

## PARTICIPATION IN EMERGENCIES IN SLOVAKIA

The Slovak Red Cross proved that community participation is possible in the early stages of a response by using rapid focus group discussions to co-design shelter support with affected people

### Introduction

During the early phase of the Ukraine crisis, the Slovak Red Cross (SRC) faced urgent pressure to design and roll out a shelter programme to support displaced Ukrainians. Rather than rely solely on assumptions or secondary data, SRC and IFRC organised a series of rapid focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), with affected people and hosts.

The shelter programme aimed to provide rental assistance for displaced Ukrainians and financial support to host families. Supporting hosting to work successfully was essential to relieve pressure on the overstretched rental market. Providing this type of support required a nuanced understanding of people's living arrangements, housing markets, hosting dynamics, and longer-term intentions. Without community input, there was a real risk the programme would not work, and hosting arrangements would fail, pushing families back into collective centres or into competition with Slovak renters. Shelter programming was also new for the National Society, which had initially only planned multi-purpose cash assistance for basic needs. A participatory assessment was therefore seen as essential both for programme effectiveness and organisational buy-in. As shelter surge David Dalgado noted, *"Without understanding the needs and challenges with hosting and renting, we'd be making the programme up with no information. But we had to act quickly."*



*Slovak Red Cross met with refugees who were being hosted by Slovak families to better understand their needs and identify how to support them as they settled into life in Slovakia, June 2022.*

### Community engagement approach: process, roles and timelines

In May 2022, SRC and the IFRC team conducted a rapid, participatory assessment using a mix of FGDs and KIIs across several regions. The process was deliberately simple and fast, taking approximately one week. Questions were designed with SRC HQ, branches, and some initial discussions with hosts, to understand the barriers affecting displaced Ukrainians from accessing hosting arrangements or the rental market. With hosting it was also important to understand what made a successful arrangement from both the host and guest perspective.

Branches organised FGDs with hosts and displaced Ukrainians in their areas, often meeting in private homes where multiple families were staying together. Groups were intentionally small and informal. A “snowball” approach helped identify participants quickly, with hosts and displaced Ukrainians referring others. In parallel, KIIs were conducted with branch managers, volunteers (many of whom were also hosting), and hosts. A rapid market rental assessment and secondary data complemented the qualitative findings. Branches played a central role, with many organising FGDs independently and providing short summary reports. This approach gave branches a concrete role in shaping the shelter programme and helped branches and HQ to have a shared understanding of the needs in the community.

## Impact and outcomes

Despite involving only around 20–25 participants, the information gathered had an important impact on the design of the shelter programme. This includes:

- **Informing targeting and transfer values:** Findings showed that most displaced people were renting rather than being hosted, and that “hosting” often involved annexes or second properties. As a result, the planned 50/50 split between hosting and rental support was revised, and transfer values were adjusted geographically.
- **Flagging potential barriers to hosting:** FGDs revealed hidden costs threatening hosting arrangements. As David explains, *“One family were supporting their Ukrainian guests to travel to Bratislava for medical treatment for their child. The host was struggling financially to support this. This showed us we needed a top up function, or situations like this could cause the host family to pull out.”* FGDs also showed that successful hosting depends on shared expectations and compatibility, not finances alone.
- **Identified safeguarding risks:** Discussions highlighted risks of exploitation within hosting arrangements, including unpaid labour and inappropriate relationships. This informed stronger safeguarding measures and guidance on safe hosting.
- **Highlighted additional needs:** The FGDs also highlighted unmet needs, such as childcare barriers that were preventing women from working. This gave branches the evidence they needed to advocate for complementary services, such as kindergartens.

## Lessons learned

Several key lessons emerged:

- **Participation is possible during emergencies.** Even during surge, taking a short amount of time for participatory discussions can prevent major design flaws. As David notes, *“The FGDs took a week, but saved us a lot of time later fixing things that wouldn’t have worked.”*

- **“Quick and dirty” is still valuable.** Although small-scale, the assessment produced critical insights that had significant operational impact, including preventing potential cases of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **Use internal delays productively.** While internal processes are being set up, teams can gather community input. *“Even when you think there’s no time, there probably is. We’re often not ready to start implementing immediately anyway,”* David reflected.
- **FGDs can build internal buy-in too.** Involving branches in leading FGDs built enthusiasm and ownership internally, and helped align HQ and field perspectives on needs and programme approaches.

## Implications

This case shows that community participation in programme design does not need to be postponed until after the emergency phase. By integrating rapid FGDs and KIIs into early assessments, SRC and IFRC designed a more effective, safer and contextually grounded shelter programme, demonstrating that even limited participation can have outsized benefits.

## Contact information

For more information on this case study please contact:

**Slovak Red Cross:** Artur Gulyayev, CEA focal point, [artur.gulyayev@redcross.sk](mailto:artur.gulyayev@redcross.sk)

**IFRC Europe and Central Asia:** Fatma Nur Bakkalbasi, Senior Office Community Engagement and Accountability, [FatmaNur.BAKKALBASI@ifrc.org](mailto:FatmaNur.BAKKALBASI@ifrc.org)