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# Connectivity for Refugees: The Foundations of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Humanitarian Response

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Forcibly displaced people (including refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and others) and their host communities are held back by connectivity challenges. Now, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, together with Luxembourg, the GSMA and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), are joining forces with governments, private companies and other organizations to ensure all major refugee hosting areas have available and affordable connectivity by 2030, advancing the digital inclusion of over 20 million forcibly displaced people and local host communities, regardless of age, gender or diversity. Only through an ambitious, multi-stakeholder effort will we be able to ensure that forcibly displaced people don't miss out on the opportunities afforded by being part of the connected society.

# Challenge

More than ever before, forcibly displaced communities are articulating, with urgency, the importance of connectivity as a basic and fundamental need and a right. In a fast-evolving digital world, increasingly diverse communities are using connectivity as a gateway for everything from accessing life-saving information to learning online, benefiting from digital services, and finding sources of livelihoods. However, in the absence of a holistic response to connectivity challenges facing forcibly displaced populations, many are still left behind.

As UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies rapidly move towards digital transformation and the provision of digital services, the question of connectivity has become foundational. Can humanitarian responders, development agencies, supported by mobile network operators, satellite connectivity providers, internet providers, regulators, and allies in the cause take action to increase the connectedness of communities and

meet basic connectivity needs, and lay a sustainable foundation for development efforts? Efforts to this date have yet to achieve considerable progress and many communities remain disconnected.

COVID-19 has altered the humanitarian and development programming landscape in ways that moved digital from the periphery of each organization's activities to the centre. Many organizations, including UNHCR, have adopted digital transformation strategies that seek to mainstream digital technology within humanitarian action. These strategies – and the wider promise of digital transformation – cannot be realized without advancing the connectivity agenda for refugees around the world.

A [report by the GSMA](#) found that 400 million people around the world live in areas without mobile broadband coverage. Most of these communities are poor and rural. Refugees and

forcibly displaced communities are also, in many instances, marginalized and settled in remote areas. It is unsurprising, then, that many displaced people and their hosting communities face connectivity struggles. Another 3 billion people face serious challenges to accessing the internet, even where broadband coverage is available, because serious legal, regulatory and financial barriers hamper their access. Refugees and forcibly displaced people are some of the most vulnerable populations facing these barriers.

Moreover, connectivity issues do not exist in isolation; they are accompanied by an array of other barriers to equitable digital inclusion, including those related to skills, education, and access to digital devices. In order to ensure displaced communities can contribute to and benefit from the connected society, these challenges must be broken down and tackled in a systematic, evidence-based way.

“ In the connected world we live in, ”  
we cannot live without connectivity.

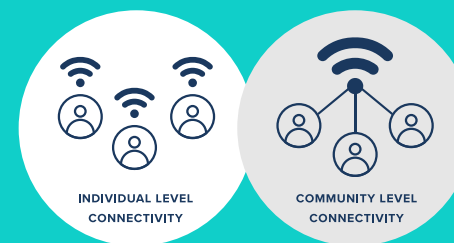
[Moussa, 20 years old, internally displaced from Dogon County – Mali](#)

# Solutions

To enduringly address this connectivity challenge, and in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals principle of leaving no one behind, UNHCR, Luxembourg, ITU, and the GSMA have come together to initiate a blueprint for action, bringing together a wide range of private sector, government, international organizations and forcibly displaced communities with the ultimate goal of enhancing connectivity in refugee-hosting areas, providing pathways for greater information access, education, livelihoods and enhanced humanitarian protection. This initiative is designed to build on - and complement - other connectivity initiatives, such as Giga - a consortium looking to connect all schools to the internet, as well as broader digital inclusion activities that aim to address the legal, social, educational, financial, and practical challenges that accompany and exacerbate the coverage and connectivity gaps. Fine-tuning, operationalizing, and maximizing the impact of this blueprint will be a collaborative effort – we need additional partners around the table to make this happen, bringing their skills, knowledge and expertise to bear for the greater good.

Together we seek to ensure all major refugee hosting areas have available and affordable connectivity by 2030, advancing the digital inclusion of over 20 million forcibly displaced people and local host communities.

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## Connectivity for a purpose: Providing pathways for all to achieve their digital aspirations

This initiative seeks to ensure refugees and other forcibly displaced communities not only have the right to connectivity, but that the pathways forward from access to and use of connectivity empower them to achieve their aspirations. To this end, the connectivity initiative will address both individual-level and community-level connectivity.

At an individual level, if a person has access to a personal mobile device and affordable data, they're able to be part of the connected society wherever they can find cellular coverage. This is complemented, for some, by laptops and other devices and home broadband, where their

economic circumstances allow. Independently, they'll be able to access vital skills, knowhow, and potentially employment and remuneration.

Others, who lack an independent means of connecting, should not be cut off from these opportunities. To ensure that everybody can forge a path towards dignified socio economic inclusion, communal options need to be made available, which might look like connected schools, libraries, community centres, coworking spaces, and internet cafes, whether connected through fiber, cellular, or satellite.

