Tackling digital exclusion among disadvantaged adolescents in Jordan

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January 2022

Acknowledgements

Suggested citation:
Jones, N., Alabadi, T., Alheiwidi, S., Al Amaireh, W., Shareef, Q., Alshammari, F., Małachowska, A. and Presler-Marshall, E. (2022) *Tackling digital exclusion among disadvantaged adolescents in Jordan: what difference does access to devices and online platforms make?* London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence

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Introduction

Recognition that access to digital connectivity, tools and services is fundamental to inclusion and participation in society has grown exponentially over the last five years (Strauman and Graham, 2016), including for persons affected by forced displacement (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2020) and socially disadvantaged young people (Banaji et al., 2018). This has been underscored by three recent events: 1) the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees which acknowledges the importance of digital inclusion for refugees during both the asylum seeking and refugee settlement phases, 2) the adoption of the UNCRC General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, and 3) the global Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent pivot towards online communication and services, including online education.

Against this global backdrop, this report presents findings from a rapid qualitative research assessment of UNICEF Jordan's digital inclusion programme for vulnerable Jordanians, Palestinian and Syrian refugees attending Makani one-stop child and adolescent centres undertaken in July and August 2021. The programme, funded by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the German Development Bank (KfW), the Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair Refugee Education Fund and the European Union, distributed tablets and 10GB of monthly data to around 10,000 vulnerable households in order to help address the digital divide and support access to online education and learning as well to life skills and other non-formal education programming (see Box 1). Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with adolescent girls and boys – both tablet recipients and non-recipients – and their parents, as well as key informant interviews, this report explores the short-term effects that the tablet distribution initiative have had in terms of education and learning, access to information and services, as well as to peers and mentors. It begins with a discussion of emerging shifts in global commitments to rights related to digital connectivity and inclusion, including for refugees and young people, and the ways in which the importance of these has been accelerated within the context of the covid-19 pandemic-related lockdowns and service closures. After presenting the methodology and key findings, the report concludes with a discussion on implications of the findings for future programming.

Background context

In line with the broader commitment to equity and leaving no one behind enshrined in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, there is growing emphasis on digital inclusion for all, including the most disadvantaged. The 2018 Global Compact for Refugees emphasises the importance of digital inclusion in the context of registration and identity management as well as in facilitating refugee self-reliance and contributions to host communities. This includes facilitating livelihood opportunities and access to affordable financial products and services through digital technologies, as well as opportunities for online education

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Box 1: UNICEF Jordan's Makani Digital Inclusion initiative

With pandemic-related school closures preventing the most vulnerable from accessing education, due to the prohibitive cost of devices and connectivity, UNICEF Jordan launched a new programme aimed at digital inclusion. In the spring of 2021, it distributed nearly 10,000 tablets – each of which came with a SIM card supported with 10GB of data per month. Beneficiary households, which were selected on the basis of their children attending Makani centres and enrolled in formal education, included Syrians living in host communities, formal refugee camps run by UNHCR, and informal tented settlements (ITS). Tablets were also provided to Palestinians living in Gaza Camp.

Because the tablets are aimed at helping children access formal education and Makani services, the software eco-system is carefully tailored. Tablets can be used to access the Darsak website, through which government schools are providing distance learning, as well as communicate (via WhatsApp and Zoom) with Makani staff, who have continued to provide learning and psychosocial support throughout the pandemic. Tablets also come with several pre-installed learning applications. Tablets cannot be used to access the wider internet and attempts to do so result in the tablet shutting down. UNICEF monitors tablet use carefully, using a custom Mobile Device Management system, and if tablets are offline for more than two weeks, Makani staff make a phone call or a home visit to ascertain why. To ensure that tablets contribute to building 21st century skills, UNICEF also provides training and ongoing technical support. UNICEF plans to distribute an additional 11,500 tablets by the end of 2021.

and learning, especially for those who may be excluded on the basis of gender or disability (UNGA, 2018).

The importance of tackling digital divides is also at the heart of the UNCRC's new General comment No. 25 (2021) which states that 'The right to non-discrimination requires that State parties ensure that all children have equal and effective access to the digital environment in ways that are meaningful for them' (p2, paragraph 11). It further argues that state parties should take all necessary measures to overcome digital exclusion, including on the basis of sex, disability, socioeconomic background and refugee status, among others, given how critical the digital environment has become in many contexts in terms of access to civic identification, information, basic services and interactions with families and peers (see also Box 2).

