

UN forum in Paris to spotlight mobile learning for refugees and displaced persons

17 March 2017 – Education experts and government officials will gather at the Paris headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) from 20 to 24 March, to discuss ways of expanding the use of mobile technologies to “reach people where they are” and improve education opportunities for refugees and displaced persons and others in emergency situations.

This year’s edition of Mobile Learning Week, on the theme “Education in Emergencies and Crises,” will introduce participants to projects such as ‘Teachers for Teachers’, a portal that connects instructors around the world through WhatsApp, a mobile messaging service.

Through this network, peers offer psychosocial and professional support and advice for challenges that instructors face in what the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) called “perhaps the toughest classroom in the world”: one that includes refugees learners.

Mobile learning involves the use of mobile technology, either alone or in combination with other information and communication technology (ICT), to enable learning anytime and anywhere.

There are 180 students in the class of the primary school teacher Romans Manyiel Garang, who will be part of a panel discussion during Mobile Learning Week. He teaches in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, in Kenya, where he started in 2015, equipped with a secondary school degree and no previous teaching experience.

Tools such as the ‘Teachers for Teachers’ portal allow him to be in touch with a larger community of instructors and receive support and feedback from peers, as well as exchange problem-solving techniques.



Mobile learning in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. Photo: UNHCR

“Comparing my ideas with others helps me grow as a teacher,” Mr. Garang told UNESCO, adding: “I have a lot I can share to help teachers overcome their challenges.”

Practical and psychosocial support offered by programmes such as ‘Teachers for Teachers’ are among the many ways educators, students and ministries of education are using cheap and widely available mobile technologies to expand and improve educational programmes to displaced people, whose numbers, according to UNHCR, surpassed 65 million in 2015.

This accounted for an average of 24 individuals being forced out of their homes per minute during every single day of 2015. Nearly 21.3 million of these people are refugees, and over half of these refugees are under 18 years old.

“We have to reach people where they are,” said Mark West, the UNESCO coordinator of the five-day mobile learning event. “Our work indicates that mobile technologies offer unique advantages for making education accessible to displaced people and others on-the-move. Mobile Learning Week is where solutions and cutting edge ideas are shared.”

The meeting in Paris will be structured in five parts: the symposium, which will include more than 70 breakout presentations; a total of 16 workshops, which aim to support learners, teachers, and systems; the strategy labs, to help guide the development of projects; the policy forum, which will bring together government officials and members of the private sector to examine how governments can facilitate the acquisition of essential digital skills, particularly for disadvantaged or displaced learners; and side events such as art exhibitions and demonstrations.

One of these side events, the Family Tent, which will be set up outside UNESCO for the duration of the conference, will show participants the living conditions of refugees.

Mobile Learning Week 2017 is organized by UNESCO in partnership with UNHCR and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). This is the 7th edition of the meeting.