

Equality versus equity: a case study from Poland

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Poland responded generously to the influx of refugees from Ukraine, providing significant access to its social protection system. Despite this, however, hardship among refugees persists. There are lessons to be drawn from Poland's approach.

Few countries have opened their social support and employment benefits systems to refugees as generously as Poland has done since the war in Ukraine escalated. The country currently hosts approximately one million registered Ukrainian refugees.¹ Poland implemented the EU's Temporary Protection Directive under the Special Act of 12th March 2022. This Act entitled Ukrainian refugees

and their spouses who crossed from Ukraine to Poland after 24th February to one-off cash support to meet immediate needs;² temporary payments to Polish households to subsidise the cost of hosting Ukrainians; and eligibility for Ukrainians to access the State welfare system.

In principle, the State welfare and employment systems for Polish citizens were made equally available to Ukrainian refugees.



The enrolment centre in Lublin, where NRC's partner PCPM is leading the 'Cash assistance for vulnerable refugees from Ukraine in Poland' project. Credit: Grzegorz Zukowski/NRC

However, refugees still face barriers to accessing the range of benefits they need, and we argue that 'equal' access to state social assistance is not enough.³

Limitations on social protection

Policy: There are a number of difficulties relating to the programme's policies. For example, Third Country Nationals (TCNs) who were legally working, studying or seeking asylum in Ukraine were excluded from the benefits provided by the Special Act and were not legally allowed to remain in Poland or claim support. Around 4% of all those fleeing Ukraine are TCNs; although the majority subsequently left Poland (for other EU countries or to return home), those who remain lack adequate assistance.

Another policy challenge is that the structure of Poland's social assistance heavily favours support for families with children. The four main social welfare benefits are for households with children and are not means-tested. However, benefits for the elderly and people with disabilities or severe medical conditions are means-tested (meaning an applicant

must prove their income falls below a certain threshold), and it can be difficult for Ukrainian refugees to prove their income. They may also need to have documentation translated into Polish or, in some cases, certification from Polish doctors or social workers to confirm eligibility. Furthermore, the cut-off thresholds for means-tested benefits are very low, placing those who receive humanitarian aid at risk of being ineligible for social protection (despite this aid being woefully below the cost of basic needs).

Resource challenges: The value of government social assistance is already low, and is inadequate to meet the rising costs of living that Polish families face. For Ukrainians, who have arrived with few belongings, these costs are even higher as they try to rebuild their lives from scratch.

There is growing evidence of refugees resorting to negative coping mechanisms. In a survey of Ukrainian refugees in Poland conducted by the Norwegian Refugee Council, 45% of refugees said they were skipping meals or eating less nutritious food, and some

reported borrowing money. Poland's pre-existing scarcity of affordable housing has been exacerbated by the large influx of refugees and many refugees are living for prolonged periods of time in substandard accommodation or collective shelters.⁴

Access: It is difficult for Ukrainian refugees to access some of the support available. Ukrainians are required to apply for a registration number to receive support. However, application forms for a registration number and for some employment and social assistance benefits are not necessarily available in Ukrainian or Russian, and applicants have difficulty submitting their information.

Employment: Poland has the second lowest unemployment rate in the EU, so it was assumed that if Ukrainians had full access to the labour market, they would become self-sufficient relatively quickly, thereby alleviating the need for State support or humanitarian aid. However, availability does not necessarily mean that individuals have access to these jobs.

Ukrainians seeking jobs are predominantly women who have caring responsibilities for children or elderly parents.⁵ Many jobs are in sectors such as transport and construction, which are not suited to the schedules of those with caring responsibilities. Moreover, the jobs available are predominantly in lower or manual skills. Many Ukrainian refugees are highly qualified; 66% are educated to a tertiary level and only 15% are low-skilled.⁶ Taking jobs that do not match their skills and capacities could detract from economic self-reliance in the long run. Furthermore, many Ukrainians are unwilling to take – and employers unwilling to offer – better paid long-term jobs, as they intend to return to their home country once it is safe and secure.

Equality versus equity

Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognises that each person has different circumstances and therefore allocates the resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome. The design of

support based on equality rather than equity resulted in cases of Ukrainian refugees' basic needs not being met, leaving many households vulnerable. The difference between the availability of social protection versus access to and adequacy of it needs to be closely analysed.

The humanitarian system is there to plug the gaps and deliver assistance to people where a government's social protection fails – but there is an assumption that if social assistance is available to Ukrainians, then it must be both adequate and accessible and therefore little additional support is needed. Humanitarians and government need to exchange information in a more effective and coordinated way and accurately identify people with the greatest needs.

In terms of the policy elements discussed above, TCNs need equal status and access to benefits as Ukrainians have; access to basic social assistance must not be based on income; and there should be more consistent support to help Ukrainians enter employment.

Improving equity in State support for refugees to ensure they can meet their basic needs will require improved data collection, sharing and coordination so that agencies can identify whose needs fall short.

At the international level, donors need to be clear about what level of support they can provide and for how long. There needs to be far better communication and coordination between government and non-government agencies, better coordination within the international humanitarian system at multiple levels, and far stronger referral processes between humanitarian agencies and government. Local NGOs should play a central role in all this, not just for the Ukrainian crisis but also to provide long-term improvement to Poland's social protection system. As such, ensuring consistent and predictable funding for local NGOs and civil society in the coming years will be critical.

Conclusion

Poland's response to Ukrainian refugees was swift, equal and generous. But this crisis has shown that we must understand and monitor access to that assistance and its appropriateness and adequacy for refugees, whose needs

are different from those of vulnerable Polish citizens for whom this assistance has been designed.

The right to social protection for all has been overlooked for too long in migration contexts. Poland's example demonstrates that where governments are willing, it is possible to deliver social protection. The key lesson is that there is a limit to the use of social protection in a humanitarian refugee context, even in countries with advanced social assistance systems. The effective use of social assistance for refugees depends upon its inclusiveness, accessibility, adequacy and appropriateness, and these four elements need to be constantly monitored to determine how international responders can best support government efforts.

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1. UNHCR Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation bit.ly/unhcr-situations-ukraine
2. The one-off benefit of 300 PLN was paid out to 1.06 million Ukrainians (with the total value amounting up to €80 million). Over 400,000 Ukrainian children received child support.
3. This article is based on: NRC and Polish Center for International Aid (2022) *Equality versus equity. How complementary approaches are required to support vulnerable Ukrainian refugees.* bit.ly/nrc-equality-v-equity
4. NRC (2023) *Hidden Hardship: 1 Year Living in Forced Displacement for Refugees from Ukraine* bit.ly/nrc-hidden-hardship
5. NRC (2022) *Economic Inclusion of Ukrainian Refugees in Poland* bit.ly/nrc-economic-inclusion

