

CASE STUDY

POLAND 2022-2024 / UKRAINE CRISIS

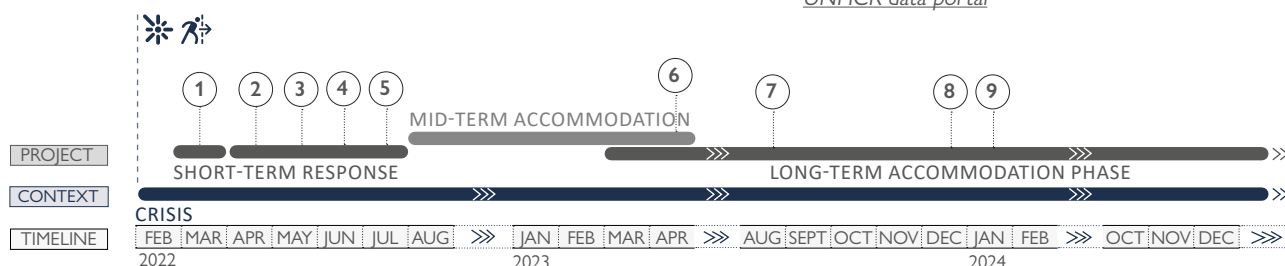
CONTEXT / SETTLEMENT	SHELTER TYPE	SUPPORT METHODS
CRISIS Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – influx into neighbouring countries		
PEOPLE AFFECTED 950,000 people (refugees from Ukraine)*		
PROJECT LOCATIONS Warsaw city and Silesia province		
PEOPLE SUPPORTED BY THE PROJECT ≈ 51,000 individuals (approx. across components)		
PROJECT OUTPUTS 3,500 people provided with short-term accommodation. 5,000 people provided with information via a hotline. 1,090+ people provided with rental support. 100+ vacant spaces renovated. 9 Social Rental Agencies (SRAs) established. Policy Impact: Advocated for and secured the approval of new government legislation supporting social rental models.		
SHELTER SIZE 20-30 m ² for short-term (hostel). 40 m ² for rental apartments on average.		
SHELTER DENSITY 10 m ² per person on average (4 people per apartment)		
DIRECT COST USD 240 per household on average USD 280 / HH for short-term accommodation USD 5,875 / HH for one-year rental support USD 620 / HH for support to rental agreements USD 6,490 / HH for one-year rental support via the SRA		



PROJECT SUMMARY

The organization, member of a global housing network that had been present in the country for almost 30 years before the crisis, quickly responded in partnership with local municipalities, facilitating short-term shelter with host families and hostel stays, as well as supporting the improvement of collective centres managed by third parties. To meet the refugees' medium-term housing needs, the organization leased apartments or helped families negotiate with landlords and finance rent payments. In the long term, two innovative pilot programs were scaled up: a social rental program and the renovation of vacant buildings. The intervention included a strong advocacy component for legislative change on social rental housing.

* [UNHCR data portal](#)



❄️ Feb 2022: Russian invasion of Ukraine.

① Mar 2022: National staff immediately offers support to families arriving in Warsaw. The international network leads a surge response.

② Apr 2022: Reception kiosk set up at the train station to support newly arrived refugees and connect them with host families; Social Rental Program work in Warsaw is significantly scaled up.

③ May 2022: Free information hotline established for refugees.

④ Jun 2022: Appointment of Minister for social integration.

⑤ Jul 2022: Social Rental Programme launched in Gliwice to operate in the Silesia province, where an SRA had not yet been established.

⑥ Apr 2023: First national call for proposals is launched to support vulnerable communities, incl. refugees from Ukraine through, among others, the development of SRAs and renovation of vacant dwellings.

⑦ Aug 2023: National organization back in the driver's seat; each country in the region adapts to local needs.

⑧ Dec 2023: At least 9 municipalities announce the launch of SRAs.

⑨ Jan 2024: Programme adds component of retrofitting entire buildings.

OVERALL CONTEXT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered a major regional displacement. By June 2022, more than 6.8 million people had fled Ukraine, most of them women and children. Poland received the largest share, registering nearly 1 million Ukrainian refugees or asylum seekers by December 2023 and more than 17 million border crossings overall. The scale and speed of arrivals strained national and municipal systems for reception, housing, and integration.

