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UCT study uncovers the power of mobile phones for refugees

Mobile phone use provides valuable opportunities to enable refugees to negotiate ways to participate in the information society. This is according to University of Cape Town postgraduate commerce student Kasky Bisimwa Bacishoga. For his PhD dissertation, he explored whether the use of mobile phones by urban refugees in South Africa can generate capabilities for empowerment, including in economic and financial activities thereby improving access to services and sources of information.

Furthermore, the use of mobile phones provides the opportunity to effectively engage with wider networks by developing and maintaining relationships, being socially and culturally connected, and communicating effectively. Lastly, it allows refugees to manage their own situation, solve problems by multi-tasking and provides them with a sense of security.

When asked why he chose this topic, Bacishoga replied: "I had no choice but to leave my country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, as my life was threatened. Being a well-educated person with an Honours degree, upon my arrival in South Africa, my assumptions were that greater democracy and development would imply greater freedom for urban refugees."

Bacishoga admitted that his assumptions were wrong. "I was confused by the failures that I was experiencing in locating better opportunities. I felt revolted by experiencing the way discriminatory practices such as social exclusion and xenophobia, and marginalisation were hindering the abilities of urban refugees to act on their ascribed rights and opportunities in South Africa."

Urban refugees in South Africa are presented with constraining factors such as the lack of resources to obtain internet-capable mobile phones, stereotypes surrounding refugees and the challenge of documentation to obtain cellphone contracts. The lack of financial resources, plus the frustration of being excluded and difficulties with the English language are further deterrents for the empowerment of refugees

Based on his understanding of informatics and the experience of being a displaced person in his own country prior to becoming a refugee in South Africa, he decided to focus his thesis on refugees' experiences.

Bacishoga's PhD research contributes to the theory in the field of Information Systems by proposing a dynamic framework with detailed concepts to explain the mechanisms and social practices that shape mobile phone usage and its potential for empowerment.

The findings of his thesis have the potential to contribute to the government policy development process and organisations seeking to assist urban refugees, by facilitating the formulation of their intervention strategies.

Notes to Editors

This research reflects the genuine opportunities an individual enjoys or the freedom that individuals must enjoy valuable beings and doings. Empowerment is referred to as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.

Kasky Bisimwa Bacishoga's thesis title: "Mobile phone use for empowerment in the context of social exclusion: an ethnographic study of urban refugees in South Africa".

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