



LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries

Red Cross of the Republic of North Macedonia

May, 2026



Context

In February 2022, an international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine started, triggering widespread displacement, extensive damage to critical infrastructure, significant loss of life and profound human suffering. The escalation led to widespread humanitarian challenges, with urgent needs emerging across multiple sectors.

The Red Cross of the Republic of North Macedonia (RCRNM), acting in its auxiliary role to public authorities, led and coordinated the humanitarian response for displaced people from Ukraine residing in North Macedonia. Building on its extensive experience since 2015 in supporting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, RCRNM remained the primary provider of sustained humanitarian assistance to displaced people from Ukraine in the country.

Under the the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries, the RCRNM delivered a comprehensive multi-sectoral humanitarian response for displaced people from Ukraine. The response prioritized immediate needs, health and psychosocial support (PSS), protection, gender and inclusion (PGI), community engagement and accountability (CEA) and the strengthening of National Society's capacities. RCRNM provided displaced people from Ukraine with in-kind and cash and voucher assistance (CVA),

access to food, hygiene items, clothing and essential household needs. Multi-purpose cash support and financial assistance to host families helped ensure safe and dignified living conditions while supporting community-based hosting arrangements.

Health and care interventions, including mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), improved access to healthcare and PSS services for both adults and children. Mental health preparedness and psychological first aid (PFA) capacity were reinforced, alongside initiatives to include displaced people from Ukraine in national health systems in line with a human rights-based approach. Child-focused activities, therapeutic groups, stress management sessions, first aid training and women's health interventions complemented these efforts and contributed to holistic wellbeing. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) support was integrated with other assistance to ensure equitable access to hygiene services, while PGI initiatives promoted protection, social inclusion and safe access to services, supported by institutional capacity building, safeguarding policies and referral systems.

CEA mechanisms, including dedicated helplines, digital feedback tools and

coordination with Ukrainian communities, ensured that programme design and implementation were responsive to needs and informed by community feedback.

The Emergency Appeal also strengthened the operational readiness and institutional capacity of RCRNM through volunteer engagement, trainings, preparedness workshops, simulation exercises and investments in logistics, communication and integrity systems.



Branch Organizational Capacity Assessment (BOCA) for the RCRNM's staff. Source: RCRNM

Methodology

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

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, 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 RCRNM 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

Comprehensive MHPSS response delivered

A comprehensive package of MHPSS services was delivered through both individual and group modalities. Individual sessions provided confidential, tailored support to address specific psychosocial concerns, while group-based activities promoted peer support, social connectedness and community cohesion. This flexible approach allowed for effective responses to diverse needs across the affected population.

At the outset of the response, the RCRNM established a dedicated PSS helpline, accessible via telephone, WhatsApp and Viber. The helpline was managed by a licensed psychologist from the Red Cross of the City of Skopje, ensuring professional and high-quality support. Remote services were provided in English and Macedonian, with the option to arrange in-person sessions supported with Ukrainian interpretation, demonstrating a strong commitment to accessibility, cultural sensitivity and tailored support for displaced people.

Needs identification and safe access to support

A structured beneficiary registration and case management system was established, enabling timely identification of displaced people and rapid screening of MHPSS needs. This was complemented by the creation of a safe and accessible support environment, including a dedicated PSS helpline providing immediate PSS, information and referrals. Together, these mechanisms strengthened early identification of distress and ensured timely access to support for people with urgent needs. Additionally, the availability of trained, multilingual staff and volunteers enabled culturally sensitive engagement with displaced people, increased trust in services and enhanced access to assistance, resulting in improved quality and impact of the response.

Institutional integration

The National Society's strong positioning within the national system significantly enhanced service delivery, such as access to medication procurement for

chronic therapy. Close cooperation with state institutions, including the Chamber of Psychologists, ensured access to qualified professionals and established effective referral pathways. In parallel, collaboration with a wide range of local and international actors supported coordinated interventions and the development of more sustainable MHPSS programmes.



MHPSS training for RCRNM's staff and volunteers. Source: RCRNM



Health sessions for displaced people from Ukraine. Source: RCRNM



Cash and Voucher Assistance

Dignified and flexible assistance provided through CVA

The RCRNM provided CVA to support displaced people from Ukraine, allowing them to prioritize their most urgent needs. By offering multi-purpose cash transfers and vouchers instead of only in-kind items, displaced people from Ukraine were able to choose what they needed most, whether that was food, clothing, healthcare or household necessities. This approach supported individual dignity, autonomy and tailored responses to different household situations.

Accountability strengthened through CEA integration

CVA programming by the RCRNM was integrated with CEA mechanisms, ensuring that beneficiary feedback directly informed programme design and delivery. Through multiple channels, including in-person visits and digital tools, displaced people from Ukraine could share concerns, ask questions and report issues. This feedback was used to adjust voucher types, distribution timing and eligibility criteria, improving access and relevance. By responding to beneficiaries' input, the programme enhanced transparency, accountability and trust while post-distribution monitoring (PDM)

allowed for lessons learned to inform both immediate actions and future CVA planning.



RCRNM volunteer assisting displaced person from Ukraine with CVA. Source: RCRNM



Protection, Gender and Inclusion

Education and learning opportunities supported

Education and learning opportunities were actively supported through a range of inclusive and engaging activities designed to promote learning, well-being and social integration. Creative workshops brought together parents and children to jointly produce Christmas decorations, greeting cards and seasonal autumn and winter crafts, fostering family bonding and creative expression.

Sport and recreational activities, including swimming and dancing classes, encouraged physical well-being and positive coping. Multicultural workshops introduced participants to the traditions and culture of North Macedonia, such as holidays, customs and traditional food, while also providing space to share and celebrate Ukrainian cultural traditions.

In addition, organized visits to cinemas theatres and museums expanded informal learning opportunities, supported cultural inclusion and enhanced participants' sense of belonging within the host community. Combining educational, recreational and cultural activities proved effective in supporting learning outcomes while also promoting positive coping and emotional

well-being. To ensure that these activities remained relevant and responsive, community feedback was gathered on a regular basis through PDMs enabling continuous adaptation of activities in line with the evolving needs and priorities of people in need.

“The RCRNM was the very first organisation my daughter and I turned to upon arriving in the country as refugees. First and foremost, we are grateful to the RCRNM for their humanity, kindness and support. For the moral support in difficult moments, for the material assistance in the form of food, hygiene items, clothing and footwear. For organizing activities for children and parents, aimed at improving psychological well-being and facilitating adaptation to life in new conditions and a new environment. Our heartfelt thanks go to the leadership of the RCRNM, the volunteers and all staff who work for the benefit of people, for the sake of a better future.”

Recipient of RCRNM's support



Community Engagement and Accountability

Community feedback mechanisms

An initial needs assessment was conducted during the first registration meetings to ensure that the response was adequately planned and tailored to the population's needs. This enabled the timely identification of vulnerabilities, priority needs and protection concerns.

Multiple communication and feedback channels were put in place, including structured questionnaires, Viber groups, focus group discussions (FGDs), online feedback forms and a dedicated telephone helpline. These channels facilitated accessible information sharing, enabled easy reporting of concerns and strengthened ongoing dialogue with displaced people from Ukraine.

Information gathered through CEA mechanisms was regularly analysed and used to adapt programming. Feedback directly informed adjustments to assistance modalities, including the provision of CVA, the establishment of child-friendly spaces and the organisation of summer camps. Regular user satisfaction checks, PDMs and FGDs enhanced accountability and transparency, while confirming the relevance, quality and appropriateness of ongoing activities.