The need to fast-track these global commitments to digital inclusiveness has been brought to the fore by the covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in recent history. In an effort to stem the transmission of the virus, educational institutions were closed, at its height affecting the education of more than 110 million children and young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Chaiban, 2020). To minimise these effects, education authorities around the region, including Jordan, sought to support continuity of learning through online education platforms, such as the Jordanian Ministry of Education's Darsak platform. While Jordan enjoys one of the highest rates of internet and mobile phone ownership and use in the MENA region (see Box 3), GAGE research with young people during the pandemic lockdown in Jordan has underscored that access and uptake of online education has been shaped by pre-existing economic and social inequalities, with refugees, girls and young people with disabilities reporting greater challenges in participating in online education (Jones et al., 2021; Abu Hamad et al., 2021).

When asked about their greatest challenge in accessing education during the pandemic, over two fifths of adolescents (41%) in the GAGE survey mentioned a lack of or unreliable internet, with a significant gap between Jordanians and refugees: 42% compared to 34%. Connectivity problems were a major factor across all settings, but particularly prevalent in refugee camps; 47%

Box 2: Children's rights within the digital environment: UNCRC General comment No. 25 (2021)

In March 2021, the UN released **General comment No. 25**, on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. The comment was based on consultation with hundreds of adult and child stakeholders from over two dozen countries around the world. The digital environment, which opens opportunities for education and socialisation, is recognised as increasingly crucial for children's development, especially – as the covid-19 pandemic has made clear – in times of crisis.

The comment's recommendations for children's access to and use of the digital environment are situated within the broader context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As such, they begin with a recognition that children's capacities are continually evolving and that adults – including caregivers as well as national leaders – must focus on children's best interests and carefully balance children's inclusion with protecting children from harm. This includes attention to how digital environments can support children's rights, including to information and freedom of expression, as well as to states' obligation to safeguard children from online violence, privacy violations and deceptive advertising.

Critically, the comment underscores the importance of ensuring that the world's children – including girls and those who are minorities, are displaced or have disabilities – have equitable access to digital environments. It requires that parties provide free access in dedicated public locations and invest in the 'policies and programmes that support all children's affordable access to, and knowledgeable use of, digital technologies in educational settings, communities and homes.' It also recognises the importance of digital connectivity for young people affected by forced displacement in allowing them to stay in touch with family and friends.

Myriad measures are laid out through which this goal might be accomplished. These include investing in schools' and communities' technological infrastructure (including electricity and connectivity) as well as the provision of connected devices for those who cannot physically access school. Equity measures also include digital literacy courses. For children, courses should be iteratively taught, starting in preschool, and incorporate not only hard skills but also the soft skills that allow children to keep themselves safe while respecting the rights of others. Teachers and parents must also be supported to develop the skills they need to guide and protect children in digital environments.

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Box 3: Digital connectivity: Jordan is a regional leader

Research undertaken by the Pew Research Center reveals that Jordan boasts high levels of internet and mobile phone connectivity. Based on findings from a 2018 survey, Jordan had one of the highest rates of internet use by adults (as measured by 'adults who use the internet at least occasionally or report owning a smartphone') in relation to GDP per capita, with a rate of 80% usage and US$9,431 PPP (Purchasing Power Parity). In terms of smartphone ownership, 76% of adults reported owning a smartphone, a rate only 6 percentage points lower than that of Australia, which at 82% had the highest rate globally. Meanwhile, the rate of social media usage (measured by the percentage of adults who use social networking sites) was the highest globally at 75% and significantly higher than the global median rate of 53%. Not surprisingly, the rate of digital connectivity (measured by internet and mobile phone usage) was significantly higher (7 percentage points) among those aged 18–36 years compared to the 37-year-plus age cohort (83% vs 76%) and among those with higher compared to lower education levels (16 percentage points difference).

Source: Poushter et al., 2018.

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of adolescents from camps reported lack of connectivity as a challenge compared with 38% in host communities and 32% in ITS. There was also a significant gender gap: only 35% older boys compared to 43% older girls indicated that internet connectivity was challenging. This widened in terms of having access to a personal device with internet that could be used to contact friends and relatives: only 45% of older girls reported access compared to 71% of older boys (Abu Hamad et al., 2021).

