

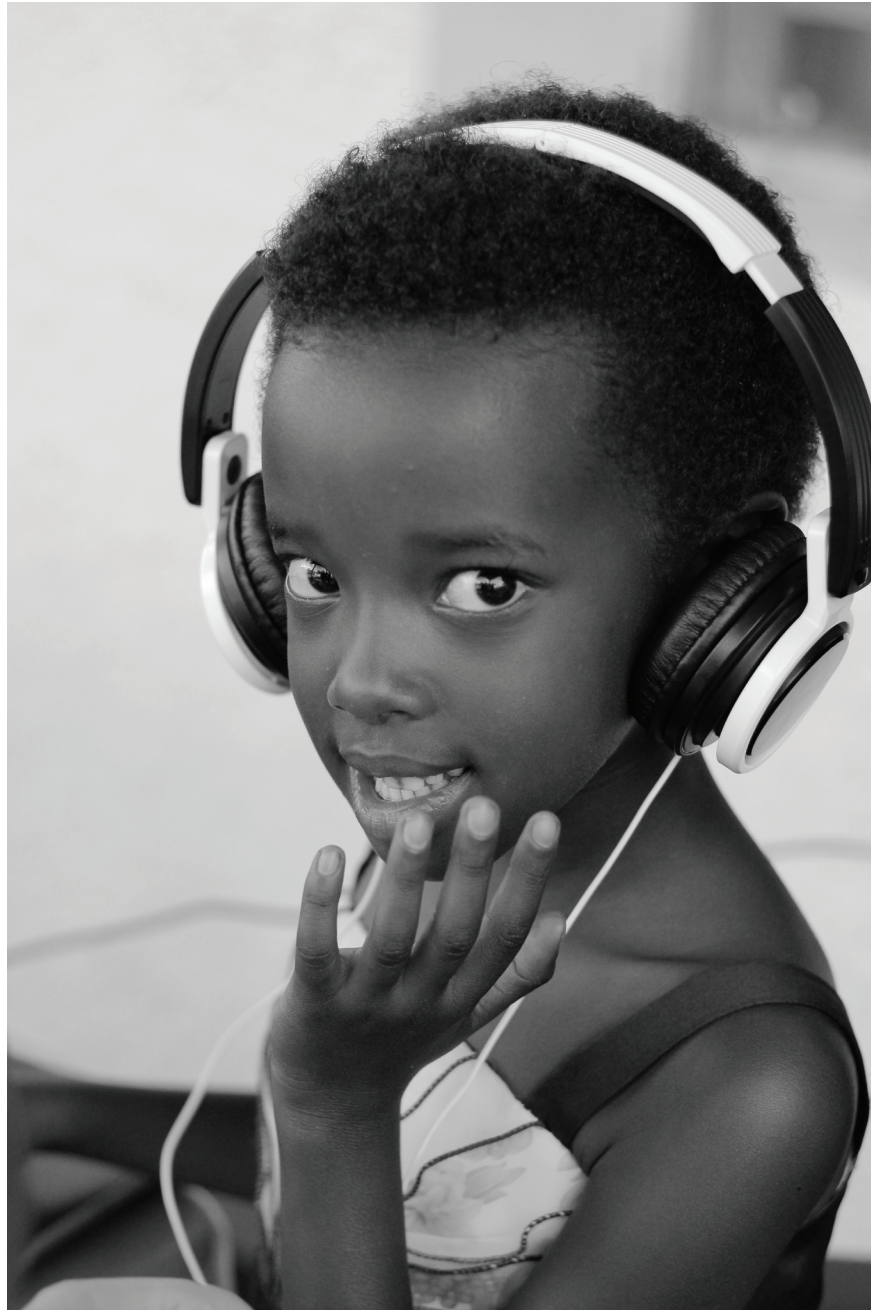
A Box of Ideas

ROSALIE HUGHES

CANKUZO PROVINCE, Burundi—Last November, Sedar Zamukulu Watula and 30 other Congolese refugees waited, perched on a circle of wobbly wooden benches in Kavumu Refugee Camp in western Burundi. Watula, 27, sweat in the heat, unusual for the rainy season. He was used to waiting—for food, for soap, for peace in his hometown of Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). But this time the wait was different. He'd come to hear a *mzungu* (white person) talk about a new project that was about to arrive in the camp—the Ideas Box.

