

Ukraine Refugee Crisis Realtime Review



Jane Cocking & Nicholas Finney, October 2022

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Executive Summary

Starting in late February 2022, the Ukraine refugee crisis was one of the largest and fastest-growing displacement crises in recent history. At time of writing, 7.5 million refugees have been recorded in Europe. The crisis has triggered exceptional levels of support and solidarity from neighbouring governments and communities. The UN humanitarian flash appeal for Ukraine is one of the biggest and most generously funded ever. Public appeals in many European countries have been very well supported.

Plan International had no operational presence in Ukraine or neighbouring countries prior to the crisis but made a quick decision to launch an Orange 2 response in Poland, Romania and Moldova and some months later in Ukraine. This was soon followed by a commitment to register a Plan office in each country. This decision making recognised the strong civil society response to the emergency and the programme has had a focus on strengthening local response. There was concern within Plan that a major response in middle and high-income countries could divert resources from programming in other parts of the world and as a result it was decided that Plan’s operational capacity from other country offices and regional hubs could not be pulled into the response. This decision was admirably ambitious but ultimately unrealistic as the commitment to three or four new countries would inevitably require additional, experienced resources. Plan’s response was unusual in (a) the organisation does not often respond in “non-presence countries” and (b) it was operationally supported by the Global Hub (GH) rather than a Country Office (CO) or Regional Hub (RH).

The Real Time Review (RTR) process involved a mixed methods approach and included visits to Poland and Moldova, along with virtual interviews and focus groups. Over 70 staff were interviewed, 28 attended focus groups and 77 completed an online survey. 10 partner organisations in Poland and Moldova were also interviewed.

The RTR set out to answer 6 overarching questions, with key findings as follows:

1. **Has Plan's response been timely and effective?** Plan's strong ambition, commitment & fast initial response have not been matched by clarity of strategy & decision-making. The response has met these criteria to some extent.
2. **Have Plan's staff been supported to do their jobs effectively?** Plan's support systems are not yet in line with its strategic ambition, leading to lack of flexibility, delays and staff morale problems. The response did not meet this criterion.
3. **Has Plan's response been appropriate and relevant?** The focus of Plan's response has been appropriate to needs but delays have often undermined the relevance of the programme. The response met these criteria.
4. **Has Plan's response strengthened local capacity and avoided negative impact?** Plan's project design has been largely determined by the assessment of knowledgeable national and local partners. The response has met these criteria.
5. **Does Plan's response adhere to humanitarian principles?** Plan's response, like that of most international organisations, has been focused on one side of the conflict largely as a result of the context. The Response met this criterion to some extent.
6. **Does Plan's response demonstrate that the organisation continuously learns and improves?** There is little evidence of quick lesson learning and adjustment during the response to date and the response does not meet this criterion.

Although Plan has been active in humanitarian crises for many years the organisation has only recently committed to scaling up its humanitarian impact and becoming the leading organisation for girls facing crisis or disaster. There is recognition in the Global Strategy that this will require the development of appropriate systems, processes and ways of working for response but there has not yet been time to put this in place. It is important that the findings of this RTR are seen against this organisational backdrop.

Plan's response to the Ukraine refugee crisis so far has demonstrated several strong characteristics including the fast initial decision, choice of programmatic interventions and partnerships with local organisations. The challenges that Plan faced related to the response strategy not being clear or well understood, decision making structures for management and support to the response not being strong enough, systems not being fit for purpose for a rapid onset emergency and an insufficient pool of humanitarian expertise that could be deployed for sustained periods.

As part of a consultative process with key stakeholders, recommendations have been formed as part of this RTR. The Ukraine Refugee Response Team should quickly confirm the strategy from now on to provide clarity on Plan's objectives for staff on the ground, partners, and those supporting in the Global Hub and in National Offices. At the global level, there are various recommendations that relate to Plan's ambition to "scale up humanitarian impact" expressed in the Global Strategy. The learning from the response to the Ukraine refugee crisis provides a great opportunity to reflect on what will be required to deliver on this priority and also to underpin a process of investment to build the necessary culture, capacity, systems, processes and structures.

Acknowledgements

The RTR team would like to thank the partner organisations that we met in Moldova and Poland. The huge effort made by local organisations to support those who have fled the conflict continues to be both inspiring and encouraging.

A wide range of Plan staff contributed to this Realtime Review and the review team would like to thank every one of them, whether they were involved in an interview, a focus group, completed the survey or provided support to help the RTR team get from A to B. Thanks to Emma Kelleher and Colin Rogers for supporting the RTR Team so well, especially when they had so much on their plate. And thanks to the CDs who made up the RTR Reference Group and provided important insights and guidance.

This was our second RTR with Plan and we continue to be impressed by the professionalism, collaborative approach and passion for Plan's mission that staff in the organisation show. It was a privilege to have an opportunity to work together again.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CO	Country Office
CPIE	Child Protection in Emergencies
CVA	Cash and Voucher Assistance
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
ERP	Emergency Response Plan
EIE	Education in Emergencies
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GH	Global Hub
HoM	Head of Mission
KII	Key Informant Interview
MERL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Research & Learning
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NO	National Office
RH	Regional Hub
RTR	Real Time Review
SRHR	Sexual & Reproductive Health Rights

For brevity Plan International is also referred to as 'Plan' in this report.

1. Introduction

Overview of the Ukraine Refugee Crisis

Following a military build-up over several months, conflict between Russia and Ukraine escalated on 24th February 2022. This triggered one of the fastest-growing humanitarian and displacement emergencies in recent history. Within weeks, millions—over one quarter of the population of Ukraine—had fled their homes to seek refuge abroad or in parts of Ukraine further from the violence.

The number of people leaving Ukraine so far is massive – there have been 13.3 million border crossings from Ukraine since the start of the crisis. The refugee crisis is also dynamic and complex with 6.2 million crossing the border back into Ukraine to date. At time of writing, 7.5 million refugees have been recorded in Europe¹.

The Ukraine crisis has triggered exceptional levels of support and solidarity. Neighbouring governments have mobilised quickly, as have local communities in those countries. In contrast with their approach to refugees from other conflicts, EU countries have been fast to provide temporary protection and access to jobs and services to Ukrainians. The UN humanitarian flash appeal for Ukraine is one of the biggest and most generously funded ever². Public appeals in many European countries have also been very well supported.



Refugees from Ukraine across Europe (as of 20 September 2022)³

¹ All data from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> as of 30th Sept 2022

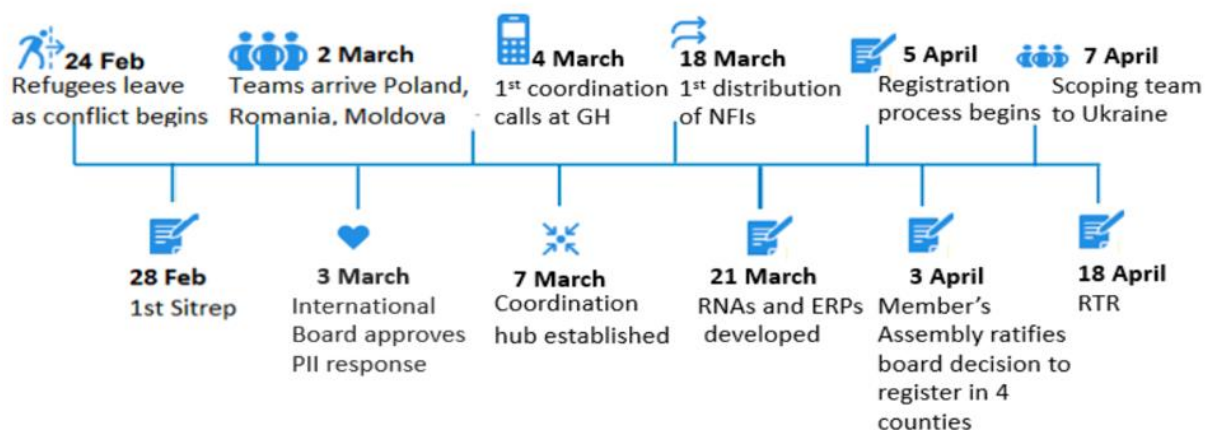
² Saez, P. (2022), Navigating humanitarian dilemmas in the Ukraine Crisis, ODI: <https://odi.org/en/publications/navigating-humanitarian-dilemmas-in-the-ukraine-crisis/>

³ UNHCR, 23 September 2022, Ukraine Situation Flash update #31

Overview of Plan International Response to the Refugee Crisis

Following the escalation on 24th February, Plan moved quickly to organise. The first crisis coordination call took place on 25th February. There was an initial discussion with National Directors on the same day. This was quickly followed by the development of initial plans for programming, communications and advocacy over the next two days. An emergency appeal pack was also assembled through the same period.

Plan International had no operational presence in Ukraine or neighbouring countries prior to the crisis. In the initial weeks of the emergency the Plan International Board authorised the organisation to respond to the refugee influx in Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary and Slovakia “with and through partners, and in alignment with our global strategy”⁴. Poland, Romania and Moldova were prioritised for scoping missions. Scoping missions to Hungary and Slovakia were initially planned but subsequently placed on hold.



Timeline of initial Plan International response to Refugee Crisis⁵

The initial decision recognised that “some of the neighbouring countries have very strong civil society who are already responding so our response must focus on strengthening the local response”. Other key aspects of the initial decision making were:

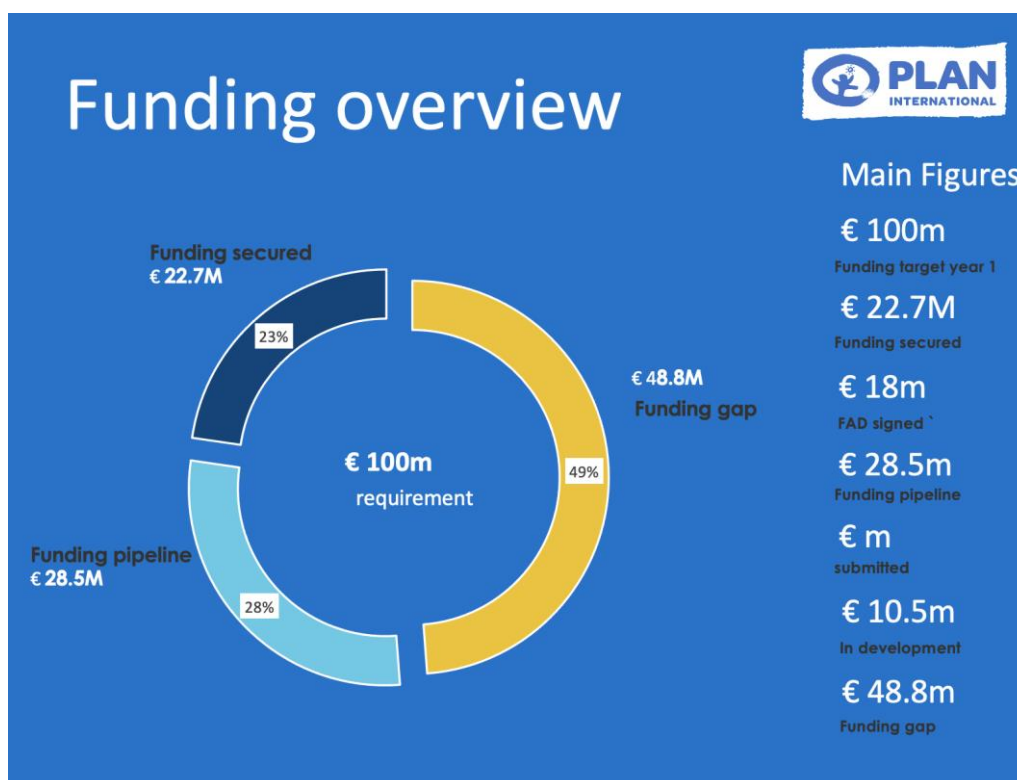
- An Orange 2 alert level was quickly agreed
- It was stated that the response could not pull resources (human or financial) away from existing programmes.
- The initial programming plans gave a clear steer to focus on response in Child Protection in Emergencies (CPIE), Education in Emergencies (EIE), Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and Cash & Voucher Assistance (CVA).
- It was initially determined not to register in the Poland, Moldova or Romania but this was revised some weeks later
- In event of an influx of refugees into National Office (NO) countries the NOs would themselves decide whether to respond domestically. A response was soon launched in Germany following this approach.

⁴ “Ukraine Crisis – Operational Approach, As of 8th March 2022” – Plan International Internal Document

⁵ Taken from “Ukraine Crisis Response Overview” 21st April 2022

Thus far the response in Poland, Romania and Moldova has reached 101,345 programme participants, with €22.4 million of funding having been secured so far for the overall Ukraine response (both inside Ukraine and the refugee crisis). The follow figures give a further breakdown of progress in terms of reach and fundraising⁶:

Country	# Target programme participants	# Programme participants reached	% of target reached
Poland	144,000	21,954 (direct) 283,000 (indirect)	15%
Romania	95,000	36,441	38%
Moldova	90,000	42,950	48%
Ukraine	80,000	25,586	32%
Totals	409,000	131,275 283,000 indirect	32%



Overview of Funding Situation as of September 2022⁷

⁶ Taken from "Ukraine Crisis Internal Situation Report – Sitrep 18" 24/09/2022

⁷ Taken from "Ukraine Crisis Response Overview Sept 2022 – Sitrep 18"

Scope of this Realtime Review

This Realtime Review is focused on the Plan International Response in Moldova, Poland and Romania. The objectives are:

1. To review Plan International's approach to the Ukraine crisis, determining if it was timely, appropriate and in alignment with the updated Plan International Global Strategy.
2. To identify key learnings from Plan International's establishment of response activities in non-presence countries.
3. Review decision making processes and timelines across the federation (Global Hub, National Organisations and Liaison Offices), highlighting key issues to address for future crises.
4. Assess Plan International's risk tolerance levels in the response and alignment with the Global risk Policy.
5. To review Plan International's approach to partnerships in humanitarian crises and determine the readiness of the organisation to work with partners in humanitarian crises.
6. Highlight key issues related to our systems and processes that should be factored into the ongoing development of the organisation's new finance and M&E systems.
7. Staffing. Were roles deployed to the crisis appropriate and timely? Was the organisation able to address staffing requirements in a timely and effective manner?

At the country levels, findings will be used to make course corrections and improvements, whilst at the global organisational level, the findings will be used to inform future organisational development and strategy.

It is important to note that:

- The objective of the RTR is not to measure the impact of the response. It is a learning process to help strengthen the existing response
- The RTR does not consider the Germany National Office refugee response, nor the response inside Ukraine which is only just being established.



2. Methodology

The RTR commenced on 9th August and was conducted over a period of two months. The following methodology was adopted:



Phase 1 – Setup

- The RTR team of 2 external consultants was briefed by the DRM team which had responsibility for the administrative organisation of the RTR.
- Scoping interviews were conducted virtually with 11 persons identified as critical to developing the analytical framework for the RTR (list of interviewees Annex 1)
- An analytical framework was drafted identifying key issues and questions that should be prioritised in the RTR. This was shared with the initial interviewees and with the RTR Reference Group (2 Country Directors) for feedback. It was amended and finalised following comments received and used as the basis for the data gathering phase (see Annex 2)
- A meeting with the RTR Reference Group was conducted to gain a country office / senior leadership perspective on how the usefulness of the RTR could potentially be maximised during phases 3 and 4.
- A list of key informants (KIs) for virtual interviews was developed. This was based on the master list of those deployed in the response so far, along with a list of staff supporting the response in GH and NOs. The KIs were selected to ensure coverage of the range key roles which have supported the response so far, staff who had spent at least 28 days within the response and who could meaningfully contribute to the questions in the analytical framework (list of interviewees Annex 1)
- A staff survey and Key Informant Interview (KII) guide was developed based on the finalised analytical framework. Country visits to Poland and Moldova were confirmed with relevant HoMs.

Phase 2 – Data Gathering

- A survey was distributed in English targeting staff deployed in the response during the first six months and those supporting the process from the GH, NOs and other parts of Plan International. There were 77 survey responses. The responses are summarised in annex 3.
- 40 virtual KIIs were conducted via Teams or Zoom.
- 2 country visits were conducted during the week of 5th September (one consultant visiting Moldova, the other Poland). During these visits a total of 14 face-to-face interviews with Plan staff were conducted, along with 10 interviews with staff from local partners

Phase 3 – Debrief and Reporting

The survey results and interview data were analysed using the indicators in the analytical framework. This analysis was used to compile a list of findings. A summary was then shared with in five focus group discussions with the following stakeholder groups:

- Finance and risk

- Human resources and legal
- National offices
- Ukraine Response Team
- Global hub senior managers

The focus groups had a dual purpose (1) check for accuracy and to validate the findings and (2) to draw out suggestions for the management action plan which would follow the RTR. In broad terms, the FGD participants confirmed that the findings were accurate, whilst also giving some useful suggestions for the full report. In total, 28 staff attended these focus groups.

The summary of findings was also shared with the DRM team members coordinating the RTR and the RTR reference group before this final report was compiled.

Phase 4 – Management Response

The next step of the process will be the compilation of a management response, which will build on the findings and recommendations in this report.



3. Constraints and Limitations

As would be expected the main constraint faced was that the RTR team could not speak to all of the staff who have been involved in the responses so far. The purposeful sampling approach enabled approximately 20% of the staff engaged in the response to be interviewed. The survey received a strong response with about a third of the staff intensively involved in the response making a survey submission.

The other constraint faced relates to the number of staff deployed within the response, sometimes for a short time period of only 2 or 3 weeks. During the initial six months the response teams in Moldova, Poland and Romania were never fully staffed which meant that there were gaps in key functions and instances of double/treble-hatting. The result of this for the RTR team was that it was sometimes hard to build a clear understanding of the sequence of events in the response. This challenge was compounded by gaps in information and documentation.

Otherwise, the RTR team found that the process went according to the agreed plan. It was very encouraging to see that those invited for interview were very keen to engage and contribute to the process.



4. Findings

The findings are organised as per the six overarching questions agreed in the analytical framework (annex 3). The relevant criteria considered are listed alongside each overarching question. A summary assessment statement is given for each overarching question, along with a Red / Amber / Green Rating.

4.1 Timeliness and effectiveness

Overarching RTR Question	Related Criteria
Has Plan's response been timely and effective?	CHS # 2 - Humanitarian response is effective and timely Feminist Principle: Purpose-driven
Overall Assessment	Response meets criteria to some extent
Plan's strong ambition, commitment & fast initial response have not been matched by clarity of strategy & decision-making	

Main findings

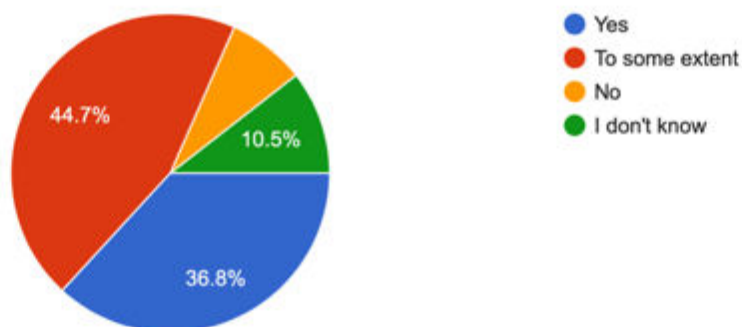
1. The Board's initial decision, endorsed by the Members' Assembly to respond was fast and in line with organisational strategy and put Plan in a very good position to respond.
2. Initial plans for programming, advocacy, communications and an emergency appeal were put in place very quickly following the escalation on 24th February (over the following 3 days)
3. The Board's decision to mount the response without drawing on resources from elsewhere in Plan was unrealistic given the challenge of establishing programming in 4 new countries at the same time. This could not be done without additional resourcing.
4. There was a significant disconnect with respect to risk. A bold initial decision was followed by risk aversion in day-to-day implementation
5. There has been no clear, commonly understood strategy for response as a whole and this has led to lack of direction and confusion. For example, the transition from the scoping missions to beginning response without considering the overall strategy led to confusion later in the programme
6. Structures and responsibility for decision making have not been clear resulting in operational issues getting stuck for extended periods of time. However, decision making has been improving over the past month.

Examples of supporting information gathered in document review, survey, visits and KIIs

- All partners commended the early arrival of Plan teams in country.
- All Heads of Mission were unclear on the limits of their authority with respect to programme, finance and HR decisions. They felt their limits were significantly lower than Country Directors would normally work to but were unclear where they should go for authorisation of some issues.
- In Moldova early decisions were made to respond which led to successful interventions but they were outside the decision-making framework as it has been understood.

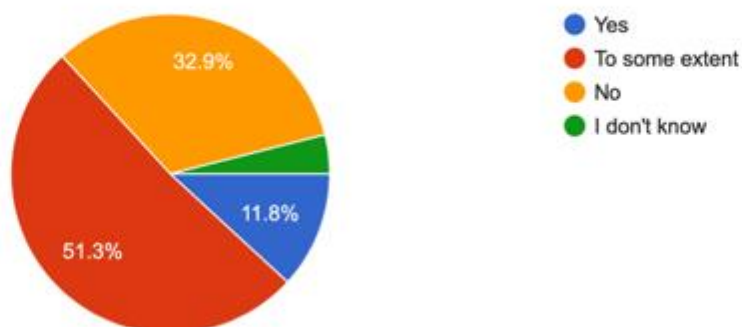
Did Plan begin responding within an acceptable timeframe?

76 responses



Has the response strategy been clearly communicated?

76 responses



4.2 Support to Staff

Overarching RTR Question	Related Criteria
Have Plan's staff been supported to do their jobs effectively?	CHS # 8 - Staff are supported to do their job effectively and are treated fairly and equitably Feminist Principle: Self and collective care
Overall Assessment	Response does not meet criteria
Plan's support systems are not yet in line with its strategic ambition, leading to lack of flexibility, delays and staff morale problems	

Main findings

1. High levels of staff turnover and inability to recruit long term members of staff have slowed response, undermined efforts of staff on the ground and caused confusion and delays for partners
2. The GH is not designed to be a Country Office and as a result were unable to provide the systems support to the programme which it required.

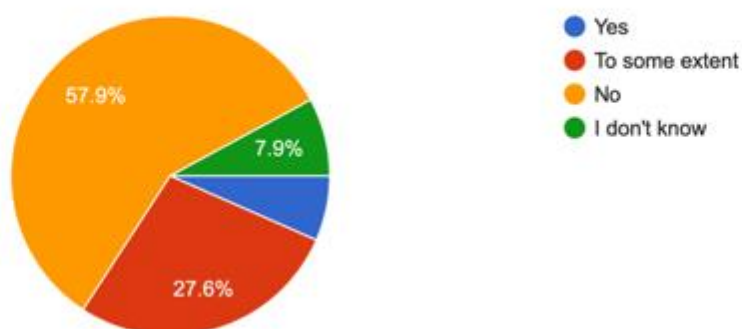
3. Due diligence procedures were slimmed down but still slow and more appropriate to development programmes rather than humanitarian response. This delayed programmes and exposed some partners to significant risks, eg proposals that were appropriate for May are only being implemented in September
4. The corporate finance system has provided poor support to staff to access cash for both programme and personal expenses. Staff have been exposed to personal stress and risk
5. Nevertheless, the values and approach of Plan staff in country was much appreciated and commended by partners – ‘these people were problem solvers despite the constraints they were working under.

Examples of supporting information gathered in document review, survey, and KIIs

- Staff are still using personal credit cards for personal and programme expenses with repayment often taking several weeks.
- Due diligence processes have taken months to complete meaning that time-specific work has been delayed in both Poland and Moldova, for example ‘summer centres’ for refugee children only being funded from the beginning of September.
- In Moldova there has been negative impact arising from payments that have been delayed in reaching partners. This has involved small organisations with limited reserves and options. There are examples of Plan’s payment process causing (1) a food distribution pipeline break, (2) damaging a partner relationship with a supplier (3) prompting a partner to dip into funds from another donor.
- Staff have been deployed to Ukraine on international contracts before registration meaning that a longer term team can be established sooner than was the case in Moldova, Poland and Romania, demonstrating a lesson learned.

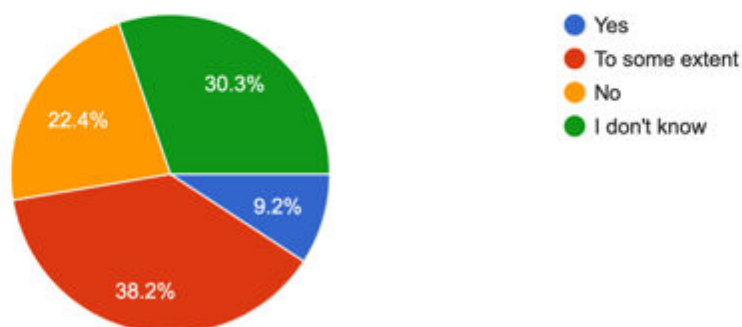
Were Plan's support systems fit for purpose for this response

76 responses



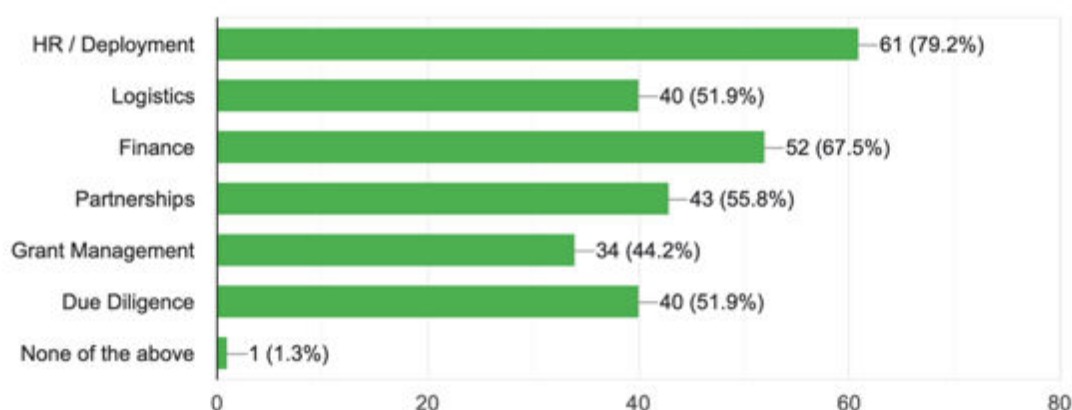
Are staff working on the response well supported to do their job with access to the necessary equipment, support and other resources?

76 responses



Which support systems need the most improvement for a situation like the Ukraine Refugee Crisis Response? (tick all the apply)

77 responses



4.3 Appropriateness and relevance

Overarching RTR Question	Related Criteria
Has Plan's response been appropriate and relevant?	CHS # 1 - Humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant. Feminist Principle: Tackling bias
Overall Assessment	Response meets criteria
The focus of Plan's response has been appropriate to needs but delays have often undermined relevance	

Main findings

1. Plan's sectoral competence in CPIE, EIE, MHPSS and CVA were all relevant to the crisis context and the needs of refugees.
2. Early interventions in the first weeks of the response were well chosen and outputs were significant

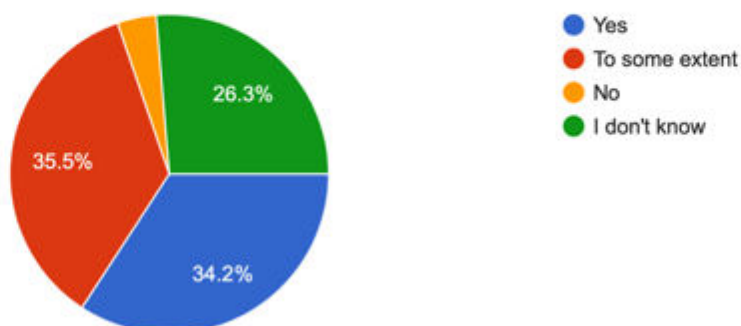
3. Delays in approval of partner proposals have undermined their relevance because of fluidity of environment.
4. Plan is clearly valued by partners as a donor but the organisation's added value on technical level is not yet clear and needs further consideration.
5. Gender specific elements have been included in programmes where partners already had expertise in this area.

Examples of supporting information gathered in document review, survey, and KIIs

- Plan's monthly partner coordination meetings in Moldova have been highlighted as a good example of a forum to ensure the relevance of Plan's programme.
- In Poland Plan's expertise in education is particularly valued by participants in the national sector fora.

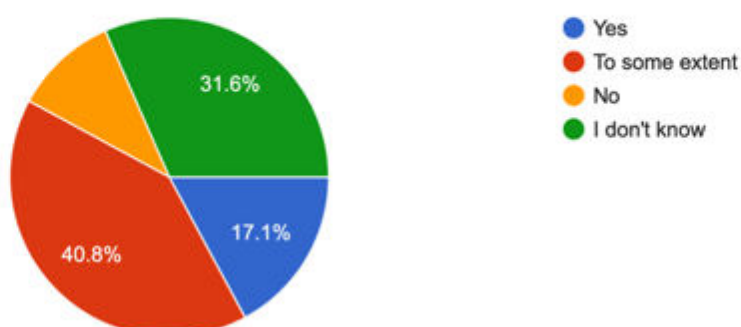
Has Plan International represented the voices of marginalised groups amongst refugee communities in a dignified manner in external communications?

76 responses



Was Plan's response based on strong communication and feedback from refugee and host communities and authorities?

76 responses



4.4 Locally Led Response

Overarching RTR Question	Related Criteria
Has Plan's response strengthened local capacity and avoided negative impact?	CHS # 3 - Humanitarian response strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects Feminist Principle: Share power NEAR localization performance measurement framework ⁸
Overall Assessment	Response meets criteria
Plan's project design has been largely determined by the assessment of knowledgeable national and local partners	

Main findings

1. Many partners are strong, established organisations and they have presented their own proposals and Plan staff have been supportive of these.
2. Plan is now working with a diverse range of partners in Moldova and Poland including small local groups, leading national bodies and the national affiliates of INGOs. This is a strength of the programme to build on. It should be noted that in Romania the selection of partners has focused on international organisations already established in country which has its benefits but is less likely to support the growth of national civil society.
3. In cases where partners were less strong Plan's approach to coaching and mentoring has been commended by partner staff for being focused and helpful
4. The relationships between Plan and partner staff appear to be respectful and mutually supportive.
5. Systemic delays and due diligence processes which often duplicate those of other agencies have meant that in many cases partners have had to use their own resources to begin programmes when they are needed – this has led to significant financial problems for some small organisations
6. Plan's decision to register their own presence rather than support partners remotely and through occasional visits has undoubtedly led to delays in partners receiving resources to begin work. As yet it is unclear whether the benefits of registration, e.g. Plan being able to provide closer supervision and technical advice have outweighed these delays.

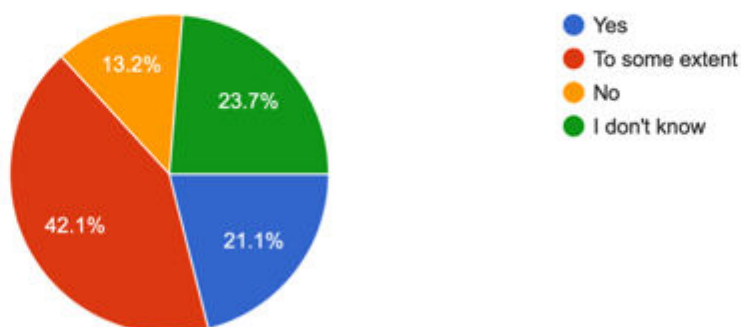
Examples of supporting information gathered in document review, survey, and KIIs

- Partners report that for the most part Plan does not seek to change proposals that they receive, although on occasions small amendments have been made.
- Specialist Plan staff have good working relationships with national experts in their sectors however, the exact value added from Plan staff being permanently in country is still being assessed.

⁸ <https://www.near.ngo/lpmf>

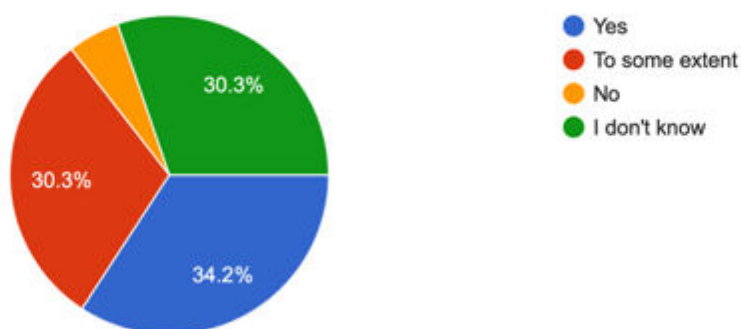
Do Plan ways of working ensure that Plan has equitable and complementary partnerships with local actors?

76 responses



In choosing where to focus in each country, did Plan coordinate effectively with local and national actors (including government)?

76 responses



4.5 Humanitarian Principles

Overarching RTR Question	Related Criteria
Does Plan's response adhere to humanitarian principles?	RFQ criterion # 10 - The response reflects the humanitarian principles of; impartiality, independence, neutrality and is based on meeting the humanitarian imperative. Consideration will also be given as to how IHL has been considered in the development of the response.
Overall Assessment	Response meets criteria to some extent
Plan's response, like that of most international organisations, has been focused on one side of the conflict largely as a result of the context	

Main findings

1. As with the international response as a whole Plan’s response has been focused on one side of the conflict. Circumstances make this inevitable but there are risks associated with the solidarity expressed by many in national and international communities for Ukraine as part of their response. This may have an impact on how Plan and others are seen in other parts of the world in subsequent responses.
2. The humanitarian imperative was at the initial intent of the Plan response but has been undermined by the delays caused by systemic processes.
3. Impartiality within communities is being actively built into plans and projects
4. Sadly new opportunities are being presented in Poland at least to support Russian-speaking refugees who are experiencing negative reactions locally
5. There was some initial lack of awareness of humanitarian principles on the part of some Plan staff members. Socialisation of humanitarian principles is needed for new staff and all partners.

Examples of supporting information gathered in document review, survey, and KIIs

- The programme in Moldova has targeted Roma people.
- There have been instances of staff in some countries feeling strongly about the need to make statements in support of Ukraine and more experienced staff have explained the importance of Plan not being perceived as a political actor.

4.6 Organisational Learning

Overarching RTR Question	Related Criteria
Does Plan’s response demonstrate that the organisation continuously learns and improves?	CHS # 7 – Humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve Feminist Principle: Self-awareness and courage
Overall Assessment	Response does not meet criteria
There is little evidence of lesson learning and adjustment during the response to date	

Note: the topics explored by the RTR focused only on Plan’s learning and adjustment within the Ukraine Refugee response, not on how learning from previous emergencies was applied.

Main findings

1. There are some examples of Plan being flexible and amending processes and programmes in response to issues arising from the programme but key points on strategy, decision-making, organisational systems and staff turnover remained unresolved for several months despite being highlighted on many occasions.
2. It is clear that in recent weeks several key issues, such as the strategy and structure of the response are now being addressed. The appointment of the new Response Director has certainly contributed to this.

3. There are reports that lessons having been learned from Poland, Moldova and Romania are now being applied to the establishment of the programme in Ukraine

Examples of supporting information gathered in document review, survey, and KIIs

- The absence of a clear, well understood strategy for the response has been referred to continually throughout the RTR process.
- Despite the issue of staff needing to use their personal credit cards for programme expenses being raised repeatedly it remains unresolved.
- There are now positive examples of lessons being learned, eg the issuing of international contracts to Ukraine staff before registration there was confirmed.



5. Conclusions

The conflict in Ukraine has led to a very different humanitarian crisis compared to any since the collapse of Yugoslavia and the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s and early 2000s. The rapid movement of millions of people from a middle-income country means that in many cases people have the resources to cope themselves with some form of support, but they are left with huge gaps in other areas. Overall the capacity and willingness of governments to receive and cope with arrivals has been high and the capacity of national civil society strong. Nevertheless, no government or society can cope with the scale of influx that took place in the spring of 2022 and international assistance is both important and relevant. How it is delivered presents challenging and complex problems.

In this context setting up four new country programmes and providing timely, relevant and high quality humanitarian response is a huge challenge and would stretch the most established humanitarian organisation. Although Plan has been active in humanitarian crises for many years the organisation has only recently committed to scaling up humanitarian impact and becoming the leading organisation for girls facing crisis or disaster. There is recognition in the Global Strategy that this will require the development of appropriate systems, processes and ways of working for response but there has not yet been time to put this in place. It is important that the findings of this RTR are seen against this organisational backdrop.

Positives

Initial decision

The initial decision to respond to the Ukraine crisis was taken very quickly, within days of the onset of the conflict by the Plan International Board and endorsed by the Members Assembly. This enabled the timely deployment of scoping missions in the region which put Plan in a strong position to respond.

Appropriate sectors for response

It is critical that response is context-specific and this is especially the case for situations such as the Ukraine crisis. Some agencies fall into the trap of offering exactly what they would do in very different environments. Plan's offer of support in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, Cash & Voucher Assistance, Education in Emergencies and Child Protection in Emergencies has been appropriate for the context and meets recognised needs.

Working in partnership

Plan's decision to work exclusively with partners was very sound. Although civil society capacity is not the same in the three refugee response countries and required different approaches, working in partnership was appropriate because it enabled Plan to quickly connect with existing contextual knowledge and understanding, to avoid heavy set up costs and to support the development of further national and local capacity.

Challenges

Strategy

Stakeholders across Plan felt there was no clear, well communicated strategy for the Ukraine crisis response. Despite this the key early steer that the response should be locally and partner-led was heard loud and clear and was followed up and implemented in each country.

In a context such as the Ukraine crisis a strategy should be a short, overarching document which sets out the overall goal of Plan's response, key objectives and how these are to be achieved. Such a strategy would inevitably evolve and should also inform the preparation of more detailed plans for specific areas, eg HR, communications etc. With respect to the Ukraine refugee response staff consulted in the RTR felt that there was insufficient discussion and communication at key points to confirm exactly what Plan wished to achieve in each country and across the whole response.

The absence of a clear and commonly understood strategy has very practical implications. It means that programme, staffing and communications plans cannot be developed coherently. This results in staff working to very short time horizons as they do not wish to make longer term commitments, and this can undermine the quality of the response and relationships with other actors. It also means that key decisions are made in the absence of an overarching framework, e.g. the decision for Plan to register in each country should have been informed by the overall purpose and objectives of the response. There were a range of options as to what a 'locally led' response could look like in terms of operational design and what degree of support from Plan each would need and it is possible that all of these options would have required registration.

A meeting involving all Heads of Missions and other key staff was held in June and steps were taken to develop a strategy but this was not followed up and so now, after 6 months, an updated strategy is being developed. This is giving much more clarity to the response.

Structure

Plan International's regular structure is a network of Country Offices reporting to Regional Hubs and then to the Global Hub. Decision-making and systems follow these lines and are effective. However, it was felt that because Plan had no programme presence in Eastern Europe then this structure could not be applied. In retrospect this decision caused a lot of confusion and despite their geographic distance from the operation a Regional Hub or Country Office could have been scaled up to manage and support the Ukraine response. This would have reduced the need to invent new systems and ways of doing things.

The structure of the response was unclear and there was no clear sense of who was 'in charge', and where responsibility for different levels of decision rested. The original intention was to operate a Ukraine Response Hub led by a Response Director reporting to the Executive Director, Programme Operations and providing all support functions for the response. Unfortunately, staff appointed to certain roles within the response lacked relevant experience and skills. In addition, the idea of a central hub was undermined by the fact that the various support functions supporting the response; HR, finance etc were all drawn from GH departments and continued to report to their GH managers rather than the hub. This is now being addressed by the current Response Director.

It was unclear to many staff where strategic and operational decision-making lay. There was no strategic oversight group which is a device Plan has used before for large scale initiatives to ensure that progress was being made and to correct its course if necessary. Although there were regular

operational meetings involving staff in country and from the GH participants were not sure what decisions they were empowered to make and as a result several key issues (such as the contracting of international staff) remained unresolved for a long time.

Systems

The business systems which were identified to support the Ukraine response were not fit for purpose. It was decided to allocate responsibility for supporting the response to the GH. However, support departments in the GH are designed to provide organisational oversight and functions which are very different to those found in country offices and so, unsurprisingly, they struggled to adapt.

Plan's systems are designed largely for longer term development programmes rather than rapid onset humanitarian response (for example, the due diligence process for clearing operational partners). Many systems are currently being reviewed and so this provides an ideal opportunity to ensure that there are suitable systems options in place for humanitarian response.

The status of teams and operations in countries was not clear. The options were that they could be stand-alone country offices or small programme units reporting to a hub which played the role of a country office. In the end they were a hybrid.

Staffing

The staff of any programme or response are its defining factor. All those interviewed for the RTR were clear that Plan staff have strong, commonly held values and a commitment to the organisation and its mission. The critical element for the Ukraine response however, was the very high turnover of staff. To date more than 150 people have been deployed or employed and many of them have been present for less than 4 weeks. The root cause of this appears to be a lack of risk appetite around recruiting locally due to local immigration and visa rules. This in turn led to a decision not to recruit dedicated staff for the response but to source people from across Plan and redeploy them. This led to delays as new staff were inducted and then were only effective for a short time before moving on and caused partners significant delays and time costs. Turnover was a recurring theme of the review and had serious knock-on impact on the timeliness and effectiveness of the response.

Risk

Plan's organisational risk framework describes a bold risk appetite when speed is important for the effectiveness of its work. This approach was clear in the initial decision-making but was not demonstrated in the implementation of the Ukraine refugee crisis response. For example: the decision to apply only a slightly shorter due diligence process than normal before contracting partners and the choice of staying with repeated short deployments rather than risking international contracts for staff before Plan was registered in the countries where they were to be located. Where speed is of the essence for the effectiveness of the work then such risks would be more than justified.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations build on the focus group discussions with key stakeholders at the end of the RTR. They offer a start-point for the development of Plan's Management Action Plans.

Ukraine Response

The new Global Strategy⁹ sets an ambition of Plan being “the NGO partner of choice by working across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus”. The ongoing response in Ukraine and refugee hosting countries is an important opportunity to demonstrate what this looks like in practice.

1. **The Ukraine Hub Director and Heads of Mission should confirm the medium term (2-3 year) strategy** for the three refugee response countries, Moldova, Poland and Romania. In developing this strategy it will be important to consider:
 - a. How to transition to nexus programming approaches which consider peace and development priorities alongside humanitarian response (considering issues such as community cohesion and durable solutions)
 - b. Specific scenarios in terms of the conflict and refugee situation at regional and country level and the potential for refugees to return from Ukraine either as a result of conflict or winter conditions.
 - c. Whether Plan intends to exit from any of the three countries and under what circumstances
 - d. Confirmation of how a locally led response will be further developed with exit plans for existing NGO partners
 - e. How to confirm local fundraising potential, in Poland and Romania in particular
 - f. How the response team structure will evolve (in particular, there is an opportunity to learn from the Lake Chad Regional Strategy)

This recommendation can and should be taken forward as soon as possible. It is recognised that the timescale for taking forward the other recommendations below may be longer.

Organisational development at global level

Since the recently agreed Global Strategy identifies “Scale up Humanitarian Impact” as one of its eight priorities. There is an opportunity to use this RTR to accelerate alignment of the organisation around this priority through the development of simple processes and strategies appropriate to fast paced humanitarian response.

2. **The DRM team should disseminate this RTR report** to GH senior management and other key stakeholders, along with a summary of findings of other recent RTRs
3. **The DRM team should lead a group of Global Hub senior managers to agree a management action plan** to identify priorities for investment to “scale up humanitarian impact” for the next 2-3 years. This plan should be shared with National Offices for consultation and with a view to agreeing how investments will be made. This should include a revision of the Disaster Response

⁹ Plan International Strategy Narrative, July 2022, “All Girls Standing Strong Creating Global Change”

Manual to ensure that it is short, succinct and provides easily understood guidance for managers and leaders in Plan at all levels involved in humanitarian response.

The Global Strategy outlines that “We will need to adjust our risk appetite for operating in fragile contexts and scale up our security management”. The response to the refugee crisis demonstrated a high level of initial risk appetite that was not adequately followed through in terms of operational support.

4. **Global Hub Senior management should agree a process for development fast-tracked emergency procedures** for finance, HR, supply chain and Due Diligence to enable rapid operational support and risk taking in a new emergency. These procedures would be signed off for a defined period of time at the beginning of a response to a crisis and should facilitate rapid response and allow for a higher degree of risk than is usual within Plan programmes.
5. **Global hub senior management should confirm leadership and management structures and accountability for emergency response** clearly articulating the likely role of the DRM team for support to different types of humanitarian response. Where appropriate these should allow for the DRM team to take on management responsibility for a response for a limited period of time.

The Global Strategy outlines “principled and locally led humanitarian action” as a key means to deliver. The locally-led Ukraine Refugee Response is an important learning opportunity. The Global Strategy also states that Plan will be “a rapid response vehicle for girls worldwide”.

6. **The Global Hub should work with all key stakeholders to put in place succinct guidelines for ‘principled and locally led humanitarian action’** with a focus on making sure that partnership due diligence is streamlined and workable for a new emergency
7. **The DRM should work with gender and partnership expertise** to identify how gender can be incorporated into a locally-led response model with a view to building response checklists and tools.

The Global Strategy states that “We will increase our dedicated surge capacity and humanitarian staff capability across the entire organisation [...]”. This RTR highlights major gaps in the capacity to deploy people to a large rapid onset emergency.

8. **The Global Hub People and Culture team should work with DRM** to identify costed options for increasing rapid response capacity for deployment in the first 4-6 weeks of a new emergency and deployable humanitarian expertise for second wave of response staff (typically deployed for 3 months). These costed options should be shared global hub senior management and NOs in line with recommendation 3, above.
9. **The Global Hub People and Culture team should develop a procedure to enable rapid contracting of staff** in an emergency response allowing a greater degree of risk than is usually the case within Plan procedures

The Global Strategy presents a “Must-Should-Could” approach for Plan’s Humanitarian Action. The Refugee Responses in Poland, Moldova and Romania are an important example of a “Could” response – “we could respond to a crisis in a country where we are not present, depending on unmet

needs, scale and capacity of the country to address the crisis and our ability to add specific value". This RTR has highlighted a lack of preparedness in certain key areas for such a response.

10. **The Global Hub Legal team should pull put in place a preparedness plan** to support faster registration of a new Plan office.
11. **Global Hub Senior management (ideally the operational lead?) should** put in place a checklist for new office setup in a non-presence country "office-in-a-box". This should cover the basis steps to follow for finance, HR, supply chain, partnership and legal. It should consider situations where Plan has a registration and where it does not. Note: an experience country office that has experience of opening new offices quickly and effectively could be enrolled to lead this process.
12. **Global Hub Senior management** should put in place a preparedness plan for provision of operational support and backstopping for a new emergency in a non-presence country which focuses on drafting in parts of Plan International with operational experience to lead and support setup of a new programme.

List of Annexes

1. List of key informants (anonymised)
2. RTR Analytical Framework
3. Data from staff survey