Research methods and conceptual framing

Methodology and sampling

The research was based on a nested sample of adolescents and their caregivers participating in the GAGE longitudinal research study. In-depth interviews

with 92 adolescent girls and boys – both tablet recipients and non-recipients – who are enrolled in the Makani non-formal education programme were undertaken (see Table 1) to explore how young people spend their days, how this has changed since the pandemic (and subsequently after their participation in the digital inclusion programme), and in particular what role digital technology plays in their lives. Two main tools were used in the individual interviews – 1) a social network hexagon tool aimed at understanding how adolescents are connecting with people, information and services – and how this has changed firstly since the pandemic and secondly after the tablet distribution; and 2) a semi-structured set of questions around perceptions of and satisfaction with the tablet onboarding process, safety pre-cautions and engagement with the online education platforms provided by UNICEF Jordan through the tablet. In addition, there were focus group discussions (FGD) involving a total of 96 adolescents who received

Table 1: Interviews with adolescents

Participant profile	Adolescent in-depth interviews								Adolescent focus group discussions			
	Tablet recipients		Non-recipients but Makani beneficiaries		Tablet recipients		Non-recipients but Makani beneficiaries		Tablet recipients (Four adolescents per FGD)			
	10–13 years				14–16 years				10–13 years		14–16 years	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Azraq Camp	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	1	1	1	1
Gaza Camp	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	1	1	1	1
Host – Irbid, Amman	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1	1	1
ITS	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	1	1	1	1
	13	13	10	10	13	13	10	13	4	4	4	4
	Young adolescents			46	Older adolescents			46	Total adolescent FGD participants			96

Table 2: Interviews with parents and key informants

Participant profile	FGDs with parents of adolescent (10–16 years) tablet recipients (Six parents per FGD)		FGDs with parents of adolescents (10–16) of tablet non-recipients (Six parents per FGD)	School teachers	Makani centre facilitators
	Fathers of boys and girls	Mothers of boys and girls	Mothers of boys and girls		
Azraq Camp	1	1	1	1	2
Gaza Camp	1	1	1	1	2
Host – Irbid, Amman	1	1	1	2	4
ITS	1	1	1	1	2
	4	4	4	5	10
	Total parent FGD participants		72		

the tablets. The sessions centred around a discussion of a vignette outlining key changes in adolescent lives since the onset of the covid-19 pandemic and subsequently following their engagement in the digital inclusion programme.

Focus group discussions were also held with mothers and fathers of tablet recipients (48 parents in total) and non-recipients (24 parents in total) to explore their perspectives on adolescent digital inclusion in general, and within the context of the covid-19 pandemic, and the impact of the tablet distribution programme on their adolescents' lives (see Table 2). Finally, 15 key informant interviews were undertaken with Makani programme facilitators and school teachers to understand these educators' perspectives about the impacts of the UNICEF Jordan digital inclusion initiative.

Conceptual framework

Our analysis is informed by GAGE's conceptual framework, which focuses on how 'three Cs' – capabilities, contexts and change strategies – interconnect to support adolescent well-being. This framework builds on the capabilities approach (Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 1995), which has evolved as a broad normative framework exploring the assets and entitlements that expand or contract people's ability to 'be' and 'do' what they value. The GAGE framework focuses on six capability domains that are core to adolescent well-being now and as they transition across the second decade of life and into early adulthood: 1) education and learning, 2) freedom from age- and gender-based violence and bodily integrity, 3) health and sexual and reproductive health, 4) psychosocial well-being, 5) voice and agency and 6) economic empowerment, and for the purposes of this report we consider the ways in which

access to digital connectivity, tools and services may enhance the realisation of these capabilities. See Figure 1 for possible entry points for digital technology to support adolescents' capability development.

Given our focus on the most socially disadvantaged young people, we pay particular attention to the work of Livingstone et al. (2017: 1) who argue that while ICTs and digital media have been heralded 'as a potential means of supporting children's needs and rights for provision, protection and participation...and [have] been explicitly linked to delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)...' , the spread of ICTs and digital media has also raised concerns about 'exacerbating forms of exclusion, amplifying pre-existing risks, or advancing state surveillance and/or commercial exploitation'. The authors emphasise that exclusion risks in LMICs are heightened for young people from economically deprived households, those in rural areas and girls. Although data is limited, available evidence suggests that there are persistent and systematic gender gaps in terms of access and use of ICTs and digital media. Parents are more likely to permit boys access to digital technology at a younger age than girls, and girls who do gain access are likely to face more limitations (through sharing devices and/or usage subject to stricter parental surveillance). Moreover, ICT-related careers are associated more with boys than with girls, and as a consequence girls are more likely to have fewer opportunities to develop the skills and networks needed for effective digital environment participation. A gender gap was similarly identified in GAGE's Jordan baseline study carried out in 2018/2019 among both Jordanian and refugee communities (see Box 4).

