

The Work of DRC's Mobile Teams During the War in Ukraine

Analytical Paper

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Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the experience of a pilot project implemented by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the NGO Lviv Mediation Centre, DRC's implementing partner, with the support of the Ukraine Confidence-Building Initiative III (UCBI III) from July to December 2022.

The pilot project involved five mobile teams, each consisting of a psychologist and mediator to address the displaced population's needs resulting from the Russian Federation military offensive launched on 24 February 2022.

The objective of the mobile teams was to help resolve or prevent conflicts in communities and locations hosting a high concentration of displaced persons, particularly in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) shelters / collective centres in the Lviv Oblast (cities of Lviv and Stryi), Rivne Oblast (city of Rivne) and Zakarpattia Oblast (cities of Uzhhorod and Mukachevo). The mobile teams also worked to provide mental health stabilisation services and crisis counselling to the conflict-affected population.

Cities for the mobile teams' operations were selected according to two main criteria:

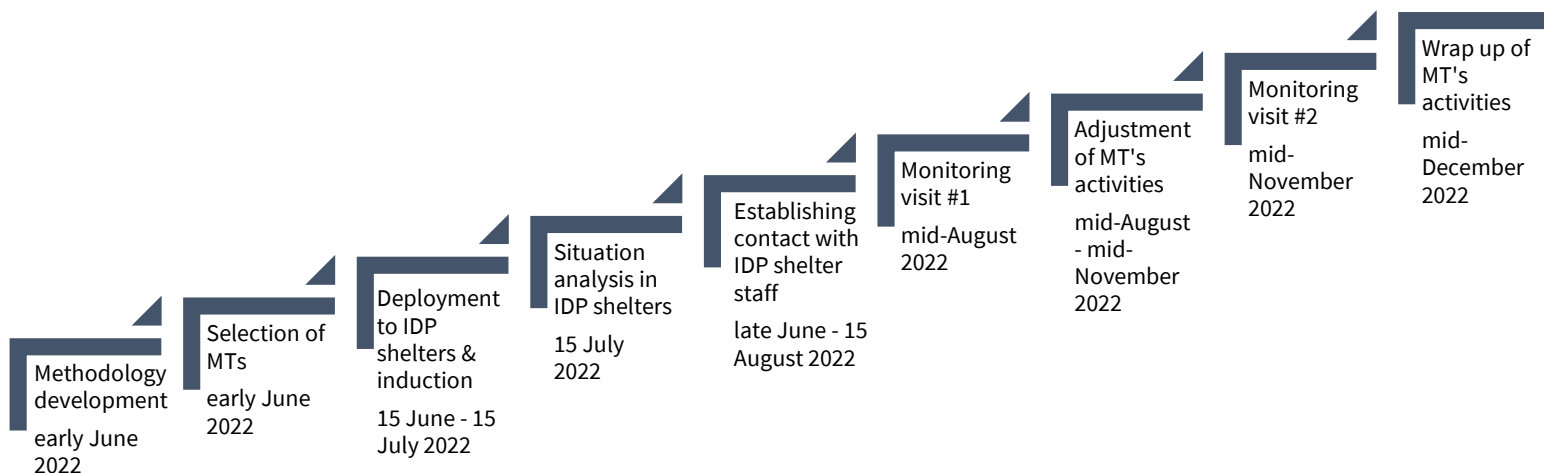
- a) A high concentration of IDPs in each oblast; and
- b) The capacity of implementing organisations to ensure the smooth operations of mobile teams in the cities.

The paper introduces the mobile teams' operating model and outlines the challenges they faced and mitigation strategies developed during the project implementation.

The information shared in the paper may inform and improve the future efforts of peacebuilding actors in Ukraine, who aim to deploy mobile teams or are already coordinating the work of mobile teams in IDP shelters / collective centres.

Mobile Teams' Operating Model & Activities

The mobile teams were established and operated as follows:



The idea to create mobile teams evolved in late April 2022 as an emergency response to migration flows in Ukraine. In March-April 2022, the western regions of Ukraine became the primary destination for many displaced people seeking refuge and key transfer points for those looking to gain asylum in neighbouring countries. According to local authorities, in March-April 2022 the western city of Lviv hosted approximately 200,000 displaced people, which is more than a quarter of its population. Due to increased migration flows and insufficient infrastructure and service capacity, the western regions of Ukraine were likely to experience growing tensions between permanent residents and displaced people as well as tensions within those groups once the initial solidarity and shock caused by the conflict wore off. In addition, the highly stressful situation could have stirred new misperceptions and misunderstandings, which could have resulted in future social division.

