



# UKRAINE 2019 PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT

**“I am frequently asked how I survived and continue to survive. Answering these questions makes me stronger.”**

**The 2019 Participatory Assessment Report of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons in Ukraine**

## Acknowledgements

This report is based on the Participatory Assessment conducted by UNHCR Ukraine with refugees, asylum seekers, persons with complementary protection, stateless persons, persons at risk of statelessness, internally displaced and conflict affected persons in Ukraine between February and March 2019. UNHCR is grateful for the extensive involvement and support of UNHCR's partners, local authorities, free legal aid centers, civil society, and international organizations. Most importantly, UNHCR would like to acknowledge the resilience and strength of those forcibly displaced and otherwise affected by conflict in Ukraine, who continue to share with us their challenges, hopes and fears on a daily basis.

### UNHCR Ukraine is grateful for its donors



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#### COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

*UNHCR Protection team meets with an elderly woman that is resting in an emergency tent provided by UNHCR to the Emergency Services of Ukraine in "Mayorsk" Entry-Exit Checkpoint (EECP). Photo: UNHCR Ukraine*

## Contents

Multi-Year, Multi-Partner Approach at the heart of the 2019's Participatory Assessment.....	4
Protection-Centered Methodology .....	4
<b>Refugees and asylum-seekers.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Access to asylum and quality of status determination procedures .....	5
Access to health care .....	6
Access to education.....	6
Language skills .....	6
Relations with host communities .....	7
Self-reliance and livelihoods .....	7
Durable Solutions.....	8
Feedback mechanisms .....	8
Recommendations .....	9
<b>Stateless Persons and Persons at Risk of Statelessness in Ukraine.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Protection Environment .....	9
Durable Solutions.....	10
Feedback mechanisms .....	11
Recommendations .....	11
<b>IDPs and persons at risk of displacement along the 'contact line' (Government controlled area) .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Security .....	11
Mine risks .....	12
Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).....	12
Military occupation of civilian houses .....	12
Freedom of movement.....	12
Housing .....	14
Access to pensions and social benefits .....	16
Access to free legal aid.....	16
Access to civil documentation .....	16
Mental health and psychosocial support .....	16
Health care.....	17
Livelihoods .....	17
Access to humanitarian aid.....	18
Access to justice .....	18
Access to education.....	18
Durable solutions .....	19
Feedback mechanisms .....	19
Recommendations .....	20
<b>IDPs in Government Controlled Area of Ukraine .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Discrimination .....	20
Security .....	21
Freedom of movement.....	21
Social protection and pensions.....	22
Housing .....	23
Employment and livelihoods .....	23
Health care.....	23
Child protection .....	24
Legal assistance .....	24
Durable solutions .....	24
Feedback mechanisms .....	25
Recommendations .....	26

# Introduction

In line with its **people-centred approach**, UNHCR conducts a participatory assessment on a regular basis in order to deepen its understanding of the protection risks faced by the persons the organization assists and provides protection for. These regular assessment ensures that **people are at the centre of decision-making concerning their protection and well-being**. Guided by the principles of community and rights-based approach and age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM), the exercise involves structured dialogue with refugees, stateless persons, internally displaced and other conflict-affected persons. During the participatory assessment, UNHCR analyses risks jointly with them, learns about their capacities and **listens to their proposed solutions**. These are then used by UNHCR to programme its protection and humanitarian response. During the 2019 participatory assessment, UNHCR met with 184 refugees and asylum-seekers, 86 stateless persons or those at risk of statelessness, and 520 IDPs and conflict-affected persons, including men, women, girls and boys, as well as members of the Roma and Crimean Tatar communities and persons with specific needs (e.g., persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV). **In total, 91 focus group discussions and 22 interviews with key informants were conducted over a period of three weeks in February to March 2019.** In this exercise, UNHCR was joined by its NGO partners, Government and civil society representatives, as well as donor representatives. UNHCR would also like to highlight the participation of the Ministry of Temporary Occupied Territories and IDPs, the Free Legal Aid Centers, the Ministry of Social Policy, the State Migration Service, the Ministry of Justice (Offices of the Civil Registry), the Civil Military Administration, as well as the EU Delegation in Ukraine and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, among others.

## Multi-Year, Multi-Partner Approach at the heart of the 2019's Participatory Assessment

This year's edition of UNHCR's Participatory Assessment focused on collecting feedback and suggestions on how UNHCR can strengthen the implementation of its five-year Multi-Year, Multi-Partner Strategy for the period 2018-2022 (MYMP).<sup>1</sup> Having launched its MYMP in 2018, this year's exercise represents the first important landmark for UNHCR Ukraine as it evaluates the impact of *year one* of its MYMP on the persons it protects and assists. Two cross-cutting themes focussed on included:

- UNHCR's delivery of protection and durable solutions, particularly local integration and community mobilization,
- UNHCR's feedback mechanisms and whether they were accessible, safe, appropriate and effective, within the framework of Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP).

## Methodology

Conducted in the government controlled areas of Ukraine only, the 2019 participatory assessment utilized a **total of 91 focus group discussions and 22 interviews with key informants**, including refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons and those at risk of statelessness, and conflict-affected persons. Facilitators asked participants or key informants to share their views on thematic points, with follow-up questions directing the flow of conversation to elicit relevant information. The approach encouraged persons of concern to speak freely, ensuring the prioritization of qualitative information, allowing an initial analysis of risks faced by different groups, as well as identification of capacities and resources within communities to enhance their protection.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2018/06/Ukraine-MYMP-Protection-and-Solutions-strategy-2018\\_2022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2018/06/Ukraine-MYMP-Protection-and-Solutions-strategy-2018_2022_FINAL.pdf)



## Refugees and asylum-seekers

### Access to asylum and quality of status determination procedures

Many asylum-seekers in Ukraine said their challenges started with the access to asylum procedure. Russian asylum-seekers mentioned that some of their compatriots who expressed their wish to apply for asylum at the border were refused entry into Ukraine. Many asylum-seekers noted difficulties in registration with the asylum authorities because of the long queues and additional requests to pay fines for irregular stay. The reorganization of the Kyiv migration service contributed to delays in early 2019.

#### DID YOU KNOW

In early 2019, the Kyiv State Migration Service's office closed and transitioned to become a new Central Inter-regional Directorate, in line with eleven other directorates that were already operating around Ukraine. The new directorate re-opened in mid-February but took some time until it could accept new asylum requests. Nevertheless, SMS and UNHCR work closely together in order to ensure a smooth transition.

Participants from different groups also noted the absence of independent interpretation in their dealings with the State Migration Service (SMS). Often they were asked to bring their own interpreter in order to apply for asylum. In this regard, some asylum-seekers highlighted that while the SMS had never demanded them to pay money for services, they have received such demands from their compatriots who provide interpretation at the SMS. During a discussion at which the SMS was present, asylum-seekers directly referred this problem to the SMS, asking them to create a list of vetted interpreters who do not request money from asylum-seekers. The participants also explained that they are not ready to file formal complaints about such incidents because they are afraid of retribution.

#### DID YOU KNOW

While the State Migration Service has a list of registered interpreters on its website, the system does not always function in practice and the authorities usually request asylum-seekers to bring their own interpreters. Therefore, UNHCR recommends to develop procedures for identifying, hiring and training qualified interpreters for all stages of the asylum procedures, including in courts. UNHCR is currently exploring how refugees who have the correct level of language knowledge can be officially certified, hired and paid to support asylum-seekers as they go through the asylum procedure.

On the quality of the asylum procedure, while asylum-seekers still mentioned that the SMS provided only brief counselling, they also reported some improvements from the side of the authorities, with better treatment for specific groups (e.g. mentioned by an LGBTI asylum-seeker in Kyiv) during registration and the asylum interview. The lengthy asylum procedure and low recognition rate were raised by the majority of the asylum-seekers, including those from refugee-producing countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia. Rejected asylum-seekers, in particular those who exhausted the asylum procedure, perceived that they had been rejected because they were unable to pay bribes. They also perceived that the Ukrainian authorities had taken a political decision not to recognize persons of particular nationalities with specific profiles, for example, political activists from CIS countries. Many rejected asylum-seekers expressed deep frustration about remaining for years in legal limbo.

*"I have been an asylum-seeker for seven years documented with only a dovidka (asylum seeker certificate issued by the asylum authorities). My passport is at the SMS, and they do not give it to me so that I can get married. I cannot marry my girlfriend. I want to have a family, but I cannot!"*

#### **Asylum-seeker from Afghanistan in Odesa**

Asylum-seekers and persons with complementary protection (another international protection status in Ukraine) complained about the fact that the documents they are issued with receive little legal recognition. Asylum-seekers who hold only an asylum certificate issued by the authorities – known as a *dovidka* - stated that when they show this certificate, they cannot get access to medical services, banking or employment.

*“The complementary protection document does not mean anything for Ukrainian employers, some banks and even in the hospitals.”*

### **Person with complementary protection from the Russian Federation**

#### **Access to health care**

Several individuals officially documented by the asylum authorities expressed low awareness about how they can access medical institutions. Some groups highlighted language barrier in communication with doctors, as well as discriminatory practices used by some doctors who make them wait in the queue longer than other patients. Furthermore, undocumented asylum-seekers confirmed that they do not have access to medical care at all, which can lead to grave consequences.

#### **DID YOU KNOW**

Until the start of the recent health care reforms, asylum-seekers enjoyed access to free urgent medical care and medical examinations. However, during the process of the reform, these measures were reversed. At present, asylum-seekers must pay for these services at the same rate as other foreigners who are temporarily in Ukraine. Asylum-seekers say they are not tourists. Most cannot afford to pay.

*“I was supposed to undergo a complicated surgery on my eyes. I was told by doctors that delay could lead to blindness. Everything was prepared thanks to UNHCR NGO partner. UNHCR agreed to cover the expenses for the surgery and I was already in the hospital. Then the doctors figured out that I do not have proper documents. They simply withdrew me from the surgery.”*

#### **Asylum-seeker from Chad**

There were also concerns about asylum-seekers with serious medical problems, like diabetes, which require both urgent and regular assistance. Asylum-seekers with disabilities may stay in the procedure for years, and they cannot receive any disability support from the state.

#### **Access to education**

While the participants at large have not reported problems with access to education, a number of them, particularly asylum-seekers, expressed feelings of hopelessness about how they will use the acquired qualification in Ukraine if their application for asylum is rejected. Some asylum-seekers said that while all their children attend schools, they see no prospects for further professional training and employment for them, as their asylum procedures are lengthy and remain unresolved for years. Participants of one group in Odesa mentioned that educational activities such as museum and theatre visits, book readings and other activities which UNHCR and its partner organized for children in 2018 were an excellent opportunity for their children to mingle with local children.

*“Our children are growing up, studying, and going to school. They ask what they should do with their lives, but we have no answers for them as we do not know which decision the Migration Service will take, or when it will do so.”*

#### **Asylum-seeker from Tajikistan in Kyiv**

#### **Language skills**

The necessity to quickly acquire local language skills was voiced by many participants. Both refugees and asylum-seekers admitted that language knowledge opens doors for employment and eases integration. Several refugees stressed the importance of Ukrainian language for those who work as interpreters in courts or with the state authorities to support other asylum-seekers. Some larger communities, like the Afghan community in Odesa, shared their own experience of organizing language classes for community members and covering teachers' fees by means of community-mobilized donations. In Zakarpatska oblast, participants who have already attended language courses expressed their keen interest in reaching higher language levels (B2 and C1). Some participants suggested new learning modalities as an alternative to classroom education, such as using skype or exchanges with local students. Some men noted that their wives had difficulty attending language classes due to family responsibilities. They supported the idea of remote learning technologies. Women themselves said they

would prioritise language studies, if effectively organized, as they understand the necessity of the local language for interactions that would further their local integration. Successfully integrated refugees who were interviewed separately also singled out quick and in-depth language learning as one of the key factors for successful local integration.

*“One of my children is disabled; he stays in his wheelchair all the time. My wife cannot work, as our son requires full-time attention and she is taking care of him. However, twice a week she always makes it a priority to attend the language classes because this is important for us to have a normal life here.”*

#### **Asylum-seeker from Afghanistan in Odesa**

*“Many people say that Ukrainians are closed, but I would suggest to go and talk to them, and look for the positive side. There are those who can hurt, but also those who call me “brother”. If you don’t speak the language – you will not have a network. First thing to do – learn the language. Then make friends and this will open you all the doors for integration.”*

#### **Recognized refugee from Guinea in Lviv.**

#### **Relations with host communities**

UNHCR met with individuals who contributed to a series of projects in 2018 designed to promote stronger relations between refugee and host communities. They shared their positive feedback about the program and one group in Odesa expressed gratitude for the active involvement of the State Migration Service in community activities.

*“We are very glad that the State Migration Service is participating in community events and initiatives, attends meetings with different refugee communities. This way we can have a dialogue, build relationship and perhaps eventually find joint solutions to our problems.”*

#### **Asylum-seeker from Russia in Odesa**

In terms of attitudes of local population to refugee communities, many participants reported discrimination related to their legal status/documents, for example, related to employment. Participants reported discrimination from the police, and one participant reported a case of being attacked in the city where he currently resides because of his ethnic origin. Somali asylum-seekers shared that they often hide their country of origin as they are concerned that it might have a negative image among the locals. At the same time, they noted that the situation has improved over the past several years. For example, while the community of Yahotyn had previously organized to block the settlement of asylum-seekers at a new Temporary Accommodation Center (TAC) located there, the asylum-seekers now residing in the TAC reported that they have good relations with local people and do not face any conflicts.

#### **Self-reliance and livelihoods**

Members of all the groups raised concerns regarding limited livelihoods opportunities. Asylum-seekers said they cannot have access to legal employment because the administrative requirements to obtain a work permit are unrealistic. For participants, access to employment was their major concern, as they want to be able to work in order to provide for the basic needs of their families.

*“I have complementary protection in Ukraine, and Ukraine is my home now. I use these roads, go to hospital here, study to become a baker. I want to give back to this country as well, and the way I see giving back is through paying taxes. I want official employment to be able to contribute to Ukrainian society.”*

#### **Person with complementary protection from Guinea in Odesa**

*“The owner of the business I’m working for says that if I take a day off, I will lose my job. There is no law that protects me. I have a small child, and it is impossible for me to support my family when they need me, as I am all the time at the market.”*

#### **Asylum-seeker from Afghanistan in Odesa**

Participants provided overall positive feedback to UNHCR’s self-reliance program, along with several suggestions for improvement. For those who have exhausted national asylum procedures, the situation is extremely complicated. Most work without authorization, and this places them at risk of extortion from the police and abuse by employers. Typically, the type of work available is physically demanding, poorly paid and unpredictable.

### **Durable Solutions**

UNHCR interviewed 14 refugees and persons with complementary protection who integrated locally without UNHCR’s assistance. When asked to identify the main factors in their success, people mentioned their legal status, solid language skills, development of professional skills and persistence in establishing local contacts and networks.

### **DID YOU KNOW**

Persons recognized as refugees in Ukraine qualify for naturalization after three years, but persons with another international protection status—“complementary protection”—cannot apply for naturalization, no matter how long they stay in Ukraine.

Persons with complementary protection expressed frustration regarding the lack of opportunities for naturalization. This impacts on their ability to plan, establish and maintain relationships in Ukraine and with family abroad, as well as access stable job prospects.

*“With complementary protection not giving access to citizenship, we are hanging in the air. I have lived here for five years with the status. I have a wife, an official job, many friends, but still I do not feel like I am rooted. We are postponing having a child, as I do not know whether my document will be prolonged from year after year or I will be told to leave.”*

**Holder of complementary protection from Syria in Uzhhorod**

*“I have complementary protection. I am soon to retire from my job, and I am eligible to receive the retirement pension. What if the State does not prolong my document at some point? How will I be able to survive given my age?”*

**Holder of complementary protection from Tajikistan, Odesa**

Asylum-seekers worry about the length of the procedure, during which they are uncertain about their future in Ukraine. In order to integrate, most groups requested support with access to employment, as well as advanced Ukrainian language courses.

