



**DIGITAL INNOVATION FOR  
MIGRANTS AND DISPLACED  
COMMUNITIES:**  
EMERGING HUMANITARIAN APPROACHES



# DIGITAL INNOVATION FOR MIGRANTS AND DISPLACED COMMUNITIES: EMERGING HUMANITARIAN APPROACHES



---

*This report was drafted by Karen Hargrave, an independent researcher and policy analyst. Some changes were made from the initial draft by IFRC in the process of finalising the report.*

# Table of Contents

<b>Overview and methodology</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>How are National Societies using digital tools in programmes for migrants and displaced people?</b>	<b>5</b>
Overall trends: types of intervention and technology, innovation and end users	<b>6</b>
Types of intervention and technology	<b>6</b>
Level of innovation	<b>10</b>
End users	<b>12</b>
Cross-border cooperation	<b>13</b>
Key clusters of examples	<b>14</b>
COVID-19	<b>14</b>
Displacement from Ukraine	<b>16</b>
Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) and Digital ID	<b>18</b>
<b>The broader context: opportunities, challenges and risks</b>	<b>20</b>
Why digital tools? Exploring opportunities	<b>21</b>
Opportunities across humanitarian programmes: relevance, scale, dignity and accessibility	<b>21</b>
Opportunities for programmes along migration routes: data analysis, cross-border collaboration and continuity of care	<b>26</b>
Opportunities for specific services and sectors	<b>27</b>
Navigating risks	<b>30</b>
Scale vs. inclusion	<b>30</b>
Risks to fundamental principles	<b>31</b>
Data protection, digital risks and real-world harms	<b>32</b>
Other risks: empathy, hype and sectoral risks	<b>35</b>
Challenges for successful use of digital tools in service delivery	<b>36</b>
Limitations of digital tools	<b>36</b>
Operating environments	<b>37</b>
Challenges within organisations	<b>38</b>
Challenges for cooperation and collaboration	<b>39</b>

Wider humanitarian sector examples	42
The Signpost initiative	42
UNHCR Whatsapp chat lines	42
<b>Guiding principles and recommendations</b>	<b>44</b>
Guiding principles for using digital tools in work with migrants and displaced communities	45
Follow basic design principles	46
Take a community-centred approach	48
If you're going to do it, do it well and make it sustainable	49
Collaborate across teams, National Societies and outside the Red Cross and Crescent	50
Manage risks by prioritising inclusion and data protection	51
Recommendations for future activities	53
Quick wins	53
Medium-effort activities	53
Areas for further investment and research	54



# OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is dedicated to alleviating human suffering, protecting lives, and promoting dignity, especially in times of crisis. This includes a global strategic commitment of the IFRC Network to improve assistance, protection and to advocate for the most at-risk migrants and displaced persons.<sup>2</sup> The IFRC commissioned a scoping study aimed at improving understanding of where the IFRC Network is integrating digital tools into programmes for migrants and displaced people.

Initially, the study was focused on services provided at Humanitarian Service Points (HSPs).<sup>3</sup> HSPs are safe, welcoming and neutral spaces where migrants and displaced people can access a wide range of humanitarian support and services, regardless of their migration status and wherever they are on their journey. However, the scoping was subsequently broadened to encompass a broader range of programmes for migrants and displaced people, given the relevance of wider examples across National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society (hereafter “National Society”) programmes.

The **objectives of the scoping** were to:

- Identify and provide an overview of HSPs (and other relevant programmes) that employ digital tools to better connect HSPs within the country or across borders, including sharing of information, and data to improve analysis and services.
- Identify sector-wide good practice in digital tools - including risks, benefits and opportunities - especially in the context of route-based programming and one stop shops (e.g. Humanitarian Service Points model).

- Analyse and document IFRC Network good practices, including the types of digital tools being leveraged, which can potentially be developed into detailed case studies.
- Provide the IFRC with recommendations on how to enhance the integration of digital tools in humanitarian service delivery for migrants and displaced persons, including opportunities, risks and possible mitigations.

**A desk review was conducted**, including Red Cross and Red Crescent documents, external literature and information provided via email by IFRC and National Societies. In total 30 documents were reviewed, in addition to 45 online links (e.g. blogs, webpages). **Primary data was also collected covering 23 individuals** through 12 key informant interviews, 1 focus group discussion and 3 written questionnaire responses. This spanned nine National Societies (in Ecuador, Colombia, Lebanon, Kenya, Serbia, the Netherlands, the Philippines and the Maldives), as well as IFRC, ICRC and three external organisations.

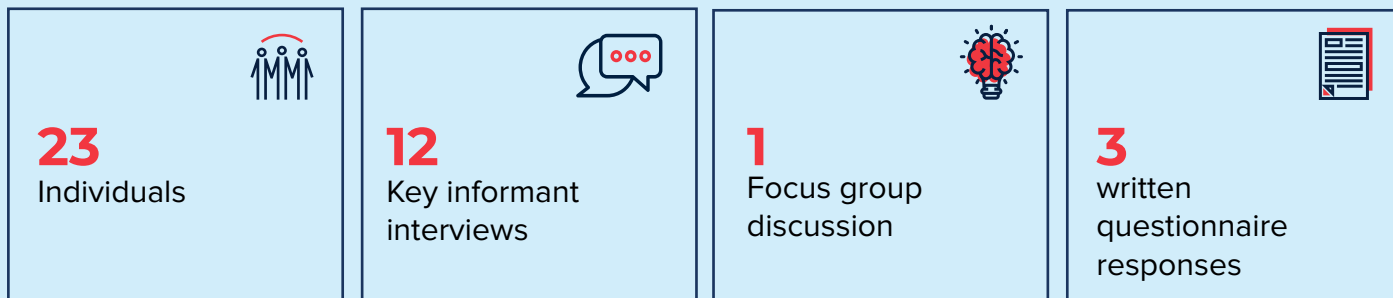
**The main limitation for the scoping was the amount of time allocated, as only a limited number of key informant interviews could be conducted.** Various additional contacts were identified through the process, who due to time limitations could not be interviewed. While a written questionnaire was shared in some of these cases, collecting perspectives from these contacts should be prioritised in any additional research.

---

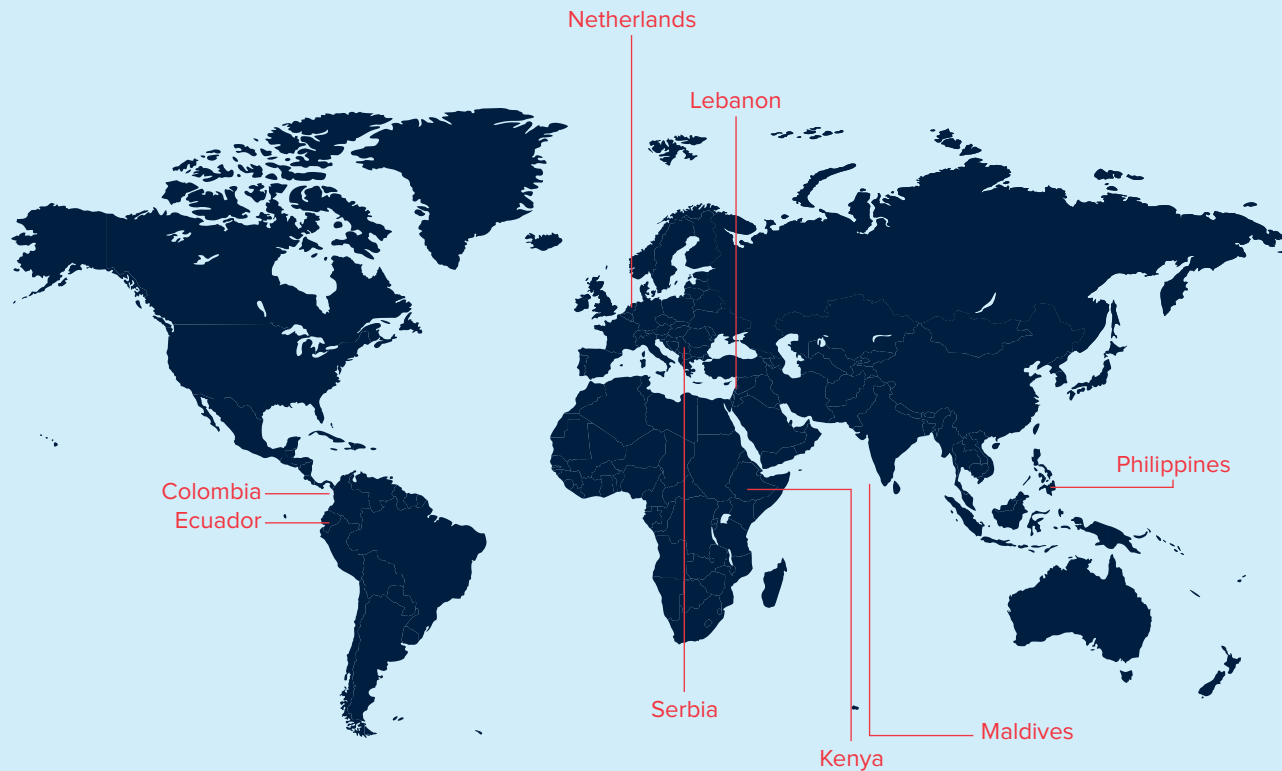
<sup>2</sup>In order to capture the full extent of humanitarian concerns related to migration, IFRC’s description of migrants is deliberately broad: Migrants are persons who leave or flee their habitual residence to go to new places – usually abroad – to seek opportunities or safer and better prospects. Migration can be voluntary or involuntary, but most of the time a combination of choices and constraints are involved. Thus, the definition as stated in the Policy on Migration 2009 includes, among others, labour migrants, stateless migrants, and migrants deemed irregular by public authorities. It also concerns refugees and asylum seekers, notwithstanding the fact that they constitute a special category under international law.

<sup>3</sup>For more details on HSPs see IFRC (2023) ‘Humanitarian Service Points Toolkit’.

# Primary Data Collection



Data collected from the following National Societies



as well as IFRC, ICRC and three external organisations.



**In terms of definitions, the scoping highlighted the importance of distinguishing between use of 'digital tools' and 'digital innovation'.**

Innovation' is defined here, in line with IFRC's Digital Transformation strategy, as 'research and development of new data and digital products, processes, or business models'.<sup>4</sup> This is considered here to include both the use of new tools or the use of familiar tools in new ways. The scoping was, however, broadened to take a wider view across National Society experiences, focusing on a wider remit of 'digital tools': namely, any technological platform or software accessed through phones, computers or other electronic devices, whether or not there is a novel element. As outlined in more detail below, National Societies are using a variety of digital tools in their services for migrants and displaced people, from websites and QR codes to custom-built software. However, it emphasised that the use of digital tools does not in itself equate to innovation, nor is innovation necessarily required for the use of digital tools to be effective.

This report is split into three main sections. Section 2 explores how National Societies are already using digital tools in their programmes for migrants and displaced people. Section 3 elaborates the wider context around the use of digital tools in programmes for migrants and displaced people, including opportunities, risks, challenges and examples from other organisations. Section 4 outlines a series of guiding principles for future work in this area and concludes with a series of recommendations for the IFRC Secretariat and National Societies. Importantly, while the focus here is specifically on programmes for migrants and displaced people, many of the findings and recommendations have wider relevance for programmes across the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

---

<sup>4</sup>IFRC (2020) *Digital Transformation Strategy*.







HOW ARE NATIONAL SOCIETIES  
USING DIGITAL TOOLS IN  
PROGRAMMES FOR MIGRANTS  
AND DISPLACED PEOPLE?

In total, 49 examples were collected of the use of digital tools in Red Cross and Red Crescent programmes supporting migrants and displaced people. The full list of examples is available here. This includes 16 examples collected from Europe, 12 from Africa, 7 from the Americas, 7 from Asia Pacific, 4 from MENA and 3 with a global remit.

This collection of examples is intended to be illustrative and is not considered exhaustive. Indeed, it is likely that there are many more instances of National Societies using digital tools that remain undocumented; this collection of examples is expected to be skewed towards better known and documented examples, and those that are familiar to IFRC colleagues supporting the study. In several countries, multiple examples were captured. For example, this was the case in Kenya (5 examples) and in the Netherlands (4 examples), where in both cases the National Societies have dedicated innovation or digital expertise.<sup>5</sup>

## Overall trends: types of intervention technology, and end users

### Types of intervention and technology

**Overall, National Societies' use of digital tools in programmes and emergency contexts supporting migrants and displaced people spans a wide range of technologies,** from relatively 'low-tech' activities (for example, the use of messaging apps to coordinate between National Societies), to more complex activities including custom-built platforms, apps and blockchain technology.

<sup>5</sup>The Netherlands Red Cross hosts the *510 digital and data initiative*, whereas in Kenya the Kenya Red Cross Society International Center for Humanitarian Affairs (ICHA) includes a focus on innovation.







Notably, **almost a third of examples included the provision of information to migrants or displaced people, with almost as many including some kind of signposting to Red Cross or Red Crescent services** (with significant overlap between these categories). Other common types of intervention included services to support access to connectivity, data sharing initiatives using digital tools, case management initiatives and tools used to provide digital access to Red Cross and Red Crescent services.

The most common types of intervention largely map onto the types of technology used. **The most common type of technology seen - in almost a third of examples - was the use of websites.** Other common types of technology used include QR codes, messaging apps, the use of hardware (for example, Wi-Fi kits or phone chargers) and custom-built software.

**Six unique webpages and one app were identified to have been developed to provide information to migrants and displaced people,** including in Australia, Serbia, the Netherlands, Montenegro, Ecuador, Colombia and Argentina. In **Serbia**, the Red Cross of Serbia developed an *online information platform* focused on supporting people transiting through the country.<sup>8</sup> The platform provides a broad range of information, including available Red Cross services, safety and practical information, as well as stories from the National Society's work. The Red Cross of Serbia consulted potential users of the platform to inform the initial design and later versions, with consultations highlighting the need for a simple and lightweight design without multiple pages and dropdown menus. The platform has automated translation into multiple languages and is maintained by a group of volunteers, who regularly update the content and featured information cards. Staff and volunteers have created a flyer with information about the platform and a QR code linking to it, which are shared at the National Society service locations.