As soon as the idea of the intervention was shaped, the project team started developing a Guideline for the mobile teams' operations, summarising operational and methodological approaches. The Guideline outlined the following key topics:

- **Mobile Team Work Sites and Entry Points to IDP Shelters**

The initial operating model developed in early June 2022 envisioned that mobile teams would work in different types of sites:

- IDP shelters (schools, dormitories, collective centres, module housing etc.).
- Private accommodation: multi-family housing offered to IDPs by locals free of charge, accommodation provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

- c) Local businesses, offices, warehouses, and sport halls serving as temporary shelters.
- d) Railway stations as transfer points for IDPs.

To reach out to the beneficiaries, the mobile teams had to establish contact with IDP shelter staff or host community representatives who worked with IDPs. They needed to identify volunteers, private housing providers, NGOs or local businesses that were offering spaces for IDPs' collective residence, railway station administrations, and city administrations responsible for IDP issues. The mobile teams, as representatives of host communities, were easily able to identify focal points and had unimpeded access to IDP shelters. During the first visit to a shelter, the mobile teams were tasked with developing a situation analysis of each site, indicating the current needs of the shelter, the responsiveness of staff, and the possible scope of work for mobile teams. The mobile teams also created an online form to receive individual direct requests of beneficiaries or invitations from authorised persons working with IDPs.

In September 2022, the mobile teams had to make changes to their activities due to the dynamics of migration flows and changing circumstances in the shelters, such as the start of the academic year and the subsequent need to accommodate incoming students in dormitories which functioned as IDP shelters in summer 2022. Starting in September 2022, the mobile teams began working in places with a high demand for the services they provided. In particular, in IDP shelters (dormitories of local universities or colleges and module housing), community or IDP support centres.

In addition, the mobile teams rolled out individual and group activities in the offices of the Lviv Mediation Centre or mobile team local partner organisations to ensure a safe space and atmosphere, contributing to trust-building and sharing of personal experiences. The mobile teams also conducted online activities to engage beneficiaries living in private accommodations.

In September 2022, the demand for the services provided by the mobile teams drastically decreased in the facilities of local businesses and sports halls hosting IDPs because their owners resumed their business activities. Railway stations no longer served as transfer points for IDPs as the displacement dynamics changed. IDPs started arriving in western Ukraine cities after having time to prepare, meaning they were not seeking overnight shelter for several nights in the railway stations.

- **Mobile Teams' Scope of Work**

As envisioned in the initial operating model, the mobile teams were tasked with delivering the following services:

- a) Counselling (psychological and social).
- b) Conflict resolution (mediation, shuttle diplomacy, facilitated dialogue).

- c) Conflict prevention activities.

The mobile teams worked with the following types of conflict or situations:

- a) Household conflicts (everyday routine quarrels, neglect of general rules of the shared space or commitments, access to available resources, humanitarian aid, etc.).
- b) Conflicts based on political views, identity, perception of conflict, language, religion; aggressive attitude towards the choices of others, labelling, etc.
- c) Emotional reactions of IDPs or shelter staff caused by long-term exposure to stress, trauma, etc.
- d) Conflicts with local authorities during business registration or business relocation from severely affected regions; conflicts regarding the receipt of social benefits.

The mobile teams applied the following tools and techniques while working in shelters:

- a) Mediation.
- b) Restorative circles.
- c) Psychological counselling.
- d) Facilitated dialogue.
- e) Social consultations (consultations on how to obtain financial assistance from the state, how to register as IDP etc.).
- f) Awareness-raising and training on self-support and stress management.

In September 2022, the mobile teams assessed that it was premature to conduct anticipated activities such as restorative circles and facilitated dialogue in shelters due to the mental state of IDPs, the volatile environment, the dynamics of migration flows and the lack of safe space in shelters. After the revision of the mobile teams' operating model in September 2022, they moved towards also delivering the following demand-driven services:

- a) 'Talking therapy' (conversation with IDPs who declined psychological support or did not provide informed consent. However, these IDPs participated in consultations lasting 40 minutes to 1 hour in which they conversed about their feelings or a traumatic experience. People who receive psychological support are frequently stigmatised in Ukraine, however, 'talking therapy' has become the most popular activity in the IDP shelters because it helps to alleviate stress and is not referred to as a 'psychotherapy session').
- b) Conflict-related awareness-raising sessions (handling emotions in conflict situations, behavioural strategies in conflict, etc.).
- c) Individual meetings with conflict parties within mediation cases.
- d) Shuttle diplomacy with conflict parties within mediation cases.

