Pulse on the Principles S3E1 Final Audio Transcript

Laura: In 2015, the United Nations set out their 2030 agenda for sustainable development. This set of sustainable development goals or SDGs replaced the millennium development goals as the benchmarks that the international community would be trying to reach over the following 15 years. September 2020 marked the beginning of a decade of action to meet those goals, made even more challenging as the world grapples with the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and a decline in the influence of multilateral institutions like the UN.

These SDGs come up a lot in development work. However, the universal values that underpin the 2030 agenda are less well-known. They include a commitment to human rights, to gender equality, and to leaving no one behind. This concept, leave no one behind, can be a bit nebulous, but it means that we can't forget about the most vulnerable in our pursuit of the SDGs, people who are marginalized, hard to reach, and who are often in the most need of assistance.

When it comes to digital, leaving no one behind can be particularly difficult. Technology can bring information, opportunity, and education to more people than ever before, but it can also exacerbate and even cause exclusion and inequality. More than half the world's population still either lacks affordable access to the internet or is less able to benefit from it because of language or literacy barriers, lack of electricity or air time, or because their access is restricted by family members.

Those who lack safe and affordable access to digital technologies are overwhelmingly from groups who are already marginalized. Women, the elderly, those with disabilities, as well as indigenous groups and those who live in poor, remote, or rural areas.

Yet, we don't often have good data on how this all plays out on the extent and the impacts of these inequalities in digital access. Putting inclusion at the heart of digital solution investments and deployment is critical to ensuring that development and humanitarian practitioners do no harm, and that programs meant to help don't leave behind those who need them the most.

In this mini-season, we'll use the digital principles to explore some of the challenges of using digital and development and aid work while keeping that commitment to leaving no one behind. This is "Pulse on the Principles."

Welcome to "Pulse on the Principles," a podcast series that gives you a live look at putting the principles for digital development into practice. I'm Laura Walker McDonald, and I'm your host for the "Leave No One Behind" mini-season. Mobile technology has been at the heart of digital development for 20 years. Recently, a particular focus for public and private sector actors has been financing connectivity interventions and digital tools meant to help populations in crisis, such as refugees and people who've been displaced from their homes to become more self-sufficient.

We see digital solutions as operating outside of physical spaces, which makes them attractive when trying to build solutions to the challenges that refugees face. But access to digital spaces can be restricted. Having a working phone with an internet connection means access to a mobile data signal, charging points, and air time. That means that if you can't get around or you don't have disposable income, you might not be able to use digital systems in the way that designers imagined.

If your education has been interrupted or you lack formal identity documentation, you may have other challenges to overcome before you can enter digital spaces and systems. All of this can restrict your access to information, assistance, and employment opportunities. And increasingly, we are concerned about protecting communities and young people getting online for the first time from those who would use digital to harm them. That's not to say there's no role for digital here. If we can involve refugees in designing these systems and programs and keep inclusion at the heart of our approach, there are ways for digital to create opportunities and durable solutions for displaced communities.

Before I introduce today's guests, don't forget that to access the latest digital principles, news, and resources, visit digitalprinciples.org and follow us on Twitter @digiprinciples. That's at D-I-G-I principles. You can also use the # digital principles. Don't forget to leave a five-star rating and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts for more episodes. Now, let's get started.

Today, we're discussing participatory design, ownership, and opportunities and harms in digital for displaced communities. Joining me are Joelle Hangi and Olivier ONkunzurwanda. Joelle is the co-founder of Refugee Artists and Authors. She's pursuing her bachelor degree in business communication with

Southern New Hampshire University. She's also a refugee from Kakuma camp in Kenya, originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

She has participated in research projects with Oxford University and the University of Geneva to address different challenges associated with living in a refugee camp and has studied the results of policies and development of projects that aim to improve refugees' self-reliance and their rights. She aspires to work on refugee affairs to influence policies and empower and support the dignity of the displaced.

Our other guest, Olivier, is the CEO and founder of the Refugee Innovation Center in Uganda, where he and other local actors collaborate to provide education and training to refugees on financial and digital literacy. He's also from the Democratic Republic of Congo and lives under refugee status in Uganda.

