



# LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

## Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries

Red Cross of Montenegro

May, 2026



## Context

In February 2022, an international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine started, resulting in widespread displacement, extensive damage to critical infrastructure, loss of life and significant human suffering, leading to a large-scale humanitarian response. These consequences created urgent humanitarian needs, particularly in the areas of health, shelter, food security and protection, affecting approximately 18 million people. Although Montenegro does not share its borders with Ukraine, since 24 February 2022 until 3 November 2025, more than [407,130](#) displaced people from Ukraine entered Montenegro, prompting an urgent response from the Red Cross of Montenegro (RCM).

In March 2022, the Government of Montenegro adopted a decision granting temporary protection to displaced people from Ukraine who cannot return to their country, for a period of up to one year. In order to supervise the implementation of this decision, a Coordination Body was established, consisting of representatives of state administration bodies responsible for internal affairs, foreign affairs, finance, labour, social welfare and health. The Coordination Body has worked in close cooperation with the RCM, which provides its humanitarian expertise and operational support to displaced people from Ukraine.

In April 2022, the RCM began implementing activities under the Emergency Appeal for the Ukraine and Impacted Countries, supported by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), enabling the RCM to complement state efforts and ensure a more effective, timely and comprehensive response to displaced people from Ukraine.

Through the IFRC's resources, the RCM has delivered essential humanitarian assistance, particularly to meet basic needs, provide seasonal winter assistance through cash and voucher assistance (CVA), as well as health and care services, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and protection, gender and inclusion (PGI) activities. Special attention has been given to women with children, pregnant women, single parents and older people, particularly those with health conditions or those traveling alone.

At the same time, investments made under the IFRC Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries have contributed to strengthening the RCM's crisis management and response capacities at both national and local levels. This capacity strengthening has significantly enhanced the organisation's operational readiness, particularly for branch-level structures that face limitations in human and financial resources, enabling a more coordinated and sustainable response.



*RCM volunteer with displaced person from Ukraine. Source: RCM*

# Methodology

To create a structured and participatory space for reflection, analysis and shared learning from the implementation of the IFRC Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries in Montenegro, a lessons learned workshop was conducted in December 2025, bringing together all RCM staff involved in the Emergency Appeal, as well as IFRC staff. Objectives were as follows:

1

Provide an overview of the main activities implemented under the Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries.

2

Identify and assess key achievements, milestones and successful practices, as well as challenges and activities that required further adjustment.

3

Assess the effectiveness of technical approaches and operational methodologies, including service delivery to people in vulnerable situations, targeting and identification of priority groups and capacity strengthening of National Society staff and volunteers.

4

Explore the replicability of the operation beyond the scope of the Emergency Appeal and identify pathways to ensure the long-term sustainability of implemented activities.

The lessons learned workshop identified and documented lessons learned across key thematic sectors and enabling areas, including health and care, MHPSS, housing and settlements, CVA, PGI and safeguarding, community engagement and accountability (CEA) and internal and external coordination.

The lessons learned workshop utilized a combination of presentation, group work and plenary discussions to facilitate an interactive and collaborative learning environment. Through this process, the workshop highlighted critical areas for improvement and generated practical recommendations to strengthen the quality, effectiveness and coherence of future emergency responses.

The findings and recommendations will guide future operations of the RCM and IFRC, while also contributing to the broader institutional learning of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, particularly by strengthening the capacity to respond to emergencies in ways that promote long-term impact and sustainability.

# Achievements



## Health and Care

### **Enhanced access to health and care services**

Access to healthcare services was significantly improved through the RCM's targeted workshops, referral mechanisms and accompaniment to healthcare providers. Community members were educated on the structure and functioning of the local healthcare system, as well as their rights under temporary protection status, enabling them to navigate available services more effectively. Interpretation support further reduced language barrier, facilitating clearer communication with medical staff and ensuring higher-quality healthcare, demonstrating the effectiveness of a needs-driven approach by the RCM.

### **Comprehensive MHPSS response delivered**

In response, the RCM consistently provided a full range of MHPSS services, from promotion and awareness-raising activities to more focused and specialized support, including referrals to additional services when needed. This approach allowed for a timely response to immediate psychosocial needs while also fostering longer-term wellbeing and resilience

among affected people, highlighting the effectiveness of a needs-driven, comprehensive MHPSS response.

### **Strengthened community resilience through MHPSS**

Community based MHPSS interventions contributed to reducing stigma around mental health, fostering a sense of ownership within the community and enhancing both individual and collective resilience. By actively involving community members, these interventions promoted a sense of agency, encouraged help-seeking behaviour and strengthened mutual support networks.

### **Integrated psychological first aid (PFA) across sectors**

PFA was fully integrated across all sectors of the response to ensure timely and coordinated support for the immediate emotional and psychosocial needs of displaced people from Ukraine. Through targeted training, staff and volunteers working across different response components were equipped to recognize signs of distress,

provide basic emotional support and facilitate referrals to specialized services when necessary. This integrated approach was further reinforced through Humanitarian Service Points (HSP), alongside other essential services, enabling early identification of distress and timely referrals to specialized support. As a result, people in vulnerable situations were identified earlier, community trust was strengthened and access to appropriate PSS was improved.

*“Field trips and organised group activities we participated in truly made a difference. They lifted our spirits and brought out positive emotions. We noticed the beauty around us, spent time together and supported one another. You realize you are not alone and that there are people ready to help you.”*

Refugee from Ukraine

*“For me personally, PSS is the most important, far more important than financial assistance. Money can be spent, but the support that keeps you strong and healthy means so much more.”*

Refugee from Ukraine



Medical check-up conducted by the RCM volunteer. Source: RCM



Physical activities for displaced people from Ukraine. Source: RCM



## Cash and Voucher Assistance

### **Dignified and flexible assistance provided through CVA**

CVA was delivered as an efficient and dignified assistance modality, enabling people to address their most urgent needs according to their own priorities. Its flexibility allowed RCM to respond to a wide range of needs, including basic living expenses, education costs and seasonal support such as winterisation. The diverse CVA interventions were adjusted over time to evolving needs, demonstrating effectiveness in both immediate relief and medium-term support.

### **Efficiency and transparency improved through digitalization**

The AccessRC, the first self-registration tool for beneficiaries, was introduced to enhance CVA delivery. The AccessRC improved accessibility, efficiency and transparency, while reducing administrative workload and operational costs for staff and volunteers.

### **Accountability strengthened through CEA integration**

CVA programming was integrated with CEA mechanisms, ensuring beneficiary feedback informed programme design and delivery.

This approach improved trust, enhanced targeting and strengthened the overall quality of assistance.



*RCM volunteer assisting displaced person from Ukraine with AccessRC registration.*

*Source: RCM*



## Protection, Gender and Inclusion

### Tailored interventions

Tailored interventions were designed and implemented to meet the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including children, older people, single parents and women, ensuring age- and gender-appropriate support and improving participation and overall outcomes for those facing heightened risks and barriers. At the same time, cohesion between displaced people from Ukraine and the host community was strengthened through a variety of activities, such as corrective gymnastics, educational workshops, cultural and sports events and excursions. These initiatives promoted integration, mutual understanding and trust, while providing opportunities for displaced people to actively participate in community life.

### Inclusion of host community

A balanced and inclusive approach to assistance was ensured by allocating 20 per cent of the humanitarian assistance and cash support budget to people in situation in the local community. This approach supported social cohesion and mitigated potential tensions, while careful and inclusive communication helped maintain positive relations with the host community.

### Education and learning opportunities

Access to education and learning opportunities for both children and adults was supported, contributing to integration, inclusion and wellbeing. For children, the RCM organized a range of non-formal educational activities, including homework support, Montenegrin and English language classes and interactive workshops that promoted learning continuity and social integration. For adults, language classes and various educational sessions were delivered, including CV preparation and employment-related support, first aid training and preventive and psychoeducational sessions. These activities strengthened practical skills, increased confidence and supported longer-term integration and resilience.

### Access and trust strengthened through HSPs

HSPs were established as effective and accessible entry points for displaced people, providing timely information, referrals and multi-sectoral support in a single location. By centralizing services, including protection, health, MHPSS, CVA information and legal or administrative guidance, HSPs reduced barriers to

access and enhanced coordination between sectors. Serving as safe spaces, HSPs also strengthened trust in RCM among the displaced people from Ukraine, fostering greater engagement, openness in sharing needs and more effective delivery of assistance.

*"I feel very happy when I see that children at the social activities organized in the camps have freedom and protection. As parents, we also feel safe and happy. Every activity and workshop becomes a special experience that the children remember and talk about long after it ends."*

Refugee from Ukraine



*Different social activities organized for older displaced people from Ukraine. Source: RCM*



## Community Engagement and Accountability

The project applied an adaptive and needs-based approach, allowing activities to remain closely aligned with the evolving needs of displaced people from Ukraine. Regular needs assessments and continuous community feedback, through CEA mechanisms, ensured that interventions remained relevant, responsive and effective throughout the implementation period. Importantly, displaced people from Ukraine actively participated in every phase of the project, from design to implementation and evaluation, which significantly contributed to the overall impact of the response.

### Community feedback mechanisms

A dedicated Call Centre was established to share information, resolve problems and support a beneficiary satisfaction mechanism for monitoring and evaluation. This improved accountability, made responses more aligned with community needs and allowed services to be continuously improved based on beneficiary feedback. Transparency in activities and the continuous consideration of community input strengthened trust in RCM. It also provided a safe and open space for displaced people from Ukraine to freely express their needs, concerns and experiences.

