



YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE:

Amplifying Youth Voices for Ukraine's
Reconstruction and Recovery

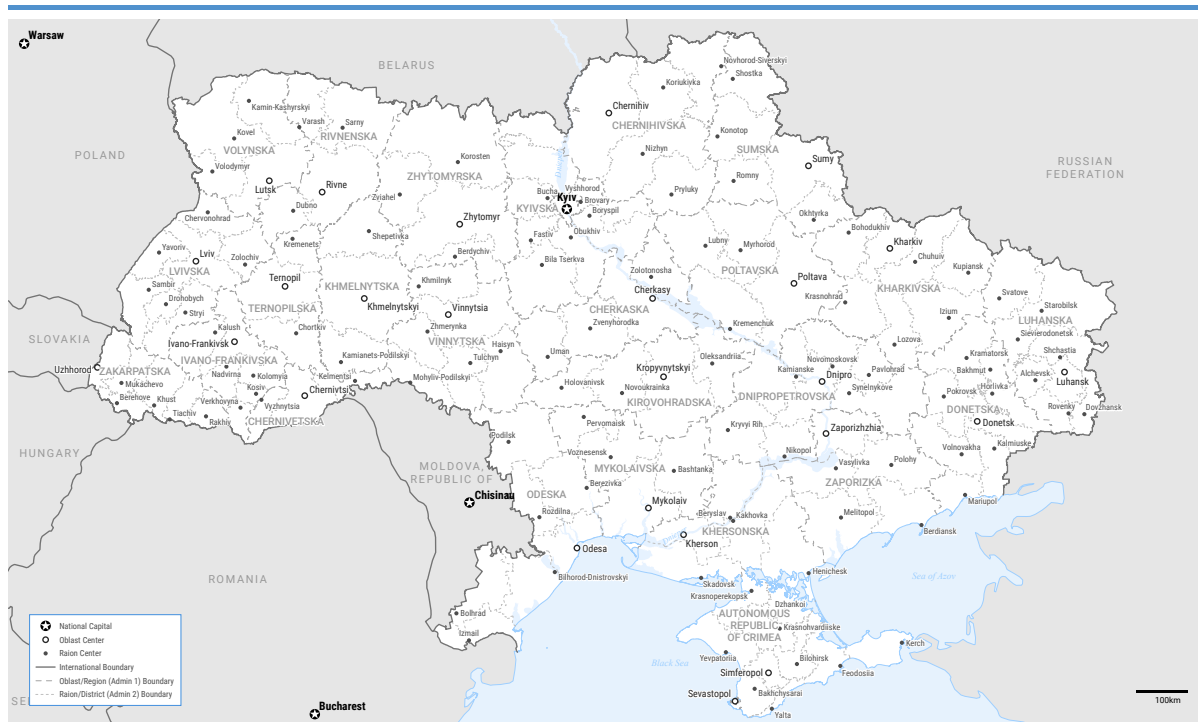
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UKRAINE Reference Map As of 8 March 2023



The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The lives of millions of people, including young people, have been impacted by the escalation of the war in Ukraine. While the conflict shows no sign of abating, reconstruction and recovery plans are being developed and resources mobilised to support these efforts. In line with the UN Security Council's Youth, Peace and Security agenda, it is essential that young people in all of their diversity play an active role in shaping the future direction of their country.

Between April and May 2023, 200 young people impacted by the war in Ukraine, either still within the country or who have fled to Moldova, Poland and Romania, volunteered their time to participate in youth consultations undertaken by Plan International. They shared their priorities and views on Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. Across all the 22 focus groups, **young people impacted by the war in Ukraine spoke of wanting to be actively engaged in their country's reconstruction and recovery to bring new ideas, innovative thinking and accountability to the future of Ukraine.** The issues in this paper reflect the views of the focus group participants and not necessarily Plan International's organisational positions.

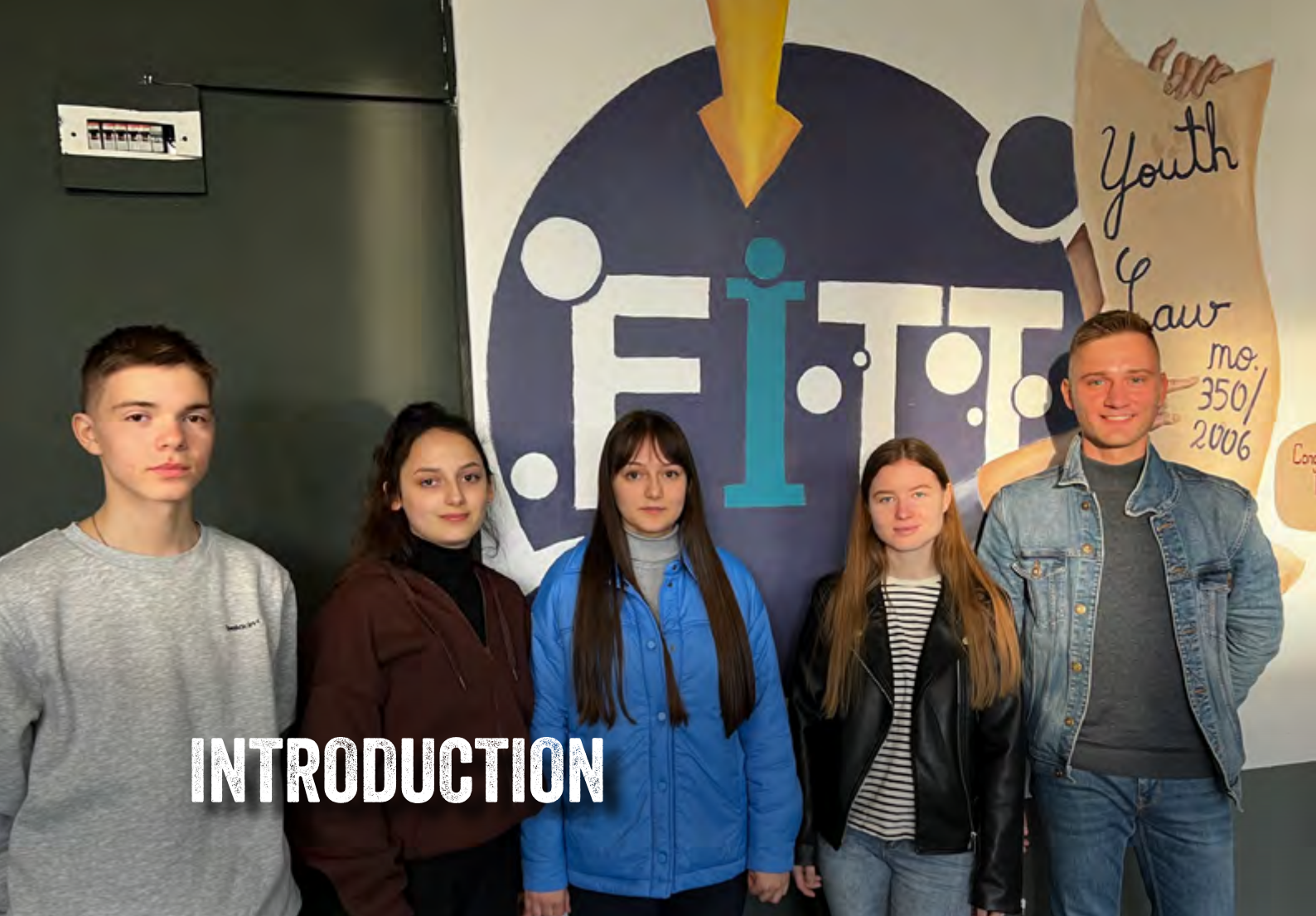
Key recurring issues included:

- The near unanimous and urgent **calls for mental health and psychosocial support to be embedded into Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery.** Accessible and affordable support is needed for young people, as is the need to destigmatise seeking mental health help. **Soldiers and veterans were signalled out in every focus group as requiring urgent mental health, psychosocial and reintegration support.**
- **Volunteers, people with disabilities, the elderly, people who have lost their homes, single mothers and children who have lost parents** were also identified as needing dedicated support.
- Significant emphasis was placed on **rebuilding Ukraine's economy, energy infrastructure, hospitals, homes, workplaces and schools, to ensure people have somewhere to live, somewhere to be educated and somewhere to be treated.** Internally displaced youth from the eastern parts of the country added **calls for Ukraine's**

reconstruction and recovery to be done in an equitable way and to rebuild both wealthy and poorer regions of Ukraine simultaneously.

- In all focus group discussions **facilitating the return to offline learning** as soon as possible **and reforming Ukraine's education system, were identified as two essential priorities** for Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery.
- Mixed responses were received when focus group participants were asked whether young women and men would have different needs and opportunities in Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. **Some young women and adolescent girls hoped that Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery would be a catalyst to dispel commonly held assumptions on gender roles.** Others expressed concerns that the war will further entrench traditional gender norms and stereotypes, particularly among men.
- **Conditions for considering safe return consistently included feeling safe, housing, education and employment opportunities.** Focus group participants advised that part of feeling safe enough to return, is the need for widescale de-mining across large parts of eastern and southern Ukraine. While some young refugees who participated in the focus groups were adamant that they would return to Ukraine at some point after the war is over, the majority were more hesitant. The economic and livelihood prospects back in Ukraine are significant factors impacting on the decision making of the young people Plan International spoke to currently living in host countries.
- **Calls for justice and accountability** featured prominently in young people's messages to decision makers and the importance of enhancing **social cohesion programming** both within and outside of Ukraine.

When the war is over, young people from Ukraine will be essential to Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. **It is of utmost importance that young people impacted by the war in Ukraine are provided with formal and informal opportunities to influence their own future and be connected to all reconstruction and recovery initiatives and decision-making processes at the local, regional, national and international levels.**



INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine has upended the lives of young people and those of their families. Many young people impacted by the war in Ukraine now face an uncertain future. Since the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, [over 8 million refugees](#) from Ukraine have sought protection across Europe and over 5 million people are internally displaced. As of May 2023, the [UN human rights agency](#) indicated that civilian casualties had risen to 23,600 however local organisations estimate the toll to be much higher.

While the war is ongoing, Ukrainian authorities and the international donor community have started strategizing on Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery¹ and have commenced mobilising the resources that will be required to support these efforts. In line with the Youth, Peace and Security agenda adopted by the UN Security Council in 2015², young people have a pivotal role in shaping and promoting conflict prevention, resolution and stabilisation efforts, as well in driving post-conflict plans on reconstruction, peacebuilding and sustainable development. It is essential that Ukraine's decision makers, at all levels of government, as well as the international donor community, work with diverse youth to identify and address their needs, concerns and priorities, given the key role young people will play in rebuilding the country and shaping its future direction. This includes prioritising the conditions needed to encourage young people who fled to neighbouring countries to come back to Ukraine and contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery.

Plan International's Ukraine Humanitarian Response is committed to promoting the views of adolescents and youth affected by the war in Ukraine and to give them a voice in important policy spaces which will help shape the country's post-war future. This policy paper summarises the key discussions from consultations Plan International conducted with over 200 young people from Ukraine, either still in the country or who fled to Moldova, Poland and Romania.

Plan International is an independent humanitarian and development organisation which upholds the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. As a child and youth focused organisation, we are also committed to providing a platform for young people to speak directly to decision makers on policies which will impact them now and in the future. In this paper, Plan International seeks to genuinely represent the diverse views of the young people who volunteered their time to speak with us. **The views captured in this paper are those the young people that participated in the consultations expressed and do not necessarily reflect Plan International's organisational positions. While Plan International is restricted in the language and terminology we can use, we do not attempt to shape in any way the language or ideas of the young people that voluntarily wanted to make their voice heard.**

¹ Including via the development of the National Strategy on Internal Displacement and Action Plan for 2023-2025, Ukraine's National Recovery Plan, and other forthcoming regional and local recovery plans.

² The UN Security Council has adopted three resolutions on Youth, Peace and Security: UNSCR 2250 (2015); UNSCR 2419 (2018); and UNSCR 2535 (2020).



METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout April and early May 2023, Plan International conducted 22 focus group discussions with young people in Ukraine and currently in Moldova, Romania and Poland. These included a total of 202 participants, consisting of 103 young people now living in the three host countries where Plan International is working in; 64 internally displaced youth within Ukraine; 20 young adults not displaced inside Ukraine; and 15 currently living in occupied territories (online). The targeted age

range was 14 to 24 but in some focus groups a few 12 and 13-year-olds also participated, as well as several over 25-year-old adults. The table below shows the breakdown of participants per country. Focus groups participants were able to speak in Ukrainian, Russian or English depending on which language they felt most comfortable in. In all but two of the focus groups, participants were grouped by age bringing together under 18-year-olds and then over-18-year-olds in separate groups.

Participants were asked:

- what they would prioritise if they were in charge of Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery;
- the role of young people;
- their vision of post-war Ukraine;
- their message to decision makers; and then specifically
- the role of education;
- what gender considerations should be addressed;
- how the reconstruction and recovery process could support young people's mental health;
- how the reconstruction and recovery efforts should promote young people's livelihoods and economic opportunities;
- what vulnerable population groups would need the most support;
- and under what conditions would they consider returning to Ukraine or where they lived prior to the escalation of the war, if internally displaced.

In the short amount of time available, Plan International sought to speak with young people impacted by the war in Ukraine currently living in diverse locations. Within Ukraine, focus groups mostly took place in central and western parts of Ukraine³ where there are large internally displaced populations. Two focus group discussions were held online due to the changing security situation in Cherkassy where an apartment building had been hit and a major highway damaged in missile attacks the day before the research team was scheduled to travel there. Our last focus group was held online with young people who either fled or were still in occupied areas. Due to humanitarian access and security constraints, Plan International was unable to organise focus groups with more young people still living in occupied areas. It will be crucial to consult with young people from newly accessible areas to identify and address their specific needs, priorities and recommendations.

