Community Engagement and Accountability in Cash and Voucher Assistance supporting people displaced from Ukraine

AN ACT OF CARE

CONTENTS

Introduction

The escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022 saw more than 10 million people - a full one-third of the country's population - displaced. Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) emerged as a leading tool to support those most in need both inside and outside Ukraine, delivering relevant and highly mobile assistance, upholding the principles of freedom, dignity, and independence, and allowing individuals to identify their own priorities for themselves.

Community engagement and accountability (CEA) played a crucial role in the success of programmes adopting cash assistance, with a comprehensive strategy and practical guidance to ensure that people's diverse needs, priorities, and preferences were included in Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement activities.

Tailored CEA approaches - including making sure communities understand eligibility criteria for CVA and establishing robust information provision and community feedback mechanisms - were developed to fit the varying contexts in each country, including taking into account the capacities, skills and prior experiences of the respective National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society's.

Integrating CEA within CVA helped enable communities to be more involved in decision-making, building trust, supporting transparency, and ultimately enhancing activities' effectiveness.

Building on National Societies' collective knowledge and experiences, CVA initiatives supporting people displaced from Ukraine are a concrete demonstration of the benefits that community-centric approaches which foster ownership, accountability, and resilience, can bring.

Innovation and adaptation

Responding to population displacement on a scale which had not been seen in 80 years made it imperative for RCRC Movement partners to scale up, to adopt new ways of working and thinking, and

to adapt to the unique demands of the context. In particular, this required the building of activities upon National Societies' established expertise and ways of working in their own countries, while at the same time capitalising on new technologies offering digital solutions, such as those enabling displaced people across the continent to register for support digitally through their phones, as well as to submit questions and complaints, and receive tailored information.

The case study

Drawing on the experiences of Bulgarian, Montenegrin, and Slovakian National Societies, as well as the IFRC, this case study seeks to offer key insights into CVA activities, how CEA was integrated into these, and the impacts this partnership offered. Information for this case study was collected through interviews with National Society CVA and CEA focal points, staff working on helplines and call centres, and Disaster Management Staff, as well as discussions with staff from the IFRC and the Netherlands Red Cross 510 Team[1], who supported the roll-out of digital processes.

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[1] 510 is a Netherland Red Cross initiative to improve humanitarian action with data and digitalization.

Key findings

Existing Capacities and Expertise: To implement CVA activities and integrate CEA, National Societies built on existing knowledge and skills, while at the same time having to adapt to the unprecedented context and embrace new ways of working.

"*Each NS is strong and unique in their own way, and they all do what they can to support the Ukrainian population. Most of them shared common characteristics*" said Sawsan Aburassa, IFRC CVA delegate, "*a mandate and a goal to support people; a personal drive to help to care; a strong presence in country even in remote regions; a good reputation, and last but not least, a workforce of motivated volunteers!*"

Integrated Approach to CVA and CEA: A key factor for success was the integrated implementation of CVA and CEA. This ensured that information dissemination, community feedback, complaints, and communication mechanisms were synchronized with the distribution of cash to people in a holistic approach. The integration of CVA and CEA improved efficiency, relevance, and coherence, and the real-time monitoring this enabled, as well as enhancing transparency, also created the possibility to identify issues and implement necessary adjustments more quickly than ever before.

Diversity in Digital and Traditional Systems: While digital systems helped accelerate and streamline the response, it was also crucial to maintain a diverse range of channels through which to engage people. Both traditional and innovative methods were essential to accommodate people's diverse preferences and needs.

Community Feedback: Establishing systems to collect, manage, analyse, and respond to people's feedback – alerting teams to any issues and areas to improve - helped demonstrate the value of listening to communities and acting on what they were saying.

Collaborative Expertise: Effectively implementing CVA activities required a collaborative effort from CVA and CEA experts, operations, legal, IT, and IM from implementing and partner National Societies (including the American, British, and Netherlands Red Cross) and the IFRC. This collective endeavour underscored the importance of teamwork across multiple functions and levels.

New Paths and Opportunities: The response to the Ukraine crisis has helped National Societies adopt new operating models and ways of working, particularly in relation to CVA, and the accompanying necessity to ensure stronger engagement with and accountability towards the communities where CVA activities are taking place.

Applying learning and innovation to the CVA response

Following the escalation of the conflict in February 2022, IFRC teams were deployed to support National Societies in countries neighbouring Ukraine, which were seeing the highest levels of arrivals of people seeking safety. National Societies in these countries each had different capacities, particularly in responding to an emergency of this scale. Initially, most were reliant on paper-based, in-person, and Excel-based methods to register people for services and support, and to collect feedback (although in some cases Kobo Toolbox was used), "*but the scale was too big for these traditional methods*" explained Servet Avci, CVA Delegate for the IFRC.

Drawing on global experience in CVA and CEA, IFRC teams understood that operational strategies had to be tailored to the specific realities and needs of the people who were being displaced and the local contexts in the region.

Through dialogue with displaced people from Ukraine, it was established that the overwhelming majority of people still had access to, and were comfortable using, digital technology such as smart phones and laptops. These discussions also established that, in principle, most people would feel comfortable using a self-service digital registration system. Having established these facts, IFRC, in collaboration with the Netherlands Red Cross and American Red Cross, proceeded with a pilot application.

IFRC recommended a holistic approach, incorporating **digital tools for self-enrolment, case management, feedback and complaints, and cash distribution**. They emphasized the importance of **disseminating ample information through various channels**, establishing **helplines**, and ensuring that feedback was received, monitored, and addressed promptly. Comprehensive training on the CEA approach and digital CVA systems was provided to the participating National Societies[2].

The success of this approach led to its implementation across multiple countries in the region, including in Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Slovakia. The precise modalities of cash assistance varied from country to country, including Multi-Purpose Cash (MCP), Cash for Health, and Winterization top-ups, but all were underpinned by a robust CEA framework. As Raisa Muratbekova, an IFRC CEA Delegate, emphasized "*Tools and systems were useful, however we need to adjust them based on what we know about the community and context, learn as you go from your communities - and do that constantly through information collection and analysis.*"

The approach included a focus on **Protection, Gender and Inclusion**, for instance, ensuring that the Code of Conduct was shared with all staff and volunteers, that a clear referral pathway

to psycho-social and legal support services was provided for sensitive cases (such as those relating to safeguarding, or including allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, violence or corruption), and that concepts of dignity and Do No Harm were mainstreamed.
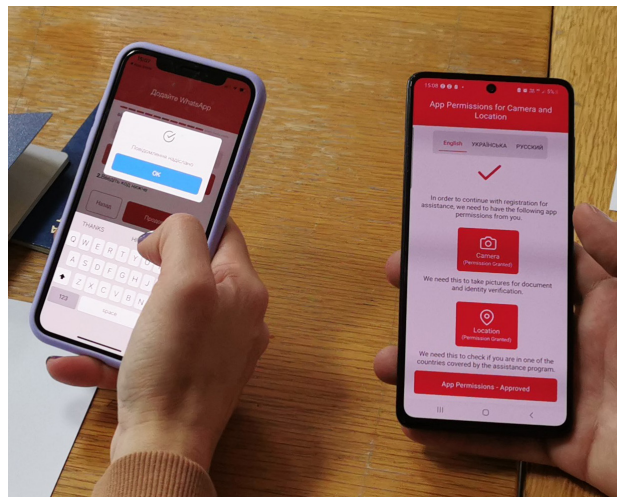
Information sharing

IFRC strived to provide National Societies with the most relevant guidance, advice, tools, and templates to support CVA implementation. In turn, National Societies applied and adapted these to their unique contexts: translating them into relevant languages, aligning them with the communication channels being used, and integrating specific eligibility criteria. "*For Digital Cash distribution, information provision is probably even more critical than with other types of distributions*", said IFRC CVA Delegate Farook Rahman. Information included how the distribution processes worked, eligibility criteria, the amount and frequency of cash support, and distribution modalities.

With the support of the Netherlands Red Cross, the IFRC set up a central website providing country-specific information – including links to National Societies' official websites - about the financial assistance available to people displaced from Ukraine: https://ukrainefinancialassistance.ifrc.org/. Recognizing Ukrainians' widespread use of the Viber messaging app, along with Facebook, other social media, and their own websites, National Societies quickly made use of these platforms to disseminate

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[2] For more information about Digital CEA tools in the Ukraine response, please refer one of the digital Hubs supported by Netherlands Red Cross - Community Engagement Hub: https://communityengagementhub.org/resources/cea-in-emergencies/conflict/ukraine-and-impacted-countries/

information. At the same time leaflets and posters were placed in community centers, local branches, at border crossings, and other strategic locations to ensure diverse channels of information dissemination that could reach for different community members, both the digitally literate and those who preferred printed and visual materials.

For programmes utilising CVA, donor requirements often dictated eligibility criteria and the prioritisation of support. As this almost exclusively focused on people displaced from Ukraine, there were cases where host communities, and particularly vulnerable people in those communities, felt unfairly left out. This highlighted the importance of listening to people in host communities, not just to displaced people prioritised to receive support. By listening to community voices and following the principles of equity and do no harm, in some cases eligibility criteria were adapted to enable the most vulnerable people from host communities to also access support.

