ARTICLE

OPEN

Check for updates

Information dependency: understanding the communicative ecology of young refugees in Kakuma

Valentina Baú [ID] [1][✉]

This article looks at the communicative ecology of young people living in refugee camps. Findings from research conducted in October 2022 in Kakuma camp, Kenya, with both humanitarian professionals and young people living in the camp are presented. The aim is to provide an understanding of the workings of this ecology and the role that humanitarian actors play within it. An illustration of the three layers of the communicative ecology of Kakuma youth—technological, social and discoursive—is provided in order to offer an understanding of the communication and information network that characterises young people's lives. In the end, this paper demonstrates how information can be viewed as a form of aid that refugee populations rely on. Reflecting on this form of dependency is useful for humanitarian organisations to recognise their role and agency in the lives of young refugees. It is also helpful to re-design their communication effort, with a view to delivering critical information for young people while providing a parallel path to self-reliance in communication.

---

[1] Western Sydney University, Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI), Sydney, Australia. [✉]email: v.bau@westernsydney.edu.au

Introduction

This article explores the communicative ecology of young people living in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. It does so through the presentation of findings from research conducted in the camp. The aim of this study is threefold: firstly, it seeks to provide an understanding of the workings of this ecology and the role that humanitarian actors play within it; secondly, it fosters young refugees' self-reliance in communication by arguing for a shift in the current dependency on agency-provided information; lastly, it aims at encouraging reflections, both from practitioners and scholars in this area, on the scope of the influence that humanitarian agencies have in protracted refugee situations, with particular focus on contexts of encampment such as Kakuma.

The article starts with an overview of the literature on communicative ecology, positioning this concept as an analytical framework within the context of encamped communities. This is followed by a contextual discussion that situates Kakuma within the background of protracted refugee situations, and examines the conditions that characterise the latter. The experience of young people and their role within these contexts is brought forth in order to establish the centrality of this group in the study. The ensuing sections offer details on the methodology adopted in this research, the methods that have been employed for data collection, participant recruitment and data analysis. The latter is presented through an illustration of the three layers of the communicative ecology of young people in Kakuma refugee camp: technological, social and discursive.

Through an analysis of the communicative ecology of the encamped youth, in the end, this paper demonstrates how information can be viewed as a form of aid that refugee populations rely on. Reflecting on this form of dependency is useful for humanitarian organisations to recognise their role and agency in the lives of young refugees, and to re-design their communication effort with a view to delivering critical information for young people while providing a parallel path to self-reliance in communication.

The findings and related reflections presented in this study are important as humanitarian agencies working in contexts of protracted refugee situations, and particularly in camps, are influential in the lives of the youth. These organisations provide critical and need-specific information in the event of an emergency and when new processes are rolled out in the camp. At the same time, they are also key actors in shaping the social life of young people, through the organisation of sports-related activities or other types of gatherings and entertainment, and in guiding their personal growth through the education and training opportunities they offer—including work experience. While this research has a focus on Kakuma, its findings can have wider impact on the work of agencies operating in other camps, as the mechanisms of information dependency expounded here have roots in the broader camp dynamics and relationships that exist between aid organisations and refugee populations in similar contexts. However, an analysis of each individual context remains important.

Understanding communicative ecologies

Tacchi (2008) explains that communicative ecologies are used to understand and describe how information flows within a specific place: this may be a community, a neighbourhood, or anywhere where a group or groups of people coexist. Different contexts will exhibit different modes in which communication flows, what communication technologies are in use, and what opportunities people have to interact and exchange information. Researching a communicative ecology means building a picture of the 'everyday, complex network of information and communication in an individual's life' (Tacchi 2008 para 3).

From an alternative perspective, Hearn and Foth (2007) clarify how the concept of media ecology centres on the role of media and examines how these structure and influence both people's lives and broader society. This is different from the idea of a communicative ecology, which takes into account also the interconnections and interactions between individuals and groups. These can, at times, be mediated by technology, but they are not exclusively so. As Slater (2013) states:

> Communicative and technological ecosystems are clearly ensembles of much more than just media, and the specification of certain assemblages as 'media' is consequential, constitutive and needing to be open to investigation rather than built into our definition of the field […] itself (p 45).

The layers of the communicative ecology identified by Foth and Hearn (2007) allow us to see a communication environment as a system through three different lenses:

i. Technological. This component of the ecology comprises all devices, including media, that facilitate interaction and connection between people;
ii. Social. This involves the different modalities that people adopt in order to organise themselves socially (e.g., friendships, community organisations, businesses);
iii. Discursive. This refers to the actual content of the communication that takes place within the ecology, and comprises the various ideas and themes addressed in conversations and, more generally, in its social universe (p 756).

According to Broad et al. (2013), the concept of communicative ecology is very useful for understanding how the communication infrastructure of a particular context can be strengthened by practitioners through targeted interventions, and how this tailored effort can encourage social change. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that the different groups, actors and channels comprising an ecology all play a role in the way communication is directed. Hence, while communication can be influenced and its content purposefully shaped, those who comprise the ecology are also agents in this microcosm. Once again, in the words of Slater (2013):

> Agency is not about the efficacy of given objects in achieving ends that have already been defined by an actor, but rather it is a story about the way in which connection works (p 49).

