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**Polish
Migration
Forum**

Humanitarian Response to the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis in Poland (2022–2025)

Phases, Actions, Lessons Learned

Localisation in the eyes of a local leader – case study

Agnieszka Kosowicz

Executive Summary

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation (PFM), established in 2007, had been a small but experienced organization supporting refugees and migrants in Poland when the full-scale war in Ukraine erupted in February 2022.

The sudden influx of millions of refugees into Poland required rapid adaptation and transformation. Rather than focusing on immediate border relief, PFM concentrated on its core expertise—mental health, education, information and protection, women's support, and job integration—areas less covered by others. Within months, the organization scaled up nearly eightfold, employing 115 staff and engaging over 120 volunteers. PFM coordinated with local and international NGOs, businesses, and government, navigating an unfamiliar humanitarian architecture while simultaneously professionalizing internal systems.

PFM identified five overlapping phases of response:

1. **Acute Crisis** (Feb–Mar 2022): Rapid influx, chaos and solidarity. Quick scaling and first international partnerships.
2. **Emergency Response** (Apr–Jun 2022): Multitude of refugee needs result in further scale-up, high coordination needs, first cases of staff burnout, funding abundant but only short-term. Intense professionalization.
3. **Mid-term** (Jul–Dec 2022): International NGOs withdrawals began. Local versus international actors tensions arose. Burnout deepened. First long-term partnerships developed. Further professionalisation.
4. **Long-term** (2023–mid-2024): Downsizing became necessary amid reduced funding and political shifts. Refugee needs grew more complex, scale of assistance decreases.
5. **Post-Crisis / “New Normal”** (mid-2024 onward): Most refugees settled, but anti-migrant sentiments rose. Most INGOs terminated their presence in Poland. PFM refocused on advocacy, fundraising, and integration. 2025 brought about a new crisis as cuts in U.S. aid forced unexpected further downsizing and prioritization amid ongoing war and instability.

The case study highlights recommendations directed both to local NGOs and to donors, UN agencies, and INGOs. For NGOs, key lessons learned include: focus on core competencies, anticipate crisis phases, document work done from day one, invest in staff wellbeing, and balance rapid growth with internal capacity. For donors and INGOs, recommendations stress: treating local actors as equal partners, providing flexible and multi-year funding, supporting back-office functions of local actors and burnout prevention, coordinating due diligence, ensuring transparent exit strategies, and learning as well as sharing knowledge from the past crises.

PFM's experience underscores both the resilience and vulnerabilities of local NGOs in large-scale humanitarian crisis. While the organization achieved rapid growth and impact, many hardships—particularly linked to funding structures, power imbalances, and lack of foresight—could have been mitigated better. By offering tailored recommendations to both implementers and funders, PFM seeks to strengthen future humanitarian responses through more sustainable, respectful, and effective collaboration.



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank first and foremost all the people - local and international, business or UN affiliated, all of those who got involved in the humanitarian response to the Ukraine refugee crisis in Poland. I was as proud to be Polish as never before, experiencing the flow of good will, compassion, generosity that welcomed refugees from Ukraine.

The public attitudes towards refugees have changed over the years, but 2022 has shown what societies are capable of. This was impressive.

This publication would not have been possible without the team of the Polish Migration Forum - dozens of former and current colleagues we had a privilege of working with, long or short term, in this crisis. It was the dedication and commitment of the people that made it possible to respond to the challenges of the crisis. Special thanks to our staff with migration experience, who support others while often experiencing own challenges, grief and fears. You are an inspiration. It was an intense but fascinating time of learning how far our individual capacities reach and where they have their limits.

I thank the INGOs who worked with us and supported us in the last three years: Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, Plan International, Mercy Corps, Care, Choose Love, Disasters Emergency Committee, HelpAge, Stiftung Vluchteling, and the UN family colleagues from UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, WHO.

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Agnieszka Kosowicz
President
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Introduction

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation was set up in 2007 to support the integration of refugees and migrants in Poland and to help develop a cohesive, respectful society in a country of growing diversity. I have designed it as a small team of closely-knit professionals, each contributing to the common purpose.

In January 2022 we had one staff member on a work contract, a case worker. All the management and staff, 15 in total, worked on the basis of civil contracts and B2B agreements, many of us part-time. We were vision and mission-driven, but far from a standardised humanitarian bulldog. We had two-pager standards of operations to justify why we do not assist people who come to us drunk. This was pretty much all, if you think about internal procedures.

We did have 15 years of experience and five areas of focus: psychological support, educational support, information/protection program, women program focussed on helping pregnant migrant moms, and a small business support and job integration unit.

Our team was a group of professionals, many with multiple years of expertise. We would help hundreds of people annually, we were agile, involved, well-connected to the NGO environment and across the national and local networks and respected. Still, we had no comms, no human relations department, no proper finance staff, no admin, no compliance and - can you imagine - no Monitoring and Evaluation unit! No policies to prevent sexual abuse within the organization, no anti-money laundering procedures, no experience with procurement, with roughly 500 000 euro as our annual budget.

In January 2022 we were already working triple hard addressing the needs of the migrants coming for help from all across Warsaw and surroundings, those arriving via the Polish-Belarusian border, and those evacuated six months earlier by the Polish government from Taliban-taken Kabul. We already felt overwhelmed and exhausted, assisting some 12 thousand people from all around.

This is where the Ukraine full-scale war found us.

The war started on Thursday, Friday we were all in shock, Saturday we dealt with family issues and Sunday, myself and my “right-hand” gathered in our small office to redesign the organization in the war context. On Monday we got all the team on board and started moving on, best we could, addressing the challenges around us.

We decided not to go into what we then considered “humanitarian”. Not to go to the Polish-Ukrainian border with water, food, clothes. Not to make sandwiches at the train stations or look for accommodations for the people who wandered around Warsaw train and bus stations. We had a feeling that what we know is unique in Poland in a sense that not many people know what we know. We figured it makes sense to stick to our top competencies - we thought (rightly so, as it turned out) they will be needed.

Our approach was the usual one that we have been taking: provide help to people with migration experience on one hand and share skills and develop the capacity of others. **This is what we did: over the course of 6-8 months we have expanded the organization roughly 8-fold (growing from 15 to 115 staff and from 30 to over 120 volunteers)**. During the course of the response we did take up some new tasks and expanded our scope of work, but keeping the general framework as it was before the crisis: mental health, education, information and protection, women, jobs. Over time, community building has been developed as an important field as well.

This short overview is a glimpse into how we have experienced the Ukraine refugee response as a local civil society organization. We have learned tremendously, but also suffered a lot. I write this to help other NGOs in other crisis situations to learn from our mistakes. As the humanitarian world shakes following the American financial cuts we want to address the humanitarian sector professionals and analysts with a case study, if you wish, and a handful of suggestions on where we could have been helped by the system better.