A digital platform and application, Access RC, enabling people to create their own user accounts and carry-out **self-registration for access to support**, was made available to streamline administration processes required in the implementation of cash assistance. Access RC allowed users to look-up information, apply for assistance, and receive support, all in a single application, which in many cases served as the primary contact between displaced people and the Red Cross Red Crescent. "*People scattered across countries very quickly,*" said IFRC CVA Delegate Farook Rahman. "*Through self-*

registration and information sharing, we reached them with information and cash support wherever they were."

This simplified processes for people who had been displaced, as well as for National Society staff and volunteers, enhancing overall efficiency.

At the same time, staff and volunteers at branches and Humanitarian Service Points (HSP)[3] supported people who physically presented themselves to also register on the system, helping ensure that as many people as possible, even those unable to register online themselves, were able to enrol to access assistance.

Registrations in Access RC created a database through which demographic factors could be monitored, helping teams identify trends and issues as they emerged. For example, when Access RC initially rolled-out, staff were alerted to the fact that a significant number of people created profiles but did not apply for assistance. Follow up with users revealed a lack of clarity regarding the necessary steps within the application. "*We decided to share clearer information across all channels to ensure people could enrol,*" said Kristina Burzanovic, Red Cross of Montenegro CVA Focal Point.

A step-by-step video tutorial was developed which National Societies shared on Viber and Telegram social media channels, leading to a significant uptick in people registering and applying for assistance.

"*Leaflets and info sessions reinforced the message, and as a result, we saw around a 20% increase in*

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[3] Humanitarian Service Points (HSP) are neutral spaces where migrants can access a wide range of humanitarian support and services of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, regardless of their migration status and wherever they are on their journeys. For more information on HSPs please check: https://www.ifrc.org/our-work/disasters-climate-and-crises/migration-and-displacement/programmes/HSP

*applications from those who hadn't applied initially, "* Burzanovic added.

Capitalising on feedback

Multilingual **helplines** were amongst the channels recommended by IFRC to help National Societies receive, collect, and respond to queries and other feedback. In most cases, volunteer helpline operators were people who themselves had been displaced from Ukraine. Many had no previous experience with humanitarian organisations but had invaluable language skills, cultural knowledge, and lived experience that made them ideal for the role. Questions, feedback and complaints received through the helplines were systematically registered by operators using Client Relationship Management (CRM) software such as ESPO CRM. In some cases, **emails and chatbots** were also employed to ensure a variety of channels were available for people to reach out to NS.

ESPO CRM, a highly customisable open-source Case Management System, has been previously adapted to support humanitarian work and used for case management in multiple responses. It's adoption in the operation supporting people displaced from Ukraine, marked its transition from ad hoc solution, to being part of the standard CVA toolkit. *"We started with an excel sheet for a few weeks to track cases, but then ESPO came in and it was extremely useful to have a central platform to store information and handle case management"*, said Gabriela Šujanská, Slovak Red Cross CEA focal point.

The system offers database functionality to manage qualitative and quantitative data, and a user-friendly way of tagging and categorising feedback and cases - a process standardised through the IFRC 'Coding Framework' - facilitating analysis and the collection of consistent data across different countries. Beyond simply being a database, ESPO CRM's Case Management functionality enabled teams to manage the flow and resolution of cases, assigning specific cases and enquiries to the most appropriate personnel, who receive automatic notifications that their action was required, ensuring quick follow-up.

Having responded, enquiries could then be referred for further action, or marked as resolved in the system. Through this flow, ESPO CRM is able to track the status and progress of individual cases through the system, as well as provide a record of overall feedback and complaints.
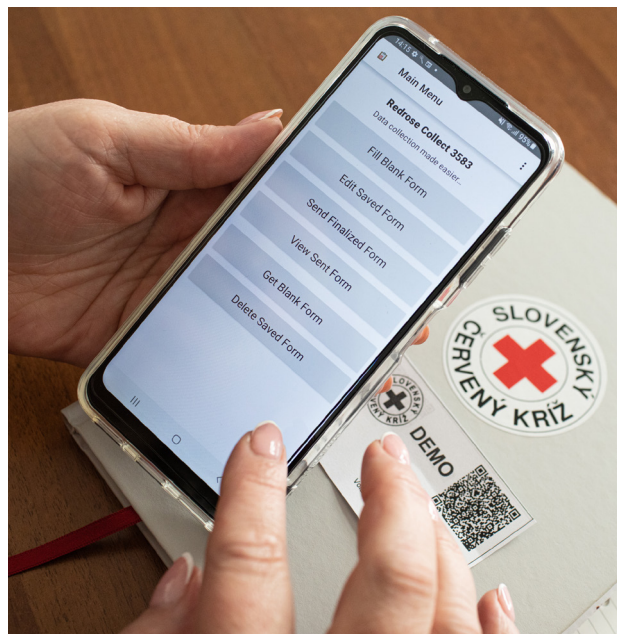
The efforts of the Netherlands Red Cross' 510 Data *and Digital initiative*[4] were crucial for the development and application of ESPO CRM to supporting people displaced from Ukraine. Information Management staff worked with CEA and CVA focal points to integrate changes to the system which was ultimately able to register feedback and enquiries coming through phone calls and Viber, as well as through face-to-face interactions (i.e. through Humanitarian Service Points).

