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Refugees in the Digital Economy: the Future of Work among the Forcibly Displaced

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Abstract

The current scale and duration of displacement prompts renewed urgency about livelihoods prospects for displaced people and the role of humanitarian organisations in fostering them. This special issue focuses on how aid organisations, together with the private sector and other actors, have worked to include refugees in new forms of online work within the web-based digital economy. Building on comparative analysis and a comprehensive review of the field of digital livelihoods among the forcibly displaced, in this introductory article we argue that including refugees in this digital economy is currently neither a sustainable form of humanitarian relief nor is it a development solution that provides large-scale decent work. We show how digital livelihoods approaches have gained a special footing in the middle ground between short-term economic relief and long-term development. Indeed, digital economies seemingly offer a variety of ‘quick-fix’ solutions at the transition from humanitarian emergency towards long-term development efforts. While digital economies harbour significant potential, this cannot be fully realised unless current efforts to include refugees in digital economies are complemented by efforts to address digital divides, uphold refugees’ rights, and ensure more decent working conditions.

Keywords: digital work; refugee; refugee self-reliance; digital economy; gig economy; humanitarianism; development; future of work

Introduction

Today forced displacement is at a record high, with over 100 million people displaced (UN, 2022). Once displaced, most people remain in exile for many years or decades. The magnitude of the scale and duration of displacement prompts renewed urgency about livelihoods prospects of displaced people and how humanitarian organisations can support these. Scholarship, policy and practice on livelihoods is now widespread, yet rarely focuses on the nexus of displacement with another emerging global phenomenon: the changing nature of work.

Digitalisation and the digital economy are at the forefront of these transformations. This includes online gig work and how innovations in technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and robotics are driving forward rapid

changes in most fields of work. Economies are increasingly becoming digital and web-based, reshaping labour markets and employment opportunities around the world. Digital labour platforms and the online gig economy now promise access to work for anyone with an internet connection, a computer and the right skillset. Inspired by this promise, governments, civil society, social enterprises and international organisations in the humanitarian and development sectors, including the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), now run or support programmes aiming to help refugees become self-reliant through digital or online remote work, often connected to forms of digital finance.

The digital economy encompasses online work and small-scale entrepreneurship mediated by digital



platforms, as well as jobs in digital fields of work – ranging from basic data entry to programming to research – that can be undertaken remotely or locally. This means that the digital economy involves both the digitisation of new and pre-existing types of work, as well as the digitisation of labour markets in a locally disembedded internet economy.¹ Both these layers share the implicit promise of inclusion and accelerated opportunity: just as anyone can in theory become a coder with the right motivation and hard work, often without the need for degrees or professional certifications (Rushworth and Hackl, 2021), anyone from anywhere can – in theory – become an online freelancer. The powerful promise of the digital economy is underpinned by equally powerful tropes of imagination (Kaurin, 2020).

In this article, we use the terms ‘livelihood’ and ‘work’ interchangeably to explore how refugees earn an income and ‘make a living’ online,² although we differentiate the use of these concepts from the narrower categories of ‘jobs’ and ‘employment’, which refer to ‘safe, productive and fairly remunerated work’ as a wage employee or own-account worker (ILO, 2015). These latter types of work are less available to refugees in the digital economy, and especially in the internet economy of digital labour and e-commerce platforms. For refugees specifically, the promise of such *digital livelihoods* arises out of significant legal and practical barriers to work in many host countries, illustrating the need to consider this population’s participation in particular. ‘Digital livelihood’ extends beyond the scope of ‘work’ to encompass a wide range of supportive interventions that intermediate between refugees and the internet economy (Hackl, in this issue), including training programmes, support with internet connectivity, access to hardware, or payment processing. Yet amidst the growing enthusiasm about digital work and livelihoods, there is currently a wide gap of evidence on the diverse opportunities and challenges that refugees encounter in the digital economy, and a lack of critical dialogue on how humanitarian and development actors both practically and normatively should be involved in this area of livelihood provision.

In practice, digital work for refugees takes place in a variety of ways, ranging from low-skill, micro-work that can be completed by smartphone to high-skill online consulting, language interpreting, teaching or translation. Alongside the digital nature of types of work, the mediation of work is digital, wherein digital technologies and platforms link service providers with customers or consumers. This includes location-based labour platforms such as ride-hailing or delivery platforms, as well as web-based digital labour platforms that are not locally bound. E-commerce platforms, ranging from Ali Baba to Jumia, as well as informal digital

entrepreneurship through apps like WhatsApp, are another aspect of the digital economy among refugees. Regardless of the medium (or outcome), significant individual resources in the form of data, electronics and electricity, as well as time and skills, are required to enter or remain engaged in the digital economy.

The Digital Economy as an Opportunity for Development

The adoptions of digital refugee livelihoods in aid emerged against the backdrop of a wider global shift towards a web-based digital economy accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The wider digital economy, estimated to be around 15.5 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), has grown two and a half times faster than global GDP over the past 15 years (World Bank, 2022). Digital labour platforms have increased fivefold in number between 2010 and 2020 globally (ILO, 2021). The demand for online freelance work has grown by an average of around 10 per cent a year, with roughly 90 per cent more projects demanded via online freelance platforms in 2021 than in mid-2016. This growth is significantly higher than changes in national labour markets, which have plummeted in many countries as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have emerged as a growing labour force on such platforms, which is exemplified by India’s share of the global online worker population having grown from 25 per cent in 2017 to 33 per cent in 2021. Some 43 per cent of all online project demands on platforms are in the field of software development and technology (Stephany *et al.*, 2021).

All of this has been viewed as an unprecedented opportunity for development in the global South, supported by economic modelling, which indicates that a mere 10 per cent increase in mobile broadband penetration in low-income countries could increase GDP by 2 per cent, while increasing digitisation overall would boost labour productivity (ITU, 2019). In the Middle East and North Africa, some predict that digitalisation could raise GDP per capita on average by more than 40 per cent, while long-term unemployment rates could drop and female labour force participation could double to more than 40 per cent in some countries (Cusolito *et al.*, 2022). While these figures are both promising and impressive, limited research explores how individuals as well as specific populations enter this economy with the assistance of humanitarian and development actors, and to which results this entry leads.

Article and Special Issue Overview

In this article, we first provide an overview of the digital economy and digital work as it relates to refugees,

followed by humanitarian debates relating to these issues, including fair and decent work, market-driven aid, and the humanitarian-development gap. We argue that in its current manifestation digital livelihoods for refugees is neither a sustainable form of humanitarian relief nor is it a development solution. It cannot offer the assistance so many desperately need precisely because those most in need of aid are likely those for whom digital work is not a viable option due to lack of the connectivity, hardware and start-up costs, as well as a lack of the skillsets in demand within the digital economy. Yet as many articles within this issue illustrate, even those refugees who have received training, are in possession of a smartphone or even a computer and have the initiative and skills to earn money online often find themselves excluded and discouraged. Without taking these outcomes seriously, the humanitarian community is at risk of ‘humanitarian neophilia’ (Scott-Smith, 2016), wherein visions of innovation and ‘the new’ take precedence over both the feasibility of such initiatives as well as the very needs they are meant to be grounded in addressing. A further concern in such a perspective is that the very real risks, be they labour exploitation or the further impoverishment of refugees, is ignored in favour of the possibilities that the digital economy holds.

This special issue builds on these newer and other long-standing debates around the benefits and risks of market-based interventions, information and communications technology (ICT) usage and digital finance in humanitarian aid and international development, and expands the critique of the growing promotion of ‘refugee self-reliance’ (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018). The articles shared here stem from a variety of academic disciplines and humanitarian practice-based perspectives and seek to more explicitly interrogate both the promising opportunities and significant risks of this foray into the digital economy. As will be further discussed, articles cover a range of geographic breadth ranging from South America to East Africa to the Middle East and focus on both specific humanitarian digital livelihoods programming, online work platforms, and the broader engagement of refugees in the digital economy. This comparative analysis underscores how the precarious inclusion of refugees into web-based economies is both globally widespread and locally specific. Indeed, the condition of forced displacement often involves a similar kind of socio-economic and political marginality that becomes mirrored and reinforced within a web-based economy. At the same time, local refugee regimes, policies, laws and infrastructures frequently determine who can access digital livelihoods and benefit from online income opportunities, illustrating the primacy of ‘real life’ within the digital.

A Brief History of Humanitarian Practice and Digital Work for Refugees

Digital refugee livelihoods began to be conceptualised and implemented on a wider scale within the humanitarian system after 2015, when the conflict in Syria first triggered large-scale displacement into Europe. At the time, only a handful of actors and initiatives were involved in leveraging online work for income generation. In contrast, at the time of writing this in 2022, almost every actor working with refugees in the development-humanitarian aid sectors seems to have gone digital. This can be traced in part to several more recent shifts in the humanitarian system, including the intersecting trends of humanitarian innovation and digital humanitarianism, as well as a wider focus within the humanitarian system on livelihoods and entrepreneurship.

Emerging as a field in 2008 with the launch of an ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance) research programme (Ramalingam *et al.*, 2009), humanitarian innovation became a concept for both research and practice related to refugees and other affected populations (Betts and Bloom, 2014; Ramalingam *et al.*, 2015). It also included a focus on humanitarian innovation ecosystems, such as calls for the system to partner with ‘non-traditional actors’ such as the private sector and led to the emergence of innovation agendas (DFID, 2012; Ramalingam *et al.*, 2009) and eventually entire innovation units within multiple non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies, including UNHCR. Indeed, ‘Managing Innovation’ was one of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit’s core themes, illustrating the extent to which innovation by this time had become present (at least as a topic) within the humanitarian community.

Building on the ‘innovation turn’ in humanitarianism, so-called ‘digital humanitarianism’ arose in 2010 after the Haiti earthquake when thousands of volunteers used a variety of digital means – from social media to satellite imagery – to help humanitarian relief operations (Meier, 2015). Understood as ‘the enacting of social and institutional networks, technologies, and practices that enable large, unrestricted numbers of remote and on-the-ground individuals to collaborate on humanitarian management through digital technologies’ (Burns, 2014), today digital humanitarianism is present in a variety of refugee assistance actors. The non-profit organisation Techfugees, for example, brings together volunteer computer scientists, innovators, social entrepreneurs, humanitarians and displaced people for hackathons and other events to develop ‘tech solutions’ for displacement, aiming to ‘support and help the

deployment of responsible technology products and services for and with displaced persons across the world since 2015' (Techfugees, 2022).

The Digitalisation of Humanitarian Services

More broadly, the humanitarian sector has digitalised many of its services, such as WFP's transition to electronic vouchers and the longstanding use of biometrics in refugee registration. UNHCR has, for instance, been involved with digital data through biometric data collection. It has used identity technology such as iris-recognition technology since 2002, when it was first employed for Afghan refugees returning from Pakistan (Jacobsen and Sandvik, 2018), and is currently rolling out its Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem (PRIMES), which includes state of the art biometrics.

Such digitalisation is seen by some as a means to increase efficiency within the system and also refugees' autonomy, be it through digital cash transfers or a digital identity. This focus is intertwined with a rhetoric of empowerment for refugees. UNHCR posits that digital identity provides internet access, mobile phones and connected services, and that it is through this digital inclusion that 'empowerment passes through' (UNHCR, 2018: 2).

At the same time that proponents of digital humanitarianism and innovation point out its virtues and vast potential, a now well-established body of literature focuses on the normative and security implications of such digital engagement, with a predominant focus on border and migration management (Latonero and Kift, 2018; Ajana, 2019; Cheesman, 2022), data privacy and usage, biometrics (Jacobsen, 2015; Završnik, 2019), and the concept of digital identities. As Latonero and Kift (2018:1) explain,

Refugees today not only depend on a physical but increasingly also on digital infrastructure to make their way across to safer places.... Refugees are able to rely on digital networks to both communicate with distant family members and locate the resources they need. Yet, those same tools are increasingly also used to exploit their vulnerabilities. For instance, the movement of refugees is facilitated by digital platforms provided by multinational corporations. But the design of those platforms is rarely catered towards the specific needs and risks inherent to the refugee experience. Furthermore, refugees must contend with the fact that similar technologies are used by governments to increase their control over borders, migration, and the access to asylum.

One of the key infrastructures of a web-based digital economy are financial service providers, ranging from conventional credit cards to PayPal, digital

wallets or other so-called fin-tech solutions. For the most part, refugees are either excluded from many of these services and must employ precarious workarounds, or they can only use digital financial tools in limited ways, like in receiving aid transfers. In this issue, Dhawan and Zollman explore how new digital financial tools are used for refugees in Kenya and Jordan. Despite being touted as a pathway for refugees' resilience and self-reliance, these tools in fact are parallel, sub-par, and ultimately inadequate services presented as a means towards 'digital inclusion' while in fact furthering exclusion. This article reinforces the need for critical analysis of 'the digital' and provides an important perspective on how even systems purportedly designed and implemented to support refugees can in fact marginalise them, sometimes in line with broader host government policies and stances.

Refugees, Digital Connectivity and Digital Economies

Humanitarian innovation and digital humanitarianism also intersect with a broader, longer-standing focus on entrepreneurship and livelihoods promotion by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies, which re-emerged more widely on the humanitarian agenda around 2000, though it has been present since the inception of the international refugee regime (Easton-Calabria, in this issue). Since 2010, and increasingly since 2015, there has been a heightened awareness of the importance of digital connectivity for refugees in the humanitarian sphere and some nascent efforts to connect refugees to digital work. Some of this early work was piloted through the UNHCR Innovation Service, established in 2012 to experiment and problem-solve within the agency. Focusing at the time on areas called Innovation Labs, the unit emphasised self-reliance in addition to ICT, access to energy, data and communication and field delivery (UNHCR, 2014). One of these projects was Community Technology Access (CTA) in Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, a programme which was seen as a 'holistic and expansive approach to formal education, vocational training and community e-learning' (UNHCR, 2014). This project has since expanded to both camps and urban areas, and forms the practical basis for UNHCR's focus on helping refugees access digital work – what UNHCR originally termed teleworking activities – and wider digital skills.

