



Profiles and vulnerabilities of people displaced through their own means (outside organised evacuation mechanisms)

July 2026 | Ukraine

Context & Rationale

Since the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has experienced one of the largest internal displacement crises in Europe. As of March 2026, approximately 3.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) resided in the country.¹ Displacement flows primarily originate from eastern and southern oblasts bordering the frontline, Russia and Belarus - notably Donetsk, Kharkiv, Zaporizka, Sumska, Khersonska and Luhanska oblasts.²³⁴ The Ukrainian government outlined the legal grounds for evacuation and introduced coordination mechanisms for evacuation measures and response to the mass population movement. Additionally, evacuations are supported by a wide array of humanitarian stakeholders.

The formal evacuation system in place primarily regulates assisted evacuation, including organised transport and relocation to transit centres under declared mandatory evacuation orders.⁵ Meanwhile, available evidence indicates that most civilians (72%) did not leave through assisted evacuation, but through their own means.⁶ Therefore, a substantial proportion of those evacuating remains outside formal evacuation channels and, consequently, may be less visible to institutional response systems. While it is possible that some individuals displacing by their own means do not require external assistance, this remains an untested assumption.

Thus, gaps in understanding the movement patterns and motivations of people displaced through their own means bear important protection implications, especially in light of the connection between displacement and vulnerability: 60% of IDP households include at least one chronically ill member, 54% - an older person (aged >60 y. o.), 37% - a person with disabilities, and 36% - a child.⁷ Family separation affects up to 42% of households from frontline areas. Housing remains the most persistent unmet need, reported by up to 44% of IDPs, while financial needs and service access gaps remain widespread.⁸

This assessment explores the drivers, pathways and vulnerability dynamics of people displaced through their own means during the recent years of the full-scale war in Ukraine.

Key Messages

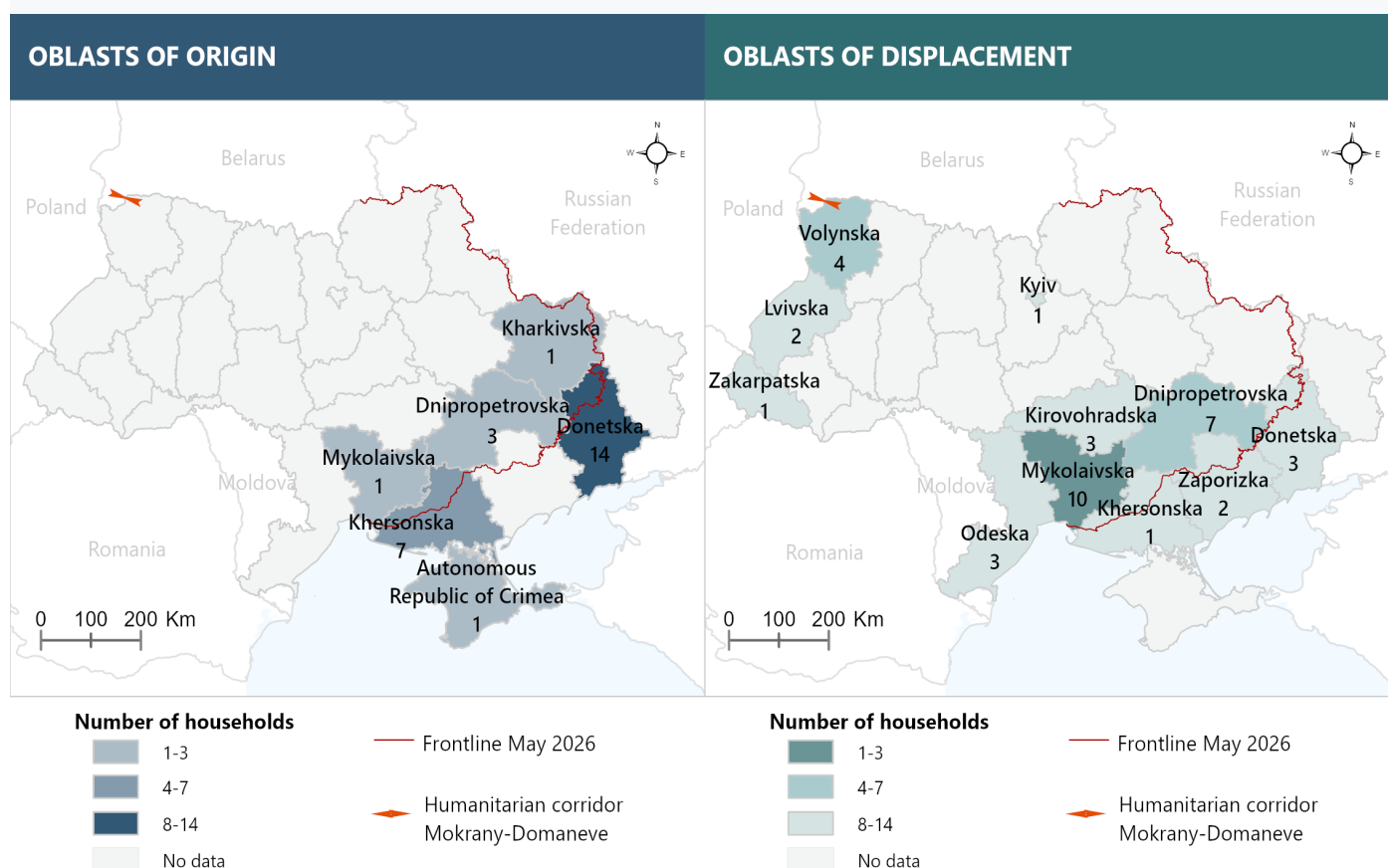
- Self-organised displacement should not be equated with a lack of need for assistance. Many vulnerable people displace through their own means, in some cases precisely because the factors related to their vulnerability prevent them from accessing organised evacuations, thereby exacerbating existing challenges.
- Understanding the risks of remaining near the frontline does not necessarily translate into the ability to leave. Greater emphasis should therefore be placed on supporting IDPs in host communities, primarily by facilitating access to adequate housing, livelihoods, and existing support services, giving people greater confidence that they can rebuild and sustain their lives elsewhere.
- Self-organised displacement can involve significant logistical, financial, and security-related challenges. People require transportation options and clear guidance on how to prepare for displacement, organise their departure, and mitigate potential security risks during transit.
- The findings suggest that, with adequate support, pre-emptive self-organised displacement may contribute, to some extent, to resilience and self-reliance. Leaving before conditions deteriorate may enable people to displace more safely, preserve more of their belongings, and plan better for life after displacement.