We have identified five phases of the humanitarian response: Acute Crisis, Emergency Response, Mid-term, Long-term, New normal. After giving a short overview of each one, we share our experience: how this specific moment in the response was for us: what was helpful and what was lacking. We share our lessons learned.

We write this not as part of a project or grant. We write because we just want to share, with no funding, no donor, in spare time. Feel free to quote and use this text any way you like - just give credit to us as author.

This is our chance to give back to the global community of local NGOs. We have felt cared for and supported by the Turkish and Greek local NGOs who shared their own experiences from the Syrian crisis with us. This is our thank you to you, friends. You helped us survive.

Agnieszka Kosowicz

In brief

This table illustrates how we remember the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

The phase of the response	International Humanitarians	PFM: key tasks and challenges
1. Acute crisis (Feb-March 22)	INGOs arriving in big numbers, looking for local partners, quick funding available, non-traditional funding sources appear (business)	key decisions on the shape and form of our involvement, prioritising, re-design of the organization, the beginning of scale-up, coordination – finding oneself in the new system, keeping pace with the needs and the shape of the response, very short-term projects
2. Emergency response (April-June 22)	coordination a challenge – huge number of new organizations around, high staff rotation at INGOs, changing rules, dynamic changes in programs and environment	professionalisation, scale-up (hiring, onboarding, training, managing large-scale operation), coordination with others, managing multiple partnerships, internal re-organization, monitoring and evaluation, first cases of staff burnout, loss of staff to INGOs short term projects
3. Mid-term (July-Dec 22)	rapid and unpredictable (to us) process of INGO withdrawal, as emergency organizations close their operations, tensions between local and international actors	burnout, particularly of the front line staff, internal management: new structures, needs and identity create a lot of managerial challenges at all levels, first cases of layoffs of staff, further professionalisation and growth, first major reporting, developing first longer-term partnerships, tensions with some INGOs, withdrawal of some donors-partners, mid-term projects

The phase of the response	International Humanitarians	PFM: key tasks and challenges
4. Long-term (23-mid 24)	Most INGOs close down their operations. A few set up local presence.	time of fixing crisis-time, hasty management, need of stability/internal cohesion in team while downsizing, downsizing itself, prioritisation in face of funds cuts, first financial gaps, difficulty to fund costs related to higher professional standards, the nature of work changes as the refugee needs become more complex and demanding, integration rather than immediate help needed fewer longer term projects
5. Post crisis/ “New normal” (from mid 24)	A handful of INGOs present, some at exit strategy phase. USAID cuts severely affect both UN, international and local organizations – all of them reduce services and downsize.	further downsizing, further financial cuts and restructuring to adapt to the post-conflict working conditions, management burnout, financial gap – difficulty to fund the professionalised structure, work against social sympathies and growing anti-migrant sentiments within the society and decision-makers

Chapter 1

Acute Crisis – Immediate Response (February–March 2022)

1. Characteristics and Context

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began on **24 February 2022**, triggering a massive movement of people seeking protection. By **early March** (within roughly 10 days), Poland had received **over 1 million refugees**, largely women, children, and the elderly. Over the next two months, over 3,5 million of refugees from Ukraine arrived in Poland, most migrated further West (<https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/poland>).

The situation was chaotic, but marked by unprecedented solidarity of the Polish society as well as the Ukrainian diaspora, literally from the first hours. Refugees were met at the Polish border by hundreds of volunteers, food, water, clothes and transportation options. Even before the NGO community organized, individuals gathered into spontaneous humanitarian response and addressed the basic needs of those who sought protection.

It took a few days for the NGOs to get involved, weeks – for the local governments, more weeks – for the state. Legislation providing the Ukrainian refugees with temporary protection was approved in Poland on 12 March, giving all the persons access to the labour market, education, healthcare and the social system. Even if the coordination by the state was absent, the central and local authorities shared a joint intention to protect those in need. Public opinion was overly supportive, media interest very high.

Ongoing movement of people from Poland to other EU countries started, with involvement of governments, local governments and citizens from other countries.

2. International humanitarian system response (as we saw it)

According to the crisis response model, the international humanitarian agencies activate within 48 hours from the beginning of the crisis. Within 5 days flash funding appeal is announced.

PFM experienced the first visit of an international humanitarian actor on 29 February (IRC). Within the next few days, numerous international organizations were reaching out, seeking an opportunity for an on-site briefing or exploring partnership possibilities (DRC, NRC, Care, UNICEF, Plan International and many others). A carousel of international staff is what we remember from this time. It was a challenge to even remember who is who, but we as a local organization have felt accompanied, not alone in the challenge, which was a welcome feeling in those first days and weeks. The flow of international support of international organizations, but also governments, local organizations from other countries, individuals and volunteers from all across the world was moving. With time, the frequent changes in personnel and unclear mandates have added to the overall dynamic environment sometimes making it difficult to establish meaningful and lasting partnerships or ensure continuity of communication.

First funding opportunities were short and with minimal reporting: quick spending and action expected. One-month to three-month projects were common at this time. Keeping pace with the needs of refugees was a challenge.

Business actors provided funding for the first days and weeks of work, notably Google, Allegro, BNP Paribas and the ING Dzieciom Foundation. The business gave us tools (a financial cushion) to react immediately and made it possible for us to function with the international humanitarian organizations (when work done often preceded funding).

3. Polish Migration Forum response

Our first step was to make decisions: if and how we get involved. Then **choose our priorities**. Emergency support for incoming refugees: food, shelter, information, transport were necessary and numerous actors took it up, but our decision was to rather focus on our top qualifications, that we knew were hard to find in Poland: mental health support, education support, information and protection, counseling for the pregnant mothers. We have decided to:

- scale up our direct support
- develop capacity of others with trainings and information sharing
- not go into any other area of the humanitarian aid.

As the funding opportunities were abundant at this phase, we started expanding our team (without any previous significant scale-up experience, PFM has grown 6-fold by June, and 8-fold by August 2022). We trained and onboarded the newly hired staff and offered trainings, offline and online, to groups of professionals (teachers, psychologists, social workers etc.) across the country. We were restructuring as we go, one may say at full speed, learning management, delegation of work, understanding how big groups work and what humanitarian response is at the same time. We would develop procedures in a hurry, under time and situation pressure – refining them in response to practical challenges, difficulties and lessons learned.

An important area of work was to remain in close contact with others: coordinate with the Polish traditional partners (each of them in the process of their own rapid change), but also participate in coordination efforts that came with the UN Family, led by UNHCR, and INGOs. Looking back, the key tasks for us was to make plentiful decisions in an unknown, dynamically changing context, coordination and understanding what the humanitarian response is.

