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Communication in Protracted Refugee Encampment: A Humanitarian and Development Approach to Youth Engagement

Practice Brief





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Foreward



This practice brief, *Communication in Protracted Refugee Encampment: A Humanitarian and Development Approach to Youth Engagement*, is the product of a collaborative research partnership between FilmAid Kenya and Dr Valentina Baú from the Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI). Bringing together practitioner expertise and academic research, the partnership reflects a shared commitment to strengthening evidence-informed approaches to youth engagement in contexts of protracted displacement.

FilmAid Kenya's long-standing presence in refugee camps and its extensive experience in participatory media, communication for development, and youth-focused programming provided a critical foundation for this work. At the same time, the empirical findings underpinning this brief arise from collaborative research conducted in refugee camp settings and consider how young people themselves use, adapt, and create media and communication practices as part of everyday life in conditions of long-term encampment.

Rather than focusing solely on organisational interventions, this brief centres young people as communicators, cultural actors and social participants. It explores how media and communication function as tools for expression, connection, learning and negotiation in environments marked by uncertainty, restricted mobility and limited formal opportunities. In doing so, it

highlights the ways young people engage with both formal humanitarian communication initiatives and informal, youth-led media practices that often operate beyond programmatic frameworks.

The collaboration between FilmAid Kenya and Dr Baú enabled a productive dialogue between practice-based knowledge and critical research perspectives. FilmAid Kenya's insights into the operational realities of humanitarian and development work informed the research design and interpretation, while academic analysis supported systematic reflection on broader patterns, challenges and implications. This approach strengthens the relevance of the findings for practitioners, policymakers and researchers seeking to better understand communication ecosystems in protracted refugee settings.

Importantly, the brief moves beyond analysis to offer practical recommendations for engaging with young people in camps from both humanitarian and development perspectives. These recommendations emphasise the need for long-term, participatory, youth-centred approaches. They call for interventions that support young people's agency, creativity and critical engagement, while also addressing structural constraints that shape communication access and participation in encampment contexts.

As displacement becomes increasingly prolonged worldwide, this practice brief contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink how humanitarian and development actors engage with refugee youth. By grounding its insights in collaborative research and lived realities, the brief offers guidance for more inclusive, responsive and sustainable communication strategies that acknowledge young people not only as recipients of aid, but as active contributors to the social and communicative life of refugee camps.

Stella Suge
Director, FilmAid Kenya

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Practice Brief

Target Audience: Humanitarian and development practitioners, field officers, donors, communication strategists, community-based organisations, refugee-led organisations.

What is the Issue?

Refugee camps are designed to provide safety and support for those seeking protection, often from protracted crises. In these contexts, young people often face barriers that limit their ability to participate fully in community life. In particular, refugee youth often experience:

- Restricted movement, reducing their chances to take part in productive activities and decision-making;
- Weak or fragmented social networks, limiting peer support;
- Unequal access to information and resources, making engagement more difficult.

These barriers shape their communicative ecology¹, which illustrates how young people communicate and participate in their environment through technology, social networks and everyday interactions.

Digital platforms: Facebook is often central to how youth access and share information in refugee camps, but it operates within deep inequalities. Many share devices, face unreliable electricity, and struggle with expensive mobile data. Limited digital skills also leave them vulnerable to misinformation. Humanitarian Facebook pages are usually one-way, offering limited space for dialogue. At the same time, public sharing of information can pose risks for vulnerable users (Baú, forthcoming).

Language and representation: Language is another source of exclusion. Community media support youth creativity and multilingual engagement, but can also include gaps such as noninclusion of specific languages or limited support after sharing a personal experience or vulnerability (e.g., early pregnancy, drug use, sexual and gender-based violence). When young people see content as irrelevant or not representative of their identities, they may disengage and lose trust in agencies (Baú et al., 2025).

Systemic challenges: Communication barriers also connect to wider issues of social cohesion across ethnicity, class, gender and religion. Without inclusive, two-way communication, these divisions risk deepening feelings of rejection and weakening trust within refugee communities, while also compromising peaceful co-existence (Baú, 2024a).

