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# LESSONS FROM CRISIS

2025

## A Practical Handbook for Local Governments, Community Leaders and Civil Society Organisations

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# Lessons from Crisis: A Practical Handbook for Local Governments, Community Leaders and Civil Society Organisations

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# Introduction

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Poland is increasingly affected by crises, including both environmental events and crises triggered by human activity. In recent years (2019–2024), the country has faced the COVID-19 pandemic, the sudden arrival of millions of refugees from Ukraine, and major flooding. Each of these situations highlighted an important lesson: the first days and weeks of a crisis are critical in determining whether assistance reaches affected people in time. Without preparedness measures, coordination, and clear operational procedures, even strong engagement and goodwill may prove insufficient.

The way institutions and communities prepare for future crises will directly influence the safety and well-being of thousands of people. In times of crisis, anyone—including ourselves and our families—may become part of the population affected by emergencies.

This handbook was developed primarily for small and medium-sized civil society organisations, as well as local leaders and community organisers. They are often among the first humanitarian actors to respond when a crisis occurs. Even when they lack prior experience in areas such as warehouse management, evacuation support, or the organisation of humanitarian assistance, they frequently take on these responsibilities during the response phase in order to protect the health and safety of affected people.

The handbook draws on the experience of more than 60 organisations involved in supporting flood-affected communities and refugees between 2022 and 2025. Members of these organisations joined forces to document practical lessons learned from field operations and to develop recommendations that can strengthen future preparedness and response. Throughout 2025, representatives of civil society organisations worked together with partners including UNHCR, IOM, WHO and UNICEF, as well as local government authorities, subject-matter experts and private sector partners. Through thematic working groups, participants identified key operational challenges, common mistakes observed during the response phase, and practical solutions that proved effective in real crisis situations. This handbook may also be useful for representatives of national and local government institutions, as well as other organisations involved in crisis preparedness and response. It outlines preparedness measures that can be implemented collaboratively across sectors. The handbook provides practical guidance on preparedness measures, operational priorities during the response phase, potential risks to avoid, and approaches to coordination with partners. Sector-specific recommendations are presented in the complementary publication *Lessons from Crisis: Systemic Recommendations*.

The work on this handbook was initiated and coordinated by the Mapuj Pomoc Network Office, which since 2022 has supported information exchange and coordination among humanitarian actors from civil society organisations. The recommendations included in this publication were developed by practitioners from across Poland—individuals whose organisations have directly responded to crisis situations. The editorial team consisted of Monika Miłowska (To Proste Foundation), Piotr Kołodziej (Save the Children), Monika Korowajczyk-Sujkowska (IOM), and Karolina Chojka-Bartoszko (To Proste Foundation). Special thanks go to the practitioners who contributed most significantly to the development of the content: Ewelina Bosak (Foundation Towards Dialogue), Stanisław Brudnoch (HumanDoc Foundation), Konrad Czerkas (TRATWA Association), Rafał Gałka (Sahana Eden), Natalia Gebert (Open Home Initiative Foundation), Paulina Kaczmarska (IOM), Aneta Kaniewska (Lena Grochowska Foundation), Anna Konior (PAH), Larysa Korban (Caritas of the Archdiocese of Katowice), Urszula Krajewska (IRC), Jacek Kulikowski (Polish Red Cross), Joanna Lenartowicz (PAH), Yuri Matnenko (Ukraine Foundation), Karina Padshakh (IOM), Magdalena Pater (Save the Children), Marcin Pawelec (The Presja Foundation), Katarzyna Pietrzak (PAH), Marcin Piotrowski (Folkowisko Foundation), Irena Pujszo (HumanDoc Foundation), Rita Ster (To Proste Foundation), Łukasz Stępień (Security Observatory), and Anna Szymkowiak (Akceptacja Foundation). We would also like to extend our thanks to the ORLEN Foundation and the PZU Group, whose support made it possible to collaborate on this publication.

The development process lasted more than six months and involved several dozen experts supported by facilitators and thematic leads. Working groups met regularly to identify key challenges and formulate practical recommendations. The draft recommendations were subsequently discussed during cross-sector consultations involving regional authorities, powiat crisis management centres, mayors, village leaders and representatives of the State Fire Service. This process helped ensure that the handbook reflects operational realities and supports the development of shared standards for crisis preparedness and response.

This handbook provides a set of practical tools, recommendations and reference points that can support both immediate crisis response and long-term preparedness. It is intended to help organisations and local leaders strengthen their readiness for future crises. Strengthening preparedness measures and cooperation today will help ensure that, when future crises occur, assistance can reach affected people more quickly and effectively.

## Structure of the Handbook

This handbook has been designed so that it can be used both as a comprehensive reference and as a practical tool to consult selectively—depending on the phase of the crisis and the role of your organisation.

Chapter 1 introduces a common conceptual framework. It explains what constitutes a crisis, outlines the different phases of a crisis and describes the typical challenges that organisations face at each stage.

Chapter 2 discusses when engagement in crisis-related activities may be appropriate and when it may be advisable to limit involvement or refrain from direct action.

These sections are intended to support organisations in making informed decisions about whether, when and to what extent they should engage in crisis response.

Chapter 3 describes the main actors involved in the crisis management and humanitarian response system—those with whom your organisation may cooperate during a crisis.

Chapter 4 translates lessons learned from recent crises into concrete operational challenges and recommendations. It is organised around six key areas of practical humanitarian assistance:

- logistics and warehousing,
- collection and distribution of in-kind assistance,
- supporting housing and self-reliance programmes,
- safety,
- legal assistance,
- communication and access to information.

Each section begins with a checklist—a short practical tool that can be used during planning processes or team briefings. Within each section you will find:

- a description of key challenges faced by local organisations,
- a set of practical recommendations addressing these challenges,
- examples of solutions and good practices.

In many sections, activities are differentiated across the preparedness phase, the response and phase-out stage. This structure is intended to help organisations understand what actions may be taken before a crisis occurs, during the response phase, and when response activities are gradually concluded.

Chapter 5 addresses cross-cutting themes that are relevant across different areas of crisis preparedness and response, regardless of whether an organisation is involved in logistics, housing, or legal aid. These include:

- safeguarding—the protection of affected people and members of response teams, and members of response teams,
- health and life-saving preparedness,
- education and childcare,
- volunteer engagement.

As in Chapter 4, each thematic section begins with a checklist and is followed by an analytical section describing key challenges and detailed recommendations.

This chapter presents standards, policies and procedures that organisations should have in place as part of their preparedness measures. In the sections on health and volunteering, activities are clearly differentiated between the preparedness phase, the response phase and the phase-out stage.

Chapter 6 presents a set of recommendations at the system level. These are measures that cannot be implemented by a single organisation alone but require cooperation among multiple actors. Civil society organisations can nevertheless play an important role in advocating for and contributing to these improvements. The recommendations address areas such as:

- the architecture of the crisis management system,
- information systems, data management and GDPR,
- education and the well-being of children,
- safety of humanitarian actors and volunteer management,
- the role of media and strategic communication,
- warehousing and logistics,
- housing and pathways to self-reliance,
- implications for local civil society organisations.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, focuses on the phase-out stage. It presents additional recommendations to support organisations in planning the gradual withdrawal of activities.

The handbook has been structured so that users can:

- quickly access checklists and practical recommendations in specific operational situations,
- return to the conceptual and system-level sections of this handbook when planning the development of the organisation and its potential role in future crises.

## Scope and Limitations

The lessons and recommendations presented in this handbook are based on the experience of a selected group of local civil society leaders involved in crisis response. They do not represent the views of the entire humanitarian community. Rather, they reflect the perspectives and practical insights of a significant, though not exhaustive, group of practitioners and experts.

The handbook presents key standards across selected operational areas. However, these should be understood as examples drawn from a broader set of principles and practices that guide responsible crisis response. This is particularly important in specialised sectors such as health services or child protection.

Reading this handbook alone is not sufficient to ensure that humanitarian assistance—especially assistance provided to populations at heightened risk—is delivered in a fully responsible and appropriate manner. In specialised sectors, including health, humanitarian actors should always refer to dedicated professional standards and technical guidelines.

This handbook should therefore be understood as a collection of recommendations intended to support preparedness and operational decision-making. It does not address all aspects of responsible and effective humanitarian assistance.

# List of Abbreviations

API Application Programming Interface
BHP Occupational Health and Safety
CCCM Camp Coordination and Camp Management
CHS Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
COVID Coronavirus Disease 2019 (disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus)
CSV Comma-Separated Values (text format used for spreadsheets and data export)
GPS Global Positioning System
HIV Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HR Human Resources
IASC Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ID Identity Document
IDP Internally Displaced Person
IFRC International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO International Non-Governmental Organization
IOM International Organization for Migration
JRS Jesuit Refugee Service
JST Local Government Unit
KGW Rural Women's Association
LGBTQ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
MEAL Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
MHPSS Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MOPS Municipal Social Welfare Centre
MOPR Municipal Family Support Centre
NGO Non-Governmental Organization
NNW Personal Accident Insurance
OC Civil Defence
OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OL Civil Protection
OPS Social Welfare Centre
OSP Volunteer Fire Service
PAH Polish Humanitarian Action
PCPR County (Powiat) Family Support Centre
PFA Psychological First Aid
PESEL Universal Electronic System for Registration of the Population (Polish national identification number)
PPP Psychological First Aid (Polish terminology used in the national system)
PSEA Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
PSP State Fire Service
RODO / GDPR General Data Protection Regulation
RP Republic of Poland
SEIS Shared Emergency Information System (shared data collection form used by organisations, according to the context of this publication)
API/CSV Data Standard Data exchange standard (API interface or CSV file) between systems used by institutions such as social welfare centres, Caritas, PAH and others
UA Ukraine
EU European Union
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund
WHO World Health Organization
WOT Territorial Defence Forces (Poland)

# 1.
# Definition and Types of Crisis

## 1.1. What Is a Crisis? Basic Definition

What does the term *crisis* actually mean? A crisis is a situation in which the existing order suddenly stops functioning: something breaks down or becomes seriously disrupted in the functioning of a person, group or institution. Difficulties arise that are so significant that available resources and standard procedures are no longer sufficient to address them.

More detailed definitions of crises vary considerably. They often differ in their points of reference and level of complexity. For example, crises may be described as developmental, situational, or linked to a specific sector or group. Crises may concern social, technical, medical or military phenomena, and they may affect individuals, groups or entire communities, including structured systems such as a state, region, county, municipality, local community or organisation. The phenomenon can therefore be understood in many ways depending on the perspective adopted. One may consider, for example, the scale of occurrence, the circumstances surrounding the crisis, or its causes and consequences.

For this reason, it is difficult to define a single universal understanding of such a broad and diverse phenomenon. However, several core characteristics appear in most definitions of a crisis:

1. A crisis is typically sudden. It often occurs unexpectedly. Even when preventive measures, risk assessments and preparedness efforts have been undertaken, a crisis may still occur.
2. A crisis may arise from natural causes or from human activity.
3. A crisis disrupts the functioning of a system. In this context, the term system should be understood broadly. Depending on the scale, the system may refer to the life of an individual, a family, the functioning of a community (for example members of an organisation, company or ethnic group), a municipality, a country, an environmental area or even the global system. A crisis disrupts this system by damaging or undermining its functioning, often causing a sudden breakdown of its foundations.
4. A crisis may affect multiple areas of functioning. In some cases it affects only one or a few areas, while in others it may influence several simultaneously—for example the social, political or economic spheres. The scale of impact also varies: crises may affect individuals, groups, larger communities or entire regions[1].
5. A crisis occurs not only within specific areas of functioning, but also within a specific geographic area. It may affect the territory of a village, town, municipality, county, region, country or even several countries.
6. The scale of challenges exceeds the capacity to respond of the affected individuals or communities. As a result, the system affected by the crisis is unable to manage its consequences independently.
7. A crisis poses a direct threat to health, safety and well-being. Individuals and communities affected by the crisis may face serious risks to their lives, safety and living conditions.
8. Crises require a response. In humanitarian crises, this most often means the provision of emergency assistance. This includes providing affected people with essential resources that ensure basic living conditions, such as:
   - food, water, energy, clothing and temporary shelter;
   - access to basic sanitation services, including clean water, toilets, hygiene facilities and waste management;
   - other forms of support, such as psychological or legal assistance.
9. The purpose of humanitarian assistance is to protect life and safety, prevent suffering and alleviate its consequences. At the same time, all actions must respect the dignity of every individual. For this reason, clearly defined principles and standards for humanitarian assistance—and strong familiarity with them—are essential.
10. A crisis has a specific timeframe. However, there is an important pattern: it is usually possible to identify when a crisis began, but it is rarely possible to determine with certainty when it will end. Therefore, the end of this timeframe can only be determined once the crisis has passed.

In summary, a crisis is a sudden and usually unexpected situation that occurs within a specific

**1** This handbook focuses on crises whose consequences affect people and communities. Crises affecting animals, plants or the natural environment—even when they do not directly affect human populations—are equally important, but their analysis falls outside the scope of this handbook.

timeframe and geographic area. It disrupts the existing order and the functioning of individuals, groups or institutions. The scale of the challenges exceeds the capacity of those affected to respond using their own resources. This may also apply to large systems, such as states, whose services, institutions or procedures may prove unprepared to respond quickly. At the same time, a crisis requires immediate action to protect the lives and safety of affected people—for example through the provision of emergency assistance and other essential forms of support. The type of assistance required depends on the nature of the crisis.

Due to the unpredictability and diversity of crises, the forms of assistance required will also vary. For this reason, it is essential to draw lessons after each crisis: to assess what worked, what did not, what was missing and what should be improved. This process can help organisations strengthen their preparedness for future emergencies. In the following sections of this handbook, you will find practical tools, checklists and recommendations designed to support this process.

## 1.2. Phases of a Crisis

At least three main phases of a crisis can be identified. The actions taken by organisations should depend on the phase of the crisis in which the situation currently falls.

1. Phase I – Acute Humanitarian Crisis (up to approximately 3 months)
   This is the moment of sudden disruption. The primary priorities are saving lives, meeting basic needs and stabilising the situation. Large-scale emergency response is required. Activities typically operate on an emergency basis and often around the clock (24/7). These may include establishing first-contact points, distributing immediate in-kind assistance, providing medical care and information, offering psychological support, arranging temporary accommodation, and organising transportation or evacuation.
2. Phase II – Transitional Phase (approximately 3 months to 1.5 years)
   Although the situation remains difficult, the initial wave of chaos begins to subside. During this phase, assistance should gradually shift from purely emergency interventions to stabilisation and recovery measures. This may include more systematic support such as education, employment assistance, social integration programmes and financial support, as well as initiatives that strengthen the self-reliance of affected people. This phase also involves restoring key social and institutional functions—for example supporting the functioning of schools, healthcare facilities, public administration and public transport, as well as facilitating access to employment opportunities.
3. Phase III – Phase-Out Stage (after approximately 1.5–2 years)
   At this stage, the crisis is no longer perceived as an acute emergency but rather as a long-term situation. Humanitarian operations continue, but with a reduced scope, gradually decreasing resources and an increasing focus on achieving long-term sustainability.

These phases may overlap, and different groups of affected people may find themselves in different phases at the same time. For this reason, it is important to adapt interventions to the current situation rather than applying the same solutions throughout the entire duration of a crisis.

**IMPORTANT**

Whenever you plan assistance activities, first consider which phase of the crisis you are currently addressing and whether the proposed interventions are appropriate to that phase.

The challenges and recommendations presented in the second part of this handbook relate primarily to the first phase of a crisis, as well as to preparedness measures that organisations can undertake before a crisis occurs.

## 1.3. Crisis from the Perspective of Civil Society Organisations

As described earlier, crises can be analysed at different scales and across different areas of impact. Within a large-scale crisis, it is often possible to identify several smaller crises affecting specific systems or actors. One such perspective is the crisis experienced within a civil society organisation itself. A sudden emergency—such as a flood—may place humanitarian organisations, particularly small and locally operating ones, in a difficult position. The decision to provide assistance to a significantly larger number of people than usual, or to respond in areas beyond the organisation's previous experience, may create an internal organisational crisis within a foundation or association.

Symptoms of such an internal crisis often include a lack of preparedness for the sudden increase in the number of people requiring support. Additional challenges frequently arise, including:

- staff shortages,
- team overload and burnout,
- financial constraints or interruptions in funding that disrupt continuity of activities,
- information management challenges (uncertainty about roles and responsibilities),
- a lack of clear decision-making, or conversely, decisions made hastily without sufficient analysis of consequences.

Another important factor is the scale and speed at which needs emerge. During a crisis, needs rarely increase gradually; instead, they often appear suddenly and at scale. Within a short period of time, hundreds or thousands of people—including children and other vulnerable groups—may require support.

Responding to such large-scale needs within a short timeframe typically requires systemic solutions involving local authorities, public services, government institutions and large humanitarian organisations. However, at the onset of a crisis these mechanisms often do not yet function effectively—or may not exist at all. In practice, this means that local civil society organisations often operate temporarily in what may be described as a "systemic gap", responding to urgent needs before formal assistance mechanisms become operational.

Under normal circumstances, local organisations typically address crises affecting individuals, families or small groups. When a large-scale crisis occurs, however, needs become collective in nature and entire communities may require support. The disruption to the normal functioning of society can be so severe that the health, safety and well-being of large numbers of people are simultaneously at risk.

How can organisations reduce the risk of internal crisis during such situations? Local civil society leaders who were actively engaged in crisis response between 2022 and 2025 highlighted two key approaches during post-crisis assessments:

- developing simple contingency plans (for example: "What will we do if funding suddenly ends?" or "What will we do if the number of people needing support doubles?");
- maintaining a willingness to learn continuously —even during the response phase, when organisations may need to take on responsibilities they have never previously managed.

Practical recommendations on how to implement these approaches are presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this handbook.

It is also important to recognise a particular situation that affects some organisations. For most organisations, a crisis is understood as the period between the sudden disruption (for example a flood, the outbreak of war or a large influx of refugees) and the moment when the situation stabilises. As described earlier, most crises have identifiable timeframes. However, in some cases the "state of emergency" appears to continue indefinitely.

For certain organisations, crisis conditions become protracted. This is currently the case for some organisations working with Roma communities or providing humanitarian assistance along the Polish–Belarusian border. The situation of the populations they support is so prolonged and complex that operating in crisis mode becomes the organisation's permanent reality. This creates additional risks, including staff overload, burnout and disruption to the continuity of activities.

You are now familiar with the basic characteristics of crises and with how crises may affect civil society organisations—including situations in which crisis conditions persist for extended periods. The next chapter examines the practical implications of this knowledge and how organisations can translate it into effective action.

# 2.

# When and How to Engage in a Crisis. Understanding the Implications and Choosing Appropriate Actions

The ability to recognise the appropriate moment to engage, and to make informed decisions about the type of actions to take, is essential for responsible humanitarian assistance. It allows organisations to use their capacities effectively.

An inappropriate response—whether too rapid, too broad or insufficiently considered—may place disproportionate strain on an organisation and may also create risks for the people the assistance is intended to support. Well-planned interventions, by contrast, can reduce the negative consequences of a crisis and provide meaningful support to affected people.