Studies on communicative ecology have encompassed a range of contexts: Okon (2015) has applied this framework to the analysis of ICTs for rural community development in the Niger Delta region, while Watson and Amababa (2015) have employed it to explore communication and violence in the Ghana's Upper East region. With a youth-related focus, Solovyeva (2017) utilised this model to look at the communicative patterns of Moscow metropolitan area residents, mapping recurring dispositions particularly among young dwellers; Sabiescu (2024), on the other hand, applied this in the UK to map communication practices that result in young people's formation of interests and aspirations, in order to envision what connections are needed to support the future achievement of their aspirations. The author of this article was the first to investigate the communicative ecologies of young people in refugee camps through her study on *The Communicative Ecologies of Displaced Youth* (Baú 2024).

Spialek and Houston (2019) argue that, through the undersanding of a communicative ecology, practitioners are better able to recognise community strengths, design programmes that more effectively target people's needs, and democratise community response mechanisms in emergencies. Communication plays a critical role in contexts of emergencies, including those of a protracted nature. A number of international organisations working in the humanitarian field have addressed overtly the role of 'information as aid.' The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' 2005 World Disasters Report, in particular, states that 'information is a vital form of aid [...] Disaster affected people need information as much as water, food, medicine, or shelter. Information can save lives, livelihoods and resources' (IFRC 2005). Sandvik (2016) has noted how the recognition of information as a basic need has become increasingly widespread, while Barrell (2018) acknowledges 'information as aid' as a distinct field in itself, which utilises communication as part of the humanitarian response. Meesters and Wang (2021) have also more recently affirmed that 'relevant information helps affected citizens to understand the situation, make informed decisions, and gain access to life-saving aid' (p 328).

A number of authors have addressed how populations can become dependent on aid for their survival (see Selim et al., 2018; Mangwania, 2022), and how aid may descrease opportunities for the development of sustainable livelihoods among communities affected by conflict or disaster (see Gladden, 2020; Harvey, Lind 2005; Mugisha, Mbache, Mushy 2021; Prabaningtyas et al. 2023). There is also increasing research on refugees' socio-economic activities and self-governance within camps; yet, broader issues of camp governance remain insufficiently explored (AbouAssi et al., 2025). Addressing this gap, Čović (2025) critiques traditional participatory governance models, pointing to resistance and alternative narratives that emerge through localized and collective action. At the same time, Yeo (2025) advocates for leveraging refugees' skills and knowledge to build resilience, while Mekonnen (2025) calls for the inclusion of displaced persons as co-producers of knowledge to challenge existing power hierarchies.

In line with these conceptualisations, if information is to be regarded as a form of aid, then it follows that a discussion on its dependency should also be tackled in order to problematise its effect. A modest number of inquiries on information dependency have been carried out in the field of Media Studies. Jun and Firdaus (2023), for example, have argued that the emergence of the Internet and other types of new media have brought about new sources of dependency on information, including one of a political nature. Through an analysis of social media use, Aldamen (2023) has shown how Syrian refugees in host countries have become dependent on these platforms for obtaining specific information. Vozab, Mihalec and Uremović (2023) have analysed media dependency in Croatia during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, studies on information as a form of aid and the dependency this creates between humanitarian organisations and affected populations are missing. This research begins to fill that gap.

At the same time, if we look at the ecology of communication as a way to promote communicative justice in realities where communication is monopolised by a group of influential actors, as expounded by Herrera-Huérfano, Pedro-Carañana and Ochoa Almanza (2023), then we can regard refugee camps as environments where communication content is influenced by humanitarian organisations for a range of reasons. Hence, from a communicative ecology perspective, and on a quest for communicative justice, it is necessary to recognise the importance of not only the right to information, but of that to communication too. Communication, from this perspective, can advance justice if we look at the use of media systems through a critical lens: these systems should enhance communication practices that are more

locally-led, creative and transformative (Herrera-Huérfano et al. 2023). This is what this article also proposes.

Kakuma and protracted encampment

Most displacement crises today have become protracted situations where both internally displaced people and refugees remain in exile for an extended length of time, with no forseeable solution (Crawford et al, 2015). For the majority of people displaced by conflict, the option of resettlement is one that is rarely available. Alternatives such as local integration and return are also complex. As a result, refugees are most commonly left to the arrangements made for them by the host country, which may or may not facilitate an appropriate response from UNHCR and its implementing agencies (Miller, 2020). These provisions, which typically involve the curbing of refugee agency, revolve often around structural arrangements such as encampment, resulting in a form of 'enforced dependency' (Harvey, Lind 2005 p 28).

A large number of young people are growing up in situations of protracted displacement across the African continent (Guyot 2007). In these contexts, nothing is static and contextual elements are constantly changing. Displaced populations are typically very heterogeneous, and a clear pathway to stabilisation and, ultimately, return does not exist (Crawford et al. 2015). Camps are created to host those who are in exile: these are improvised infrastructures that result from an immediate response to exceptional circumstances. While their purpose is to provide a home to those who need shelter, its occupants never perceive themselves as settled. Rather, even after decades, they continue to see themselves as en route to another location, either their place of origin or a third country. Relationships, skills and status from the past are lost in the present wait, and the project of a meaningful life in the future becomes difficult to shape in an endless state of uncertainty (Papoutsi 2023).

Although intended to be temporary, these camps often exist for many years or even decades and encounter serious governance issues. Their management involves a complex web of actors, such as international organisations, national governments, NGOs, and local stakeholders. While humanitarian efforts are designed to support refugees, these interventions can inadvertently undermine refugee autonomy by limiting their involvement in decisions that affect their daily lives (AbouAssi et al., 2025).

Jansen (2016) underlines that refugee camps should not be looked at simply as isolated zones of despair, but also as spaces of creativity, resilience, and political resistance, deeply connected to global social and economic networks and media. While initially shaped as practical aid infrastructures, these spaces are transformed over time by residents' routines and actions into lived environments. The resulting setting reflects both modern governance and economic life, shaped—but also limited—by humanitarian bio-political care. The lifestyles that emerge reflect a blend of control and agency, leading to the normalisation of alternative, increasingly permanent forms of settlement.

