

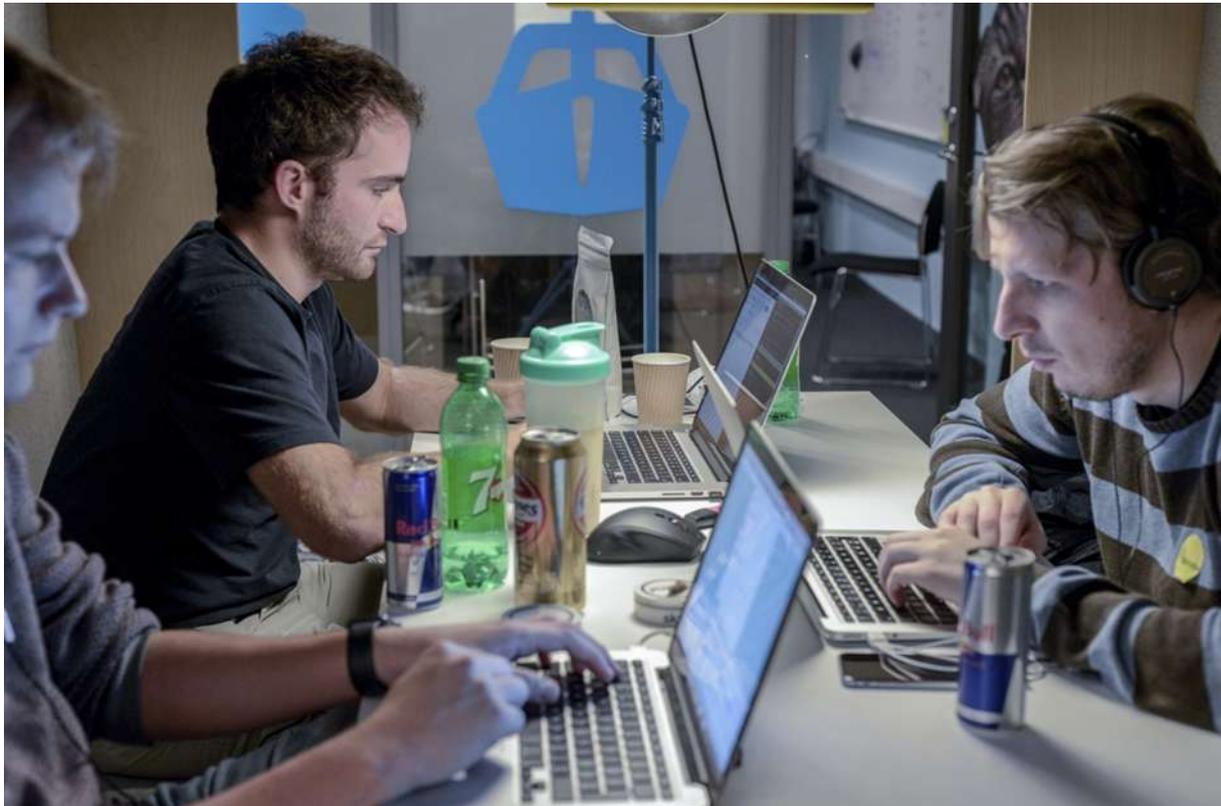


Techfugees

Techies connecting migrants

One year after its creation in London, "Techfugees" has become a global platform, bringing together some thirty local "chapters" of computer engineers, start-ups, NGOs, associations and other specialists who develop innovative digital technologies adapted to the needs of migrants and migrant support organisations.

Jean-Luc Janot with Antoine Saint-Denis, AEIDL (18/11/2016) - Photos: Tom Hayton



Kom Inn, the winning team of the Oslo hackathon, hard at work (14-16 October 2016).