*“I am an educated young man, I have a university degree and speak several languages. Yet I have been an asylum-seeker for the past seven years. What kind of durable solutions are we talking about?”*

**Asylum-seeker from Syria in Odesa**

### **Feedback mechanisms**

The majority of participants knew how to provide feedback to UNHCR and partners. Some expressed their concern that they do not receive replies to their resettlement applications submitted directly to UNHCR. During the meetings conducted in the frame of the participatory assessment, UNHCR provided further information about its procedures, as well as the limited resettlement opportunities. Many participants said that when they come to UNHCR, they do not receive the desired and clear answer about how their problems can be resolved in Ukraine. In particular, there are often no answers to questions about resettlement and financial assistance. One of the participants mentioned that some communities of refugees and asylum-seekers, for example from the Russian Federation, do not understand UNHCR’s role in Ukraine if it is not able to carry out a large resettlement program. Some participants asked UNHCR to reply to them with a short confirmation to acknowledge receipt after they send a request by e-mail.



## Recommendations

### To the Government of Ukraine

- Ensure timely access of asylum-seekers to the asylum procedure and documentation.
- Provide improved independent and quality interpretation free of charge.
- Introduce necessary legislative amendments, as well as changes to the format of the asylum-seeker certificate, so that asylum-seekers can access medical care, employment and bank services.
- Asylum authorities should inform relevant service providers, in particular medical institutions, about the status of the current asylum documents, so that access to services will improve.
- Increase recognition rates for the asylum-seekers from refugee-producing countries.
- Provide persons with complementary protection the opportunity to apply for naturalization.
- Facilitate access to residence registration.

### To UNHCR, international organizations and NGOs

- Continue advocacy for legislative and administrative reforms that would strengthen the asylum system and possibilities for integration in Ukraine. Advocacy should be more vocal through greater use of media and involve a wider number of actors.
- Encourage the authorities to explore regularization of asylum-seekers who have been rejected by the authorities but for whom UNHCR consider that they have a valid claim. Among those, some have resided in Ukraine for several years and have developed bonds with the country (e.g., family, social, cultural ties).
- Implement peaceful coexistence projects, allowing for refugee communities to design projects jointly with local institutions, since this encourages dialogue. Also, engage the regional offices of the State Migration Service in community activities, as this allows for enhanced understanding. Continue to support community initiatives which help refugee communities to self-organize.
- Continue with the small business grants program and reduce time in reviewing applications.
- Prioritize the provision of language courses at different levels for varying groups of students; consider organizing skype classes and increase the intensity of existing language classes.
- Adopt a more creative approach to employment options, which could include employment with NGOs and UNHCR; create social enterprises with new job placements; involve the private sector and UNHCR grants beneficiaries more closely; and support vocational training.

## Stateless Persons and Persons at Risk of Statelessness in Ukraine

### Protection Environment

In this year's participatory assessment, UNHCR focused on outreach to persons at risk of statelessness among the homeless, migrant and Roma populations. Some homeless persons met during this exercise do not hold Ukrainian passports and said they have lived without a passport for over 20 years. They say they cannot afford legal support in approaching the SMS. As they do not have any documents, they cannot benefit from the state's free legal aid.

### DID YOU KNOW

Many homeless people lost their USSR passport and in order to receive a new Ukrainian passport they need to present the SMS with a birth certificate (or a duplicate), a passport picture, and they must have a parent with a Ukrainian passport. Obtaining proper documentation most often require going through court procedures which is a challenge for marginalized populations.

Stateless persons who reside irregularly on the territory complained that there is no way for them to regularize their stay in Ukraine and no access to employment, education, birth and marriage registration, livelihoods and freedom of movement.

*"I am 26 years old, I want to get married, I want to have children. I do not want my children to be in the same situation as me. I do not have a nationality. I arrived in Ukraine in 1999. I could not receive my diploma, I cannot work officially. I feel like my life is total chaos."*

**Woman from Turkmenistan**

Undocumented Roma displaced by the conflict are in a legal limbo and must frequently change their residence. They say they face discrimination from the SMS and the local community. Since most are illiterate, they engage mainly in seasonal work on farms. Their children have no access to kindergartens/schools, and the women have no access to social payments or health care.



UNHCR meets with IDP Roma women during focus group discussion in Zolotonosha Town in Cherkasy Oblast in Central Ukraine. The discussions took place in a Roma Community center run by the Roma NGO Ame-Roma with which UNHCR is frequently cooperating. UNHCR supported the community center in 2017. One of the main challenges mentioned by the women was the safety of their children and their difficult socio-economic situation. Photo: Crimea SOS.

#### DID YOU KNOW

For various reasons (poverty, illiteracy, early marriages, low awareness of parents, inaccessibility of state's free legal aid), many ethnic Roma face difficulties in obtaining birth certificates for their children born in Ukraine. As a result, when they grow up, they cannot obtain a Ukrainian passport. Most Roma in Zakarpatska oblast speak Hungarian and do not know the Ukrainian language, which makes it more difficult for them to approach the local authorities for documentation.

Housing is a concern for stateless persons and persons at risk of statelessness in Ukraine, in particular for Roma. In Zakarpatska oblast, many Roma reside in houses which have no access to sewage and water systems. The land on which houses have been built is usually not recognized as their property and, as a result, many cannot register their residence. The lack of passports and residence registration makes it impossible for undocumented Roma and homeless people to conclude agreements with family doctors, which is a precondition to access health care. In Kharkiv, Roma participants mentioned that they were discriminated against on the labour market, some even mentioned difficulties in ensuring access to school for their children.

*"I really want to go to kindergarten. There, I will probably eat regularly."*

**Child from the Roma community**

#### Durable Solutions

In order to achieve durable solutions, persons at risk of statelessness identified documentation as the most important priority. This would open possibilities for housing and employment. Participants wish to get free legal aid from the state-run Free Legal Aid Centers so that they can obtain the necessary documentation and mistakes in their civil documents can be corrected. Participants highlighted the financial barriers to accessing documentation, since they said they did not have money to pay for DNA tests, consular fees for passport issuance, and court fees for establishing legal facts. Housing and employment were the other priorities of persons at risk of statelessness. Undocumented individuals are

not eligible for social housing programs and cannot access formal employment due to their lack of passports.

### **Feedback mechanisms**

Many interlocutors were not previously aware of UNHCR and its contacts. UNHCR provided them with information on available services and how to give feedback on those in order to improve their quality, as well as on how to register individual complaints which require follow up actions.

### **Recommendations**

#### **To the Government of Ukraine**

- Make justice more accessible by giving undocumented persons access to state's free legal aid.
- Consider a reduction or exemption of administrative fees for civil documentation for vulnerable individuals.
- Create a pathway to regularization for undocumented stateless persons in Ukraine by adopting the draft law number 9123, which would introduce a statelessness determination procedure.

#### **To UNHCR, international organizations and NGOs**

- Advocate for the involvement of development actors in supporting social and economic integration activities targeting the Roma population, including measures to ensure that Roma have access to civil documentation and passports. Activities could prioritize housing, utilities, employment, education, health care and social support.

## **IDPs and persons at risk of displacement along the contact line (Government controlled area)**

### **Security**

Participants in every focus group discussion held along the contact line highlighted lack of personal security due to shelling, improper bomb shelters, diffusion of responsibility concerning access to and maintenance of protective facilities, including basement in multi-story buildings. The focus group discussion in Svitlodarsk was held on a morning when shelling occurred.

*"We never know when the shelling will start. Sometimes it could be quiet for several nights and then it would start again in the morning or during the day hours. This suddenness and unexpectedness is the worst part."*

### **Conflict-affected woman in Svitlodarsk**

It was highlighted that people who live along the contact line have grown accustomed to daily shelling. As a result, they tend to neglect safety rules. Children still play outside when there is shelling in the background, and people have stopped taking shelter in their basements of their houses.

Mine contamination is also a major concern expressed by the participants during the discussions. Returning to a house that has been abandoned for some time close to the line of contact constitutes a danger for displaced persons who wish to return to their home. The presence of mines and unexploded ordnances in the fields also exposes to a high risk of casualties persons who have relied on gardening or breeding cattle for survival in areas where employment prospects are dire.

