

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Innovating To Ease The Plight Of Refugees Nationwide



The primary purpose of UNHCR is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country.

In more than six decades, the agency has helped millions of people restart their lives. Today it has a staff of more than 7,600 people in over 125 countries devoted to helping refugees worldwide.

The Challenge

There are over 10 million refugees in crisis around the world, with many millions more still trying to return home. Displaced from their homelands by conflict and disaster, they find themselves stateless and homeless, without the resources to reestablish their lives. In the wake of World War II, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established by the United Nations.

The following year, the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees—the legal foundation of helping refugees and the basic statute guiding UNHCR's work—was adopted. By 1956, UNHCR was facing its first major emergency: the outpouring of refugees when Soviet forces crushed the Hungarian Revolution.

CHALLENGE

UNHCR has helped tens of millions of refugees restart their lives after facing the unthinkable. Unfortunately, millions still desperately need its help. Similar to other humanitarian organisations, UNHCR needs to continuously develop innovative solutions in order to best serve as many people as possible.

SOLUTION

To help nurture this burgeoning culture of innovation, the agency's innovation team launched "UNHCR Ideas" on the Mindjet Spigit platform. UNHCR Ideas was designed as an online platform that could bring people together to generate ideas and collaborate on new innovations for the organisation.

RESULT

UNHCR partnered with the IKEA Foundation in its latest challenge. The winning idea was to distribute tablets to refugee children that are pre-loaded with language-learning applications that can improve the first and second language skills of refugee learners in both self-study and classroom contexts.

“Creating better educational opportunities for displaced children and their families is important to us. This is why we partner with UNHCR Innovation.”

Jonathan Spampinato
 Head of Strategic Planning and Communications, IKEA Foundation

Over the last 60 years, UNHCR has helped tens of millions of people restart their lives after facing the unthinkable. Unfortunately, there are still many millions more that desperately need its help. Similar to other humanitarian organisations, UNHCR needs to continuously develop innovative solutions in order to best serve as many people as possible. The interest in engaging with new technologies and innovation is of growing interest to humanitarian agencies worldwide, including UNHCR. The agency felt that with the right tools, it could break through its own bureaucracy to create a culture of innovation and find new solutions for long-standing challenges in their global work with refugee communities.

The Solution

To help nurture this burgeoning culture of innovation, the agency’s innovation team launched the “UNHCR Ideas” community. UNHCR Ideas was designed as an online environment that could bring people together to generate ideas and collaborate on innovations for the organisation. Through a private donation, UNHCR was able to launch the Ideas programme on the Mindjet Spigit platform. With Spigit, UNHCR would be able to bring together thousands of people from its offices and partner organisations as well as refugee camps in the 126 countries where it operates.

An initial challenge was launched on the platform to gauge performance and engagement. The six-week challenge, rolled out to 318 participants, asked how to improve access to information and services provided by UNHCR to refugees residing in urban areas. UNHCR staff responded with 114 ideas posted, more than 430 votes cast, and over 1,200 comments made in the discussions around the topic. Made up of carefully chosen specialists, the UNHCR Expert Review Panel and Leadership Committee selected a winning idea, which was then implemented as a project in 2014.

UNHCR then followed up with a challenge sponsored by the IKEA Foundation, which aimed to improve learning opportunities for children and youth in the world’s poorest communities by funding holistic, long-term programmes that can create substantial, lasting change. The Foundation works with strong strategic partners to apply innovative approaches to achieve large-scale results in four fundamental areas of a child’s life: a place to call home; a healthy start in life; a quality education; and sustainable family income.



