Digital Collaboration in Refugee Management: Challenges and Opportunities for Non-Ratifying Countries in the Digital Era - The Case of Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The management of refugees in Indonesia, as a non-ratifying state to the 1951 Refugee Convention, poses considerable challenges in developing effective collaborative frameworks for refugee protection. Although Indonesia is not bound by international treaty obligations, it functions as a critical transit country for over 12,700 forcibly displaced individuals. The digital transformation era offers unprecedented opportunities to enhance collaborative refugee management through innovative technological solutions that bridge coordination gaps between government agencies, international organizations, and civil society actors. This study examines the challenges and opportunities of implementing digital collaborative frameworks in Indonesia's unique non-ratifying context, focusing on inter-agency coordination mechanisms and technological infrastructure requirements. Through a qualitative analysis of the perspectives of various stakeholders, this research identifies critical gaps in digital infrastructure, technical capacity, and institutional coordination that limit the effectiveness of collaborative efforts. The findings indicate that while digital technologies hold considerable promise for enhancing coordination efficiency and service delivery, their implementation is encumbered by significant barriers, including technological disparities, data privacy concerns, and institutional resistance to collaborative innovation. The present study makes a significant contribution to the extant literature on refugee management in non-ratifying states by providing empirical analysis of the impacts of digital transformation on humanitarian collaboration. The policy recommendations put forth include the development of national digital refugee management frameworks, the establishment of interoperable technology infrastructure, and the creation of capacity-building initiatives. These initiatives are designed to address technological disparities among stakeholders while ensuring

refugee agency and meaningful participation in digital governance processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global refugee crisis represents one of the most complex humanitarian challenges of the 21st century, characterized by the forced displacement of millions of people worldwide due to armed conflicts, human rights violations, natural disasters, and climate change consequences. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the global refugee population reached 42.7 million in 2024, comprising 36.8 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate, including 4 million in refugee-like situations requiring international protection, and 5.9 million Palestinian refugees under UNRWA's mandate (*Global Trends*, 2024). This crisis transcends geographical boundaries and demands innovative collaborative solutions that can address the complex needs of vulnerable populations while managing the administrative, logistical, and social challenges faced by host countries, particularly in contexts where legal frameworks may be limited or absent.

UNHCR's legal foundation for protecting and assisting refugees is primarily established through the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which define fundamental rights for refugees and establish the principle of non-refoulement. This mandate has been expanded through several regional instruments including the 1969 OAU Convention in Africa and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America (*UNHCR's Mandate for Refugees and Stateless Persons, and Its Role in IDP Situations*, 2024). These legal frameworks create binding obligations for ratifying states to provide protection and ensure access to basic rights and services for refugee populations through coordinated governmental and international responses

Indonesia occupies a unique and strategically important role in the global refugee protection framework. As the world's largest archipelagic nation and a major transit hub in Southeast Asia, Indonesia currently hosts over 11,735

refugees and asylum seekers from 52 different countries, with the largest groups originating from Afghanistan (45%), Myanmar (22%), and Somalia (9%) (*UNHCR Indonesia Protection Brief*, 2024). Despite this significant humanitarian responsibility, Indonesia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, maintaining this position due to various factors related to domestic policy, national security concerns, and legal and social consequences deemed incompatible with the country's current conditions and priorities. As Indonesia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, the government is not under any legal obligation to recognise refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) in the country. The UN Refugee Agency is therefore tasked with assessing whether an individual qualifies for refugee status (*The Perils Of Seeking Refuge In Indonesia And Other Countries Not Part Of The UN Refugee Convention*, 2022). However, Indonesia continues to demonstrate humanitarian commitment by providing temporary shelter and essential services to vulnerable populations, operating within a framework of voluntary cooperation with UNHCR and international partners rather than legal compulsion.

This non-ratification status creates both opportunities and challenges for developing effective refugee management systems. On one hand, it provides Indonesia with flexibility to manage refugees more pragmatically without being bound by the extensive obligations set forth by international conventions. On the other hand, it creates legal protection gaps and coordination challenges that require innovative approaches to ensure adequate protection and services for refugee populations. The absence of formal legal frameworks necessitates greater reliance on voluntary cooperation mechanisms between government agencies, international organizations, and civil society actors, making collaborative frameworks essential for effective refugee management.

