



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

23 April 2020

Dear Mr. Solomon,

Thank you for your letter, to which I am responding on behalf of the High Commissioner, and for your interest in ensuring forcibly displaced people have the ability to access connectivity safely and securely, and that they enjoy the same rights to access connectivity as their host communities.

As you noted, internet access has rapidly risen among top priorities for households across the world. Displaced people are no exception to this, and with good reason. In today's world, the protection of individuals is something that transcends the offline world and needs to be realised in the digital realm. Digital technology presents opportunities to enhance the protection of those fleeing conflict and persecution, while presenting risks that must be addressed by governments and the international community alike.

In this context, UNHCR seeks to enhance the digital inclusion of refugees and works to ensure refugees and the populations that host them have the right, and the choice, to be included in a connected society. This is done in line with the Global Compact on Refugees which highlights the need to leverage digital technologies to support refugee inclusion in national frameworks, including specifically universal access to telecommunications. This approach was integrated into the recent Global Refugee Forum and is an integral part of UNHCR's Strategic Directions. You will find further information about our approach through a variety of reports published, many of which are available on UNHCR's Connectivity for Refugees web portal.

To this effect, UNHCR works at both the global and local level to address issues of digital access and inclusion. At the global level, UNHCR works with a broad range of partners, including broad coalitions such as the Broadband Commission, to advocate for refugee inclusion and enhance access to connectivity, and as an avenue to support displaced persons' fundamental rights, including the right to privacy.

At the local level, UNHCR country operations pursue such matters in line with operational priorities in the country, often fitting into broader strategies to enhance the protection of UNHCR's people of concern, and driving national and local partnerships. One such example is in Uganda, where UNHCR co-chairs a technical working group to enhance connectivity for refugees and their host communities, a mechanism through which we have successfully expanded SIM-card access for refugees and cellular coverage in refugee hosting areas in partnership with Ugandan authorities and mobile network operators. Another such example is Bangladesh, where UNHCR has engaged with partners across the board, including authorities, to advocate for a lifting of restriction placed on refugees, including as concerns connectivity and internet access.

Mr. Brett Solomon
Executive Director
Access Now

Digital channels are a critical avenue to ensure Persons of Concern have access to information and essential services and can provide feedback to UNHCR and other response partners, especially in this period of pandemic and given the restrictions this has brought to many across the globe. We welcome engagement with all civil society members on these matters, and this engagement is best channeled through our Innovation Service which spearheads our Connectivity for Refugees efforts and can be reached at hqconref@unhcr.org.

Thank you very much for your interest and engagement.

Yours sincerely,

Kelly T. Clements
Deputy High Commissioner for refugees