Abundance of volunteers was another new reality for us – that we learned to benefit from. On one hand, the presence of dozens of people eager to get involved and show support was extremely encouraging and useful. On the other – a big international group of volunteers required professional coordination, management and supervision, which we had to learn as we go, as well. It was necessary to make the voluntary involvement meaningful and useful. I believe that overall we did a great job at this front.

4. Key Lessons Learned (for NGOs)

- **“Choose your battles”.** Resist the urge to do everything. You will not address all the needs you see. Make choices based on your own mission and capacity.
- **Be flexible, monitor the changing needs of refugees** – in crisis needs may change often and fast.
- **You enter a marathon, not a sprint,** but money is abundant only at the beginning. Humanitarian funding is about a sprint, so don't expect otherwise. If you want to continue working after the crisis, think about the long-term. The people in need and their needs will be with you longer than the funding.
- **Document everything you do,** even if no one asks for it, from “day 1”. Good data will provide you with credibility necessary to obtain further funding.
- **Get to know the dynamic of the humanitarian crisis – and share knowledge within your team.** Learn about the phases of the crisis and the standard responses of the global community – this will help you make decisions.
- **Get to know the working standards in a crisis – Core Humanitarian Standards.** Take them seriously, apart from giving you a set of standards they also give a good overview of where you can go wrong.
- **Keep balance internally.** Reorganize internally to address new needs, but develop not only your services at the front-line, but also your structure and back office (management, supervision, finance, communication, MEAL, HR).
- **Share.** Access to funding turned out to be very imbalanced between local NGOs – and this intensified in time. It was worthwhile to share and involve others in building new partnerships, apply for funding together and just be considerate of your partners. This helped minimize unhealthy competition that affects coordination at a later stage.
- **Communicate.** It is important to be in the loop with circles where information is: cluster system, govt and local govt group, NGO network.
- **Divide work between your staff, with some doing business as usual.** It was a good advice to let some staff deal with the crisis, but some deal with the ongoing work, like previous projects or reporting. It is extremely hard for the same staff to go on with previous work and create a new crisis system at the same time.
- **Don't expect order at this stage.** This moment of response is chaotic. Don't expect perfect coordination, don't expect perfection from yourself. Work with what is available.

I remember a lunch with Christine Goyer, the then Deputy Head of UNHCR in Warsaw, to which I came late and agitated, and started to explain myself, apologizing. She stopped me saying: “It is OK, this is what it is. This is what crisis looks like. This is normal.” It was a grounding experience to hear that at this moment: chaos was normal, hectic days filled with work and meetings and now knowing what to do were normal. Change was normal, constant flow of people and needs and tasks from dawn to dusk were a natural crisis environment. It was so sobering to hear that.

5. Recommendations for Donors, UN and INGOs involved in humanitarian response

- **If you seriously think about localisation** – give your local partner information necessary for independent, quality, long-term planning that allows the partner to combine your and their own knowledge. Respect the local partner's objectives and approach (they may go beyond the crisis time-frame, and your own focus).
- **Treat the local partner as an expert,** who knows the local conditions and how to function in the local context.
- **Do not make false/excessive promises.** We have experienced situations, when an international organization expected us to get involved based on a promise that has not materialized and caused managerial and financial challenges.
- **Allow flexible programming.** Support your partners to build a financial cushion. You know better than them it will be needed soon.
- **Share your experience from other humanitarian responses:** not only on standards of service delivery, but also management, communication, scale-up, prioritisation, crisis response dynamics and risks.
- **Focus on the local leaders:** make sure the flow of information is two-way, don't treat them as informants on the local context only.
- **Use the capacity of your staff** to share their experience with the local partners. Allow your staff to share competencies and experience not directly tied to their current role, but also past experience (believe it or not, we have heard from international staff of INGOs they are asked not to go beyond the current role).

Chapter 2

Emergency Response (April–June 2022)

1. Characteristics and Context

By March 18 there were already more than two million refugees from Ukraine in Poland, some of them non-Ukrainian, some people of colour. Four million people went through Poland during this period – some moved on to other EU countries, around 1.5 million sought protection in Poland. Unequal treatment and discrimination in the support system were a big challenge, for example refugees from Ukraine of Roma origin, or non-white refugees were often finding themselves out of the support networks: they oftentimes were not accepted by the individual hosts or not accommodated by the state-funded centres.

Just several dozen of thousands were accommodated in state-subsidized centres, most people were still housed by individual Polish families. The generosity of some families started to wear out – people accepted refugees to their homes expecting the situation to last a few days, not weeks or months. Hosts started to seek support for themselves, some experienced secondary trauma. Still, the involvement of the society was very high, with over 75 percent of Poles and more than 90 percent of the Ukrainian population in Poland participating in the humanitarian response.

Train and bus stations were full of people waiting for assistance. Free-shops, help centres, and infostands were present in most Polish cities. Evacuation continued, Warsaw experienced new arrivals in thousands every day.

The number of people crossing the border was still high, with a significant percentage of people of special needs (persons with disabilities, small children, persons with serious illnesses, the elderly). The composition of the refugee population was very different to what we had known from the past – for example we have never before welcomed refugees terminally ill, mentally ill, elderly, or worked with evacuated institutionalized foster care children.

The local authorities in many cities got involved in the response, providing accommodation for vulnerable groups, hiring Ukrainian-speaking staff in institutions or offering the refugees free local transport. Formal temporary accommodation centres were established by cities or private owners (with state subsidy). With time, voluntary involvement of citizens started to fade.

2. International humanitarian system response (as we saw it)

A UNHCR-led cluster system is established, a standard humanitarian crisis approach, providing a coordination mechanism between numerous actors involved.

According to UNHCR's Refugee Response Plan, there were 103 partners in the response in 2022, some of them international organizations. Many of them were present in Poland just for the first six months of the response and left mid 2022. Some are still present in Poland in 2025.

Risks were gradually being identified and mapped, and international actors intensified their efforts to professionalize the local partners. Training opportunities were abundant and the funding for this purpose was plentiful. We have really learned a lot at this stage from many actors: how to provide services, but also how to monitor and document work done, at large scale. It was a challenge to avoid overlapping training: a range of organizations would offer the same kind of capacity building – at times it was difficult to benefit from the multitude of the training offers. At the same time many needs that required systemic response remained unaddressed. The generosity of the international community at this time was striking and very supportive.

As typical in a crisis, experienced international staff would arrive on short-term contracts (often replaced by newly recruited staff as the UN and INGOs scaled up their presence themselves), rotation was a major challenge. PFM would host dozens of visits every week, to analyse the priorities and agendas of international actors was difficult. A carousel of faces made it difficult to build relationships, and created the constant need of updating newly arrived staff. Coordination meetings felt as if you start anew each week, with a new set of partners.