Largely since 2015 there has been a rapid explosion of initiatives, actors and programmes in the field of digital work for populations receiving humanitarian assistance and development aid. All major international organisations and UN agencies are now heavily invested in the area of digital economies. The ILO dedicated its most recent World Employment and Social Outlook to

platform work (ILO, 2021), published a report on refugees in the platform economy in Africa (Hackl and ILO, 2021b), and is developing new programmes on job creation on digital platforms under the US\$94 million multi-stakeholder partnership for improving prospects for host communities and forcibly displaced persons (PROSPECTS). The UNHCR's Innovation Service and its Digital Access, Inclusion and Participation Programme also invest significantly in digital access and inclusion for refugees, including on digital economies. However, despite this work, neither the 2014–18 UNHCR Livelihoods Strategy nor the 2019–23 Global Strategy Concept Note on Refugee Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion discuss digital work. However, other areas of the UN system have focused on it more specifically, with UNDP publishing a major research report *Digital Livelihoods for People on the Move* (Easton-Calabria, 2019) and recently dedicating itself to the UNDP Digital Strategy, with new research and programmes being commissioned on the digital economy around the world.

A plethora of other new initiatives and programmes across local, national and international scales that could be added to this brief list illustrate the breadth of interest in fostering digital work for refugees. Several of these are highlighted in articles in this special issue. Alencar and Camargo (in this issue) explore a digital work intervention for Venezuelan refugees in Boa Vista, Brazil, revealing 'asymmetric digital imaginaries' between humanitarian agencies' understanding of the needs and aims of ICT use by refugees and the reality of how and why refugees make use of technology for work (or don't). This and other reflections throughout the issue highlight the importance of evaluating not only the outcomes of existing digital livelihoods programmes but the conceptions with which they are designed, and the extent to which refugees' voices and agency are incorporated into programming. Some initiatives emerged as innovation pilots in highly challenging contexts, as in Lebanon, testing the inclusive promise of the digital economy. As the field report by Shibli and Kouzi (in this issue) on the Digital Skills Training programme highlights, ambitious goals cultivated by WFP to use online freelance work as a livelihood solution for refugees in Lebanon were undermined by a range of interlinked layers of exclusion, including government restrictions on refugees' participation in trainings. Alongside Lebanon's restrictive policies on refugee work, further barriers were posed by regulations that block refugees from accessing platforms and financial services (Shibli *et al.*, 2021). This is only one of many sobering experiences that inform a proposition put forward by Mansour-Ille and Starks (in this issue), based on experiences among refugee women in Jordan: that there is an urgent need

to adapt existing mechanisms and regulations to be more inclusive for refugees, and refugee women in particular, and do more to clarify the regulations affecting them and the gender-related and other risks that digital livelihoods involve.

Digital Labour Platforms and the Notion of 'Fair' and 'Decent' Work

The deeply rooted tension between precarity and opportunity has defined the rise of the digital economy within aid efforts, in part due to the predominant focus on linking refugees to the digital platform economy. There is now a wide-ranging critique of work on these platforms, including on working conditions, precarity, algorithmic control, as well as research on platform workers' agency and organising (Anwar and Graham, 2019; Howson *et al.*, 2021; Wood *et al.*, 2018a). Workers in developing countries are often most affected by uneven internet connectivity, time zone differences, language problems, a lack of security and inadequate pay mechanisms; meanwhile, deepening local and global digital inequalities threaten to leave those without resources ever further behind (Robinson *et al.*, 2020). For example, digital economies have to some extent exacerbated economic divides and social inequality in parts of Africa (Karar, 2019). Digitalisation has nevertheless allowed many workers to access new income opportunities, and digital labour platforms in developing countries provide an alternative source of livelihood amid a scarcity of other opportunities (Heeks, 2017).

Work on digital labour platforms is predominantly classified as self-employment, whereby workers are independent contractors without access to a stable employment relationship or social protection. Platforms present themselves as mere mediators between clients and workers, or service providers and customers (while taking often significant cuts of contractors' profit). Precarious self-employment remains the dominant reality despite several landmark legal challenges in Europe and elsewhere that redefined gig workers as employees (European Commission, 2021). From an international rights perspective, however, certain fundamental principles and rights apply to all working people, including those engaged through digital labour platforms. This includes decent work objectives and key declarations by the ILO, its Conventions and Recommendations, as well as its Constitution. Standards on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, non-discrimination and equal remuneration, as well as the elimination of forced labour and child labour, are all key tenets that digital and non-digital work should uphold (ILO, 2021: 204).

Fair Work in the Online Sphere

In addition to these international labour standards, there has been a growing movement to define fair work principles specifically for the digital platform economy. As discussed by the Fair Work Foundation (Fairwork, n.d.), these include principles such as fair pay, fair working conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation. But a lack of effective regulation of digital labour platforms and the online outsourcing sector remains a major obstacle for the role platform work can play in generating sustainable income for marginalised or vulnerable populations. As the article by Hackl (in this issue) highlights, aid organisations running digital livelihoods programmes have little capacity to reshape the largely indecent working conditions and risks that define the digital economy and refugees' experiences within it. Unable to transform the conditions imposed by a largely unregulated digital economy, humanitarian and development organisations become intermediaries with limited power.