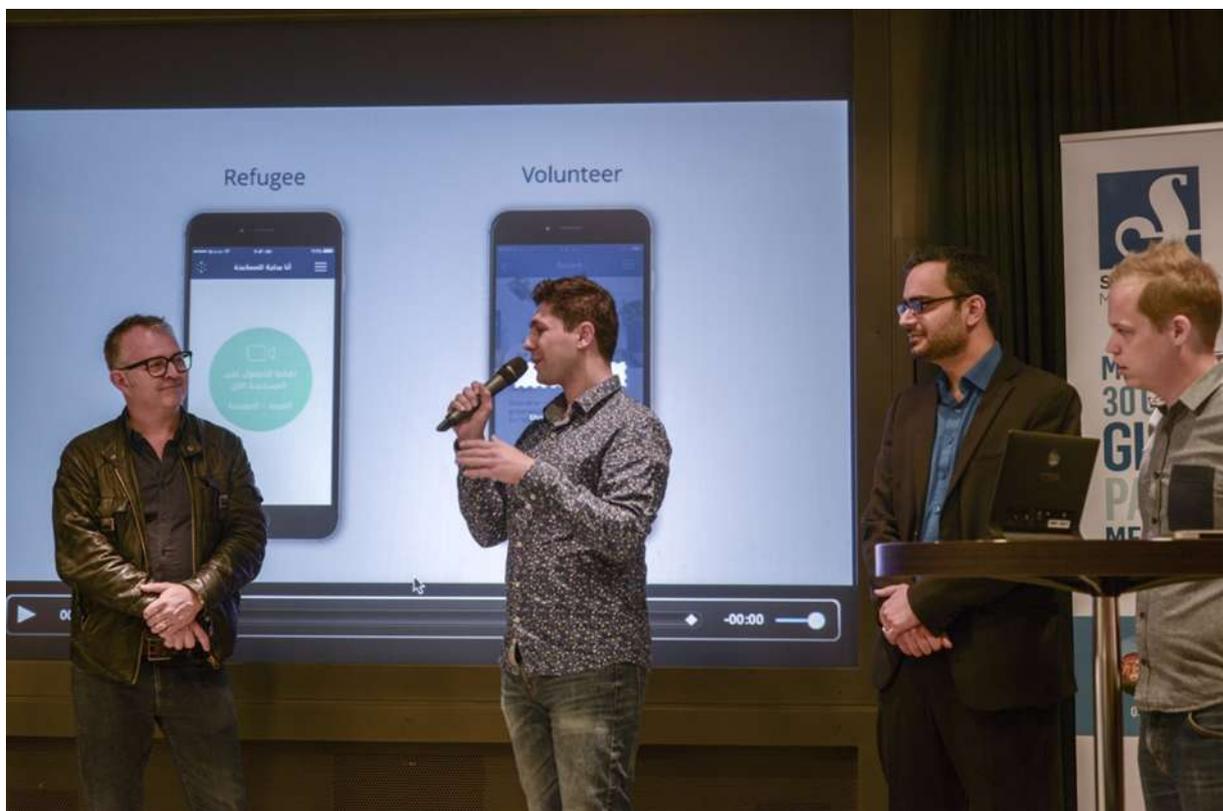
[Techfugees](#) was founded by Mike Butcher, a journalist for [TechCrunch](#), in September 2015. At the height of the migrant crisis, Mike wondered how the entrepreneurs around him could help to find good, quickly applicable ideas to facilitate communication, knowing that contact with their family, with authorities, etc. is one of the basic needs of migrants, along with food or shelter.

A first "hackathon" (computer encoding workshop) organised in London in October 2015 mobilised more than 300 people and gave birth to practical computer application prototypes for refugees, such as [Geecycle](#), a platform for individuals to donate their old smartphones to

refugees, or Refugee.info, a website with essential information for refugees arriving in Greece and the Balkans.

Other hackathons have followed in 25 countries, from New York, Sydney, Oslo, Paris to Belgrade and Amman. Lisbon, the latest city having joined the Techfugees community, held its hackathon on November 8, at the Web Summit, the largest technology conference in Europe, in the presence of Giórgos Papandreou, the former Greek Prime Minister. The Dublin hackathon in October 2016 resulted in at least three devices:

- **Health Path** ([@HealthPathIRL](https://twitter.com/HealthPathIRL)), a digital health platform to assist refugees access health services in their native languages, and integrate into the local healthcare system;
- **Isle of Hope** ([@IsleOfHopeIRL](https://twitter.com/IsleOfHopeIRL)), a programme to promote inclusiveness by matching refugee and local families to build friendships and support systems; and
- **Líonra** ([@LionraHq](https://twitter.com/LionraHq)), a peer-to-peer platform that facilitates refugee integration through skills exchange and knowledge sharing.



