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The Contributions of WhatsApp to Social Inclusion: A Case of Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria

Salihu Ibrahim Dasuki¹ and Naima Hafiz Abubakar²

¹University of Sheffield, UK

²American University of Nigeria, Yola

Abstract. *This paper addresses the topic on how WhatsApp can improve the lives of internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by conflict. To theorize the complex relationship between mobile technologies and social inclusion, Sen's five distinct instrumental freedoms was drawn upon to understand the use of WhatsApp by IDPs affected by Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and its impact on their social inclusion. Based on a one-week fieldwork of an ongoing research, the case narrative presented both the freedom outcomes afforded the IDPs by the use of WhatsApp and also the impediments that hinder the developmental impact. Finally, we conclude by providing some implications for research and practice.*

Keywords: WhatsApp, Freedoms, IDPs, Nigeria.

1 Introduction

According to the UNHCR (2017) report titled "*Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017*", 65.8 million people are forcibly displaced from their homes due to violence, conflicts, persecutions or violations of human rights. Children below the age of 18 constitute 52 percent of these displaced persons. Furthermore, Sub-Saharan Africa is a host to more than 26 percent of the world displaced population and the number has continued to grow due to ongoing conflicts in Central Africa Republic, Sudan and Nigeria which is the focus of our research. Currently, Nigeria is facing a huge humanitarian challenge as a result of the continuous attack by the militant group "*Boko Haram*" in the North Eastern region. Due to this instability, many of its citizens are internally displaced into new communities where they struggle to get adequate access to suitable housing, clean water, education and health facilities to satisfy basic human needs. This increasing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria has impacted adversely on social inclusion generally. Warschauer (2003) defines social inclusion as "*the extent that individuals are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies*". In the context of IDPs, it is universally agreed that mobile technologies can offer new opportunities for income and employment (Hyde-Clarke, 2013), support social inclusion by opening new dimensions in social interaction (Chiumbu, 2012), and enabling self-empowerment amongst IDPs (Diminescu et al., 2009). To date, there has been limited research on

the how IDPs use mobile phones in sub-Saharan Africa (Bacishoga et al., 2016). The few existing studies seem to concentrate on simply providing mobile access to immigrants (Kutscher & Kreß, 2016) or technologies used by refugees living in host communities in developed countries (AbuJarour and Krasnova, 2018) or provide little insights into the process on how mobile technologies can enhance a more social inclusion of IDPs (Andrade and Doolin, 2016). To fill this gap, we carried out a research based on a one-week field work in Nigeria to qualitatively examine how IDPs are using the mobile platform - WhatsApp (a peer to peer messaging app that allows users text, chat, and share media, including voice messages and video, with individuals or groups) in order to understand ways in which it can promote social inclusion.

Also we examined the factors that impede IDPs from using WhatsApp to achieve social inclusion. Drawing upon Sen's (1999) capability approach (CA) as a theoretical lens, we show an alternative way for evaluating the impact of WhatsApp on social inclusion and point out the significance of socio-cultural context and the need to consider these factors when designing and implementing policies on access and use of mobile platforms. Furthermore, our study contributes to a better understanding of the impact of WhatsApp on IDPs, which positions our study within the domain of enriching sustainable development goals (SDG) 16 which aims at using technologies in integrating IDPs both economically and socially. Also, due to the relative novelty of WhatsApp use by IDPs in Nigeria, little substantive research and theoretical literature exists on the experiences of IDPs and how such experience may inform the ways we think about social inclusion in relation to technology. On the practical side, our insights may advise governments and other stakeholders in their efforts towards the use of information and communication technologies to empower IDPs in sub-Saharan Africa.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. We provide a literature review in Section 2. In Section 3, we discuss our theoretical framework. We present our research methods in section 4 and introduce our findings and analysis in Section 5. In section 6, we conclude our paper and discuss areas for future research.

2 Internal Displaced Persons and ICTs

Forcefully displaced persons have to adapt into their new host communities and construct new meaningful lives (Andrade and Doolin, 2016). They are faced with a range of issues such as overcoming their disrupted education, learning a new language, negotiating family relationships, and dealing with discrimination (Abujarour and Krasnova, 2018). One solution to these challenges is the use of ICTs as tools to navigate the new information environment that they encounter (Lloyd et al. 2013; Andrade and Doolin, 2016). Particularly, the Internet and social media can provide a communicative space that connect IDPs with a wide range of people and also enable their participation in the information society (Caidi et al. 2010). For example, Navarrete and Huerta (2006) work on transnational communities of immigrants show that the Internet has transformed the way in which displaced person interact thus helping them to break the time and distance barrier. The combined characteristics of emerging technologies, that is, text, image, audio and video has

shown to satisfy both the communication needs of displaced persons and also vital in creating and promoting their sense of belonging in the community (Abujarour and Krasnova, 2017).