Plan International would like to thank its partners, education institutions and local youth organisations who helped facilitate the focus group discussions in the four countries. Plan International would particularly like to thank all the young people who volunteered their time to share their perspectives, thoughts and recommendations. Our researchers appreciated how generous and candid all participants were in sharing their ideas, as well as their personal stories and experiences. We heard how important it was for them to be able to give their opinions on the future of their country. Many Plan International staff were involved in arranging the focus group discussions and inputting into this policy paper. A special thanks goes to Mariia Anosova, Program Assistant at Plan International Ukraine for her excellent work project managing the focus groups within Ukraine and adapting to changing schedules and security considerations.

Table 1: breakdown of focus group discussion participants per country

Country	FGDs	Total participants	#female participants	#male participants
Ukraine	11	99	67 in total: 7 under 14; 28 aged 14-17; 18 aged 18-24; 14 aged 25+	32 in total: 3 under 14; 17 aged 14-17; 7 aged 18-24; 5 aged 25+
Moldova	3	18	13 in total 3 under 14; 6 aged 14-17; 4 aged 18-24.	5 in total 1 under 14; 1 aged 14-17; 3 over 18.
Romania	6	53	38 in total 4 under 14; 17 aged 14-17; 17 aged 18-24.	15 in total 3 under 14; 4 aged 14-17; 7 aged 18-24; 1 over 25.
Poland	2	32	15 in total 1 under 14; 11 aged 14-17; 3 aged 18-24	17 in total 3 under 14; 7 aged 14-17; 7 aged 18-24

³ For security and safeguarding reasons, the exact locations of the focus groups discussions are not being included in this paper or the names of the organisations which helped facilitate these.



IF YOUNG PEOPLE WERE IN CHARGE

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Despite our age we have a lot of things to say that are really important to hear

12 year-old boy living in occupied Mariupol.

“

Young people should be given more authority as we have a vision for how the country should look like, we're willing to reconstruct it ourselves and we won't be doing it just to make money

17 year-old internally displaced teenage girl from Kherson.

“

The young people who will live here have to do something to make the country better and rebuild it for ourselves. We have a great opportunity to build a new country for ourselves

26 year-old man in Kyiv.

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Across all the focus groups, young people impacted by the war in Ukraine spoke of wanting to be actively engaged in their country's reconstruction and recovery, to bring new ideas, innovative thinking and accountability for the future of Ukraine. Multiple participants raised that young people are already involved, either by volunteering in humanitarian aid delivery or helping with initial rebuilding efforts. **What was requested was for this engagement to be systematised and formalised. Focus group participants called for the establishment of formal processes to promote youth participation in reconstruction and recovery efforts.** A young man currently in Kyiv added this should include developing consultation mechanisms to ensure young veterans have a voice. A 17-year-old boy internally displaced from Kherson highlighted the importance of reconstructing Ukraine in an equitable way to ensure both wealthy and poorer regions of Ukraine are simultaneously rebuilt. Similarly, a young male refugee in Bucharest, Romania emphasised that **Ukraine's reconstruction should not just focus on Kyiv and other big cities.** A 16-year-old teenage girl originally from Donetsk thought that reconstruction efforts should prioritise the regions of Ukraine most affected by the war including the Donetsk region, Mariupol, Bakhmut and Luhansk. Significant emphasis was placed on rebuilding Ukraine's economy, energy infrastructure, hospitals, homes, workplaces and schools. For instance, a female university student in Kyiv said that alongside rebuilding homes, it is equally important to rebuild

schools, kindergartens and hospitals so that people who come back have somewhere to live, somewhere to be educated and somewhere to be treated. A 20-year-old internally displaced young man said he would prioritise medical help. His parents are still in Mariupol and they are in need of medical assistance. He would also **focus on social housing support.** So many people he knows cannot afford to rebuild their homes. In five focus groups, it was highlighted that the rebuilding process should include the construction of environmentally sustainable buildings and investment in green energy.

Tackling corruption was also raised as an important priority in eight of the focus groups. An internally displaced young woman from Mariupol said she would go back once the city is under Ukrainian control and if she was assured that there would be changes. She does not see the point of going back if corruption levels stay the same after the war. A 20-year-old man now in Moldova thought that decreasing the level of corruption would be necessary to ensure equal opportunities for everyone living in Ukraine. Addressing corruption in Ukrainian universities was raised as an issue of concern in over 18-year-old focus groups within Ukraine, as well as in Romania and Poland. Focus participants described professors requesting bribes for high exam results as a common occurrence within some universities across Ukraine.



MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

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The war has forced young people to grow up really quickly and we now struggle with low morale

14-year-old internally displaced girl from Mariupol

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Our mental health is definitely one of the primary concerns, because it's not possible to build a healthy country with mentally ill people

17-year-old internally displaced girl from Kherson

“

I think every Ukrainian will need psychological support. It will be important for the future of Ukraine, as now we have people who don't care or feel sad when people die as it's too much for them and it is too scary

adolescent refugee girl currently in Bucharest, Romania

“

When my village was being bombed, I kept praying for the bombs to fall every 10 seconds, instead of every two seconds. Now my mental health is different. I think 95% of young people are not okay with their feelings. Neither am I. I haven't seen my family in over a year and I am here alone

18 year-old refugee woman from Kherson, now in Romania.

Mental health and psychosocial support for young people

As an organisation working alongside its local partners to provide young people impacted by the war in Ukraine with mental health and psychosocial support, Plan International researchers sought to ask young people how the reconstruction and recovery process could support their mental health. However **the depth and sheer prevalence of young people's concerns surrounding the mental health challenges they, their families, and friends face and their determination to convey these frankly was astonishing.** In nearly every focus group discussion, **the crucial need to embed mental health and psychosocial support into Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery came up** unprompted and well before the planned questions relating to this. Across cities, towns and online where the focus group discussions took place, young people spoke of being scared of loud noises such as fireworks, cars backfiring, or airplanes. A young man who fled Mariupol and is currently living in Kyiv, recounted how he immediately got to the ground when he heard Ukrainian air force planes engaging in a training exercise when he was in Western Ukraine. He still has flashbacks from before he fled Mariupol. An 18-year-old woman in the same focus group also shared that she experienced similar flashbacks and even though she has deleted all news applications off her phone, she still thinks of what she saw, what she remembers and that her home is destroyed. An 18-year-old man from Odessa now in Moldova, similarly explained that he sees people around him with deep trauma who will never be able to celebrate holidays or fireworks. Acute sensitivity to loud noises was frequently raised in all focus groups. A 17-year-old teenage girl now in Romania highlighted the need for everyone to start seeking professional help as untreated trauma could impact on people's lives and health for decades to come. A 14-year-old boy in Poland thought the war needs to stop before they can be ok again.

