



Instant Network Schools

Name: Instant Network Schools

Organization: United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

Year launched: 2014

Countries: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, DRC and South Sudan

Users: 62,500 refugee youth

Vodafone Foundation had a passion for mobile learning. The massive telecommunications provider had created a “digital school in a box” concept with tablets that could be pre-loaded with any kind of curriculum for all subjects. The tablets worked on Vodafone’s mobile network without incurring any charges to the user. However, the Foundation realized quickly that they had the right technical expertise to develop and scale this technical solution, but were lacking the right networks and a clear understanding of the user needs.

The former deputy commissioner of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) met with Vodafone Foundation in 2013 and was thrilled to discover a technical solution that would solve a long-standing problem in the refugee camps where UNHCR worked. UNHCR staff had been exploring how to offer digital education, but had not found the right partner. The idea was quickly pitched to UNHCR’s Innovation team who brought it from idea into the development phase using their own experience.



Refugee youth study on pre-loaded tablets

UNHCR and Vodafone decided to launch the product, Instant Network Schools, in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya in May 2014. The Instant Network Schools (INS) opened in 13 refugee schools. In just a short period of time, teachers observed increased confidence in the use of Information and Communication technology (ICT) and an increased understanding of and exposure to the outside world.

Driven partially by these strong initial results from the Dadaab schools and partially by the Foundation’s ambitious scaling goal, UNHCR expanded quickly. By mid-2018, the program was operating in 64 schools across refugee camps in DRC, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Only three full time staff managed the process.

That said, each country had a slightly different context and set of needs. While Vodafone provided 100% of the funding, UNHCR managed the program expansion and adaptation. One of the most critical parts of Instant Network Schools was the curriculum pre-loaded onto the tablets provided to classrooms. Depending on the country context, governments could play a very active role in controlling what students learn. UNHCR worked to ensure that refugees were provided with content that fit local regulations while allowing them to learn broadly and think independently.



School in a box filled with tablets and connectivity

The partnership made great tech solutions scale to thousands due to the continued support of Vodafone Foundation, and yet UNHCR's Innovation unit acknowledged that managing expectations with private sector players could be difficult at times. The partnership required a great deal of flexibility and transparency on both sides.

One area of common expectation mismanagement was the impact measurement of the program. UNHCR had been working with the Vodafone Foundation to understand the difference between outcomes and outputs. While measures like 'classroom size' were an important indicator of how many students used the program and theoretically how much attention each student received (outputs of the program), it was not the best indicator for measuring the quality of education (program outcome). The outcomes were what really needed to be measured to show if the program was having the desired impact. The differences in these types of indicators were nuanced, and as the Innovation Lead at UNHCR described, it is easy to fall into the trap of measuring things that are easy to measure – rather than measuring what really matters.

Chris Earney, Head of the UNHCR Innovation unit, explained that the quick scaling of Instant Network Schools should not be seen as a strong indicator that it was successful – yet. "It's in a lot of places quickly, but that doesn't really mean anything," Chris acknowledged. "The whole conversation around scale... everyone means different things when they talk about scale." Benefits to moving more slowly could mean that the program has time to fix any problems that arise before moving to a new location. Benefits to scaling quickly included enabling more refugees to have access to education more quickly. And the definition of scale could change completely if Instant Network Schools expanded to include populations beyond refugees.

As Instant Network Schools moved forward, there were outstanding questions on who would maintain the program long term, and whether it could be replicated or moved to an open-source model for easier multiplication. Chris also stressed that the cultural elements of the program required more focus: "We've been fetishizing the technology, and then missing everything else." The slick tablets and centralized Wi-Fi made mobile learning possible even in hard-to-reach areas, but developing the right curriculum, training the right teachers, and helping students understand how to use the tech well were even more important pieces of the program.

By mid 2018, Instant Network Schools had moved out of UNHCR's Innovation unit and into the Education unit, to be run fully by the staff there. The program continued to explore new strategies around connected learning and new partners who are interested in joining the effort, such as Google. "It's now hardwired into the programming of our organization," Chris explains about UNHCR's search for strong partnerships. The right partners can carry these innovative ideas throughout the world.

Key success factors: strong technical and funding partner with a drive to deliver real impact; embedded innovation unit with experience in working on and handing over ideas

Key challenge: managing partner expectations around what constitutes as impact

Summary	Tech		Scale	Partners	Impact	Success Factors	
Wifi and tablets pre-loaded with educational content for refugee schooling	LOW TECH	Primary tech used: Hardware	SCALED	Private sector	SOCIAL	Initiative: Defined goals, linked to mandate	Organizational: Alignment to strategy, dedicated team