

UNICEF Humanitarian Cash Transfers to Ukrainian families in Slovakia:

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Background

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, over 127,000 Ukrainian refugees entering Slovakia have applied for Temporary Protection status. The arrival of over 95,000 Ukrainian women and children early in 2022 increased the demand for public services, especially in the social sector, which presented a significant challenge for Slovakia's social protection system. The Slovak government therefore requested the international community to step in by handling registration and payments for a temporary humanitarian cash response to Ukrainian refugee families.

UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM and IFRC agreed with the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (MoLSAF) to support the country's national refugee response by complementing the cash benefits provided by the national social protection system to

Slovak citizens but not available at the time to Ukrainians. The UNICEF Refugee Response in Slovakia rapidly set up cash transfers to support vulnerable Ukrainian refugee families so that they can meet their immediate financial needs.

Between June and December 2022, UNICEF directly supported 21,560 refugee households, making 55,000 single payments with a total value of over €11 million. The following benefits were provided to Temporary Protection holders: Material Needs Benefit Assistance (MNB), Carer's Benefit for Children with Specific Needs (Carer's Benefit), Cash for Child Development and Education (CCDE) and Winterization Benefit– a temporary one-off grant to cover the winter months.

Aim & Key findings

This briefing note presents the lessons learned and recommendations developed from routine and in-depth post-distribution monitoring commissioned by UNICEF for each tranche of the humanitarian cash transfers. The aim is to understand how UNICEF,

international partners and the Slovak government can adapt their approach to cash transfer as the crisis continues in order to better support the refugee population and continue to improve the livelihoods of refugee households and the lives of refugee children.



Household income and expenditure

The regular and predictable financial support provided by UNICEF and its partners was essential for Ukrainian refugee households, as it gave them financial security and prevented them from resorting to negative coping strategies, e.g. cutting spending on food and essential goods such as children's clothes and shoes. UNICEF cash assistance accounted for 40–50% of the budget of households receiving Carer's Benefit – a benefit targeting parents of children with severe disabilities and medical conditions.

Accommodation

Most refugees' housing situation was improved by the cash assistance provided by UNICEF and other organizations. State housing support contributed significantly to the overall effectiveness of UNICEF cash support, as it allowed householders to furnish children's rooms and buy appliances and kitchen utensils. Overall, beneficiaries' financial security increased over time, and more could afford to pay the rent for their accommodation in full (an increase from 9% before to 18% after distribution of the MNB).

Nutrition

UNICEF cash assistance improved refugee households' access to nutritious, high-quality food. Families with children on special diets could buy better quality and more diverse food and reduce their dependency on food banks. However, over a quarter of households surveyed still relied on food banks six months after the first humanitarian cash distribution.

Childcare and education

Overall, the proportion of Ukrainian refugee children attending all levels of education in Slovakia increased over the period when UNICEF cash assistance was distributed. However, although primary school attendance increased, secondary school attendance fell. One third of all Ukrainian children were not attending school in Slovakia, although over half continued to attend Ukrainian education online. Most children aged 16–17 would have completed their schooling in the Ukrainian system, but, because of differences with the Slovak system, some children in this age group were at particular risk of missing out on educational and employment opportunities in Slovakia, as over 50% of those in the households surveyed were not attending education in Slovakia. The main barriers to accessing education were insufficient information and lack of Slovak language skills.

Healthcare

Access to healthcare has been essential for refugee families, especially those with children with severe disabilities and medical conditions. UNICEF cash assistance helped households to cover out-of-pocket healthcare expenses, especially those with children needing specialized care. Three quarters of households surveyed had no issues accessing healthcare. Those who faced barriers attributed it to lack of money, lack of information about the Slovak healthcare system and/or difficulties in navigating a complex system.

Qualifications and employment

The proportion of refugee household members employed as auxiliary workers fell and the proportion employed in the private sector rose over the period when UNICEF cash assistance was distributed. The main barrier to finding a job was said to be a lack of Slovak language skills, but one third of those surveyed were not learning Slovak. A lack of appropriate certification was also a barrier to refugees' finding jobs that match their skills.

Recommendations for UNICEF and partners and the Slovak government

Cash assistance provided by UNICEF and other international organizations and support from the Slovak government and citizens improved the lives of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia in every area considered in the post-distribution monitoring. However, the findings of the monitoring also highlighted systemic obstacles that might stand in the way of further improving the lives of vulnerable Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and those who continue to arrive and remain in Slovakia, such as increases in the cost of living and barriers to their inclusion in Slovak society.

Key recommendations for designing support and inclusion measures for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia:

Humanitarian aid and social protection

1. [Continue unconditional cash support through MNB to refugees first entering Slovakia until registered with MoLSAF](#)

Refugees' survey and interview responses repeatedly confirmed the importance

of reliable cash support in the first months after being displaced.

During the period of cash distribution, the first payment of benefit was made in the month after entry.

Key recommendation: Ukrainians should receive an unconditional cash benefit during the month of entry to prevent a gap in support for refugees. This recommendation has been addressed already, and the MNB is now provided during the first month of refugees entering Slovakia.

2. [Ensure that cash benefits increase in line with inflation or meet the minimum subsistence level in Slovakia](#)

The inflation rate in Slovakia peaked at over 15% in February 2023. If inflation remains high, it will continue to reduce Ukrainian refugee householders' ability to buy essentials such as food, fuel, clothes and shoes.

Key recommendation: The Slovak government and international organizations

should consider local inflation rates or minimum subsistence levels when determining the level of cash assistance.

3. [Assess and review the humanitarian and social protection support available to Ukrainian refugees remaining in Slovakia](#)

Identify and fill gaps in basic social protection support, find ways of integrating refugees remaining in Slovakia into Slovak society through social protection measures, and devise targeted solutions for specific sub-groups of refugees that take into account their particular situation and work across the life cycle – from childhood to old age.

Key recommendations: The Slovak government should collect information on refugees re-registering for Temporary Protection and use it to create a database of refugees remaining in Slovakia and beneficiary profiles to inform targeted support. MoLSAF should consider expanding refugee households' access to the national social protection system, prioritizing the most vulnerable groups.



The international community should provide support for refugees that complements the support available to Slovak nationals to facilitate long-term transition of refugees to the Slovak national system. MoLSAF should use the successful transfer of the administration of the MNB and Carer's Benefit from UNICEF to the Ministry as a model for the transition.

4. Continue state housing support to maintain the improvement in the livelihoods of refugees, notably parents who cannot work or earn sufficient income

By December 2022, 18% of refugee households were paying rent in full (an increase from 9% before cash distribution) and 8% were paying rent in part (an increase from 4%). If the trend of refugees becoming more financially independent continues, housing support could be gradually reduced for those with earnings above a threshold and targeted at those who cannot work or earn enough to pay for housing.

Key recommendations: On the understanding that the housing support in its current form will expire, the Government should collect data on refugees benefiting from housing support for the purpose of needs-based profiling to provide more targeted support in future, without removing the support altogether. The reformed hous-

ing support should target Ukrainian households directly, which will give them more agency and autonomy and allow the support to be linked to other government services.

5. Continue to provide the Carer's Benefit and consider the progressive inclusion of children with disabilities and specific needs in other forms of support under the Slovak social protection system

In November 2022, the Carer's Benefit provided by UNICEF was transferred to MoLSAF, which continues to provide benefit and register new children. Since January 2023, all refugee children are included in the Slovak public healthcare system, which should significantly reduce household expenditure on medical aid. These developments are critical to stop households with children with severe disabilities being left behind and falling into poverty.

Key recommendations: The Slovak government and international organizations should continue the promising practice of expanding support for families with children with disabilities to improve their financial security and access to family support and child protection services, healthcare and education. The support should also be widened to include respite care (e.g. day care, specialized respite care).

6. Continue to promote and invest in Slovak language skills, degree certification and requalification for refugees and to expand formal and informal preschool provision

The main obstacles cited to finding employment were lack of Slovak language skills, issues with degree certification and parenting responsibilities. Investment in these areas will increase refugees' chances of finding suitable employment and allow single parents to work, thus reducing refugee households' dependence on humanitarian aid.

Key recommendation: The Slovak government should consider measures to increase uptake of Slovak language courses, resolve issues with refugees' degree certification and increase provision of preschool services, including through innovative programmes such as children's groups and 'play and learning hubs'.

Childcare and education

7. Prioritize supporting young people aged 16–17 years to continue their education or to find employment in Slovakia

Because of differences between the Slovak and Ukrainian education systems, over 50% of children in this age group were not attending school in Slovakia. This puts

them at risk of missing out on opportunities for further education or employment.

Key recommendation: Government policy should address the needs of and support to young refugees in this age group, to enable them to move into tertiary education in the Slovak system, start a vocational qualification or find employment, e.g. by including them in the promising flagship European Youth Guarantee initiative.

8. Provide further support for learning Slovak inside and outside the education systems to improve children's educational outcomes

Children in two out of three households surveyed were not learning Slovak. Children need to be able to speak the language to benefit from schooling in Slovakia, make friends and integrate into society.

Key recommendation: The Government and partners should provide more Slovak language courses free of charge, extend the length of courses and focus on courses for groups of similar ages.

9. Promote enrolment in schools and uptake of extracurricular activities by improving the information available on education; continue to provide cash support, and

strengthen capacities of education staff and schools in key areas

Children who are out of school for long periods are at risk of poor educational outcomes and isolation. Families require quality information about the benefits of children being in education and taking part in extracurricular activities. Parents and children need also comprehensive information about the Slovak education system and how it compares with the Ukrainian system in order to make informed decisions. Continued cash support will contribute that children attend school and take part in activities that incur a cost.

Training and support for staff working with children who need additional support, or who have faced trauma, including psychosocial support and interpretation services, could help families to make informed decisions about whether to enrol children in school.