Existing institutions, policymakers and governments appear to be more effective at regulating location-based types of platform work than regulating the web-based online work that has been the focus of digital refugee livelihoods. This regulatory blind spot 'can be attributed to the fact that law is inherently geographic, and thus better able to accommodate work organised within its referential jurisdiction, such as delivery work and transportation services' (Johnston *et al.*, 2020: 28). While platform workers themselves have successfully organised in a variety of ways and contexts, including through orchestrated strike action (Wood *et al.*, 2018b) and in-person actions for location-based platforms (Chesta *et al.*, 2019), this is different again among web-based online labour platforms, the workers of which are globally dispersed and seemingly dis-embedded from locations. Yet, here too, workers have found innovative ways to organise, for example through mutual aid or by publicising and evaluating their relationships with clients, showing that 'it is possible for online platform workers to establish common interests and build collective voice despite the specific geographic challenges associated with online work' (Irani and Silberman, 2013; Johnston *et al.*, 2020: 41).

Refugees, Digital Economies, Regulations and Legal Rights

In some ways, rights and digital inclusion have a contradictory relationship in digital livelihoods provision, which in turn has a contradictory relationship with the state and its regulations. Alongside the limitations of geography, as discussed above, digital platforms largely

operate outside or at the margins of state or government regulations, particularly in the global South, where large segments of the population already work in the informal sector. Because platform work is defacto self-employment it does not fall into the protections and laws that govern employment in most countries. At the same time, humanitarian organisations realised that digital livelihoods are a potential way around the exclusive aspects of states, precisely because of a lack of regulation. What follows is a situation in which development actors, such as the ILO, advocate for more inclusive digital employment policies and stronger regulation that offers worker protection, but at the same time, a large variety of private and aid sector initiatives make use of the regulatory vacuum that defines the digital economy, because it can allow refugees and other marginalised populations to circumvent labour market restrictions (see Hackl, in this issue). This can lead to confusion around what changes should be advocated for. For example, classifying platform workers as employees with access to social protections, while taxing their income, may make such work more decent and benefit both workers and the state, but it may simultaneously lead to the blanket exclusion of refugees within the framework of national policies that govern them differently from citizens.

Given all this, for forcibly displaced persons, including legally recognised refugees, the question of rights and working conditions on labour platforms brings additional complexity. A lack of employment rights has long pushed forcibly displaced persons into the informal economy, at the same time as lack of access to legal documentation, as well as banking and financial services hinder the ability of refugees to start businesses. In this way, refugees and other forcibly displaced people often already find themselves in informal economies that have similar features to online gig work: a lack of social protections, precarious working conditions, and often ad hoc piece work without sustainability and security of income (Hunt *et al.*, 2018; Betts *et al.*, 2020; Hackl and ILO, 2021a). Informal work has been particularly consistent in refugees' economic activity, particularly in places where their right to work in the formal economy is restricted.

Moreover, due to refugees' frequent lack of rights to work, invisibility has been a key feature of their social and economic lives (Bjarnesen and Turner, 2020). This makes them easily exploitable. The online gig economy mirrors this trend, because home-based online work as self-employed freelancers is perceived to be somewhat invisible, not only from the public but also from authorities, which is particularly relevant for those refugees who face restrictions to their right to work. Such invisibility combines with a frequent legal ambivalence about online freelancing's legality for

refugees due to a lack of regulation of labour platforms. This and many other specific issues affecting refugees demand a closer attention to how the general principles and standards on the rights of workers translate into, and become distorted by, the wider socio-economic, political and legal context of forcibly displaced people and its reflections within the digital economy.

The rights and norms governing refugees' economic activity offer an important starting point to do so. Articles 17–19 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees provide for opportunities for wage-earning employment, self-employment and for employment in liberal professions. Work broadly falls under the economic dimension of local integration, which involves refugees becoming increasingly self-sufficient and contributing to the local economy. This process of integration also has legal and socio-cultural dimensions, requiring host states to grant secure legal status to refugees (UNHCR and IPU, 2017). Yet fewer than half of the 175 states parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention formally grant refugees the right to work, and even states which grant the right to work may impose some conditions or reservations to this right (Zetter and Ruaudel, 2016), leading to the informality described above. Against this backdrop, there is a need to understand better what the specific legal and economic context of forced displacement means for work on digital labour platforms, and how digital inclusion can be coupled with a strengthening of rights.

Economic Inclusion and a New Digital Era of Market-Driven Aid

Examining the inclusion of refugees in the digital labour market offers insights into a new era of marketised intervention, which closely aligns the platform economy with humanitarian and development organisations. This trend of market-driven aid in turn has increasingly characterised how humanitarian organisations govern refugees by prioritising refugees' integration into local and transnational markets over the provision of material goods (Pascucci, 2021). This problem goes far beyond refugees and extends into the rapid inclusion of youth in Africa and the Middle East – and indeed in many other places – into digital labour platforms (see LeVine, 2013).