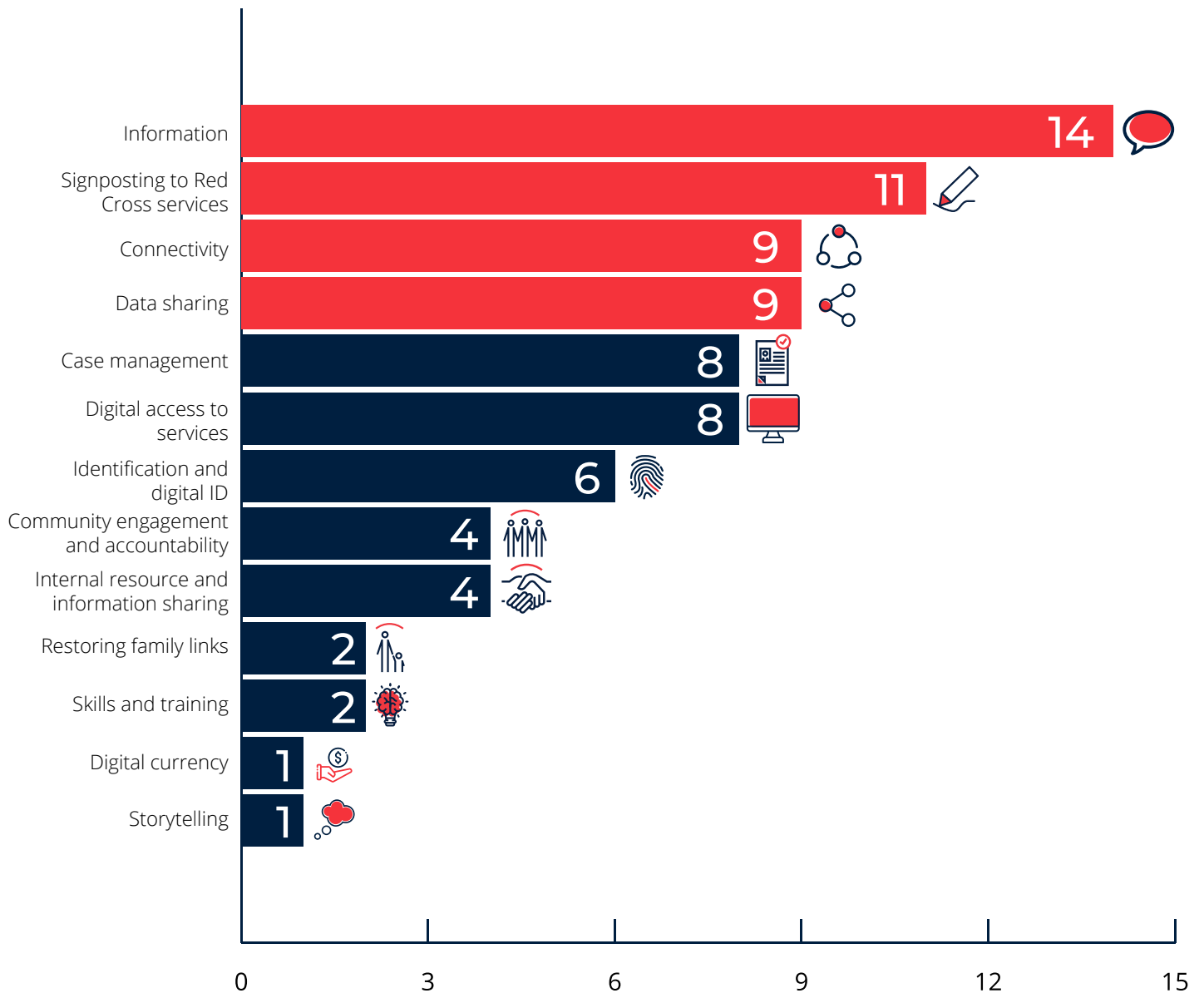
---

<sup>6</sup>In the types of interventions listed 'connectivity' refers to initiatives to support affected communities' access to internet and phone connections. 'Data sharing' refers to initiatives focused on collecting and sharing a range of data points. 'Case management' refers to the use of digital tools to manage individual cases for support. 'Digital access to services' refers to either self-registration tools or various other ways in which services are delivered online (for example through mobile money or vouchers sent through messaging apps). 'Identification and digital ID' refers to interventions focused on providing digital forms of identification or using digital technologies to securely store foundation identity documents. 'Community engagement and accountability' includes interventions that include feedback mechanisms and other ways of engaging affected communities.

<sup>7</sup>Some examples spanned more than one type of intervention or included multiple types of technology.

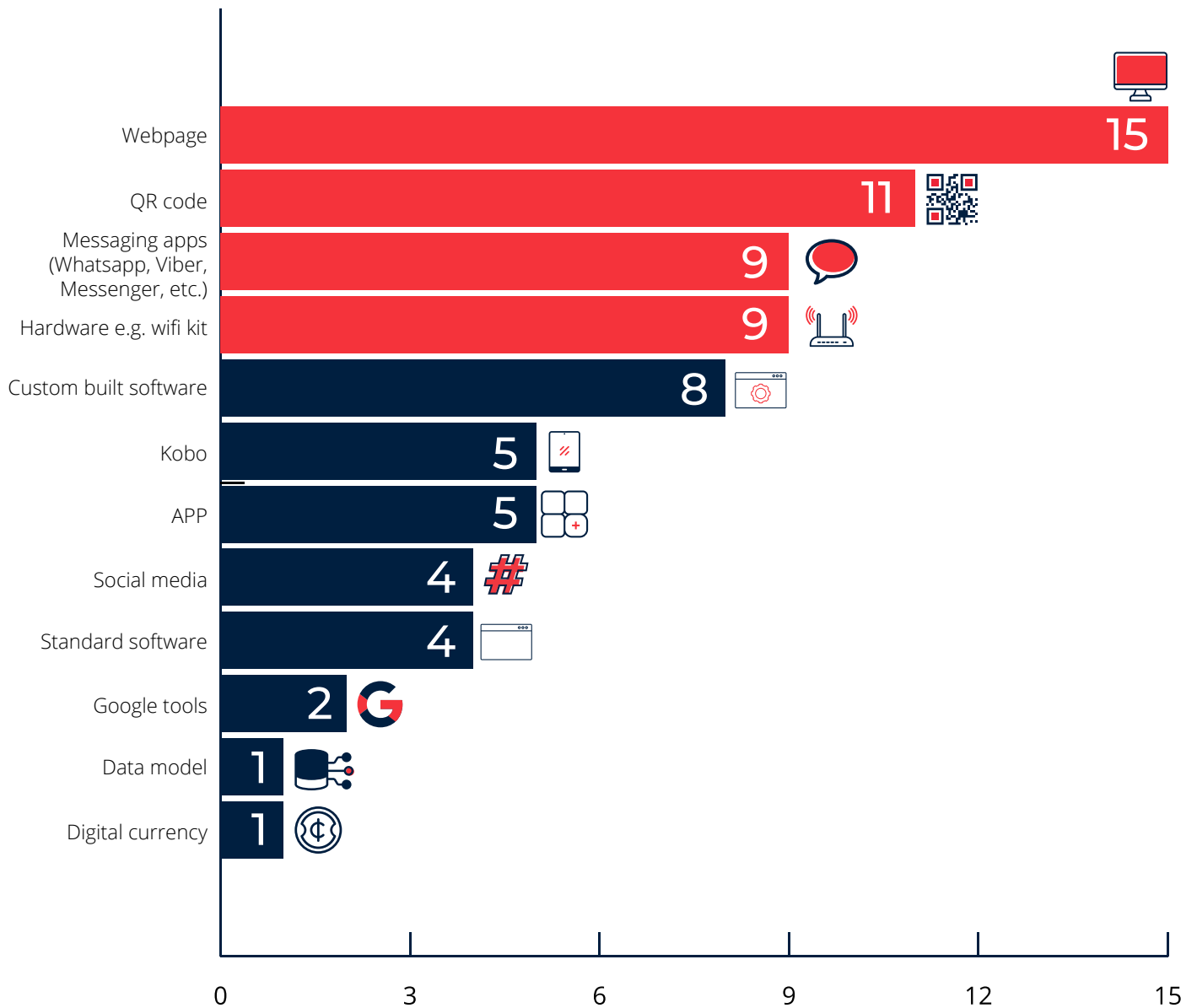
<sup>8</sup>KII 09

# Most common type of intervention





# Most common type of technology



In the **Philippines** the Philippine Red Cross uses QR codes at its welfare service desks for Filipino nationals deported from Malaysia to link arrivals to key online information.<sup>9</sup> In the past, the Philippine Red Cross used the IFRC *Virtual Volunteer* platform as its main online repository for information. However, due to perceived changes over time in the way people access information (for example, greater use of visuals and less appetite for long text) and a lack of updates to the platform over time to keep pace with this, the National Society has pivoted towards using social media to share information. Information is shared on the National Society's Facebook page, and they can be contacted using the Facebook Messenger app.

**In many National Society HSPs along migration routes, supporting connectivity for migrants and displaced people is included as a basic service.** For example, by providing access to Wi-Fi, phone chargers, SIM cards and temporary use of phones. Examples of this were documented at HSPs in Lebanon, the Philippines, Colombia and Mali. It is anticipated that more examples exist beyond those documented. In the Philippines, in 2020 the Philippine Red Cross partnered with telecoms companies to offer SIM cards and prepaid credits to people deported from Malaysia.

Also focusing on connectivity, in **France**, the French Red Cross developed a mobile 'repair lab', providing repair services for essential items including mobile phones. The most common operations in this regard currently being custom-cutting of hydrogel film to protect phone screens and re-gluing of detached screens. The lab

can function from a modified large van, towable trailer or through use of a mobile backpack. The French Red Cross have developed a toolkit to enable other National Societies to adopt the repair lab model. The toolkit includes guidance on vehicles, planning, operations, equipment, communications, team management and risk management. The service has been replicated in Slovenia, where the Slovenian Red Cross has used a mobile backpack donated to them by the French Red Cross in their HSP.

**The scoping also highlighted that many National Societies use Kobo as part of their assessment, registration, implementation, and reporting of programmes for migrants and displaced people,** with many emphasising Kobo's offline functionality as a benefit for work in remote locations. This includes National Societies in Lebanon, Slovakia, Mali, Gambia, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger, though it is also anticipated that more such examples exist beyond those documented.<sup>10</sup> In Europe National Societies participating in the Global Route Based migration programme<sup>11</sup> have recently implemented a Kobo forms with shared characteristics to collect consistent information about services provided across different countries.<sup>12</sup>

## Level of innovation

**The level of innovation in examples collected varied significantly.** Examples were ranked low, medium and high innovation, with levels of innovation considered relative to activities across the Red Cross and Red

---

<sup>9</sup>KII 11

<sup>10</sup>FGD 01, KII 07, Written response 02.

<sup>11</sup>The Global Route Based migration programme is a multi-year, global programme to improve the safety and dignity of people on the move along land and sea-based migration routes in Africa, Europe, Middle East and North Africa and the Americas. For more details see IFRC (2024) 'Global Route-Based Migration Programme'.

<sup>12</sup>FGD 01.

Crescent Movement (as opposed to the humanitarian sector as a whole). **In total, 14 examples were classed as 'high' innovation:**<sup>13</sup>

- The AccessRC app;
- The RedSafe app;
- ICRC's *Trace the Face* webpage;
- Netherlands Red Cross 510's Digital Engagement Hub, 121 platform, use of the EspoCRM case management platform and Ukraine social media listening data model;
- The Netherlands Red Cross WhatsApp helpdesk for undocumented migrants in the Netherlands;
- The use of digital ID in Kenya, Uganda and in the Sahel;
- Piloting of the Sarafu community currency in Dadaab and Kalobeyi camps;
- The piloting of a data stewardship platform in South Sudan enabling various INGO to share data to support referrals and avoid duplication of beneficiaries in the context of a CVA programme.



<sup>13</sup>Most of the examples listed here are discussed in more detail below. For more information on the use of EspoCRM for case management platform in the context of displaced Ukrainians in Slovakia see: Netherlands Red Cross 510 (2024) *'Shelter Information Management: Innovating Rental Assistance & Hosting Assistance Programs'*. For more information on the development of the social media listening model for Ukraine see: Netherlands Red Cross 510 (2024) *'Enhancing Disaster Response through Social Media Listening: An Innovative Tool for National Societies'*. For more information on the Sarafu community currency see: Red Social Innovation (2021) *'Sarafus, the community currency at the service of the local economy in Kenya'*.

## End users

For the majority of examples that were collected, **Red Cross and Red Crescent service users - in this case migrants and displaced people - were identified as the end users of the digital tool/service**, either as the main end user (in over half of examples collected) or alongside National Society staff and volunteers (in an additional 11 examples).

Nonetheless, **10 examples were collected that were primarily designed for Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers**. This includes data sharing, case management and coordination platforms, and the online *HSP toolkit*. In the **Netherlands** the Netherlands Red Cross developed a Helpful Information (HIA) webpage for staff and volunteers who were involved in the response to people displaced from Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> The Netherlands Red Cross 'HIA' concept has been through multiple iterations. In its first iteration, a HIA webpage was developed for undocumented migrants in the Netherlands, as cornerstone of the National Society's efforts to assist migrants during COVID-19. In the case of displacement from Ukraine, a new iteration was developed that focused on staff and volunteers as end users, instead of service users.

