

EMPOWERING REFUGEE AND HOST-COMMUNITY YOUTH WITH DESIGN THINKING SKILLS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Kathinka Strand HASSELKNIPPE, Anna KIRAH and Thomas FLYGENRING
Design without Borders

ABSTRACT

Design is problem solving; it is the systematic and creative development of products, services to meet people's needs. In the Human Centred Design approach (HCD), the belief is that the people who face challenges are the ones who hold the key to solving them. Traditional design is generally limited to designing *for* end-users, HCD is about designing *with* the people we serve. This project aimed at teaching relevant design thinking methods and processes to community members, empowering them to *design for and by themselves*. We experienced an evolving from designing with the people we serve to giving the people the skills to be able to design for themselves.

Uganda has seen a massive influx of refugees following the outbreak of civil war South Sudan. Despite having a refugee management approach is amongst the most progressive in the world, there is a need for youth empowerment due to dependency of foreign aid combined with a high youth unemployment rate. The Adjumani Design Challenge was a UNDP initiated pilot of a youth design training that spanned three months in late 2016. Youth from South Sudanese refugee settlements and Ugandan host-communities were guided through a complete HCD process focusing on stimulating the mind-set, creativity and confidence necessary to turn challenges into opportunities for change. We discuss the short-term outcomes of this pilot in the perspective of youth empowerment and the potential impact on community development, as well as the possibilities and limitations of traditional HCD training methods and tools as well as these evolved methods and tools.

Keywords: Refugees, Uganda, South Sudan, Human Centered Design (HCD),

1 INTRODUCTION

Hosting over 1 million refugees [16], Uganda is known for its progressive refugee policy, where refugees are provided land, freedom of movement and access to employment and social services, giving refugees opportunities for building their lives. However, it does not come without its own challenges; increased competition over employment opportunities, scarcity of social services and environmental degradation are some of the many challenges that the host communities face, particularly among the youth [12]. Opportunities arise, and research shows that refugee settlements in Uganda have “a strong presence of innovative entrepreneurship, including the use and adaptation of technology” [5]. In order to enhance peaceful coexistence and build self-reliance and resilience, UNDP wanted to utilize Human Centered Design approach with refugee- and host communities.

2 RESEARCH GAP AND APPROACH

The literature review was based on Human Centered Design (HCD) approaches and other design programs from similar contexts. The Humanitarian Innovation Fund argues that, “a longstanding challenge for the humanitarian system has been to find ways in which those traditionally ‘served’ in a humanitarian crisis can be engaged in a more ‘participatory’ and ‘empowering’ way. Yet these intentions often end up as hollow rhetoric against the backdrop of top-down aid interventions” [5]. As a response to this challenge, HCD has gained ground as a valuable tool when designing with vulnerable populations. HCD is a process and a set of techniques commonly used to create products, services, systems, etc. The HCD approach takes beneficiaries as the starting point; understanding what people need and want before considering viability and feasibility [1]. Limited research has been done

on HCD projects and design trainings in refugee settings or in low and middle income countries (LMICs). While HCD is taught at universities in the western world, this is not the case for LMICs where HCD courses are limited. Some trainings exist, targeting poor communities with low education levels, and lessons can also be learned from HCD toolkits. The Adjumani Design Challenge was implemented to test the potential impact of such trainings, while evaluating the efficiency of content and form in the context it would be used.

3 METHODS AND SCOPE

The Adjumani Design Challenge (ADC) was a pilot project of a design training, implemented by the Ugandan-Norwegian design company Design without Borders Uganda Ltd (DwB), on behalf of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and Adjumani Local Government. The training took place in the northern region of Adjumani, over the course of three months. 30 participants were trained; Ugandan host-community and South Sudanese refugee youth between 15-31 years of age, both genders, with education levels ranging from primary school to diplomas [10]. The participants came from several different villages and refugee settlements, were divided into six teams, with a mix from host- and refugee communities.

ADC was composed of six workshops, each covering two days, taking part in the weekends to accommodate the participants who were in school. During the workshops, participants were gathered for trainings and in-between the workshops, the teams conducted field work. Through the workshops the participants were taken through a redesigned HCD process that was applicable to non-designers, practicing individual steps and using a wide range of design tools, methods and practices. ADC took the participants through a complete design project; identifying and framing challenges; researching to understand the challenges; creating ideas, concepts and prototypes, pilots and implementations.

The sessions were held in a community youth center, and consisted of lectures and group work. Every new method introduced followed the same pattern; the facilitators presented the method and made a demonstration, involved the participants, then had the teams try the methods and apply it to their self-chosen project (“Hear, Try, Apply”). Every session started and ended with joint and individual reflection on the process, understanding how the different steps relate to the overall process of designing meaningful, relevant, useful and desirable solutions.

4 OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section we discuss how the Adjumani Design Challenge (ADC) relates to similar HCD practices and trainings and how it transcends them. In addition, we highlight some learnings that might be applicable for other practitioners in the field.

4.1 Designing for, with and by a target group

We can separate different design approaches in the following manner: design FOR the target group; design WITH the target group, design BY the target group [9]. Each approach can work when designing for change in a LMIC context, but they come with different advantages and disadvantages. Designing FOR a target group is based on traditional understanding of design and it is also still taught in many higher educations in the western world. It is possible for a skilled designer to possess unique experiences and skills which help her design innovative and appropriate solutions without being part of the community she is designing for. However, more often than not, the approach of designing FOR a target group in LMICs can result in a lack of critical insight and context which is necessary in order to design the best possible appropriate solutions that can be implemented.

An HCD project generally entails a component of designing WITH the target group and there seems to be two models of HCD; the IDEO HCD approach and the co-creative HCD approach. The IDEO approach involves a relationship between the designer and the target group. Designers work with the target group and involve them in the design process, but often the designers take over and design FOR the target group based on obtained insights. This approach can be successful, however it is placing design skills over context and culture at the stages where the designer is not working with the target group. This results in a risk of failure due to a lack of context and culture at both solution and implementation stages. In the co-creative HCD approach, the target group is part of the entire design process, working with the designers as collaborators. This process is time consuming, but often results in successful solutions that are implemented together with (or by) the target group and which take local context and culture into account. Local presence is the mitigating factor for HCD co-creation

approach, however, some projects still fail when designers are not involved in implementation with the people who own and use the solutions.

The questions posed during the ADC were: Is it possible through facilitating a practical, cultural and context-specific design education, to have the target group use design thinking and design skills to identify and reframe challenges, and to find ways of solving them within the context of their own lives? Does ownership of creating and implementing solutions BY the target group (instead of by the designer), increase motivation and persistence, resulting in successful implementation? Is it possible to form bonds between two co-existing communities through the facilitation process which results in collaboration? In this model, design moves from *collaborating* with to *facilitating* the learning of context appropriate design tools and applying them to relevant solutions BY the target group(s).

The humanitarian system has for some time attempted to engage beneficiaries of their interventions in a more participatory and empowering way. However, despite the best intentions this rhetoric seldom makes it into practice and interventions often remain with a top-down approach [5]. In an attempt to address issues seen in these interventions, such as lack of ownership, poor adaptation to context or culture, problematic power structures, donor reliance and lack of resilience, ADC took form as a pilot of a design training. ADC is an example of design BY, meaning that the community members learned and practiced how to design appropriate solutions for themselves and for their communities, which changes the role of the designer to facilitator. The results of the pilot showcase some of the possibilities and limitations of what community members can design themselves.

4.2 Design educations for non-designer: their trainings and toolkits

As a reference, we will compare the Adjumani Design Challenge to other design trainings and design toolkits, all with the same goal of teaching non-designers how to successfully use design methods to design appropriate solutions for their communities or target group. These are based on our own experiences with the toolkits and trainings and our assumptions based on reviewing them.

International design company IDEO's design kit "The field guide to Human-Centered Design", outlines the HCD process and tools, is free to download and has been used all over the world. In theory anyone can download and use the toolkits, but an evaluation in 2013 found that a limited group of people can actually reach and benefit from using the toolkits; they are only available in English, they use jargon and complex language; some of the many tools presented are difficult to apply to the work [9]. These toolkits are made by westerners for a highly educated and western context. Inspired by the IDEO toolkit, but seeing how it was poorly adapted to the African context, Future by Design created the "Human Centered Design Africa Toolkit". Their target, however, is still NGOs, companies and other highly education people who work in the LMIC context. There is no specific material for working with rural, illiterate and/or vulnerable communities. This toolkit is made by and for the African context, however it is still a tool kit for highly educated.

In order to benefit from the HCD toolkits, recipients need to already have an understanding about the benefits of design to find, approach and actually use them. The toolkits we have assessed seem to be created for target groups with prior knowledge and understanding of design and/or design thinking; companies and organizations, even designers, use these toolkits in their work. In practice, it is doubtful that these toolkits are used by certain target groups in LMICs, specifically people in communities with limited knowledge of the benefits of design.

MIT'S D-lab is conducting a practical design training, the Creative Capacity Building (CCB), targeting poor agricultural communities in LMIC in Africa and South America. They focus on increasing local capacity and local innovation and their village training programme is a "hands-on skills-building workshop that introduces the design process to community members, regardless of their educational background" [11]. Their goal is to train participants to create or adapt technologies for improving their lives in a hands-on process using a selection of design tools.

Depending on who the target audience is for design trainings and toolkits we can expect different outcomes, as they possess different mind-sets, creative capacities, references and skills. In our experience members of a target group know their context and culture the best, but often lack the extensive skills of a trained and experienced designer. The ADC specifically targeted youth from rural communities in northern Uganda, from both Ugandan host-communities and south Sudanese refugee settlements, with education levels from primary school to diploma. ADC curriculum took inspiration from methods and processes found in the known HCD toolkits. Learning from their approach of IDEO

and CCB, ADC developed their own methods and processes to better fit the context and culture of Adjumani and the participants of the training.

4.2.1 ADC: What kind of design is being taught?

ADC taught the entire HCD process, but reduced the amount of tools and methods used, selecting and evolving the ones most applicable to the context, and focused on facilitating for the design of both services and products. This approach represents a new kind of design where designers are facilitators allowing people to reframe their challenges to opportunities, allowing people to create themselves and allowing people to take control of their own lives.

4.2.2 The process of selecting challenges

HCD toolkits take as a starting point that the challenge has been selected, and subsequently starts the design process with redefining and refining said challenge. We assume the CCB takes a similar starting point, as they work with practical solutions to practical problems.

In the Adjumani Design Challenge, the process started before the challenge had been selected. Youth in Adjumani face many complex challenges, and one of the main focuses of the training was for the participants to understand how to find good challenges with the right size and scope, to be able to turn these challenges into opportunities for themselves and their communities. This approach differs from that of other design trainings because it starts with the complex activity of finding the most pressing challenges in the communities, understanding and defining their root cause and identifying opportunities for achievable design interventions that can, over time, solve bigger community challenges. We argue that practicing the art of choosing appropriate challenges is an important part of any design training and that ADC benefited from the added focus on understanding how big complex problems, seemingly impossible for the participants to solve, are composed of several smaller challenges which presents opportunities for them.

4.3 Mindset – who will solve our problems?

In the context where the communities are and have traditionally been heavily reliant on foreign aid, the team observed a mind-set amongst the youth that problems should and will be solved by foreign and local aid organizations. The participants were thinking in terms of “what can an NGO do to solve this problem for us?” They routinely chose to work on big and complex challenges, initially not able to see how what kind of challenges they could impact themselves. Based on this observation, ADC aimed to change this mind-set, to teach the participants to focus on finding challenges within the scope of their own interventions, without relying on outside help to be able to achieve their goals.

