UNICEF Emergency Response Office in Poland

Emergency Response Progress Report

Poland, March-October 2022
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The war in Ukraine has displaced families at a scale and speed not seen since World War II. As of 30 September, over 7.5 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe, with 4.2 million registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes. Poland has welcomed the vast majority of women and children seeking temporary protection with over 1.4 million having so far registered for temporary protection (PESEL), but it’s likely the true number of refugees is over 2 million.

This mother-and-child displacement crisis emanating from the war in Ukraine has exerted extraordinary pressure on Poland’s public service delivery system. As the war continues, the smaller numbers coming across the border are often from areas that have been under continuous onslaught. Most have fewer resources and contacts than families who fled earlier. Most of those fleeing Ukraine do not speak Polish, especially those from eastern areas of the country.

Poland’s model response, quickly providing systems for legal stay and work, along with access to health, education and protection services – all buttressed by tremendous public solidarity – will require sustained and significant support to continue delivering on the rights of children and families.

The arrival of winter may lead to further displacement and more challenging conditions in Ukraine and in host countries, triggered by the cold weather and increased intensity of military offensives in Ukraine. This in turn could lead to rising needs – for example, increased heating costs, need for insulation in accommodation centres, additional expenses for clothes, blankets, etc. In Poland, a new wave of refugees is anticipated by government authorities over the winter months, ranging from 500,000 to 800,000 people, according to government projections.
Overview

The UNICEF Emergency Response Office in Poland was established in days to help strengthen the national, municipal and local systems already delivering essential services and protection to refugee children and families from Ukraine. UNICEF support – technical, human resource and supply – supplements and strengthens existing capacity. Our twin-track approach to working with government has seen us partner with central government, including the Ministries of Health, Education, Justice, and Family, as well as the 12 municipalities hosting around 75% of refugees from Ukraine. We are also partnering with a large range of NGOs and CSOs to fill key gaps in government service provision. UNICEF has followed this response model because Poland is a high-income country and EU member state with a decentralized system of service provision and because the New Special Act on Protection of Refugees from Ukraine delegated new responsibilities to local authorities and put a significant strain on existing services.

Our focus is to reach children and their caregivers (mostly mothers) who have fled the war in Ukraine, providing access to services and support that keep children learning, healthy and protected, with caregivers well-informed with necessary and lifesaving information to help families recover from the war. From ‘Blue Dot’ safe spaces at border crossings and large reception centers to making sure children can go to school and get healthcare, we support all families taking refuge in Poland. In collaboration with the Polish National Committee for UNICEF, we jointly advocate for the rights of every child in Poland, with a focus on the most vulnerable.
Supporting Newborns

Over 4,500 newborns from Ukraine (born between Feb 22 and Aug 3, 2022) have been vaccinated in Poland to date with Hep B and BCG vaccines. UNICEF is supporting these efforts with the procurement of IPV polio, Hep A and Hep B vaccines, as well as syringes to cover the additional demand.

In the area of infant and young child feeding, we’re encouraging mothers to exclusively breastfeed and sharing knowledge on how best to feed their babies and young children as they adapt to life in a new country. Trainings on exclusive breastfeeding and infant and young child feeding are being rolled out to 500 health workers in hospitals and 120 staff working in Blue Dot support hubs and we’re establishing lactation groups in 10 maternity wards. Each lactation expert is expected to counsel 100 lactating mothers per month, reaching a combined total of approximately 5,000 mothers per month, benefitting both Ukrainian and Polish mothers and children. UNICEF has also partnered with the Ministry of Health to monitor the distribution of formula to make sure it is safe for babies.

Vaccinations are essential to protecting both Ukrainian and Polish children and families against preventable diseases. In the area of social and behaviour change,

UNICEF is running an information campaign targeting mothers from Ukraine in refugee-hosting countries, focusing on the importance of vaccinations to increase protection against polio and other preventable diseases. Billboards and signs in public transport, bus stops and metro stations have already reached over 400,000 people with relevant information on prevention of infectious diseases, access to health services and to motivate caregivers to sign up for vaccination.
First 1000 days of a child’s life are crucial for their future development. Early childhood development is essential to supporting healthy brain development among newborns and young children and for children’s overall health and wellbeing. Education is especially important to pre-school aged children, many of whom are unable to express their feelings about being dislocated from their homes and separated from their fathers and other family members. UNICEF has supported establishment of over 100 Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres across the country or helped expand the capacity of existing facilities where children can play, interact with their peers and regain a sense of normalcy.

ECD centres established with UNICEF support across Poland are currently serving more than 8,000 refugee children and benefitting around 7,000 mothers who have fled the war in Ukraine. Majority of caregivers employed at these centres are refugees from Ukraine themselves, many of them mothers of small children. UNICEF is also expanding regular daycare services and supporting Polish kindergartens to take in children from Ukraine so that mothers can look for employment, achieve financial independence and build confidence as they adjust to their new reality.