The Result

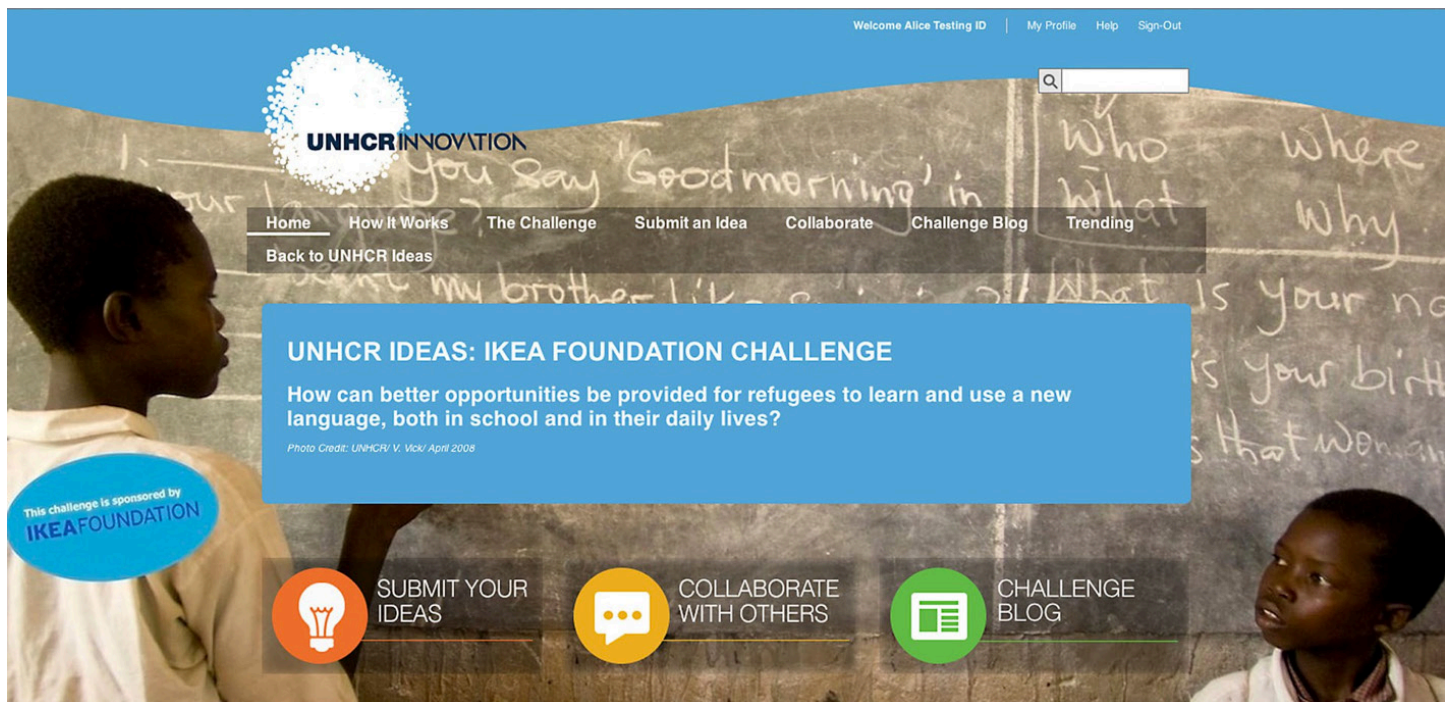
The recent activities within UNHCR Innovation exemplify the growing interest in innovation for humanitarianism. There was an overwhelming interest from staff to participate in the challenge, which led to the original cap of 150 participants being raised significantly. From interviews with participants, the majority found the platform easy to navigate and enjoyed having an opportunity to connect with others globally and contribute their ideas to the wider organisation.

In the IKEA Foundation challenge that followed, the winning idea came from Ioannis Papachristodoulou, a Senior IT Assistant for UNHCR in Athens, Greece. His idea was simple: distribute tablets to refugee children that are pre-loaded with existing language-learning applications. Through mobile application technology, the first and second language skills of refugee learners can be fostered or improved in both self-study and classroom contexts.

Funding to research and pilot Papachristodoulou's idea will come from a €2.5 million IKEA Foundation grant awarded to UNHCR's Innovation Unit—an inter-departmental team within the agency that champions more efficient, creative solutions to the daily challenges that refugees face.

"We want to help create better opportunities for the millions of refugee children and their families who have been forced to flee their homes due to war, famine, and natural disaster," explains Jonathan Spampinato, Head of Strategic Planning & Communications at the IKEA Foundation. "Creating better educational opportunities for displaced children and their families is important to us. This is why we partner with UNHCR Innovation."

The accessibility and mobility of tablets could prove to be an efficient way to help secure better language-learning opportunities for displaced children and their families.



Spigit was founded to help companies unleash the power of their employees, partners, and customers to drive innovation. Spigit is the leading software for crowdsourced innovation, and is used by leading companies in systems integration, financial services, insurance, pharmaceutical, healthcare, technology, and more, including IBM, Capgemini, Citibank, and Pfizer. Spigit's 4.5M users from 150+ countries have generated over \$1B in increased revenue from their enterprise innovation programs. Spigit is a wholly owned subsidiary of Mindjet, and is headquartered in San Francisco with offices throughout the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, and Australia.

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