



Policy Brief

Ukraine refugee response in neighbouring countries: Guidance for Local Authorities

The escalation of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 created a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe. Millions of children were uprooted from their homes, separated from their families and put at risk of violence. Around 5.4 million people remain displaced across Ukraine one year after, and humanitarian needs continue to grow. In Europe, 5.9 million refugees from Ukraine are recorded, among them 86 per cent of women and children. In addition, 5 million are registered for temporary or similar national protection schemes. The complexity and unpredictability of the war in Ukraine, including recent attacks on critical civilian infrastructure, increasing humanitarian needs, nuclear threat, economic hardship and harsh winter conditions, are inhibiting returns and triggering new refugee movements¹. As the crisis has evolved, refugees have moved to major cities in host countries.

The response to the humanitarian crisis has required mobilising resources and expertise across the whole spectrum of society, from public and private sectors to civil society organisations and citizens.

Citizens, national and subnational authorities, and civil societies have shown unprecedented solidarity.

Local authorities have been central to this response as providers of vital frontline services and 'managers' of social cohesion. While the assignment of responsibilities varies across sectors, local governments bear or share responsibilities with subnational actors for key areas such as social welfare, health care and education. Local government can provide certain public goods and services more effectively,

due to access to local knowledge of highly variable time and site-specific local conditions, needs and priorities, and because of their closer connections with agents of public action as well as direct contact with affected populations. They play a vital role in developing inclusive and welcoming communities, where no one is left behind.

Local governments are in a position to translate national policies into local actions. Therefore, coordination and synergies between governments and local authorities should be ensured.

In partnership with governments and subnational authorities, UNICEF has been expanding and improving existing services and providing support that keeps children learning, healthy and protected while keeping caregivers well-informed about their rights and providing psychological support allowing refugee families to recover from war-time traumas.

This document, informed by the work undertaken with local authorities and the technical support that UNICEF has provided across the region since the beginning of the conflict, outlines key recommendations for local authorities to respond to the needs of people displaced from Ukraine.

The recommendations aim to ensure that the decisions and approaches of local authorities promote the rights of all uprooted Ukrainian children in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). They spell out proactive measures essential to support women, girls and people with disabilities who face unique risks and have specific needs.

¹ UNICEF – One Year of Response Consolidated Humanitarian Situation Report
[https://www.unicef.org/media/135141/file/ECAR-Humanitarian-SitRep-\(One-Year-of-Refugee-Response\)24-Feb-2023.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/135141/file/ECAR-Humanitarian-SitRep-(One-Year-of-Refugee-Response)24-Feb-2023.pdf)

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Key Recommendations

Children displaced in and outside of Ukraine are at heightened risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse. The war in Ukraine has resulted in a child protection crisis. Children are oftentimes in desperate need of safety, stability and access to child protection and other services, particularly those children who are unaccompanied or who have been separated from their families. Women and adolescent girls' heightened risks and need demand gender-sensitive and responsive services, including healthcare, psychosocial support, safe accommodation, cash and voucher assistance, livelihood support and continued education.

The majority of countries in Europe have centralised child protection systems, with deconcentrated offices at municipal level. However, municipalities are often accountable for family support services, including different interventions ranging from municipal social workers who support vulnerable families, home-based support for families and caregivers with a child with a disability, and other services that aim to support families in difficult circumstances. These services are often designed at municipal level in col-

laboration with local communities and are funded through municipal budgets. These services can be attached to local social service centres, schools, clinics, or community centres.

These local services are critical to identify the most vulnerable children, including separated and unaccompanied children providing immediate support, and facilitating their registration and access to services. Early identification and registration are fundamental to ensure that the needs of children, their parents and caregivers are adequately assessed and met and that they are reached systematically by essential health, education and social protection services.

Local public administrations play a crucial role in collecting disaggregated data on the sex, age and disability of refugees. They are on the frontline regarding hosting refugees and developing policies on response and integration within a broader framework of inclusion, diversity and equality that spans ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age and disability.

Ensure accurate identification and registration systems for children and caregivers to protect and allow them access to basic services²

Local authorities could...

Facilitate and support identification and registration of refugee families and children into national child protection systems, using a child-friendly process. Particular attention should be given to unaccompanied and separated children, including those evacuated from residential care arrangements.

Distribute specific, clear and child-friendly information about the registration process and access to services available, in formats accessible for children with specific needs, such as children with disabilities. Local authorities' communication channels could be used to send clear messages in a language the affected population understands, stressing the need to register children and vulnerable groups.

Ensure that registration of children and women is linked to access to health services, by offering benefits linked to financial mechanisms covering medical costs, and enrolment in health programmes promoting vaccination and access to primary healthcare services, especially for mothers and children. Use registration as an opportunity to share materials in Ukrainian illustrating where, when, and how health services can be accessed, and where translation services are available.

Create safe spaces for children and caregivers at border crossings and other strategic sites in collaboration with national authorities, international organisations and partners to provide practical support and information to children, women and caregivers in their onward journeys. Safe Spaces should be linked with national child protection systems and provide specialists' support for those in need of protection, such as children on their own, adolescents, women with young children, persons with disabilities or survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). Child-friendly spaces should offer a welcoming space for children to rest, play, and be a child.

Introduce or strengthen, in coordination with national authorities, mechanisms to train volunteers and volunteer organisations that are responding to emergencies, requiring them to undergo official vetting and registration procedures. This is critical for all volunteers and volunteer organisations working at border crossings points, other transit points and reception facilities.

Monitor and intervene to coordinate, manage/regulate, or eventually take over parallel initiatives led by the private sector, volunteers and individuals, which might involve risks for refugees. This work should systematically monitor online and offline risks, such as platforms where information is shared on housing and employment, day-care and educational opportunities.

Ensure safe, accessible, sensitive and child-friendly reception and housing arrangements for children, caregivers and women. If private accommodation is not an option, and if children are to be housed in collective or shared accommodation centres, this accommodation must be designed to meet the needs of children and women – including their specific needs based on gender, age and disability – and to meet minimum child protection and safeguarding standards to prevent child sexual exploitation and gender-based violence (GBV). Appropriate care includes foster care and small-scale, high-quality, integrated residential care. Large institutional care, and prolonged care in shelters, should be avoided. Community sponsorship schemes are not appropriate for children deprived of family-based care.

Local authorities, as the level of governance closest to the population, have a privileged position in collecting disaggregated data on the sex, age and disability of refugees. Data are key to informing strategic directions, policies and programmes aiming to welcome and facilitate the social inclusion of children and caregivers.

² Guidance for protecting displaced and refugee children in and outside of Ukraine. How authorities, humanitarian groups and volunteers can help ensure children displaced by the war are protected and supported until a safe voluntary return becomes possible (<https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/guidance-protecting-displaced-children-ukraine#5>).

The local community in Braşov actively engaged in supporting people fleeing the war immediately at onset of the Ukraine refugee crisis. Institutional actors were quick to respond as well. Already in February 2022, the City Hall of Braşov, the Directorate of Social Assistance and several local non-governmental organizations set up the 'Braşov for Ukraine' working group to provide support to refugees and send aid to Ukraine. On 4 March, the community centre 'Braşov for Ukraine' was opened in the business incubator premises and technology transfer centre 'CATTIA' is open 24/7 to receive and assist refugees. (<https://ua.brasovcity.ro/>). CATTIA centre soon became known as a Blue Dot – an entry point for most refugees to access services provided by the municipality, county authorities and civil society in Braşov. Blue Dot is a child and family-friendly space that provide critical support to children and families on the move. Blue Dot provides access to services, including key information to travelling families, safe spaces for mothers and children, identification and referral of children at risk to appropriate services, family reunification services, legal counselling and psychosocial support. Many local actors, decentralised governments, counties and NGOs were involved in the response under the coordination of the City Hall, The Inspectorate for emergency situations and the social assistance department under the mayoralty. This is a great model of community involvement, refugee integration and coordination of efforts among different members of society. To date, the CATTIA Blue Dot has provided services for 12,000 refugees and 350 children in total enrolled in non-formal education programs³.

Located close to the border, Ruse Municipality has experienced an increase in the number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs) in the last couple of years. To ensure adequate assistance to this vulnerable group, the municipality opened the first residential social service in Bulgaria, specialising in the provision of counselling, social and protection services to UASCs, foreign citizens, and refugee children. With the growing influx of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, UNICEF partnered with Ruse Municipality to improve the capacity of the centre and the quality of the available services. This will include support in providing a safe and secure environment, delivering specialised services (translation and interpretation), building staff technical skills and competencies, and creating opportunities for integration and socialising of children, contributing to the development. The establishment and expansion of this Crisis centre in Russe is a symbolic step as it represents a considerable advancement of the child protection system at the local level in ensuring access to UASCs to adequate and specialised alternative care arrangements.

