

Evaluation of UNHCR's L3 Response in Ukraine

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
DECEMBER 2024**

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Purpose and objectives of the evaluation

In line with its Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response,¹ the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Evaluation Office (EVO) has commissioned Key Aid Consulting to undertake a Level 3 (L3)² independent evaluation of UNHCR's L3 Response to the crisis in Ukraine.

The evaluation is intended to analyse the extent to which UNHCR provided a relevant, timely and effective response to the crisis in Ukraine, taking into consideration the complex enabling and constraining factors since the escalation of the war in February 2022. The evaluation has three objectives:³

- Inform the development of implementation plans for the 2025–2027 multi-year strategy.
- Contribute to better plan for achievement of results for internally displaced people (IDP), returnees (refugee and IDP) and war-affected people – through an analysis of the engagement, partnerships and results of UNHCR's activities as part of a broad, inter-agency effort.
- Help UNHCR plan for and support, under the leadership of OCHA, the transition towards medium and longer-term solutions for IDPs, and the potential return of large numbers of refugees from neighbouring countries of asylum, under the leadership of the Government of Ukraine.

The evaluation documents the achievements, challenges, lessons learned, and future positions and adaptation required to further strengthen UNHCR's programming, response and advocacy in Ukraine. In addition, given the response's scale in budgetary terms, the evaluation provides external accountability to partners who have funded UNHCR's response inside Ukraine. The period under evaluation is from the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 to March 2024 and has a strong focus on current programming and future scenarios.

Evaluative judgments were informed by a range of primary and secondary data including a literature review from a repository of over 1,200 documents, 147 key informant interviews (KIIs) with UNHCR staff, implementing partners, government representatives and cluster staff, 17 focus group discussions (FGDs), and surveys with UNHCR staff and its partners.

Key findings

Effectiveness of UNHCR's approach to delivering protection and solutions

In its L3 response, UNHCR has been effective in delivering a range of humanitarian assistance and protection to some of the most vulnerable people in Ukraine, at scale. Key factors that contributed to this success have included flexible funding, capable staff, strong partnerships and UNHCR's long experience working in Ukraine.

During the two years under evaluation, UNHCR was overall more effective in meeting its sectoral targets in 2022 compared with 2023, with varying degrees of success across

sectors. This variability was due in part to its appetite to adapt its response to the evolving context instead of rigidly adhering to predetermined targets. In 2023, a greater emphasis was placed on strengthening the quality of its interventions. Of particular note is that, in a context that was highly conducive to cash responses, UNHCR achieved an effective and timely scale-up of its multipurpose cash assistance (MPC).

UNHCR's law and policy work, legal aid and community-based protection have been strengths of UNHCR's response. They have provided an important '*bridge*' that has facilitated its engagement in recovery and solutions. While this is necessarily a collective endeavour in Ukraine, UNHCR has played a pivotal role in piloting approaches and advocating for action in support of sustainable recovery solutions. Its early and sustained engagement to supporting Area-Based Approaches (ABA) has been an important part of this approach, but it is also an area that has lacked coherence from the collective IASC system in Ukraine which has resulted in an approach which is yet to achieve significant scale. The implementation of UNHCR's multi-year strategic plan offers an opportunity for it to review its engagement and determine its priorities which is particularly important given the context of funding reductions alongside continuing high levels of humanitarian need.

Partnerships have been an essential part of UNHCR's response in delivering a complex set of activities, often in highly insecure areas. UNHCR's partners have shown courage, competence and ability in delivering assistance and protection to IDPs, returnees, war-affected people and within these, specific vulnerable groups. UNHCR has provided a supportive environment for these partnerships. However, despite a strategy that places emphasis on national non-governmental organizations (NNGO) and civil society partners, UNHCR's multi-year strategic plan (MYSP) lacks a coherent vision for how UNHCR will seek to strengthen these partnerships in a way that is consistent with its Grand Bargain and Global Refugee Forum commitments.

UNHCR's response in Ukraine remains urgent and necessary two and a half years after the invasion began, however, funding reductions have required that changes be made. The steps UNHCR has taken to understand and articulate its strategic priorities for its humanitarian response, early recovery and solutions approaches will be important if it is to maintain its effectiveness in this complex situation.

Relevance of UNHCR's Response

UNHCR's response to the Ukraine crisis has maintained its relevance by adapting to the changing needs of the population. The agency has met many of its age, gender and diversity (AGD) commitments and has sought to ensure that people have access to information and feedback channels. The evaluation found scope for improvement in identifying and targeting the most vulnerable people, as part of strengthening its intersectional analysis. There are also gaps in the coherence of UNHCR's feedback mechanisms that compromise efforts to analyse, respond to and act on the feedback it receives or that is reported to its partners.

