

From Response to Resilience

A Programmatic Review of Plan International's Humanitarian Impact in Ukraine, Poland, Moldova, and Romania

Programmatic Impact Report



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Mother hugs her daughters during distribution of cash vouchers in Romania © Plan International / George Calin

Acronyms & Abbreviations

CAY	Children, Adolescents and Youth
CoC	Champion of Change
CSE	Comprehensive Sexual Education
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CVA	Cash and Voucher Assistance
ECE	East and Central Europe
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GTM	Gender Transformative Marker
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and other non-cis-heteronormative identities
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NFIs	Non-Food Items
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCA	Organisational Capacity Assessment
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PALS	Parenting and Adolescents' Life Skills
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SEL	Social and Emotional Learning
SRHR	Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

Foreword



Anastasiia Konovalova

Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine

In February 2022, I became a refugee fleeing Ukraine with my 2-year-old son. For nearly a year, Romania had been our home, and it was there that I learned about Plan International, which literally “saved my life”. When I say “saved my life”, I mean it in a profound way that sets Plan International apart from other organizations in its approach to beneficiaries. But let me tell you the whole story.

When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine occurred, I was working as a teacher, and my whole life was devoted to children. That is why, upon arriving in Romania, my colleagues and I immediately started organizing classes for Ukrainian children, which eventually led to the establishment of several educational hubs across the country. In those first days of classes, instead of the expected 200 children, around 500 showed up. Children were scared and traumatized; some of them came from Mariupol and experienced occupation, spent long hours in shelters, witnessed death, and faced starvation. Their parents were struggling to support them, just as we, teachers, were refugees trying to adapt to a new reality.

Numerous humanitarian organizations visited our hub in Bucharest, bringing sweets, branded backpacks, inviting entertainers, and providing mental health support through activities such as coloring. Over time, some children began to come to school merely for the free items and adopted dependency behavior. While our goal as teachers and parents was to foster resilience and encourage them to keep learning and developing, so they could care for themselves.

The first organization that approached us not just with basic needs for survival but with technical expertise and a comprehensive understanding of our challenges was Plan International. They were the first to ask us what we truly needed and involved us in the development of the program, allowing us to take the lead while also helping us gain a new perspective. It was about dignity. We were never treated as victims of war. Instead, we were given the opportunity to work, to engage in meaningful activities, and to plan for our futures.

Plan International and the local partner organizations they selected struck an outstanding balance between

acting swiftly – vital during emergencies – and thinking strategically ahead. They conducted in-depth needs assessment interviews not only with teachers but also with children and their parents, developing rapid solutions. I still can't imagine how they achieved what they did, because all assistance typically takes time. Children received books, tablets, furniture, and toys for early development programs. Teachers got training in mental health, psychosocial support, and self-care. It was all focused on supporting children and upholding the dignity of those who work with them. Plan International also helped teachers rent apartments and get paid for their work in educational hubs. One of the most crucial actions taken by Plan was connecting these hubs across Romania into a network, allowing teachers to share experiences and offer support to one another. The seeds planted by the organization continue to bear fruit. Through this network, people can find jobs and opportu-

nities to build their skills by attending training sessions, conferences, analyzing cases, sharing best practices, and fostering a sense of community.

Plan helped me discover my own strength while I was going through an incredibly difficult time. They guided me but also allowed me to take the lead in that guidance. This experience inspired me to become the Deputy Minister of Education. In this role, while working on early childhood education reform, I apply a people-centered approach – even a person-centered approach – where community leaders drive the process and make decisions based on their values, rather than merely addressing basic needs. Our goal is to support them in the same way that Plan supported us in Romania. I want them to feel what I felt while holding hands with Plan – I am heard, my voice matters, and I am cared for.



Sven Coppens

Director, East and Central Europe, Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis Response

On the 2nd of March 2022, Plan International's International Board approved new operations in East and Central Europe to respond to the impact of the escalation of the war in Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. The resulting refugee and IDP crisis became the largest post-WWII humanitarian crisis that hit Europe. Since February 2022, Plan International has established a solid presence in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries, Moldova, Poland, and Romania. This enabled us to actively address the humanitarian crisis resulting from the ongoing war.

Plan International is marking 4 years of responding to the humanitarian needs that affected populations are facing in Ukraine, and to the resulting refugee crisis in Poland, Romania and Moldova. We are proud to capture and present the impact of our humanitarian response in this programmatic impact report. We hope it will allow us to continue highlighting and addressing the devastating impact that the war in Ukraine has on girls, boys and young people from Ukraine in all their diversity.

Since its inception, our new presence throughout East and Central Europe intentionally reflected Plan Inter-

national's localisation commitments: drawing upon extensive experience in both humanitarian and development settings, Plan International in East and Central Europe adopted a localized, partner-led approach. Through effective partnerships with 65 local organizations and local governments, Plan International's Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis Response has reached nearly 1.7 million individuals. This impact assessment report is a heartfelt tribute to the tremendous results our humanitarian partners in Ukraine, Moldova, Poland and Romania have achieved over the past 4 years.

The war in Ukraine is continuing with all intensity and seemingly without an end in sight. Nearly four years into this devastating war, children in Ukraine continue to pay the highest price. Each new attack deepens their trauma and erodes their safety, education, protection, mental health and hopes for the future.

Plan International will continue to stand in solidarity with every child, parent and caregiver affected by the ongoing war. As long as it takes.



Refugees from Ukraine are led to buses for onwards travel at the Polish border © Plan International

Introduction

Since 2022, the war in Ukraine has reshaped the humanitarian landscape of East and Central Europe (ECE), demanding coordinated, localised, and gender-responsive action. In this context, **Plan International's Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis Response** has sought to amplify and add value to civil society partners' integrated humanitarian programming in ECE. Specifically, as part of its global humanitarian mandate, Plan International's Response aims at reducing the vulnerabilities and risks faced by refugees, displaced and conflict-affected people inside Ukraine and neighbouring countries. It focuses on increasing the resilience, well-being and agency of girls,¹ young people and minority or non-dominant groups. Whilst providing direct life-saving humanitarian assistance, Plan International's objective is also to move beyond the immediate crisis response to address structural inequalities and promote social, gender and economic justice across ECE.

escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 by establishing operations in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. The organisation established a presence within Ukraine in August 2022 and has since been progressively developing, expanding, and enhancing its Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis Response in ECE.

Since initiating its operations in ECE, Plan International's overarching ambition in the region has been to amplify and enhance the integrated programming of civil society partners by empowering them to lead throughout the project cycle. By consistently maintaining **partner spending above 70%**, Plan International's localised and partner-led approach has ensured faster, more contextual, and sustainable delivery of assistance, whilst strengthening the long-term capacity of local civil society actors. From 2022 to 2025, this approach has allowed Plan International to reach more than **1.7 million people** across **65 partners** and **87 projects in four countries** (Chart 1).

Plan International initiated its Ukraine Refugee Crisis Response programme immediately following the

Chart 1 – Plan International's reach by country in ECE



¹ Plan International recognise gender as a multidimensional concept which influences people's identities and expressions in many ways, and that gender identity goes beyond a binary field of male and female. In this report, "girls" is therefore employed as an umbrella term.



Refugees from Ukraine disembark ferry in Romania after crossing the Danube river from Ukraine © Plan International / George Calin

Whilst programmatic needs have expanded in Ukraine, the global aid environment has entered a period of contraction. Funding humanitarian and development assistance has become increasingly challenging worldwide. According to the OECD, Official Development Assistance (ODA) decreased by 7.1% in 2024, compared to 2023. This is mainly due to a reduction in contributions to international organisations, as well as a decrease in aid for Ukraine, lower levels of humanitarian aid and reduced spending on hosting refugees in donor countries.ⁱ

Whilst the United States was the largest aid donor globally, contributing over USD 60 billion in 2024, and accounting for 30% of total ODA,ⁱⁱ international aid cuts following the defunding of the US Agency for International Development and the reduction of contributions by other nations pose serious concerns. Although nearly 300 million people worldwide rely on humanitarian aid, in 2024 alone, a USD 25 billion gap emerged between the funds needed for United Nations appeals, with only 51% of contributions received. For 2025 so far, the gap stands at USD 35 billion, with only 22% of the required funding received.ⁱⁱⁱ

These shifts threaten both humanitarian coverage and the sustainability of gender-transformative and youth-focused programming globally. In Ukraine specifically, funding coverage was reaching 78%, with a 693 million gap. However, as it entered its fourth year since the escalation, the war in Ukraine continues to inflict

immense suffering and has deepened the severity of humanitarian needs along the front lines and at the northern border.^{iv} Plan International's strategy, like those of other organisations in ECE and globally, will thus need to adapt to these contextual changes.

Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis: Key Figures^v

- **12.7M people**, 36% of the population, in need of urgent humanitarian assistance inside Ukraine
- **3.6M people** estimated to be displaced inside Ukraine
- **5.1M refugees** from Ukraine recorded in Europe

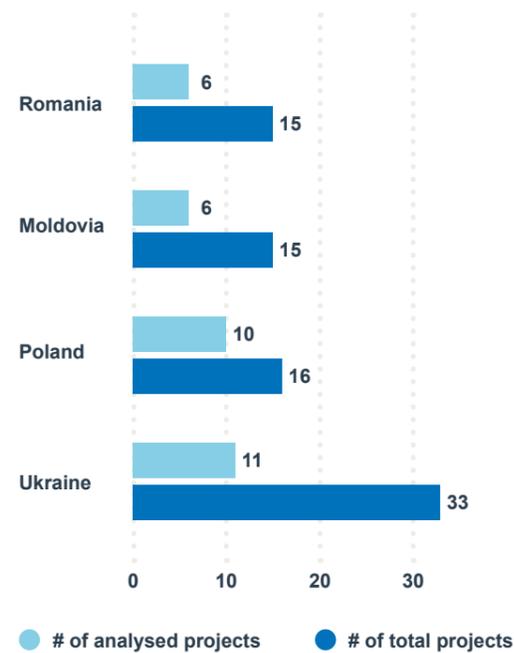
Given this pivotal moment, assessing the programmatic impact of Plan International's humanitarian, nexus, and development initiatives in Ukraine, Moldova, Poland, and Romania is highly relevant. Extending beyond the reach of programme participants, such analysis will enable Plan International to critically reflect on its programming outcomes within the region since 2022. Findings will also serve to inform the next regional strategy development process for Plan International in ECE.

Approach

To assess the programmatic impact of Plan International in ECE, a secondary data analysis was performed. Qualitative data from available sources encompassing **33 of Plan International's projects** in Ukraine, Moldova, Poland, and Romania were reviewed (*Chart 2*). This includes evaluation reports, post-distribution monitoring reports, and after-action reviews. To triangulate information, results from Plan International's 2025 country strategy survey and insights from quarterly reports produced since 2023 were considered in the analysis.

A thematic analysis was performed to derive findings across the **six programmatic areas** that inform Plan International's 2023-2025 Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis Response Strategy (*Figure 1*). To ensure a systematic approach, the analysis was conducted in accordance with the evaluation criteria established by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC).^{2vi} The analysis also incorporated considerations of projects' gender and inclusion, as well as their youth-centredness.