The few young people that Plan International was able to speak to online still in occupied territories, described being constantly stressed and calling for an end to the war. A 14-year-old adolescent girl from Bucha, now in Poland thought that young people still in occupied territories will need the most support. She added that it was hard to comprehend or talk about what is happening in Mariupol. In the same focus group discussion with adolescents now in Rzeszow, Poland, a 15-year-old boy thought that help and support, including mental health support, will first need to go to those living in areas most directly affected by the war and others will need to wait.

Young people now in the three host countries where Plan International is working in, reflected that it took them a long time to start feeling safe even while knowing they were outside of Ukraine. A 20-year-old woman originally from Odessa and now in Moldova said refugees from Ukraine in host countries had to realise that they were now safe and accept the events that happened in their lives, but people still feel like something has been ruined. A 14-year-old teenage girl in Poland, said in addition to refugees trying to cope with the conditions that saw them flee Ukraine, some young people are now also being bullied in host country schools. She said she does not feel like she belongs in Poland, that it is difficult to make friends and her classmates do not understand how scary it was when they had to run away.

Focus group participants had many **recommendations on how to incorporate mental health and psychosocial support for young people into Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery.** These included: **making free therapy sessions available to everyone in need; enhancing the capacity and availability of school psychologists so that they are properly equipped**

to support distressed students who have lived through traumatic events; establishing group psychology sessions within youth centres across the country and providing different approaches to therapy including art or music therapy; expanding 24-hour help lines; promoting peer-to-peer mentoring programs; and ensuring tailored outreach to young people with disabilities to ensure they get the support they need too. It was systematically emphasised that all programs aimed at supporting young people's mental health and resilience should be free and available to all in need. Focus group participants described the fees to see a psychologist as being too expensive for most people in Ukraine who are already struggling with soaring cost of living prices and an over **20 percent inflation rate** in 2023. An 18-year-old female psychology student now living in Kyiv said that in a discussion with her professor and classmates, they estimated that people displaced by the war would need a minimum of five years of intense psychological support, followed by many more years of regular therapy to be able to fully recover from the mental scars caused by the conflict.

It was repeatedly emphasised that it **will not just be young people who will need ongoing mental health and psychosocial support, but that services should be freely available to all people from Ukraine impacted by the war.** This will require a nation-wide shift in attitudes on seeking help and support for mental health issues. Focus group participants spoke at length of **needing to tackle the stigma associated with mental health in Ukraine.** It was recommended that this should include nation-wide media campaigns normalising seeking help.

Mental health, psychosocial and reintegration support for military personnel

Soldiers and veterans were signalled out in every focus group as requiring urgent mental health, psychosocial and reintegration support. **Some participants shared how worried they were for their family members, particularly their fathers, while others spoke more broadly of their concerns on how the war was impacting conscripted soldiers, predominantly men.** A 16-year-old internally displaced girl from Kharkiv conveyed her anguish for her father, fighting in Bakhmut. A 17-year-old teenage girl now in Romania shared that when she speaks with her dad, he becomes upset and angry. He can no longer have regular conversations with her or her mother. She knows he has seen people being killed and has had to kill people, but she is scared that she does not know how she and her mother can help him in the future. She thought veterans will need support to grieve. A 14-year-old boy in Moldova conveyed that his father is triggered by the air sirens on his rest days and is rarely able to see his family now outside of Ukraine. **Focus group participants anticipated that it will be extremely challenging for soldiers to reintegrate into daily life and emphasised the importance of rolling out reintegration programs which will support veterans and their families.** A 20-year-old woman now in Moldova speculated that soldiers used to shooting their guns in response to violent situations may struggle not to resort to violence when confronted with difficult situations when they are back in civilian life. Several participants stressed that family members including children will need to understand what their loved ones experienced and be provided with coping and supporting strategies.

Support for vulnerable populations

During the focus group discussions, volunteers, people with disabilities, the elderly, people who have lost their homes, single mothers and children who have lost parents were also identified as needing dedicated support as part of Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. Young children, especially those who lost one or both of their parents, were identified as requiring the greatest care and attention. **A young woman now in Suceava, Romania recounted seeing a 10-year-old child sitting in the middle of the road. The child told her that both of their parents had just been killed in a missile attack and they did not know what to do.** An adolescent girl currently in Bucharest, Romania thought that children who have lost their parents during the war will carry this trauma with them all their lives if they do not get immediate help to deal with and understand their loss. A 16-year-old teenage girl from Luhansk said that a lot of the volunteers she knows, including volunteer doctors, are close to burnout. She said that for over a year they have been risking their lives going close to the frontlines or within occupied territories to provide lifesaving aid and are having to cope with seeing things that people should not see. **Burnout concerns among volunteers** were raised in four other focus groups within Ukraine.

The **need to rebuild cities to make them more inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities** was raised in a quarter of the focus groups. A young woman in Kyiv thought

that Ukraine is not a country that is used to accommodating people with disabilities and reconstruction and recovery efforts should include reforms to ensure Ukraine is more accessible and inclusive of people with disabilities. **An adolescent girl currently in Moldova and who identified as being neurodiverse, said that the escalation of the war and needing to flee, had made it even harder for her to communicate and express her feelings.** She thought that special support programs will be needed to help her reintegrate back in Ukraine.

Concerns for the elderly were highlighted during seven of the focus groups, including three within Ukraine and four in host countries. As well as calls to raise the pension, as outlined in the section below on livelihood and economic opportunities, focus group participants flagged the need to undertake targeted mental health and psychosocial support for the elderly and provide them with dedicated financial assistance to help them rebuild their homes, if damaged or destroyed. **A 20-year-old woman explained that her grandparents lived their whole life in the same apartment in Mykolaiv, but they were forced to leave when a rocket hit their apartment building. She said it was great trauma for them to leave their home and they do not understand how to live in the future.** An adolescent girl now in Romania shared that one of her elderly neighbours was too frail to leave. The woman's only son is in currently in the army and is not able to regularly check in on her. The [UN estimates](#) that 4.2 million elderly people are in need of humanitarian assistance within Ukraine.



PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AS PART OF UKRAINE'S RECONSTRUCTION AND RECOVERY

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For us to achieve gender equality, both men and women need to be treated the same. This means no longer allowing men to be paid higher wages than women and making sure that parental leave is not an obstacle to obtaining promotions or jobs in particular fields. We need to properly address the differences in gender

17-year-old internally displaced adolescent girl currently in Lviv

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We need to start teaching gender equality in schools and change the stereotypes that some professions are only suitable for men and others only for women. Changing our attitudes to gender must start in schools because schools have the most influence on our mindset

16-year-old internally displaced adolescent girl currently in Lviv.