Methodology Overview

This is an exploratory assessment, providing initial insights regarding self-organised displacement.

This study relied on a qualitative approach, combining Individual Interviews with people displaced through their own means (27 in total), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders working with IDPs during their displacement (8 in total) and stakeholders involved in receiving IDPs (9 in total). These included governmental stakeholders and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Data collection took place from 23 March to 24 April.

Geographic coverage was nation-wide, including people who evacuated from the frontline oblasts, prioritising high-risk areas, and from the temporarily occupied territories (TOT).



Map 1: Locations where data collection took place, some of the respondents displaced more than once.

Detailed sampling can be found in Annex 1 and a full description of methodology can be found in the [Terms of Reference](#).

In addition to this report, REACH developed a storymap exploring pathways of those displaced by their own means in greater detail, following personal narratives of respondents. The storymap can be found [here](#).

Glossary

Evacuation: This report interprets evacuations to include a broad set of different types of assisted civilian movements that includes humanitarian or volunteer-assisted evacuations, government-assisted, and government-ordered mandatory evacuations.

Frontline areas: Locations within 30km from the frontline.

Respondents: Interviewed people displaced through their own means.

Informants: Interviewed stakeholders working with IDPs during their displacement or involved in receiving IDPs.

Limitations

- Data collected through this assessment is indicative of the situation at the time of data collection. Given the dynamic nature of hostilities, displacement patterns, and evacuation regulations in Ukraine, findings may be affected by subsequent changes in security conditions, policy amendments, or shifts in humanitarian response mechanisms.
- The study interviewed people who successfully displaced through their own means. It does not include people who attempted to displace but were unable to do so, or those who remain in frontline areas and in temporarily occupied territories. As a result, the findings reflect the experiences of people who were able to leave, rather than the full range of experiences and barriers faced by those who could not.
- As the recruitment of respondents for individual interviews was conducted with the support of local NGOs and humanitarian partners, the sample is likely to include individuals who have already interacted with assistance providers. IDPs displaced by their own means who have not sought support, remain unregistered, or deliberately avoid formal systems may have been underrepresented. This may have resulted in findings that reflect relatively higher levels of service awareness or access than experienced by the broader IDP population who displaced by their own means
- Certain groups have been more difficult to reach, including people currently residing in remote or rural areas, older people (especially those living alone), people with disabilities, and individuals with limited digital access. As a result, some vulnerability profiles may not have been fully captured.
- Given the sensitive nature of wartime experiences, respondents may have been reluctant to disclose information related to trauma, informal coping strategies, distrust toward authorities, irregular movement pathways, or protection incidents. Social desirability bias may have influenced how respondents described their decision-making processes or interactions with state institutions.
- Key Informant Interviews with authorities, humanitarian actors, and service providers provided insights into evacuation procedures, coordination mechanisms, and assistance gaps from an institutional perspective. However, these stakeholders may present systems and interventions in a favourable light, potentially underreporting operational challenges, coordination failures, or service limitations.
- This is a qualitative case study that offers in-depth, indicative insights. The findings are not statistically representative and do not capture the full situation across Ukraine.

Profiles of people displaced through their own means

Who are the people displacing through their own means?

A widespread assumption often held by stakeholders is that vulnerable people more often displace with organised evacuation. Although the demographic characteristics of people joining organised evacuation vary, certain groups were more often noted among them by informants: older people, people with disabilities or mobility issues, families with children, those with less financial resources or social networks, people missing documents and those who stayed until organised/mandatory evacuation was in place.

At the same time, informants generally perceived people displaced through their own means as more proactive and self-reliant than those who use organised evacuation mechanisms. They commonly described the former as more likely to independently seek information, opportunities, and resources and more likely to have plans for life after displacement from their hromada (including housing or employment plans). Some believed that those who displaced through their own means are more likely to have better financial resources (or more belongings which they brought when displacing), to have documents on them, and social networks at the destination.

Yet, such assumptions do not capture the whole picture. People's support needs remain highly dependent on individual vulnerabilities that precede displacement. Hence, self-organised displacement should not be equated with lack of need for support, as some vulnerable people displace through their own means too.

Sixty-seven percent of households which displaced through their own means comprised an older person (+60 y.o.), 54% included a person with chronic illness, 51% - a person with disability, and 46% - at least one child.⁹ Many of them were hoping not to displace at all but once it proved critical, organised evacuation was no longer an option. They were left on their own, which exacerbated vulnerability. Some people displace at the last moment, when organised evacuation is no longer possible, precisely due to their vulnerabilities, such as lower financial resources or mobility issues, which hindered them from displacing earlier.

People with mobility and health issues (including older people and people with disabilities), people with less financial resources and poorer social networks (as that challenged their trip, planning, and adaptation upon arrival) were considered at the highest risk of vulnerability. Other mentions of vulnerable people included men (due to risk of mobilisation and hence avoidance of registration for services and support), families with children, unaccompanied children, young people, those who displaced urgently (and thus couldn't prepare well for the trip), and in TOT - relatives of

Ukrainian military members, who risk persecution by Russian forces during the trip or at filtration camps.

Decision-making process in (self-organised) displacement

Why are people reluctant to leave?

Some people living in proximity of the frontline do not want to evacuate or wait until the last moment to do so. According to UNHCR's Protection Survey of August-September 2025, 19% of people living within 30km from the frontline did not plan to leave their homes if the security situation deteriorates, while 34% were undecided.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the majority of those with no displacement intentions are more vulnerable – including people of older age, those who exhibit higher levels of specific needs and vulnerability, and those who live alone.¹¹

The REACH survey found that people most commonly hesitate about leaving due to reluctance to abandon one's home, because of emotional attachment and/or fear of losing accommodation and property, with no tangible plan for life and livelihoods after displacement. This was particularly evident among older people. Others were trying to preserve their sources of income, especially in rural areas where people rely on stationary livelihoods, such as farming and agriculture.

It was the house, built through our own hard work, with our own hands, that kept us from leaving. And at our age [60+], starting all over again isn't really an option... That's what kept us there right until the very end.