Figure 1: The GAGE capabilities conceptual framework and linkages to the digital environment

Education
- Access to online education
- Learning by playing online games
- Development of digital technology skills

Freedom from violence and bodily integrity
- Access to information on reporting of violence

Health
- Access to information on health conditions and on SRH
- Access to information on health services

Adolescent capabilities and linkages to the digital environment

Voice and agency
- Opportunities to participate in online activism
- Access to information

Economic empowerment
- Digital financial inclusion
- Access to digital technology jobs

Psychosocial well-being
- Access to peer networks • Access to trusted adults
- Access to online counselling

Box 4: Digital gender divide: Findings from GAGE's baseline research

Overall, 35% of the 4,000 adolescents in the GAGE baseline survey reported having a mobile phone for their own use and 51% reported having ever used the internet. Differential access was primarily shaped by age and by gender, though there were also less significant differences by location, nationality and disability status – which appear to be primarily driven by household poverty. Younger adolescents and girls are disadvantaged in terms of connectivity compared to older adolescents and boys. Younger adolescents are 69% less likely to have a phone (17% versus 56%) and 49% less likely to be online (35% versus 69%) compared to older adolescents. Across both age groups, girls are 43% less likely to have a phone (26% versus 46%) and 17% less likely to be online (47% versus 56%) compared to boys. Of note, however, is that GAGE findings indicated that married girls are significantly more likely to have a phone for their own use than their unmarried peers (63% versus 35%).

Source: Jones et al., 2019.

Findings

Overall, our qualitative data indicates that the Makani digital inclusion intervention has been perceived as very positive by adolescents, Makani facilitators and teachers (see Table 3 for a summary of key benefits identified). Parents also provided positive feedback, although some had reservations regarding online safety and the costs of tablet repairs. We explore the effects of the programme to date on adolescent capabilities and, where relevant, we highlight differences in terms of age, gender, nationality and location.

Education and learning

A key benefit of the tablet distribution was that it enabled disadvantaged families who lack sufficient devices and financial resources to cover online education costs to access educational content, both the government of Jordan Darsak online education programme established during the pandemic as well as supplementary educational resources provided by UNICEF Jordan's Makani programme to support children's core learning skills. Adolescents from refugee households highlighted that the tablet was critical in enabling them to study. For

Table 3: Summary of the effects of digital inclusion for supporting adolescents' capability development

Adolescent capability	Change pathway	Limitations
Education and learning	• Enables adolescents to study and to spend more time on studying • Provides motivation for students to study who had lost interest during lockdown • Enables students to better understand educational content as they can go at their own pace and revise more challenging material • Facilitates parental engagement with adolescent learning • Facilitates interaction with teachers on learning questions • Provision of internet packages over-comes cost barriers to online study • Supports catch-up on lost learning • Supports development of digital literacy skills, especially for girls who tend to have more restricted access to devices	Boys less engaged with the tablet for educational purposes; access to more educational games might be motivating
Bodily integrity/ freedom from age- and gender-based violence	• Because of the in-built controls on the tablets, overwhelming majority of adolescents felt safe online	A small minority faced online bullying. More explicit internet safety awareness-raising could be considered going forward
Psychosocial well-being	• Enables adolescents to have enhanced opportunities to connect with peers – both school and out-of-school peers • Enables adolescents to connect with family who are living in other localities, which is especially important for those in the refugee community • Enables adolescents to connect more easily with teachers and Makani facilitators as trusted non-family adults	A minority of adolescents, especially boys, were spending long hours online which resulted in decreased in-person interactions with their family. A small minority felt excluded as they lacked the skills to get online.
Health and nutrition		Online learning platform could be used as a tool to enhance health and nutrition knowledge but currently this is not the case.
Voice and agency	• Access to devices facilitates adolescents' decision-making over investments in their studies • Access to internet packages reduces adolescents' dependence on parents to support costs for online study, especially in context of scarce household resources	
Economic empowerment	• Supports adolescents to develop digital literacy skills which are critical for 21st century labour markets • Facilitates adolescents' access to information about future career pathways	An important economic limitation was the expense of fixing tablets if broken in economically disadvantaged households.

questions. *Before that it was not possible. I love the tablet.*

For some adolescents this renewed sense of motivation also stemmed from the ability to interact with their teachers more readily via the tablets. For example, a 14-year-old Jordanian girl noted that: *'I contacted my teacher through the tablet … and asked her about things I did not understand.'* Other adolescents emphasised that with the tablet they could better engage in a dialogue with their teachers and get the sort of feedback that they had previously enjoyed during in-person education. For example, a 12-year-old Syrian refugee girl in Azraq Camp noted that: *'I asked the teacher to explain the answers again for me … she explains it, audio records it, then sends it to me.'*