The conversations often lacked balance: as a local organization we were being checked and reviewed for credibility, as a potential partner (due diligence). There was little space to discuss the objectives and perspective of the international partners, their approaches or sources of funding. The initially very flexible nature of funding changed into more project-like – this is a time of drafting projects and first crisis-time reporting.

Monitoring and evaluation became necessary and professionalisation was required from the local partners. With each partnership (PFM had 22 financial partnerships in 2022 and 2023), we would go through the same due diligence process.

In May/June 2022, PFM received training from DRC on Core Humanitarian Standards. It was a great experience to see a framework that helped understand the chaos around us. I remember the feeling of relief as our chaotic experience of the first months of response started to make sense, and we could relate to universal values guiding various aspects of our then spontaneous response.

3. Polish Migration Forum response

This was a time of extremely intense work: delivering services to the population in crisis, with a team in crisis (many of the staff we hired are persons with migration background, many have just come to Poland as refugees, the Polish staff was equally in a big process of change, as the organization was reshaping). A structural change and growth were an enormous challenge.

Hiring, onboarding and training of staff and organizing the services for a large number of people are a big task in itself. Growing 6-fold and becoming a big system – a team of more than 100 multicultural staff, with nearly 100 volunteers – was a whole other challenge, run by people with no previous big-scale managerial experience. Internal processes, communication, delegation of work, monitoring, documentation significantly change – we were learning all of that as we went.

A small team of friends turned into a big-company-like system, and this provoked internal tensions. We needed to professionalise: design and implement a multitude of internal procedures, rules, standards, systems, not only to meet the donor/partner workload monitoring expectations, but simply to be able to work efficiently in a big group and get work done.

Internal communication has become a separate task (as opposed to weekly lunch meetings in a small team). We have learned what “MEAL” stands for (monitoring, evaluation, accountability, learning) and established much more advanced MEAL mechanisms.

Being used to seeing ourselves as a small team of professionals, we needed to acknowledge the change we lived through: being a big system, making mistakes, not being ideal, having conflicts, facing miscommunication. For some old staff, the scale-up was unwanted and unwelcome. The close-knit group of friends was gone. Some of the newly hired staff we could not manage properly, some hires were failures. Some staff we have lost at this stage to international organizations, who were expanding their own local teams and paid twice as much.

Learning leadership skills at high speed was a big issue: the leadership not only had to learn and lead, but also to train other leaders. The management of the organization changed in this period – and evolved over the next months. Handling responsibility and pressure was hard for everyone in the organization, but people react to pressure differently. Building a healthy set of expectations between the management and the team was a process that took us a while.

PFM did not fundraise in this period – money was abundant. We were offered more money we could manage in a healthy way. It was the first time in our experience that we did not need to look for funding – and refusing funding proved to be a hard lesson to learn (we did, with time). The optimal solution would be to set some of those “early crisis money” for the future. However, it was usually not possible: the partners offering the funding wanted the money spent, results documented, to showcase success for their donors. At times we were pressured to undertake extra duties and services, when we were already working at our limit. At times we were told that either we expand the project or we lose the entire partnership. We have heard “it is my way or highway” a couple of times (luckily, not very many). In result, we sometimes felt compelled to compromise our priorities, our concept of cooperation, just to be able to continue working.

We also remember this period as a constant due diligence procedure, being reviewed by numerous partners over and over again, for hours.

The business was a very important, unexpected ally – supporting us with funding, office space, furniture, counseling, technical support and various assistance items.

4. Key Lessons Learned (as we saw it)

- **Grief the change** – was our Greek friends' advice on crisis response. Say farewell to your own organization as it was before and acknowledge the change – you are a new entity. The past is gone. Some of your staff will not like/want to acknowledge that.
- **Big teams are not small teams, but... bigger.** They are a whole other universe, requiring a different sort of management in areas which function spontaneously in a small organization. Business experience is helpful, but not fully adequate in a humanitarian context. Catch up on managerial training, tips, advice – it will help.
- **The motivation of your team is different than it was**, it is also diverse. You are no longer a group of idealists with the same world-view, some staff is with you to make ends meet, some see the situation purely as an opportunity of professional growth. New working conditions affect everyone. Some of your staff will change roles and blossom, some will feel lost. Some will not see a place for themselves. In some you will find unexpected resources. You are a very different group of people, having grown in crisis.
- **If you grow fast, you need to learn to monitor work done.**
- **Diversity management and awareness is needed in your own organization – even if you teach it to others.** The fact you are a diverse organization in the humanitarian field does not mean your team has a natural skill to function in this environment. Address your own diversity. At one point we had a big internal discussion on understanding humanitarian standards, precisely, whether or not to provide assistance to Russians or in Russian. For some staff the concept of neutrality was impossible to accept. An open conversation with the team was organized and helped. Culturally appropriate feedback is something we needed to learn – how to be respectful, but get the message through.
- **At this stage you may lose staff due to burnout** (people are likely to have worked more than ever for the last 3-4 months, this takes a toll). Invest in staff well-being. Celebrate!
- This is a time **you may lose staff to international organizations**, who expand their local teams and offer radically higher wages. Do not get overly frustrated. Sometimes people come back. Sometimes they reappear in new roles, with new skills, and become allies.
- **Coordination improves impact** – coordinate, monitor your external environment, which changes dynamically. Monitor how the refugee needs change and adapt.
- **Clear roles** avoid duplication and chaos – also within your team.
- **Make use of your monitoring and evaluation unit.** There is a risk for them being used just for donor reporting purposes. Learn from your own data and use it for decision-making.
- **Learn to refuse money.** Choose what you want to do. Resist the urge to do it all. Keep choosing your battles.

- **Pay attention to onboarding.** Quick growth poses challenges to the identity of the organization and internal structure. Talk about purpose and values.
- **Old communication mechanisms do not work in a rapidly expanding team.** Create new ones (regular meetings in teams and for the whole staff).
- **Wellbeing** – in this time teams work much too much and a healthy working environment is jeopardized. Manage workflow. Assign and monitor tasks. Make sure your colleagues all know what is expected of them.
- **Take care of yourself.**

“You seriously want to say you worked 8-hour shifts in Greek islands, when the boats were coming?” we would question friends from ARSIS in Greece. “Yes. And eat and sleep,” Michalis Vasilakis of ARSIS would reply, adding more tips on working hygiene, disregarding our doubtful giggles. Some months later, we seriously had internal arrangements that going to a toilet is OK, and lunch is a human right of a humanitarian.