Furthermore, social media such as Facebook, twitter, Instagram etc. have provided a platform for disconnected social groups to interface thus allowing displaced persons to maintain and build contact with new and existing contacts and as well as distant networks (Abujarour and Krasnova, 2017). It has also enabled them to monitor events and participate in the political activities of their communities (Andrade and Doolin, 2015; Caidi et al. 2010). For example, Gifford and Wilding (2013) work on ICT use by refugees in Melbourne shows that social media gives refugees the space to voice their experiences and present themselves to their friends, community and hosting country, thereby giving them a sense of belonging. Within the ICT4D domain, Andrade and Doolin (2016) draw upon the capability approach to understand how refugees in Australia exercise their agency and enhance their well-being using ICTs in ways that assist them live a valuable life in their new society. They find out that technology as a resource enabled the refugees to participate in an information society, to communicate effectively, to understand a new society, to be socially connected, and to express a cultural identity. Similarly, Abujarour et al. (2018) explored the relationship between the intensity of Internet use and the sense of social connectedness of Syrian refugees in Germany, as well as the impact of social connectedness on their social inclusion. In this study, we extend the research efforts of Andrade and Doolin (2016) and Abujarour and Krasnova (2017) by exploring the use of WhatsApp by IDPs in Nigeria and its contribution to their social inclusion.

3 Theoretical Framework

An appreciation of the domain of ICT for the social inclusion of IDPs is incomplete without theorizing the notion of human development itself. According to the Human Development Report (2016), human development is defined as *“the expansion of the richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the economy in which human beings live”*. This definition resonates with the Amartya Sen’s capability approach (CA) which focuses as the expansion of human freedom both as the primary end and means of development (Sen, 1999). It critiques the economic theories of development such as modernization that concentrate on income, gross domestic production and expenditure (Sahay and Walsham, 2017). CA constitute of two key elements namely functionings and capabilities. Functionings represent the beings and doings and are constitutive of a person’s wellbeing. Capabilities on the other hand is referred to as the freedoms that people have to enjoy valuable beings and doings (Alkire, 2005). However, Sen has not provided a list of valuable capabilities or functionings. As such, the CA framework has been criticized as an unworkable idea, incomplete and unspecified (Robeyns, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000). Sen intentionally resists prescribing a set of capabilities, rather he emphasizes the need for a democratic process to identify the list of valued capabilities that are culture and context sensitive. Sen (1999) proposes five distinct instrumental freedoms that directly or indirectly enhance people to live more freely. They are:

- **Political Freedoms:** Freedom of expression and the freedom to scrutinize and criticize authorities, to enjoy a free press and multi-party elections.
- **Transparency Guarantees:** Freedom to trust others and to ensure that information is honestly disclosed.
- **Economic Facilities:** Opportunities people have to participate in economic activities
- **Social opportunities:** Freedom to health facilities and education
- **Protective Security:** Opportunities available to prevent vulnerable people from abject deprivation.

Sen (1999) noted that the instrumental freedoms complement and reinforce each other. For example, people's participation in policy making can enhance transparency of the process. In this paper we examine how these five instrumental freedoms can be interpreted and applied to the Nigeria context in order to ascertain WhatsApp contribution to the social inclusion of IDPs in Borno State.

4 Research Method

To address the research aim of this study, a qualitative investigation was conducted to understand how IDPs in North Eastern Nigeria were using WhatsApp to enhance their social inclusion. A broadly interpretive approach was adopted in this study (Walsham, 2006) with the aim of understanding the social context of the use of WhatsApp. This is an ongoing study and data was collected for one week in June, 2018 in Maiduguri city of Borno State. The state has witnessed outbreaks of violence mainly due to the Boko Haram insurgency. Boko Haram is a jihadist militant organization based in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria. The insurgency has led to thousands of deaths with at least one attack taking place every month. As of October 2017, there were approximately 275,720 IDPs in Maiduguri, 5% of the IDP population are females; 56% are children below 18 years old and 7% are persons over 60 years (IOM 2017). There are about 2,406,151 mobile phone subscribers residing in Borno State (NBS, 2017). Many of the IDPs have smart phones and majority of them are active mobile subscribers who use WhatsApp. WhatsApp popularity in Nigeria has eaten into the traditional SMS (Short Message Service) and voice platforms provided by the major mobile operators such as Glo, MTN and 9mobile since the application enables users to make voice and video calls and text messaging for a relatively cheap data cost. Currently the cost of a new smart phone in Nigeria is as low as 4000 Naira (approximately \$11) and subscribing for a monthly WhatsApp bundle using the network providers is as low as 60 Naira (approximately \$0.17).

