



Advancing Resilience for Children in Moldova, Hungary, and Bulgaria

Summary of Lessons Learned

December 2023



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This report is produced within Advancing Resilience for Children in Moldova, Hungary, and Bulgaria project funded by the Swedish Postcode Foundation (October 2022 – December 2023).

The project was coordinated by the International Rescue Committee in partnership with ADRA in Moldova, For Our Children Foundation in Bulgaria and Nesting Play in Hungary.

Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swedish Postcode Foundation.



1. Executive Summary

In response to the crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine in 2022, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and partners in Bulgaria, Moldova, and Hungary embarked on an expansive protection and empowerment program that encompassed the project *Advancing Resilience for Children in Moldova, Hungary, and Bulgaria*. This initiative was designed to **support refugees fleeing from Ukraine and the host communities** in these countries, recognizing the diverse and multifaceted needs of these populations. The project offered a wide range of support, including safe spaces, educational assistance, socioeconomic integration, mental health and psychosocial support, and referrals to specialized services.

This Summary Report provides an overview of the **contextual considerations** that are essential for understanding the relevance of the project developed in Bulgaria, Hungary and Moldova as a comprehensive response and support system for refugees swiftly after the outbreak of the war. It aims to highlight the invaluable lessons learned and suggestions on how to strengthen the activities within safe spaces and similar community-based settings.

The Summary Report further elaborates on the project approach, objectives, and roles played by IRC and their partners: ADRA from Moldova, Nesting Play from Hungary and For Our Children Foundation (FOC) from Bulgaria. Among other key takeaways, **lessons learned** underscore the role of safe spaces as vital community hubs, the necessity of the support for facilitators in safe spaces, and the importance of continuous programs.

Aimed at enhancing the support provided to both refugee and host communities, the **recommendations** stress the need for continuous training and support for facilitators, language-learning programs, the promotion of community engagement, and the importance of cultural understanding and inclusivity.

Advancing Resilience for Children in Moldova, Hungary, and Bulgaria project has not only provided crucial support to refugees and host communities but has also yielded invaluable lessons that should **guide future efforts**. By incorporating these lessons and recommendations, if taken up at scale, we can ensure that safe spaces and community-based initiatives continue to be a cornerstone of support, fostering resilience and promoting social cohesion in times of crisis.

2. Background

With the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022, there has been a growing concern about the number of people in need of humanitarian response in the country, the neighbouring countries, and the region. The war has resulted in millions of people being displaced, both internally and across Europe, and the Council of the European Union introduced the [temporary protection directive](#), later [extended until 4 March 2025](#). This directive is aimed at alleviating pressure on national asylum systems and allowing displaced persons to claim harmonized rights to residence, labor, housing, medical assistance, social welfare, and education across the EU. As we look ahead to 2024, even though it is anticipated that forced displacements will decrease compared to the initial years of the response, Europe is currently hosting approximately 6 million refugees from Ukraine, with approximately [84 percent women and children](#) and 16 percent men.

Inter-agency planning, coordination, and fundraising efforts have been ongoing, and the IRC has actively been tracking the situation. Based on these considerations and scoping missions, the project locations were selected. Moldova faced a complex crisis involving [energy and food security](#), economic constraints, rising inflation, and limited institutional capacities. Bulgaria experienced a year marked by interim governments and shifts in state refugee accommodation plans. Hungary relied on the solidarity of the local host community and the invaluable contributions of local non-governmental organizations.

2.1 Bulgaria

According to [UNHCR data end-November 2023](#), over 173,600 Ukrainian refugees have applied for temporary protection or similar protection schemes in **Bulgaria**, while 51,975 are recorded in the country. Most of these refugees are women and children. Ukrainian refugees have been supported with essential information, referrals, mediation and legal assistance through [Blue Dot Safe Space](#), Protection and Support Hubs. It is expected these hubs will transition into sustainable community hubs, open to all vulnerable families. However, refugees' access to the available services, with the focus on mental health and psychosocial support, needs to be strengthened. In most cases, Ukrainian refugees have been able to find low-skilled, seasonal employment despite the [majority having completed higher education](#). School enrolment efforts are ongoing but [only 3% of all Ukrainian refugee children](#) have enrolled in schools. Therefore, further support is needed to increase the enrolment rates of Ukrainian children in national schools and kindergartens.

2.2 Hungary

As one of the four neighboring EU countries to Ukraine, **Hungary** has recorded approximately 60,400 Ukrainian refugees as of [end-November 2023](#). As the war continues and as people transit from and to Ukraine,



LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN HUNGARY

and through neighboring countries, the biggest challenges faced by Ukrainians who wish to stay in Hungary include long-term housing and accessing the labor market. New challenges, such as providing daycare and education for school-aged refugees, accessing medical services, and socio-economic support for longer stay of families have emerged. Many refugees have little information about their rights, medical and educational options, and how to ask for help in specific situations. Further, the [asylum system in the country has shrunk](#), making it exceedingly difficult for refugees to seek asylum. Subcarpathian [Roma](#) fleeing Ukraine, have had significant difficulties accessing protection intended for refugees from Ukraine since a considerable number have Hungarian citizenship and are not entitled to protection foreseen under the Temporary Protection Directive. Refugees are housed in collective accommodation but nevertheless, access to housing remains one of the most pressing needs as are access to the labor market, mental health and psychosocial support services and improved protection and support mechanisms. While policies introduced by the Hungarian government aim to promote the inclusion of Ukrainian children in national schools, 78% of Ukrainian school-aged children were enrolled based on the preliminary [Multi-Sector Needs Assessments findings](#) presented in September 2023, with the main obstacles including a lack of available space in schools and language barriers.

“Having a right on paper is one thing, but realizing and claiming that right in practice requires more support. It was crucial to be aware of the context developments and to overcome language and other barriers.”

*Nesting Play team member,
Hungary*

2.3 Moldova

In **Moldova**, according to [UNCHR data end-November 2023](#), there are 113,000 Ukrainian refugees remaining in the country, almost 90% being women with children. Moldova saw the establishment of Tech Labs in schools across the country, offering a safe learning environment for refugee children engaged in online education, with Romanian bridging classes, digital skills training, catch-up sessions, and mental health support. In the 2023-2024 school year, only 2,078 refugee children from Ukraine were enrolled in kindergartens, elementary and high schools, thus most refugee children continue education within the Ukrainian online school system, remaining isolated at home, deprived of communication with peers and integration into the local community. This especially applies to children from vulnerable families who do not have financial opportunities to enroll them in extracurricular activities. [Roma refugee population](#) face stigma, discrimination, language, and literacy barriers to accessing services, information, and local inclusion opportunities. Local private companies received support to encourage business expansion, increased production, and job creation, including opportunities for refugees, but disparities persist for labor market opportunities between the rural and the urban population, as well as a mismatch between the skills and labor market demands.¹ These aspects are affecting both refugee and vulnerable host communities.

¹ [Feasibility Study Presentation on Employment Opportunities, Skills Development and Social Cohesion Feb 2023](#)

3. Project Scope and Partners

The IRC and partners have worked to support refugee and vulnerable local communities' children and women leaning on the evidence-based IRC's safe space methodologies – [Safe Healing and Learning Spaces](#) as well as [Women and Girls Safe Spaces](#).

Advancing Resilience for Children in Moldova, Hungary, and Bulgaria project was funded by the Swedish Postcode Foundation from October 2022 until December 2023. Division of work between the project partners has been clearly designed in the project document, with IRC overseeing project management, coordination, and external reporting, as well as technical support, while partner organizations were handling activities on local level. The project ensured that forcibly displaced families and children are protected, their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing improved (through community based MHPSS services and activities in safe spaces), and access to safe and inclusive learning opportunities increased.

3.1 For Our Children Foundation

For Our Children Foundation, a partner with a proven track record in support provision to vulnerable children in Bulgaria, has established safe spaces in Sofia and Plovdiv. In those protective environments, children participated in activities stimulative for their development such as speech and music therapy, while facilitated peer-to-peer support was provided for mothers. Active social, psychological support, and mobilization of various specialists around each child have been the key approach to help families overcome vulnerability. Access to different types of services has been facilitated by cultural mediators or team members who speak both Ukrainian and the local language, which not only referred clients but also accompanied them to the meetings with doctors, social welfare institutions, health care workers and migration authorities.

3.2 Nesting Play

Partner in Hungary – **Nesting Play** has experience in play-based learning and development support for children, and empowerment of parents and teachers. Their local teams ensured that Ukrainian refugee children were assisted with learning-through-play approach and provided with social and emotional support in safe spaces. By carefully providing structured and focused services within safe spaces in and out of Budapest, as well as through various after school activities, summer camps and language classes, children were empowered to cope with their new reality and build social networks with their peers. Women and caregivers were supported through sessions on positive parenting, access to protection services, cultural orientation, and referrals to specialized service providers.



CHILDREN ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES IN MOLDOVA

3.3 ADRA Moldova

Through the safe spaces for women and children, **ADRA Moldova** provides an enabling environment for members of both refugee and host communities. Across safe spaces children and women have access to activities tailored to their age, including various workshops, educational and psychosocial sessions, and language courses. Provided with self-help tools refugees easier overcome the trauma and stress and gain a sense of safety. Monitoring the constantly changing needs of refugees indicated the necessity to redesign program activities, in order to shift the focus from emergency to integration. Therefore, refugee families, as well as the most vulnerable groups among local population (women, children, elderly, people with disabilities and from rural areas) get an updated information, and access to psychosocial counselling, social integration activities and non-formal education.

3.4 IRC

With the **IRC's** expertise in emergency, including many countries along the current migratory route, the IRC team coordinated communication and collaboration among partner organizations, strengthening their programmatic and financial capacities and response to the humanitarian crisis. By forming a coalition of partner organizations, the IRC provided international expertise in the local contexts, support exchange of information, and resources, and forming networks, which will remain useful to local civil society organizations after the end of the refugee crisis. IRC carried out field visits to monitor the quality of services, and enhance the programmatic and organizational capacity of partners, as well as effective and efficient implementation of the project.

IRC and partner organizations have enhanced psychosocial well-being, access to protection and other services, and provided educational support to refugees and host populations.

- **13** safe spaces for children and women were established and operational.
- **1212** women and girls participated in Women and Girls Safe Space activities.
- **2293** children participated in Safe Healing and Learning Space activities.
- **194** professionals strengthened their capacities in refugee protection and establishment and management of safe spaces.

4. Lessons Learned and Action Taken

In humanitarian efforts, a continuous process of identifying the lessons learned, and embracing good practices is extremely important. The following insights not only reaffirm the learned lessons, but also reiterate their importance, go beyond individual programs, and have wider relevance for organizations engaged in similar endeavors.

In that sense, the IRC and partners aimed to understand the context and factors that affected project implementation and to learn from the implementation itself. Strong emphasis was placed on gathering insights and lessons learned to inform and improve project implementation. This

approach was underpinned by direct feedback from clients, inter-agency coordination insights, regular partner meetings, and analysis of various data sources.

The client feedback mechanisms facilitated continuous input and feedback from program beneficiaries, ensuring their perspectives were actively taken into consideration. Both refugees and members of the host community participated in focus group discussions, openly sharing their experiences, needs, and concerns.

To examine the ways in which specific activities had been carried out, IRC organized regular meetings with partners forming a platform for discussing technical and programmatic questions. These discussions allowed for the exchange of ideas, problem-solving, and the identification of best practices. Field visits were conducted to assess and address technical challenges and programmatic considerations on the ground. This hands-on approach helped refine the implementation of the project activities.