Oslo hackathon finalists with Mike Butcher, the founder of Techfugees (left).

Techfugees [events](#) (hackathons but also conferences, meetings, workshops, and the collective creation of apps and software...) bring together and network computer scientists, entrepreneurs and start-ups with NGOs but also government agencies involved in migration issues.



Presentation and some of the hackers at the Oslo hackathon.

In its one year of existence, Techfugees has become a [global network](#) with nearly 30 "chapters" in 22 countries spread across five continents. These local groups are essential to the organisation's mission. They help to gather the local tech ecosystems around the topic of refugees, create relevant local events and content to feed the local community, and coordinate the sharing of best practices with other chapters internationally. Since there is no "one size fits all" solution to the crisis, local chapters can make a difference by developing tailored solutions and by becoming beacons of inspiration for others.

A team of about 20 volunteers based in London coordinate the network, and also promote and support fundraising (through a crowdfunding campaign launched at the Web Summit, donations and with the help of several private sponsors of the tech sector, including Schibsted, a large Norwegian group).

The T5

As well as operational goals, such as constructing a sustainable ecosystem, Techfugees has defined five main focus areas (the "T5") where tech can have a significant impact:

1. Infrastructure (providing connectivity and access to the internet and technology, either in refugee camps, on the move or in host communities);
2. Education (providing access to blended learning via online/offline language courses, teachers and universities);
3. Identity (e.g. recognition of skills and diplomas);
4. Health (providing access to essential, medical and psychological care); and
5. Inclusion (facilitating the social, cultural and economic integration of refugees).

To date, Techfugees activities have involved 88 volunteers and have resulted in around one hundred tools that benefit 30 000 refugees and migrants.



Attendees of the 2nd Techfugees Conference (London, Nov. 2015). An Afghan refugee shows his battery pack (Calais "Jungle")



Interview with Joséphine Goube, the CEO of Techfugees

How did you get involved in an initiative like Techfugees?

When Techfugees started, I was running a start-up in London called Migreat, which was at the intersection of technology and immigration. We had created an online wizard using an intelligent algorithm to facilitate migrant visa applications. When I saw on my phone that the editor of TechCrunch was organizing a conference on the issue of refugees and technology, I was both furious and happy: furious because all my press releases on the issue had always been ignored because it was not a topical issue; but also very happy to see that finally one of the tech gurus was interested in this issue and was going to give it the attention it needed. Immigration and refugees are a major phenomenon of the 21st century, and it is going to become an even bigger story, so we can either look at it as a crisis, or as an opportunity.

Techies are often perceived as spoiled kids, who are passionate about technology and video games ... Or as specialists at the service of industry, some might call it "the big capital" ... What drives them to get involved?

Having observed the developers, data scientists and designers that come to our events, I see part of a generation that is somewhat disillusioned by what the world of work has offered them - coding is cool but ultimately they do not feel very useful- and another part, who are very committed, motivated by the promise of "open-source", with an open mind on the possibilities of the Internet, but for whom this promise is fading. They know that coming to a hackathon for refugees, creating code for NGOs, has a real value in the world of tomorrow.

Are developers really able to understand the often very harsh reality of migrants? How can you reconcile two very different types of people?

This question arises at every hackathon and we have to be careful not to make the same beginner's error when it comes to understanding what a refugee really is. You don't ask a plumber to solve a wastewater disposal problem in Lagos or a doctor to calm your husband's anger. Developers need to understand the context and the problem before they can develop a solution. Our hackathons always start with one or two refugees presenting their story. This helps to change the image of the refugees: no, they do not seek pity; yes, they want to be included and to be useful to our societies. Then, our team spends an hour providing information, data and definitions, which are useful to pinpoint the problem. The hackathons are also supervised by NGOs and technology experts from the humanitarian sector.

To be honest, however, this question is prejudiced: I know a lot of refugees who are engineers. To be a refugee is just a label we attach to people, it's a piece of paper. It does not mean anything other than: "I left my country because if I stayed there, I would be dead"!

What is Techfugees' originality in relation to all these technological initiatives that have emerged since the start of the refugee crisis?

Our originality comes from the fact that we emerged from an improvised conference, organised by leaders of the technological industry and by a journalist specialising in technology. In this context, we are not focused on solving a particular problem faced by refugees, but on facilitating

the development of an ecosystem of technologies, talents and finance in order to build lasting, durable solutions with a strong impact.