IDP displaced through their own means from the near-frontline territory in 2025

IOM's 2025 General Population Survey indicated that IDPs who displaced through their own means were less likely to have left during the first years of the full-scale invasion (44% vs. 71% among all IDPs), suggesting later displacement.¹² Some were wary of leaving for the unknown, afraid of discrimination, or saw no prospects for life elsewhere. Many who stayed in dangerous areas hoped that the war would end soon or that the frontline would not reach their homes, while those who had experienced displacement before were reluctant to lose everything again.

Some people face prospective difficulties during the trip, which makes them hold off the decision to displace, e.g., people with mobility issues and other health risks (for whom travel is logistically difficult) and men (who face the risk of mobilisation if they encounter army recruiters during their trip).

Some do not want to displace if their family members cannot or do not wish to do so along with them – this includes children and teenagers whose relocation depends on parents' decision, and caregivers of older people and/or of people with health issues. Additionally, some people stay to watch over theirs and neighbours' homes.

Delaying displacement may increase the risks to safety both at their location and when leaving it, as the situation in the frontline changes and drone attacks become more frequent. Additionally, hasty displacement, which eventually may happen as the security threats increase, can leave people less prepared (e.g., able to take less belongings or documents), which places them at a greater risk of vulnerability and need for support after displacement.¹³ It can happen that leaving by car/bus will become impossible due to security risk and evacuators cannot reach the location anymore. According to CIVIC survey, 9% of people living in dangerous areas want to leave but are no longer able to do so.¹⁴

Additionally, informants reported that some people return to dangerous areas after displacement (e.g., if they haven't found secure job/housing at the destination), while others try to travel out of the dangerous zone only to access services and come back. The scale of returns to frontline areas is striking – as of March 2026, IOM noted over 1,5 million cases.¹⁵ Another REACH study found that IDPs returning to unsafe areas are mostly motivated by family reunification – within 30km from the frontline that was the dominant factor (cited by 40%), followed by economic reasons and accommodation challenges in the place of displacement.¹⁶ Those who return to the frontline areas are largely aware of the difficult security situation and not deterred by it. Upon return, they are at a higher risk of protection issues and secondary displacement.¹⁷ This underscores the importance of supporting IDPs in securing viable conditions at their destination. In an IOM study, returns to dangerous areas were observed among 23% of households which displaced by their own means.¹⁸

Respondents from the temporarily occupied territories more frequently mentioned logistical barriers to displacement (lack of transportation options and restrictions imposed by Russian security forces). Additionally, informants highlighted that people in TOT may be inclined to stay due to influence of family and media, and that many are scared of the trip, especially of the so-called (Russian) filtration camps, that they may need to pass through when trying to cross into Ukrainian-controlled territory (see section *The pathways of displacement*). Moreover, it was highlighted that people in TOT often don't know who they can trust, which further exacerbates their sense of insecurity and complicates potential displacement.

When do people decide to leave?

Reasons for and possibility of displacement have reportedly changed over the time, along with the evolving security situation. Many of those who stayed in frontline areas for year(s) became largely used to the unsafe situation after the first or second year of war.

The most terrible thing is [that] we understand that in the background the hostilities are taking place, but what is happening in the head, [is that people are] getting used to everything. And it happens that all the boundaries of

normal and abnormal are erased in your head

NGO stakeholder involved in evacuations

With the expanded use of short-range drones (in particular "First-Person-View" (FPV) drones) since 2024, threats' intensity changed. FPVs, with a range of circa 30km, are largely used in frontline areas, including cases of use against civilians and aid workers.¹⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that between 24 February 2022 and 30 April 2025, FPV attacks in Ukraine killed at least 395 civilians and injured 2,635, most of which happened since July 2024.²⁰ Given the dire security condition, displacement is nowadays reportedly motivated by immediate security threats (e.g., intensified shelling, approaching frontline, depending on the awareness of threats), moving frontline and consequently a risk of occupation.

These findings align with a CIVIC study, according to which 77% of those who decided to leave did so out of fear of violence or physical harm (for 64% that was the most important factor), and 53% – out of fear of psychological or mental harm.²¹ In some cases, risks to safety only convinced people to leave after they took an effect – such as death of a relative or friend or destroyed housing. In the CIVIC study, 15% decided to leave after having experienced psychological harm, and 12% – after having experienced physical violence.²²

The other day somewhere I saw that they asked a woman, "Why didn't you leave before?"; "My husband did not want to", she says. "What has changed?"; [they asked]. She says, "He was killed".

NGO stakeholder involved in evacuations

The second most often mentioned factor was social influence, primarily advice from family, less often from friends or acquaintances, and sometimes from neighbours. Similarly, CIVIC study recognised communication with family and friends as a factor impacting the decision to leave for 30% of respondents.²³ Additionally, informants highlighted the importance of social influence in temporarily occupied territories, noting that the influence of family and media could have either effect – motivating people to leave or to stay. Sometimes, families decide to stay, but once children turn 18 years old, they can make their own decision to leave.

Moreover, informants noted that some people decided to leave due to difficult living conditions, including lack of utilities and basic services (e.g., medical care), due to destroyed housing, or for the wellbeing of children.

A survey conducted by the UNHCR at the Mokrany-Domanove border crossing, currently the only one operating between Ukraine and Belarus, sheds some more light at motivations behind the displacement of people from TOT. In the survey, 79% of respondents cited family reunification and other family-related reasons as the most important factor. Concerns about

the future in the TOT were also a significant factor for 42% of respondents, while 32% noted the deteriorating security situation in TOT as a key factor and 31% - access to medical services.²⁴ It is however crucial to note that safety issues may be underrepresented in surveys with people from TOT, as they may be reluctant to discuss the political/security situation out of fear for their safety or that of their relatives and friends who stayed behind.

Factors driving self-organised displacement and associated risks

Why do some people leave through their own means?

Two opposing narratives dominate the pathways of those displaced through their own means. On the one hand, it was noted that people often opt for displacing through their own means when they can (i.e., they have their own transport and financial resources), to avoid shortcomings of organised evacuation (including limited possibility to bring belongings or pets, pre-determined destination, inadequate transportation options etc.). Among the strongest reported advantages of self-organised displacement are the ability to bring property, livestock, and pets. Bringing essential belongings and livestock could help secure livelihoods at the destination. Moreover, some self-employed people reportedly opted for self-organised displacement to ensure relocating their business.

If I evacuate with government assistance, what will I be able to take with me? Just two bags, and they'll drive me out - that's it. But if I manage to leave on my own, at least I can take some of my belongings with me.

IDP displaced by their own means from the near-frontline territory in 2025

Respondents who displaced by themselves highlighted that it allowed them to make their own choices about many aspects, primarily the destination, but also the transport and timing. Respondents highlighted issues concerning the timing of organised evacuation as some wished to leave earlier. Additionally, a notable share of respondents mentioned that housing conditions provided after evacuation are sometimes uncomfortable, and that consequently they tried to plan for their own accommodation.

In addition to material resources, social networks and personal preparedness, such as having a planned destination, also played a role, facilitating arrangement of own accommodation, employment and/or support networks at the destination.

On the other hand, a notable share of interviewed people displaced through their own means were not aware of organised evacuation options or such opportunities were not available at the time. The increased intensity of drone attacks and the presence of mines in areas close to the frontline made organised

evacuation more difficult or impossible to conduct in certain places in the past years. A few respondents asked for evacuation support but were excluded because they did not meet the criteria and hence ended up displacing by themselves. Some interviewed stakeholders involved in evacuations admitted refusing to evacuate people who had already evacuated once, or those who did not respect the policies [of the evacuators].

According to CIVIC, evacuations' information landscape has improved over the recent years, with communication becoming more widespread and clearer.²⁵ Although informants often noted information campaigns or available hotline about evacuation, some reported insufficient information about evacuation mechanisms - sometimes limited to information spread by word of mouth.

Nonetheless, it is important to mention Russian misinformation and disinformation campaigns concerning evacuation routes and treatment of displaced populations in the West of Ukraine, which made some people reluctant to leave or trust in organised evacuation.²⁶ Additionally, informants noted that some men displace by their own means to avoid registration and consequently potential mobilisation.

What are the risks of self-organised displacement?

Whether going alone or with organised evacuation, people leaving the dangerous areas face certain risks, primarily safety-related. Due to the changes in security situation, people now face even greater risks when trying to leave frontline areas. When fleeing, they are at risk of several protection threats, including being fired on by Russian troops and FPVs, and having to pass through areas contaminated by landmines.²⁷ Early evacuation helped spare some civilians from the worst of these threats - in early months of the full-scale invasion, civilians were able to leave through negotiated green corridors (safe passage lasting from several hours to days), which largely ceased to exist after May 2022.²⁸ It remains crucial to encourage people to leave the dangerous areas as soon as possible.

Other risks during the trip include issues with (missing) documents, family separation, and challenges due to people's psychological or physical condition (who may e.g., require specific adaptations in transportation). While these risks concern all IDPs, those joining organised evacuation may be better prepared to face them with support of state or humanitarian stakeholders conducting evacuations (see section *The pathways of displacement*). Additionally, IDPs face challenges at the destination - notably difficulties in securing housing and employment, and in accessing basic services (e.g., social services).

However, several disadvantages and risks are associated specifically with self-organised displacement. Those who displace by their own means are at risk of vulnerability

at various stages of displacement - before leaving their location (due to safety risks and difficulties with planning), during the trip (due to logistical difficulties and insufficient information) and after arriving at the destination (largely due to lack of secure and stable housing opportunities, information about available services and integration into the new community, see section *Adaptation*).

Among the challenges of the pre-displacement stage, most respondents emphasised the difficulty of leaving behind one's home and belongings. Constant shelling made displacement especially dangerous. Difficulties organising the displacement process itself and the need to displace again (for those with experience of secondary displacement) were noted by a few respondents. In the context of the journey, the most frequently mentioned issues were a feeling of uncertainty about the trip and the future, and difficulties associated with the car journey itself.

And people are told - you have only one suitcase or one backpack and you need to put your whole life in that backpack and go into the unknown. Therefore, they are most vulnerable on the road.

NGO stakeholder involved in reception of IDPs

Findings suggest that people who displace through their own means may face a greater risk of falling through the cracks of existing support systems. While they are eligible for support addressed to IDPs, they might find it more challenging as they have to reach out to these services by themselves, and access may be obstructed by insufficient information.

Moreover, people who displaced through their own means may lose some assistance provided at/via transit centres as they don't always pass through them – notably, transit centres often direct people toward collective sites. Without such referral it may be more difficult to "get a spot" - out of those newly arrived in collective sites in 2026, only 9% evacuated by their own means²⁹. In effect, obstructed access may concern access to humanitarian and other financial support, information, free accommodation support, transportation, IDP registration, and psychosocial services.

Again, I will not talk about self-evacuation [self-organised displacement], because we do not see them. [...] We do not know who these people are, where they live, what their emotional and psychological state is. [These] people did not pass through us.

Employee of a transit centre

Safety concerns during the trip were also frequently mentioned, particularly due to the attacks and limited awareness of dangers. Transportation and travel-related issues, especially the lack of transportation adapted for people with disabilities or reduced mobility and the use of unauthorised (private) carriers, were another

key challenge. Informants also highlighted gaps in information on required documentation and travel procedures, as well as the financial burden, and family separation linked to self-organised displacement. Less commonly mentioned issues included limited government awareness of the needs of people displaced through their own means, insufficient funds for unexpected travel changes, and for people from TOT - difficulties crossing borders (see section *The pathways of displacement*).

Additionally, people who displaced through their own means noted having to bear greater responsibility and burden, including the need to decide on a place to live, the financial difficulty of self-organised displacement, and greater stress and exhaustion. Among respondents, single people and those caring for people with chronic illnesses are more likely to say that organising displacement by themselves requires a great deal of responsibility in order to cope with the challenges.

Pathways of displacement

How do people displace by their own means from frontline areas?

The decision to evacuate is oftentimes spontaneous, made not long before the departure, leaving little time to prepare for the journey and life ahead. Most respondents made the decision to displace within less than a month before departure, while only a few took six months or more. Approaches to route planning varied - some did not have a clear plan for the travel, while others planned it in more detail - analysed potential route, decided on the safest timing, and marked the vehicle with a white cloth to highlight its civilian status. Yet, a few respondents mentioned that they only had partial knowledge of the route, and some encountered difficulties with navigation.

We knew the drones usually flew during the day, not at night. We tried to leave at dawn. We also watched the weather - if there was fog, we knew they couldn't see us, so that was the safest time to leave.

IDP displaced by their own means from the near-frontline territory in 2024.

It was highlighted that people need clear instructions on how to prepare and leave, and information about potential security risks during the travel. Moreover, informants noted that unforeseen challenges may arise during self-organised displacement (e.g., logistical, security-related, financial difficulties). Due to insufficient knowledge or resources, some may fail in their attempt to leave the dangerous area.

