

Working Group 17

How can digital tools enhance asylum and refugee protection?

Background

The abundance of information that the digital age provides should make it easier to judge asylum claims correctly, not more difficult. However, this is not always the case. Authorities may be reluctant to consider electronic evidence (e-evidence) unless certain quality conditions are met. Applicants may be asked to provide information to support their asylum claim which they are not in a position to provide. Moreover, the assessment of such information by the authorities requires certain skills. Occasionally the previous social media activities of an asylum applicant are used by the authorities as grounds for refusing asylum claims. In other cases, the applicant's social media activities could serve as proof for the validity of the claim, but their authenticity and reliability remain in question.

New forms of media could be used more extensively for reporting human rights abuses, provided that the reliability and authenticity of the data is ensured and authors are protected from state surveillance activities. To provide information on asylum procedures and enhance protection, Member States could also use 'new media'. Children easily access and use social media, and the possibilities for reaching out to this audience, particularly unaccompanied children, have yet to be fully explored.

Objectives

This workshop aimed to explore how digital tools can enhance refugee protection. It looked at how asylum judges can use new media and e-evidence to enhance protection for asylum seekers, particularly in terms of country of origin information. It also examined the other side of the coin: the expectations on asylum seekers to provide increasing amounts of e-evidence to support their claim for protection.

As children are frequent social media users, the workshop explored the potential impact of the use of e-evidence on them. In addition, it looked at how civil society organisations and others could optimise the use of 'new media' for reporting human rights abuses. Such media may also provide a way for Member States to inform people about access to asylum procedures and for reaching out to unaccompanied children.

Speakers

- Rosemary Byrne, former Chair, Scientific Committee FRA. Associate Professor of International Law, Trinity College Dublin
- Verena Knaus, Senior Policy Advisor, UNICEF Brussels

- Colin Yeo, Editor and Founder, Free Movement blog
- Katinka Ridderbos, Senior Research and Information Officer, UNHCR
- Günter Schumacher, Principle Researcher, Joint Research Centre

Main messages

1. The reliability of documented human rights violations and risks for cyber surveillance of human rights activists: Asylum applicants face the dilemma that they need to hide their identity in their country of origin. But they also need to prove the reliability of information to support their asylum claim.
2. Children as users of social media: The core principles underpinning children's rights should apply when authorities assess e-evidence and social media in protection claims put forward by children. The four core principles are: all actions are taken in the best interests of the child; non-discrimination; participation of the child in decision-making processes that affect them; and the survival and development of the child.
3. Digital media as an information tool: Civil society should empower people in need of protection on how to find reliable digital information.

Promising practices

- Primero is a highly configurable web application and mobile app designed to address the needs of UNICEF and its partner organisations. It was built to operate as a standalone application or as a centrally-hosted system. The architecture enables the system to run on a laptop, a privately-hosted server, or in a managed cloud environment. It supports data collection and case management workflows for ongoing field work, and can be configured to perform periodic synchronisation of data with other systems to support collaboration and data-sharing. The ability to be hosted on a laptop allows field workers to use the application in remote areas without internet connectivity or consistent power to operate independently for long spans of time. The design was developed as a way of meeting the specific needs of those delivering humanitarian services. This tool could be used in various ways to enhance the protection of refugees and people in need of international protection, UNICEF, Uganda & Sierra Leone, UNICEF Primero - Global Platform for Data Collection & Case Management.
- NGOs involved in child protection use smartphones to track the onward travel of unaccompanied children in order to confirm that the child did not go missing, Bodossaki Foundation, Greece.
- A Spanish migrant NGO operating from Morocco tweets when boats with migrants and refugees leave Morocco. As a result, the Spanish coastguard knows that they need to be on the look-out for any potential incidents. However, this is creating tension between the NGO and Spanish authorities because of the potential pull factors, Caminando Fronteras, Spain/Morocco.

- A website that provides reliable information and advice to refugees on hotspots and travel routes, Refugeeinfo.eu.
- A social enterprise that coordinates the international technology community's response to the needs of refugees. It organises conferences, workshops, hackathons and meet-ups around the world in an effort to generate technological solutions that can help refugees, Techfugees.

Next steps

- EASO and FRA could provide guidance on the use of e-evidence for assessing asylum claims.
- Member States should make the encryption of reports by human rights defenders possible.
- Credible institutions should use new forms of media for making reliable information available to refugees.
- NGOs and national health services should develop web-tools to provide psychological help.
- Countries receiving migrants - particularly those in and around Europe - should agree on minimum data to be collected and shared in the interest of refugee protection.
- A platform should be built to encourage NGOs to share information. This could lead to the creation of digital networks.