SITUATION BEFORE THE CRISIS

Poland already faced a shortage of affordable housing, especially in major urban centers. Rising demand, limited land, and high construction costs had pushed rents upward, restricting access for low-income households and young adults. Even before arrivals from Ukraine, rental markets in large cities were tight and costly, with few affordable and adequate options.

SITUATION AFTER THE CRISIS

The sudden influx into Poland put heavy pressure on reception and accommodation systems. Newly arrived families initially relied on collective sites such as sports halls and convention centers, or stayed with Polish host families. The surge worsened long-standing housing shortages, reducing availability and affordability for both refugees and residents. Some temporary solutions, especially hostels and adapted institutional buildings, effectively became long-term housing, highlighting the protracted nature of needs.

NATIONAL SHELTER RESPONSE

Polish authorities, supported by international assistance, rapidly assessed needs and established temporary collective shelters in repurposed buildings such as sports halls, vacant commercial premises, schools, and hostels. While the government led the response complemented by a strong civil society effort that included a host family programme and integration services, the absence of an official longer-term national shelter strategy constrained coordination and data-driven planning.



A hotline was set up by the organization to support new arrivals in the country, and guide through the immediate housing options available.

PROJECT PHASES

Anticipating a protracted crisis, the organization avoided a purely reactive model. It designed a multi-year, multi-track intervention that balanced immediate reception support with pathways to sustainable, affordable housing and integration.

SHORT-TERM – EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

During the first months, the organization partnered with the Warsaw municipality to run a reception kiosk at the main train station, helping newly arrived refugees access temporary accommodation. The initial hosting model relied on volunteer host families, then added short-stay hostels as safe, suitable offers declined and caseloads grew. This option was more expensive but became indispensable and ultimately prevailed during the emergency phase, as humanitarian partners providing similar options decreased. The project also supported upgrades to collective centers managed by third parties and established a free hotline to guide arrivals through immediate housing options.



Initially, host families received refugees and asylum seekers voluntarily. After some time, this model was not sufficient to meet the demand.



Given the increased caseload of Ukrainians coming into Poland, the organization started using hostels for short-term accommodation.

MEDIUM-TERM – INTERIM SHELTER SOLUTIONS

In this phase, the team mobilized owners to lease vacant apartments to the organization for 6–12 months and used its second-hand furniture shop as a logistics hub to repair and furnish units. A flexible subsidy model encouraged self-reliance by gradually increasing tenant contributions while fully covering costs for the most vulnerable households. The hotline also helped resolve landlord–tenant issues. Over time, an additional modality – the nationwide “Step Into Your Home (Krok do Domu)” initiative – emerged as a guarantor model to facilitate independent tenancies. It bundled rental payment and property-damage insurance, deposit and gradual rental subsidies, search and negotiation support, contract templates, legal and translation assistance, and handyman services, thereby reducing risk for landlords and barriers for tenants.

LONG-TERM – HOUSING SOLUTIONS

This component focused on expanding access to affordable rental housing by increasing supply through the renovation of vacant flats and buildings and by supporting the establishment of social rental agencies managed by the organisation or other actors.

- **Social Rental Agencies (SRAs):** Prior to the project, building on foundational research on social rental schemes (2015–2017) and a pilot in Warsaw (2016–2019), SRAs were formally codified in 2021 as a policy tool allowing municipalities to partner with NGOs—a historic integration of civil society into the formal housing system. Leveraging the refugee crisis to accelerate the rollout of SRAs, the organization delivered comprehensive support through capacity-building for municipal authorities and NGOs on establishment and best practices, free technical consultations covering documentation, budget drafting, and legal resolutions. Additionally, the organization directly managed the SRA in Dąbrowa Górnicza (Silesia), which served as a replicable model for other municipalities.
- **Revitalization of Empty Buildings:** Simultaneously, the organization expanded another pilot project to rehabilitate vacant multi-residential structures. By upgrading these properties and reintroducing them to the market via SRAs, the initiative addressed local accommodation deficit. The government subsequently embraced this model, incorporating it into broader support schemes for municipalities and non-profits assisting vulnerable groups, including refugees.

The project also promoted legislative changes to improve refugees' access to affordable housing and complemented these efforts with non-housing support, including language courses, childcare, and vocational training.

Although beneficiaries did not have to move through every stage, a planned progression from supported social rental schemes to independent tenancy proved highly effective. 80 per cent of households successfully transitioned, facilitated by intensive social work.



