

CASE STUDY

MOLDOVA 2022-2024 / UKRAINE CRISIS

CONTEXT LOCATION

SUPPORT METHODS

CRISIS

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – influx into neighbouring countries

PEOPLE AFFECTED

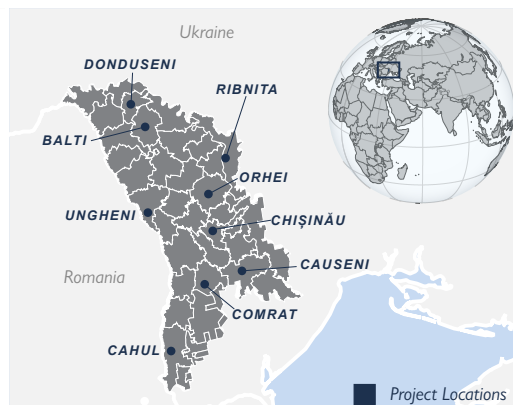
1,165,421 people affected (arrivals from Ukraine)*

PEOPLE WITH SHELTER NEEDS

124,493 Ukrainian (individuals)*
100,000 Moldovan (individuals)*

PROJECT LOCATIONS

Causeni, Comrat, Cahul, Ungheni, Donduseni, Balti, Orhei, Ribnita and Chisinau



PEOPLE SUPPORTED BY THE PROJECT

Direct beneficiaries:
50,000 Ukrainian refugees; **6,000** Moldovans
Indirect beneficiaries:
100,000 Ukrainian refugees; **40,000** Moldovans

PROJECT OUTPUTS

10 Community Service Centres in 9 regions, including complete and partial renovation of publicly owned facilities, as well as equipment.

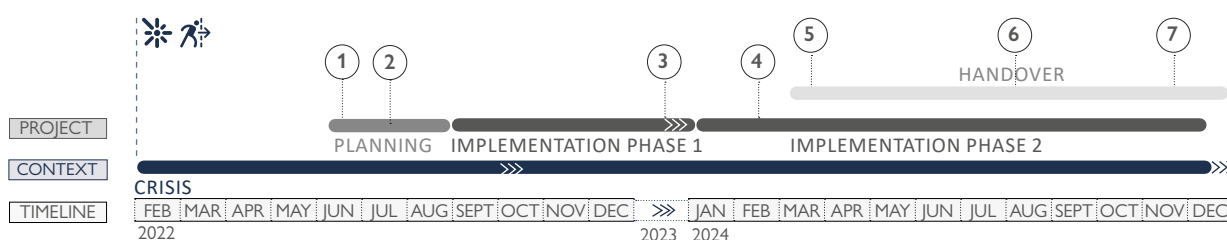
PROJECT COST

USD 267,412 for full renovations on average
USD 193,060 for partial renovations on average
USD 29,445 for equipment/furniture on average

PROJECT SUMMARY

Community Service Centres were established as inclusive, accessible public spaces co-designed with municipalities, civil society organizations, refugee groups, and local communities to deliver multi-sector services and strengthen social cohesion. By rehabilitating or equipping existing public facilities and embedding them in local systems, the program enabled safe, dignified and inclusive spaces for learning, recreation, information, protection, psychosocial support, and referrals. The centres operationalized a community-based protection approach and supported the transition from emergency response to inclusion, backed by formal agreements with local authorities to foster sustainability and gradual handover.

* UNHCR data portal



Feb 2022: Russian invasion of Ukraine -

Large number of refugees arriving to Moldova through the northern border in Otaci and the southern border in Palanca.

- 1 Jun 2022: Identification of locations for establishing Community Service Centres and negotiations with local authorities.
- 2 Jul 2022: Launch of the first CSC in Chisinau.
- 3 Jul-Aug 2023: Selection of building location and development of technical documentation and project layout for the Ungheni CSC.
- 4 Feb 2024: Final inspection and official opening of Ungheni CSC.
- 5 Mar 2024: Signing of the first MoC with the Ungheni City Hall.
- 6 Jul-Aug 2024: Development of technical documentation and project layout for Balti CSC.
- 7 Oct-Dec 2024: Implementation of renovation works in Balti CSC.



