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When working in crisis becomes daily life. Local organisations supporting refugees in Poland

Summary of the report

The humanitarian crisis related to the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people from war-torn Ukraine has shifted the responsibility for refugee support from a small group of specialised and experienced organisations to a challenge faced by the wider Polish social sector. Additionally, the operating conditions of the surveyed group of organisations are changing dynamically. The long-term activities in the crisis and the shrinking of funding, partly linked to the withdrawal of international organisations, bear consequences for the organisations themselves, those directly involved within them, as well as for refugees. This research project responds to the need for access to current and reliable data regarding the situation, challenges, and needs of local organisations supporting all refugees in Poland.

Data collection for this study was carried out between January and March 2024, and it consisted of both quantitative and qualitative components, preceded by a literature review of existing studies. The quantitative data is based on online surveys submitted by 158 organisations, while the qualitative data is derived from 6 focus group interviews with representatives of 22 local organisations. These organisations differ in terms of resources available and the scale of their operations. Additionally, we carried out an expert focus group discussion with representatives from 6 sector organisations, sense-checking the findings and co-creating recommendations derived from the study. The report depicts the current state of affairs and the changes that local organisations experienced between 2021 and 2022, the period directly before and after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, and between 2022 and 2023, during the crisis.

Key findings and conclusions

The basic characteristic of organisations

Local organisations supporting refugees are a specific part of the non-governmental sector in Poland. They are characterised, among other things, by a wide range of activities, extensive experience, and larger financial and human resources than the average Polish NGO. In 2023, 35% of the organisations supporting refugees had budgets of approximately over €230,000 (PLN 1 million). Most of the total of organisations employed paid staff (83%) and relied on volunteer support (94%). At the same time, this group is internally diverse. A small percentage of the surveyed organisations (14%) were established after 2022, but for one-third of organisations conducting activities aimed at refugees, it is a relatively new experience, undertaken as a result of the escalation of the full-scale war in Ukraine. The majority (68%) of the surveyed organisations state that refugee support is one of the key organisational objectives, but for others, it is secondary.

Currently, the most common activities include efforts to integrate refugees into the Polish community and providing information, as well as psychological support and education, including language courses. Organisations have continuously adapted the forms of support as the needs of refugees have rapidly evolved. The outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine has caused a significant number of changes in the situation of organisations supporting refugees and their resources. They significantly increased their teams, had larger budgets, changed their operational methods, and some (37%) even experienced the need to reformulate their missions or goals. However, the majority of these changes are not expected to be permanent.

Expertise of organisations

Many local organisations supporting refugees in Poland have extensive operational experience, resulting in a wealth of expertise acquired over the years. In addition, due to the growth in funding opportunities in the first year after the escalation of the war in Ukraine, some of the organisations underwent fast professionalisation, expanded their teams and hired specialists. Moreover, **most of the surveyed entities received professional support in the last two years in the form of training, workshops, access to knowledge, know-how, experts or educational materials.**

The expertise also includes experience of working in crisis and learning lessons from it. **Local organisations supporting refugees operate comprehensively and support people arriving in Poland at all stages as they assimilate to their new realities.** During the crisis, local organisations continuously adapted the forms of support as the needs of refugees changed very quickly throughout the months. **After months of operating in crisis, organisations recognise a need for increased engagement from state institutions and the delegation of certain tasks currently carried out by the civil society.**

Organisational stability

Local organisations supporting refugees operate under conditions of high uncertainty and flux. In the first year since the escalation of the war in Ukraine, the attention of international organisations focused on providing funding for local organisations and initiatives involved in the response. As a result, these organisations increased their budgets (72% of local organisations declared an increase in their budget in 2023 compared to 2021) and expanded the staff headcount and volunteer teams (47% experienced such a change). **In 2024, two years after the escalation of the war, the reality of organisations supporting refugees looks markedly different despite the unchanging scale of need.**

The key challenges revolve around the lack of financial stability and difficulties in securing funding. These problems are experienced by 75% of organisations and even more **anticipate that obtaining funding for refugee-focused activities will become even more difficult in the near future.** Consequently, organisations had already to reduce their staff headcount and are currently relying on short-term funding. Since 2022, a key source of funding for refugee-supporting activities has been funds from international organisations, e.g. United Nations (for 20% of local organisations), and INGOs (18%). **The concerns related to financial stability are linked to the withdrawal of these entities from Poland.**

Despite these demanding and uncertain operating conditions, organisations are determined to continue supporting refugees. Most of the surveyed organisations plan to maintain their activities for the next two years, but one-fourth expects to scale them back.

Burnout

An important aspect of the management of an organisation is, apart from the size of the budget, the wellbeing of its team. **The most significant challenge faced by nearly 60% of local organisations working with refugees is fatigue and burnout. It affects everyone: the staff, volunteers, and management.** Furthermore, more organisations predict that burnout will become a significant issue affecting their activities in the coming years, compared to the number currently experiencing the problem. Most organisations that identify the symptoms of burnout among their teams undertake some preventative actions, mainly in the form of supervision, psychological support, and anti-burnout workshops. **At the same time, there is a need to deal with this issue more systematically.**

Networking

Organisations supporting refugees consider the expansion of their networks as one of the key and most enduring changes in the past two years. The partners of organisations supporting refugees are most often other Polish organisations, the local community, and INGOs. Joint projects and sharing information are the most common activities carried out jointly. **Organisations greatly value the opportunities to expand cooperation and see a further need for networking.** Additionally, every third surveyed organisation declared a need for various types of training and workshops, most often in the areas of organisational management and fundraising.

Recommendations

Many of the challenges faced by local organisations that deliver support to refugees in Poland are systemic. For this reason, our recommendations are mainly directed to donor and support entities that provide support to the surveyed group of entities.

Recommendations for donor and support entities:

- Invest in long-term projects that will enable strategic and institutional support for local organisations. It is also necessary to review the mechanisms and procedures for awarding grants.
- Allow projects to include budget for costs related to combating burnout and developing employee skills development in organisations.
- Need to invest in opportunities for networking and strengthening the intra-sector cooperation.
- To design support for organisations, considering the diversity of activities and key organisational aims.

Recommendations for public administration institutions:

- Transfer some of the supporting and integration tasks to state institutions and use the expertise of local organisations and civil society at large.

Recommendations for local organisations supporting refugees:

- To diversify the sources of funding, find new partners and reduce dependency on grants.
- Provide consistent support, such as training and supervision, to prevent burnout of staff.
- Regularly align the vision and mission of the organisation among the staff and strengthen a sense of community.
- To build coalitions and undertake joint advocacy activities.

The full report is available at

Humanitarian Leadership Academy website

Humanitarian Leadership Academy

A global learning initiative, part of Save the Children, providing high-quality humanitarian capacity strengthening for the sector to help people prepare for and respond to crises, providing trainings, research and evidence, and convening spaces.

Klon/Jawor Research

The research team of the Klon/Jawor Association, an organisation that supports the development of civil society in Poland and runs the ngo.pl portal. Klon/Jawor Research brings together expert knowledge of the non-governmental sector in Poland with experience of conducting research and analysis. Since 2002, we have been conducting the largest independent cyclical study of associations and foundations in Poland - [The capacity of NGOs in Poland](#).



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The project has been carried out by the research team of the Klon/Jawor Association in collaboration with the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, a sub-entity of Save the Children.