4.4 Outcomes of ADC

The six teams chose to work with themes ranging from alcoholism to early marriage and crop farming. Within their themes they identified several challenges and, by the use of selection criteria, chose a specific challenge, refined and reframed it and conducted field work to further understand how the challenge is wired and how it affects people and communities. From their challenge they identified opportunities, and through an iterative process the teams designed products and services responding to their challenges, with continuous involvement from community members (“end-users”). The designs were prototyped and piloted, and ranged from farming tools, sanitation products, youth groups and financial planning tools. As of late January 2017, three out of the six teams implemented the solutions they designed during the Adjumani Design Challenge in their local communities. The teams are receiving income from implementation of their solutions. This indicates a success rate of at least 50%, although a further study is necessary to understand long term learnings.

4.5 Benefits of ADC

The HCD approach (design BY) developed and used in ADC has benefited the participants and communities of Adjumani, and shows promising results. With this approach, the ownership of the solutions shifts from the designer to the target group and their community; the target group chose which challenges to solve, how to solve them and who should benefit, while simultaneously creating employment opportunities for themselves. The ADC approach to HCD has shown to stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit, resiliency and collaboration in vulnerable communities, while ensuring that the capacity for repeating the design process stays within the community.

UNDP, both head office in Kampala and area office in northern Uganda, agree that ADC gave promising results in teaching design thinking for problem solving BY members of the community FOR the community as a whole. A UNDP project manager and livelihoods specialist noted that the organization is now “more confident than before that many of the challenges facing the communities can be turned into opportunities by themselves” and that “the HCD approach is one of the most promising ways in which we can stimulate the creativity which lies within all of us”. [12] The participants reported increased self-esteem in being proactive about their own situations. They commented on the positive effects of interacting with each other and other community members on the outcome of the design process. [13] The participants are still working with each other, implementing the designs in their teams. Local youth leaders reported seeing a mind-set change not commonly seen during trainings. One local youth leader who was also involved as a facilitator, noted that the ADC was “building the capability of young people to identify their own problems, and it goes ahead on impacting knowledge on how they can screen the best suitable solution for their own problems using locally available resources that are efficient and affordable at their reach”. [14] As this project has recently been concluded, the long term-effects cannot yet be measured. UNDP, together with the Local Government and Youth Leaders are continuously monitoring the development of the teams and the participants to understand the long-term benefits.

4.6 Challenges and limitations?

ADC focused on people themselves designing the solutions they or their communities need and it appears to have been a success, however, there are also limits to this practice. The extent of this design training cannot compare with that of a university education in design, and ADC focused on pushing the participants to understand which problems are solvable (for them and by them) and which ideas/concepts are doable (again for them and by them). The content of design thinking had to be adjusted to fit the participant’s education level and interest and the limitations to what these communities can solve themselves are not known to us.

During the execution of ADC, the team faced some challenges to take learning from. It was difficult for the team (even the Ugandan nationals) to understand all cultural challenges. Many of the teams had challenging dynamics based on gender, nationality, tribes, personality and power structures within settlements and host-communities. Had we understood the challenges ahead of time, we could have mitigated some of these challenges by taking the appropriate action early. Many of the participants were not used to being systematically creative and expressing their opinions; in the earlier workshops the participants turned to the facilitators and designers for validation, while they later on in the process trusted their own instincts more. We believe building the participants confidence in their own capabilities is an important aspect to consider when executing such design trainings. More research is necessary to see if this generalizes to all forms of vulnerable communities.