A connected neoliberal trend in emergency governance has also emerged out of market-driven aid, which in turn has fashioned refugees as entrepreneurial subjects that are resilient and adaptive, not only supported to withstand adversity but also to thrive by becoming empowered, and responsible for their futures (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015). While this rhetoric has been present in refugee assistance since the 1980s, particularly that connected to self-

reliance (Easton-Calabria, in this issue), it is now present in discussions on 'the digital' as well. UNHCR's rhetoric on refugees' connectivity, digital identity and the notion of digital rights illustrates it well:

A legal identity for every individual is of utmost importance. However, a digital identity that give[s] access to the internet, mobile phones and related services is equally becoming important. *Empowerment passes through digital inclusion: Access to jobs, income and remittances, online learning and web-based economic activities will make a difference in the lives of people we care for.* (UNHCR, 2018: 2; emphasis added)

That the forcibly displaced are now linked to digital economies and labour markets suggests that neoliberal aid has found a new ground to flourish on, with an underlying aim to realise individual self-sufficiency within such digital markets: the digital connecting, upskilling, mentoring and supporting of refugees so that they can make a livelihood online and succeed as self-employed online 'freelancers' or entrepreneurs. Indeed, it may in part be appealing due to the opportunity it presents to largely bypass tricky host country discussions on refugees' right to work in the place where they actually reside.

Following on from this, within this entanglement of aid and digital labour markets, digital economic inclusion is seen as making refugees more resilient to the exclusive dimensions of their displacement, such as their frequent exclusion from local jobs. This is because, as earlier discussed, the digital labour market is perceived to circumvent or transcend locally specific restrictions: to offer income opportunities that are not bound to the dynamics of local markets. It is, in short, perceived to represent a disembedded space and market where 'the potential coming together of employers and workers' can happen on a 'planetary scale' (Graham and Anwar, 2019). However, while web-based work can transcend some spatial boundaries and local constraints, the digital labour market is characterised by its own inequalities, some of which mirror or reinforce the specific local experience of forced displacement. The new trend of using digital markets as aid is therefore only 'new' in some respects, because many layers of exclusion and marginalisation that have long affected refugees' economic lives are reproduced by it, while new aspects of exclusion and digital divides emerge all the time.

The Humanitarian-Development Gap and Digital Refugee Self-reliance

Assistance to foster digital refugee livelihoods also sits at the nexus of humanitarianism and development and

grappling with many longstanding challenges inherent to the humanitarian-development gap. Most obviously, this type of assistance brings up questions of where humanitarian assistance ‘stops’ and development work ‘begins’, who the most suitable recipients of digital livelihoods assistance are, and which actors are best placed to offer assistance at different stages of livelihoods development – and displacement. While these questions are not new or confined to this type of assistance, their relevance is also emblematic of more recent changes in the broader humanitarian assistance regime, in which more crises are protracted and levels of funding are increasingly inadequate in relation to the level of humanitarian need. While displacement is a clear example of this, another is the growing shift in food security actors, such as WFP, to more systems-strengthening initiatives that are focused on value-chains and local food procurement rather than just providing food or cash assistance (WFP, 2022). This illustrates a growing trend of ‘humanitarian’ actors undertaking ‘development’ work.

Particularly interesting regarding both linkages and gaps between humanitarianism and development in the sphere of digital livelihoods is that actors from each have consistently been involved in this work, and sometimes are co-creators of these initiatives. At times these varying perspectives and mandates create a certain tension between pragmatism and ethics. In instances where humanitarian and development agencies work together on initiatives, understanding of the ‘ideal participants’ tend to break down along the humanitarian/development divide, with the former advocating for those most in need of long-term income sustainability and the latter more focused on participants most likely to succeed in the digital economy (INGO employee interview, 2019). Many initiatives end up focusing on the latter with the result, as the NRC and International Trade Centre’s Refugee Empowerment Skills Initiative (RESI) discussed in interviews, often being a mostly male and educated participant pool at the neglect of those most in need of livelihoods, such as uneducated single mothers (INGO employee interview, 2019). While examples such as these bring up both ethical and practical challenges with which humanitarian and development agencies currently grapple, they above all represent a larger truth that expands well beyond digital livelihoods: displaced people today, like other recipients of assistance, are often in need of *both* short-term assistance and initiatives focusing on long-term, sustainable outcomes.

