

Refugees, Migrants, and Digital Integration

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Social and territorial dimensions | Original language: English



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Who are refugees and migrants?

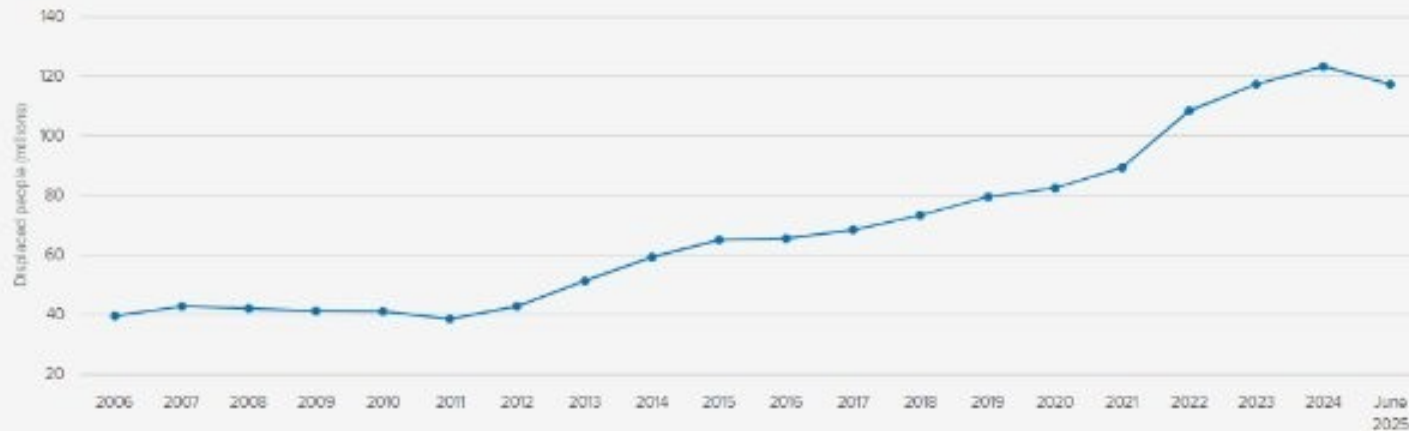
- A **refugee** is a person who is forced to flee their home country because of war, persecution, or violence. They cannot return safely and are protected under international law, mainly by the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees leave not by choice, but for survival and safety.
- A **migrant** is someone who moves voluntarily to another country to improve their life, for example, to find work, study, or reunite with family. Migrants are not escaping direct danger and are subject to the immigration laws of the country they move to.



Global statistics

Global forced displacement trend over the last 20 years

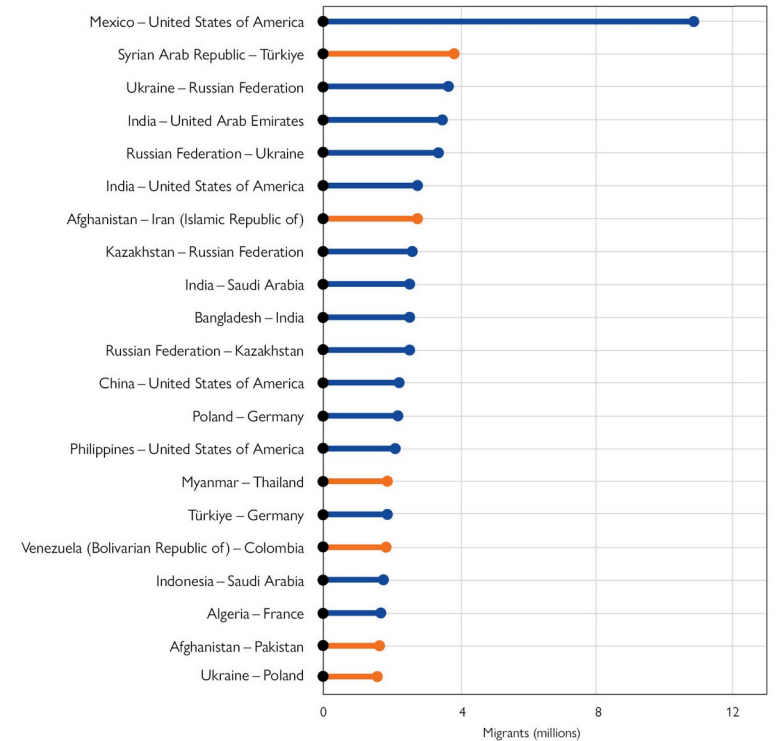
At the end of June 2025, 117.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order.



Source: MID-year Trends 2025, 4 November 2025.

WORLD MIGRATION REPORT 2024

Figure 1. Top international country-to-country migration corridors, 2024



Source: UN DESA, 2021a; UNHCR, 2023a.

Notes: The corridors represent the number of international migrants (millions) born in the first-mentioned country and residing in the second. Corridors represent an accumulation of migratory movements over time and provide a snapshot of how migration patterns have evolved into significant foreign-born populations in specific destination countries.

Those corridors comprising mainly displaced persons are coloured orange. Revisions have been made based on large-scale displacement from Ukraine to neighbouring countries (as at end October 2023).