5. Recommendations for Donors, UN and INGOs involved in humanitarian response

- **Support organizational capacity** of local partners, also in decision making and managerial areas.
- **Recognize and address the power imbalance** between local and international actors.
- **Share your experience from previous conflicts/responses:** discuss with your partners your own failures and failures of your other partners in the past.
- **Fund coordination/managerial roles,** particularly those who tend to be underfunded but important to the organization structure: comms, HR, finance, MEAL. Review the project proposals with your own knowledge: local actors may tend to underestimate the managerial effort necessary to deliver the project. (If you agree to fund an underbudgeted project – the staff will work overtime, this leads to burnout. Flag it out to the partner if costs are underestimated.)
- **Fund supervision and burnout prevention programs,** recognize the emotional labor involved in humanitarian work.
- **Consider multi-year funding from the beginning** – you know that your local partner is undergoing a change that is a lasting one. Help prepare for that by investing in organizational development milestones, not only output targets.
- **Explain the primary idea standing behind your expectations on internal policies and working standards.** Chances are, the quickly expanding organizations are only drafting them – and can use advice on what is important in specific documents.
- **Make sure you provide adequate visibility to your local partners vis a vis donors.** Involve your local partners in communication and building narratives towards your audiences.

Chapter 3

Mid-Term Response (July–December 2022)

1. Characteristics and Context

In Poland, in the second half of 2022 has not felt like “mid-term”, rather – we have felt very much in the very heart of the response. By the end of 2022, Europe hosted **12.4 million refugees**, with Poland being a major host (1,4 mln registered with the PESEL UKR ids). Some stabilization of the humanitarian response was visible, even if the challenges were plentiful, and the spontaneous involvement of the society slowed down.

Yet, some humanitarian actors started to withdraw, assuming that the emergency phase of the crisis has ended and it is time for the state to take over crucial roles.

The Ukrainian arrivals also slowed; focus turned toward integration in education, housing, and labor, with pressure on job placements, schools and social systems. There were 1300 group accommodation centres according to MOI data in 2022 – but some were already closing due to lack of funding. Instead of big centres for a few thousand people, smaller centres were gradually being organized in diverse locations (some of them isolated, which later affected integration opportunities). 200,000 Ukrainian refugee children were attending Polish schools (Ministry of Education data), 500,000 were benefitting from the child support system.

The concerns were rising over employment conditions: 58% of refugees reported being offered sub-minimum wages, on the other hand, majority of refugees in the productive age have found jobs and were self-sufficient.

The government and local governments gradually diminished their humanitarian support, closing down the big accommodation centers, shelters, free-shops, limiting the scope of financial support towards housing. To our disappointment, no systemic solutions were being developed to assist the persons with special needs: there was no state-run system to cope with the presence of the elderly refugees for example, persons with disabilities, children with special educational needs and so on – at the initial stage of the response many in the NGO community expected our support to be a sort of bridge to the state system to be built. Yet, time went by and no state system was there – we, the NGOs, were expected to cope with the needs of the people we had no capacity to respond to.

It was encouraging to see the public attitudes towards the refugees overwhelmingly positive. We did feel the support of others: from volunteers to the city authorities or business partners. It was important to us.

2. International humanitarian system response (as we saw it)

The international humanitarian system envisions monitoring of the response after 5 months, with an assumption the crisis response is meant to be finalized after 6 months. We did not feel we are “mid-term” nor did we realize the nature of funding of the response is changing from the very flexible rapid response to more regular and demanding sources. Monitoring and reporting requirements of international partners were new and somewhat unexpected. The INGOs would not share the details or characteristics of their own funding with us, and we were too preoccupied with our own work to ask. This led to many misconceptions.

The INGO community (very many of its representatives) came to Poland from other humanitarian setups. They often arrived from African or Asian crises, where the states are not fully able to take the leading role, and sometimes, where state structures are absent altogether. For some people, working in a European context was a new experience. It was a challenge to adapt their previous *modus operandi* to a context of EU state: with data protection laws, labour code, and developed NGO community. For most local actors, we were working in our first humanitarian crisis. So, this was a learning time for everyone. It took some time for all of us to understand and respect each other.

At this stage, some INGOs closed down their operations and left, often with little notice. Some started to plan exit strategies. The local organizations were concerned that some INGOs started to set up local offices. There were fears of competition and imbalance of power.

At this time, some INGOs started to review their budget and spend the money they have fundraised and not spent yet – there were still funding opportunities for 3-6 months projects and pressure to take up more work to quickly spend the “leftover” resources. This funding was welcome, as it allowed us to support the new arising needs of refugees we have identified. At this time we also started to discuss longer-term projects (with DRC being our main counterpart at that time).

I remember one organization coming to us with an expectation to take fingerprints from people, whom we give pre-paid shopping cards. We were shocked – you cannot just fingerprint people! It is only the police or border guards that can take fingerprints – we could not legally do it. The INGO was searching for a local organization that would agree to do this, they could not comprehend it is something illegal here.

3. Polish Migration Forum response

After six months of the response the team was exhausted – and the workload still very demanding. Burnout has become an issue, particularly in the part of the team with a migration background. Yet, the situation somewhat stabilized, and it was time to identify and fix managerial mistakes and failures.

Our most significant challenge of the time was to keep pace with the refugee changing needs in an evolving environment, which did not bring enough systemic solutions: the nature of questions and issues the refugees would approach us was becoming increasingly more complex and emotionally draining, as for many questions we did not have a sufficient response.

It was a challenge to respond to the team’s needs: order, predictability, quality internal procedures and processes. The staff expectations (however just) often exceeded our capacity to respond as the workload and pressure of the refugee needs was still overwhelming. Yet, it was at this time that we have

developed a whole library of internal procedures, i.a: anti-corruption, anti-mobbing, sexual abuse prevention, financial control, standards of operations for each kind of service we provided, Cost Share Policy, Data Protection, Work Place Safety, Salary Scale Policy, HR policies, Procurement policies – developing them with the team and learning to implement them was a big accomplishment.

It was also a time to let go of staff that did not fit in, for whatever reason. Hasty recruitment is not always good. Some people we have recruited without sufficient clarity on who we need. Some were just not fit for the job. The needs and abilities of the organization were also changing – and some positions could not be maintained. Our advice would be to part with people who do not do the job for whatever reason as fast as possible. Their extended presence in the organization is harmful.

This phase of the crisis was also a time of major reporting. After the initial months where we were just expected to do the job, a lot of documentation came in, and it was at times stressful. Changing requirements, formats, sets of data expected were a norm.