As previously mentioned, a 'coding framework' was developed by IFRC to support the consistent categorization of data being received. This was adapted based on National Societies' experiences and needs. Being able to categorize enquiries based on geographical area, the type of feedback, and the sector or topic concerned also helped data analysis, including highlighting the areas where feedback was most focussed.

Initially, when registrations to access assistance were at their peak, National Society CVA and CEA focal points were using ESPO CRM to handle and

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[4] https://510.global/2022/08/the-digital-maturity-framework-establishing-a-collective-vocabulary-for-digital-transformation/

review cases every day. IFRC Delegates backed up this work, enabling the swift identification and resolution of potential inconsistencies and issues, for example providing technical support to resolve inconsistencies in Access RC app registrations. In time, this collaborative approach empowered National Society staff to conduct thorough cross-checks and swiftly address emerging challenges independently.

A **Power BI Dashboard** was connected to ESPO CRM enabling National Societies and the IFRC to carry out analysis of the data coming in, providing an overview of how many people were registering for assistance, and who and where they were, as well as the number and types of feedback and complaints received, and how these were being resolved.

The Netherlands Red Cross 510 team also contributed to understand community insights through **Social Media Listening (SML)**, a system which scans publicly available social media posts to gain an understanding of the main topics people are discussing, and their priority concerns. As Ukrainians were mostly using Telegram, the team concentrated on this channel, providing insights about what communities wanted, needed, understood (or did not understand) about humanitarian services and their perceptions of humanitarian agencies' efforts. This provided a useful source of information against which to triangulate data collected through ESPO CRM.

While Access RC and ESPO CRM supported National Societies to reach more people and follow their cases more efficiently, **all the NSs maintained multiple entry points and non-digital ways to engage with or reach people**, for example, through in-person support at local branches, community centres, and Humanitarian Service Points. Teams of volunteers were invaluable for visiting people in remote areas or people living with mobility issues or other disabilities. In-person **informative workshops** were also held at branches, along with **Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews** to engage and collect feedback and views from communities about the assistance being offered.

Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM), delivered through SMS, online through the Access RC, as well as in-person across all National Societies, offered another way to actively listen to and understand people's experiences of the support being offered. These included questions about people's overall satisfaction, their assessment of information provided, and preferred information channels. A Power Bi Dashboard enabled information submitted through these PDMs to be monitored and analysed in real time.

All National Societies involved have now carried out learning workshops, evaluations, or reflections on the CVA and CEA approaches implemented during the response, and compiled findings from these to integrate into future activities and programs.

Conclusions and recommendations

The three National Societies included in this case study – Bulgaria, Montenegro and Slovakia - all recognised that CEA enhanced CVA, recommending that it should be integrated into all future CVA activities from the outset. By actively engaging communities, and welcoming feedback through multiple channels, National Societies and the IFRC were able to swiftly respond to and resolve issues as they arose, ensuring assistance remained relevant to people's needs, and maintaining high levels of accountability. National Societies also highlighted the importance of CEA in strengthening dignity, dialogue, and learning.

Contributing to Efficiency, Risk Mitigation, and Impact: This case study found that integrating CEA into CVA activities helped ensure relevant assistance was available to those most in need. The timely provision of information, and systematic interaction with communities – including the collection, management, analysis and resolution of feedback - enabled real-time adaptation, supporting community satisfaction and trust, and resolving issues before they could escalate further.

Ensuring Relevance to People' Needs: Actively listening to communities, and monitoring feedback in real-time enabled the identification of changing and unforeseen needs, and implementation of timely adaptations, enhancing the relevance of CVA activities by supporting their alignment with people' needs and preferences.

Tailoring Cash Modalities Through Community Insights: The integration of CEA approaches helped identify cash modalities most relevant to people's needs. Direct, tailored interaction with communities helped ensure the relevance of adjustments, as well as of the assistance overall.