Acknowledging that ADC was a pilot project, certain learnings can be taken considering the format of the training. The pilot was time consuming and labor intensive, and should be easier to replicate without having to recreate all materials anew. In addition to this, the pilot consisted of outsiders doing the teaching and a future programme should include training the trainer as a next step so that members of the local community are involved in all steps. The participants had little previous knowledge of design, and many were not fully prepared for what the training they had signed up for would actually be, meaning some participants initially lacked motivation or were not the right fit for the training. Throughout the process most of the participants were actively engaged and realized the potential benefit for them. Future trainings can benefit from the first participants taking the role as change agents in their communities; being involved for peer trainings, finding, motivating and informing potential new participants.

5 FINAL REMARKS

Adjumani Design Challenge has showcased that many of the challenges faced by refugee communities can be turned into opportunities BY the community members themselves. In this model, design moves from *collaborating* with to *facilitating* the learning of context appropriate design tools and applying them to meaningful and relevant solutions BY the target group(s). In addition, we witnessed increased motivation and persistence resulting in successful implementation of 50% of the solutions designed by the participants themselves.

ADC showed that the HCD approach, when adapted to local context and when designers facilitate, is one of the most promising ways to stimulate the creativity and confidence essential to creating solutions to challenges and improving livelihoods in communities like that of Adjumani. We believe that ADC is approaching the shift of focus that will unlock a great potential of the use of design training in LMIC communities. The key to moving people from being recipients of aid to taking ownership of their own lives can happen only if the people are capable of creating locally made solutions using locally available resources, materials and knowledge. Even in HCD projects where such factors have been considered, the fact remains that there is an outsider (trained designer) designing FOR a beneficiary. ADC transcends this fact and affords the local community to design their own solutions where the capacity of developing and redoing the design process has the potential to remain WITH the beneficiaries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would especially like to thank UNDP, DwB, Adjumani Local government, the country of Japan, UNCHR and the participants for their support.

REFERENCES

- [1] IDEO. *Design Kit: The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design*. Retrieved 2nd February, 2017.
- [2] UNCHR. *South Sudan Situation – Adjumani*. Available: <https://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/region.php?id=47&country=229>. [Accessed on 2016, 27 Dec.]
- [3] UBOS. *National Population and Housing Census 2014*. Available: <http://www.ubos.org/2014-census/census-2014-final-results/>. [Accessed on 2016, 16 December]
- [4] Future by design. *Human Centered Design Africa Toolkit*. Retrieved 2nd February, 2017
- [5] Betts, Bloom and Weaver. *Refugee Innovation; Humanitarian innovation that starts with communities*, Humanitarian Innovation Project, 2015
- [6] Betts, Bloom, Kaplan and Omata. *Refugee Economies, Rethinking Popular Assumptions*. Humanitarian Innovation Project, 2014
- [7] The International Refugee Rights Initiative. *South Sudanese refugees in Adjumani District, Uganda: Telling a new story?* 2015
- [8] Frog. *Collective Action Toolkit*. Retrieved 2nd February 2017
- [9] Am I a Designer. *The HCD toolkit evaluation – presenting our results to IDEO.org*. Available: <http://amiadesigner.com/the-hcd-toolkit-evaluation-presenting-our-results-to-ideo-org/> [Accessed on 2017, 5 January] (2013).
- [10] UNHCR. *Emergency update on the South Sudan refugee situation – Uganda*. 2017
- [11] D-Lab. *Creative Capacity Building*. Available: <https://d-lab.mit.edu/creative-capacity-building>, [Accessed on 2017, 2 February]
- [12] Interview with Luna Nagatomo, Livelihoods Specialist, UNDP, 2016, 16 December
- [13] Interview with Minzi Gift, South Sudanese participant of the ADC, 2016, 15 December
- [14] Interview with Dima Godfrey Obol, Chairperson of the Adjumani Youth Council and facilitator of the Adjumani Design Challenge, 2016, 15 December
- [15] Interview with Mudathir Doka, Field Associate, UNHCR, 2016, 14 December
- [16] Interview with Pedro Mathos, Head of Programme, World Food Programme, 2017, 25 February