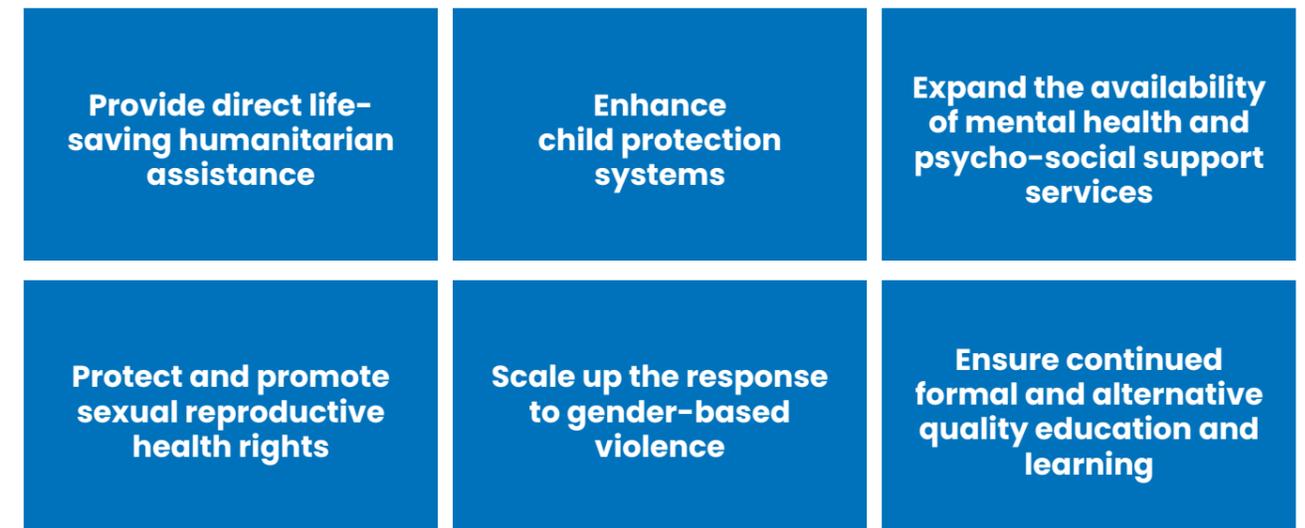
Chart 2 – # of analysed projects per programme country



Panel discussion at the SRHR report launch in Bucharest © Plan International

² The OECD DAC evaluation criteria encompass projects' relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability.

Figure 1 – Plan International's programmatic areas in ECE



Plan staff help distribute backpacks to children from Ukraine in Moldova © Plan International/Tatiana Sultanova

Note on data quality

Given the integrated nature of Plan International's programming in ECE, the sources examined for this report frequently encompassed multiple programmatic areas. It is essential to recognise that the analysis conducted as part of this report relied upon the quality of evidence available. Due to the lack of quantitative data and systematic evaluation for some projects, the impact of certain interventions in ECE remains unclear.

This report is divided into two principal sections. The first section presents an evaluation of Plan International's impact in ECE within the six programmatic areas. As part of the section, key findings from research reports produced by Plan International in ECE since 2022 were synthesised to provide an overview of needs and challenges within each programmatic area. The second section discusses cross-cutting learnings related to the relevance, efficiency, and sustainability of projects. It also discusses insights into Plan International's gender and inclusion and youth-centred approach in ECE.

Key Findings



Summary of Plan International's and partners' programmatic impact in ECE

Direct Humanitarian Assistance

- Emergency assistance through various modalities, including cash and voucher assistance (CVA), has allowed Plan International and partners to meet the evolving needs of displaced and refugee communities in Ukraine and host countries.
- Whilst interventions primarily addressed urgent needs in ECE, they also enhanced participants' well-being and social adaptation, leading to the integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in their new communities.

Child Protection

- The referral of children, adolescents, and youth (CAY) to support services, capacity strengthening for key protection specialists, and family-level protection approaches have enabled Plan International and partners to create a protective and emotionally healthy environment for CAY in ECE.
- Child protection interventions also supported the integration and well-being of refugee CAY, including children with disabilities.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

- Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) interventions in various formats, including group and individual therapy, enabled Plan International and partners to increase the well-being and emotional resilience of displaced and refugee participants, including CAY, in Ukraine and host countries.
- Improved psychological well-being strengthened interpersonal relationships and integration for displaced CAY and adults.

Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

- Referral and the provision of direct services by Plan International and partners have expanded access to Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services in ECE.
- Awareness-raising interventions have also provided essential information to support IDPs, refugee and host communities in understanding their SRHR and accessing key services in Ukraine and host countries.

Gender-Based Violence

- Whilst the provision of information has increased awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) risks amongst project participants, the scale-up of GBV services for survivors by Plan International and partners has ensured their protection and safety in ECE.
- More recently, programming targeting gender norms has also been used to help reduce GBV prevalence in Ukraine and host countries.

Education

- In Ukraine, whilst various modalities delivered by Plan International and partners have ensured children stay engaged in learning amidst ongoing disruptions, school rehabilitation efforts have increased access to quality education.
- In host countries, the continuation of education and social activities provided safe spaces for refugee CAY, and language courses actively supported their integration into host communities.



Friends play with dog at accommodation centre for IDPs in Ukraine © Plan International / Albina Vinar



Key cross-cutting learnings

Gender and Inclusion

- Although initial programmatic efforts focused on responding to project participants' gender-specific needs only, most projects across ECE in 2025 meet gender-transformative criteria.
- Comprehensive assessments have been essential to guarantee that interventions are inclusive of vulnerable groups in Ukraine and host countries, beyond IDPs and refugees groups.

Youth Focus

- Since 2023, Plan International has engaged in intentional youth inclusion by connecting with youth in ECE and providing a space for them to express their needs and priorities.
- In the last year, Plan International has further deepened its youth focus across the regional portfolio, with a strategic pivot to a more structured and participatory approach.

Plan International's Programmatic Impact in ECE

A. Direct Humanitarian Assistance³

Across all countries, Plan International and partners' humanitarian response has been characterised by adaptability and dignity-centred approaches to ensure that the immediate needs and long-term resilience of displaced and refugee communities were addressed.

Since the onset of the crisis, Plan International and partners have laid a strong foundation for cash programming in Ukraine to meet the evolving needs of affected communities. This approach enabled recipient households to preserve their dignity by covering their basic needs and improving their financial stability. It also empowered local partners to deliver more sustainable and impactful assistance. Although CVA has been primarily used to cover needs related to medicines, food, and personal hygiene products, cash for winter energy has also allowed households to improve their situations.

507K

people reached by Plan International and partners' **direct humanitarian assistance** in ECE.

About the CVA Modality

In 2024, Ukraine was the world's most significant cash response with an estimated USD 668M delivered in support of people in need.^{vii} By providing money or vouchers, CVA enables people in crisis to purchase what they need most, helping them regain control over their lives with dignity and choice.^{viii} Following the 2022 Regional Refugee Response Plan,^{ix} Plan International delivered a total of **EUR 5.1M** in CVA to refugees and displaced communities in Ukraine, Moldova, Poland and Romania.

Over the last year in **Ukraine**, direct life-saving support remained a priority for Plan International and partners as the war continued to disrupt the lives of children and families. Flexible modalities, including multi-pur-

³ Plan International has been using an integrated approach in its humanitarian response, working across multiple programmatic areas in projects. Whilst Plan International's entire strategy and project portfolio in ECE is humanitarian, interventions including protection and education work are humanitarian and often life-saving but are considered separately in the report. This section thus covers direct humanitarian assistance, including CVA, food and non-food items, as well as emergency services.

pose cash assistance, cash for protection, winterisation support, repair vouchers, non-food items (NFIs), and microgrants, enabled households to meet urgent needs quickly and effectively. These interventions have also been critical to strengthen coping mechanisms, support protection outcomes, and empower affected populations with agency. In areas where cash was not viable, such as during household evacuations from frontline areas, gifts-in-kind provided essential support.

In most countries, emergency assistance through various modalities remained central for Plan International and partners to meet the immediate needs of refugees. Throughout the years, Plan International **Moldova** and its partners distributed winter kits, food, hygiene items, and CVA, whilst helping refugees navigate systems and access services. The distribution of medical and food vouchers has been particularly effective for refugee households to meet critical health-care needs and enhance their food security. In the last year, Plan International continued to provide humanitarian assistance in Moldova by providing emergency packages and services at the borders according to the needs of refugees from Ukraine.

About Winterisation Support

As part of its regional strategy in ECE, Plan International delivers emergency services to people in need. From October onwards, this includes **winterisation support** to cover harsh weather conditions. As per the CVA working groups' guidance, a thorough assessment by country teams and local partners ensures the best modality (i.e., in-kind or cash support) is selected to meet the needs of project participants.⁴

In **Romania**, Plan International's partners ensured support for both refugees and host communities through an emergency shelter and mobile outreach, which met basic needs and promoted integration. The emergency shelter in Bucharest was the first point of entry for families arriving in Romania, whilst the mobile team supported refugees in private accommodations by distributing food and NFIs, providing social work services, and assisting with documentation and navigating the Romanian social system. Community facilitators and information officers also supported refugees to register at community centres, access services and

⁴ In Ukraine, winterisation may also take the shape of in-kind distributions, with clothing and blankets distributed to families in need, particularly those with children, individuals with disabilities and older people.



Mother and her daughter look for clothes at the Moldova for Peace warehouse © Plan International

referrals, as well as receive counselling for temporary protection and medical appointments. Whilst food vouchers were also delivered, the various modalities of partners' humanitarian interventions in Romania were particularly relevant for refugees in a context where most organisations provided food support only.

Finally, in **Poland**, Plan International adapted its programming with partners to reflect the evolving humanitarian landscape. Interventions initially focused on emergency aid, cash assistance and NFIs to meet refugees' immediate needs. Whilst Plan International and partners continued the delivery of CVA and hygiene kits, refugee arrivals stabilised in Poland from 2024 onwards. Plan International thus pivoted toward medium-term support, emphasising access to services, housing, education, and long-term MHPSS support. This ensured continued relevance and impact in a changing humanitarian landscape in Poland.

Whilst Plan International and partners' humanitarian interventions mainly addressed immediate needs in ECE, they also enhanced participants' well-being and social adaptation, leading to the integration of IDPs and refugees in their new communities. For instance, evidence from projects in **Ukraine** suggests that improved access to essential services, resources and more stable living conditions enhanced social cohesion and community engagement. Similarly, interventions integrated with education in **Poland** and in **Romania** have improved the integration and well-being of refugee families by proposing activities that facilitated the adoption of a lifestyle as close to normal as possible. Children's involvement in educational activities allowed parents to explore employment opportunities. Despite the disruptions brought on by relocation, families were able to restore a sense of continuity in their daily lives.



Mother and her daughter found support at the HumanDoc integration centre in Poland © Plan International



What we have learned through Plan International's research on humanitarian assistance⁵

Although feedback mechanisms exist across all of Plan International's projects in ECE, understanding the potential barriers to reporting Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) is crucial, especially as the war in Ukraine has increased Ukrainian refugees' vulnerability to GBV and SEA in neighbouring countries.

According to a 2025 study by Plan International, CARE and the International Rescue Committee in **Poland**,^x refugees from Ukraine often do not consider SEA reporting as a priority when receiving aid, as they instead **prioritise basic survival needs**. Findings demonstrate that **fear of losing access to services outweighs safety concerns**, partly due to social norms and taboos around abuse. According to the study, limited awareness of power imbalances during aid distribution further complicates the issue, underscoring the need for humanitarian workers to improve their understanding of these dynamics in ECE.