Monitoring Community Satisfaction in Real Time: Helplines, ESPO CRM, and Power BI, coupled with PDM activities and Focus Group Discussions, gave National Societies a dynamic insight into CVA implementation and satisfaction, and provided a concrete demonstration of the value of listening to and understanding communities.

Changing Perceptions and Ensuring Transparency: Integrating CVA and CEA prioritised transparency and the need to be people-centred, in turn supporting the provision of more relevant and efficient assistance.

Facilitating Coordination and Complementarity: Community engagement helped strengthen coordination and reduced duplication. By listening to communities, National Societies were able to identify complementary initiatives and ensure coherence across their various activities.

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Bulgarian Red Cross

Empowering Communities, Changing Perceptions

Bulgarian Red Cross Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) integrated Community Engagement to deliver enhanced support.

Background

In Bulgaria, the National Society had previously been reluctant to move beyond small-scale cash transfers, preferring instead to work through vouchers or in-kind support. Before 2022, support offered to migrants and refugees was centred on housing and social services with limited cash assistance, even in 2013 when an estimated 23,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Bulgaria. Similarly, while there were pockets of experience within the National Society, formal integration of Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) into standard ways of working was limited. However, the arrival of people displaced from Ukraine in 2022, and efforts to ensure consistent approaches by National Societies across the region, prompted a significant shift, leading to the integration of cash assistance into the Bulgarian Red Cross' (BRC) response framework.

About the programme

In its initial response following the escalation of the conflict in spring 2022, as part of its auxiliary role to support the government in humanitarian activities, the BRC distributed food parcels and other items covering basic needs to people displaced from Ukraine.

As the crisis grew, BRC continued to provide food parcels, hygiene kits and other in-kind support. At the same time, they also began to offer CVA activities to help cover medical costs, rent, clothing, utility bills, and other basic humanitarian needs. In total, this program eventually distributed more than BGN 190,000 (approx. CHF 95,000) supporting almost 1,200 households.

Humanitarian Service Points (HSP) were set up in key locations to support displaced people from Ukraine, and BRC used interactions with people at

these points to assess the challenges they were facing and disseminate information.

"Based on the assessment information, we were motivated to implement a new approach", said Jassen Slivensky, BRC Head of Disaster Management.

"*There were so many people crossing the border, with as many as 25 busses crossing the border every day.*"

"IFRC shared their experiences from other countries in the region, like Romania and Lithuania, and proposed a similar approach to Cash Assistance. We then worked together and launched the programme in December 2022."

In Bulgaria, people displaced from Ukraine were spread across the country creating a logistical challenge for people to be registered and access support. Based on previous experience, the IFRC proposed the use of Access RC which would enable people in Bulgaria who had been displaced from Ukraine to self-register and access cash assistance.

"*Volunteers & staff were initially registering people manually and were exhausted, then the magic came: people could register themselves on Access RC,"* said Slivensky.

"It relieved the pressure on volunteers and branches, and we were reaching many people we would not have been able to support otherwise!"

The digital system also enabled BRC to see and understand a wealth of information about the communities they were seeking to support, which would not have been available otherwise.

"Self-registration and analysis of the data people provided, gave us information we did not previously have, such as their geographical distribution in the country, which helped us in shaping our response," explained Romualdas Kaminskas, BRC DM Officer/CVA Coordinator.

Information sharing

When BRC started using IFRC CEA tools and templates for the cash program, the CVA team and Ukrainian volunteers first contextualized the materials, ensuring information was accurate and available in relevant languages. Information was initially shared on Facebook, but thanks to feedback from communities, it was quickly identified that Ukrainians were highly active on Viber, with BRC establishing national and regional Ukrainian language Viber channels.

"We launched the CVA program information on Facebook, but rumors circulated that it was a fraud, so we quickly posted updated information on our website and shared information through social media (including Viber) to allow enrolment to continue," recalled Kaminskas, adding that the 510 team, was also supporting them with Social Media Monitoring, highlighting trends they could act upon.

In the words of Jassen Slivensky, the Ukrainian CVA response *"helped us to bring programs, communications and media people around the same table, responding to issues through multiple channels."*

Collecting, responding to, and using feedback

Building on an existing psychosocial **helpline,** BRC engaged with service providers to develop the call center further and adopt the ESPO CRM case

management system. It was identified that people calling the helpline preferred to speak Ukrainian, Russian, and English, and accordingly additional Ukrainian speaking volunteers were hired as operators.

"We had up to nine people working," explained Kaminskas. *"At the beginning we managed the wide diversity of instances and complexities through daily coordination meetings, and by the time it became less intense, the teams had gained confidence on how to respond to queries and how to use the system."*

BRC also offered an **email address** through which people could contact them for support.