Olivier holds a bachelor's degree in law and is a social entrepreneur in digital and humanitarian operations. He also founded a filmmaking course for young refugees with an emphasis on girls in Rwanda to train them on film and photography business. Both Joelle and Olivier are calling in from places where network connectivity isn't great, which is very appropriate to the theme of this podcast, but it means you will hear some distortion and connectivity issues during the recording.

Olivier and Joelle, it's so lovely to have you on the podcast today. And to start us off, I think many of us don't have an adequate understanding of how environments for displaced communities are different in different places. I'd love to hear more about your individual stories and about some of the digital programs you've seen in your communities. Joelle, could you kick us off?

Joelle: Personally, as my bio can reflect, I'm from the DRC, Democratic Republic of Congo, and I flee my country since 2014 and now located in a refugee camp in Kenya, in Kakuma precisely. And the journey was not that easy because you're finding yourself in a remote area. You are lost and you don't know the way forward. But definitely with time and when you try to dig into the opportunities and try to see positive things, I was able personally to resume with my studies since 2015 and also explore some possibilities and opportunities.

And when it comes to refugee settings, people are just imagining miserable things happening but from experience, I can say that things are moving and people are very creative when it comes to refugee setup. And when it comes to connectivity as well, people have tried hard to come up with some solutions to

address some of the issues that they're facing despite all the challenges because most of the time refugee camps are located in remote areas where people don't have access to most recent tools or access to digital items or devices, but people have been very creative and come up with some solution that can help them address some of their challenges.

And I have witnessed that through some community-based organization that have tried hard to address the issues when it comes to connectivity. People are very creative and also look forward on how to explore the possibilities and access some of the opportunities they can get online as I did because first of all, I did all my studies. And so far, I'm about to finish my bachelor degree because I had access to internet and do some of my work just through online. And that is one positive experience that I have.

But despite that, I have to be honest with the situation. It's not really easy like other cities and countries because refugee set up, we have so many challenges when it comes to infrastructure and other things that are required for people to have access to internet such as energy. So you can see that in refugee camps, there is no access to energy at all. And it's just few of them who can have access to solar panels, which can't help them run throughout the day or week.

So it's really challenging, but refugees themselves are really creative and try to find ways to respond to those critical issues because there is that reality of protected situation in the camp. Like people are living there over 20 years and 40 years and to look for solutions when it comes to their basic needs.

Laura: Thank you, Joelle, for setting that scene for us. Olivier, how about you? What have you seen in your story and for you, what has been good or what has been problematic about what you've experienced in terms of digital solutions?

Olivier: I'm Olivier, CEO and founder of Refugee Innovations Centre Rwamwanja. Most of the issues that we've been having as in environment and energy, lack of networking gadgets like telephones and antennas, roads, a lack of electricity in the camp, this hinders the networking system and the digital solutions that are in the refugee setting but some people from the camp put up in different villages some Wi-fi.

And another thing, we've been training people in computer skills, and we've been just getting a big number of people graduating in the skills, but the power on this side is just is not there. We are just using the solar system, and the solar system now it's limiting us to use it just for our daily basis when the sun shines.

So that's their limitations. And we have more than 40 villages around and only 2 villages are connected.

And that is another thing with this digital solution. This one is allowing just children just to connect with radio receivers through their teachers was just in a radio studio then they teach them from there. The student learns. They ask questions for those who can access mobile phones. That is in Rwamwanja and most of the camps in Uganda.

Laura: That's a great reminder. And I had started my career working in text messaging and we talked a lot about radio. It's still the world's most widespread communications technology. And I think your point about you can extend the reach of digital knowledge by having digital in the radio station and then people can ask questions of the presenters. Even if they don't have much access to the internet, they can text the question. Absolutely inspiring work.

And worth noting also is that many radio stations in these contexts are run by volunteers, both the presenters and the technical staff. So let's go back to the notion of how we design these digital programs. I mentioned at the top of this episode that there are several challenges to generating opportunities using digital technology. And sometimes it's not that the technology itself is problematic. It's the access to them.

One of the digital principles, understand the existing ecosystem, acknowledges that well-designed initiatives and tools think about the particular infrastructure and needs that exist in each community in which you're working. So, while we've talked about the importance of digital access, how can we actually address these issues of availability and affordability of digital? Joelle, what are your thoughts on this?

