGRATION CRISIS IN EUROPE?

- 1 The unavailability of information, the inability of people to communicate with each other, to share information on food and other needs.
- 2 A lack of willingness from the EU to address the problem.
- 3 The need to form a cohesive ecosystem of support, maybe new technological tools will allow for new solutions.
- 4 A lack of medical information on refugees, i.e. vaccination needs, could be solved by a USB card containing vaccination and medical data.

EMPOWERING PEOPLE

The motivation behind inventions such as the ideas box is to empower refugees to solve their own problems, and not simply shower them with emergency aid. “It’s not anymore about how can we help the refugee, get them support, it’s more about how we can place them at the centre of the services we provide to them,” said Lachal. “It gives an opportunity to change our point of view on aid, not to consider refugees as numbers we have to manage but as users who are part of the solution,” he said.

For Kiron University student Alaa, his studies have helped him keep up with changing technology and improve himself. He has helped to develop a smartphone app for Kiron students, to help with their coursework. “The technology we now have in our hands is so simple, so useful, and it’s so great to do what you want, to reach your dream,” he said. “We need this power to keep going, we don’t need more blocks to reaching our goals.”

The same is true of initiatives such as startupboat.eu, a hub for scientists, activists, developers, inventors to come together and develop novel solutions to the refugee crisis. It was founded by [Paula Schwarz](#), who says bringing people together to brainstorm on a boat has major advantages. “People have their heads free on open water,” she said. “We connect people together to solve social problems – working together, thinking together,” said [Salim Mohammed](#), a Deutsche Telekom engineer from Aleppo, Syria, who also works for Startupboat.eu.

Startupboat.eu’s latest project is a new database of around 400 budding entrepreneurs in the German refugee community, and Schwarz is currently lobbying corporations and politicians to get the word out. “They want to be integrated,” she said.

ROADBLOCKS

But while entrepreneurs and tech companies are finding innovative ways to help refugees, the people who hold the purse strings often stand in the way. For [Claus Haugaard Sørensen](#), a Senior Advisor on Resilience, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response at the European Commission, political will is the main roadblock in the refugee crisis. “Technology cannot resolve the problem, the problem is political,” he said. “There is a moral responsibility here to get it done and move on.”

Human rights organisations have hit out at the EU’s approach to the refugee crisis, which is largely based on protecting the bloc’s external borders, and the European Commission’s latest proposal to curb migration aims to reproduce the March EU-Turkey deal with other neighbouring countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon. On the positive side, the bloc is still the world’s largest humanitarian aid donor, mobilising an extra €500 million for the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, on top of its annual humanitarian aid budgets of around €1 billion.

The problem is that this aid is often not channelled into innovative new solutions. “The people that sit on the money and the contracting, they have their manuals and their standards, and if the innovation doesn’t fit into the rule book then the innovation will be pushed aside,” Sørensen said.

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Another problem is the lack of communication between aid organisations in the camps and along migration routes. The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is responsible for information management, and currently has more than 3,000 datasets, while the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has the legal mandate for registering refugees. But there are countless non-governmental organisations and charities working in camps and along migration routes that also keep their own records.

“We have a very big problem in the humanitarian sector,” said Startupboat’s Paula Schwarz. “Everyone is collecting data differently and not sharing it,” she said. Startupboat has been tapping universities for help in building up databases that could help identify how many tents or how much food, for instance, is needed in the various refugee camps.

“We call it database-hugging syndrome,” said Google.org’s Jacqueline Fuller, but pointed out that there were also dangers in sharing information too widely. “Data can sometimes be helpful, but you have to be careful as well that it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.”

Libraries Without Borders’ Jérémy Lachal said that technology is bringing a “new mindset”, even to the NGO sector. “We are seeing the same revolution in humanitarian aid as we are seeing in our societies, with the emergence of the net economy,” he said.

CONCLUSION

“The revolution is silently happening,” Lachal said to sum up the mood of the debate, a sentiment echoed by Schwarz, who added that the world was moving “step by step towards a solution” to the refugee crisis. The European Commission’s Claus Sørensen warned, however, that the migration crisis would not stop with the war in Syria. “It is going to be a permanent phenomenon, so we’d better get prepared,” he said. “We can cope with it with technology, with good politics, with engagement from everybody.”

FRIENDS OF EUROPE’S WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS TO EUROPE’S REFUGEE CRISIS

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Acknowledge benefits of migration | 6 Access to credit for immigrant entrepreneurs |
| 2 A positive new conversation on migration | 7 Ambitious and coordinated housing drives |
| 3 Ease and spread the costs of migration through EU budget | 8 Integrate migrants through education |
| 4 Speed job-seeking migrants into work | 9 Tax incentives for companies sponsoring migrants |
| 5 Contest the fallacy that migrants steal jobs | 10 Migration as a solution to the pension crisis |

Read our full discussion paper at www.friendsofeurope.org/future-europe/win-win-solutions-to-europes-refugee-crisis/



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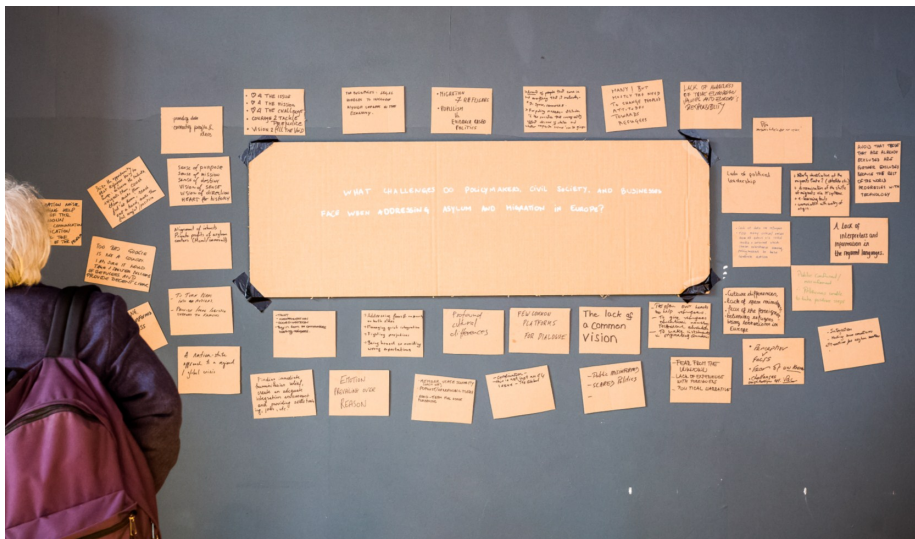
WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS TO EUROPE'S REFUGEE CRISIS

A 10-POINT APPROACH TO TACKLING THE EU'S IMMIGRATION AND INTEGRATION CHALLENGES

DISCUSSION PAPER
BY GILES MERRITT AND SHADA ISLAM

This discussion paper launches Migration Action, a new Friends of Europe initiative. Its basic assumption is that the refugee and migrant crisis of 2015 risks being equally daunting in future years. The challenge of absorbing so many newcomers requires a substantial policy re-think throughout the EU. The ideas set out here aim to spark a new and more constructive debate.

 DOWNLOAD THE DISCUSSION PAPER





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