"If you work with people, they will always have questions and need clarification," said Milena Popova, BRC Information Management Cash & Voucher Assistance Officer and helpline operator who was tasked with managing the e-mail inbox. *"Using technology to manage the data, we can learn a lot from what people ask: programmes without two-way communication cannot work."*

Alongside the digital platforms and helpline, BRC maintained a strong focus on the **HSP and mobile teams** who were engaging with people directly, particularly older people, some of whom struggled with technology.

Weekly analyses tracked trends, demographics, and the main reasons for calls. *"Information provision sessions, Q&As, FGD's - systematically interacting with people helps you understand and respond to challenges in real time"* added Kaminskas.

For the medical reimbursement program, feedback analysis and active engagement with communities helped identify issues related to invoicing for health services as well as challenges people faced in applying to the program. Knowing these issues existed, and the specific problems people faced, helped the team develop solutions for people with health issues to access support more quickly and easily.

"*Having our volunteers reaching out to communities helped maintain relevance and the personal relationship,*" said Kaminskas.

To help manage cases, HSP, branch, and helpline staff inputted data into the ESPO CRM system, which was then reviewed daily by the CVA Focal Point.

Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM) surveys were carried out online, but BRC also maintained an in-person approach: *"Online PDMs gave us a wealth of quantitative information, but in person PDM's add quality to it, and help spot things you will not if you only carry out a survey,"* said Kaminskas.

Lessons learnt and next steps

BRC felt that implementing CVA with a CEA approach helped them to change people's views on CVA: *"Cash is now perceived as transparent, and 'oriented to people's needs' - all of this is now visible,*" said Slivensky. *"CEA also enriched raw numbers with qualitative data and told us if our support was relevant, helpful, appreciated – which is what we are here for. Now, CEA is embedded in our operations, extending beyond this program."*

The experience also strengthened BRC's sense of being part of a network. *"We got help from Geneva and Budapest, exchanged learning with other National Societies – we now also have a CVA community of practice"* said Slivensky, adding that BRC is also considering using the approach and tools in other operations in Bulgaria. *"We are discussing how to tailor the system to be effective for smaller scale distributions. Cash is the future, it is easier for the people in need, more efficient and transparent, so we are discussing how to tailor the system for smaller scale distributions."*

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Red Cross of Montenegro

Community Engagement and Accountability in Cash Assistance: An Act of Care

Red Cross of Montenegro's agile Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) response was strengthened and guided by strong Community Engagement.

Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Red Cross of Montenegro (RCM) established a helpline to maintain contact with people who were feeling isolated. *"We used it to keep up with changing needs, to direct aid where it was the most critical"* recalled Mina Popovic, the RCM Protection Gender and Inclusion (PGI)/Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) Focal Point. At the time, RCM also prioritized receiving and managing feedback to better understand and respond to people's needs. *"Once again, our experience reaffirms that if you keep conversation with the population open, you can understand a lot about your own relevance and where best to direct aid,"* Popovic added. The National Society's response in supporting people displaced from Ukraine, brought their experience in CEA to a whole new level.

Svuda za svakoga.
Fokus-grupe za izbjeglice iz Ukrajine i domicilno stanovništvo

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About the programme

In early 2023, the IFRC began rolling-out CVA with a strong CEA approach. IFRC delegates provided tools, access to the ESPO CRM case management software, example information materials from other contexts, and multiple trainings. *"Examples from other countries were a starting point for our own brainstorming,"* said Kristina Burzanovic, RCM CVA Focal point. The self-registration tool, Access RC, was also well received, Popovic said: *"The old way was slower, it required manual work, Access RC made registration more efficient."*

Through monitoring data from Access RC, RCM, with the support of the IFRC, realised that many individuals failed to include information about their household and dependents while registering, as a result, only requesting support for a single

individual, rather than their whole family. *"Together with the IFRC, we decided to change the default view enquiring about family dependants – which could be deselected if not applicable (rather than the other way around) - it changed the trend,"* explained Burzanovic.

Information sharing

Discussing how information was shared, Popovic explained the RCM approach: *"We adapted it to the context, and we tried to put ourselves in people's shoes about the information they wanted to have,"* she said.

The NS shared information at border crossings, local branches, and public institutions where people registered for refugee and protection status. *"We were familiar about Ukrainian groups on Telegram and Viber, and we started sharing information there,"* added Popovic. *"We also put it on social media and on our website"*. Throughout the response, the RCM continued delivering in-person information sessions at all branches, ensuring that the right information

about the programme was provided. As Popovic explained: "*We maintained space for in person engagement with populations.*"

Collecting, responding to, and using feedback

All digital elements of RCM's CVA work were centrally administered in the National Society's Podgorica headquarters team, with some branches and volunteers finding the ESPO CRM system somewhat challenging to use themselves.

