

A braid of care and empowerment — partnerships for refugees from Ukraine

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February 24, 2022 was Hanna Mankus's forty-second birthday, but instead of a celebration, she woke up to an invasion. Peering out of the window, she saw several Russian fighter jets flying by her home in Zaporizhzhia from Crimea, the sonic booms of the aircraft shaking the entire building as they passed. With a surge of adrenaline, Hanna sprang into action, instinctively gathering some belongings, grabbed her children by the hand, and rushed to the railway station in hopes of boarding one of the evacuation trains.

The scene was one of pandemonium and despair, with thousands of people, including women, children, and the elderly, desperately struggling to secure a place on the trains. For a few minutes, Hanna's heart skipped a beat as she momentarily lost sight of her younger son, Artem, during what felt like an eternity. On the train, compartments originally meant for four

people held twenty individuals, pressed together in discomfort. Whenever the train was forced to stop due to overhead shelling, the hours felt like days. When they were finally able to cross the border, the family found themselves adrift in a sea of uncertainty, where the duration of their exile remained unknown.

Hanna's story is far from unique. During the first three months of Russia's invasion, 6.5 million people left Ukraine, the biggest exodus in Europe since the Second World War and one of the fastest-growing refugee crises in history. Host countries, including Poland, which received over 3.5 million refugees in a matter of months, and Moldova, the second poorest country in Europe with a population of just 2.6 million, which received over 700,000 refugees, were quickly overwhelmed. In the face of what could have become a humanitarian disaster of gigantic proportion, hundreds of thousands of individuals and families in the host countries took action, flocking to railway



Image: Polish Women Can Foundation

Ukrainian refugees study Polish language and culture at the Safe Haven, a collaboration between the Polish Women Can Foundation and Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation



Image: Airlink

Strengthening the local capacity to provide life-saving medical care through the donation of medical equipment, in partnership with Airlink and ADRA in the Baryshivka region, Ukraine

stations and borders to offer transportation and necessities, or opening their doors to the refugees, allowing Ukrainian families, women and children to stay in their homes. National and international non-government organizations also acted quickly, setting up tents and providing services, many times coordinating the efforts directly on the ground.

For Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation (Tzu Chi), a faith-based international non-governmental organization with volunteers in 66 countries and activities in 128 countries around the world, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine marked the start of months of febrile activity. Before the conflict, the organization had its main activities, resources, and volunteer manpower in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, with only a modest presence in Europe. In particular, the organization was not present in any of the countries neighbouring Ukraine. Still, the mandate of the organization's founder, Bhikkhuni Dharma Master Cheng Yen, was clear: compassion and love go beyond borders and are independent of religion, nationality, ethnicity, societal status, age, or gender. Remaining inactive in the midst of such tremendous suffering and needs was not an option.

Mobilizing connections in Poland as well as volunteers from Germany, Türkiye, UK, and the US and establishing relationships with local churches and charitable organizations, Tzu Chi was able to quickly set up a number of distribution points to provide refugees with grocery cards and cash value cards, providing recipients with the agency to choose how to use the assistance, based on their individual needs. Distributions were organized to maximize their healing, uplifting, and community building qualities, featuring Ukrainian performances and music, a streamlined check-in and distribution process, and a large number of volunteers to guide and interact with the refugees, who were also invited to volunteer or donate money themselves to assist others and pass the love forward.

However, it was clear from the start that there were limits to what Tzu Chi could accomplish by itself. To have a lasting,

positive effect on the development of the refugee crisis, Tzu Chi needed to partner with other local as well as international organizations, working together to maximize the impact of their combined resources and expertise. Tzu Chi therefore issued a call for project proposals and reached out to long-term partner organizations to solicit project ideas and plans rooted in the situation on the ground. Among the proposals received, the organization selected those most aligned with its principles of directness, timeliness, priority, practicality, and respect, with a special focus on projects that promoted agency and empowerment of the target populations. Selected organizations included UNICEF, the Camillian Disaster Services International Foundation (CADIS), Polish Women Can Foundation, IsraAID, Airlink, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Project Hope, and World Hope International. As it happened, aside from strengthening the aid capacities of everyone involved, these partnerships also created a strong interfaith bond, including Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and secular organizations working hand in hand to provide relief for the mostly Orthodox, Catholic or secular Ukrainian refugees and IDPs.

For Hanna and the millions of other Ukrainian refugees, weeks in exile turned into months, and with time, a range of different needs presented themselves. In the beginning, the main concern might have been shelter and food, but gradually, needs for psychological support, medical assistance, and long-term housing were joined by the necessities of learning the host country's language and finding job opportunities. Anticipating these developing needs, Tzu Chi's various partnerships addressed different clusters of needs, and the flexible partnership setups ensured that the responses would evolve and develop according to the shifting situation on the ground.