Kakuma camp is located in Kenya in the West District of Turkana County, at relative proximity to the South Sudanese border. Together with Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, it has a population of almost 295,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR Kakuma November 2024 data). The camp was established in 1992 following the arrival of young Sudanese escaping the war. It is now home to a large number of communities besides Sudanese, including South Sudanese, Ethiopians, Somalis and Congolese. Other nationalities are Ugandans, Rwandans, Burundians and Erithreans. The camp is managed by the Kenyan Department of Refugee Services, while UNHCR coordinates thirty-nine humanitarian agencies that provide assistance to the camp population.

In 2019, young people between the age of 15 and 24 represented 16% of the migrant population in Africa (Migration Data Portal 2021). While UNHCR does not make available specific figures on the number of young people in Kakuma, including Kalobeyei settlement, children aged between zero and 17 years constitute 57.45% of the combined population (UNHCR July 2023). Through this percentage, we can infer that the proportion of youth in the camp is exceptionally high.

When it comes to information provision, those seeking asylum in a new country, including young people, have the right to access information that is critical for their current wellbeing and future livelihood. Having reliable and transparent access to services through which information is provided, as well as an understanding of how these services can be claimed, provides people with agency in their decision-making (Bellino and Kakuma Youth Research Group 2018). The Inter-Agency Standing Committee, a humanitarian coordination forum of the United Nations system, emphasises how identifying the needs of young people, gathering their feedback, and circulating information and key messages that address these needs are critical phases in the humanitarian programme cyles (IASC 2020).

With particular reference to situations of encampment, Guyot (2007) has argued that young people should actively participate in decision-making bodies—their participation should recognise the important role they play within the household, often by acting as intermediaries between humanitarian organisations' communication and the home. This author has also highlighted how, along with contributing to issues such as vulnerability, violence, malnutrition, idleness and trauma, refugee camps can also foster dependency among the youth. Combined with the long-term prospect of confinement, this can lead young people to abandon their social responsibilities (Guyot 2007). Also Crisp (2004) has observed how the isolation and exclusion that characterise the circumstances of refugees in camps, and their lack of financial autonomy, leave them unable to contribute even to the societies that are hosting them.

A global refugee youth consultation led by UNHCR (2016) has identified the 'facilita[tion] of refugee youth networking and information sharing' (p 29) as one of the core actions that need to guide humanitarian actors in shaping youth-specific policy and programmes. As Guyot also (2007) underscores, young people 'are a conduit of information, serving as liaisons between aid structures and their own community' (p 163); they also 'have a strong sense of what is wrong with service provision, what may be lacking in their communities and how these stressors might be ameliorated' (p 171).

Research methodology

This research was carried out as an in-depth qualitative exploration. The methods that were adopted are outlined in Table 1. These include semi-structured interviews, participatory research workshops and ethnographic interviews.

The interviews were conducted by this researcher. They were one hour long, semi-structured discussions where representatives from humanitarian organisations working in Kakuma were asked questions related to their use of media and communication in their work with young people, and to their knowledge around young people's media preferences or communication practices within the camp. The participatory research workshops were also facilitated by this author in English, while a research assistant provided cultural context and occasional translation in/from Kiswahili when this was deemed necessary. In each workshop, young people worked in two groups of four using flipchart paper and coloured markers, and addressed the three questions of 'who', 'how', and 'what about,' in reference to young people's communication practices in the camp: who do young people in Kakuma communicate with? How do they pass on or receive information? What are the contents of their conversations? Groupwork enabled participation and collective reflection; the adoption of a visual method that allowed young people to draw their own ecology was also a catalyst for discussion and decision-making. This author has extensive experience in working with conflict-affected and displaced communities in different areas of the Global South, particularly in African countries, and, to the extent of her ability, was mindful of the potential dynamics arising from her role as a foreign researcher. The ethnographic interviews consisted of brief conversations conducted by research assistants with young people in different locations across the camp where the youth tend to gather. These short interactions were devised to capture young people's preferred media channels, communication practices and information sought in their daily life in the camp.

The research was conducted in partnership with FilmAid Kenya during October 2022. FilmAid Kenya is a development and humanitarian organisation in Kakuma that harnesses the use of film and digital media to inform and educate the refugee population. Its activities are critical especially at times of an emergency. The organisation also carries out a wide range of projects with the youth, providing them with media production skills and with the knowledge needed to make informed choices in the context of the camp.

Invitations to participate in an interview were circulated by FilmAid Kenya directly to the other agencies working in the camp; those invited, in particular, were program staff who worked closely with the youth on a range of activities from education, sports, vocational training, and so forth. Humanitarian agencies that agreed to take part in this study are listed in Table 2. FilmAid Kenya also recruited young people for the participatory research workshops through the camp's community structure and community mobilisers the organisation works regularly with. Besides residing in the camp, inclusion criteria for young people involved being aged between 16 and 24, and having conversational knowledge of the English language. The final sample for the workshops comprised a mix of genders (male/female) and nationalities, with the youngest participants being 18 years old.