Ten community service centres were rehabilitated through the project, including spaces for learning and recreational activities for refugees and locals.

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CONTEXT

Moldova, one of the countries most immediately affected by the 2022 escalation in Ukraine, received over 1.4 million arrivals seeking safety. While many transited onward, more than 124,000 refugees remained in the country by August 2024, a large share of whom were women, children, and older persons. Moldova's response was complicated by structural constraints: pre-existing poverty, the lingering effects of COVID-19 and a gas crisis, a high degree of informality in the economy, and limited fiscal space to expand public services at pace with needs. In spite of this, the Government and communities showed remarkable hospitality and extended broad access to services and rights for refugees, including work, education, and primary health care. In 2023, the macroeconomic picture showed tentative improvement, yet vulnerabilities persisted and the protection environment required robust, localized support.

SITUATION BEFORE THE CRISIS

Prior to 2022, Moldova's economy had endured a succession of shocks and the population had been steadily declining; approximately 42% resided in urban areas and 58% in rural areas, with negative natural growth since 2020. Moldova's asylum caseload was small before 2022, with just 437 individuals in the asylum system. Protection expertise and institutional mechanisms existed, but the scale of subsequent displacement far exceeded prior experience.



Selected public facilities were rehabilitated to provide multisectoral services to refugees and locals, alongside energy efficiency upgrades.

SITUATION AFTER THE CRISIS

By late 2023 and into 2024, displacement dynamics stabilized, but a growing number of refugees opted to remain in Moldova, equivalent to about 4% of the population. Around 68% of refugees lived in urban areas and 32% in rural settings. Half of them lived in the capital city Chişinău. The majority reported living in private accommodations, though collective centres, hotels, and shared arrangements remained part of the shelter landscape. Among those renting, most could maintain their housing for at least six months, but a sizeable proportion remained uncertain about duration. This underscored the importance of predictable support and tenancy safeguards, but also the need for pathways out of collective centres. Authorities and partners prioritized single female-headed households, Roma refugees, persons with disabilities, and older people, while also including vulnerable Moldovans to reduce perceptions of inequity and foster social cohesion.

NATIONAL SHELTER RESPONSE

Moldova's overall refugee response emphasized a whole of society approach aligned with commitments made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, with social cohesion identified as one of four pillars of the 2024 Refugee Response Plan (RRP). RRP partners committed to localized, participatory, evidence-based, and gender- and diversity sensitive programming, implemented in close cooperation with national ministries (including Education and Labour and Social Protection), civil society, and local public authorities. Through community-based planning and decision-making, the response sought to: improve community and public infrastructure; facilitate service access for refugees and vulnerable Moldovans, including cultural and sport events; and create inclusive, safe communal spaces which fostered refugee-host interactions and peaceful coexistence. The community-based protection model informed the design of the Community Service Centres (CSCs) and ensured that the centres remained integrated within municipal systems.



The design of centres, integrated within municipal systems, was informed by a community-based protection model.

PROJECT DESIGN

The project aimed to reduce vulnerability and protection risks and promote inclusion by identifying, rehabilitating, and operationalizing CSCs as municipal hubs for outreach, services, and community development. The design aligned with the Cities of Solidarity initiative, which sought to strengthen collaboration and partnerships with cities across Moldova led by local authorities and communities. Centres were intended as safe, welcoming, and accessible spaces supporting individual and community well being for diverse groups—women, men, older persons, adolescents, children, and persons with disabilities.

Key design features included:

- Multi sector services available: legal aid, child protection and youth activities, gender based violence (GBV) prevention, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), education and vocational training, employment and social assistance linkages, and information/referrals to specialized services.
- Age-, gender-, and diversity inclusive layouts with private rooms for confidential services, safe programming for at risk groups, and barrier free access for people with disabilities.
- Energy efficiency measures (thermal insulation for facades and roofs, replacement of windows, and heating system repairs), to improve comfort and reduce recurrent costs, where feasible.
- Clear role definitions and handover pathways to local authorities, anchored by formal agreements and built on existing public facilities to minimize costs and duplication.