For over a year now, we have seen an explosion in an app and tech market targeting refugees (especially in Germany). We have been active observers: connecting NGOs with good projects, organising conferences with agencies such as DFID or UNICEF, or promoting good projects in the media (CNN, Bloomberg, etc.) and to potential funders (the UN, the European Union, etc.). In doing so, we have collected a lot of data that allows us to have an overview of promising technologies and projects, and of mistakes to be avoided.

Hackathons have generated dozens of ideas for technological applications, but many ideas do not become projects, and many projects do not result in a real service to migrants. How can we improve this situation? Which applications do you think are really essential?

We have categorised the needs of refugees into five major programmes: connectivity, education, health, identity, and social inclusion. However, at the heart of the problem, and of the solution, is access – access to the Internet and the mastery of digital technology. Half of all refugees are under 18 years of age. How can they get an education that allows them to become responsible adults? The average time spent in the camps is 17 months. How can these individuals lead a 'normal' and satisfying life during this waiting period? You also have many women and children who are victims of violence, rape and prostitution. How can we prevent the mafias responsible for this from getting rich?

We sometimes complain that we don't have Wi-Fi when traveling in another country, so imagine what it is like for a refugee!

Developing projects takes time, and the enthusiasm that existed at the end of 2015 has subsided. Yet, the needs are still there. How can we continue to mobilize goodwill and ensure the sustainability of projects that are worthwhile?

Firstly, we never thought the enthusiasm would last, and it is not because there was enthusiasm that we institutionalised our movement. It is because there is a real, lasting need. The migratory phenomenon will increase. This is a fact. Most countries in Africa have not yet made their demographic transition, climate change is accelerating and the rising sea levels will see entire regions disappear. I'm not trying to scaremonger, I'm just underlining the reality of climatic and geopolitical conditions. Immigration follows these trends.

As I mentioned, I have been working on the immigration and technology issue for five years now, and I have long been misunderstood by my peers in the tech community. I know the media and media cycle. Enthusiasm will rise and fall but I am not worried about the media attention. I am worried about not having enough time or enough money to invest now. When George Soros announces \$500 million for refugees, I am happy and we need more people like Soros.

Wars and crises have always been an opportunity to advance technology. Can the innovations generated by Techfugees ultimately benefit everyone?

Yes, definitely. It will benefit migrants, expats and ultimately everyone. Because we are all, at some point in our lives, confronted with situations of displacement and surrounded by strangers or people who speak another language. It is no coincidence that the investors of my former start-up, Migreat, came from international money transfer organisations. It is a huge market, which is constantly growing.

What about financing? Is it easy?

This is not obvious. We are building a library of best projects and of our network intelligence, but this is not tangible for an investor, and for many people. We are slowly approaching foundations but we have been mostly dependant on the donations from individuals. That's what has funded us so far - £10K in a year. We would like to be able to do more - and we have launched an online crowdfunding campaign - bit.ly.donate2techfugees.com - targeting £100K, to demonstrate that we have a community around the world that believes in Techfugees. Another reason for the difficulty in attracting funding is that this is a very political issue. We have in the past experienced last minute refusals or disappointments because business leaders were afraid that their consumers would penalize them for helping refugees...

How do you assess the impact of Techfugees to date?

We have organised more than 35 events in one year, in partnership and/or collaboration with some of the largest non-governmental and governmental organisations, bringing together more than 2,000 techies and more than 350 refugees. We know from experience, and from statistics from specific events, that these refugees have become, through our events, representatives of their community, and have been employed and/or have built their own businesses.

Today, more than half of the Techfugees' volunteer team is made up of refugees and migrants. Techfugees as such is already a great success.

How do you see the future of your initiative?

We hope to increase the impact of our events, of the projects deployed and of technologies created. But most of all, I hope that more and more foundations and investment funds recognise that refugees are a resource in which to invest for the future of the planet.

I have always believed that being forbidden to travel because of visa requirements, being a certain nationality, etc. - is out of date, and that one day it will eventually disappear.



Techfugees at the Creative Conference (New York, Feb. 2016).



Brainstorm session at the 2nd Techfugees Conference (London, Nov. 2015).