³ UNICEF good management practice in Brasov Blue Dot (<https://www.unicef.org/romania/documents/good-management-practices-brasov-blue-dot>).

Ensure the provision of emergency protection and mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS)

Local authorities could...

Strengthen the capacities of:

- frontline workers (such as facilitators, school-teachers, health professionals and local police) on critical child protection issues, including gender-based violence (GBV) and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, to ensure adequate care and a safe environment for every child. It is important to develop and strengthen Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), protocols and coordinated response mechanisms on child safeguarding, for example, how to respond to the disclosure of cases of violence or sexual abuse across sectors and service providers.
- municipal stakeholders (such as lawyers, legal guardians, teachers and local civil society organisations) on child rights and other critical child protection and GBV services.

Establish and promote clear identification, referral and response pathways and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for women and children, particularly adolescent girls and children with disabilities who

face heightened risks and vulnerabilities, such as GBV and human trafficking.

Introduce or strengthen child rights monitoring and referral mechanisms, as well as child protection information and case management to promote evidence-based and needs-informed child protection interventions (such as multi-stakeholder identification and referral mechanisms for children who are victims of violence, abuse or exploitation).

Ensure that children, adolescents, and their caregivers have access to essential mental health and psychosocial care (MHPSS), including in daycare centres, non-formal play and learning hubs, and schools. Additional support should be available for those with more severe needs, including support for parenting and caregiving. MHPSS services should be prioritised across all services put in place for children, adolescents and their caregivers by local authorities, such as health, protection and education. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that mental health services are accessible to refugees and that Ukrainian-speaking counsellors are available as needed.

Since the start of the war, the Government, local authorities and population in Poland have shown unprecedented solidarity in welcoming and integrating refugee children fleeing Ukraine. National child protection system, services and actors at national and local levels were strengthened to prevent and respond to child protection risks and reduce vulnerabilities related to refugee children. In partnership with UNICEF, the Municipalities of Łódź, Lublin, Białystok, Poznań, Katowice – and in Gdynia established Spilno Hubs. The concept of “Spilno” – which means “together” or “jointly” in Ukrainian – is a service Hub that aims to support refugee children and families to address their immediate, medium and long-term needs related to their integration into Polish society. The hubs provide a multidisciplinary service package to both the affected and host communities, strengthening their resilience while maintaining a human rights-centred approach. The Spilno Hub in Poznan offers age-appropriate, gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive services. All necessary information and IEC (information, education and communication) materials on available services are provided including disability assessment as well as eligibility/access to cash benefits, and protection services. Children and caregivers benefit from individual psychological counselling and speech activities, community-based mental health and psychosocial support, legal counselling, and education activities (languages classes, extra-curricular activities, computer skills courses etc). Services are focused on strengthening family and community support and aim at enabling environments for child and family safety and wellbeing. Integration into labour market services including open day with possible employees to explain criteria and preferences for potential job opportunities. Spilno hubs provide group awareness-raising and engagement sessions/workshops covering multiple topics, including gender-based violence and girl and women empowerment⁴.

⁴ UNICEF Spilno Hubs in Poland (<https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/unicef-launches-six-spilno-hubs-five-months-support-ukrainian-refugees-and> and <https://www.poznan.pl/mim/wortals/unicef/,-,p,68104.html>)

Ensure that local response is meeting the needs of the refugee population and hosting communities, by strengthening or setting up regular feedback mechanisms, and improving participation in local decision making

Local authorities should...

Create safe spaces where refugees, children and youth from hosting communities and other stakeholders can participate in a sensitive, inclusive and meaningful way in municipal governance and decision-making processes. These spaces should help them develop their capacity to mobilise, network and hold district and city authorities to account for protecting and realising their rights. The process can include 'place-making' to create or adapt public spaces, playgrounds, and other social infrastructure for and with children and youth, and the involvement of those with disabilities and particular needs related to gender.

Set up or strengthen social listening mechanisms to understand what refugees and host communities feel, need and are worried about, to guide timely and evidence-based actions (through periodical assessments, surveys and social media monitoring). Mechanisms must be inclusive and sensitive to the needs of different configurations of families and caregivers (e.g., single mothers, grandparents as caregivers) in the context.

Promote and enhance safe and confidential feedback and complaint mechanisms. These mechanisms should be inclusive, child- and disability-friendly and accessible, and should build on existing community structures. They should use feedback to adjust the response where needed.