The HIA page developed for the Ukraine response addressed a need that had been identified to make sure all staff and volunteers working in the response had access to accurate and up-to-date information. This proved a challenge in the context of high numbers of staff and volunteers involved in the response across the country, as well as rapidly changing government policies. Co-design sessions were conducted with Netherlands Red Cross focal points, which highlighted the need for an information hub with centralised information. The

---

<sup>14</sup>KII 03. For further information see Netherlands Red Cross 510 (2024) 'Reaching People Affected with Helpful Information'.







rationale behind the HIA page was to mitigate risks of incorrect information being provided by staff or volunteers using outdated PDFs and word documents. To date, this version of HIA has had an average of 3,100 visits per month. Like other iterations of HIA, it prioritises a simple and lightweight design, which is easy for local staff to keep updated via a google form. In the context of a complex and fast-moving response, the HIA page for staff and volunteers helped support more consistent responses to evolving needs and questions.

## Cross-border cooperation

Finally, 17 examples that were collected involved some element of **cross-border cooperation**. In some cases, this was linked to digital tools developed by IFRC or ICRC for use across different countries and by different National Societies. For example, IFRC's AccessRC app and *online HSP toolkit*, or the ICRC's *RedSafe app* and *Trace the Face webpage*. As outlined in more detail below, several examples of cross-border cooperation relate to programmes responding to the needs of displaced Ukrainians across Europe. Other examples tended to centre on **collaboration along established migration routes, where dedicated route-based programmes have supported broader cross-border cooperation**.

For example, **in the Sahel** National Societies have used various **WhatsApp groups to share information about relevant mobility patterns and programmes**. Collaboration is also supported through a **Sahel+ digital platform** (currently under re-design), which serves as a National Society repository for good practices and knowledge sharing, tools and resources, reports and news articles, and a dashboard for data on trends and flows. Meanwhile, National Societies involved in the **EU Trust Fund programme (in Mali, Gambia, Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso)** used **QR codes** to follow services given to migrant communities. Individuals were given individual, unique QR codes, which were scanned by staff and volunteers stationed at HSPs under the project using

the Kobo Collect app on their phones. By doing this, they could see what kind of support the person in question already received, feeding into a shared dataset across the project.



In Latin America, the **Ecuador and Colombia National Societies collaborated on the development of an orientation brochure for people transiting through the two countries.** The brochure is [available online](#), alongside printed paper copies, with a QR code used at the two National Societies' HSPs to link to the brochure.<sup>15</sup>

## Key clusters of examples

Many of the examples collected cluster around key themes. COVID-19 and the response to recent displacement from Ukraine appear to have been accelerators of digitisation for National Society programmes for migrants and displaced people, with around a third of all examples collected relating to one of these themes.<sup>16</sup>

### COVID-19

As has been well documented elsewhere, the pandemic placed new demands on National Societies with programmes for migrants and displaced people, as well as those who hadn't previously worked with these communities.<sup>17</sup> This included the provision of information about COVID-19 protective measures and government restrictions, as well as work by many National Societies to support access to COVID-19 vaccines, including for those without documentation. In many cases, National Societies - like the wider humanitarian sector - turned to digital tools as COVID-19 restrictions placed unprecedented limitations on face-to-face activities.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Written response 03.

<sup>16</sup>Eight examples were identified linked to assistance given during COVID and a further eight were linked to the Ukraine displacement response.

<sup>17</sup>See Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (2021), *Locked down and left out? Why access to basic services for migrants is critical to our COVID-19 response and recovery*; IFRC (2021), *Risks and resilience: Exploring migrants' and host communities' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in West Africa*.

<sup>18</sup>KIIs 01, 03, 05, 07, 11; Written response 01.



In the **Netherlands**, the Netherlands Red Cross implemented a package of digital assistance for undocumented migrants in response to the pandemic, including a Helpful Information web-app (mentioned above), a WhatsApp HelpDesk and access through WhatsApp to digital supermarket vouchers.<sup>19</sup>



In **Niger and Peru** the National Societies respectively made psychosocial support and cash assistance available to migrants through WhatsApp.



In **Thailand**, the Thai Red Cross Society (TRCS), in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health, encouraged village health volunteers and migrant health volunteers to use the “Phon Phai” application to report the whereabouts of individuals undergoing a 14-day home quarantine. This included both Thai nationals and migrant workers, whether documented or undocumented in Thailand. TRCS provided assistance to more than 800,000 people, delivering food and COVID-19 protective equipment such as face masks, hand sanitizer and trash bags. Additionally, TRCS, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health and the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC), developed a COVID-19 vaccination system and the Thai Red Cross Biometric Authentication System (TRCBAS) for registration and identity verification for COVID-19 vaccinations using iris scans. This initiative aimed to vaccinate both documented and undocumented migrant workers to control and prevent the spread of COVID-19.<sup>20</sup>



In the **Maldives**, the Maldivian Red Cross issued beneficiary cards to migrants to facilitate access to vaccines and other support.<sup>21</sup> The cards contain a unique identification number, which could be searched on an internal database to validate the migrant’s identity. In many cases, such as in the Maldives and the Netherlands, the digital tools developed at the height of the pandemic continue to be in use, having been adapted to focus on longer-term needs among migrant communities.

<sup>19</sup>KII 03. For further details see Red Social Innovation (2022), *[‘The Netherlands Red Cross’ digital cash aid for undocumented migrants](#)*; Red Social Innovation (2022), *[‘WhatsApp Helpdesk: a support service for undocumented migrants’](#)*; Red Social Innovation (2022), *[‘Helpful Information Web-app: a Netherlands Red Cross initiative with referral information for undocumented migrants’](#)*; Netherlands Red Cross 510 (2024) *[‘Reaching People Affected with Helpful Information’](#)*.

<sup>20</sup>For more information see AIS (2020), *[‘AIS Joins Thai Red Cross Society to Provide Care through Sim Cards and Insurance Supports Migrant Health Volunteers in Avoiding a Second Wave of COVID-19 among Migrant Laborers’](#)*; Thai Red Cross (2020), *[‘The Thai Red Cross Society’s Assistance to COVID-19 Patients’](#)*.

<sup>21</sup>Written response 01.





## Displacement from Ukraine

Likewise, **various factors explain the proliferation of digital tools in response to displacement from Ukraine.**<sup>22</sup> This includes high levels of digital literacy among displaced Ukrainians, as well as the vast levels of funding channelled to the response. It is likely that high levels of funding created an enabling environment for experimentation with digital tools, while also creating new challenges in terms of the expected scale of the response, leading IFRC and National Societies to explore digital solutions as a way to streamline processes.

In **Hungary**, the Netherlands Red Cross 510 initiative supported the Hungarian Red Cross' implementation of the Digital Engagement Hub (DEH), a standardised technological solution designed to facilitate digital and omni-channel communication between humanitarian actors and people affected by a crisis. In Hungary the DEH took the shape of a digital helpdesk, staffed largely by Ukrainians, where displaced people could access support and information through channels such as Viber and calls.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most notable example of digital tools being used in National Society Programmes in response to displacement from Ukraine is the development of what is now called the **AccessRC app.**<sup>24</sup> The AccessRC app was developed in response to the **challenge of distributing a high volume of cash assistance to people displaced from Ukraine across Europe (to cover their basic needs)**, in a context where National Societies were experiencing challenges accessing the target population in order to distribute assistance, many of whom were not presenting themselves to Red Cross service points.

While initially a few National Societies experimented with using a website for self-registration for cash assistance, an app was eventually selected in order to offer stronger data security for potential service users who were required to share identification documents for verification as part of the registration process. The team who developed AccessRC drew on experience from the American Red Cross, which had previously (though unsuccessfully) developed an app to support assistance in the context of Hurricane Harvey. The AccessRC app, which supports registration in multiple languages, was

---

<sup>22</sup>KIIs 04, 06-08.

<sup>23</sup>Support provided through the helpdesk included issues with cash and voucher registration, referrals for assistance with food, clothing, shelter and legal information. For further details see Netherlands Red Cross 510 (2023), 'Supporting Refugees Who Fled Ukraine through a Community-Driven Helpdesk Center'.

<sup>24</sup>KIIs 04, 06, 12. For further details see IFRC (2024), 'AccessRC App Digital Self Enrollment' video presentation.



first used in Romania, then expanded over time to cover cash assistance to Ukrainians in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Moldova, Montenegro and Lithuania. National Societies used various tools to share information about cash assistance available through the app, including social media channels such as Viber and Telegram, and by using QR codes. The National Societies put in place measures to support users who might struggle with digital self-registration to register for CVA in different ways. For example, through home visits to people with disabilities and assisted registration sessions at National Society service points where users could be guided through the process by staff or volunteers.<sup>25</sup> The AccessRC app has also been used to distribute monitoring and other surveys to users.

A lessons learned report in Montenegro found that self-registration using the app resulted in more efficient and effective delivery of support,<sup>26</sup> while a post-distribution monitoring survey across 10 countries found that 91% were satisfied or very satisfied with the self-registration process.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, relatively low ratings on the **Apple Store** and **Google Play Store** suggest technical glitches and other challenges impacting significant numbers of users.

IFRC has since explored other use cases for the AccessRC app, including use in different regions and for wider forms of assistance. Most notably, the app was also tested and validated in Colombia for cash assistance targeting Venezuelans and host communities.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, work is also ongoing in Colombia to now use AccessRC in the context of an emergency response (via the DREF).



---

<sup>25</sup>IFRC (2024), *Lessons Learned Workshop Report: CVA and CEA in Response to Ukraine and Impacted Countries Crisis Emergency Appeal. Red Cross of Montenegro*; KII 04.

<sup>26</sup>IFRC (2024), *Lessons Learned Workshop Report: CVA and CEA in Response to Ukraine and Impacted Countries Crisis Emergency Appeal. Red Cross of Montenegro*.

<sup>27</sup>IFRC, *'Ukraine and Impacted Countries Crisis. PDM Overview'*.

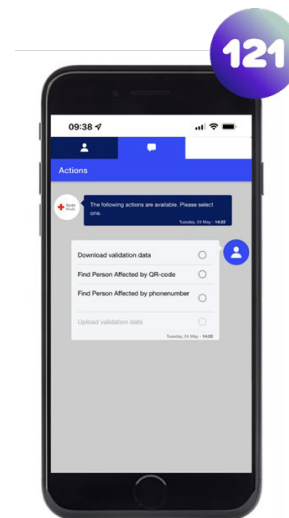
<sup>28</sup>Cash Hub (2024) *'AccessRC Pilot programme for Cash and Voucher Assistance in Colombia'* promotional video.

## Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) and Digital ID

The AccessRC app was one of several examples of National Societies using digital tools in the context of cash and voucher assistance (CVA).<sup>29</sup> CVA has been a key area for digital innovation across the wider humanitarian sector, with specific opportunities connected to the use of mobile money for delivery of CVA.<sup>30</sup> Examples already highlighted above include the use of WhatsApp by National Societies to support delivery of CVA during COVID-19.

Another key example in the context of CVA is the development of the **121 Digital Cash Aid Platform**. The platform was built by the Netherlands Red Cross 510, in collaboration with humanitarian, technical and academic partners. The platform includes a portal which can be used to manage the CVA programme, as well as an app designed to be used by aid workers to validate recipients.<sup>31</sup> The platform allows users to manage various aspects of a CVA programme from registration and validation to making payments. It is optimised for low-bandwidth areas and is integrated with Kobo for offline registration. The platform was first designed and piloted in Kenya by the Kenya Red Cross, supported by the Netherlands Red Cross, British Red Cross and GSMA.<sup>32</sup> Although the original pilot was not focused on migrant or displaced communities, the 121 platform has since been used across many other contexts, including displaced and migrant communities in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Ukraine and the Netherlands.

Multiple examples that were captured also relate to **digital identification (digital ID)**, including through a dedicated programme carried out by IFRC, in collaboration with the American Red Cross, Norwegian Red Cross, Norwegian Refugee Council, Norwegian Church Aid, Save the Children and Innovation Norway (the DIGID consortium).<sup>33</sup> Digital ID refers to a “suite of technologies that, when taken together, facilitate the identification process [...] [which] can be a digital copy of an identity document, a set of attributes representing an individual in a transaction or a metasytem of digital identifiers that, when taken together, can uniquely identify an individual”.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>29</sup>In total 7 examples were collected linked to CVA.

<sup>30</sup>KII 02; see also ALNAP (2023), *Assessing the promise of innovation for improving humanitarian performance. A 10-year review for the state of the humanitarian system report*.

<sup>31</sup>For further details see Netherlands Red Cross 510 (2024) '121 Platform'.

<sup>32</sup>See GSMA (2021), *Red Cross 121 Digital Cash Aid Platform: Grant project lessons and outcomes*.

<sup>33</sup>For further details and case study reports see: <https://interoperability.ifrc.org/resources/reports/>.

<sup>34</sup>IFRC (2021) *Digital identification: An analysis for the humanitarian sector*.



Pilots from the DIGID Consortium have included displaced communities **in Kenya and Uganda. In Kenya, the Kenya Red Cross Society drew on learnings from a previous digital ID cash programme to pilot the use of digital ID to support access to healthcare among refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi camps.**<sup>35</sup> As part of the pilot, 80 patients who were treated at the Kenya Red Cross Society's health facility in Kalobeyi and Kakuma Mission Hospital received printed QR codes, which linked to digital wallets and contained basic profile information about patients, as well as a basic digital health record containing details such as prescribed medication and medical history. The QR codes were used during subsequent visits to check the individual's identity and health record, supporting streamlined service provision and continuity of care. Individuals with a basic phone could use a short code number to access a menu with functions including viewing their credentials and medical history and deleting data that they no longer wanted to be used. The digital wallet was developed by Gravity12, based on a similar methodology used previously for cash assistance in Kenya with non-refugee populations.

Learnings from the digital ID pilots in Kenya were built on by the Uganda Red Cross Society, who implemented a **CVA pilot using digital ID with IDPs in Uganda**, delivering cash assistance to 60 participants.<sup>36</sup> The Kenya Red Cross Society and Uganda Red Cross Society also conducted a **cross-border simulation exercise on the border between Kenya and Uganda**. The simulation provided an opportunity to explore how the digital credentials issued by one National Society could be used by vulnerable people when they move to a new location and seek assistance from another National Society.

---

<sup>35</sup>KII 10. For further details see IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2023) *Dignified identities in healthcare and migration: Lessons from Kenya*.