The digital transformation era has fundamentally altered how humanitarian organizations deliver services and coordinate responses to complex emergencies. Recent technological advances in data management, artificial intelligence, blockchain technology, and mobile applications have created unprecedented opportunities to enhance refugee protection and service delivery. Digital platforms enable real-time information sharing, improve coordination among various stakeholders, and facilitate more efficient resource allocation (Abraha, 2025). However, the implementation of these technologies in refugee management contexts, particularly in non-

ratifying countries, presents unique challenges that require careful analysis and strategic planning.

The implementation of digital collaborative technologies in refugee management contexts, particularly in non-ratifying countries, presents unique challenges that require careful analysis and strategic planning. While smartphones and other technologies can assist decision-making, they do not always improve migrants' journeys or lives. Forcibly displaced populations can face barriers in the form of limited internet access and low levels of digital literacy. Digital tools may also expose them to surveillance and privacy risks(Alencar, 2023). Digital technologies can help support the health of migrants and refugees and facilitate research on their health issues. However, ethical concerns include security and confidentiality of information; informed consent; how to engage migrants in designing, implementing and researching digital tools; inequitable access to mobile devices and the internet; and access to health services for early intervention and follow-up (Matlin dkk., 2025).

Indonesia's current refugee management system has not fully embraced digital technological advances in its collaborative operations, creating significant coordination challenges among stakeholders. Digital infrastructure disparities vary dramatically between urban and rural areas, creating barriers to effective inter-agency coordination and collaborative service delivery. The absence of integrated digital platforms for collaborative refugee data management creates information silos, duplicated efforts, and inefficient resource utilization among government agencies, international organizations, and civil society partners. Current coordination relies heavily on traditional communication methods and fragmented databases, preventing real-time information sharing and collaborative decision-making processes. Furthermore, the lack of standardized digital infrastructure specifically designed for collaborative refugee protection limits humanitarian actors' ability to coordinate comprehensive services and track collective outcomes effectively.

Recent developments in digital humanitarian response have demonstrated the transformative potential of collaborative digital platforms for refugee management. Digital technologies can help recent arrivals navigate bureaucracies, orient themselves, and become familiar with the local information landscapes in their new host community. Moreover, refugees have used mobile technologies to seek medical support on mental health apps and through SMS (*How Technology Is Affecting the Refugee Crisis - World |*

ReliefWeb, 2016). Blockchain technology offers opportunities for secure identity management and collaborative documentation systems, while AI-powered platforms can improve resource allocation and service matching across multiple organizations. Mobile applications can bridge language barriers and provide refugees with direct access to essential information and coordinated services from various providers. Cloud-based coordination platforms can enable multiple stakeholders to collaborate effectively while maintaining data security and privacy standards required for protecting vulnerable populations. The potential of digital technology to enhance collaborative refugee management in Indonesia extends beyond operational efficiency improvements. Innovative technological solutions can facilitate more effective coordination between the Indonesian government, international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM, and civil society partners. Digital collaborative platforms can enable real-time data sharing, enhance joint case management systems, and provide coordinated access to information and services for refugees themselves, creating a more integrated and responsive humanitarian ecosystem.

This research addresses a significant gap in understanding how digital technology can be effectively leveraged to support collaborative refugee management in countries that have not ratified the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. While extensive literature exists on refugee management in countries that are parties to international refugee law, limited empirical research examines the specific challenges and opportunities faced by transit countries like Indonesia in developing collaborative digital frameworks. Previous studies have shown that while digital technology developments can provide alternative pathways for refugee self-reliance and empowerment, they also generate new forms of exclusion and exploitation that require careful consideration in collaborative design processes. However, insufficient attention has been paid to how collaborative digital frameworks can be designed and implemented in non-ratifying contexts where legal frameworks are limited and coordination mechanisms are largely voluntary rather than mandated.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities for implementing collaborative refugee management through digital technology in Indonesia's context as a non-ratifying country. The research examines existing gaps in digital infrastructure and technical capacity while proposing innovative collaborative solutions that can enhance coordination between government agencies, international organizations, and civil society actors. By analyzing current practices and identifying best

practices from other contexts, this study contributes to the growing literature on collaborative refugee management in non-signatory countries and provides practical policy recommendations for advancing digital technology utilization in Indonesia's refugee protection efforts.

The expected benefits of this research include theoretical contributions to academic understanding of digital humanitarian innovation in collaborative contexts and practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners working to improve refugee protection and welfare through enhanced inter-agency coordination. The study's significance lies in its potential to inform the development of replicable models for digital collaborative refugee management that can be adapted to other non-ratifying countries facing similar coordination challenges. By focusing on the intersection of digital transformation and collaborative governance in refugee management, this research addresses critical contemporary challenges in humanitarian response and contributes to more effective, coordinated, and humane approaches to refugee protection in the digital era.