Misalignment of INGO and local perspective on specific issues has become clear. For example, PFM struggled with one of the partners on child protection casework standards. The international partner insisted on its approach. We found the response incompatible with Polish law and practice. Another international partner requested fingerprinting refugees receiving aid, which we did not want to or could legally do – situations like this led to tensions and conflicts. Not always our arguments were heard. Sometimes we were given the “my way or highway” option – which we have perceived to be highly disrespectful.

The open letter

At this phase, the relations between local and some international organizations have become tense. PFM led an open appeal of the local organizations to the international ones, calling for more partner-like relations, respect and recognition of the local perspective.

There were some tensions and bitter feelings, some roundtables and bilateral discussions. The local organizations had some expectations that could not be met. As we now know from other countries, INGOs have been making the same mistakes and same harmful practices over and over, crisis after crisis, which could also be avoided. For example, organizations are encouraged to start work before contracts are signed (finding themselves in financial limbo if things went wrong), at times there were excessive promises made and not kept, at times local partners were offered funding that was not healthy (eg. no sufficient backoffice costs are planned or results of the projects are overestimated), there were often no proper negotiations and partnerships with international organizations pushing their own agenda with no sufficient local consultation etc. Much of this could be avoided if the local NGO community was properly informed of the humanitarian sector dynamics and if the INGOs really approached the local organizations as equals.

We were all learning. With time, with some organizations (in our case Plan International and Save the Children being good examples), very deep and meaningful partnerships have been developed. Time and good will on both sides were necessary for this to happen.

4. Key Lessons Learned (for NGOs)

As the crisis continued, it was important for us to:

- **Celebrate.** Be sure to give your staff moments to celebrate work done, have rest and joyful moments of appreciation. The team and yourself need some balance and counterweight for the everyday struggle.
- **Monitor your work.** It is particularly necessary in a big team, even if trust and friendship have always been your core organizational value. Create user-friendly tools for monitoring and self-evaluating your work. Take advantage of all INGOs (tools, methodologies) but don't lose your own principles in the process.
- **Pay attention to your team and be aware of burnout.** Pay special attention to your staff with migration background – the news from the frontlines add additional burden to their everyday realities.
- **Keep balance in budgeting and growth.** Secure overhead in all undertakings – you are likely to be offered funding for activities only. Make sure to accept funds that allow you to function in a healthy way.
- **Acknowledge internal change.** Take time to realize and manage the change you go through as an organization and a team. Some of your team is new and not familiar with your organization in its pre-crisis shape and form. Some old staff objects to the change. Recognize this. Say farewell to the organization you were, embrace the new. Set clear rules. Review the mission and vision of the organization – update it and share with the team. Explain the values and priorities of the organization to the team regularly.
- **Identify the growing diversity of the beneficiaries and their needs.** While some of your beneficiaries were somewhat settled, new people kept coming: the population you work with is increasingly diverse. Reflect this in your planning.
- **Partner with others.** It will enhance your impact, enable access to information and funding. Make sure you build new partnerships: not only with international, but also local partners: local government and other NGOs. Join networks, share information on what you do, liaise with others regularly. Crisis is a time when many organizations and institutions are more inclined to build new relations, as everyone is overwhelmed and seeks resources and means to address the challenges around.
- **Media relations – nurture those.** Feeding the media with regular, accurate and up-dated information is very important for the success of the response and for the local community-refugee population relations on the long run. Establish regular contacts with all kinds of media, try to be proactive in those relations.

5. Recommendations for Donors, UN and INGOs involved in humanitarian response

- This is a time that the funding not spent in the previous phases of the response can be spent – **do not overdo**. Do not pressure your partners into spending more they can manage. Do not encourage them to do work that would mean expanding the team any further or undertake excessive burdens.
- Explore if there are **organizations in smaller cities** which can use your funding.
- **Recognize the moment your local partners are in:** mid-crisis, tired and overworked. Rationalize your own expectations. For example: five international organizations working with one local partner can communicate and coordinate its capacity building agenda and recognize each-others workshops or trainings. We did train people twice from the same topic because INGOs insisted on the training to be performed by them.
- Make sure **your capacity building offer is a quality one** – and not just a tick box exercise. Don't waste people's time, they don't have much of it.
- **Coordinate your due diligence procedures, recognizing processes already done.** (It was actually achieved in Poland: INGOs did use each others due diligence processes – at least partly. This was very helpful and time-wise from our perspective.)
- While working with the local partners' reporting and monitoring **keep in mind your admin structure is often by far larger than your partners'**. Coordinate internally so your expectations are realistic.
- **Involve your partners in meaningful communication as experts**, not a "monkey show".

Chapter 4

Long-Term Response (2023 – mid-2024)

1. Characteristics and Context

The long-term phase of the response was characterised by a slowly diminishing, but still significant size of the refugee population, as some persons were either moving on to other EU countries (primarily Germany) or going back to Ukraine, combined with diminishing civil society engagement in the spontaneous crisis response and growing anti-migrant sentiments. **By mid-2024**, there were less than 1 million refugees from Ukraine in Poland, representing 96% of Poland's refugee population.

From the beginning of the response the situation was untypical. EU response (activation of the temporary protection, free movement of persons within EU) allowed for basically free movement of people from Ukraine to other countries. Poland from the beginning was welcoming, opening its labour market and involving the refugees from Ukraine into its educational and social systems. Thanks to those decisions the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian refugees in productive age have become integrated into the labour market (up to 350 000 employed by mid-2023). However, there were and still are significant groups of people stuck in limbo: those who cannot join the labour market easily and become self-sufficient: the elderly, single parents (especially with young kids or big families), persons with disability.

The most vulnerable groups found themselves in difficulty: not managing their lives but not having much to count on in terms of available help. Systemic challenges emerged: de-skilling, language barriers, and underqualified employment.

The key challenges of this time included sustaining political support (parliamentary elections of 2023 in Poland have included a strong antimigrant rhetoric), consolidating inclusion policies, managing labor market integration and educational access. The regulations relating to migrant integration and presence have started to become more and more rigid.

2. International humanitarian system response (as we saw it)

The majority of international partners involved in the crisis response to the Ukraine refugee needs have closed their operations in 2023/mid-2024. Oftentimes, the closure of the operation was quick and not sufficiently communicated. Only a few organizations paid attention to a phase-out process (notably DRC and NRC), discussing their exit strategies and communicating them in advance to the local partners.

Some organizations (like IRC or Save the Children) took a decision to establish a local presence. Not often those plans were clear to the local actors, so the decisions were sometimes received with mixed feelings. It was not welcome to see strong international actors compete for the local funds for example. Oftentimes, the imbalance of power between international organizations and local, freshly expanded ones, was a challenge.

