

*Researchers who are Refugees: Findings and reflections from a participatory study of Connected Learning higher education programs in emergencies*

*Aim:* In this panel session, we share insights from three work-in-progress empirical studies that embody the social justice and inclusion sub-theme. The three studies, funded by an internationally renowned educational foundation, are part of a single, ongoing, and more extensive research effort led by refugee researchers in collaboration with multiple investigators across other institutions, investigating the potential of connected learning programs in emergencies. In this panel session, we: 1.) Share findings from Participatory Action Research (PAR) of Connected Learning (Ito et al., 2013) programs in two different refugee camps as two case studies, 2.) Critically discuss the role Connected Learning plays in fostering relevant and accessible higher education in emergencies, and 3.) Discuss how PAR was adopted by refugee researchers and the potential of PAR in engaging refugee learners as primary stakeholders in the research process.

*Higher Education in Emergencies:* Currently, only 3% of age-eligible refugees have access to higher education (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). This dearth affects all displaced people, including 90 million refugees and >1.6 billion people experiencing housing insecurity (UNHCR, 2022; Habitat, 2021). Immediate and long-term losses occur when displaced adults cannot access higher education. UNHCR aims to increase tertiary learners to 15% of age-eligible learners and sees Connected Learning (CL) as one promising scaling mechanism that will educate 75,000 refugee learners by 2030. In order for CL to replicate and positively impact learning, international universities, donors, and NGOs must understand refugee experiences and outcomes. This requires systemic thinking, integration of psychosocial support, relevant curricula, and centering refugee perspectives (Crea, 2016). However, refugees are rarely included in this integrated process besides as subjects in research conducted on them, leading to a breakdown of cross-cultural trust in educational establishments and irrelevant programming.

*Researchers who are Refugees:* Refugee involvement in research has become increasingly common in long-term refugee camps in low- and middle-income countries (Temple & Moran, 2006; Dryden-Peterson, 2012); however, most research projects remain under the sole leadership and design of scholars who are from outside (Godrie et al., 2020). Traditional research and humanitarian assistance views utilize agendas from outsider perspectives and typically apply deficit framing. Refugees are often recruited to assist research with language and cultural knowledge, that can facilitate access for external experts. In such cases, refugees cannot challenge the perspectives of researchers, who are foreign to the context and community. This results in a loss of trust as well as less accurate or relevant findings. Including refugees as researchers and equal stakeholders is crucial to engaging with communities, developing a holistic view of the research goals and outcomes, and navigating the crucial decision-making and evaluation process. Participatory Action Research provides an alternative as the “people’s research” methodology to involve local members of the traditionally researched communities as collaborators and refugee-centered (Doná, 2007; Park, 2006).

*Conceptual Framework:* Connected Learning, an evidence-based research-to-practice approach, is a framework for enabling a learner’s goals by connecting personal interests, mentored support, and long-term career development (Ito et al., 2013). CL builds on the

research of learning in new media and posits four sets of constructs: (1) learner-supportive contexts for CL, (2) properties of CL, (3) design principles that inform CL creation and practice, and (4) mechanisms by which CL uniquely supports learners. While this framework was developed largely in stable, high-income countries and for secondary-school learners (or younger), we benefit from CL in emergency settings for two reasons: first, as a framework with learner-centered criteria, it serves as an aspirational benchmark for what programs should strive for, and, second, its learner-driven approach aligns with PAR. In our research study and in this panel session, we will focus on constructs (1) and (2) since design principles and mechanisms vary widely across emergency settings and are challenging to draw from only two case studies.

*Context:* In 2019, we piloted Participatory Research (Flores, 2007) with 27 university students as researchers living in three refugee camps (Kakuma and Dadaab camps in Kenya and Adjumani Settlement in Uganda) to investigate the CL programs they were a part of as higher education pathways in their emergency settings. Results showed strong proof-of-concept of the CL-PAR approach as particularly impactful; for example, we identified a mismatch between classes and students' aspirations driving the large percentage of program dropouts. The pilot program was conducted in a short timeline of six months, culminating in inter-site dissemination of preliminary findings that demonstrated the potential for a more extensive, longer-term engagement of refugee learners with PAR.

In 2021, an educational foundation grant was awarded to expand the pilot program to address three specific aims: 1.) Generate quantitative and qualitative understanding of CL's impact on refugee learners in Kakuma and Dadaab Refugee Camps in Kenya; 2.) Describe from a refugee-centered perspective the potential of CL pedagogy and technology to transform learning environments in emergencies; and 3.) Identify the methodological affordances of PAR in enabling research-to-practice translation in emergencies.

The research team at each site participated in comprehensive and context-specific training. After the training, student researchers completed the research design and contextualized research tools. Data collection begins in both the camps in August 2022, and the study will be conducted, including full analysis and community dissemination, by the end of 2022. Each site contextualized existing Connected Learning principles (interest-powered, peer-supported, shared purpose, openly networked, academically oriented, and production-centered) and asked research questions to understand CL's critical contexts and core properties in their settings. At CIES, we will share our efforts that address two critical gaps in higher education in emergency contexts: 1) little understanding of how CL meets the needs of higher education for refugees, and 2) no prior evaluations of PAR as a potential approach for adult refugee inclusion, critical knowledge production, and dissemination.

This 90-minute session will begin with a 10-minute introduction to the session's speakers, chair, and objectives. The presenters will each present for 10-15 minutes. The chair will then mediate discussions between the audience and speakers on relevant topics for about 30 minutes. The session will end with concluding remarks from the chair.