<sup>36</sup>IFRC and Uganda Red Cross Society (2023), *Dignified credentials to access humanitarian cash assistance in migration: lessons learnt from Uganda*.



A close-up photograph of a person wearing a white knit hat with a dark stripe and a red shirt. They are looking down at a smartphone held in their right hand. Their left hand is positioned over the phone, possibly interacting with the screen. In the background, a clipboard is visible with a document titled "CBS ALERT RECORD" and a grid of data. The overall scene suggests a field worker or community health worker using mobile technology for data collection or communication.

THE BROADER CONTEXT:  
OPPORTUNITIES,  
CHALLENGES AND RISKS

The various examples highlighted above take place in a complex wider landscape. This section elaborates the broader context around the use of digital tools in programmes for migrants and displaced people. It draws on insights from Red Cross and Red Crescent programmes, as well as from the wider humanitarian sector, to highlight key opportunities, challenges and risks, as well as relevant examples from other organisations.

## Why digital tools? Exploring opportunities

### Opportunities across humanitarian programmes: relevance, efficiency, dignity and accessibility

Digital tools present a number of opportunities for humanitarian organisations implementing programmes for migrants and displaced people, many of which apply across wider humanitarian programmes. As highlighted in the sections below, many of these opportunities should be weighed up against complex risks, challenges and trade-offs.

First and foremost, the **opportunity to use digital tools to provide appropriate and relevant assistance**. As discussed in more detail below, significant barriers remain for some groups in terms of digital literacy and connectivity. Nonetheless, many migrants and displaced

people are online in their everyday lives and can reasonably expect the services provided by humanitarian organisations to adapt to that reality. By one (now outdated) estimate, in 2018 refugees spent around a third of their disposable income on connectivity.<sup>37</sup> An assessment by the Netherlands Red Cross of undocumented migrants in the Netherlands highlights the importance of mobile (smart) phones for people on the move across Europe to maintain connections to their community, find information and access services.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, research by GSMA explores how displaced communities across multiple contexts inhabit complex digital worlds, where phones present an entry point for connecting with friends and family, staying up to date on news and information, relaxation and financial wellbeing.<sup>39</sup> As one interviewee put it, using digital tools in programming should not necessarily be seen as innovation but as delivering '21st century humanitarian assistance'.<sup>40</sup>

**Perhaps the most widely discussed opportunity presented by digital technology is the opportunity to streamline processes, enhance efficiency, achieve greater scale and deliver assistance faster in humanitarian responses.**<sup>41</sup> Automating parts of programme delivery can provide an opportunity to provide assistance at scale, while freeing up staff and volunteers' time to focus on more complex cases or harder-to-reach groups; though automated processes are still likely to require staff capacity, especially in the initial phases. For example, through the AccessRC app the processing of straightforward CVA applications by

---

<sup>37</sup>Financial Times (2018) 'Telecoms operators dial in to refugee markets'.

<sup>38</sup>Red Social Innovation (2022), 'The Netherlands Red Cross' digital cash aid for undocumented migrants'.

<sup>39</sup>GSMA (2022), *The digital worlds of displacement-affected communities*.

<sup>40</sup>KII 05.

<sup>41</sup>KII 01, 04-07, 11-12; FGD 01



displaced Ukrainians was automated. With over 10,000 CVA applications registered in the first 20 days after the app was launched, automating the processing of applications enabled timely processing in a way that would not have been possible with manual processing.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the automation of compiling reports from registration data collected by National Societies using Kobo has the potential to minimise time spent by staff and volunteers providing information for donor reporting.<sup>43</sup> Presenting other possibilities, chatbots can increase the capacity of teams to respond to requests for information by automating responses to simple information requests.<sup>44</sup>

Digital tools may more widely offer the promise to ‘do more with less’ and to provide assistance at speed.<sup>45</sup> For example, digital cash transfers offer the potential for rapid disbursement of economic support.<sup>46</sup> Digital internal authorisation processes provide the opportunity to eliminate slow, paper-based processes requiring the printing and manual signature of multiple documents.<sup>47</sup> As discussed at length below, efficiencies may come at the risk of other tradeoffs, while assumptions about cost-saving should be evaluated critically. However, in the context of vast global humanitarian needs and ongoing funding pressures, opportunities for efficiency are an important driver of increased interest in digital tools.

### **Digital tools can also provide the opportunity to deliver programmes in a way that enhances**

---

<sup>42</sup>TT 04.

<sup>43</sup>FGD 01.

<sup>44</sup>GSMA (2021), *'In conversation with Solidarités International: Artificial Intelligence in a humanitarian context'*.

<sup>45</sup>HPG (2022), *Digital technologies and inclusion in humanitarian response*.

<sup>46</sup>IIRC (2023), *'Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age'*.

<sup>47</sup>KII 12.







**community empowerment and dignity.** This is a key part of the rationale of the DIGID consortium, which found that the use of digital ID can support dignity and access to services for people without identification documents, enabling them to use their own credentials provided by humanitarian organisations to access assistance.<sup>48</sup>

**More widely, some digital tools can create the opportunity for affected communities to register and access assistance at a time and place that is convenient and safe for them,** eliminating the need to queue at physical service locations.<sup>49</sup>

**In this way, digital tools can also provide the opportunity to reach certain groups who may otherwise be excluded or have difficulty accessing in-person services.** As outlined below, however, this should be weighed up against broader questions and risks in terms of accessibility. Groups for which digital services may improve accessibility include populations who are highly dispersed, people in remote areas far from service locations or who would have to travel through insecure areas to access assistance, people (such as undocumented migrants) who may not feel comfortable making themselves physically known to humanitarian staff, and people with disabilities limiting physical movement or with caring responsibilities.<sup>50</sup> For example, in the context of displacement from Ukraine, where many displaced people were women with caring responsibilities, a large volume of registrations on the AccessRC app were made from 8-9pm, long after regular

---

<sup>48</sup>IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2023), *Dignified Identities in humanitarian action: Journey and reflection*.

<sup>49</sup>KII 04, 12; IFRC (2024), *'AccessRC App Digital Self Enrollment' video presentation*; Red Social Innovation (2022), *'WhatsApp Helpdesk: a support service for undocumented migrants'*; Red Social Innovation (2022), *'The Netherlands Red Cross' digital cash aid for undocumented migrants*.

<sup>50</sup>KII 04, 09. See also IFRC (2024), *'AccessRC App Digital Self Enrollment' video presentation*.

service points were closed.<sup>51</sup> Some groups, for example younger people, may simply prefer the option of digital services. Whereas digital tools can provide the opportunity to provide assistance at points on migration journeys between physical service locations. Social media tools have the potential to reach large numbers of people who may not already be familiar with Red Cross and Red Crescent services.

**Digital tools can also be used to support the accessibility of services by facilitating the translation of key information and processes involved in accessing assistance into languages that service users understand.**<sup>52</sup> For example, automated translation can streamline otherwise time-consuming translation processes. Digital tools can also be used to signpost users to translated content. For example, in 2022 the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) in Medan conducted a project with the company Binogi and UNHCR to test the use of Binogi's education app with migrant youth. The app enabled youth to scan textbooks in schools to access similar or relevant content in their native language.

**Digital tools can also create the opportunity to strengthen community engagement and accountability (CEA) initiatives and deepen the affected communities' understanding of their own needs.** For example, with the potential to analyse trends in requests made to digital helpdesks, automate data collection from social media or push out surveys to users registered with digital platforms such as AccessRC.<sup>53</sup>

Other broader opportunities that came up in the scoping included the possibility of **eliminating fraud and duplication of assistance, as well as using digital tools to support resource mobilisation and logistics capacity.**<sup>54</sup>

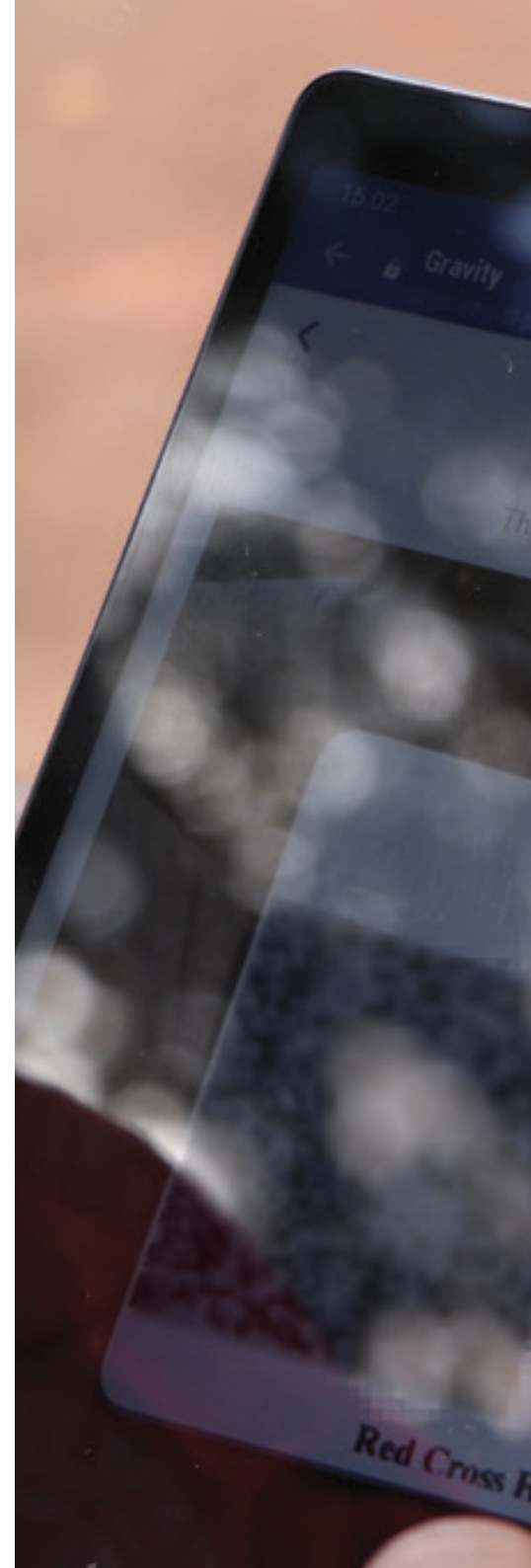
---

<sup>51</sup>IFRC (2024), *'AccessRC App Digital Self Enrollment'* video presentation

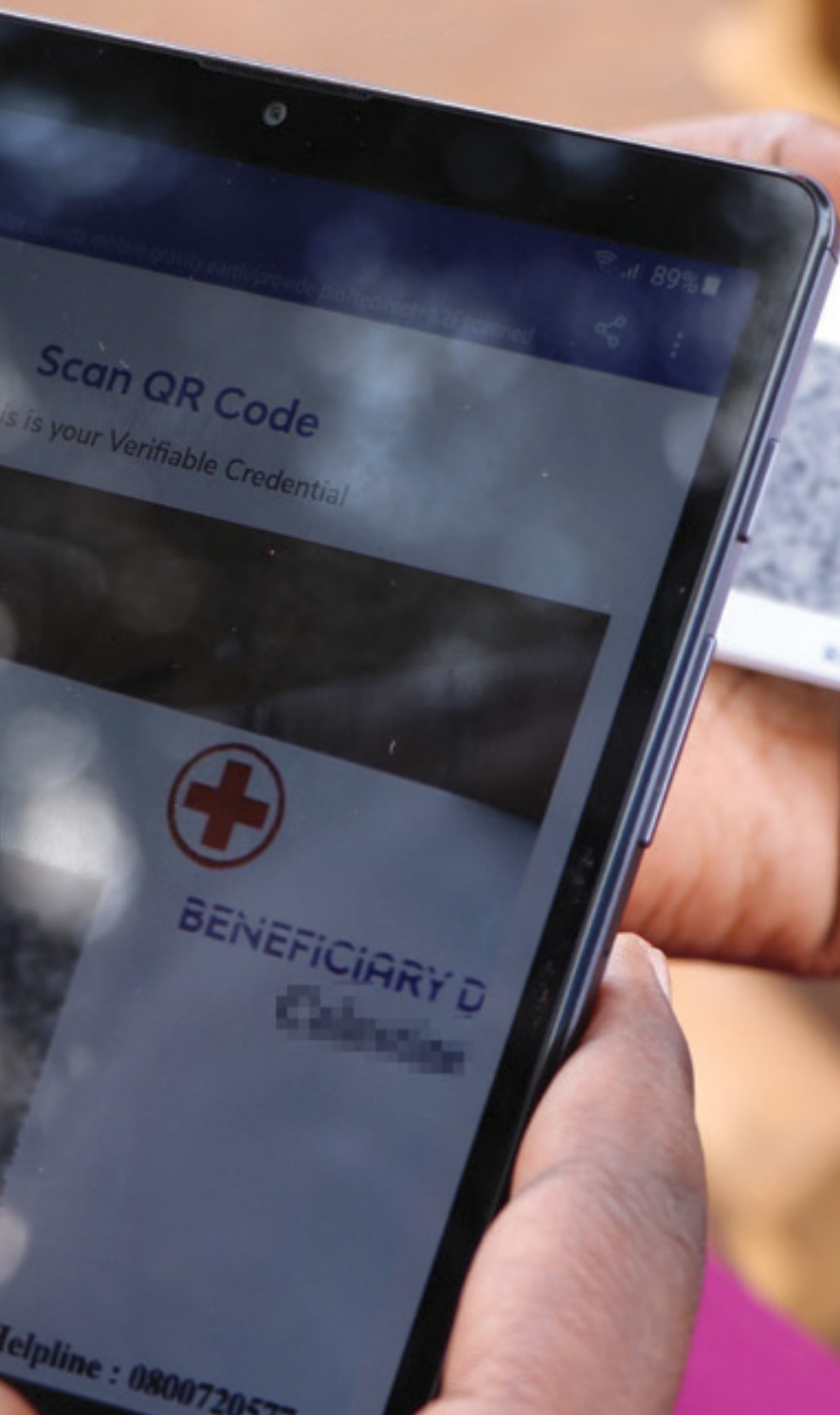
<sup>52</sup>KIIs 04, 09, 11.