In some situations, the most responsible decision may be not to engage immediately in direct assistance. If an organisation does not have the necessary resources or expertise to act effectively, it may be more appropriate to focus on preparedness activities, crisis prevention, or on supporting recovery and strengthening community resilience after the most acute phase of the crisis has passed. Effective crisis engagement is not limited to frontline response—it also includes work carried out before and after a crisis.

In this section of the handbook, you will learn:
- when it may be appropriate to engage your organisation in crisis response activities,
- how to do so in a responsible and effective manner,
- what potential consequences may arise from inappropriate or poorly planned engagement.

You will also become familiar with two key standards that guide responsible crisis response: the Crisis Management Cycle and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS). In addition, this section introduces three key components of humanitarian response:
- assistance — the provision of direct support to affected people,
- protection — ensuring that individuals are protected during the delivery of assistance,
- safeguarding — preventing harm, abuse or exploitation of affected people and members of response teams.

**IMPORTANT**

In some situations, maintaining distance may be the most appropriate approach. In others, rapid action may be required. In many cases, effective response depends on close coordination among multiple actors. When responding to a crisis, your organisation should contribute its experience and capacities to the broader crisis management system. This should be done in a way that maximises the organisation's strengths, avoids causing harm to affected people, and safeguards the well-being and sustainability of the team.

## 2.1. When to Engage

The decision about whether and when your organisation should engage in humanitarian response activities should not be driven solely by urgency, media attention or emotions. Instead, it requires a careful assessment of whether your organisation's involvement will meaningfully contribute to the response—whether it is appropriate to the situation, feasible given available resources, and safe for both affected people and your team.

In practice, this means viewing a crisis as a process rather than a single event. Different types of interventions are needed at different stages—some immediately after the onset of a crisis, others in the weeks or months that follow. Understanding the crisis management cycle can help you make informed decisions about whether to engage immediately, at a later stage, or whether your organisation should focus primarily on preparedness and recovery activities. The following section explains this cycle step by step.

### THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT CYCLE

It is easier to determine when to engage in crisis response once you understand the crisis management cycle. This model describes the stages of action typically undertaken by organisations and institutions in crisis situations. It is based on two fundamental objectives of crisis response:
- minimising the impact of the crisis, and

- restoring affected communities to normal functioning as quickly as possible.

The Crisis Management Cycle

1. The first stage is prevention. Similar to preparedness, preventive actions are undertaken before a crisis occurs. This stage involves identifying potential threats and risks, investing in infrastructure, developing procedures, safety plans and early warning systems. Such measures reduce the likelihood that a crisis will affect additional groups—for example local communities—and help limit potential impacts.
2. The second stage is preparedness. This includes developing crisis response plans and operational scenarios, as well as training organisations and institutions—including public authorities, civil society organisations and private actors—in crisis management. It is also a time for building partnerships, networks and communication structures. The objective is to ensure that organisations and institutions are ready to respond quickly and in a coordinated manner when a crisis occurs.
3. The third stage is response. This stage includes direct actions undertaken during the crisis itself. At this point, previously established structures and mechanisms are activated to deliver emergency assistance, protect affected populations and implement humanitarian interventions. The primary objective is to reduce losses and ensure that affected people have access to assistance.
4. The final stage is recovery. This phase includes activities aimed at restoring normal functioning following the crisis. Examples include rebuilding infrastructure, supporting local economic activity and implementing psychosocial support programmes. The goal is to restore stability and equilibrium as much as possible.

**IMPORTANT**

Most organisations tend to engage primarily in the response phase of a crisis. As a result, resources are often concentrated on only one part of the crisis management cycle, while other phases remain insufficiently addressed. When insufficient attention is given to prevention, preparedness and recovery, communities remain less resilient and less prepared for future crises. In such cases, the recovery process may also be incomplete or uncertain, leaving communities more vulnerable to subsequent emergencies.

Understanding the crisis management cycle helps illustrate that responding to a crisis is a broad and multifaceted process. Humanitarian engagement does not need to focus solely on immediate response. There are many other areas within crisis management where your organisation can contribute effectively, drawing on its specific capacities, knowledge and resources.

## 2.2. How to Get Involved?

Once you know that you can and want to get involved in the crisis response, another important question arises: how to do so responsibly. Below you will find two simple “filters” that will help you understand the basic elements of properly organized activities:

- The Core Humanitarian Standard – helps assess the quality and appropriateness of the response,
- Three areas of responsibility – help define the scope of actions for which your organisation can realistically take responsibility.

### CORE HUMANITARIAN STANDARD

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) is a set of nine principles that define when assistance is truly effective—when it responds to people’s needs, is safe, and is delivered in a well-organised manner. It provides the foundation for an effective crisis response that is centred on the needs of affected people.

From the perspective of a leader involved in humanitarian action, five of these principles are particularly important. You can treat them as a practical checklist—if your organisation is able to ensure each of them, it is a strong indication that you can engage in crisis response in a responsible and effective way.

Principle 1. Assistance is appropriate and relevant
Humanitarian actions should respond to the actual,

verified needs of communities affected by the crisis. In practice, this means that:

- activities are based on identified and assessed needs, rather than intuition or resources that happen to be readily available;
- decisions rely on concrete information, such as conversations with affected people and data provided by local authorities, humanitarian actors or emergency services;
- you avoid actions based on the assumption that "someone might find this useful," and instead provide assistance only when you know that it addresses real needs.

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**What information do I rely on to assume that this form of assistance is needed here and now?**

### Principle 2: Assistance is delivered in a timely and efficient manner

This commitment refers not only to the speed of response but also to how effectively resources are used. In practice, this means that you:

- organise activities in a way that avoids wasting time and resources (for example, combining several deliveries into a single transport instead of transporting each separately);
- set realistic expectations: it is better to promise less and deliver reliably than to promise too much and fail to meet expectations.

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**Does the way I organise assistance allow it to reach affected people as quickly as possible? Am I avoiding unnecessary delays or complications?**

### Principle 3: Affected people influence the assistance they receive

This principle highlights an essential aspect of humanitarian action: assistance should not be delivered automatically or based solely on external assumptions, but should reflect the needs and perspectives of affected people. In practice, this means that you:

- avoid adopting a "we know better" attitude—even with significant experience, it is impossible to fully understand every individual situation;
- ask affected people what they need and how they would like assistance to be organised. If direct consultation is not possible, you rely on verified sources and reliable information (see Chapter 4 for examples of such sources).

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**How can affected people communicate their expectations or concerns? Do they have an opportunity to express how they assess the assistance they receive?**

### Principle 4: Humanitarian actors cooperate and coordinate their activities

Well-organised assistance is consistent and coordinated. This is essential to avoid duplication of activities and gaps in assistance. In practice, this means that you:

- identify which actors are already operating in the area (local authorities, volunteer fire brigades, faith-based organisations, foundations or informal groups);
- define clearly which part of the response your organisation will take responsibility for, taking into account the activities of other actors;
- share information with partners to avoid situations in which some groups receive the same assistance multiple times while others receive none.

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**Do I know what actions other actors are implementing? Do the activities organised by my organisation complement these efforts, or do they duplicate them?**

### Principle 5: Assistance is safe and accountable

Safety applies both to affected people and to those providing assistance. Particular attention must be paid to preventing abuse, especially in relation to individuals from groups facing heightened vulnerability.

In practice, this means that you:

- ensure physical safety (for example, clearly marked assistance distribution points and transparent procedures);
- ensure psychological safety (for example, people are not required to recount traumatic experiences in order to receive assistance);
- establish clear procedures for responding to abuse, violence, harassment, exploitation or discrimination;
- introduce specific safeguards for people belonging to vulnerable groups;
- reduce the risk that someone in a position of authority as a "helper" may misuse that position in relation to affected people.

The five principles described above form the essential foundation for engaging in crisis response in a responsible and effective manner, while respecting the dignity and safety of affected people.

## THREE AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Another perspective that can help you determine whether—and in what form—your organisation is ready to engage in humanitarian activities is the division of actions into three areas of responsibility. These areas illustrate how different humanitarian actors can contribute complementary forms of support.

### Area 1: Direct Assistance

The first area concerns direct assistance. This includes all forms of support that ensure access to essential goods and services, such as:

- food,
- hygiene products,
- clothing,
- access to shelter and transportation,
- financial assistance.

In many countries, including Poland, in-kind assistance (such as aid packages) is increasingly being replaced by cash assistance or vouchers. This approach offers several practical advantages:

- it does not require complex logistics related to storage and transportation;
- it allows affected people—or organisations working directly with them—to purchase exactly what is needed;
- it reduces the risk of distributing items that ultimately prove unnecessary or unsuitable.

### Area 2: Protection During the Provision of Assistance

All humanitarian activities should ensure the protection of affected people. In practice, protection may involve measures such as:

- ensuring access to reliable and up-to-date information (for example, explaining assistance rules, legal rights or administrative procedures in a clear and accessible manner);
- organising assistance points in a way that prevents exposure to aggression, humiliation or stigmatisation;
- facilitating access to legal assistance (for example, helping individuals understand official documents or administrative procedures);
- facilitating access to psychosocial support (such as psychological counselling or support groups);
- monitoring potential risks (for example, verifying accommodation offers for refugees or responding to reports of misconduct).

Activities involving the distribution of assistance or the provision of services should be organised in ways that minimise additional risks for affected people. Protection also requires particular attention to groups facing heightened vulnerability, including children, older persons, persons with disabilities and individuals who do not speak the language of the host country.

### Area 3: Safeguarding

Safeguarding refers to protecting affected people from abuse or exploitation by those providing assistance. This includes situations in which individuals misuse their position, access to resources or access to sensitive information in unethical or inappropriate ways.

In practice, safeguarding measures include:

- establishing clear behavioural standards for volunteers and staff (for example, a code of conduct);
- introducing simple and accessible mechanisms for reporting misconduct (for example, a designated phone number, email address or contact person);
- avoiding situations in which a single individual has excessive control over access to assistance;
- ensuring the confidentiality and protection of personal data.

All humanitarian activities should be organised in ways that protect affected people from potential harm or abuse by those providing assistance.

**IMPORTANT**

The Core Humanitarian Standard and the three areas of responsibility are practical tools designed to help you answer two key questions: **whether the assistance being offered is meaningful, needed and safe, and what responsibilities your organisation can realistically take on.** Using these frameworks, you can make informed decisions about whether and how to engage in humanitarian activities in response to a crisis.

## 2.3. How to Prepare Your Organization for Crisis Response: Recommendations

In this section, you will find specific recommendations on how to translate the principles you've learned into practical decisions that can be implemented right away. They are based on the practical experiences of many aid organizations. You can treat them as a "pre-crisis" checklist for your organization, institution, or community.

### Recommendation 1. Review previous actions

Prepare in advance and learn from past experience. Organise a meeting with key members of your organisation, institution or community. Together with your team, reflect on the experiences and lessons learned from previous crises. If your organisation has not yet been involved in responding to emergency situations, analyse your past activities and organisational practices instead.

The following questions may help guide this reflection:

1. Which stage of the crisis management cycle (discussed in Section 2.1.) did your organisation engage in, and why?
2. How did your organisation use its knowledge and experience to support people affected by the crisis?
3. Was the full potential of your team and organisation utilised? If not, what was missing?
4. Did your organisation's response follow the principles of responsible crisis response? If yes, how were these principles applied? If not, what should be improved? When reflecting on this question, consider the five key principles of the Core Humanitarian Standard (discussed in Section 2.2.).

### Recommendation 2. Identify Potential Risks

Together with the key members of your organisation, identify potential risks. Consider what types of crises may occur in the future and which of them your organisation may realistically be able to address (for example flooding, refugee crises, drought, financial crises or other emergencies).

Next, reflect on the types of crises that could occur within your organisation itself. Consider risks whose consequences could affect your organisation directly. These may include: external risks, such as political, economic, technological, legal or environmental factors; internal risks, such as financial constraints, staffing challenges, operational disruptions or communication-related issues affecting how your organisation communicates about its activities externally.

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**Which potential risks and crises are most likely to occur in the future? Which of them could have the greatest impact on your organisation? Select the most relevant risks and analyse them in greater detail.**

### Recommendation 3. Develop a crisis response plan

After identifying the greatest potential risks your organization may face, create a response plan for them. Divide potential risks into those with the greatest possible impact on the organization and those most likely to occur.

1. The plan should include a set of basic actions your organization would need to take in response to a potential crisis.
2. The plan should include:
   - identifying resources that could be used in a crisis situation,
   - determining the point at which your organization should take action,
   - appointing a team responsible for crisis response activities.

3. Develop a 72-hour action protocol for each crisis (specifying who coordinates the flow of information, who maps the area, and who provides direct field support).
4. You may also pre-establish a decision-making team (a crisis task force within your organization). Based on up-to-date data from local crisis management institutions, its members would make quick decisions on where to direct assistance.

### Recommendation 4. Identify Local Humanitarian Actors

Ensure that you understand the local environment and the key stakeholders who may be involved in crisis response in your municipality or region. This means identifying who may participate in responding to a crisis, what roles they play, and what capacities they have—before an emergency occurs. For example, you can:

- prepare a simple stakeholder map, including local authorities, emergency services, volunteer fire brigades, schools, faith-based organisations, social welfare centres, other civil society organisations, informal groups and local businesses;
- identify their mandates, resources and limitations (for example access to buildings, transportation, volunteers or specialised expertise);
- determine which institution is formally responsible for coordinating crisis response in the area;
- collect contact information for key individuals and agree on preferred communication channels in case of an emergency;
- develop simple templates or forms for mapping partners and their capacities.

An equally important element is building relationships with these actors before a crisis occurs. This may include participating in local meetings, holding working discussions about potential cooperation, or inviting partners to joint conversations about possible crisis scenarios. It is also helpful to clearly communicate what your organisation does, what type of support it can realistically provide, and what forms of support or information it may need from other actors (for example access to information, facilities or logistical assistance).

Further detailed recommendations are provided in later sections of the handbook (see in particular Section 5.2. Health and Life-Saving Preparedness).

# 3. Cooperation with Partners

An effective response to a crisis—whether at the local or national level—is never the result of the actions of a single organization or institution. In practice, crisis response requires cooperation among multiple actors: public administration, emergency services, civil society organizations, international institutions, the private sector and local community initiatives. Whether assistance is coordinated and effective—or fragmented and duplicative—often depends on whether these actors understand their respective roles, mandates and limitations.

In this chapter, you will learn about the key partners you may encounter during a crisis, including national and local government authorities, the State Fire Service and Volunteer Fire Brigades, networks of civil society organizations, international non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies and so-called "non-obvious allies" such as businesses, faith-based organizations and local community groups.

The chapter explains the roles these actors play, their formal responsibilities and the ways in which your organisation may cooperate with them—both before a crisis occurs and during the response phase.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a detailed overview of legal regulations, but rather to present a practical "map" of partners: whom you can turn to for support, what you may expect from them, and in which areas your organization can provide meaningful contributions. Understanding this broader landscape will help you plan activities that complement the wider crisis response system rather than operating independently of it.

## 3.1. Government and Local Administration

The institutions responsible for crisis management in Poland are national government authorities and local government units. These institutions are typically the first point of contact for organisations seeking to engage in crisis response activities. However, the form of cooperation and the appropriate channels of communication depend on the administrative level involved and the type of public institution concerned.

A key condition for effective cooperation with public administration is understanding the different legal frameworks governing their actions. Citizens, businesses and civil society organisations generally operate under the principle that "everything that is not prohibited is permitted." Public administration functions differently: only actions explicitly authorised by law are permitted." This means that institutions responsible for crisis management may undertake actions only within the limits defined by legal regulations. This model ensures order, accountability and stability in the functioning of the state.

### STRUCTURE OF THE SYSTEM

Crisis response in Poland follows the principle of subsidiarity. This means that actions are initially undertaken at the lowest level of public administration capable of effectively addressing the situation. Only when the available resources and capacities at that level are insufficient is responsibility transferred to institutions at a higher administrative level.

For organizations seeking to cooperate with public institutions during a crisis, it is therefore important to understand the structure of the crisis management system. This structure reflects the hierarchical levels of public administration responsible for responding to emergencies. Crisis response is organized sequentially across administrative levels—from the municipality (gmina) level to the county (powiat) level, then the regional (voivodeship) level and finally the national level. The structure determines who formally coordinates response activities at each level and to which authority support requests should be directed when local capacities are insufficient.

In simplified terms, the hierarchy of public administration involved in crisis management is as follows:

- National level – Council of Ministers
- Regional level (voivodeship) – voivode (regional governor)
- County level (powiat) – starosta (powiat governor)
- Municipal level (gmina) – wójt (village mayor), burmistrz (town mayor), or prezydent miasta (city mayor)

### RESPONSIBILITIES OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

In this section, you will learn about the key public administration bodies you may encounter at each of these levels. Next to each entity, you will find a brief explanation of its role in crisis management.

**National Level**

| | |
|---|---|
| Council of Ministers | The highest authority responsible for crisis management in Poland. |
| Government Crisis Management Team | An advisory and consultative body operating under the Council of Ministers. It supports the initiation and coordination of activities related to crisis management. |
| Government Center for Security (RCB) | Serves as the national crisis management centre. It continuously monitors threats, analyses risks, issues public warnings (including through RCB alert messages), and coordinates the flow of information between state institutions and across government ministries. |
| Ministry of the Interior and Administration | The ministry responsible for shaping national policy in the field of internal security, including civil protection and civil defence. It supervises key services involved in crisis response, such as the Police and the State Fire Service, and cooperates with the Government Centre for Security (RCB) and other ministries in planning and coordinating crisis response activities. |

**Regional Level (Voivodeship)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Voivode (Regional Governor) | Responsible for crisis management, civil protection and civil defence at the regional level. The voivode chairs the Regional Crisis Management Team and prepares the Regional Crisis Management Plan. |
| Marshal of the Voivodeship | The head of the regional government responsible for areas such as regional transport, healthcare, regional infrastructure and economic development. In the context of crisis management, the marshal cooperates with the voivode by mobilising resources and capacities of regional institutions, such as regional hospitals and other institutions managed by the regional government. |
| Regional Crisis Management Team | An advisory body to the voivode on matters related to crisis management. It includes representatives of public services and the regional administration. When necessary, the voivode may invite representatives of other organizations and institutions—including civil society organizations—to participate in its work. |
| Regional Crisis Management Center | An organizational unit operating under the authority of the voivode. Its primary responsibilities include monitoring threats, analysing risks and coordinating activities related to safety and crisis situations across the region. It also ensures the continuous flow of information between counties (powiats), emergency services and national government authorities. |

**County Level (Powiat)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Starosta (Powiat Governor) | Responsible for crisis management, civil protection and civil defence at the powiat level. The starosta chairs the Powiat Crisis Management Team and prepares the Powiat Crisis Management Plan. |
| County Crisis Management Team | A supporting body for the starosta in matters related to crisis management. It prepares analyses and recommendations, reviews crisis management documents and coordinates cooperation among services, inspections and other institutions operating at the powiat level. In addition to representatives of powiat services and institutions, the team may also include representatives of municipalities (gmina) and voluntary rescue organizations. |
| County (Powiat) Crisis Management Center | An organizational unit of the starosta (powiat governor), acting on his behalf. Its main task is to monitor, analyze, and coordinate security and crisis-related activities within the powiat on a 24/7 basis, as well as to ensure a constant flow of information between municipalities (gmina), emergency services, and the regional level (voivodeships). The Powiat Crisis Management Team performs tasks analogous to those of the Regional Crisis Management Team, but on a powiat scale and on behalf of the starosta (powiat governor). In addition to representatives of powiat services and institutions, its permanent members also include representatives of voluntary rescue organizations. |

**Municipal Level (Gmina)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Wójt (Village Mayor), Burmistrz (Town Mayor), Prezydent miasta (City Mayor) | The authority responsible for crisis management at the municipal (gmina) level. This office is responsible for crisis management, civil protection and civil defence within the municipality (gmina). The mayor chairs the Municipal Crisis Management Team and prepares the Municipal Crisis Management Plan, which is submitted to the powiat authorities for approval. |
| Municipal Crisis Management Team | This team performs functions similar to the Powiat Crisis Management Team but operates at the municipal (gmina) level and supports the mayor. In addition to representatives of municipal institutions and local services, it may also include representatives of voluntary rescue organizations. |
| Municipal Crisis Management Center | Unlike at the powiat level, municipalities are not legally required to establish a Municipal Crisis Management Centre. The decision to create such a centre, as well as its organizational structure, is determined by the executive authority of the municipality (the village/town/city mayor). |

**Cooperation Space Between Civil Society Organisations and Public Administration**

Public administration is formally responsible for crisis management. However, without cooperation with civil society organizations, its operational capacity is limited. NGOs often possess detailed knowledge of local needs, flexible resources and the trust of local communities. Public administration, in turn, has the legal mandate, institutional structure and formal instruments necessary to coordinate response activities.

This section outlines how these two sectors can work together—from the participation of civil society representatives in crisis management teams, through cooperation agreements, to the formal inclusion of NGOs within the civil protection system. The objective is to demonstrate concrete mechanisms through which cooperation can become a permanent element of the system rather than an ad hoc response limited to crisis situations.

**Participation in Crisis Management Planning and Teams**

Polish legislation on crisis management allows representatives of civil society organizations to participate in crisis management teams at the municipal (gmina), county (powiat) and regional (voivodeship) levels. This means that village/town/city mayors, starosts or voivodes may invite NGO representatives to participate in the work of these teams—particularly when such organizations are active in their jurisdiction. However, public authorities are not legally required to do so. of including representatives of civil society organizations in crisis management teams at the municipal, county and regional levels. This means that the wójt, burmistrz, prezydent miasta, starosta or voivode may invite NGO representatives to participate in the work of these teams—particularly when such organizations are active in their jurisdiction. However, public authorities are not legally required to do so.

For an NGO representative to become a member of such a team, an invitation from the relevant public authority and the organization's agreement to participate are required. Once included, representatives of civil society organizations may contribute to the planning process, provide recommendations and familiarise themselves with local crisis response procedures.

**Cooperation Agreements**

Under current law, specifically Article 5 of the Act on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteer Work, public authorities may (but are not required to) enter into agreements with non-governmental organizations. These are voluntary arrangements between public authorities and NGOs that set out the rules for their joint activities. These agreements may explicitly specify civil protection and crisis management activities in which the organization is to be involved.

The document should clearly indicate:
- the parties to the agreement (the administrative entity and the specific civil society organization),
- the scope of tasks the organization undertakes to perform (e.g. operating an aid distribution point, evacuation support, psychological support),
- the method of carrying out these tasks and the rules for initiating cooperation in the event of a threat (who makes the decision, how contact is established),
- the rules for financing or covering the costs of activities (e.g. whether the administration reimburses expenses, provides equipment, or finances part of the staff or on-call duties).

The agreement does not replace competitive grants or grant agreements, but it can serve as a framework for planning and describing long-term cooperation in crisis situations.

**Recognition as a System Entity (by Administrative Decision)**

The Act on Civil Protection and Civil Defense provides for the possibility of formally incorporating additional entities—including nongovernmental organizations—into the civil protection system. The decision in this matter is made by the competent authority based on the scope of the organization's activities, namely:
- the village/town/city mayor—for activities at the municipality (gmina) level,
- the starosta (powiat governor)—at the district (powiat) level,
- the voivode (regional governor)—at the regional (voivodeship) level,

- the minister responsible for internal affairs—for entities operating nationwide.

Participation in the system entails the assumption of specific obligations. The administrative decision should specify, in particular:

- the scope of tasks for which the organization is responsible within the system (e.g. a specific type of rescue operations, logistical support, operating a relief center),
- the area of operation (e.g. a specific municipality (gmina), county (powiat), region (voivodeship)),
- the rules for cooperation with public administration and services (e.g. the method of alerting, participation in exercises, reporting of activities),
- the basis for funding or reimbursement of costs related to the performance of tasks.

In practice, this means that the organization becomes part of the official response system, with an assigned place and role. It is therefore not a loose, informal collaboration, but a status resulting from a decision by an administrative body, which may also entail specific requirements (e.g. regarding readiness, equipment, and personnel qualifications).

In addition, rescue organizations may apply for inclusion in the National Rescue and Firefighting System. However, this issue goes beyond the scope of this guide and requires a separate discussion.

## 3.2. State Fire Service and Volunteer Fire Service

Another important partner with whom organizations involved in providing emergency assistance collaborate is the fire service. You may encounter officers from either the State Fire Service or the Volunteer Fire Service.

### STATE FIRE SERVICE

The State Fire Service (PSP) is a professional, uniformed, and specialized unit under the authority of the Minister of the Interior and Administration. It is one of the key institutions of the crisis management system in Poland. Its role is not limited solely to rescue and firefighting operations. In humanitarian crisis situations, the PSP becomes one of the most important pillars of support.

In the following sections, you will learn about the specific activities carried out by the State Fire Service, and you will also discover potential areas of cooperation between the State Fire Service and your organization.

**The Role of the State Fire Service During a Crisis**

During a humanitarian crisis, the State Fire Service becomes a pillar of technical, logistical, and organizational support. It is responsible for disaster relief, conducting rescue and search operations, and supporting the coordination of crisis management.

1. Direct rescue operations and public safety – the State Fire Service is responsible for responding to natural disasters (floods, storms, landslides) and technical emergencies (chemical incidents, structural failures). In particular, this includes:
   - evacuating people from endangered areas,
   - providing assistance to the injured,
   - securing incident sites (e.g. cordoning off the area, stopping traffic, conducting an initial assessment of structural safety),
   - removing the immediate effects of incidents (e.g. pumping out water, clearing fallen trees, limiting the spread of hazardous substances).
2. Supporting the activities of other entities in the field – firefighters have the equipment and experience that allow them to quickly set up and secure reception points, temporary shelters, or aid distribution centers. The State Fire Service may:
   - provide and operate power generators and other critical technical equipment,
   - assist in preparing and securing the infrastructure of temporary shelters,
   - ensure access to water and basic sanitation infrastructure.
3. Technical coordination within the crisis management system – the State Fire Service is responsible for the technical security of operations, advises central and local authorities on safety matters, and assesses risks associated with relief operations.

**Cooperation with NGOs**

Civil society organizations can complement the activities of the State Fire Service, for example by providing social, psychological, and humanitarian assistance:
- by focusing on providing affected or displaced persons with, for example, shelter, food, clothing, and psychological support,
- by supporting logistics (e.g. by managing warehouses or transporting donations), caring for volunteers, and operating reception centers.

NGOs therefore support the activities of the State Fire Service but do not replace its operational roles (e.g. rescue operations). The Fire Service, in turn, may support the activities of your organization or another regional organization in the field. However, this will always be operational support, not financial.

**IMPORTANT**

The State Fire Service does not provide direct financial support to civil society organizations. However, it can provide equipment and resources (e.g. tents, pumps, transportation), train volunteers and NGO staff on safety protocols, and involve NGOs in joint crisis response plans.

NGO activities are typically funded by local governments, regional governors (voivodes), or government programs, in which the State Fire Service can play an advisory and supportive role.

## VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE

The Volunteer Fire Service (OSP) is a community-based, voluntary, and specialized organization operating primarily at the local level. The OSP is part of the National Rescue and Firefighting System (KSRG) and provides crucial support to the State Fire Service and local communities in protecting lives, property, and the environment. There are over 16,000 OSP units in Poland (of which over 5,000 are part of the KSRG). All OSP units have the status of civil protection and civil defense entities. Volunteer firefighters combine rescue operations with educational, preventive, and community-building functions, promoting safety among residents. Volunteer Fire Brigades are affiliated with the Association of Volunteer Fire Brigades of the Republic of Poland, which, as a civil protection and civil defense entity, is responsible for conducting training in civil protection and civil defense and supporting authorities in building social resilience.

### The Role of Volunteer Fire Service During a Crisis

During a crisis, the Volunteer Fire Service (OSP) is usually the first and closest rescue entity to residents. Units operate within their municipality (gmina), are familiar with the layout of the area, local infrastructure, and particularly vulnerable individuals (e.g. the elderly, people with disabilities). This allows them to respond quickly to threats and provide precise on-site information to emergency services and local authorities.

1. Direct rescue operations – like the State Fire Service (PSP), the Volunteer Fire Service (OSP) participates in firefighting operations, evacuations, and cleanup efforts following floods, storms, or other local incidents. Volunteer firefighters secure the area, help emergency services reach hard-to-access locations, conduct search operations, and provide first aid or advanced first aid.
2. Support for evacuation and protection of the population – the Volunteer Fire Service can organize and operate local assembly points, assist in the transport of evacuees, transport people with limited mobility, and secure belongings left behind (e.g. by temporarily securing buildings).
3. Local logistics and aid organization – thanks to their technical resources (fire station, vehicles, basic equipment), Volunteer Fire Service units often take on the role of a local logistics hub: they provide space for storing donations, assist in sorting and distributing them, and support the organization of aid distribution points or temporary shelters.
4. Information and community outreach – as part of the local community, the Volunteer Fire Service plays a vital role in disseminating information: it conveys messages from authorities and emergency services to residents, explains procedures, and helps ensure that information reaches people who have limited access to official channels (e.g. the elderly and those living in rural areas). It can also alert local authorities and NGOs to needs that are not visible "from the outside."
5. Long-term post-crisis support – once the immediate threat has subsided, the Volunteer Fire Service participates in mitigating the effects of the crisis (e.g. pumping out water, clearing the area, securing buildings) as well as in preventive and educational activities, teaching residents safety rules and how to prepare for future crises. All these activities are carried out within the framework of the crisis management system, most often in cooperation with the State Fire Service and the municipality.

### Cooperation with NGOs

Cooperation between the Volunteer Fire Service (OSP) and civil society organizations is typically based on a simple division of roles: the OSP focuses on rescue and technical operations, while NGOs supplement these efforts with social, psychological, and organizational support. Together, they can create an effective local assistance system.

Examples of areas of cooperation:

1. Evacuation and shelter sites – the Volunteer Fire Service is responsible for security, evacuation, and basic infrastructure (e.g. generators, lighting), while the local organization handles registration, meal distribution, childcare, and psychosocial support.

2. Logistics of aid – a Volunteer Fire Service station can serve as a warehouse or distribution point for donations; NGOs organize collections, sorting, needs assessments, and distribution.
3. Reaching vulnerable populations – the Volunteer Fire Service, with their knowledge of the local area, can help reach the elderly, those living alone, and people with disabilities.
4. Education and prevention – joint meetings with residents, evacuation drills, and informational campaigns (e.g. how to prepare for a flood, storm, or power outage).

It is important to establish the rules for such cooperation in advance—preferably with the involvement of the municipality and based on local emergency management plans. This ensures that during a crisis, everyone knows their responsibilities, and the actions of the Volunteer Fire Service and NGOs complement each other rather than getting in each other's way.

## 3.3. Networks of Civil Society Organizations

Networks of civil society organizations represent an "intermediate layer" between a single NGO and the overall crisis response system. They may take the form of federations, coalitions, information platforms or thematic working groups. Their primary role is to connect organizations, standardise practices, facilitate the flow of information and represent their members jointly before public administration and donors.

In the context of crises, local networks and the Mapuj Pomoc Network fulfill several key functions:

- they collect and organize information about who is doing what and where (making it easier to identify gaps and duplication of activities),
- they provide tools (standards, procedures, document templates, service maps),
- they organize permanent communication channels (meetings, working groups, mailing lists),
- strengthen the organization's position in discussions with government agencies and donors.

Networks of civil society organizations may bring together various entities: from small local associations to large foundations and international organizations. This enables joint planning of activities, coordination of aid, as well as advocacy before public administration and donors. As a result, a single organization does not operate in isolation but becomes part of a broader crisis response system.

For you as an organizational leader, this means that instead of building contacts "from scratch," you can join an existing cooperation structure and use its resources.

### TYPES OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION NETWORKS

**Crisis and Humanitarian Networks**

A good example is the Mapuj Pomoc Network, established by the To Proste Foundation. It brings together over one hundred and forty organizations from across Poland and monitors the activities of approximately 3,000 entities. It organizes meetings, working groups and information exchange between NGOs, local authorities and other actors.

Mapuj Pomoc is both an interactive platform and a cross-sector network. The map of aid points available on the platform allows real-time updates on available forms of support across Poland, making it easier for people in need and organizations to find appropriate aid services. At the same time, the Mapuj Pomoc Network brings together civil society organizations, local authorities and other actors, offering regular information exchange, meetings, training and work in thematic groups on coordination of activities, aid standards, advocacy and countering disinformation.

Until 2025, a similar coordinating role was fulfilled by the NGO Forum "Razem" – a network established in response to the refugee crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, co-founded by PAH (Polish Humanitarian Action) and the Ashoka Foundation. After the Forum ceased operations, the practices it had developed, its working groups, and some of its tasks were incorporated into the Mapuj Pomoc Network, which took over the role of the main platform for humanitarian cooperation at the national level.

For your organization, participating in such networks means: faster access to information about needs and gaps in aid, easier partnership-building, the ability to use established tools and standards, and greater visibility before administration and donors. In the following subsections, you will see the role these networks play during a crisis and the forms in which you can cooperate with them.

**Thematic Networks – Migration, Refugees, Local Development**

Specialized coalitions operate in specific areas. The Granica Group is an alliance of organizations and initiatives assisting migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border—it combines direct aid, monitoring of violations, and advocacy for humanitarian standards.

If your organization works in the field of migration and refugees, it can also partner with, for example, the Migration Consortium. This is a coalition of leading Polish organizations supporting migrants and refugees. The Consortium monitors the situation, prepares reports (e.g. on accommodation conditions, narratives around the war in Ukraine, or reception standards), conducts advocacy at the national and European level, and shares knowledge with field organizations.

Another type of network consists of geographically rooted structures. The Polish LGD Network – Federation of Regional LGD Networks brings together most of the local action groups (LGDs) in the country that work to promote the development of rural areas and small towns.
Although their primary purpose is not crisis response, in practice, LGDs possess local knowledge, connections with local governments and the business community, and experience in development planning—making them a valuable ally in efforts related to post-crisis recovery and strengthening community resilience.

**"Infrastructure" Networks**

In addition to strictly crisis-related networks, there are "umbrella" organizations that strengthen the entire civil society sector. Examples include:

- The National Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations (OFOP) which represents the interests of NGOs at the national level, works to promote a favorable legal environment, and participates in fund monitoring committees and dialogue bodies,
- The SPLOT Network, which brings together centers supporting non-governmental organizations, develops management standards and offers consulting services, which translates into greater organizational readiness to act even during a crisis,
- The Donors Forum in Poland (Forum Darczyńców w Polsce) brings together grantmakers and develops standards for responsible philanthropy; it has a real impact on how grant programs are designed, including crisis programs.

These entities rarely engage in direct aid, but they have a significant influence on whether the financing system and legal environment support rapid, flexible responses to crises.

**Territorial Networks (Regional Federations and Platforms)**

Regional federations and platforms of non-governmental organizations bring together NGOs operating within a single region (voivodeship) or several neighboring counties (powiats). They serve as a "local umbrella": they represent organizations before regional (voivodeship) and county (powiat) governments, facilitate contact with government offices, and organize joint activities, training, and information exchange. As a result, individual organizations do not have to break through to local authorities on their own—they can use the leverage of the collective voice of the entire network.

Some of these structures are members of the National Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations (OFOP) or work closely with it. Examples include: the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations, the Wielkopolska Coordinating Council – Union of Non-Governmental Organizations, the Lower Silesian Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations, the Union of Associations of the Lublin Non-Governmental Organizations Forum, the Pomeranian Network of Non-Governmental Organization Centers, and the Mazovian Federation for the Social Economy.

An interesting example of a regional network is "SAN" – a forum created by local members of the Mapuj Pomoc Network, including the Folkowisko Humanitarian Foundation, the Q Foundation, and the Germanitas Foundation. Together, in the region, they aim to ensure good coordination of aid during humanitarian crises and natural disasters.

In practice, such regional structures can be your organization's first point of contact when you're looking for partners, information on funding opportunities, or want to get involved in activities planned at the regional level, including those related to crisis response.

In the following sections, you will see the specific role networks play during a crisis and how your organization can collaborate with them on a daily basis, rather than just in the heat of the moment.

## THE ROLE OF NETWORKS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS DURING A CRISIS

During a crisis, networks of civil society organizations primarily serve as information command centers. They collect data from the field (from their members, local governments, and emergency services), organize it, and make it available in a way that allows one to quickly see where assistance is already being provided and where it is lacking. Thanks to this, individual NGOs do not operate blindly but can make better plans for their involvement.

Networks such as Mapuj Pomoc translate this directly into practice—with maps and services databases updated in real-time show what support is available in a given location, where gaps exist, and which organizations need reinforcement. Other networks (e.g. the Migration Consortium, Grupa Granica) monitor the situation in narrower thematic areas, providing in-depth analyses and recommendations regarding specific groups (e.g. refugees, people detained at the border).

Typical tasks of networks during a crisis include:

- coordinating the flow of information between organizations, local authorities, services and donors,
- identifying gaps in aid and encouraging specific entities to step in where "nobody is present yet,"
- rapidly sharing tools and standards (e.g. simple safety procedures, form templates, guidelines for working with specific groups),
- advocacy responses—preparing joint statements, making alerts about violations of standards, communicating real needs from the field to authorities.

An important task of networks is also looking after the well-being of the organizations themselves. During a crisis, networks can organize "second-line" support for their members: webinars, supervision, legal consultations, exchange of good practices. For an individual NGO, this means not being left alone with difficult dilemmas and overload, but having access to the experience of others.

As a result, networks do not replace organizations operating in the field but strengthen them and connect them into a coherent whole. It is often the effectiveness of networks that determines whether hundreds of dispersed initiatives form a coherent aid system or remain a collection of uncoordinated well-intentioned actions.

## FORMS OF COOPERATION

Cooperation with networks of organizations does not necessarily mean immediate membership in a formal federation. What is more important is that your organization stays in the loop and knows how to make practical use of this cooperation—especially during a crisis.

