



HOW IS LIFE: MICRO-NARRATIVES ON THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA



HOW IS LIFE: micro-narratives on the impact of the Ukraine crisis in the Republic of Moldova

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UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and the planet.

Key Insights

- Survivalist attitude, with people focused on everyday survival and meeting basic needs, rather than projecting themselves into the future or maintaining cultural traditions;
- Assertive and quick decision-making was valued more than deliberative problem-solving processes;
- Responsibility for their situation was placed with a sole individual, but refugees were also likely to accept government and community-oriented responsibility;
- Overall, people did not feel prejudiced by their national identity or where they came from. This perception however changed for those looking for work, who felt judged for where they came from, and for Roma people, who felt judged by how they looked;
- More transparency and clear rules and processes are needed to improve the situation for the majority.

Context

The current situation in Ukraine is a major regional crisis with potentially disastrous implications for European stability and the millions responding to, or displaced by, the conflict. The decisions of the coming days will shape international relations for years to come and directly affect the lives of millions of people. UNDP is concerned by the far-reaching effects of the current tensions on the economies in the region, which are already weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNDP is leading the socio-economic response to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine closely coordinating with the humanitarian response and partners such as UNHCR. The UNDP Moldova country office (CO) is a key factor in the regional response effort: Moldova is hosting the highest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita, which has a dramatic impact on Moldova's budget. A number of services for the refugees have been identified, such as a strong need for support in essential service provision including providing psy-

chological counselling and legal aid. Another key priority for the humanitarian response is to strengthen the absorption capacity of local CSOs and governments that will be receiving aid.

Research Methodology

UNDP Moldova partnered with The Cynefin Company to explore the experiences of both Ukrainian refugees in Moldova and the local Moldovan citizens. SenseMaker®, a mixed methods ethnographic research tool, was used to collect micro-narratives about living in the community. Using a marker, respondents then situated their story on triads or dyads to provide quantitative data. This allows the researcher to identify clusters and patterns in the stories. Triads are designed to explore the balance between three inter-related concepts. Each dot on the triangle represents where the participant placed their story and, in data analysis, patterns and aggregations are quantitatively investigated. Dyads, based on Aristotle's Golden Mean, are designed as a form of hidden hypothesis testing. In data analysis, the results are displayed as a histogram where you can observe deviations from the mean. It is the respondent, and not the researcher, who interprets the meaning of the story through these geometric shapes. This is essential to eliminating the biases of the researcher. The power of meaning is in the hands of the storyteller, giving us an honest snapshot of the way people think on the ground. The researcher can filter stories along demographic lines, comparing the responses of, for example, different age brackets, genders, economic groups, and importantly the differences and similarities between responses of locals and refugees. This comparative analysis is possible due to the multiple choice questions section at the end of the survey which is used to 'slice and dice' the data. For example, an individual triad or dyad can be filtered to show only responses from women over 60, seeing how the responses demographic group differs from men over 60, women under 30 and so on.

Underpinning the research methodology is the principle of abductive reasoning as opposed to inductive reasoning. We are not looking for straightforward linear causal relationships. Rather SenseMaker® treats its research area as a local ecosystem where all things are interrelated, dynamic and ever-changing. The results offer an opportunity to plan interventions that are localised and contextual.

There is a new family thinking about moving to Moldova. What experience would you share to explain what it is like to live in your community? (Please do not include the real names of people in your story)

A large, empty white rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for respondents to write their answers to the survey question.

