FOREIGN AFFAIRS

An App to Save Syria's Lost Generation?

By Mark Latonero

In January this year, when the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe had hit its peak—more than a million had crossed into Europe over the course of 2015—the U.S. State Department and Google hosted a forum of over 100 technology experts. The goal was to "bridge the education gap for Syrian refugee children." Speaking to the group assembled at Stanford University, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced a $1.7 million prize "to develop a smartphone app that can help Syrian children learn how to read and improve their wellbeing." The competition, known as EduApp4Syria, is being run by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and is supported by the Australian government and the French mobile company Orange.

Less than a month later, a group called Techfugees brought together over 100 technologists for a daylong brainstorm in New York City focused exclusively on education solutions. "We are facing the largest refugee crisis since World War II," said U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power to open

the conference. "It is a twenty-first-century crisis and we need a twenty-first-century solution." Among the more promising, according to Power, were apps that enable "refugees to access critical services," new "web platforms connecting refugees with one another," and "education programs that teach refugees how to code."

For example, the nonprofit PeaceGeeks created the Services Advisor app for the UN Refugee Agency, which maps the location of shelters, food distribution centers, and financial services in Jordan. For the EduApp4Syria competition, Norad will fund five winners from the 78 entries to develop games that aim to teach children literacy skills in Arabic and improve their psychological and social well-being.

In the scramble to address the deepening refugee crisis, it seems that policymakers, big tech companies, and advocates are turning to the smartphone to find a solution.

Techfugee events have gone global, with hackathons in London, Melbourne, and Paris. These gatherings are filled with hundreds of young techies who come armed with Post-it notes to ponder how digital tools like education technology might improve refugees' lives.

But as so often plagues the "ed tech" field, developers of new apps risk failing to understand the unique challenges facing refugee children living without running water, let alone a good mobile network.

YANNIS BEHRAKIS / REUTERS

An Afghan immigrant, who arrived on a dingy from Turkey, tries to communicate with relatives as he waits for temporary documents outside a police station in Kos island, Greece, May 28, 2015.

Nearly ten million refugee children worldwide today have little or no access to adequate teachers, classrooms, or materials. Currently, 2.8 million children both in and outside Syria are currently not in school. Jordan's Zaatari refugee camp, one of the largest, has seen the arrival of 80,000 refugees over the last three years, and just over half are children. Since the average length of time a refugee is displaced is roughly 17 years, according to the United Nations, this means an entire generation of Syrians risks growing up without even a primary school education.

The impact could be disastrous. In a recent interview on CNN, journalist Fareed Zakaria asked Elias Bou Saab, Lebanon's education minister, what happens when refugee children are not in school. "Anytime you have children out of school," Bou Saab replied, "they are . . . abused, for either child labor, easy recruit[s] for the terrorist organizations like ISIS [the Islamic State] and Nusra and others. You have child prostitution, you have earlier marriages . . . even [the] crime rate goes up in the country." Numerous studies have found that each year a girl is deprived of education, she will likely make less money, marry earlier, and live a shorter life than one who continues through primary and secondary school. UNICEF reports that 3.7 million Syrian children have been born since the conflict started in 2011, including 306,000 born as refugees. While the long-term effects for the stability of the region are unknown, they are cause for serious concern.

It seems that most Syrian refugees have access to smartphones, and dozens of news articles have documented how mobile phones are an essential survival tool used to find shelter, connect with lost family members, and coordinate perilous journeys. And it is tempting to imagine that the phones could be

loaded with educational content, connecting both students and teachers across great distances.

Yet even in more stable circumstances, it is hard to create education technologies that actually work. In the United States, the Los Angeles Unified School District's $1.3 billion project to give every student an iPad devolved into a debacle of failed software and an FBI investigation into preferential treatment given to Apple and the education giant Pearson. In New York City, a $100 million investment for classroom management software collapsed over privacy concerns when parents protested against the collection of data intended to predict who might become problem students. For those designing educational technology for residents of Jordan's Zaatari camp, a multitude of challenges awaits. According to researchers from Penn State University who visited the camp to measure technology access, 85 percent of youth aged 15 to 24 have mobile phones; however, most of the younger children do not own their own cell phones, but borrow them from older family members or friends. More telling is that 80 percent of youth surveyed need to borrow SIM cards to access the mobile network. Jordan's most popular mobile phone carrier, Zain, drops phone connections 30 percent of the time in the camp. A data plan is expensive and WiFi is hard to maintain, which makes it difficult even for phone apps designed to be used offline—the software needs to be downloaded in the first place along with regular updates.

The reality is that no learning app or technology will improve education by itself. It's also questionable whether mobile apps used with minimal adult supervision can improve a refugee child's well-being. A roundtable at the Brookings Center for Universal Education noted that "children have needs that cannot be addressed where there is little or no human interaction. A

teacher is more likely to note psychosocial needs and to support children's recovery, or to refer children to other services when they are in greater contact with children." Carleen Maitland, a technology and policy professor who led the Penn State team, found through her experience at Zaatari that in-person interactions with instructors and staff in the camp's many community centers could provide far greater learning opportunities for young people than sitting alone with a mobile app.

YANNIS BEHRAKIS / REUTERS

Stranded migrants charge their phones near the Greek-Macedonian border, November 24, 2015.

In fact, unleashing ed tech vendors or Western technologists to solve development issues without the appropriate cultural awareness could do more harm than good. Children could come to depend on technologies that are abandoned by developers once the attention and funding have waned. Plus, the business models that sustain apps through advertising, or collecting and selling consumer data, are unethical where refugees are concerned. Ensuring data privacy and security for refugee children using apps should be a top priority for any software developer.

In cases where no in-person education is available, apps can still play a role, particularly for children who feel unsafe to travel outside their shelters or are immobile owing to injuries or disabilities. But if an app is to stand a chance of making a real difference, it needs to arise not out of a tech meet-up in New York City but on a field research trip to a refugee camp, where it will be easier to see how mobile phones are actually accessed and used. Researchers need to ask basic questions about the value of education for refugees: Is the goal to inspire learning on traditional subjects? Empower students with academic credentials or job skills? Assimilate refugees into their host country? Provide a

protected space where children can be fed and feel safe? Or combat violent extremism at an early age?

To decide, researchers need to put the specific needs of refugee children first—whether economic, psychosocial, emotional, or physical—and work backward to see whether technology can help, if at all.

Finally, instead of hosting competitions and events that court tech darlings, the United States and other Western nations should invest in initiatives that identify or train refugees who are educators, students, or engineers and enlist them as key partners in building potential solutions. As developers experiment with new technologies, failures and mistakes are inevitable, but involving refugees from the beginning will help minimize the risks. The well-meaning tech community should at minimum adopt a do-no-further-harm approach and should be ready to aim for a higher duty of care.

This coming September, U.S. President Barack Obama will convene a UN summit on the migrant and refugee crisis. According to Blinken, the president will "put access to education front and center" for a group of high-level participants at the UN General Assembly. Because the education of refugee children will be at the top of the agenda, this summit could be a key moment to shift the conversation about technological fixes. With every flashy new initiative, it becomes even more important to ensure that policymakers remain skeptical that "there's an app for that."

MARK LATONERO is a Fellow at the Data & Society Research Institute in New York City, where he leads the Data and Human Rights program. He is also a Visiting Scholar at

New York University. For the past five years, he led the Technology and Human Trafficking Initiative as a Research Professor and Research Director at the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy.