

Poland

Update on the context and situation of children

After the escalation of the war on 24 February 2022, population movements continued throughout the year as hostilities continued. The Ukraine refugee crisis became the largest since World War II, causing over 2 million people had to flee Ukraine within the first two weeks of the war. In that time, there have been more than 9.4 million border crossings from Ukraine to Poland (UNHCR Dec 2022). In the early weeks of the war, more than 100,000 people were fleeing each day, and at the peak of this displacement, there were an estimated 3.5 million refugees from Ukraine in Poland. There are more than 1.5 million registered refugees from Ukraine in Poland (UNHCR Dec 2022). The overwhelming majority, around 90%, are women and children. Following approval of a European Union Temporary Protection Directive in March 2022 granting Ukrainian refugees protection and access to services in all EU Member States, Poland continued to bear the maximum burden of refugees as an entry point for Ukrainians using Poland as a transit country during their journey to Europe or seeking temporary protection. Ukrainian children and families have endured over 10 months of violence, trauma, loss, destruction and displacement since the war escalated on 24 February 2022. For the refugees, the experience will have lasting physical and psychological impacts. This can prevent children from reaching their full potential and negatively affect their future. Our work here is to intervene and stop this from happening.

Children were impacted by traumatic events, many arriving unaccompanied, separated or relocated from institutional care facilities, requiring strengthened capacities for identification, family reunification, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention support. Access to formal education remained a challenge, with many children continuing online learning and only around 200,000 refugee students enrolled in formal schools. Refugees faced significant challenges accessing health care, including preventive care, putting children and adults at risk. Unaccompanied and separated children were appointed temporary guardians by the Polish courts. These children remain at heightened risk of trafficking, exploitation and abuse. More than 2,000 children evacuated from care institutions in Ukraine have been cared for in temporary facilities across Poland, often with care and protection standards below the national ones. Many of these children have various disabilities and do not receive the care and protection in line with their needs. The war's economic impact and rising inflation increased financial hardship in most countries in the region, stretching host government capacities to provide services for refugee children and families and making it crucial to complement and strengthen national systems. While the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated 1.2 million returnees to Ukraine by early December 2022, persisting war and attacks on critical civil infrastructure, increased humanitarian needs, military threats, economic hardship, and harsh winter continue to inhibit returns and trigger new refugee movements.

This crisis has meant a sudden and significant scale-up in demand for education, health and protection services in Poland. Poland is a high-income, stable country and a member of the European Union. It has systems in place to protect and care for its people, including its children. The country has seen its share of emergencies, wars and terror, but it has been many decades since it has dealt with a crisis like this.

Poland has provided a model response to a humanitarian crisis bolstered by tremendous public solidarity for Ukraine. However, the sudden influx of people has put extraordinary pressure on its capacity to support them. At the same time, the humanitarian situation in parts of Ukraine is deteriorating, and attacks on critical energy infrastructure are taking their toll. While some have returned to Ukraine, many others keep arriving in Poland. Extra support is required for the most vulnerable who have had difficult experiences and sometimes long, arduous journeys.

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF's Emergency response in Poland has adopted a multifaceted approach, setting a strategy that capitalizes upon the existing systems and ameliorates them with UNICEF's technical and institutional expertise in working in emergencies. The Poland Emergency office focuses on the fundamental needs of refugee children and has carried out the following actions until December 31 since the start of the war.

- **Humanitarian Response: Frontline support for children and young people**

UNICEF's work commences with the frontline response for children and young people. The situation for families in and leaving Ukraine continues to be very challenging. It's critical we provide on-the-ground and immediate support, supplies and services to the thousands of people fleeing Ukraine, especially those who are newly arriving. Decisive and timely humanitarian action protects families and children.

The war in Ukraine left families in shock, desperate for safety, and needing essential supplies. In response, UNICEF has provided thousands of crucial products, including first aid kits, medical equipment, hygiene supplies, food items and education materials.

Around 138,000 aid packages have been provided to individuals and families through our joint work with municipalities and local NGOs. These packages include essential supplies for hygiene, health, and food items.

Municipalities have distributed the items to schools, kindergartens, community centres and support hubs. Supplies are also being delivered to collective accommodation centres for refugees and Blue Dot support hubs, ensuring critical support to families still fleeing the war in Ukraine.

- **Education: keeping children and young people learning**

Our education programme focuses on ensuring all children in Poland who've fled the war in Ukraine can learn and thrive. To do this, we have developed multiple pathways for learning that have helped more than 460,000 children and young people engage in formal and non-formal education. Around 200,000 children have been enrolled in Polish formal schools and preschools, whereas 260,000 children have been supported with specialized early childhood development, Polish language learning or support for digital learning in dedicated hubs for children and adolescents, including children with disabilities provided specialist support.

Alongside municipalities, we have helped recruit and deploy around 1,500 Ukrainian teaching assistants to support integrating refugee children into the Polish system and provide a positive learning experience for needy children. A further 5,000 Polish teachers and assistants have been given training and support to meet the specific needs of children coming from Ukraine.

We have distributed almost 17,000 digital tablets and 1,400 computers to children, teachers and schools to bridge learning gaps.

Over 350,000 children in 2,220 education institutions, including schools, community centres, daycares and preschools, have been supported with learning materials and resources through UNICEF. These investments in the Polish system are provided to whole classrooms, schools and preschools, meaning Polish children benefit in addition to their Ukrainian peers.

Close to 7,000 teachers and education personnel have participated in professional development focusing on classroom management, multicultural competencies, teaching Polish as a foreign language, inclusive education and mental health support.

To support language learning and integration into the education system, we have provided Polish language classes to more than 9,000 children and young people and almost 4,500 parents.

Many children, especially older students, want to continue to study the formal Ukrainian curriculum. UNICEF recognizes the value of this approach and has partnered with local governments and NGOs to establish 61 Education and Development Hubs in cities with high refugee populations. Additionally, UNICEF has worked with NGOs in cities with large refugee populations to support running newly established Ukrainian schools accredited by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science to follow the Ukrainian curriculum. Demand is high, with more than 8,000 children from Ukraine enrolled and more looking for places.

For children of preschool age, UNICEF has partnered with NGOs and local governments to establish 35 Early Childhood Education and Care centres across Poland.

At the centres, different models of care have been developed to meet the unique needs of each child. There is a particular focus on including children with disabilities or those who need extra support. The centres do not have fees, so mothers and caregivers from Ukraine with small children can access safe, trauma-informed care, creating a sense of community for the families involved. UNICEF also supports education, development, therapy and psychosocial support centres for children with disabilities across Poland. Around 10,000 children have been provided services at UNICEF-supported Sun Centers in Krakow.

We have also supported the stretched Polish early childhood education system to expand to take in children from Ukraine. Over 30,000 children under six have accessed preschool and daycare services supported by UNICEF.

- **Child Protection: protecting our most vulnerable**

Children escaping conflict are especially vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse. We must protect them. In particular, the risks of girls and women facing gender-based violence soars and the possibility of human trafficking and sexual exploitation increases in times of displacement. Children with disabilities and children evacuated from Ukrainian childcare institutions are particularly vulnerable and unprepared for life in a new country.

One of the crucial ways we protect refugee children is through our work in Blue Dot Support Hubs, a regional partnership with UNHCR. These are front-line services at border crossings and busy transit points. Through seven UNICEF-led Blue Dots in Poland, more than 240,000 services have been provided to children and families fleeing war in Ukraine, including mental health and psychosocial support, the use of a child-friendly space, child protection referrals and information on healthcare, education, housing and transport.

In partnership with the 12 municipalities hosting around 75% of child refugees, we support the substantial scale-up in child protection service delivery, including community-based services for

vulnerable children, children with disabilities and families.

Children exposed to conflict can suffer severe psychological consequences. Not addressing mental health issues can stall a child's development and stop them from participating meaningfully in society.

More than 244,000 children and caregivers have received mental health and psychosocial support through interventions across our programmes. Many Ukrainian-speaking psychologists and psychiatrists are hired to provide specialized treatment. This work starts at the border and transit areas with Blue Dot Support Hubs, where trained staff can provide immediate mental health and psychosocial support.

In our work with Social and Family Assistance Centres across 12 municipalities, almost 3,000 social service personnel have been hired and trained to provide child protection services and psychosocial support to Ukrainian children and caregivers. Through our work with partners, more than 1,700 teachers and educators, volunteers, parents and psychologists have participated in training to help them understand how to work with young people who have been through the war.

Over 3,500 social service professionals have participated in specialized training, peer support and coaching programmes. We have also strengthened reporting channels and are working with partners to standardize operational procedures and enhance the quality of protection services.

Children fleeing war alone are among the most vulnerable. To protect and care for unaccompanied and separated children, including those evacuated from childcare institutions in Ukraine, we have partnered with the government, local authorities and NGOs.

UNICEF has identified and supported over 3,000 unaccompanied and separated children. UNICEF is supporting the local authorities in hiring additional social workers who monitor children with temporary guardians and provide them with financial and psychosocial support.

Nearly 2,000 children, many with disabilities, have been evacuated from childcare institutions in Ukraine and are currently hosted in temporary facilities in Poland. UNICEF works with the authorities to respond to these children's and their caregivers' urgent needs. This includes medical care, mental health and psychosocial support, assistance with accommodation, and additional caregivers.

Our cooperation with the Ministry of Justice includes capacity building of justice professionals and promoting child rights among children ensuring access to legal aid, particularly the refugee children.

The prevention and response to violence against children and gender-based violence (GBV) is a crucial part of our response in Poland. Since April 2022, we have supported more than 48,000 women and children to access information on protection services and the prevention of violence against women and children.

We have also partnered with municipalities to strengthen services for victims of domestic violence and families in crisis. This includes increasing capacity by employing additional staff at crisis intervention centres and providing translation services to facilitate dialogue with child victims and families from Ukraine.

- **Social Protection: to shield refugees from the effects of poverty**

Direct cash transfers and financial assistance offer a dignified way of assisting refugees and empowering people to make their own decisions. UNICEF worked with national and local institutions to help shield vulnerable children and caregivers from the harmful effects of poverty and exclusion. Almost 111,385 children have benefited from the national universal child grant 500+ through our partnership with the Ministry of Family and Social Policy. The Social Security Institution ZUS administers the funding.

UNICEF also worked with municipalities to provide targeted financial and in-kind assistance, including housing, to the most vulnerable children and caregivers, including those with temporary guardians, children with disabilities and socially vulnerable families, benefiting more than 3,600 children.

- **Health: Helping mothers and children to thrive**

Around 90% of over 1.5 million registered Ukrainian refugees in Poland are women and children. This mother-and-child displacement crisis has put much extra pressure on Poland's public healthcare system.

Newborn babies and their mothers need critical support to ensure they survive the crisis and thrive. Around 7,000 Ukrainian babies have been delivered in Polish hospitals since the beginning of the war. UNICEF encourages mothers to breastfeed exclusively and provides information and support to ensure refugees can feed and provide for their babies and young children as they adapt to life in a new country. To achieve this, 500 healthcare professionals, including nurses, midwives, and neonatologists, have been provided trainings on breastfeeding and lactation support in maternity wards across Poland. In spring-summer 2022, UNICEF reached out to more than 500,000 refugees through an awareness-raising and demand-generation campaign promoting immunisation safety and its importance to children's health through advertising, information at Blue Dot Support Hubs, and through partnerships with municipalities and community-based NGOs.

UNICEF worked with Poland's Ministry of Health to bridge any increased demand by providing supplies of critical vaccinations, 50,000 polio and 5,000 Hepatitis A vaccines, and 50,000 syringes during the early phase of the response.

- **Adolescent participation: Engaging and supporting young people**

Young people make up many of those who fled the Ukraine war to Poland. Their situation is critical. Adolescence is already a challenging time, and significant life disruption and heavy stress during this period can impact adulthood.

UNICEF is working to engage, empower and support young refugees as they recover and integrate into life in Poland. More than 235,000 young people have participated in our Adolescent Development and Participation programmes to give young people tools and skills to thrive. This includes support to develop coping mechanisms and build resilience and life skills and capabilities to set them up for education and employment.

Over the past year, UNICEF has worked with the Scouts in Poland as part of a regional partnership with the World Organization of the Scout Movement to develop activities for young refugees. The programmes, which included after-school activities, winter and summer break events and camps, benefited almost 235,000 young people from Ukraine. They covered activities such as first aid, volunteering training, cultural evenings, sessions on understanding their rights and entitlements as refugees, communication, and team building.

In partnership with municipalities, UNICEF reached more than 1,600 Ukrainians with job counselling services to equip them with the knowledge and tools enabling them to choose education and career paths to facilitate integration and participation in Poland. The camps have not only supported education and protection but helped young people from Ukraine build connections with Polish peers.

UNICEF is also giving young people 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 stay connected and informed.

- **Social and behaviour change: Giving people the information and tools they need to succeed**

The social and Behaviour Change programme developed tools and campaigns to address barriers and support access for refugees to essential services. We use behaviour insights and human-centred design to ensure problem-solving approaches based on evidence, understanding and relevance for the people. A two-way communication channel allows refugees to give feedback on what is working well, what they need and what concerns them, helping UNICEF shape its interventions to suit their needs, keep affected populations engaged and ensure accountability. Over 100,000 people have provided feedback and shared concerns through our partnerships with Scouts, the Institute of Mother and Child Foundation and Unbreakable Ukraine. We have held U-Report co-creation sessions with Ukrainian teenagers and used information from our education and vaccination hotlines to inform the broader work of UNICEF response in Poland.

We have reached over 3.7 million people entering Poland from Ukraine with information on essential services, including vaccination and education through advertising, information at Blue Dot Support Hubs at border crossings and busy transit hubs, municipalities and community-based NGOs. The Viber messaging app and Ukrainian mobile operators provide more than 200,000 people with information on health and education services directly to their mobile phones.

- **Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)**

Preventing sexual exploitation and abuse of children by aid workers, and especially in humanitarian context in the underpinning of UNICEF's work. This work falls under the United Nations Secretary General's UN system-wide strategy on PSEA. Our work in this area includes capacity-building sessions and action plans on PSEA developed with all UNICEF partners across Poland. Almost 170,000 people in Poland now have access to safe reporting channels to report sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers through Blue Dots and other interventions supported by UNICEF in collaboration with municipalities and NGO partners.

- **Gender**

Gender is mainstreamed across UNICEF's programmes globally, which is no different in Poland. Women constitute 50% of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine (UNHCR 2022). Women and girls

fleeing conflict are especially vulnerable and can face increased discrimination as well as significantly increased risks to their safety and protection. These risks include gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence and human trafficking. Therefore, a strong focus on the unique needs of girls and women is embedded across all our work in Poland.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF's multilayered partnerships with governmental bodies, institutions, local administration and grassroots civil society organizations provided opportunities for policy and system strengthening and expanded assistance to the population in need.

With its established presence in cities of Krakow, Warsaw, and Gdansk, UNICEF Poland optimized its reach through its partnerships with 12 municipalities hosting 75 per cent of the total refugee population in Poland. UNICEF also scaled up the delivery of humanitarian support, building capacities of frontline responders, providing emergency supplies, human resources, supporting national system capacity in close coordination with governments, other UN agencies, Polish National Committee (NatCom), CSOs, youth and community networks.

UNICEF is also closely collaborating with the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) Health and Justice to ensure the most holistic approach to refugee response in the areas of protection, education and health.

In Poland, UNICEF leads the Education Sector to coordinate among country's municipalities and over 40 civil society organizations. Jointly with UNHCR and the local NGO-Empowering Children Foundation (Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę), co-leads the Child Protection Working Group. UNICEF has been an active member of PSEA Network, GBV Sub-sector, MHPSS and AAP Working Groups. UNICEF co-leads respectively with UNHCR and WHO the Basic Needs and Health Sectors to harmonize the country-wide response for refugee children, ensuring their access to quality inclusive education within the national system, informal education initiatives and the social protection mechanism in accordance with international guidelines and humanitarian principles

Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF Poland's response to the Ukrainian refugee influx has been unique, depicting good example of scaling up a response in a limited timeframe among myriad of challenges.

UNICEF has been working in low, middle, and upper middle-income countries, guided by well-established emergency systems and procedures to respond and scale up emergency response, including pre-positioning stock. However, working in a high-income country such as Poland with a strong government and service delivery mechanisms in place provided opportunities to fast tracking the refugee response. EU's legal and regulatory framework and Poland's country-specific practices required a thorough understanding of the rules of Engagement and the operational context surrounding the refugee response wherein UNICEF was able to tap-in the capacity of the national and regional governments combining with its technical expertise.

UNICEF Poland's work has been a unique, providing avenues for working through national systems with strong governance experience in other high-income countries. Poland, a non-CPD country, posed initial challenges to rolling out its emergency response due to unavailability of the basic cooperation agreement in place. UNICEF adopted an approach of engaging with the government both at the central and municipal levels to understand and manure through the complex political relationships between municipalities – the main arm of Polish state service delivery to its citizens – and the central government. UNICEF capitalized upon the existing systems and worked with the municipalities to

expand its refugee response. Working with municipalities in areas with a concentration of refugees has been pivotal in reaching out to the refugee population. Through signing the letter of Engagement, UNICEF partnered with 12 municipalities leveraging upon their existing service delivery mechanism, expediting the response and ensuring sustainability as some of the investments have been made at the institutional level into the systems.

The operational presence in the field locations facilitated coordination with various government entities and helped coordinate the response with other actors such as UNHCR, IOM, WHO and IRC.

UNICEF Poland received technical support, and surge staff to help with the initial response; however, as the response moved into the sustained phase, UNICEF began to recruit new staff to augment its capacity and ensure the suitability of its response. Engaging staff for this response proved unexpectedly challenging due to constrained labour markets for the national staff comparatively, low salary rates compared to the private sector and high cost of living for the international staff. Several actions have been taken to sustain the staff's well-being, including a salary survey for international staff.

Due to the mobility of the refugee population, alternative education opportunities helped to maintain and adapt education and care services to children on the move ensuring flexibility and geographical mobility.

UNICEF's Refugee Response in Poland will continue in 2023 with some adaptations and re-organization of the priorities vis-à-vis considering any potential influx of refugees due to the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine.