



# LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

## Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries

### Croatian Red Cross

May, 2026



## Context

Following the escalation of the international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine on 24 February 2022, many people were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in other parts of Ukraine or in other European countries, including Croatia. Displaced people from Ukraine began arriving in Croatia on 25 February 2022, with the number of arrivals steadily increasing thereafter. By 29 December 2025, a total of 32,605 displaced people from Ukraine had been registered by the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia and were granted temporary protection status. In line with its humanitarian mandate and as part of the civil protection system, the Croatian Red Cross (CRC) immediately began responding to the needs of displaced people from Ukraine. At the peak of the response, 105 local branches supported displaced people across 427 locations nationwide, including towns, municipalities, collective centres and private accommodation. This scale of assistance required the mobilisation of more than 400 local staff, over 700 volunteers and 20 personnel from the CRC headquarters.

The CRC provided food and non-food items (NFI), hygiene items, cash and voucher assistance (CVA), mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), restoring family links (RFL) services, protection, gender and inclusion (PGI) activities, community engagement and accountability (CEA), water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) support and

information on available assistance in Croatia and referrals to relevant institutions when needed. During the initial phase of the response, CRC local branches organized and managed distributions and participated in the organization of reception of displaced people in accommodation facilities.

The focus was on people in vulnerable situations, as identified through needs assessments conducted at regular intervals. These included single parent households mainly led by single mothers, households with members aged 65 or older, families with three or more children under the age of 18 and households with members living with chronic diseases or mental or physical disabilities who depend on permanent care by another family member. The assessments consistently showed that many of these families were unable to meet their basic minimum needs without regular humanitarian assistance, regardless of whether they were accommodated in public or private facilities.

Following the closure of the Emergency Appeal, the CRC will continue to support displaced people from Ukraine in line with its capacities, primarily through the distribution of food items provided by the State Stock Reserves, the provision

of RFL services and psychosocial support (PSS) through existing or newly developed projects.



*Preparation of humanitarian aid for displaced people from Ukraine.  
Source: CRC*

# 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 Croatia, a lessons learned workshop was conducted in November 2025, bringing together all CRC 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, 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 CRC 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

### **Strengthened community resilience**

The CRC delivered MHPSS services aimed at addressing vulnerabilities in a context of high uncertainty. These services included focused psychological support as well as recreational and awareness-raising activities. Community feedback following the provision of services was positive, with particular emphasis on increased self-efficacy and improved integration into the local community.

### **Tailored MHPSS for affected people**

MHPSS activities were designed and implemented with the active participation of displaced people from Ukraine. CRC conducted a needs assessment targeting people in vulnerable situations and based on their responses, developed relevant activities and interventions. These interventions promoted a sense of safety, encouraged self-efficacy and strengthened community support networks.

### **Enhanced human capacity for MHPSS**

Given the specific context in which the displaced population was dispersed across the country, CRC strengthened its

PSS capacity by recruiting additional staff and interpreters. All new staff members received training in psychological first aid (PFA), equipping them to recognize signs of distress, provide basic PSS and refer those in need to appropriate services. The training also addressed staff well-being, enabling them to recognize and manage their own stress.

### **Improved visibility of MHPSS**

Throughout the response, CRC was recognized as one of the leading providers of MHPSS services for the displaced community, both within the Movement and by external partners. Community feedback highlighted a strong sense of safety associated with the CRC. The humanitarian response to the needs of displaced people from Ukraine increased CRC's visibility beyond its traditional role, creating opportunities for future partnerships and collaboration.

### **Information platforms**

One of the most significant and sustainable achievements during the Emergency Appeal has been the

establishment of dedicated information-sharing platforms to provide guidance and support to displaced people from Ukraine. WhatsApp and Telegram groups proved to be particularly effective communication channels ensuring timely access to relevant information.

Although the project activities and associated funding have concluded, these groups remain active and continue to serve the community independently. Initially facilitated by CRC staff and volunteers, the platforms have demonstrated strong community ownership and sustainability, continuing to function without direct operational support from the CRC.



*Preparation of humanitarian aid for displaced people from Ukraine.*

*Source: CRC*



## Cash and Voucher Assistance

### Assistance provided through CVA

Assistance was provided through multipurpose cash vouchers redeemable at one of the largest supermarkets in Croatia, allowing displaced people from Ukraine to cover additional needs not included in standard support for periods ranging from two to five months. The CRC complemented this assistance with in-kind distributions from existing stocks, enabling families to prioritize items not included in the in-kind packages when using their cash vouchers.

Conducted in October and November 2023 and January and February 2024, these distributions formed part of the 2023/2024 winterization strategy, taking into account the reduced availability of seasonal employment during this period. Vulnerability criteria for selecting people were established in close consultation with all stakeholders, including local branches and community members. These targeting criteria were carefully applied and verified to ensure that assistance reached the intended groups.