UNHCR has performed well in shifting its focus and adapting its programmes to the changing context. This has been undertaken in response to both large-scale changes in the situation and more specific information from partners. Refining its needs analysis will continue to be important as UNHCR seeks to find long-term solutions for people affected

by the war. Cash assistance has been a valuable resource for people affected by the crisis, and UNHCR has played a lead role in its provision. However, the evaluation found that there is still scope for it to ensure that cash is used as the preferred modality over the provision of goods in-kind.

UNHCR's programmes have been designed to be sensitive to the conflict in Ukraine, and its humanitarian assistance is consistent with its humanitarian principles. The agency has done well to balance the need to work with the government with a need to maintain operational independence. Territories under the Temporary Occupation of the Russian Federation continue to have the greatest unmet needs, and UNHCR has supported collective efforts to advocate for humanitarian access to these areas. Despite the escalation of the situation to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principles at the global level, efforts to gain principled access have, however, ultimately failed.

Coherence of UNHCR's contribution to the government's delivery of social protection and recovery

UNHCR has adopted a collaborative approach in Ukraine that has sought to support and engage the government at all administrative levels despite the challenges posed by the war. It has successfully brokered Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with a range of Ministries (in addition to local authorities at Oblast and Hromada level), which have strengthened the coherence of UNHCR's response with government policy in addition to creating opportunities to advocate for policy changes on behalf of those receiving assistance and protection.

Specific to social protection (SP), UNHCR has supported the Ministry of Social Policy's efforts to expand social protection programmes, both by increasing the number of people who receive benefits and the amount of money they receive. UNHCR has also provided long-standing support to PeReHid, which has provided a forum for strengthening the coherence of support to social protection in Ukraine in the future.

While UNHCR's approach of working collaboratively with the Government in Ukraine has yielded positive outcomes, there is room for improvement in how the collective IASC system engages with the government on issues of internal displacement and solutions. There are many UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing support to system-strengthening, but scope remains to strengthen coordination and coherence.

Coherence and effectiveness of UNHCR's engagement in inter-agency coordination

UNHCR has worked hard to navigate the challenges of a rapidly changing context and to scale-up its coordination leadership capacity since the full-scale invasion. This has permitted its clusters (Protection, Shelter and Non-Food Items, and Camp Coordination and Camp Management) to achieve many of their core functions in addition to making efforts to leverage the benefits of tri-cluster coherence, which has been a strength of the response. All three clusters have improved their engagement with local actors over time, with the national NGO, Right to Protection's prominent co-leadership of the protection cluster worthy of particular mention.

Despite the progress that has been made in strengthening humanitarian coordination, there continue to be gaps in planning for the future collective coordination system in

Ukraine. While humanitarian coordination has been the subject of a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) commissioned consultancy, there continues to be a lack of clarity surrounding the issue of transition to national leadership.

Reaching agreement on a nexus coordination model has also taken time. UNHCR has supported the efforts of the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) through its participation in the Community Planning for Durable Solutions and Recovery Working Group (CPDSRWG), but it should be considered a priority for the government-led and locally rooted coordination mechanism to move from principle to practice.

Conclusions

UNHCR has responded proportionately and in a timely way to an unprecedented crisis in Ukraine. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused a humanitarian crisis of staggering proportions; UNHCR has been a critical player in addressing this immense challenge.

UNHCR has delivered relevant and effective humanitarian assistance and protection. UNHCR's focus has been on providing essential aid to those affected by the conflict, including shelter, food and other basic needs. Through its diverse partnerships, it has proved agile in the delivery of much-valued protection services. It has also played a leadership role in the provision of cash assistance, albeit with an enduring need to ensure that cash is routinely prioritized over in-kind assistance.

UNHCR has played a key role in advocating for and piloting solutions programmes. In doing so, UNHCR has met its corporate commitments for “*solutions from the start*” and has brokered partnerships with a range of actors to promote and deliver sustainable recovery, albeit with a need to dovetail this with its ongoing humanitarian response.

UNHCR's response has retained a strong and successful focus on collaborative efforts. UNHCR's success draws heavily on strong partnerships. Collaborating with governments, NGOs and other humanitarian organizations has allowed UNHCR, through its partners, to expand its reach and deliver assistance more effectively. This collaborative approach has ensured a comprehensive response that addresses the multifaceted needs of the displaced population.

UNHCR has been diligent in delivering its collective coordination responsibilities. UNHCR has, in large part, met its cluster leadership responsibilities and has been proactive in leading and contributing to a range of other inter-agency forums, both for the delivery of short-term humanitarian response as well as those tasked with the important responsibility of designing and delivering longer-term recovery and solutions.

Recommendations

These eight (8) recommendations suggest ways to build on these strengths to improve UNHCR's own response in addition to how it may contribute to changes that are important for the collective response. Two recommendations are targeted at improving UNHCR's global analysis and guidance.