Some respondents mentioned that they felt safer displacing by themselves rather than relying on organised evacuation, as the latter becomes a target for FPV drones. However, this is not necessarily true

– OHCHR noted cases of FPV targeting evacuation movements, but also buses and private cars.³⁰ On the other hand, informants noted that those who have the means might choose to leave by their own transport but still look to NGOs for a sense of safety and direction (e.g., by following an evacuation convoy with a car).

According to the informants, those who displace by their own means often seek at least some support in displacement, very often from NGOs, or displace only partially on their own. NGOs can provide advice, referrals, or information. Moreover, some people who displaced by their own means reportedly turned to transit centres, where they could receive further information and referrals to services. Those who do not reach the transit centres may be at greater risk of falling through the cracks of support system, especially those with weaker social networks at destination, as some protection services, referrals to collective sites and humanitarian aid are offered through these centres. Nonetheless, on top of lack of awareness about the transit centres, reaching them is not always logistically easy, depending on the route and location.

Many respondents mentioned relying on help of family and friends during the journey, which highlights the role of social networks in enabling displacement. Family and friends helped with transportation, but they were also frequently the main source of psychosocial support – importantly so, as many respondents noted mental stress, uncertainty, and exhaustion during the journey. Informants added that some people who displaced by their own means return to the dangerous areas to help their family or friends leave.

Some people moved with rented vehicles (both passenger and freight). Payment for rented transport was often covered using financial help received in the place of origin, as well as personal savings. Less frequently, people travelled by train, bus, or taxi. A few respondents stressed the high cost of travel. Despite having organised their own transport, people who displaced by their own means could not take all their belongings.

Throughout the trip, some noted that staying at a hotel was often impossible and some slept in their cars if the journey lasted multiple days. The trip was particularly challenging for people with health issues. Hence, some noted the need for help with transport or making arrangements for people with disabilities and health issues.

The most common sources of information and channels of communication during displacement were the Internet, including social media, followed information passed by the word of mouth and official announcements. Some mentioned obtaining information through NGOs' hotlines, volunteers, resilience points, the military, village councils, executive committees, and SMS.

Many respondents were aware of transportation support opportunities and transit centres. Some knew about

Drawing from their experience, interviewed people displacing through their own means outlined the following advice to people wishing to leave dangerous areas:

- Leave the dangerous area as soon as possible.
- Plan the journey step by step and weigh every option.
- Prepare financially and take your belongings.
- Search for available support from NGOs or governmental services.
- Try to displace to where family or friends live.

assistance with purchasing tickets, food, and hygiene supplies. Yet, several respondents had no knowledge of the assistance available to support during the displacement.

Most surveyed people who were displaced by their own means had identified their destination before departure and planned the journey independently. However, this should not necessarily be understood as an expression of full agency or free choice. Decisions were often constrained by the need to secure any available place to stay, with destinations largely determined by where relatives, friends, or other contacts could provide accommodation or practical support. As a result, destinations were often located relatively close to the oblast or broader region of origin. According to IOM, IDPs displaced by their own means were more likely to remain in the East of Ukraine than the overall IDP population (47% vs. 35%) and less likely to relocate to western oblasts (7% vs. 15%).³¹

Most often, respondents' initial plan was to displace temporarily, usually for less than a year, while some did not plan for a longer stay at all. People with members of the household with disability or chronic illness aimed for temporary relocation more often. This has further impacted their integration in a new community (see section *Adaptation*). According to IOM data, the plan to return to area of origin in the long term was mentioned by 41% of households that displaced by their own means, while 12% were unsure of their long-term plan.³²

How do the pathways of self-organised displacement compare to organised evacuation?

Informants noted changes in the evacuation process over the past 4 years following legal updates along with the shifting security landscape. Evacuation is organised by state authorities, such as civil-military administrations, local government, police and State Emergency Service of Ukraine, often supported by humanitarian stakeholders. Evacuation decision taken by the authorities may be announced on the radio, mass media or via air raid sirens. Additionally, the Ministry for Communities and Territories Development operates a 24/7 hotline,

providing an immediate channel of assistance for those requiring evacuation.³³ Evacuation can be carried out via trains or cars/buses moving in a column. Evacuated population is then transferred to the transit centres.

The transit centres were designed for the short-term stay of evacuated people during their movement to another accommodation, often collective sites. The transit centres provide registration, lodging, food, medical care, psychological support, legal assistance, assessment of basic social service needs, and organisation of further transport.³⁴

Yet, some gaps in effective and inclusive evacuation process persist. Ukraine lacks clearly defined legislative criteria for declaring evacuation in the context of wartime conditions – settlements may be declared unsafe, but the decision on evacuation may be delayed.³⁵ Other gaps consist of the lack of a clear procedure on information sharing and coordination of activities between state authorities and humanitarian stakeholders. The Ukraine Protection Cluster highlighted as well insufficient staff and facilities in host communities to accommodate IDPs in need of specialised care (especially people with disabilities and older people), hindered access to services of people with missing documents and risks in evacuation of children deprived of parental care amid insufficient coordination between the authorities.³⁶

Despite its limitations, organised evacuation may offer more support and stability to evacuees. In line with the Protection Cluster's guidelines, interviewed stakeholders engaged in evacuation highlighted that they offer comprehensive evacuation support in cooperation with other entities. The offered support may begin with preparing people to evacuate - informing about the evacuation pathway, preparing them for checkpoints, ensuring they have all relevant documents. Some interviewed stakeholders highlighted as well that they have a possibility to evacuate people with special needs, e.g., people with mobility issues or disability. These provisions constitute important advantages compared to self-organised displacement.

How do people leave temporarily occupied territories?

Some people waited too long with the decision to displace and believed that the frontline wouldn't reach them. Once that happened, leaving became even more difficult. To leave from temporarily occupied territories, a person has to displace by their own means, although some receive support from NGOs which share information on how to leave TOT, or use private carriers, or less frequently - volunteers, for transportation. The journey is dangerous (facing safety risks from the Russian forces), long (taking between a few days to a few weeks) and costly (in 2024, Zaporizhzhia authorities estimated the cost at up to 30,000UAH, 673USD³⁷). Hence, people displacing from TOT experience different

Ukraine's evacuation legislation

Ukrainian evacuation legislation was primarily drafted before the war (mostly based on the Civil Protection Code of Ukraine, adopted in 2012). While the Code addresses emergency situations, it reflects the legal regime of martial law only to a limited extent and does not fully address the current security and humanitarian challenges. Hence, secondary legislation, including numerous regulations, plays an important role.⁵⁷

The Procedure No. 841 and its amendments intend to clarify the evacuation procedures and to strengthen the state policy on protecting the rights and addressing the needs of the civilian population.⁵⁸ The Cabinet of Ministers Resolutions No. 282, No. 841 as well as MIA Order No. 579, establish the processes and requirements for evacuating persons with disabilities. These include identifying and enlisting persons with disabilities who may need support during evacuation and establishing escort groups comprised of staff with relevant expertise to accompany them during said evacuation.

