Integrating Technology into Resettlement Practices

Annotated Bibliography

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Contents

Executive Summary

Purpose

This annotated bibliography presents key research and resources on emerging technologies in refugee resettlement. It supports service providers integrating technology into resettlement services, with a focus on virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI), and implementation frameworks. Each annotation includes a brief overview of how these tools enhance access to essential services, facilitate cultural orientation, or strengthen pathways to self-sufficiency.

Key Terms

Integration of technology, specifically VR, into refugee resettlement is building an early but promising foundation. Internationally, studies demonstrate VR's potential to strengthen newcomer integration across multiple outcomes, including location-specific community navigation skills development, improved mental health, and resource access to help prepare newcomers for their new communities. VR and other emerging technologies have potential to significantly enhance learning and confidence, particularly when integrated with human-centered service delivery.

Introduction and Inclusion Criteria

To produce this narrative annotated bibliography, Switchboard used an exploratory, non-systematic search strategy to identify representative sources relevant to the topic. Search terms included *VR for refugee integration, VR for cultural orientation, AI placement algorithms for refugees, conversational AI refugee services, mobile translation in humanitarian contexts, digital tools and platforms for resettlement services,* and *participatory designed refugee technology.* Geographic scope focused on resettlement contexts—specifically the United States, Canada, and Europe—with a secondary focus on displacement and development contexts. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025. To provide practical implementation guidance, there are also government-funded program evaluations and program documentation from intergovernmental organizations (e.g., Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration). In total, we selected 18 sources for inclusion.

Annotated Bibliography

Virtual Reality for Cultural Orientation and Integration

1. Kirya, M., Debattista, K., & Chalmers, A. (2023). Using virtual environments to facilitate refugee integration in third countries. *Virtual Reality*, 27(1), 97-107. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10055-022-00659-x

Source Type: Peer-reviewed randomized controlled trial

Annotation: This experimental study with 122 refugees explores preparing for UK resettlement using virtual reality (VR) for cultural orientation. Researchers compared three instructional modalities for teaching UK National Health Service navigation, including text-based training materials, 360° videos, and interactive VR. Participants were tested on knowledge acquisition, knowledge retention, user experience, usability, and "sense of presence" in a new space.

VR significantly outperformed both text and 360° video across all measured outcomes. Most critically for resettlement programming, VR demonstrated superior ability to create lasting memories and transfer knowledge that users could apply post-arrival. The study found that VR's immersive learning enabled participants to "mentally rehearse" health care navigation procedures in ways that traditional media could not facilitate.

2. Syrian Canadian Foundation & University of Toronto Mississauga. (n.d.). Engag3D: *Helping newcomers improve their language skills using virtual reality and artificial intelligence*. https://syriancanadianfoundation.ca/engag3d/

Source Type: Government-funded pilot program (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada)

Annotation: Engag3D is a three-year pilot program (2021–2024) funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada that uses VR for English language instruction among adult newcomers. The program provides VR headsets to learners to practice English in simulated real-world scenarios, including job interviews, shopping, banking, health care appointments, and workplace interactions. VR practice occurs in parallel with conventional English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom instruction. Early evaluation data from University of Toronto Mississauga indicates improvements in listening comprehension, speaking, and confidence using English in everyday life. ESL instructors reported that learners demonstrated noticeably less hesitation with using English after VR practice sessions.

3. Wanner, L., Bowen, D., Burgos, M., Carrasco, E., Černocký, J., Codina, T., Danilins, J., Davey, S., de Lara, J., Dimopoulou, E., Egorova, E., Gebhard, C., Grivolla, J., Jaramillo-Rojas, E., Klusch, M., Mavropoulos, A., Moudatsou, M., Nikolaidou, A., Ntioudis, D., . . . Vrochidis, S. (2024). Support of migrant reception, integration, and social inclusion by intelligent technologies. *Information*, *15*(11), 686. https://doi.org/10.3390/info15110686

Source Type: Peer-reviewed research article documenting multi-country implementation

Annotation: This article describes the WELCOME Platform, a European Union Horizon 2020 research project combining conversational agents (AI-powered virtual assistants) with VR environments to support migrant and refugee reception and integration. The platform integrates multiple technologies: 1) "MyWelcome VR," providing immersive cultural orientation and 2) a companion mobile application delivering personalized support via agent-driven service coordination including language learning, civic education, and social activities. Field trials with migrants and refugees in Greece, Spain, and Germany demonstrated that the integrated AI + VR system successfully supports overburdened services while improving user experience navigating their new countries. The modular design allows agencies to use components independently or together based on the provider's capacity and newcomers' needs.

4. Logie, C. H., Okumu, M., Admassu, Z., MacKenzie, F., Gittings, L., Kortenaar, J.-L., Khan, N., Hakiza, R., Kibuuka Musoke, D., Nakitende, A., Katisi, B., Kyambadde, P., Lester, R., & Mbuagbaw, L. (2025). Findings from the Tushirikiane-4-MH (supporting each other for mental health) mobile health–supported virtual reality randomized controlled trial among urban refugee youth in Kampala, Uganda. *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*, *12*, e12. https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2025.3

Source Type: Peer-reviewed randomized controlled trial

Annotation: This randomized controlled trial tested a VR-enhanced mental health intervention with 335 urban refugee youth in Uganda. The intervention combined co-created VR videos addressing trauma, peer pressure, and community resources with Group Problem Management Plus (GPM+), a World Health Organization (WHO)-endorsed therapy framework. The co-creation methodology included refugee youth as script writers, actors, and cultural guides to ensure cultural relevance and authenticity. Results showed statistically significant improvements in emotion regulation, a sense of belonging in their communities, and mental well-being. VR videos were used as discussion prompts to help youth understand abstract concepts and reduce stigma around mental health support.

5. Kaplan-Rakowski, R., & Gruber, A. (2023). The impact of high-immersion virtual reality on foreign language anxiety when speaking in a foreign language. *Smart Learning Environments*, *10*(55). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-023-00263-9

Source Type: Peer-reviewed randomized controlled trial

Annotation: This experimental study with English language learners compared foreign language anxiety (FLA) levels when practicing speaking in VR environments versus in video conferencing (Zoom). Each participant practiced speaking English in both VR and Zoom, with anxiety measured using the validated Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. Results showed that VR statistically significantly lower FLA scores compared to Zoom. The immersive VR environment allowed learners to focus on language production without the heightened self-consciousness that occurs when seeing themselves on screen or making eye contact with conversation partners. VR creates a

psychological “comfort zone” that reduces anxiety 10 times more effectively than video.

6. Hosseini-Mozari, M., & Nellermoe, K. (2024). Braided river in (virtual) public space: A new model for community engagement and digital literacy. In *Learning. Life. Work – San Francisco*. AMPS | California Institute of Integral Studies. https://www.switchboardta.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/BraidedRiver_MozariandNellermoe_AMP_Research_2024.pdf

Source Type: Conference paper; mixed-methods research study

Annotation: This mixed-methods study documents the Bridging the Gap (BTG) project, a collaboration between the International Rescue Committee in Salt Lake City and the University of Utah that integrates VR into cultural orientation programming. The team collected feedback data from more than 140 clients who had experienced VR in the cultural orientation training. Of the group surveyed, clients spent an average of 6.8 minutes inside VR. During that time, they rated their comfort level (1 being not comfortable and 5 being very comfortable) at an average of 4 in a headset and 4.16 inside a headset immersed in a 360° video. This research was implemented in a mixed-methods approach with institutional support, community voice, and a thorough analysis of quantitative data. Notably, 60% of participants indicated they could imagine using VR in their homes, and 79% were able to describe specific types of VR content they wanted to see in the future. The study introduces a “braided river” framework, emphasizing adaptability and multiple entry points for technology engagement alongside an eight-step co-creation model that positions refugees as active participants in content development rather than passive recipients. Ethical considerations included trauma-informed facilitation, linguistically appropriate interpretation, communal technology use, and culturally appropriate separation of sexes when needed.

7. Streuli, S., Ibrahim, N., Mohamed, A., Sharma, M., Esmailian, M., Sezan, I., Farrell, C., Sawyer, M., Meyer, D., El-Maleh, K., Thamman, R., Marchetti, A., Lincoln, A., Courchesne, E., Sahid, A., & Bhavnani, S. P. (2021). Development of a culturally and linguistically sensitive virtual reality educational platform to improve vaccine acceptance within a refugee population: The SHIFA community engagement-public health innovation programme. *BMJ Open*, *11*(9), e051184. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-051184

Source Type: Peer-reviewed community-based participatory research study

Annotation: This study documents the development of a VR health education resource through community-based participatory research (CBPR) with 60 Somali refugees in San Diego, California. The team conducted focus groups and interviews throughout 2019–2020 to co-design a five-minute VR experience simulating a pediatric vaccine visit. The videos were in Somali with culturally appropriate avatars and realistic clinic environments. The CBPR methodology involved Somali community members as equal partners throughout the development of the VR experience; they informed the research questions, guided script development, evaluated prototypes, and shaped final content.

Key findings demonstrated that CBPR effectively guides culturally responsive VR development, that linguistic and cultural appropriateness are essential (54% of participants reported increased comfort

with vaccination after Somali voice-over prototype), and that VR must accommodate health and technology literacy levels. The study reinforced participatory design for VR content creation with refugee communities, emphasizing community engagement as essential to effectiveness.

8. WIL GmbH / VIL GmbH. (2025). *Digital integration project : VR for refugees (DIP).* https://www.vil.digital/en/marktplatz-inhalt/digitales-integrationsprojekt---vr-fur-gefluchtete

Source Type: VR country program documentation

Annotation: The Digital Integration Project (DIP) is a comprehensive VR platform used across Germany for newly arrived refugees. The platform provides 360° simulations similar to those in U.S. resettlement service areas. This includes everyday life (shopping, public transportation, mobile contracts, housing search), education (school systems, tutoring, continuing education, responsibilities), authorities (government services, driver's licenses, taxes, employment registration, insurance, civic engagement), health (doctor visits, emergency services, health insurance, pharmacy, preventive care), and culture and norms (sports, associations, leisure activities, German traditions, legal system, social courtesy). Refugees use Pico VR headsets to practice scenarios, gaining practical knowledge and familiarity with institutions before encountering them for the first time in person. The program is delivered through community centers and social service agencies as part of Germany's federally funded integration course system.

The study included three evaluation phases with 390 participants across 11 cities. The results show statistically significant well-being improvements for VR users compared to a 2D video control group, as well as strong participant endorsement (93% rated VR as helpful for integration). The report identifies, however, that no independent peer-reviewed evaluation exists and that effectiveness claims rest on self-reported well-being data rather than actual integration outcomes.

9. Khora & Kommunernes Landsforening (KL). (n.d.). *VR for integration of immigrants: "Job in reality" ("Job i virkeligheden").* https://khora.com/project/vr-for-integration-of-immigrants-kl/

Source Type: National program

Annotation: This Danish program, developed by VR studio Khora in partnership with the National Association of Municipalities, consists of five 360° VR films showing a refugee's journey into the Danish labor market. The sectors include transportation, retail, hospitality, cleaning, and caretaking. The films explicitly focus on Danish workplace culture and implicit norms, including punctuality, communication styles, hierarchy, and professional expectations that newcomers often struggle to navigate. The VR content is available in six languages (Danish, English, Arabic, Farsi, Somali, and Tigrinya) and deployed by municipalities, language centers, and vocational education providers as part of employment-focused integration programming. The films address misconceptions about work in Denmark, particularly for refugees entering sectors where cultural expectations may differ significantly from home countries.

Artificial Intelligence in Service Delivery

1. Immigration Policy Lab (Stanford University & ETH Zurich). (2023). *GeoMatch: Connecting people to places using artificial intelligence*. UNHCR Global Compact on Refugees. https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/geomatch-connecting-people-places-using-artificial-intelligence

Source Type: Implementation study

Annotation: GeoMatch is an AI-powered placement recommendation tool developed by Stanford's Immigration Policy Lab that uses machine learning to predict where refugees are most likely to achieve employment success post-resettlement. The algorithm analyzes refugees' background (education, work experience, language skills, family composition), local labor market conditions, housing availability, and historical integration outcomes to generate placement recommendations within existing resettlement networks. The tool has been operational in Switzerland since 2020 and in the United States since 2023 through Global Refuge (formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service).

GeoMatch is designed as a recommendation system. Program officers review AI-generated suggestions alongside explanations for the recommendations and retain full authority to accept or override suggestions based on human judgment. Placement officers report significant time savings using the tool. Rigorous randomized controlled trials are still being conducted in both countries to measure long-term employment outcomes.

2. Sprenkamp, K., Eckhardt, S., Zavolokina, L., & Schwabe, G. (2025). From information-seeking to information-asking: Designing RefuGPT, a chatbot for Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland. *Digital Government: Research and Practice,* 6(4), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1145/3735140

Source Type: Peer-reviewed evaluation

Annotation: Through interviews with Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland, researchers identified that refugees experienced severe "disorientation" when trying to navigate their communities. This included difficulties accessing information for urgent needs (such as administrative procedures and social services) driven by language barriers, unfamiliarity with Swiss systems, and digital literacy gaps. To address these challenges, researchers developed RefuGPT, a conversational AI chatbot powered by the large language model (LLM) GPT-4 that accesses two complementary information sources: 1) official government guidance, and 2) community knowledge from resettled Ukrainian refugees. Evaluation with Ukrainian refugees demonstrated that RefuGPT transformed their information access experience from difficult to easy, by asking questions and receiving immediate, accurate answers via a chatbot. The technology is designed to increase capacity rather than replace human service providers by escalating complex cases to caseworks/counselors.

3. Tarjimly. (2022). *Tarjimly: Translating for humanity*. MIT Solve Platform. https://solve.mit.edu/solutions/60179

Source Type: Technology innovation case study (MIT vetted social innovation)

Annotation: Tarjimly is a mobile application using machine learning algorithms to connect refugees needing translation or interpretation services with multilingual volunteers in real-time. The platform maintains a network of over 42,000 volunteers who offer translation and interpretation services in 144+ languages, with an average connection time of 86 seconds. The platform addresses critical gaps in traditional interpretation and translation services, particularly for harder-to-find languages such as Dari, Pashto, Tigrinya, Rohingya, and Karen. Professional interpreters are not always available, or they can be expensive. Medical interpretation comprises approximately 20% of sessions, with the platform designed to be HIPAA-compliant for health care contexts. The mobile design increases accessibility for newcomers. The platform supports text, voice, and video translation and interpretation modes, adapting to different communication needs. Tarjimly has integrated AI functions that generate instant translation that human volunteers refine to improve accuracy. As a result, the app is also training large language models (LLMs) on common refugee languages.

4. International Refugee Assistance Project. (2019, July). *IRAP and Marhub launch chatbot to provide legal information to refugees seeking assistance* [Press release]. https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/irap-and-marhub-launch-chatbot

Source Type: Organizational press release; operational program documentation

Annotation: Mona is an AI-powered chatbot developed through a partnership between the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) and Marhub, a refugee-founded technology nonprofit. Deployed on Facebook Messenger and Telegram in July 2019, Mona was initially piloted in Lebanon, providing Syrian and Iraqi refugees with legal information in English and Arabic. The chatbot addressed three U.S.-specific immigration pathways: refugee resettlement, family reunification, and Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for individuals who worked with the U.S. government. By 2020, Mona had served over 17,000 refugees seeking information about legal options for reaching the United States. IRAP acquired Marhub in 2021, integrating the chatbot technology into its broader legal services infrastructure.

Mona represents one of the earliest conversational AI deployments specifically designed for U.S. immigration pathways. The chatbot uses rule-based, pre-programmed answers and keywords that trigger pre-written responses. The technology guides users through decision trees about their eligibility for various programs and provides critical information. Complex cases are directed to human legal staff. This predates generative AI, which uses unique responses by predicting answers based on patterns learned from massive text datasets.

Implementation Frameworks

1. Chen, J. X., McDonald, A., Zou, Y., Tseng, E., Roundy, K. A., Tamersoy, A., Schaub, F., Ristenpart, T., & Dell, N. (2022). Trauma-informed computing: Towards safer technology experiences for all. In *Proceedings of the 2022 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Article 544). ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3517475

Source Type: Peer-reviewed conference paper

Annotation: This paper adapts the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) six principles of trauma-informed care to technology design: safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, enablement, and intersectionality. The framework provides guidance across the technology lifecycle: conduct user research in safe locations with clear consent, ensure privacy, evaluate AI for potentially triggering content, and employ implementation practices that give users control rather than forcing participation. The authors ground recommendations in real-harm case studies, including social media triggering traumatic memories, facial recognition enabling surveillance, and inappropriate chatbot crisis responses—all demonstrating how trauma-informed principles prevent damage.

2. Potocky, M. (2021). The role of digital skills in refugee integration: A state-of-the-art review. *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion*, *5*(5), 69–108. https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v5i5.37514

Source Type: Peer-reviewed literature review

Annotation: This literature review synthesizes 39 empirical studies examining how digital skills affect refugee integration across major resettlement regions, including North America, Western Europe, and Oceania. The review was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2020–April 2021), a period when accelerated global reliance on technology made digital proficiency increasingly critical for accessing services, employment, education, and social connections. The author searched 10 databases to identify studies focused on refugees' practical use of digital technology in integration contexts, excluding studies on refugees in transit, camps, or protracted displacement to focus specifically on community-based resettlement.

The review showed that digital skills affect all the areas of integration, yet many refugees lack necessary digital literacy for navigating government websites, accessing information, and protecting their privacy. Refugees arrive with widely varying technological experience. Digital exclusion compounds integration barriers by reducing access to opportunities, increasing dependence on intermediaries, and heightening isolation as services and connections move online.

3. Switchboard. (2024). *Getting started with virtual reality: A guide for introducing VR technology in refugee resettlement service provision*. International Rescue Committee. https://www.switchboardta.org/resource/getting-started-with-virtual-reality-guide-for-introducing-vr-technology-in-refugee-resettlement-service-provision/

Source Type: Practitioner toolkit and implementation guide

Annotation: This comprehensive toolkit provides resettlement agencies with practical guidance for implementing VR in cultural orientation and integration programming. The guide addresses the full implementation lifecycle: assessing organizational readiness, selecting appropriate VR equipment (headset options, technical requirements, budget considerations), developing or sourcing 360° video content, training staff to facilitate VR sessions, engaging clients effectively, and evaluating

outcomes. The toolkit emphasizes VR as a supplemental tool that enhances and does not replace traditional cultural orientation. It provides promising practices for integrating VR across core service areas: education system navigation, transportation and wayfinding, health care procedures, employment preparation, shopping and daily living, and recreational activities.

4. Switchboard. (2025). Using artificial intelligence in service delivery: A framework to evaluate organizational readiness. International Rescue Committee. https://www.switchboardta.org/resource/using-artificial-intelligence-in-service-delivery-a-framework-to-evaluate-organizational-readiness/

Source Type: Practitioner toolkit and organizational readiness framework

Annotation: This framework provides resettlement agencies with a structured approach to evaluating their readiness for AI integration into service delivery. The toolkit addresses five core readiness components: organizational readiness, problem-solution alignment, data security and privacy, ethical considerations, and resource management. The framework includes a scoring matrix that categorizes organizations as "nascent" or "emerging" in their AI readiness across each domain. The toolkit emphasizes responsible AI use through a "human in the loop" approach, requiring staff oversight of all AI-generated content, particularly for decision-making affecting newcomers. It addresses AI risks, including hallucination (AI generating incorrect information and presenting it as factual), algorithmic bias in training datasets, and the concentration of AI development in wealthy nations, which creates potential gaps in representation of Global South populations.