Set on a barren plain of 200 acres, Kavumu is Burundi's fourth and newest refugee camp. It is home to 3,600 refugees, and more arrive each day. With the exception of a few generators and solar panels for the non-profit organizations in the camp, Kavumu is without electricity. Cell phone access is spotty. About 80 percent of the camp's predominantly Congolese population are illiterate, and most speak only Swahili or Kinyarwanda.

The presenter, an enthusiastic French woman in her



late 20s, arrived and introduced herself and her organization, Libraries Without Borders. “The Ideas Box is a container of tools to enable you to access culture and communicate with the world,” said Marine Louvigny, the project’s Paris-based program manager. An interpreter translated her French into Swahili. She promised that one Ideas Box would arrive in the camp in February, be installed next to the tent where the residents receive their monthly food rations, and stay for at least a year.

This was the most interesting news Watula had heard since he arrived in the camp six months before. He thought about being able to connect on Facebook with his brother, Prince, in Goma instead of relying on his friend’s finicky mobile phone.

Access to electronic information is becoming as basic as food and shelter to the world’s refugee population. And while the aid regime long regarded technology as an unaffordable luxury, aid workers are increasingly seeing it as fundamental to their mission. The challenge has become how to bring modern tools to remote, isolated parts of the planet, to populations with low literacy rates, and even lower levels of computer knowledge. And who is best placed to do this? Humanitarian organizations—often large, sclerotic bureaucracies designed half a century ago to provide food, shelter, and medicine on meager budgets and goodwill—may seem ill-suited to

provide these new tools to the populations they serve. Still, many are trying with experiments like the Ideas Box.

Designed by world-renowned creator Philippe Starck, the Ideas Box is quite an innovation. It offers computers, paper books, electronic books, audio books, tablets, a movie screen, a video camera, and more, at a cost of \$140,000 per box. Five have been built to date, and will be tested over the next year in Burundi and Rwanda. Six more are to be built by the end of the year, destined for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan.

“With a project like this, we’re not physically saving lives, but we’re saving the soul, the mind, the heart, everything that makes a human a human,” Starcks says in an interview.

EARLY EXPERIMENTS

Before aid groups installed the first wired computer in a refugee camp five years ago, displaced communities—forced by circumstance to improvise and innovate—were already building generators that convert USAID-donated cooking oil into electricity to charge their mobile phones, splicing cable wires to watch news from their home countries on third-hand television sets, and waking up at 2 a.m. to Skype family members because their service provider’s network was clogged during the day.

Aid agencies have been less quick to embrace technological change. “Most humanitarian organizations are really bad at adapta-

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tion,” says Michael Barnett, a leading scholar of humanitarian organizations and professor at George Washington University. Unlike companies that operate for-profit, aid groups are rarely held accountable when they fail to provide services effectively. They are delivering to a clientele whose voices are never heard. “It’s not like refugees are going to go choose another agency to receive their food from,” Barnett says. “UNHCR [UN Refugee Agency] and the organizations it subcontracts have a monopoly over refugee camps.”

Not surprisingly, change came from outside the traditional aid sector. Non-profit tech company Ushahidi (Swahili for “testimony”) is one example of an early initiative to bring technology to emergencies. After the 2007 election crisis in Kenya, the government banned live media broadcasts. A group of Kenyan bloggers then united and built an information-gathering network. They tracked violence and shared crime data in real time, helping Kenyans know which neighborhoods to avoid and if their family members were in danger. The organization has gone on to adapt the technology for disasters in Haiti, New Zealand, the Balkans, and Libya.

Projects like Ushahidi began attracting attention as a new paradigm in humanitarian work. The days of foreign aid workers flying into a crisis zone and relying on their own information to target relief were coming to an end. Under the new system, the affected communities supply the data. Aid workers still play a role, but the community’s feedback drives their response.

Humanitarian aid’s old guard—the UNHCR, Red Cross, UNICEF, and large non-profit groups like Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee—paid attention as these new projects succeeded. They began to see that distribution of technology is both possible and crucially important in

emergencies. Indeed, it can save lives, alleviate human suffering, and protect human dignity—the golden pillars of humanitarian aid.

In 2009, UNHCR, the United Nations organization mandated to protect the world’s populations affected by war and disasters, started to react by installing its first wired computers in camps. Working in partnership with Microsoft, the agency launched the initial pilot projects in Rwanda and Bangladesh. It has since expanded to 13 other countries.

In a promotional video for this pilot project, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, spoke directly to the camera from his large office in Geneva, with soft Chariots of Fire style music in the background. “To support refugees is not only to give them food and shelter,” he began. “It is to make sure they can participate in the modern world.” With this statement, humanitarian aid took its first steps into a networked age it could no longer ignore.

In 2012, UNHCR created an entire unit to figure out how new technologies and ideas can serve humanitarian ends. The UNHCR Innovation Unit is the agency’s way of “recognizing that the humanitarian field is changing, as must humanitarian actors,” says Jacqueline Strecker, one of the first to be hired on the team.

Many humanitarian organizations have followed suit and created similar departments. But technical capacity is a problem. Jake Watson, who coordinates technology projects for the International Rescue Committee in the Middle East, is a rare individual who’s worked in the private sector—in his case, Internet start-ups—before turning to the humanitarian field.

Watson feels as if he has stepped back in time in terms of technological know-how. “We’re trying to do this stuff with no money, and the level of technical knowledge in the field is quite low,” he says. “We’re



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whipping out projects, and there's little acknowledgement that maintenance and support is needed. Especially in the environments we are working in, often without electricity and Internet connection, these aspects cannot be ignored."

The nature of funding for these projects is also a problem. Grants for humanitarian projects are typically short-term, intended for emergencies. Watson says such short funding cycles "hamstring" his agency and others, "making it very hard to make the kinds of investments in durable tech solutions, including tech support and maintenance."

The challenges are not all technical and financial. In some places where UNHCR installed computers and Internet connections for its pioneer projects, they became bustling hubs. But in others, the community ignored them, suggesting that technology may not be enough. "We've learned that access is multidimensional and not just about the technology," says Strecker. "It's equally about

ensuring people have the means and motivation to engage with these tools."

The UNHCR is now testing a potpourri of projects like the Ideas Box that focus not just on the technology itself, but on how it is implemented. And they're doing it in partnership with groups like Libraries Without Borders, new to the humanitarian field. They are introducing wired computer labs in secondary schools in Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya with telecom company Vodacom, e-readers containing local books with international non-profit World Reader in Tanzania, and mobile tablet labs in Malaysia with online education content provider Brain Pop.

These projects are part of a larger trend driven by the private tech sector to bring the network age to the unconnected. Over the past year, both Google and Facebook have launched billion-dollar initiatives—called Google Loon and Internet.org, respectively—aimed at spreading the Internet to the two thirds of people on the planet without it.

Google estimates it may be able to achieve this goal as early as 2020 using high-altitude hot air balloons and drones. Whether the aid community's efforts will be complementary or redundant remains to be seen.

BACK HOME IN THE DRC

Watula, the man on the bench in Kavumu Camp, has known the importance of technology for years. In the DRC, he often watched television at home, used computers at the university where he studied international relations, and was a frequent contributor to a student-run radio station. In February 2013, he received death threats after broadcasting a critique of violence between rebel group M23 and the Congolese government. He then fled to neighboring Burundi, becoming one of the world's 15 million refugees. He brought his cell phone and a bag of clothes. After a few nervous months in Burundi's capital, Bujumbura, he was trucked to Kavumu Camp, which opened in May 2013 to accommodate the mounting numbers of Congolese seeking refuge in this small central African country.

Although Watula's education sets him apart from most in Kavumu, his current struggles do not. The most difficult aspect of his sudden and unsought refugee status has been boredom and loss of purpose. Before the Ideas Box arrived last February, Watula often spent entire afternoons simply sitting and daydreaming about his former life where he not only studied and contributed to a radio show, but also finished a novel. Talk-

ing with friends, lining up for food distributions, cooking, cleaning, and sleeping occupied much of his first months in Kavumu. "When you're a refugee, you become close to losing hope, and you see your future being compromised," he says.

Critics of humanitarian assistance have been accusing aid workers of creating idleness and dependency for decades. Yet little has changed in the way aid is provided. Most displaced remain confined to camps. They are given food, water, shelter, and little more. Host countries rarely grant refugees work

permits, so they remain idle or conduct petty black market trades. Seventeen years, the average length of stay in a refugee camp, is a long time with nothing to do.