Joelle: Refugees are really creative and from experience have witnessed community-based organization being very creative to the sense that when they don't have antennas like big antennas to make sure that a good number of people can be accommodated in their system, most of the time they use devices that can help them to reach as many people as possible.

But at the same time, I think the best way to respond or to support some of the initiatives or even develop something big is to work with the local community because I truly believe that refugees, they're the ones who knows the problems very well. They know the settings very well. They know the challenges that they're facing on a daily basis and how well those challenges can be addressed.

And there is so many advantage working with the local community. One of them is to make sure that the people who are utilizing the devices, they have capacities to maintain and also to grow the projects. So it's really important to build on whatever is there or how to design solution that can be effective because the case of refugees is quite complex. People are moving in and out every day, and people were well-placed to work with the local community. So I think that one is the most effective way to address this issue and to design a program sustainable in the future.

Laura: Absolutely. And, of course, one of the principles is design with the user. And Olivier, I wanted to bring this up with you as well. Your background is fascinating. Coming to Uganda in 2015 under refugee status, and then quickly noticing how detrimental a lack of information, skills, and equipment is for the people around you, you founded the Refugee Innovation Centre where you teach a community about financial and digital literacy. It's a great take on the design with the user principle because you intimately know the context and the needs and challenges that people face. It'd be great to hear a bit more about how you work with the community and other local actors to actually design the programs.

Oliver: Within Rwamwanja refugee settlement, it's a little bit complex. And the population is a little bit big, and we mostly face challenges about equipment and infrastructure. Most of us, we are not allowed to build permanent houses. When I have like me, I have like five computers. And when I'm using these computers with tarp lanes, the roof is covered with tarp lanes so the computers are not safe, but I'm not allowed just to put the iron sheets. That's one of the challenges. And we fear just to involve more digital materials so that when they lay in or when something happens, the computers are not safe.

But now we communicate the issues to OPM Office of Prime Minister, Department of Refugees. They've been listening and sometimes even advocate for more funding just for permanent houses. But we believe we can't stop impacting our communities because we want just these people just to get connected and to take back their real life that they have been living before they come in refugee settings.

Another thing, within Rwamwanja refugees settlement especially, we have children. Most of them, they don't have parents. They are like orphans but when you just telling them about digital world, they feel they want just to participate but the problem, you get a very big number with very small digital equipment.

Another thing, refugee communities who are trying just to connect with other community-based organizations who are also involved in digital. Like we have one and now I'm the second. So me, I'm just working in one extremity of this settlement and another one that's gone just for the other extremity of the settlement. We also need to blow away the fear because the digital world gives you a space just to communicate your issues, to communicate your success and so on.

Laura: We mentioned radio, that being a key communications channel for populations who perhaps don't have access to mobile data. And we mentioned there that it's very possible that outlying settlements or parts of the camp perhaps might get good mobile signal even if they don't have a mobile data signal.

But there are some people who are not able to access digital technologies at all And, you know, the theme of this mini-season for the "Pulse on the Principles" is Leave No One Behind. And I think often of it's not just access to the device and the signal. It's also being able to charge the device and having the time perhaps to wait while the device charges. And then if you do have it charged up, is anybody else managing or observing your use of that device? And this access issue is complex.

So I was thinking about that particularly, Joelle, in the context of feedback, you know, hearing from communities about services that they might be receiving or even communications like radio shows or programs that you run. How are people able to give feedback and participate in the design process in that ongoing way? And how do you think that works for people who are perhaps less able to connect to any digital technology at all?

Joelle: One of the things that I think has been very effective when it comes to getting feedback from people in every kind of project that is running or planning to take place in refugee camps is we have that structure where we have refugee representatives. We have youth representatives as well. And with that, it's easy for people to get feedback on a certain project or designing of a project.

For most projects I've been part of, most of the time we have tried hard to work closely, first of all, with refugee leaders, first of all, because they are choose and based on community and nationalities as well because we have also that kind of language barrier challenge. So we have to make sure that we are even talking to them in the local language so that they can get the points as well as we can get also what we want from them. That has been one of the strategy.