Because refugees from Ukraine are generally unaware of the SEA risks that could result from misconduct by humanitarian staff, **prevention** should be the primary focus for overcoming reporting barriers. Therefore, the study indicates that reporting can be facilitated through:

- Awareness-raising on rights, opportunities to report, and available mechanisms for aid recipients.
- Improving reporting mechanisms accessibility (i.e., simplification, language, multiple digital and physical entry-points) and confidentiality.
- Demonstrating accountability of mechanisms and processes in place.

Interested to learn more about about SEA underreporting in Poland?

See the following report:



Study Synthesis:
Research on Barriers
to SEA Reporting
(July 2025)



Plan staff visits an informal reception centre near the Polish border with Ukraine © Plan International

⁵ This sub-section, as well as similar ones found in the following sections, synthesises findings from research projects conducted in ECE by Plan International.

B. Child Protection



Plan International and partners' child protection work across ECE has focused on strengthening systems, empowering local actors, and ensuring vulnerable children receive tailored support. In Ukraine and host countries, interventions have thus been designed to create safer and more inclusive environments for CAY.

191K

people reached by Plan International and partners' child protection programming in ECE.

Plan International and partners' child protection interventions have enabled the referral of CAY to support services. In **Ukraine**, partners played a pivotal role in enhancing case management and referral mechanisms. These systems have enabled state services and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to identify and support at-risk children, including those displaced, living with disabilities, or in foster care, through continuous and individualised assistance. As this support ensured children's specific needs were identified and addressed, it reduced protection risks and supported their well-being and social inclusion.

In host countries, Plan International also strengthened case management and referral mechanisms. In **Moldova**, for instance, Plan International supported the rollout of the national database, *Primero+*, through its local partner. This enabled the systematic registration and case management for at-risk children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, children with damaged documents, those with disabilities or with caregivers with disabilities, and those removed from their families as a protective measure.

Similarly, in **Poland**, Plan International partnered with leading child protection organisations to support overwhelmed systems. Services were delivered through recreational centres, institutions, and helplines, including Ukrainian-language support, with multicultural programming and case management addressing both immediate and long-term needs. Additionally, in

Romania, whilst Plan International's partners directly addressed the unmet needs of the most vulnerable children and caregivers, they also collaborated with authorities by bringing cases of child protection to their attention.

Capacity strengthening for key protection specialists has also enabled the creation of a protective environment for CAY. Evidence from a project implemented in **Ukraine** until mid-2024 suggests that training delivered on Child Protection Minimum Standards and Plan International's **Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting (PALS)** programme increased the awareness of specialists working in educational institutions, social services, public associations, and government authorities in Donetsk Oblast. The training enhanced specialists' knowledge of key protection concepts in the context of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, whilst supporting the development of skills to foster their professional resilience. To strengthen cooperation in the field of child protection in Ukraine, this approach was complemented by meetings and round tables with local authorities. In the last year, Plan International and partners also conducted various capacity-building programmes, including training for social workers on case management in conflict settings.

About Plan International's PALS programme

Plan International's global **PALS** programme supports adolescents and their caregivers in emergency and protracted crisis settings. It aims to equip adolescents aged 10 to 19 years and their caregivers with essential information, skills and resources to support adolescent health, safety and well-being in times of crisis.^{xi}

In host countries, training delivered by Plan International and partners to specialists has also strengthened human and institutional capacity to respond more effectively to the protection needs



Father plays with his son at an event to mark the first International day of Play © Plan International

of refugees from Ukraine. In **Moldova**, training through partners addressed capacity gaps, particularly given the rapid expansion of Moldova's child protection workforce in 2023 and 2024. Partners supported newly appointed specialists with case management and inter-institutional coordination, whilst helping them gain the procedural clarity required for daily decision-making. Plan International's partners also supported the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Moldova to implement the *Restart* Social Assistance System Reform in 2023. This included extensive capacity-building activities for child protection and social workers at different levels. Finally, training on the Child-Friendly Feedback Mechanism has also

strengthened the capacity of organisations working with refugees from Ukraine and vulnerable communities in Moldova.

In **Poland** too, Plan International's translation and rollout of the Child-Friendly Feedback Mechanism manual have been key to localising global standards and enhancing shared ownership to improve national-level safeguarding practice. Plan International's partner also implemented activities focused on embedding child protection and safeguarding standards in hospitals and sports clubs, aligning closely with national priorities under the 2024 *Kamilek Act*, which enhanced child protection standards across organi-

sations working with minors. This intervention directly responded to institutional gaps in implementing these legal requirements. By training more than 900 health-care professionals and 98 sports clubs, the project strengthened institutional readiness and offered practical tools to comply with new standards.

Family-level protection approaches for host and refugee communities have also been instrumental in developing emotionally healthy environments for CAY. Across interventions delivered by partners in **Romania** and **Moldova**, training, including **PALS** sessions for caregivers, enhanced relationships of both host and refugee families. The development of social-emotional skills during the sessions improved the psychosocial well-being of caregivers. Networks created through activities also evolved into sustainable peer-support systems to exchange advice, share cultural experiences, and provide emotional reassurance. In both countries, the community hubs where sessions were delivered thus became informal gathering points for host and refugee families and enabled the creation of new support networks.

Therefore, beyond systems and training, child protection intervention by Plan International and partners supported integration and well-being through non-formal education and livelihood initiatives. In **Romania**, for instance, evidence suggests that activities that fostered leadership, life skills, and social cohesion empowered youth from refugee and host communities. The establishment of adolescent-friendly spaces provided them with safe environments for learning and interaction, which increased young people's self-confidence, communication abilities, and social integration. Similarly, integrated child protection interventions in **Poland** demonstrated the value of integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices within the Polish education system. Whilst this approach contributed to creating a more cohesive environment for both Ukrainian and Polish adolescents, it improved their well-being and emotional and social resilience.

Critically, child protection interventions also supported the integration of children with disabilities in their new communities. In **Ukraine**, for example, partners endorsed the creation of inclusive

Responding to the specific needs of CAY with integrated programming

Whilst Plan International's child protection approach supports referrals and direct service delivery, interventions often integrate education or MHPSS components to respond to the needs of CAY from Ukraine. For instance, key activities include supporting CAY in staying in school, attending online education activities, and integrating SEL or language classes into their curriculum. Psychosocial support and life skills sessions are also incorporated to provide them with resources to enhance their psychological well-being.

resource centres to meet the needs of children with special needs and foster a more inclusive approach to social service provision. The centres supported both the children and their caregivers, providing essential financial assistance for medical check-ups, educational materials, and specialised services, including speech therapy. Interventions also funded social workers to provide services directly at home, thereby significantly improving the quality of life for households.

Similarly, in **Poland**, partners contributed to creating inclusive environments for refugee children from Ukraine living with disabilities. By adapting to the needs of children through safe spaces called *Spynkas*, children with disabilities from Ukraine found a sense of normality by socialising amongst other Ukrainian children.⁶ Other interventions in Poland developed a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach to enable personalised care for children from Ukraine and Poland living with disabilities. Whilst collaboration amongst specialists led to improvements in both communication and motor skills, family assistants also played a crucial role in reducing the isolation of refugee children by supporting their integration into Polish schools.



What we have learned through Plan International's research on child protection

The escalation of the war in Ukraine has impacted the sense of safety and protection of adolescent girls, boys, and their caregivers. However, as Plan International's research suggestsⁱⁱⁱ, child protection concerns differ for those residing in Ukraine and those in host countries.

Key protection risks in Ukraine

In **Ukraine**, the primary concern is the threat to personal safety from bombs and violence directly connected to the war. Whilst the dangers from bombs affect adolescents' physical and psychological health, the insecurity caused by the escalation of the war has greatly limited their freedom of movement. As demonstrated by Plan International's research, adolescents' sense of safety in Ukraine is also threatened by the increased burdens on their caregivers, especially single female parents. In some cases, caregivers may need to prioritise providing for adolescents' basic needs over supervising them. Reduced adult supervision heightens the risk of accidents and exposes adolescents to dangers they may not be able to handle on their own.

Child protection risks are worse for vulnerable groups in ECE

Plan International's research in ECE also highlights that certain groups, including unaccompanied minors, adolescents with disabilities, and girls from ethnic minorities such as Roma, face increased protection risks. As the war worsens existing vulnerabilities, these adolescents encounter multiple risks, including the breakdown of their support systems and exposure to different types of violence.

In **Ukraine**, **adolescents with disabilities** face significant protection challenges due to the war, such as difficulties accessing safe accommodation and participating in evacuations necessary for their safety. In **Poland**, refugee children with disabilities and their families encounter double stigma. Whilst behaviours associated with their condition can sometimes be seen as complex or problematic, many also face discrimination because of their refugee status, which makes it harder for caregivers to manage their children's needs and care.

In addition, Plan International's findings demonstrate that the escalation of the war has exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of **LGBTQI+ community members in Ukraine**. Where individuals may feel hesitant to reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation out of fear of stigma and discrimination, they can also encounter difficulties in finding shelter as well as accessing basic necessities and inclusive services.

Young people's agency

Adolescents are typically not involved in the **decision-making process**, including decisions to relocate due to the crisis, and therefore feel disconnected from family decisions. Because of the pressure, stress, and anxiety caused by war, families reported that caregivers often need to make quick decisions for their family's welfare. This can result in key decisions being made without consulting adolescents. Despite their reduced agency and decision-making power, Plan International's consultation with young people demonstrates that they want to be actively involved in their country's **reconstruction and recovery**. Young people have clear opinions to contribute to the discussion about rebuilding Ukraine's economy, energy infrastructure, hospitals, homes, workplaces, and schools.

Interested to learn more about child protection needs and challenges in ECE?

See the following reports:



[Young People on the War in Ukraine \(June 2023\)](#)



[Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania \(June 2024\)](#)



[Building Bridges: Towards Inclusion for Refugee Children living with Disabilities in Poland \(October 2024\)](#)



⁶ Until April 2024, Plan International's *Spynkas* project in Poland has provided critical safe spaces to support refugee children with disabilities from Ukraine. *Spynkas* combined childcare and access to specialist care in the Ukrainian language to address the needs of all children, regardless of disability or diagnosis.

C. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Across ECE, Plan International and partners have significantly expanded access to MHPSS services. By combining direct services and local capacity-building, partners' MHPSS work has supported recovery from the trauma of displacement by offering individuals the opportunity to rebuild self-esteem and develop coping mechanisms.

50K

people reached by Plan International and partners' MHPSS programming in ECE.

Strengthening local capacities was key to delivering sustainable, community-based MHPSS interventions in ECE. In **Ukraine**, for instance, Plan International's partners enhanced the knowledge and capacity of young psychologists, particularly those working in schools. Whilst this ensured they delivered effective, school-based mental MHPSS to children in need, it also led to a sustainable expansion of service availability. Teacher training to support basic MHPSS and child support at school also increased teachers' ability to engage students and build positive relationships, whilst psychological assistance provided to them contributed to a decrease in the level of burnout. Furthermore, interventions in Ukraine advanced the implementation of Plan International's **PALS** and **Parenting under Pressure** programmes by training facilitators to deliver these programmes in the regions with the greatest need.