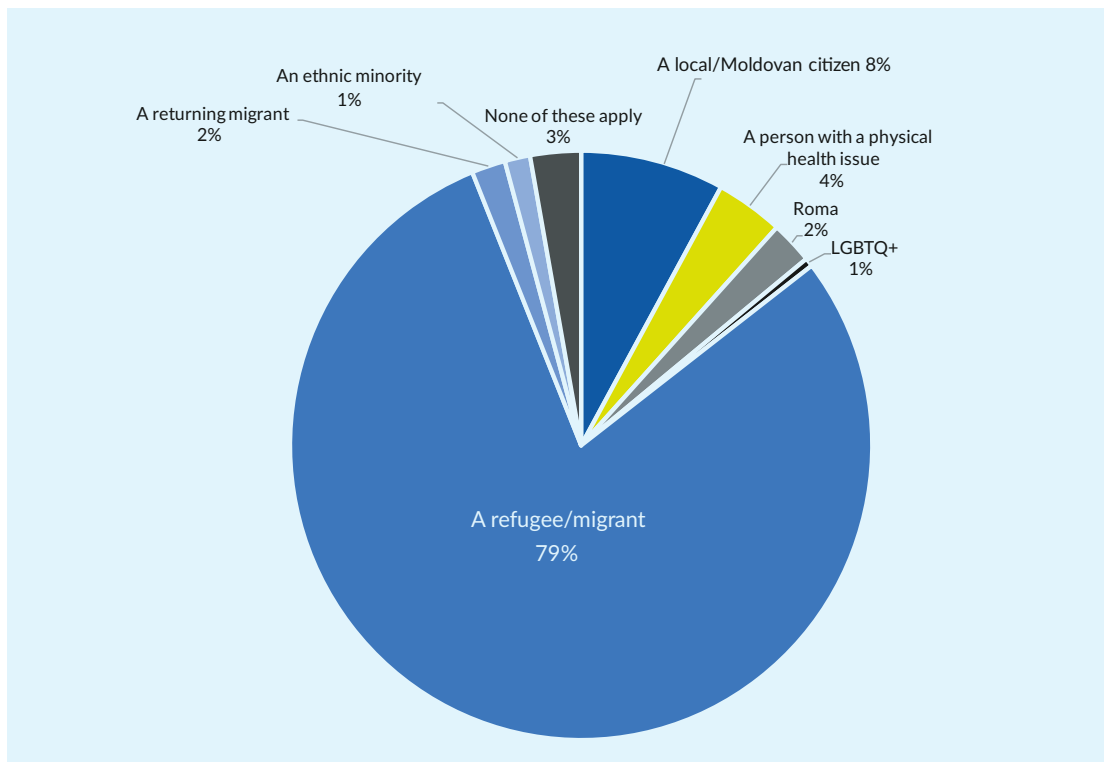
The question was slightly adapted to the local environment, or additional prompts were needed for respondents: in particular, the question was phrased to consider both Ukrainian refugees and Moldovans, however, most of the respondents were Ukrainian refugees. This meant respondents struggled to answer the question, or the question did not align with what they wanted to talk most about. Instead, some prompting questions were added, which were particularly helpful to elicit narratives by refugees in Moldova were to ask how they felt about their stay in Moldova, what they needed most, what services they used most or would like to keep using, etc. The result was a series of narratives focusing on refugees' most pressing needs, their sentiments about their stay in Moldova and the services they had access to, as well as their perceptions of their stay.

Demographic findings

Interviews to collect answers were conducted at refugee centres: Moldexpo, Hotel Balti, Dumbrava Alba, and at several locations where refugees receive aid packages: Moldova-Film, Patria-Lukoil, and Dendrarium Park. Additionally, the link to the survey was posted on all UNDP Moldova social channels, as well as on the unified government platform for refugees <https://dopomoga.gov.md>.

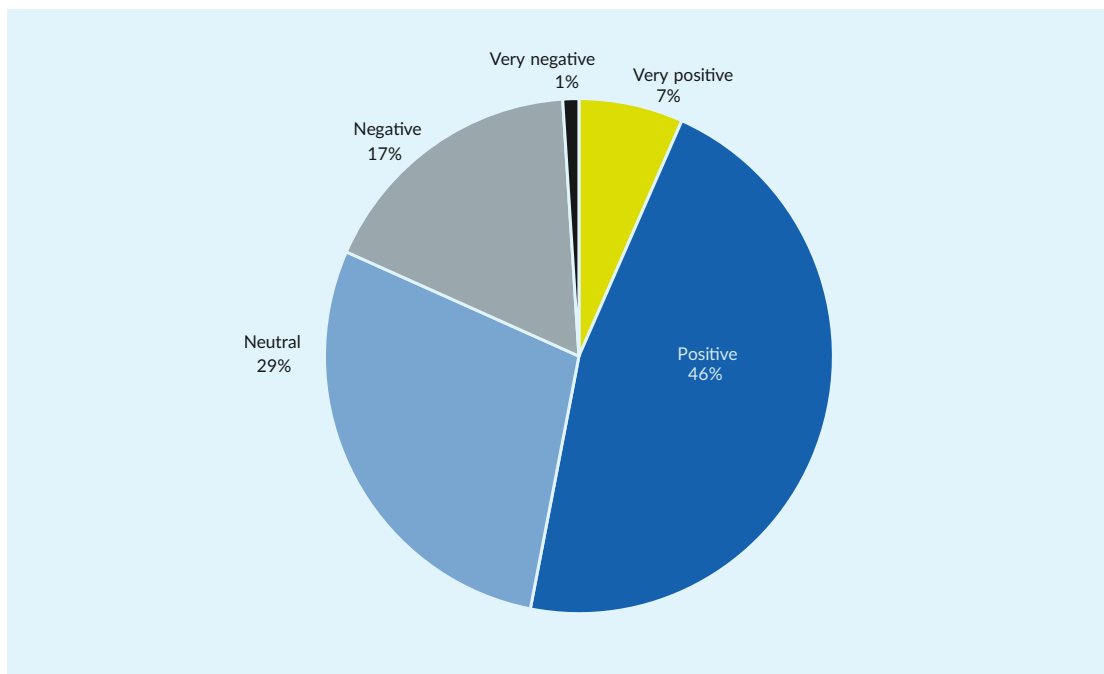
A total of 202 stories were collected between April and July 2022. The majority of respondents were women (87%) with a varied age range, level of education, and level of income. Stories were largely collected from refugees (79%) but there was also some representation from minority / vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+, and Roma people (8%). Only 31% were in a form of employment.