“

We are not ready to accept to be equal, because we still have other challenges to confront first. There is a very long list of other problems to solve first. In order to be tolerant and equal, first we have to rebuild and fix the country's economy and afterwards we will probably be tolerant

20-year-old male refugee currently in Moldova

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Mixed responses were received when focus group participants were asked whether young women and men would have different needs and opportunities in Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. Young men and adolescent boys who participated in the focus group discussions, were overall more dismissive of gender considerations. For instance, an 18-year-old male refugee in Romania said there was no gender discrimination in Ukrainian society, while a 14-year-old internally displaced adolescent boy stated that gender equality already exists in Ukraine and reconstruction support should therefore be distributed based on needs regardless of someone's gender. Several young women and adolescent girls similarly stated that gender should not be a decisive factor in Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery.

In contrast, **an internally displaced adolescent girl in Lviv hoped that Ukraine will stand up to its entrenched patriarchal mentality** and move towards genuine equality between men and women. A young refugee woman in Romania also noted the need for Ukraine to leave behind old 'Soviet Union mentalities'⁴ on the roles of men and women. An internally displaced adolescent girl noted the existence of anti-gender discrimination laws in Ukraine but thought these have a long way to go before being consistently implemented or being reflected in daily life. She added that their generation will be responsible for transforming Ukraine's attitudes on gender.

Young women focus group participants recounted their experiences with gender discrimination and receiving lower wages to their male colleagues prior to the escalation of the war. For example, a 21-year-old medical student and young woman refugee currently in Romania, described attempts to dissuade her from pursuing more 'serious' medical fields such as surgery and oncology. She was told that once she becomes a mother, she would not be able to prioritise her work or patients. During the same focus group in Suceava, a 20-year-old woman psychology student described how professors tried to convince male students to change to computer science or other 'more manly professions'. A 13-year-old refugee boy in Poland suggested it would be worthwhile to increase fines for employers who engage in gender discrimination. These reflections in the focus group discussions echo the findings from a [recent study by NGO Girls](#) which found exacerbated gender stereotypes influenced the choice of careers among adolescents and youth in Ukraine.

Some young women and adolescent girls who participated in the focus group discussions hoped that Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery would be a catalyst to dispel gender roles, as women will have an opportunity to take up jobs traditionally filled by men. Others however expressed concern that Ukraine's Martial Law⁵ and conscription of men would further entrench traditional gender norms. A 19-year-old internally displaced young woman currently living in Cherkassy explained that the war is increasing militarised masculinities and the stereotypes of men being strong, the defenders of Ukraine and protectors of its people. A 19-year-old male refugee in Poland reflected that a lot of young men his age are fighting on the frontlines, and while they have little life experience, they are now expected to be warriors and be ready to die for their country. A 20-year-old internally displaced young woman thought that enhanced toxic masculinity would prevent young male veterans from seeking mental health and psychosocial support to address the traumas they may have experienced while on the frontlines. This would have ramifications for themselves and their families, as outlined in the section above. Several young men across different focus groups thought that most young male veterans will choose

to solve their mental health problems by themselves and will not seek help from a psychologist. **Further research into the war's impact on gender norms, particularly with the focus on men and masculinities, would help promote a gender-transformative approach to Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery and ensure harmful gender norms are not inadvertently exacerbated.**

A dozen young women raised the need to address the additional obstacles women soldiers were facing. This stemmed from reports that [women soldiers](#) experience greater obstacles in obtaining correctly fitting uniforms, protective equipment, or hygiene kits.

An 18-year-old internally displaced young woman stated that LGBTIQ+ persons face even greater challenges and discrimination, given ongoing intolerance towards the LGBTIQ+ community. She recounted a classmate who identified as non-binary who was mocked by their professors when they requested being called a different name. She thought that **reforming gender norms and promoting gender equality needed to include greater acceptance of LGBTIQ+ persons.**

Two recommendations were put forward during the focus groups on how Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery could promote gender equality. The first was to increase women's diverse representation in the media and in politics, as young women do not see many women leaders or depictions of women in roles outside of being mothers. A 19-year-old woman currently living in Cherkassy thought it would be worthwhile for Ukraine to consider a quota for women representatives in parliament, similarly to what other post-conflict countries introduced to promote more women in elected positions. The second recommendation is to **teach gender equality, comprehensive sexual education and the prevention of gender-based violence from a young age in schools.** For instance, a 21-year-old refugee woman in Romania thought that children from the time they are in kindergarten should be taught that they are equal and that no gender is stronger or more powerful than another. She added that children should be taught to accept all people as equal and not to discriminate against marginalised minorities, immigrants or LGBTIQ+ people. A 17-year-old internally displaced girl stressed that teaching gender equality at schools needs to include preventing domestic and family violence, as this is an issue that is not getting enough attention and which no one wants to talk about despite it being prevalent across Ukraine. A young refugee woman in Moldova similarly thought that teaching comprehensive sexual education would help build respectful and healthy relationships.

4 Specific term utilised by focus group participants, particularly during discussions relating to gender equality, mental health and psychosocial support and education.

5 In response to the escalation of the war in February 2022, [Martial Law was enacted](#), and since extended, resulting in the temporary restriction of a number of constitutional rights and freedoms. Men between the ages of 18 and 60 are prohibited from leaving the country and can be conscripted as part of general mobilisation efforts. Curfews are also in place across the country.



THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN UKRAINE'S RECONSTRUCTION AND RECOVERY

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I would start with education reforms and I would start these right now. In the future, in the next ten, 15 years, we will be in dire need of specialists. And these specialists are being educated right now

internally displaced adolescent girl, currently in Lviv.

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“

We have this unique opportunity to introduce new approaches to the education system. We will have a chance to not just rebuild it as it was before, but to make it much better than it was

25 year-old male teacher in Kyiv

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Return to offline learning

In all of the 22 focus group discussions, **facilitating the return to offline learning as soon as possible and reforming Ukraine's education system, were identified as two essential priorities for Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery.** Focus group participants systematically expressed their frustrations at online learning, described decreasing teaching standards and learning outcomes, low morale, and mounting challenges to stay motivated or focused on their studies. A 17-year-old boy internally displaced from Kherson explained that many schools near where he used to live had been destroyed or badly damaged. He was worried that it may

take a long time to repair these to a sufficient enough standard, including with enough shelters, to allow students to return to face-to-face learning. This would prolong their time studying online. He suggested as an alternative, that functioning schools could host one cohort of students in the morning and another in the afternoon to enable a higher proportion of students to study at least partially offline. An internally displaced young woman thought that after three years of studying online, due to the covid pandemic and then since the escalation of the war, that it may be hard to adapt back to face-to face learning and socialisation programs may be needed so that students do not feel awkward or experience social anxiety being back in offline classes.

In terms of reconstructing schools with adequate shelters, a lot of emphasis was also placed on building modern education facilities with natural light and playgrounds, rather than a return to what many described as 'soviet style' grey and dark concrete buildings.