<sup>53</sup>KII 03, 06; FGD 01. See also Red Cross 510 (2023), *'Supporting Refugees Who Fled Ukraine through a Community-Driven Helpdesk Center'*; Netherlands Red Cross 510 (2024) *'Enhancing Disaster Response through Social Media Listening: An Innovative Tool for National Societies'*; IFRC (2024), *'AccessRC App Digital Self Enrollment'* video presentation.

<sup>54</sup>KII 12; HPG (2022), *Digital technologies and inclusion in humanitarian response: Tech for Refugees* (n.d.), *'Refugees and Technology'*.









## Opportunities for programmes along migration routes: data analysis, cross-border collaboration and continuity of care

Some opportunities were identified that are unique to the challenges of providing assistance to mobile populations along migration routes.

**Many respondents highlighted the potential of using digital tools to strengthen National Societies' data collection and analysis, contributing to a stronger understanding of needs, whether in countries of destination or along migration routes (both internal to countries or cross-border).**

For example, digital tools such as Kobo, online self-registration or digital ID could be used to accumulate real-time data on services being accessed by migrants and displaced communities, as well as the demographics and number of people receiving assistance. An understanding of this data could support the delivery of more relevant assistance at the service locations where data is collected. Such data could also help to forecast needs in other locations: for example, at HSPs further along established migration routes, so that National Societies are appropriately resourced and prepared to respond.<sup>55</sup> Such data could also be used more widely to better understand and anticipate mobility patterns, although, as discussed below, any attempts to do so should be cognisant of risks.<sup>56</sup> It may also have broader benefits in terms of the accessibility and relevance of

services, or potential to use data collected as an evidence base for humanitarian diplomacy.

**Moreover, digital tools have the broader potential to strengthen cross-border cooperation and the continuity of care along migration routes.** As outlined above, there are various ways in which digital platforms - for example, WhatsApp groups or online portals - have been used to strengthen connections, communication, information and resource-sharing between National Societies along established migration routes. National Societies are also beginning to explore the idea of shared information platforms; for example, the Serbian Red Cross is discussing potential for other National Societies to join their existing web information portal, so that people on the move could select the country they are in to access relevant information.<sup>57</sup>

There are several ways in which National Societies are already using digital tools to identify service users and record instances of support received. This ranges from unique identifying numbers (in the Maldives), to digital ID (in Kenya, Uganda and the Sahel) or registration through the AccessRC app (in Europe and Colombia). **Such systems could in theory be expanded to support continuity of care across borders if common or interoperable systems were used by multiple national societies.**<sup>58</sup> For example, refugees in Kenya who were consulted as part of a needs assessment linked to the DIGID consortium identified the possibility of continuity of care from the Red Cross as they move between Sudan and Kenya as a key potential benefit of using digital ID when accessing services.<sup>59</sup>

**The use of such digital tools can also negate the**

---

<sup>55</sup>FGID 01, KII 06.

<sup>56</sup>KIIs 02, 06, 12. FGD 01.

<sup>57</sup>KII 09.

<sup>58</sup>KIIs 07, 10 and Written response 01; IFRC and Uganda Red Cross Society (2023), *Dignified credentials to access humanitarian cash assistance in migration: lessons learnt from Uganda*; IFRC (2024), 'AccessRC App Digital Self Enrollment' video presentation.

<sup>59</sup>IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of migrants in Kenya*.

**need for service users to go through the process of registration multiple times as they move within a country or across borders**, giving out the same information to multiple National Societies and humanitarian organisations.<sup>60</sup> A DIGID consultation in Colombia found that, even within one county, ‘Migrants in the focus groups expressed boredom and tedium at having to register at each HSP along the journey across the country [...], there was a total rejection of having to register at each point of care every time a humanitarian service is needed. The people consulted considered that their rights to privacy were being violated and they felt re-victimized. They criticised the information and registration systems as bureaucratic and unfriendly’.

## Opportunities for specific services and sectors

Finally, several opportunities were identified relating to specific types of services or sectors. The most frequently mentioned was the opportunity to make better use of digital tools to **provide information to migrants and displaced people on their rights, risks and available services**.<sup>62</sup> This is reflected in the number of National Society examples provided above along these lines. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has a unique added value in this space, as a well-known and trusted ‘brand’,<sup>63</sup> in the midst of complex and confusing information ecosystems.<sup>64</sup>

Several respondents pointed to the idea of **developing service maps** to direct people on the move to their nearest Red Cross and Red Crescent service location, making clear what services will be available so that service users are aware in advance.<sup>65</sup> A distinction was also made between ‘one-way’ information, for example being offered on static websites, and ‘two-way’ information that is responsive to the service user’s own requests and needs. The possibility was raised to use features such as geolocation to offer real-time, localised information, for example pushing out notifications with relevant information, as people move across borders.

Many respondents also pointed to the importance of **supporting connectivity** for people on the move along migration routes, with particular emphasis placed on how doing so connects to core **Restoring Family Links (RFL) services**, supporting individuals to maintain communication with their friends and family members as they undertake difficult journeys.<sup>66</sup> Again, the National Society examples above make clear the different ways this can be facilitated, from creating wifi hubs to distributing SIM cards. In the Philippines Starlink technology is being used to support connectivity in remote locations.

As already discussed above, **CVA assistance** represents another sector where digital tools present a range of opportunities for more efficient support.

---

<sup>60</sup>KII 12; IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of migrants in Kenya*; IFRC and Cruz Roja Colombiana (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of Migrants in Colombia*

<sup>61</sup>IFRC and Cruz Roja Colombiana (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of Migrants in Colombia*, p.19-20.

<sup>62</sup>KIIs 02,03,04,06,09,11; FGD 01; see also Red Social Innovation (2022), *The Netherlands Red Cross’ digital cash aid for undocumented migrants’*.

<sup>63</sup>KII 02; see also Global Migration Lab (2022), *Migrants’ Perspectives Building Trust in Humanitarian Action*.

<sup>64</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*.

<sup>65</sup>KII 06. 09; FGD 01.

<sup>66</sup>KII 07, 11.

Other opportunities that were highlighted include:

## Financial services

Supporting access to mobile money across borders for people on the move;<sup>67</sup>



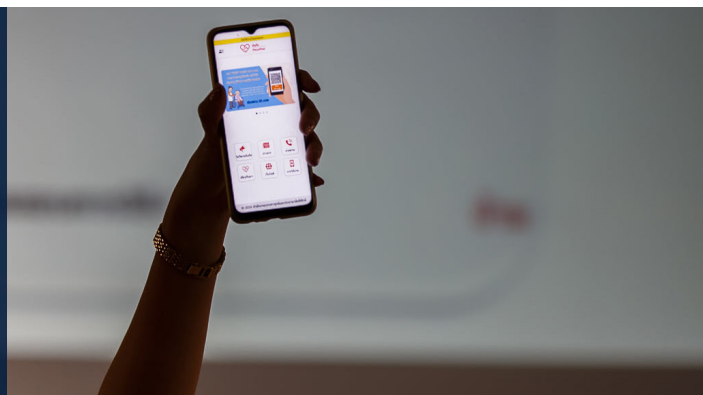
## Health

Using digital ID to support continuity of healthcare and empowering patients with access to a record of their own medical history, prescriptions and doctors notes.<sup>68</sup>



## Leisure

Supporting overall wellbeing through access to digital services for entertainment and relaxation (e.g. videos, music, gaming or other content).<sup>69</sup>



<sup>67</sup>KII 02

<sup>68</sup>IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2023) *Dignified identities in healthcare and migration: Lessons from Kenya*; IFRC and Cruz Roja Colombiana (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of Migrants in Colombia*.

<sup>69</sup>Tech for Refugees (n.d.), *'Refugees and Technology'*; UNHCR (2022), *The Digital Leisure Divide and the Forcibly Displaced*.



## Education and training

Using online platforms to conduct education and training activities for migrants and displaced communities.<sup>70</sup>



## Psychosocial support (PSS)

Using communication tools to provide PSS online.<sup>71</sup>



## Digital livelihoods

Promoting access for migrant and displaced communities to digital economies and remote work.<sup>72</sup>



<sup>70</sup>Tech for Refugees (n.d.), *'Refugees and Technology'*;

<sup>71</sup>UNHCR (2023), *Designing Safe Digital Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support (MHPSS) for Displaced and Stateless Adolescents*.

<sup>72</sup>See, for example UNHCR (2022), *'Promoting safe access for refugees and host communities to the digital economy'*; UNHCR (2023), *'The identity issue: Digital risks of proxy IDs in Kenya's online economy'*.

## Digital safe spaces

Exploring how digital channels can create a feeling of closeness and online community for groups such as LGBTQI people on the move.<sup>73</sup>



In many of these areas the portability of digital services could provide opportunities to provide assistance in different sectors that is appropriate to the needs of mobile populations.

## Navigating risks

**Responsible programming should ensure that the vast opportunities offered by digital tools are balanced by an understanding of relevant risks and potential harms.** Importantly, this should be balanced by the recognition that a 'risk only' mindset in the digital space in itself raises the risk of doing nothing and failing to take up opportunities to make use of digital tools to develop appropriate, relevant and accessible services.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, assessments of digital risks often fail to adequately acknowledge and compare the risks already implicit in the status quo of regular programming - for example, in requiring undocumented migrants to make

themselves visible in order to access physical service points. Nonetheless, a risk analysis of any digital tool is critical in order to identify where risks may outweigh opportunities and, where relevant, to ensure appropriate mitigations.

## Scale vs. inclusion

**A large and growing body of evidence points to how the opportunities to utilise digital tools to achieve scale in humanitarian response should be weighed up with possible trade-offs in terms of inclusion.**<sup>75</sup>

As outlined above, digital tools can in some cases widen accessibility of services to groups who would struggle to access physical services. However, digital tools can entrench and exacerbate existing inequalities, with access to devices, digital literacy and connectivity varying between groups based on factors such as gender, age, geography, language and (dis)ability.<sup>76</sup> For example, one study in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in Uganda found

---

<sup>73</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*.

<sup>74</sup>KII 02, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 11.

<sup>75</sup>KII 01, 02

<sup>76</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*; HPG (2019), *The humanitarian 'digital divide'*; IFRC (2021), *Digital Identity: An analysis for the humanitarian sector*; ICRC (2023), *'Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age*.

that women were 47% less likely to own a mobile phone and people with disabilities 10% less likely.<sup>77</sup>

In general, **women may face barriers to connectivity** due to cultural norms or requirements for family permission to own and use devices.<sup>78</sup> Digital identity verification tools such as biometrics and liveness checks may present specific challenges for **people with disabilities**.<sup>79</sup> **Elderly people** may not have access to devices or struggle to navigate digital platforms, as many are speakers of marginalised languages.<sup>80</sup> **Refugees and migrants may face exclusion from digital platforms** where citizenship and identification are conditions of participation or access to connectivity.<sup>81</sup> **Exclusion from labour markets may mean they lack the resources to purchase more advanced devices;** for example, one assessment found that in Kalobeyei refugee settlement in Kenya, only around a third of refugees had access to smartphones and 8.5% had no phone at all.<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile **automated processes may present risks of 'algorithmic discrimination'**, reflecting the biases of existing datasets that are used to train AI models.<sup>83</sup> Across the board, the concern is that those who are

already most marginalised in society end up excluded from services depending on digital tools.

## Risks to fundamental principles

**For the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, risks of exclusion through use of digital tools come in direct conflict with the principle of impartiality:** providing assistance on the basis of need alone.<sup>84</sup> The scoping also pointed to wider risks in terms of upholding the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement while using digital tools, though some have also framed the principles as an essential tool for navigating the complex space between digital risks and opportunities.<sup>85</sup>

**Private companies that develop and sell digital technology are not neutral.**<sup>86</sup> Most tech firms have a diverse customer base, and digital supply chains are complex, including services that are offered to repressive governments, as well as wider security and defence actors. More widely, the Silicon Valley 'move fast, break things' ethos stands in stark contrast to the principles of humanitarian actors seeking to provide services

---

<sup>77</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*

<sup>78</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*

<sup>79</sup>HPG (2022), *Digital technologies and inclusion in humanitarian response*; IFRC (2024), *Lessons Learned Workshop Report: CVA and CEA in Response to Ukraine and Impacted Countries Crisis Emergency Appeal*. Red Cross of Montenegro.

<sup>80</sup>KII 02, 11; IFRC and Cruz Roja Colombiana (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of Migrants in Colombia*.

<sup>81</sup>KII 01

<sup>82</sup>IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2023) *Dignified identities in healthcare and migration: Lessons from Kenya*.

<sup>83</sup>HPG (2022), *Digital technologies and inclusion in humanitarian response*; ICRC (2023), *'Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age*.

<sup>84</sup>KII 02

<sup>85</sup>ICRC (2023), *'Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age*; UNHCR (2020), *Meeting communities where they are — the increasing preference of messaging apps*.

<sup>86</sup>ICRC (2023), *'Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age*.



that ‘do no harm’ to vulnerable populations.<sup>87</sup> Different organisations have navigated this balance in different ways. While some have engaged enthusiastically with private sector providers, others have leaned towards tools such as open-source software and a ‘DIY’ approach to avoid risks. Tensions are clear here between product accessibility and quality on the one hand, and maintaining humanitarian principles and a ‘do no harm’ approach by working in isolation.

## Data protection, digital risks and real-world harms

**There is growing literature that discusses data protection and digital risks in the context of humanitarian programmes.** Many of these discussions remain theoretical or are difficult to definitively link to real-world harms. However, concerning incidents exist. For example, when in 2021 personal information collected by UNHCR from Rohingya refugees (including biometrics), who had fled persecution in Myanmar, was shared with the Government of Bangladesh, who in turn shared it with the government of Myanmar.<sup>88</sup> In another case, biometric data collected by the government of Afghanistan and the US military fell into the hands of the Taliban.<sup>89</sup>

**Perhaps the most important factor to consider in this area is the reality that many state and non-state actors are likely to have an interest in data collected about migrants and displaced**

---

<sup>87</sup>KII 01, 05.

