



Ukraine Red Cross Society

Research Report – June 2024

Focus Group Discussions for the URCS Restoring Family Links Unit

Developed and conducted by the CEA Unit in collaboration with the PMER Unit of the URCS

Executive Summary

This research report presents the findings from focus group discussions (FGD) conducted with volunteers and staff members of the Restoring Family Links (RFL) unit of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS). The primary objective was to gather insights and feedback from these frontline workers to better understand the service needs of families assisted by the RFL program. The discussions explored the participants' experiences, challenges faced, and recommendations for improving support services.

Key findings include the need for better communication and information sharing with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the introduction of a vulnerability category specifically for families of missing people, the provision of financial assistance tailored to their needs, and enhanced training opportunities focused on practical scenarios and emotional resilience. Based on these findings, several recommendations are outlined to address the identified gaps and strengthen the RFL program's ability to serve families effectively.

Introduction

The Restoring Family Links (RFL) program of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) plays a crucial role in assisting families separated due to armed conflicts, natural disasters, and other emergencies causing mass displacement. With the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the demand for RFL services has surged, placing immense pressure on the program's resources and personnel.

Methodology

Qualitative data analyzed in this report was collected using focus group discussions method with a small group of participants. Participants were selected using census sampling as there was a need to involve a wide range of participants from the RFL program.

The discussions were facilitated by three specialists of URCS PMER¹ and CEA units with experience of conducting qualitative research and followed a semi-structured format, allowing for open-ended discussions while ensuring that key topics were covered. The focus group guide included 11 open-questions exploring participants' experiences, challenges faced, perceptions of families' satisfaction

¹ Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting

with services, training needs, collaboration with other units and organizations, and recommendations for program improvement.

Specialists conducted a pre-study briefing and de-briefing with participants to explain their participation, provide plans for discussion, how the study results will be used as well as to reflect on participants' experience of the FGD itself. Each FGD lasted from 1,5 to 2 hours.

Discussions were recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights from the discussions.

FGD Participant

Two FGDs were conducted, involving a total of 18 participants from various regional branches of the URCS. The participants included volunteers and staff members of the RFL unit, representing diverse regions of Ukraine.

FGD 1

- 8 volunteers from Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Chernivtsi, Ternopil, Zaporizhzhya, Volyn URCS branches.
- Gender: 4 female and 4 males

FGD 2

- Total 10 female participants. 9 volunteers from Chernivtsi, Vinnytsia, Poltava, Zhytomyr, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kherson, Luhansk, Kryvorizka, Transcarpathian URCS branches and Head of RFL department.

Findings

The FGDs provided valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and needs of the RFL unit volunteers and staff members. Several key points emerged from the discussions:

1. Communication and Information Sharing with the ICRC:

Participants expressed frustration with the lack of effective communication and information sharing between the URCS and the ICRC. They highlighted the need for access to the ICRC's database **Prot 6** to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure accurate and timely follow-up on cases. Additionally, participants expressed a desire for regular updates and feedback from the ICRC regarding the progress of search efforts and the status of cases. RFL Service users often expect feedback from the URCS, but volunteers frequently lack the necessary information to provide answers. Several FGD participants mentioned that this situation could potentially harm the overall image of the URCS in the eyes of the general population.

“You're like a buffer between the ICRC and the people,” says a participant, explaining that they act as a “first contact” to help smooth the situation by listening to people and providing support or humanitarian assistance.

The Tracing Service and the ICRC Protection Department securely exchange encrypted files using the ASPERA FASPEX platform and the FLA system's interoperability function.

2. Vulnerability Category for Families of Missing People:

FGD participants identified a lack of formal recognition of the increased vulnerability of families of missing people, and to provide a specific category for them to enable prioritisation of their needs, as critical gaps. Without this recognition, families often face barriers in accessing essential services

and support, exacerbating their already difficult circumstances. Introducing a dedicated vulnerability category and tailored financial assistance programs could help address their unique needs and alleviate some of the financial burdens they face.

Iryna Tsaryuk, Head of the URCS Tracing Service, explained that this issue of providing additional assistance is already being partially considered by leadership and partner organisations: *“For this initial period, the RFL takes care of those who have small children, older parents on a low income, and family members who have very serious chronic diseases like cancer or tuberculosis.”*

3. Financial Assistance and Support Services:

Participants emphasized the need for tailored financial assistance and support services for families of missing people. Many of these families face financial hardships, legal challenges, and emotional distress, requiring comprehensive support beyond the search for their missing loved ones.

4. Personal experience, Training and Capacity Building:

Personal experience

Generally, RFL volunteers feel satisfied that they can help people in difficult situations. Their responsibilities include providing minimal psychological support, refer families to other organizations if needed, or to encourage and help program participants to support each other. Gratitude and recognition from families or other program participants motivate volunteers and inspire them to continue their work. Difficult moments, such as calls for clarification on the closure of a case in the event of a death, as well as anxiety related to the uncertainty of the condition of loved ones, cause emotional stress, but volunteers believe that their work is important and has a positive impact on the lives of others.

Training and Capacity Building

“...there are different types of applicants [RFL Service users]: there are those who respond mildly, and there are those who can be aggressive, shouting, using foul language, so we need to know how to find a way out of such situations, how to approach a person properly. This work helps strengthen us so to use our communication skills and improve them,” a focus group participant explained.

Participants expressed a strong desire for practical, scenario-based training to enhance their skills in handling challenging situations encountered in their work. The emotional toll of their roles was evident, and participants recognized the need for training in emotional resilience and self-care strategies to better cope with the demands of their work. Investing in comprehensive training programs could equip volunteers and staff with the necessary tools to navigate complex situations and provide effective support to families.

Overall, participants acknowledged their satisfaction with the high level of training and preparation provided by the Tracing service team, including training sessions, consultations, supervision, and regular online meetings to support their work in RFL. However, volunteers feel they do not always receive enough support and sufficient recognition for the importance of their work from the URCS branch administrations. For example, there have been cases where volunteers do not have a working space in the office, others mentioned that branches engage volunteers for full working days and across many other activities, although volunteers are not supposed to equate to a full-time employee, according to URCS volunteering policy.

5. Collaboration and Coordination:

Participants recognized the importance of effective collaboration and coordination with other URCS units, such as the Psychosocial Support Program (PSP) and the Emergency Response Teams (ERT), as well as with external stakeholders like the National Information Bureau and Coordination Headquarters. Improved coordination was seen as crucial for providing comprehensive support to families. Cooperation with the ERT involves collaboration in search efforts for people from de-occupied territories, as the ERT compiles lists of evacuees during evacuations.

6. Public Awareness and Recognition:

Participants expressed concerns about the lack of public awareness and recognition of the URCS's role in the RFL program. Greater visibility and acknowledgment of their efforts could foster trust and cooperation from families and the broader community, potentially leading to increased support and resources for the program.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered from the FGDs, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the understanding and address the service needs of families assisted by the Restoring Family Links program:

1. Establish a formal communication and information-sharing protocol with the ICRC:

- Explore the possibility of granting limited access to the ICRC's Prot 6 database for designated URCS staff members to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure accurate case follow-up.
- Facilitate regular meetings or teleconferences between the URCS and the ICRC to discuss case progress, address challenges, and coordinate efforts on cases that involve collaboration between URCS Tracing services and the ICRC.

2. Introduce a dedicated vulnerability category for families of missing people:

- Advocate for the recognition of families of missing people as a distinct vulnerable group within the URCS's humanitarian aid programs.
- Develop criteria and guidelines for identifying and assessing the needs of these families, considering factors such as financial hardship, legal challenges, and emotional distress.
- Allocate resources and establish specific support mechanisms tailored to the unique needs of families of missing people, including financial assistance, legal aid, and psychosocial support.

3. Enhance volunteers' capacity, productivity and motivation through training and capacity-building opportunities as well to ensure necessary working conditions:

- Develop comprehensive, scenario-based training programs focused on practical skills for handling challenging situations, such as dealing with emotional distress, aggression, or panic attacks among families.
- Incorporate modules on emotional resilience, self-care strategies, and stress management to equip volunteers and staff with tools to cope with the emotional demands of their work.
- Collaborate with subject matter experts, such as psychologists and social workers, to design and deliver these training programs.

- Establish a system of rewards and recognition for volunteer achievements, such as certificates, awards, or increased compliance.
- Establish a mentoring system where experienced volunteers or program leads provide advice to newcomers. In this way, volunteers can provide additional support to each other.
- URCS branches to ensure minimum level of working conditions (such as a working space, management support) for RFL volunteers. RFL URCS NC team together with volunteer unit to provide instructions and to clarify the role of volunteers for branches.

4. Strengthen collaboration and coordination with other URCS units and external stakeholders:

- Establish regular coordination meetings or information-sharing platforms involving the RFL unit, the Psychosocial Support Program (PSP), Emergency Response Teams (ERT), and other relevant URCS units.
- Explore financial opportunities for joint initiatives or collaborative projects that leverage the strengths and resources of different units to provide comprehensive support to families.
- Engage with external stakeholders, such as the National Information Bureau, Coordination Headquarters, and relevant government agencies, to facilitate information exchange and coordinate efforts.

5. Increase public awareness and recognition of the URCS's role in the RFL program:

- Develop a comprehensive communication and outreach strategy to raise awareness about the URCS's efforts in the RFL program and the services provided to families of missing people.
- Consider more actively seeking the support of donors to finance programs prioritising vulnerable RFL service users (particularly the families of those missing and captured as a result of the armed conflict in Ukraine).
- Engage with media outlets and leverage social media platforms to share success stories, highlight the program's impact, and promote the organization's role in supporting these families.
- Collaborate with government agencies and other relevant organizations to ensure the URCS's contributions are acknowledged and recognized in official communications and public events related to the conflict and its humanitarian consequences.

6. Conduct regular needs assessments and gather feedback from families:

“Create a book of feedback and suggestions on the [URCS] website,” participant suggestion.

- Implement mechanisms for regularly assessing the evolving needs and challenges faced by families assisted by the RFL program, such as surveys, FGDs, or individual interviews.
- Establish channels for families to provide feedback on the services received, identify gaps, and suggest areas for improvement.
- Utilize this feedback to continuously refine and adapt the services offered to better meet families' needs.

By implementing these recommendations, the URCS can better understand the needs of families assisted by the Restoring Family Links program and strengthen its ability to provide comprehensive and effective support.

Limitations and areas of improvement

Iryna Tsaryuk, Head of the URCS RFL Department, was present during one of the FGDs which could potentially have influenced discussions.

The need to reduce the number of questions from 11 open-ended questions was identified to allow time for full discussion by participants.

Conclusion

The FGDs with volunteers and staff members of the RFL unit provided valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and needs of those working directly with families assisted by the service. The findings highlighted several areas for improvement, including communication and information sharing with the ICRC, the introduction of a vulnerability category for families of missing people, the provision of tailored financial assistance and support services, improved training opportunities, increased collaboration and coordination, and greater public awareness and recognition of the URCS's role in RFL. These findings underscore the importance of addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by the families of missing people, who often navigate complex emotional, financial, and legal challenges in addition to the uncertainty surrounding their loved ones' whereabouts.

References

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