Data for this study was collected via interviews with four randomly selected participants who are IDPs and active WhatsApp users. The interview session took place at a safe location in Maiduguri and each session lasted about 45 minutes. The participants comprised of one woman (33 years old) and three men (34 years old, 42 years old and 39 years old). Two of the participants had a university degree, one had a higher national diploma and one had a high school certificate. All participants before insurgency lived outside Maiduguri; they all came from different cities affected by the insurgency namely Gwoza, Konduga, Bama and Baga. All participants are now living

in rented accommodation with their families in Maiduguri. We explained the objectives of the study and sought consent from each of the participants prior to commencing the interviews. The informed consent form states that participation in the study was voluntary and reports resulting from the study would not contain any information that could be used to identify the participants. Interview questions related to their experience in using WhatsApp, how they have used it to adapt to their new communities and self-empowerment and how they use it to enhance their social inclusion. Interviews were conducted in Hausa language and later translated into English. We use pseudonyms for participants to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. Qualitative data were transcribed and then analysed following the guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2014) and relating it with the concepts for Sen's capability approach. The following section shows how the Sen's five instrumental freedoms was drawn upon to understand the freedoms afforded to these IDPs as a result of their use of WhatsApp.

5 Analysis

5.1 Political Participation and Transparency

The 2015 election in Nigeria was the most anxious since the civilian regime in 1999. This was as a result of the rise in unemployment, corruption, poverty and more importantly the rising insecurity due to the Boko haram insurgency. The militants had seized almost 70 percent of the territory in Borno state. Many town and villages were under their control; the population of Maiduguri was gradually swelling with IDPs who had fled from the terrorist. The residents felt let down by the ever rising insurgency and insecurity caused by Boko Haram and what was described as non-effort by the then President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Despite the deteriorating insecurity situation, the government promised to hold the February 17, 2015 elections by boosting military presence and providing assurance of citizens' safety. The electoral body also made institutional arrangements for the thousands of IDPs to cast their votes at the IDP camps. Thus, many IDPs started using their WhatsApp communities to disseminate anti-government messages and reasons while the PDP led government should be voted out. This was done across various political WhatsApp groups constituted of hundreds of members. Ngamdu, 34, a political activist that fled his hometown, Bama to Maiduguri said he used WhatsApp to vigorously campaign against the previous administration and it was the fastest and easiest channel to reach a wide audience:

"I kept sending broadcast messages about the atrocities of the PDP led government and how Borno state has been destroyed because of their lack of commitments to ending the insurgency. And you know it's easy for information to go viral on WhatsApp and I am a member of over 30 WhatsApp groups. When I send the message to one political group, members see it and share it to another political group and it keeps been shared and before you know it in few hours the message would have reached over 20000 individuals within and out of Borno state. I believe this helped market the then opposition party APC "

Apart from political campaigns, Ngamdu noted that the WhatsApp group provided a platform for political discussions and people became more aware of daily political events and issues happening in Borno State. More importantly, citizens used WhatsApp to monitor the election activities on election day especially as there is a rising demand for real time information in Nigeria with a lack of uninterrupted 24-hour coverage on local television channels and radio stations, high costs of print media and impediments in freedom of expression and press freedoms. To prevent election rigging, Ngamdu noted that:

"Majority of the members of the various WhatsApp group became reporters in their polling units and also at the IDP camps during the election period. Before the election, broadcast messages were always sent daily stating in Hausa "Ku fita ku yi zabe. Ku Kasa, ku tsare, ku raka ku tsaya" meaning you should come out and vote. After voting, ensure you guard, protect and escort the results to the collation centre and wait until it is counted". So immediately people finished voting, people take pictures of the result sheet and share it on the WhatsApp group while others are sharing information on the tallies of the total numbers of votes of each political party".