Overall, FilmAid Kenya supported the researcher in all logistical aspects of the study, including obtaining relevant permits to access the camp, recruiting participants and organising venues for research activities, developing an interview schedule with partner agencies working in the camp, facilitating the participation of

Table 1 Methodology.	
Method	**Population sample**
-Semi-structured interviews to gather experts' views on young people's media use and communication practices	-15 staff members: program officers (or equivalent role) of selected humanitarian agencies operating in the camp, who work closely with young people
-Participatory research workshops to uncover young people's understanding of their communication needs and media use	-4 groups of 8 young people
-Ethnographic interviews to gain insights into young people's media use	-approximately 60 people surveyed

Table 2 Agencies whose representatives have participed in an interview for this study.

Participating organisations

UNHCR
Humanity & Inclusion HI
LWF World Service - The Lutheran World Federation
Danish Refugee Council DRC
SNV Dutch development agency
FilmAid Kenya (*Note*: 2 representatives were interviewed)
PeaceWinds Japan
Norwegian Refugee Council NRC (*Note*: 2 representatives were interviewed)
Co Here - formerly Xavier Project
Windle International Kenya WIK
GIZ German development agency
World Vision
Echuman Wellness and Rehabilitation Centre (*Note*: not officially a UNHCR partner but works with young people from the camp)

Table 3 Technological layer of the communicative ecologies of Kakuma camp.

TECHNOLOGICAL LAYER

Mobile phone
Voice calls, SMS, voice notes, video calls, **emails, hotlines, Whatsapp (groups)**, Telegram (groups), Instagram, **Facebook**, Twitter, Imo, Messenger, Viber, Skype, TikTok, **YouTube**
Traditional media
Mobile Information Caravan service (MICs), mobile screenings, radio, television
Print & Art
Posters, leaflets, brochures, noticeboards, billboards, drawing, painting, dancing, etc.
Financial
MPesa, banking apps

their own staff in interviews, and providing vital guidance in navigating both cultural and practical matters around the camp.

When conducting research in a refugee camp, receiving support from one of UNHCR's implementing partners provides the benefit of being able to rely on established communication channels and networks of relationships; this facilitates the process of reaching and retaining participants. Humanitarian organisations in camps can also navigate institutional and community gatekeepers more effortlessly. A slight drawback of this support is that the majority of those who are likely to be included in the research are those already engaged with the organisation's activities; this has the potential of excluding marginalised or less-engaged members of the population. In the context of this research and activities with youth, for example, this was mitigated by allowing young people to share information about the study with others they knew, who could become involved if they were interested in participating.

Based on a review of published literature on ethics and ethical practice related to research among refugees, Deps et al. (2022) have observed that the unfolding of a study in this area is shaped by issues related to the vulnerability of the refugee population (including power asymmetries), to procedural ethics arising from ethics committees and formal processes, and to the practical ethics that one encounters when conducting the research. Power imbalances, in particular, are at the heart of many ethical challenges researchers encounter when studying displacement. From an epistemological standpoint, these unequal dynamics are reflected and reinforced in how knowledge about displacement is produced. Those with lived experience of forced migration are frequently invited to share their personal narratives, yet they are rarely placed at the centre of research production. Consequently, control over the research process typically stays with the researchers (Clark-Kazak, 2021). This study is not exempt from these dynamics. Here, the voices of young people have been collected and analysed in light of the humanitarian context that shapes them and provides them with meaning that is dependent on their environment; in doing so, it is important to acknowledge that what presented may not adequately provide full coverage of the breadth of experiences, capabilities, and aspirations of the youth.

The communicative ecology of young refugees in Kakuma
The data analysis was conducted through a staged process. Firstly, the ethnographic interviews were reviewed: types of media used, information sought by the youth and other communication behaviour-related data were transcribed and organised in a table. Secondly, data gathered from the participatory workshops were added to the table. Additional qualitative observations or notes on comments or reflections presented by the youth during the research activities were also organised in distinctive categories. Findings arising from the analysis of the participatory workshops and ethnographic interviews held with the youth were then triangulated with the answers from the interviews with agencies' representatives. While most gaps were filled effectively thanks to data collected through three different methods, information from the semi-structured interviews added a key dimension through the experience and views of those working with young people. At the same time, these were also useful to develop a broader picture of both strengths and weaknesses of the existing communication structure between agencies and young refugees.

The process of data organisation has facilitated the emergence of a Technological layer (Table 3), a Social layer (Table 4) and a Discursive layer (Table 5) in the communicative ecology of young people in Kakuma camp. The discussion that follows offers details on each of these levels of analysis.

In discussing the first layer, it should be noted that, in this research, the term technology is utilised broadly to include all

Table 4 Social layer of the communicative ecologies of Kakuma camp.

SOCIAL LAYER
Agencies
UNHCR, IRC, WFP, LWF, WTK, NRC, Red Cross, JRS, IOM*, community mobilisers
[*These are the agencies that young people have indicated they mostly communicate with directly]
Camp structure
Security, zone leaders, block leaders, community leaders, police, security committee
Personal
Friends, family, religious leaders, church members, Bible/Qur'an study groups, choir members, elders, boyfriend/girlfriend, barber, neighbours, team-mates (e.g. sport-groups such as the basketball group, the football group, the volleyball group), shepherds, shopkeepers, doctors/nurses, teachers/head teacher, culture/interest groups [e.g. Kakuma Reading Society, Ubuntu dance group, actors group, journalists group], messenger [sending someone to pass on information]
External
Turkana community, journalists from local media outlets/radio stations

Table 5 Discoursive layer of the communicative ecologies of Kakuma camp.