We argue that digital livelihoods approaches have gained a special footing in the middle ground between short-term economic relief and long-term development. Indeed, digital economies seemingly offer a variety of ‘quick-fix’ solutions at the transition from humanitarian

emergency towards long-term development efforts focusing on social and economic integration. With forced displacement being increasingly protracted come demands for enhancing refugee *self-reliance*, a principle that is enshrined in the Global Compact on Refugees. Powerful imaginaries that refugees can work from their computer or smartphone inspire ideas that the digital economy provides a fast lane to economic self-reliance, as long as upskilling and support can help with initial access (Rushworth and Hackl, 2021). One of the main limitations of early digital livelihoods programming, when little evidence existed to inform initiatives, was an underlying assumption or hope that digital economies can help circumvent a lack of rights and labour market access among refugees – ultimately an assumption that the inclusivity of digital livelihoods could trump the exclusivity of injustice and rightlessness. As the articles in this issue show, this assumption has largely proven untrue in practice. Not only have some digital livelihoods programmes failed to achieve their employment objectives, despite important other benefits they created (see Shibli and Kouzi, in this issue), but the actors facilitating refugees’ access to an online gig economy that lacks decent working conditions have also failed to protect them from risks (see Hackl, in this issue). The unregulated and transnational nature of digital economies, which feature the unchecked reign of profit-oriented platforms, makes it all the more important to connect a struggle for fair digital work and economic inclusion with a wider struggle for rights and justice among refugees.

The Transfer of Risk under the Guise of Capability

Examining the digital economy from the perspective of refugees also reveals how new layers of risk are currently being inscribed into humanitarian practice and programme design among the forcibly displaced. These often occur under a rhetoric of refugee agency and capability, with a focus on humanitarian assistance ending at the point that refugees enter a labour market. However, this is deeply problematic if the conditions of such labour are indecent and precarious, raising questions about the role of humanitarian and development actors in offering digital livelihoods assistance: as growing numbers of refugees are incorporated into digital labour platforms and online work, their legal status and frequent vulnerability further amplify the significant risks, explored further below, that characterise the lives of workers in the digital platform economy. As the web-based digital economy is also largely unregulated, exploitation, including lack of payment, is common.

Moreover, connectivity and online work pose significant digital risks, such as fraud and scams, data protection and privacy risks, as well as other cyber threats that can be amplified by refugees' vulnerabilities and low digital literacy or online experience (Martin, 2021).

Some digital livelihoods programmes mirror the precarity that is dictated by platform capitalism and indecent work, even if they provide additional support in the shape of mentoring or skills training. Some programmes train refugees to become online freelancers and expect them to develop the 'right mindset' needed to invest days or weeks of unpaid time into building up their profile in digital labour platforms. Notably, this time can in fact cost refugees money, as they must pay for data bundles, hardware and internet connection, while being expected to suspend or reduce other regular work they may have done previously. Ultimately, the time investment and potential expenses of such training and preparation only sets refugees up for a similar situation when they do in fact begin looking for online work: the business models of major platforms demand that workers invest many hours of unpaid work time into bidding for jobs, waiting for gigs or building up their reputation and profile – with no assurance of success (ILO, 2021). This raises the question of a risk of debt without secure returns, or a loss of income due to time they would have otherwise invested elsewhere. Beyond all this, however, is a concerning lack of reflection in current humanitarian and development rhetoric on the actual likelihood of realising sustainable digital livelihoods for refugees.

At the end of the day, humanitarian digital skills training programmes may be setting refugees up for work, but it is hard to argue that they are setting them up for *jobs*. This distinction is important in terms of refugees' potential for sustainable livelihoods as well as the type of work for which they may be competitive. Research focusing more broadly on the future trends of work note the 'double disadvantage' faced by lower-educated, lower-paid workers who have in turn not only limited financial safety nets and lower job security, but less time and resources to devote to further training or reskilling (Accenture, 2017). Based on existing surveys of digital work for refugees and displaced people (Easton-Calabria, 2019), it appears that most refugees are being trained to engage in low-skill online work such as image categorisation that will ultimately be completed by AI as artificial learning progresses. It also concerns the ethics of humanitarians' roles in this field, if decent work – or work at all – is not assured (Easton-Calabria, in this issue). There is currently a particular challenge in facilitating transitions from gig work to decent employment in digital livelihoods. The entry into the digital world of work does not come with any of the job

protections that commonly designate security and stability at work, and thus risking further deepening vulnerabilities and risks among refugees – who are often dealing with significant challenges to begin with.

Given all this, there is a need for humanitarians to take 'digital responsibility' for their work with refugees, as discussed by Easton-Calabria (in this issue). This includes long-term monitoring of the outcomes for refugees of digital livelihoods trainings and critical analysis of the multifarious agendas to which digital livelihoods invariably contribute. As part of making evidence-based decisions, including based on existing research on the precarity of digital work, humanitarians must in fact be willing to stop trainings if results show refugees are largely unable to find remote gig work, or that this type of work opens channels to exploitation that humanitarians in fact cannot address.

Overview of the Articles

The articles in this issue focus on a wide variety of related themes on refugees and the digital economy. They paint a picture of how foundational rights, such as the right to work or to hold valid or recognised identity documents, and financial access are crucial yet commonly lacking components of engagement in the digital economy. It also illustrates the many ways that this engagement and the experiences arising from it are to some extent contextually dependent, ranging from case studies in Brazil to Kenya to Lebanon. Notions such as spatial imaginaries and the digital responsibility to protect are accompanied by practical considerations of how to improve humanitarian practice in supporting refugees in accessing decent digital work. An overview of the articles in this issue is as follows.