Inclusion of displaced people from Ukraine as RCRNM volunteers

Displaced people from Ukraine were actively engaged as volunteers within the RCRNM, strengthening trust with affected communities and enhancing culturally appropriate communication. Their involvement supported more responsive and effective service delivery, while joint volunteer engagement with host communities promoted social cohesion, mutual understanding and positive community relations.

"I want to express my deepest gratitude to the RCRNM. During a very difficult period in our lives, you helped us immensely with food, a children's playground, excursions for our kids, financial support, and medical check-ups! Thank you so much for being there for us and for always reaching out to check on how we are doing. It is wonderful, and we truly appreciate your work and support."

Recipient of RCRNM's support



National Society Development

Strengthened operational structures

The operational response system was strengthened through the reinforcement of the National Intervention Unit and the establishment of well-defined local teams. This resulted in a more efficient, clearly structured and scalable response capacity at both national and local levels.

Evidence-based planning and decision-making

Analytical mechanisms and tools were introduced to support systematic data analysis, operational planning and informed decision-making. These mechanisms enhanced the ability to assess needs, prioritize interventions and adjust operations based on evolving contexts.

Standardization through regulations

Regulations, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and additional internal acts were developed and applied to ensure consistency, coordination and quality across all response activities. This standardization strengthened compliance with internal standards and improved internal coordination.

Strategic frameworks for capacity development

Key organisational priorities were identified and translated into a coherent framework for national and local development. Unified methodological approaches, including Preparedness for Effective Response (PER) and BOCA, were applied to enable a systematic and harmonized approach to organisational capacity strengthening.

Digitalization, coordination and institutional recognition

Modern digital tools were integrated to enhance coordination, communication and information management (IM), significantly improving operational oversight during disaster response. Through sustained field engagement and a visible operational presence, the RCRNM strengthened its institutional recognition and credibility among state authorities, national crisis management structures, the corporate sector, the general public and people in need.

Challenges

Legal, administrative and institutional challenges

Displaced people from Ukraine faced significant legal and administrative challenges that complicated access to healthcare, social protection and employment opportunities. Key legislation, including the Law on Foreigners and Persons under International Protection and the Law on Health Insurance, had not been amended, further restricting protections and service delivery. In addition, the non-recognition of diplomas and certificates posed additional barriers to integration of displaced people from Ukraine. Operational efficiency was also affected by restrictive administrative frameworks, including procurement procedures and delays, as well as limited alignment of SOPs across institutions and Red Cross units, which created coordination challenges. Finally, insufficient information from state institutions during the early phase of the response hindered timely planning and effective implementation of support activities. Furthermore, the lack of unified approaches within the RCRNM occasionally affected the consistency and coordination of service delivery.

Language barrier

At the beginning of the response, language barrier occasionally hindered effective communication with displaced people from Ukraine. Although partial mitigation

measures were implemented, including the use of interpreters, online tools and Macedonian language support, these efforts did not fully resolve the issue, sometimes limiting beneficiaries' access to information and services.

Limited access to healthcare services

People in vulnerable situations, such as mothers, children and older people required tailored PSS and trust-building efforts. Inadequate health insurance solutions further constrained access to comprehensive care, as many displaced people from Ukraine were not automatically enrolled in the national health system and faced barriers to obtaining coverage. Furthermore, many displaced people from Ukraine were initially reluctant to use mental health services due to stigma and limited awareness of available support.

Operational and logistical challenges

Aid distribution beyond Skopje was hindered by infrastructure limitations and logistical constraints, while standardized humanitarian aid packages did not always meet the specific needs of beneficiaries. Overlapping assistance from multiple organisations at the onset of the conflict created inefficiencies. Limited capacity in local Red Cross branches reduced the effectiveness of CVA implementation

and obstacles with banking and financial service providers (FSP), including difficulties opening accounts and inadequate recognition of beneficiaries, further complicated cash transfers. In addition, limited knowledge of CVA tools among providers restricted the scope and efficiency of this modality. Non-standardized data collection, often relying on spreadsheets, affected data quality and analysis, while gaps in infrastructure and equipment maintenance within national depot systems impacted preparedness and the timeliness of response operations.



