Symposium title: Refugees as Researchers: Findings and Reflections from a Participatory Study of Connected Learning Higher Education Programs in Emergencies

Aim: In this symposium session, we will: 1.) Share findings from an evaluation of Connected Learning programs in two different refugee camps as two case studies, 2.) Critically discuss the role Connected Learning can play in fostering relevant and accessible higher education in emergencies, and 3.) Present a novel participatory approach to engaging refugee learners as equal stakeholders in the research process.

Background: *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 80 million refugees and >1.6 billion people experiencing housing insecurity (UNHCR, 2021; Habitat, 2021). Immediate and long-term losses occur when displaced adults cannot access higher education. UNHCR aims to increase tertiary learners to 15% 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.

Refugees as Researchers: 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 views of research and humanitarian assistance utilize agendas from outsider perspectives and typically apply deficit framing. More often, refugees are recruited to assist research because they have particular skills, such as language and cultural knowledge that can facilitate access for external experts. In such cases, refugees cannot challenge the perspectives of researchers, who are often foreign to the context and community. This results in a loss of trust as well as less accurate or relevant findings. The inclusion of refugees as researchers and equal stakeholders is very important to engage with communities, developing a holistic view of the research goals and outcomes, and ethically crucial in the decision making and evaluation process. Participatory 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).

In 2019, a Participatory Evaluation Research (PER) (Flores, 2007) methodology was adopted to train refugee students in higher education as researchers and in turn, for the student researchers to investigate the Connected Learning programs offered as a higher education pathway in their emergency settings. The research team in each site participated in the full training on the participatory evaluation research. After the training, student researchers designed the research, contextualized research tools, conducted data collection, analyzed results, and disseminated preliminary findings. 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 the critical contexts and core properties of CL in their settings.

Structure of the session: This 60-minute session will begin with an introduction to the session's speakers, chair, and objectives. The presenters will each present for 5-7 minutes. Following this, the chair will 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). InZone, an academic institution within the University of Geneva offers refugees access to higher education in the camp by partnering with international universities. Seven student researchers participated in the PER program in Kakuma and conducted their component of the multi-site research activities. They asked research questions to understand the three core components of CL: interests, relationships, and opportunities. The team contextualized the Connected Learning survey and administered it to 79 students from a sample of 242 students. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 20 students. The study revealed that the program's key highlight was in the creation of opportunities for their learners. The students in the InZone 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 major 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.

#2 Connected Learning in Dadaab Refugee Camp: Dadaab refugee camp hosts 223,000 refugees in Garissa county in eastern Kenya (UNHCR, 2021). The Borderless Higher Education for Refugees, a consortium of Canadian and Kenyan universities and NGOs have operated since 2013 aiming to make higher education accessible for adult learners in Dadaab through different blended learning university programs. Four student researchers from the BHER program participated in PER and investigated the BHER 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 8 learners participated in a follow-up qualitative interview. Key findings from the study indicate that the use of technology is a facilitator of access to higher education, while also a barrier for continuous academic support due to limited internet and other contextual challenges. The study also found the lack of Psychosocial Support in the BHER program, a crucial facet of educational programs in emergencies.

#3 Participatory Research Approach in Emergencies: In the third presentation, student researchers from the two camps will discuss the participatory methodology adopted and reflect on their experiences. The approach involves a theoretical and practical framework that fosters grassroots activities and community engagement. 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 symposia presentation, student researchers will discuss the benefits and the challenges of adopting PER and key takeaways for improvement when researching within protracted refugee environments.

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