Before the invasion, the Camillian Mission for Social Assistance had been assisting populations affected by homelessness in Warsaw, building up significant capacities and networks for shelter, rehousing, and job placement services as well as a variety of urgent relief expertise. With the arrival of the Ukrainian refugees, these capacities were quickly put to good use, with staff setting up information services at the two main railway stations in Warsaw, providing information as well as hot meals and other assistance to tens of thousands of refugees on a daily basis. With assistance from Tzu Chi, part of the Camillians' homeless shelter facility was turned into short-term housing for Ukrainian women and children, and their seminary dormitory was renovated and repurposed into intermediate-term housing, in particular for families. The provisions included meal services, regular medical services, childcare for preschool-aged children, as well as job placement and assistance in finding long-term rental housing for residents once they were able to stand on their own feet. The most recent addition to the services is the provision of a co-working space, enabling refugees to make an income by providing services to the community, including hair-dressing, manicures, and various types of handcraft.

The Polish Women Can Foundation specialized in assistance to children in foster care and their families, with expertise in dealing with different types of trauma in children and with the benefit of a large contact network among day care facilities around Poland. Building from their experiences of assisting



Image: Tiffany Tu

Cash value cards with letters of blessing from Tzu Chi and CADIS



Image: IsraAID

In Moldova, IsraAID's Child-Friendly Spaces have provided more than 2,500 children with therapeutic and recreational play, crafts, and educational opportunities in partnership with Tzu Chi

those vulnerable populations, they proposed to create an integration space where refugees, primarily the elderly, women, and mothers with children, could find a range of services helping them deal with their traumas and preparing them for a long-term stay in Poland. In partnership with Tzu Chi as well as a medical clinic company, AMEDS, the offerings included psychologist services, legal consultation, group therapy, therapeutic activities for children, medical services, and classes in parenting, safe birth, nutrition, and, crucially, the Polish language, all at no cost to the clients. The space was primarily staffed by Ukrainian refugees, providing employment opportunities for psychologists, doctors, teachers, and administrative personnel who were in this way able to assist their compatriots while simultaneously making a living and practicing their professions. This integration space was such a success with the Ukrainian refugee population in the Warsaw area that both the integrations space and the medical assistance project have been extended for a second year, currently running through to the end of 2023.

In Warsaw, these facilities complement the family care services and financial assistance provided by Tzu Chi's

volunteers. For example, care recipients may visit AMEDS for medical care and go to Polish Women Can for Polish language classes and psychological assistance, while working in the co-working space provided by the Camillian Mission. The close partnerships across organizations, sectors, and faiths create a braid much stronger than any of its threads, and the unity of vision among the partner organizations ensures that all of them work toward empowerment and rehabilitation, obviating the possibility of service recipients falling into a state of dependency or entitlement.

For the people who work within these partnerships, the experience is providing another, unexpected benefit — the deep and warm friendships developed with colleagues, volunteers, and care recipients from different organizations, countries, cultures, and backgrounds. In the end, such interpersonal relationships, characterized by gratitude, respect and love, may very well be what will most help refugees from Ukraine in their journey of re-establishing their lives, whether in their new host countries or after returning to Ukraine in the future.

Letter from a Safe Haven beneficiary

"I arrived in Warsaw with my daughter Vlada and our dog, having only two backpacks with candles, matches, soap and provisions for three days each. Thankfully, I heard about the Safe Haven by Polish Women Can Foundation and Tzu Chi Foundation. There, we were able to receive grocery cards, professional psychological support, legal assistance, group language classes, various trainings and group meetings, and even celebrations and gifts during the holidays. My daughter found friends among the group for teenagers, who spend time solving their problems together with psychologists and also play games such as billiards and bowling. For us, the Safe Haven has truly become a place where you feel like home. It's a place where you can take a break, drink delicious coffee, talk about what's going on right now and know that you're not alone. It's a space where new friends appear, new ideas are born and the desire to live returns. Thank you so much for being in our lives, and thank you for your work, responsiveness, professionalism, creativity, warmth, and humanity."

Marianna Fedorenko

Supply of clean, drinkable water, free for residents

After the city of Mykolaiv saw its water infrastructure destroyed by war, the city had no clean water for over three months, and what water it did have was contaminated. Tzu Chi and IsraAID partnered with the local municipality to install twelve reverse osmosis (RO) systems along with 32 heated dispensers, which, so far, have produced more than 2.3 million litres of clean, drinkable water free for all residents.

"We had no water whatsoever. Every day, I drove around looking for springs. I wanted to help my hometown. I do everything in my power to help people with drinkable water."

A Mykolaiv resident, Pavlo, who joined IsraAID as a water process engineer.