50,000 children under 6 across Poland are engaging in learning activities with 1000 ECD kits that have been delivered to kindergartens and ECD centres.
Supporting School-age Children

In Poland, UNICEF is supporting all existing channels so children can access formal and non-formal education, and expanding learning opportunities for around 500,000 children until the end of 2022. In partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) in the 12 municipalities which host the largest number of refugees from Ukraine, we are supporting training on teaching Polish as a second language, remedial and catch-up learning and providing mental health and psychosocial support. We’re helping with the recruitment of Ukrainian assistant teachers, intercultural assistants and translators who will facilitate students’ transition and inclusion into a new school system. We are also distributing IT equipment to schools in order to speed up language learning and bridge learning gaps, as well as providing learning kits, classroom furniture and sports equipment to facilitate inclusion. 192,993 children from Ukraine, including 35,100 children in pre-schools, are already enrolled in Polish education system across the country.

UNICEF is also supporting refugee children in Poland studying the Ukrainian curriculum. We’ve partnered with local government and NGOs to set up Education and Development Hubs across Poland, where students can attend online classes, receive help with their homework, interact with peers, join Polish language classes and get mental health and psychosocial support. Additionally, in cooperation with MoES, UNICEF Learning Passport is available on the MoES digital education platform with resources in Ukrainian language on mental health and psychosocial support for learners, teachers and caregivers.

UNICEF is also working with MoES to roll out a teacher training programme on inclusive education to ensure all children, including children with disabilities, have a fair chance to go to school, learn and develop the skills they need to thrive. Furthermore, UNICEF is working with central and local governments on the recognition of Ukrainian teachers’ academic qualifications in Poland, which will allow teachers from Ukraine to be able to officially teach in Polish schools.

500,000 children from Ukraine and Poland are benefitting from expanded learning opportunities

17,000 Tablets and laptops have been distributed to support learning
Supporting Adolescents

Young refugees who have fled conflict, need a sense of belonging, predictability and purpose. Over summer 2022, UNICEF and the Scouts worked with 6,000 young people from Ukraine to be part of the emergency response, giving them a way to help their fellow refugees and build skills in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Volunteers from Poland worked alongside peers from Ukraine, while Scouts were trained to support their well-being and mental health, and together they supplied humanitarian aid in 37 reception points along the border.

Ahead of the school year, UNICEF worked with several municipalities to engage around 150,000 adolescents from Ukraine and Poland in education activities, well-being and mental health support, life skills, Polish language lessons, etc. UNICEF and Scouts also organized summer camps with skills workshops, including hands-on practical activities, communication and teamwork exercises. At the camps psychologists from Ukraine were employed to be available for participants when needed. These programmes have not only supported education and protection efforts benefitting young people from Ukraine, but also helped them build connections with their Polish peers and prepare for the start of new school year.

UNICEF is also giving adolescents tools to express their opinions and concerns. Our youth engagement digital platform U-Report Europe https://europe.ureport.in/ is encouraging young refugees from Ukraine to share their opinions through online polls, to stay connected and informed. The U-Report Europe chatbot also answers questions on access to health, education services and other opportunities available to them and their families in Poland.

150,000 adolescents participated in a variety of summer activities ahead of the new school year
Health

UNICEF’s health response in Poland is focused on preventing disease outbreaks, helping refugees from Ukraine gain access to health care and promoting exclusive breastfeeding. In addition to vaccine supply, safe water and sanitation is crucial to preventing diseases like diarrhea and cholera, which can be deadly. Since the early days of the crisis, UNICEF distributed WASH and dignity kits, which include basics like soap, washing powder, feminine hygiene supplies, etc. We’re also partnering with the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health on disease surveillance so we can respond immediately to prevent outbreaks.

As part of our winter response, the procurement of 80,000 family hygiene kits (each kit is for a family of four) and 4000 institutional hygiene kits (one kit is for 50 people), reaching approximately 350,000, have been procured and distribution will start in November.

Linking refugees to health care is another priority and we’re working hard to provide families with both the information they need as well as access to appropriate services. We’re particularly focused on reaching children with disabilities and mothers and children in need of mental health support. We’re also providing health kits with essential medicines and medical devices to Polish clinics, to help ensure they have enough supplies to treat the large numbers of new patients.

350,000 out of 400,000 target refugees from Ukraine are benefitting from hygiene supplies
Mental Health

Mental health and psychosocial support is a major area of focus for UNICEF’s Emergency Response Office in Poland because we know that supporting children’s wellbeing now can help prevent the long-term negative impacts of trauma. Although most children fleeing war in Ukraine and crossing into Poland escaped physical harm, they are all suffering from the invisible wounds of war. Polish children have also indirectly suffered from the stresses of the conflict, and they too need our support. Children experiencing severe distress need early intervention to prevent serious mental health issues in the future.