Key recommendations: The Government should provide information on the Slovak education system, how to enrol children as well as the benefits of children being in school, providing support if necessary; promote online parent communities to encourage information sharing; and give children more opportunities to take part in extracurricular activities.

10. Support schools to make the educational offer in Slovakia more attractive to Ukrainian children and young people and to provide individualized learning support for students

Schools in Slovakia can develop 30% of their total curriculum independently, which could be adjusted to better meet the needs of Ukrainian children.

Key recommendation: The Government should support schools to incorporate elements of the Ukrainian culture and language (history, sense of identity, multi-cultural learning) and the Ukrainian educational system (including extra hours of mathematics and natural sciences) into their curriculum.

11. Adopt a 'two-track approach' to support the integration of Ukrainian children with disabilities into inclusive standard education, conduct a survey on Ukrainian children's quality of learning in special schools, and share information on the network of schools providing educational support to children with specific needs

The two-track approach would involve (1) providing comprehensive information on inclusive education for Ukrainian parents and (2) supporting schools to provide

good learning support for children with disabilities in standard schools.

The observed trend suggests that increasing numbers of children with specific need are being enrolled in special schools. Sharing comprehensive information on schools that provide inclusive education and on other support available (school counselling centres, psychologists, therapists) for children with specific needs will allow full use to be made of existing capacities in the Slovak system. This will prevent children from being excluded from education or parents from deciding to opt for special schools where an inclusive school is available.

Key recommendations: The Government should address the systemic barriers to integration in mainstream education that children with disabilities face and address the shortfall in provision by expanding inclusive extracurricular groups (e.g. extra classes, camps). A survey on children's quality of learning in special schools is strongly recommended.



Healthcare

12. Address parents' lack of information about the public healthcare available in Slovakia, and build the capacity of health professionals and health insurance providers to communicate with Ukrainian parents

Parents found the Slovak healthcare system difficult to navigate, were unsure about what was covered by public health insurance, and lacked information on which therapies and treatments available in Slovakia are alternatives or equivalent to those available in Ukraine. Addressing these issues could directly reduce refugee households' out-of-pocket costs and reliance on humanitarian aid.

Key recommendations: The Government should ensure that Ukrainian parents are informed about the changes in Slovak legislation on healthcare for Ukrainian refugee children, including what healthcare services children are entitled to. Health professionals and insurance providers should be well informed about the Slovak equivalents of medicines and treatments available in Ukraine, and should understand which services are covered and not covered by public healthcare for Ukrainian adults and children.

13. Collect information on out-of-pocket healthcare payments made by households with children with specific needs

Because of legislative changes introduced in January and September 2023, which allowed Ukrainian children and adults full access to public healthcare, the out-of-pocket costs of such households are expected to decrease. However, information about the types of costs incurred by households is needed to determine whether they are covered by the change in policy and whether further changes are needed in future.

Key recommendation: The Government should collect these data to understand the types of charges still borne by refugee households following the change in legislation.

14. Provide comprehensive healthcare information at other points of contact with the Ukrainian refugee population and strengthen referral pathways

This will increase the reach and uptake of the information. Increasing the use of referrals from other social support systems to healthcare would also increase the uptake of appropriate healthcare services.

Key recommendation: The Government should provide information about the Slovak healthcare system during the planned re-registration exercise for Temporary Protection to ensure maximum coverage, during registration of newly arrived refugee families and in alternative settings where there will be peer support (e.g. community centres).

Views expressed by refugee families

The recommendations should not detract from the many positive outcomes of the humanitarian cash assistance provided by UNICEF and the Slovak state and citizens, and the difference it made to the lives of Ukrainian families, as evidenced by these mothers' experiences:

- “ The cash assistance was completely sufficient. Besides funding from UNICEF, we received food aid from the owner of the house in which we live. We didn't lack anything. I have nothing to recommend because UNICEF is doing its best for us; we don't need anything more.
- “ Yes, UNICEF helped us; we could afford more food. We used the financial aid provided in October to children for education purposes to pay for a speech therapist. It helped us a lot, as without this help, we would not have been able to afford a speech therapist. The older daughter attends a club that costs us €5 a month. Aid from UNICEF covered 70% of our expenses.
- “ ... Thanks to UNICEF's financial assistance, I could buy my son an orthopaedic mattress, a pillow, and an exercise machine. I also bought toys for children,

books, puzzles and legos. My son needs special shoes; thanks to UNICEF's help, I bought enough shoes for my son.

- “ We have a great experience at the Children's Cystic Fibrosis Centre. My son regularly goes for examinations; from the beginning, they also provided us with an interpreter. They give us prescriptions for medicines and special diets. My son and I were sent for free treatment to Dolný Smokovec, the National Institute for Children's Tuberculosis and Diseases

Rather, they serve to highlight how UNICEF, the Slovak government and other national and international partners can work together to further improve the lives of Ukrainian refugee families in future, as suggested by this mother:

- “ I would be glad if mothers of children with specific needs were invited to a meeting where they would explain to us how to proceed. How to look for special facilities in Slovakia and what we are entitled to.