The WhatsApp platform also played a watchdog role in ensuring the transparency in elections in Borno state. It ensured citizens participation by allowing the citizens to report news and information surrounding the election. However, Ngamdu noted that many of these IDPs turned political activists were also harassed during the day of election with some of them having their phones seized by police due to recording of evidence of election malpractice. However, this did not hinder the activist in reporting the live election feeds and results. Since after the elections, citizens have continued to use WhatsApp in offering suggestions on how the government can fix the country. Also, many have used the platform to reach out to their elected representatives who have their legislative aides registered in these groups that respond to citizens' complaints on behalf of the politicians. Andrade and Urquhart (2012) argue that ICTs are able to assist political liberty of its alleges beneficiaries however several wider institutional factors usually constrain these political liberties.

5.2 Economic Opportunities

Due to Boko Haram insurgency, Borno state has witnessed a rise in poverty and unemployment. Many private businesses have shut down as a result of the violence leaving many unemployed. However, the findings of the study revealed that citizens of the states are adopting the use of WhatsApp for entrepreneurship and also seeking temporary employment. Ayshe, 33, a divorcee who lives alone with her two kids took up the use of WhatsApp to start her own business. She specialises in selling a variety of baby clothes and products. According to her:

"When we moved to Maiduguri after Boko Haram took over Baga, I was unemployed So I decided why don't I continue the business I was doing while in Baga but using my phone since I did not have the money to rent a shop. So what I did is tie myself to one of the groups for example the Kanuri Jewel is a very popular WhatsApp group here. I started posting my products with some information such as pictures and price and instantly I started getting a lot of enquiries through private messages."

Gradually sales started coming in and I started expanding myself into other groups and I also got referrals from my existing customers"

Ayshe further noted that a lot of people prefer the online business as it prevents them from having to visit the markets. Crowded places such as markets are usually soft targets for Boko Haram suicide bombers. Also Ayshe noted how she has also been able to further provide temporary employment as a result of her business. She stated that:

"I have employed two delivery boys who reside in the IDP camp close to me who are in charge of ensuring the products reaches the customers. I pay them for each delivery they make. Payments are being made before any delivery is made. Once I receive a credit alert on my phone, I immediately pack the client's product and call any of the delivery boys to come pick it up"

Ayshe further noted that due to the emergence of WhatsApp, the number of women entrepreneurs in Borno has continued to grow, however there were still few challenges with the business model of WhatsApp amongst married women. She noted that some of her friends who started the business and stopped highlighted jealousy of their husbands as shown in the quote below:

"I had a friend who was also into the business; she sells locally made house incense. After a week or so of her marriage, she told me she had stopped and I asked her why. She informed me that because she had to address customer enquiries all the time, she was finding it difficult to engage in her house chores. The first thing she does when she wakes up is check her phone and also customers keeping sending and contacting her in the night and her husband was not too comfortable with her chatting with her male clients thus leading to several marital problems. To save her marriage she had to quit the business".

Ayshe also highlighted the dominating factor of husband and culture hindering many of the married women from engaging in this WhatsApp led home business. She stated this:

"You see due to our culture and religion, when a lady is married here, she is now under the control of her husband who is responsible for taking care of her. Usually, these women come into the marriage with their phone but how they access and use the internet is usually determined by the husbands. For a business like this that requires talking to men, it may not go down well with their husbands"

Interestingly, the findings of the study also showed that culture and religion hindered some women from using WhatsApp to become business entrepreneurs. Usually, culture in most countries in Africa constrains the participation of women in social, economic and political activities - even in agendas that impact their lives (Nyemba-Mudenda and Chigona, 2017).

5.3 Social Opportunities

Since its inception in 2009, the Boko Haram ideology has always been western education is a sin. The institutions of higher education in Maiduguri which are symbols of western education have been a major target of the Boko Haram militant group. One of its major institutions came under attack in January 2017 and since then several suicide attacks have been executed and foiled within and around the premises. These attacks usually lead to temporary shutdown of the institutions pending when

normalcy returns. Modu, 42 years, a lecturer from Gwoza working in one of the institutions found the use of WhatsApp as a novel approach to form an online classroom and continue engagement with 43 students enrolled for his 2nd year undergraduate political module whenever there was an attack and the university was temporary closed.