Since the beginning of the war, more than 100,000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Prague, many of them are children. Since the start of the crisis, the Municipality of Prague in partnership with UNICEF and CSOs has integrated accountability to affected populations (AAP) mechanism for refugees. This mechanism has ensured active participation of refugees in planning and design services and activities. Through the Follow-Up Center, around 1,877 refugees (55% women and 26% children) were provided with support on housing, enrolment in education, provision of mental health and psychosocial support, legal, protection and health. The municipality will finance the best project aiming to empower and include 15-17-year-olds. Moreover, in partnership with UNICEF, the Municipality of Prague involved young people from Ukraine in designing a research project to understand refugees' unmet needs.

Promote child and youth participation and empowerment

Local authorities could...

Build mechanisms for dialogue and youth participation in local decision-making and create opportunities for inclusive dialogue with adolescent boys and girls. This could include organising townhall meetings, ‘meet the mayor’ conversations, regular online consultations (including through U-Report Europe Connecting Ukrainians, exchanges in local social media, and the mobilisation of young influencers and bloggers. Regardless of the engagement type, provide a safe and respectful space for adolescents to participate, ensuring attitudes demonstrating readiness to listen to and take their views seriously. Youth are also crucial actors in strengthening peace and security. They are positive and constructive social agents” who play an essential role in building sustainable peace⁵.

Create open spaces and establish adolescent and youth centers to connect and support their mobilization, engagement and volunteerism as part of the refugee response. This could include the provision of registration, capacity building, skills development and vocational training.

Organize safe and inclusive peer support circles among youth with a facilitator and mentor to provide psychosocial and mental health support to adolescents and youth and build their resilience (based on UNICEF’s Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation methodology). Offer opportunities and access to youth e-mental health platforms/solutions/apps.

Introduce programmes for innovations and co-creation with adolescents, young people, youth organizations and the private sector like Upshift⁶ (e.g., hackathons, youth challenges and skill-sharing events), youth internships and 1-st job opportunities which can help youth strengthen both their transferrable skills and vocational skills and competence, improve their self-efficacy and resilience, develop an entrepreneurial mindset and support social integration and reconstruction efforts.

Encourage youth and adolescents to provide feedback and oversight about their experiences with local service delivery (e.g., through exit polls disaggregated by sex, age and disability, online questionnaires, and social media).

Create innovative solutions for promoting social cohesion through creative expression and participation in local events and initiatives for both girls and boys. These could include activities related to sports, arts, outings in nature, cultural and language exchanges, as well as initiatives around climate action. Local authorities could also support the development of ‘buddy programmes’ to link local and refugee youth and adolescents. Those activities will directly contribute to building resilience and solidarity among peers.

⁵ Our Common Agenda, Policy briefing 3, Meaningful youth engagement in policy-making and decision-making process (<https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-youth-engagement-en.pdf>).

⁶ UPSHIFT is an opportunity to support youth and adolescents to become a force for positive social and economic change, contributing to a competitive labour force, sustained economic growth, improved governance, and vibrant civil societies. The UPSHIFT programme blends leading approaches to youth and adolescent development with social innovation and social entrepreneurship. UPSHIFT empowers young people to identify challenges in their communities and create entrepreneurial solutions to address them (<https://www.unicef.org/innovation/upshift>).



The Municipality of Burgas is one of the frontrunners in providing support to Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria. The city of Burgas was the first to set up the Blue Dot in Bulgaria as well as the first city to sign a strategic partnership with UNICEF and develop innovative integration policies for refugee and migrant children and families which can be applied beyond the Ukraine emergency. In its integration activities for Ukrainian refugees, Burgas is focusing on two key components – education and youth development. Burgas Municipality opened a transition learning center that provides early childhood education and care and access to primary education to support the continuation of learning of refugee children. Over 110 refugee children from 3 to 14 years participate in Bulgarian language classes, skills building, catchup classes, psychological assistance, extra curriculum, and inclusion activities. The center is equipped with diverse educational resources, including therapeutic, and diagnostic materials, and equipment for sports, music, theater, and fine arts workshops. Following the adaptation period, refugee children are referred to local kindergartens and schools with the support of the municipality. The local authorities confirmed their commitment to maintaining this learning center for the next 5 years following the decision of the Municipal Council to allocate the premises for this specific purpose. Burgas is also committed to creating skills-building opportunities for young Ukrainian refugees and disadvantaged youth in the local community through non-formal education activities, as well as community support for youth-led initiatives. This component is implemented through the Burgas International Youth Center which facilitates social innovations and helps to develop the important skills of teenagers and young people, provides them with psychological support, and promotes youth participation. Burgas Municipality developed and launched the online youth portal titled “Burgas Likes the Youth” which provides information about opportunities and activities to young people in the community. The portal has a Ukrainian language version ([Burgaslikesyouth/en](https://burgaslikesyouth/en), [Burgaslikesyouth/uk](https://burgaslikesyouth/uk)). Burgas Youth Academy is another great example of how key local services for children can be made available and tailored for refugee children. The Academy, which is implemented in partnership with UNICEF in 2023, educates youth leaders about the work of the local authorities, and local decision-making, and supports the participants to generate and develop solutions to community challenges. Ukrainian adolescents and youth from Burgas are invited to join the learning and inspiration sessions with opinion leaders and experts as well as to pitch their ideas and projects, developed throughout the academy, for funding with the ideas and plans developed throughout the Academy.