Figure 1. I Identify as.....



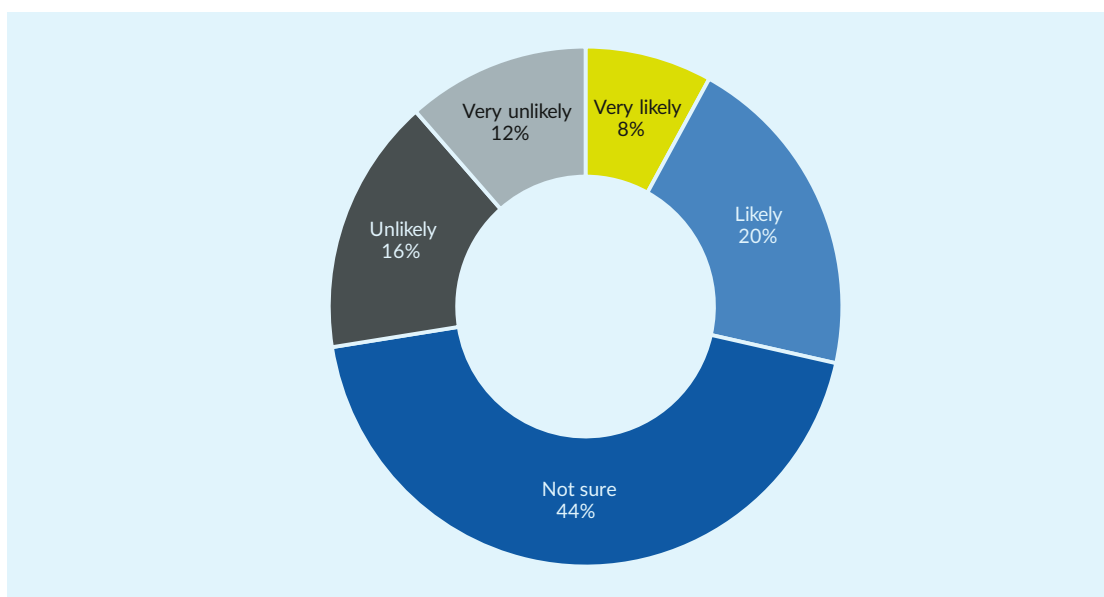
Over half of respondents qualified the emotional tone of their story as “positive” (47%) or “very positive” (7%), citing the warm welcome they received in Moldova as an overriding factor. Others expressed mixed feelings – the war generated grief and sorrow, but they are deeply grateful for the help they received in Moldova and would be remiss to not account for the kindness encountered along the way – the push and pull of negative and positive factors resulted in them choosing “neutral” as their answer (29%). The remaining 18% of stories were seen as “negative” and “very negative”.

Figure 2. The emotional tone of my story is.....



As the vast majority of respondents identified themselves as refugees, perhaps unsurprisingly, 93% had lived in Moldova for less than 12 months. Most were unsure about whether they would stay in Moldova (44%), but 28% responded they were unlikely to stay, and 29% responded they were likely to stay.