- e) Full-cycle mediation (mediation, which ends with a joint meeting between parties to a conflict and a joint decision on the conflict).
- f) Crisis-response individual psychological counselling (one-off consultations).
- g) Individual psychological therapy (series of meetings, long-lasting process).
- h) Psychological group therapy (series of meetings, long-lasting process within one established group).
- i) Group art therapy for children.
- j) Social counselling (topics of consultations: IDP status, social benefits, admission to academic institutions, etc.).

- **Mobile Teams' Support Services**

To ensure the smooth operations of mobile teams and prevent burnout, the Lviv Mediation Centre and DRC organised weekly group supervision meetings for all mobile teams and individual supervision upon request. The mobile teams also had weekly group intervention meetings and individual interventions upon request to work with personal attitudes, emotional reactions, and stressful environments.

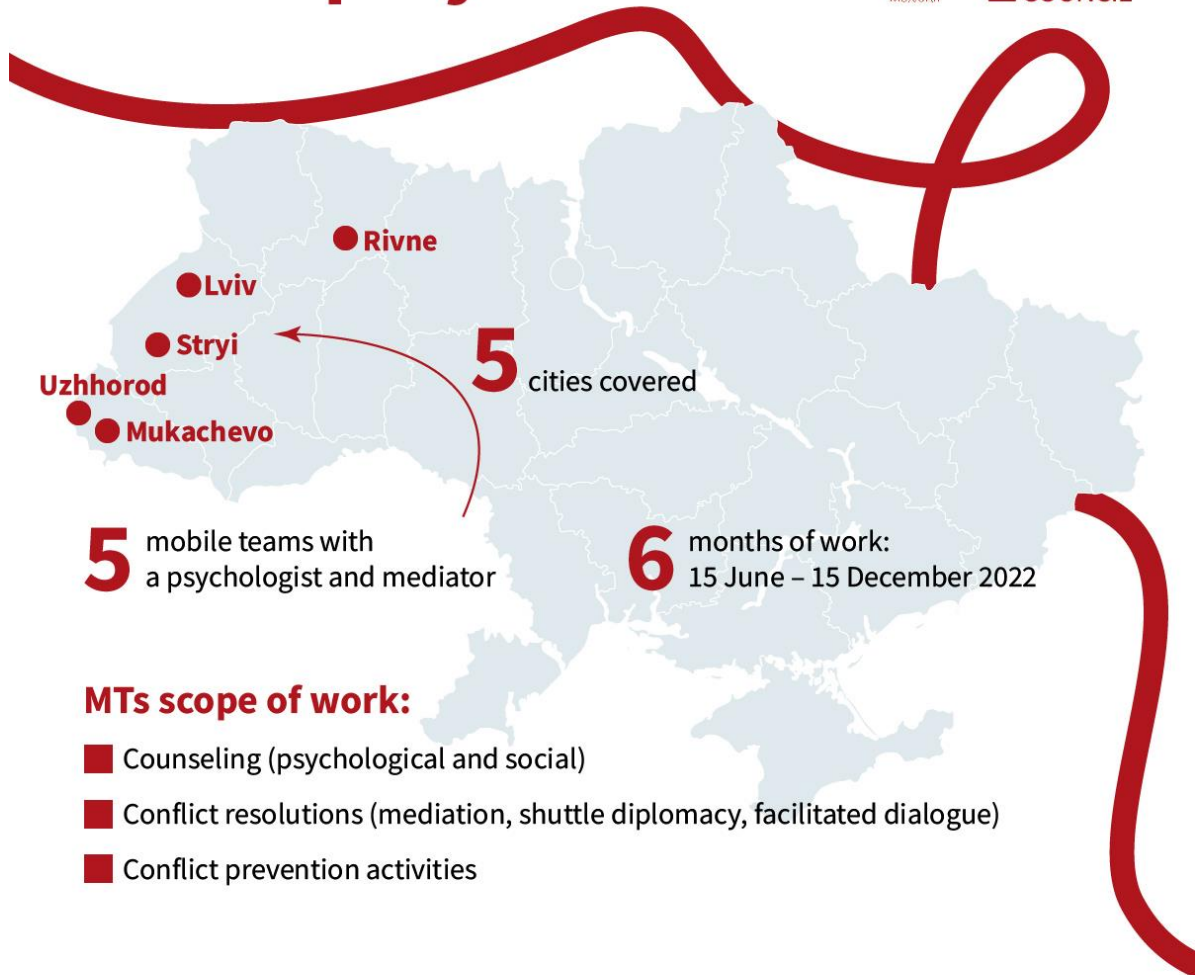
On top of this, half of the mobile team members attended 10 individual psychological or professional mentorship sessions with external psychologists and mentors deployed by the DRC. According to feedback from the mobile teams, such additional support services were beneficial for their mental state and provided the necessary support during the project implementation.