The most common and most useful forms of cooperation:

1. Presence in databases and on maps. Ensure that your organization is listed in national databases and maps (e.g. maps of aid services, network membership catalogues), such as Mapuj Pomoc. This ensures that during a crisis, other entities—including local authorities, OSP, PSP and large NGOs—can quickly locate you and invite you to cooperate.
2. Participation in meetings and working groups. Most networks hold regular online/offline meetings: crisis briefings, thematic working sessions, groups focused on specific populations (e.g. refugees, children, persons experiencing homelessness). During a crisis, this is often the only place where you can relatively quickly establish "who is doing what," avoid duplication and find partners for joint initiatives.
3. Using shared tools and standards. Networks provide ready-made solutions: templates for simple safety procedures, protection policies, registration forms, standards for working with specific groups. Instead of creating everything from scratch under time pressure, you can adopt or adapt existing materials—which accelerates the start of activities and reduces the risk of errors.
4. Joint reporting and data exchange. During a crisis, it is particularly important to share up-to-date information with the network: how many people your organization has assisted, what the most urgent needs are, where gaps are emerging. In return, the network provides aggregate analyses (e.g. for an entire region) that you can use in planning activities or in funding applications.

5. Advocacy and joint positions. It is difficult for a single organization to effectively advocate for changes to procedures, additional funding or corrections to government actions. A network can prepare a joint position, report or appeal that aggregates the experiences of many entities. Your role is to provide field data and sign on to the collective voice—this significantly increases the chances that someone on the government side will respond.
6. Project partnerships and consortia. Many crisis funding programs encourage applications through partnerships or consortia. Networks often facilitate the creation of such groups: they connect organizations with different competencies (e.g. a local NGO + a specialist organization + an advocacy entity), help define the division of roles and prepare a joint project.
7. "Second-line" support for the team. The network can organize for its members legal consultations, supervision, psychological support for teams, webinars on safety during crisis work. From the perspective of a small organization, this is often the only way to access such support—and to prevent the team from "burning out" in the first weeks of intensive aid.

In practical terms: the more you establish before a crisis (network membership, communication channels, participation in meetings, basic standards), the easier it will be to use these mechanisms during a crisis – when there is no longer time to build relationships from scratch.

What does this mean for your organization?
From a practical standpoint, it is worth:

- identifying at least one crisis or sector-specific network, with which you want to maintain regular contact (e.g. the Mapuj Pomoc Network, the Migration Consortium, Grupa Granica),
- check whether a federation or regional network operates in your region (e.g. associated with a LGD or OFOP) and establish a relationship with it,
- ensuring your organization is listed in databases and on maps (e.g. Mapuj Pomoc), so that during a crisis it is visible to other entities,
- follow announcements from infrastructure networks (OFOP, SPLOT, Donors' Forum), as they often contain information about new funding sources, standards, and legal changes regarding crisis response activities.

Participation in networks helps your organization better understand who is doing what during a crisis. This allows you to avoid duplicating efforts and direct resources to areas where there are actual gaps in aid.

## 3.4. International Non-Governmental Organizations

International non-governmental organizations (International NGOs – INGOs) are organizations typically registered in one country but operating in many countries simultaneously. They run permanent aid and development programs, often across dozens of countries, and have their own logistical and expert base as well as large humanitarian budgets. They operate in areas such as food aid, health, shelter, WASH (water, sanitation, hygiene), education, civilian protection and legal support.

INGOs differ from UN agencies (e.g. UNHCR, UNICEF) and from government donors. INGOs formally remain civil society organizations, but they are also permanently embedded in the global humanitarian aid system. In recent years, many of them have adopted commitments related to "localisation of aid": transferring a greater share of funding and responsibility to local and national organizations and building partnerships with them (e.g. the Charter for Change initiative, DG ECHO guidelines on equitable partnerships).

Describing all international non-governmental organizations is beyond the scope of this handbook; therefore, we highlight only a few examples of entities that were particularly active in Poland during the response to the mass arrival of refugees from Ukraine:

- International Rescue Committee (IRC) – a global humanitarian organization that since the 1930s has been helping people affected by conflicts and disasters; it operates in more than 40 countries, including Poland, providing cash assistance, legal support, education and integration support,
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) – an independent humanitarian organization specializing in the protection of the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons; it operates in approximately 40 countries, providing material, legal and educational support,
- Save the Children – an international non-governmental organization that for over 100 years has been working to protect the rights of children worldwide. It provides humanitarian aid in crisis situations such as wars and natural disasters, supports access to education and healthcare, and combats poverty, violence and the exclusion of children,
- CARE International – a confederation of humanitarian organizations operating in more than 100 countries; it focuses on combating poverty, crisis response and strengthening the position of women and girls.

INGOs engage in crises with significant financial and expert resources. They increasingly declare that they want to work in partnership with local organizations, not instead of them.

### THE ROLE OF INGOS DURING A CRISIS

During a crisis, INGOs may fulfill several typical roles, depending on the country, the scale of the event and the presence of local partners:

1. Direct implementer of activities (field operations).
   INGOs sometimes deploy their own teams, warehouses and supply chains and carry out field operations: food and hygiene distribution, establishing temporary shelters, medical support, WASH activities, protection programs. This often complements or reinforces the activities of local services and organizations, especially in the first phase of major crises.
2. Bearer of standards and technical expertise.
   Through their work in many countries, INGOs have developed procedures and standards (e.g. on shelter, cash assistance, protection of vulnerable groups, team safety). They often participate in coordination structures (clusters, sector teams), co-develop operational guidelines and translate them into practice in a given country.
3. Partner and financial intermediary.
   INGOs are an important link between donors (governments, EU institutions, international foundations) and local entities. They obtain large grants and then implement them independently or in partnership with national organizations—transferring part of the funds onward (sub-grants, partner projects). Donors increasingly require that such cooperation be based on the principles of equal partnership rather than pure subcontracting.

4. International advocacy and resource mobilization.
   INGOs have access to international media and forums, can raise awareness about the situation in a given country, present joint positions with local partners and influence donor decisions. From the perspective of local organizations, this is an opportunity for their experiences and demands to be heard beyond the country's borders.

Well-designed INGO presence can genuinely strengthen the local aid system—provided that activities do not replace local actors but cooperate with them and transfer part of the responsibility and resources to them.

## COOPERATION WITH NGOS

From the perspective of your organization, cooperation with INGOs may take various forms. It is essential from the outset to clearly establish the rules, scope of responsibility and expectations—so that the relationship is a partnership rather than purely subcontracting.
Typical models of cooperation:

1. Project Partnership. An INGO and a local organization jointly implement a project funded by an external donor. The INGO usually handles donor relations, part of management and reporting, while the local NGO handles field activities, contextual knowledge and work with communities. In a good model, the agreement provides for: full coverage of the local organization's costs (including overheads), a clear division of tasks, joint planning and the right to co-decide on the shape of activities.
2. Subgrants and financial support for smaller NGOs. An INGO may run grant competitions for local partners—particularly where there are many small initiatives and access to large international programs would be unrealistic for them. Good practice involves combining funding with advisory support: help with project planning, financial reporting, developing basic procedures (e.g. safety, data protection, safeguarding).
3. Technical support and capacity building. INGOs can train the teams of local NGOs (e.g. in cash assistance standards, protection of vulnerable persons, field health and safety (BHP), safeguarding policies), provide tools (procedure templates, forms, data collection systems), and support the adaptation of internal regulations to the requirements of international donors. Condition: support should respond to needs defined by the local partner, not exclusively to INGO expectations.
4. Joint Advocacy. The local organization contributes knowledge of the situation in the field; the INGO contributes access to media, international forums and donor contacts. Joint reports, positions or campaigns can more effectively influence the decisions of authorities and international institutions than actions by either side alone.

Cooperation with INGOs also carries risks: administrative overload, disproportionate risk allocation (the local NGO bears the consequences of errors but does not co-decide on the project), staff drain, or treating the partner as a cheap contractor. Therefore, it is worth:

- demanding a transparent agreement (including information on what share of the budget goes to local partners),
- negotiating realistic direct costs,
- ensuring that you have influence over the shape of activities and methods of working in the field,
- clearly communicating your limitations and needs.

A well-structured relationship with an INGO can be an important reinforcement for your organization—not only financially, but also organizationally (procedures, standards, know-how), which will remain with you even after the specific crisis project has ended.

## 3.5. United Nations Agencies

United Nations agencies are institutions with an intergovernmental mandate, funded primarily from the public resources of states and international organizations. They are not non-governmental organizations, but in practice they operate in similar areas as INGOs—conducting direct aid activities, developing standards and cooperating with a network of partners, including NGOs.

In the context of crises, the following agencies are particularly important from the perspective of Polish organizations:
- UNHCR – the UN Refugee Agency, responsible for the protection of persons fleeing persecution and conflicts, including access to asylum procedures and integration support,
- IOM – the International Organization for Migration, a UN agency dealing with migration, responsible for supporting migrants, displaced and returning persons,
- UNICEF – the United Nations Children's Fund, focused on protecting children's rights, health, education and safety, including in emergency situations.

### ROLE DURING A CRISIS

During major crises, UN agencies fulfill several parallel roles: operational, coordination, expert and advocacy.
- UNHCR
  - is responsible for the protection of refugees and asylum seekers—it monitors compliance with refugee law, supports the creation and implementation of legal solutions,
  - organizes and finances material, cash and specialist assistance (e.g. legal aid, protection support) for refugees and host communities,
  - cooperates with governments, local authorities and NGOs in planning systemic solutions (registration, accommodation, integration).
- IOM
  - manages migration flows in emergency situations: evacuation, relocation, support for voluntary returns,
  - conducts aid activities for persons in transit (e.g. at borders, in reception centers, on migration routes)—shelter, food, healthcare, psychological support,
  - provides data and analyses on population mobility, which is essential for planning crisis response.
- UNICEF
  - conducts humanitarian activities focused on children and their caregivers—including health, nutrition, education in crisis situations, protection from violence and exploitation,
  - activates rapid financing mechanisms that enable response within hours of a crisis,
  - works before, during and after a crisis: from urgent assistance (water, vaccinations, therapeutic food) to activities rebuilding education and child protection systems.

In practice, this means that UN agencies are rarely the first point of contact for small local organizations. However, they play a critical role in setting the framework and priorities of the international response, including funding streams and standards that subsequently guide the work of international and national non-governmental organizations (INGOs and NGOs).

### COOPERATION WITH NGOS

UN agencies formally cooperate primarily with governments, but in practice a large part of their activities is based on partnerships with civil society organizations—both large and local. The basis for such cooperation is formed by principles defined within the UN system (including the possibility of granting consultative status to NGOs).

Typical forms of cooperation:
- Operational Partnerships
  - UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF commission the implementation of some activities to local and international organizations (e.g. operating support centers, legal clinics, educational programs for refugee children).
  - Often, the NGO is responsible for direct work with people, while the UN agency provides funding, standards, monitoring and reporting.

- Including NGOs in Coordination Structures
    - UN agencies lead or co-lead working groups and clusters (e.g. on protection, children, shelter, education) to which organizations active in a given area are invited,
    - participation in such structures provides access to information about planned activities, needs and funding.
- Building NGO Capacity
    - training in humanitarian standards, child protection, work with migrants, safeguarding policies and data collection,
    - support in implementing procedures required by international donors (e.g. data protection, prevention of abuse).
- Advocacy and Joint Positions
    - UN agencies use the data and experience of NGOs to prepare reports and recommendations for governments and the international community,
    - civil society organizations can co-create such documents, providing field material and flagging violations of standards.

From a practical perspective for your organization, this means that:

- it is worth monitoring which UN agency offices are operating in Poland (or in the region) and in which areas they run programs,
- in the event of a refugee or migration crisis, key contacts will be with UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF, often through larger networks (e.g. migration consortia, humanitarian networks),
- cooperation with a UN agency usually requires meeting certain organizational standards—but it can bring more stable funding and access to expertise that is difficult to find independently.

## 3.6. Partners and Allies Outside the Aid System

Not all key actors responding to a crisis are formally part of the crisis management system or the humanitarian sector. In practice, "non-obvious" partners play a huge role: the business sector (including corporate foundations and state-owned companies), local entrepreneurs, rural women's associations (KGW), parishes, and other communities. They have resources, networks, and public trust which—when properly leveraged—can significantly strengthen relief efforts.

### THE ROLE OF NON-OBVIOUS PARTNERS DURING A CRISIS

In times of crisis, non-obvious partners can play several key roles:

1. Material and Financial Support. Companies and corporate foundations can quickly provide financial resources, equipment, or services (e.g. transport, communication, accommodation, food). Local businesses—such as shops, wholesalers, transport companies, hotels, and printing houses—also play a crucial role, as they can often deliver needed supplies almost immediately, without lengthy procedures.
2. Infrastructure and Space. Parishes, parish halls, community centers, cultural centers, and facilities of rural women's associations (KGW) can be rapidly transformed into information points, storage areas, or temporary shelters. Businesses, in turn, can offer warehouses, halls, office spaces, or accommodation for volunteers and people affected by the crisis.
3. Human Resources and Social Networks. Rural women's associations (KGW), parishes, and local initiatives are embedded in strong, informal social networks. They often know who in the community is in a difficult situation, who needs to be reached, and who is able to help. Additionally, company employees can engage in relief efforts as volunteers—either individually or through employee volunteering programs.
4. Building Trust and Communication. For many people, local actors—such as parishes, community leaders, or well-known entrepreneurs—are more trustworthy than anonymous external organizations. Non-obvious partners can therefore play a key role in communication, helping to reach individuals who do not use official channels such as social media or government websites.

All of this means that in a crisis, it is often the "non-obvious" partner that has the first real opportunity to respond. If you cooperate with them, they can help organize that response and integrate it into the broader support system.

### COOPERATION WITH NGOS

Cooperation with non-obvious partners requires a clear division of roles: NGOs bring expertise in aid standards, protection of vulnerable groups, procedures, and accountability; local partners contribute resources, relationships, and knowledge of the local context.

1. Simple agreements and clear "who does what" arrangements – when working with a company or corporate foundation, it is important to define not only what is funded or provided (e.g. transport, food, accommodation), but also the rules for financial settlement and accountability. When initiating cooperation with a parish, a rural women's association (KGW), or a local business, identify individuals responsible for specific tasks, as well as the timeframe of the cooperation.
2. Joint actions and local campaigns – for example, you can organize in-kind or financial collections under the brand of a local partner, while following your own needs assessment. You can also involve partners in information campaigns (posters, church announcements, local media, shops) (more on communication methods in Section 4.6).
3. Employee and local volunteering – companies can make their employees available (e.g. 1–2 days per week) for specific tasks such as logistics, running assistance points, IT support, accounting, or translation. Parishes and rural women's associations (KGW) can mobilize local volunteers for your activities. However, it is essential to provide them with instructions, short training, and safety guidelines (more on volunteering in Section 5.4).
4. Long-term partnerships – with a corporate foundation or a large local business,

you can develop a standing partnership in times of calm that is automatically activated during a crisis (e.g. a ready scenario defining who provides transport, where storage is located, and how quickly a support point can be opened). With parishes or rural women's associations (KGW), you can agree on a permanent role within a local response plan (e.g. meal preparation, childcare, reaching isolated individuals).

At the same time, cooperation with non-obvious partners must adhere to basic standards:

- clear rules for allocating aid (who qualifies, under what conditions, based on which criteria),
- protection of affected individuals (no religious, political, or commercial pressure in exchange for assistance),
- data protection and privacy,
- avoidance of situations where gratitude for help is exploited for other purposes.

Well-structured cooperation ensures that local resources—funding, space, and relationships—become part of a broader, responsibly organized system of assistance, rather than a spontaneous effort that is difficult to sustain over time.

# 4. Humanitarian Aid in Practice – Challenges and Recommendations

In this chapter, you will learn what humanitarian aid looks like from the inside—from the initial planning of warehousing and transportation, through the collection and distribution of donations, to support for housing, safety, legal assistance, and communication with those affected. The challenges and recommendations gathered here are based on the experiences of organizations that have carried out activities in both sudden crises and longer-term self-reliance processes.

In the following sections, you will find specific guidelines: how to organize logistics and warehouses, how to plan the collection and shipment of in-kind aid, how to support housing programs, how to ensure security (including data protection), how to organize legal aid, and how to communicate needs and resources without excluding vulnerable groups. The accompanying checklists are designed to help you quickly verify whether key elements have been addressed before, during, and after a crisis.

# Logistics and Warehousing

## Checklist: Logistics and Warehousing

**Are you ready to respond to a crisis?**

❑ I have selected a warehouse location or locations (warehouse, fire station, gymnasium, private warehouse, etc.)—at least one
- ❑ I have agreed with the owner on the terms of use during a crisis (agreement/letter of intent, access conditions, fees)
- ❑ I know what the technical capabilities are (access, loading dock, access to electricity/water/heating)

❑ I have a planned warehouse layout
- ❑ I know where the zones will be: goods receipt, sorting, storage, distribution/loading
- ❑ I have a simple warehouse plan prepared (e.g. a sketch on paper or in a file)

❑ I have developed a system for recording goods received and issued
- ❑ I have a template for the goods receipt/issue document

❑ I have rules for sorting and classifying products
- ❑ I have established categories (e.g. food, hygiene, clothing, chemicals, equipment)
- ❑ I have a consistent labeling system that can be explained to a new person in a few minutes

❑ I have a procedure for regular inventory
- ❑ I have a simple form/table for recording inventory levels
- ❑ I have designated a person responsible for inventory

❑ I have defined storage conditions for various products
- ❑ I know where I can store food (a dry, clean place with the right temperature). I know whether I have access to a refrigerator/cold storage for products that need to be refrigerated
- ❑ Food is stored separately from chemicals

❑ I have a plan for a brief training session for warehouse staff

❑ I know how to categorize warehouses
- ❑ I know which location can serve as a large transshipment warehouse (for trucks, large deliveries)
- ❑ I know where local/specialized warehouses can be established (closer to beneficiaries, with a narrower range of products)

❑ I have a basic warehouse evacuation plan prepared

❑ I have a "core list" of warehouse contacts and resources
- ❑ I have a phone number assigned to the warehouse (e.g. a dedicated warehouse service phone)
- ❑ I have a list of people involved in warehouse work with a description of roles (coordination, record-keeping, loading/unloading, contact with drivers)

❑ I have checked existing framework agreements in the region
- ❑ I have checked whether local government (municipality, county, voivodeship) has agreements that NGOs can use

❑ I have prepared the option of entering into my own framework agreements
- ❑ I know what issues I need to check in the agreement (legal liability, comprehensive insurance (AC), third-party liability (OC), personal accident insurance (NNW))

- ❑ I have a list of potential transport providers for crisis situations
  - ❑ a list of commercial companies
  - ❑ a list of organizations and entities in the region that declare readiness to share their fleet

- ❑ I have a plan for a rapid response system for urgent needs
  - ❑ I know who will receive urgent transport requests (e.g. one person at the warehouse), I have a plan for the order of processing requests (simple prioritization rules)

- ❑ I know how to access support from the WOT, PSP, and other services

- ❑ My organization has (or will have) a profile on mapujpomoc.pl

- ❑ I collaborate with the local Social Welfare Center (OPS)
  - ❑ I have the contact information for the person responsible for collaboration at the Social Welfare Center (OPS)

## 4.1. Logistics and Warehousing

An efficiently run warehouse is the backbone of the entire in-kind aid system. The lack of a plan, clear rules and simple inventory management tools very quickly leads to chaos: surplus of some products, shortage of others, food waste and overload of the team and volunteers.