Quality and inclusive education for all

In nine focus groups, participants raised the disparities in learning conditions and educational outcomes between government and private schools. There were **calls to establish minimum standards for all education buildings as part of Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery**. A 19-year-old man currently in Poland described the conditions of his former school in a village in Chernivtsi Oblast as terrible and with no heating or electricity. In winter, he explained it was extremely hard to concentrate on the lessons when it was so cold in the classroom. A 14-year-old boy refugee in Poland said that his old school could not even afford soap or toilet paper. Lack of appropriate water sanitation and hygiene measures can impact negatively on school attendance, especially for adolescent girls who are menstruating.

Adolescent girl refugee currently in Romania said that good quality free education will be important as a lot of people have lost everything in the war and will not be able to pay for good education for their children. She added that the education conditions should be the same for everyone across Ukraine. Multiple participants raised that **pathways to university should exist for students who cannot afford the tuition fees**. A young woman currently studying in Kyiv added that Ukraine's schools and universities should be more inclusive to everyone, including children with disabilities, orphans and people from low-income families. An internally displaced adolescent girl in Lviv said that in her old class a girl with disabilities was so frequently bullied that she left the school. She added that students and educators needed to be a lot more accepting of students with disabilities. A teenage boy in the same focus group added that most schools in Ukraine do not accommodate student with disabilities, including those in wheelchairs and that this needs to change.

Support for education reforms.

As well as sharing their thoughts on the physical conditions of educational facilities, **focal group participants spoke at length on the need to reform the education system itself**. [Reforms to Ukraine's education system](#) started back in 2016 but their implementation has faced challenges, particularly since the escalation of the war. **Young Ukrainians described the education system as being overly rigid, bureaucratic and complicated**. High school students being able to choose some of their subjects based on their own interests and differing abilities was emphasised in every focus group Plan International conducted, including online with school aged students living in occupied territories. Participants spoke of having too much theoretical knowledge and not enough practical skills, as well as being prepared for exams but not for life. An internally displaced teenage girl in Lviv thought that more focus should be placed on developing their mental abilities

and analytical thinking, rather than monotonous repetition of learning materials. A young refugee man in Poland thought that by everyone studying the same subjects, they were all being turned into robots. Huge emphasis was placed on needing to be taught life skills, especially basic financial literacy, being provided with career advice and to offer students the option of learning manual skills which will aid Ukraine's reconstruction. Adolescent girl currently in Moldova, said that she had all this theoretical information but would have no idea how to pay a bill. A 22-year-old refugee woman currently in Romania similarly conveyed that schools should teach students soft skills such as psychology, comprehensive sexuality education and basic economics as they know a lot of things but do not know how to open a bank account. A 19-year-old woman now living in Moldova was among the many who thought that it would be worthwhile for more foreign languages to be taught at school, especially English.

Investing in teachers and educators

In over a dozen focus groups, it was raised that **investment in education reform should extend to improving the conditions for teachers and other educators**, as well as supporting more young people to consider careers in education. This includes **encouraging teachers who fled to neighbouring countries to come back to Ukraine and those internally displaced to return to their former schools**. A young male teacher in Kyiv was concerned that there would be teacher deserts in parts of the country that had experienced the most fighting. A teenage girl now in Romania recounted how she had thought of studying education when she finished high school, but when she told her teacher she was advised to choose another career as teaching is too difficult. A 19-year-old man now in Romania thought that increasing teachers' salaries would make the profession more competitive and sought-after. In the same focus group in Bucharest, a young woman said that teaching is not an attractive career for young people to work in as it is not well paid and ambitious or creative people will not want to work in the education sector.

Strengthening technical and vocational institutions

Several young adult participants further raised that Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery is an important opportunity to promote technical and vocational institutions and provide incentives to young people to consider learning trades that will be vital in Ukraine's reconstruction. A young man internally displaced from Donetsk said that professional and technical institutions have needed reform and modernising for decades. He added that these institutions will help provide the large workforce needed to rebuild Ukraine and these trades should be made more attractive to young people to consider working in. In the same focus group, a young internally displaced woman added that financial incentives encouraging young people to take up construction-related jobs could include housing subsidies or other social benefits. A teenage girl refugee in Poland thought it was important to also encourage young women to take up these roles, given the number of young male veterans who may be wounded in the war and as way of tackling traditional gender norms.

LIVELIHOODS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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The reconstruction and recovery will be a depressing process. It will look like a scar. But we understand that we must do certain actions to bring something new and to give something new to our children and grandchildren to have a secure life, to live in beautiful country and to show them and to tell them the story of our country and to share with them information about the events which took place before

23-year-old woman currently in Moldova.

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I want to come back home as I have my family there and it's my homeland, but I need to know that I will have the same standard of living as I have here living in Europe. So let's say it honestly, we need to increase the salaries in Ukraine

20-year-old woman, currently in Poland

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When asked how Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery could support young people's economic opportunities and livelihoods, focus group participants frequently raised their **concerns related to increasing costs of living, low salaries, and challenges entering the job market.** A 19-year-old woman in Cherkassy suggested prioritising the rebuilding of damaged workplaces and instigating job creation programs. She explained that she lived in an area that was hosting a lot of internally displaced peoples and with the influx of people, a lot of individuals were struggling to find work, including her mother. Another young woman internally displaced said it was extremely hard to find work, particularly which could be done remotely. An internally displaced female student said that a lot of young people were looking for work and needed to find jobs, even while at university, given the tough economic situation many of them were in. **Participants in eight focus groups recommended the introduction of local initiatives aimed at supporting young people to find jobs. These could include CV and application writing workshops, interview coaching and mentoring.**

Young people's lack of experience was identified as a significant obstacle to finding work in nearly all focus groups. Participants explained that there were limited entry level opportunities, with most employers seeking candidates with a couple of years of work experience. A young woman refugee in Bucharest said young people faced a row of closed doors in their attempts to look for work in Ukraine. A young student in Kyiv said there was no support for recent graduates to help them enter the job market. A young internally displaced woman originally from Luhansk said it is hard for her to find work, as no employer will give her a job without experience, but questioned how she can acquire experience if no one hires her in the first place. An internally displaced young woman from Mykolaiv explained that due to Covid and the escalation of the war, her whole university degree was done online and there were no possibilities to seek out work experience while completing her degree. She thought companies should have more trust in young people. A 23-year-old refugee woman in Timisoara, Romania similarly thought that employers should

be encouraged to lower their work experience requirements. **Among the solutions offered to bridge this experience gap were to create incentives for employers to create entry level positions, to scale up internship programs, and develop job placement initiatives between universities and national and international companies currently in Ukraine.** An adolescent girl currently in Poland further suggested that international organisations working on the humanitarian response within Ukraine could provide mentorship and internships for young people wanting to gain experience in the humanitarian and development sector. In six over-18-year-old focus groups, participants also spoke of needing initiatives aimed at making it easier for young people to open their own businesses. These included offering grants or low interest loans, providing free project management courses or similar trainings, and lowering taxes for under 30-year-old starting their own businesses.