Recommended actions	Responsible
UNHCR Ukraine Strategy	
<p>1. As part of the implementation of its 2025–2027 Multi-Year Strategic Plan, UNHCR Ukraine should more clearly define the scope of its support to key strategic operational areas, namely Area-Based Protection, Collective sites and Community-Based Approaches</p> <p><u>Area-based approaches (ABA)</u>: While UNHCR retains a strong commitment to implementing ABAs, as part of its MYSP, it should leverage its catalytic role to focus on promoting the conditions that would ultimately allow UNHCR to reduce its level of engagement. To achieve this, it should define a set of conditions (including triggers) under which it would responsibly handover these duties and/or phase out.</p> <p><u>Collective sites (CS)</u>: UNHCR should seek to implement a sustainable approach from the outset and outline a set of conditions for responsibly phasing out its existing operational support for CSs. This should include facilitating residents' wider social and economic inclusion in hosting communities as well as active resident engagement for care and maintenance of those sites that remain. In sites with new arrivals, reception support will still be needed. This would be best achieved as part of a broader cluster-led transition.⁴</p> <p><u>Community-based approaches</u>: The recent shift in strategic direction will be reflected in an updated protection strategy for UNHCR Ukraine. UNHCR's overarching protection strategy should incorporate a community-based protection strategy that brings together the different elements of UNHCR's approach (working with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and outreach facilitators, IDP Councils and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) staff), as a means of ensuring coherence across the agency's humanitarian response and solutions work in Ukraine.</p> <p>It is anticipated that CBOs will play a key role in the delivery of UNHCR's community-based protection programme, which underlines the importance of ensuring adequate support is provided to them. However, UNHCR should also ensure that expectations are managed in terms of what CBOs can achieve</p>	<p>Ukraine CO Representative with support from the Deputy Representative, Assistant Representative (Protection) and relevant sectoral staff and cluster leads</p>

and the scale at which they can achieve it. UNHCR should further establish clear benchmarks to more consistently monitor and support CBO graduation objectives.

Operations

2. Cash: Internally and across the clusters under its leadership, UNHCR should ensure that the use of Cash-Based Interventions is the default modality and that the use of in-kind is clearly justified (e.g., demonstrated lack of market functionality or lack of financial service providers). At a minimum, UNHCR should rebalance the resources it dedicates to the distribution of Non-Food Items, in favour of greater allocation to its Cash-Based interventions.

Ukraine CO
Representative with
support from the CBI
team and cluster leads

3. AAP: UNHCR should develop a coherent Accountability to Affected Populations strategy that integrates a “*whole-of-house*” approach as part of its wider community-based protection strategy. This should address the gap in effective feedback loops to affected people and to senior management as well as the coherence of underlying evidence streams.

Ukraine CO
Representative with
support from the
Assistant
Representative
(Protection)

Government support and partnerships

4. Government: UNHCR Ukraine should advocate within the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and United Nations Country Team (UNCT) for a more coherent approach to Government System-strengthening across the collective IASC system. If called upon to do so, it should be prepared to actively contribute to a process of review and mapping to determine the best means of coordinating collective system-strengthening efforts in the future.

Ukraine CO
Representative with
support from the Deputy
Representative &
Assistant
Representative
(Protection)

5. Local and national NGOs: UNHCR should further advance localization by investing in the capacity of national NGO partners and Community-based Organizations. The 2025–2027 Multi-Year Strategic Plan offers an opportunity for UNHCR to set out a more predictable basis to support its partners.

UNHCR should more clearly articulate its aspirations for the support it will provide to its local and national NGO partners between 2025–2027, drawing on the tenets of the nascent localization strategy in Ukraine and UNHCR’s Corporate Grand Bargain and GRF commitments.

Ukraine CO
Representative and
Deputy Representative

Collective coordination and clusters

6. UNHCR should support the transition of the clusters to government-led coordination through the following actions:

- In the context of the HCT-mandated Area-Based Coordination consultancy, advocate for a transition of the clusters to a coordination model that places government in leadership roles.
- For the clusters UNHCR leads, UNHCR should identify potential government principals who can assume a leadership role.
- UNHCR should actively contribute, within the UNCT, to the development of a coordination model for the UN's work in the areas of recovery, development and durable solutions, that has a foundation in government leadership and enables a seamless transitioning of the clusters and sustainable, nexus programming.

Ukraine CO
Representative
and Deputy
Representative

UNHCR Headquarters

Global analysis and guidance

7. UNHCR globally should review its application of area-based approaches and amend guidance to ensure that area-based approaches incorporate collective objectives and outcomes for both programming and advocacy. This should clarify UNHCR's contribution as part of a wider collaborative multi-stakeholder effort in which UNHCR has a distinct competence consistent with its mandate.

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8. Drawing on lessons from previous L3 responses, including in Ukraine, UNHCR globally should consider developing a “post L3” road map to support Country Operations in the timely planning for scale-down in a way that protects and sustains dividends from the response. It should include practical guidance on how and when to start prioritizing and planning for responsible drawdown, both geographically and sectorally. The guidance should also include aspects of human resource restructuring and partner management in the context of resource reductions.

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