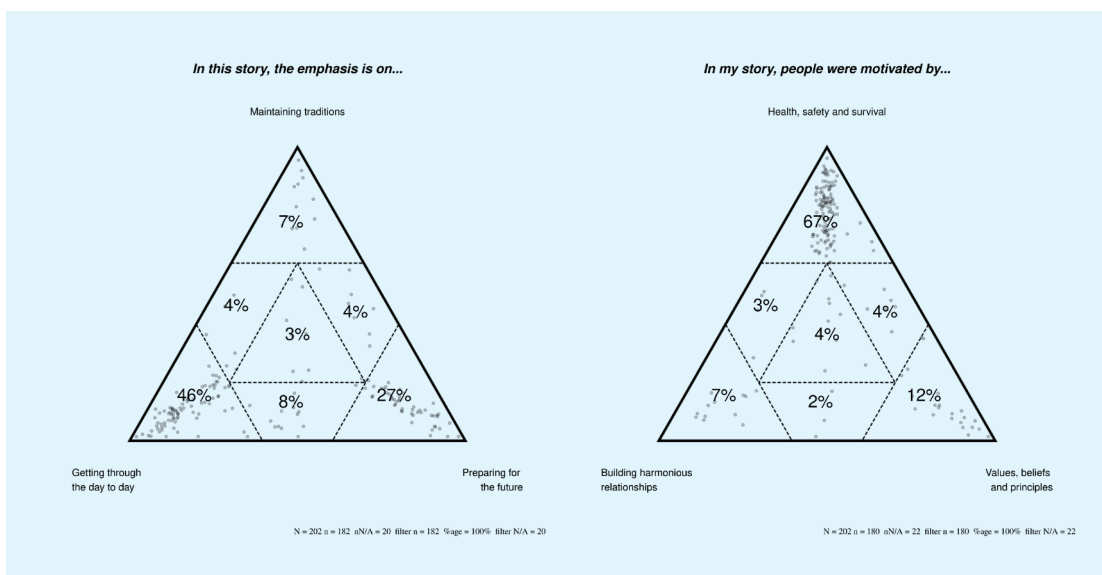
Figure 3. How likely is it that you will stay in Moldova long-term?



Key Quantitative Findings

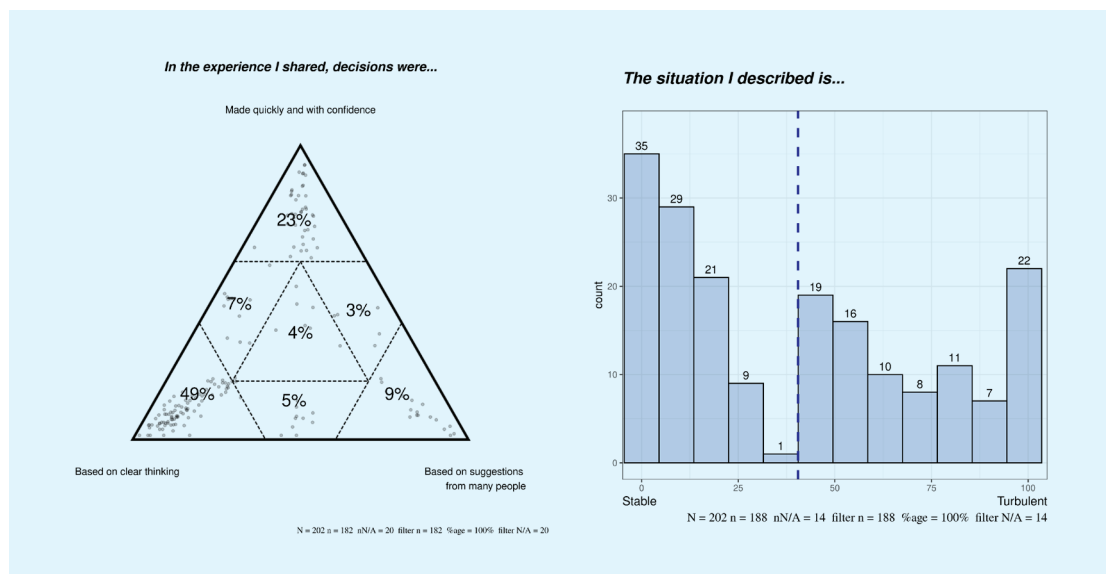
Survivalism:

There was a largely survivalist attitude, with people more focused on meeting their basic needs, rather than maintaining cultural traditions or making future preparations (T1: left). Survivalism, if left unaddressed, can lead to social atomisation, and personal isolation and, at worst, create the conditions for the dehumanisation of groups perceived to be ‘the other.’ The presence of a survivalist mindset is reinforced by other findings (T4: right) which also suggests the people were motivated by health, safety, and survival, more than by building harmonious relationships and acting according to their values and principles.