The organization second hand furniture shop was expanded and used as a logistics hub to furnish vacant apartments leased by the organization.



The program included legal assistance, insurance, gradual rental subsidies and handyman services, to reduce obstacles for tenants.



At the start of the crisis, some owners of empty apartments in Warsaw offered them to the organization free of charge for around six months to host women and children who had recently fled Ukraine. In some cases, subsequent arrangements were made with landlords to pay rent.

TARGETING

The intervention focused on Warsaw (short-, medium-, and long-term) and Silesia (medium- and long-term), building on the organization's existing presence. Beneficiary selection prioritized vulnerable individuals and families from conflict-affected Ukrainian provinces, including single parents, older people, and people with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Two income groups were distinguished: households able to contribute part of the rent and those unable to afford 20 % of the rent.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community integration and social cohesion were promoted through events, workshops, and volunteer engagement. For example, in June 2024, an interactive theatre-and-circus “Ciałobajka” event was held for families in the Social Rental Programme, creating an opportunity for peer connection, communication with staff, language practice, and celebration around Children's Day and the end of the school year. In 2023, 30 volunteer initiatives took place in six cities, engaging 532 people. Corporate and international volunteer groups supported repainting, furniture recycling and assembly in rented apartments, as well as refreshing social service spaces .

MATERIALS AND SUPPLY

Market impact was limited, aside from a brief early shortage of mattresses. To meet increased demand for furniture and appliances, the second-hand furniture shop was adapted to accept and manage donations: warehouse space was expanded, additional delivery vehicles were purchased, and extra staff and volunteers were mobilized for distributions. Private-sector donations of basic furniture and appliances helped equip previously empty rented apartments.

EXIT/HANDOVER

An explicit exit strategy guided transitions after the 12-month social rent support period. The team interviewed tenants and landlords to review intentions, financial sustainability, and barriers. Common obstacles included language, legal concerns, market unfamiliarity, social stigma, and affordability gaps. Drawing on these lessons, the “Step Into Your Home” modality was developed to provide insurance products, deposit and gradual rent support, search and negotiation assistance, legal and translation help, and standard templates—enabling direct leases between landlords and tenants and reducing perceived risk. For the most vulnerable families unable to sustain costs after 12 months, referrals to alternative solutions or extended social rental support were envisaged. The programme also emphasized continuity and systemic uptake so that social rental initiatives and Empty Spaces repurposing could continue beyond the immediate response and remain accessible to the wider population.



In the long-term phase, the project also renovated vacant buildings such as this one, which were then occupied through the Social Rental Programme. Volunteering played a key role throughout the project, both by participating in social cohesion initiatives and by actively contributing to upgrades and furnishing the apartments.



Entire apartments were renovated and furnished through the project.

MAIN CHALLENGES

- **Organizational capacity and staffing.** At crisis onset, the organization had limited humanitarian experience and a small national footprint, with more than 20 staff in place. Rapid recruitment was difficult in a competitive market; the team eventually expanded to over 80 staff, including of Ukrainian origin. This growth was supported by early surge assistance from the international network.
- **Host-family limitations and safety.** The initial host-family scheme with the city faced several hurdles: risks for unaccompanied women, mismatches between single-room offers and family needs, and a shrinking pool of suitable hosts. Pre-screening mitigated some issues, but the model was ultimately replaced by the hostel accommodation.
- **Accommodation market volatility and safety.** Inflation and seasonal demand increased hostel prices, triggering contract renegotiations. Safety incidents required strengthened risk mitigation, clearer house rules, and dedicated caseworkers for routine monitoring.
- **Rental market complexity.** For newcomers, Poland's rental market—with multiple contract types and varying tenant protections—was difficult to navigate. Legal ambiguity discouraged both tenants and landlords. The programme therefore integrated legal expertise, standardized guidance and contracts, and advisory support to increase confidence and protection on both sides.
- **Sustainability for the most vulnerable.** Households receiving full rent subsidies (e.g., people with disabilities, limited employability) often struggled to transition after 12 months. The organization responded with tailored exit strategies, targeted extensions, and closer links to social support centers and NGOs to identify alternative solutions.
- **Institutional integration of SRAs.** Embedding SRAs within municipal structures increased trust, policy relevance, and long-term impact, but reduced some flexibility and required stronger municipal capacity. Scaling depended on political will, stable financing, and ongoing technical support, partly addressed through a national support programme for municipalities.