The other one is to make sure that we are as inclusive as possible in every kind of discussion because most of the time we collect feedback from discussion like having a community discussion where people can just sit down and design like for a week. After that, we have at least something out of that, though I know that it's really very challenging looking at the settings of refugee camps, especially where I come from where we have more than 18 nationalities. Not all of them were able to express themselves in English. Some of them are just illiterate and not even able to write or even know their identity, but we try hard to work closely or to involve those who are really close to them to make sure that we can get the insight as much as possible and to be inclusive as well.

Because when it comes to digital access, as is most of the time, one idea that can come in our mind is to look at youth and people who still have potential, but we also forget that they have parents who probably are illiterate and not be able to access digital tools or to use them. So it's really important for us to take that into mind when you're trying to have that kind of approach and try to design a certain program.

And the other thing was, I think it has been really helpful to get data from local organizations that have been in place for quite long because they have data on what has been happening for a long period of time. So it's really important to take that into mind so that we can maximize whatever we are planning to do as much as possible.

Laura: So part of designing and running a successful program is using impact data continuously and incrementally to understand not just your outputs, but the outcomes of your program. And in fact, this is the be data-driven digital principle. So what are some examples of indicators that you might be using to measure whether or not programs are helping households to become more resilient and self-reliant?

Joelle: First of all, I think it's clear for us to measure the impact of certain projects or programs, especially when it comes to connectivity and access to digital tools and other things. From Kakuma, we have a community-based organization called Kakuma Ventures where I've been trying to volunteer and try to see the impact from where they started and with kind of database that tracking people who can connect from their devices like on a daily basis, monthly basis, and after three months trying to sit down and see the impact from there.

And recently, like during the Coronavirus, we could easily see, like people are really relying on internet and digital world to make things moving. And the

refugee camps are not left behind because they were also trying to see how to overcome that. And with that database, like easily, you can monitor how people are accessing internet and for how long they have been online. You will understand that there is that high needs and high demand of internet, despite the fact that we have tried to make it as affordable as possible but we have also to be cautious that there is still that category, which is not able even to access it.

If you don't have a smartphone, you don't have just a phone which can be connected to the internet. You don't have a computer. So it's really hard for us as an organization to dig into those details as we are still facing other challenges in the area where we are working like providing internet and making sure we can reach as many people as possible.

And I think having that data has been very helpful to measure the impact because we could easily see, like parents are paying for their children to have access to the internet and also telling us like, "Can you monitor this internet and make sure that they can't access certain sites?" So we're trying to monitor things how they're going.

And we can say that when the company started like 3 years ago, it started with less than 200 per day. You can have like 50 people connected but now we have like almost 600 people connected per day. And people are still like, "We want to join," and we are like, "Okay." I think we have to make sure that we have a good system in place so that we can include as many people as possible.

But, you know, that impacts students during this period are able to access their courses online. People are able to communicate, to talk to relatives in Australia or in Canada. And I want to use data because it's cheap. Like I can't really afford calling with a normal call but with WhatsApp or other platform, it's easy for me. People are getting information because they are online. That's the way we measure our impact, bringing something positive. And then I think when it comes to connectivity, that's how we can also measure because we have data and we see what is happening on grounds.

Laura: Fascinating. And it's great to hear that the uptake being so robust there. Olivier, the same question to you. How are you thinking about measuring your impact and how easy has that been particularly in these last six months?

Olivier: The Refugee Innovation Centre has been providing some computer skills to the community. And we have an organization called IFC Foundation that has started distributing some money to elderlies and other people just within the settlement. We have understood that, especially the elderlies, they

can't use these mobile phones. So they're just engaging in elderly literacy just to mobile phone use. This was really successful.

And now these people just they can use the phone as calls because after receiving their phone, they believe that the phone is only just for withdrawing some money, but we told them that they can even use the phone when they are calculating some things. Maybe they are just calling some people. Involving them just in digital.

And another thing, we've been measuring the impact according to the financial self-resilience. When we teach someone, for example, when we have this filmmaking skills training. So when we teach someone like in photography, the person is using that camera just to generate some income there. When the person has started already generating some money, that is the real impact that you wanted. That's the way that we've been using to measure the impact.

Laura: So we were talking about design with the user, and some folks in the digital principles community have argued that part of that is actually educating the user. So thinking about digitizing aid has quite a few implications for how we protect people. For example, refugee financial transaction data might give away some personal information.

So, for example, purchase patterns where people are doing transactions and where they're sending money. Another similar example is digital ID programs for people who don't have ID cards. And I think in the first episode, we talked a bit about ID cards for Rohingya minorities in Miramar, which made them fear that they might be targeted. How can people designing these digital programs safeguard this very sensitive information, and what digital rights are most important to educate refugees on?

Olivier: First of all, we tell them that the phone can produce both negative and positive effects according to the way just they're using it. We normally just encourage them, that most they use it well, it produced to them just positive effects.

Another thing we work together just to know how they can just protect their data. For example, using the PIN just for the phone to close the screen of the phone, that one just helped them just to limit the users to the phone. And the second is like when someone just is using mobile money, they have just to know that the PIN, they have to hide it somewhere. They don't need to share with anyone. So what we normally just teach them is how they can use it better for their sustainable and peaceful living.

Most of them understand one side of the community. Elderlies, they can not just understand the use of digital technology. Like they believe that these phones are satanic. Some of them, they are like 666. It's normally happened to those people who are really aged 60 and above. So actually, that is some of the challenges and some of the wages that we normally use just to let them know that they are protected and how they can use this data in their life.

Laura: So Joelle, the same question to you. How are you approaching those potential protection risks and communicating that and helping them understand and consent to them?

Joelle: Basically what we do, we are trying our best in the organization to make sure that we have things that are secured as much as possible because we are like if we have to collect people's data and other details about their life and whatever they are doing, it's really important for us to be able to protect the identity and the data.

One of the things that we have tried hard to work on is to work with the local telecommunication providers. Like they can host our data because it's quite reliable. And also we can also at least be in peace. We know that where we are placing our data, it's quite safe.

Secondly is to make sure that we have legal advice in case of anything. We might have crash of data. And it's really important for us to know how to protect, not just ourself, but how also to protect those we are serving though it's really very hard for us to maintain the legal advice throughout. So most of the time, we have to call them as consultants and they leave because we can't afford paying them. We can't afford them indefinitely.

And when it comes now to rules and regulations in the hosting countries, at some point when we are trying to upgrade in order to make sure that our data and information that we are holding is well-secured, it's really hard for us to make sure that we can have access to those services easily because of the regulation.

And then as much as we are talking about connectivity, it's really important to bring that aspect on board because apart from other challenges that refugees might be facing, regulation has been one of the biggest challenge that entrepreneurs, innovators, and other people can come on board and address issues on top of other things that are already there.

And also the good thing is because we are from that community, we have already the trust of our local people so that they know like those people are really reliable in the sense that with simple things like when you tell someone the internet signal is working, small things that you can get someone's trust.

And it's really important to also work closely with their leaders like community leaders so that they can convince the rest of the community about some of our work and what are the benefits for them to share with us some of their information that might be a little bit confidential, but how they can feel confident because they know that we can keep those information quite safe.

We are working together with UNHCR, one of the agencies that is really focusing on protection and make sure that every person of concern is getting as much protection as possible. To also involve them in what we are doing because we feel like if there is a kind of break or anything going wrong, at least they know what is happening. They know what we have tried to put in place to make sure that we can protect the data that we have as much as possible. And if we can get a system that can allow us not to get that much data, we better use that process rather than exposing, collecting data that at some point we can't be able to handle in the future.

Laura: Joelle, Olivier, I want to thank you both so much for sharing your stories with me today. What an incredible way to open our third mini-season on Leave No One Behind. Thank you.

Joelle: Thank you for hosting today.

Oliver: Thank you so much. I'm very, very glad to be part of it.

Laura: And to those of you listening, if you'd like to give us feedback on this episode or any other topic in our lineup, you can reach out to us at principelsadmin@digitalimpactalliance.org. You can also visit us anytime at digitalprinciples.org and follow us on Twitter @digiprinciples. That's @ D-I-G-I principles. You can also use the # digital principles. I'm Laura Walker McDonald. Thanks for listening.

"Pulse on the Principles" is made possible by the Norwegian Agency for development cooperation and is produced by Claudia Nim and Abigail Shirley of the Digital Impact Alliance. Special thanks to Podcast Village for recording, sound mixing, and graphics. See you next time.