The issue is not solely around access to technology, but also on how communication is designed and practised in contexts of protracted encampment: a communicative ecology approach, centering youth realities and fostering interaction, offers a path to meaningful participation and long-term community resilience (Baú, 2024b).

¹ This concept was introduced in Tacchi, J., Slater, D. & Hearn, G. (2003). *Ethnographic Action Research Handbook*. UNESCO.



Why it Matters

In protracted refugee situations, and particularly in contexts of encampment, communication is not a secondary concern: it is central to humanitarian effectiveness, development outcomes and peacebuilding. For young people, it shapes access to services, livelihoods, wellbeing and leadership opportunities. While many face overlapping vulnerabilities such as limited mobility, gender-based exclusion and restricted access to education or psychosocial support, timely and trustworthy information can transform their role from passive recipients to active contributors, strengthening wellbeing, advancing development and building social cohesion (Baú, 2024a).

Inclusive Communication as a Resilience Strategy

When used with participation in mind, digital platforms like Facebook can give youth space for expression, connection and reflection. Their impact, however, depends on inclusive engagement, safeguards and alignment with youth norms, areas often missed in agency-led communication (Baú, 2024b). Communication also acts as a resilience tool: when agencies engage with the informal networks young people already use, they can better support community development, rebuild trust

and enable co-led initiatives (Baú, 2024a). In contrast, poor communication, marked by gender barriers, language exclusion and digital divides, suppresses youth agency, increases inequity and fuels disengagement (Baú, 2024a).

Social Cohesion through Communication

In protracted encampment, community cohesion cannot rely only on formal institutions: it must also grow from within. Youth play a vital role in this process, using radio, social media, as well as cultural and social events to connect across ethnic, gender and generational lines. Without inclusive communication, gaps deepen competition for resources, reduce trust in agencies and polarise group identities (Baú, 2024b). Participatory approaches help ease tensions, bring hidden conflicts to light and give youth safe ways to express themselves, turning them into active agents of change (Baú, forthcoming). Moreover, communication strategies that integrate trusted facilitators, relevant cultural themes and accessible platforms help create inclusive development, contributing to a cohesive and resilient camp society where youth can shape futures beyond survival (Baú, 2024a).





What Does the Research Tell Us?

Understanding the Concept of Communicative Ecology

The concept of communicative ecology helps explain the complex ways youth communicate in refugee camps. It refers to the full system of communication in daily life, including technology, social networks and shared narratives. This framework highlights that communication is not only about media tools, but also about meaning-making within cultural and relational contexts.

A communicative ecology has three connected layers:

- Technological: the devices and platforms youth use;
- Social: the networks and institutions they engage with;
- Discursive: the ideas and dominant narratives shaping communication.

Understanding how these layers interact allows practitioners to design activities that address barriers across all three dimensions, rather than treating them separately (Baú, 2024b).

Humanitarian Agencies and their Role in Youth Communication

Humanitarian actors play different roles within youth communicative ecologies. In some camps, they act as central influencers by providing structured spaces, media training, skills development, and information channels such as radio. In these cases, agencies help shape both the technological and social layers of communication. In other settings, however, communication is mostly one-way, with agencies seen as external service providers. Even when tools like WhatsApp are used, youth participation can be minimal and their concerns not fully reflected in program design. This limits opportunities to strengthen social cohesion and youth agency (Baú, 2024a).

Spotlight: RefFM Radio Station in Kakuma Camp

RefFM, a refugee-run radio station supported by FilmAid Kenya in Kakuma, plays a dual role in both community building and humanitarian communication. It promotes diversity through multilingual broadcasting, engages youth with arts, music, sports and psychosocial content, and shares public safety messages as a link between youth and agencies. However, language barriers, unintentional fragmenting reporting and limited participatory design can reduce its potential to strengthen cohesion (Baú et al., 2025).