<sup>88</sup>Human Rights Watch (2021), *‘UN Shared Rohingya Data Without Informed Consent’*.

<sup>89</sup>Aarathi Krishnan (2023) *‘5 Ethical Principles for Digitizing Humanitarian Aid’*.







**communities.**<sup>90</sup> Repressive countries of origin or non-state actors may have an interest in identifying and locating displaced individuals. Host and transit country governments and security agencies may be interested in data about where migrants and displaced people are, or the routes they are taking, as part of wider approaches focused on surveillance, enforcement and border control.

**There are various ways in which humanitarian agencies' use of digital tools can lead to data falling into the wrong hands.** Where humanitarian actors use digital tools from private firms without clear data privacy agreements in place, the data that is collected may be shared with third parties such as security agencies.<sup>91</sup> Widely-used tools and operating systems will often have vulnerabilities that are routinely exploited by state and non-state actors.<sup>92</sup> Humanitarian actors themselves or third parties may be the victim of data breaches and hacking.<sup>93</sup> For example, in order to mitigate this risk, ICRC tested the design of its RedSafe app - which stores users' personal documents - by recruiting researchers and hackers known to have breached secure systems to identify vulnerabilities. Humanitarian actors may also be subject to lawful access requests, where local regulations

provide a legal basis for states to ask service providers to hand over data.<sup>94</sup>

**Many studies also point to difficulties securing meaningful, informed consent from communities for the collection of their data where access to services depends on agreeing to share certain data.**<sup>95</sup> In many instances service users lack the ability to remove or manage the data that is collected from them, while they may be subject to 'function creep' where data collected for one purpose is then used for another.<sup>96</sup>

Studies suggest a **complex picture in migrants' and displaced communities' own perspectives on these aforementioned risks.** Research conducted with migrants and displaced communities - including in Kenya, Uganda, Lebanon, Colombia - point to community concerns about data leaks or data being used for surveillance by authorities.<sup>97</sup> For many people on the move, staying hidden can be a viable protection strategy, with many reluctant to share identifying information.<sup>98</sup> However, various Red Cross context assessments also point to many people who have said they are comfortable with providing personal data in order to access services,

---

<sup>90</sup>KII 01, 02, 08; IFRC and Cruz Roja Colombiana (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of Migrants in Colombia*; ICRC (2023), *“Back to basics’ with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age*; GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*;

<sup>91</sup>KII 01.

<sup>92</sup>KII 08; see also Perloth, N. (2021), *This is How they Tell me the World Ends*. London: Bloomsbury.

<sup>93</sup>KII 02, 06, 08; HPG (2019), *The humanitarian ‘digital divide’*; IFRC and Cruz Roja Colombiana (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of Migrants in Colombia*; IFRC (2021), *Digital Identity: Enabling Dignified Access to Humanitarian Services in Migration*.

<sup>94</sup>KII 08.

<sup>95</sup>HPG (2022), *Digital technologies and inclusion in humanitarian response*; Krishnan (2022), *‘Humanitarian Digital Ethics: A Foresight and Decolonial Governance Approach’*; IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2023), *Dignified Identities in humanitarian action: Journey and reflection*.

<sup>96</sup>HPG (2019), *The humanitarian ‘digital divide’*; HPG (2022), *Digital technologies and inclusion in humanitarian response*;

<sup>97</sup>IFRC and Cruz Roja Colombiana (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of Migrants in Colombia*; Kenya Red Cross (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of migrants in Kenya*; GSMA (2022), *The digital worlds of displacement-affected communities*; IFRC and Uganda Red Cross Society (2023), *Dignified credentials to access humanitarian cash assistance in migration: lessons learnt from Uganda*.

<sup>98</sup>KII 01; KII 09.



particularly when the data is being shared with trusted humanitarian organisations.<sup>99</sup> The latter point highlights the responsibility for humanitarian organisations to approach digital tools in a way that lives up to these expectations.

**Several respondents suggested that avoiding the collection of personal or identifying information can be a key mitigation. However, even population-level data can pose a risk of harm.** For example, data collected about overall mobility patterns of people on the move or the location of informal settlements could be used for the purposes of border security and immigration enforcement.<sup>100</sup> Even seemingly benign interventions such as maps of services could be used by immigration enforcement or by far-right groups looking to target groups of migrants.<sup>101</sup>

**Beyond data privacy and protection, it is important to recognise the risks that the digital sphere pose to migrant and displaced communities,** as part of the wider context surrounding humanitarian agencies' use of digital tools. This includes cyber threats, scams, misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.<sup>102</sup> Increasingly, many physical protection incidents have digital elements.<sup>103</sup> Humanitarian organisations have

encountered cases of impersonation, where a malicious actor uses their brand to extort vulnerable communities.<sup>104</sup> Even information provided directly by humanitarian organisations may cause harm if it is not routinely updated, rendering it misinformation.<sup>105</sup> Whereas digital systems may be open to manipulation by malicious actors making fraudulent claims for assistance. Research by UNHCR suggests that displaced people recognise the importance of online security and risks, but nonetheless prioritise connectivity.<sup>106</sup> However, the research points to the need to support affected communities - who feel powerless to respond to digital risks - to safely navigate this landscape, just as humanitarian organisations already do in the cases of non-digital risks.

## Other risks: empathy, hype and sectoral risks

Finally, a number of other wider risks arose from the scoping. First, the risk of a **loss of empathy and greater distance** between humanitarian organisations and affected communities as services go digital.<sup>107</sup> This could be seen as an especially relevant risk to consider for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, given the strength of its unique model, where services are deeply

---

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.* See also IFRC and Croix Rouge Nigérienne (2022), *CVA in Migration Context – Voices of Migrants in Niger*,

<sup>100</sup>KII 01.

<sup>101</sup>FGD 01.

<sup>102</sup>GSMA (2022), *The digital worlds of displacement-affected communities*; ICRC (2023), *'Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age*; UNHCR (2021), *Connecting With Confidence: Managing Digital Risks to Refugee Connectivity*.

<sup>103</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*

<sup>104</sup>KII 11; GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*.

<sup>105</sup>KII 02.

<sup>106</sup>UNHCR (2021), *Connecting With Confidence: Managing Digital Risks to Refugee Connectivity*.

<sup>107</sup>KII 01; GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*; ICRC (2023), *'Back to basics' with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age*.

embedded in communities, including community-based staff and volunteers.

Respondents also spoke about the risk of humanitarian actors **being misled by hype** around digital tools - offering quick silver bullet fixes to what are in reality complex challenges - as well as the importance of being equipped to spot red flags.<sup>108</sup> Finally, attention should be paid to **risks that surround specific sectors and interventions**, such as digital delivery of CVA or PSS.<sup>109</sup>

## Challenges for successful use of digital tools in service delivery

Beyond the risks explored above, the scoping also covered practical challenges that may pose a barrier to successful use of digital tools in service delivery for migrants and displaced populations. Many of these challenges were raised directly in the context of existing National Society interventions, posing important considerations for future work in this area.

### Limitations of digital tools

Firstly, **digital tools themselves have limits**. Relying on them for programme delivery can make implementation subject to difficulties in cases of software glitches.<sup>110</sup> Off-the-shelf products may not work for the needs of humanitarian organisations and affected communities, requiring investment in custom-built software.<sup>111</sup> The pace of technological change, particularly at the moment

---

<sup>109</sup>NRC (2023), *Data Sharing in Humanitarian Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA): A look at risks, threats and mitigation technologies*; UNHCR (2023), *Designing Safe Digital Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support (MHPSS) for Displaced and Stateless Adolescents*.

<sup>110</sup>KII 07, 11.

<sup>111</sup>KII 01.





in areas such as AI, can make it difficult for humanitarian organisations to keep up, develop responsible practice guidelines and maintain the relevance of their services.<sup>112</sup> It may be difficult to encourage humanitarian service users to engage with new platforms, or the remoteness of digital services may not be desirable where service users prefer human interaction.<sup>113</sup>

## Operating environments

**Humanitarian agencies' operating environments and the digital environments of service users may not be conducive to digital solutions.** Digital literacy and access to devices varies significantly between different migrant and displaced populations and is in some cases very limited.<sup>114</sup> In some communities, even where people own devices they may be shared between multiple users. As discussed above, within these communities there is also likely to be variation along the lines of gender, age and other factors. Service users may not be able to afford devices or data plans, or devices may be shared or their use subject to social norms.

**Refugees and migrant communities may also be more likely than other populations to face barriers to connectivity.** One UNHCR study in 2016 found that globally, refugees living in rural areas were twice as likely compared to the global population to not have mobile coverage.<sup>115</sup> Migrants and displaced communities may be more likely to experience electricity shortages or unreliable internet.<sup>116</sup> Migrants and displaced people in different countries, regions, or even individuals travelling

---

<sup>112</sup>KII 02; HPG (2019), *The humanitarian 'digital divide'*; Spencer (2021), *Humanitarian AI: The hype, the hope and the future*.

<sup>113</sup>KII 01.

<sup>114</sup>Written response 03; UNHCR (2022), *The Digital Leisure Divide and the Forcibly Displaced*.

<sup>115</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*.



through multiple countries, are likely to face varied digital and mobile ecosystems.<sup>117</sup> National regulations may prohibit mobile operators from allowing access to SIM cards for individuals without national documentation, or there may be specific regulations around services such as cash for migrants or refugees.<sup>118</sup> Individuals living or travelling through areas of conflict, repression or natural-hazard linked crises may experience loss of coverage, attacks on network infrastructure, or service restriction orders by authorities (including limits on bandwidth, coverage and signal jamming).<sup>119</sup>

All of these challenges are also likely to face humanitarian organisations, including National Societies, operating in these areas and limit their ability to depend on digital services.<sup>120</sup>

## Challenges within organisations

**This scoping also pointed to several challenges within organisations that inhibit the uptake of digital tools.** The most common concern raised was the cost and investment involved in rolling out new digital tools. Despite promises of efficiency-savings, many respondents felt that, at least in the short to medium term, digital tools were likely to involve significant financial and human resource investments. High up-front costs were discussed, particularly if seeking to 'do digital well'. As one

respondent put it: 'you don't need to send people to the field but if you're doing it right then your tech budget will need to significantly increase'.<sup>121</sup>

Respondents pointed to **costs that were involved for National Societies** including: equipment (such as tablets, phones, servers); software, particularly when contracting tech start-ups to design custom-built software; hosting websites and maintaining QR codes.<sup>122</sup> They also pointed to the **human resource investment needed to support the rollout of new digital tools**, including developing and supporting IT expertise, supporting capacity to analyse data as well as collect it, engaging experts from legal and finance teams, as well as training staff and volunteers.<sup>123</sup> Across the Red Cross and Red Crescent, relevant capacity is concentrated within a small pool of National Societies with high-level expertise, without investment in supporting a consistent baseline of digital capacity across National Societies. Where data is collected, National Societies may not have sufficient in-house capacity to process and analyse that data, requiring external support. While some pointed to limited technical capacity in some National Societies requiring significant investment in training, others felt that existing National Society skills and knowledge were not adequately recognised in a drive towards centrally-designed solutions.<sup>124</sup> Reflections from the AccessRC pilot in Colombia also highlighted the need to ensure

---

<sup>116</sup>UNHCR (n.d.) *Empowering Refugees Through Technology*; Kenya Red Cross (2022), *CVA in migration context – Voices of migrants in Kenya*;

<sup>117</sup>GSMA (2022), *The digital worlds of displacement-affected communities*; GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*.

<sup>118</sup>KII 10, 12.

<sup>119</sup>GSMA (2024) *Connectivity in Crisis: The Humanitarian Implications of Connectivity for Crisis-Affected Communities*

<sup>120</sup>KII 02, 07, 08, 11, 12; FGD 01; Written responses 02 and 03.

<sup>121</sup>KII 08.

<sup>122</sup>KII 07-08, 10, 12; FGD 01; Written response 03.

<sup>123</sup>KII 07, 10; FGD 01.

**regionally based local support for National Societies** adopting centrally designed tools.<sup>125</sup> While at present technical requests and questions from National Societies regarding the app are filtered through a central team in Geneva, respondents highlighted that the inefficiency of this model and the need to support technical expertise at the regional level to support National Societies directly.

Several respondents pointed to the **long-term nature of many of these costs**, which are likely to go beyond project funding cycles. For example, the costs that are involved to ensure that digital tools are appropriately maintained, updated and evolve with technological changes and community feedback.<sup>126</sup> This was one factor that was connected to **a perceived inadequate focus on the sustainability of digital tools within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement**, or, as one respondent put it, 'not having a new system every two seconds'.<sup>127</sup> This was considered a particular concern when balanced with efforts to communicate such tools to communities and volunteers, encouraging uptake, and ultimately raising expectations of their longer-term use. Virtual Volunteer is a good example of an IFRC digital tool which is no longer regularly updated or maintained. Elsewhere, in the Sahel QR codes that were used to support continuity of services are no longer in operation after the closure of the EU Trust Fund Project; the connected platform is no longer accessible to National Societies. Meanwhile, in Kenya the Kenya Red Cross Society has faced challenges accessing data collecting during its digital ID pilot when the third party software design company subsequently collapsed, rendering their

digital platform inaccessible.

It was also raised that initial underestimations of the costs, time and other investment involved in adopting digital tools often failed to recognise that in many cases supporting successful implementation of digital tools goes beyond the tool itself but involves supporting an organisational-wide change to digital ways of working. It was suggested that this requires buy-in from all levels of the organisation, from implementing staff to senior leadership; convincing staff of the value of adopting new digital tools, or persuading 'tech phobic' (often older) colleagues and finding ways to engage them in the process.<sup>128</sup>

## Challenges for cooperation and collaboration

Finally, respondents also spoke about **challenges in terms of collaboration between National Societies across borders, and with other humanitarian organisations**. Despite the many examples highlighted above of National Societies using digital tools to support cross-border cooperation, this was still considered a challenge and a key area for future improvement.