Some participants reported cases of aggressive behaviour from persons in uniform who blame the civilians for the conflict. In Sviatohirsk, participants complained they did not feel safe due to the close proximity of military bases, movement of military equipment, flying helicopters and military drills conducted nearby. Participants in Pervomaiske (mainly displaced from the settlement of Pisky) complained about the recent unwarranted searches of houses as a result of the explosion in a nearby military depot. They said that they were asked intimidating questions, which created psychological pressure. According to the participants, these people were in uniforms without any insignia, and they were wearing masks.

The issue with street lighting remains a concern in the settlement of Chermalyk near the contact line. In 2015, the settlement's lighting system was severely damaged and the military did not allow the community to repair it for security reasons. Following the decreased level of fighting, the municipality reached a verbal agreement with the military, but their budget was insufficient to cover the costs for rehabilitation. In Krasnohorivka, undocumented male residents expressed fear of being forced to engage in ad hoc jobs for the military, such as digging trenches, because they are unable to confirm their identity.

### **Mine risks**

People displaced from Chihary cannot visit their homes because the territory is contaminated with landmines. Since many people depended on their vegetable gardens, they face difficulties in supporting themselves.

Persons residing along the contact line are afraid to use their vegetable gardens because of fears of mines and unexploded ordnance. Many people depend on their poultry and other domestic animals to survive; however, due to high risks of mines, cows and goats cannot graze freely. Due to poor employment prospects, men frequently collect scrap metal, which can include unexploded remnants of war. This causes additional protection risks.

### **Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)**

In Avdiivka, women noted psychological pressure associated with the presence of the military. They said they stay at home as much as possible in order to avoid contact with the military.

*"I try not to go out, I have learnt even how to live without bread, it was hard first, I used to love fresh bread so much. Now, I leave my house only once or twice per month to get some food."*

### **Conflict-affected woman in Avdiivka**

Survivors of SGBV said they cannot access adequate services, such as medical services, emergency medical and psychological support. Participants had low awareness about what constitutes SGBV and where to seek services.

The police have little coverage in settlements along the contact line. At the so-called Svitlodarsk arc, there is just one police officer covering eight towns and urban-type settlements. Civilians have to appeal to the military for help. In one case, a woman said that this had just made the situation worse.

### **Military occupation of civilian houses**

Participants complained that the military lives in their houses in Chihary. They believe this is the reason they are not allowed to visit their homes, since shelling is less frequent than before. Participants in Avdiivka and Svitlodarsk complained that the military is based in civilian multi-story buildings. In Svitlodarsk, the roof is leaking and the apartments of the top floor are flooded when it rains. Residents are not allowed on the roof to perform repairs, and they suspect there is military equipment on the roof.

According to participants in Kurakhove, some community members are unable to access their belongings in the contact line settlement of Novotroitske (Volnovasky Raion) because their houses are occupied by military. Reportedly, some of the residents of this settlement were evicted from their houses by the military because they could not show the documents proving their ownership.

According to participants who was explaining the situation in his isolated settlement near the contact line, there are four houses in his settlement that are currently occupied by the military. Three owners left the settlement prior to the houses being occupied; therefore, they have not entered into an agreement with the military. In 2015, one owner made a verbal agreement with the military allowing them to use his house until further notice; however, at present, the military has refused to vacate the premises.

### **Freedom of movement**

Many participants complained about the difficulties while crossing the contact line as they face long lines and long waiting hours. Though there is supposed to be an accelerated lane for vulnerable persons, some eligible persons had to wait in the common queue. People complained that some pay money to be fast-tracked.

**DID YOU KNOW**

The Border Guards at the EECP accepts certain vulnerable categories to be “fast tracked” across the EECP. These include vulnerable persons, some eligible persons (e.g., persons with disabilities, persons over the age of seventy, and pregnant women).

People say they feel insecure and helpless while crossing the contact line. They fear being detained and interrogated or that their belongings would be taken from them. They fear shelling and sniper fire while crossing. Men raised concerns of being treated in an undignified manner. People said they tried to avoid saying a spare word so as not to endanger themselves and their families. Some complained at bribery and extortion while crossing. Many participants said they prefer paying some money to cross faster as this lessens the security risks at the EECPs.

*“When I cross a check point I try not to speak unless I am asked. I try to be very careful with every word I say and I make sure I speak Ukrainian – they like it and let you cross. One can never know when he can be detained and interrogated. On one occasion I was detained for several hours at the EECP and interrogated. It was never explained to me why I was detained.”*

**Conflict-affected man in Svitlodarsk**

Those who cross are unable to transport their furniture and household appliances from NGCA to GCA as the GCA side does not permit the entry of these items. Furthermore, persons without identity documents cannot cross the EECPs. In addition, undocumented people, especially men, face difficulties in crossing internal check-points. People are able to cross internal checkpoints with expired identity documents; however, people who lack any documents must obtain an “identity certificate” from the head of the Civil Military Administration. In order to avoid trouble, these persons prefer not to leave their settlement at all.

According to some participants, before going to the nearby settlements they agree with local police that they will cross a particular internal checkpoint so that local police can back them up and confirm their identity in case of inspection by military. Their movement depends on the discretion of military personnel.

There are limited transportation opportunities between Sviatohirsk and other towns. Bus fares are expensive and there are no discounts for older persons or persons with disabilities. In many localities along the contact line, public transportation is very limited or non-existent.

The Chermalyk to Mariupol line is the only connection covered by public transportation available for the residents of the settlement of Chermalyk. Therefore, to reach public services based in Volnovakha, locals must rent a taxi or switch to a bus in the city of Mariupol. This detour makes it difficult for people to travel back and forth before dark, when shelling intensifies. The security situation also impacts in the cost of transportation.





*For the purpose of this Participatory Assessment, UNHCR met with a group of elderly women in the settlement of Chermalyk, located right on the contact line. Chermalyk is still being hit by shelling as well as small arms fire. During the meeting with a group of women in a community center that had been previously repaired by UNHCR, the women raised security as one of their main concerns. Photo: UNHCR*

In 2018, a local transportation company established a bus connection between the settlement of Berdianske and the city of Mariupol. However, since the price of UAH 12 seemed too high to residents, the bus was cancelled. Therefore, local residents must travel on foot some 1,5 km to the settlement of Sopyne, where transport connection is currently available and costs UAH 7. With the support of a humanitarian organization, travelling from Berdianske to Mariupol became possible, as they have entered into agreement with local transport company to ensure that this route is covered. This project will provide free transportation once a week through September 2019.

People displaced from Chyhari are not allowed to visit their houses. They were concerned that the cemetery was shelled in the settlement. They asked for a green corridor at Easter to tend the gravesites of their loved ones.

Participants of the discussion in Pervomaiske complained about their lack of access to their homes in Pisky settlement. According to them, the settlement is controlled by the military who do not give permission to IDPs to enter and see their houses. There are currently six to ten people living in Pisky (out of 2,500 residents before the conflict) and the rest are displaced in neighboring settlements or other parts of Ukraine. There is even one family whose husband is in Pisky looking after their house while the wife and children are displaced. She wanted to visit her husband but was refused access.

### **Housing**

Many people complained about inadequate living conditions as their house/apartment was damaged. Some were assisted by international organizations with basic repairs. Many lost their furniture and household items. They cannot afford to buy new ones.

The majority of houses in the settlement of Berdianske remain unrepaired, since the assistance of humanitarian actors was insufficient to cover the needs. Participants stated that they cover their windows with tarpaulin or blankets, which were provided by the military. In 2018, they received roofing

slates and insulation, as well as replaced damaged windows; however, some houses need more extensive repairs.

In Avdiivka, participants complained about the high prices of running water, which they said is more expensive than in Kyiv and Sloviansk. As there is low water pressure, it does not reach the top floors of multi-story buildings. Usually, participants informed that running water is available only for several hours per day. After 10 p.m. water is not available.

There is low voltage of electricity in settlements along the contact line, which results in damaged appliances and creates risks of spontaneous combustion. Participants complained that it is often not possible to use a washing machine due to low pressure of running water and low voltage.

In winter it is difficult to find wood or coal. Participants said they had to collect wood or use nutshells to heat their rented houses. Most participants said they had difficulties getting through the winter, since the price of coal, wood and utilities was not affordable. Many rely on humanitarian assistance in the winter.