For many families, receipt of the tablet helped to overcome the digital divide that their children were facing. In addition to facilitating access to formal education offered online, adolescents emphasised that having access to a tablet designated for education purposes in the household also offered them an opportunity to strengthen their digital literacy skills, especially for those whose parents lack such know-how. A 16-year-old Syrian refugee boy living in an ITS explained his experience as follows: *'Over the last three months I've now learned how to use a tablet, I can access the content I need … If I encounter a problem, I can't ask my father, but my sister knows and helps me.'* A 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza Camp noted that she was employing her new digital skills to help her explore her extracurricular interests, including Quranic studies: *'Now I will look for the stories of the prophets and watch them on the tablet…. I memorise the verses and I like to read about the stories of religion.'*

It is worth noting, however, that not all young people were able to acquire the requisite digital literacy skills through the tablet distribution process, and that there was some criticism of the lack of a structured onboarding process for adolescents at the beginning of the initiative. Both parents and adolescents explained that due to social distancing restrictions only one parent – and not adolescents – could attend a session when the tablets were first distributed and that for parents with limited

◖◗ I contacted my teacher through the tablet … and asked her about things I did not understand.

(A 14-year-old Jordanian girl)

◖◗ Girls are motivated. … Especially after receiving the tablet, they became more motivated. They don't miss a single link or lesson.

(A mother in Azraq Camp)

education and/or digital literacy, this was not sufficient to enable them to then pass on relevant information and skills to their adolescents. For example, a 16-year-old Syrian refugee boy from Azraq Camp explained:

I used the tablet for three days … then I gave it to my little brother when I did not know how to use it…. My mother received it [from the Makani centre] for me … but she didn't explain how to use it…. She is illiterate…. She asks my little brother to use it for learning…. I do not need it. How could I use it for studying if I could understand nothing?! … I do not want to learn.

Similarly, a 15-year-old Syrian refugee girl, also from Azraq Camp, noted that she had struggled to benefit from the tablet because *'They didn't teach me…. They didn't call you to explain it…. They never invited me… And my father didn't get any explanation either when he received the tablet.'*

To mitigate these challenges, Makani facilitators offered technical support to beneficiaries with low digital skills but it was unclear from the study respondents whether any programme beneficiaries had availed themselves of this support. In terms of differences among adolescents, our findings indicate that there were notable gender differences in adolescents' readiness to take advantage of the tablet distribution programme for educational purposes. Overall, it was reported that girls were more likely to regularly use the tablet to support their studies than their male counterparts, in part because they are inclined to be more studious and in part because they have fewer options outside the home. As participants in a mothers' focus group discussion in Gaza Camp emphasised:

The girls use the internet more than the boys … as they don't go out…. A boy goes out of the house but a girl doesn't go out…. I feel that a girl is more careful and interested in her studies…. The tablet improved education for females … The girls like to study…. They are sitting at home, so they will be on the tablet…. The girls like studies more, thank God.

Young adolescent boy in an ITS in Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE

Mothers in Azraq Camp highlighted similarly high levels of motivation among girls regarding their education and the fact that this was further enhanced by the tablet distribution:

> Girls are motivated. They are. Especially after receiving the tablet, they became more motivated. They don't miss a single link or lesson.... No, never, especially Maths and Arabic links.... Since the tablets, they have become more motivated to study.

By contrast, parents and adolescents agreed that boys, and especially older adolescent boys, were more likely to use the tablets to play games online, even if it meant in a small minority of cases finding ways to circumvent the safety controls that UNICEF had installed on the tablets, either through experimentation or paying local computer repair technicians to bypass the controls.[1] As a 16-year-old Syrian refugee boy from Azraq Camp explained:

> The tablet is encrypted, I can't add any app.... The only application is WhatsApp, we cannot add any application until after decoding it ... some people paid money to decode the tablets.... After decryption we can use it without supervision.

Another 12-year-old adolescent boy participating in a focus group discussion in Azraq Camp noted that although their initial hacking efforts had eventually been thwarted (by UNICEF programme management), they still manage to access some games:

> We can access it through WhatsApp ... through the link. Then a video appears. then a small picture appears on the side. You click on it and that's how you can access it ... and there is the Play Store. I have four games from there.... But then they blocked it.... I could install a game and then it disappeared for a month. And then I saw it again in the background, but it requested a password.

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1   UNICEF management made continuous efforts to identify these problematic cases and reformat tablet programming to prevent further breaches.