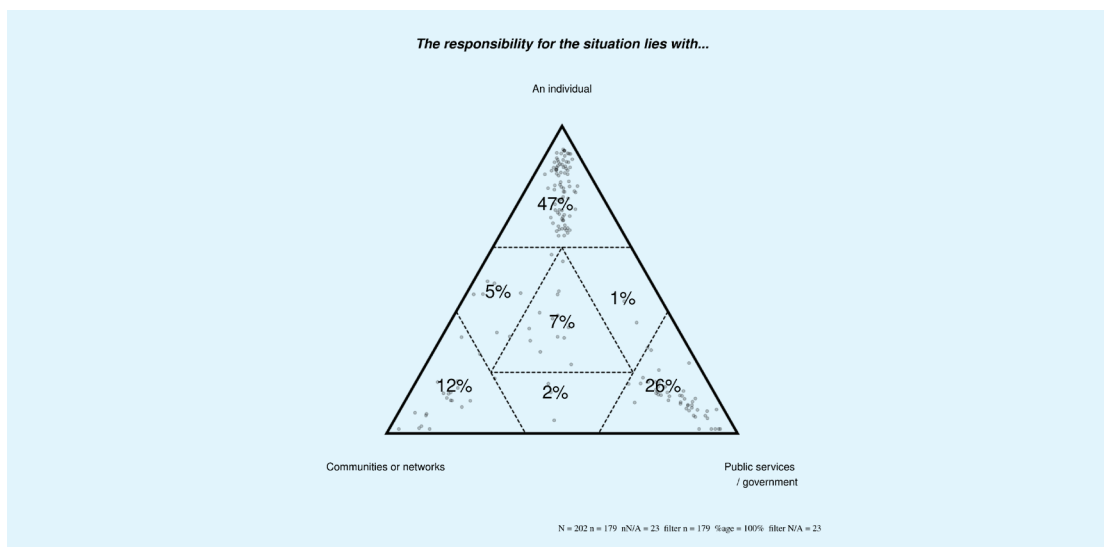
Decision-making:

In a crisis situation, assertive and quick decision-making was more positively valued than more deliberative problem-solving (T2: left). In chaotic crisis situations, there is often no time to consult others, and the emphasis should be on quickly establishing order and stability. In Cynefin terms, the priority must be to move from chaos to complexity (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Chaos provides the perfect opportunity to experiment and innovate with novel ideas. But, as the situation stabilises and moves towards the complex domain, which the graphic below suggests is happening (D2: right), then top-down, decision-making could prove dangerous.



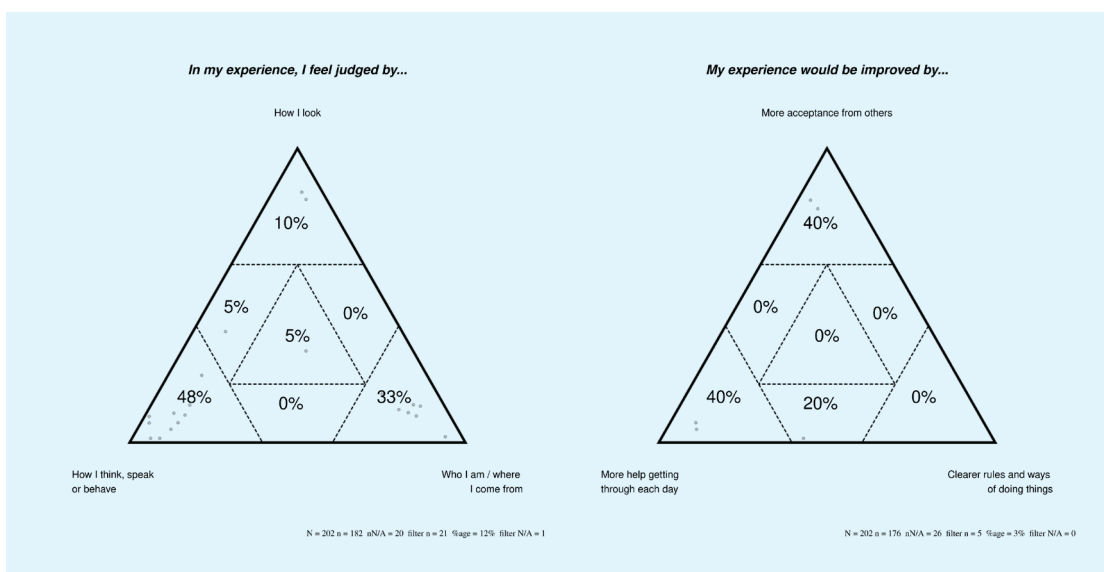
Responsibility:

Largely respondents placed responsibility with a sole individual (particularly political leaders), but refugees were more likely to accept the role of government and community-oriented responsibility (T3). Some refugees likely showed an increased awareness of interdependence as an alternative to atomised independence due to their experiences. Refugees’ stories repeatedly referenced gratitude for the help they had received and a feeling of uncertainty about the future. This is likely to have affected their attitude towards individualism and individualist accounts of personal responsibility. The attitudes reflected in responses were multifactorial, with those who were married or in a relationship significantly more likely to say responsibility lay with the individual. Males (who were largely of pensionable age) were far less likely than females to say responsibility lay with the individual. It suggests those who were young and/or had more social support were more comfortable identifying with individual responsibility.