*Displaced person from Ukraine receiving humanitarian aid from CRC. Source: CRC*



## Protection, Gender and Inclusion

### Tailored interventions for specific groups

To address the needs of specific vulnerable groups, including children, youth and older people, tailored interventions were designed and implemented. A participatory approach was applied to ensure that activities respond to identified needs and to promote meaningful participation of displaced people from Ukraine. Activities included educational workshops, cultural and sports events and excursions. In addition, CRC provided PFA and ensured safe referrals in cases of gender-based violence (GBV), while also contributing to coordinated support mechanisms for people experiencing mental health challenges.

### Community-based support

Community-based support activities, including life skills development and summer schools, contributed to strengthening cohesion between host and displaced communities. These initiatives fostered trust, social connectedness and mutual understanding, while providing safe spaces for building social networks, particularly for youth. As a result, some participants became engaged as community volunteers within local branches, which contributed to enhanced community capacity and

supported the wellbeing of both volunteers and the wider community.

### Inclusion of host community

A balanced and inclusive approach to assistance was ensured by allocating 10 per cent of the humanitarian assistance and cash support budget to a small number of people in vulnerable situations within the host community. This approach supported social cohesion and helped to mitigate potential tensions, while careful and inclusive communication helped maintain positive relations with the host community.

### Education and learning opportunities supported

CRC supported the enrolment of children in kindergartens and schools and played a key role in strengthening the capacity of teachers to better support children affected by displacement. Croatian language classes were organized on a non-formal basis, improving participants' language skills and increasing their employability. Additional activities included CV preparation and employment-related support. Together, these interventions supported longer-term integration and resilience.



## Community Engagement and Accountability

### Community feedback mechanisms

To ensure timely and effective communication and to receive immediate feedback on needs and the assistance provided, the CRC and local branches established a dedicated communication channel, including Telegram, enabling fast communication in Ukrainian. This channel offered a safe and open space for sharing information, addressing issues as they arose and enabling evaluation of the support provided. This approach strengthened transparency, accountability and trust among the people receiving assistance.

### CEA integration in CVA assistance

During the preparation phase for the cash voucher distributions, a variety of information materials were developed to support the process, including a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document, infographics and an informational brochure. All materials were contextualized and made available in Russian, Ukrainian and Croatian to ensure that both local branches and the communities receiving support fully understood the objectives of the intervention, the value of the cash vouchers, the designated supermarket and other relevant details.

### Inclusion of displaced people from Ukraine as CRC volunteers

Youth from Ukraine who participated in the RC Youth Summer School remained connected to the CRC and continued volunteering at the local level. This inclusion was valuable as it strengthened social cohesion, provided meaningful engagement for displaced youth and allowed them to contribute their skills and perspectives to the community while enriching the humanitarian work of the CRC.



*Social gathering organized for displaced people from Ukraine. Source: CRC*



## National Society Development

### Human resources development

Beside participation at trainings, meetings, workshops, study visits linked to topics of CVA, CEA, MHPSS and logistics, an out-of-office “HR Development Day” was held on the topic of improving the communication with the public, partners and the media with emphasis on crisis situations, but also mutual internal communication. As a result of this very successful workshop, additional PSS workshops were held for the staff to provide more space for exchanging experience, bonding and teamwork that are all very important in building a strong team ready to respond to complex humanitarian needs of the displaced people from Ukraine.

New IT equipment and new furniture that have been acquired facilitated the increase in the productivity of the staff allowing them to work more efficiently, completing tasks faster and handling more complex projects. Also, the latest hardware supports modern software applications, ensuring seamless integration and functionality. With new IT equipment cyber security has been significantly enhanced and greater satisfaction of workers has been achieved increasing the readiness to respond to crisis as well.

Response capacity in crisis situations, with a particular focus on the response to the needs of displaced people from Ukraine has been enhanced through coordinated meetings with Red Cross branch directors.

### Logistics capacities strengthened

The CRC strengthened its operational capacity by enhancing and upgrading the building of the CRC’s National Logistics Centre warehousing and office capacities with dedicated construction works and equipping the interior spaces.

### Position of the National Society strengthened

The CRC has further strengthened its presence across all levels of organization, from national to local, with every level actively engaged in the response. A total of 105 local Red Cross branches out of 112 participated, with the National Society taking on a coordinative role. In this context, the CRC has been recognized by the state as a credible and reliable key partner. All people who filed a request for temporary protection status with the Ministry of Interior were advised to register with the CRC to access various forms of humanitarian assistance.

# Challenges

## **Delayed launch of the Emergency Appeal**

The CRC began initiating activities even before 24 February 2022, mobilizing resources immediately after the onset of the international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Given the national context, in which displaced people from Ukraine were accommodated across the country, nearly all local branches were actively engaged in the response. However, funding from the Emergency Appeal was received at a later stage, requiring the CRC and its branches to initially rely on internal financial resources to sustain operations.

## **Widespread local branch response**

The response was implemented through a wide network of local branches, which enabled broad coverage but also presented operational challenge. In certain areas, particularly rural and remote locations, limited transportation options made access to medical check-ups and therapy difficult. Where public transport was unavailable, this placed an additional burden on CRC staff, who often had to provide transportation themselves.