DISCOURSIVE LAYER
Friends, family and neighbours
Employment, education, family issues, household tasks, **income generation**, advice and guidance, leisure, dating / relationships, **business plans, future**, money, marriage, **career**, responsibilities, **disputes, problem-resolutions**, community issues, **food** and **water**
Shopkeepers
Products, debt, **job opportunities**
Teachers
Exams, **career choices**, advice, promotion
Religious leaders
Religious matters, Bible studies, spiritual guidance
Doctors/nurses
Health issues, medications, **vaccinations, outbreaks**, counselling
Block leaders and security
Disputes, complaints, peace and order in the community
Sports groups
Team contribution, **physical health** and exercise, tournaments schedule
Agencies
Education, scholarship opportunities, job opportunities/career, sport (opportunities), food distribution/*bamba chakula* (**food vouchers**), **resettlement**, shelter, **security, protection issues, health**, women **empowerment, water** and sanitation, new arrivals, "special needs"

channels through which information is conveyed or exchanged, regardless of their actual format. In their communication with the youth, agencies utilise all the **channels highlighted** in Table 3. When considering this layer of the ecology in Kakuma, three important points arise both from the discussions with young participants during the participatory workshops and from the interviews with agency representatives:

- there is a significant lack of access to laptops or desktop computers among young people in Kakuma. The limited opportunity to connect to the Internet is provided through mobile phones, who the youth either own or share with friends or family members;
- the youth can access important information on matters concerning their lives in the camp or any available opportunity for work or training on specific Facebook pages managed by the agencies. Comments, questions and, less typically so, some content can be posted by the youth on those pages for further information exchange;
- agencies such as FilmAid Kenya may offer young people the opportunity to receive training on the use of audio-visual technologies, including photography, radio and film-making courses. The productions developed by the youth through these activities are then shared on online channels such as YouTube or other Facebook pages related to the camp. Overall, these technologies are also part of the communicative ecology of young people in Kakuma, as they are being

employed to produce content (e.g., videos, images, podcasts) that both informs and entertains the youth.

Personal and social connections that are part of young people's daily lives are listed in Table 4 and grouped into four categories. These are based on the youth's indications during the participatory workshops.

As a result of the large number of agencies operating in Kakuma, young people living in the camp also interact with a high number of humanitarian professionals from different organisations. Community mobilisers, commonly referred to as 'incentive staff', are also important in the camp. These are refugees who are recruited informally by agencies to carry out a number of tasks in relation to the organisations' activities, and whose primary role is to engage the community in participating in a new project/initiative, or to pass on relevant messages on issues that may affect camp residents. Young people also have some interaction with the broader structure of the camp, particularly when it comes to security. Similarly, youth living in Kakuma are free to communicate with visitors and can reach the nearby town (of Kakuma) freely. The Turkana community can access the camp for business or to visit its residents. A new section of the camp called Kalobeyei has been set up as an intergrated settlement next to the Kenyan local population.

In relation to the discoursive layer of the ecology, Table 5 shows how themes highlighted across different groupings are connected to those highlighted within the Agencies group. In

Fig. 1 Wordcloud of the main social gatherings taking place in Kakuma camp, generated from research data.

particular, young people's communication themes connected to humanitarian agencies appear, to various degrees, to encompass all of the themes present in the other categories. This shows the central role that agencies play not only in the lives of young people living in the camp, but also as information-providers within the discoursive layer of young people's ecologies. And as young people seek and receive information from the organisations, these in turn are able to add, remove, or even prioritise and downgrade content in the youth's agenda. For example, if a health emergency is declared in the camp, agencies will push that content in the discourse; if a new system for scholarship applications is being adopted, agencies, again, will open up the space for conversation on such topic.

The communicative *momentum* of Kakuma's social layer

During the participatory workshop activities, young people also identified a number of social opportunities, social moments or gatherings in their lives, where information is exchanged. Upon analysing the forms and nature of such gatherings, which are part of young people's daily lives, it is interesting to note how these are either organised by the agencies working in the camp, or utilised by agencies to communicate with the population of the camp or with particular groups within it. Figure 1 visualises the types of gatherings that bring people together in the camp, and which young people are typically also likely to attend, either invidually or with their peers / family members.

These social opportunities can also be grouped in accordance with their format and purpose. Below, information on these is organised with the aim of explaining the nature of the different activities and how some of them are connected, to various extents, to the agencies' communication effort.

- Youth support groups, community engagement groups, community meetings, group discussions, home visits

These gatherings take place either with or between community members, and are aimed specifically at information transmission, either one way or multi-directionally, often with the intention of collecting feedback.

Arrangement type: organised by agencies **and** used by agencies to pass on information.

- Sports competitions, inter-school competitions, training courses

These youth-specific gatherings typically involve schools, which are often supported by certain agencies, whose

programmes target the youth in different ways, either in some or most of their activities.

Arrangement type: organised by agencies **and** used by agencies to pass on information.

- Kakuma Got Talent, World Refugee Day

These are large-scale events that have been established by UNHCR and are implemented by the organisations for a variety of purposes, including celebrating refugee youths and their talent, and keeping young people engaged and entertained.

Arrangement type: organised by agencies **and** used by agencies to pass on information.

- English teams' televised soccer games, queues during food distribution (or water collection)

These gatherings of a seemingly very different nature bring together large groups of people in the camp. The latter type, in particular, is connected to the work of a specific organisation. Yet, what both have in common is that neither are purposefully organised with the idea of a congregation. Nevertheless, these represent crucial opportunities to deliver important messages.

Arrangement type: used by agencies to pass on information.

- Religious services, school assemblies

These official events are part of the community's life and their goal, among others, is to discuss issues related to the community and, where/when possible, suggest solutions, including through the use of spiritual guidance. While there is no defined humanitarian purpose behind them, also these events can be approached as communication platforms for refugee-related matters.