In Krasnohorivka, water in the pipeline is of technical quality, not purified. Gas supply to the town was cut in 2014 because the hostilities damaged the gas line. No wood is available in the forested areas. Coal price is costly.

Many said that they survived winter because of humanitarian winterization programs. It was reported that persons without documents were not included into programs of humanitarian agencies.

In Pisky, residents complained they could not obtain documentation to prove the conflict-related damage to their homes. They wanted such documentation to ask for assistance or compensation. They had applied to various authorities, including the head of the district administration of Yasynuvatsky district. They were told that architects cannot visit the settlement since it is too dangerous; therefore, they cannot obtain any documentation. They are aware that such documentation was issued in other settlements located in close proximity to the contact line.

In the three focus group discussions held in Sviatohirsk with IDPs sheltered in collective centres, there were many complaints of poor living conditions. In Sviati Hory, residents said there was little hot water and the rooms were cold. They complained of tensions with administration of the center and said they faced threats of eviction. In Kurakhove, residents of the collective centre said conditions were inadequate. Obsolete flooring, poor insulation and sanitation conditions, as well as insufficient heating in winter, negatively affect the residents. Poor hygiene conditions were another source of complaint, as there is only one bathroom functioning in the building.

In Mariupol, some IDPs mentioned that they do not apply to the municipality's social housing programme because they are not sure whether the accommodation they receive will satisfy their living standards (i.e. their apartments have varying conditions, and not all of them have basic furniture). According to the social housing in Mariupol programme terms, an applicant will be able to learn about the location of an apartment and its conditions only after being selected for the programme.

Participants noted differences between the social housing programmes in Mariupol and Pokrovsk. Mariupol city does not consider a family's low income as a deciding factor when selecting beneficiaries for social housing or setting rental terms with the beneficiaries. In Pokrovsk, the municipality bases its decision on the family's income. If a family's income increases after a year of residing in social housing, the family might be excluded from the program. These provisions discourage IDP families from seeking official employment.

IDPs also complained about the need to pay for the utilities at home in NGCA. They said that if they accumulate debts for utilities in NGCA, the local courts can authorize the seizure of the apartment. Participants in southern Donetsk oblast said they could solve their housing problems in GCA if they could sell their property in NGCA. However, this is not currently realistic for two reasons. First, paper work is burdensome as it is necessary to conclude a sales agreement in GCA using a notary. Second, prices for property in NGCA are very low, so the amount would not be sufficient to procure anything in GCA.

### **Access to pensions and social benefits**

Many participants complained about frequent delays and suspensions of pensions and social payments. In the meantime, people rely on their relatives, friends or community members when their pensions and/or social payments are delayed. Those who have vegetable gardens rely on what they grow in their gardens. Pensions and social benefits are inaccessible for persons holding no valid identity documents. People are motivated to restore their identity documents in order to be eligible for pensions and social payments.

In Sviatohirsk, there is no office of social protection or pension fund, so people have to travel to Sloviansk. This is costly and difficult for persons with disabilities. Among IDPs registered in Sviatohirsk, 18 per cent have disabilities.

### **Access to free legal aid**

Participants noted a high demand for free legal aid services. They most frequently requested support with pension reinstatement, social benefits and civil documentation, especially with passport issuance and renewals.

### **Access to civil documentation**

Many vulnerable people face challenges when they try to exercise their right to access to personal documentation. For example, persons originally from Svitlodarsk must now approach the local authorities in Bakhmut raion to obtain or renew their passports. The State Migration Service in Bakhmut has no access to their paper files, so the applicants are told to bring three witnesses to corroborate their identity. This is a challenge for IDPs. There is low level of legal literacy among the population about the new plastic identity cards, which are gradually replacing the internal passports in paper format. People do not trust the new identity cards, which they fear will give them less access to their rights than “a normal passport”. They are also concerned that their residence registration (which they refer to as “propiska”) is not indicated on the identity card. Parents who hold residence registration in NGCA raised the problem of obtaining residence registration for their children. The children cannot obtain registration in NGCA, and if their parents do not have permanent housing, they cannot receive the registration in GCA either. When asked which assistance they would need to restore their documents, undocumented persons said they would need legal assistance, financial assistance and transportation. After losing civil documentation, people say they feel like social outcasts. As a result, some have resorted to substance abuse. Without documents, they cannot access support from social institutions. Members of the Roma community in Kurakhove stated that they have faced issues with restoration or receipt of Ukrainian passports. A 27-year-old man said he had never obtained a Ukrainian passport, even though both his parents held passports. It had taken him four months to obtain a birth certificate. He said that the SMS asked him to bring a residency certificate from his place of origin, which is in NGCA. This is not possible. Also, some members of the community hold Soviet passports and have never applied for a Ukrainian passport. Access to the SMS remains a pressing problem. Because the SMS’s online system has limited capacity, people are able to get access during night-time hours only. People from Luhansk have to stand in line early in the morning every day to visit the Migration Service. As a result, local people do not have a possibility to visit this center due to enormous queues, which creates tensions. Participants noted the intolerant atmosphere in the SMS office in Kurakhove. It is very challenging to secure an appointment with an SMS employee. In addition, participants said that their written inquiries to the SMS had been unanswered. Undocumented persons rely on humanitarian assistance. However, in 2019, many agencies switched from in-kind to cash-based assistance, which left out people who do not hold identity documentation.

### **Mental health and psychosocial support**

In areas along the contact line, many people complained about anxiety and sleep disorders. They said they never knew when the shelling would start, and that uncertainty led to high levels of stress.

Children are scared at night and ask to sleep with their parents. Even teenaged children often share beds with their parents or grandparents because of fear.

*“My teenage daughter gets very scared and upset when the shelling starts. One day she got so angry when the shelling started, I was at work she was on her own at home. She cried and asked me to come back home from work which I could not. I felt so bad at that time. When I*

*came home my daughter asked me to buy her a gun – she said she would go and kill the persons who shoot.”*

### **Conflict-affected woman in Svitlodarsk**

When asked about how they coped, some women mentioned doing Pilates or yoga, which have become popular but remain costly. They suggested establishing a place where yoga and Pilates were available for their community free of charge. Persons living with HIV said they had needs for professional psychosocial support.

#### **Health care**

In many communities along the contact line, residents said there is no ambulance service, or that ambulances lack fuel. Ambulances do not come after dark due to risks of shelling.

The only hospital in Avdiivka is half-destroyed. It is also used as military hospital. The town cannot afford repairs. Residents believe that the repeated shelling of the hospital is linked to the fact that it also serves the military. Some participants mentioned that they had requested medical assistance from military doctors and they all had been assisted. Participants in Avdiivka complained about poor health care, lack of specialized doctors and medical services. There, they cannot access ultrasound services and dental x-rays. Many doctors have left the area and only few have stayed, mostly older physicians. Furthermore, there is no cardiologist or endocrinologist and there are few dentists and pediatricians. Therefore, participants mentioned that they have to go to Kramatorsk (one bus per day; long hours of travel and expensive; need to stay overnight) or to Kostiantynivka (more buses but still expensive). Subsidized public transportation was a suggestion.

There is no maternity hospital in Stanytsia Luhanska and the raion hospital lacks key specialists in gynecology, anesthesiology, speech therapy and pediatricians. Women forced to go to Bilovodsk district hospital (70 km from Stanytsia Luhanska) or to Lysychansk to deliver babies. As a result, people have to spend long hours and their scarce funds on transportation. Women feel compelled to use medical facilities in Luhansk NGCA as the distance between Stanytsia Luhanska and Luhansk is 20 km. They said they can receive free medical assistance in NGCA.

People living with HIV mentioned that they do not have free access to medical services. They said they are often refused treatment when their status is disclosed and that there is violation of confidentiality of patients. Medical staff do not have skills to work with people living with HIV. This gap leads to poor quality of medical services.

Lack of access to medical care was mentioned by participants in Pervomaiske, Sviatohirsk and Chermalyk. People must travel to larger cities with hospitals and specialized doctors. Participants recommended to create mobile visits of doctors to specific settlements.

#### **Livelihoods**

In cities and towns, such as Mariupol and Pokrovsk, many IDPs stated they had been successful in finding jobs or self-employment opportunities.