Majority of the students all have smart phones with WhatsApp installed in it. The WhatsApp environment was used to share course resources, information about upcoming deadlines and time extensions, also words of encouragement were shared across the platform keeping students connected through their phones in these difficult times. Modu stated:

"During this break, I will post a message on the WhatsApp group about political theories and asked them to go read about it on the internet and relate it to the Nigeria context. Within some few hours, messages start popping up and the students start debating on the topic. Some students will ask me: Mallam Modu, I'm sure you agree with my argument and disagree with Aisha's own? But I am always on the neutral side since we do not have one single answer in political studies. The good side of this WhatsApp group is that even when the university is in session, it's still very active"

Modu also stated how the students drive learning and discussion on the WhatsApp group. The students became more engaging and it allowed shy students to engage as shown in the quote below:

"I remember once the network was so poor and I couldn't post any message to the Whatsapp group throughout the morning. Once the network was back, several messages came into my phone and the first I could remember was from a student who hardly talks in class: Hi Sir is there no activity for us today? I replied that my network was bad and immediately they start sending in their messages. I also use the group to post messages encouraging the students to be resilient and not be deterred by the threats of Boko Haram and more importantly to always be vigilant".

It is evident that the use of the WhatsApp group has resulted in building up trust between the students and the lecturer and encouraging collaborative learning. When the university was re-opened, the students who are made up of many displaced persons provided a good feedback on the use of WhatsApp as noted by Modu. The findings show that Mr Modu who is a lecturer has been able to use WhatsApp to enhance his teaching and learning in a vulnerable environment. The finding of the study show that WhatsApp indeed can enhance the freedom of teaching and learning but like every other virtual learning environment, there are social, human and environmental factors that could hinder its usage (Cetinkaya, 2017).

5.4 Protective Security

Whatsapp provides opportunities and possibilities for individuals to interact and engage with people during crises by disseminating relevant information. In this study, Whatsapp have enabled active citizenship where members of the community take ownership of their community safety. Jafaru, 39, an IDP and a community leader from Konduga noted that being a member of the neighbourhood WhatsApp group seems to have made members more security conscious. Jafaru stated:

"There was a day one of the group members posted "who else heard that loud bang. Is it another bombing?" immediately there were several responses to the

questions, apparently it was one of the transformers within the neighbourhood that blew off..Also whenever there is an attack immediately people post messages informing members who are not aware and also advise them on routes to follow when getting home in case they are not at home"

Jafaru believes that the WhatsApp group have made neighbourhood safe places and have served for preventive purposes.

"In the group we share security alerts and pictures of wanted criminals and terrorist from the security agencies and these criminal are not stupid. If they know that there is a WhatsApp group where members of the community pay attention to and monitor in collaboration with the local vigilantes, then they know: Okay we should not be in this area because the members are monitoring us already"

Other benefits of the WhatsApp group are that it allows members to report suspicious activities in the community. Also, the local vigilantes have been given phones and their numbers have been added into the WhatsApp group. Jafaru noted that the local vigilantes have found the WhatsApp group helpful in solving community crime. During the interview, Jafaru raised some concerns about the effectiveness of the use of WhatsApp for protective security. He noted that many of the members sometimes hesitate to discuss security issues that specifically have to do with boko haram and report incidents in the group due to fear of retaliation. Also, Jafaru noted that whenever some members report criminal incidence in the group chats calling the attention of local vigilantes, the response time from the vigilantes is usually ineffective. The findings show that citizens are increasingly eager to create safe communities for themselves and WhatsApp has provided the opportunities for participatory community policing. Although there are few factors that are usually encountered that may hinder WhatsApp usage to achieve community policing which on the other hand can decrease the feelings of community safety (Pridmore et al., 2018). To avoid this, Van Steden et al. (2011) argued that institutional arrangements should be provided to actively involve all stakeholders in the use of technology in enhancing their personal and environmental safety.

6 Conclusion

Studies on IDPs affected by Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria are underrepresented in the literature due to either the lack of interest by scholars or the difficulties of access to them. Hence, the main newsworthy contribution of this study is the nuanced account of WhatsApp use by IDPs and how such use enhances their freedoms to live a valuable life. From the case narratives, using the Sen's five instrumental freedoms, we have illustrated how the use of WhatsApp in the case study led to increased social, economic and political opportunities for the IDPs. While discussing all these positive outcomes, we have also identified the social, economic and infrastructural constraints that hinder the full conversion of use of WhatsApp into freedoms in this particular context. However as indicated it is pertinent for ICT4D scholars to understand and work towards mitigating the contextual factors that influence the full realization of these freedoms. In proposing areas for potential mobiles for development research, the limitation of this study is acknowledged. This study was limited to a single case study and was carried under a short time frame,

although there is scope for conducting a longitudinal study using both qualitative and quantitative sources and other resilience frameworks on the basis of the existing results in order to provide more insight on the contributions of WhatsApp to the social inclusions of IDPs in Nigeria.

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