Facebook as a Dual Platform for Humanitarian and Development Communication

Facebook functions as a dual-use platform for both humanitarian communication (e.g., service updates, health campaigns) and development-focused engagement (e.g., creative expression, digital entrepreneurship). Youth actively participate through both official pages of organisations working in the camp and informal peer-run groups. However, the platform's unregulated nature introduces risks such as misinformation and online harm, and humanitarian agencies have yet to fully integrate it into long-term, ethically grounded communication strategies (Baú, forthcoming).

Communication and Social Cohesion in Encampment

Social cohesion grows when community members lead the process, and communication helps connect people, build trust, and support working together. When youth are involved in radio programming, social media discussion, cultural events or community dialogue meetings, they help connect different ethnic, gender and age groups.

A communication framework for promoting social cohesion in protracted encampment is useful to explain how trust, participation, and collaboration can grow through planned communication activities.

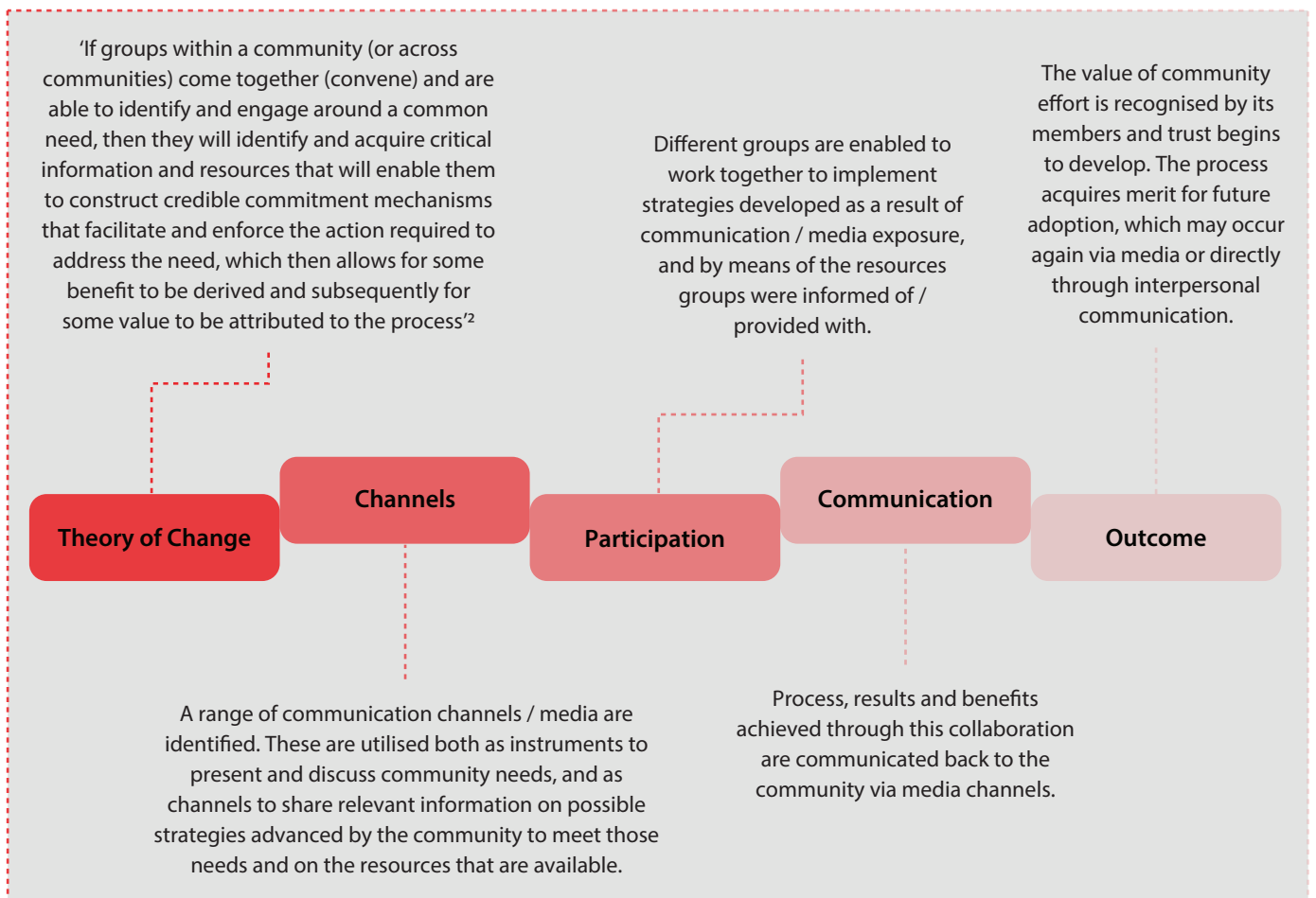


Figure 1: Communication framework for promoting social cohesion in protracted encampment (Baú, 2024, p.8.)

Applying this framework assists humanitarian work in protracted refugee camps. It increases engagement, fosters trust, empowers communities and ensures that interventions respect cultural differences (Baú, 2024a).

² Bennett, S., and A. D'Onofrio. 2015. Community-Driven Development in Conflict-Affected Contexts: Revisiting concepts, functions and fundamentals. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 4: 19. Page 19.



Strategic Guidance for Implementers

Research highlights the need for youth-centered and context-responsive communication in protracted refugee situations. Five interconnected strategies provide practical steps for humanitarian and development actors to enhance youth participation and strengthen social cohesion. To strengthen communication with young people, agencies should adopt an ecology-informed, participatory approach that is inclusive, culturally sensitive, and designed around the realities of the youth.

1 Foster Content Co-Creation and Youth Ownership

Radio or media programs can include a rotating group of youth representatives who help choose weekly topics and contribute ideas. By involving young people directly in building an agenda for discussion, the platform shifts from simply broadcasting information to becoming a space for co-production. Youth feel more invested when they can influence the content and see their concerns reflected in the programming (Baú et al., 2025).