However, in other towns and rural areas, especially close to the contact line, participants said that the lack of job opportunities was a major concern. Many people from Avdiivka used to work in Donetsk. However, employment availability there has reduced significantly. It was suggested to establish an additional checkpoint connecting Avdiivka directly to Donetsk for commuters from Avdiivka with simplified crossing procedure. However, others opposed this idea as they noted the need to obtain official labour records to receive pensions in the future. Records from Donetsk-based enterprises in NGCA will not be accepted by the Ukrainian authorities. People complained about age discrimination on the job market. They said there were no employment opportunities for persons over the age of forty. Due to limited opportunities, people believe that jobs are given to people who have the right connections. Many coalmines have closed, which has reduced the number of employment opportunities near the contact line, therefore, people are engaging in odd jobs or seasonal work. In Sviatohirsk, participants mentioned the absence of employment opportunities and discrimination against IDPs. Some participants complained that employers refused to consider employing IDPs.



Persons without identity documents cannot obtain official employment. They face difficulties in obtaining even unofficial seasonal jobs because they cannot pass through internal checkpoints. Most undocumented individuals survive with no income at all as they depend on members of the community and humanitarian organizations for assistance with housing and basic needs. Some women have felt compelled to work unofficially. For example, they talked about how they carry goods across the broken bridge at the EECP in Stanytsia Luhanska. This provides a minimal income.

*“Women work at the bridge at the EECP, taking goods back and forth in a wheelbarrow. The oldest woman is 82 years old, she works as a young one.”*

### **Conflict-affected woman at Stanytsia Luhanska**

Participants from Zolote mentioned that there are no employment opportunities there as coalmines have closed. People used to sell their homemade products, but now they cannot access markets, which are located in NGCA. In Luhansk oblast, some IDPs reported that they had been refused jobs because they have relatives living in NGCA.

#### **Access to humanitarian aid**

Participants complained about the lack of support from humanitarian organizations and rigid vulnerability criteria, which means that many deserving individuals do not qualify under the programmes of NGOs.

Participants of pension age shared their perspective that it is unfair that IDPs are excluded from individual humanitarian assistance when their income is above UAH 2,000. Meanwhile, local residents of the settlement receive assistance since their income is lower, even though they do not have to pay rent and have never been displaced.

#### **Access to justice**

There is no court in Avdiivka. After the conflict started, Avdiivka's court moved to the town of Selydove. Only three out of seven judges work there; others have left the area, which results in delayed hearings and procedures. There is a high demand for court services in the town. There is poor transportation to Selydove, and people cannot afford to travel there.

#### **Access to education**

Participants raised many issues related to education. Isolated settlements do not provide access to secondary education. Rural schools have outdated teaching methods and the quality of education is insufficient for children to qualify for university. Some young people choose to enter tertiary education institutions in NGCA because tuition is free. Students in so-called “displaced universities” raised the problem of insufficient classrooms and dormitories for students and teachers. Children with disabilities require special education, which is available only in big cities such as Kharkiv or Mariupol.

### **DID YOU KNOW**

Following the conflict in east Ukraine, a number of universities have been “displaced” from NGCA to GCA because of fear of the conflict and because the buildings of the universities might have been seized. In these situations, academics, professors and student bodies fled the conflict zones in an organized manner and re-structured their university elsewhere. Even a Council of Rectors of Displaced Universities was set up. In some cases Ukraine's Ministry of Education would issue an evacuation order once an initiative group of students, teachers and administrators had been set up at the university that could take responsibility for the move. Universities would move into their own campuses elsewhere where possible or, if not, negotiate with local authorities over allocation of space.

Access to early childhood and school education remains another concern for the residents of the settlement of Berdiansk, since most of the local children must attend school either in the nearby settlement of Sopyne or in Mariupol.



### **Durable solutions**

When asked about durable solutions, conflict-affected persons who live along the contact line did not provide recommendations. Five years after the start of the conflict, they were not able to see how their situation could be sustainably improved. They do not see an end to the conflict in sight.

IDPs living along the contact line complained about the lack of durable solutions. Housing is a priority. IDPs have been living in rented houses, collective centres or with relatives for almost five years, and there is no end in sight. They feel ignored or forgotten by their government. They have heard that donors have given money to Ukraine to help IDPs, but they do not see the assistance.



*Margaryta is a wheelchair bound and displaced young woman who recently turned 18. She suffers from epilepsy and cerebral palsy and lives in collective centre with her mother and grandmother who takes care of both of them. Being displaced to the small town of Sviatohirsk ridged her of quality health care and rehabilitation services which resulted in rapid deterioration of her health condition. UNHCR supported her family with medical devises required to conduct regular checkups of health condition at home, winter clothes and warm blankets. Margaryta is an A student, tutored by a teacher at home. She dreams that one day she would be able to study at a regular study room with other young people and make some good friends. Photo: UNHCR*

### **Feedback mechanisms**

During focus group discussions, many interlocutors were not previously aware of UNHCR activities and contacts. Many were not aware of the UNHCR hotline; this may be linked to the fact that there are gaps in mobile telephone coverage along the contact line. Also, the communities generally expressed low levels of trust about complaint mechanisms. During discussions with the community, UNHCR provided information on different ways to give a feedback on the quality of activities either through UNHCR's hotline, through the webpage or through colleagues (UNHCR or partner staff) who are regularly working in settlements along the contact line.

**Recommendations****To the Government of Ukraine**

- Disseminate information to residents of settlements along the contact line about the existence of civil protection installations, such as bomb shelters and route to them. Also, to make sure that bomb shelters are equipped with necessary items considering the fact that residents have to spend considerable time there.
- Arrange the return of judicial authorities back to locations they have left because of the conflict (e.g. Avdiivka).
- Expand the provision of public transportation in areas along the contact line so that all residents can access necessary services.
- Extend the services of the State Migration Service in areas along the contact line, and simplify the procedures for issuing passports/ID cards to IDPs and persons with residence registration in NGCA.
- Expand the delivery of survivor-centered services relating to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and raise awareness about these risks.
- In cases where the military finds it necessary and proportionate to use civilian property, establish a system for documenting the requisition of property and providing due compensation.
- Expand housing opportunities for IDPs. While social housing is a helpful solution for some, it would be a more durable solution to assist people to purchase a home, such as through subsidies or affordable loans.
- Assist persons with damaged houses to conduct repairs, or provide compensation for the property damage they have suffered as a result of the conflict.
- Provide more inclusive policy towards Roma Communities in the East of Ukraine (conflict-affected) by adding the mentioned communities into information sharing campaigns on labor market opportunities, legal services, as well as social services.

**To UNHCR, international organizations and NGOs**

- As part of shelter intervention along the contact line, to consider a minimum package of furniture provision for the conflict-affected population in order to create faster and smoother re-establishment of lives. By doing that the beneficiaries of shelter projects will not consider the secondary displacement due to lack of financial means to cover for minimum level of internal furniture.
- Expand the provision of psychosocial support, including community-based activities to relieve stress associated with the conflict.
- In establishing vulnerability criteria for assistance, consider the specific needs of IDPs, including the fact that many must pay rent.
- Ensure that persons without identity documentation are referred for support in obtaining documents and that they can benefit from assistance programs.
- Increase and diversify the types of vocational and self-employment trainings in order to strengthen the capacity of the affected population and allow them to be less dependent on humanitarian assistance.
- Support the authorities' efforts to expand survivor-centered services relating to SGBV and to raise awareness about SGBV.
- Advocate for development of a national strategy for the displaced universities to be provided with sufficient and proper premises for studies and for living of students and teachers. It is important to facilitate cooperation at the university-to-university level to exchange on available programs and courses.
- Promote economic development along the contact line so that people can find employment.
- Continue programs to repair houses damaged by the conflict.

**IDPs in Government Controlled Area of Ukraine****Discrimination**

Discrimination based on the place of origin (Donetsk or Luhansk oblasts, or Crimea) was reported by many participants. IDPs of Crimean Tatar and Roma ethnicity, LGBTI individuals, large families, single parents and pensioners are the most affected.