The humanitarian response gradually shifted from meeting the first needs of refugees to more integration-related assistance. There was focus on access to employment, education, and housing. According to the humanitarian response model – this is a moment when the humanitarian actors step out, and development actors step in. But in Poland it did not happen. The expectation was that the state, being

an EU country, takes over the “development” role, or that this role is spare. However, lack of systemic solutions combined with continuous new arrivals made the situation complex.

Basic needs were still unaddressed for some people. Emergency accommodation, crisis response, food, health care – remained to be the top need of the refugees that were seeking our aid. In 2024, there were still nearly 10 000 new arrivals monthly from Ukraine to Poland. Yet, emergency funding was no longer available to help them have the basic needs met.

It was assumed that the state/development actors would take over the duty to provide assistance still necessary and humanitarian actors' role came to an end. While the state provided subsidy to the accommodation costs (that started to be gradually diminished from 2023), no specific assistance was developed for persons in various vulnerable situations: there are no sustainable solutions for the elderly refugees, persons with disabilities, persons terminally ill, single mothers with many children.

It took time for us to understand what “localisation” means – INGOs and UN used this word a lot. Obviously localisation is about channeling the humanitarian funding through the local organizations, but also giving local actors space at the discussion table. In Poland, this was indeed done by Kevin Allen of UNHCR. Allen did give priority to local partners at many tables, high level meetings and ground-level networking. He was also praised by many for cutting down the number of coordination meetings that have become unmanageable in the mid-term phase of the response.

3. Polish Migration Forum response

PFM's key challenge was to adapt to the still changing environment: withdrawal of international funding, shrinking public and business involvement in the response and increasingly complex refugee challenges we were faced with. While the number of refugees seeking our help slightly reduced, the questions and needs people were seeking help with have become much more complex. Oftentimes, we did not have the resources to address them, which created emotional burden for the staff.

We needed to downsize, redesign our scope of work, reorganize our involvement in the situation again. This was difficult considering all the local partners were doing just the same: we were in the midst of downsizing and closing down operations.

Another round of prioritization had to take place: we needed to cut some services and cope with the dissatisfaction of refugees, and our own staff that felt they lost their previous impact. Downsizing the team shortly after an intense period of work and teambuilding was very difficult. Some staff would mourn the big organization we have just recently been. This time was yet another moment of significant change, new redistribution of work and responsibilities.

With the downsize we needed to reprioritize again, but not equipped with the assistance of numerous international partners who were eager to help and train us earlier. This was hard, particularly as the long term phase of the crisis was also a time of burnout and exhaustion of the managerial part of the team.

We did experience resignations and burnout of key staff at this stage. The challenge was to manage the organization with a smaller team.

Early at the long-term response phase, PFM conducted a wellbeing program, which included assessment,

workshops and some burnout prevention initiatives. While recognizing and mapping the situation was valuable, I now see that going through such exercise in the crisis was somewhat counterproductive. Putting more focus on burnout, without enough celebration time, worked against our interest to build a healthy working environment. The process helped the organization to understand the gravity of the situation (most of the staff was overburdened), we did not have the sufficient resources to address the identified needs.

The long-term phase of the response was a time to look for alternative funding sources and think about the future: challenges were plentiful, the organization was highly operational and experienced, yet – we had no funding (nor even prospects) to fund the organization at its current size and shape. Exploring future possibilities, drafting strategies for post-crisis time was already an important challenge.

4. Key Lessons Learned (for NGOs)

- **Downsize immediately after the crisis response reaches this stage.** Fast-grown organizations that expanded for the first stages of the response will not be sustainable – **do not be fooled by the superficial moment of stability that this phase may indicate** – funding for the current size of the humanitarian organization will not be available. Start reducing the team immediately after the mid-term phase.
- **Communicate with your staff and explain the characteristics of the response regularly.** Downsizing is detrimental to your team's wellbeing, also to those who stay – talk about it, explain the process, part with people the best you can.
- **Dismissing staff is costly.** In the Polish case, the crisis lasted more than three years already – this means that most of our staff were already on permanent job agreements – not at all easy to terminate. Negotiate funding with your donors for parting with staff.
- **Manage annual leave of your staff well.** In crisis people tend not to use their leave systematically, at this stage some staff may have many days of accumulated leave – not only this negatively affects the persons' wellbeing, it is also costly to pay compensation for unused leave. *ekwiwalentów za niewykorzystane urlopy.*
- **Prioritize leadership wellbeing** – the leaders are both the most experienced and the most exhausted at this stage.
- **Cut your programs and productivity down, in line with resources available,** not in line with your hyper-activity of the last months, but in a way allowing your team to return to a healthy work dynamic. Help the team slow down. Focus on the core.
- **Invest time in strategic foresight** – think about post-crisis scenarios and about what the reality, the needs, your team are likely to look like in the future. This is a moment to reflect who you need in the team long term, and who short-term – and take personnel decisions accordingly.

5. Recommendations for Donors, UN and INGOs involved in humanitarian response

- **Communicate. Talk to your local partners** – for them this may be the first experience of a long-term crisis response. Share your plans: when and how your operation will close, why and when you set up a local office as an INGO. Do so with maximum notice.
- **Invest in system-strengthening.** This means also sharing your own donor contacts, your networks, tools and capacity you have created. We have experienced many furniture donations from INGOs closing down – but very few conversations that would help us survive financially after our international partners are gone.
- **Support transition-funding** – help local NGOs access funding that provides necessary support in the transition period of downsizing and donor withdrawal – as new funding sources are being identified.
- **Budget staff reductions.** Dismissing people costs – and your local partners may not think about budgeting it.
- **Help your local partners downsize.** Investing in training in the moment of growth is important. But it is also important to support post-crisis decisions of the local partners.

Chapter 5

“New Normal” (mid-2024 and beyond)

1.Characteristics and Context

In crisis response theory this is a time when the crisis is no longer considered a crisis, the emergency is managed and the reality after the crisis reaches a new stable shape. Even if the refugee population is high and many challenges remain unsolved, “new normal” reflects the situation when no more emergency or extraordinary plans are undertaken or no new measures taken to provide support to those in need. The situation is seen as stable and manageable.

In Poland, the majority of refugees have indeed settled, with more than 80 percent having stable income and supporting themselves. The discussion on refugees focuses on self-reliance and resilience. New arrivals are limited (even though, according to the Polish Border Guards, around 9 thousand new refugees were crossing the Ukrainian/Polish border monthly in 2024). The refugee population started to shrink – partly because of returns, partly – due to onward movement, primarily to Germany. In 2023, Poland hosted around 1,5 million Ukrainian refugees and Germany less than a million. In 2024 those data were reversed. By June 2024, UNHCR and Polish government data shows, the number of refugees from Ukraine in Poland fell to the below-million level.