In nearly every focus group, participants were **worried that with the rising cost of living an increasing number of people in Ukraine were struggling to afford basic items.** This led to **recommendations to increase salaries but also pensions and other social benefits.** An adolescent girl now in Poland said that older people in Ukraine were going hungry and could not afford to buy food. A young refugee woman currently in Cojusna, Moldova said that even before the war, pensioners were struggling to live on their pension. A 15-year-old adolescent girl in Chisinau, said that her grandmother who is still in Ukraine cannot afford to buy her prescription medicine on her pension alone. A young refugee woman in Romania said she knew of mothers with young children who could not work and could not always afford food due to the increasing prices. An adolescent boy now in Poland said he saw how his mother struggled on her single mother benefits.

As outlined in the section below, economic opportunities and livelihood prospects are key factors informing young people's decision to come back to Ukraine or return to where they used to live prior to the escalation of the war.

CONDITIONS FOR SAFE RETURNS



I will return home only when I am sure that I will not hear explosions on the street

14-year-old adolescent girl internally displaced from Mariupol

For me to return we need glass in the windows. I lived in a region where all the houses now have no roofs and are windowless

adolescent refugee girl now in Moldova

People who left Ukraine, they don't want to come back. Because in Ukraine you don't know what the future looks like

14-year-old internally displaced adolescent girl from Kharkiv

We need to know our country is a safe place to live, and we need to know we can get work in our country

Young refugee man currently in Romania



Focus group participants were asked under what conditions they would consider returning to where they used to live prior to the escalation of the war. Responses varied among youth who are internally displaced, as well as among young refugees outside of Ukraine. However, across all focus group discussions **the majority of participants listed that safety, housing and education or employment opportunities were the key factors which would inform their decisions and those of their families to return.** Young people who fled areas now occupied, said they would only go back once their towns or

regions were again under Ukraine's control. A 20-year-old man who had been living in Donetsk region said that any occupied territory, no matter its size, could lead to the war starting again. A young woman twice displaced, first from Luhansk and then Mariupol said she would like to go back to where she is from, but she has no home to return to and neither region is safe to go back to. Some young refugees who left Ukraine thought that they would not return until the war was officially over and there were guarantees that there would be no future reoccurrences of conflict.

Focus group participants advised that part of feeling safe enough to return, is the need for widescale de-mining across large parts of eastern and southern Ukraine. A 20-year-old man from Odessa thought it would take a long time for all the mines to be found and safely removed, meaning roads, forests, beaches and oceans will remain dangerous for years to come. An internally displaced student now in Kyiv recounted that when she went home briefly, she was terrified of going anywhere for fear of stepping on a mine. A adolescent boy currently in Poland said that if they do go back, his mother has forbidden him to go anywhere near forests, as where they used to live is now contaminated with mines. He added that the threat of mines is a significant factor in them not feeling safe to go back. A few adolescent boys and young men refugees added that Ukraine's Martial Law and the possibility of conscription was a further issue they had to weigh up when considering going back to Ukraine.

Internally displaced youth said that their second biggest challenge was housing, followed by education and job prospects. Numerous IDP youth explained that their houses or apartment buildings had been damaged or destroyed and they had nowhere to live if they were to return. The need to rebuild houses or to provide IDPs with affordable housing was raised in all 11 focus groups inside Ukraine. A young internally displaced woman currently living in Cherkassy said that if you have nowhere to live and nowhere to work then it is impossible to go back. Another young woman internally displaced stated that providing internally displace people with affordable housing will be increasingly challenging given rising costs of living and accommodation prices. An internally displaced adolescent girl said that with so many schools and workplaces damaged or ruined, people will need to be given some form of guarantee that they will have access to decent levels of education and work opportunities, when they do come back.

For refugees in host countries, as well as safety and housing considerations, a huge other factor impacting on decision making on whether to go back, are the economic and livelihood prospects back in Ukraine, compared to where they are currently living. **While some young refugees who participated in the focus groups were adamant that they would return to Ukraine at some point after the war is over, the majority were more hesitant.** For instance, a 20-year-old woman currently in Poland explained that she had always envisaged studying abroad to gain life experience and then live and work in Ukraine. Now she does not know what to do. In the next few years, she hopes to start a family and does not know whether she could be living back in Ukraine with young children without there being guaranteed safety and knowing for certain there will not be another war. A 20-year-old woman from Odessa and now in Moldova, said she needed to be sure the war was truly over before moving back. She will wait at least a year after the end of the fighting before considering whether to move back or not. Adolescents in Suceava, Romania said they needed peaceful skies, no air sirens or rocket attacks and a signed peace treaty before returning. Two 18-year-olds in Timisoara, in south Romania said they have just started university there, so they will wait to graduate before making any decisions. Most adolescents that Plan International spoke with in Poland similarly advised that they and their families had decided to stay in Poland for the duration of their studies. The same group of adolescents are however also nearly all following Ukrainian schools online, in addition to attending Polish school. One adolescent girl explained that finishing school in Poland will give her family more time to see what the job prospects are back in Ukraine. Another adolescent girl then added that it did not make much sense to go back to Ukraine and live next to damaged buildings, which would be hard mentally to live in post-war surroundings. She thought it was better to finish her education in Poland and then go back to Ukraine to help then.

Young adult refugees are also weighing up the likelihood of better economic and livelihood opportunities if they stay in Europe, given the higher salaries and job prospects there. A 19-year-old internally displaced woman said her friends now studying in Europe considered European universities as being more reputable and of higher standards, which is another reason she was advocating for education reform so that young people would view Ukrainian universities as being of comparable standards to those in Europe. Numerous internally displaced adolescents and young adults within Ukraine reflected that most of their friends now abroad would likely not come back, as the longer they stay outside of Ukraine the more they will settle into a new community, with new friends and partners. This will make it harder to consider restarting a new life in Ukraine when the war is over. A dozen young people still in Ukraine suggested developing a campaign to motivate young people currently living abroad to come back. This needs to include financial assistance to rebuild their homes and help finding work. One young internally displaced woman said that she had friends who fled to Europe after losing everything. They have now started earning a living again and are rebuilding their lives. She thought that people will need to understand that coming back to Ukraine will not be the same traumatic experience as having fled to a new country with nothing. Another internally displaced young woman thought that targeted outreach needs to be directed towards single female headed households now living outside of Ukraine. She thought that mothers with young children will face a lot of challenges living in a post-war country. They will need to be reassured that they will not be alone, and they will be supported in finding accommodation, childcare and employment. This will then help the young mothers become finally independent. Among those who suggested a campaign encouraging young people return to Ukraine, they also raised the need not to judge those who fled Ukraine or are still choosing to stay abroad.



YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY

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It's very painful to watch this war go on and what is happening to our country. Something needs to be done to end the war

14-year-old adolescent refugee girl, currently living in Poland.