Andreas Hackl critically analyses the role of digital livelihoods initiatives and interventions as forms of intermediation across gaps and barriers between refugees and the web-based digital economy. Because digital livelihood initiatives lack the power to reshape the indecent conditions and values of work in the digital economy, they fail to have a transformative impact on a wide range of challenges and risks, including those imposed by the platform economy and by national regulations and laws. As a result of this power deficit, the digital economy currently reshapes livelihood provision far more than aid organisations can reshape its disempowering effects. This highlights that current efforts to include refugees in the digital economy must be paired with wider struggles for justice and equality, including the struggle for decent working conditions and reduced risks in the wider digital economy.

Amanda Alencar and Julia Camargo draw on interviews and participant and non-participant observations

of Venezuelan women and humanitarian actors engaged in a digital work initiative in Boa Vista, Brazil, to explore the 'spatial imaginaries' present within discourses surrounding technologies promoting digital livelihoods for refugees. Through naming and framing these imaginaries within broader literature and theory, they elucidate key themes present within both refugees' and humanitarians' idealised understanding of digital work for refugees and highlight the precarity evident within interviews with Venezuelan participants. Important gendered reflections emerge relating to the possibilities of digital work for women, as many participants struggled to work while still being able to meet their responsibilities as mothers. An important practical takeaway provided by the article is the need for more collaboration and dialogue between humanitarians and refugee participants in digital work programmes, as a clearer understanding of the main challenges faced by refugees is needed in programming design.

Swati Mehta Dhawan and Julie Zollmann focus on financial inclusion by exploring access to finance through in-depth, repeat interviews with refugees in Kenya and Jordan. The digital financial services they explore did not in fact mainstream finance for refugees, as the systems remained parallel and significant barriers to livelihoods remained. They argue that without removing barriers to livelihoods, finance has a limited role in ensuring self-reliance and is unlikely to lead to meaningful self-reliance. Within this context, digital work and digital livelihoods were largely irrelevant to their study participants, who – representing the majority of refugees – likely would not be selected for participation in digital livelihood trainings due to lacking the skills many programmes require. Be it digital finance or digital work, their research illuminates the current denial of refugee rights in Kenya and Jordan, and the need for humanitarian actors and donors to call these injustices out and insist instead on a rights-based refugee regime.

Rabih Shibli and Sarah Kouzi's field report reflects on the DST programme run by the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, which was supported by WFP. While the authors highlight the many benefits the training brought to the participating refugees and Lebanese youth, including enhancing self-confidence and forging friendships, their analysis of the wider barriers and restrictions that impacted the outcomes paints a sobering picture. In particular, they show how Lebanon's restrictive policies for Syrian refugees, alongside the country's deep economic crisis, have fundamentally undermined the potential of digital skills to translate into digital jobs for most participants. Their report contests the widely held assumption that web-based income opportunities transcend local markets, policies and regulations.

Dina Mansour-Ille and Demi Starks further discussions in this op-ed on the gendered nature of digital work and livelihoods with a focus on women refugees in the MENA region. They focus in particular on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's digital work, highlighting through examples from the Jordan Compact the significant challenges refugee women face. In so doing they call for gendered policies that improve refugee women's digital livelihood opportunities and for a wider recognition that bringing refugee women into remote employment necessitates stronger service delivery, vocational and skills training, and legal structures.

Evan Easton-Calabria concludes this special issue through an op-ed focusing on the need for greater considerations of ethics and responsibility by humanitarians when promoting the engagement of refugees into the digital economy. Discussing a new responsibility to protect, she examines the quality of work and contracts that refugees receive in the digital economy and questions the role of humanitarians in exploitative situations that refugees as digital gig workers may encounter after digital trainings and programmes have formally ended. Building on other sectors that have developed comprehensive norms to guide their engagement with 'the digital', she calls for the development of a framework of digital responsibility among humanitarians that takes these risks into account.

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Notes

- 1 While the wider *digital economy* incorporates a large diversity of economic activities that are dependent on, or significantly enhanced by, digital technologies (OECD, 2020: 36–7), the *internet economy* refers more directly to work and entrepreneurship that is intermediated by, and dependent on, web-based infrastructures such as digital labour platforms. Such platforms facilitate work using digital technologies to intermediate between workers and clients, or directly engage workers in labour services; this line of work is often referred to as platform work or gig work (ILO, 2021: 33). Throughout this article (and the Special Issue it presents) we adopt the more inclusive term of 'digital economy' while remaining cognisant of the particularities of the internet and platform economies.
- 2 The ILO defines livelihoods as 'a set of activities and strategies pursued by household members, using their various assets (physical, natural, human, social, financial)

in order to make a living. Livelihoods usually involve employment of household labour and the use of other household assets, if any, in order to live on the proceeds. For the large majority of people across all countries, the most important livelihood asset is primarily their own labour, followed by other household assets (physical, financial, social and natural).’ (ILO *et al.*, n.d.: 4)

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