BOXES WITHIN BOXES

Libraries Without Borders is one of a handful of organizations thinking about how technology can stimulate humanitarian aid recipients. Founded in 2007 to support traditional libraries in the developing world and in France, where it is headquartered, the group became involved in disaster relief after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. With funding from UNICEF, it installed "Story

Boxes"—essentially mobile libraries—in the camps of displaced people in and around Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince.

These boxes were a success and led the organization to think about taking the project to a new level. Anointed the Ideas Box, the 2.0 version of the Story Box is designed to use technology to bring culture to populations normally lacking access to both.

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The Ideas Box aims to “fight against boredom and passivity,” says Benjamin Gausset, who recently left his job at the French Embassy in Bujumbura to manage Ideas Box’s pilot phase in Africa’s Great Lakes region. “For many people [in the West], refugee camps are places with nothing. This is an error,” he says with fervor. “Refugees have food, clothing, shelter. They are OK in these respects. The major problem is idleness.”

In early 2013, funding from the Pierre Bellon Association in France and the George Soros Foundation in the United States allowed Libraries Without Borders to start making the Ideas Box a reality. A few months later, renowned French designer Philippe Starck agreed to donate a design, adding immediate clout and momentum to the project. While Starck is best known for his luxury watches, yachts, and juicers, he has also coined the term “democratic design”—the idea that well-made, quality objects should not be reserved for the elite. The Ideas Box fits neatly into this philosophy. Starck saw his task as creating a circus. According to Louvigny, the France-based project manager, “It needed to be adaptable and compact, something that from one second to another could be pulled out into different elements.”

The circus comparison works. The Ideas Box, which Starck finished designing in September 2013, has the color and pageantry of a troop of clowns. When packed up, it could be taken for a golf cart-sized Rubik’s Cube, with four brightly colored metal boxes strapped together. Each box houses a sep-

arate module—portable cinema, IT equipment, library with paper books, games, and art supplies, and an administrative center to track the users. The system also contains light, IKEA-esque furniture, ropes and tarps to protect it from the elements, and a battery pack enabling self-sufficiency in settings without electricity, like Kavumu Camp. When set up, it resembles a tented digital playground. Each of the four boxes occupies a corner, and brightly colored desks and chairs populate the middle. It is meant

to be assembled and dismantled daily, taking about a half hour each time.

Yet as the UNHCR’s pilot project to bring Internet to camps demonstrated, technology and bright colors are not enough. “Within the humanitarian sector there has been a tendency to focus heavily on product innovation and physical technologies,” writes refugee scholar and Oxford lecturer Alexander Betts. He urges humanitarian organizations to take a “bottom-up approach” with respect to innovation. In other words, projects should be created based on ideas from refugees themselves.

What stood out to Strecker when Libraries Without Borders first came to her with the Ideas Box proposal in 2012 was that it seemed to emphasize this bottom-up notion. It works with local publishers to provide materials in languages spoken by the refugees. It hires members of the refugee community to promote the tools and to give advice on what kinds of materials might interest the users. And Strecker says that while the technology inside the box is unquestionably impressive, it is not the focus.

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ACTION STEPS

FOR HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS:

- Increase partnerships with organizations that have technical expertise like Ushahidi, Facebook, and Google.
- Whenever possible, install and use open-source software to avoid having to pay costs of upgrading every few years. (See Humanitarian Open Street Maps, an organization that develops open source maps, as an example.)
- Take bottom-up approaches to technology and innovation by recognizing how affected populations are already using (or not using) technology. (See work of Alexander Betts, Associate Professor in Refugee Studies and Forced Migration at Oxford.)

FOR DONORS:

- Develop new financing models (in particular longer funding cycles) to enable humanitarian organizations to test new technologies in the challenging settings in which they work.
- Join or encourage development of teaching organizations in the developing world, working with Ideas Box or similar online and computer- or tablet-based learning models in refugee camps.
- Assist in the development of refugee media vehicles like *The Kavumu Gazette*.

—Rosalie Hughes

BUT WILL IT WORK?

Not everyone is as convinced by the idea. Morten Sigsgaard, who works on conflict-sensitive educational planning for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), sees the project as the opposite of bottom-up. He attended the Ideas Box's unveiling in Paris last October, coinciding with a conference on culture and technology in humanitarian settings. Sigsgaard sees it as typical of all too many aid events, demonstrating the disconnect from the people it's meant to serve. "I saw a group of Parisians armed with a generous budget, state-of-the-art marketing, and allied with the star designer Philippe Starck. They had come up with something that in many ways was

quite fantastic," he says. "Except that it seemed to be a Paris-driven thing."

The conference backdrop enhanced this image. Held in a cultural center in Paris' upscale 7th arrondissement, with gilded chandeliers, heavy curtains, and a view of a manicured garden framing the stage, the speakers reflected on how to engage illiterate populations, how "bibliotherapy" can help children in disaster zones, and how best to solicit feedback from refugees.

Sigsgaard acknowledges that the project backers have good intentions and some interesting ideas. But he is skeptical about how it will be received on the ground, despite its efforts to provide locally relevant content. "You have to sort of zoom out," he continues, "and think OK, what happens in

a refugee camp or an IDP camp when we take this really expensive equipment and put it there?” Humanitarian workers in Burundi asked similar questions when they first learned of the project, but for different reasons. Ulrich Ntareme, a Burundian who now manages the Ideas Box in Kavumu Camp, worked for another non-profit organization when the UNHCR announced the idea at a meeting last fall. He and others present were skeptical. “Like most people at the table, I was concerned that refugees would become better informed than those who are in charge of taking care of them,” says Ntareme, smiling thinly.

Initial opposition to new ideas is particularly common in the aid sector, says humanitarian scholar Michael Barnett of



George Washington University. Despite their talk of equality and accountability, he says, humanitarian organizations have remained quite hierarchical. Aid groups act and speak on behalf of those they serve; aid recipients receive, with little control or voice over their situation. “No one in power ever gives it up voluntarily. Show me one political order that agreed to give it up voluntarily,” says Barnett. “It just doesn’t happen.”

Empowering technology like that contained in the Ideas Box may require humanitarians to either embrace these new tools

and thereby cede some of their power, or risk becoming irrelevant. And so Ntareme’s initial skepticism has faded. He is now an ardent advocate of the project.

BACK IN BURUNDI

Louvigny explains to the circle of refugees in Kavumu Camp the concept of tablets and audio books. Before leaving their country, well over half of Kavumu’s adults were farmers in South Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the most isolated and underdeveloped areas of the world. While many in the audience know what computers and cinemas are, tablets and audio books are foreign concepts, even to Watula, one of the few who’s attended secondary school.

Louvigny then asks the audience what they imagine their community could create with the tools the project will provide. A young man raises his hand, breaking the crowd’s silence.

“We could make a camp newspaper ... and call it *The Kavumu Gazette*,” he exclaims.

Louvigny smiles. This is exactly the type of initiative the project is meant to foster. Watula leaves the meeting feeling, for the first time in months, hope.

In February, Watula is sitting on the same crooked bench when the truck carrying the Ideas Box arrives in the camp. He and two other refugees have been hired to work as facilitators for the Ideas Box. The job involves teaching and promoting the tools to other refugees, and earns him around \$30 per month. So he is especially eager for its arrival.

After travelling over 5,000 miles from a warehouse outside Paris, the box reaches its new home next to the tented warehouse storing Kavumu residents’ monthly rations of maize, beans, and oil. Nearly the weight of a Volkswagen Beetle, it contains equipment worth over \$55,000. Gausset, his Burundian

counterpart, Ulrich Ntareme, and two Paris-based staff of Libraries Without Borders unstrap the box and unload the colorful cubes from the truck bed to the container where they will remain locked until the unveiling. By the time they finish an hour later, over 100 people have joined Watula to watch.

Two days later is the official launch. The Libraries Without Borders team sets up the box for the first time, unfolding portable furniture, unwinding stiff cords, and taking e-readers out of cardboard boxes. Two hundred refugees file around the box and take seats on the ground. Libraries Without Borders, the head of UNHCR in Burundi, and a representative of the Burundian government express their delight in this newest arrival at the refugee camp. Then, a group of refugee comedians present a sketch on how to use the materials. They pretend to switch on a laptop by lighting a match and the audience, cued, shouts in unison, "Not like that!" in Swahili. Bellows of laughter erupt over and over as the actors demonstrate how to use the devices with similar comedic jests.

The following week, a group of 10th graders arrive as the box's first users. Before stepping under the box's thatched hut, a group of 15-year-olds washes their hands in the basin outside the entrance—mandatory for all users. Then they fill the seats, giggling and poking each other. A refugee facilitator, 27-year-old Dominique Shima Makamba, explains the rules: no food or water near the electronics, no phones inside (it's meant to be a quiet space), and no stealing.

Makamba then pairs the students and brings ten tablets for them to try. The students stop moving, and silence follows. "They were stupefied," says Makamba. He demonstrates how to access various applications: one that tests French spelling, another that asks questions on the world's countries, and a soccer game. When the allotted hour

ends, the students do not want to leave. But it's time; another 20 have already washed their hands and are waiting to enter.

ON THE HORIZON

Libraries Without Borders hopes that the Ideas Box, or some equivalent, will eventually be in every refugee settlement in the world. Yet there are many ways this dream could fail, the most likely being financial. The current price per box, \$140,000, including electronics, furniture, transportation, and six months of management, would drop if the boxes were produced on a large scale. Yet even at half the current cost, one box would still be more than twice as expensive as building a modern primary school in Africa. Rwanda, where the UNHCR first put Internet in refugee camps, suggests a cautionary tale. Despite repeated requests by the manager of this project, Olivier Ntaganda, and by refugees themselves, UNHCR has not found the funds to update the old software to levels in line with computers across Rwanda. If donors are not willing to pay for an upgrade from Microsoft Word 2003 to the 2010, will they be willing to spend money so that every refugee can access a tablet?

And what happens after Libraries Without Borders stops managing the boxes? After one year, the group plans to hand over each box to a community group. What is to prevent a local leader from co-opting the process and stealing the materials? Four-fifths of Burundians living around Kavumu subsist on less than \$100 per year, or one ten-thousandth the cost of an Ideas Box. The refugee population earns even less.

Above all, how will Libraries Without Borders encourage the 80 percent of refugees who cannot read or write to use the box? Ntareme, the Burundian box manager, said this is one of the biggest challenges they are facing in Kavumu. The organization is

paying refugee facilitators like Watula to go tent-to-tent promoting the box and encouraging the old and the illiterate to try the tools that do not require reading, such as the cinema and games for adults. Yet until now, most people lining up to use the box have been the young and literate minority.

Award-winning educational researcher Sugata Mitra's "hole-in-the-wall" experiment has shown that poor, undereducated children can teach themselves to use computers without supervision or formal training, thanks to "curiosity and peer interest." But will this translate to Kavumu's adult refugee population?

When asked if he thinks the tens of thousands of dollars spent on the Ideas Box could have been better used to help the residents of Kavumu—by increasing food rations or providing adult literacy classes—Watula pauses to think. Then he says firmly, "This money was not wasted at all. The opposite."

Though Watula is unlike most refugees in the camp, his sentiment is not unique. A cross section of refugees interviewed in February after the arrival of the Box—women, elderly, illiterate, and the long-term displaced—agree that modern tools like those inside the Ideas Box are essential for their communities.

Take 23-year-old Karine Asala. A single mother living in Kavumu, Asala dreams of owning chickens one day. While the Ideas Box may not directly help her with this goal, she finds the tools it provides are essential for other reasons. "Here in the camp we don't have any work, we don't have anything," she says over a crackly telephone line. "But the things inside the box now distract me from my worries." So while

Watula reads novels by José Saramago—his favorite author—on an e-reader to develop his French vocabulary, Asala watches Swahili soap operas on a tablet to take her mind off her boredom and troubles.

As consensus grows around the idea that technology is a basic need, questions persist. What shape will the technology take—a multicolored box conceived by Starck, the man who refurbished the private Elysée Palace apartments of French President François Mitterrand, or something simpler? How much of the already strapped aid resources will be put to these new tools? And to what extent will for-profit tech companies like Google and Facebook step up to fill these gaps?

These questions can no longer be ignored. "Either [humanitarian] organizations adapt to the network age, or they grow increasingly out of touch with the people they were established to serve," writes the UN Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). "If they choose to adapt, an old dream—enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—has a chance of coming true: that all people gain the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of any frontiers. That is a goal worth pursuing."

Watulu puts it his own way: "With the tools in the Ideas Box we've understood that we still have purpose, that we can start to live again and get our hope back. Because now there are things we can do. I don't know by which channel yet," he says. "But with this new technology, it's something precious beyond description."

He hopes to launch *The Kavumu Gazette* over the summer. ●