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We need to do everything possible to lower the number of casualties among our military personnel. We are using the youth of Ukraine to fight on the frontlines, but no one is thinking that we will also need them to work on rebuilding Ukraine. This has to be stopped because a lot of young boys our age are fighting

19-year-old male refugee, currently living in Poland.

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While the consultations focused on Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery, youth participants systematically sought to express their views on broader peace and security issues within Ukraine. Their **perspectives on security, accountability, justice and social cohesion further underscore how critical it is to ensure the direct participation of young people impacted by the war in Ukraine in all peace and security decision making processes both at the national and local levels.**

Calls for justice and accountability featured prominently in young people's messages to decision makers, as well as needing guarantees that this will not happen again in the future. There was significant anger at the circumstances surrounding the escalation of the war, especially given their

concerns at the long-term impacts this will have on them, their friends, their families and country. A 16-year-old adolescent girl originally from Zaporizhia said that those who helped Russian troops in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine should be prosecuted and put on trial both at the Hague and in the highest court of Ukraine. A 21-year-old woman currently in Romania said that she is too scared to return to her home in Kharkiv, which is a 30-minute drive from the Russian border. She said she is so afraid to return home as she does not know when she will see Russian military trucks near her house again and does not know what Russia will do in the future. A young woman currently living in Kyiv and from Donetsk similarly described her fear of this reoccurring and questioned the point of rebuilding their houses and careers if this happened again in a decade's time.

The reintegration of children and young people currently living in occupied areas, was frequently identified as a key priority for Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery efforts. A 25-year-old man from Donetsk said when the war is over, children born under occupation or who have lived under occupation for nine years, will not understand Ukrainian. He thought they will need specialised support and courses so that they can understand and learn Ukrainian and follow the Ukrainian education system. A young woman internally displaced and currently similarly observed that psychosocial and mental support will be needed for children who lived under occupation. She anticipated that they may need help to deal with that and reintegrate back into Ukrainian life. Some of the focus group participants anticipated there may be resistance from those who have been living in occupied territories. One young man from Mariupol thought that they would now have a different point of view and consider Ukrainians as the occupants. An 18-year-old woman from Chernihiv similarly thought that some people in occupied territories might not like being taught Ukrainian and might push back against this.

Which language Ukrainians speak was a contested issue among focus group participants. This was the subject of significant debate, especially in focus group discussions within Ukraine. While some firmly believed that only Ukrainian should be spoken and taught, others from eastern parts of the country stated that they should not be discriminated against for being from predominantly Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine. Internally displaced Russian-speaking children are reportedly being bullied across central and western parts of Ukraine. A 16-year-old boy who had just fled Mariupol recounted that in his first few days after arriving in Western Ukraine that he was humiliated for speaking Russian when he tried to buy medicine at a local pharmacy. He said that such an attitude really impacts on his morale. Similarly, a 17-year-old adolescent girl originally from Kherson further described how internally displaced people from the East and currently in Western Ukraine are being discriminated against and bullied in schools for not speaking fluent Ukrainian. She said that they are not the enemies just because they are not fluent in Ukrainian, but they are still Ukrainian. She added that this problem could not be solved by mocking internally displaced youth or making nasty comments towards them, but rather a practical solution had to be found, such as free Ukrainian language courses to help displaced youth better integrate. In the same focus group discussion, a 17-year-old adolescent boy also from Kherson added that everyone needs to know or learn Ukrainian as its their national language, but they should not be ashamed or bullied for speaking Russian while trying to learn Ukrainian.

It will be imperative that these deeply rooted divisions, including relating to language and whether people stayed in Ukraine or sought protection in host countries, be addressed as part of Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery and be informing current social cohesion programming both inside and outside of Ukraine. Targeted engagement will also be needed with young people in occupied territories as soon as they are accessible to hear directly from them on their needs, priorities and recommendations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When the war is over, young people from Ukraine will be essential to Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. Not only will they contribute to the country's economic recovery and workforce that will physically rebuild damaged or destroyed infrastructure, their decisions on whether to return to Ukraine or where they used to live if internally displaced, will directly impact on the overall success of reintegration and post-conflict development plans. Ukraine's youth will be instrumental in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security and the implementation of peacebuilding and social cohesion strategies within Ukraine. Among the youth who participated in the focus group discussions, there was a recurrent determination for their voices to be heard

and their ideas acted upon. There was a clear desire to push for positive changes based on their collective visions for what the future of Ukraine should look like.

Plan International makes the following recommendations to ensure the active participation of diverse young people in Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. It is of utmost importance that these recommendations give way to youth both formally and informally being given the chance to influence their own future and to be connected to all reconstruction and recovery initiatives at all levels.

Ukrainian decision makers at all levels of government should:

- Develop and implement alongside diverse youth a Ukraine National Action Plan on Youth, Peace and Security which aligns with its Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan and the 2022 EU Youth Action Plan promoting meaningful youth participation and empowerment for sustainable development, equality and justice. The YPS NAP should include clear lines of coordination and responsibilities across relevant ministries and establish a joint committee to undertake regular monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the plan both at national and local levels.
- Further in line with the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, establish youth councils in every Ukrainian Oblast to facilitate formal and systematic consultations with diverse young people and ensure their priorities are reflected in the development, implementation and monitoring of local reconstruction plans and school recovery plans. Localised participatory processes should be accessible to young people with disabilities, be open to internally displaced and non-displaced youth and consist of equal representation of young men and women, as well as encourage the participation of individuals who identify as non-binary.
- Create online platforms to solicit regular inputs from young refugees from Ukraine currently in host countries with special focus on reconstruction and recovery priorities and their economic and livelihood needs.
- Develop tailored outreach processes to identify the specific needs of veterans, including young veterans and those who have been wounded, as well as the needs of their families.
- Work with local civil society organisations in contact with young people in occupied territories to start collecting their views on how to prioritise the reconstruction and recovery of newly accessible areas.

International donors and the UN agencies should:

- In line with the Youth Peace and Security Agenda and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, facilitate and fund the direct participation of women's rights, women-led, youth-led and LGBTIQ+ organisations in all upcoming donor conferences on Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery. For individuals not able to travel or leave the country, they should be provided with options to participate and input into discussions online.
- Invest in and provide political support for initiatives aimed at strengthening the Youth, Peace and Security agenda within Ukraine and in host countries, including by increasing funding for youth-led peacebuilding organisations and initiatives.
- Encourage Ukrainian government counterparts to ensure youth and gender inclusive representation in consultations mechanisms relating to Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery, as well as across all programming, policy and political processes. This includes promoting the direct participation of adolescent girls and young women in all of their diversity across all decision-making fora.
- Promote the need for national and local level recovery plans to be informed by sex, age and disability disaggregated data and gender and age analysis.
- Continue supporting education programming as a central component to inclusive reconstruction and recovery efforts in Ukraine and a key platform for social cohesion and gender transformative recovery.
- Work alongside the Ministry of Social Policy and social workers at the local level across each hromada of Ukraine to strengthen the sustainability of service provision at the local level.



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