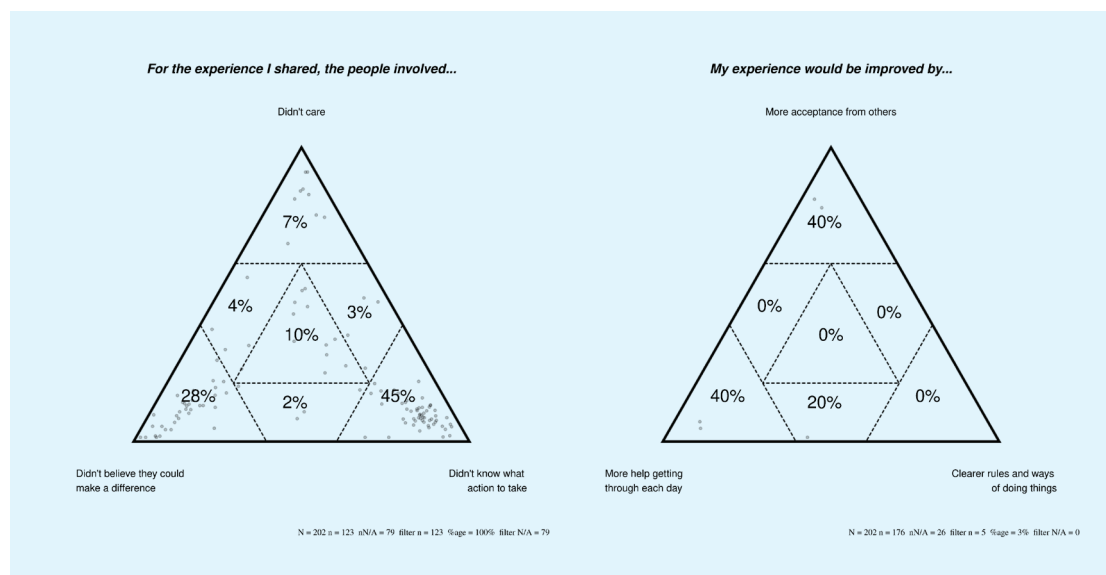
Prejudice:

If people felt judgement or prejudice, it was largely aimed at how people spoke or behaved rather than the way they looked or their national identity. However, refugees that were looking for work felt more judged by ‘where they came from’ compared to the overall dataset. This suggests that prospective employers may still be favouring local citizens in their employment practices (T5: left). When it came to experiences from minority or vulnerable groups, the stories and data patterns largely did not vary. However, those identifying as Roma people felt more judged by their outward appearance and sought more acceptance from others compared to the overall dataset (T7: right). This suggests that more could be done to address cultural prejudices towards Roma people.



How can we help?

People’s stories, and the quantitative data patterns, reveal that Moldovan citizens cared about the situation, and dealt with the refugee crisis with empathy. The main barrier was that people didn’t know what to do to help, or believed that they didn’t have the ability to help (T6: left). To improve the situation, both for entering refugees and for the local citizens trying to support the effort, there needed to be clearer rules and processes in place (T7: right).



Narrative findings

Specific rather than general needs

All parties – refugees, host families, volunteers – put forward the sentiment that, for the most part, the refugees are receiving everything they might need: food, shelter, hygiene items, financial aid (most cited the MDL 2,200 aid from UNHCR). It is only when pressed to suggest what kind of help would they like to receive more respondents shared some recommendations while emphasising that their basic needs are covered. Clothing for the summer (a lot of refugees came with a few winter clothes); more fresh products in the food packages such as dairy, meat, fruits and vegetables; vouchers or direct cash

assistance; activities for children – were cited. Therefore, the areas for further action are quite precise (i.e. access to fresh produce) rather than big gaps (i.e. access to food); moreover, cash assistance and vouchers for a wider range of products were quoted as particularly supportive, more than clothes or food donations. Moreover, more clarity is needed when it comes to the application process for vouchers, financial assistance for host communities, and financial aid for refugees, as several refugees, host families and volunteers mentioned.

By and large, people are appreciative of any help and the support received in Moldova, and are not hungry for luxuries. When asked “What are you missing?” or “What would you like more of?” a common response was “There is enough, we are very grateful. [...] I don’t want anything except for the war to end and not come here” (“Всего хватает, мы очень благодарны. Границу мы перешли без проблем. Ничего не хочется кроме того чтобы война закончилась и сюда не пришла”, Refugee, man, 70+ years).