There are important challenges in terms of **interoperability (namely, the ability to connect and feed into each other)** between the many different digital systems that are in operation across the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and wider humanitarian sector.<sup>129</sup> Data sharing across borders and between

---

<sup>124</sup>KII 07, 11; FGD 01.

<sup>125</sup>KII 12.

<sup>126</sup>KII 01, 03, 06, 11, 12; FGD 01; Written response 01.

<sup>127</sup>FGD 01; KII 03.

<sup>128</sup>KII 10; FGD 01.

organisations also runs into numerous challenges in terms of differing data protection policies and legal frameworks, and the need to have appropriate **data sharing agreements in place.**<sup>130</sup>

Some respondents also pointed to perceived **challenges in terms of institutional infrastructure within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to document and share existing digital tools and experience between National Societies.** This was considered important to avoid duplication of efforts and the proliferation of overlapping digital tools across migration routes.<sup>131</sup> As one National Society representative put it: 'We can always create different [digital platforms] but then we are asking people on a migration route whenever they enter a different country to get a different app or go to a new website. It is cumbersome for them and not helping them'.

Finally, there can also be **challenges in terms of translating central digital tools and guidance to different national contexts. For example, well thought-through data protection guidance can run into challenges when meeting the realities experienced by under-resourced National Societies.** What seems like realistic guidance in headquarters may be impractical for National Societies working in fast-moving and challenging contexts, with their own established preferences in terms of digital ways of working and tools.<sup>132</sup>

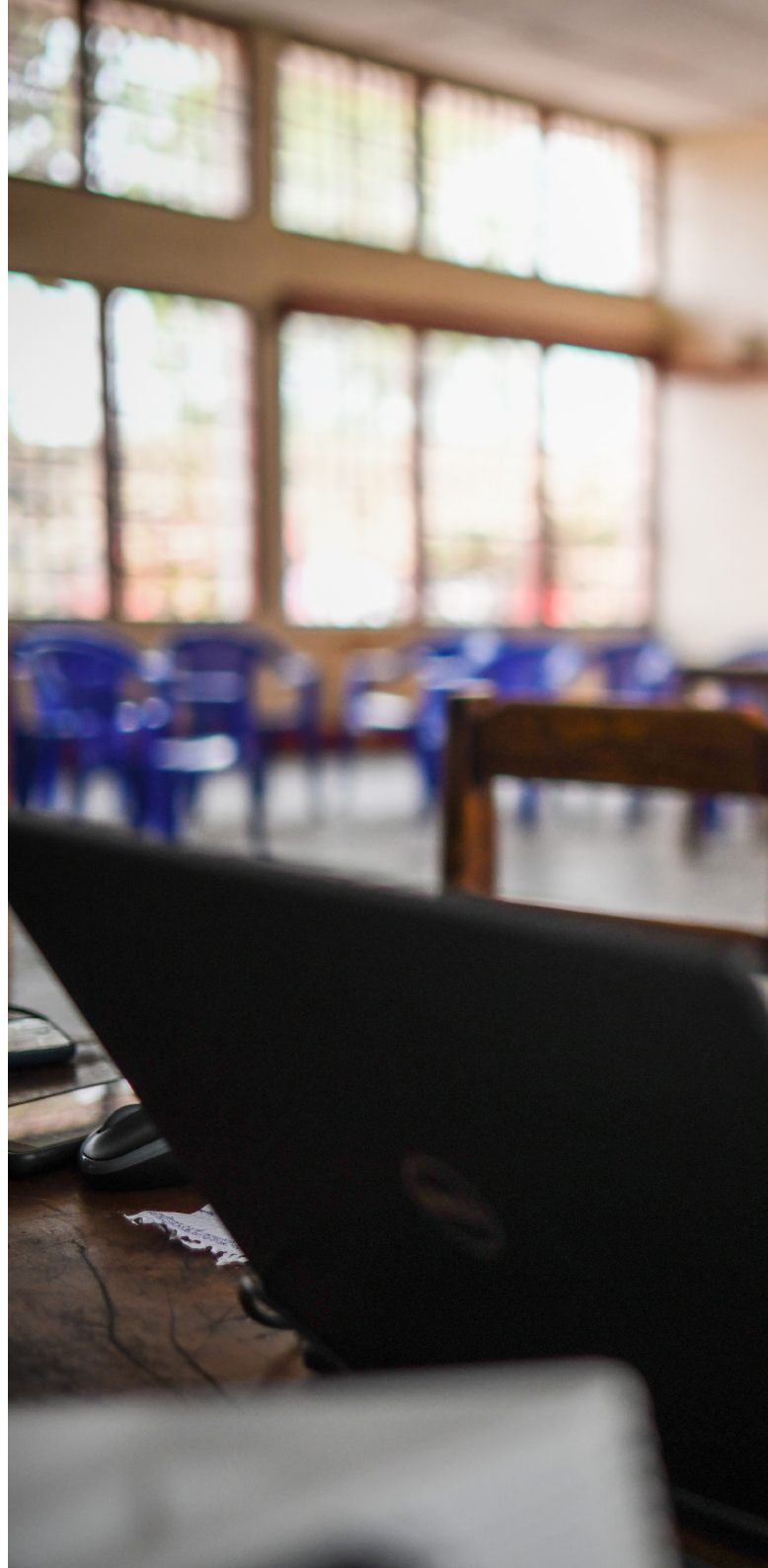
---

<sup>129</sup>KII 03-04, 6, 100-11; FGD 01. *IFRC (2021) Digital identification: An analysis for the humanitarian sector; IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2023), Dignified Identities in humanitarian action: Journey and reflection; IFRC and Kenya Red Cross (2023) Dignified identities in healthcare and migration: Lessons from Kenya.*

<sup>130</sup>KII 06, 12.

<sup>131</sup>FGD 01, KII 09, 12.

<sup>132</sup>KIIs 05, 08.







## Wider humanitarian sector examples

As outlined above, National Societies' use of digital tools in programmes for migrants and displaced people takes place in a complex environment characterised by overlapping opportunities, risks and challenges. There is much to be learned from the experiences of other organisations working with the same communities, in the same environments and navigating the same confusing landscape. Several examples from external organisations were reviewed as part of this scoping. Given National Societies' existing prioritisation, highlighted in Section 2, of using digital tools to provide information, two examples were selected in this space to be explored in more detail here, as examples of effective and thoughtful practice.

### The Signpost initiative

Signpost was launched by the IRC and Mercy Corps in 2015 in response to the large-scale arrival of refugees to Europe. It was designed to respond to the needs of refugees arriving in Greece for reliable information, where an initial refugee.info website was created. It has since grown throughout the region and expanded globally, now covering 20 countries on five continents, with 14.5 million documented users. The Signpost initiative today consists of multiple country and crisis-specific platforms, using a cross-cutting model that was developed based on data generated from initial iterations, surveys, UX research and advice technology companies. Partners of the platform include Cisco, Google, Zendesk (Tech for Good), Meta and Tech for Refugees.

Recent iterations have included platforms for people on the move in Central America (Cuenta Nos) and those displaced from Ukraine (United for Ukraine). Every local Signpost program is context-specific and designed to meet users where they are on the digital channels they already use and in the languages they speak. The model includes a combination of a website containing key information, a local service map, social media channels and a digital helpdesk supported by local moderators. Moderators, who are refugees themselves, receive training from journalists, lawyers, and other specialists, with the ability to consult with specialists in a larger editorial team. Trends in questions being asked through the helpdesk are then fed through to update the information contained on the relevant information webpage.

### UNHCR WhatsApp chat lines

In recent years UNHCR has explored opportunities to engage with refugee communities using WhatsApp, initially driven by changing operational possibilities during COVID-19.<sup>133</sup> WhatsApp was selected as the platform to use for piloting a chat line due to a commitment to 'meeting people where they are' in online and offline spaces, with WhatsApp dominant as a preferred form of communication in many contexts where UNHCR works. Significant thought went into managing digital risks and the development of a 'privacy by design' approach, working closely with turn.io to develop the service and prioritising explaining its privacy policy to users in a simple way. UNHCR's innovation team have shared learnings throughout the process on their blog, taking a transparent approach to the risks involved in experimenting with new technology within a large organisation.

---

<sup>133</sup>For further details see: turn.io (2023), *To help build a better future for refugees, UNHCR's chat services suit their preferences, meet their needs, and safeguard their data*; UNHCR (2020), *Meeting communities where they are — the increasing preference of messaging apps*; UNHCR (2021) *Six key findings from engaging communities through messaging apps*; UNHCR (2022), *UNHCR Turn.io WhatsApp Service - Introduction to the pilot* YouTube video.



Since an initial pilot the service has expanded to 20 chat lines in 12 languages, with over 75,000 users in Brazil, Panama, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, El Salvador, Greece, Mexico, Peru, Algeria, Chile, Hungary, Indonesia, Jordan, Sudan, Poland and Hungary. Individuals can seek answers to common questions about their rights and the services available to them. They can also be referred to UNHCR staff for specific support. While some responses are automated, messages are triaged with human assisted responses. Following an initial pilot the service has been contextualised for different use cases. For example, adding voice notes in Latin America due to their popularity in the region. While benefits have been noted in terms of saving staff time responding to simple requests, UNHCR has also noted the significant up-front investment in time necessary to build an adequate service.







GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has outlined the many and varied ways in which National Societies around the world are already using digital tools as part of programmes to support migrants and displaced people. It has also explored the challenging environment in which this takes place, with opportunities finely balanced with risks and challenges. This final section seeks to offer concrete guidance to IFRC and National Societies for navigating this complex space in future programmes. First, by outlining a set of guiding principles for work with migrants and displaced people that incorporates digital tools. Second, by sharing a set of actionable recommendations for IFRC and National Societies for future programmes, including potential 'quick wins', as well as recommendations for future investment.

## Guiding principles for using digital tools in work with migrants and displaced communities

Five guiding principles are proposed here, drawing on experience from within and outside the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement:



**1. Follow basic design principles**



**2. Take a community-centred approach**



**3. If you're going to do it, do it well and make it sustainable**



**4. Collaborate across teams, National Societies and outside the Red Cross and Crescent**



**5. Manage risks by prioritising inclusion and data protection**

For each principle relevant examples are given from existing Red Cross and Red Crescent practice, to demonstrate the expertise that already exists within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in these areas.



## Follow basic design principles

### Red Cross and Red Crescent examples of good practice in design:

- The Netherlands Red Cross [\*HIA information websites \(Section 2.1\)\*](#)

First, a number of basic principles are suggested for designing any digital tool used in work with migrants and displaced people.

#### Ask if a digital tool is needed

The first question to ask during the design of a digital tool should be: is this necessary? In some contexts, digital tools may not be an appropriate solution. For example, where affected communities and National Societies face overwhelming barriers to connectivity or do not have access to sufficient devices. In other cases, traditional offline methods may be good enough for the purpose at hand without the need to turn to digital tools.

#### Start with the problem, not the solution

Red Cross and Red Crescent programmes should avoid the risk of ‘solutions searching for a problem.’ Any effort to draw on the use of digital tools should start with a clear problem statement, then move on to exploring how digital tools can be part of the solution.

#### Design for context

As outlined in detail above, there are likely to be significant differences between (and within) migrant

and displaced communities in terms of their access to devices, connectivity and digital literacy. **The design of any digital tool should start with a thorough assessment of the digital worlds of potential service users.**

For example, consultations with undocumented migrants in Europe suggest that, while most have phones, they are likely to face limits on usage in terms of slow wifi connections, limited data and limited phone storage.<sup>134</sup> This points to design principles prioritising digital solutions with an easy-to-load simple design, as well as avoiding the creation of new apps which this population are unlikely to download. In other cases, for example displacement from Ukraine, high levels of digital literacy and high-tech smartphone usage may point to the opposite set of design principles.

Designing for context **should also include an assessment of the capacities and operating context of relevant National Societies**, including their access to devices, connectivity, technical expertise and their own preferences for digital tools. For example, in some cases National Society preferences may dictate making the most of tools such as Kobo that are already being

<sup>134</sup>KII 03, 09.



used. Alternatively, challenges with reliable internet and electricity may make offline and low bandwidth options a priority.

### **Don't reinvent the wheel**

**Any new deployment of digital tools should also start with an exploration of other tools fulfilling a similar purpose,** within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and beyond. If a similar tool already exists, then a new one may not be necessary; instead, National Societies could explore adaptation and collaboration in terms of existing tools. If a gap exists that could be filled by a new tool, then simple mistakes can be avoided by understanding lessons learned from previous experience with similar initiatives.

### **Iterate and update**

**Effective examples from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well as other organisations, show the benefits of taking an iterative approach to design.** For example, using pilots to refine the design and use of digital tools, or using trends and feedback from interactions with service users to guide the tool's future format and content. Developing new tools should be seen as a learning experience: accept that you may not get it right the first time.

**Efforts to use digital tools to provide information should also prioritise keeping content regularly updated to ensure accuracy,** including by designing any tools and related processes so that information can easily be updated by operational staff who are likely to have the most up-to-date information.





## Take a community-centred approach

### Red Cross and Red Crescent examples of good practice in community-centred approaches:

- The Netherlands Red Cross *Whatsapp Helpdesk* and *Digital Engagement Hub (Section 2.2)*

**Efforts to use digital tools with migrant and displaced communities as an end-user should be rooted in a community-centred approach**, ensuring that digital tools meet their needs and preferences.

**Priority should be given to leveraging platforms that are already used, rather than trying to engage service users with new platforms.** Just as offline efforts to share information often go to locations where target communities are already located, digital information-sharing should prioritise communities' existing digital spaces. This includes social media platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram and Line. For example, one study along the Western Balkans route found that 41% of those surveyed used social media and messaging apps during the journeys, compared to just 8% using websites.<sup>135</sup> In this case, failure to engage with social media and messaging platforms in order to reach people moving along this route, or relying solely on websites or custom-built apps, misses a huge opportunity to leverage the channels people are already using.