Participants explained they faced discrimination in:

- Access to pensions (rules are different for IDPs from those applicable to other citizens; impossibility to choose a bank; frequent control measures);
- Higher education (one out of three groups with students informed that students were refused educational grants based on their displacement);
- Procedures in receiving passports for traveling abroad (additional documents requested only from IDPs were mentioned by three groups);
- Double discrimination during employment was noted among transgender, Roma IDPs and persons living with HIV (based on the fact of displacement and belonging to a minority). For example, an employer refused to hire a person after the individual's HIV status was disclosed (Kharkiv), and a large public company disclosed the gender identity of a transgender IDP (Kyiv), and both incidents resulted in psychological distress;
- Persons with Crimean residence registration face discrimination since they are treated as non-residents of the country based on the provisions of the law "On the free economic zone Crimea". These individuals cannot access the full scope of banking services unless they register as IDPs;
- Problems with accessing bank loans based on the fact of displacement were mentioned in three groups.

*"I was told "We do not rent housing to foreigners" ..."*

#### **IDP student from Crimea studying in Kyiv**

##### **Security**

In 12 out of 35 focus group discussions, participants expressed security concerns in their places of displacement, which include:

- Tensions between male IDPs and former ATO combatants were strongly emphasized by IDPs in Mykolaiv oblast. IDPs feared turning to police, because "local people have better established contacts, including based on personal links";
- Teenaged Roma IDPs and female displaced students face personal safety threats based on the fact of their displacement ("there is no one to protect you here, you are stranger").

However, in most groups IDPs mentioned that they personally felt safe and never faced physical assaults or threats based on the fact of displacement. IDPs in big cities like Kyiv and Lviv mentioned that in new locations they felt better than during trips to NGCA/Crimea.

*"The higher the socioeconomic level of the population, the more tolerant the society is and accepts individual particularities. Unfortunately, in Ukraine, society as a whole is far from tolerance"*

#### **A transgender person from Donetsk oblast**

##### **Freedom of movement**

Overall, the situation with the freedom of movement was assessed as good. Specific issues voiced by IDPs included:

- Some IDPs decided not to go to NGCA (even when there is a need) because they fear their data will appear in "Arkan lists," (i.e., the database of the State Border Guard Service) which will cause them to be deprived of their pensions/social payments;
- Those who cross the administrative border with Crimea informed that they lacked clear information on rules of crossing and "were never sure if the rules changed";
- Transgender IDPs said they cannot cross EECs due to issues with gender indication in their ID documents.

*"This summer, when I was coming back to Ukraine, I was barely resuscitated in GCA. I thought I was dying due to my blood pressure. That day, some elderly died. It is the "Bridge of Death", it is not a road."*

**An elderly woman with disability from Luhansk oblast, residing in Zhytomyr**



*“I suffered from ill-treatment and searches of policemen due to my Donetsk registration. They do not care that I have a disability. They think I simulate my disability. They let “normal” people pass and search all the persons with disabilities.”*

### **IDP man with disability from Donetsk, residing in Odesa**

#### **Social protection and pensions**

Many IDPs rely on social benefits. In discussions, participants said that they had applied and received financial assistance for IDPs aimed at covering rent and utilities (known as “targeted assistance”).

However, since assistance is not based on an economic need, it is assigned to any registered IDP who fits the additional criteria set out in legislation (those who do not own housing in GCA or have a bank deposit exceeding a threshold amount). In ten discussions, IDP pensioners said they feel under a constant threat of the suspension of pensions and social benefits due to the discriminatory legislative framework. Despite two decisions of the Supreme Court (see below), IDPs in two groups (with representatives from Odesa, Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts) informed that the department of social protection continues to conduct home visits to verify beneficiaries’ place of residence. This has an impact on IDPs who may be absent from their homes for a variety of reasons, such as staying in hospitals for long-term treatment (for example, in one case, the authorities suspended the pension of a cancer patient who was in hospital) or traveling abroad. All IDPs who had had their pensions suspended said that even if their pension was reinstated, they were not able to subsequently receive the accumulated arrears, even if they won court decisions.



*This was a Focus Group Discussion with IDPs with disabilities held in Kyiv’s UNHCR office. Most of the IDPs consulted by UNHCR in Kyiv are living in collective centers in and around Kyiv. The main challenge mentioned by the IDPs with disabilities was housing and accessibility for wheelchair users and social economic situation. Photo: UNHCR*

#### **DID YOU KNOW**

Supreme Court decision of September 2018 announced that pensions cannot be suspended/terminated based on the provisions of a by-law (meaning, Resolutions 637 and 365 of the Cabinet of Ministers regarding the payment of pensions and the verification of those). Supreme Court Decision of December 2018 declared that some provisions of Resolution 365 are

null and thus home visits for the purpose of verification and any subsequent suspensions should not take place.

### **Housing**

IDPs in all groups said housing was a top priority. Many insist that stable housing is a key to integration, since would allow building social links and stable employment/private entrepreneurship.

Specific problems exist for residents of collective centers (CC):

- In two facilities administrations imposed restrictions for IDP residents, including unexplained requests that IDPs inform them in advance if they plan to be absent for over two days;
- Five out of six groups expressed fear of unexpected forced evictions, including through power, water and electricity cutoffs;
- Most CC residents lack private space, which affects their relations with other family members and with neighbours. Teenagers mentioned that this interfered with their ability to build social links due to impossibility to invite friends. Some children had difficulties in finding space to study;
- In three groups, participants mentioned no special equipment/proper conditions for persons with severe disabilities, including children.

For IDPs residing in private apartments/houses, lack of permanent housing is the core problem:

- The majority rent apartments and feel insecure due to the reluctance of owners to sign rent agreements. They face unpredictable increases in rental costs and requests to vacate the rented housing;
- For IDPs in settlements at the seashore, summer evictions are part of their displacement stories, since landlords prefer to rent their properties by the day during the holiday season. At least three individuals told personal stories of being refused to extend their rent in May. One IDP informed that this stress caused a long-lasting serious health problem;
- Targeted assistance barely covers utility costs, let alone rent payments.

*"We first pay for housing, and we thrive to survive with what is left ..."*

#### **Elderly IDP woman residing in Kropyvnytskii**

### **Employment and livelihoods**

Most participants expressed concern regarding employment. Some challenges mentioned by participants are common to the general Ukrainian population such as vacancies available through employment centers are low-paid and available employment opportunities are in the informal sector. Challenges that are more specific to IDPs included that skills and experiences were not applicable in the host community, so they required requalification/re-training; employers reject students and recent university graduates based on the assumption that they could unexpectedly return to their original place of residence. Students in four groups mentioned considering employment abroad (Poland, other EU countries; for Kherson it was with foreign maritime companies). At the same time, IDPs with successful employment experience expressed an opinion that five years of displacement is long enough to recover and start taking responsibility for one's life.

### **Health care**

Health care is another acute issue mentioned by most IDPs. Many IDPs said they feel their health deteriorated after displacement. In particular, IDPs mentioned serious health conditions having occurred during the second or third year of displacement. Older persons mentioned that they had suffered strokes after displacement or experienced exacerbation of chronic diseases.

*"I had to sell my house in NGCA for 10,000 UAH to pay chemotherapy. I had no other way out."*

#### **Female IDP from Donetsk oblast now living in Zhytomyr**

IDPs living with HIV have necessary access to the ART therapy. However, since a large share of their monthly income is spent on housing, they face difficult choices about having either proper nutrition or



necessary vitamins/specialized drugs for opportunistic diseases. When faced with unexpected health problems requiring large financial resources, IDPs say they generally cannot access assistance from humanitarian and charitable organizations, which predominantly operate closer to the contact line.

### **Child protection**

Overall, IDP children and teenagers interviewed in focus groups say they do not feel integrated for financial and social reasons. Many say they experience psychological distress. Five children (including a Roma IDP and a Crimean Tatar IDP) revealed situations of bullying based on the fact of displacement or belonging to an ethnic minority.

Many IDPs mentioned that poor housing conditions prevent children from socializing with their peers. Teenagers highlighted that their relatives and friends remain in NGCA. In host communities, they managed to find only a few friends who understand their life circumstances. Host communities do not encourage successes of IDP children and fail to highlight them in local media. Bullying in schools based on the fact of displacement (mentioned in five different groups) is worse when children reside in a collective center (noted by mothers in Odesa and in discussions with children) or when children belong to an ethnic minority (Roma, Crimean Tatars).