“Мы всем довольны, нас очень хорошо приняли, питание отличное, волонтеры помогают. Комната чистая, хорошая. Старший ребенок занимался уроками онлайн. Невестка пошла на бесплатные курсы от примэрии. Мы приехали 9 апреля из Одессы в Бельцы. Мы сначала снимали жилье, но потом переехали в медицинское общежитие, но в конце прошлого месяца перевели в гостиницу. Тут условия лучше, мы благодарны. Народ очень отзывчивый.”

“We are happy with everything, we were received very well, the food is excellent, volunteers help. The room is clean and good. The older child took lessons online. My daughter-in-law went to free courses from the mayor’s office. We arrived on April 9 from Odesa to Balti. We first rented an apartment, but then we moved to a medical hostel, but at the end of last month we were transferred to the hotel [Hotel Balti]. Conditions are better here, we are grateful. The people are very responsive” (Refugee, woman, 50-59 years).

Childcare and activities for refugee children

Refugee parents are preoccupied with the well-being of their children and appreciate the organising of activities for children – the enrolment into school classes or the ability to follow online lessons, the presence of educators on the premises of Moldexpo (Chisinau) and Dumbrava Alba (Balti), the ability to play outside, creative art classes, excursions – all help keep a busy schedule for children and contribute to their development,

decrease isolation, help alleviate stress, and provide some free time for parents. Kindergarten services have been difficult to access for refugee parents: there are virtually no places left in state kindergartens and the private ones are very expensive. Some have brought grandparents with them to look after the children. While in refugee centres childcare is freely provided on the premises, refugee parents with young children living with relatives or in rented housing – i.e. the majority of refugees – struggle to access childcare. This can result in impeding the parents from finding an occupation, depleting their physical and emotional resources, and locking families into isolated islands of care, preventing even a temporary inclusion into the local society.

“Тут нам понравилось, условия хорошие и с детками занимаются – это очень важно. Так они бы оставались одни пока мы на курсах.”

“We like it here [Dumbrava Alba camp, Balti], the conditions are good and the children are involved in activities – this is very important. Otherwise, they would have been left alone while we are busy with the vocational courses.” (Refugee, woman, 40-49 years)

Housing insecurity

While some refugees were fortunate to stay with relatives, others shared that it was difficult to find a place to rent – few places were available for short-term rent and the rent increased as a result of the war. Among those living in refugee centres, some were more satisfied than others – at Hotel Balti and Dumbrava Alba, refugees were happy with having their own rooms and bathrooms, while at Moldexpo a lot of respondents shared that the lack of doors (the “rooms” are divided by blankets) resulted in some incidents of theft and the common bathrooms were a challenge. Those living in refugee centres also expressed anxiety related to the instability of their housing situation – some have been moved from room to room, and others were moved from one centre to a new one. On the hosting families’ side, multiple locals shared that they could not figure out how to receive the MDL 3,500 aid for housing refugees.

“Перед принятием решения ехать в Молдову, нужно позаботиться о том, где вы будете там жить. К сожалению, это оказалось очень непростым вопросом, квартиры в аренду можно взять сроком только на один год и больше либо посуточная аренда, которая рассчитана на туристов. Здесь такие правила аренды жилья. Возможны варианты, но их сложно найти.”

“Before deciding to go to Moldova, you need to take care of where you will live there. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a very difficult issue, apartments can be rented for only one year or more, or for daily rent, which is designed for tourists. Unfortunately, such are the rules for renting housing. There are other options, but they are hard to find.” (Refugee, woman, 50-59 years)

Employment

In the unstable situation refugees find themselves in, employment is not a priority for most – only 13% ticked the “looking for work” box. Refugees spoke of the uncertainty characterising their stay, often thinking they might be leaving any day now, only to see news of shelling in their region and once again delay their plans. Some reported wanting to find work to not be dependent on aid and exercise a degree of agency. Others mentioned the language barrier (not speaking Romanian) as a hurdle to finding a job. A group of women from the Dumbrava Alba centre gave a very positive account of their vocational training courses – they enjoy the ability to learn new skills (hairdressing, manicure etc.) and the community that such activities provide.

Overall, employment did not appear as an urgent priority in itself for the majority of the respondents, but rather as a tool for community building and gaining a degree of financial independence.



Directions of interventions and solutions

The derived insights from the dataset and the micro-narratives suggest a need to move beyond generic short-term interventions towards specific and sustainable interventions, moving beyond survivalist attitudes, and promote transparent and accessible support schemes. As the situation is stabilising, the focus from humanitarian to developmental solutions is needed to respond to people's longer-term needs, and shift the mentality from a survivalist, crisis attitude. In particular, the following interventions are needed:

Design and implement targeted initiatives:

- Given that people express very specific needs, support interventions should target distinct needs, or promote flexible solutions. In terms of needs, childcare services were mentioned as one area of support, in particular activities for children and kindergarten services.
- Regarding social inclusion, Roma integration into the education system and the employment sector remains a priority.
- Finally, cash assistance, rather than the less flexible coupons, provides more flexibility to meet the specific needs of refugees.