My brother kept trying on the tablet until he could open it. And we could install the other three games.

Fathers in a focus group discussion in Azraq Camp concurred with this assessment:

By God, I mean, yes, the girl benefited more because in general the girl has a hobby to study more than the boy, the boy has his hobby of playing [games], the boys always have a hobby of playing, I mean, if he holds the tablet, he must search for a game in it!

Mothers similarly complained that their sons tended to prioritise online games and to engage only perfunctorily with learning-related content on the tablets. As one participant in a focus group of mothers in Azraq Camp noted:

I give the tablet to my son and tell him to use it and study for two hours, but he directly opens the link and solves it carelessly to open the game. He wants to have the tablet just to solve his homework in five minutes and play for the next two hours. But not girls, she opens the link, solves her homework, opens links again, then she sends it.

Bodily integrity and freedom from age- and gender-based violence

A key concern that emerges when young people have enhanced access to devices and the internet is their exposure to online or cyberbullying and violence. Our findings indicate that both parents and adolescents were made aware of the safety controls that UNICEF Jordan had installed on the tablets aimed at protecting children from such risks. Nonetheless, some parents still expressed unease about what content adolescents were able to access online and their limited capacity – especially those without (or with limited) digital literacy skills – to monitor this. A participant in a mothers' focus group discussion in an ITS emphasised that *'The tablet is open for them … the tablet is open without any control or without any conditions … I'm afraid to let them use it.'* Another participant in the same group further explained:

We feel afraid … they are young children … you know there are things they can't understand … they may open

◗◗ The tablet is open for them … the tablet is open without any control or without any conditions … I'm afraid to let them use it.

(A mother in an ITS)

bad things … we don't know … whether they can see any sexual content … We are afraid of this and of them wasting time … and being too busy to do things other than studying…. When the child doesn't have school, he spends most of his time on the games. So, this is not true.

Similarly, adolescents when asked if they had been informed about how to report experiences of age- and gender-based violence as part of the tablet distribution process – either during the onboarding or through online Makani sessions – none of the adolescents specifically mentioned this. For the overwhelming majority of young people involved in the initiative, their online experience was safe and there were no concerns. Only a small minority of adolescents and several facilitators noted that some participants had experienced online bullying. However, facilitators generally emphasised that the limited ability of most tablet recipients to access any websites outside of the learning-related content enabled by UNICEF significantly minimised the risks.[2]

Health and nutrition

Based on previous rounds of GAGE research, we are aware that the internet is where most young people would look if they wanted more information especially about sexual and reproductive health issues, particularly given the cultural taboos around discussing these issues openly in the home or at school (Jones et al., 2019). Accordingly, as part of the qualitative research tool employed in the interviews with adolescents, we included questions related to the type of content that young people either have access to on the learning platform or search for online, and whether this included any health, nutrition, or sexual and reproductive health-related topics. However, because of the tight controls on the websites and apps that young people can access via these tablets, no one reported looking for such

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2   UNICEF implemented a number of safety measures aiming to protect the children from accessing harmful content e.g., the MDM system and also the parental control services provided by Zain SIM cards.

content. It is perhaps an area that could be explored as the online platform is further expanded over time.

🧠 Psychosocial well-being

Increasingly in Jordan, as in other middle-income country contexts, digital inclusion forms an important component of adolescents' psychosocial well-being insofar as online connectivity can support their access to peer networks and to trusted (non-family) adults, especially in the context of school closures and pandemic-related lockdowns. We therefore explored the extent to which access to the tablets enhanced young people's social connectedness and found that it generally had a positive effect, and especially for girls who tend to be disproportionately socially isolated given gender norms that restrict their physical mobility in adolescence.

In terms of access to peer networks, the findings suggest that the tablets provided a helpful avenue for young people to connect with peers during school and Makani centre closures. Adolescents reported that the main way for communicating with peers was via WhatsApp groups that Makani facilitators established to send messages to participants and to provide information updates about the coronavirus. A 16-year-old Syrian refugee girl from Azraq Camp noted that *'I use WhatsApp, my friends and I created a group on WhatsApp ... and to communicate with the Makani centre facilitator.'* Some young people also used WhatsApp to communicate with friends or with siblings living outside the camp. A 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza Camp explained that:

> Before I had the tablet, I used to use my mom's mobile ... but I was having a problem when the internet is disconnected ... I was upset because I couldn't communicate with my friends.'