Ensure that key local services for children are available for and adapted to refugees' children

In Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Local authorities could...

Accelerate reforms and plans to expand ECEC services for all young children and ensure access and integration of young refugee children in ECEC, with a focus on provision of diverse and flexible modalities of early learning. This means delivering flexible, holistic formal and non-formal programmes that are linked to the needs of refugee children and their families. Rapid ECEC expansion can take on multiple modalities including refurbishing existing spaces, setting up modular kindergartens or non-formal play and learning hubs where children have opportunities to play, learn and interact and minimise disruptions to learning and development caused by conflict and displacement.

Ensure a clear link between non-formal and formal ECEC programmes to facilitate mainstreaming and enrolment of children into formal learning systems. This can support refugee children's integration into formal systems and host communities. For instance, in Slovakia UNICEF and partners established non-formal play and learning hubs targeting children and their families as forms of alternative ECEC, with municipalities engaged from the outset in providing the public spaces and planning professional development activities for ECEC staff.

Capitalize on existing resources to meet the additional demand for ECEC services. This should include physical resources to provide the spaces and mate-

rials for quality early learning experiences, and human resources to meet an increased need for ECEC educators. This can include leveraging existing infrastructure, such as public libraries, playgrounds, or other community spaces. In terms of expanding the qualified teaching workforce to meet the additional demand for ECEC, this could be done by: 1) rapidly employing more educators from the host and refugee communities, 2) providing professional development opportunities for new and existing educators, and 3) ensuring positive working conditions for the ECEC workforce.

Engage refugee caregivers in order to support them in navigating the local ECEC system and to increase their knowledge of ways to provide early learning experiences for their children at home, which is especially essential in the absence of a sufficient number of ECEC services. Caregivers impact their child's development, socioemotional wellbeing, learning and home environment and their engagement is crucial. They can be engaged directly through formal and non-formal ECEC centres. For example, PrimoHUB – a play, learning and parenting hub implemented in Romania with the support of UNICEF, Romania's Ministry of Education and the Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development – has engaged caregivers of children age 6 or below to increase their parenting skills.

The Municipality of Chisinau was at the forefront of welcoming refugee children fleeing Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, UNICEF MCO signed an MoU with Chisinau Municipality to expand service delivery and support to the Ukrainian and most vulnerable Moldovan Children. Through this partnership, for the first year of the crisis, Chisinau Municipality was able to deliver more than 3,100 hot meals for pre-school and primary age refugee children. In addition, 1,500 Education and early childhood care staff were trained to deliver first aid psychological support. More than 43,000 Ukrainian and Moldovan pre-school children received learning supplies through the support of Chisinau Municipality including ECE kits, didactical materials⁷ as well as LEGO and DUPLO boxes. The Chisinau Municipality, in partnership with UNICEF, has launched the opening of ten day-care centers for children and their families, including refugees. These centres, managed by the General Directorate for the Protection of Children's Rights of the Chisinau Municipality, aim to protect and assist children at risk, ensuring free access to preventive activities and specialised services. These centers will provide technical assistance to ensure children's and adolescents' rights in Chişinău. Each sector of the capital hosts two centers that will offer services to over 500 children and teenagers from Moldova and Ukraine every year. The day-care centers provide access to multiple social services, such as assisting children at risk according to their needs, developing parenting skills, informing the community and empowered institutions about the specific needs of children and families in difficult situations, and facilitating child monitoring and social inclusion. Boys and girls aged 7 to 18 and their families can access specialised services and programs, including personalised assistance, individual and group psychological counselling, safe spaces with educational materials, specialized literature, development games, and robotics equipment.