For a refugee who lacks their own individual means, having an opportunity to connect might just provide the space they need to realize their ambitions in our global connected society.

This new initiative will establish structures and systems to accelerate partnerships and coordination, mobilize resources, and ensure predictable and consistent response actions. We will need to identify gaps, prioritizing locations for action based on enabling environments and a deeper understanding of barriers and challenges.

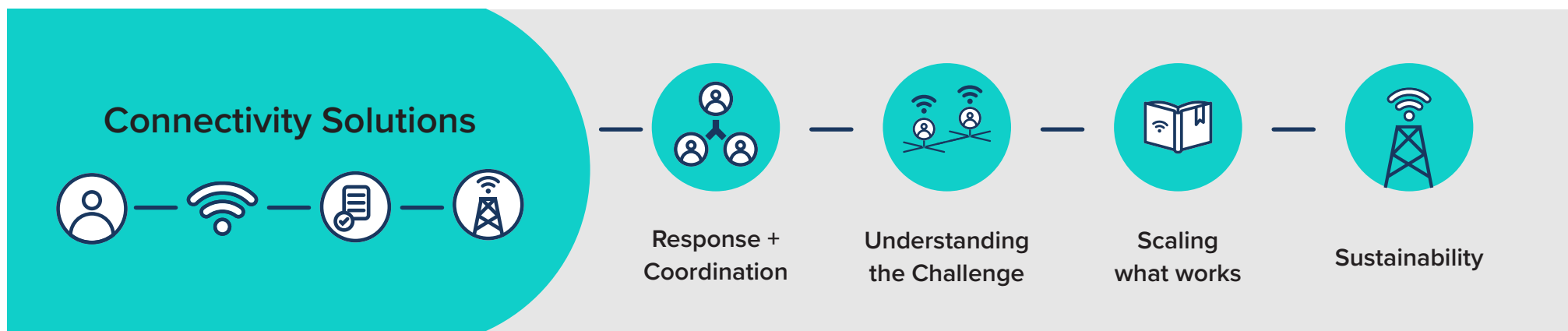
Solutions will be technology agnostic and address both individual-level connectivity – primarily through advocacy and commercially led partnership approaches – and community-level connectivity, where deeper humanitarian, development and government investment is required. Across these initiatives, we will seek to understand, acknowledge, and leverage the skills, capabilities, and priorities of community members as far as possible.



We will need to build and generate evidence, to expand and scale what works, and to share this knowledge within the wider humanitarian and development community. Through these efforts, we can build pathways for sustainable connectivity solutions in refugee hosting areas, accelerating the digital transformation and improving the lives of forcibly displaced people and their hosting communities.

## Key approaches

To achieve this, teams in UNHCR, Luxembourg, GSMA, and ITU have outlined a core set of activities centered on the piloting of a sector around connectivity under formal refugee response frameworks - a holistic, multi-stakeholder and coordinated approach to addressing Connectivity for Refugees challenges root and branch. This is complemented by other actions that will lay the foundations for advancing meaningful connectivity as both a community need and a keystone of digital transformation in the humanitarian sector.



Response +  
Coordination



## Piloting connectivity as a refugee response sector, integrated into emergency response processes

- Identifying suitable country / regional contexts and situations.
- **Developing Sectoral Response Plan** - roles and responsibilities of different actors.
- Creation of **enabling policy and regulatory environments** for Connectivity for Refugees intervention
- **Private Sector Refugee Response Framework** building off the MNO-focused Humanitarian Connectivity Charter, and Satellite-focused Crisis Connectivity Charter.
- Linked with established UNHCR IT Emergency Preparedness and Response processes, **leveraging existing networks of standby partners**.

## Connectivity Solutions



### Piloting new business models for advancing and innovating connectivity solutions

- Design and Delivery of comprehensive **connectivity plans** in select refugee hosting locations to radically advance connectivity solutions.
- Providing **financial support** to organisations spearheading innovative connectivity solutions supporting refugees
- Establishing **field-driven** and **community led approaches** to connectivity solution development where applicable

Sustainability



## Devising pathways for new sustainable connectivity solutions

- Collective action to ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless populations are **included within national strategies** for universal access.
- **Exploring financing strategies** for connectivity for refugees in the medium to long term, leveraging humanitarian and development financing, alongside private sector investment and government-led action.



### Understanding the Challenge

Generating evidence and data, and mapping of infrastructure and connectivity to identify gaps

- Developing comprehensive **data mapping** in refugee response areas leveraging a wide range of data sources, linking with the Disaster Connectivity Maps.
- Better community connectivity / information and communication needs **assessments**, developing analytical frameworks that provide substantial insight for all stakeholders.
- **New Connectivity Research Programmes** ensuring new and innovative approaches are brought into the conversation.