Guidance on this can be found from the Americas, where IFRC in 2020 published a regional orientation guide to support National Societies to implement a WhatsApp for Business line in the context of responses to mobility from Venezuela.<sup>136</sup>

**Talking to service users should be a core part of the design and implementation of any digital tool.** This should include consultations to understand how they see their own needs (including needs for information), how they use and navigate technology. During the design phase co-design sessions are critical, as well as user testing in a pilot phase to road test design and translation. Face-to-face information and engagement sessions can be effective tools to share and build trust in any new digital tools, as well as face-to-face and digital mechanisms to collect user feedback. Other key activities include talking to service users to understand their perspectives on data protection and digital risks, their digital literacy and skills base, and workarounds they have used to get around challenges with digital tools.

<sup>135</sup>Mixed Migration Centre (2023), *'Migrants and refugees who took the Western Balkan route: Access to information and decision-making'*.

<sup>136</sup>IFRC (2020), *WhatsApp Business: Information and Feedback Mechanism in a Migratory Context. Regional Orientation Guide*.



## If you're going to do it, do it well and make it sustainable

### Red Cross and Red Crescent examples of good practice in investment and sustainability:

- ICRC's *Trace the Face* webpage
- The *121 Platform* for CVA

**Recognise from the start of the process that designing and implementing a digital tool is likely to involve significant up-front investment: it may not save time or money in the short- to medium-term.** Embarking on a digital project should involve an honest assessment of whether a team has the capacity and resources to do it well. Where rolling out a digital tool requires substantial changes to embedded ways of working, project planning should not underestimate the time and investment this will involve.

**Budgeting for the project should include investment in human resources and soft skills as well as digital components.** Successful use of digital tools will depend on building a team and expertise within National Societies - as well as regional support - with the ability to own and manage digital tools in the long-term. This should include

IT specialists and other capabilities depending on the tool (for example, data analysis capacity in the case of data-sharing initiatives).

**It is also critical to budget and plan for the long-term maintenance and updating of any digital tool to ensure sustainability.** If the initial development of a tool is project-funded, then it is important to ask: what will happen to the tool when the project-funding ends? For example, will data and systems still be accessible to National Societies? Who will update and maintain it? Are there users depending on the tool who may face challenges if it is no longer used after the project closes? For many tools, their success should be measured in terms of long-term sustainability, rather than just short-term engagement and use.







## Collaborate across teams, National Societies and outside the Red Cross and Crescent

### Red Cross and Red Crescent examples of good practice in collaboration:

- Partnerships and engagement with mobile phone operators by the *Thai Red Cross*, *Philippine Red Cross* and *Kenya Red Cross* (Sections 2.1 and 2.2)

**The most effective programmes including digital tools involve collaboration at various levels. Within National Societies, collaboration is critical.** Even a well-resourced and -trained core team is likely to need to draw on wider expertise, for example in terms of incorporating community engagement and accountability, navigating data protection and legal frameworks, or designing to support protection and inclusion. IFRC and ICRC capacity in specific thematic areas can be a critical resource for National Societies to draw on.

**Operational National Society staff and volunteers who work with migrants and displaced people on a day-to-day basis should be included in the design and feedback stages of digital tools.** This can help to build ownership, as well as a deeper understanding of communities' needs (though this should not be seen as a substitute for talking to them directly). Consultation with operational staff is particularly critical when they are targeted as the main end user of a digital tool.

**Collaboration between National Societies along established migration routes is also key to ensure interoperability, avoid duplication of platforms**

**and make the most of digital tools to support continuity of care.** This is a long-term and deep-rooted challenge for National Societies, with benefits far beyond those for digital tools. More widely, National Societies can benefit from each others' experience, learning from others who have used digital tools.

Finally, **collaboration with actors that are outside the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement should also be seen as a key factor for success.** This could involve engaging with other humanitarian organisations to learn from their experiences developing similar tools, using digital solutions to address shared challenges or simply understanding what they are already doing to avoid duplication. Collaboration with the private sector is also key to consider, being mindful of differing perspectives and ethos from private sector actors. This could include involving private sector actors in design processes or seeking broader partnerships. Private sector actors have valuable expertise in terms of designing digital products that work seamlessly for users, which can be drawn on while being mindful of risks and challenges.



## Manage risks by prioritising inclusion and data protection

### Red Cross and Red Crescent examples of good practice in collaboration:

- *Measures taken by National Societies using the Access RC app* in response to displacement from Ukraine to ensure inclusivity (Section 2.2).
- Context assessments from the *DIGID Consortium* aimed at understanding community perspectives on Digital ID and views on risks
- *ICRC measures to test for security vulnerabilities* in its RedSafe app (Section 3.2)

**Digital tools, like most regular programme tools, come with a number of risks:** this should not be seen as a reason to avoid them completely but to ensure responsible programme design that limits harm to affected communities.

Work with digital tools should work from the starting point that **not every service user will have access to devices, connectivity, or be digitally literate. They may not be comfortable sharing data with humanitarian organisations or may prefer human contact to digital systems.** There are various measures which can be taken to prioritise inclusion:

- **Include an assessment of groups likely to be excluded** in pre-design consultations with refugee and migrant communities.
- **Ensure that there are meaningful non-digital alternatives**, so that individuals unable to use or uncomfortable with digital tools are not excluded – and so that consent to digital options is meaningful.

- **Explore features to maximise inclusion.** For example, voice assistance and translation into appropriate languages.
- **Support digital literacy and connectivity for migrants and displaced communities**, including groups most likely to face barriers.

Programmes using digital tools should also **take data protection seriously.** Where data is being collected from migrants and displaced people, programme design should start with the question: **what would happen to service users if the data ended up in the hands of state authorities as part of immigration enforcement and border control activities?** If there would be a risk of serious harm, then these risks should be weighed up against the likely benefits for affected communities. Seeking communities' own perspectives on these risks and tradeoffs can provide crucial guidance in navigating risks and help to avoid paternalism.

Where the decision is made to collect service users' data, then mitigations should be followed - for example:



**Data minimisation and routine deletion:** wherever possible minimise the data protected from vulnerable communities and delete it when it is no longer needed.



**Ensure that data privacy and ownership is built into the design of digital tools,** prioritising this as a core design principle. Service users should be made aware of how their data will be used, stored and where possible be able to request its removal.



**Vet and establish robust MoUs with third party providers.** Work with trusted and pre-vetted third party providers where possible and risk assess new providers.



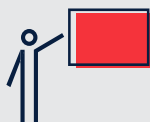
**Test the security of tools,** drawing on networks and volunteers to recruit experts to identify vulnerabilities in new systems.



**Enforce strict purpose limitation,** so that data collected for one purpose is not used for wider initiatives.



**Control access to systems and data containing personal information,** ensuring that people with access have appropriate training and using tools such as PINs.



**Identify when further Movement expertise and training is needed.** Data protection is a complex field which National Societies should not be expected to navigate on their own. Avenues for further support could include *ICRC's Data Protection Handbook* and ongoing ICRC training courses, or drawing on the expertise of other National Societies.





**Consider including information on online security and digital harms** in information programmes targeting migrants and displaced people.

## Recommendations for future activities

Recommendations are outlined below for future activities by IFRC and National Societies. These are divided into low-effort 'quick wins', medium-effort activities and those that would require significant further investment (but may have the biggest payoffs).

### Quick wins

- **Develop a short guidance note for National Societies considering using digital tools as part of their HSP or migration/displacement response.** This could include factors such as: recommended design principles (based on those outlined above); short checklists to identify whether a digital tool is suitable and key actions to support inclusion and data protection; guide questions to help staff assess risks.
- **Integrate easy-to-use digital elements in the HSP toolkit.** For example, guidance on using technology to support connectivity, or on how to generate QR codes to signpost to information and other services.
- **Review and remove information portals that are no longer routinely maintained and updated.** For example, reviewing the accuracy of the Virtual Volunteer webpage and removing elements (*e.g. the services map*) if they are no longer up to date.
- **Strengthen collaboration between IFRC digital**

**and migration teams** to ensure that regional migration focal points are aware of Federation-wide developments and standards. Conversely, this would help to ensure that knowledge and experience using digital tools in migration programmes can inform Federation-wide work in this area.

- **Initiate conversations between the IFRC and other organisations working with digital tools in similar areas to National Societies to explore possibilities for learning and collaboration.** For example, this could include organisations such as IRC, UNHCR and GSMA.

### Medium-effort activities

- **Explore potential possibilities of standardising data collection via Kobo along migration routes and between regions where it is already being used.** This could build on experience in Europe of using standardised Kobo fields as part of the route-based migration programme.
- **Explore options to share experience across National Societies who have used digital tools in programmes for migrants and displaced people.** Several National Societies who participated in the scoping expressed interest in doing so. This could be in the form of a small working group, or by facilitating bilateral connections.
- **Engage National Societies in a process to create a set of principles for partnerships with the private sector for migration and displacement.** This could include red flags, red lines, and templates

for aspects such as MoUs and data privacy agreements.

- **Create a region-by-region ‘bank’ of initiatives outside the Red Cross and Red Crescent focused on sharing information with migrants and displaced people that are considered safe and effective.** National Societies could be encouraged to direct migrants and displaced people at HSPs to these tools, or collaborate locally with implementing organisations.
- **Create a more extensive mapping of existing information-sharing portals used by National Societies for migrants and displaced people.** This could be used to identify redundancy, duplication or potential for collaboration.
- **Collaborate with other organisations in the humanitarian sector to develop understanding on new opportunities and emerging good practices in a constantly evolving digital landscape.** For example, specific opportunities and risks associated with AI, from back-office efficiencies and chatbots, to big data and predictive analytics.

## Areas for further investment and research

- **Explore how IFRC and National Societies can better leverage digital communication channels that migrants and displaced people already use** to support sharing of key information and signposting to Red Cross and Red Crescent services. These interventions appear to be clear areas of National Society interest in terms of digital tools. However, initiatives have tended towards developing new platforms rather than working with established channels: this is a missed opportunity. More could be done to build on the experiences of National Societies who have tried this (e.g. Netherlands Red

Cross) and that of other organisations.

- **Create an up-to-date and online map of Red Cross and Red Crescent HSPs.** This could include key information such as services provided and opening hours. This could draw on the design of the ongoing health services mapping. National Societies operating HSPs should be involved in the design, as well as service users. Work on any such map should be adequately resourced and planned so that the infrastructure is in place to keep it regularly updated.
- **Explore how connectivity can be included in broader Red Cross and Red Crescent humanitarian diplomacy on migrants’ and displaced peoples’ access to basic services.** It is clear from National Society practice at HSPs that connectivity is considered a key, basic service. This should be echoed in global and national-level humanitarian diplomacy, addressing cases where legal frameworks pose barriers to connectivity. IFRC could also support National Societies to work with mobile operators to enhance connectivity for migrants and displaced people, highlighting coverage gaps and issues with accessibility.
- **Conduct research mapping National Societies’ and service users’ digital worlds across key established migration routes.** This could include:
  - Assessing National Societies’ IT, IM and data protection capacity, digital tools they are already routinely using and their interoperability.
  - Understanding the digital worlds, preferences, access to devices, levels of connectivity and assessment of digital risks for people moving along these routes at different stages of their journeys.
  - Understanding whether people along these routes would prefer to access Red Cross and

Red Crescent services digitally, and if so how they would prefer to do so.

- Understanding if there are specific groups that services don't already reach who could be included through the use of digital tools, and if so how.
- **Explore digital solutions to the challenge of cross-border continuity of care on migration routes.** This should include consideration of whether existing approaches, such as the AccessRC app or digital ID, could be part of the solution. Private sector partners could also bring new ideas to this long-standing challenge. The feasibility of proposed solutions should be mapped against what is known about service users and National Societies' digital experiences along established migration pathways.
- **Explore possibilities to include digital elements in HSPs and/or bring National Societies and private sector partners together to explore**

**whether a 'digital first' HSP could be an appropriate modality in some cases, and if so what this could look like.** Either avenue of engagement could be piloted first with interested National Societies, before including relevant guidance and lessons learned in the HSP toolkit and future programme design. This could include areas such as supporting digital leisure and livelihoods, sharing information on digital risks and supporting digital literacy. This should build on research about service users and National Societies' digital experiences along key migration pathways.

- **Utilizing data collected by National Societies, undertake a feasibility study and risk assessment for a real-time mobility needs and patterns dashboard.** This idea has been raised as having valuable potential but there are also concerns about practical challenges and data privacy risks. A more detailed analysis is needed to explore whether this is an opportunity worth pursuing, or if risks and challenges outweigh opportunities.





## Credits:

Cover: © IFRC. Photo by Erika Pineors

p. 01: © IFRC. Photo by Finnish Red Cross

p. 04: © IFRC.

p. 05: © IFRC. Photo by Saara Mansikkamäki

p. 06: © IFRC. Photo by Alberto Soler

p. 12: © IFRC. Photo by Hermanos Corallo

p. 12: © IFRC. Photo by Ukraine

p. 17: © IFRC.

p. 19: © IFRC. Photo by Kenyan Red Cross

p. 20: © IFRC. Photo by Corrie Butler

p. 22: © IFRC. Photo by Hermanos Corallo

p. 24: © IFRC.

p. 28: © IFRC. Photo by Ville Palonen

p. 28: © IFRC. Photo by Arab Red Crescent

p. 28: © IFRC. Photo by Thai Red Cross Society

p. 29: © IFRC. Photo by Thai Red Cross Society

p. 29: © IFRC. Photo by Philippines Red Cross Society

p. 29: © IFRC. Photo by Hermanos Corallo

p. 30: © IFRC. Photo by Hermanos Corallo

p. 32: © IFRC. Photo by Javier Ormeno

p. 36: © IFRC. Photo by Thai Red Cross Society

p. 40: © IFRC. Photo by Corrie Butler

p. 43: © IFRC. Photo by Benoit Matsha-Carpentier

p. 44: © IFRC. Photo by Victor Lacken

p. 47: © IFRC. Photo by Sydney Morton

p. 49: © IFRC. Photo by John Sparrow

p. 55: © IFRC. Photo by Corrie Butler