*“Everyone asks me how I live – in challenging living conditions and sometimes even lacking food. They ask why I have not returned. Answering these questions makes me stronger. I saw war. I am happy here. Here I feel safe.”*

**IDP teenager from Donetsk NGCA, residing in Irpin**

### **Legal assistance**

Participants expressed greater trust in legal services provided by NGOs and local IDP lawyers as compared to the Free Legal Aid Centers (FLAC). Three participants conveyed their negative experience with FLACs (delayed assistance due to overload). Participants of two focus groups were not aware of FLACs. Three focus groups emphasized that they need NGOs providing legal aid in their oblasts with online access. The transgender community is aware of FLAC services, but their requests require specific legal, medical and psychological knowledge. Roma IDP community members expressed low level of trust in state bodies, including FLAC. IDPs in four focus groups mentioned they lack clear information on complaint mechanisms existing in Ukraine for different state authorities.

### **Durable solutions**

IDPs' future intentions depend largely on housing, existence of employment, and the interests of their children. The majority of participants do not plan to return even after the conflict ends. Some may consider returning, but only in case of safety and social-economic opportunities there. Two participants informed they were thinking of returning due to the lack of habitable housing and employment. Participants of two focus groups (Crimean Tatar) and one key informant (locally integrated IDP) intend to return only if Ukraine reinstates control over the territory. When asked about their priorities in terms of durable solutions, IDPs mentioned housing, employment, health care, and participation in affairs of host communities.

### **DID YOU KNOW**

There are programmes in Ukraine that facilitate housing for IDPs in Ukraine. One of them is a scheme created with the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated 10 October 2018, No. 819 entitled “Some issues of providing citizens with affordable housing”, which functions on a 50/50 approach in which 50 per cent is paid by the IDP in need of housing and 50 per cent by the state. In 2018, UNHCR prepared a report evaluating the programme ([click here](#)). Other programmes include tailor made specifically for housing in rural areas and some ad hoc minor local programs at the oblast level.

On access to housing, IDPs said that procurement of housing is an option only for those that can afford them and do not have other large expenditures, such as on medicine or access to health care. For those who do not have enough financial means to procure housing, temporary or social housing could be an option. In general, IDPs have said that they have not heard of the available housing programmes

and/or do not believe this option is available in their communities. IDPs proposed several possible solutions, including:

- Simplification of access to social housing for IDPs through amendments to Resolution No. 682 of 2008 to be prepared by the MinTOT, MoSP and the Ministry of Regional Development;
- Diversification of programs aimed at helping IDPs to purchase housing such as low-interest loans with interest rates below 7 per cent; increased budget for 50/50 type affordable housing program, which would increase the number of subsidized households; creating rent-to-own housing schemes; programs to procure housing from private individuals with the support from the state; and leasing programs with the involvement of international donors;
- Construction of social hostels for the most vulnerable IDPs with the involvement of international and other donors;
- Replication of the best programs implemented in different cities (such as Mariupol);
- Compensation mechanisms for damaged or destroyed property, as well as for housing left behind in Crimea or NGCA, that would serve as a source to partially cover expenses related to purchase of housing (state buy-out mechanism);
- Use cooperatives of IDPs for housing construction;
- Raise awareness among IDPs on existing possibilities.

Employment was another recurrent theme mentioned by IDPs as needed for local integration and economic sustainability of households. IDPs have been told by representatives of State Employment Center that they have plenty of vacancies. However, for most IDPs, the jobs available do not pay high enough salaries for them to meet their financial needs and, especially, to pay for rented housing. Many IDPs mentioned that they do not possess the necessary employable skills required in the oblast of displacement. IDPs made the following proposals regarding employment:

- Employment and entrepreneurial programs combined with new skills building;
- Requalification and training programs by the State Employment Centers;
- Building networks of IDPs and host communities, where employers could be linked with prospective employees.

Participants from eight focus groups (including community leaders and IDP students) feel integrated in host communities. For them, integration means own housing (6 groups); official employment (6 groups); social networking (5 groups) and voting in all types of elections (5 groups). Other criteria included children's success in schools, participation in social and cultural events, support from international organizations and good knowledge of the city/town. IDPs say that since they cannot vote in local elections, the local authorities do not take account of their interests, and IDPs do not benefit from the resources available at local level as a result of the decentralization process. This impedes integration. To address this problem, IDPs suggested the following:

- Register IDPs as members of territorial communities;
- Extend to IDPs the right to vote in local elections;
- Strengthen links with local self-government and executive authorities through IDPs engagement in civil councils, working groups, and through civil society;
- Local authorities and donor organizations to support IDPs in building capacities and skills to enhance integration through community mobilization.

Living in displacement for a long time and facing numerous challenges in accessing services, employment, adaptation, socialization and experiencing distress, IDPs have begun to build initiative groups (which quite often turn into community-based organizations) to provide each other with mutual support. One of the main goal for IDPs using this approach is to take action in order to facilitate change in local community, as well as at central level. Displaced persons representing active communities state that they face difficulties in accessing financial support.

### **Feedback mechanisms**

Focus group discussions revealed that not all IDPs are aware of the differences in mandates among the UN Agencies. Those participants who have received assistance from UNHCR partners (legal or individual) do not always remember the link between the partner and UNHCR. About half of the

participants did not know about the availability of a hotline for IDPs. However, the community representatives with whom UNHCR works with are aware of the organization's mandate and know the focal points' contacts, the hotline number and the email address. Representatives of the community also know the principles of Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and know how and where to complain in the event when intervention of the management or IGO would be required. This was achieved owing to separate training sessions that UNHCR held for the IDP community in 2017. IDPs stressed the importance of transparency within a feedback system to reduce distrust that may exist towards UNHCR. Online surveys and opinion polls on social networking platforms encourage transparency.

### **Recommendations**

#### **To the Government of Ukraine**

- Allow IDPs to choose a bank for receiving pensions, not only through Oschadbank.
- Review norms that declare individuals with residence registration in Crimea as non-residents, thus unblocking their access to banking services.
- Raise awareness regarding prohibition of discrimination based on the fact of displacement, including with universities, banks, and landlords.
- Facilitate dialogue between the host population, including former combatants, and IDP communities.
- Promote a culture of tolerance in order to prevent attacks upon displaced national minorities and other groups, as well as respond to such incidents with appropriate law enforcement measures.
- Ensure timely and effective dissemination of information regarding legislative and procedural changes relevant to IDPs (crossing of the line of contact to/from NGCA and the administrative border with Crimea; access to social benefits and pensions; possibilities to access housing etc.).
- Ensure that IDP pensioners are treated equally with other citizens of Ukraine by de-linking access to pensions from IDP registration.
- Adopt a normative framework that would unblock payment of arrears to IDP pensioners as per respective court decisions.
- Include IDPs into local (city, rayon, oblast) social, economic, cultural and health related programs in order to ensure that they have access to respective services on an equal basis with host communities.
- Increase the state budget allocation for the "Affordable housing" program.
- Diversify possibilities for procuring housing by introducing programs involving private, international and state (local and central) funds. This could include leasing, rent-to-own, rural housing programs, establishing cooperative housing for local communities and IDPs, etc.
- Expand social housing by identifying respective housing premises and involving finances from different sources to ensure that social housing is suitable for IDPs in vulnerable situations, such as persons with disabilities.
- With regard to collective centers, search for alternative solutions in order to prevent cases of forced eviction.
- Support establishment and development of small and medium-scale business by IDPs.

#### **To UNHCR, international organizations and NGOs**

- Strengthen capacity of the state authorities of Ukraine, including on local level for them to be able to fulfil the above recommendations.
- Support capacity of IDP-run NGOs and initiative groups to ensure that they are sustainable and are able to advocate for their inclusion, integration and protection themselves.
- Raise awareness of the population, including IDPs, on their rights, promoting culture of dialogue, tolerance, and respect for human dignity and rights.
- Share success stories of individual IDP communities' activities through different UNHCR channels.
- Contribute to elaboration of housing solutions for IDPs, including through establishment of special funds to finance selected solutions.
- Implement programs that would promote sustainable employment or starting a small business.
- Share the findings of this participatory assessment with the central authorities, ministries, members of parliament, UN Agencies, embassies, international organizations and IDP communities.