Transformational Humanitarian Response: The Example of Poland

LSE Department of International Development
Report commissioned by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and Save the Children

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Save the Children International's CEO and Board Chair visit to Poland to Save the Children's Ukrainian Refugee Response

List of Acronyms

INGO - International non-governmental organisation

NGO - Non-governmental organisation

CSO - Civil Society Organisation

UN - United Nations

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

EU - European Union

OCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

RCF - Refugee Coordination Forum

RRRP- Regional Refugee Response Plan

WHS - World Humanitarian Summit

TA - Transformative Agenda

IASC - Inter-Agency Standing Committee

Executive Summary

This report is a contribution to understanding the importance of having localisation at the core of any crisis response. On behalf of Save the Children UK and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA), the research was carried out by postgraduate students at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) between October 2022 and March 2023.

The report inquires into the research question, 'to what extent does the Ukrainian refugee crisis response in Poland represent a transformational localised response?' The report examines how the Polish response looked at the start of the crisis, how it evolved, and what lessons can be learned from the different actors around the themes of localisation, collaboration, funding, child protection, and education. The report concludes with a recommendation section for the response going forward. To include a holistic perspective from different actors, the report pulls together evidence about the response through a combination of a comprehensive literature survey and semi-structured personal interviews with local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and volunteers.

Localisation recognizes the need to invest more in local capacity and reduce dependence on international organisations through promoting accountability and community engagement in the design and implementation process of humanitarian programmes.

Drawings on the wall at the new school set up for Ukrainian refugee children in Warsaw

Key Findings

- The Polish local response demonstrated that civil society organisations can adapt quickly and expand their work according to need, much faster and with better local awareness than international responders.
- Local actors are also better positioned to carry out sustainable long-term solutions as the immediate humanitarian need subsides.
- Collaboration between international and local actors, including the government is essential to ensure local actors are able to properly and quickly scale-up to meet immediate needs. Although many INGOs have shown support for the Transformative Agenda which emphasises coordination and collaboration, and the Grand Bargain which aims to shift the power from international actors to local actors, the findings in this report show that there is still a gap between the commitments in the agenda and the actions of INGOs.
- This report acknowledges the need of enhancing transparency and communication, strengthening localisation efforts and streamlining the process of proposal applications and mutual respect in partnerships between local actors and INGOs.
- The report finds that there was inadequate financial and logistical support from the Polish government in the early phase, during which the private sector contributed time and resources of their own in collaboration with local and international actors to help people fleeing Ukraine.
- The response could have been more efficient with a greater focus on capacity sharing between INGOs and local organisations as well as stronger government support for funding and coordination.

The humanitarian response of Poland toward Ukrainian refugees has been transformational to some extent given the extraordinary achievements led by local people and businesses. By showing that a locally-led effort is by all means possible during a humanitarian disaster, lessons can be learned for future emergencies, bringing in civil society actors earlier and more centrally to a response. Moving forward, it is important that the burnout rate of volunteers, overwhelmed Polish systems and the rising anti-refugee sentiment is properly addressed to ensure sustainability. The HLA's plans to support Ukraine Regional Response through diverse capacity and leadership strengthening initiatives have been already acknowledgedin and are addressing many of those systemic shortcomings.

Background

In the early hours of the 24th of February, 2022, a culmination of historical and military build up led to the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that has killed thousands, displaced millions and ravaged entire cities (Al Jazeera, 2022). Over 8 million refugees have fled Ukraine (UNHCR, 2023), signifying the largest population movement in Europe since the Second World War (UN Press, 2022). Poland has spearheaded the response by hosting over 1.5 million refugees with a concerted effort between the government, local and international organisations, as well as Polish citizens who welcomed many into their private homes (OHCHR, 2022). . In 2021, when hundreds of refugees from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan were stranded at the Belarus-Poland border, Poland posted riot police and border guards to stop the flow of refugees (TRT World, 2022). Although Poland has not viewed refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan favourably in recent years, Ukrainian migrants have been welcomed since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Le Noé, 2022).

Families displaced by the conflict in Lviv

Before the invasion in 2022, approximately 1.3 million Ukrainians were residents in Poland (Government of Poland, 2022) and the country was experiencing strong economic growth with an increase in labour force participation and income (World Bank, 2022).. The signing of the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness in 1992 between Poland and Ukraine has allowed for increased cooperation between the two countries (Government of Poland, 2022). The treaty, along with geographic proximity, economic

stability, a shared fear and history of Russian invasion and occupation helps explain Poland's initial response to the Ukrainian war. A year after the start of the war, an evaluation is imperative of the early-stage responses, current status, and the question of where the fate of Ukrainian refugees is headed within Poland.

A transformational humanitarian response through localisation

Humanitarian actors are spread out far and thin, responding to each crisis only for as long as the onset of the next crisis allows them. Despite an increase in need, relief is recorded to reach less than half of the people it targets even when humanitarian funding has doubled over the last decade (The New Humanitarian, 2022). Where relief does reach its intended beneficiaries, it leaves them dependent on aid (ALNAP, 2022). The Transformative Agenda (TA) under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) was a result of efforts to resolve this dissonance and bring about a timely and effective response to crises through stronger leadership, structured coordination and greater accountability particularly to affected populations.The TA was also envisioned to bridge the gaps within the pre-existing cluster approach to crisis response which was understood as 'overly process-driven' (IASC, n.d.). In this vein, the TA was keen to be governed more by the impact of a response and not the process of its implementation.

The TA, while important in ensuring efficiency in the rapid relief stages, still suffers from the short-sightedness that has come to characterise much of the efforts in the humanitarian system. At the Global Humanitarian Policy Forum held in December of 2022, the focus on short-term delivery of goods that is primarily driven by outsiders or 'parachuted experts' rather than deploying local capacities was identified as a fatal flaw in the sustainability of crisis responses (OCHA, 2023).

The localisation agenda was born out of this recognition of the need to invest more in local capacity and reduce dependence on international organisations through promoting accountability and community engagement in the design and implementation process of humanitarian programs (Jideofor, n.d.). Though many differing definitions of localisation exist, throughout this report localisation is understood as the process in which local and national actors are engaged in an equitable partnership throughout all phases of humanitarian response, with a

particular emphasis on supporting a response that is locally led (Plan International, n.d.). Additionally, the OCHA New Way of Working Policy (NWOW) provides a path towards the removal of barriers to collaboration. Central to NWOW is the shift to reinforce and not replace local and national actors. This is the "change in mindset and behaviour required to sustainably reduce need, risk and vulnerability" (Canns, 2017, p. 7).

With critical knowledge of the language, geography and socio-cultural norms and values and a sincerity for the salvation of their own people that is hard to manufacture in remote humanitarian actors, local actors are the most strongly placed to respond for the long-term relief and re-building of people and societies affected by crises. Oxfam rightly frames the local responders as 'the first to arrive and last to leave' or more accurately the only ones to remain (Oxfam, 2016). Identifying and investing in the capacities, expertise and leadership of vulnerable communities is critical to ensure that the humanitarian system does not produce cycles of palliative relief and protracted suffering.

Despite the best interests of donors and humanitarian organisations alike, the bulk of the international funding continues to sit with the UN and larger agencies thereby working against the potential for localisation. Words have not translated to action when it comes to an overhaul of funding flows. Despite targets like the 2016 Grand Bargain promising to channel more humanitarian funding to local and national actors, local funding decreased from 2.8 percent in 2017 to 1.2 percent in 2021 (OCHA, 2023). Recommendations have been made to set up local expert registers and emergency funds that local actors can tap into when crisis strikes (OCHA, 2023) and to increase visibility of the contributions of local actors (Robillard, et al., 2021).

International organisations can also play a role in bridging the gaps between donors and local actors by setting standards of direct engagement and spotlighting the latter's impact and equipping them with advocacy and fundraising skills that garner the trust of donors. As part of our shifting the power agenda, the HLA acknowledges the centrality of Civil Society Organizations and sees a natural space for its work within the above movement and sector-wide frameworks and the wider context. The HLA's Engine 2 plan has committed to investing in the development of the operational, technical and institutional capacity of local and national actors as one of the first steps to advancing effective localisation while recognizing the concept of capacity sharing. This stems from

the fact that communities and local/national actors, who are often the first responders, have not only accumulated a wealth of contextual capacity over the years, but are embedded in the communities they serve.

Local governments also have a key role in creating conditions that are conducive for local organisations to action a transformational response that will sustain into the future. They are the only actors with sovereign authority to direct the country's political, social and economic efforts towards building back better and therefore need to be considered one of the most decisive actors in driving transformational humanitarian responses.

The HLA training for local humanitarian actors in Warsaw, Poland

Methodology

The research inquires the question, **'to what extent does the Ukrainian refugee crisis response in Poland represent a transformational localised response?'** This study was conducted within the theoretical framework of the localisation agenda and consisted of a qualitative case study of the Polish response to Ukrainian refugees through a combination of key informant interviews and a comprehensive literature survey. 12 key informant interviews were conducted with INGOS, CSOs and individual volunteers. A thematic analysis following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilised when interpreting the interview data. The HLA Humanitarian training for local humanitarian actors in Warsaw, Poland

Limitations

Given that none of the researchers speak Polish or Ukrainian, only the reports written in English were accessed and interviews were conducted in English. With the majority of participants having Polish or Ukrainian as their primary language, meanings could have been lost in translation. Furthermore, the majority of INGO actors interviewed were only involved in the initial phase of the crisis. Both of these limitations have been mitigated to an extent through the insights gained from CSOs currently working on the response who worked with INGOs other than Save the Children and through the literature survey on the larger INGO scene.

Ethical considerations

The primary research of this report was conducted with the required ethical considerations. Before each interview, participants were required to sign an informed consent sheet which asked permission for the interviews to be recorded and explained the impact and aim of the study. It also ensured that all data would be anonymised. The consent form can be found in the Appendix. All the data gathered was stored in restricted access files within Google Drive, only accessible to the researchers. Additionally, this research has been approved by LSE's Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

Localisation

Volunteers and Civil Society Organisations

Through their work with Ukrainian refugees, Polish civil society has demonstrated how localisation is essential to the future of humanitarian response. Innumerable bottom-up initiatives originated just hours after the news of the war broke out across media channels and "people were standing at the border, waiting with hot drinks, meals and clothes even before the refugees arrived" (Sengupta et al. 2023, p.2). The sheer number of refugees arriving at the border "necessitated a 'whole society' response" (Lee et al., 2023, p.42). Among those interviewed for this study, there was unanimous agreement that this refugee response was locally led, with the main contributors being volunteers and CSOs. At the beginning of the response, volunteers, the Ukrainian diaspora community and CSOs played a significant role in relieving some of the pressure exerted on the local and national government from the mass influx of refugees. According to Baszczak et al. (2022), through grassroots activism at the start of the war, the government was able to take the needed time to make legislative changes and activate official forms of aid. Within the first three months of the war, 70% of Polish citizens were involved in refugee assistance (Baszczak et al., 2022). Many CSOs quickly adapted and expanded their work according to need. Volunteers drove to the border to transport Ukrainians and pass supplies, provided free accommodation, collected food and medications, translated, and offered their professional support in terms of legal advice and psychosocial support (Domaradzki, et al., 2022). It was expressed repeatedly throughout the interviews how easy it was to get involved in the response, with a respondent stating that they "don't know if there was a single person who didn't help at all; everyone was either donating, volunteering or starting their own initiatives" (Personal communication, 2023).

"I'm really surprised and I'm really happy to be surprised because it's one of the first moments in my life that I'm not ashamed for what is going on in my country"

Personal communication with volunteer, 2023

Domaradzki et al. (2022) found that 7% of their 2,200 respondents personally hosted refugees (Figure 1). Through Polish citizens opening their homes, the country was able to take in a significant number of people without having to utilise refugee camps. Domaradzki et al. (2022) found that the local response was "primarily motivated by humanistic and democratic values, including altruism and public service" (p.1). According to an interviewee, "civil society was the responder, was the saviour, I mean, they were everything…" (Personal communication, 2023).

Infographic 2. Poles' participation in various forms of assistance during the first three months of the war (%)

Buying items	59%
Donating money	53%
Helping refugees sort out various matters	20%
Volunteering one's own time	17%
Providing housing	7%
Transport (including from the border)	5%

Source: prepared by PEI based on the results of the survey.

Figure 1. Source: Baszczak et al., 2022, p.15

Local and National Government

Initially, the Polish government struggled to organise themselves to help the refugees arriving in the country (Domaradzki et al., 2022). A majority of the interviewees stated that the national government's response was unorganised and delayed and if local volunteers and CSOs had not stepped in, the response would not have unfolded the way it did.

Once the government stepped in, they focused on setting up the legal framework that would allow refugees to travel to and remain in Poland (Baszczak et al., 2022). Poland adopted an open-door policy towards Ukrainian refugees, with the Interior Minister confirming on February 24, 2022, that Poland would take in "as many [refugees from Ukraine] as there will be at our borders" (Hargrave, Homel, and Drazanova, 2023). This was followed by the establishment of a law on assistance to Ukrainian citizens that was passed on March 12, 2022 (MEDAM, 2022). Under the new legislation, Ukrainian citizens and their families arriving in Poland since February 24 were granted permission to legally stay in Poland for 18 months and access the labour market, healthcare, education and other welfare systems (MEDAM, 2022).

Overall, Polish opinion on the role of the national government greatly varies. A survey conducted by the Union of Polish Metropolises of residents in twelve Polish cities found that over 75% of participants were aware of the central government's activities to help people from Ukraine and had a positive perception of them (Hargrave, Homel, and Drazanova, 2023). Conversely, some believed that the government played too small of a role with one volunteer coordinator from Warsaw writing on LinkedIn, "The joke's over, the governor [of the Warsaw region] is only giving interviews that everything is under control, and we the volunteers are on the brink of physical and mental collapse" (Wanat, 2022). The national government struggled in some cases to provide coordination and logistical support to CSOs and volunteers, with one interviewee stating:

"I think the role of the local and Polish government should be much bigger because it shouldn't be on me to do this work."

Personal communication with CSO worker, 2023

Most of those interviewed for the study remained sympathetic to the government stating that although the response was delayed, they did the best they could given the circumstances.

"People usually expect from the government a lot. (...) it was not perfect, but organising the system to relocate thousands of refugees in a few days is an amazing job"

Personal communication with CSO worker, 2023

Furthermore, the government has launched a pilot program to establish migrant integration centres in the Greater Poland voivodeship which would provide refugees with a range of support services such as legal assistance and access to education and healthcare (MEDAM, 2022). Despite these feelings, many acknowledged that the local response would have been stronger if the national government had stepped in earlier.

Although the role of the national government was limited, many of the study's interviewees shared that the local government was a crucial part of the early response. One of the interviewees praised the role of the government in Krakow, one of the first partners of Save the Children Poland, sharing that the municipality gathered the local NGOs a few weeks prior to the start of the war to begin preparing for the possibility of a refugee crisis. This not only helped establish connections prior to the war but also made the communication between NGOs and the municipality throughout the early response more efficient. INGO interviewees stated that the local government, specifically in Krakow, was more open to coordinating and listening than the national government. Furthermore, many of the local municipalities launched fundraising campaigns, established information centres and webpages, arranged for the transportation of refugees from the border, offered legal and psychological support, and set up temporary housing for the refugees (MEDAM, 2022).

Private Sector

The private sector has increasingly become an important actor in humanitarian crisis responses, most notably as a donor. This remained true in Poland's response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. At the onset of the crisis, private sector businesses in Poland began giving financial aid as well as in-kind donations to many CSOs (Hargrave, Homel, and Drazanova, 2023). Many Polish businesses with Ukrainian staff took it upon themselves to help their employees leave Ukraine, bring their families to Poland, and provide them with housing (Hargrave, Homel, and Drazanova, 2023). All of the study's interviewees stated that the private sector played a fundamental role in the early response. Many of the hotels gave up their rooms for long-term housing, restaurants provided catering services, and transport services worked tirelessly to provide support for the refugees (Personal communication, 2023). Furthermore, companies have begun hiring and developing training resources to welcome Ukrainian refugees into the Polish workforce (Flick and Goldstein, 2022).

Many businesses also cooperated with INGOs and CSOs to help them with their efforts. Three of the interviewees reported that the private sector, including banks, supermarkets and distribution companies, were genuinely engaged in the response. For example, one INGO cooperated with a Polish supermarket chain to establish credit voucher systems for refugees. The interviewees also shared that the engagement from the private sector in this response was unprecedented compared to other crisis responses. In addition to the general good will, this was likely possible because Poland is a high-income country with a flourishing private sector. International businesses also sought to help. For example, more than 50 companies with global operations joined together and pledged to support Ukrainian refugees as part of the Tent Partnership for Refugees, which is a global non-profit that helps integrate refugees and ensure that businesses are involved in humanitarian responses (Tent News, 2022). However, international companies should remain conscious of and abide by local laws and regulations.

Collaboration for localisation

As planned out by INGOs

It is clear that the international community entered the scene of the Ukrainian refugee crisis with a concerted intent at coordination and collaboration. According to an evaluation done by CARE (2022), the local leadership witnessed in Poland was able to provide a solid foundation for "emergency response programming that can be strengthened and built upon" (p.4). Given that Poland is a high-income country with a stable government and active civil society, the context was different from the majority of prior humanitarian crises. Many INGOs did not have experience in this environment and were not yet registered within the country. This provided the opportunity for local organisations to take the lead in the early response while INGOs provided much-needed technical support.

In accordance with the Refugee Coordination model (RCM) which draws from the cluster approach to multi-agency and multi-sectoral emergency response as well as the transformative agenda, the regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for Ukrainian refugees was designed to ensure complementarity and flexibility. The Poland chapter of the RRP epitomised a strong commitment to collaboration between international and national NGOs, the government, CSOs, diaspora and refugee-led organisations, volunteers, private sector and donors to ensure cohesive action as well as advocacy and fundraising assistance for all RRP actors (UNHCR, 2022).The inter-agency Refugee Coordination Fora (RCF) were established for a localised approach and these were set up in regions across Poland. The RCF was aimed at initiating "dialogue and cooperation in Poland between entities that [...] have been reluctant to work with each other" (MEDAM, 2022, p.41). The RCF promises agile and streamlined structures that optimise efficiency and effective coordination of all partners. At its inception in 2022, 47 per cent of RRP actors in the Poland chapter were national and local organisations (UNHCR, 2022) which increased to over 50 per cent in the 2023 iteration of the Poland RRP (UNHCR, 2023). This demonstrates not only remarkable commitment to partnership but also offers a testament to the exceptionally active and persevering civil society and volunteers in Poland.

A critical collaborative initiative undertaken in the initial phases was the Blue Dot Hubs. Building on its inception in 2016, the UNHCR and UNICEF worked alongside partners from the national governments and local NGO actors responding to the Ukrainian refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries, to establish these safety hubs across the region (UNHCR & UNICEF, 2022). The Blue Dots are located at strategic points like train stations, border crossings, community centres, and along major transit routes. As of May 2022, 12 Blue Dot hubs were operational in Poland. Additionally, clusters were active in Poland during the first year of the response but could have been more effective as they could allow for funds to be channelized in a more localized way. It is important to consider the gaps around coordination through sector working groups and the UNHCR around RRPs when considering localization.

As experienced by local actors

Some months into the response, CSOs in Poland sent out two emphatic open letters addressed to international donors and humanitarian organisations. It was clear that the collaboration intended was fraught with challenges and local actors were unanimous in their disappointment in counterproductive partnerships. The letters as well as the interviews conducted for this study echo the same sentiment across the following areas of friction -

1. Transparency and communication

In the initial stages, local actors entered into partnership with no clear onboarding processes or guidelines on what to expect with regards to procedures, conditions and requirements for international grants. Many CSO actors cited a lack of transparency and accountability in the relationship with international actors operating with a false assumption that their ways of working are universal. The flow of information was seen as one-way, where local actors provided full access and information on their work while being completely uninformed on the objectives and plans of international actors. Local actors also grappled with the dissonance between the grand bargain commitments and the unprecedented funding at the international level that they were struggling to access on the ground. Lack of communication regarding the duration, commitment and reporting requirements of partnerships led to lengthy planning processes and drafting of agreements that were followed by sudden exit strategies by the very same organisations.

"International organisations have one giving hand, but also have one taking hand"

Personal communication with INGO worker, 2023

2. Streamlined processes

Despite elaborate coordination mechanisms with the regional RRP and the country level RCF, the humanitarian sector still failed to provide local actors with a unified process for partnership. With overcrowding of international actors, varying due diligence procedures for each organisation, frequent rotations of INGO staff and lack of knowledge-sharing and communication within their teams, local actors were caught in endless loops of procedural and informational burdens that distracted from their primary tasks of assisting refugees. A common thread of frustration across all the interviews with CSO organisations was that they felt like much-needed time, energy, and resources went into recurring hour-long meetings, 10-page application forms and familiarising themselves with the next person on rotation. INGO interviewees themselves cite that they could understand the frustration of CSOs who had to start over every few weeks due to the high turnover of staff but did not know how to work around it. The hiring of local staff by INGOs has been able to counter this issue to an extent. A CSO actor recounts having to turn down collaboration opportunities due to limited time or resources to comply with their requirements. The interviewee mentioned a singular positive experience with an INGO when they adjusted their application to one page for smaller grants. Another CSO actor asserts that the early response stages and the first three months in particular should have been stripped down to a focus on working together and delivering needs rapidly without time-consuming regulatory processes and approvals.

3. Mutual respect

Having taken initiative and worked tirelessly from day one of the response, the aversion of CSOs towards the label of implementing partners is more than valid. It was clear that neither were they merely implementing partners nor were INGOs equipped with enough knowledge of the local context to be able to lead the response. Throughout the interviews, a common consensus was the importance of cultural

competence and respect for the already-established knowledge of the volunteers and CSOs on the ground in Poland. In a 2022 report from the DEC on localised humanitarian response in Ukraine, "a lack of recognition of local capacities" was cited as one of the main obstacles to the relationship between local and international actors (Harrison, et al., 2022, p.18). This is due to the fact that capacity and localisation are understood and influenced by those in power positions within the humanitarian field. Therefore, "higher value is placed on capacities which international actors possess, which leads to a failure to recognise and value existing local capacities" (Harrison, et al., 2022, p.18).

"When you try to do everything, you end up doing a whole lot of nothing"

Personal communications with INGO worker, 2023

INGO workers themselves state that despite best efforts to listen to the local actors regarding not setting up parallel systems, they still went in and spread themselves thin trying to reach as many people as possible. One of the INGO interviewees mentioned that in many instances, local partners would have been best supported with merely the transfer of funds as they were best placed to do the work themselves and he could not identify any value-add by his INGO. They also reportedly operated with a stereotype regarding beneficiary populations that did not match the Ukrainian diaspora and refugee population who were laboriously working at the frontlines of the response.

"We had to make sure that we are not on the menu, but that we are at the table"

Personal communications with CSO worker, 2023

CSO workers reported difficulties in trying to negotiate with INGOs on how certain systems they wanted to set up would not legally work in the Polish context. For example, many INGOs attempted to provide funding to CSOs in January, but the financial year for Poland ends in December so they were unable to use this funding.

These conversations were usually perceived by international actors as stemming from the inexperience of local actors when in actuality, these stem from a lack of contextualisation and runs the risk of working against the desired localisation of humanitarian responses. Several CSO workers reiterated that international actors need to assume good intent and listen as the former will be left to deal with the ramifications of inapplicable systems. All the CSO actors recognised that the collaboration in its best parts did enable them to upskill themselves in areas like technical know-how, proposals, reporting and safeguarding, appreciating the role INGOs and teams like HLA's Regional Centre in Eastern Europe, focusing on strengthening their capacities. They affirm that reliable, predictable and equitable partnership can provide them with much needed resources and knowledge. However, despite several interventions from international actors like the #ShiftThePower movement aimed at empowering local populations the localisation of international funds, capacity and resources do not materialise when they are most needed.

Actioning the lessons learned

It has been accurately identified that local actors that engaged with direct programmatic work have limited resources to invest in capacity strengthening and this is one of the areas where they appreciate international support. An INGO employee that worked on this response from the beginning explained the importance of supporting the capacity strengthening of CSOs in order for them to be able to generate funding directly, making themselves more sustainable in the long-term.

Throughout the crisis, UNHCR has expanded their involvement in Poland taking a localised approach, increasing their staff from 8 to 111 and developing offices throughout Poland (MEDAM, 2022). According to UNHCR (2023), sustainability and localisation will continue to play a central role in the 2023 Plan for Poland. They explain that shareholders have committed themselves to "empowering national and local humanitarian action" through increasing financial accessibility to local actors, following the overall goals of the Global Compact on Refugees. These efforts will need to imminently bridge the glaring gap between narrative and action that currently represents the humanitarian landscape to ensure that lives are saved to the maximum possible extent.

Funding

From the interviews conducted, a picture emerges where funding at the onset of the response was directed to CSOs and volunteers from private companies and individuals. Meanwhile, funding was flowing into the INGOs at an unprecedented rate. After two to three months, the funding from the general public in Poland decreased, and grants from INGOs became an important source for the local responders. Most interviewees thought that funding to the response decreased with time, while some thought that the overall funding available remained constant but moved from consistent small donations from many actors to larger sums coming from fewer sources. Multiple interviewees said that they are now mainly sustaining their activities through grants coming from INGOs and companies. Based on the interviews in this study and the secondary research published for this response so far, it is not possible to provide an exact funding breakdown. However, some trends can be identified.

Government

In terms of financial assistance, the national government played a limited role in the early stages of the crisis. The March 12 legislation offered a one-time small cash transfer of 62 euros (PLN 300) as well as a financial subsidy of up to 8 euros (PLN 40) a day for Polish individuals hosting Ukrainian refugees (MEDAM, 2022). The support scheme ended in August 2022 (ACAPS, 2022). In total, it was estimated that Poland spent about 4.45 billion euros (PLN 25.4 billion), or 1% of its GDP, on assistance for refugees in the first month (MEDAM, 2022). Despite this, none of the interviewees identified government funding as a major contributing factor to their operations at any stage of the response.

"We did not receive any financial support from the government. I know there was a lot of funding going to Poland and on the national level it did not really filter down"

Personal communication with CSO worker, 2023

INGOs and CSOs

Interviewees representing both Polish CSOs and INGOs commented that INGOs seem to have received the majority of international donations, due to being perceived as trustworthy institutions. One INGO representative stated "I don't think they [international donors] have the risk appetite for it. They prefer to work with the people they know" (Personal communication, 2023). A CSO representative noted that it felt unfair that INGOs received much more funding than the CSOs who were carrying out the work on the ground.

A consistent issue raised from CSOs and volunteers during the interviews was that funding from INGOs was difficult to access. Application forms were time-consuming, complex, and inflexible, requiring accounting and reporting abilities which the Polish organisations did not have. The funding was seen as being inflexible, which did not suit the conditions the CSOs were working in. They felt that the applications requested information that they did not have available (particularly regarding past accounting documentation). One CSO interviewee noted that other small international NGOs would set up duplicate efforts and would receive the funding because they could fulfil the requirements the INGOs were after. However, most CSOs reported that they had received funding from INGOs at some point.

One CSO representative commented that the funding from INGOs took very long to arrive, up to 6-7 months after the initial request was made. However, this was not the experience of all CSO interviewees. One CSO representative noted that funding from INGOs was widely available and quick to get, with a turnaround time of about 1 month. There was also some concern expressed by CSO representatives regarding the uncertainty of long-term commitments from INGOs. One interviewee said: "I have to know for how long I can count on this support from INGOs, because if I don't know if the partner will disappear in one month or six months, how can I make a plan?" (Personal communication, 2023).

Most CSOs noted that they had not been fully prepared for the reporting requirements that came from INGOs after receiving funding. INGO representatives interviewed were aware that CSOs in Poland struggled with the grant reporting required. One INGO representative said "[CSOs] were encouraged to apply for funding and for partnerships and didn't really know what goes with it. They weren't really informed what they are

signing up for" (Personal communication, 2023). This interviewee also thought that INGOs had been unclear about when CSOs would receive the money granted, and that payouts had been severely delayed in some cases.

Private Sector

CSO representatives and individual volunteers unanimously agreed that the early stage of the response was funded by local businesses and individuals. Over time, the interviewees felt that this generosity had waned, with some notable exceptions of companies that had continued to contribute financially to CSOs. Funding from individuals was the predominant source to CSOs and individual volunteers early in the response. However, several CSOs and individual volunteers cited a steep learning curve around how to engage with donors and crowdfunding campaigns. Money was given to local organisers at the onset of the response, largely through word of mouth. A few weeks into responding, most individuals and CSOs recognised they had to reach beyond their immediate surroundings for donations to sustain their operations. Social media was cited as the primary way to reach people with links to crowdfunders. Several interviewees noticed that quickly feeding back what the money donated had been spent on worked best to generate more funding by building trust. Organisers chose to take photos of items they had bought, film work in progress, and publish detailed lists of procured items and their cost. All interviewees who used this technique said that donations increased with more transparency.

CSOs found that funding applications made to companies were easier to fill out, were approved promptly, and did not place many restrictions on how the money was to be spent. One CSO representative commented: "Companies are definitely less bureaucratic than international NGOs in terms of funding" (Personal communication, 2023).

"The private sector was our favourite to work with. They told us to write generally what we needed support for, rather than telling us how to restrict the money to a specific field. This made it possible for us to act very quickly"

Personal communication with CSO worker, 2023

Child protection and Education

Of the 1.5 million refugees who came to Poland 40% were under the age of 14 (UNICEF Refugee Response Office in Poland, 2023). This situation has left many children vulnerable to human trafficking, violence, abuse, and psychological distress. Child protection and Education are highly interlinked and work hand in hand, especially during emergencies when the latter can be used as Child Friendly Spaces. So far, as acknowledged by a majority of the study's interviewees, there has been adequate child protection and education response in Poland. Despite this, there are some issues that demand attention and support.

"There were buses just stopping in front of the centre and saying they want to take hundreds of people. Sometimes they were individuals from other countries, sometimes supposedly organisations, but you don't really know"

Personal communication with CSO worker, 2023

Child Protection

Most interviewees recognised the identification and verification process as the main issue in safeguarding children. While children are exposed to all kinds of risks, like gender-based violence and abuse, human trafficking was seen as the most urgent issue by the interviewees. Interviewees witnessed strangers offering to take refuges to shelters in Italy and Spain. Another interviewee emphasised the challenges related to unaccompanied children. For example, since the majority of men were not allowed to cross the border, fathers would drive their children to unverified strangers at the border, unwillingly leaving the child in danger. One of the INGO interviewees further noted that many of the volunteers were not sufficiently trained when it came to child protection and safeguarding. "We developed a pocket handbook for volunteers because they were super busy, they didn't have the time to train. But you know, simple

things like not being in a room alone with the child. To ensure safeguarding" (personal communication, 2023).

At the border, the refugees must secure temporary accommodation or board a train to travel to their family or friends in another city. As identified by CSO leaders who worked on the frontline, borders or train stations are areas that need strict procedures in order to assist child refugees safely. Yet, there were no formal procedures on background checks for volunteers put in place to ensure the safety of children.

In order to minimise these risks, local organisations had to build verification processes. These included allocating staff to the border or requiring registered volunteers to wear vests and name tags in order for them to be recognisable to refugees in need. A few CSO leaders mentioned that setting up the verification and safeguarding process as a local organisation with relatively limited capacity was an arduous procedure. They expressed that it would have been helpful if the government or INGOs had cooperated with them in setting up verification processes to save time. However, Poland has implemented new legislation that provides a temporary guardianship system for separated and unaccompanied minors upon their arrival in the country, (Hoff & De Volder, 2022).

Education

During a humanitarian crisis, the education sector is often neglected in the early phase of the response. In Poland, the pressure on the education system is anticipated to escalate as Ukrainians face tough choices about whether to remain in Poland or return. In the summer of 2022, there were huge concerns about how the Polish education system would manage to accommodate the estimated 700,000 Ukrainian children in the country (Reidy, 2022). Around 200,000 Ukrainian students were enrolled in Polish schools, and many were placed in classrooms despite not speaking Polish (Reidy, 2022). Interviewees pointed out that students still do not have access to education. "Schooling is a problem because there is not enough space in schools for Ukrainian children (personal communication, 2023).

Prior to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, the Polish education system was already facing a shortage of teachers and classrooms, leaving numerous Polish students

without access to education (Reidy, 2022). Although Ukrainian students were offered places in schools, there were not enough teachers to teach them introductory Polish courses. The city administration in Warsaw prepared for approximately 60,000 Ukrainian students to join the school system in September 2022, yet there was only room for 36,000 (Reidy, 2022). The Polish government has allocated more than 145 million euros for additional educational support for Ukrainian refugees. However, it remains unclear if there are plans to increase the capacity of the educational system for 2023 (Reidy, 2022). Therefore, many INGOs like Save the Children Poland see education as one of their key priorities.

A major concern voiced by interviewees is the lack of focus on integration for Ukrainian children joining the Polish education system. One INGO interviewee pointed out that integration was a big challenge both for children and schools. "Children are coming and leaving [...] So that's quite a big floating group, making integration difficult" (Personal communication, 2023). Some students chose to leave in the middle of the school year due to the language barrier. Some interviewees shared that these issues arose because Ukrainian children were expected to integrate and join the education system too quickly. This transition was made all the more difficult due to the different education systems between the two countries. This transition was made all the more difficult due to the different education systems between the two countries. For example, Polish schools require students in the eighth grade to take an end-of-year exam which is a prerequisite for entering secondary school. This prerequisite does not exist in Ukraine, and therefore many Ukrainian students were forced to take the exam or repeat the year (Ortega, 2023). Furthermore, although refugees were given admission into schools and kindergartens, one interviewee stated that they could sense an increase in anti-refugee sentiment, with many Polish people not feeling comfortable sending their children to school with Ukrainian refugees. Education for children with special needs was addressed very slowly.

Another major concern pointed out by most interviewees was the need for children's psychosocial support due to the trauma from witnessing and fleeing war. A few interviewees pointed out that children feared being separated from their mothers, even for short periods of time.

"When we were in the Museum of Modern Art… we offered to just step outside and there were huge glass windows where you could play and constantly see each other, but they wouldn't go outside"

Personal communication with INGO worker, 2023

Interviewees cited that teachers were not trained on how to deal with traumatised students, and some children were unable to trust teachers and schools. Interviewees stated that they felt the need for more after-school activities so their single guardians could join the workforce.

Anzhela*, 8, gets support with her homework from a Ukrainian teacher in a Digital Learning Center in Lodz, Poland

Way Forward

A year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there is growing fear in Poland that the refugee response can no longer be sustained. Indeed, when compared to other refugee crises, the response from Poland was unprecedented. This sentiment was voiced by a Polish governor, "Maybe it's a miracle. In 2015, Germany took one million refugees in one year, and it was a big success. We had to receive two million in a few weeks. It is a big difference" (Rice-Oxley, 2022). Due to the reception of a large number of refugees in such a short amount of time, many official systems were overwhelmed. Moving forward, it is imperative that Poland invests more in housing, schools, nurseries, and the healthcare system. Despite the acknowledgement by the local Polish governments of the lack of necessary infrastructure, it is difficult to tackle issues like the housing crisis quickly (Reidy, 2022). Furthermore, the CSOs as well as local governments are running out of the funds necessary to implement the infrastructure projects (Wanat, 2022). At the start of the crisis, local municipalities looked towards the national government for funding but as this has thinned out, the national government has begun to ask the European Union for aid (Wanat, 2022).

Moreover, many of the individuals who volunteered in the early stages of the crisis have had to scale back their efforts. The sentiment that Poles are tired was shared by the majority of our interviewees, with one stating

"There are definitely less volunteers who are willing to help, and I think partly it's because lots of them are burnt out now"

Personal communication, 2023

According to a public research poll conducted in June 2022, the number of Poles who believe that Poland should continue accepting refugees is slowly decreasing, from 94% in March to 82% in June (Domaradzki, 2022). The war has also led to high rates of inflation. One of the interviewees shared that this may lead to an increase in tensions between Poles and Ukrainians, with many Poles beginning to resent the refugees who are still dependent on the government, aid agencies and on the goodwill of people. Prior to the war many Ukrainians in Poland faced discrimination and harassment,

increasing the fear that "this attitude will come back very soon" (Reidy, 2022). Therefore, with a lack of funding, infrastructure, a declining economy and volunteer burnout, the future of Poland has begun to look grim. Agnieszka Kosowicz, the president and founder of the Polish Migration Forum, stated:

"We are… just before a stage where there will be a collapse of lots of things. I'm expecting homeless people. I'm expecting kids that won't have access to education. I expect exploitation in the labour market."

Reidy, 2022

Although the current state may look bleak, there are steps that can be taken to move past these issues. To ensure the continuous positive reception of refugees into Polish society, the government should prepare medium and long-term strategies for their integration at the national and local level. It must take on a multifaceted policy, accepting that some refugees will remain in Poland, while some will want to resettle elsewhere in Europe or return to Ukraine once it is safe. To ensure successful integration, the government should ensure that refugees remaining in Poland are given proper access to long-term housing, employment, education, and other public services (MEDAM, 2022). Their efforts should also focus on poverty reduction through social protection systems and employment schemes. Furthermore, the government along with CSOs and INGOs should stop any misinformation and propaganda campaigns to ensure that public opinion on Ukrainian refugees remains positive in Poland. If left unaddressed, this could create tension within Poland, potentially leading to refugees returning back to Ukraine before it is safe to do so and deepening the humanitarian crisis. As mentioned by an interviewee, there must be the understanding among the local population that Poland will never be the same country therefore making it imperative to coexist and become more open, rather than turning to hate.

Recommendations

Localisation

1. INGOs, similarly to the HLA team at Save the Children, should offer their technical support in order for CSOs to be able to scale-up their work and still address the organisation's original purpose. Technical support needs to be in alignment with the specific needs of local organisations rather than those of INGOs.

   a. The technical support would consist of for example, INGOs carrying out monitoring and evaluation processes and capacity gap analysis to understand where support is most needed and to not duplicate efforts. This is important to avoid overstretching resources and increased feelings of resentment, burnout and decreased solidarity within the local community.

2. The current understanding of localisation by INGOs pushes national and local actors into adopting tools they lack experience with and goals and agendas they don't align with.

   a. To maximise the effects of localisation, INGOs should conduct country capacity assessments to understand the roles of each humanitarian actor and their differing capacities. The Learning Needs Assessment driven by the HLA will provide added value to this exercise. Through understanding the existing humanitarian landscape and developing a consensus on localisation through proper feedback mechanisms for local actors to utilise and voice their experiences, localisation efforts are more likely to sustain.

3. INGOs should focus their capacity building efforts on advocacy training. This would provide CSOs with the necessary tools to advocate their projects to the local and national government, encouraging them to increase their cooperation efforts.

4. INGOs can take on broker roles by hosting a series of roundtables, like the one facilitated by the HLA's Regional Centre and Polish Migration Forum in Warsaw, conducted with a focus on the identified needs of the crisis as well as the employment needs of Ukrainians. The roundtables will also allow the private

sector to learn the ways in which it can play an integral part in the response, either through funding, or employment programs for Ukrainians. Along this line, INGOs can also coordinate workshops and networking events between the private sector and Ukrainians to facilitate employment opportunities.

5. When considering localization, conflict sensitivity approaches and non-discriminatory should be considered and encouraged. INGOs should evaluate Polish sentiments around refugees play out at large since national CSOs who bring in local expertise can be affected by these sentiments.

Collaboration

1. A more egalitarian partnership and two-way flow of information where both INGOs and CSOs are kept updated about their agendas, time commitment, procurement processes, fund allocation and exit strategies. This can be achieved through shared dashboards in each partnership that monitors and updates the trajectory as mapped out in Figure 2: Localisation Trajectory

2. Unified due diligence processes by all INGO actors united under the UNHCR's Regional Response Framework and inter agency Refugee Coordination Fora so that CSOs can decrease time spent working on multiple variations of due diligence processes during the emergency when they are short for staff and time and as a consequence delay critical life-saving partnerships

3. Longer deployment of field staff by potentially:

   a. recruiting exclusively field-deployed officers,

   b. by managing work streams in ways that allow for a duration of at least the most critical initial months of the response (this duration could be different for each crisis depending on the volatility of the situation, but the interviewees cited three months as pertinent for the situation in Poland)

   c. recruiting local staff onto INGOs as Save the Children Poland and few other organisations have done in this context

4. In cases where frequent rotations do happen, channels of internal communications and knowledge sharing need to be managed more rigorously

to reduce the procedural and informational burdens that CSO actors have to shoulder to repeatedly update and keep newly deployed staff informed while already themselves operating at bare minimum capacity.

5. An approach centred around allowing affected populations to articulate their needs and support required and responding accordingly. An INGO worker cited, somewhat controversially, that in many cases a mere transfer of funds would have been more efficient and useful than their presence in Poland.

Funding

1. INGOs should include clear guidance on reporting requirements from grants given by them at the application stage, ensuring that applicants are aware of the reporting requirements prior to submitting a funding request.

   a. INGOs should consider advising CSOs to include funding for an administrative position to help with the reporting requirements of a funding application.

2. INGOs should work with CSOs to build the capabilities needed to be eligible for INGO grants. INGOs should offer workshops to local CSOs on how to strengthen their reporting capacity.

3. INGOs should create a streamlined process for grant and partnership applications and reporting that reflect the urgency of a humanitarian emergency, reducing the reporting burden during the rapid response phase, for example by creating shorter applications for smaller grants.

Child protection and education

1. Government should establish the identification and verification process for children at risk and unaccompanied children at the border and other reception sites, such as train stations or shelters, to ensure effective child protection and safeguarding.

a. INGOs could establish an information screening service that allows local actors to verify the authenticity and source of certain kinds of information like posters or flyers that may come from ill-intentioned actors

2. INGOs should assist local organisations by providing technical support in registering and verifying volunteers at the volunteer sites to prevent human trafficking.

3. The government should adequately invest in education by providing more classrooms, teaching materials. This would not only make education accessible for Ukrainian children but would also help address current problems within the education system which are affecting Polish students.

a. The government, along with the help of CSOs and INGOs, should establish nurseries and day care centres to provide single parents with safe spaces for their children and increase their ability to enter the labour market.


Maria* the Psychologist conducts a session with the Ukrainian children in Poland

Conclusion

In its initial phases, the Polish response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis represented the greatest potential for transformational localisation. This is undoubtedly due to the many enablers that galvanised a society-wide response in Poland through a strong economy, functioning government, active civil society, cultural affinity and shared geopolitical concern. However, from the entirely locally-led rapid response to subsequent stages of the crisis, the case of Poland provides an opportunity to retrace the steps of local and international responders and identify the factors that worked in favour of and against the progression of successful localisation as mapped out in the below figure.

Figure 2: Localisation Trajectory
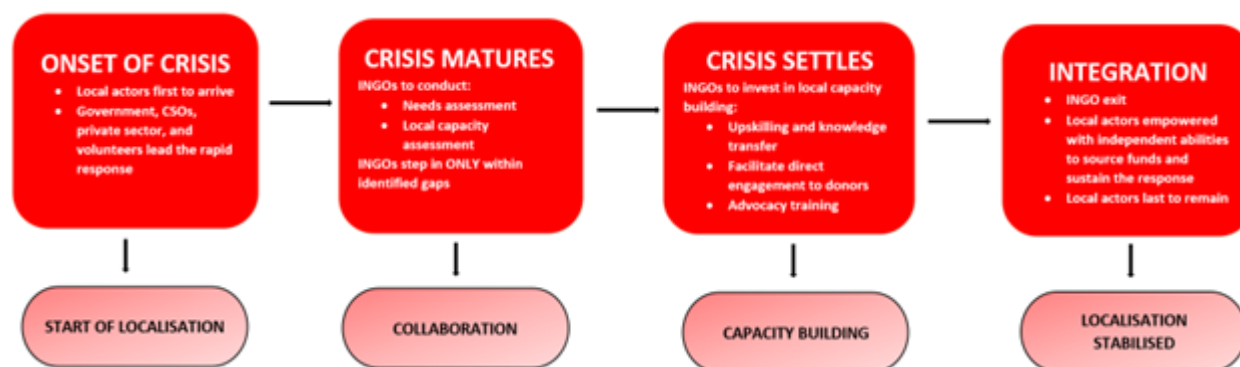
Source: Researchers' analysis

This study signals to obstacles in the stage where the response started to mature wherein the entry of INGOs, while instrumental and appreciated, did not complement the local response or fill gaps as efficiently as it could have. However, there is a real opportunity in the current stage where the response is settling, for timely investment in capacity strengthening that can ensure better chances for the sustainable integration of Ukrainian refugees through localisation.

The case study of Poland demonstrates how localisation can be the key to unlocking a transformational response that empowers affected populations to take ownership of their future and actively work towards it in a manner that does not risk a relapse into crisis when international attention subsides.

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