Similarly, a 13-year-old Syrian refugee girl living in Azraq Camp noted:

> I use the tablet to contact my brother [who lives outside the camp] and talk and ask him about the lessons I do not understand.... I send him questions and he replies

⏸ **I do not sit with them [my family]. I sit on the internet for 10 hours.... And my sister for five hours ... I watch YouTube.**

(A 13-year-old Syrian refugee boy living in an ITS)

⏸ **I use WhatsApp, my friends and I created a group on WhatsApp ... and to communicate with the Makani centre facilitator.**

(A 16-year-old Syrian refugee girl from Azraq Camp)

and teaches me from a distance. He teaches me on the tablet.

It is worth noting, however, that not all tablet use is interactive and that a minority of young people, especially boys, emphasised how much time they were spending online alone and to the detriment of time they would otherwise have spent with family members. As a 13-year-old Syrian refugee boy living in an ITS explained:

> I do not sit with them [my family]. I sit on the internet for 10 hours.... And my sister for five hours ... I watch YouTube.... My life is better with the tablet.... Before having the tablet, I couldn't watch YouTube and could not play anything. When I received the tablet, I could do everything I like.

Others, again a small minority, noted that while they would like to take advantage of the tablet to communicate with friends, they don't have the skills to do so. This was especially the case with young people in ITS where the general level of connectivity and digital literacy appeared quite limited. As a 13-year-old Syrian refugee boy living in an ITS pointed out:

> I didn't know anyone at all online, from the platform to books, and from books to platform ... I didn't talk to anyone online.... There is only WhatsApp and it needs a login and a number.... I don't know how to see them; I have my friends who have tablets and they can see but I can't see them online.

Similarly, another 12-year-old Syrian refugee boy also living in an ITS noted that:

> The other boys can open the camera, but I cannot open the camera ... I don't know how to open it ... I only have classes today and I will see after that day or see my cousins or see someone who knows and could teach me about it ... I have not participated in the live classes – I know it exists but I don't know how.

The findings were very positive regarding the enhanced access to trusted adults that the tablets afforded adolescents, with multiple adolescents, caregivers and teaching professionals citing recipients' increased ability to contact Makani facilitators and teachers. A 15-year-old Palestinian boy in Gaza Camp noted that while he had been in regular contact with his Makani facilitator prior to the tablet distribution, the tablet enabled him to reach a wider range of staff and peers: *'The tablet saved me the effort of going all the way there [to the Makani Centre] … and now I have also gotten to know new people with the tablet – I contact many people on WhatsApp…. They created a group for us.'* Similarly, a 16-year-old Palestinian girl in the same camp reported that the tablet had made communication with her school teachers much simpler:

> It helped me to communicate with my teacher anytime; when I used my mother's phone, the internet card was expired and I could not always communicate with my teachers, while I could use the tablet to communicate with my teachers for a longer time and solve questions with them.

Teachers also noted that it was evident which adolescents were receiving educational support from Makani as they were generally more prepared and more eager to engage with homework exercises.

In terms of using the tablets to cover informal education subjects that Makani typically provides – such as life skills and psychosocial support activities – Makani facilitators noted that they had so far not taken advantage of the tablets to engage with adolescents on these topics. They explained that these sessions usually require group work that is more challenging online, and they had not to date received any tailored training to support an online approach. In a similar vein, although the research tools included a question about whether young people had used the tablets to access online counselling services to help them respond to the increased psychosocial stresses experienced by many adolescents during the pandemic, no one reported using the tablets for this purpose. More broadly, adolescents reported that they would be reluctant to utilise such services as they would feel uncomfortable sharing their concerns and challenges with someone unknown to them and without the reassurance of in-person contact.

⏸ **The tablet has made it easier to access online education… we can study for longer periods and we have the data package now.**

(A 16-year-old Syrian refugee boy from a host community)

💬 ## Voice and agency

Adolescents reported that the main effect the digital inclusion programme had had on their voice and agency was to reduce their need to negotiate access to devices or internet bundles with siblings or parents and consequently to increase their ability to determine their engagement with online learning. For example, a 12-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza Camp explained that *'Previously I couldn't access the internet … Mama doesn't have internet and I can't come to the centre…. Now I can solve things remotely, and if I don't go, it's normal.'*

For older adolescent boys, access to internet data packages was especially attractive in enabling them to be online for longer periods without having to rely on financial support from their parents. For example, a 16-year-old Syrian refugee boy from a host community emphasised that:

> The tablet has made it easier to access online education… we can study for longer periods and we have the data package now…. Previously we had to wait to get money from our parents to charge it at the shop.