The challenges described in this area were identified by organizations and public entities that actually operated aid warehouses during recent crises—both central and local ones. For each challenge, working groups developed a set of recommendations. This is not a catalog of theoretical best practices but a response to real problems encountered during operations. They will help you prepare for the future.

### 4.1.1. SPACE PLANNING AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

During recent crises, organizations faced the challenge of how to plan the warehouse and manage the flow of donations so that it would be safe, transparent and manageable even with a large influx of aid.

***Challenge: Lack of warehouse space planning and management of donation workflows***

Recommendation 1. Plan the warehouse layout. Divide the warehouse into zones from the start: goods receipt, sorting, storage, and distribution/loading. Mark them clearly (signs, colored tape on the floor) so that even a new person can quickly find their way around.

Recommendation 2. Implement an inventory management system (product registration). Prepare a simple system for recording goods received and issued (paper or electronic) that allows you to track inventory levels. For food, you can use the FIFO (First In, First Out) principle—dispatch products that were received earliest and have the shortest expiration date first.

Recommendation 3. Establish rules for product segregation and classification. Divide products by:

- category (e.g. food, hygiene, clothing, chemicals),
- expiry or validity dates,
- distribution priority (e.g. products for infants, elderly persons, persons with chronic diseases).

Use consistent labels (e.g. colors, symbols) so that every team member understands the system in the same way.

Recommendation 4. Conduct regular inventory checks. Introduce regular inventory checks. This will help identify shortages, surpluses and ensure that no expired products remain in the warehouse—especially food and medicines/medical supplies.

Recommendation 5. Ensure proper storage conditions. Each product group requires different conditions: food—a dry, clean place, appropriate temperature and regular date checks; products requiring refrigeration—access to refrigerators/cold storage; chemicals—separate, well-ventilated rooms.

**IMPORTANT**

Always store food separately from chemicals.

Recommendation 6. Prepare the team and volunteers for warehouse work. Create a simple training system (instructions, short onboarding sessions) for warehouse managers and volunteers. Where possible, pair external volunteers with local people—this facilitates communication of rules, familiarity with the location and building responsibility for the warehouse.

Recommendation 7. Specialize your warehouses—avoid "jack-of-all-trades" warehouses. From the beginning, distinguish transshipment warehouses (capable of receiving large shipments, e.g. with forklifts) and local/specialized warehouses (closer to recipients, with a narrower range of products). Avoid creating a single universal warehouse where it will be hard to maintain order.

Recommendation 8. Prepare warehouse document templates. Prepare a goods receipt document template in advance (and if possible, a goods issue document). During a crisis, this will allow you to launch the warehouse faster, without wasting time creating forms on the spot.

Recommendation 9. Develop a basic warehouse evacuation plan. Plan where and how you will transport warehouse goods in case of evacuation. Define priorities (what goes out first), available means of transport and potential alternative locations.

Recommendation 10. Map out potential warehouse locations in advance. Identify in advance which facilities have been designated by local authorities as potential warehouses. Check whether they have assigned categories (e.g. food, chemicals), technical capabilities (access, loading dock, power supply) and learn the contacts of the persons coordinating work at these warehouses.

### 4.1.2. TRANSPORTATION

Throughout Poland, similar problems with transport logistics arose during crises. Most often they resulted from a lack of coherent communication and agreements with transport companies, the need to cover costs (not all companies agreed to provide free support) and logistical problems—a shortage of available drivers, vehicles and volunteers.

**Fleet and Funding**

***Challenge: Insufficient fleet or funds for transportation***

Recommendation 1. Identify existing framework agreements in the region. Check whether larger civil society organizations in your region have framework agreements with leasing or transport companies. Ask whether your organization can be included in such an agreement and on what terms. Also verify whether NGOs can use framework agreements entered into by local government (municipality, county, voivodeship), e.g. for vehicle rental or transport services.

Recommendation 2. Enter into your own framework agreements with transportation companies. If there is no large organization with a framework agreement in your region, consider entering into such an agreement or partnership yourself—with local or national leasing companies or carriers.

**IMPORTANT**

Pay special attention to legal liability and insurance issues (comprehensive insurance (AC), third-party liability (OC), personal accident insurance (NNW)). Remember that each company has its own agreement template for contracts with other entities. There is no single, universal template.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH) has signed framework agreements for various services, including transport. Such a framework agreement specifies the types and number of vehicles, terms of use (period, range, how to submit requests), rates and payment methods, and requirements for drivers and liability for damages.

Recommendation 3. Take advantage of the transportation services available during the crisis. In situations requiring larger shipments, organizations typically use commercial carriers on a paid basis, while smaller loads are sometimes transported by private individuals who volunteer their help free of charge. It is worth monitoring offers from companies declaring free or discounted transport of donations during crises and creating a list of organizations and entities with delivery vehicles ready to share their fleet with other NGOs.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

If one of the regional organizations has its own transport (e.g. vans, delivery vehicles), it often shares it with other entities.

During crises, InPost has provided free transportation of in-kind donations (including for persons affected by the 2024 flood). Thanks to such support, civil society organizations were able to reduce transport costs, especially for small and medium-sized loads. Information on cooperation opportunities is worth checking directly on the InPost website or by contacting their hotline.

Recommendation 4. Define rules for using private vehicles. If you plan to use private vehicles (belonging to volunteers or individuals), clearly define the tasks they may be used for (e.g. small loads, short local routes), verify insurance coverage and prepare a simple agreement or declaration for drivers. This will reduce the risk of disputes and misunderstandings in case of cargo or vehicle damage.

Recommendation 5. Check the possibility of obtaining free fuel. Before you begin intensive operations, check whether there are support programs in your region that provide fuel for emergency services and organizations involved in aid. Information on this may be published by major fuel station chains, voivodeship or county governments, and national authorities (e.g. in crisis communications).

**GOOD PRACTICE**

In 2024, not only the State Fire Service and Volunteer Fire Brigades benefited from free fuel for travel and operations in flood-affected areas. Local organizations from Lower Silesia, including the Mountain Festival (Festiwal Górski), received fuel vouchers redeemable at ORLEN and BP stations.

**IMPORTANT**

Regularly check the websites of major fuel station chains to see whether they have announced the issuance of fuel vouchers for organizations in your region.

Recommendation 6. Create a transport cooperative for crisis situations. If several organizations and institutions operate in your area, you can create a simple transport cooperative. You can share information about available vehicles (type, capacity, time availability), submit your transport needs or plan combined routes to reduce empty trips and duplication of runs.

**Transport Organization**

Experience from past crises shows that even well-organized external transport is not sufficient if there is no efficient system for delivering aid the whole way—to specific towns, streets, or households. In many areas, challenges included fragmented information about road conditions and the lack of simple tools for coordinating local transport.

At the same time, the 2024 floods revealed an important systemic limitation. The Territorial Defence Forces (WOT) often supported NGOs in distributing equipment, but clear frameworks for this cooperation were lacking. Each WOT unit was responsible only for a specific area. As a result, such support was not available everywhere on the same terms, and its use often depended on previously established relationships.

***Challenge: Difficulties in organizing transport within crisis-affected areas***

Recommendation 1. Build a database of local volunteer drivers. From the very beginning of the crisis, start building a database of local drivers who know the area and are ready to help with their own vehicles. Collect phone numbers, distinctive vehicle descriptions (e.g. "blue Toyota pickup"), information about vehicle type (off-road, van, car with large capacity) and time availability. Designate a person responsible for updating this database so that at any given moment it is clear whom to ask for support.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

During the flood crisis, individual local drivers who knew the terrain and could reach hard-to-access places played a crucial role. Where lists of such drivers were created, with vehicle descriptions and hours of availability, it was easier to match tasks to capabilities.

It is also worth organizing short, daily briefings with local drivers (e.g. in the morning or evening) to gather up-to-date information about road accessibility, closed sections, detours and particularly difficult locations. Such field knowledge is often more current than official road bulletins.

Recommendation 2. Build a rapid response system for urgent needs. Local drivers can be key for urgent, small-scale transports—water, medicines, essential supplies. It is worth creating a simple duty roster or a list of drivers drivers on-call who can be mobilized at short notice. Define clear rules: who receives requests (e.g. one person at the warehouse or coordination point), how urgent needs are verified, and in what order they are handled.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

In one flood-affected town, a simple driver duty roster was created. Each day, 2–3 people were on call during specific hours. When an urgent need arose (e.g. delivering medicines to a cut-off street), the coordinator didn't have to send multiple messages—they called people on the duty list in sequence until someone confirmed they could go.

Recommendation 3. Check possibilities for support from Territorial Defence Forces (WOT), fire services, and other public institutions. In some situations, public services—such as the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT), State Fire Service (PSP) or other equipped units—supported local transport. In flood-affected areas, WOT supported non-governmental organizations in distributing equipment (e.g. household appliances, dehumidifiers) to specific addresses, using vehicles adapted for difficult conditions. Remember, however, that each WOT or PSP unit operates in a specific area and cannot always carry out transport outside its area of responsibility.

**IMPORTANT**

Decisions on the scale and type of support from WOT and other services are made at the level of crisis management teams. To make use of this potential, contact your municipal office (urząd gminy), county authority (starostwo powiatowe) or regional crisis management center and report your needs there—preferably in an organized manner, with a brief description of the task, estimated number of trips and deadline.

### 4.1.3. COORDINATION BETWEEN WAREHOUSES

In many locations, in-kind aid was collected in several—even a dozen—warehouses operated by different entities. However, there was no single place where one could check who had what, what was lacking, and where surpluses could be redirected. This led to situations where some warehouses were overloaded with donations, others faced shortages, and transport was carried out blindly.

***Challenge: Lack of a coordination system between individual warehouses***

Recommendation 1. Join a warehouse coordination system (e.g. Mapuj Pomoc). Join the warehouse system that Mapuj Pomoc plans to launch in 2026, which was tested during the floods. Register your organization on the platform and assign specific individuals access to update your profile. The system is designed to be simple: each warehouse can report whether it has "a lot," "a little," or "a shortage" of specific resources, and whether it needs them or not.

In the first weeks of a crisis, it is crucial that all actors have access, in one place, to information on who has what resources, where they are located, and what resources are needed. Be prepared for your warehouse information to be visible to other organizations and institutions—this enables coordination.

**IMPORTANT**

The registration process on mapujpomoc.pl is free and available to all entities operating within a crisis. It is worth doing this in advance—creating a profile and familiarizing yourself with how the site works will save you time when the workload suddenly increases. After prior registration, the first inventory data entry takes about 10 minutes.

Recommendation 2. Map locations that can serve as aid warehouses. Mapping potential warehouses should be one of the key preparedness activities carried out while conditions are still stable. This means creating a local and regional database of spaces that can be quickly converted into aid warehouses if needed: sports halls, Volunteer Fire Service stations, unused municipal buildings, existing logistics centers, private warehouses, or spaces offered by companies.

This process should be carried out in cooperation with local governments, non-governmental organizations, Volunteer Fire Service units, private facility owners and logistics operators. It is important to agree on the terms for lending these spaces in crisis mode already at the preparedness stage—e.g. through preliminary agreements or letters of intent. This way, when a crisis hits, the supply chain can be launched quickly, logistical chaos avoided and the influx of donations better managed.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

The Folkowisko Foundation and the TRATWA Association implemented a system of regional warehouses serving as transshipment and sorting points. This enabled the distribution of aid (e.g. convoys consisting only of dehumidifiers or household appliances) to precisely specified addresses. The warehouses were located approximately 50 km from the crisis-affected areas. They enabled efficient response and reduced the chaos associated with direct deliveries to the most affected locations.

Recommendation 3. Create a coalition to monitor warehouse mapping by local authorities. If several civil society organizations, informal groups, Volunteer Fire Service units or other entities involved in aid operate in your region, it is worth creating a simple monitoring coalition to track the progress of local governments in designating warehouse locations. Such a coalition does not replace local government actions but helps organize knowledge about where warehouse infrastructure is well-planned and where gaps still exist that would need to be patched ad hoc during a crisis.

Recommendation 4. Establish inter-institutional cooperation protocols (for large NGOs). If your organization operates on a larger scale (regional or national), prepare cooperation protocols with other aid organizations and institutions in advance. These should include:

- data exchange protocols between organizations (who, in what scope and for what purpose shares information),
- a standard format for recording aid distribution information (a shared table, Excel spreadsheet or agreed system with consistent data entry),
- GDPR-compliant consent templates enabling legal data sharing,
- procedures for contact and cooperation with key local institutions (Social Welfare Centers (OPS), schools, parishes, other public entities).

This way, during a crisis you will be able to agree more quickly on who is helping whom and where, and the risk of duplication and "blind spots" will be reduced.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

The Mapuj Pomoc Network developed a GDPR-compliant template for information-sharing consent. It enables legally safe information sharing between organizations and standardizes reporting practices. Need such a document? Contact us: mapujpomoc@toproste.org

**IMPORTANT**

Social Welfare Centers (OPS) are often the first point of contact for affected individuals. OPS therefore has the most up-to-date knowledge of residents' real needs. Establishing ongoing cooperation with the local OPS allows for better planning of aid distribution and directing support where it is most needed. **Establish cooperation rules in advance (contact person, information exchange channels).**

Recommendation 5. Prepare framework agreements for services and goods. Sign framework agreements in advance for key services and goods that may be needed during a crisis (e.g. transport, warehousing, equipment rental, purchase of dehumidifiers, power generators). In the framework agreement, it is worth specifying:

- prices and payment terms,
- a note on the possibility of purchase priority (useful when demand for a given product suddenly spikes, e.g. dehumidifiers),
- available quantities and types of goods/services,
- terms for any barter cooperation.

This way, during a crisis you only need to place an order under already agreed terms, instead of wasting time on negotiations and formalities.

Recommendation 6. Prepare a core list of warehouse contacts and resources. Prepare a simple list of information needed to quickly launch a warehouse or distribution point. It should include at least:

- a phone number assigned to the warehouse (e.g. a service phone that can be passed to the next person on duty),
- an eSIM card,
- a list of people involved in warehouse work with a breakdown of their roles and competencies (coordination, record-keeping, loading/unloading, contact with drivers).

The list should be available in both paper and electronic form and regularly updated, so that in a crisis situation you don't start with frantic searching for numbers and figuring out who is responsible for what.

# Collection and Distribution of In-Kind Aid

## Checklist: Collection and Distribution of In-Kind Aid

**Are you ready to respond to a crisis?**

- ❑ I know when to choose financial support instead of in-kind donations
  - ❑ I have a list of potential partners for prepaid cards/vouchers (shops, pharmacies, etc.)

- ❑ I can enter basic transport data into the shared system (e.g. mapujpomoc.pl)

- ❑ I have a rule: I do not send donations without confirmed need

- ❑ I know the contact for the coordinating network

- ❑ I have prepared short lists of standard products for different crisis phases
  - ❑ I have separate lists for different types of crises (e.g. flood, refugee crisis, power outage)
  - ❑ I know where and how I will publish the current list (website, social media, posters)

- ❑ I know how to find local organizations in the crisis area

- ❑ I have written packing and labeling instructions for packages
  - ❑ The instructions include the rule "one box = one type of product"
  - ❑ I require a box description: product name, quantity, shortest expiration date
  - ❑ I have defined 2–3 basic types of standardized packages (e.g. "3-day food package," "family hygiene package")
    - ❑ Aid packages (e.g. "cleaning package," "starter package") are prepared only on explicit request or need
    - ❑ I have a simple form/specification for agreeing packages with the recipient (product list, quantities, number of people/days)

- ❑ I have a standard, realistic donor visibility model (e.g. one photo + mention on social media)
  - ❑ In agreements and arrangements, I do not promise more than I can deliver
  - ❑ I have simple instructions: how to label packages with the donor's logo/name
  - ❑ I have a simple plan for collective acknowledgments (e.g. a weekly post with a list of donors)

- ❑ I maintain a contact list of donors (individuals, schools, companies)
  - ❑ I maintain contact with them so I can return with a request for support in later crisis phases

- ❑ I have established who is responsible for delivering packages to persons who cannot reach the warehouse
  - ❑ I know how to integrate the package delivery plan with the local transport system (volunteer drivers, Volunteer Fire Service, other entities)

## 4.2. Collection and Distribution of In-Kind Aid

In-kind collections are what most people think of as the most natural response to a crisis. In practice, however, they can be one of the most problematic areas of aid. Recent crises have shown that warehouses are very quickly flooded with unnecessary or surplus donations, there is no space for storage, and team effort goes into sorting and disposal rather than real support. In addition, poorly labeled packages block warehouse workflows, donors expect visibility, and some affected persons cannot reach aid distribution points at all. It is also easy to send things "just in case" in good faith that nobody on site actually needs.

In this section of the handbook, you will learn how to plan collections and shipments so that they actually help rather than create more work for others: when it is better to opt for financial support instead of in-kind donations, how to avoid surpluses, how to properly label packages, how to approach donor visibility sensibly, and finally—how to organize aid delivery to persons who cannot come to the warehouse themselves.

### 4.2.1. DISTRIBUTION OF SURPLUS GOODS

***Challenge: What to do with unnecessary or excess items***

Recent crises—the 2022 refugee crisis and the 2024 flood—showed that in the first phase (1–4 weeks), warehouses are flooded with unnecessary products. It happened that aid organizations received, for example, wedding dresses or worn-out bedding. Meanwhile, products considered essential, such as water, food or household chemicals, were delivered in excess. There was often no space to store such donations.

Recommendation 1. Consider financial support instead of in-kind donations. Before announcing a collection of goods, consider whether financial support in the form of prepaid cards or vouchers would be more effective. How you can organize this in practice:

- agree with a partner (e.g. a retail chain, pharmacies) on the possibility of issuing prepaid cards or vouchers of a specified value—the person receiving the card will be able to use it at selected retail points or for specific product categories (e.g. food, cleaning supplies, medicines),
- design a simple procedure: who receives a card, on what basis and where it can be used,
- clearly inform donors that you are collecting funds for cards/vouchers instead of goods.

This way, affected persons decide for themselves what they need most, and you avoid problems with transport, storage and disposal of useless donations.

Recommendation 2. Send goods only when needed and only to verified locations. If your organization has collected goods for people in need, it can send them to a specific local warehouse or to a regional warehouse. Before sending a shipment of donations, make sure that:

- you know the exact address of the warehouse or reception point,
- you have confirmation that the given goods are currently needed at that location,
- the warehouse is prepared to receive the specific quantity and type of products.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

In crisis situations, the Mapuj Pomoc Network activates a map of currently operating warehouses (mapujpomoc.pl). You can find there information about current needs or shortages at a given warehouse, as well as results of regional warehouse inventories. Before sending a shipment, call the selected warehouse and make sure that the declared aid is actually needed and will be accepted.

Recommendation 3. Hold shipments if needs are not confirmed. If you have not been able to confirm demand for a given product—hold the shipment. What you can do instead of sending "just in case":

- store the goods locally (if you have the capacity) and continue looking for a warehouse or organization that actually needs them,
- contact a coordinating network (such as

Mapuj Pomoc) that works with regional warehouses or volunteer fire brigades to help identify the right destination.

**IMPORTANT**

Most people want to send donations within the first hours after a crisis breaks out. As a result, in the first days, aid distribution points and warehouses are overwhelmed. The needs of crisis-affected residents usually do not change quickly—it is better to hold a shipment until needs are confirmed, so as not to add work to already overwhelmed warehouses.