The Ukraine Protection Cluster released a guidance on evacuations in July 2024 addressed to the humanitarian stakeholders. It stresses, among others, that evacuation needs to be voluntary, inclusive approach must be applied, families should not be separated, evacuating stakeholders should bear in mind the best interest of the child and children and that reliable information about evacuation procedures and risks should be disseminated.⁵⁹

In March 2026, a controversial law entered into force. The law No. 4779-IX amended the Civil Protection Code of Ukraine (Art. 33) to introduce the possibility of a partial mandatory evacuation for certain categories of population who, due to age or health condition, are unable to independently take measures to preserve their life or health, including children, people with disabilities, and elderly people - an exhaustive list of vulnerable categories was not established. This includes potential evacuation of children without parents.⁶⁰

UNHCR noted that this law creates ambiguity and inconsistency with other laws and thus opens the way for diverse implementation approaches. In addition, it is misaligned with operational realities and capacities, and does not specify adaptation measures. Additionally, the law introduces new rules concerning the evacuation of children raising serious child protection concerns, in particular with regards to family unity, guardianship and care. Finally, the law suggests the possibility of use of coercive means for the mandatory evacuation of the civilian population, requiring additional safeguards to ensure compliance with international protection standards.⁶¹

displacement pathways and set of challenges than those leaving from frontline areas.

As crossing the demarcation line is no longer possible (and has been so for at least 2 years), Ukrainians trying to leave TOT have to pass through Russia and Belarus (seemingly less often chosen routes run through Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan) and enter Ukrainian-controlled territory from abroad. A humanitarian corridor between Ukraine and Russia (the Kolotylyvka – Pokrovka checkpoint) used to admit Ukrainian citizens crossing into Ukraine, but has been closed in 2024. Currently, the last open crossing on Ukraine's Eastern border is the Mokrany-Domanove border crossing point between Belarus and Ukraine (which is closed for regular movement, accepting only one-way arrivals of Ukrainians with valid documents).³⁸ After crossing the border, Ukrainians are met by volunteers who can provide aid and bring them to other locations.

While travelling through TOT, civilians risk being stopped at checkpoints, which have been functioning in occupied Donbas since 2014.³⁹ Since 2022 reports have also emerged of so-called "filtration camps" established by the Russian forces in areas between TOT and Russia, where civilians may be stopped, detained, and subjected to screening and questioning about their links to the resistance movement, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, or special services, as well as Ukrainian government or any volunteer activities.⁴⁰ This bears a risk of harassment, detention or denial of passage – Human Rights Watch called the filtration camps an abuse against civilians.⁴¹ Those reportedly subjected to particular scrutiny by the Russian forces reportedly include men, former members of the military or state services, or their relatives, activists and people with patriotic tattoos or those who publicly expressed pro-Ukrainian views.⁴²

People were still using the Internet, liking posts here and there, leaving comments. They had to know that the FSB would check their phones. They know exactly where to look, what to check, and how to recover deleted information.

IDP displaced by their own means from a temporarily occupied territory in 2025

Many people who try to displace from TOT face issues regarding documents. Many do not have a valid Ukrainian passport to enter the country from abroad – in such cases, they can obtain a Certificate of Return at a Ukrainian consulate once they reach third country (which, however, complicates and prolongs the journey).⁴³ On the other hand, passing the TOT checkpoints without a valid Russian passport is also challenging as the occupying forces have been pushing local population to obtain it. OHCHR noted that on 10 September 2025, a deadline expired for Ukrainian citizens in TOT and Russia to acquire Russian citizenship and "legalize their presence" (i.e., obtain a Russian

passport).⁴⁴ This presents logistical challenges and is in clash with people's national identity.⁴⁵

Adaptation at host community

How fast do people displaced through their own means integrate in the new community?

Some informants believed that people displaced through their own means may integrate faster than those who arrived with an organised evacuation, due to having had planned post-displacement life, having better material resources and social networks. However, others challenged that assumption, highlighting that the speed and effectiveness of integration are not necessarily tied to the type of displacement, but rather person's individual traits – as previously discussed, profiles of people displaced through their own means vary.

Integration pathways of those who displaced through their own means are shaped by both practical considerations and emotional adjustment. Informants noted that many IDPs initially experience emotional distress and may be reluctant to seek assistance, even when needed, often requiring time to adapt before engaging with support services. While some initially rely on humanitarian assistance, in certain instances IDPs may become dependent on it, although many interviewed people displaced through their own means cited relying on themselves. Integration pathways, including reliance on public and non-governmental services, social networks, and self-reliance (finding employment and renting housing), differ depending on pre-existing vulnerability and resources.

And it's especially a pity, well, 60 plus people [aged over 60 y. o.]. Well, it's a pity for everyone. But these are 60 plus people who have worked all their lives on that house, on that kind of life. And at one point, well, [...] they got into a car, and behind them, a rocket hit a house and destroyed everything that they, well, all their lives built. These are self-evacuated [people displaced through their own means] people. And it's really scary.

NGO involved in reception of IDPs

Informants stressed that integration happens when a person acknowledges that they will stay at that location for some time and joins the local education system or labour force. On that note, several informants reported that many displaced children study online, often as they (and their parents) prefer to maintain a connection with the place of origin by keeping the same teachers and classmates. While this helps preserve hometown social links, it may impact children's socialisation at the host community negatively, and hinder quality of learning. Other reasons for studying online included physical barriers (such as online schooling due to alerts, not enough places at local schools and kindergartens, etc.). Nonetheless, some children were reportedly joining local schools, increasingly so since September 2025, although

education remains obstructed by security threats.

Most respondents reported feeling more vulnerable after than before displacement. The most significant reason is the psychological stress caused by the displacement experience, followed by a deterioration in health. Problems with psychological state were noted more often among rural residents. Additionally, informants noted initial or prolonged stress in displaced children.