There was a strong shift in public interest and donor attention. Barely any humanitarian funding was available since mid-2024 for the refugee response. Addressing the refugee needs started to involve the need to manage and address narratives. Right-wing politicians and parts of the society started to express anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee opinions, the social environment has become less welcoming. Public support to refugees fell from 94% support in 2022 to only 57% in late 2024 and 51 % in may 2025 (<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-06/Ipsos%20World%20Refugee%20Day%202025.pdf>).

Increasingly often the Ukrainians started to be portrayed as a burden to the society, even if the research (Deloitte and UNHCR) regularly shows that their presence has significant economic impact – in 2024, refugees from Ukraine contributed 2,7% of GDP. Challenges: perceived migrant labor competition (Deloitte report indicates that the work of Ukrainians did not affect the unemployment of Poles, it even brought the wages of the Poles up), social integration frictions, housing market tension, and political shifts affecting protections have remained.

2. International humanitarian system response (as we saw it)

In 2024 the majority of humanitarian actors terminated their work in Poland. Out of just a handful few announced exit in 2025, just one established a local office with an intention of long-term presence. One (Humanitarian Leadership Academy of Save the Children) focussed on capacity building offering support making possible for the local actors to reflect on the humanitarian experience of the past years.

Traditional take over of funding and responsibilities between humanitarian and development agencies did not take place – there is no justification for development aid in an EU state.

3. Polish Migration Forum response

In a way, this phase of the response is a post-partum experience. There are challenges and tasks around, yet, there is a huge effort that requires a kind of closure (hence this publication). At this stage, our work involves team management, downsizing, another exercise of priority revision – this time we go through this exercise mostly alone.

The organization has developed a decent internal safety culture, the staff is well-trained, much more independent and confident. The management role is to downsize on staff expectations – there is an urge to perform at a previous level with much fewer staff.

Managing downsizing is a challenge, for all involved. It is hard for staff to be laid off and for the staff that sees colleagues go. It is difficult to part with staff for the management. It is difficult to face human emotions involved – anger and frustration that sometimes result in unfair and ungrounded accusations or reactions.

Managing information and awareness raising in an increasingly hostile environment becomes a major task. The level of hatred and anti-migrant rethorics affects the daily functioning of the team, particularly the staff with migration background.

Fundraising again becomes an important task (at acute and mid-term we barely had to do any fundraising efforts, money was just made available with relatively little effort on our side). At this stage fundraising is fundamental for the organization's further existence. We need to seek new funding sources, seeking support of the local governments, the government, the EU funding possibilities and business partnerships. Increasingly often we engage in commercial undertakings, providing training or capacity building support at a fee.

Advocacy requires extra attention as well. In the crisis, cooperation and partnerships with the state administration was much more open and flexible. Following the crisis it is easier to continue the exchanges, build upon developed relations and achievements. On the other hand, the systems become less flexible again, stiffen, and staff rotates. Yet, the crisis allows for intersectoral recognition of value and impact.

4. Key Lessons Learned (for NGOs)

- The international actors withdraw from the crisis response before it actually ends. **The last phase of the response is characterized (again) by the needs exceeding the possibility to respond.**
- After turbulent times during mid-term and long-term response, the relations with INGOs are likely to be very good: in our case, Plan International and Save the Children have become our true trusted partners. UNICEF emerged as a new partner to us at this last stage.
- Crisis response is primarily about **agility, ability to capture the change**, new trends, evolving needs and opportunities. Management in crisis is primarily about managing change and ability to function in an unknown, unpredictable environment.
- Standards and operational procedures are very helpful in managing dynamic situations – even if they **require updates and revisions regularly.**

- **Not everyone is able to work under pressure.** Some people (leaders, staff, partners, beneficiaries) do not handle pressure well.
- After the initial acute phase of the crisis, when people are just in a shock, people involved in a crisis situation are just human. At the heart of humanitarian mobilization the people (yourself, your staff, your partners of all kinds) have their egos, limitations, ambitions and personal interests. **Work with what you have. Do what you can do.**

5. Recommendations for Donors, UN and INGOs involved in humanitarian response

- **Discuss the crisis response process with your local partners.** Share your own lessons learned, share the logic behind your stay-or-leave decisions and your main out-takes from working together.
- Plan for **exit strategies** ahead and discuss them with partners.
- When possible, provide **bridge funding** for local actors or help them reach follow up funding after you leave
- Stay in touch with your local partners. build on the relationships you have created, involving your partners in joint fundraising, learning or advocacy.

Final words – on the present

As I write in January 2026, the war in Ukraine continues. We hear of fatalities almost every day, even if the world discusses peace agreements – the missiles keep falling, the people keep fleeing, the people keep dying.

In Poland, the humanitarian phase of the response is over. We are already facing another crisis, or poly-crisis linked to a generally unstable geopolitical situation.

In January 2025 the new American administration decided to stop a significant part of its international aid. This affected our operations – Polish Migration Forum lost 29 percent of its funding between January and April 2025, and some of our key international allies were also badly affected. We needed to adapt to the unexpected again.

We are now in a moment of further prioritisation. We focus on the most vulnerable in our direct support. Advocacy and capacity building are our priority areas in the work with the system.

In the last three years we have learned to roll out a humanitarian response: we have scaled up 8-fold within a few months, then downsized nearly threefold in over a year. We have learned to set up new programs and management structures, communication channels, master monitoring and evaluation, and developed a set of internal safeguarding procedures.

The crisis response was an incredible learning experience. But in a way – lots of pain was unnecessary. It could have been less hard, had we known more about the crisis dynamic and challenges ahead.

Sometimes, small things matter. It is possible to sign funding agreements that fund half of the staff before Christmas, instead of 31 December. It is possible to redesign due-diligence procedures in a way that the local organizations do not have to go through dozens of them. Effort can be put in self-learning of the local organizations not to have unrealistic expectations. The next humanitarian response can be actually better than the Polish one.

We keep hearing that some harmful procedures or approaches have been repeated for 10 or more crisis responses so our efforts to change them are bound to fail. Well, this does not have to be that way. I sincerely hope our experience can serve others. Next country, next crisis, next time. Good luck, folks! You do something extremely important. Take care of yourselves.

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Polish Migration Forum Foundation 2025

FOUNDATION Polish Migration Forum

Since 2007, the Polish Migration Forum Foundation has been supporting all individuals with refugee or migration experience who reside or stay in Poland.

We strive to include migrants and refugees in Polish society, ensuring their rights are respected and combating discrimination. We work towards sustainable, responsible integration, recognizing that it is a process requiring the commitment of both sides – the host and the hosted.

What sets us apart is the comprehensiveness of our services, a committed and competent team, and openness to non-standard challenges. We value our flexibility. We are happy to cooperate with others.

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