Arrangement type: used by agencies to pass on information.

As highlighted elsewhere in this article, alongside programmes implementation, delivering messages to camp residents is a crucial task for humanitarian organisations. Because of the large number of refugees living in the camp, the different languages spoken, and the diverse media use based also on demographics, agencies need to both develop new and take advantage of existing opportunities for communication. What was presented above shows how social opportunities of various kinds, such as those mentioned by young people during research activities, become sites of information sharing on topics or matters that the organisations want to bring to the community's attention, even when these are unrelated to the actual purpose or focus of the physical gatherings.

Discussion

The findings introduced in the previous sections enable us to form an image of the communicative ecology of young people living in Kakuma. At the same time, while it is useful to reflect generally on communication and its practices, this image needs to be looked at through the frame of a humanitarian context. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that what is presented here is not an attempt to suggest that young refugees lack agency or capacity in advancing their rights and concerns, or are unable to establish independent communication exchanges with individuals or groups they wish to engage with on subjects that matter to them. Rather, this concluding discussion on the communicative ecology of the young refugees places emphasis on the critical role that agencies play within the humanitarian ecosystem of the camp, specifically in relation to the youth.

As acknowledged previously in this article, in contexts of protracted encampment, humanitarian organisations have a critical role in shaping the lives of displaced communities, and they do so also through the use of communication. The observations

presented below want to unveil the connecting thread that exists between the humanitarian agencies' communication effort within the camp, and the reality of information dependency that this has created. While this process is not antagonistic in nature, and it is instead a concerted action by these actors to support the camp community, it has reproduced, in some aspects, the dynamics of aid delivery to disenfranchised populations presented previously through the literature, without considering the potential of these communities to produce and share information that is relevant to them. This is especially applicable to young people, who have a strong ability to use communication technologies creatively and who are in contact with many different groups and individuals across the camp, as also revealed by the analysis of the ecology.

In summary, the communicative ecology of young people in Kakuma shows the following traits in its composition.

Technological Layer. Young people in the camp are exposed to and may interact with a relatively broad range of media technologies (as presented in Table 3). Whilst, on a day to day basis, they mostly engage with mobile phones and with mobile phone–accessible communication platforms, the agencies enable access to additional channels that young people would either have no contact with or suitable skills to utilise independently.

Social Layer. This layer, introduced in Table 4, is heavily influenced by the activities implemented by agencies with young people in the camp. At the same time, agencies have a presence in this layer not simply as actors but also as active agents, passing on information or communicating important messages to the youth: in particular, what young refugees view as 'social opportunities' are in turn regarded by agencies as 'channels'—or in other words, opportunities to pass on important messages.

Discursive Layer. Topics and themes belonging to this layer (presented previously in Table 5) revolve around young people's everyday life and challenges, and they are similar to those of young people who do not live in camps. Yet, here again, agencies are present in this layer as central actors in the discourse that characterises the lives of the youth. The youth's discourse, in particular, comprises topics that have a substantial connection to the issues dealt with by the humanitarian agencies in their work in the camp. Communication is central in delivering key messages and in meeting young people's information needs in relation to those issues.

Through this analysis, it has become evident how communication and information sharing in Kakuma are heavily dependent on humanitarian agencies, who appear to be setting the agenda or at least influencing the conversations based on their areas of work (mandates). Social gatherings of different kinds, which are often organised by agencies themselves, also become opportunities to send messages to the camp population and/or to receive information. There is a wide range of media channels; these are mostly managed, run, or produced by the agencies. Young people have some involvement in audio and video productions that are circulated in the camp. They also organise other activities independently based on their interests, both cultural and sports-related, and make use of media channels for such purposes too.

The literature review has highlighted a lack of studies on information as a form of aid, and limited understanding has been developed so far on the dependency this type of aid delivery creates between humanitarian organisations and affected populations. This research takes a step in the direction of creating awareness of the dynamics of information provision between humanitarian agencies and refugees in context of protracted

encampment, where the role of the organisations is critical not only in the everyday functioning of the camp, but also in recognising and acting upon the right to information that displaced people hold.

In order to attain communicative justice, however, it was discussed previously how Herrera-Huérfano et al. (2023) encourage us to look beyond the right to information, and to recognise the importance of the right to communication too. This means that rather than scrutinising merely the ideas of information transmission or information sharing, we need to re-think how the information that is being circulated has been produced and by whom. This can be done by repurposing the media system of an ecology and prioritising creative and transformative communication practices that are locally-led. In an environment such as that of Kakuma refugee camp, where young people represent a large share of the population, innovative communication practices that are youth-led can work alongside the effort of humanitarian organisations by promoting an agenda that more effectively meets the needs of the younger generations, while delivering messages in a vocabulary and format of their creation. This would not only make messages more comprehensible to the youth, but it would also strengthen a sense of community within the camp. On a connected ecology-related concept, Spialek and Houston (2019) state that:

> Robust communication ecologies are associated with greater perceptions of neighbourhood belonging. Neighbourhood belonging includes the emotional connection individuals have with other local residents and the amount of support that individuals provide to those neighbours. Neighbourhood belonging contributes to the civic life of communities by influencing local problem-solving efficacy and engagement (p.4).

Thus, while humanitarian organisations may play a dominat role in the communicative ecology of young people in Kakuma camp, agencies themselves can redress the balance by supporting the community, with particular focus on the youth, to communicate for and among themselves through effective means on issues that affect them. While critical information on subjects such as service provision, health emergencies and other decisive matters that impact the lives of refugees in camps must continue to be fact-checked and provided by relevant organisations, the layers of the ecology can shift towards a more community-driven agenda (discursive) and self-organised communication opportunities (social) where information is presented, discussed and recognised through more creative and engaging practices (technological) with the direct involvement of young refugees.

Conclusions

Through findings from a study conducted in Kakuma camp, Kenya, this article has provided an analysis of young refugees' media practices and communication networks within the camp through the framework of communicative ecology. The presentation of the ecology brings to light the role that humanitarian agencies play as communication agents in the lives of young people, and the influence they have both on the avenues of information transmission and on the content of information itself.

The literature introduced highlights how, over time, information has come to be regarded as a form of aid in emergencies and humanitarian settings, including in protracted situations of encampment such as Kakuma. Dynamics of aid delivery can often be likened to those of information sharing with affected populations. As a result, this can generate dependency also in the use

of communication. Young people comprise a significantly large group within the camp, and their communication-related behaviour and / or adoption of communication technologies must be considered in order to enhance agencies' communication effort. At the same time, this should leave space for self-reliance and youth-driven practices.

As this article demonstrates, applying a communicative ecology-informed lens to understanding young people's access to information and information-sharing behaviour is useful for humanitarian agencies to redesign their communication task in the camp in a manner that allows the youth to contribute directy to message shaping and delivery, based on their own skills, knowledge and lived experience. Most importantly, young people can play a role in setting their own communication agenda. While this should continue to include key items that humanitarian organisations need to bring to the refugee community's attention, through more inclusive practices enhanced emphasis can be given to what young people value the most in relation to their needs, interests, and dreams for their future.

While this research was conducted in Kakuma, its findings may provide lessons and encourage reflections for other refugee camps around the world. Practical suggestions to foster youth-led information provision in refugee camps, for example, can involve training young refugees as community communicators, supporting youth-led media initiatives, creating youth clubs or councils that facilitate dialogue and co-create messaging relevant to their communities, facilitating connections with local media outlets and engaging youth in designing communication strategies and content with humanitarian agencies. While it needs to be acknowledged that some of these initiatives already exist, including in Kakuma, this paper shows the importance of looking at young people's communicative ecology to see whether these are genuinely working and how new ones can be introduced.

This study also opens up space for further investigation in this area, expanding the scope of inquiry to the inclusion of young people's media literacy within the reality of refugee camps. Moreover, it offers a launching plaftorm for more research on the use of communication for community engagement, with young refugees in particular, in contexts of emergencies and protracted displacement where humanitarian and development work meet.

Data availability

A dataset for this study is not available due to privacy concerns related to the main participant group.

References

AbouAssi K, Diab JL, Nabatchi N (2025) Refugee Camp Governance: Challenges, Opportunities, and Future Directions. In AbouAssi K, Diab JL, Nabatchi N (eds) Inside the Camp: Reimagining Refugee Governance for a Changing World. Institute for Migration Studies, Lebanese American University, Beirut, p 2-6

Aldamen Y (2023) Understanding social media dependency, and uses and gratifications as a communication system in the migration era: Syrian refugees in host countries as a case study. Social Sciences 12(6):322

Barrell J (2018) iNGO Communications: global strategic planning. In Garsten N, Bruce I (eds) Communicating Causes: strategic public relations for the non-profit sector. Routledge, London, p 185-199

Baú V (2024) Communicative Ecologies of Displaced Youth Ways of Connecting in Protracted Situations of Encampment. Communication Studies 76(3):297–311

Bellino MJ, Kakuma Youth Research Group (2018) Closing Information Gaps in Kakuma Refugee Camp: a youth participatory action research study. American Journal of Community Psychology 62:492–507

Broad GM, Ball-Rokeach SJ, Ognyanova K, Stokes B, Picasso T, Villanueva G (2013) Understanding Communication Ecologies to Bridge Communication Research and Community Action. Journal of Applied Communication Research 41(4):325–345

Clark-Kazak C (2021) Ethics in Forced Migration Research: Taking Stock and Potential Ways Forward. Journal on Migration and Human Security 9(3):125–138

Čović S (2025) Redefining Participation in Refugee Camps: Challenging Dominant Narratives and Mapping Resistance. In AbouAssi K, Diab JL, Nabatchi N (eds) Inside the Camp: Reimagining Refugee Governance for a Changing World. Institute for Migration Studies, Lebanese American University, Beirut, p 10-12

Crawford N, Cosgrave J, Haysome S, Walicki N (2015) Protracted Displacement: uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London

Crisp J (2004). The Local Integration and Local Settlement of Refugees: a conceptual and historical analysis. UNHCR, Geneva

Deps PD, Rezendea I, Andradea MAC, Collina SM (2022) Ethical Issues in Research with Refugees. Ethics, Medicine and Public Health 24: 100813

Foth M, Hearn G (2007) Networked Individualism of Urban Residents: discovering the communicative ecology of inner-city apartment complexes. Information, Communication and Society 10(5):749–772

Gladden J (2020) System of Structural Dependency in the Sudanese Refugee Women of Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. The Journal of Sociology Social Welfare 47(1):149–171

Guyot J (2007) Child and Youth Participation in Protracted Refugee Situations. Children, Youth and Environment 17(3):159–178

Harvey P, Lind J (2005) Dependency and Humanitarian Relief: a critical analysis. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London

Hearn G, Foth M (2007) Communicative Ecologies: Editorial preface. Electronic Journal of Communication 17(1-2):2–6

Herrera-Huérfano E, Pedro-Carañana J, Ochoa Almanza, J (2023) Dialogue of Knowledges in the Pluriverse. In Pedro-Carañana J, Herrera-Huérfano E, Ochoa Almanza J (eds) Communicative Justice in the Pluriverse. An International Dialogue. Routledge, New York, p 5-31

IASC (2020) With Us & For Us: working with and for young people in humanitarian and protracted crises. UNICEF and NRC for the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, New York

IFRC (2005) Focus on Information in Disasters, World Disasters Report 2005. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva

Jansen BJ (2016) The Protracted Refugee Camp and the Consolidation of a 'Humanitarian Urbanism'. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (ijurr). https://edepot.wur.nl/419236

Jun TJ, Firdaus A (2023) Social Media Political Information Dependency (SMPID): Theorising news seeking in an age of sharing and posting. SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research 15(1):1–21

Mangwanya M (2022) Evaluating the Impacts of Foreign Aid on Low-Income Countries in Sub- Saharan Africa. International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science 11(6):370–377

Meesters K, Wang Y (2021) Information as Humanitarian Aid: Delivering Digital Services to Empower Disaster-Affected Communities. In Oliveira L, Tajariol F, Gonçalves L (eds) Digital Services in Crisis, Disaster, and Emergency Situations. IGI Global, Hershey, p 328-351

Mekonnen D (2025) Tentative Reflections on Refugee Camp Governance: Whose Voices Matter Most? In AbouAssi K, Diab JL, Nabatchi N (eds) Inside the Camp: Reimagining Refugee Governance for a Changing World. Institute for Migration Studies, Lebanese American University, Beirut, p 19-22

Migration Data Portal (2021) Child and Young Migrants. IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, Berlin https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/child-and-young-migrants (accessed 31 Aug 2023)

Miller SD (2020) Conflict-induced displacement and development. In Bastia T, Skeldon R (eds) Routledge Handbook of Migration and Development. Routledge, London, p 363-372

Mugisha A, Mbache E, Mushy R (2021) Factors Influencing Refugee Dependence on Humanitarian Aid at Nakivale Settlement South-Western Uganda. Global Journal of Human-Social Science 21(H1):19–32

Okon U (2015) ICT for Rural Community Development: Implementing the Communicative Ecology Framework in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Information Technology for Development 21(2):297–321

Papoutsi A (2023) The Temporalities of Encampment: Producing Discomfort 'in Transit.' Lessard-Phillips D, Popoutsi A, Sigona N (eds) Migration, Displacement and Diversity. The IRiS anthology. University of Birmingham, Birmingham, p 67–71

Prabaningtyas, Pudjiastuti RAR, Alami TN, Farbana AN, Arfan F (2023) Access to education for refugee children in indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic: Challenges and adaptation strategies. Advances in Southeast Asian Studies 16(1):39–61

Sabiescu A (2024) Aspirations Mapping and Communicative Ecologies, Working Paper Collection | 5. Loughborough University, London

Sandvik KB (2016) The humanitarian cyberspace: shrinking space or an expanding frontier?. Third World Quarterly 37(1):17–32

Selim N, Abdalla M, Alloulou L, Halli MA, Holmes SM, Ibiß M, Jaschke G, Gonçalves Martín J (2018) Coming Together in the So-Called Refugee Crisis. Anthropology in Action0 25(3):34–44

Slater D (2013) New Media, Development and Globalization: making connections in the Global South. Polity Press, Cambridge

Solovyeva O (2017) Communicative Ecology of Moscow Residents: mapping major patterns among the young dwellers. Urban Studies and Practices 2(3):7–15

Spialek ML, Houston JB (2019) The influence of citizen disaster communication on perceptions of neighbourhood belonging and community resilience. Journal of Applied Communication Research 47(1):1–23

Tacchi J (2008) Ethnographic Action Research Training Handbook. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane https://ear.findingavoice.org/intro/2-0.html#:~:text=What%20are%20'Communicative%20Ecologies'%3F,which%20communication%20and%20information%20flows (accessed 31 Aug 2023)

UNHCR (2016) "We Believe in Youth": global refugee youth consultations. Final report. UNHCR Geneva https://www.unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/09/We-Believe-in-Youth-Global-Refugee-Youth-Consultations-Final-Report.pdf (accessed 31 Aug 2023)

UNHCR (July 2023) Kenya: registered refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR, Nairobi https://www.unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/08/Kenya-Statistics-Package-31-July-2023-DIMA.pdf (accessed 31 Aug 2023)

Vozab D, Mihalec M, Uremović LH (2023) Media dependency in a multiple crisis: information seeking and media trust after an earthquake during the Covid-19 pandemic. Druš. Istraž. Zagreb God 32(1):93–114

Watson MD, Ambaba G (2015) Hidden Violence of Postcolonial Africa: a communicative ecology view of Ghana's Upper East Region. Ghana Studies 18:136–161

Yeo J (2025) Whole-community approach: asset-based crisis management for governance of refugee camps. In AbouAssi K, Diab JL, Nabatchi N (eds) Inside the Camp: Reimagining Refugee Governance for a Changing World. Institute for Migration Studies, Lebanese American University, Beirut, p 36–37

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares have no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Approval was obtained from Western Sydney University Human Ethics Committee on 31/05/2022. In-country approval was also received from NACOSTI (National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation), Kenya, on 15/06/2022. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Informed consent

All participants accepted to participate in this reseach freely. They received an explanation of the research objectives and of the importance of their input in the study; they were also able to discuss these further with the researcher, ask questions and clarify expectations before providing consent at the start of each research activity. Consent was obtained throughout the month of October 2022, as research activities were carried out.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Valentina Baú.

Reprints and permission information is available at http://www.nature.com/reprints

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.