

Opinion: UN plan to bring Internet to refugees requires ambitious thinking

By Larry Downes, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.27.19

Word Count **844**

Level **1050L**



A new report calls for all communities that host refugees to provide affordable and usable mobile and internet connectivity. Photo by: ukayacan/ iStock / Getty Images Plus Photo by: ukayacan/iStock/Getty Images Plus

Concerns about the costs and challenges of digital technology continue to grow. Still, there are daily reminders of how new technology helps and connects people.

Take, for example, a recent plan by a group of communications experts. They want to help refugees forced to leave their countries. The communications experts recently worked with the United Nations' High Commission on Refugees. Next, they released a plan called the "Global Broadband Plan for Refugee Inclusion."

The plan calls for all refugees and the communities that host them to have affordable mobile and internet connections.

More Basic Need Than Luxury

At first, the idea of devoting scarce resources to making sure refugees can go online may sound unwise. The world's 68.5 million refugees have more urgent needs. They includes food, shelter and

personal safety.

However, access to information and communications is becoming more of a basic need than a luxury. That was the main idea behind the broadband plan, said its lead author, Blair Levin. "Our research shows that refugees see connectivity as a critical survival tool, and are willing to make large sacrifices to get connected," he said.

Levin said the Internet could help refugees return to self-reliance more quickly, for example, by being able to access money.

Few people appreciate the potential of broadband connectivity as much as Levin. Among other things, he authored the visionary U.S. National Broadband Plan. Levin has advised dozens of other countries, states and cities on plans to connect everyone to affordable high-speed Internet service and how to use it to improve the delivery of essential services.

As the report makes clear, the lack of connectivity among those forced to leave their homes, and often their countries, is particularly important. Nearly half of all refugees, which is about 32 million people, don't use the Internet. Those that do use the Internet may not make full use of its capabilities. This can be caused by several factors, including a lack of key government applications and language challenges in a new home.

For refugees, the problems accompanying poor communications options are severe. Without inexpensive and reliable access, refugees cannot easily locate and maintain contact with family members who may be scattered throughout the world. Connectivity is also increasingly necessary for access to health care, education, jobs and public safety.

Access And Cost

The reasons for low connectivity among refugees are mostly obvious, including the cost of mobile devices and service plans. Network access and electricity may not be available in the places where refugees live. Even something as simple as the lack of documentation to prove your name, which refugees often don't have, can make connection impossible.

Still, solutions to these kinds of problems aren't hard to imagine. There may be as many as a billion people who still do not have regular connections to the Internet. Yet there have been improvements in key technologies. Many people, including refugees, could now be fully made a part of digital life.

Eventually, some companies learn to create beyond the limits of old technology and thinking.

Providing broadband for refugees, for example, may be profitable if businesses look beyond the immediate money they would receive. There's a much greater value the service would generate. The value is for the users, the companies they use and, perhaps most of all, society as a whole.

New Thinking And Inspiration

That kind of fresh, new thinking is represented by Reliance Jio Infocomm, an Indian mobile communications startup. It was founded in 2010, by India's richest individual, Mukesh Ambani.

At the time, India's mobile market was experiencing intense competition among several providers. Most people would have seen little opportunity for a new company, especially given the high initial

costs of building all-new communications technology.

Ambani saw something different: a value that was invisible to older companies. While India's middle-class was largely online, the digital revolution had left behind India's lower-income consumers. It was an enormous market that Ambani believed could be served by breaking the rules.

Ambani gambled on an all-new LTE network that cost billions to make available. LTE allows fast wireless communication. Once set up, though, the company saw it as both easier and more affordable to operate. Where older companies were charging as much as \$60 per gigabyte of data transmitted over old network technology, Jio could charge less than \$1.

Spreading the costs over so many users means each individual user pays a small amount. Beyond the benefits to users and Indian society as a whole, Jio has been profitable since 2017.

Can similar thinking make the "Global Broadband Plan for Refugees" happen? Levin believes so. While the plan lays out a number of concrete steps to improve access and affordability, the most important step is helping key people work together.

"While everyone would benefit from universal refugee connectivity," Levin said, "none have the resources or authority necessary."

A Large Shift Needed

Solving the problem requires a large shift. It requires the kind of approach Jio and other open-minded companies are using to overcome a business-as-usual mentality in the digital age.