Promote projects moving beyond the survivalist mentality

- Encourage people to seek economic opportunities, while lowering the barriers for refugees seeking work
- Improve access to economic opportunities for refugees and host communities
- Design and implement programmes focused on offering stability and certainty to refugees, such as supporting refugees in moving towards long-term housing

Transparent, accessible, adequate and well-promoted support

- Promote human-centred support schemes, with an emphasis on clear communication, easy access and a strong promotion and distribution campaign.

Way forward

- Compare the results from the micro-narratives survey to similar assessments
- Further analyse the dataset and other assessments to respond to more specific questions, in particular about economic livelihoods
- Gather further data on host communities' narratives, motives and needs.

SMS Survey (multi-needs assessment)

In parallel to partnering with the Cynefin Company and the abovementioned partners to make sense of the experiences of both Ukrainian refugees in Moldova and local Moldovans through this survey, UNDP Moldova partnered with Orange and Monday.com to create a smaller, multi-needs assessment survey. Upon request from the government (Ministry of Internal Affairs/ Bureau of Migration & Asylum), and leveraging the list of Prepay numbers distributed for free by Orange to Ukrainian refugees (~49,000 numbers), a link to the survey was sent to these numbers, with an incentive (free minutes; free Internet) to improve turnout. As a result, around 858 answers were collected, between 21.06 and 20.07 (ongoing).

Results

Some of the results provide contrasting or supporting evidence to the survey results of this report: in terms of demographics, 56.5% of respondents were from Odesa, with an additional 17.4% from Mykolaiv Oblast. The majority were women (82.6%), aged 25-44 (58%), and married (60%).

Employment and stay

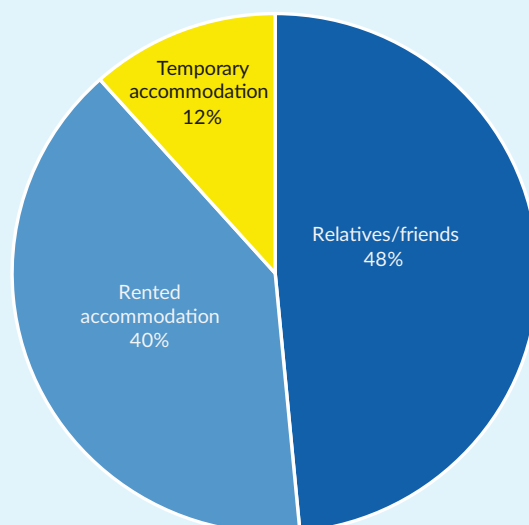
With almost two-thirds (64%) responding that they are not looking for a job, and mainly rely on assistance from organisations (41.3%) or allowance from the Republic of Moldova (20.2%), this supports the findings of this report that cash assistance remains highly valuable for refugees. Amongst those looking for employment, the top sectors are community and social services (15.6%), followed

by restaurants, cafes and hotels (13.4%) and retail (7%). While the lack of interest in seeking employment could be due to the sentiments that their stay is temporary, lack of access to adequate employment, or prejudice by employers, more research is needed to understand why most respondents do not seek a job.

With regards to the length of stay and the likelihood of staying in Moldova, respondents align with the findings of this report: most plan to stay 3-4 months (42.4%) or 2-3 months (23%). However, when asked what they plan on doing after the 90 days of temporary stay in Moldova, the majority (56%) considered a temporary stay. While these results seem paradoxical, this aligns with the sense of chaos and resulting difficult decision-making gathered through the micro-narrative. As the results of the abovementioned report showed, while some knew they were likely to stay or not, most respondents remained unsure about it.

While housing insecurity was not addressed in the report, most respondents answered that they are staying with friends or relatives (48%) or rented accommodation (40%). As services such as activities for children or vocational training exist in refugee accommodation centres and are highly valued by the refugees (see report above) their accessibility remains more limited for what represents the majority of refugees. This also underscores the importance of the MDL 3,500 housing aid, rent subsidies, and – to a lesser extent – safe and reliable temporary housing.

Figure 4. **Accommodation type in Moldova**



Finally, in terms of needs, Internet connection (22.1%), healthcare and reproductive services (13%), accommodation (12%) and childcare or care services (10%) ranked highest.

Figure 5. **What kind of help do you most need in Moldova?**