The CSCs also served as community-level platforms to share information on a time bound rental assistance program implemented by various partners under common guidance. While rental assistance was not a core CSC output, the centres acted as hubs for information, outreach, and referrals. Key considerations for the rental support included: incentives for partial self payment of rent to avoid dependency; criteria linked to all components of the right of adequate housing: security of tenure, services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy. This approach, which the CSCs facilitated, aimed to support transitions from collective centres and reinforce the protective environment in both urban and rural areas.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

LOCATIONS & COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Three months into the emergency, the project team identified priority cities with significant refugee presence across a range of living arrangements—collective centres, private rentals, host families, relatives. Selected municipalities included Chişinău, Bălţi and Donduşeni in the north, Ungheni (near the border with Romania), and Căuşeni, Cahul and Comrat in the south.

The approach sought to empower local authorities to support refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and host communities through co ownership and joint planning. In several municipalities, authorities provided rent free premises and covered utilities; elsewhere, dialogue on cost sharing and maintenance continued during the course of the project.



The centres provided a variety of services, and were located within existing public facilities such as youth centres, schools and cultural venues.

Principles agreed with authorities included avoiding duplicating existing services and strengthening established institutions to enable smooth transfer of service delivery to local systems. For example, this meant embedding centres within youth facilities, cultural venues, and schools, catalyzing increased municipal participation, youth volunteerism, and inter departmental engagement (e.g., social assistance, employment offices).

IDENTIFICATION OF PUBLIC FACILITIES

While locations were identified in 2022, shortlisting specific facilities remained iterative into 2024. Candidate sites were assessed with partners, local associations and NGOs, refugee representatives, and authorities, using criteria such as ownership, accessibility, proximity to services, and presence of activities. Facilities with grassroots leadership or strong civic engagement were prioritized. A multi-functional team reviewed each site, and consensus among stakeholders was sought prior to construction.

CO-DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Of ten facilities selected for CSCs, seven underwent full or partial renovations and three received equipment and furniture. For eight centres, co-design workshops with refugees, locals, and authorities shaped room configurations and privacy needs. Three centres incorporated enhanced outdoor areas for sports and events, co created with the community. Typical construction spanned four to six months per centre, with handovers (including financial inspection and quality certification by municipal technical departments) adding roughly two months depending on complexity. At the end of 2024, already ten centers were fully operational.



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The centres functioned as multi-service hubs and were managed by NGOs who also linked users to a network of service providers.

OPERATIONALIZATION: SERVICE MIX AND MANAGEMENT

Once operational, CSCs functioned as multi service hubs, with activities fully aligning with those mentioned in the project design section. Local coordinators—often NGOs with community development expertise—managed day to day operations, liaising with a network of service providers (typically up to ten per centre, excluding authorities and community representatives) to maintain a balanced, multi sector offer. The centres brought together municipal departments, UN agencies, national and international NGOs, and community groups, with a deliberate focus on building local capacity for sustainability and progressive handover.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Both refugees and Moldovans were consistently engaged in planning, implementing, assessing, monitoring, and evaluating the services provided in the CSCs. Their role included:

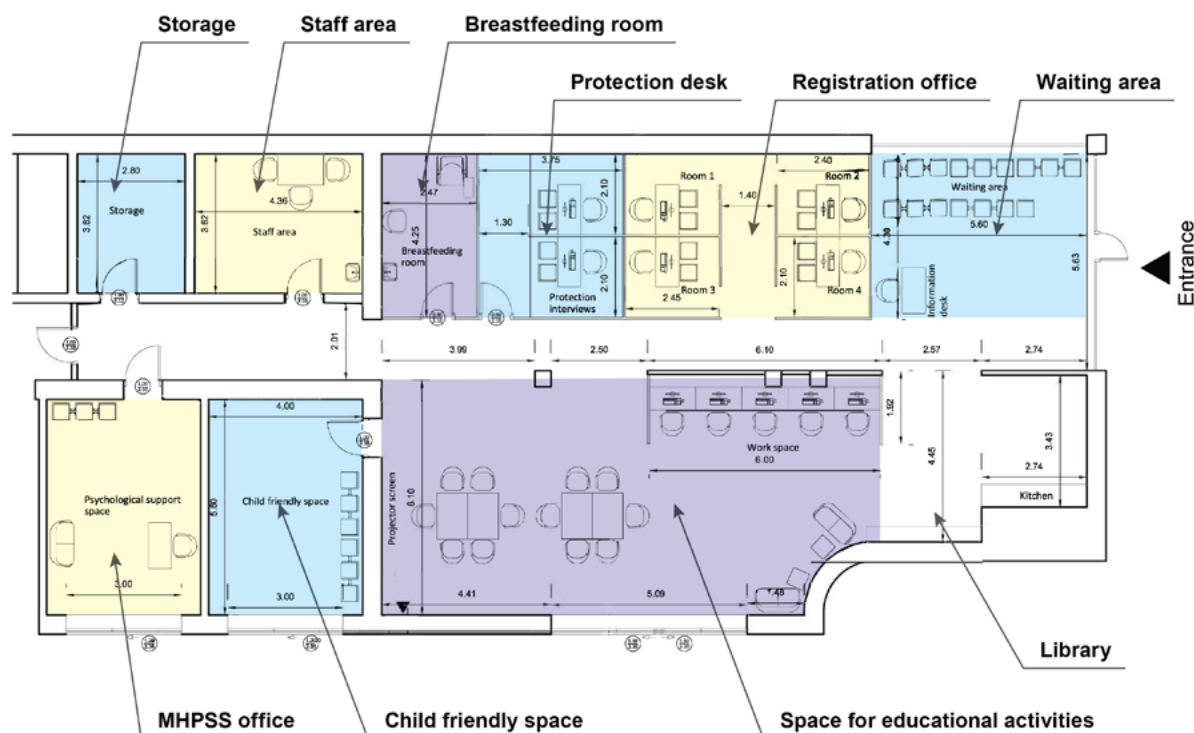
- Identifying protection risks, service gaps, and community capacities;
- Planning, implementing, and monitoring CSC activities to strengthen resilience, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence;
- Taking ownership of the protection response through community committees and outreach volunteers;
- Using and strengthening feedback and complaints systems to improve service quality and effectiveness;
- Participating in activity planning by youth councils, refugee organizations, and informal groups, and helping establish these associations where not already present.

This participatory model improved relevance and accountability, cultivated civic ownership, and embedded the centres within local social ecosystems.



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The facilities were co-designed with authorities, locals and refugees through participatory workshops.



The centres included age-, gender-, and diversity inclusive layouts with private rooms for confidential services and safe programming for at risk groups.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Administrative decentralization and the need to coordinate across multiple government layers created variation in procedures for negotiating and approving Memorandums of Cooperation (MoCs). In some regions, MoCs encompassed both CSC operations and Cities of Solidarity initiatives; elsewhere, they covered only one component or split responsibilities between city and district authorities. These differences increased transaction costs and lengthened decision timelines. In response, the project team adapted documentation to local standards, maintained continuous dialogue with municipal leadership, and aligned centre mandates with existing institutional strategies to secure buy in.

A second operational challenge was the need for stronger infrastructure guidance at launch. Starting work late in the first year under urgent timelines and with minimal standardized documentation led to cost increases and follow on works in some sites. In 2023–2024, the team developed an operational technical guideline to standardize steps, templates, and quality assurance expectations, improving scoping accuracy and easing municipality implementer coordination.

A third challenge lay in sustaining maintenance and utility costs. While several municipalities committed premises and utilities, others faced fiscal constraints. The project addressed this through progressive cost sharing discussions, energy efficiency upgrades to reduce running costs, and embedding CSC programming within existing municipal plans and budgets to align resources over time.