### Enhanced outreach to vulnerable groups

The project ensured effective outreach to displaced people from Ukraine through a combination of digital, community-based and field approaches. Communication channels such as Viber and Telegram groups were actively used to share timely information, available services and updates in accessible formats and languages. Strong cooperation with community leaders and a Ukrainian non-governmental organisation (NGO) operating in Montenegro, facilitated trust-building and improved access to hard-to-reach people. Moreover, RCM mobile teams played a key role in reaching people living in remote and less accessible areas, ensuring continuity of support beyond HSP and community centres. In addition, a digital chat-bot platform, established through the EU4Health programme, was used to provide information, referrals and guidance on MHPSS, further expanding access to support.

## Active participation of displaced people from Ukraine as volunteers

The response actively engaged displaced people from Ukraine as volunteers to strengthen the overall humanitarian effort. By involving volunteers, the response enhanced outreach to reach more affected people, improved service delivery across educational, psychosocial and humanitarian activities and strengthened community engagement to ensure services were relevant and responsive. Engaging volunteers also fostered peer support among displaced and host communities and promoted the sustainability of services through local participation and capacity-building.

*“We all decide together which topic would be interesting for the next workshop or support group and next time we explore that topic.”*

Recipient of RCM’s support

*“In general, we give feedback immediately, and of course, we also receive surveys where we can anonymously rate the activities. If we did not like something, we simply would not come, but, here we are, three years with the Red Cross.”*

Refugee from Ukraine



Language classes organized by RCM. Source: RCM

In May 2023, Nelli and her husband arrived in Tivat, Montenegro, carrying only essential belongings and a deep sense of uncertainty. *“The RCM was the first door we knocked on, and that door opened wide for us”*, Nelli recalled. They faced numerous challenges: adapting to a new environment, overcoming the language barrier and dealing with social isolation. The emotional strain of displacement weighed heavily and they needed both practical and PSS to regain a sense of stability.

With the help and support of the RCM, Nelli slowly rebuilt her confidence and routine, yet something was still missing. She felt a strong desire to give back, to contribute to the community that had welcomed her and to be of help to others experiencing similar difficulties. Nelli decided to join the RCM Tivat local branch as a volunteer. Alongside other volunteers, she supported group activities, contributed to cultural events such as Žučénica Fest, and helped bridge connections between the local and displaced community. Moreover, she began co-leading weekly yoga sessions for displaced women from Ukraine.

These activities brought Nelli a renewed sense of purpose, belonging and stability. Volunteering allowed her to transform from a recipient of aid into an active contributor within the community. Her involvement encouraged participation of other displaced women and supported the continuity of community based MHPSS activities in the RCM Tivat local branch.

*“That was the moment I felt that I belonged to the community again,” she says with a smile. “We were no longer just guests, we were part of something we were creating together with the local community.”* Nelli’s story highlights the importance of sustained support and the powerful impact of volunteer engagement, especially when those who once needed help are empowered to play an active role in supporting others.



## National Society Development

### **Operational capacities strengthened**

The RCM significantly strengthened its operational capacities at all levels, including both human and material resources. Investments in staff and volunteer training across multiple areas, combined with improvements in logistics and infrastructure, enhanced the RCM's preparedness and ability to respond effectively to the complex humanitarian needs of displaced people from Ukraine.

### **Credibility and partnerships enhanced**

Through its active role in implementing temporary protection measures, the RCM strengthened its cooperation with governmental and international stakeholders, including through membership in the Coordination Body for monitoring activities related to international protection. As a result, the RCM was recognized by the state as a credible and reliable key partner.

### **Demonstrated best practices**

The RCM served as a model for other Red Cross/Red Crescent partners by demonstrating best practices in activities implementation, particularly in CVA programmes and through the innovative

AccessRC digital platform. Lessons learned were systematically documented and shared with relevant stakeholders, contributing to structured knowledge exchange within the Movement. This process supported institutional learning and facilitated the replication and adaptation of effective approaches and best practices in other operational contexts.

### **Legal and institutional frameworks improved**

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for PGI and CVA were developed and adopted, providing clear guidance for consistent and effective implementation of activities and improved support to beneficiaries. The adoption of these SOPs strengthened organisational compliance, clarified roles and responsibilities and contributed to the institutionalization of PGI and CVA principles and practices across the organisation, ensuring their systematic application in current and future programmes.

# Challenges

## **Challenging political situation in the country**

A challenging political situation in the country, marked by frequent changes in personnel within state institutions led to delay in provision of services, especially related to health protection. Furthermore, during the operation, changes were introduced to the tax exemption procedures applicable to the RCM, which resulted in delays in obtaining the required approvals and exemptions.

## **Gaps in institutional support**

Challenges within state institutions, including lack of vertical communication, access to adequate accommodation, livelihood and integration into the education system, affected the ability of displaced people from Ukraine to fully exercise their rights and access essential services. RCM mitigated these challenges by providing continuous support through mobile teams, facilitating communication with relevant institutions, offering guidance on rights and procedures and accompanying individuals in accessing available services.

## **High staff turnover at national and local levels**

High level of staff fluctuation at both national and local levels disrupted continuity and implementation capacity, requiring repeated onboarding and adjustment during the response. The high influx of

displaced people from Ukraine placed significant pressure on staff, while the available human resources were not proportionally increased, limiting the capacity to respond efficiently to the growing needs of the affected population.

## **Administrative and procurement constraints**

At the outset, standard administrative and procurement procedures, including agreement finalization and fund disbursement, required additional time to complete. As a result, the initiation of activities took place after the very first phase of the emergency.

## **Limited access to healthcare services**

Displaced people from Ukraine faced challenges in accessing healthcare due to language barrier, limited familiarity with the healthcare system in Montenegro and administrative barriers. In particular, the system did not recognize the Personal Identification Number (PIN) of temporary protection status holders, which prevented proper registration and hindered their access to healthcare services. The revision of healthcare services available to persons under temporary protection status further constrained access to care, as coverage was limited to urgent medical services

and therapy for chronic conditions. This increased the risk of unmet health needs and placed additional pressure on humanitarian actors to fill existing gaps.

### **Mental health stigma**

Mental health stigma affected people's willingness to seek help, especially during the early phase of the response and for specialized services like psychological counselling. RCM mitigated this challenge by being responsive, building trust with the community and providing diverse forms of support through HSP and children friendly spaces. Mental health promotion activities and PFA helped reduce stigma and encouraged more people to seek help.

### **Language barrier**

In the initial phase of the response, language barrier represented a key challenge in communication and the provision of support. To address this, RCM engaged Ukrainian-speaking staff and interpreters, which helped to mitigate these obstacles. In addition, RCM provided Montenegrin language classes throughout the response, facilitating longer-term integration and ensuring independent access to services.

### **Sustainability of the activities**

Limited funding opportunities raised concerns regarding the sustainability of services, particularly those addressing longer-term needs.

Nevertheless, a degree of sustainability was achieved through strengthened capacities and the establishment of trust and participation mechanisms that continued beyond the Emergency Appeal.



*Support group activities for displaced people from Ukraine. Source: RCM*

## Recommendations

Scale down administrative requirements to speed up response operations. Simplify procedures to enable the National Society to deliver timely and efficient assistance and ensure immediate presence and support in the field.

Develop clear, step-by-step instructions for self-registration on the AccessRC. Explain and simplify the process, including eligibility, required documents and next steps, to enable beneficiaries to complete registration independently, reduce errors and ensure timely access to assistance.

Continue sharing experiences, best practices and lessons learned among National Societies within the Emergency Appeal. This practice will support mutual learning, help identify successes and common challenges and strengthen the overall quality of emergency responses.

Continue investing in strengthening the capacities of staff, volunteers and local structures through targeted training, simulation exercises and other capacity-building activities, with a focus on the local level. Strategic investment in these capacities is essential to ensure a rapid and effective response in future emergencies.

Continue engaging communities in decision-making, programme design, implementation and feedback processes to ensure interventions remain relevant, culturally appropriate and responsive to their needs. By integrating CEA approach, programmes become more responsive, transparent and accountable, enabling communities to express their needs, provide input and raise concerns effectively.

## Conclusion

The Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries has left a strong and lasting impact on the RCM, with multiple achievements sustaining beyond its duration. Trust and credibility with state institutions and partners have been reinforced, positioning the National Society as a reliable and preferred partner for future emergency responses and long-term initiatives.

Various tools, materials and resources developed during the operation remain within the National Society, ready to be adapted and reused for different emergencies, settings and target groups, ensuring continued efficiency and quality of response. Valuable human resources are now available for ongoing and future programs, as Ukrainian community volunteers are actively engaged and well-equipped to continue providing support to displaced people from Ukraine. Their involvement strengthens cultural sensitivity, inclusion and community resilience.

Standardized cash assistance procedures and institutionalized operational capacities now provide a flexible, efficient and sustainable framework for cash-based interventions, ensuring that the National Society is well-prepared to respond effectively to future humanitarian needs. Collectively, these achievements demonstrate the enduring benefits of the operation and provide a solid foundation for continued excellence in humanitarian response.

# THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

## **HUMANITY**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

## **IMPARTIALITY**

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

## **NEUTRALITY**

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

## **INDEPENDENCE**

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

## **VOLUNTARY SERVICE**

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

## **UNITY**

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

## **UNIVERSALITY**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.