In **Ukraine**, group and individual therapy delivered through partners helped children build emotional resilience amidst ongoing conflict. Partners' interventions have contributed to strengthening psychosocial care services in schools, improving emotional regulation, decreasing fear and anxiety, and increasing positive thinking amongst children. The supportive environment and guidance from professionals, combined with activities such as breathing exercises and art therapy, further enhanced children's ability to

navigate their feelings constructively. Over the last year, Plan International and partners' focus on MHPSS continued to be pivotal in Ukraine. Activities, including targeted sessions for children, individual counselling, and group psychological work, allowed for a targeted focus on issues of coping with grief and indefinite loss, both for the children themselves and their families.

Plan International's approach to MHPSS in ECE

The prevalence of mental disorders in conflict-affected populations is around **22.1%**,^{xiii} highlighting a critical need for support in conflict settings. People affected by the war in Ukraine are especially vulnerable due to ongoing stress, violence, and anxiety, requiring specialised care. In ECE, Plan International prioritises a holistic, life-course approach and ensures all project participants, partners, and staff have access to essential MHPSS services.

MHPSS interventions in various formats have also increased the well-being of participants from both refugee and local communities in host countries. In **Poland**, partners tailored services for children and women. Services including therapy, art and sport-based activities, as well as peer support networks, contributed to reducing stress and improving overall well-being. A referral system for specialised care was also established for severe cases, including survivors of GBV, with services available in Ukrainian and Russian.

Similarly, in **Moldova**, MHPSS services were delivered by partners through individual and group sessions, art therapy workshops, and social cohesion events. SEL and Psychological First Aid activities for host and refugee communities provided a safe space for CAY to express emotions and develop effective coping strategies. Whilst partners also supported the referral



Children take part in a group MHPSS activity in Ukraine © Voices of Children

of at-risk children and relevant social assistance, the aforementioned activities significantly contributed to stress reduction and improved emotional well-being in both groups.

In **Romania** too, MHPSS interventions enabled CAY to access therapy to process trauma and develop coping strategies. For instance, partners supported Ukrainian and Romanian adolescents through daily-access youth spaces and trauma-informed programming. This addressed emotional challenges such as anxiety, guilt, and identity fragmentation, especially amongst boys.

In addition to CAY, interventions also addressed the psychosocial well-being of adults. In **Romania**, for instance, parents were provided with opportunities to alleviate stress and improve their well-being and communication with their children. Given the financial, bureaucratic and social challenges they faced as they became heads of households, ongoing psychological support was specifically beneficial for women with children, as it contributed to their adoption of healthy coping mechanisms.

Enhanced psychosocial well-being has also led to improved interpersonal relationships and integration for displaced CAY and adults. For instance, in

a project implemented in schools in **Ukraine**, group sessions increased children's openness and their willingness to socialise and improve relationships with classmates and friends. Similarly, a project providing Art Therapy boxes to children in Ukraine also had a positive effect on relationships within households by improving children's well-being and creating opportunities for caregivers and children to spend quality time together. Over the last year, the rollout of the **PALS** training further supported parents and children to navigate relationships and use healthy coping mechanisms to communicate in the high-pressure wartime context.

In host countries, MHPSS interventions have also supported social cohesion and the integration of refugees into their new communities. MHPSS sessions for refugee women from Ukraine in **Poland** have improved their psychological well-being. Whilst the sessions encouraged them to share this knowledge within their households, they have also contributed to women's integration by fostering support systems with other refugee peers and Polish individuals. In **Moldova** and **Romania** too, the provision of safe spaces for open communication during group MHPSS sessions or for intercultural activities, such as cooking workshops and art therapy, created a sense of solidarity between host and refugee communities.



What we have learned through Plan International's research on MHPSS

The ongoing war in Ukraine has seriously affected CAY's mental health and psychosocial well-being. As Plan International's research shows,^{xiv} the emotional burden of displacement, losing family members and friends, as well as disruptions to education, have all deeply impacted CAY from Ukraine.

Stress and anxiety caused by war experiences

Findings from Plan International's research in ECE highlight that adolescents from **Ukraine** demonstrate signs of **lasting psychological effects** from their experiences of the war, including high levels of stress and anxiety, sleep difficulties, and fluctuating emotions. Adolescents in areas under attack or on the frontline are deeply affected by the **constant threat of danger**. The ongoing stress and worry have increased their levels of tension. Whilst managing these circumstances often requires psychological support, adolescents and caregivers report a significant gap in access to essential specialist mental health services in Ukraine.

In **host countries**, many adolescents reported feeling **increased stress and pressure** due to having family members remaining in Ukraine. Many children from Ukraine reported feeling stressed in their daily lives and worried about their families' financial and housing issues. For adolescent boys, personal survival and societal expectations add to their emotional distress.

Challenges for vulnerable groups

Research conducted by Plan International indicates that **adolescents with disabilities** affected by the war face increased levels of stress and anxiety due to existing barriers, such as social exclusion and limited institutional capacity to offer specialised support. The disruption caused by the war to consistent support systems, social networks, and essential services, such as regular therapy sessions, can all harm their mental health.

Adolescents from the LGBTQI+ community also encounter specific psychosocial challenges due to the hostility they faced before the war began. Fear of stigma and discrimination can deter adolescents from

seeking mental health support and can worsen feelings of isolation and harmful coping mechanisms.

Additionally, according to young people involved in Plan International's research on Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery, **soldiers and veterans** also urgently need mental health and psychosocial support. Reintegration into everyday life will be highly challenging for soldiers, and implementing reintegration programmes will be essential to support both veterans and their families.

Difficulties for adolescents in host countries

Whilst refugees from Ukraine were very warmly welcomed in host countries at the beginning of the response, **anti-migration narratives** are escalating at an alarming rate. In this context, Plan International's research findings show that adolescent girls experiencing displacement in **Romania** and **Poland** are increasingly the targets of hate speech and harassment based on their nationality. Differences in cultures and perspectives in host countries also influence their integration. For example, adolescent girls in Poland expressed a particular distance from their local community counterparts due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Similarly, displacement has fractured friendships and peer groups, with many adolescent boys and young men struggling to build new connections due to **language barriers, cultural differences, and emotional withdrawal**. Some report experiencing survivor's guilt, feeling a sense of unearned privilege compared to peers who remain in Ukraine. Whilst some young men feel welcome and safe in their host countries, others perceive increasing hostility and feel pressure to return to Ukraine despite the risks.

Adolescents' coping mechanisms

Family and friends can help reduce anxiety in adolescents, as a **trusted social environment** provides emotional comfort. To cope with the harsh realities of war and to foster a sense of normalcy and calm, adolescents also engage in activities such as reading, listening to music, drawing, playing sports, and walking with friends in nature.

However, according to Plan International's research, adolescents are also resorting to **harmful coping mechanisms** to handle stress and anxiety caused by the escalation of the war. In **Ukraine**, for instance, caregivers reported a noticeable rise in the use of electronic cigarettes and prolonged internet usage. Adolescent boys may also isolate themselves socially, engage in risk-taking behaviours, or use alcohol and online gaming as a means of escape. This underscores the need for MHPSS interventions that offer healthier alternatives for managing stress.

Barriers to accessing MHPSS services

The **lack of accessible information** about free mental health services and financial constraints related to private psychological support are common barriers preventing adolescents from knowing where to seek help, both in Ukraine and host countries. However, adolescent boys and young men face additional social and cultural obstacles that hinder their access to MHPSS services. As **traditional masculinity norms** discourage vulnerability and help-seeking behaviour, many suppress emotions to avoid appearing weak, thereby reinforcing their isolation and reluctance to seek mental health support.

Interested to learn more about MHPSS needs and challenges in ECE?

See the following reports:



[Young People on the War in Ukraine \(June 2023\)](#)



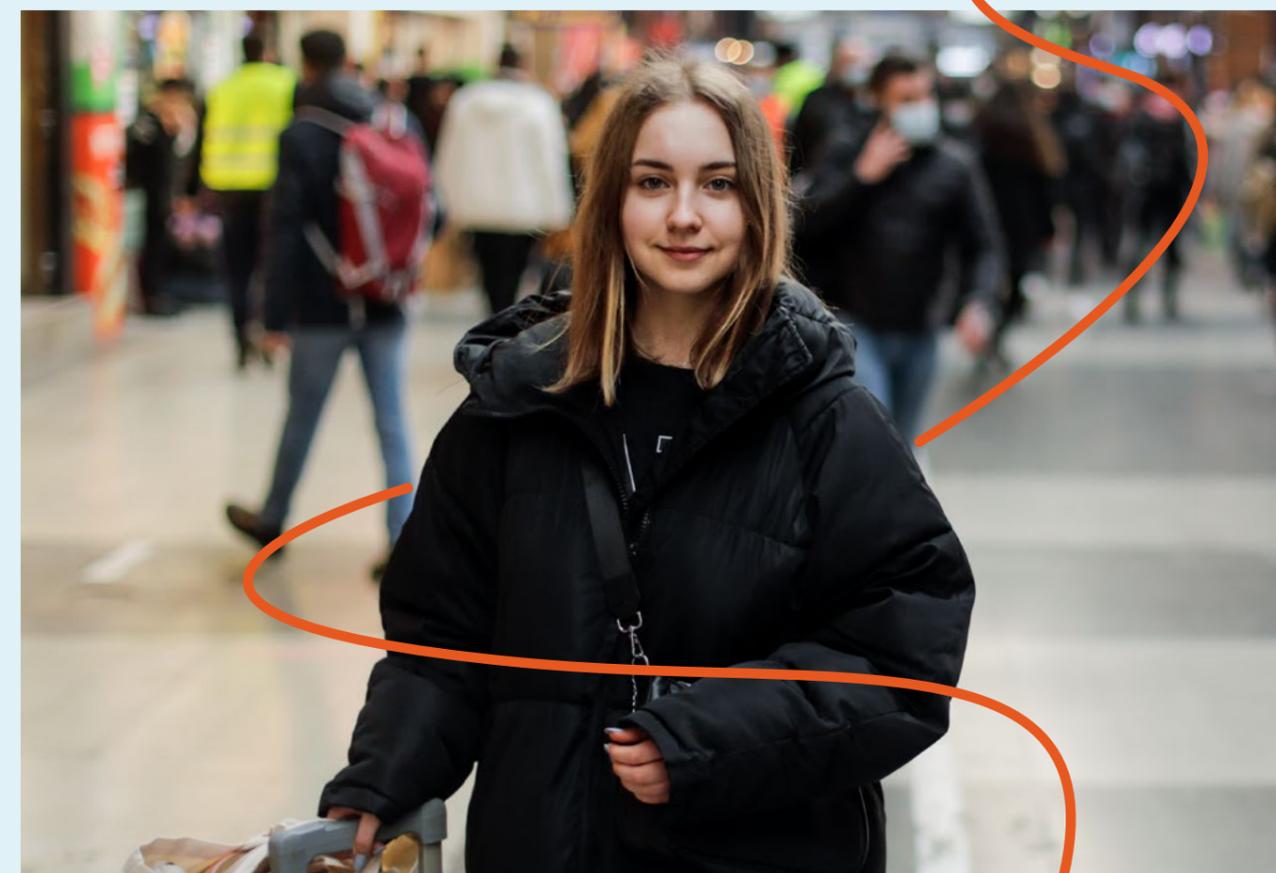
["It Is Cool Here, No Doubt About It... But Home Is Home...": Exploring the Subjective Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents Living in Poland in the Face of the War in Ukraine \(November 2023\)](#)



[Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania \(June 2024\)](#)



[Invisible Wounds: Navigating mental health challenges and support for adolescent boys and young men \(March 2025\)](#)



Adolescent girl at the Bucharest train station waits to board a train to Hungary © Plan International/George Calin

D. Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

Plan International and partners' SRHR interventions across ECE have combined direct service provision with awareness-raising efforts, ensuring that even in politically restrictive environments, girls, women, and vulnerable groups can access the care and information they need.