A 13-year-old Syrian refugee girl in Azraq Camp also underscored that access to free internet cards as part of the tablet distribution programme was pivotal in allowing her and her siblings to study online and interact with their friends, given the financial challenges her family experienced during the pandemic lockdowns:

> Before the coronavirus I talked everyday online with friends … but after we could not afford any internet connection…. We wanted to go and get an internet card … but we have no money … and there was a curfew…. We tell them [the Makani facilitator] that we want to study and how can we study, you tell us to study online, and we do study online but we need internet.

However, a number of adolescents highlighted that the internet bundles were not adequate for the whole month, especially in households with multiple siblings studying online. As another 13-year-old Syrian refugee girl in Azraq camp reported:

> The internet bundles are not enough … sometimes I open the links they send, but one link opens and the other does not open…. I think the bundle they give me contains 2MB…. They send 15 links every two days. We must solve all problems in these links…. This is our homework.

Economic empowerment

In addition to facilitating access to formal education and supporting the development of digital literacy skills (as discussed above), digital inclusion initiatives such as the tablet distribution initiative could also facilitate young people's access to information about skills building and employment opportunities. We included this as a specific question in the interview guides with adolescents and caregivers but, generally because of limited access afforded to the internet as a result of the safety controls on the tablet, adolescents emphasised that this was not something that they had considered. However, we did find one example which is suggestive of the potential that the tablets could provide, perhaps through a structured exercise organised by formal education teachers or Makani facilitators. An 11-year-old Syrian refugee girl living in Azraq

▌▌ **I searched on the tablet about my dream job … about everything police officers do. How they work and help the country and such.**

(An 11-year-old Syrian refugee girl living in Azraq Camp)

Camp highlighted that she had used the tablet to explore her professional aspiration to join the police: *'I searched on the tablet about my dream job … about everything police officers do. How they work and help the country and such.'*

From a more practical perspective, our findings also uncovered some economic challenges associated with the tablet, namely the expensive and time-consuming nature of repairs should the tablet get broken. As part of the programme, households sign a contract committing them to undertake repairs of broken tablets; however, for many disadvantaged families the repair fee (estimated to be between 70 and 100 JOD) was beyond their household economic capacities. As a 15-year-old Syrian refugee girl living in Amman explained:

> They told us to keep the tablet carefully…. But if it breaks, they have nothing to do with it. If it breaks only, if the screen breaks, the parents fix it…. They asked the parents to sign a contract…. One girl in my class, her tablet broke and they told her, ' Either you give it back, and you have no relationship with it, or you fix it and it stays with you.'

Conclusions and programming implications

Our findings highlight that the UNICEF Jordan digital inclusion initiative implemented through the Makani programme is having an important and positive effect on the realisation of the rights of young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds – including vulnerable Jordanians, and Palestinian and Syrian refugees – to digital connectivity, tools and services. In particular, it is playing a critical role in supporting their access to online education and to social connectedness to peers and trusted adults. In order to further strengthen the initiative in line with the commitments in the 2018 Global Compact for Refugees and in the General comment No. 25 on the rights of children in the digital environment, our findings point to the following programming implications:

1. Provide more in-depth training for adolescents about tablet functionality, especially regarding access to learning-related applications.
2. Ensure that in-depth sessions for adolescents and parents regarding internet safety and cyber bullying identification, reporting and prevention are accessible at each Makani centre, and that parents and adolescents are able to reach out to a focal point if they have any concerns or questions regarding online safety as they interact with the tablet over time.
3. Consider investing in training among older adolescents to carry out simple repairs directly at Makani centres – for example, as part of Innovation Labs – to reduce costs for families and to speed up repair time.

4. Given boys' more limited engagement with online learning content and preference for online games, consider investing in learning tools that take a games-based approach in order to strengthen boys' engagement to address overall learning-outcome deficits.
5. Invest in training for Makani facilitators regarding tablet functionality and its potential as a teaching tool, especially with regard to psychosocial well-being and life skills.
6. Consider expanding the type of material that young people can access on the tablets, especially with regard to tailored, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information, as well as information about where to report and access support and services for young people at risk of age- and gender-based violence.
7. Consider providing more than one tablet per family – for example, one tablet per two or three school-going children – in order to address time-use pressures on the tablet and increase its durability.
8. Continue to invest in blended (in-person and online) education approaches in case of future lockdowns or crises, and also to enhance online literacy skills as part of the core Makani programme offering.

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Front cover: 'I used not to study well through the phone, because the screen is small and unclear, the tablet now is going to help me a lot, because the screen is clear and big.' Ghazal, 10 years old, from Syria © UNICEF Jordan