## *Description of Presentations*

**#1 Connected Learning in Kakuma Refugee Camp:** Kakuma refugee camp and Kalobeyei settlement host about 200,000 refugees from more than 19 countries in the Turkana county of Kenya (UNHCR, 2021). Multiple international and national organizations, including universities, NGOs, and TVET institutes, offer refugees access to higher education in the camp. During the pilot study in 2019, seven researchers from one organization performed PAR to investigate learners' experiences in connected learning programs. The team contextualized the Connected Learning survey and administered it to 79 students from a sample of 242 students from one higher education program and conducted qualitative interviews with 20 students. The study revealed that the program's key highlight was the creation of opportunities for its learners. The students in the program were able to obtain varied professional development opportunities, such as serving in leadership positions and attending conferences. This further helped in creating relationships through new networks. Another significant finding also showed that the students were most likely to persist in the program only when their personal interests and goals aligned with the program.

In the ongoing study, eight students (3 Female and 5 Male) researchers from five organizations in Kakuma participate in the PAR program to build on prior findings. The research team is investigating three specific aims: 1.) refugee learners' experiences with the six principles of connected learning; 2.) the process of critical knowledge production and dissemination to relevant communities through PAR; and 3.) choices and pathways leading to social change by refugee learners post-higher education.

**#2 Connected Learning in Dadaab Refugee Camp:** Dadaab refugee camp hosts 223,000 refugees in Garissa county in eastern Kenya (UNHCR, 2021). A consortium of Canadian and Kenyan universities and NGOs have operated in Dadaab since 2013, aiming to make higher education accessible for adult learners in Dadaab through different blended learning university programs. During the pilot study in 2019, four student researchers from the consortium program participated in PAR. They investigated the higher education program's influence on Connected Learning principles and the academic support for higher education learners in the camp. A contextualized version of the Connected Learning survey was administered to 70 learners from a sample of 750 students, and eight learners participated in a follow-up qualitative interview. Key findings from the study indicated that the use of technology is a facilitator of access to higher education while also a barrier to continuous academic support due to limited internet and other contextual challenges. The study also identified a lack of Psychosocial Support in the programs, a crucial facet of educational programs in emergencies. Since 2019, a larger university network and another consortium have also begun higher education programs in Dadaab.

In the ongoing study, seven student (3 Female and 4 Male) researchers from a refugee-led, local research organization have expanded on the pilot study to further investigate CL's impact in Dadaab. Using a mixed-methods research design, the researchers are currently in the process of collecting survey data from a sample of approximately 1000 students and qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 24 students identified through purposive sampling. The student participants in Dadaab will include both refugee and host community learners who have gone through the CL programs.

*#3 Participatory Research Approach in Emergencies:* In the third presentation, faculty researchers from a large mid-western University in the U.S. will discuss the theory of change adopted, that is, “refugee researchers” when equipped to conduct intellectually ambitious and technically sound studies, are best poised to analyze, interpret, and disseminate findings that are relevant, significant, and change-making. The presentation will elaborate on the participatory methodology adopted in this larger study and will present findings on the refugee researcher’s experiences and their unique process of producing critical knowledge. The approach involves a theoretical and practical framework that fosters grassroots activities and community engagement. During the pilot study, anecdotally, refugee researchers shared that research results are never presented back to the community, despite Kakuma being one of the most “overstudied” refugee contexts (Omata, 2021). Through data from focus groups, interviews, and final reports, the presentation will also highlight how the refugee researchers transfer research results into practice and disseminate it to their immediate communities. Preliminary outcomes from the study indicate that it enables collective decision-making, demonstrates inclusivity, produces relevant knowledge, and creates an equitable research process that promotes connections within the local community. Therefore, in this presentation, researchers will discuss the benefits and challenges of adopting PAR, how PAR is translated to practice, and its impact on the refugee learner community.

## References

- Crea, T. M. (2016). Refugee higher education: Contextual challenges and implications for program design, delivery, and accompaniment. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 46, 12–22.
- Doná, G. (2007). The microphysics of participation in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2), 210-229.
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2012). The politics of higher education for refugees in a global movement for primary education. *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees*, 27(2).
- Flores, K. S. (2007). *Youth participatory evaluation: Strategies for engaging young people* (Vol. 14). John Wiley & Sons.
- Godrie, B., Boucher, M., Bissonnette, S., Chaput, P., Flores, J., Dupéré, S., ... & Bandini, A. (2020). Epistemic injustices and participatory research: A research agenda at the crossroads of university and community. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 13(1).
- Habitat for Humanity. (2021). World Habitat Day. <https://www.habitat.org/volunteer/build-events/world-habitat-day>
- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., Schor, J., Sefton-Green, J., & Watkins, S. C. (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.
- Omata, N. (2021). ‘Over-researched’ and ‘Under-researched’ refugee groups: Exploring the phenomena, causes and consequences. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 12(3), 681–695.

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huaa049>

Park, P. (2006). Knowledge and participatory research. Handbook of Action Research: Concise Paperback Edition, 83–93.

Temple, B., & Moran, R. (2006). Doing research with refugees: Issues and guidelines (Economic and Social Research Council (Great Britain) (Ed.)). Policy Press.

UNHCR. (2021). Dadaab Refugee Camp. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/dadaab-refugee-complex>

UNHCR. (2021). Kakuma Refugee Camp. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kakuma-refugee-camp>

UNHCR. (2021). Tertiary Education. <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>