OUTCOMES AND WIDER IMPACTS

- **A stronger national actor.** The response significantly strengthened the organization institutionally. From a smaller development-focused footprint, it expanded staffing and operational capacity, built humanitarian competencies, and later applied them in other domestic responses.
- **Systemic expansion of affordable housing models.** Affordable housing approaches moved from local pilots to a coordinated national strategy. The SRA model gained momentum through a government programme and a major government funding allocation of nearly USD 25 million, enabling new agencies and renovation of vacant properties. Municipalities that integrated SRAs with social services demonstrated effective local pathways to scale. The “Empty Spaces” program also demonstrated a viable approach to converting unused buildings into liveable housing, increasingly generating strong government interest for broader adoption in post-crisis recovery plans.
- **Policy influence grounded in practice.** Scaling social rental models during the crisis generated strong evidence that informed national policy. Technical training and advisory services, alongside continued advocacy, helped institutionalize SRAs in municipal structures, with national bodies providing ongoing support.
- **Sustainable legacy.** Renovated apartments and buildings continued to meet housing needs. Embedding SRA mechanisms within municipal systems provided a durable, scalable channel for affordable housing and integrated social support beyond the immediate response.



Once renovated, the flats remained as part of the affordable housing stock for the local municipalities, linking post-crisis efforts to durable outcomes.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

STRENGTHS

- ✓ **Presence in the country prior to the crisis.** Existing operations in Warsaw and Silesia enabled a quick start-up and immediate coordination with municipal services.
- ✓ **Existing pilot programmes.** Pre-crisis pilots in social rental and vacant-building rehabilitation were repurposed and scaled to meet refugee housing needs and to inform national policy.
- ✓ **International network's support.** Early surge support provided strategic capacity, specialist staff and funding during the initial phase.
- ✓ **Scale-up capacity.** The programme grew rapidly—expanding staffing and overall portfolio—while tapping corporate and community volunteer engagement, including recruitment of staff of Ukrainian origin.
- ✓ **Advocacy capacity.** The entity effectively mediated on behalf of refugee tenants, influencing policy and practice around social rental and affordable housing.
- ✓ **Comprehensive assistance.** The Social Rental Programme combined housing with enablers such as language, IT, vocational and other skills courses, supporting stabilization and integration.

WEAKNESSES

- ✗ **Initial capacity to respond.** Despite an existing national presence, limited humanitarian experience posed early operational challenges. Adjusting to the directive, time-critical demands of emergency management took time for a development-focused team.
- ✗ **Staff well-being.** Sustained workload and exposure to distressing situations affected staff mental health, requiring additional support measures.



The social rental programme included direct assistance such as subsidies and renovations with activities like legal support, vocational and language courses.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Leverage existing pilots for rapid scale.** Pre-existing affordable housing pilots can be quickly adapted and scaled in crises, accelerating transitions from temporary relief to durable solutions.
- **Integrate legal expertise from the outset.** Embedding legal support and standardized contracts increases confidence and safety for both tenants and landlords in complex rental markets.
- **Adopt a holistic, trauma-informed approach.** Housing assistance should be paired with enabling services—education, health, community-building and psychosocial support—to restore stability.
- **Prioritize beneficiary-led livelihoods and enablers.** Flexible vocational support and structural enablers such as childcare help households move from dependence to self-sufficiency, complementing the transition from supported to independent tenancies.
- **Empower dedicated domestic entities.** Investing in specialized national organizations during crises strengthens long-term sector capacity, policy influence and institutional resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

- **Move more quickly from emergency response to early recovery activities,** aligning with the organization's strengths in durable housing solutions.
- **Work more intentionally on partnerships** with organizations from other sectors to ensure a holistic response, while maintaining focus on the housing mandate.
- **Strengthen internal management** by enhancing interdepartmental communication, holding regular Q&A with staff, conducting periodic process reviews, and organizing routine learning exercises every three to four months.



FURTHER READING ON SHELTER PROJECTS

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

On rental support: [SP 10TH ED. / A.XX / ECUADOR](#)

On responses in neighboring countries:
[SP 10TH ED. / A.XX / MOLDOVA](#); and [A.XX / UKRAINE](#)