

The Early Lessons of Cash Coordination in Poland



Poland - Refugees from Ukraine register for cash assistance at UNHCR's cash enrolment centre © UNHCR / Maciej Moskwa

This report provides learning and initial outcomes of multi-purpose cash coordination in the Polish operational context since the establishment of the Cash Technical Working Group. Amongst those, it documents how the coordination structure has evolved to address the unique demands of the refugee response while shedding light on both achievements and areas for improvement. It provides an in-depth synopsis, highlighting the salient features that characterize Poland's cash coordination activities.

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SUMMARY - Early Lessons

- The effective coordination efforts of the multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) resulted in a swift expansion and extensive reach. Despite spanning multiple sectors a significant portion of MPCGs were distributed during the refugee response in 2022. However, this study revealed that the reported figures are underestimated, suggesting that the actual numbers may be greater. This can be attributed to the timely implementation of harmonization measures by the cash working group (CWG).
- The shared leadership model adopted by the CWG has emerged as a lesson learned. The division of tasks between co-chairs, such as technical support and advocacy, has proven effective in enhancing the coordination structure's functionality.
- The inclusive membership approach opened doors to stakeholders, although the CWG can further invest in engaging local actors in decision-making.
- The CWG's primary focus regarding harmonizing transfer value and targeting criteria was to establish a clear and uniform assistance measure at the onset.
- Investing in digital solutions for common information-sharing can be considered a step forward in terms of efficiency. If more CWG members join data-sharing agreements, stronger alignment can accelerate coordination and deduplication efforts.
- MPCA coordination currently lacks institutional collaboration to link MPCA with national social protection schemes. As the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) and CWG seek to promote local ownership, actors aim to further invest in partnerships with institutions at the national level.

REFUGEE RESPONSE IN POLAND

Since 24 February 2022, nearly one-third of Ukrainians were forced to flee due to the full-scale invasion. This created one of the largest displacement crises ever in Europe. As of June 2023, almost 8 million people had fled Ukraine into neighbouring countries, (UNHCR, 2023); as of May 2024, there are almost 6.5 refugees who have fled Ukraine, including some 6 million across Europe (UNHCR, 2024). Under the auspices of the Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP), partner organisations provided assistance to

more than 526,000 individuals including cash, NFIs and protection services across all 16 regions of Poland from March-August 2022 (UNHCR, 2022a, p.5).

As of May 2024, Poland is currently hosting 953,895 refugees. In March 2022, the Government of Poland (GoP) began including refugees in national protection systems by adopting the Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens (UNHCR, 2022a, p. 5). The framework enabled refugees to benefit from broader protection services than other forcibly displaced populations. Since entering into force, over 1.7 million refugees from Ukraine applied for temporary protection in the country and accessed different services provided by the state authorities and humanitarian actors (UNHCR, 2024).

The government-led response is complemented by an inter-agency coordination structure which entails thematic sector groups. The Refugee Coordination Model (RCM) was adopted in March 2022 in response to the influx of refugees, which was later amended to reflect the contextual changes (UNHCR, n.d.; UNHCR, 2022b, p. 36-37). Through the Inter-Sector Coordination group (ISCG), the RCM leads humanitarian interventions in complementarity with national and local government priorities (UNHCR, 2022b).

Since the early stages of the influx into Poland, humanitarian actors distributed cash assistance to the most vulnerable groups. The scale of the crisis and the high number of humanitarian actors required an inter-agency coordination mechanism to harmonize approaches and adequately meet the needs of the refugees. Accordingly, the Cash Working Group (CWG) in Poland, co-chaired by UNHCR and local NGO Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH), was created to support the GoP and facilitate coordination of efforts and achieve overall effectiveness of cash assistance.

METHODOLOGY, SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted in Poland between November 2022 and - June 2023 to examine the coordination process, its outcomes and lessons learned whilst the research was being conducted. As such, the thesis is focused solely on the multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) coordination. The study also explored cash coordination process driven by CWG and its effectiveness on Cash Transfer Programming outcomes in Polish operational context. The timeframe was limited to the onset of Ukraine refugee response when CWG initiated coordination of the MPCA in Poland. Therefore, cash coordination prior to the influx of refugees from Ukraine is outside the scope of this study.

The scope of research was limited to the CWG's coordination mechanism, owing to its leading role in cash response across the whole country. Hence, the study was focused on processes within the CWG and the outcomes of cash coordination. To capture different themes, achievements and best practices and their impact on MPCA-related outcomes were documented. Other modalities coordinated by the CWG were excluded from this research. The researcher aimed to understand where Cash Transfer

Programming actors agreed on common approaches in terms of technical and strategic coordination. The study also sheds light on challenges that the CWG tackled since the activation of the coordination mechanism (CWG, 2022).

The study relied on three methods: i) researcher's direct observation of a regular coordination meeting, ii) insights provided by CWG co-chairs and iii) secondary data analysis. The primary and secondary data for the study was collected and analysed between September 2022 - May 2023. As a part of the research, qualitative methods were employed to collect data. Firstly, a comprehensive desk review was conducted to gather and analyse secondary data. The desk research was followed by semi-structured interviews with UNHCR and PAH as key informants and co-chairs leading the CWG at the time. Data collection tools were comprised of open-ended questions and gave the interviewees space to freely express their perspectives regarding the CWG's progress and actual topics at the time. The co-chairs provided descriptive and explanatory views that were afterwards used to draw findings. Thus, the primary data collection was based on non-random purposive sampling gathering key insights from the respondents with the most knowledge and expertise in the field.

The first limitation is scarcity of the holistic research on MPCA coordination. The lack of interest can be attributed to two main factors. On the one hand, the systematic use of cash working group for MPCA coordination was only introduced in March 2022. Secondly, with regards to the Polish operational context, the complex refugee response along with cash coordination was a new endeavour for the country. The CWG was also experiencing frequent contextual changes throughout the response. However, this was a unique opportunity to make initial observations during the evolution of CWG and contribute to the broader discourse of cash coordination both at academic and operational levels.

The second constraint the researcher faced was insufficient secondary data available related to what the CWG or its members produced at the time. As UNHCR is one of the co-chairs of CWG (CWG, 2022), the UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP) was consulted in the beginning of this research. The ODP is a publicly accessible platform used by UNHCR to share key information. With regards to the work of CWG, the latest publicly available CWG regular meeting minutes dated back to May 2022. Along with the minutes, the ODP was lacking CWG member reports. The information on cash assistance was accessed through the needs assessment reports and factsheets produced by UN agencies, such as UNHCR and IOM, the Global Protection Cluster and the RRP. Nevertheless, the content was generic and did not provide full insight on cash coordination structure and its outcomes. To overcome the limitation on data flow, the researcher asked co-leads of CWG to share all the documents that could significantly support desk research. In addition, the researcher was given permission to access the CWG's common database for information management.

KEY FINDINGS

Achievements

- **High Effectiveness of MPCA.** Analysis of secondary data and the interviews showed that the CWG members assisted over 526,000 individuals, from March-August 2022 or approximately 97% of all cash recipients and 71% of the targeted refugees from Ukraine reached in 2022 (CWG, 2023; UNHCR; 2023). This data was derived from the reporting contributions of 26 distinct cash actors within the CWG's framework, while the CWG's membership is actually comprised of a larger number than this subset of contributors. Therefore, there is a high likelihood that the number of MPCA recipients exceeds the actual reporting figures provided than the number of the CWG members.
- **Shared leadership between UNHCR and local actors.** The leadership responsibilities are equally distributed with particular exceptions. It is noteworthy that NGO Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH) holds to its UN representing the CWG and advocating for MPCA coordination at the ISCG level. Most of the technical functions are implemented and overseen jointly. The CWG endorsed an updated terms of reference encouraging resourcing and inclusion of local/national actors as co-chairs in case they meet a set of criteria. The updated terms of reference introduced the idea of periodic elections for selecting local/national actors as a co-chair (CWG, 2023). The approach intended to progressively leverage the local knowledge and expertise of implementing actors and increase their ownership in cash coordination. Moreover, the terms of reference included separate annexes for co-chairs outlining coordination tasks including the division of responsibilities between co- chairs and those beyond the CWG's scope (CWG, 2023).
- **Inclusive membership.** To facilitate smooth access, the CWG leadership utilized existing networks and avenues such as mailing lists. Starting with 22 members, the number of members rose over time, as the CWG saw a surge in membership counting over 100 member organisations as per May 2023. A dedicated list was developed to maintain a record of interested participants.

Employing this strategy, the CWG managed to rapidly mobilize funds for MPCA. The strategy contributed to more effective and sustained coordination efforts, as compared to the earlier stages of the response. Later, the updated terms of reference expanded its membership scope to capture a wide representation of actors from ISCG, state authorities, donors, and financial service providers (CWG, 2023).

- **Leveraging common information sharing tools.** The early emphasis on digital tools laid the foundation for more advanced technological integration and efficient information management, allowing for smoother data collection,

updates, and dissemination. The CWG has actively advocated for the use of the 5Ws framework (who is doing what, when, where, and why). Initially, 5Ws were employed via the Kobo Collect platform to facilitate the updating of members' MPCA activities (CWG, 2022). The system was later migrated to SharePoint, providing a more robust and adaptable platform for managing the wealth of information generated by the CWG's activities (CWG, 2023).

Another notable initiative in this direction was the advocacy for the adoption of the Population Registration and Identity Management Eco- System (PRIMES) as a means to streamline operations (CWG, 2022). In addition, the CWG's commitment to efficient tracking and management was reflected in its continued use of the Refugee Assistance and Information System (RAIS), an information management portal administered by UNHCR. RAIS is an inter-agency tool for tracking assistance, referrals, and assessment information. It enables UNHCR and partners to share assistance records and cross-check beneficiary list.

The strategic employment of RAIS enabled the CWG to not only monitor the progression of registered applications but also to fine-tune the coordination efforts through data-driven insights. The integration of RAIS into the coordination process served as a pivotal tool that helped the CWG members increase overall efficiency. Namely, it allows the CWG members to prevent duplication of assistance, provide targeted assistance to the most vulnerable households and maintain data security, Provide efficient reporting tools, standardize reporting and improve overall accountability.

From Flexible to narrow targeting. The CWG has embraced a flexible approach as in the case of transfer value. The approach allowed the member organisations to direct their efforts towards specific vulnerable populations in accordance with their resources, expertise, geographical reach, and donor commitments. In the subsequent months, the CWG took a proactive step to form a dedicated sub-working group specifically for targeting purposes.

Challenges

High Turnover and Fluctuating Membership. The considerable drawback of cash coordination is the difficulty to retain institutional memory stemming from high turnover rates within the CWG since March 2022. The frequent change at the helm hampers the coordination process slowing down the pace of progress.

The CWG in Poland also grapples with the dual challenges of fluctuating membership and limited participation, posing hurdles to effective coordination. The constantly changing composition of members hampers the full realization of their collective potential. The presence of multiple members does not necessarily ensure effective coordination, as maintaining deep engagement in discussions becomes intricate. This

scenario restrains the harnessing of the rich expertise these organisations could contribute.

Limited Representation of Local Actors. Factors such as language barriers and constrained technical capacities significantly affect local representation and undermine the capacity to fully comprehend on-ground intricacies, impacting the responsiveness of interventions and overall efficacy in coordination.

Insufficient Data Inputs. The consequence of incomplete participation of all CWG members becomes apparent when there are gaps in the data collected within the 5Ws tool. In addition, although there is progress in a number of actors interested in joining data-sharing agreements, the CWG is tackling obstacles to implementing de-duplication at a larger scale. Consequently, this limitation affects information management and accurate reporting (UNHCR, 2023; PAH, 2023).

Necessity to establish robust linkages with the national social protection schemes.

The discussion around linking cash to the existing social protection programmes had been one of the cornerstone topics resulting in the establishment of another dedicated sub-working group for mapping existing social protection services and advocacy to establish linkages with MPCA. The secondary data review revealed that the primary focus of the CWG was to achieve harmonization and provide technical guidance.

The social protection task force completed the mapping of the existing social protection schemes. In addition, there attempts to establish contacts with the GoP in this regard, although it has not been translated into a solid institutional collaboration as of yet.

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