Furthermore, limited preparedness of local communities and civil protection structures to respond in a coordinated and efficient manner to this type of crisis directly affected field operations. This was especially evident in the early phase of the response, when

timely information from the civil protection system on available accommodation capacities for refugees was crucial due to the high number of arrivals.

## **High staff turnover**

There were challenges related to high staff fluctuation at the National Society level and at the local branches, which disrupted continuity and affected implementation capacity. Repeated onboarding and adjustment processes were required throughout the response, creating difficulties for local teams directly implementing activities while managing uncertainties related to project requirements and procedures. At the IFRC level, frequent staffing changes further affected communication and coordination with the CRC, leading to occasional lack of clarity in programming guidance, especially regarding revisions and adjustments. Additionally, the absence of dedicated staffing support during the initial phase further constrained operational capacity at a critical stage of the response.

## **Language barrier**

At the start of the response, language barrier posed a significant challenge for communication and service delivery, particularly affecting older

people. To overcome this, the CRC engaged Ukrainian-speaking staff and interpreters, which effectively addressed these obstacles. Additionally, language classes were provided, supporting longer-term integration and enabling refugees to access services independently.

### **Information management (IM)**

Due to insufficient funding, limited digital transformation and a lack of human resources in IM, the CRC's capacity to efficiently collect, analyse and share data was constrained, making it more challenging to monitor activities, assess needs and adjust interventions promptly across all levels of the response.

### **Administrative barriers**

Insufficient capacity in kindergartens affected both host community members and people displaced from Ukraine, resulting in reduced access to childcare and, in turn, limiting parents' ability to seek or maintain employment. These challenges were further compounded by administrative barriers related to admission and enrolment procedures.

Additional constraints were identified in relation to limited public transportation, particularly in remote areas of the country, which restricted access to essential services.

CRC partially mitigated these challenges through support with interpreters and accompanied referrals, enabling people to access relevant medical and other essential services.

## Recommendations

Strengthen timely and high-quality data and IM system and public communication through increased digitalisation. Improving internal data collection, analysis and sharing mechanisms, while enhancing the visibility of the extensive work carried out behind the scenes, would contribute to greater transparency and accountability and accurate and timely response to reporting requests. With this regard also identify relevant indicators and targeted values as well as adequate evaluation of activities implemented. This aspect has been missing at the overall Emergency Appeal implementation as well as the National Society level. Therefore, this has been recognised as an important lesson learned to be addressed in the future implementation processes.

These efforts would help build and maintain public and donor trust, both in terms of financial contributions and volunteer engagement, facilitate more effective and transparent cooperation with the media and further position the organisation as a credible and key stakeholder in humanitarian action.

Develop an integrated digital system for beneficiary registration (faster, more transparent and with broader reach), including the development of a mobile application for volunteers and staff.

Continue to systematically engage communities in decision-making, programme design, implementation and feedback processes. Sustained integration of the CEA approach ensures that programmes remain responsive, culturally appropriate and aligned with the evolving needs of affected populations. Maintaining the use of diverse and complementary communication channels, including face-to-face engagement, digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, focus group discussions (FGDs) and surveys, strengthens trust, transparency and accountability in service delivery. These mechanisms enable communities to express their needs, provide meaningful input and raise concerns in a timely and accessible manner, thereby reinforcing ownership, programme quality and long-term sustainability.

To strengthen organisational resilience and ensure sustainable emergency response capacity, update of internal legal acts governing the rights and responsibilities of staff working in field operations during crisis situations is essential. Clear and up-to-date internal rules contribute to staff protection, well-being and operational clarity in high-pressure environments. In parallel, sustained investment in continuous training for staff and volunteers, structured exchange of good practices and the meaningful inclusion

of beneficiaries in Red Cross programmes will enhance institutional learning, improve programme quality and reinforce long-term organisational sustainability.

Improve communication among all relevant sectors during writing project proposal, throughout implementation and needs assessment prior and during implementation with the aim of achieving mutual understanding and agreement on relevant and realistic activities to meet the needs of affected population.

Empower local communities, local leaders and organizations to promote cultural dialogue among refugees and host communities. Maintain and nurture partnerships between local organizations and institutions to improve future collaborations.

Build partnership with universities and other translation companies to be more reliable and efficient in related emergencies.

Create volunteering programmes which will allow active participation of displaced people from Ukraine (or any other affected population) in local communities.

## Conclusion

The Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries achieved several results that will be sustained beyond the project timeframe and will serve as a foundation for continued and future support to people in need.

A range of educational, informational and psychoeducational materials were developed, adapted and translated, ensuring their availability for use in future emergencies and response operations. In parallel, the capacity of staff and volunteers was strengthened through trainings at various levels, enhancing preparedness and equipping the CRC to continue providing quality support to displaced people from Ukraine as well as to host community.

Drawing on the experience and lessons learned from the Emergency Appeal, opportunities were identified to mobilize national funding and to further extend assistance to people in vulnerable situations. The operation also contributed to the establishment of new local and national partnerships, which can be further strengthened in future humanitarian and development initiatives.

# 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.