Also, IRC and partners aimed to harmonize project activities with the broader humanitarian response by understanding the local context and coordination efforts. The project benefitted from the insights and inputs of inter-agency coordination working groups, as well as key organizations involved in the support provision in each country. This collaborative approach helped ensure that the project was aligned with broader humanitarian efforts and that best practices were shared and implemented. Numerous sources, including Multi-Sector Needs Assessments, UNHCR Intention Surveys, UNHCR Protection Monitoring, and official administrative data, have highlighted a range of hurdles impacting the educational support to refugee children in the region, access to psycho-social support, access to protection and other services.



CREATIVE ACTIVITIES IN BULGARIA

4.1 Safe Spaces Approach

The IRC Safe Healing and Learning Spaces support children to regain their resilience through educational and psychosocial support. As an approach, it has been used by IRC since 2016 and includes a toolkit with materials to set up, monitor, and evaluate the delivery of literacy, numeracy, social emotional learning, and parenting education. This Toolkit was developed for use primarily in crisis or post-conflict settings and it has been implemented by the IRC and partners in numerous global locations. The tools were field tested with displaced communities and frontline staff and refined through feedback from academic and peer reviewers.

The IRC Women and Girls Safe Spaces support women and girls through activities aiming to enhance knowledge, skills, access a range of relevant services, improve psychosocial well-being, create social networks, and collectively raise attention to their rights and needs. As an approach, it has been used by IRC since 2013. After years of practice and formative research findings voiced by IRC and partner staff, enriched by research and contribution from UNHCR,

UNFPA and UNICEF, the WGSS Toolkit has been used by a broad variety of humanitarian actors in different settings.

Lesson: Selecting Locations

When beneficiaries are not located in refugee camps, or collective accommodation centres, but scattered in urban and rural areas across the country, the location of the safe space must be carefully selected.

Steps taken during the project

The project beneficiaries were residing in private housing or government accommodation sites throughout the community, so additional efforts were needed to ensure steady engagement rates. For instance, outreach has been strengthened to ensure that communities are aware of and can access activities in safe spaces, while communication via social media channels and chats was ensured. Also, schedules were tailored to fit other activities such as online schooling, or time needed to reach the centers.

Recommendations

- Prior to the establishment of safe spaces, conduct a thorough community assessment to identify key locations where beneficiaries are residing, considering private housing and government accommodation sites. Equal attention should be paid to urban and rural areas to ensure all refugees have access to services.
- Strengthen outreach efforts to disseminate information and raise awareness about the safe spaces and their benefits.

Lesson: Support for Facilitators

For smooth implementation of activities, the facilitators in all safe spaces relying on the IRC's methodology have to be supported with trainings on child protection (CP) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Prevention, as well as the [functioning of Child-Friendly Space \(CFS\) in emergencies](#) and [Women and Girls Safe Spaces](#).

Steps taken during the project

After the training, the three partner teams were continuously supported through monthly consultations. In addition to the [Safe Healing and Learning Spaces \(SHLS\)](#) training and

Recommendations

- Ensure programmatic and operational support for facilitators in safe spaces particularly because they may be people working part-time, engaged to work after their primary jobs, or volunteering to support events in their community. Even though they have pedagogic and social work backgrounds, they need support with tracking and documenting the work done, as well as fresh ideas about activities, to keep the people engaged.
- Tailor comprehensive training programs for facilitators that cover CP, GBV Prevention the functioning of CFS and WGSS, including adaptation and translation of essential resources.

consultations, the IRC shared with the partners the [Social Emotional Games Bank](#)², translated into Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Russian, and Romanian. Further, each partner team was engaged in peer learning and received a set of tailored recommendations for improvement of the spaces and activities. Local teams, consisting of professionals from both local and refugee communities, also deepened their practical knowledge about the components needed to coordinate safe spaces and stimulating environments where people can recover and thrive. The activities were planned carefully to avoid secondary trauma for the team members, especially those from the refugee community.

Lesson: Client informed interventions

Recognizing the vital importance of **community engagement**, we learned that actively seeking and valuing feedback from children, young people, and adults is fundamental for the success of our interventions. The lesson underscores the critical role that the community plays in shaping and informing our initiatives, reinforcing the need for continuous dialogue with and responsiveness to the insights of community members across all age groups.

Steps taken during the project

The local teams have conducted focus group discussions and compiled feedback surveys where participants could **voice their ideas, concerns, and suggestions**, ensuring that the program responds directly to their

- Encourage peer learning among partner teams by facilitating regular sessions for knowledge sharing and collaborative problem-solving. This can enhance the effectiveness of the teams and foster a supportive community.
- Be mindful of the potential for secondary trauma among team members, especially those from refugee communities. Implement a trauma-informed approach in the planning and execution of activities to create a safe and supportive environment. This includes being responsive to the evolving needs of both the facilitators and the communities they serve.

Recommendations

- Arrange focus group discussions with children, young people, and adults to ensure their ideas, concerns, and suggestions are heard, and that the program responds directly to their needs, including re-designed activities and content.
- Establish and adjust system for regular evaluation and feedback to assess the effectiveness of the support provided. This allows for adjustments and improvements in the facilitator support strategy over time.
- The sharing of feedback, suggestions, and complaints needs to be encouraged and promoted, and tailored to the age of responders. For example, children can post different emoji signs on a pin board to show how they liked a session. A suggestion box or ideas box needs to be visible, and all beneficiaries need to be informed about it

² Social Emotional Games Bank is a part of SHLS methodology and entails a set of games to reinforce social-emotional competencies (brain building, emotion regulation, positive social skills, conflict resolution, perseverance).

needs, fostering trust and collaboration. The refugees and locals have proposed, designed, and led creative as well as recreational activities and participated in outreach to foster mixed group interactions.

Lesson: Boosting community resilience

The safe spaces are essential as meeting points and resource hubs in the communities. Municipalities and local organizations can utilize the established meeting points and community hubs for the benefit of all vulnerable people, thus building more resilient and cohesive communities.

Steps taken during the project

In addition to the methodology, reliable schedules, and availability of facilitators, the safe spaces were located in cultural centres, municipal buildings, libraries, or other premises where people usually meet, while respecting the minimum standards for establishing and running safe spaces, and where refugees and vulnerable locals could learn more about various types of support. Also, local teams coordinated their efforts with other service providers present there.

and encouraged to use it.

- Safe space facilitators need to be on the look-out if someone wants to share feedback and be aware of how to ensure appropriate response actions.

Recommendations

- Establish safe spaces in premises where people usually meet and where refugees and vulnerable locals could learn more about diverse types of support.
- Optimize the use of safe spaces as multifunctional resource hubs. Encourage municipalities and local organizations to actively use the existing safe spaces as central meeting points.

4.2 Educational Support

Educational support in this context entails but is not limited to activities for children after school, tutoring support, non-formal education, links to formal education, spaces for learning, imaginative, creative, recreational, and educational activities.

Lesson: Digital and in-person programs

As online schooling program has been taking place, digital learning programs

Recommendations

- Combine online schooling with a balance of digital learning programs and face-to-face activities to enhance overall educational

and face-to-face activities should have been complementary. The programs should ensure that children and adults have a **balanced routine** that includes hands-on learning, to boost interaction and socializing.

Steps taken during the project

Since children were attending the Ukrainian online schooling program, many of them were missing socializing opportunities and lacked structured time spending. The teams worked to diversify daily routines and learning opportunities to ensure that children are on track with their learning. In some cases, practical obstacles, internet connection and long screen-time emerged as additional issues, so supplementary programs were provided.

Lesson: Awareness of parents about formal and non-formal education

Local teams providing non-formal education and safe space activities need to have good collaboration with local schools, early childhood education and daycare institutions. Complementary approach, cross-referrals as well as joint work to raise **awareness of parents** is needed to support children's enrolment into formal education.

Steps taken during the project

The local teams worked to address parents' concerns linked to curriculum disparities, language barriers and plans to go back to Ukraine when the situation stabilizes. In parallel, the efforts were in place to raise awareness of parents with regards to enrolling children in educational institutions, as well as to get relevant

experiences.

- The teams should work to diversify daily routines and learning opportunities to ensure that children are on track with their learning.
- Ensure access to Internet connection.
- Implement measures to mitigate the impact of long screen time, such as incorporating breaks and diversifying learning activities.

Recommendations

- Raise awareness of parents with regards to enrolling children in educational institutions, as well as how to get relevant support, especially in rural areas.
- Integrate non-formal education activities that align with formal curriculum goals, fostering a smoother learning experience.
- Design activities that apply to different learning styles in a way that non-formal education complement the formal one, i.e. through spaces for learning, imaginative, creative, recreational, and educational activities and learning through play.

support, especially in rural areas, because the teams had collaboration with local municipal bodies, kindergartens, and schools. While planning and conducting activities, non-formal education has been an integral part of the schedules through spaces for learning through play - imaginative, creative, recreational, and educational workshops.

4.3 Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support

Psychosocial support is cross-cutting through activities and safe spaces and includes sessions on positive coping skills, resilience building, emotional regulation, peer support, counseling based on assessed needs (e.g., problem-solving; re-activating social networks, daily activities and enhancing functioning). More specialized MHPSS support was ensured in line with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's [intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies](#).

Lesson: Continuity of Support

To achieve impactful results, the engagement of refugee and host women and children requires **continuity**. Adaptive activities and topics and constant needs analysis are crucial to adequately respond to the clients' needs over time, especially since **psycho-social support** has been the over-arching component of the program.

Steps taken during the project

In addition to organizing one-time events, people were able to take part in activities **continuously**, while groups were formed based on age, gender, vulnerabilities, and interests. Separate activities were provided for pre-school and school-age children, women, and girls. As a result, the facilitators have tailored activities to meet the specific needs and preferences of each group,

Recommendations

- Prioritize activities and interventions that contribute to the mental and emotional well-being of the participants, which may be evolving over time. In the initial stage, the focus should be put on Psychosocial First Aid (PFA), anchoring, resilience building and coping skills, since people face high uncertainty. When refugees stay longer at a certain location, the activities should encourage personal development, skills-building, and profound psychosocial support.
- Forming groups based on age, vulnerabilities, and interests – pre-school and school-age children, women, and girls – is of particular importance across all activities targeting MHPSS prevention, promotion, and self-care.
- For tailoring activities, consider the specific needs and preferences of each group, providing a client-centred, trauma-informed,

understanding the impact of traumatic events while focusing on clients' priorities and strengths. This way they built social connections as well as self-reliance.

and strengths-based experience.

Lesson: Mainstreaming MHPSS

Reserved attitudes or stigma related to seeking help related to mental wellbeing were noted. The duration of stay got prolonged, so the facilitators and psychologists needed to align the activities from those focused-on anchoring and stress reduction to those fostering resilience. For people in need of more specialized and focused support, facilitators needed to know the national referral pathways and to refer people to mental health service providers on the local level.

Steps taken during the project

The local teams have incorporated psycho-social support in the activities in safe spaces. In addition, the facilitators worked with psychologists and prepared activities for enhancing coping mechanisms and emotion regulation skills. In case further MHPSS services were needed, the safe space facilitators referred people to local mental health service providers. They ensured that the services are conveniently located and accessible to those with caregiving responsibilities, including flexible times of sessions, since lack of free time emerged as an obstacle.

Recommendations

- Promote open conversations through workshops, seminars, and informational sessions to enhance understanding of mental health and combat stigma about seeking help.
- In cooperation with psychologists, design activities focused on enhancing coping mechanisms and emotion regulation skills. Ensure the facilitators are equipped to detect any signs of distress and build trust with the safe space visitors to address any protection related risks or psychosocial support needs.
- In case facilitators recognize any signs of psychosocial distress when supporting individuals which may have been exposed to traumatic events, they need to be able to either support the clients or refer those with relevant problems/symptoms to local health service providers or mental health specialists.

4.4 Access to Services and Protection

Ensuring **access to services** in this case involves providing essential information and referral to healthcare, education, housing, and social assistance programs. Simultaneously, **protection** involves safeguarding refugees from various risks such as violence, exploitation, and

discrimination. This includes ensuring legal awareness or assistance for asylum procedures, offering psychosocial support, and creating safe spaces that uphold human rights for all individuals seeking refuge.

Lesson: Age, gender, and diversity considerations

Facilitators need to be familiar with vulnerability criteria and age, gender, and diversity considerations to efficiently support the people who come to safe spaces. People need to have information about the available services especially in case of heightened vulnerabilities.

Steps taken during the project

Collaborating with women and children, the teams have recognized the vulnerabilities faced by certain groups within the refugee and host communities. For instance, they paid attention to pregnant women, mothers with infants, women with three or more children, and those caring for older persons and individuals with disabilities. Households composed of older persons and those with dependents [have lower levels of access](#) to employment, more gaps in finding stable accommodation options and higher dependency on assistance from Governments and humanitarian organizations. Being aware of this ensured the facilitators to be prepared to address their unique challenges, and to provide them with adequate information.

Lesson: Protection considerations

Duly constituted awareness on protection and safeguarding issues for safe space staff of all levels, and in general for those professionals who work with minors in the context of their professional duties should be integrated from the onset of the project.

Steps taken during the project

Given the high numbers of women and children coming to safe spaces, the facilitators ensured that interventions for

Recommendations

- Raise awareness of facilitators about vulnerability criteria, age-specific needs, gender considerations, and cultural diversity awareness of people they work with. Consider factors that limit access to resources and assistance to be able to tackle them.
- Provide information about key services in multiple formats, considering a combination of factors, such as disability, socio-economic status, language, health, education, and social networks.
- Map available services and target those who need them the most. Establish connections with the providers to jointly ensure a more effective and equitable response to emergencies.

Recommendations

- Integrate GBV prevention and response as well as child protection training for all safe space facilitators. These should tackle the principles of respect and dignity, confidentiality, safety, security, and non-discrimination.
- Facilitators must have the survivor-centered approach and put the presumed or identified survivors and their interests/needs in the center of

child safety and initiative-taking prevention and response to **GBV** including in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse were available. They were alert to any signs of abuse or distress. Additionally, they conducted awareness sessions on personal safety and how to report any concerns, along with the community meetings, and posters. There were safe and confidential reporting mechanisms within the spaces, including drop boxes or suggestion boxes where individuals could report any concerns or incidents, including those related to child neglect and/or abuse or gender-based violence. These mechanisms were easily accessible, and individuals knew how to use them.

Lesson: Socio-cultural aspects

Understanding cultural differences and getting to know local customs and traditions enables refugees to get familiar with their new environment. Complementary to this, the locals need to be engaged in programs to understand the traditions of refugees. This way, preserving **cultural heritage** as well as enforcing **intercultural dialogue** and cohesion would be ensured.

Steps taken during the project

In a protracted context of this program, **socio-cultural aspects** have been considered. The parents stated during focus group discussions that while it was important to keep contact with schoolmates and friends, and speak their own language, it was equally critical for their children to build new friendships and to be exposed to the language where they are currently residing. When it comes to women and caregivers, cultural background as well as gender roles were taken into consideration especially when developing counselling sessions and topics.

process.

- The best interest of the child must also be considered, as well as taking the individual circumstances of each child into account, including their family situation, and prioritizing their needs for safety, protection, and physical and mental health.

Recommendations

- Include activities that enable people to maintain connections with their cultural heritage.
- Facilitate collaboration between refugees and locals in understanding each other's traditions.
- Equip professionals with the knowledge needed to understand and support individuals from diverse backgrounds.
- Adjust programs based on insights from children, parents, caregivers, and community members related to the principles of cross-cultural communication.

Lesson: Language barriers

Language-learning programs and interpretation services are needed to facilitate effective communication and understanding, promote inclusivity, and reduce linguistic isolation.

Steps taken during the project

The local teams consist of people who speak local and Ukrainian or Russian language. However, the teams have recognized the significant **language barrier** faced by many refugees and host community members outside of the safe spaces. Facilitators made sure that the children could fully participate and understand the assignments and outcomes of different activities. In mixed group activities, children had contact with the local language as well. Cultural mediators and interpreters assisted adults during counselling or meetings with other service providers and migration authorities. Language courses were provided as part of safe space activities.

Recommendations

- Ensure that people can fully participate in activities by providing clear instructions and facilitating contact with local languages in mixed group settings.
- Employ cultural mediators who support people by interpreting key information, taking into account cultural elements, to assist adults in navigating services, promoting better understanding.
- Consider integrating language courses into the safe space activities or map other providers of such services.

“Working together with IRC, our teams enriched their knowledge by taking socio-cultural considerations of refugees into account.”

*For Our Children
Foundation team member,
Bulgaria*

5. Conclusions

Based on the context and key takeaways, the IRC and partners aimed to consolidate the lessons learned and recommendations that stem from the practical implementation on the ground, including the voices of clients and key actors.

The organization and implementation of this project has been based on national and international good practices and evidence-based methodologies and has considered the opinion and experience of people working with children, caregivers, and women, who know, better than anyone, the everyday contexts on community level. These insights reinforce the value of lessons learned and extend their applicability beyond individual programs, offering broader relevance for organizations involved in similar initiatives.

“The whole project has been a learning experience because we wanted to ensure our activities are adaptive to the needs of women and children.”

*ADRA Moldova team member,
Moldova*



- Effective facilitation is the cornerstone of successful safe spaces. To ensure the best outcomes, facilitators need comprehensive training and ongoing support, including consultations and access to resources. A strong focus on protection and safeguarding is essential from the project's outset.

- Safe spaces play a vital role as community meeting points and resource hubs. Utilizing existing cultural centers and community premises strengthens resilience and cohesion in vulnerable populations. Local organizations and municipalities should leverage safe spaces as hubs to benefit all community members, enhancing overall community resilience and cohesion.

- Choosing the right locations for safe spaces is crucial, ensuring that people across urban and rural areas have equal access. Tailored outreach efforts and schedules are necessary to meet the diverse needs of different communities.
- Involving community members in decision-making, idea-sharing, and program design fosters trust, collaboration, and community ownership.
- Digital learning programs need to be incorporated alongside face-to-face activities to offer a balanced routine that promotes interaction and socialization.
- Collaboration with local schools and raising awareness among parents is essential to support refugee children's enrolment in formal education and reduce school drop-out.



- Continuous activities on regular basis tailored to individual needs and interests are key to providing a client-centered experience. Duration of such programs should be longer in order to build trust and establish connections among the people and between them and the facilitators, psychologists, and educators in the safe spaces.
- Normalizing discussions around mental health as well as activities for



enhancing coping mechanisms and emotion regulation skills should be mainstreamed. In case further MHPSS services are needed, referral system connecting individuals to mental health service providers should be established on the local level.

- Facilitators need to be equipped with knowledge of vulnerability criteria and considerations to effectively support vulnerable individuals, promoting their well-being and integration.
- Facilitators need to maintain a strong focus on protection considerations, safe and confidential reporting, and take the necessary steps in case of child neglect and/or abuse, or GBV. Focus on preventive measures, such as awareness campaigns and community engagement, is needed to reduce the risks.
- Understanding the cultural and social aspects of both refugee and host communities is vital for fostering intercultural dialogue and cohesion.
- Language-learning programs and interpretation services are essential to facilitate effective communication, promoting inclusivity and understanding.

In the journey to provide support for refugee and host communities over the past year, IRC and partners have collected lessons that highlight the importance of continuity, community engagement, and cultural sensitivity. These are aimed to encourage the experience exchange, and inform future programming linked to activities for refugee and local children, women, and caregivers. By applying these lessons and recommendations, we can create a more supportive and resilient environment for both refugee and host communities, fostering resilience, inclusivity, and empowerment.

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