2. METHODS

This research employs a qualitative methodology to provide an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for implementing collaborative refugee management through digital technology in Indonesia. The choice of qualitative approach is strategically aligned with the exploratory nature of this study, which seeks to examine complex social phenomena involving multiple stakeholders operating within Indonesia's unique legal and institutional context as a non-signatory state to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Qualitative methodology enables the researcher to capture the nuanced perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of various actors involved in refugee management, providing rich contextual insights that quantitative approaches alone cannot adequately address (Creswell & Poth, 2017).This methodological framework is particularly well-suited for investigating emerging phenomena such as digital transformation in humanitarian settings, where existing theoretical frameworks may be insufficient to explain complex interactions between technology, policy, and practice.

The research employs a multi-stakeholder analytical framework that recognizes the complex ecosystem of actors involved in refugee management in Indonesia. Primary stakeholders include Indonesian government agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Law and Human Rights, and

local immigration offices, as well as international organizations including UNHCR, IOM, and various UN agencies. Secondary stakeholders encompass civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations providing direct services to refugees, academic institutions, and technology providers developing digital solutions for humanitarian contexts. Tertiary stakeholders include refugee communities themselves, local community members, and private sector actors involved in digital infrastructure development. This comprehensive stakeholder mapping ensures that the research captures diverse perspectives and experiences while identifying potential points of collaboration and conflict in digital refugee management initiatives. The multi-stakeholder approach is essential for understanding how different actors perceive the benefits, risks, and challenges associated

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Humanitarian Innovation in Collaborative Context

Digital humanitarian innovation represents the transformation of humanitarian practices through collaborative use of digital technologies, data, and online platforms to collect, process, and distribute information in response to crises or disasters. In the context of refugee management, this innovation is characterized by multi-stakeholder collaboration where data—collected by various organizations and digital volunteers—is algorithmically processed to support collaborative decision-making and coordinated rapid response (Ravn & Johns, 2025).

This collaborative approach enables real-time information sharing between international agencies, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in coordinated efforts to protect and assist refugees (Kurpiewska-Korbut, 2024).The theoretical foundation for digital collaborative refugee management emphasizes cross-sector collaboration, sustained investment, and ethical considerations that ensure all stakeholders can participate meaningfully in collaborative processes. Digital infrastructure offers significant opportunities to improve humanitarian responses to refugees through enhanced efficiency, service coordination, and data access, while reducing administrative burden on humanitarian organizations. However, its success is heavily dependent on addressing challenges such as technology access, digital literacy, data privacy, and most importantly, establishing effective collaborative mechanisms between diverse stakeholders (Latonero & Kift, 2018).

Digital humanitarian innovation in Indonesia's non-ratifying context requires significant theoretical adaptation. Without formal legal commitment to refugee protection, this creates what can be termed a "collaborative innovation gap"—the disconnect between technological capabilities for humanitarian response and the limitations imposed by absent legal frameworks and fragmented institutional responsibilities. This gap necessitates innovative collaborative approaches that can function effectively within voluntary cooperation frameworks rather than legally mandated coordination.

The theory of contextual adaptation becomes crucial as it must simultaneously accommodate: (1) the legal uncertainty of refugee status affecting data sharing protocols, (2) UNHCR's unique role as the sole protection mandate holder creating coordination asymmetries, and (3) complex domestic political dynamics that influence stakeholder willingness to participate in collaborative digital initiatives. This creates a unique collaborative environment where technological solutions must be designed to facilitate voluntary coordination rather than enforce compliance-based cooperation.

The application of collaborative governance theory in Indonesia's refugee management context reveals complex dynamics that extend beyond traditional humanitarian frameworks. Collaborative governance theory emphasises that although those collaborating may have a unifying goal, individual actors and organisations are also bound by their own motivations and incentives (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This theoretical understanding becomes particularly relevant in Indonesia's non-ratifying context, where the absence of legal mandates creates what Emerson and Nabatchi (Emerson dkk., 2012) describe as "voluntary collaborative arrangements" that must navigate competing institutional interests and resource constraints. The study's findings align with collaborative governance involves public and non-public actors in deliberative processes through which problems are identified and defined and new creative solutions are designed and implemented . However, in Indonesia's context, this collaborative framework operates within what can be termed "constrained voluntarism"—where political willingness to collaborate exists but is limited by legal boundaries, resource disparities, and institutional cultures that may resist digital transformation.

Current Digital Infrastructure and Stakeholder Capacity

The analysis reveals significant disparities in digital infrastructure preparedness among stakeholders involved in collaborative refugee management in Indonesia. Despite government efforts to strengthen digital infrastructure, varying levels of technological capacity among different organizations create substantial barriers to effective collaboration. Almost half of all refugees and asylum seekers are from Afghanistan, followed by Myanmar, Somalia, and 49 other countries. UNHCR has a country office in Jakarta and field presence in Aceh, Medan, Makassar, Pekanbaru, and Tanjung Pinang (*Dimana kami bekerja*, t.t.).highlighting the geographical scope of coordination challenges.

International organizations, particularly UNHCR and IOM, possess sophisticated digital systems but face critical integration challenges with government platforms and local partner systems. UNHCR's proGres system and IOM's MiMOSA platform represent advanced data management capabilities, yet interoperability issues prevent seamless collaborative data sharing between these systems and Indonesian government databases. This technological fragmentation significantly undermines collaborative effectiveness and creates coordination bottlenecks that limit the ability of different organizations to work together efficiently.

Civil society organizations present the most diverse range of digital capabilities, creating a collaborative challenge where larger NGOs with advanced technological resources must coordinate with smaller community-based organizations relying on basic communication tools. This technological heterogeneity requires collaborative approaches that can accommodate varying levels of digital sophistication while ensuring equitable participation in coordinated refugee management efforts.

The dispersed nature of refugee populations across Indonesia creates varied collaborative challenges at different administrative levels. Major urban centers like Greater Jakarta, Medan, Bogor, Makassar, and Pekanbaru, each hosting significant refugee populations, require sophisticated collaborative digital systems capable of managing complex coordination among multiple stakeholders. Conversely, smaller municipalities with refugees scattered across areas like Kupang, Lombok, and Aceh struggle with basic digital infrastructure requirements for effective inter-agency collaboration.

Refugee stakeholders have developed unique perspectives on collaborative digital infrastructure, often viewing technology as both an opportunity for empowerment and a potential source of vulnerability. Recent research indicates that for every refugee, the right to work and access to labour are fundamental requirements for securing a sustainable livelihood and living a dignified life with enhanced resilience ((Prabaningtyas dkk., 2025).Digital technologies can provide pathways for economic inclusion and self-reliance, but they must be designed with refugee agency and meaningful participation at their center.

Community-led digital innovations demonstrate the potential for refugee empowerment through technology, but they also highlight the importance of ensuring that collaborative digital frameworks genuinely serve refugee interests rather than simply facilitating organizational coordination. Refugee perspectives emphasize critical concerns about digital surveillance, data privacy, and the potential for collaborative technologies to be used for control rather than empowerment. These concerns must be addressed in designing collaborative frameworks that ensure meaningful refugee participation in digital governance processes.

Indonesia's non-ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention creates unique challenges for developing sustainable inter-agency coordination mechanisms in the digital era. Unlike ratifying countries where legal frameworks mandate coordination, Indonesia's collaborative refugee management relies on political goodwill and bilateral agreements, creating structural uncertainty that affects long-term coordination effectiveness and the sustainability of digital collaborative initiatives.

This voluntary coordination framework becomes particularly complex in the digital era, where collaborative platforms require sustained institutional commitment and standardized protocols that may conflict with flexible political arrangements. The absence of formal legal foundations means that collaborative digital initiatives must be designed to function within ad-hoc, crisis-responsive coordination rather than systematic, proactive collaboration.

The coordination between UNHCR and IOM in Indonesia reflects broader regional challenges in the Asia-Pacific region that affect digital collaboration efforts. The publication of the UNHCR's 10-Point Plan of Action on International Protection and Mixed Migration in 2007 marked a significant milestone but created ongoing tensions with IOM regarding operational

coordination. This tension impacts digital coordination on the ground, where IOM works closely with UNHCR but does not have an advisory or decision-making role in the resettlement of refugees to third countries. The unclear division of responsibilities between refugee protection (UNHCR's domain) and migration management (IOM's domain) creates overlapping mandates that require ongoing negotiation and can complicate digital data-sharing arrangements.

In the digital age, coordination between these two organizations has become increasingly complex due to differing data systems and information management approaches, requiring technical interoperability and harmonized procedures that have not yet been fully achieved. Current collaborative digital initiatives face several critical challenges that limit their effectiveness, including unclear objectives, undefined roles and responsibilities in digital processes, and lack of standardized data protocols.

The implementation of digital collaborative frameworks in refugee management raises significant ethical considerations that must be addressed to ensure protection of vulnerable populations. Prohibit automated risk assessment and profiling systems in migration, asylum management, and border control. Prohibit any use of predictive technologies that wrongfully threaten the right to asylum (*Global*, 2024)). These concerns are particularly relevant in collaborative contexts where multiple organizations may have access to refugee data and different standards for data protection.

The risk of technocolonialism in collaborative digital initiatives requires careful attention to power dynamics and equitable participation. International organizations with superior technological capacity may inadvertently dominate collaborative processes, potentially marginalizing local stakeholders and refugee communities themselves. This creates a fundamental tension in digital collaborative innovation where technology can enhance coordination efficiency while simultaneously deepening disparities in participation and decision-making power among collaborative partners.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

a. National Digital Refugee Management Framework

Indonesia must develop a comprehensive national digital refugee management policy that establishes clear guidelines for collaborative data

sharing, privacy protection, and inter-agency coordination while maintaining the flexibility inherent in its non-ratifying status. This policy framework should recognize that digital collaborative initiatives require sustained institutional commitment that transcends political cycles and administrative changes while balancing standardized protocols with adaptability to changing circumstances.

The framework must balance the need for standardized protocols with the flexibility to adapt to evolving stakeholder needs and technological developments. The policy development process should prioritize inclusive consultation mechanisms that bring together government agencies, international organizations, civil society actors, and most importantly, refugee communities themselves in collaborative decision-making processes.

b. Capacity Building and Digital Equity

The significant disparities in digital infrastructure and technological capacity among stakeholders require comprehensive capacity building initiatives that address both technical and collaborative skills. Government agencies need targeted support to develop digital literacy and collaborative management capabilities that enable effective participation in multi-stakeholder digital platforms. This includes training programs for civil servants on digital coordination tools, data management protocols, and cross-sector collaboration techniques.

Local civil society organizations require particular attention as they often possess deep community knowledge and cultural understanding but may lack the technological resources to participate effectively in digital collaborative initiatives. Capacity building programs should focus on providing these organizations with the technical tools and training necessary to contribute meaningfully to collaborative digital governance while preserving their unique community-based approaches to refugee support.

c. Interoperable Technology Infrastructure

The development of interoperable technology infrastructure represents a critical policy priority that requires significant investment and coordination among stakeholders. Indonesia must establish technical standards and protocols that enable seamless data sharing between different stakeholder systems while maintaining appropriate security and privacy protections. This

infrastructure development should prioritize open-source solutions and locally developed technologies that reduce dependency on international providers and build domestic technological capacity.

The regulatory environment for digital humanitarian innovation requires careful calibration to encourage technological advancement while preventing exploitation and ensuring accountability. This includes establishing oversight mechanisms for digital collaborative platforms, certification requirements for humanitarian technology providers, and clear procedures for addressing grievances and disputes arising from digital refugee management systems.

d. Collaborative Governance Models

The voluntary nature of coordination in non-ratifying contexts requires innovative governance models that can sustain effective collaboration without legal compulsion. Indonesia should develop formal collaborative agreements between government agencies, international organizations, and civil society partners that establish clear roles, responsibilities, and decision-making procedures for digital refugee management initiatives.

These collaborative agreements should incorporate conflict resolution mechanisms that can address disagreements and tensions between stakeholders without disrupting service delivery to refugee populations. The governance model must also include regular review and adaptation procedures that allow collaborative frameworks to evolve in response to changing circumstances and lessons learned from implementation experience.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that while digital technologies present significant opportunities for enhancing collaborative refugee management in Indonesia, their effective implementation requires addressing substantial challenges related to technological disparities, institutional coordination, and ethical considerations. The unique context of Indonesia as a non-ratifying country creates both opportunities for flexible, innovative approaches and challenges in ensuring sustained collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

The research demonstrates that successful digital collaborative frameworks in non-ratifying contexts require careful attention to power dynamics, equitable participation, and refugee agency. The findings suggest

that technology alone cannot overcome structural challenges in refugee management, but when implemented thoughtfully within supportive collaborative governance frameworks, digital tools can significantly enhance coordination effectiveness and service delivery.Future research should focus on developing and testing specific digital collaborative models that can be adapted to different non-ratifying country contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the long-term impacts of digital collaborative initiatives on refugee welfare and stakeholder relationships would provide valuable insights for policy development and program improvement.

The implications of this research extend beyond Indonesia to other countries facing similar challenges in developing effective collaborative approaches to refugee management in the digital era. The framework developed in this study provides a foundation for understanding how digital technologies can support collaborative governance in contexts where formal legal obligations are absent but humanitarian needs remain urgent and complex.

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