- Distance Learning in Refugee Camps-

Executive summary

The idea proposed by ACTED focuses on the use of modern technologies to promote refugee education, through enhancing access to online resources, courses and educational support. The idea has been successfully piloted in the Dadaab camp in Kenya. This document proposes to implement this form of education more widely, in order to facilitate access to educational resources for refugees’ world-wide. In particular, ACTED proposes to pilot this activity, through the Amplify Programme, in the Adjumani Refugee Camp in Uganda. Lutheran World Relief has recently set up the first internet café in the camp, providing one of the vital components necessary to undertake this form of educational development.

1. MOOCs

Massive Online Open Courses have recently become the new norm for distance learning worldwide, with many highly regarded universities (Harvards, Tufts, LSE) offering the option to study online, and receive a recognised diploma following completion of the course. This in turn has increased worldwide access to quality education, with the only requirements being access to internet and a computer or tablet. Increasingly, MOOCs are being considered for educational purposes in refugee camps. With formal education being more difficult to provide in fragile contexts, non-formal and informal education is becoming increasingly important, not least as a result of the promise of open learning initiatives in general, and in light of the emerging MOOC paradigm in particular.1

Barbara Moser-Mercer, a professor of conference interpreting at the University of Geneva's Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, worked with academics at Kenyatta University in Nairobi to develop an interpretation course that was to be delivered in Dadaab, a town in eastern Kenya that is home to about 340,000 Somali refugees. The project faced numerous challenges, primarily from the Kenyan government. The authorities feared that the provision of higher education would make refugees reluctant to return to their home nation. However, the course was eventually approved following the provision that all learning was done on-line. As a result, refugees who were enrolled on the course would be able to access the content if they returned to Somalia.

In order to minimise tensions between the refugees and the host community, the course was offered to both groups. 25% of the places were offered to members of the local community, with 75% being offered to refugees. The project remains on-going, but the potential of this sort of project in undeniable.

Prior to the implementation of the wider project mentioned above, the Center for Interpreting in Conflict Zones at the University of Geneva undertook a pilot project with two students from the Dadaab. “We worked with Coursera and CET to download lecture videos in advance and delivered the course materials on USB keys to Dadaab. We also collaborated closely with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) staff on the ground and Coursera staff in Mountain View, California to troubleshoot issues, while carefully documenting all the challenges the refugee learners faced.

Challenges fell broadly into three categories: technological, cultural and linguistic. Both learners spent about eight hours sharing what they learned with other refugees in the camp (their temporary village), discussing ideas before writing their assignments. Both students achieved an average score of 8.25/10 on the 4 quizzes, and 8.5/10 for the two essays”2

“Regular e-mail communication was deemed most efficient in providing remote learning support to the two refugee learners. During the 4.5 weeks of the course, the researcher received a total of 21 e-mail messages from the two learners and sent out a total of 26 e-mail messages (replies, encouragements and inquiries about learning progress); the researcher also exchanged a total of 23 e-mail messages with the UNHCR community services officer who ensured contact with the refugees on the ground”3

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1 MOOCs in Fragile Contexts – 2014 European MOODS Stakeholders Summit – 2014
2 http://blog.coursera.org/post/79379451739/guest-post-a-learning-hub-in-a-refugee-camp
3 MOOCs in Fragile Contexts – 2014 European MOODS Stakeholders Summit – 2014
From the results of the above pilot, it is clear that despite challenges in the implementation of this course, this approach to education not only benefits those that attend the virtual courses, but also those that are able to learn from the students. In addition, the inclusion of local community participants serves to minimise tensions between refugees and the host community, through increased interaction and mutual benefits.

Adjumani refugee camp is currently home to 97,095 South Sudanese refugees⁴, and is managed by Lutheran World Relief. A recent initiative in the camp has set up an internet café, allowing refugees to access the internet more easily. Due to the size of the camp, and the relative stability of the region, this location would provide an ideal situation in which to further pilot the MOOC concept for refugee education. Identification of potential participants would require consideration of the courses being offered, the motivation levels of the individuals, as well vulnerability considerations. This mode of education provision is highly adapted to supporting the education of women, as it allows for learning to be undertaken on a flexible basis, allowing women to attend to their traditional responsibilities around the course requirements.

2. Resources

In order to effectively implement this activity, it requires internet access, and access to the necessary technology and support throughout the course duration. This therefore requires the purchase of computers and/or tablets to allow refugees (and host community participants) to access the resources, as well an internet access. In addition, it requires support from an NGO and educational institute to choose or develop the course, as well as to support the participants throughout and course duration.

As an internet café has recently been established in Adjumani refugee camp, one of the vital elements is already in place to undertake this pilot. ACTED proposes to undertake the procurement of the remaining equipment, and to liaise with local universities and educational facilities to refine the courses offered through this project.

Challenges will include language barriers between the refugees and the host communities, as well as supporting students to access the resources and ensure motivation remains high enough to ensure success. This will be mitigated through inclusion of local educational institutes in order to ensure effective translation of material, and the provision of support in local and refugee languages. The main criticism of MOOCs is the loss of motivation by students, due to limited accountability for non-completion of the course. ACTED believes that this challenge would be minimised by an effective system of feedback between course convenors and students, in order to provide support, encouragement and feedback throughout the course.

Conclusions

The proliferation of MOOCs presents an exciting new option for refugee educational programming, and allows refugees to access resources that would otherwise be unavailable to them. The resources required to implement this project include internet access, technology for study and support to students. The potential benefits, for refugees and the host community, vastly outweigh the costs of providing these resource.

The implementation of MOOCs in refugee camps remains fairly limited, primarily due to the relatively new adoption of MOOCs worldwide, and due to the lack of pilot projects in refugee camps worldwide. In order to further develop this exciting possibility, ACTED proposes to pilot the use of MOOCs in Adjumani refugee camp in Uganda. Following further discussions, a course would be chosen through partnerships with local educational institutes, technology purchased, and students chosen from within and outside the camp to undertake a short pilot. Lessons learned and challenges encountered would serve to inform the world-wide discussion regarding this form of refugee education.

⁴ UNHCR Uganda Fact Sheet – January 2014