

Enhancing capacities of early childhood professionals in emergencies

Lessons learnt from the Ukrainian refugee crisis

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WHY INVEST IN THE ECEC WORKFORCE IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS?



ECEC professionals have a critical role in ensuring the quality of ECEC services. Building the capacity of the ECEC workforce therefore supports the inclusion of refugee children and their families within host communities.



Strengthening the ECEC workforce equips professionals to respond to a range of needs, including those arising in the context of families fleeing conflict. It therefore contributes to building a more resilient, flexible and adaptable ECEC system.



Diversifying and improving the skills of ECEC professionals, including leaders, assistants, educators and specialists, is required as part of a whole system approach.

HOW BEST TO ENHANCE ECEC WORKFORCE CAPACITIES?



Capitalize on existing human resources from the host and refugee communities, focusing on the essential role of ECEC educators while also building the competences of auxiliary staff to provide appropriate support.



Reduce policy and legislative barriers for qualified staff from refugee communities to be included within the host country ECEC workforce



Support host country language acquisition among the ECEC refugee workforce, while supporting them to preserve and celebrate their cultural and linguistic identity.



Provide an array of ongoing relevant and responsive professional development to support and upskill the ECEC workforce, bringing together professionals from host and refugee communities.

BACKGROUND

In May 2022, UNICEF commissioned Ecorys to carry out a “Situation Analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in support of Ukrainian refugees across EU member states and Moldova.” It aimed to provide insights to country level responses to supporting Ukrainian families and children and to inform ongoing actions regarding access to and quality of ECEC for Ukrainian refugee children. This brief on lessons learnt is part of a two-brief series. Its suggested recommendations build on the data collection and analysis carried out between May 2022-January 2023, as well as the findings, conclusions and recommendations presented in the two earlier publications.

The war in Ukraine represents a refugee crisis of a scale unseen in Europe since the second World War. From the start of the conflict on 24 February 2022, 5.3 million Ukrainian refugees have been recorded across Europe,¹ and 5.1 million have registered for temporary protection.²

Around 20% of the Ukrainian refugee children arriving in the EU since the start of the war are estimated to be under the age of 6.³ Early childhood (birth to 6 years) is foundational to future health, development and learning. Investment in high quality ECEC services is of the utmost importance to take advantage of this short but critical window of opportunity. This also requires investment in a suitably trained, flexible and resilient ECEC workforce equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver high-quality ECEC programmes.



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WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES RELATED TO ECEC WORKFORCE CAPACITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS?

› Lack of human resources to meet an increased need for ECEC educators.

Challenges with ECEC system capacity have been reported across all host countries, with widespread shortages of ECEC personnel in existing facilities. The lack of human resources also concerns auxiliary personnel, such as medical staff, nurses, translators, psychosocial staff, language teachers, parenting support specialists, psychologists, Special Educational Needs (SEN) professionals, integration experts, and mediation experts.

In many European countries, the additional workload placed on existing ECEC professionals has a significant impact on their motivation, wellbeing, and retention, especially considering the long-term impact of the COVID crisis on the sector.

1 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

2 <https://cream-migration.org/ukraine-detail.htm?article=3573>

3 ECEC WG – Special meeting for Ukraine – 5 April 2022

› **Lack of qualification, skills and knowledge among ECEC educators to effectively support young refugee children’s complex needs.**

The refugee crisis has seen the arrival of a large number of young children requiring care and education to support their early development, particularly their emotional and psychosocial support needs amidst ongoing conflict and forced displacement. This influx has placed a premium on ECEC professionals with the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver high quality ECEC services to all children, including those with complex needs.

In many countries, the crisis revealed the absence of procedures and processes guiding ECEC professionals to address young children’s complex needs, including both Ukrainian children and nationals in host countries in need of specialist services. In Ireland,⁴ a multidisciplinary approach has been developed to address this issue, meeting young children’s linguistic cultural, psychological and educational needs in tandem. This approach includes offering specialist inter-cultural, counselling, and mental health services aligned with high quality ECEC provision.

A lack of Ukrainian language skills is a common barrier among ECEC educators, especially in non-Slavic countries, which adds to the obstacles in assessing and responding to young Ukrainian refugee children’s needs.

› **Uneven distribution of existing human resources to meet the need**

Almost all countries reported having more acute staff shortages in the urban areas and capital cities, while at the same time, demand for ECEC services was often higher in these areas. This has required careful planning to redistribute human resources to meet demand. Sweden is distinctive in its decision to allocate Ukrainian refugees to municipalities in a more centralised way, and to deploy the ECEC workforce to match local needs.⁵ By September 2022, half of Swedish municipalities reported that their schools have access to teachers or other staff who speak Ukrainian and/or Russian.⁶

4 Early Childhood Ireland, Update on Ukraine:

<https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/update-on-ukraine/>

5 UNICEF (2022). Situation analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in support of Ukrainian refugees across EU member states. First Synthesis Report. Available online: <https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Ecorys%20cycle%201%20synthesis%20report%20-%20ECEC%20situation%20analysis.pdf>

6 ‘Barn från Ukraina i svensk grund- och gymnasieskola – Skolverket,’ available at: <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/ovrigt-material/2022/barn-fran-ukraina-i-svensk-grund-och-gymnasieskola>

HOW CAN CAPACITY BUILDING OF THE ECEC WORKFORCE BE ACHIEVED IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS?

1. Capitalize on existing human resources from the host and refugee communities, focusing on the essential role of ECEC educators while also building the competences of auxiliary staff to provide appropriate support.

Many countries have hired additional personnel, including Ukrainian educators and teachers, to address staffing shortages. This has been achieved in a variety of ways, including a combination of the following:

- › boosting the pool of professionals by rehiring retired educators (e.g., Denmark⁷).
- › providing greater flexibility in the criteria to join the ECEC workforce, while matching this with professional development opportunities.
- › hiring Ukrainian professionals as auxiliary staff, such as caretakers, teacher assistance, cultural mediators, translators (e.g. Sweden, Poland, and Latvia).
- › providing entry-level roles that enable progression to become ECEC educators. Germany provides internship opportunities for Ukrainian educators in the ECEC sector, while other countries use a volunteering-based system as a first point of entry.

In many countries, the shortage in ECEC human resources has been partially resolved by involving the non-profit sector and volunteers (e.g., Hungary, Poland, and Czechia). The non-profit sector often has fewer restrictions in hiring procedures and can move more quickly to recruit Ukrainian professionals (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova). While volunteers can be hired quickly, it is important that they are qualified, trained, monitored and supported to provide high-quality ECEC services.

To manage the increasing demand in specialised support for children affected by war, host countries have taken steps such as scaling-up psychosocial support training for the ECEC workforce, mobilising paid and/or volunteer online counselling services (e.g., Cyprus, Belgium, Bulgaria), and drawing on professionals from the non-profit sector to assist with delivering specialist services into formal ECEC settings (e.g., Hungary⁸).

7 <https://www.tvsyd.dk/soenderborg/pensionerede-paedagoger-staari-koe-for-at-hjaelpe-ukrainske-boern-men-der-er-ikke-brug-for-dem>

8 UNICEF (2023) Situation analysis of early childhood education and care services in support of Ukrainian refugees across EU Member States Second Synthesis Report. Available online: https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-06/Ecorys_synthesis_Cycle_2_Final.pdf (p.39).



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2. Reduce policy and legislative barriers to hire qualified staff from the refugee community to access the host country ECEC workforce.

Some countries have opted to exempt Ukrainian refugee educators from standard diploma recognition procedures, or to provide fast track recognition (e.g., Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Netherlands). Ukrainian professionals require support for inclusion and integration within the host country workforce and society. This may include host country language classes (e.g., Germany, Ireland, Spain, and France), support with transferring of credentials, training on the host country education system, and community inclusion.

3. Support host country language acquisition among the ECEC refugee workforce, while supporting them to preserve and celebrate their cultural and linguistic identity.

One bottleneck to hiring Ukrainian teachers is the obligation to speak the host language to be officially recognized as an educator. Some countries choose to offer free language classes (e.g., Sweden⁹ reported achieving good progress teaching the Ukrainian educators the national language), while others make temporary exceptions to the requirement (e.g., Lithuania¹⁰ exempts teachers from speaking the national language for 2 years). Education facilities sometimes hire Ukrainian translators or mediators (Italy, France, Luxemburg) to address the lack of languages skills amongst national professionals. Efforts to hire Ukrainians as cultural mediators, assistants, and translators should not create or reinforce professional hierarchies within the ECEC profession but should instead provide Ukrainian educators recruited as trainers and mediators opportunities for relevant and suitable professional development and career progression.

9 'Barn från Ukraina i svensk grund- och gymnasieskola – Skolverket,' available at: <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/ovrigt-material/2022/barn-fran-ukraina-i-svensk-grund-och-gymnasieskola>

10 Bernotiene, R., Jakavonyte-Sta kuviene, D., Paulike, K. (28-04-2022) Lietuvos savivaldybese taikomi Ukrainos vaike ugdymo organizavimo modeliai: pirmosios patirtys [Ukrainian models for organising children's education in Lithuanian municipalities: first experiences], access on the internet (from 46:40 min): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3g9OFip3To>

4. Provide an array of ongoing relevant and responsive professional development to support and upskill the ECEC workforce, bringing together professionals from host and refugee communities.

Educators need to have the right skill sets to support the integration of refugee children and their families in host communities and make them feel safe, visible and valued. All EU27 countries and Moldova offer training and coaching classes for the ECEC workforce, including the provision of information, guidance, and written and online training materials. These mainly address how to better understand the needs of refugee children. For example:

- › The Swedish National Agency for Education has released an online module for professionals on how to speak to children affected by war.¹¹
- › Greece¹² has issued guidance on how to work with children from a refugee background.
- › Spain, France, Ireland and Slovenia provide specific guidance for dealing with children affected by war trauma and children displaying post-traumatic stress disorder.

A caveat of many of these materials is the fact that they are often standardised and not modified to the current refugee crisis. Only a few countries reported adapting and updating these materials to include contextually-specific information relating to refugee children and families fleeing the conflict in Ukraine (e.g., Czechia, Slovakia, and Lithuania).

11 The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket), Talking to children and young people about war and crisis <https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/inspiration-och-stod-i-arbetet/stod-i-arbetet/att-prata-med-barn-och-unga-om-krig-och-kriser>

12 UNICEF (2023), *op. cit.*

CASE STUDY EXAMPLES



CASE STUDY 1 CERTIFICATION/DIPLOMA RECOGNITION EXEMPTIONS FOR UKRAINIAN STAFF IN LITHUANIA

Lithuania has introduced regulations allowing Ukrainian ECEC specialists to work in their profession, by exempting Ukrainians from the standard diploma or certificate recognition procedures. If there are children from Ukraine in an ECEC establishment, it is common to have educators from Ukraine working there, usually as teaching assistants or as teachers who can communicate in Ukrainian. Research conducted with Ukrainian teachers employed in Lithuanian ECEC settings found that:¹³

- › educators often appreciated being able to return to the ECEC profession they held before the start of the war.
- › staff from host communities reported professional benefits from being able to work together and learn from one another's cultures, adopting innovative educational methods and sharing their own experiences.
- › refugee children valued the opportunity to communicate with some of their teachers in Ukrainian, and hearing their language spoken in ECEC and school settings.

Many teachers have started to learn and communicate in Lithuanian, as the opportunity to work without host country language skills was granted for two years.

13 Jakavonyte-Sta kuviene, D., Ja inauskas, L., Kudinoviene, J. (2023). *Lithuanian language learning in multicultural contexts for pre-school children and primary school pupils arriving in Lithuania*. Manuscript of the article.



CASE STUDY 2 FOUNDATIONAL TRAINING ON PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID AND TRAUMA- INFORMED PRACTICES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS¹⁴

Implemented by: UNICEF, International Step by Step Association, War Child Holland

Countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Moldova and Ukraine

The Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid and trauma-informed practices with young children and caregivers is a Training of Trainers (ToT) aimed to equip experienced trainers of early childhood professionals (with minimum 5 years of practice) with the foundational knowledge and skills around psychological first aid and trauma-informed practices. The aim is to better support practitioners working with children and their caregivers who are internally displaced in Ukraine, or who have fled Ukraine.

The training can be provided in 3 days, 5 hours per day, in an online format but with the possibility of being adapted to in-person training. The content, format, and duration of the training at the country level can be tailored according to the context and needs of specific target groups. To effectively strengthen the capacity of practitioners, the ToT combines theory with practice, focusing on applying the guiding principles of the psychological first aid in daily practice, geared towards recognizing and addressing signs of distress in young children, caregivers, and practitioners. It also focuses on how to provide responsive and healing environments and activities in ECEC settings, as well as how to manage stress and prevent burnout among practitioners.

Since June 2022, 4 ToTs have been delivered to selected cohorts of experienced trainers coming from eight countries. In total, 137 master trainers were trained from 8 countries. These master trainers have organized numerous cascading trainings to roll out the material to their colleagues: reaching over 3,000 ECEC professionals, social service specialists, Ukrainians working with children, state and local authorities, psychologists, and more. The estimated number of indirect beneficiaries (children, who benefited from their teachers) currently stands at over 60,000.

14 <https://www.issa.nl/content/foundational-training-psychological-first-aid-and-trauma-informed-practices-young-children>

FURTHER RESOURCES

On early childhood education and care and refugee response can be found [here](#).



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