5. Wright, J., & Verity, A. (2020, January). *Artificial intelligence principles for vulnerable populations in humanitarian contexts*. Digital Humanitarian Network. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/artificial-intelligence-principles-vulnerable-populations-humanitarian-contexts

Source Type: Policy paper; ethical framework

Annotation: This policy paper establishes foundational AI principles for vulnerable populations in humanitarian settings, organized around five sections: weighing benefits against risks, addressing algorithmic bias, evaluating security vulnerabilities, navigating consent challenges, and providing recommendations. The authors argue that AI should be avoided when there are simpler solutions and to take into account power imbalances when refugees are unable to refuse participation without jeopardizing access to services. The framework recommends participatory approaches involving affected communities in AI design, transparency about how systems function, and robust human oversight of automated decisions.

Conclusion: Implications for Resettlement Practice

This review revealed that limited peer-reviewed research exists regarding the use of emerging technologies such as VR and AI among refugees in the United States. However, promising use cases, including peer-reviewed studies, exist in Canadian and European contexts and have achieved

national scale. This review reveals an opportunity for resettlement and government agencies to act as both implementers and evidence-generators for the U.S. context.

The research suggests that technology integration in refugee resettlement holds significant promise. Emerging applications like AI have shown to be capable of operating within existing government cooperative agreements with resettlement agencies and drawing from multiple information sources, including official government guidance combined with community knowledge from resettled refugees (Sprenkamp et al., 2025). In addition, the use of VR to improve resettlement outcomes is strongly supported by three randomized controlled trials and more than a dozen descriptive and pilot studies included in this bibliography. VR significantly enhanced learning and confidence (Kirya et al., 2023; Syrian Canadian Foundation & University of Toronto Mississauga, n.d.), reduced anxiety (Gruber & Kaplan-Rakowski, 2023), and improved knowledge retention that transfers to real-world experiences (Kirya et al., 2023).

Two implementation principles stand out across the sources reviewed. First, co-design is essential. Newcomers as active co-creators produce measurably superior outcomes. The SHIFA study documented a 54% increase in comfort with vaccination among participants after Somali-language narration was developed through community participation (Streuli et al., 2021), and a randomized controlled trial with Ugandan refugee youth found that co-created VR content improved mental health outcomes (Logie et al., 2025).

Second, technology works best when integrated into human-centered service delivery. Successful implementations pair VR, AI chatbots, mobile apps, and translation tools to address multiple integration barriers simultaneously, while preserving human judgment at critical decision points. The WELCOME Platform's combination of VR, AI agents, and mobile platforms illustrates how multi-modal systems can serve more newcomers without increasing staffing demands. The Tushirikiane-4-MH Project in Kampala embedded VR sessions within facilitator-led pre-briefing and debriefing (Logie et al., 2025); GeoMatch's AI placement algorithm reserves final placement decisions for caseworkers (Immigration Policy Lab, 2023); and conversational AI chatbots, including RefuGPT and Mona, escalate complex cases to human service providers. Across these examples, technology enhances rather than replaces caseworker expertise.

Across three randomized controlled trials and more than a dozen pilot and descriptive studies, VR and AI technologies demonstrate measurable potential to improve resettlement outcomes when implemented through participatory co-design with newcomers and integrated with human-centered service delivery models (Kirya, Gruber & Kaplan-Rakowski, Logie et al.). There is an opportunity for continued development and research on the pairing of AI and VR to provide location-specific community navigation skills development, real-time information sharing, and resource access to help prepare newcomers for their new communities in the U.S. Both technologies enhance rather than replace human capacity, and both require participatory design principles and ethical considerations to ensure responsible adoption for impactful and innovative resettlement services for refugee newcomers.

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