Recommendation 4. From the outset, communicate the possibility of redirecting aid. If you are organizing a collection or receiving donations gathered by others, clearly state which crisis the goods are intended for (e.g. specific event, location, or group). At the same time, emphasize that in case of surplus, items may be redirected to another organization or community that needs them more—either domestically or internationally.

Include this principle in your collection guidelines and donor communications. This ensures flexibility in reallocating surplus without risking a loss of trust.

Recommendation 5. Prepare standard product lists for different crisis phases. Before the next crisis occurs, prepare short lists of products that are typically needed in different phases. You can prepare separate versions of lists for different types of crises (flood, refugee crisis, prolonged power outages, etc.).

You can publish such a list on your website so that donors know in advance what is needed in a given situation.

Recommendation 6. Support local organizations financially instead of organizing collections. If you do not operate in the immediate area or do not have the appropriate experience, space or resources, consider transferring financial resources to organizations that operate directly in the crisis-affected area. You can encourage such support among the audiences reached through your organization's channels, e.g. social media.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Find organizations operating in the crisis area on mapujpomoc.pl, support one of them financially and/or encourage others to do the same. They know best what purchases need to be made locally and how to organize aid without additionally burdening warehouses.

### 4.2.2. PROPER LABELING OF DONATIONS FOR THE WAREHOUSE

Improperly labeled donations slow down warehouse work, block space and require engaging additional people just to unpack, inspect, sort and repack products. Time and energy that could have been spent on real aid go into "rescuing" poorly prepared packages.

***Challenge: Disruption of warehouse workflows due to improperly labeled donations***

Recommendation 1. Require proper labeling of donation boxes. If you are packing goods or receiving donations from other organizations, schools, parishes or companies, ensure from the start that they are clearly sorted and labeled. You can explicitly request that each box contain only one type of product (e.g. only floor cleaning products, only t-shirts in a given size). A clear description and indication of quantity are also important.

This way you don't waste time unpacking and checking contents—you can see right away where to place the box and when it should be distributed first.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

The Folkowisko Foundation provided organizations, schools and other institutions delivering in-kind donations with simple packing instructions. The two key rules were: one box = one type of product, and a mandatory box description (product name and the shortest expiration date among items inside). This meant that, for example, household chemicals with a long shelf life could be set aside for later distribution without unpacking, while the most urgent boxes were processed first.

Recommendation 2. Prepare aid packages only upon explicit request. Aid packages (e.g. "cleaning package," "family starter package") make sense only when a specific organization or warehouse asks you to prepare them according to a defined specification. Before you start assembling them:

- ask the receiving organization for an exact list of products that should be included in one package,
- agree on how packages should be labeled (e.g. package name, number of persons, number of days),
- ensure that all packages of a given type are as uniform as possible—this makes distribution and planning easier.

Avoid assembling ad hoc or arbitrary sets. It is better to send well-labeled, uniform boxes than mixed packages that must be unpacked and sorted again on site.

### 4.2.3. VISIBILITY OF DONORS

In crisis situations, many individuals and organizations want to show— e.g. on social media— that their assistance has reached its destination. Ensuring donor visibility can be time-consuming. Even if goods arrive at a warehouse with branding, it is easy in the midst of operations to miss the moment to take photos or prepare reports. Therefore, it is advisable to be cautious when promising—especially in agreements—detailed promotional obligations regarding donors, particularly for small-scale donations.

Recommendation 1. Establish a simple method for labeling donations and sharing photos. Propose a simple, feasible model for ensuring a given donor's visibility (e.g. a school, organization, company). Clearly communicate what you can provide (e.g. at minimum one photo of delivered and distributed packages, a mention on social media).

This way you maintain transparency: the donor knows what to expect and has greater trust in your organization as the entity distributing donations. You, in turn, are not burdened with unrealistic commitments.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

The Folkowisko Foundation asked donors who cared about visibility to attach a sheet of paper with their name or logo to the boxes they donated. The organization committed to sending back at least one photo of the packages on-site. This model is simple to implement, increases the sense of transparency and helps build relationships with donors for the future.

Recommendation 2. Plan simple forms of acknowledging donors. Instead of making many individual promises, prepare a few standard forms of acknowledging donors that you can realistically deliver (e.g. certificates of thanks, photos, a social media post).

Try to maintain contact with donors. After the first phase of the crisis, support usually drops significantly. Thanks to good relationships, you will be able to approach individuals and institutions that have already trusted you once again.

### 4.2.4. DISTRIBUTION OF AID OUTSIDE THE WAREHOUSE

Not all affected individuals are able to reach distribution points due to cleanup efforts, poor road conditions, illness, caregiving responsibilities, or being in transit (e.g. moving to another location). For example, during the 2024 floods, in the early days:

- some affected individuals did not have time to visit warehouses because they were busy protecting their property or cleaning up,
- others were unable to reach distribution points due to damaged or impassable roads.

Similarly, refugees arriving in Poland from Ukraine in 2022, who were in transit, were unable to reach warehouses. It was more convenient for them to receive food packages that could serve as provisions for the journey. If you run a warehouse or provide products in another way, your activities must also account for those who will not come to collect them in person.

***Challenge: How to deliver goods to those who cannot collect them themselves***

Recommendation 1. Prepare standardized packages based on real needs reported from the field. Instead of distributing individual items off the shelf, prepare simple standardized packages (e.g. food kits, hygiene kits) that can be easily distributed or delivered to people unable to visit the warehouse.
In practice:

- collect information on real needs from local volunteers and institutions (social welfare centers, village leaders, parishes),
- based on this, define 2–3 basic types of packages (e.g. “3-day food package,” “family hygiene package”),
- prepare packages according to a fixed product list so that each package of a given type is similar,
- label them clearly (e.g. “food – 3 days – 1 person,” “hygiene – family”) so delivery volunteers do not need to open them.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

The TRATWA Association and the Folkowisko Foundation, during the refugee crisis response (2022) and the flood (2024), prepared ready-made food and hygiene packages, which allowed for rapid on-site distribution and direct delivery to affected persons.

# Supporting Housing and Self-Sufficiency Programs

## Checklist: Supporting Housing and Self-Sufficiency Programs

**Are you ready to respond to a crisis?**

❑ I know the phases of a crisis (described in Chapter 1.2)
❑ I have a simple spreadsheet with a database of available accommodation options in the region (rooms, apartments, hostels, agritourism, parish houses, etc.)
  ❑ For each location I have: the address, number of available places, accessibility information for persons with disabilities, contact details of the owner/manager
  ❑ I have an agreed rapid communication channel for accommodation (e.g. a messenger group or Facebook group)
  ❑ I know which locations can serve as transit hostels and emergency overnight accommodation here and now

❑ If I run a hostel/temporary housing/emergency apartments, I have a simple set of house rules for residents
  ❑ I discuss the house rules upon admission of each person
    ❑ I clearly communicate that the accommodation is temporary and what the approximate length of stay is
    ❑ I inform from the beginning about possible further pathways (self-sufficiency programs, other forms of accommodation)

❑ I know the local rent subsidy programs and the conditions for using them

❑ I am able to organize local language courses or I know where such courses already operate

❑ I have basic information about the local job market (industries, typical wages, relevant training) written in plain language
  ❑ I take into account the needs of persons with limited mobility, single parents and persons who do not speak the local language

❑ I have a current list of local support services (language courses, career counseling, psychological support, legal aid, activities for children)
  ❑ I am ready to provide information in plain language and, if needed, in translations into languages used by displaced persons
  ❑ I monitor whether people in crisis are stuck for years in a formally temporary role as guests and I respond if this is the case

## 4.3. Supporting Housing and Self-Sufficiency Programs

Do you remember the phases of a crisis? They are described in section 1.2. Understanding which phase a crisis is in is essential for planning housing support. The appropriate solutions depend on what is needed at each stage.

In the first phase the most important thing is that people have a safe place to sleep here and now. Your activities may include:
- organizing transit hostels and overnight accommodation for people on the move,
- launching temporary and emergency accommodation on a larger scale (collective shelters, halls, hostels, dormitories, temporary apartments),
- supporting train station reception points and other first-contact locations,
- organizing around-the-clock volunteer shifts,
- combining accommodation with basic material, medical and food aid.

In practice, the goal is to quickly reach people in crisis and provide them with a place where they can rest and make their next decisions.

During the second (transitional) phase, the focus shifts from purely emergency shelter to more stable housing. At this stage, you can:
- help cover rent (subsidies, support programs),
- support apartment rentals (mediation, negotiations with landlords, assistance with contracts),
- combine housing support with language courses, employment support, and integration activities,
- work with residents on gradual self-sufficiency (income, employment, childcare, access to services).

The goal is simple: to help people transition from emergency shelter to a normal life with housing.

If the crisis continues for a long time, you cannot repeat the same solutions indefinitely. Therefore in the third phase:
- gradually phase out some emergency and transitional programs,
- together with local government and institutions, seek permanent solutions,
- create support for persons who are unable to achieve full self-sufficiency (e.g. elderly persons, persons with disabilities, single caregivers with children, persons with chronic illnesses, persons who cannot return to their place of origin).

The point is that housing assistance should not operate out of habit but should be consciously adapted to the situation—while at the same time not leaving the most vulnerable persons without support.

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**Which phase of the crisis am I in now, and does what I am doing fit this stage?**

### 4.3.1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PREPAREDNESS PHASE

The scale and pace of the influx of people during a crisis may require the immediate activation of accommodation on a very large scale. The challenge here involves limited procedures and a lack of digital registration tools. It is also possible that in the initial phase, all of these tools and procedures will need to be in paper form. This may be forced by a lack of electricity or network access.

Recommendation 1. Build a local database of accommodation options
Prepare a simple online spreadsheet listing accommodation options in your region (rooms, apartments, hostels, agritourism, guesthouses, parish houses). Collect: the address, number of places, barriers/facilities for persons with disabilities, and contact details of the owner/managing institution. Record how many places are available, what the conditions are, whether there are stairs, an elevator, a bathroom adapted for persons with disabilities, and who to contact.

Connect this with a single rapid communication channel (e.g. a Facebook group or messaging platform) so that volunteers, partners and people in need know where to look for up-to-date information.

Recommendation 2. If you run accommodation—implement rules and clearly communicate its temporary nature

If your NGO operates a hostel, temporary housing or emergency apartments, prepare a simple set of house rules for residents (cohabitation principles, how to report problems, prohibitions, consequences). Discuss the rules upon admission. Also ensure clear communication that this is temporary accommodation—say from the start approximately how long support may last, what happens next and what the possible pathways to self-sufficiency are.

### 4.3.2. EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS IN THE TRANSITIONAL PHASE

Support in the transitional phase may apply to any group that has been forced to relocate for an extended period, e.g. people fleeing war. They must rebuild their lives in a new place. Without support for economic self-sufficiency, they can easily become trapped in long-term dependence on the aid system. This is where your organization can play a key role: helping people learn the language, find employment, plan next steps and gradually transition from temporary shelter to more stable living.

Recommendation 1. Organize local language courses and integration activities

Language skills and a sense of belonging in the local community are essential for refugees. They enable independent functioning in the job market and everyday life. You can:

- organize language courses (e.g. small groups led by volunteers or instructors),
- offer integration activities such as community clubs, activities for children and parents, shared cooking sessions, and guided neighborhood walks introducing local services (clinics, offices, schools, bus stops).

At this stage, your role is to help ensure that people in temporary housing are not isolated, but gradually learn the language, get to know people and institutions around them.

Recommendation 2. Establish career counseling points

Many people who have been forced to relocate suddenly need very basic support to take their first steps in the local job market. This applies especially to persons who do not speak the language, have limited mobility, or belong to vulnerable groups (e.g. single parents, elderly persons, persons with disabilities). You can:

- invite a career advisor, labor law specialist or employment office staff to hold regular consultations (e.g. once a week for 2–3 hours),
- schedule short individual consultations (in person or online) for the people you support,
- provide basic, easy-to-understand information about local job opportunities, typical wages, and relevant training programs, including translations or language mediation where needed.

Ensure that support is adapted for:

- persons with limited mobility (information about local jobs, remote work, physically undemanding tasks),
- persons who need to balance work with childcare,
- persons who do not speak the local language.

Your task is not to replace the employment office, but to create a clear pathway of access to career counseling for persons who would not reach these institutions on their own.

Recommendation 3. Map local support services

Look around at what already exists in your area: language courses, career counseling, psychological support, activities for children, legal aid. Your role may be to:

- collect and translate basic information: what are typical wages, employment conditions, what to watch out for to avoid exploitation—in plain language, with translations into languages used by the people you help,
- actively communicate these opportunities – on social media, in leaflets, during office hours, at accommodation sites;
- clearly state that support is also available for persons who do not speak Polish,
- ensure that persons with disabilities, single parents and elderly persons are welcome and can count on solutions adapted to their capabilities.

### 4.3.3. ACTIVITIES IN THE DE-ESCALATION PHASE

In the third phase of the crisis, instead of organizing aid for many people at once, you can focus on those who despite the passage of time, are unable to function independently in terms of housing and finances (e.g. elderly persons, persons with disabilities, single caregivers with children, persons with chronic illnesses).

Recommendation: Develop individualized plans for those who cannot become self-sufficient

The form of these activities depends on the type of crisis and the needs of specific groups. In some contexts, this may involve regular community meetings at a cultural center, shared meals, or activities for families and children. In others, it may involve a local buddy system, where residents support newcomers in handling administrative matters, finding healthcare, or understanding local customs.

The goal is to treat self-sufficiency not only as having a roof over one's head, but as a starting point for integration—building relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, and minimizing the risk that people remain for years in a temporary guest status.

# Safety

## Checklist: Safety

**Are you ready to respond to a crisis?**

❑ I collect only data that is truly necessary for providing aid
- ❑ I store data in a single secure digital tool (password-protected)
- ❑ I have a list of persons with access to data and the scope of their permissions
- ❑ I restrict data access exclusively to persons who need it
- ❑ The team and volunteers have undergone basic GDPR training
- ❑ The organization has written rules: what should not be sent by email, what should not be copied, what needs to be anonymized

❑ I have a designated contact person for communication with the municipality, county, services and national authorities
- ❑ I have up-to-date contact information for key partners (municipality, county, police, State Fire Service (PSP), Territorial Defence Forces (WOT), Social Welfare Center (OPS), regional crisis management center
- ❑ I report suspicious job offers, transport offers, accommodation offers and other threats to local government/services

❑ I know how to prepare simple warning communications (posts, graphics, leaflets) about risks: human trafficking, exploitation, theft

❑ I have a consistent system for identifying staff and volunteers (vests/armbands/ID badges with the organization's logo)
- ❑ I have informed the municipality, police, State Fire Service (PSP), Social Welfare Center (OPS), medical services and other partners about what our identification looks like
- ❑ I provide services with information about where, when and in what form our teams operate (e.g. distribution, surveys, info points)
- ❑ I require that persons in the field carry an identity document and the organization's ID badge
- ❑ We train the team on how to introduce themselves to residents and services (who we are, whom we represent, what our purpose is)

## 4.4. Safety

In a major crisis, when many new people arrive in a short period of time, the risk of abuse and crime increases—from fraud and theft to human trafficking. That is why it is so important to ensure the safety of the people you are helping: through good procedures, cooperation with services and clear communication. Particular care should be taken to protect persons from vulnerable groups—children, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, persons who do not speak the language.

*Challenge: Preventing abuse and crime*

### 4.4.1. DATA DIGITIZATION AND GDPR (RODO)

Recommendation 1. Digitize data and ensure GDPR compliance

If you collect data on persons you are assisting (e.g. for housing, benefits, registration lists), do so in an organized manner and in compliance with data protection regulations. This means, among other things:

- collecting only data that is truly necessary,
- storing it in a secure digital tool (password-protected) rather than in scattered notes and files,
- restricting data access only to persons who need it,
- brief training for volunteers and the team on GDPR basics (what may not be done with data, what should not be sent by email, what needs to be anonymized).

**IMPORTANT**

Clear rules (who sees what data, what can or cannot be copied) reduce the risk of misuse and help better protect people in vulnerable situations.

### 4.4.2. COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION

Recommendation 1. Maintain ongoing cooperation with local and national authorities

Consistent, reliable information is one of the most important tools for preventing abuse. By maintaining regular contact with the municipality, county, voivodeship and central government offices, you can:

- verify suspicious situations more quickly (e.g. job offers or apartments without a contract),
- pass on official communications about safe accommodation, transport, reception points,
- respond to emerging threats (e.g. signs of human trafficking, violence, labor exploitation).

In practice, this means that it is worth having one person in the organization responsible for contact with local government and services, and exchanging information on an ongoing basis—rather than creating your own, parallel communication loop.

Recommendation 2. Run awareness campaigns against abuse

Official communications from institutions often arrive with delays or do not reach people who do not speak the local language. As an NGO, you can react much faster by launching simple warning campaigns on social media and wherever your beneficiaries are (chats, online groups, aid points).

Use social media to quickly warn about human trafficking, dangerous job offers, and other crimes. These can be short multilingual messages with clear guidance such as: “Do not get into unmarked vehicles”, “Do not give your documents to strangers”, “Do not sign contracts you do not understand”. Thanks to this, you can significantly reduce the risk that someone from vulnerable groups will fall victim to abuse[1].

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Engage online influencers or people with large followings in campaigns. Choose channels that reach your target groups.

**1** More about communication practices can be found in section 4.6.

### 4.4.3. IDENTIFICATION OF VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF

In crisis situations, many people and entities involved in aid operate in the same place—non-governmental organizations, public institutions, neighborhood initiatives, informal groups. The lack of clear identification of who is a verified employee or volunteer makes it harder for services to operate, lowers the sense of security among people receiving aid and makes it easier for unauthorized persons to impersonate helpers.

***Challenge: Lack of secure identification of volunteers and staff***

At the national or regional level, it is worth working toward a common identification system for non-governmental organizations operating during crises (e.g. uniform clothing elements, markings, ID badge standards). These are systemic measures that go beyond the capabilities of a single organization (more on this in Chapter 6).

Recommendation 1. Identify your staff and volunteers and coordinate this with partners

If there is no national or regional identification system, create a clear identification method at the organizational level for persons acting on your behalf during a crisis and coordinate it with key local partners. In practice, this means:

- consistent, visible elements (e.g. vests in the same color, with the organization's logo; personal ID badges with a photo),
- informing the municipal/county office, police, State Fire Service (PSP), military, medical services and other aid entities about what your organization's ID badges and markings look like,
- providing services with information about where, when and in what form your staff and volunteers operate in the field (e.g. conducting surveys, distributing aid, providing information).

This way, services and other partners can more easily recognize NGO volunteers and staff, which increases the safety of persons in crisis, speeds up cooperation and reduces the risk of abuse.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Always carry and present an official ID document and organizational badge upon request. Briefly explain who you are, which organization you represent, and the purpose of your presence. Clarify how your team operates in the field (e.g. "we work in pairs, wearing blue vests with our logo, carrying personal ID badges").

Such transparency increases trust, facilitates cooperation with residents and people in crisis, and reduces the risk that your activities will be considered suspicious or that someone will refuse assistance out of fear of abuse.