I was under such immense stress while evacuating that after we arrived, both my husband and I developed various health problems over the following year.

IDP displaced by their own means from a temporarily occupied territory in 2024

Respondents noted the difficulty to get used to a new place and the absence of one's own home. Some consider themselves more vulnerable than the evacuated IDPs, mainly because they remain invisible to the assistance system.

A minority, by contrast, feel less vulnerable than before displacement, mainly thanks to a better psychological state, amid a safer environment. In comparison to those evacuated, people displaced through their own means mostly feel less vulnerable than the evacuated - primarily because they had greater certainty about their final destination and because they had family at the destination (who provided support with housing or finances).

Some informants specified that stronger social networks within the host community or geographical proximity to the place of origin may help integrate faster, particularly in terms of social integration. Nonetheless, it needs to be stressed that those displacing to areas relatively close to the frontline may continue to face security risks and are more likely to report unmet needs (than non-displaced population in these areas).⁴⁶

What does the integration pathway look like?

Upon their arrival IDPs who displaced by their own means reportedly prioritise finding housing, registering the IDP status, accessing financial or in-kind aid, and searching for information on available services and support. In the early stages of integration many people also search for employment and, if relevant, access medical services, legal aid (including restoration of documents), social services or services for children, or unemployment benefits - if eligible.

Informants highlighted that although those who displaced by their own means may not receive material support during the displacement process, they remain eligible for many types of aid (including state-issued IDP allowance) upon registration for the IDP certificate. Most respondents did not encounter difficulties with obtaining the certificate. Additionally, some informants highlighted

that their own organisation does not differentiate between the two groups of IDPs (those who left with organised evacuation and those who displaced through their own means).

Some respondents mentioned problems with accommodation, with the quality and living conditions of housing being the most common issue, followed by difficulties finding and securing stable rental housing (especially for households with children or animals). Among providers of housing support (other than accommodation at collective sites) respondents most often mentioned (I)NGOs. Compared to those who left with organised evacuation, those who displaced by their own means are perceived as more likely to rent accommodation independently.

Rental housing is never truly stable. Today you have a place to live, but tomorrow the owners may return from abroad, and you have to start looking all over again. Every move is physically, financially, and emotionally exhausting.

IDP displaced by their own means from the near-frontline territory in 2026

Yet, those who displaced by their own means, especially those from rural areas and households with members with chronic illnesses, mentioned financial challenges at the destination. Respondents from rural areas and older people commonly noted expensive services, amid insufficient income (pensions and salaries) and long waiting times for receiving IDP benefits. Some received material support from international organisations and NGOs, such as one-off benefits or in-kind aid. Although respondents mentioned searching for employment (including via state employment centres), some - especially those aged 50 y. o. or older, encountered difficulties in finding employment. For many older respondents pensions were the main source of income, which is not sufficient to rent accommodation.⁴⁷

Two days ago, I went to a job interview at a shop - they needed a sales assistant. They told me they were looking for someone under 30 [years old]. Then I applied for a kitchen assistant position. The salary was extremely low, and the schedule was seven days a week... I knew I simply couldn't stay on my feet all day... I even applied to work at a kindergarten, and they told me directly: 'You're an IDP. Sooner or later, you'll leave anyway.'

IDP displaced by their own means from the near-frontline territory in 2025

Meanwhile, it was highlighted that humanitarian aid has been increasingly skewed toward the frontline areas since 2024⁴⁸, focusing on lifesaving assistance. Additionally, in March 2024 the government limited the coverage of IDP allowance by introducing new criteria for eligibility⁴⁹. These developments may be exacerbating the financial strain on the IDP households or deter some

from displacing at all.⁵⁰

Family is one of the most important sources of support, often providing a place to stay or helping with finances, everyday necessities, and psychosocial support. Friends and acquaintances are likewise a key resource, especially regarding housing and psychosocial support. Support from other IDPs, colleagues, volunteers, and the church was mentioned by a few respondents. Some recalled host population helping with information, housing, and covering basic needs. Nonetheless, some respondents noted social cohesion issues, with stigmatisation and a lack of understanding from locals, especially in urban areas and cited more often by older respondents.

Non-governmental institutions were mentioned as sources of information and referrals (to other needed services). Some informants believed that some IDPs do not trust public institutions, hence they may turn to NGOs for support in the first place, rather than governmental institutions, although this was not specified by respondents.

The most common channels for obtaining information were the Internet, including social media, followed by word of mouth and face-to-face communication. Additionally, a few respondents reached out to the city council, the Administrative Services Centre (ASC), obtained information via phone calls or events for IDPs. All other channels (e.g., social services, transit centre) were noted only in isolated cases.

However, some respondents did not know about available support or faced other barriers when trying to access it. Others did not want to search for help upon their arrival in the host community, either because they believed that they did not need such services (e.g., Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)), or due to discomfort in asking for help. Notably, many respondents tried to cope with psychological challenges on their own, without professional support.

Which needs remain unmet?

While eligible, access to services may be obstructed to some degree, notably as IDPs who displaced by their own means need to find them on their own (instead of being referred through evacuation stakeholders or transit centres). These IDPs, particularly those with specific vulnerabilities (e.g., mobility issues), reportedly face barriers in accessing services.

Some respondents knew about available support but found it inaccessible. The most common barriers were physical ones (inaccessible location), bureaucracy or restrictive eligibility criteria. Additionally, informants noted insufficient information and digital exclusion, cases of discrimination, and limited capacity of service providers' staff. Overall, the barriers appear not necessarily tied to the modality of displacement (organised evacuation vs. self-organised displacement), but rather specific vulnerabilities or systemic issues, as

similar barriers to accessing services were noted in other studies, notably the Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) 2024⁵¹.

Moreover, some respondents mentioned issues with their documents. This most often concerned secondary displaced people and people from TOT, who may not have the documents required in Ukraine-controlled territory. Missing documents can cause problems with obtaining IDP registration, compensation for destroyed property, or accessing medical services in a new location.

The greatest unmet need mentioned by those who displaced by their own means is securing livelihoods (either via financial support or employment), followed by housing and household items. Medical support and MHPSS, support in restoring missing documents, need for information, and in-kind aid (food and hygiene items) were cited by some respondents. Informants noted as well material needs for school materials, and needs in education, and social services.