### Scaling what works

Building knowledge, evidence, good practices, guidance, and strengthening business cases

- Delivering comprehensive **training programmes** spanning the sector, curated for each stakeholder type.
- Develop a deeper and more robust **understanding of potential business models** for last mile and challenging connectivity environments.
- Deeper analysis of business models implemented for advancing **individual level connectivity solutions**.

## Stronger Partnerships for Success

Each of the current partners in this consortium knows that only with long-term commitment and collaboration can humanitarian and Development organizations and partners contribute to moving the needle on connectivity. To that end, we will be seeking to engage with, learn from, and partner with a wide range of actors throughout this process.

The consortium is looking for public and private sector partner support, not only from cellular providers but from the wider technology ecosystem, including other internet service providers, satellite and communications technology companies, infrastructure providers, and more.

Each of the core activities leans on expertise and capabilities of the public and private sectors, from roll-out of new infrastructure, to value-added services and partnership brokering, there is something each organization in the telecommunications / ICT ecosystem and beyond can contribute. Naturally, from governments and policymakers, an enabling environment is needed to advance these endeavors.

This support and collaboration will help catalyze connectivity efforts in humanitarian contexts, help transition vulnerable populations into longer term solutions to their plight through driving forward a vital digital transformation.

## Founding Partners



**Get in touch to sign up and be part of the initiative.**

## How to get there

The four founding partners are seeking partnerships to kickstart the initiative and maintain coordinated efforts on meaningful connectivity in forced displacement settings, with further investment required for country-level connectivity programmes based on specific needs. To achieve this, we are seeking at least \$20 million in core support, with at least \$200 million in direct investment and contributions to advance the refugee connectivity agenda.

Ongoing needs around connectivity solutions exist, with new emergencies highlighting the need for support and investment every day. No contribution is too little, and even beyond the financial contributions, in-kind support is needed from potential partners who want to be a part of and shape the future of this exciting work.

# Annex 1 - Illustrative Pledges

Achieving meaningful connectivity of forcibly displaced and stateless people is something that every organization can contribute to, and not a challenge where only one party has the key to a solution. In fact, solutions rely on a range of commitments and contributions from a wide variety of stakeholders and we are looking to solicit these in the form of pledges.

Initiative partners are in the process of developing more detailed country-level requirements, outlining how stakeholders can improve connectivity in major refugee hosting locations, advancing the availability and affordability of services for 20m forcibly displaced people and host communities by 2030. Over time, the initiative will landscape relevant countries, bringing together information on both connectivity and telecommunications as well as refugee response, bringing together all major stakeholders and establishing a platform for delivery of the connectivity agenda, and accordingly prioritize countries in liaison with all relevant stakeholders.

In turn, we will build out comprehensive plans country by country that include additional mapping elements as applicable, as well as further data on solution scope, building out clearer metrics on scope and impact of the intervention. To support pledges in the immediate term, we have created a selection of illustrative examples that can be used to help in the crafting of your own pledges.

## Governments and Regulators

- Provide political support to the initiative by using different political fora to raise awareness and advocate for this initiative
- Sharing with partners and networks and advocating for advancing the agenda
- Include aspects relating to connectivity in existing humanitarian and development programmes and support to forcibly displaced people
- Provide financial support to activities under the initiative
- Employment of human resources and contacts to mobilize national private sector partners to contribute to the initiative
- Ensure that relevant frameworks acknowledge government-issued ID for refugees and asylum seekers as valid for registering SIM cards, i.e. through issuing directives
- Including forcibly displaced and stateless people explicitly in national strategies regarding universal access and digital transformation

## Technology Companies

- Further invest in extending coverage to major refugee hosting areas
- Provide subsidized satellite bandwidth in support of connecting key facilities utilized by refugees
- Collaborate with humanitarian organizations to understand gaps in connectivity and build business cases for connecting refugees to spur investment
- Provide value-added services that cater to the unique needs of forcibly displaced and stateless people in relation to access to information, education and financial services
- Provide in-kind products / services for the benefit of the most marginalized forcibly displaced people and their hosting communities
- Provide connectivity products and services designed to cater to the unique needs and preferences of forcibly displaced and stateless people
- Deploy experts and engineers to help with the design and deployment of local connectivity solutions

## NGOs and Civil Society Organisations

- Advocate for inclusive approaches to extending universal connectivity, with a focus on amplifying the voices of forcibly displaced and stateless people
- Developing programmatic pathways advancing digital solutions across education, livelihoods, protection etc. leveraging connectivity solutions to enhance the business case

## International Humanitarian and / or Development organizations

- Prioritize humanitarian and development programming advancing the connectivity and digital inclusion of forcibly displaced people and their hosting communities
- Provide mechanisms to de-risk investment in connectivity solutions targeting forcibly displaced people and their hosting communities
- Providing data and analysis in support of developing business cases
- Developing programmatic pathways advancing digital solutions across education, livelihoods, protection etc. leveraging connectivity solutions to enhance the business case