Summary:

AILEM is an app that aims to provide language education for refugees and asylum seekers to help integrate in a foreign country. In order to expand the effectiveness and impact of this free app, we connected AILEM to new users through events and youth centres to assist refugees in new regions.

Project Description:

Upon arrival, refugees and asylum seekers face the direct challenge of a language barrier. The inability to express oneself means individuals can not access basic services, opportunities, resources, employment, and healthcare, creating more challenges to building a new life. Language is the most basic element of local culture. The need to learn the local language is further driven by the need to integrate in one’s new community. Refugees and asylum seekers have the right to a sense of belonging and acceptance in their new community. Yet many refugees and asylum seekers face social exclusion, and are barred from equal opportunities and acceptance from the local community. AILEM is a free app designed to help refugees learn language quickly and easily, allowing them to peacefully integrate into their new land. This Projects for Peace experience focused on refining and improving the app in order to connect to new users. I chose to conduct summer events to meet with potential users to see how we might tailor this app to their needs, as my past experiences with AILEM showed that word of mouth campaigns are the best way to connect with refugees around the world. I have chosen locations where there are newly arrived asylum seekers/refugees, which means they are in the greatest need of learning a new language.

Originally, I planned to locate this project in the US. I decided to move our locations to Belgium, Malawi, and Bangladesh because of the lack of response from many of the organisations my team and I contacted in the US. The events we hold are usually in partnership with a local organisation or refugee centre, allowing us to reach out to different refugee communities. Without the connection to a local partner, it is extremely challenging to host an event. Moreover, our team connected with larger populations of refugees in the other regions, which was another incentive to change the location.

In Brussels, Belgium, my team and I worked with refugees at Fedasil Petit Château (an Asylum Centre), where we shared about our app and played games to get to know each other while practising English. There were around 30 refugees from across the world, from Somalia to Tajikistan, who all downloaded the app and are able to continue to learn English or French on AILEM at their own time. Belgium is where my family and I lived as refugees, and inspired the creation of this app. Fedasil was the most suitable location as it is where all asylum seekers and refugees arrive first in Belgium. Our participants had all recently arrived (ranging from a few days to a few months), thus were more likely to want to learn English and French. We originally made this connection with Fedasil when AILEM won first place in the prestigious Charlemagne Youth Prize in 2023, an honour awarded by the European Parliament and the International Charlemagne Prize Foundation. The biggest outcome of the event at Fedasil Petit Château was a major stepping-stone for AILEM’s reach in Belgium, as the Fedasil Petit-Château facility connected us to all the French speaking centres for future AILEM events across the country. Another outcome of the event is the continued testing of the app, as we noticed how using the app in a weak wifi signal area would affect accessing the various features of the app, such as the curriculum and online games. Seeing this in person, our next step is to find methods to allow features to be accessed with weaker wifi. Finally, through the in-person event we are able to better understand the demographic of the refugee and asylum seeker population, so we are now working on adding new languages such as Somali.

In Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi, we hosted an AILEM x Sanaa Weekend inviting more than 1000 refugees in the community for a half-day event from 2pm to 9pm at night. Malawi is one of the branches of main hubs with a strong AILEM presence through our AILEM refugee team Innocent, Prince,
Catherine, Chinsinsi and Gilbert in Dzaleka. This event was filled with refugee performances, activities, app presentations and showcases. The event not only allowed us to share how to use the app directly to the people of the refugee camp, and also offered a chance to support local refugee artists, one of which was Salama Africa, a dance and music group based in Dzaleka Refugee Camp. Dance and art is a large part of the culture and entertainment at the camp. I believe through supporting dance and art we can bring together the local community for peace and understanding. Prior to the event, I trained our AILEM refugee team to be able to teach others how to download the app, how to make an account using email and how each feature would be able to aid English learning. During the event, our team would present and physically teach, demonstrate and assist on using the app. Additionally part of the event expenses was a one-day wifi subscription from TNM and router to encourage the community to download the app and test it out, without using their own limited phone data. One example of useful feedback was we found that not all refugees have an available email address to register an account on AILEM, thus refugees recommended to us to have another method to log in without email. With this we coded an option to use phone number to register an account, which now favoured the option to make an account among all our users worldwide. Other feedback we received was regarding some bugs, glitches or typos found in the app, that we fixed after the event. This event in particular with its large attendance of refugees meant that we can conduct in-person user testing crucial to make the app more polished and user friendly.

Following this event we launched our iPads at the Youth Centre at the Refugee Camp, with the iPads donated for free by our partnership with ComputerAid. Youths in the refugee camp came together to research topics given by the AILEM team. In the long term, refugee youths can use the iPads for educational purposes. There are dozens of refugee teenagers who want to learn English at the refugee camp, but however do not have phones in the rural camp. With the implementation of iPads, the youths can access AILEM to learn English, thus breaking down the barriers of accessing language education.

