

UKRAINE EMERGENCY: CHILDREN FLEEING UKRAINE – THE ADVOCACY AGENDA FOR ACTION

A call for action to protect all children and their families displaced by the war

The ongoing war in Ukraine **poses an immediate threat to the lives and well-being** of the country's 7.5 million children. Children have been killed, wounded, uprooted from their homes, separated from family members, and severely distressed by the devastating violence all around them.

A rapidly growing number of children and families are fleeing to neighbouring countries, with many more expected to be displaced in the coming days and months. The Refugee Response Plan indicates that **up to 4 million – including at least 1.6 million children – may be displaced outside the country**.

Children are – and will be – disproportionately affected given their unique vulnerabilities and needs, which can be heightened by a child's age, gender, disability, and circumstances. The humanitarian response must understand these needs and seek to address them through an adapted approach.

Children without parental care are at a heightened risk of violence, gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation. When these children are moved across borders, whether through evacuations or having by parents or relatives in order to protect them, these risks are multiplied. The risk of trafficking also soars in emergencies.

Neighbouring and impacted countries must ensure the **immediate identification and registration of unaccompanied and separated children** fleeing from Ukraine, after allowing them access to territory.

Immediately following border crossings, safe spaces for children and families need to be made available by states, linked to national child protection systems. The current emergency also necessitates rapidly expanding the capacity of emergency care arrangements with screened caregivers as well as other critical services for the protection of children.

Countries receiving children fleeing from Ukraine have demonstrated extraordinary compassion and solidarity – keeping their borders open and extending lifesaving support. As the number of those fleeing grows rapidly, **responsibility sharing at national, European, and international level** will be key.

Children's lives should not be put on hold. Meeting their immediate needs, including child-friendly reception, safety, housing, education, health care and protection, is just the first step to ensure that they can continue to learn, grow, and discover. We must ensure that they have the protection and support they need now and going forward, to grow, thrive and enjoy life as all children should.

The priority now must be **ensuring that children and their families are safe and provided with the support and assistance they need immediately**, without discrimination, while at the same time enhancing local and national capacities in receiving countries to rapidly scale up existing services to ensure that they can continue to accommodate, support, include and protect children and young people.

Action needs to be not only fast, but forward looking, building the foundations for a sustainable life for refugee children and their families. Applying the many valuable lessons that we have learned on how best to protect and support children from previous refugee responses – captured also in the Global Compact on Refugees – will help all stakeholders put in place a sustainable response from the beginning.

Experience has shown that **extending national systems to include refugee children is cost-efficient, more protective and more sustainable**. This means including children fleeing Ukraine in national education and child protection systems, ensuring unhindered access to family income and work, as well as access to gender-based violence, mental health and psychosocial support services.

UNICEF and UNHCR call for **nine key actions** to help children forcibly displaced by the war in Ukraine:

1. End the hostilities and protect women and children from the effects of war

UNHCR and UNICEF join the UN Secretary-General in calling for an **immediate end to hostilities and for a peaceful resolution of the war to protect innocent children and civilians**. War is already driving children and families from their homes, displacing them within the country and forcing them to flee outside of their country – disrupting lives and livelihoods, tearing families apart and terrifying and traumatising children and families.

Places where children live, play, learn or access key services should never be used or targeted for military purposes. Civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected and spared under all circumstances. A failure to do so will compound the already extraordinary levels of human suffering of civilians. We call for all actors to protect children from conflict and urge that civilian infrastructure, especially schools, hospitals, and water facilities, remain safe and accessible to children in need. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas inflict massive and often indiscriminate destruction, impacting civilians, particularly children who suffer the most as they are less able to escape. They are among the first victims of mines and unexploded remnants of war.

Safe passage must be provided, so that civilians, including children and families can get out of harm's way and so that humanitarian supplies – food, water, medical supplies – can reach everyone in need quickly and safely.

Children need to be kept out of the line of fire and we call on all parties to abide by legal and moral obligations to keep children safe. No child should spend their days in fear, be forced to hide in basements or be injured or killed while in their homes, schools, or streets.

Nobody under 18 should participate in the war, either as a combatant or to support the armed forces or groups. Armed forces and groups often recruit children and young people – both boys and girls – as fighters or to perform support activities. This exposes them to abuse, separates them from their families and has serious long-term consequences.

Children in eastern Ukraine already lived in one of the world's most contaminated stretches of land with remnants of war. This reality is now rapidly extending to other parts of the country. All children and their communities in Ukraine should receive **emergency explosive ordnance risk education** to minimize the risks of unintentional explosions, and demining efforts should be prioritized.

Children living in institutional care, including boarding schools or institutions for children with disabilities in Ukraine are particularly vulnerable. The raging war inside the country is endangering their lives and well-being. Humanitarian evacuations, as a measure of last resort, can be lifesaving. Those legally responsible for children in institutions in Ukraine must, however, ensure that evacuations are done in line with national authorities' instructions. Movements must be reported to competent authorities in Ukraine and neighboring countries immediately upon crossing the border, and as far as possible, children should be evacuated with their identification papers and case files.

2. Provide safety to children and families by keeping borders open, maintaining access to asylum and protection, ensuring timely identification of children at risk

UNICEF and UNHCR welcome the positive stance of several countries on access to asylum for individuals of all nationalities fleeing Ukraine and **call on hosting countries to continue to keep their borders open**, without discrimination, to ensure all children and families can get to safety as quickly as possible.

UNHCR and UNICEF also welcome the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) by EU Member States for people fleeing Ukraine, which will ensure fast access to safety for those who need international protection. Any children that do not fall within the scope of the Directive should be supported to access asylum procedures, if necessary, and receive dedicated support to be sure they are able to effectively exercise their rights. **Child-friendly reception, asylum and other procedures that are fast and safe for children should be integrated in all aspects of the response.**

Time is of the essence when children are involved. **UNHCR and UNICEF calls for the identification of children at risk, including those who are separated or unaccompanied**, to take place immediately upon arrival, after access to territory has been granted. Procedures for identification should not be included as part of border procedures, to avoid any delay in access to territory and safety.

Children and families should be offered **safe spaces and immediate referral** to services, including mental health and psychosocial support and gender-based violence support services. UNHCR and UNICEF stand ready to offer support to governments to establish or expand on 'blue dot' Support and Information Hubs for children and families at key border crossing points and other strategic locations.

3. Safeguard children and their families from any type of violence, xenophobia, and discrimination in host communities

All children – regardless of nationality, race, or ethnicity – have a right to be protected from violence, discrimination and xenophobia – during their journeys, when crossing a border and in host countries.

UNHCR and UNICEF recognize and applaud the incredible outpouring of support and empathy demonstrated in hosting countries. Volunteers, cities, NGOs, private sectors, governments, and individuals have come forward to receive and welcome children and their families. However, host countries must ensure that such support is provided in a way does not put children at further risk, including of exploitation and abuse. Services provided to children must be subjected to quality controls,

and efforts are needed to raise awareness. Confidential and child-friendly complaints mechanisms are needed in case any violations should occur.

Children must also be **protected from the risk of gender-based violence and trafficking**, including through the provision of information to new arrivals at the border entry points and railway stations. Information that is developed and disseminated needs to be in formats that are accessible to children.

UNICEF and UNHCR call on all partners at national and local level, religious groups, NGOs, the media, and the private sector – and most importantly host communities – to stand together, welcome and include newly-arrived children and families while ensuring that the needs of children from the host community are addressed.

4. Immediately provide for children’s basic needs, including health and psychosocial support

UNHCR and UNICEF call on all states to ensure that **children fleeing Ukraine have access to key services**, including health care and psychosocial support, services for survivors of gender-based violence and support for children with disabilities.

Hosting countries have been at the forefront of developing new ways of responding to refugee crises – through responses that benefit both refugees and host communities, that include refugees in national systems, and that ensure access to livelihoods and/or social protection, and decent living conditions.

Children should have access to national child protection systems, with the same quality of care that is provided to national children, while ensuring their specific needs, especially for child victims of violence, separated and unaccompanied children, and children with disabilities, health or psychosocial needs.

Supporting **existing child protection systems to be able to respond to the scale of the needs** is crucial to ensure children receive timely, quality services. This will include addressing specific barriers related to the need for interpretation services, lack of information and gaps in capacity in national services.

It may be required to pool capacities across Europe to deploy trained social workers, guardians and psychosocial support staff, ideally those experienced in working with refugee children, to assist children wherever they are – upon arrival, at service point or in the reception facility housing them, as well as in host communities. Interpreters and cultural mediators also play an important role.

All staff involved in procedures involving children must have expertise in child friendly procedures - from registration to identification of specific vulnerabilities. Where specific vulnerabilities have been identified, children should be referred to child protection staff. UNICEF and UNHCR stand ready to support states and partners to provide capacity building, technical support and surge capacity.

Cities, in particular, play a unique role as frontline providers of these key services, and they must be supported as they respond to the needs of uprooted children and their families and include them in their service delivery systems and support them to rebuild their lives – as quickly as possible.

This requires opening local and national health care systems – including COVID-19 response, treatment, and routine child vaccination programs – to arriving children and families.

It will also **require rolling out and resourcing cash assistance programmes for immediate needs**, while expanding national social protection schemes to meet the needs of incoming families and ensuring access to basic family income to protect children from poverty and negative coping mechanisms. Such programmes should be designed to address child specific risks and contribute to better outcomes for children.

5. Ensure safe, child-friendly reception and housing arrangements for children and families

UNICEF and UNHCR call on states to ensure the **presence of staff from child protection and social welfare** ready and equipped to receive and assist children immediately after crossing the border and in reception facilities in a child-protection sensitive manner, ensuring immediate access to safe spaces for identification of children at risk, rapid assessments and the provision of immediate services.

Where limited child protection experts are available, other staff must be made aware of identification mechanisms, referral pathways and contact points for referrals. Safe spaces and private spaces for breastfeeding must be established. Menstrual hygiene management sensitive to the needs of adolescent girls must be prioritized as well as gender separate toilets and showers provided.

The most effective way to provide protection is to ensure **children remain with their families**. Children who arrive without adult care must be identified and placed in the care of the relevant child protection authorities. This should, wherever possible, be in registered and screened foster families. If such accommodation is not an option, and if children are to be housed in collective or shared accommodation centres, UNHCR and UNICEF call on governments to make sure **any accommodation is designed for the needs of children** – including specific needs based on gender, age, and disability. Accommodation must also meet minimum protection and child safeguarding standards that can prevent and mitigate the risk of exploitation and abuse, including gender-based violence. Mitigation measures should include confidential and child-friendly complaint mechanisms and the deployment of trained personnel.

6. Keep families together, ensure family tracing and do what it takes to reunite families

UNHCR and UNICEF calls for everything possible to be done to **maintain family unity and expedite family tracing and reunification**, ensuring any decision is in each child's best interests. Children who are travelling alone or who have been separated from their families must be supported for tracing and reunification in safety, either inside or outside the host country, and in the best interests of the child.

This includes **defining the concept of 'family' flexibly**, encompassing all family members dependent on each other, allowing for flexibility on documentary requirements; and strengthening cross-border cooperation among competent national authorities.

Family tracing should only be carried out by qualified actors and reunifications should follow a best interest's assessment. Family reunification procedures should be streamlined across states to address barriers to fast, efficient and transparent family reunification.

Unaccompanied children arriving with adults such as former neighbours or friends of the family, should not be automatically separated from such caregivers – a rapid assessment can help ascertain whether this is a safe care arrangement and should be allowed to continue in the child's best interests. Placement of unaccompanied children in institutional care should be a last resort to be used for the shortest possible time. Institutional care wherever used should be small in size (residential) and integrated into local communities.

Until the fate of a child's parents/other close relatives can be verified, each separated child is considered as still having living close relatives. **No action should be taken that may hinder eventual family reunification such as adoption, change of name, or movement to places far from the family's likely location** until all tracing efforts have been exhausted. **Separated children** cared for by family members must be supported to remain with these families where in their best interests, until they can be reunified with parents or caregivers.

UNHCR and UNICEF are grateful for the solidarity and readiness shown by States to support unaccompanied and separated children through **eventual relocation schemes**. Given the particular vulnerability of these children, however, immediate needs and safety where they are must be prioritized in the short term, while medium to long term solutions are identified, based on their best interests.

7. Ensure children and young people have immediate access to education, training opportunities and support to rebuild their lives

Education for refugee children is arguably the best means available to help them, here and now, and to transform their futures. UNHCR and UNICEF calls on states to **include children fleeing from Ukraine in national education systems**, open vocational and other training programmes, and ensure access to labour markets for their caregivers. This is also an investment in lasting social cohesion by ensuring that refugees and host community children learn and play side by side.

Children below the age of 18 who have been granted Temporary Protective Status have a right to access education under the same conditions as nationals, as well as other important social services. Attention must, however, be paid to certain groups, such as asylum seekers and stateless persons, who may fall outside the scope.

UNICEF and UNHCR stand ready to support hosting governments to assess education sector needs, strengthen inclusive education systems and policies and work with local/national authorities to expand coverage and quality of all levels of education to respond to the needs in each given context.

We call on national authorities and the private sector to step up now to provide children and young people displaced with the tools, access and skills needed to rebuild their lives and remain connected. This includes

investing in connectivity initiatives for refugee children and young people and expansion of national digital learning initiatives. A 21st century refugee crisis requires a 21st century response that meets

children's **digital needs, ensures connectivity, and unlocks the incredible potential and talent** of refugee children and young people who through no fault of their own have seen their lives turned upside down.

8. Prepare for the future and accelerate refugee inclusion

UNHCR and UNICEF call on all stakeholders to lay the foundations of a strong medium- and long-term approach in the early stage of the emergency response.

This includes the need for **age- and gender-disaggregated data on displaced children** and their needs visible in national data sets to guide investments and policies. All data collection, sharing and retention should also be in line with the best interests of the child, including their right to privacy and data protection. Data should also include specific needs.

Policies and responses should be designed to make sure that investments and support really do reach the most vulnerable children and families, including in frontline communities and under-resourced areas hosting refugees. This may require **scaling up immediate, flexible, and long-term financing** for refugee hosting countries, working with the European Union and International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank and regional development banks like EBRD or KfW.

Additional, flexible and multi-year funding should be provided for the UN, civil society, and refugee and youth-led organisations to support national authorities in their response and to ensure the immediate and long-term needs of refugee children, their families and host communities are met.

Cities and local authorities that host children and families need to be supported financially, practically and politically. Many cities – including UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative network, cities that are part of the Mayors Mechanism on migration, the Global Parliament of Mayors or United Cities and Local Government, have been on the forefront of innovative and inclusive approaches to welcome children and young people. This helps to ensure access to key services, involvement of young people in local decision making and prevention of discrimination or xenophobia.

9. Engage children and young people, safely and ethically, as key actors and partners in shaping the response – and work with youth- and refugee-led organisations

UNHCR and UNICEF call for effective and ethical **child and youth participation** in the early humanitarian response and longer-term service delivery.

Children and young people forced to flee from conflict are best placed to help contribute to the response to address their needs, having experienced first-hand the disruption that war has caused in their lives. They bring with them talents, ideas, and skills that we must leverage in shaping an adequate and effective response. They are part of the solution and should be treated as partners.

Every child should be **heard and provided with information** on options available, as well as counselling and targeted support. Children, youth, and families need timely, accurate and accessible information on their rights and services, in languages that are relevant to them.

To untap the potential of children and youth, **systematically seek and consider their views and insights**. To best address the challenges they face, including specific challenges faced by adolescent girls and young women, and by children and youth with disabilities, involve children and youth in all stages of the design and implementation of the response, using an age-sensitive and youth-centred approach.

Youth volunteers can help identify and provide services and supplies on the ground, connecting young people in need with relevant services. Young volunteers can support child protection activities, support recreational or education activities, and help build socio-emotional skills through volunteer circles or similar activities.