In Education, Local authorities could...

Collected data and assess learning needs. It is critical to collect and exchange data on the registration of displaced people to enable proper monitoring and education planning. This includes mapping the education and protection needs of displaced children and their families and covering these needs with the available capacity and services.

Give guidance to education institutions on how to include displaced children and adolescents from Ukraine. Stress that meaningful inclusion of Ukrainian learners in quality education programs is not only about enabling them to learn. It also requires action to address their social and emotional needs alongside their academic support needs.

In cooperation with community-based organizations and faith-based agencies, run activities that enable displaced children to keep in touch with the Ukrainian culture and language. Organize after school programs with cultural, language and recreational activities. Ensure that activities are also offered to the local community children and youth to promote social cohesion.

Remove financial, administrative, and legal barriers to accessing education. Provide guidelines for education institutions to explain how costs sustained for including Ukrainian pupils will be approved and reimbursed.

The Bucharest City Hall, local authorities, NGOs, companies, and private individuals joined forces to offer support for Ukrainians since the beginning of the war. Through the Department for Social Assistance of the Bucharest Municipality and each sector, local authorities and NGOs, have created safe spaces for children and caregivers. The spaces have been designed to offer a secure place where services are available to every child and caregiver. The mayoralty and districts of Bucharest opened ten Play, Learning and Parenting Hubs, which facilitated the provision of learning activities and learning materials, including books, schools-in-a-box, school bags and stationeries. Play, learning and parenting hubs are offering services for both Ukrainian and Romanian children and their families. In addition, there are five educational and two youth hubs that facilitate access to learning and integration through the delivery of Romanian language classes, encouraging social interactions and promoting social cohesion between Ukrainian refugee children and their Romanian peers – from primary school ages to adolescents.

⁷ ECE Play Box (My Play Box) distributed included: coloring set, notebook, drawing book, pencil set, scissors for children, magnifying glass, magnet, plastic animal set, measuring tape, skipping rope, ball, play dough set, Doll, tangram (3 dimensional), draughts piece, matching cards set, snap cubes, blocks for making castle, geometry board and elastic band set, plastic box, cloth drawstring bag, self-care set, wooden chest.

An estimated one third (over 10,000) of all Ukrainian refugee children in Slovakia are currently enrolled in the Slovak education system. In December 2022, 1,703 Ukrainian children attended kindergartens, 6 918 were enrolled in elementary schools and 1 506 in secondary schools.

While the Ministry of Education adopted several measures to support inclusion of Ukrainian children, schools lack capacities to provide children with individualised learning support, support to children’s social needs and their mental health. The Municipality of Bratislava provided a community centre (called the “Ukraine Slovak House”) for the NGO partner SME SPOLU to offer non-formal learning and social inclusion activities for Ukrainian refugee children and families. These activities include Slovak language courses, English language courses, visual art activities (including art therapy, painting), psychological support, yoga classes, children’s play groups and theatre/performing arts. Over 200 children have joined the activities of this community centre. As the capital of Slovakia, the Municipality of Bratislava is leading by example with its approach to welcome and include Ukrainian refugee children and their families in the community. The Municipality of Bratislava expanded early learning provision by introducing 5 Play and Learning Hubs in its leisure time centres. These hubs target children aged 3-8 and are led by Ukrainian-speaking educators.

Moreover, the Municipality partnered with a state language education institution to offer Slovak language courses for Ukrainian adolescents and young adults. Ukrainian adolescents are benefitting from the language courses, with additional courses to be provided in the near future because of the interest and demand. The Municipality is working with ten schools (with the highest number of Ukrainian refugees) to promote inclusive approaches to education. This entails capacity building of teachers and school staff on supporting the learning experiences of refugee children and providing mental health and psychosocial support.

In health and nutrition, local authorities could...

Ensure immediate and effective access to local health services for all children and families. These should include primary and preventive healthcare (immunization, prenatal/antenatal care, nutrition and hygiene), as well as sexual reproductive health, mental and psychosocial services for mothers and adolescents.

Provide information to mothers and caregivers on the importance of keeping children’s vaccinations up to date at all the local services. Facilitate the registration, in the local information system, of vaccination carried out in Ukraine (especially if necessary for school enrollment). Share information on where and how to have children vaccinated.

Ensure that health centres and hospitals have post-rap PEP kits and other emergency supplies to meet the particular needs of women and girls for health and obstetric support.