EXIT/HANDOVER

Sustainability centered on transitioning management and maintenance from international partners to local authorities and communities. The Cities of Solidarity initiative provided the framework for localization, with MoCs formalizing municipal roles (e.g., space provision, support for service providers, joint initiatives, and a plan to transfer centre management). The signing of MoCs—such as the Ungheni agreement in March 2024—served as key milestones toward full local stewardship, clearer accountability lines, and durable inclusion of the centres in civic life.

OUTCOMES AND WIDER IMPACTS

The conversion of abandoned or under used public facilities into vibrant CSCs revitalized community assets and increased access to inclusive, accessible spaces. Energy efficiency measures improved comfort while reducing utility costs, and accessible layouts expanded participation. Protection referrals were streamlined: individuals receiving counseling could be linked to specialized services via standardized local pathways. Service providers also deployed mobile teams from the centres to reach remote villages, improving geographic equity. Community led activities enhanced interaction among youth and adults, promoted healthy lifestyles, and strengthened community ties. For example, a co-created mural in Donduşeni encouraged shared ownership between residents and refugees, ultimately promoting social cohesion. Lastly, as of August 2024, ten centres were operational, reflecting institutionalization of the approach and anchoring of the centres within municipal systems.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

STRENGTHS

- ✓ **Strong engagement of local authorities**, with close coordination and consultation with host communities, was instrumental in establishing CSCs across multiple regions.
- ✓ **Renovating existing public facilities** minimized costs and allowed authorities to repurpose sites that had been abandoned for years, demonstrating effective resource utilization and long term impact.
- ✓ **A participatory design process** throughout identification, planning, and implementation fostered a sense of ownership among refugees and hosts, improving acceptance and outcomes.
- ✓ **The activation of CSCs acted as a catalyst** for new ideas and programming that promoted social cohesion.



Users and local authorities were engaged in the design and operation of the centres. Agreements were signed to formalize municipal roles.

WEAKNESSES

- × **Some municipal institutions** foundational for CSCs **struggled to independently sustain maintenance costs**, requiring additional cost sharing measures
- × **In certain locations, limited stakeholder engagement** during design stages led to decision making challenges and perceptions of disproportionate influence by particular actors.
- × **The urgency to commence implementation** meant the first year started late with minimal infrastructure guidance; this necessitated the development of an operational guideline for infrastructure implementation in 2024.
- × **After completing works** per agreed Bills of Quantities, **unforeseen additional tasks emerged** in some centres, increasing costs and prompting plans for follow up phases; subsequent efforts focused on improving scoping and estimation accuracy.



FURTHER READING ON SHELTER PROJECTS

On the Ukraine crisis: [SP 9TH ED. / A.22-A.23 / UKRAINE](#)

On multisectoral services for refugees and migrants:
[SP 9TH ED. / A.13 / ECUADOR 2020-2022;](#) [SP 8TH ED. / A.10 / VENEZUELA 2020.](#)

LESSONS LEARNED

- Establishing CSCs should be collaborative, grounded in consultations and active engagement with local communities, refugees, and local authorities. This improves relevance, strengthens accountability, and supports inclusive governance.
- Involving refugees, municipal actors, and host communities across identification, design, and implementation fosters shared ownership and facilitates smoother transitions to local management.
- CSCs provide meaningful roles for community committees and outreach volunteers, enabling structured feedback on service quality and impact, as well as constructive engagement with local authorities.
- Signing Memorandums of Cooperation with municipalities is a critical component of the exit strategy.
- Given the multi sectoral nature of CSCs and the diversity of actors, robust, multi level communication and reporting mechanisms are needed to manage roles and expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

- Secure a signed MoC before initiating a CSC. Early interventions experienced disparities when municipal leadership changed mid project and incoming officials were unfamiliar with previous commitments. This was addressed in 2024 with MoCs in Ungheni and Bălți.
- From an infrastructure perspective, adopt a standardized operational guideline to clarify steps, roles, and quality standards for authorities and implementing partners, including templates to strengthen accountability and transparency. Maintain continuous, clear communication with Mayors and municipal teams from the outset to ensure alignment and continuity.