A **helpline** was established, with Ukrainian staff answering inquiries and carrying out data entry in ESPO CRM. Feedback collected from local branches was later also entered into ESPO for follow-up. Internal coordination was required between the helpline team, RCM CVA and CEA staff, and IFRC colleagues at the regional level.

"*Sometimes it was easier not to have people (physically) in front of you asking for an immediate response,*" explained Mariia Horobets, an RCM helpline operator "*Managing cases like we did, allowed us to listen, research the answer, and come back to the caller with the right details. Sometimes, particularly with older people, we could refer them to the local branches for support.*"

Horobets also felt communication was particularly important in CVA. "*There's a lot of information needed when transferring money, and a lot can go wrong: it is key to be able to provide, and receive, information at the right time,*" she said. Thanks to community feedback, RCM discovered, for example, that the financial service provider was having issues delivering the promised support. "*We got the info before the financial service provider could even report it to us, so we addressed it quickly,*" Horobets added.

Integrating CEA and CVA together, enabled delivery of the activity to become increasingly sophisticated. "*Having all cases, their requests, status, feedback in one platform, and being able to respond, track progress, and carry out analysis helped greatly in the efficiency of the response*" said Popovic.

Despite the utility of the digital tools, RCM also maintained a strong focus on in-person engagement with people. "*We were concerned about losing our links with people displaced from Ukraine,*" explained Popovic. "*We needed to keep local branches close to the communities and maintain personal ways to engage*".

Mobile outreach teams were kept operational, and volunteers were supported through information sessions and dedicated Viber groups, and online **PDMs** were complemented by frequent in-person **Focus Groups Discussions.**

"*We found ways to reach out to and be in touch with people, but also to be efficient – the personal touch - the helpline, and ESPO to manage and follow up on cases, helped us to do that,*" Popovic added. "*Frequent interactions with the population, centralised systems such as the helpline, ESPO, and PDMs gave us a real-time view of people's satisfaction.*"

Lessons learnt and next steps

At the end of 2023, RCM held a comprehensive lessons learnt workshop, highlighting successes and challenges raised by the CVA response in Montenegro. The workshop identified a series of actions to be included in future programmes, including contracts with local service providers, capacity building, and adjustments to technology. The CVA Focal Point, Burzanovic, is convinced that integrating CEA into the CVA program was key. "*It helps you identify in real time whether the modalities you have chosen are the most relevant, easy to use for different people, and monitor if they work – interaction with the population enables us to act quickly if they are not useful, working or relevant,*" she said.

It was felt that donor restrictions, which limited prioritisation of cash support only to people displaced from Ukraine - overlooking vulnerable people in host communities whose needs might be exacerbated by the population movement - were felt to have mistakenly limited the implementation of cash support.

In line with ongoing efforts to engage people in host communities, the National Society is exploring possibilities to incorporate host communities into the cash transfer program.

RCM is also exploring the adoption of a central database for streamlined case management across all activities. "*We are looking into applying a similar central database for all activities in Montenegro, as we recognise its improvement in efficiency, and relevance,*" said Burzanovic.

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Slovak Red Cross

Empowering Aid: Enhancing Cash Response Through Community Engagement

Slovak Red Cross' Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) supporting people displaced from Ukraine, has been driven by Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA).

Background

Prior to 2022, Slovak Red Cross (SRC) had no previous experience in delivering large-scale cash assistance. The National Society's CEA approaches mainly involved conducting assessments and collecting feedback through suggestion boxes, and they did not have comprehensive methods for community engagement.

"*CEA started with the CVA Program initiated for people displaced from Ukraine",* recalled Gabriela Sujanska, SRC CEA Focal point.

About the programme

Branches were the first point of contact for people displaced from Ukraine, and SRC offered MHPSS, health, and legal support, alongside the government in Bratislava. The creation of Humanitarian Service Points (HSP) enabled the response to widen. SRC asked the IFRC for support to respond to the high

numbers of arrivals and HSPs and branches were trained to use the self-registration app Access RC.

"*Manual enrolment for cash support was hard: online registration enhanced reach and efficacy,"* said Sujanska. *"At the beginning, IFRC did a lot of operational work we couldn't do, then trained us while slowly handing over to ensure we could continue by ourselves."*

Samuel Zlatos, SRC CVA Coordinator, added that: *"Cooperation was close. The IFRC gave focus to a bottom-up approach involving all levels of the NS, including volunteers and branches as they are the ones who know the context best."*

Information sharing

Information about the CVA programs was placed in strategic locations, leaflets were shared digitally and manually, and updated as needed. In Slovakia, the cash programme for people displaced from Ukraine was communicated carefully, as there was a concern that local Slovak circumstances – including inflation and low wages domestically – meant it was a risk to publicize the financial support offered to people displaced from Ukraine.