Provide Youth-Generated Content Opportunities:

Communication programs can promote youth voice by offering dedicated spaces for youth-created content. To achieve this, humanitarian organisations can:

- Develop regular radio or media segments for youth to share personal stories, cultural poems or opinion pieces in their own voices;
- Record and broadcast youth contributions so that young people hear themselves and their peers represented;
- Recognise and validate youth experiences by giving them visibility in community dialogue;
- Encourage interaction and feedback to move away from one-way information delivery.

Enhance Youth Media Skills through Mentorship:

Mentorship initiatives can build youth capacity and confidence to become active media creators. To achieve this, humanitarian organisations can:

- Pair youth interested in journalism, radio hosting or performance with experienced practitioners;
- Provide hands-on training in skills such as audio editing, interviewing and presenting;
- Encourage knowledge-sharing that builds both technical ability and self-confidence.

2 Co-Create a Social Media Strategy with Youth Input

Humanitarian agencies should develop a contextualised Facebook communication strategy by actively involving refugee youth. This assists in mapping how young people use Facebook, what content they trust, and how they prefer to interact with aid agencies. Without this contextual understanding, communication risks becoming ineffective due to misaligned messages or inaccessible formats (Baú, 2024b). Meaningful inclusion ensures that communication interventions reflect youth needs and digital behaviours.

3 Build Youth Capacity and Empower Peer Communication Hubs

Humanitarian organisations should invest in capacity-building for youth communicators by providing short training sessions on digital storytelling, videography, social media strategy, data privacy and interpersonal communication. These trained youth can act as community communicators and amplifiers within their own networks.

In camps like Kakuma, for example, youth self-organise into groups such as reading clubs, dance groups or sports teams, which act as informal spaces for sharing news and ideas (Baú, 2024b). Agencies can build on these structures by providing training in communication skills and access to basic media tools. This turns existing groups into trusted sources for important updates. For example, a sports team could produce short weekly videos with job announcements, health tips or education opportunities, sharing these with their peers via WhatsApp or promoting them at a youth centre. Such initiatives both strengthen information flow and increase youth visibility in the community.