149K

people reached by Plan International and partners' SRHR programming in ECE.

Awareness-raising and education interventions provided essential information to support displaced, refugee and host communities in understanding their SRHR and accessing key services.

At the start of operations, progress in **Ukraine** was achieved through awareness-raising sessions on SRHR, combining age-appropriate education on contraception, puberty, menstrual health, consent culture, and healthy relationships. Increased access to reliable SRHR information improved adolescents' and young women's knowledge and self-protection, whilst also contributing to reducing stigma and promoting gender equality. More recently, awareness-raising activities in Ukraine have been integrated into the **PALS** programme to strengthen young people's confidence and promote healthier behaviours. Nonetheless, both approaches to awareness raising in Ukraine have contributed to enhancing CAY's ability to make informed decisions about their SRHR.

Awareness-raising and education activities have promoted SRHR in host countries, too. In **Moldova** and **Romania**, Plan International and partners used a peer-to-peer model to deliver SRHR education for adolescents. Adolescents' participation in SRHR sessions revealed unexpected interest in subjects originally considered secondary. The sessions were especially relevant where adolescents had almost no access to reproductive health information. In addition, in **Moldova**, parenting sessions integrating SRHR and

child protection for both host and refugee caregivers promoted skills for the well-being of families, helping parents gain a comprehensive understanding of gender-related health and rights.

In host countries, Plan International and partners have also expanded access to SRHR services through referral and the provision of direct services. For instance, despite a restrictive policy landscape in **Poland**, Plan International supported referral to SRHR services to Ukrainian refugees, especially for survivors of GBV, as well as Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) outside of school for adolescent refugees with parental consent. In addition, through one partner, Plan International supported the opening of a clinic to directly support the reproductive health of both Polish and refugee individuals.

In **Moldova**, partners reached refugees, as well as participants from marginalised backgrounds, including sex workers and drug users, through STI testing, contraception, and referrals to specialised care. More recently, this work was expanded to offer pregnancy monitoring, hygiene kits, and adolescent-focused information sessions, including for children in temporary placement centres, as well as Roma and youth.

About Plan International's approach to SRHR in ECE

Across the countries where Plan International operates in ECE, CSE remains limited both within and outside schools, leaving CAY without essential information and support regarding their SRHR, sexuality, and relationships. Since the start of operations in the region, Plan International and partners have been filling this gap by supporting adolescents, youth, and service providers to ensure access to timely, age- and gender-responsive SRHR services and information.

In **Romania**, partners provided safe healthcare access for girls and women, including abortion, medicines, and referrals. Access to services was further enhanced through two helplines, including one for youth and one multilingual call centre offering support in Ukrainian, English, and Russian. A women's centre was also established in a rural community, creating a safe space for community members to access SRHR services and engage in community-led initiatives that improved their well-being.

Interventions that target social norms were critical to improve SRHR access in marginalised communities. For instance, interventions focusing on SRHR awareness amongst Roma adolescents in **Moldova** prompted changes in knowledge, attitudes, and

practices related to SRHR across project participants. Although discussing these topics is generally regarded as inappropriate within Roma families, consultations with CAY, parents and professionals allowed for gaining acceptance from the community, leading to an increase in SRHR awareness amongst Roma CAY.

In **Romania**, interventions also contributed to shifting norms regarding SRHR across participants in marginalised communities. Group and individual sessions created a safe and inclusive environment that encouraged women to prioritise their health and share advice with others. Following the sessions, participants reported feeling more informed about SRHR and becoming increasingly comfortable during SRHR consultations.



Partner Youth for Youth's young volunteer distributes contraception and sex ed info at the Intimisfera exhibition © Youth for Youth

What we have learned through Plan International's research on SRHR

Programmes that protect SRHR remain highly relevant in ECE, as Plan International's research indicates:^{xv}

In **Ukraine**, access to state SRHR services has been restricted due to the **destruction of hospitals and clinics, resource limitations, and disruptions to the wider healthcare system** since the escalation of the war. Issues were also reported in providing emergency contraception and clinical management for rape survivors in areas near or on the frontlines because of pharmacy closures, damaged facilities, and disrupted supply chains.

In **Poland**, recent **rollbacks of sexual and reproductive rights**, including access to contraception and abortion, are the main obstacles to accessing SRHR services for both refugee and local girls and women. Poland's abortion law is currently amongst the most restrictive within the EU. Many girls in Poland receive little to no information on free SRHR services, either from the government or non-governmental organisations.

In **Romania**, access to SRHR services is limited by **conservative attitudes, bureaucratic obstacles, and an underfunded healthcare system**. Despite abortion being legal up to 14 weeks, many doctors refuse to perform it at public clinics or to provide referrals. Since 2021, SRHR services have also suffered setbacks, as the Romanian government ceased funding contraceptive subsidies and sex education, resulting in the closure of clinics.

Obstacles for marginalised groups

According to Plan International's research, marginalised groups face specific challenges in accessing SRHR information and services in Ukraine and Romania. In **Ukraine**, marginalised groups, including **girls from the Roma community**, find that financial constraints add an obstacle to SRHR services. They are also more vulnerable to missing out on already limited SRHR services due to a lack of awareness about the free services available to them.

Similarly, in **Romania**, there is considerable SRHR discrimination and marginalisation of groups such as **refugees, Roma, LGBTQI+, rural populations, and persons with disabilities**. Although Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and NGOs in Romania offer services for these groups, many lack targeted programmes to address deep-rooted and systemic discrimination against vulnerable populations.

Sources of information on SRHR

According to adolescent girls in **Ukraine**, as well as those in **Poland** and **Romania** following Ukraine's online education system, **sexual education** is introduced late, typically when students are aged 13 to 14. Findings from Plan International's research reveal that although this gap in CSE existed before the escalation of the war, it has since worsened because of the difficulties in delivering quality CSE online. In Poland, refugee girls also reported limitations on the provision of CSE, with older adolescents stating that they had not received any classes on SRHR since they shifted education systems. In Romania, there is currently little to no CSE being provided to youth in Romanian public schools.

Considering the limited CSE that adolescents receive, the primary sources of information for girls are their **mothers or female caregivers**. However, some girls experience silence on the topic at home and do not feel comfortable starting these conversations. Others explained that female caregivers have limited time to discuss these issues since the escalation of the war in Ukraine. Boys in **Ukraine** also receive information informally rather than through official channels and face a lack of access to adequate SRHR information.

The influence of stereotypes and norms about sex and sexuality

The role of **caregivers and the family environment** in facilitating access to accurate SRHR information and quality services can be crucial. However, caregivers from displaced families may hesitate to seek professional help for girls due to negative attitudes linked to SRH services. Additionally, adolescents' health and



Young people participate in a SRHR peer to peer training in Romania © Youth for Youth

well-being might suffer when sexual education only reinforces **harmful stereotypes and norms about sex and sexuality**.

In **Romania** specifically, misinformation about sex is widespread due to the influence of social media and pornography. Difficulties in accessing SRHR also reflect increasingly conservative gender norms within Romanian society. The dominance of traditional views on contraception, abortion, and gender roles results from the impact of religious institutions that use external funding to influence legislation and public policies.

Interested to learn more about SRHR needs and challenges in ECE?

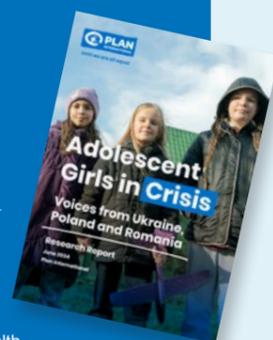
See the following reports:



[Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania](#) (June 2024)



[Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights in Romania: Current Status and Future Trajectories](#) (August 2024)



E. Gender-Based Violence

Plan International and partners' GBV programming across ECE has evolved from initial information raising to a focus on targeting gender norms to reduce the prevalence of GBV, whilst also providing direct support to survivors of GBV.

87K

people reached by Plan International and partners' GBV programming in ECE.

The provision of information by Plan International and partners has increased awareness of GBV risks amongst project participants. At the start of operations in **Ukraine**, large-scale awareness campaigns and workshops were delivered with partners. Partners employed tools including the Confidence Diary and youth-led media projects, such as "Detoxiq Show"^{xvi}, which reached thousands of adolescents in frontline and conflict-affected regions. These efforts improved young people's knowledge of GBV risks, strengthened their personal boundaries, and encouraged help-seeking behaviours.

In **Romania** too, integrated interactive activities helped young people approach complex issues critically. The gradual shift from taboo and embarrassment to active curiosity and informed discussion allowed students to internalise messages about respect, consent, and self-awareness. They not only retained accurate information on sexual health, anatomy, and violence prevention but also shared it with peers and friends, extending the project's influence beyond the classroom.

Whilst online campaigns and informational materials raised awareness of available resources in host countries, the scale-up of GBV services for survivors by Plan International and partners has ensured their protection and safety. In **Moldova** and **Romania**, for example, Plan International's partners provided shelter and safe spaces for women survivors of abuse, ensuring protection and dignity in times of crisis. Legal support and counselling also ensured women and girls regained autonomy and security in Romania. These

services were inclusive of the needs of various groups: whilst refugee and migrant women received culturally sensitive assistance, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups also benefited from tailored accessibility measures to guarantee their protection. Finally, another intervention in **Romania** supported capacity-building sessions for workers in the field of domestic violence to reinforce their knowledge about topics, including restraining orders, services to combat violence against women, and support standards.

Furthermore, in the last year in ECE, Plan International has initiated programming to target gender norms to reduce the prevalence of GBV. In **Ukraine**, the implementation of the **Champions of Change (CoC)** programme reached over 500 adolescents and youth, building knowledge on gender equality, challenging harmful norms, and strengthening leadership and advocacy skills. Evidence demonstrates that the programme led to positive behavioural change, higher awareness of gender inequality, and active youth engagement in community initiatives.

Similarly, in **Romania**, interventions also engaged men and boys in awareness campaigns, promoting positive role models and challenging societal attitudes that perpetuate violence. In **Poland**, GBV programming also transitioned from emergency case management and legal aid to a broader prevention strategy, with a deeper engagement in gender equality for long-term GBV reduction. These efforts in Ukraine, Poland, and Romania thus aligned with regional goals to address root causes and build community resilience to GBV.

About the CoC programme

Plan International's **CoC** programme aims to promote gender equality through youth participation. Active in 41 countries, the programme seeks to empower girls and involve boys to recognise and challenge harmful, negative masculinities that sustain discrimination and inequality.^{xvii}



What we have learned through Plan International's research on GBV

Programmes aiming to expand responses to GBV for vulnerable groups, including adolescent girls, LGBTIQ+ communities, and refugees, remain highly relevant in ECE, as indicated by Plan International's research.^{xviii}

The threat of GBV for adolescent girls

Adolescent girls in ECE face various **protection risks**, including GBV at home, online, and in public spaces. Where Plan International conducted research, in **Ukraine**, **Poland**, and **Romania**,⁷ girls aged 10 to 19 have expressed strong fears of experiencing SEA and have reported concerns about rape and other forms of sexual assault.

For instance, girls in **Ukraine** sometimes expressed greater concern about sexual violence than about the insecurity caused by the war itself. In **Romania** and **Poland**, girls reported a worrying rate of exposure to sexual harassment both in person and online, to the point that many seem to have normalised these experiences. To stay safe, girls reported adapting their behaviours by **avoiding going out at night and walking alone**.

In **Poland**, girls reported **online sexual harassment** such as "catfishing" by adult men pretending to be adolescents, receiving unsolicited nude images, requests for intimate photos, and sharing explicit images without consent. In **Ukraine**, low parental control, linked to the impacts of the war and caregivers' limited cybersecurity knowledge, increased **adolescents' risk of SEA, money fraud**, and other **online threats**.

GBV and insecurity in public spaces

According to Plan International's research, adolescent girls from Ukraine in **Romania** and **Poland** face a high incidence of **sexual harassment and assault in public places**. This includes witnessing public masturbation by adult men, catcalling, being filmed in public

without consent, as well as sexual assault. Refugee girls in Romania and Poland also reported harassment from boys and men because of their nationality, showing how their visibility as refugees can make them targets for predatory individuals.

Girls and young women participating in the **Safer Cities project** in **Poland** also highlighted that they often feel threatened or unsafe in public spaces due to **gender discrimination** and **unequal power dynamics** between men and women. With 43% of young women in Poland experiencing at least one instance of harassment in a public space before they are 18 years old, project participants expressed frustration, feeling they must assume personal responsibility for their own safety.⁸

Norms related to GBV

Findings from Plan International's research also reveal that adolescent girls reported a specific awareness of **victim-blaming attitudes**, with the lack of police protection and justice for survivors often linked to a reluctance to report crimes to the police. With some girls reiterating these attitudes themselves, this suggests that girls have internalised narratives that fail to recognise the perpetrator's role as the cause of sexual violence, leading them to think others would blame them for the violence they experience.

Although the escalation of the war in Ukraine has led to adolescents experiencing a reinforcement of traditional gender roles, there are also signs that the disruption to 'normal' life has contributed to some **shifts in gender roles and attitudes**. Across **Ukraine**, **Poland**, and **Romania**, adolescent girls exhibited a significant awareness of society's gendered expectations and how these influence the choices and experiences available to both girls and boys.

⁷ Whilst Plan International operates in Moldova too, research was only conducted in Ukraine, Poland, and Romania. However, the protection risks faced by girls in Moldova are similar.

⁸ The project examined the experiences faced by girls and young women in public spaces, including those from marginalised groups such as ethnic and cultural minorities, with different migration status, including refugees, from the LGBTIQ+ community, people with disabilities and girls and young women of colour.



Young people take part in the 'Safeteen' workshop in Ukraine © Plan International

Similarly, some young women and adolescent girls who participated in Plan International's research on Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery in 2023 hoped that this process would serve as a **catalyst to challenge traditional gender roles**. Whilst adolescent boys and young men were generally more dismissive of gender considerations, research and programmes that tackle the war's impact on gender norms and masculinities could help prevent GBV and the reinforcement of harmful gender stereotypes during the country's rebuilding efforts.

Heightened risks for marginalised groups

In **Poland**, Plan International's evidence shows that marginalised groups faced increased GBV risks, with girls and young women with intersectional vulnerabilities encountering greater insecurity:

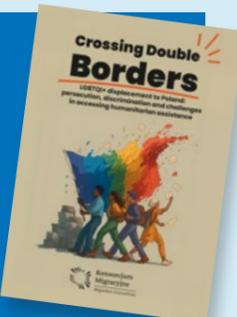
- Girls and young women from **ethnic minorities**, including Roma, face intersectional discrimination based on ethnicity and gender, and encounter increased risks of harassment and violence in public spaces due to racial stereotypes and biases.
- Girls and young women who are **refugees** face heightened risks to their safety due to language barriers, cultural isolation, and discrimination. This includes discrimination in schools, public spaces, and across online and in-person hate speech.

- Girls and young women from the **LGBTQI+** community face safety concerns related to homophobia, transphobia, and GBV, and experience exclusion and harassment in public spaces, which affects their sense of safety and well-being.

Interested to learn more about GBV needs and challenges in ECE?
See the following reports:



[Young People on the War in Ukraine \(June 2023\)](#)





[Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania \(June 2024\)](#)



[Safer Cities for Girls – Policy Recommendations for a Safer Poland: Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces \(Sept 2024\)](#)



[Crossing Double Borders – LGBTQI+ displacement to Poland: Persecution, Discrimination and Challenges in Accessing Humanitarian Assistance \(June 2025\)](#)

F. Education

Plan International's and partners' education programming across ECE has ensured continued access to quality learning despite conflict, displacement, and systemic challenges. The continuation of education has also been beneficial for the integration of displaced and refugee CAY in their new communities.

1.1M

people reached by Plan International and partners' **education programming** in ECE.

system resilience, whilst safe spaces in shelters ensured children could learn in secure environments. More recently, partners ensured that children in grades 5-11 had uninterrupted access to both formal and alternative learning opportunities. Despite ongoing disruptions caused by the conflict, a comprehensive package of catch-up classes in core subjects was delivered. Sessions with speech therapists also addressed individual learning needs and supported overall child development.

Partners' provision of essential equipment and school rehabilitation also increased access to quality educational services in Ukraine. For instance, partners' installation of 13 water access points provided schools and kindergartens in Mykolaiv Oblast with access to drinking water, which increased access to education. Additionally, the restoration of schools in Cherkasy, Khmelnytskyi, Kirovohrad, and Vinnytsia oblasts has improved learning environments and student engagement, particularly in rural areas. Notable improvements in children's learning environ-

From the beginning of Plan International's operations in Ukraine, various remote and in-person modalities, including catch-up classes, remedial education, and extracurricular activities, have ensured CAY remain engaged in learning amidst ongoing disruptions. Plan International's collaboration with the Ministry of Education strengthened



Teacher teaches in the basement of a kindergarten in Kharkiv Oblast © Words Help / Georgiy Ivanchenko



Ukrainian youth take part in a robotics class at a youth centre in Bucharest © Plan International

ment and the introduction of new educational tools and engaging activities boosted their motivation and involvement. Partners' interventions in Ukraine thus highlight the importance of infrastructure support in strengthening the resilience of educational services.

In host countries, the continuation of education and social activities provided safe spaces for refugee CAY. In **Moldova** and **Romania**, formal and alternative educational activities helped restore a sense of normality for refugee families. Community centres and educational hubs with computer classrooms enabled children continuing with the Ukrainian education system to follow distance learning in a structured environment. This setup also eased the burden on parents who would otherwise need to support their children's online learning at home. Ultimately, whilst they also promoted digital education, computer classrooms offered a semblance of normality for children.

In **Poland**, interventions focusing on children's self-confidence, emotional regulation, and social engagement led to clear behavioural and attitudinal changes amongst participants. For example, theatre, yoga, and leadership sessions supported participants' psychosocial and developmental needs by providing a sense of stability, belonging, and self-expression in a context of prolonged displacement. The mix of artistic, physical, and reflective sessions contributed to their emotional well-being and social reintegration.

Finally, language courses actively supported the integration of refugee CAY in host countries. In **Poland**, for instance, the breadth of methods employed by Plan International's partners, including the integration of SEL practices, fostered well-being and mutual understanding whilst enhancing integration in classrooms. Intercultural debate clubs and mixed activities also created opportunities for integration beyond the original scope.

Similarly, in **Moldova**, an accelerated education programme, which included Romanian language bridging, allowed for meeting the immediate and short-term needs of crisis-affected CAY. It re-familiarised them with the classroom and the process of formal learning, whilst delivering non-formal activities designed to strengthen SEL competencies. Adopted by the Ministry of Education and Research, the programme now serves as a core resource for Moldovan schools enrolling refugee learners.

In **Romania** too, language classes supported by Plan International and partners contributed to improved integration outcomes for children and adolescents. With some achieving native-level proficiency, refugee children and adolescents from Ukraine progressively socialised with Romanian peers beyond the classroom. Whilst the interventions enabled refugees to enrol in Romanian schools, some adolescents even expressed a preference for continuing their higher education studies in Romania.



What we have learned through Plan International's research on education

CAY in Ukraine, and those who now live in Poland, Romania, and Moldova, since the escalation of the war, have faced educational disruptions. As many experienced disruptions from COVID-19 online learning, Plan International's research indicates that programmes ensuring continued quality education remain highly relevant in ECE.^{xix}

Security risks linked to in-person education in Ukraine

In **Ukraine**, ongoing **disruptions caused by the need to seek shelter** impact adolescents' ability to attend school, receive a consistent education, and deepen their feelings of insecurity within the school environment. According to Plan International's research, adolescent girls in Ukraine highlighted that the immediate threat of shelling, risking their physical safety, overshadowed their educational experiences.

Whilst adolescents expressed concerns about the risks of in-person education, schools in the western and central parts of Ukraine have reopened with additional safety and security measures. However, despite building new or strengthening existing bomb shelters, they often **struggle to provide safe in-person lessons** due to the limited capacity of bomb shelters.

Online education is not the preferred option

Although adolescents in Ukraine feel safer at home than at school, they highlight the importance of **direct interaction for learning and socialisation**. Amongst all ages, genders, and countries, adolescents affected by the war express a longing for the moment when they can return to their schools, reconnect with their classmates, and experience "normality".

Ukrainian youth also voiced their frustrations with online learning, noting a decline in teaching standards and learning outcomes, low morale, and increasing chal-



Children learn in class at one of the EduTech Labs in Moldova © Amicii dei Bambini

allenges in staying motivated or focused on their studies. Since online education heavily depends on access to devices, power, and internet connectivity, a more adaptable approach for completing assignments is often necessary when students lack consistent access.

Integrating into new education systems in host countries

Evidence from Plan International's research demonstrates that **language barriers** have been the primary obstacle to adolescents' integration into new educational systems. In **Poland**, textbooks and materials were not tailored to ensure access for Ukrainian students. As they also often attend online classes at their Ukrainian schools to maintain continuous education within the Ukrainian system, the increased workload of students from Ukraine reduces their attendance at Polish schools and their participation in after-school activities.

Similar challenges were reported in **Romania**. As of 1 May 2023, refugee adolescents from Ukraine must be registered in the national education system to be eligible for financial aid. However, without sufficient language skills, adolescents are unable to follow the classes. Many thus reported continuing with remote learning from Ukraine, which can further isolate them from regular social interactions in their host community.

However, opportunities for integration exist. Those who attend a Polish school reported that, although they face many challenges, it provides some routine, as well as opportunities to learn the Polish language and **build social connections with peers**. Group tasks and activities outside the classroom have been beneficial for Polish and Ukrainian students in fostering connections and creating bonds. Refugee students also appreciate the support provided by some Polish teachers and Ukrainian intercultural assistants.

The need to integrate MHPSS intervention with education

In **Poland**, the lack of psycho-pedagogical support for students from Ukraine was one of the most significant issues observed at the start of the escalation of the war, according to Plan International's research. Whilst school staff were aware of the potential trauma faced by refugees, they recognised a need to develop their skills, including **diagnosing and responding to difficult emotions**, as well as **recognising situations that threaten students' emotional safety** or require specialised interventions. Beyond teachers' training, intercultural assistants have also been vital in providing a sense of emotional security whilst helping students cope with cultural differences, supporting educational processes, and facilitating interactions with parents.



Girl with her new backpack provided by Plan International's partner in Moldova © Plan International

Interested to learn more about education needs and challenges in ECE?

See the following reports:

[Culturally Diverse Schools \(August 2022\)](#)

[Young People on the War in Ukraine \(June 2023\)](#)

["It is cool here, no doubt about it... but home is home": Exploring the subjective wellbeing of children and adolescents living in Poland in the face of the war in Ukraine \(November 2023\)](#)

[Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania \(June 2024\)](#)

Cross-Cutting Learnings

A. Gender and Inclusion

Despite launching innovative projects and partnering with gender-expert organisations, Plan International has faced challenges in implementing its gender-transformative approach in ECE at the beginning of its humanitarian response. This gap was particularly evident during project design phases with partners, where the focus on gender-transformative approaches was not fully understood, considering humanitarian needs. As a result, initial programmatic efforts mainly focused on responding to project participants' gender-specific needs, rather than addressing gender and unequal power dynamics.

By 2025, however, there has been a marked improvement, with most projects across the ECE portfolio meeting **gender-transformative criteria**. Examples from interventions across host countries demonstrate that gender dynamics were increasingly addressed. Whilst most interventions assessed were rated as "Gender Aware", some interventions, including the SRHR helpline in **Romania**, reached "Gender Transformative" standards. Similarly, in **Ukraine**, the implementation of the **CoC** programme and other initiatives reflects a commitment to gender-transformative principles. For instance, through GBV intervention targeting young female activists and youth/feminist CSOs, Plan International and partners enhanced youth engagement in the development of feminist leadership within communities. This aligns with Plan International's objective to strengthen girls' and young women's agency over the decisions that affect them, as well as by building their knowledge, confidence, skills and access to and control over resources.^{xx}

About Plan International's gender-transformative approach

Plan International's gender-transformative approach addresses the root causes of gender inequality and reshapes unequal power dynamics. Plan International's strategy promotes critical reflection, questioning, and challenging of gender norms, whilst contesting the distribution of resources and roles based on gender. By establishing an enabling policy, budgetary, and institutional framework for gender equality, the approach seeks to safeguard girls' and women's rights, overcome the barriers they encounter, and fulfil their needs.^{xxi}

Whilst gender-transformative intent has increased, operationalisation in ECE still requires strengthening concerning the application of Plan International's **Gender Transformative Marker (GTM)** across all phases of the project cycle. Continuing to build staff capacity on the use of the GTM would ensure that gender principles are embedded more systematically and that staff and partners are equipped to apply the marker effectively across all phases of programming.

Across ECE, the inclusion of minority groups and participants with disabilities has sometimes been challenging in some interventions. In a few instances in



Girl at a backpack distribution organised by Plan International's partner in Moldova © Plan International

Ukraine and **host countries**, the definition of minority groups has led to the exclusion of other vulnerable groups from activities. Where minorities were limited to IDPs and refugees, groups, including LGBTQI+ and ethnic communities, did not receive targeted support. Similarly, the case of one humanitarian assistance distribution in **Ukraine** provided some relevant lessons regarding accessibility for participants with disabilities by highlighting challenges, including: physical inaccessibility of registration locations and receipt of aid, lack of transportation for those with limited mobility, and long queues. These examples underline the importance of developing comprehensive inclusion strategies across projects to ensure all minority groups are effectively integrated into projects.

B. Youth Focus

Until mid-2023, Plan International's Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis Response exhibited a gap in youth-centred programming. Despite partners' enthusiasm to engage youth, a lack of clarity and capacity on how to operationalise youth-led approaches was identified, as they were unequipped to translate youth engagement principles into practice. As a result, Plan International shifted its approach to an **intentional youth inclusion**

Despite these few examples, most interventions across ECE show that thorough assessments enabled inclusive interventions for marginalised groups. For example, in **Poland**, outreach to vulnerable refugee households as part of a humanitarian intervention was enhanced by a **partner-designed questionnaire** to assess individual and household vulnerability for tailored support. As part of an SRHR intervention in **Romania**, a **gender analysis** assessed the barriers faced by women and girls, particularly Roma, including discrimination and limited decision-making power. This allowed for fostering an inclusive environment, empowering women and exploring gender dynamics. Similarly, the implementation of **vulnerability scoring** in another project in Romania helped identify vulnerable participants.

by connecting with young people and providing a safe space for them to express their needs and priorities.

The launch of the policy paper **Young People on the War in Ukraine – Amplifying Youth Voices for Ukraine's Reconstruction and Recovery**^{xxii} at an EU Council High-Level Meeting in Stockholm in June 2023 marked a turning point. This strategic advocacy

initiative elevated youth perspectives to the policy level, signalling a commitment to embedding youth voices in recovery planning. The subsequent Youth Event in Kyiv in November 2023 further reinforced this trajectory, providing a platform for youth to engage directly with government officials, civil society, and project partners.

Throughout 2024, Plan International continued its engagement with young people through advocacy initiatives. Plan International ECE staff, along with two young Ukrainian women activists from Ukrainian partner organisations, attended the European Humanitarian Forum in Brussels. This allowed the two young activists to speak to decision-makers, including the Ukrainian Deputy Health Minister and senior European Union representatives. Plan International additionally organised a webinar on youth-led solutions to priorities in Ukraine to hear from young Ukrainian activists on their ongoing needs, priorities, and challenges relating to the humanitarian response in Ukraine.^{xxiii}

Plan International's 2024 report, **Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania**,^{xxiv} also participated in amplifying the voices of adolescent girls and youth impacted by the war in Ukraine around key issues, including the ongoing insecurity, MHPSS, the impact of disrupted education, and limited access to SRHR. The launch of the report took place ahead of the Ukraine Reconstruction Conference in Berlin and involved three young women activists from Ukraine. This forum allowed them to address German civil society and decision-makers about their priorities and recommendations for Ukraine's future, whilst meeting with members of the German parlia-

ment, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

From 2025 onwards, Plan International has significantly deepened its youth focus across the ECE portfolio, with a strategic pivot from engagement through advocacy initiatives to a more structured and participatory approach. This evolution is evident in several initiatives, including:

- The **contextualisation and direct implementation of the CoC programme in Ukraine**, which integrates gender equality and youth empowerment.
- The **provision of seven mini-grants to youth-led partners in Poland**, to combat GBV and promote gender equality through youth-centred initiatives at the national level.
- Continued **collaboration with partners through youth peer-educators in Romania** to lead awareness-raising sessions with adolescents on SRHR and CSE.

However, despite these advancements, Plan International must systematise its approach with youth and engage them as agents of change rather than as participants. The development of a clear strategy to operationalise Plan International's youth-led commitment in ECE is thus required. This would not only allow for meeting the needs of the most vulnerable groups but also ensure that Plan International stands out within the crowded NGO landscape in the region.

C. Relevance

Participatory approaches have been instrumental in establishing the relevance of interventions across diverse programmatic areas. Across Ukraine and host countries, adaptations for interventions, following feedback from participants, have been crucial to guarantee relevance. As a participatory and needs-based design enables participants' ownership and consideration of the needs of both refugee and host communities, it can foster social cohesion. Evidence from interventions in host countries demonstrated that the integration of delivery mode,

adaptability, and prioritisation of both refugee and local needs enhanced the relevance of interventions for CAY and their families from both communities.

Several mechanisms have allowed Plan International and partners to engage in participatory design and implementation in ECE and improve interventions' relevance. In **Moldova**, for example, relevance was reinforced across design and activities by the continuity of the intervention and proximity to participants.

Needs assessments were iterative, combining formal consultations with continuous observation and informal feedback channels such as parent groups, community meetings, and online communication. In **Poland** too, activities were shaped through continuous consultation with children, adolescents, caregivers, and frontline staff. Partners used **surveys, focus groups,** and **informal discussions** to define priorities and adapt

D. Efficiency

In ECE, Plan International's **partner-led approach** has been beneficial to enhance efficiency across interventions, as it enabled joint problem-solving in project delivery. Examples from interventions in ECE demonstrate that whilst Plan International consistently demonstrated a high degree of responsiveness and adaptability to the needs of its partners throughout projects, joint problem-solving efforts and considerations of partners' organisational capacity enhanced overall efficiency and fostered mutual trust.

In addition, examples from interventions in host countries demonstrate that partners showed strong adaptability by adjusting delivery schedules, modifying modalities, and reallocating budgets when necessary. In **Romania**, for instance, efficiency was closely linked to trust-based collaboration. Monthly meetings were viewed as constructive, allowing issues to be discussed openly. In **Poland** too, efficiency was shaped by a balance of oversight and operational flexibility. Structured monthly reporting meetings allowed Plan International to closely monitor activities without imposing rigid control. Another key source of efficiency

E. Sustainability

In ECE, sustainability was strongest where activities became embedded in **institutional systems, organisational routines,** or **community practices.** The most lasting results were thus those that built knowledge, training materials, and networks that

sessions in response to participant feedback. Due to the nature of the projects and the close relationships with the communities, partners mostly relied on verbal communication to assess the needs. In Moldova and Poland, these approaches ensured that interventions from child protection and psychosocial support to education and SRHR activities remained aligned with community priorities and responsive to emerging needs.

was partners' ability to make rapid adjustments in resource allocation to respond to actual needs.

Illustrations from interventions in Ukraine and host countries also demonstrated the relevance of **training sessions** for partners for the efficiency of projects. For example, training on child-friendly feedback mechanisms and safeguarding policies provided by Plan International ensured that partners could deliver activities efficiently and with confidence. This underscores the need for a systematic approach to capacity development for partners, based on an **Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA)** to ensure capacity development efforts address partners' needs and constraints, beyond technical discussions. For instance, interventions in **Poland** and **Romania** have benefited from best practices regarding project management and resource management to improve efficiency. In addition, in **Poland**, dedicated capacity-building budgets within partners' budgets have ensured partners have the autonomy to assess and respond to their own internal needs.

partners and authorities can continue to use independently. However, securing continuous funding remains a primary challenge for the sustainability of Plan International's interventions in ECE. As capacities and trained personnel remain contingent upon funding

availability, the ability to procure funding from diverse sources, including international donors, is imperative to guarantee the long-term sustainability of Plan International's initiatives in ECE. However, the withdrawal of the United States' development assistance disrupted critical services and created funding gaps across sectors, which impacts the sustainability of Plan International's projects in ECE.

In this context, Plan International had to **adapt its scope** in response to funding constraints. For instance, **Poland's** classification as a high-income country and global crises diverting attention and resources elsewhere have significantly impacted donor prioritisation and limited visibility for the needs of Ukrainian refugees. Plan International Poland thus faced intense competition from well-established organisations with deep local roots, making access to new funding increasingly difficult. In response, Plan International strategically diversified its donor base by tapping into private sources. It also leveraged its global expertise in SRHR to position itself as a specialist actor in Poland and maintained a strong focus on child protection and inclusive education.

In **Moldova**, legislative reforms and UNHCR's financial support have facilitated the integration of Ukrainian refugees into national systems, reducing their visi-

bility as a distinct humanitarian group. This shift prompted Plan International to transition from direct aid to system-strengthening interventions, particularly in education and social protection. However, Moldova's fragile political environment, marked by Russian interference and economic strain, has increased the vulnerability of the host population. Shrinking funding opportunities and reduced staffing have further limited Plan International's technical oversight and capacity to maintain programmatic quality. As a result, Plan International's strategic focus on child protection, SRHR, and education reflects a pragmatic response to these constraints.

Similarly, in 2024, **Romania's** operational landscape was shaped by government changes and shifting refugee dynamics, with many Ukrainians returning or relocating. These developments reduced the scale of humanitarian interventions and required greater adaptability in programme design. Plan International responded by expanding programming to include host communities, with a particular emphasis on SRHR. The launch of the SRHR research study, **Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights in Romania: Current Status and Future Trajectories**,^{xxv} positioned Plan as a technical leader in the sector and facilitated partnerships with smaller grassroots organisations.



Staff at the 'Let's go' children centre in Kyiv © Plan International

Suggested Strategic Orientations

After over three years of operations in ECE, Plan International has accumulated a set of insights that should inform its next strategic cycle in the region. The following three strategic adjustments are proposed to deepen impact, strengthen positioning, and enhance organisational resilience.

Operationalise Youth-Centred and Gender-Transformative Approaches

Whilst engagement with grassroots and youth-led organisations was strengthened to empower youth initiatives in ECE over the past year, a clear strategy must be devised to roll out Plan International's youth-led approach in ECE. This should be achieved by prioritising youth leadership in advocacy, campaigning, and influence, as well as enhancing capacities, creating meaningful platforms, and ensuring equitable resources for youth-led organisations. Establishing a Youth Advisory Group at the regional level could further reinforce this effort by institutionalising youth leadership and anchoring policies and practices in youth perspectives. Ultimately, a youth

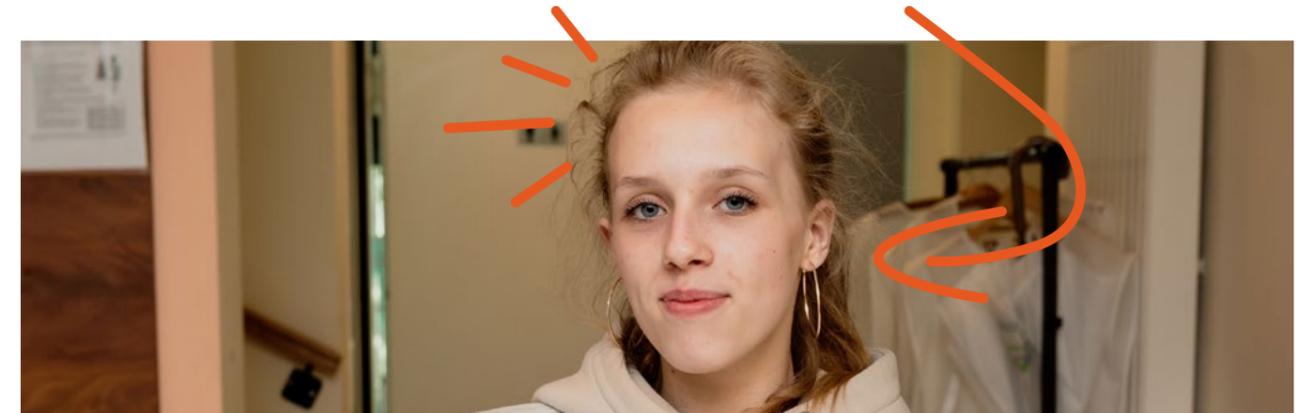
engagement strategy would not only help meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups but also ensure that Plan International stands out as an organisation in the region.

Additionally, despite increased attention to gender-specific needs across programmes, gender-transformative approaches remain inconsistently embedded across programmes. The absence of internal technical leadership has limited the integration of GTM from design to monitoring. This gap reflects a broader need to institutionalise gender expertise through sustained investment in staff capacity, tools, and culture in ECE.

Prioritise Evidence-Based Action

Whilst youth and gender-transformation should remain foundational for the development of Plan International's new strategic cycle in ECE, it must also go beyond these principles and embed adaptive, evidence-informed mechanisms that respond to the distinct realities of each country. Prioritising evidence-based action by investing in research would not only enhance programmatic relevance but also strengthen Plan International's credibility as a technical leader and strategic enabler regionally. High-impact research projects thus offer opportunities to design targeted interventions and advocacy grounded in the realities and experiences of young people. This could also enhance donor engagement by articulating Plan International's added value as a technical partner to improve services, policies and procedures.

Furthermore, the analysis conducted as part of this report underscores the need to allocate resources towards the development of formal Monitoring & Evaluation frameworks to ensure quality data is available to systematically assess programmatic impact. Although measuring impact in conflict settings is challenging, prioritising the formulation of robust indicators, systems to measure change, and independent verification for accountability is essential to strengthen Plan International's credibility. Utilising global resources developed by Plan International, including reliance on the revised thematic areas and the internal Project Management, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning system, could also be crucial in maximising and understanding impact across interventions in ECE.



Plan International's partner staff oversees the transfer of SRHR vouchers to adolescent girls from Ukraine in Romania © Jesuit Refugee Service

Strengthen Internal Capacity

Lessons from ECE operations also underscore the importance of early investment in stable internal structures and skilled personnel. In the early stages of the response, limitations in grant and project management hindered effective monitoring and steering of projects in host countries. The reliance on technical expertise often outpaced operational realities and did not always align with local partner capacities. This led to delays, oversight gaps, and multiple no-cost extensions, increasing internal burdens and affecting perceptions of delivery capacity. Partnering with low-capacity organisations further amplified financial risks, especially where finance teams were under-resourced or absent.

From mid-2023 onward, Plan International prioritised the strengthening of its programme management

structure by recruiting skilled project managers to improve quality delivery. Whilst this improved portfolio and project management capabilities substantially, the shrinking availability of financial resources in host countries has constrained Plan International's ability to invest in dedicated technical staff. However, strengthening internal technical and project management capacity is essential not only for quality implementation but also for building credibility towards partners. Internal capacity is essential to create a regional, structured approach to capacity development with partners, based on OCAs, to ensure that activities address all relevant aspects of the partnership. When this capacity is limited, dedicated capacity-building budgets within partners' budgets could ensure partners have the autonomy to assess and respond to their own internal needs.

Conclusion

Over the past three and a half years, Plan International and its partners in ECE have demonstrated agility and responsiveness in a rapidly evolving regional context. The assessment of Plan International's and partners' interventions in ECE demonstrates the impact of integrated programmes in the region. The six programmatic areas have worked together to address the most urgent needs of displaced and host communities, whilst also achieving development-oriented outcomes. Projects have promoted protective environments and increased access to quality education and language support for CAY. They have also improved participants' well-being and empowered communities with information, referral, and direct access to SRHR and GBV services.

The evaluation of Plan International's gender-transformative and youth-centred approaches also yields positive insights. Although initial programmatic efforts focused on responding to project participants' gender-specific needs only, most projects across ECE in 2025 meet gender-transformative criteria. Plan International has also considerably deepened its youth focus across the regional portfolio through a more structured and participatory approach.

Beyond global commitments, several cross-cutting elements have also proven essential in strengthening the impact of interventions in ECE. These included assessments to reach participants from marginalised groups as well as partner-led and participatory approaches. Ultimately, whilst the sustainability of Plan International interventions in host countries has been affected by funding challenges and changing needs locally, Plan International and partners have been able to adapt by shifting their strategic focus to these realities.

Therefore, by aligning its strategic priorities with local realities and global commitments, Plan International can continue to deliver high-impact programming whilst positioning itself as a trusted technical leader in the region. The next strategy cycle offers an opportunity to consolidate lessons, deepen partnerships, and reinforce resilience, ensuring that CAY, in all their diversity, as well as their communities, are supported to thrive in ECE.

Acknowledgments

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A comprehensive list of the partners Plan International has been partnering with is available in the Appendix at the end of this report.

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Appendix – Plan International's Partners per Thematic Focus⁹

Location	Partner Name	Humanitarian Assistance	Child Protection	MHPSS	SRHR	GBV	Education
Moldova	Amicii dei Bambini	•					•
	Asociata Obsteaca Centrul National de Prevenire a Abuzului fata de Copii			•			
	Ave Copiii		•				
	Centrul de Ajutor Social al Femeii si Familiei (Stimul)					•	
	Children's Rights and Information Centre and World Vision		•				•
	Copil Comunitate Familie			•			
	GenderDocM			•			
	La Strada		•				
	Primaria MEA – Moldova for Peace	•					
	The Moldova Project	•		•			•
	Uniunea pentru Echitate si Sanatate				•	•	
	Youth-Peer						•
	Alliance 4 Europe			•			
	Eduro					•	
	Federa				•		
FreedDom					•		
Poland	Fundacja Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej (Center for Citizenship Education)						•
	Fundacja Dalemy Dzieciom Się (Empowering Children Foundation)		•	•			
	Fundacja Rozwoju Dzieci (Foundation for Child Development)						•
	Fundacja Szkoła z Klasą (School with Class Foundation)						•
	Grow Space					•	
	HumanDoc	•			•		
	Juniper					•	
	Local Girls Movement					•	
	Martynka			•		•	
	Patchwork		•	•			
	Polska Akcja Humanitarna (Polish Humanitarian Action)				•		

Location	Partner Name	Humanitarian Assistance	Child Protection	MHPSS	SRHR	GBV	Education
Poland	Polskie Forum Migracyjne (Polish Migration Forum)		•	•			•
	Strefa Dorastania Toward Dialogue					•	
	Unity (Jedność) Foundation			•			
	Zustricz					•	
	Adventist Disaster Relief Agency	•					
Romania	Asociatia ANAIS			•		•	
	Asociatia CARUSEL	•					
	Asociatia Centrul de Dezvoltare Curriculara si Studii de Gen: FILIA				•		
	Asociatia Moaselor Independente				•		
	Asociatia pentru Dezvoltare prin Educatie, Informare si Sustinere, DEIS	•		•			
	Fundație Național Tineret				•	•	
	Jesuit Refugee Services						•
	Protagonisti in Educatie	•		•			
	Youth to Youth				•		•
	#WeAreAllUkrainians						•
	Slavic Heart	•	•				
	Charitable fund "BGV"						•
	Friends' Hands	•	•	•			
	DePaul Ukraine	•					
	Dobrodiy Club	•		•			
DOCCU		•	•			•	
EdCamp			•				
Equilibrium		•	•			•	
NGO "Girls"			•		•		
Ukraine	Istok	•		•			•
	Partnership 4 Every Child	•					
	Pomogaem	•		•			
	Posmishka		•	•		•	
	Pro.Svit			•			
	Re:Osvita						•
	SavEd						•
	STAN						
	Tvoya Opора			•			
	Voices of Children		•	•			
War Child						•	
Wordshelp			•			•	

9 This table includes all organisations Plan International has been partnering with since 2022, covering current and former partners.



About

Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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