Why digital integration matters?

Digital integration allows people to access **online education**, enabling learning anytime and anywhere, and to use **e-government services**, making interactions with public institutions easier and more efficient. It opens up **employment opportunities**, from job applications to professional development, and supports economic participation. Beyond access to services and work, digital integration fosters **communication, social connection, and inclusion**, helping individuals stay connected with family, friends, and their communities. It reduces social isolation and ensures that all members of society can participate fully in civic, cultural, and social life.

Digital Integration = Social Participation

Digital Access Challenges

- Availability of online resources is still a major problem to most displaced groups. A lot of people do not have individual devices, constant access and even a SIM card that restricts them to a significant extent to engage in online services and education. Also equal opportunity to learn and communicate is not possible due to the high price of smartphones, laptops, and data plans. In addition to technical limitations, mistrust in digital systems also plays a role in their use, since the fear of privacy, surveillance, and misuse of personal data prevents the use of online platforms by many. As an illustration, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are frequently forced to use phones together or even rely on unreliable connections, and Ukrainian internally displaced people in the EU have financial and linguistic obstacles to access digital services.



Education and Digital Literacy

- The key obstacles facing displaced populations are digital literacy and access to good education. Not all people are digital savvy and it is hard to use online learning platforms or enjoy the advantages of digital resources. Moreover, localized learning resources, such as classes in native languages or culturally-oriented content, are usually absent. The other issue is the acceptance of diplomas and previous schooling and this can lead to failure of refugees or internally displaced individuals to use formal education or jobs. The initiatives that seek to improve upon such issues include Coursera to Refugees, UNHCR Learn, and Google Learn, which include free online courses, language courses, and skills development to enable these educational opportunities to be bridged.





What Prevents Inclusion

- There are several conditions surrounding digital exclusion among refugees and migrants. Technical barriers are the ones that do not allow people to access online services due to the absence of such devices, internet access, and affordable technology. Educational barriers, in the form of low digital literacy, lack of localized materials and diploma recognition problems restrict the learning and professional integration opportunities. Psychological obstacles, like fear to be monitored or the distrust towards digital systems lower the usage of digital platforms. Participation is further impeded by social barriers such as language, social isolation and community support. All in all, these aspects indicate that digital divide only strengthens the existing social divides and that both technological and social aspects should be covered in order to enhance real inclusivity.

Language barriers and digital adaptation

Digital adaptation begins with linguistic inclusion. If services are not understandable, integration fails.

Digital adaptation here: not just learning technology, but being able to use it meaningfully in one's own language and cultural frame.

- ✓ Migrants face digital adaptation challenges **due to lack of translation and complex official language.**
- ✓ Machine translation often **ignores** cultural meaning and **creates errors.**
- ✓ **Complex terminology** leads to confusion even among those who know the language.
- ✓ Language barriers **create digital inequality** and social isolation (creating own platforms/forums).

Own Example: me and my family came to Poland after the full-scale invasion started, didn't know language, but thanks to the volunteers and government we made everything so now we are legally here.



Machine translation and digital adaptation

Translation ≠ Adaptation



Machine translation supports communication but doesn't guarantee cultural understanding — a key part of digital adaptation.

Digital adaptation here: it means **technology adapting to human culture, not just humans adapting to technology.**

- MT helps **speed up** communication but **fails to convey** cultural nuance.
- Errors are **critical** in **!legal!** and **!medical!** contexts.
- Effective digital adaptation requires **human-in-the-loop translation.**
- Localization (cultural adaptation) is **essential** for true inclusion.

Example: In IFRC projects, volunteers edited machine translation of medical instructions to take into account the cultural characteristics of perception.



Cultural adaptation and digital diversity

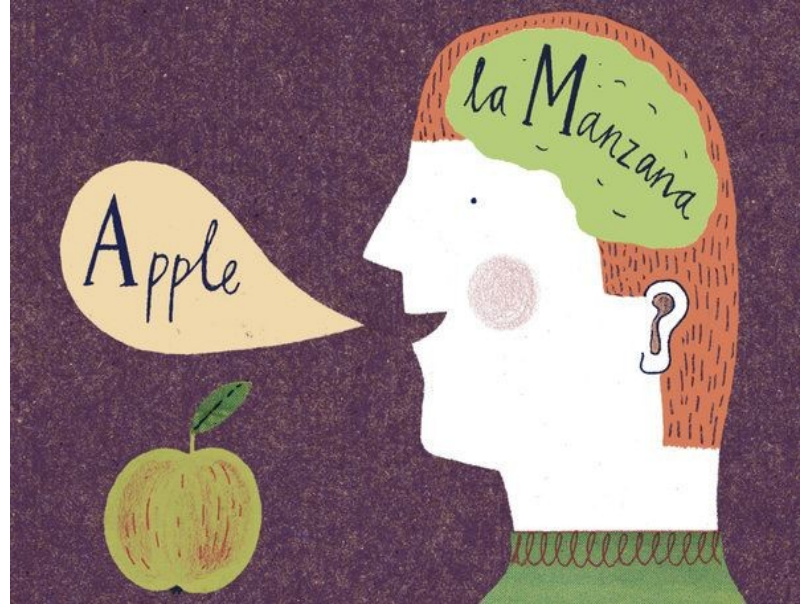
Migrants bring their culture into the digital space, shaping new hybrid forms of identity and communication.