Social activities for displaced children from Ukraine. Source: RCRNM

Recommendations

Emphasize early planning, strong institutional ownership and the development of a clear, phased exit strategy in collaboration with state institutions to ensure continuity of core services. Effective coordination among public institutions, civil society organisations and humanitarian actors is essential to avoid duplication, optimize resource use and deliver efficient services.

Prioritise integration and inclusion measures, including access to livelihood opportunities, employment pathways and recognition of educational and professional qualifications, as key components of long-term recovery and resilience. Regularly review legal and administrative frameworks and adapt to facilitate access to essential services. Shift strategically from short-term assistance toward promoting self-reliance, social and economic integration and local ownership in order to strengthen long-term resilience in line with the IFRC principles.

Embed PGI and CEA as core, cross-cutting components throughout programmes to ensure sustainability and impact beyond the immediate emergency phase. Maintain and strengthen relationships with communities, including established networks, to support long-term resilience.

Use both formal and informal community groups as trusted channels for information sharing and feedback, strengthening outreach, accountability and community trust.

Strengthen operational effectiveness by investing continuously in staff and volunteer capacity, developing clear protocols and harmonised operational mechanisms and improving coordination, consistency and quality assurance. Continue developing and adapting practical tools and enhance human capacities to improve preparedness and enable more effective and sustainable future responses.

Adopt a flexible approach that combines in-kind support with CVA and strengthen coordination with local Red Cross branches to ensure effective and timely humanitarian operations. Build targeted capacity among staff and volunteers, particularly in CVA and emergency response, to maintain operational readiness and deliver high-quality services. Establishing framework agreements with financial service providers, enhancing advocacy with state institutions, and utilizing digital registration tools will improve efficiency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making. Sustained community engagement, systematic documentation of lessons learned and strengthened partnerships with humanitarian actors and institutions will further support relevance, resource mobilization and the long-term resilience of humanitarian operations.

Establishing framework agreements with FSPs, enhancing advocacy with state institutions and utilizing digital registration tools will improve efficiency, accountability and evidence-based decision-making. Sustained community engagement, systematic documentation of lessons learned and strengthened partnerships with humanitarian actors and institutions will further support relevance, resource mobilization and the long-term resilience of humanitarian operations.

There is a need to simplify procurement procedures, align RCRNM's approaches with the national crisis management system and strengthen local team capacities to ensure timely and sustainable responses. Institutionalizing lessons learned and integrating training into regular branch operations will enhance long-term impact and operational efficiency.

To ensure preparedness and stability, the RCRNM should establish pre-agreements with the Government of North Macedonia and develop a programme for contingency stock reserves in collaboration with governmental and local authorities.

Conclusion

The operation addressing the needs of displaced people from Ukraine in North Macedonia has demonstrated the capacity and resilience of the RCRNM to respond effectively to complex humanitarian crises. Despite facing significant legal, administrative, health and operational challenges, the National Society successfully delivered multi-sectoral assistance, combining in-kind support, CVA and PSS, while maintaining strong coordination with state institutions, local authorities and partner organisations.

The operation reinforced the credibility and trust of the RCRNM with communities and institutions, strengthened institutional capacities and institutionalized key tools, procedures and human resources that will continue to support future emergency responses. Lessons learned, the integration of PGI and CEA and the development of standardized operational frameworks provide a strong foundation for improving preparedness, efficiency and sustainability in future interventions.

Overall, the achievements of this operation highlight the importance of flexible, community-centred and coordinated approaches in humanitarian response. By embedding these practices and continuously investing in capacity, infrastructure and strategic partnerships, the RCRNM is well-positioned to enhance resilience, promote inclusion and ensure effective support to vulnerable populations in future emergencies.

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.