Knowledge about the local context informed SRC cash strategies. *"We were learning what the Slovak Government was providing as financial aid to vulnerable people: we aligned our cash transfers to people from Ukraine to similar amounts. Some of our programmes targeted only people displaced from Ukraine, as we were aware that similar support was already being provided by the government to Slovak communities. Later, we implemented a split of 80% to people from Ukrainian and 20% to the local population,"* Zlatos explained.

Slovak RC offered four modalities through which people could access cash transfers, with Access RC enabling people to select the option that best suited them.If no option was selected the system automatically defaulted to the "Cash pick-up" option. "*People suggested we change the default option to Bank Transfer, so we changed it*", said Zlatos. "*In an emergency, we often pick standard options, but the risk is that we exclude some of the most vulnerable. Through a strong CEA approach, we can identify issues like this quite quickly and adjust as we go.*"

SRC was aware that online self-registration could exclude some groups - for example, older people or people with disabilities - so adapted their communications efforts accordingly. "*We wanted to prioritise people who might have issues registering using the app, so first we disseminated information through HSPs and Community Centres, which are connected to vulnerable members of the community and* could assist them with Access RC registration," recalled Zlatos. "*Halfway through the cash initiative, we started a broader communication campaign, allowing everyone else to participate.*"

Collecting, responding to, and using feedback

To support case management, HSPs and branches were trained to use the ESPO CRM system. "*ESPO CRM made us more efficient: for instance, we could prioritise pending cases,*" said Zlatos. "*Considering its complexity, adapting the system was easy, timely, and flexible: ESPO CRM has been "bent" in many ways to match what was useful and made sense!*"

With the support of Ukrainian volunteers, SRC also set up a **helpline** to manage queries. "*We quickly started receiving calls*", explained Artur Gulyayev, the helpline team leader. "*At first, we used the excel sheets to track and record cases, but with ESPO we became more efficient.*"

Frequently asked question sheets were used, but eventually, the three helpline staff became autonomous. Most queries reaching the helpline related to financial issues, so operators worked closely with CVA Focal points to find answers and solutions. At the beginning an IFRC CVA delegate supported in country, but in time, SRC were able to handle queries themselves, and the need for IFRC to step in became less frequent.

"SRC *was combining the outcome of social media listening, call centers/Helplines, and HSP data in monthly reports,*" Jonath Lijftogt, RC Netherlands 510 team Digital CEA specialist, remembered. "By *triangulating data, we identified trends.*"

Through feedback, SRC found out that people displaced from Ukraine were already able to access some assistance through other channels so the

National Society adapted its work to complement rather than duplicate assistance being offered by others.

SRC maintained multiple channels to engage with communities. Community Centres were active and often referred people to HSPs for specific support. SRC also conducted **Key informant interviews** and proactively strengthened Focus Group Discussions before, during, and after distributions. The online **PDM** included questions to monitor the relevance of the eligibility criteria, to inform SRC's next Cash for Health Programme. *"We tried to get as much information as possible in terms of people's health needs,"* explained Zlatos. *"This helped us to include relevant diseases in the eligibility criteria that we did not have before."* But PDMs also had their drawbacks: *"Online PDMs collect a lot of information but miss interaction with people and become too dry,"* said Sujanska.

One solution for this lack of interaction was focus group discussions, as Zlatos explained: ***"FGDs***

should be carried out consistently throughout: in person interaction is more open, people can say what they want," he said. *"There may be human observation that can pick up more issues and needs for referral."*

Lessons learnt and next steps

SRC also felt that the integration of CEA offered benefits to their own internal coordination.. *"By focussing on two-way dialogue with communities, we also improved engagement and communication within our National Society"* said Zlatos. Volunteers, too, were happy and found engaging in this new approach motivating. *"They wanted to help, and through feedback they got confirmation they were!"* said Sujanska.

SRC management is now considering mainstreaming CEA throughout the National Society's programmes:

"Having a real time way to listen and understand if the assistance is being relevant and effective, helps avoid wasting money and redirect it towards what works best," explained Sujanska.

Zlatos was also positive about the future. *"In SRC, we now consider cash as an important strategy – even the most hesitant seem to have changed their minds and consider cash as a complement to the other assistance provided,"* he said.

Contact information

For more information on the case study

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