

Transitions in Protection

Exploring transitions in the context of humanitarian protection assistance scale-down in central and western Ukraine

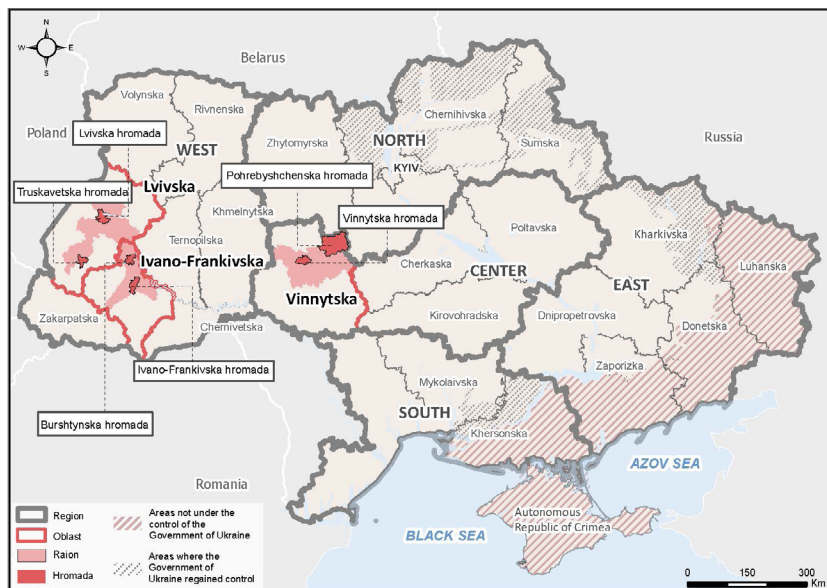
Case study of six hromadas in Lvivska, Ivano-Frankivska and Vinnytska oblasts

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Context & Rationale

As the needs of conflict-affected populations in western and central Ukraine became increasingly protracted and less acute, the 2024 and 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRPs) focused their efforts on providing life-saving assistance in the South and East^{1,2}. Consequently, humanitarian stakeholders have begun scaling down aid programmes in the West and Centre. At the same time, initial discussions around transitioning away from humanitarian assistance underscored the importance of coordinating this process responsibly, ensuring that non-humanitarian systems and resources are equipped to address ongoing and often complex needs. As of January 2025, additional issues have emerged due to a sudden and potentially long-term decline in funding for both humanitarian and development activities, which further strengthens the need for sustainable transition to other forms of assistance³.

HNRP 2025 was re-prioritised in April to assist 4,8 million people, out of 12.7 million people in need⁴. It prioritises those with extreme and catastrophic needs, primarily living near the frontlines, as well as individuals with severe needs in areas experiencing pockets of crisis in western and central Ukraine. Additionally, the plan emphasises sustainable solutions by linking humanitarian activities with national mechanisms, complementing Ukraine's social protection system, and prioritising the provision of essential services through governmental institutions where possible⁵. Meanwhile, conflict-affected populations in western and central Ukraine continue to face chronic and often complex challenges that jeopardise their immediate well-being, longer-term resilience, and the country's prospects for sustainable recovery. Addressing the needs of population poses challenges to service providers, many of whom are operating beyond their capacity.



Map 1: Locations where data collection took place.

It is hence crucial to explore how and to what extent the ongoing protection-related needs of the conflict-affected population are being met at the local level, as well as to assess the process of these transitions.

Objective

REACH conducted an assessment to explore how and to what extent ongoing protection-related needs of conflict-affected people in selected hromadas of western and central Ukraine are being met at the local level, in the context of the scale-down of humanitarian assistance. The assessment further aimed to explore to what extent transition from reliance on humanitarian aid to other, longer-term, solutions is taking place as a sustainable, coordinated, and systematic process.

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).

Methodology overview

The assessment relied on qualitative interviews with local government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing protection services (46 interviews in total), as well as with vulnerable groups of local society (older people, caregivers of children, internally displaced people (IDPs) in and outside of collective sites, covered by 22 focus group discussions and 20 interviews in total). Data was collected between April-June 2025 in Vinnytska and Pohrebyshchenska, Lvivska and Truskavetska, Ivano-Frankivska and Burshtynska hromadas. Additionally, a workshop with protection stakeholders was conducted in Vinnytsia on 6 August 2025, to discuss and draft solutions to issues identified by the research. Recommendations presented on p.3 were developed by the Protection Cluster based on the key findings of this assessment.

Key findings

1 Key spheres affected by the scale-down and insufficiently covered by government providers include: legal aid, psychosocial support, GBV services, safe spaces for children and social protection services.

Individual social workers are reported to struggle with capacity in oblast centres. Psychosocial support, free legal aid, individual social workers, safe spaces for children and social taxi services frequently figured among local populations' unmet needs.

Moreover, vulnerable population groups noted barriers in accessing services, in particular the need to travel to the oblast centre, restrictive eligibility criteria, bureaucracy, long waiting times and insufficient information.

When designing protection policy or programming, it is also essential to take into account areas such as livelihoods, shelter, and health needs, as these issues are deeply interconnected. Many respondents of the vulnerable groups noted insufficient finances to satisfy their basic needs, along with high costs of certain services not available free of charge, and increasingly limited financial support opportunities. The ability to meet basic needs compounds and is compounded by protection challenges.

2 Certain groups where existing vulnerabilities, such as age and disability, have been compounded by experiences of conflict and displacement are at risk of being left behind as aid scales down, since they need continuous support from government services or community-based protective mechanisms.

These groups are often reliant on humanitarian assistance. Scale-down of aid coupled with limited capacity of public institutions and hosting communities to meet needs in specific spheres and locations, presents a gap that requires sustainable solutions.