Ensure that all reception centres and host structures have safe and private spaces for breastfeeding and Infant and Young Child Feeding materials in Ukrainian, including QR codes to Bebbio and other online platforms with essential health information for parents. Local authorities should also ensure that water,

sanitation and hygiene (WASH), menstrual hygiene management and supply provision are all sensitive to the needs of adolescent girls. Ensure the provision of safe, hygienic and accessible gender-segregated toilets and showers.

Employ enough qualified interpreters and intercultural mediators in health centres, as well as Ukrainian and Russian speaking professionals who can provide services to refugees in their native languages. Ukrainian health professionals can be successfully integrated in the provision of health services, after training in the local language and local service delivery protocols, as demonstrated by experiences in a number of countries.⁸

Ensure sufficient support for children with disabilities and complex needs and their families through the following approaches:

- Provide disability awareness and rights training to first responder health care workers to reduce the likelihood of stigma or discrimination impacting referral decisions and the over-medicalization of disability.
- Provide training to frontline workers in first contact with children to support identification of chil-

⁸ The IEHK PEP kit contains medicines for emergency post-exposure prophylaxis of HIV infection and presumptive treatment of other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) following sexual assault. It also contains emergency contraceptives and pregnancy test kits.

- dren at risk or with developmental difficulties, including disabilities, and their referral to appropriate services (including Early Intervention services).
- Support early detection of risks and developmental difficulties including disabilities as a part of routine health care services for refugee children and ensure referral and availability of early intervention services for children and their families.
- Ensure provision of assistive technologies (AT) and essential supplies to children with disabilities.
- Engage refugees with disabilities (including children and young people and their parents) and local Organizations of People with Disabilities in the health sectors response to the refugee crisis to establish support networks for refugee children with disabilities.

The authorities of the seaside city of Gdansk, in the north of Poland, found themselves with a large increase of refugees when the war in Ukraine escalated in February 2022. One of the immediate priorities in terms of access to healthcare was child immunization. The local authorities knew that disseminating accurate information and allaying the spread of misinformation was and is essential to ensure that every child is protected with life-saving vaccines. The “Ask about vaccinations” (in Polish Zapytaj o szczepienia) project was launched in March 2023. Run by the local municipality together with the Gdansk Foundation, the initiative addresses vaccine confidence head-on by providing a source of verified information about vaccination programmes in Poland. At the heart of the project is a UNICEF-funded mobile consultation point, where people from Ukraine could receive comprehensive information about vaccinations. The consultation point is staffed with doctors, healthcare workers and translators – who explain the science behind vaccines and their proven effectiveness in preventing diseases. They also provide information about the safety and potential side effects of vaccines to address any concerns people may have. The consultations are conducted in Ukrainian and in a relaxed, informal atmosphere so as not to create distance between those seeking information and the consultation point’s staff. The role of local authorities, in partnership with UNICEF, was key in providing essential health supplies and access to healthcare, benefitting more than 370,000 women and children. This includes first aid kits, health equipment and COVID-19 essentials like PPE and antigen tests. Around 150,000 children and caregivers have benefitted from hygiene supplies, including hygiene kits and pink boxes to promote menstrual hygiene, as well as hygiene services, in four Polish municipalities.



Credit © UNICEF/Pic 1101344

Social protection and social welfare, Local authorities could...

Lead mapping and coordination of the various humanitarian and development actors that plan to establish humanitarian cash transfer programmes to ensure synergy, complementarity and coherence of the humanitarian interventions with national and local social protection policies.

Contribute to development of Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) for establishment of cash benefits for vulnerable refugee children and households, ensuring alignment with national legislation and local policies on cash benefits and social protection entitlements, aiming to reach the largest number of beneficiaries with no duplication. Cash benefits should ideally be delivered with the local social protection systems, rather than in parallel.

Detect gaps in identification and registration of vulnerable children and households, including children with disabilities, new and lactating mothers, pregnant women, adolescent/young girls, Roma families

and families in need of temporary emergency support and put in place instruments to allow for easy, fast and complete registration.

Simplify processes for cash benefits application, by simplifying and reducing the amount of documentation required, encourage the use of e-platforms, considering the specific circumstances of refugee children and households.

Provide people with clear information about their entitlements to financial support and where and how to access this support, in line with the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive and national legislation. Information should be age, language and culturally sensitive.

Support, leverage and allocate the financial and human resources that would be necessary for the implementation of the cash benefits programme.

