
HCI, Forced Migration & Refugees: Collaborations across Borders and Fields

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UNHCR key facts in 2015:
60 million displaced
1 million fled to Europe
4.2 million from Syria



Figure 1 Syrian teen participates in a co-design workshop at Za'atari Refugee Camp, Jordan, in November 2015.

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Abstract

The year 2015 marked the worst forced migration and refugee crisis since World War II, with the forced displacement of over sixty million people. Few countries and agencies have been prepared to provide humanitarian support for this unpredicted wave of migration. Experts have observed that the effects and impacts of this mass migration are just beginning. Collaborative efforts from HCI, development, policy, anthropology, health sciences, political science, and the learning sciences are needed. The aims of our contribution to this CHI HCI4D workshop are: (a) to gather researchers across industry, academia and

agencies that serve refugee populations to share experiences, theories, and methodologies, (b) to articulate pressing areas of work and research, (c) to facilitate collaborations across borders and contexts, and (d) to identify shared problems and to collaborate around solutions for forced migrants and refugees. We posit that thoughtfully and collaboratively created technology solutions across sectors are needed to support communities facing forced migration and living as refugees.

Author Keywords

Refugees; forced migration; immigration; HCI; design; co-design; action research; policy

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous; See <http://acm.org/about/class/1998> for the full list of ACM classifiers. This section is required.

Introduction

In 2015, over 60 million people were displaced due to persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violation, notably from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Asia, and East Africa [32]. The worst humanitarian crisis since World War II, the stories of migrants and refugees were caught via social media as they travelled across Europe and the world. Few countries and agencies have been prepared to provide humanitarian support for this unpredicted wave of migration, especially against anti-immigration backlash. Experts observe the impacts of these mass migrations as just beginning, and addressing growing needs requires the joint efforts of government, industry, foundations, and non-government organizations (NGOs). A key

contributor is also the HCI community with colleagues across academic and technology fields.

As one example, a recent report on the role of ICT for education in contexts of conflict and crisis [11] identifies the powerful possibilities of adopting technology to support refugees and forced migrants in the redevelopment of school systems as well as in teaching and learning practices. However, divisions are evident between technology creators and innovators and the usability and adoptability of those tools in both emergency and protracted refugee settings. In effect, one of the persistent challenges in the use of technology in conflict settings and with refugees in particular is that vast difference across contexts, cultures, and communities who comprise “refugees”. How can successful initiatives in one setting be adopted to another when the cultural and political context are so different? In what ways can technology be used to cross rigid boundaries defined by camp lines and international laws?

The researchers and practitioners aligned here seek to interrogate the development and delivery of technology in context, considering specifically how technology-based initiatives can meet cross-sectoral needs for distinct refugee communities. Understanding the cultural, social and political implications of human-computer interactions in refugee settings – rapidly and exponentially emerging and changing – requires a multitude of voices, perspectives and experiences to converge. We posit that information exchanges over digital and social media, using mobile phones, and across the vast webs of the Internet can be harnessed to support refugee communities in a multitude of ways. Indeed, refugee communities are rich and resourceful

experts of their own already using technology in meaningful ways. Understanding these existing technological practices and the depth of knowledge within the many different refugee communities requires collaboration with and across sectors and actors.

Our prevailing questions in this meeting ask: How can tensions between the need for participatory methods and rapid deployment be met in the face of conflict and crisis settings when using technology? What kind of cross-sectoral collaborations will minimize cost and maximize positive impact for and with refugee communities? How can HCI initiatives streamline and improve the experience of forced migration? What are the current affordances and constraints of mobile technologies for people on the move (and which technologies in which contexts)? What are ethical protocols for adopting new technology in and with refugee communities? Who is excluded from that which HCI might offer? We posit that thoughtfully and collaboratively created technology solutions across sectors are needed to support communities facing forced migration and living as refugees.

In addition, a pressing question and challenge in this field of work relates to research and data collection. As emergency contexts such as the crisis in Syria rapidly disperse, initiatives aiming to support refugees are deployed in parallel. As a result, there is an evident gap in the process and possibility of identifying research artifacts and outcomes. How can the effectiveness of technology-integrated initiatives, embedded in cultural and political problems, be captured, recorded, and analyzed as people are on the move? How can the impact of restrictions and regulations associated with refugee camps be considered in the research

landscape? Where is the ethical place for research in contexts where both human and material resources are already so thin?

The purpose of this CHI HCI4D proposal is to bring together researchers who focus on forced migration and refugees. Our research contexts vary—across borders with different populations over the past few decades, using different methodologies, perspectives, and partners. Our meeting aims are manifold: (a) to gather researchers across industry, academia and agencies that serve refugee populations to share experiences, theories, and methodologies, (b) to articulate pressing areas of work and research, (c) to facilitate collaborations across borders and contexts, and (d) to identify shared problems and to collaborate around solutions in HCI for forced migrants and refugees. Working in consultation with the HCI4D Workshop Consortium will strengthen these discussions by building on participants' knowledge and experience related to HCI and ICTD.

A celebrated outcome will be a working group on HCI, Forced Migration and Refugees with continued meetings at CHI. An additional aim is to create a special journal issue on the topic. The field's journals include: *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Refuge*, *International Migration Journal*, and *Forced Migration Review*. According to Maitland [25], historically, refugee studies draws on theories and approaches from international law, international studies, documentary production by the UN and other international agencies, development studies, and literary studies. It is a strong counterpart to information technology sciences, e.g., ACM CHI, Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD), and Information Systems for

Crisis Response and Management (ISCRAM). It is timely for refugee and forced migration studies to be explicit in the joining of forces with HCI, to serve a growing population of people in desperate need of resources, capital, education, and social support.

The listed experts will participate in the workshop asking questions about the role of HCI in refugee studies. Although HCI in forced migration and refugee studies has much to learn from ICTD more broadly, they are distinct fields. We invite others with an interest in HCI, forced migration and refugee studies to join us and build collaborations to address these and other questions present in the field.

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