In Bangladesh, our operation distributed packages to 200 forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals living in Rohingya Camp 1E. These packages included essential items and AILEM t-shirts, and were distributed in biodegradable bags. The contents of the packages were donated by our partners; our AILEM team assembled the care packages, and created the event and presentation. Distributing packages is something we do in AILEM, as we previously donated winter clothes in Wales, along with stationery for Ukrainian refugee children. This event was in collaboration with our partners, Saifham Group, ICT Division of Bangladesh, support from the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) and Skill Finesse (formerly known as Homeacademy BD). On the ground, we have our AILEM ambassador, Arpurbo Zunaid, who is a Bangladeshi local and expert on AILEM. He travelled to the rural camp and conducted the distribution event and presentation. The event allowed us to build up trust with the community at the camp and thus lay the foundation for more AILEM events and projects conducted there. We believe that it is important to build up trust, as currently it was the first time AILEM engaged with that refugee camp and we do not have an established refugee team at the camp. This is a similar roadmap as our work in Malawi, starting with a large-scale event to make our presence known, then later encouraging them to download the app to learn English and also working on mini projects for the long term, like the iPad launch.

AILEM will continue to support refugees and asylum seekers as our app can be continued to aid refugees’ learning and integration efforts beyond the Projects for Peace grant. We also have our refugee coordinators around the world who help us lead events and AILEM sharings of why we created this app, to impact the community of refugees. Our work aligns to our mission and ethos of “created by refugees, for refugees” as we provide support, education, space for refugees and asylum seekers worldwide. We are able to continue supporting refugees and asylum seekers worldwide through our free-to-download application so that refugees can learn at their own pace. Our refugee coordinator system helps us host AILEM: A language app for peace
local events, which are important because they are our eyes and ears of AILEM - seeing what are the strengths and areas of improvements to refine the application, our in person events and truly embody our ethos.

Reflection:

I believe the definition of peace involves reducing conflict – including both fighting the external conflicts around the world but also the internal conflicts and struggles individuals may have. It involves speaking out and taking a stance against conflict, as well as taking action to bring about peace in communities. AILEM brings about mutual understanding and enlightenment in the short term, by bringing the refugee and local community together. The app reads out phrases one can use when ordering food at a restaurant, for instance, or to express pain at the hospital. In the long term, refugees can learn through short stories on the app, grasping the basic elements of grammar, vocabulary and expressions of the local language.

The metaphor “Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime” applies to language, as it is the key to building an empowered and peaceful community. With language, an individual can access their basic needs, education, and safety. Language is a reflection of our cultures, beliefs, emotions and traditions and by being able to share we can bring communities together for greater understanding.

Thanks to Projects for Peace, we engaged with more than 1000 refugees across three countries and continents in person, leading to hundreds of downloads on our application around the world, 200 care packages delivered in Bangladesh, and 5 iPads set up in Dzaleka Refugee Camp. As mentioned previously, we faced the problem of lack of response from the US-based refugee organisations, thus we changed our focus to hosting events in areas that we already had the personnel and established networks. Without a hosting partner organisation, the knowledge and communication barriers would make it hard to involve a large group of new arrivals. One of the factors of this challenge, I believe, was the fact that I was a freshman and have never been to the US before. This unfamiliarity meant that I had to adjust to the local process for refugees in the US, the scope of work that NGOs here work on, and even the stigma surrounding refugees here - with many differences to Europe, Africa and Asia. I believe that this challenge can be mitigated with more research, collaboration with the UofR's Centre for Community Engagement and speaking to more NGOs. I previously faced the same challenge when we first started in Europe, as I navigated the best strategy and means to hold refugee events.

Through working with AILEM in the past years, I can see the progress of building a community through app development because of our ethos “Created by refugees, for refugees”. Each refugee interview, survey and feedback has inspired me and I embed it in AILEM. The diversity and uniqueness of AILEM can be seen in the difference between each operation in each region – collaboration with different stakeholders from NGOs, government agencies to the refugee communities – and the unique range of services we provide, tailored to the location and situation, and the impact for the long and short term.

Personal statement:

The Summer of Projects for Peace has been transformative for AILEM and for myself. It has allowed me to work in-person with refugees from around the world, empowering them with the language abilities to lead flourishing and peaceful lives. We saw the smiles, the joy, the laughter throughout this summer. With language, the refugees who were once alienated parts of our community were able to feel like home, and to share their unique stories to the world.

- Abobakar Sediq Miakhel