Ensure refugees are linked with effective referral pathways to ensure that their needs – financial and non-financial – are addressed. This is vital for those with complex needs, as children with disabilities.

Contribute to maintaining coherence on social protection benefits for both the host population and refugees. Local authorities should periodically assess the needs of communities residing in their territory and ensure that they have access to social protection benefits in cases where their financial security and well-being is threatened, i.e. families struggling to cope with the energy crisis or increase in food prices.

Support analysis and reviews to map gaps and bottlenecks, including review of financial mechanisms that prevent the municipality from effectively ex-

panding and delivering social protection measures to migrant and refugee children, as for the national populations whenever they are affected by crisis and shocks. Integrate mechanisms to preserve the purchasing power, e.g. when linked to inflation.

Encourage and facilitate a horizontal dialogue and exchange of experiences between different local governments on social protection practices. Ensure that national government is a party to such dialogue and advocate with national government to establish policies that allow more flexibility to local governments on applying local solutions to ensure delivery of social protection entitlements for populations affected by crisis – be it refugees, or local populations.

In Hungary, the Municipality of Budapest, in partnership with UNICEF, has established a co-design Humanitarian Cash Transfer programme to reach out 3500 Ukrainian Refugee Households with cash (one off- payment to cover three months expenses) and services to cover their immediate and long-term needs. The Municipality of Budapest leads the development of Standard operation Procedures (SOPs) for the programme, including targeting criteria while is responsible as well to implement and monitor the programme. The value of the transfer is based on the family allowance benefit, adjusted to the depreciation of the Hungarian Forint. The benefit basis is 16,000 HUF per child per month. The households will ultimately receive 48,000 HUF for each child, which is about 126 euro. Specifically, the Municipality is responsible for registering and maintaining the database of beneficiaries in line with the national and subnational policies on data protection; confirm the eligibility criteria, create the list of beneficiaries and oversee the payment delivery through one of the major banks in Hungary. Furthermore, the Municipality of Budapest, with the support of UNICEF, developed the communication package to inform the beneficiaries about the programme, including how to register and how to benefit. The communication channels are multiple including direct outreach by third parties, but the municipality is the key institution to lead and oversee all communication efforts, which aim to provide very clear factual information about the programme to Ukrainian refugees. A third party (Hungarian Red Cross) will conduct a Post Distribution Monitoring Survey (PDMs) to assess the impact of the programme and provide a better understanding of the socio-economic profile of the targeted population. The findings of the PDM will be informative for the design of additional social protection interventions as well as for flagging areas for improvement in the national and local social protection systems. The partnership focuses on strengthening the capacity of the local frontline workers and formal system to respond to the emerging needs of the affected population. identifying and referring vulnerable households with children are addressed also to other services such as health, education or psychological and legal assistance, among others, to the relevant national and local cadre of social welfare frontliners. Trough this programme the Municipality of Budapest will be able to build its capacity in designing social protection schemes for vulnerable populations and leverage this know-how to cope with potential forthcoming high influx of refugees.

Concluding remarks

Local authorities are critical to ensure that refugee children and families have access to social services and social protection entitlements as their fundamental rights. War, conflict and displacement, especially during protracted crisis have dire consequences in the wellbeing of refugee households which lack basic income and struggle to meet ends.

Local governments can make a real difference in the lives of children and caregivers fleeing from conflicts, like the Ukrainian, because they are closer to them and they have an in-depth understanding of the concrete challenges and opportunities these communities face, often putting in place innovative solutions to address them. This can mean adapting national policies to local needs, or filling in for gaps in national systems through municipal services. Mayors, businesses and citizens come up with creative ways to make their cities and communities more inclusive, experimenting with new approaches and piloting public-private and other partnerships. The influence of local governments goes far beyond the limits of their municipalities. National authorities often look to local governments for policy solutions that were first introduced at the city level.

Local authorities with partners not only have put in place services to the immediate needs of Ukraine's children and families, but they also contribute to strengthening national child protection systems, social protection systems, expand pre-school capacities and national education systems, improve health services and mental health and psychosocial supports. This enables structural systemic changes that will provide improved support to all children in these countries beyond this emergency.

Coordination among national and local governments, actors and comprehensive and system-wide approaches are required to welcome and integrate refugee children and their families within the response to the Ukraine refugee crisis and to other refugee and migrant responses in the future. Local authorities in co-designing a child-centred with partners like UNICEF, strengthen existing systems with innovative solution enabling services to be more resilient and reach the most vulnerable population.

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