Mobile Teams' Achievements

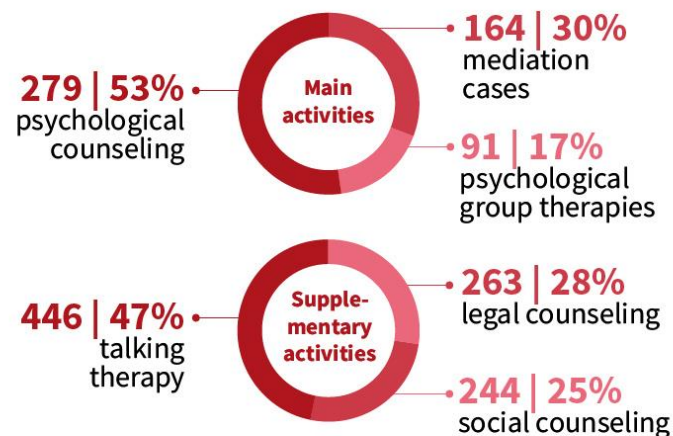
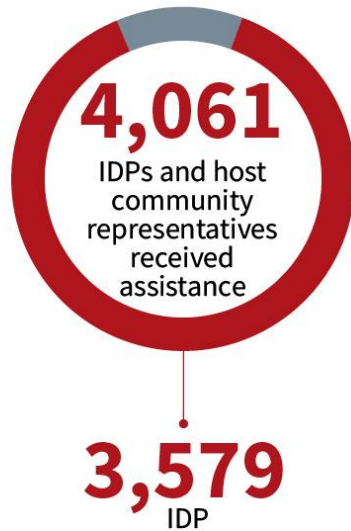
- **Mobile Teams' Achievements**

Despite the challenges associated with the project implementation, the mobile teams demonstrated the following outreach and performance:

About project



Statistics



Challenges and Lessons Learnt

1. **Time is necessary to build trust between mobile teams and beneficiaries.** The access of mobile teams to IDP shelters and the provision of services is impossible without trust-based relations with the staff of IDP shelters and IDPs. Based on the experience gained by the mobile teams, at least two months are needed to establish such relationships. So, when operationalising mobile teams, at least two months must be allocated for the introductory phase and establishing trust-based relations with the staff of IDP shelters and IDPs.
2. **IDPs and host community representatives working with IDPs should be equally supported by mobile teams.** The IDP shelter staff usually work in dormitories and do not receive any top-up to their salary or benefits for taking care of IDPs hosted in

dormitories. The staff's mental state directly impacts living conditions, and, consequently, the integration of IDPs into host communities. The staff have up-to-date information about conflicts in the shelters and the needs of IDPs, and mostly enjoy the trust and respect of the IDPs. The staff also holds coordination meetings with IDPs, participates in the distribution of humanitarian aid, and tries to resolve conflicts. While performing all these duties, the staff of IDP shelters should be supported by mobile teams.