# Legal Assistance

## Checklist: Legal Assistance

**Are you ready to respond to a crisis?**

❑ I have an up-to-date list of local legal aid points (NGOs, municipal legal aid centers, county family support centers, migrant centers, pro bono law firms, student legal clinics)
- ❑ I know what types of cases each point handles (migration law, family law, labor law, housing law, etc.)
- ❑ I know the operating hours of each point, what languages they serve in and how to refer a person there

❑ I have a written simple referral procedure—what information I provide and how I arrange contact for the person

❑ I know and can use mapujpomoc.pl to search for legal aid in other regions

❑ I know the main sources of information about the activities of international legal organizations (e.g. UNHCR Data Portal)

❑ I belong to (or know how to join) at least one working group/network related to legal aid or rights protection

❑ I am on the mailing list/in the messenger group with other NGOs and counseling points, and I maintain contact also between crises

❑ I have information on which institution handles what (social welfare centers (OPS), county family support centers (PCPR), government offices, migrant centers, NGOs)
- ❑ I know how to recognize reliable legal aid and where the official free legal assistance points are located
- ❑ I inform institutions (city office, Social Welfare Centers (OPS), county family support centers (PCPR), crisis centers) that my organization provides legal aid, in what scope and how to contact us (if applicable)

❑ I seek out law firms and lawyers willing to collaborate pro bono
- ❑ I have a list of legal contacts to whom I can refer particularly difficult or sensitive cases

❑ If I collect testimonies (e.g. video recordings), I have the person's consent and use them exclusively internally, for planning aid

❑ I ensure that legal matters are discussed in a safe atmosphere—without pressure, without bystanders, with respect for privacy

## 4.5. Legal Assistance

Legal aid in a crisis is needed faster and more frequently than is usually assumed. Recent aid efforts have revealed gaps: organizations often did not know where such support already existed, persons in crisis did not know their rights or trust institutions, and lawyers were easily overwhelmed by repetitive questions. On top of this, there is the risk of fraudulent "advisors" and the sensitive nature of cases (violence, residence status, employment, family), which require not only expertise but also safe conditions for conversation.

In this section of the handbook, you will learn how to organize this area step by step: start by mapping existing legal aid services and building a network of contacts, prepare simple informational materials in multiple languages, clearly communicate the role of individual institutions and data processing rules, and then organize legal aid points in the field—so that they are accessible, reasonably loaded and genuinely useful for persons in crisis.

### 4.5.1. MAPPING AND NETWORKING

During recent crises, it often turned out that organizations did not know what legal aid services were available—both locally and in other locations. Often they tried to create solutions from scratch or could not provide people in need with information about where to turn. This led to duplication of activities, overload of teams and poorer information for persons in crisis.

***Challenge: Lack of awareness among organizations about available legal support and contacts to NGOs providing such support***

Recommendation 1. Map local legal assistance points

Before a crisis occurs, prepare a list of partners and places where you can refer cases or direct persons in need of legal assistance. Record who provides what type of support (e.g. migration law, family law, labor law), their operating hours, what languages they accept and on what basis you can refer a person (referral). These may include city offices, county family support centers (PCPR), pro bono lawyers, bar associations, voivodeship/marshal offices (social policy departments), student legal clinics and other civil society organizations.

Having this contact map prepared in advance allows you to respond quickly during a crisis and direct people to the right entities, instead of losing time on frantic ad hoc searches for help.

**IMPORTANT**

First, use the existing network of services. Only when it is overloaded or unavailable should you create your own tools or programs.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Establish cooperation with municipal free legal aid points. You can refer persons in need of legal support there—especially in the first phase of the crisis, when demand for such assistance is greatest.

Recommendation 2. Collect contacts of legal aid providers nationwide

You do not need to know all the regulations—only whom to refer a person in need of legal assistance to, including outside your local area.

**IMPORTANT**

A current list of institutions and organizations providing legal aid in Poland, broken down by region, is available on mapujpomoc.pl. You will find there information about the scope of services, operating hours and languages served. Information about the activities of international organizations can be found on the UNHCR Data Portal.

Recommendation 3. Join working groups and coalitions

To stay informed and effectively influence assistance efforts, join existing working groups and networks. Participation in spaces such as as Grupa

Kryzys (Crisis Group), the Mapuj Pomoc Network Advocacy Working Group or the UNHCR Protection Sector[2] will allow you to:

- better coordinate with other entities,
- exchange information on challenges and best practices more quickly,
- participate in local or national coalition efforts instead of working in isolation.

Even if you start by simply listening, over time you will become a recognized partner, which facilitates future cooperation and referral of legal cases to where they can be best handled.

**IMPORTANT**

Do not wait for a crisis to get to know people. Build relationships with NGOs, law firms, advisory centers, and institutions in advance. Even occasional meetings or joining a mailing list ensures that when a crisis occurs, you know whom to contact.

### 4.5.2. PROVIDING LEGAL INFORMATION

Many people you work with do not know their basic rights, do not understand procedures such as residence legalization or the rules for accessing benefits. As a result, the same questions come up again and again, and limited legal resources become quickly overloaded.

***Challenge: Limited legal awareness among beneficiaries and lack of trust in organizations***

Recommendation 1. Prepare simple Q&A materials in multiple languages

To provide support to a larger number of people with limited legal staff, prepare a list of frequently asked questions (Q&A) with short, simple answers. These may include questions about: residence legalization, personal identification numbers (PESEL), access to benefits, employment, healthcare and education.

These materials (e.g. infographics, leaflets, digital resources) can be shared via your website or social media. Ensure they are available in the languages of the target groups. They help answer basic questions that arise in the early days of a crisis.

Recommendation 2. Clearly explain the role of social institutions

People in crisis often do not understand the roles of institutions such as social welfare centers or migrant integration centers, or what cases they handle. It is helpful to explain this in a simple way. For example, prepare a “which institution handles what” chart and share it through your channels.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

You can establish cooperation with universities that offer law programs to recruit volunteers from among law students or trainee legal advisors. They can, for example, hold office hours under the supervision of experienced lawyers, gaining valuable professional experience in the process.

Recommendation 3. Build trust in legal assistance from the first contact

People in crisis often do not know whom they can trust or what will happen to their data. Therefore, every time clearly state: who you are, which organization you represent, why you provide legal support and whom it is intended for. Explain in simple terms that the data they share is processed solely for the purpose of providing aid and is protected in accordance with the law.

Also ensure visible identification of yourself and your team: ID badges, shirts or vests with the organization's logo, information about the organization's name, the person's role (e.g. "lawyer," "coordinator," "volunteer") and a contact number. It is also worth having a short leaflet about the organization—with details, website address, phone number—that you can give to the person after the conversation. All of this increases the sense of security and makes it easier for people to decide to seek legal aid.

2 Information on participation in the UNHCR Protection Sector can be found at this link https://data.unhcr.org/en/working-group/309?sv=54&geo=10781 (accessed: December 2025). The page is available in English.

Recommendation 4. Warn against fraudulent "legal advisors" and cooperate with institutions

Raise awareness among people in crisis about the risks of fraudulent "advisors"—persons or entities offering supposed legal assistance for inflated fees, without clear rules, without a contract or without proper credentials. Explain how to recognize a reliable source of support (e.g. how to verify an organization's details, where the official free legal aid points are, and share recommendations from trusted institutions).

Inform crisis management centers and local institutions about your legal aid services —e.g. the city office, social welfare centers (OPS), county family support centers (PCPR) . Clearly communicate: who provides the aid, in what scope, for whom and how to contact you.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Organizations such as the Fundusz Lokalny Masywu Śnieżnika have built cooperation with city offices and social welfare centers, gathering information about the conditions for receiving benefits. This allowed them to build knowledge within the organization on the one hand, and strengthen the credibility of their activities in the eyes of institutions and beneficiaries on the other.

Recommendation 5. Adapt communication and procedures to vulnerable groups

Ensure that legal assistance is accessible and understandable. In practice, you can:

- prepare simple graphic materials, step-by-step visual guides, or short explanatory videos instead of long texts,
- use plain language and combine text with visuals,
- apply specific procedures for cases involving children (e.g. legal guardianship requirements; involve appropriate adults; avoid sensitive legal discussions with minors alone),
- watch for situations where people may be exploited in exchange for housing or other basic needs. Educate beneficiaries about such risks and their rights, and inform them where to report concerns.

Legal aid should not only exist on paper but be truly understandable and usable by vulnerable individuals, enabling them to act if they are being exploited.

Recommendation 6. Cooperate with pro bono law firms

If your organization does not have the resources to independently provide legal support—especially for persons from particularly vulnerable groups—consider cooperating with law firms that can work pro bono.

### 4.5.3. ORGANIZING LEGAL ASSISTANCE IN THE FIELD

Legal topics are sensitive—they often involve violence, loss, uncertain residence status, family problems or undeclared work. People in crisis therefore need not only information but also a safe space, in which they can calmly describe their situation. The situation looks different in the first phase of a crisis (e.g. at the border or at a reception point during a refugee crisis), where quick, basic information matters, and differently in later stages when cases become more complex. Legal aid points should be launched as quickly as possible but run in the most comfortable conditions possible.

Recommendation 1. Place the legal aid point in a publicly accessible location

It is worth organizing a legal aid point in a place that people can actually reach and where they feel safe: a local community center, library, social center, organization's office. It is important that:

- there is at least a minimally separated space for a private conversation,
- people do not have to talk about their problems in the corridor or in front of others,
- the point is clearly marked, but the conversation itself can be held in discreet conditions.

Recommendation 2. Combine the point with a simple online/phone contact pathway

It is also useful to connect such a point with online or telephone contact options. A simple workflow works well:

- first, receive the person’s request (in person, by phone, or via a form),
- then refer the person to a specific legal

advisor (legal counsel or attorney) who specializes in the relevant field of law (e.g. family, migration, labor law).

This way, you do not try to resolve all cases on the spot, but instead organize them first and then direct them to the appropriate specialist—maintaining both confidentiality and comfort for those seeking help.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

In legal aid, the phone is often the primary tool rather than email or online forms. It enables faster response to requests and immediate referral to the appropriate person.

### Recommendation 3. Identify legal needs in the field

If the people you want to help are dispersed across a given area, you can send a volunteer into the field with a simple task: recording short video materials with statements from affected persons about their legal problems and the type of assistance they need.

Such recordings should serve exclusively for organizing aid, not for publication in media or promotional materials. The point is to collect as accurate a picture as possible of the real legal problems of a given group and to enable the legal team to later familiarize themselves with the situation.

# Communication and Access to Information

# Checklist: Communication and Access to Information

**Are you ready to respond to a crisis?**

❑ I have a list of places where I can post printed announcements (municipal office, social welfare centers, volunteer fire stations, church, rural women's associations (KGW), community center, clinic, shops)

- ❑ I use local media (newspaper, radio, municipal bulletin) to convey aid information
- ❑ I have agreed with the municipality or media on a regular space/column for aid communications
  - ❑ In the municipality, there is one main place for publishing official information (e.g. the office's website, a crisis tab, an official profile)
  - ❑ I encourage the municipality/city to publish a list of local NGOs with a description of activities and contact details on their website
- ❑ I cooperate with local leaders (village heads (sołtys), rural women's associations (KGW), senior organizations, council members, clergy) to disseminate information
- ❑ I remember to contact the mayor/municipal office before engaging local leaders and I inform them of my planned activities

❑ I have a plan for reaching households directly with information (door-to-door visits, address lists, support from the social welfare center)

❑ If needed, I modify communication channels if I see that some people still cannot access information about available aid

❑ Every communication from my organization has a publication date

- ❑ Where possible, I indicate the validity date of the communication (e.g. until a specific day, until further notice)
- ❑ I regularly review old posts and information, remove or clearly mark what is no longer current

❑ The team (staff and volunteers) has undergone brief training on safe communication about persons in crisis

- ❑ I have a written internal guide on how to write and speak about affected persons
- ❑ I use a simple consent form for the use of image and statements (if applicable)

❑ I know which tool is the main source of information about resources and needs in the region (e.g. mapujpomoc.pl, a municipal tool)

- ❑ I regularly use this tool myself, instead of creating separate, closed lists of resources
- ❑ I encourage local organizations to report their needs and resources on an ongoing basis in one shared place

## 4.6. Communication and Access to Information

In a crisis, information can be as important as food or shelter—and at the same time, it can be a source of many problems. This is an especially important area in today's times, when the phenomenon of disinformation and information wars is spreading. The most common challenges are: difficulty reaching the most excluded persons (elderly, from rural areas, without internet access), a flood of incomplete or false messages on social media, violations of affected persons' privacy, and the lack of a single place where information about current needs and resources would be collected and accessible. The result is chaos, duplication of efforts, loss of trust and a real risk that some people will not receive aid in time.

In this section, you will learn how to build diverse communication channels so as not to rely solely on the internet; how to counter disinformation and ensure consistency of messaging with public institutions; how to talk about people in crisis without violating their privacy; and how to communicate needs and resources in a way that facilitates rather than hinders cooperation. This will help you plan where to obtain reliable information, how to keep it up to date, and how to reach those who need it most.

### 4.6.1. DIVERSITY OF CHANNELS AND REACHING EXCLUDED GROUPS

Not everyone you want to reach uses the internet, social media or even a phone. Some elderly, isolated persons or those living in rural or remote areas simply will not see standard communications. It is therefore worth assuming that one form of communication is not enough—and planning to reach these people through other channels.

***Challenge: Failure to reach the most excluded groups (socially or geographically)***

Recommendation 1. Use a variety of communication channels
Information should be disseminated through as diverse a set of channels as possible. You can prepare:

- printed announcements and post them in places where people actually go: municipal offices, social welfare centers (OPS), fire stations, churches, rural women's associations (KGW), community centers, clinics,
- short messages shared through local partners (e.g. village leaders, rural women's associations (KGW), senior organizations).

Local media is also important: newspapers, radio, and municipal bulletins. You can negotiate a dedicated section for NGOs or a permanent aid information column.

Keep messages short, clear, and specific: who, where, when, and what people can apply for.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

You can be supported in disseminating information by: the municipality, the parish priest, a local shop, a community center, a rural women's association (KGW), a retirees' association. If you give them ready-made, short messages (e.g. an A4 poster, a notice card), there is a good chance they will reach people who do not use the internet.

Recommendation 2. Reach households directly through local leaders
In many cases, public notices alone are not enough. Information about specific aid (financial support, legal assistance, distribution of goods) should reach households directly.

You can use local leaders such as village heads, community organization leaders, council members, or social welfare staff who know the local population well.

**IMPORTANT**

Before asking local leaders for help, contact the municipal authority first. This strengthens your credibility and facilitates cooperation.

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**Regularly verify whether the people you have entrusted with delivering information have actually reached affected individuals. Quick daily checks (e.g. how many households visited, any issues encountered) help prevent communication breakdowns.**

### 4.6.2. COUNTERACTING MISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION CHAOS

During a crisis, information spreads at lightning speed—especially on social media and through message chains. Some of it is incomplete, outdated or simply untrue. This causes chaos, generates fear, directs people to the wrong places and makes your work harder.

***Challenge: False information on social media***

Recommendation 1. Establish a single shared space for official local information
Ensure that your municipality or locality has one main place where verified, up-to-date information is always published—and where you direct people instead of creating multiple parallel communications. This could be a municipal website, crisis tab, or official information profile.

Your organization, together with other NGOs, can collect and pass on verified updates (e.g. duty rosters, aid distribution, legal support) to this central space.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

In Lądek-Zdrój during the 2024 flood, civil society organizations transmitted communications to the city office, which published them on its website. This way, residents knew that if they were looking for reliable information, they always started from one official source.

Recommendation 2. Always update communications and include dates
In a crisis, the situation changes from day to day. If you do not update information, even a truthful communication can become misleading after a few days.

Therefore, with every piece of information you publish, provide the publication date. If possible, also add the validity date (e.g. "valid until Friday April 12," "current until further notice").

Regularly review your communications on social media and your website—remove or clearly mark what is no longer current. This is a simple step that reduces the risk of people going to the wrong address or calling a number that is no longer in service.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Encourage municipal authorities to publish a list of local NGOs with descriptions and contact details.
This helps verify credibility and guides people to reliable sources.

Recommendation 3. Together with other organizations, establish a communication channel with the crisis management team
If several organizations operate in your municipality, it is important that the crisis management team (municipal, county) does not receive conflicting information from multiple sources. Agree among yourselves on **one person**— an NGO representative, who maintains ongoing contact with the crisis management team, transmits information to it, receives official communications and distributes them further.

This reduces the risk that different versions of the same information will reach residents, and communication between organizations and the crisis management team becomes more consistent and predictable.

### 4.6.3. PRIVACY OF AFFECTED INDIVIDUALS

In crisis situations, information communications often focus on the personal stories of affected persons. Showing faces, names and dramatic details may attract attention, but at the same time can lead to secondary traumatization, stigmatization and lasting violations of privacy. This also applies to materials published by your organization—on the website, on social media, in reports.

*Challenge: Privacy violations and excessive media exposure*

Recommendation 1. Train your team in safe communication practices about persons in crisis
Ensure that your entire team (staff and volunteers) knows how to talk and write about persons in crisis, without violating their dignity. You can prepare a brief training session or internal guide covering, among other things:
- how to avoid a sensational tone and unnecessary details from private life,
- when not to ask for a statement or photo at all (e.g. immediately after a traumatic event),
- how to respond when someone does not want to be photographed or quoted.

Most importantly, everyone in your organization should understand that the person's right to privacy and safety is more important than the need to "show a story" in communications with donors or media.

Recommendation 2. Establish clear guidelines and obtain written consent for image use
Prepare simple, written guidelines for communication about affected persons, e.g.:
- whether and when you change names,
- whether you provide age, town, number of children, story details,
- in what situations you do not show faces at all (e.g. in cases of violence, refugee status, debt, mental illness).

If you decide to include photos in your organization's materials, ensure a consent form for the use of image and statements – in which you clearly inform:
- who will use the photo/statement (your organization, partners),
- where the materials may appear (website, report, social media),
- that the person has the right to withdraw consent and how they can do so.

At every photo session or recording, make sure the person understands what they are consenting to—and that refusal will not affect their access to aid. This reduces the risk of abuse and shows that you treat affected persons as individuals with agency.

### 4.6.4. COMMUNICATING NEEDS AND RESOURCES

During a crisis, the same problem often arises: organizations have knowledge about their own areas, but there is no single place showing what resources are available and where there are gaps. This slows down activities and leads to situations where one place has surplus aid while another has none.

Recommendation 1. Clearly indicate where to find information on resources and needs
Ensure that both your team and people outside your organization (volunteers, partners, donors) know where to check current information about resources and needs in the region. If a shared tool such as mapujpomoc.pl is in use in your area, direct people there—instead of creating your own parallel "resource lists."

Most importantly:
- use it regularly yourself,
- encourage local organizations to report their needs and resources on an ongoing basis,
- in your communications (leaflets, social media, meetings) clearly indicate: "current needs and resources can be found here: ...".

**GOOD PRACTICE**

During the 2024 flood, the Mapuj Pomoc Network regularly published summaries of current needs reported by organizations on mapujpomoc.pl and on social media. Both individual organization posts and consolidated field data summaries were shared. The key was that **local organizations reported their needs and resources on an ongoing basis**, so that others knew where aid was truly needed, instead of relying on guesswork.