Digital adaptation here: it's **the process of embedding culture into digital life**

- ❖ Platforms often ignore cultural diversity and assume “mainstream” user.
- ❖ Digital segregation arises as ethnic groups build separate online spaces.
- ❖ Diaspora communities enable digital adaptation through mutual help and cultural expression.
- ❖ Online learning platforms bridge integration and identity.



Solutions for effective digital adaptation



Digital adaptation succeeds when technology, policy, and communities work together.

1. *Improve language accessibility*

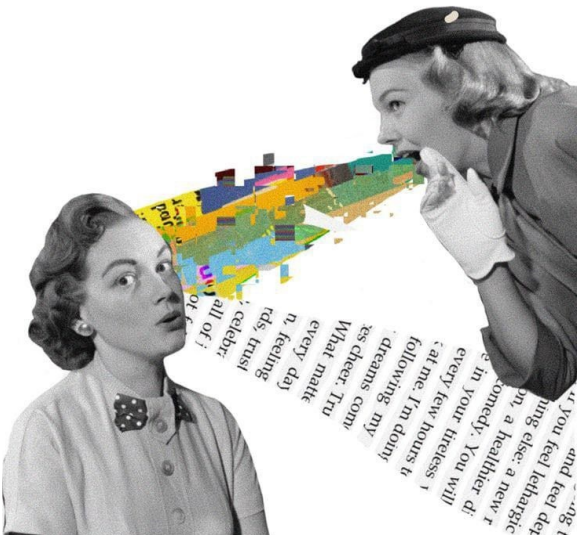
Multilingual interfaces and automatic language detection; **Human-in-the-loop translation** for critical information; Simple, visual, and **easy-to-understand instructions**.

2. *Support online communities*

Recognize diaspora groups as **integration partners**; Create **official multilingual communication channels** (bots, moderated groups); Empower community leaders and volunteers as **digital mediators**.

3. *Education and digital literacy*

Digital skills and **language courses** (MOOCs, UNHCR Learning Passport, Kiron); Peer-to-peer **mentorship among migrants**; Cultural sensitivity in **educational content**.



Role of HEIs (Higher Education Institutions)

Education initiatives:

- Online courses and mentoring programs for refugees
- Scholarships and access to open educational resources
- Support in language and digital skills

Example: Kiron Open Higher Education is a non-profit organization from Germany, founded in 2015. It gives free online education for refugees and people who cannot enter a university in a normal way. Kiron offers university-level online courses, mentoring, and help to join official study programs. Its main goal is to make higher education open to everyone, no matter their status or background.



Role of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations)



Practical help and digital support :

- Providing devices and internet access
- Training in digital skills and mentoring
- Psychological and social support



Examples of successful projects:

- Techfugees – an international network that creates digital tools for refugee inclusion, such as apps and online learning platforms.
- Save the Children – helps refugee families with education, digital learning, and mental health support.
- RefuAid – a UK organization that gives small loans, guidance, and education opportunities to help refugees continue their careers.

Cooperation and Future Steps

Stronger together: partnerships for digital inclusion

Digital integration works best when all sectors join forces:

Actor	Contribution				
HEIs (Universities)	Education, certification, and academic support				
NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations)	Practical help, local connections, and trust				
Government	Laws, funding, and digital infrastructure				
Private sector	Technology, innovation, and work				

Proposals and next steps:

- Create open learning platforms
Build online systems that everyone can use, no matter where they live or what their legal status is.
- Multilingual support and adapted content
Translate materials into different languages to remove the language barrier in learning and communication.
- Train refugee digital mentors
Involve refugees themselves as mentors who can teach and support others. This “peer-to-peer” approach builds trust and helps stronger community integration.

Conclusion

Digital integration must be understood not simply as a technical challenge, but as a complex social process.

Access to technology is only the first step. True integration faces much deeper, human barriers: linguistic, cultural, and a fundamental lack of trust in digital systems.

Therefore, "providing access" on its own does not guarantee "inclusion." Effective solutions require a holistic approach and close cooperation between universities, NGOs, government, and the private sector.

Resources

- <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/refugee-definition>
- <https://explore.britannica.com/explore/savingearth/difference-between-migrant-and-refugee>
- <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/migration>
- <https://www.computeraid.org/blog/what-is-digital-inclusion-and-why-it-matters-in-to-days-world/>
- [https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Space-and-imagination-rethinking-refugees-digital-access WEB042020.pdf?](https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Space-and-imagination-rethinking-refugees-digital-access_WEB042020.pdf?)
- <https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Digital%20Innovation%20for%20Migrants%20and%20Displaced%20Communities.pdf?>
- <https://www.unhcr.org/learning-passport>
- <https://www.unhcr.org/digital-inclusion>
- <https://digitaldiasporas.net>
- <https://www.oecd.org/migration>