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2019 Global Trends Report

An Anthology of Briefing Notes by Graduate
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How Artificial Intelligence Can Support the Human Rights of Refugees

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Issue

How can artificial intelligence (AI) technology be employed to support and protect the human rights of refugees as they transition from their home country to the host country?

Background

In the March 2018 draft of the Global Compact on Refugees, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acknowledged the importance of harnessing technology in support of refugees (UNHCR 2018). AI — which aims to simulate of human intelligence processes by machines, including machine learning and deep learning — offers innovative and creative opportunities to enhance the promotion and protection of human rights for refugees. Depending on its application, AI systems can be used to advance or obstruct the rights of those who have been forced to flee their homes, making it a dual-use technology with a potential positive and negative application. By partnering with its high-tech community, Canada has an opportunity to lead in the implementation, operationalization, and oversight of the Global Compact through the development of ethical AI-driven solutions that are designed to support the rights and dignity of people on the move.

There is significant potential for AI technology to advance the Compact during the three main stages of displacement: the period of initial flight; the journey to the host country; and the integration into the host country.

With respect to the first stage, AI can be used to help predict forced displacement by using algorithms to analyze big data and reveal new insights into the root causes of forced displacement. AI systems are currently being used to predict patterns and trends with respect to factors such as climate change, economic uncertainty, and political instability, and can be applied in the context of forced displacement in so far as it can help to track changes in the indicators that often cause people to leave their homes. More specifically, AI technology could be used to help identify when forced displacement is likely to occur so that receiving states and humanitarian actors led by the UNHCR can be better prepared to manage comprehensive responses to mass influxes of people (Nyoni 2017). In short, AI has tremendous potential as a tool to assist with scenario planning.

The journey refers to the time in which refugees are "on the move," or the period after the point of departure to arrival in the country of destination. Given the transnational nature of forced movement and the inherent vulnerabilities of those who are in transit, it is difficult to develop programs that support and protect the rights of refugees, let alone prevent human rights violations from happening in the first place or punish those who commit them. Most protective services are statically located in one place and are not designed with mobile populations in mind. AI has the potential to provide innovative, rapid, adaptive and mobile solutions, such as enabling the creation of digital identities for those without documentation (Mercy Corps 2018) that recognize the legitimate security concerns of host states, respect international refugee law and the

principle of non-refoulement, and facilitate international cooperation on behalf of refugees. An example of this is India's programme 'Aadhaar', which has not only pioneered AI-based identity management but has also been hailed as an SDG champion for putting so many people who were previously undocumented on the grid, and which could make the whole process of border crossing much simpler (Government of India, 2018).

Once refugees reach their destination, challenges evolve from remaining safe in transit to achieving more permanent resettlement and integrating into their new communities. Although the issues faced are highly individualized, integration namely involves the fulfilment of rudimentary needs, including finding housing, securing credit, gaining employment or education, and accessing services. AI technologies can assist these endeavours through its instant delivery of accurate and up-to-date information, its ability to connect people and networks, and in its elasticity in providing personalized responses. Indeed, many private and civil society technological developers are working to provide new uses for their AI technology in this area, creating 'chat bots', facial recognition systems, translators, banking platforms and enabling sharing economy networks (World Economic Forum 2018). In accordance with the Global Compact on Refugees, governments and developers have an obligation to ensure that any new technology is used to empower refugees, not exploit them.

Conclusion

Canada should take the lead on integrating AI technology into the human rights and refugee regimes. To mitigate the potential harmful effects of AI on refugees, Canada should press for language in the Global Compact that establishes and clarifies that ethical cooperation on AI is a form of refugee responsibility sharing. To help implement the Compact, it should lead in the negotiation of a shared, digital information protocol and identity management system, and call for the creation of a multi-stakeholder accountability and feedback mechanism, residing either within or independent of the UNHCR, to monitor the uses of AI within the refugee regime. Along with members of the high-tech sector, Canada can help to develop an accreditation scheme to certify applications of AI that support refugee rights and allocate funding for future innovation of needs-based tools. The scale and nature of recent forced displacements indicate that not one type of actor — governments, humanitarian organizations,

technological entrepreneurs, civil society groups/organizations or individual people on the move — has a complete overview of the situation or the ability to develop innovative and comprehensive solutions to the complex set of problems on its own. In consonance with the Global Compact, Canada should take the lead on developing more effective intergovernmental agreements, responsibility sharing, and public-private partnerships for security and protection to effectively use AI to support human rights of refugees.

Recommendations

Lead on the development of ethical standards relating to the use of technology in support of the Global Compact on Refugees. Given the timeliness of the Global Compact negotiations and adoption, there is an opportunity for Canada to be an international standard-setter. Post-New York, Canada must be a strong and vigilant advocate of global ethical frameworks in dealing with refugee movements, and this advocacy must extend to the digital realm. Specifically, Canada must lead in the development of ethical standards that prioritize the rights of refugees, including but not limited to standards that protect the right to privacy and minimize biases that could undermine the human security of refugees. Ethical language should be written such that states that do not treat refugees according to international ethical standards (for example, in the provision of food, water, shelter, access to health care and employment) can be held accountable.

Negotiate a shared, digital information protocol and identity management system. The protection of individual privacy is a fundamental human right, in addition to national security considerations, that guides transnational cooperation on managing the movement of people. Nevertheless, this technology reveals gaps and ethical concerns relating to how data is used. Consequently, an integrated approach that protects refugees, emphasizes the civilian and humanitarian character of international protection, while at the same time safeguarding the national security of the involved states, is needed. These topics do go beyond AI; however, AI can play a significant supporting role, offering the opportunity to create shared, digital information protocols and identity management systems by respecting individual privacy, protection, and national security without compromising effectiveness. As a result, Canada could lead the negotiations on a globally shared identity management system and digital information protocol.

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Create multi-stakeholder accountability and feedback mechanisms that include refugees. AI technology is a fast-evolving and generally uncontrolled industry with constant innovation and development. It is an overwhelming challenge to oversee this area as a single governmental actor. Therefore, the use and development of AI technology to protect and promote human rights for refugees is only effective if relevant stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. These multi stakeholder accountability and feedback mechanisms based on AI systems offer the opportunity to develop appropriate, fair, safe, diverse and widely relevant input and responses, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women and youth. Accordingly, clear and safe multi stakeholder communication and information-sharing systems based on AI technology are important tools to support the human rights of refugees. These mechanisms can be incorporated into the refugee support platform, as conceived in the Global Compact. Although inaction as a result of multiple actors being involved in decision making may be a significant challenge to overcome, refugees also cannot be left out of the decisions that directly affect them. Feedback mechanisms composed of refugees along with other relevant actors, to evaluate the tools and resources provided to refugees and other displaced populations, are necessary.

Form an accreditation scheme to reward AI quality and accessibility. There is currently a plethora of AI systems and tools available that aim to assist refugees while in transit and in their resettlement. There are tools that provide services in family reunion, accessing credit, translation, and counselling, to name a few. The government's most appropriate role here is to connect these powerful tools with their intended target audience. By serving as a convener in this way, the government can ensure that refugees are technologically assisted and that the tools are used to their fullest extent.

One way of achieving this is to initiate an accreditation scheme that signposts refugees to the most trusted and effective AI tools on the market. In turn, this would promote future innovation in line with the principles that the accreditation scheme adheres to: accessibility and quality. In following this recommendation, the government must contemplate two key considerations. First, accreditation would involve some government oversight of the private sector. For the accreditation scheme to have legitimacy, the process for granting (or not granting) certification must be fair, transparent, and based on clear and objective criteria.

Second, the government must note that a government-led accreditation scheme is not necessarily the ideal "fix-all" solution, but rather a starting point. Research shows that refugees have considerable trust issues in lending their private information to government agencies (Benton and Glennie 2016, 8). Thus, refugees may also have those same trust issues with using a tool or system that is seen as endorsed by the government. The *ideal* is a peer-led system of accreditation. However, in the absence of such a system, this is the next best solution for the government to follow at this time. In doing so, it must consider the long-term strategy of supporting a peer-oriented system of accreditation.

Allocate funding for future innovation of needs-based tools. To ensure that AI is fulfilling its potential in this area, the government must procure specific tools according to refugee needs, as well as offering funding for generalized innovation. Importantly, funding must not be confined to "kick-starting" new tools, but also to sustaining existing ones that are of great benefit to its user base. Funding opportunities in this area must recognize that AI tools that have significant societal value may not be commercial in nature, and so require additional funding. This funding could derive from both the Pan-Canadian Artificial Intelligence Strategy and from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada given the cross-sectoral relevance of this fund (Canadian Institute for Advanced Research 2018).

In this vein, the Government of Canada can take inspiration from counterparts in Australia, where a "Match Lab" operates in order to provide project funding to tech developers, and to host a fundraising and business clinic on their behalf (Australia Match Lab 2017). Thus, developers benefit both from grant funding, and from skills training and networking convened by the government.

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Acknowledgements

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