3. **Flexibility of mobile teams.** At the project's inception stage, the mobile teams discovered that most IDPs who came to western Ukraine had already overcome the initial stress caused by the displacement. As a result, psychological crisis counselling, which was one of the anticipated mobile team services, became irrelevant. At the same time, the mobile teams started receiving requests from IDP shelters to conduct art-therapy sessions for IDPs, which was not initially envisioned by the project. Therefore, the mobile teams made changes to their activities and started providing art-therapy sessions, long-term psychological support or even therapy instead of working on crisis counselling. Mobile teams should be ready to change approaches, develop demand-driven training materials, and even attend IDP shelters after 6 pm when employed IDPs return from work.
4. **Flexibility of donors and coordinators.** The implementation of such projects requires the flexibility of donors, project coordinators and mobile teams. Donors should express a high level of responsiveness to changing activities and budgets if necessary. Coordinators need to apply agile project management strategies and be ready to make changes to methodologies.
5. **'Talking therapy' was the most in-demand service offered by mobile teams.** In the shelters, many IDPs declined psychological support or did not provide informed consent. However, IDPs frequently initiated a chat or conversation with the mobile teams and shared their experiences and emotions. The mobile teams exercised their professional counselling tools and active listening during these conversations. Eventually, IDPs felt a sense of relief following these conversations. The mobile teams were tasked with naming this service/activity/type of support and, after numerous discussions, decided to call it "talking therapy or therapeutic conversations".
6. **Safe space for mobile team activities.** Not all IDP shelters have safe, comfortable and private spaces for individual or group activities. Moreover, the mobile teams frequently conduct project-related activities outside shelters with IDPs who moved out from shelters or lived in private accommodations. Projects should therefore invest in equipping such spaces in the targeted shelters or renting safe and accessible spaces.
7. **Collaboration with local partner organisations or institutions** is crucial for the effectiveness of mobile teams. The mobile teams were informed about the case for their intervention from local partners, for instance, the IDP Support Centre established by Lviv City Council or Free Legal Aid offices. Moreover, in some cities, the mobile teams used the offices of local partners to provide services in safe and private spaces away from the shelters. Such a collaborative approach allows for better outreach. It also

allows host community representatives to join activities with IDPs, indirectly contributing to improved social cohesion and community conflict prevention.

8. **The services provided by mobile teams should be delivered along with humanitarian aid or other ‘hard’ activities.** The mobile teams facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid to temporary shelters in Lviv and Stryi (Lviv Oblast) through the DRC’s internal referral mechanism. In particular, five targeted shelters in Lviv and Stryi received hygiene kits. The mobile teams coordinated the distribution of NFI kits (non-food item kits) between the shelters’ administrations and DRC. The team initiated the referral process to address the needs of the shelters, which the mobile teams could not address. After providing humanitarian aid, the mobile teams noticed a change in the attitude of the staff and IDPs in collective centres towards the work of the mobile teams. This mobilised IDPs and encouraged them to participate in the activities of the mobile teams. In these communities where emergency needs are evident, humanitarian aid (the ‘hard component’ to address the basic needs of conflict-affected people) was a priority, and when provided, proved to be an entryway for conflict prevention activities or psychological support for IDPs (the ‘soft’ component). As a lesson learned, material assistance and cultural or recreational events should accompany any ‘soft activities’ in IDP shelters during crises.
9. **Mobile teams should be supported by supervision and intervision** to reduce work-related stress, prevent burnout and increase their motivation. A supervising mediator and a supervising psychologist worked with the mobile teams throughout the project. Supervisors provided weekly group supervision sessions and individual sessions upon request. Supervision components have proved to be essential in overcoming the emotional reactions, personal biases, and attitudes of mobile team members, which could impede their communication with IDPs.
10. **Field visits of project coordinators and face-to-face communication with mobile teams and beneficiaries are compulsory.** It helps to better understand the conditions in which the mobile teams work and to see the impact of the work of mobile teams on people.
11. **Collecting feedback from the project’s beneficiaries is highly challenging,** even with simplified data collection tools. The project’s beneficiaries are extremely cautious about sharing personal data or even their opinions as a result of living in areas beyond government control or coming from highly affected areas. This means that beneficiary feedback forms should be as simple and concise as possible.
12. **Mobile teams should organise informal, face-to-face meetings between the teams** if the security situation allows. At the project planning stage, face-to-face networking activities for mobile team members and project coordinators were not envisioned due to the security situation and volatile context. When the security situation allows, the operational model of mobile teams should always include respective networking activities during the project inception and wrap-up phases.
13. **Mobile teams should facilitate and support host community representatives affected by the conflict and the integration of IDPs into host communities through**

cultural and recreational events away from IDP shelters, which would engage host community representatives and IDPs. Such events would contribute to social cohesion and IDP integration and recovery.

14. **The words ‘mediation’ and ‘mediator’ are unclear to IDPs and host community representatives due to insufficient awareness about conflict prevention and resolution practices** involving third parties. The word ‘mediator’ was hence replaced with the word ‘conflictologist’ (‘conflict resolution expert’, ‘конфліктолог’) in all mobile team public/external communications.