Groups facing the most significant challenges, paired with lack of capacity to address them independently, included IDPs in collective sites, people with disabilities (especially older people in both cases) and single caregivers (especially those of children with disabilities). While capacity of stakeholders is limited, the population of these groups continues to grow due to the war and on-going displacement, including evacuations, from frontline areas. Among other challenges, these groups struggle with financial needs and most often cannot take up employment. Older IDPs in collective sites seem to rely more heavily on NGO support, placing them at greater risk as humanitarian assistance is scaled down.

3 Robust cooperation among stakeholders, including strong engagement from NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), contributes positively to protection services' provision.

Many informants noted positive collaboration, often informal, between local authorities and NGOs/CSOs, as well as engagement of IDP councils. Additionally, formal mechanisms of cooperation included the establishment of Resilience Centres and the contracting of NGOs by ministries and local authorities. NGO presence was more often noted in oblast centres.

Amid limited capacity of public service providers, frequently due to shortages in financing and staffing, such cooperation was frequently pivotal to meeting local needs. However, NGO service providers may also face challenges in the long term, particularly if funding becomes less predictable.

Moreover, service delivery and stakeholder collaboration differ across locations, often depending on local budget and political will, risking fragmentation of standards. Other barriers to service provision included financial constraints and staff shortages.

4 Coordination and communication efforts regarding transition are visible, however, some local stakeholders may be missing a clear picture of the scale-down, as there was limited time to plan, implement and communicate about transition, when humanitarian actors were shifting their capacities to the East and South.

Additionally, affected populations are unsure of future available aid from NGOs and continuity of collective sites, which hinders them from planning for the future.

Overall, the transition from humanitarian to local service provision in the assessed hromadas can be characterized as partially coordinated and fragile in terms of sustainability. While notable progress has been made, especially where transition was supported by capacity-building and targeted donor investments, significant gaps remain.

In some cases, local authorities reportedly took over international-led activities and individual cases, while local NGOs continued fundraising efforts. Yet, handovers have not always included adequate planning for staffing or funding continuity.

Recommendations

Humanitarian protection needs of the vulnerable populations, including internally displaced people, in the assessed hromadas continue, along with the scale-down of humanitarian actors' presence. For those who are not sufficiently covered by national service systems and without community support networks – these needs may become even more compounded over time. Hence, in the context of the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for 2026, it will be critical to develop a well-calibrated transitional response package for the most vulnerable people in order to reduce reliance on humanitarian assistance while preventing people from being left behind. Here, efforts to link them up with government social services should be accompanied by ongoing basic humanitarian and community social support in the interim.

The Protection Cluster developed the following recommendations addressing this assessment's key findings:

1 Strategic Priority 4 of the HNRP 2026 focusing on the Support for Vulnerable IDPs opens up a window of opportunity to shape up this "missing link" in the humanitarian response strategy and

will require adequate resourcing. As demonstrated in the findings, protection services, including informational and legal services, psycho-social services, social support and community-based protection activities, will be critical to ensure that the most vulnerable IDPs are effectively integrated into state and community-provided systems. This should be complemented by vulnerability-focused sectoral interventions, in particular shelter, health and livelihoods.

2 The vulnerabilities people experience are often complex, intersecting and context-specific. As a consequence, categorical targeting methodologies in humanitarian assistance or social protection systems may risk leaving certain people behind. The effective implementation of tailored transition responses under Strategic Priority 4 will therefore require people-centred prioritisation. This should take into account individual-, household- or collective site-level assessments of risks and circumstances, rather than rigid, quantitative vulnerability criteria.

3 This assessment clearly highlights the vital role of NGOs, CSOs and community-based mechanisms in the transition away from humanitarian assistance. As such, these actors and the local perspectives they represent should be effectively integrated into the ongoing development of social protection systems, for example under the National Service Strategy. This approach will be essential in advocacy to remove barriers to accessing the state systems.

4 Coordinated and properly resourced transition planning for protection activities should be prioritised and resourced at national, regional and local levels, in order to reduce undue burden on local actors and prevent vulnerable populations from being left behind. Amid ongoing shifts in the humanitarian context, this should be informed by regular sense-checking and documentation of lessons learned, such as the recent Protection Cluster Fit-for-Purpose analysis.

Accountability to affected populations is a critical component of the transition process. Transition planning should take account of community perspectives from the outset, with a particular emphasis on local-level consultations both directly with IDPs and with representative mechanisms such as community-based organisations or IDP councils. At the same time, humanitarian actors should develop communication plans to inform people about transition processes and manage their expectations. Ensuring that the most vulnerable - including IDPs living in collective sites - have access to adequate information about available support will be vital to reducing uncertainty and ensuring they are able to effectively plan for their future.

Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan: Strategic priorities

The strategic priorities of the upcoming HNRP 2026 are expected to remain in line with the priorities of the Re-Prioritized HNRP 2025, which are as follows⁴:

Strategic priority 1: *Supporting the most vulnerable who remain close to the frontline*

Strategic priority 2: *Evacuations*

Strategic priority 3: *Emergency response after strikes*

Strategic priority 4: *Humanitarian contributions to the most vulnerable among the IDPs including those in collective centers*

Contextual sources

1. OCHA, [Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024](#), December 2023.
2. OCHA, [Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025](#), January 2025.
3. REACH, [The impacts of sudden decreased funding on Ukrainian CSOs](#), March 2025.
4. OCHA, [Re-Prioritized Humanitarian Ukraine 2025 Needs and Response Plan](#), April 2025.
5. OCHA, [Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025](#), January 2025.