4 Secure Dedicated Funding for Social Media Literacy Programs

Investing in digital literacy for refugee youth is essential for both protection and empowerment. The research underscores the risks of unmoderated Facebook use, ranging from misinformation to cyberbullying (Baú, 2024b). Yet, such programs are often underfunded and considered marginal. Agencies must allocate sustained budget lines for media literacy training focused on ethical participation, fact-checking, online safety and constructive digital citizenship within the camp context.

5 *Use Culturally Resonant, Personally Meaningful Communication*

Research shows that youth discourse is not limited to institutional themes. In Kakuma and Za'atari camps, for example, young people frequently engage in conversations about relationships, future planning, household challenges and emotional wellbeing. Messaging that speaks to these lived experiences can more effectively establish rapport and foster trust (Baú, 2024a). Additionally, connecting messages to the discursive layer of the communicative ecology increases relevance and impact. This is especially important as agencies tend at times to communicate in a problem-solving mode, which risks excluding broader narratives of aspiration and agency.

As an example, instead of framing a vocational training opportunity as 'skills development for livelihood stabilisation', agencies could promote the same initiative as an 'opportunity to build one's future and family support', a language that aligns with the emotional and familial priorities identified in youth discourse.

6 *Integrate Arts, Sports, and Cultural Celebration into Programming*

Instead of one-off events, agencies can support recurring cultural segments, on radio or at community gatherings, where youth share music, poems, personal stories or discussions in their own voices. These regular platforms make cultural expression part of everyday communication, fostering pride and mutual recognition across diverse groups.

Such initiatives help build emotional connection, identity and trust, especially in multi-ethnic settings. Linking these segments with communal activities like sports or festivals can also strengthen social cohesion and make communication more relevant to young people's lived experiences (Baú et al., 2025).

7 *Social Cohesion Messaging*

Social cohesion messaging involves strategically using media platforms to promote narratives of inclusion, celebrate shared identity, and challenge divisive perceptions within displaced communities. This has been identified as a critical component of communication programming in refugee camps, especially in protracted settings where fragmentation and mistrust exist (Baú, 2024a).

In particular, community newspapers are highlighted as an effective medium for delivering such messaging. A publication like *The Refugee Magazine* supported by FilmAid Kenya in Kakuma camp, for example, served as central hubs of local storytelling and information-sharing. It showcased the everyday lives, achievements and aspirations of residents, thus helping to normalise diverse experiences and foster a sense of local belonging. By reporting on local events, institutions and individuals, this newspaper created opportunities for residents to see themselves and their communities reflected positively in public discourse (Baú, 2024b).

This type of media platform has not only informed but also inspired participation, as it helped residents form positive associations with their camp environment and with one another. For implementers, this underscores the strategic value of investing in locally produced, resident-led communication platforms that highlight inclusive stories and reinforce shared values as a counter to narratives of division and despair.

8 *Collaborative Contact Interventions to Strengthen Social Bonds*

Building opportunities for shared, positive experiences among diverse youth groups is essential to fostering cohesion in protracted displacement settings. Communicative interventions should not only transmit information but also catalyse interpersonal trust and social capital. One effective strategy is to design collaborative contact initiatives. Examples of these are Radio Listening Clubs like Sikika in Kakuma camp, where individuals from different ethnic, social, or national backgrounds come together to participate in youth-led discussion groups around shared interests and co-learning.

Agencies can connect with young people by using a mix of communication channels that match their daily habits and available tools. In camps like Kakuma, most youth access the internet through mobile phones, often shared with friends or family. Agency-managed Facebook pages can be used to share important updates, respond to questions, and allow youth to contribute their own posts. Organisations like FilmAid Kenya also provide training and access to audio-visual equipment, enabling young people to create videos, images or podcasts. These creations can then be shared on platforms like YouTube or camp-related Facebook pages, becoming part of the local communicative ecology and helping youth both access and produce meaningful content (Baú, 2024b).



Summarising Challenges and Enablers with Youth Communication in Protracted Encampment

1 Challenges

Fragmented Communication Strategies

- **Narrow, tool-focused approaches:** Programs may focus on isolated tools or message delivery without considering broader systemic patterns.
- **One-directional use of digital platforms:** WhatsApp or Facebook are often used to push information and may limit opportunities for dialogue.
- **Misalignment with youth interests:** Platforms may tend to reflect agencies' agendas rather than youth priorities such as education, resettlement or employment, leading to disengagement.
- **No shared definition of cohesion:** Lack of a common understanding around this notion, or a relevant theory of change, leads to fragmented and possibly counterproductive programs.
- **Risk of backlash:** Social cohesion initiatives may trigger resistance if youth feel misrepresented or perceive programs as externally imposed.
- **Persistent digital exclusion:** Income, education, age and gender disparities keep some youth disconnected from vital communication channels.

Technological Barriers

- **Limited access to communication spaces:** Youth centres provide some resources but are constrained by fixed hours and, in some context, reduced scope for spontaneous interaction.
- **Mobile-only connectivity:** Reliance on basic mobile phones creates digital inequality and limits access to higher-data platforms.
- **Language exclusion:** Platforms like RefFM use dominant languages (e.g., English, Kiswahili, Arabic), excluding youth who may speak other languages.

Structural and Conceptual Challenges to Cohesion

- **Restricted mobility and external control:** Youth movement is limited by camp rules and governance, reducing opportunities for participation.
- **Resource competition:** Scarcity of resources creates tensions that weaken social cohesion.

Risks of Poorly Designed Communication

- **Misinformation and exploitation:** Unfiltered content on social platforms like Facebook may expose vulnerable youth to misinformation, online abuse or exploitation where moderation is weak.
- **Stoking division:** Media programs that associate crime or problems with specific ethnic groups can fuel tribal tensions and undermine social cohesion.
- **Erosion of trust:** Communication that fails to provide meaningful support or actionable referrals risks alienating youth and reducing confidence in agencies.
- **Performative engagement:** Radio call-in shows without proper follow-up can turn disclosure of personal struggles into empty performances rather than genuine support.



2 Enablers

Enabling Communication through Ecology-Informed Design

- **Communication as foundation:** Communication is to be seen not only as a tool but as a system that supports social learning, trust, accountability and identity-building.
- **Ecology-informed approach:** When agencies align with youth's real behaviours, content preferences and social dynamics, communication becomes more relevant and sustainable.
- **Youth-produced media:** In Kakuma, initiatives like those implemented by FilmAid Kenya enable youth to create media content and share digital stories on platforms like YouTube and Facebook, amplifying their voices and visibility.
- **Skill development and empowerment:** These projects not only provide platforms for youth expression but also equip young people with technical and creative skills, strengthening long-term participation.

Harnessing Community Platforms and Self Organised Groups

- **Community-managed platforms:** Facebook pages run by camp residents can serve as trusted information sources. When agencies collaborate with these platforms, rather than replacing them, they build trust and community ownership.
- **Youth-led clubs and initiatives:** Groups such as the Ubuntu Dance Group or Kakuma Reading Society act as informal hubs for peer-to-peer communication and belonging. Supporting these spaces amplifies authentic youth leadership.

- **Community mobilisers:** Refugees recruited as mobilisers or outreach facilitators help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between agencies and youth, ensuring messages are delivered in ways that resonate locally and foster trust.
- **Clarity and accessibility of information:** Programs that prioritise simple, consistent and accessible communication strengthen youth's sense of agency, belonging and readiness to engage in peacebuilding and development.

Toward a Strategic Communication Shift

- **From delivery to engagement:** Move away from one-way media delivery toward relational communication that builds trust, reciprocity and dialogue.
- **Support self-organising:** Recognise and empower youth-led initiatives as central pillars of communication ecosystems.
- **Honor local agency:** Ensure youth voices shape agendas, content and processes.
- **Address structural inequality:** Acknowledge gender, mobility and digital divides, and design communication strategies that actively work to bridge them.
- **Integrate communicative ecologies:** Ground programs in the real-life patterns of social interaction, media use and discourse within camps.



Research that has informed this brief:

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