Some reported poor-quality or unavailable medical care, transport issues, and shelling in the place of displacement. Others faced an overall absence of help for IDPs at the host community. People who had been displaced a second time, and those with a sick family member, most often reported that assistance was unavailable. In MSNA 2025, 15% of IDP households noted that aid was not provided in their area or did not function regularly.⁵²

There was no assistance available when we arrived. I found the humanitarian hotline online, and they told me the city council had a programme that provided cash assistance if food aid was unavailable.

When we went there, they laughed and said, 'Yes, that programme existed, but the funds have run out.' I asked if there was at least somewhere we could get food for the first few days. They replied that no one wanted to deal with it anymore because it required too much paperwork.

IDP displaced by their own means from the near-frontline territory in 2025

Lonely people primarily needed help with accessing services and help with navigation when moving to a new community. Among people with disabilities, the most acute need was special transport and accompaniment while travelling. Pressing needs among older people include housing, utilities, and home necessities (including bed linen and dishes), finances, and assistance with accessing services.

If an older person has no family or is particularly vulnerable, they should be able to turn to social services. Social workers should be assigned to visit them regularly, check on them, and provide support.

Without help from relatives, friends, or social services,

every stage of displacement becomes extremely difficult.

IDP displaced by their own means from the near-frontline territory in 2025

Similar unmet needs appeared as well in other studies on IDPs, and were mentioned as well by the host population in some locations, although IDPs are more likely to report at least some unmet needs (only 13% of IDPs report sufficient access to all needed goods and services, compared to 20% among non-displaced population).^{53,54,55} Notably, in IOM study 42% IDPs reported insufficient access to medicines and 30% - to health services (compared to 30% and 35% among non-displaced population, 35% to accommodation (7% among non-displaced), and 34% to income-earning opportunities (26% among non-displaced), and many noted need for various material/in-kind support.⁵⁶ Hence, again, the unmet needs appear to be a systematic, possibly nation-wide issue.

Unmet needs during the journey to the host community were mentioned rarely, but the most prominent one was the need to take more belongings (reported particularly often by older people), followed by the need for information (about border crossing and evacuation options) and need for specialised support for vulnerable people (people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, older people, people with pets).

The information needs of respondents during the adaptation period relate primarily to the availability of support in general, as well as to the possibility of receiving additional financial assistance and housing options. Among possible channels for reaching IDPs, respondents expressed preference for face-to-face guidance, followed by local government. All other channels, such as e-mail, social media, hubs, telephone calls, websites, a database with free housing, contact while registering for IDP certificate, and meeting IDPs upon arrival, were each mentioned by a few respondents.

Recommendations on supporting IDPs who displaced by their own means

Based on the findings, the Protection Cluster suggested the following recommendations for stakeholders engaged in IDP-oriented protection activities, bearing in mind the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP):

1

Ensure that the HNRP 2027 includes and prioritizes vulnerable people displacing by their own means, in particular in relation to Strategic Priority 2, and recognizes that those displacing by their own means are also in need of humanitarian assistance due to specific risks and vulnerabilities (not only those who are evacuated by state or humanitarian actors).

Ensure provision of humanitarian assistance and services to IDPs – regardless of whether they were evacuated or displaced by their own means – along the entirety of their journey, including the support in receiving areas both in frontline oblasts and in West and Center, focusing on specialized protection services, housing, improvements to accessibility, livelihoods and health.

2

3

Avoid overconcentration of response activities addressing IDPs' needs in the transit centres. HNRP 2027 should hence include relevant packages to support IDPs on the route (inc. transit centres), as well as in receiving areas in collective sites and within hosting communities in urban and rural settings.

Support people to take decisions regarding their own safety, including on displacing by their own means, which would enable them to remain more independent, rely on their own family and community networks and take along their belongings, pets, etc. This can be best achieved by early engagement with communities in frontline areas to provide information on how to prepare, possible displacement routes and assistance available in hosting areas.

4

5

Expand community-based protection activities (e.g. community centres, community volunteers and social facilitators, engagement with IDP Councils), protection monitoring, as well as Accountability to Affected Populations in receiving areas, so as to strengthen outreach and information on assistance and services available, and identification of IDPs who displaced by their own means beyond transit centres.

Ensure tailored protection services to IDPs from the occupied territories and make sure it is planned for within the relevant Strategic Priorities of the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2027.

6

Conclusion

The decision of whether, when, and how to displace is complex and shaped by a range of personal circumstances and external factors. As such, it is difficult to define a single profile of people who displace through their own means.

Nevertheless, findings suggest that self-organised displacement should not be equated with a lack of vulnerability. Respondents consistently described

continuing to face significant challenges after leaving through their own means, including risks during the journey and being outside formal support systems upon arrival, which could undermine access to livelihoods and essential services. While family and friends were often described as providing critical support during and after displacement, participants who displaced alone reported facing even greater barriers.

More broadly, the findings indicate that, given the often protracted nature of displacement, greater attention should be paid to how evacuation and self-organised displacement can better support, rather than disrupt, people's livelihoods. A particularly persistent challenge reported by both self-displaced and evacuated IDPs is access to adequate and affordable accommodation. These findings point to the importance of longer-term housing solutions that provide displaced people with greater confidence that they can rebuild their lives elsewhere.

The findings also suggest that future research and policy discussions should therefore focus on designing evacuation approaches that not only enable people to reach safety but also help them preserve or re-establish income sources, social networks, and access to services, making displacement a more viable and sustainable option for those living in high-risk areas.

ABOUT IMPACT

Founded in 2010 and headquartered in Geneva, IMPACT Initiatives is a leading applied research organization and the largest independent provider of data in crisis-affected contexts. Through our initiatives—REACH, AGORA, and PANDA—we enable humanitarian and other aid actors to make better, evidence-based decisions by delivering timely, relevant, and methodologically rigorous data and analysis. Our extensive presence across crisis-contexts allows us to collect data directly from crisis-affected people wherever needed, including among the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach.

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Annex 1

Figure 1. Sampling for the Key informant interviews with stakeholders who are involved in evacuation, IDP reception and services provision

KIIs		
Type of stakeholder	Stakeholders' areas of involvement	
	Involved in evacuation	Involved in IDPs reception and providing services
Governmental	1	4
NGO	4	5
INGO	1	1
Volunteer	2	0

Figure 2. Sampling for the Individual interviews with people displaced through their own means

IIs			
People who displaced in 2023-2024	People who displaced in 2025-2026	People who displaced from frontline oblasts	People who displaced from temporary occupied territories
8	19	24	3