UNICEF’s Emergency Response Office in Poland aims to ensure that those who’ve fled war in Ukraine, whether children or caregivers, have access to mental health and psychosocial support. Systems we put in place will also benefit Polish families.

In partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Institute of Mother and Child, we’re providing training and capacity building to health professionals on counselling parents and young children. Through our partnerships with the 12 municipalities with the largest numbers of refugees from Ukraine and civil society organizations, we’re delivering community-based programmes that help people understand that their feelings are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation and which encourage them to maintain close connections, routines, play and learning as a way to regain a sense of normalcy and balance. Mental health and psychosocial support is also being delivered through schools, day care centres, summer camps, child friendly spaces and parenting programmes.

Additionally, UNICEF supported over 150 early childhood education teachers with quality professional development training on inclusive education, social-emotional learning and coping with negative experiences. They have already reached 10,000 children. In partnership with the Institute of Mother and Child, UNICEF is currently providing training and capacity building to 240 health professionals on counselling parents and young children with developmental and health problems.

585,000 children, adolescents and caregivers are receiving access to mental health support
Protection

UNICEF’s work on child protection in Poland aims to ensure that children who’ve fled the war in Ukraine are protected from violence, exploitation and abuse, and enjoy nurturing care. A crucial part of this is the UNICEF-UNHCR Blue Dot Child and Family Support Hubs, which provide information, mental health and psychosocial support, referrals, legal aid, as well as child-friendly spaces for refugee children and families. At these Hubs and beyond, we’re engaging with front-line professionals to raise their awareness and capacity for identification, prevention and response to the major child protection risks in emergencies: trafficking, violence against children, gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse. UNICEF has provided various services to over 208,000 people at four UNICEF-led and two UNHCR-led Blue Dot facilities (as of 13 October).

On longer term support for refugees from Ukraine, UNICEF works with the Polish Government on policy, systems strengthening and capacity-building at central and local levels. In partnership with municipalities, we’re supporting the substantial scale-up required in child protection service delivery. This includes community-based services for vulnerable children and families, such as family assistants and day care centres, including for children with disabilities. We’re also enhancing social services by employing and training additional social workers.

On responding to – and stopping – violence, abuse and exploitation we’re working to ensure all children can access quality social services. For example, through awareness raising campaigns, additional social workers, capacity building on identifying signs of violence and strengthening reporting channels. On unaccompanied and separated children, UNICEF has mapped 2,365 children evacuated from institutions in Ukraine who are currently accommodated in different facilities in Poland and carried out a rapid assessment. UNICEF and its partners plan to urgently address child protection concerns in facilities nationwide.

Financial assistance being provided to refugee families includes an immediate cash benefit directly supporting 309,400 children through the universal child grant and child grants administered through our partnerships with municipalities. We have also partnered with the Ministry of Justice to help ensure that children in conflict with the law, child victims and witnesses of crime, including refugee children from Ukraine, have access to child-sensitive justice system.

309,400 children are benefitting from immediate cash assistance through child grants provided to the most vulnerable families
Refugees in Poland are trying to make decisions about the future when their sense of certainty has been ripped away from them. It’s hard to enroll in school when you hope to return home before the academic year ends, or to sign up for vaccinations when you left all your immunization records behind. Refugees can also struggle to find information about services that are available or feel intimidated by the bureaucracy in a new country where they can’t speak the local language.

UNICEF is using the latest research in social and behaviour change, as well as human centred design approaches to address behavioural barriers to encourage refugees from Ukraine to use the essential services available to them and to integrate into their new communities and live healthy lives.

One of the ways we have done this is through the Spilno website www.spilnoinPL.org which provides up to date information in Ukrainian on health, education and legal matters and has reached over 50,000 to date. It supplements the Spilno website inside Ukraine. We are also running campaigns to encourage change in behaviours that lead to greater well-being.

In addition to the Vaccination campaign described above, together with partners, we launched a back-to-school campaign to support access to available learning opportunities. During the campaign, UNICEF and its partners engaged 5,600 people, while the Education Helpline made more than 2,100 education referrals. We are also in the process of research and developing campaign materials to encourage access to mental health support, as well as foster community cohesion.

3.2 million
People reached with life-saving information on essential services
Strong partnerships with local and central government, as well as civil society partners are key to our effective response in Poland.

Timely and generous commitments of bilateral donors and public sector partners remain vital.

Important and flexible support from the private donors, including corporate partners, foundations, philanthropy partners, and individual donors responding to ongoing fundraising campaigns by UNICEF National Committees, has played a central role in this response.

Contact
Hugh Reilly, Chief of Communication
UNICEF Emergency Response Office in Poland
+48 783 896 843 | hreilly@unicef.org

We thank you for your continued support in our efforts to provide access to essential services for children and families in Poland affected by the war in Ukraine.