### Recommendation 2. Communicate that needs change and educate on how best to help

Maintain a steady, reliable message to the media and local community that crisis needs change over time – what is needed today (e.g. sandbags during a flood) differs from what will be critical in a few days (dehumidifiers, shovels, rubber boots). In every communication, emphasize that distributing aid takes time and that sending things "blindly" often results in surpluses of unneeded donations.

**IMPORTANT**

In educational activities—e.g. through cooperation with schools in the municipality/county—reinforce the simple principle: in many crises, flexible funds that can finance whatever is truly lacking in subsequent phases help more than in-kind donations.

# 5. Cross-Cutting Topics

Cross-cutting topics encompass issues common to all areas of aid activities—regardless of whether you are organizing a warehouse, housing support, legal assistance, or field operations. Safeguarding, health and life, education and childcare, and volunteering are areas where a single mistake can have serious consequences for the safety and well-being of both those providing assistance and those receiving it.

In the following sections, you will find practical recommendations on how to build systemic solutions: safeguarding policies and procedures, preparedness for life-saving activities, strengthening education and childcare in crises, and planning volunteer work—from recruitment to ensuring their well-being. The checklists included with each topic are intended to help you quickly verify whether the most important elements are in place in preparing your organization for the next crisis.

# Safeguarding

## Checklist: Safeguarding

**Are you ready to operate in a crisis?**

- ❑ My organization has basic policies in place:
  - ❑ I have a child safeguarding policy:
    - ❑ there is a document signed by the management board
    - ❑ staff and volunteers working with children have been informed of the policy and are familiar with its rules
  - ❑ I have an overall safeguarding policy:
    - ❑ there is a document signed by the management board
    - ❑ staff have been informed of the policy and are familiar with its rules
  - ❑ I have a policy on preventing sexual abuse and exploitation of beneficiaries:
    - ❑ there is a document signed by the management board
    - ❑ staff and volunteers have been informed of the policy and are familiar with its rules

- ❑ I have a written procedure specifying what a staff member should do upon noticing violence
  - ❑ I have a written step-by-step list of actions
  - ❑ I have a ready-to-use incident reporting form
  - ❑ I have an up-to-date list of support institutions to which a beneficiary experiencing violence should be referred/reported
  - ❑ Staff have basic knowledge of reporting violations
    - ❑ Staff are familiar with the procedure for reporting violence to social welfare centers (OPS)
    - ❑ Staff are familiar with the procedure of Blue Card (Niebieska Karta) application

- ❑ All beneficiaries (including children and persons with disabilities) are clearly informed where and how they can file a complaint in case staff or volunteers of my organization violate professional ethics
  - ❑ I have three feedback channels (i.e., ways to submit complaints about our staff):
    - ❑ email
    - ❑ a physical complaint box (in a location accessible to beneficiaries, where affected persons can submit written reports of misconduct)
    - ❑ phone

- ❑ Staff have undergone training in basic psychological first aid (not mandatory, but recommended)
  - ❑ Our team has designated a focal point (a person responsible for handling all reports of violations of safety rules, harm to beneficiaries, violence, etc.):
    - ❑ the designated person understands their responsibilities and response procedures
    - ❑ staff know who this person is and how to contact them

- ❑ We have developed a protocol for handling situations in which a staff member is at risk from a beneficiary

- ❑ A person has been designated to monitor and evaluate whether the focal point maintains the highest ethical standards and appropriately responds to safety violations and incidents of abuse

# 5.1. Safeguarding

Safeguarding in Poland is still a relatively new area. Only in recent years have organizations gradually begun to introduce procedures aligned with international standards and the requirements of some donors. This chapter is intended to help you navigate this area in a realistic way: to show where you can start within your organization, even if you do not have a dedicated team, large resources, or extensive policies.

## 5.1.1. WHAT IS SAFEGUARDING

To make this concept easier to understand, this guide adopts a simplified definition. Safeguarding is an organization's responsibility for the safety and well-being of the people it supports—by preventing abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect that may arise from the actions of the organization, its staff, volunteers, partners, and collaborators.

In practice, we refer to three main safeguarding areas: those concerning children, adults, and the organization's team.

**Child Safeguarding**

Child safeguarding means ensuring that all activities of an organization are safe for children and take their specific needs into account.

It refers to both collective and individual responsibility to protect children from:

- intentional harm (violence, exploitation, neglect),
- unintentional harm resulting from programs, procedures, or the behavior of staff, volunteers, partners, and other individuals associated with the organization.

Child safeguarding activities include identifying, preventing, and responding to situations where children are harmed or exposed to risk in connection with the assistance provided by the organization.

**Adult Safeguarding**

Adult safeguarding refers to all individuals aged 18 and over who receive support from an organization. It focuses on preventing all forms of harm caused by:

- staff,
- volunteers,
- partners, and other individuals acting on behalf of the organization.

Adult safeguarding covers both direct behaviors (e.g. "help in exchange for something" propositions, aggressive communication, threats, non-consensual physical contact) and the way activities are designed:

- whether procedures do not require the disclosure of unnecessarily sensitive personal information,
- whether the organization of assistance does not expose individuals to humiliation (e.g. publicly discussing financial or health situations),
- whether the complaints system is accessible to people who may fear consequences or do not know the language.

> **IMPORTANT**
>
> **Adult safeguarding is your organization's commitment to ensure that no adult receiving assistance is harmed as a result of seeking support—neither by people associated with the organization nor by the way that assistance is delivered.**

**Staff Safeguarding**

Staff safeguarding refers to the safety of people working within an organization—including both employees and volunteers. It focuses on preventing and responding to:

- harassment, intimidation, and bullying,
- discrimination, as well as demeaning comments and behaviors,
- abuse of power or position (formal or informal) in the workplace or work-related environment.

The goal is to create an environment in which people involved in aid activities are protected, can report misconduct, and clearly understand what behaviors are unacceptable.

### 5.1.2. DEVELOPMENT OF SAFEGUARDING – RECOMMENDATIONS

In the first months of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the first challenge became particularly evident: the lack of structured procedures, standards, guidelines, and trained individuals responsible for safeguarding within organizations. Many entities—especially smaller, local ones—had neither policies nor designated persons who knew how to respond to signs of abuse, safety violations, or other situations requiring intervention.

The second, parallel issue was the lack of safeguarding materials available in Polish—adapted to field realities and feasible to implement with limited budgets. Most available tools were designed for large international organizations, operated in a different legal and organizational context, or required resources that local NGOs simply did not have.

**Policies and Procedures**

***Challenge: Lack of procedures, standards, and trained safeguarding personnel***

Recommendation 1. Develop safeguarding policies and procedures before a crisis occurs.
Safeguarding should not be developed during a crisis—an organization should already have basic safety and protection principles established and implemented in advance. If you know that in the future you may engage in humanitarian assistance, it is even more important to prepare ahead of time.

Develop coherent safeguarding rules that cover prevention, reporting, and responding to abuse. Make sure that you understand these rules and that your team (including volunteers) is familiar with and trained in them. Ensure that all members of your organization know what to do when a report of a violation arises and whom to contact.

Clear guidelines and rules of conduct—focused on avoiding harm to beneficiaries—will allow you to act more quickly in a crisis situation, reduce organizational chaos, and limit the risk of violations.

**IMPORTANT**

**Remember that the safeguarding policy should be approved by the organization's management board. The document must express a zero tolerance approach to any form of abuse and violence, applying to everyone: the board, staff, beneficiaries, and partners.**

Recommendation 1A. Suggested safeguarding package for a small NGO
You can treat this as a minimum starter package that is worth having in place before a crisis:

1. Simple Safeguarding + PSEA policy (template)
   Prepare a short, clear policy describing how your organization prevents abuse, violence, and exploitation (including sexual exploitation and abuse – PSEA), what behaviors are unacceptable, and how to report violations. It does not need to be extensive—what matters is that it is clear and known to the team.
2. Complaints procedure (person on-duty + email + box + hotline)
   Establish a simple reporting pathway:
   - a dedicated email address,
   - a designated person on duty to receive reports,
   - a physical complaint box where you work with beneficiaries,
   - if resources allow, a simple phone number or hotline available during specified hours.

The most important thing is that people know where and how they can report an issue.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**If your team includes individuals whose native language is different from yours, translate key safeguarding documents for them.**

3. Initial training + a short refresher every 2 years. Introduce a mandatory one-time safeguarding training for every person during onboarding (staff, collaborators,

volunteers). About every 2 years, conduct a short refresher to reinforce key principles, procedures, and contact points.

4. Emergency contacts / referral pathways list. Prepare a list of phone numbers and contacts to which you can refer cases in situations of risk or serious violations: police, social welfare centers (OPS), emergency intervention facilities, and specialized organizations (e.g. those dealing with violence or child protection). Keep this list easily accessible to the team and ensure everyone knows how to use it.

**IMPORTANT**

**Developing standards takes time. Remember to remain open to collaboration and be patient. Such a package does not require large resources, but it gives you a foundation for safer operations when a crisis occurs.**

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**If your organization operates on a small or medium scale, you can seek support from more experienced partners, such as Polish Humanitarian Action or Polish Red Cross, in developing basic safeguarding practices.**

### Training

Regular onboarding and refresher training is essential to ensure that everyone in your organization understands safeguarding principles, knows their responsibilities, and knows how to respond to reports. Documents alone are not enough—you need people who know how to apply them in practice.

**IMPORTANT**

**A trained team is a prerequisite for safeguarding principles to work in practice, not just exist on paper.**

Recommendation 1. Train your team in basic safeguarding
Organize a basic safeguarding training for your team (staff and volunteers) as soon as possible after implementing your policies.
You can use available online courses, for example:

- the Kaya platform (courses available in Polish, English, Arabic, Ukrainian – general course, free of charge),
- the DisasterReady platform (including trainings on investigation procedures—what a complaint-handling process looks like).

These courses usually end with a short test and a certificate. Such proof of completion may be sufficient in emergency situations, when you need to quickly build basic team competencies.

In the long term, it is advisable to encourage your team to participate in in-person training or workshops. This format allows you to tailor the content to your organization's specific context and policies, and to practice scenarios and responses to challenging situations.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**People responsible for safeguarding in an organization should undergo initial training immediately after recruitment, as well as participate in short refresher trainings on safeguarding basics approximately every 12 months.**

**IMPORTANT**

**All new team members should complete mandatory onboarding training covering the protection of children, adult beneficiaries, and staff.**

Recommendation 2. Train your team in psychological first aid

In crisis situations, the first people to interact with someone experiencing trauma are rarely psychologists. They are usually staff and volunteers—at reception, in a warehouse, during aid distribution, or at an information point. Therefore, it is important that your team has basic training in so-called psychological first aid (PFA).

This is not therapy, but the ability to:

- calmly receive a report or account of a difficult experience,
- ensure the person's immediate safety (e.g. moving them away from a crowd, providing a quiet space),
- do no harm—avoid probing into traumatic details, judging, or questioning the person's experience,
- refer them further—to the appropriate person within the organization, a specialist service, or relevant authorities.

Basic psychological first aid training helps your team respond better in situations where beneficiaries disclose violence, abuse, or other experiences requiring intervention. This directly strengthens safeguarding practices—because the report is received safely, and the person is not further burdened by the team's reaction.

More about this type of training can be found in section 5.2.1.

Recommendation 3. Organize training to strengthen stress resilience

It is important that people working in crisis situations have not only substantive knowledge, but also basic tools to cope with psychological strain. You can organize short trainings or workshops on: recognizing early signs of burnout, simple stress regulation techniques (e.g. taking breaks, working in pairs, sleep hygiene), setting boundaries in contact with beneficiaries, and maintaining a balance between work and personal life.

Such measures reduce the risk of overload, team conflicts, and abuses resulting from chronic stress.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**To effectively implement safeguarding practices and ensure they are followed in reality, it is advisable to designate (or hire) specific individuals responsible for receiving and handling reports—so-called focal points. These are people whom everyone (beneficiaries, volunteers, staff) knows they can approach to report suspected abuse, a concerning situation, or a breach of rules.**

**Staff Safety**

In crisis situations, you may encounter aggression, pressure, or manipulation from the people you are helping—especially when they are experiencing high stress, a sense of injustice, or helplessness. If an organization does not have clear rules on how to respond in such situations, it exposes staff and volunteers to physical, psychological, and reputational risks. This, in turn, can quickly lead to chaos, burnout, and a decline in the quality of assistance provided.

This includes both overt aggression (shouting, threats, violence) and more subtle forms of pressure: manipulation, unfounded accusations, or coercion (e.g. "if you don't help me, I will file a complaint," "I know where you work").

***Challenge: Lack of procedures for responding to situations where a staff member is threatened by a beneficiary***

The absence of clear response protocols in such cases exposes you and other members of your organization to physical, psychological, and reputational risks. It can lead to disorganization and a decline in the quality of services. In addition, unprepared staff may react inappropriately, which increases the risk of escalation of conflict and endangers the safety of both themselves and others in the environment.

Recommendation 1. Introduce staff protection procedures

In your policies and procedures, it is important to clearly define:

- which behaviors from beneficiaries are considered unacceptable (aggression, threats, persistent pressure, manipulation, unfounded accusations),
- in which situations a staff member has the right to end a conversation or withdraw from contact,
- that your organization stands by the staff member when they act in accordance with procedures—and does not leave them alone with the consequences of a difficult situation.

You need simple, clear steps to follow in case of a threat—so that every team member knows what to do in the moment and what to do afterward. The procedure should specify, among other things:

- what to do in case of verbal or physical aggression or threats (e.g. ending contact, calling for support, reporting to a supervisor, contacting the police if necessary),
- who is responsible for receiving the report (e.g. a coordinator or safeguarding focal point),
- how to document the incident (a brief note, without unnecessary personal data),
- what forms of support the organization provides to the staff member after the incident (conversation, supervision, reassignment of tasks).

The more concrete the procedure is, the lower the risk that someone will improvise in a difficult situation or be left alone with the problem.

### Recommendation 2. Monitor and improve staff protection measures

Protective mechanisms are not “set once and for all.” From time to time, review how they function in practice.

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**Do I know where to report a problem? What situations tend to recur? Do other staff members and volunteers in my organization use the protection procedures?**

Based on this, you can make improvements—simplify procedures, clarify definitions, or add new types of situations (e.g. online communication abuse). It is normal for the first version of your policies not to be perfect—the important thing is to update them based on your team’s real-world experience.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Supervision and psychological support**
**Regular meetings with a supervisor or psychologist allow staff and volunteers to discuss difficult situations, relieve tension, and manage long-term stress. This is not only “emotional support,” but also a space to jointly identify safer ways of working.**

**Training in risk management and conflict situations**
**It is worth organizing training to prepare staff to respond safely in situations involving aggression, violence, or manipulation from beneficiaries (e.g. de-escalation techniques, working in pairs, involving security/services when needed, setting clear boundaries).**

**Rotation in handling high-risk cases**
**Avoid situations where one person is responsible for particularly demanding cases for a long period (e.g. cases involving violence, long-term conflicts, or highly demanding individuals). Rotation reduces the risk of burnout and escalation of problems.**

### Child Protection

Children and adolescents, due to their vulnerability, dependence on adults, and limited awareness of risks, require special protection in any situation where they interact with your organization—both as beneficiaries of assistance and as underage volunteers. The lack of clearly defined protective mechanisms exposes them to the risk of abuse, violence, manipulation, or unintentional involvement in situations that threaten their physical and emotional safety.

Incorporating protective procedures and regularly monitoring their implementation should be a standard from the very beginning of planning and throughout the execution of activities—not an optional add-on.

***Challenge: Lack of appropriate mechanisms to protect children and underage volunteers***

Recommendation 1. Introduce and promote a child protection policy

If your organization works with children or engages underage volunteers, you should have a clear, concise, and accessible child protection policy. Make sure that:

- it is written in simple language,
- it is known to all members of the team,
- it covers both beneficiaries and underage volunteers.

It is also necessary to train staff and volunteers in the basics of child safeguarding and to plan for psychological support for underage volunteers who may come into contact with difficult stories or situations.

If your organization is small and you do not have the resources to create multiple separate documents, you can include child protection as a clearly marked section within your PSEA policy (described in the next subsection 5.1.2.5)—provided that this section clearly outlines child protection principles and is understandable to the entire team.

Recommendation 2. Provide simple and safe reporting channels for children

In crisis situations, children are among the most vulnerable groups. Therefore, they need solutions adapted to their age. In practice, this means preparing:

- a separate, child-friendly version of the child protection policy (a simplified summary of the rules written for children),
- simplified complaint forms regarding staff of your organization, which a child can understand and complete on their own or with a trusted person,
- short informational leaflets explaining what a child can do if someone harms them or makes them feel uncomfortable.

Reporting channels should be simple and safe—for example, an anonymous box, a helpline, or a designated trusted adult whom children know they can approach. These channels should also be accessible to parents/guardians and volunteers.

Recommendation 3. Screen people working with children

Your organization should have a clear procedure for vetting all individuals who have regular contact with children. This includes checking:

- references and experience,
- criminal records related to offenses against children (where legally possible),
- basic attitudes and motivation for working with children.

This helps minimize the risk of allowing individuals who may pose a threat to children to work with them.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Age-appropriate communication channels**
**When sharing information about safety rules and reporting mechanisms with children, use formats adapted to their age: simple language, pictograms, short messages, and graphics. What is clear to adults is often not understandable to children.**

**Cooperation with external institutions**
**Maintain contact with local social welfare centers, schools, court probation officers, and organizations specializing in child protection. This allows you to quickly activate not only internal procedures but also systemic intervention pathways in case of a violation.**

**Consulting solutions with children and young people**
**Whenever possible, involve children**

**and young people in the creation and evaluation of protection mechanisms. Simple consultations (e.g. "Do you understand this poster?", "Would you know who to report to?") help tailor tools to their real needs.**

### Protection against Sexual Violence and Violations of Physical Integrity

Sexual violence, harassment, abuse of power, and violations of bodily integrity are among the most serious risks in humanitarian and support activities. They affect both people receiving assistance and staff and volunteers. The absence of clear protective procedures means that victims may not receive appropriate support, and your organization is exposed to serious legal and reputational consequences.

Therefore, you need a simple, clear system: explicit rules, prohibitions, reporting procedures, and a defined way of responding to any signal of violence or exploitation..

***Challenge: Lack of mechanisms to prevent and respond to violations of physical integrity and sexual misconduct***

Recommendation 1. Develop and implement a PSEA policy (Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse)

Prepare a short, clear PSEA policy that applies to everyone: staff, collaborators, volunteers, and anyone acting on behalf of your organization. The policy should clearly:

- define what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse,
- prohibit any sexual relationships with beneficiaries (including those "with consent"),
- prohibit requesting any personal benefits in exchange for assistance,
- describe how to report violations and how the organization will respond.

If you run a small organization with limited-scale activities, you can combine basic PSEA principles with other safeguarding elements in a single document—what matters is that the section on sexual violence is clearly marked.

Recommendation 2. Inform beneficiaries about their rights and ways to report abuse

Beneficiaries are often unaware that they have the right to report inappropriate behavior by staff or volunteers, or they may fear consequences. It is your responsibility to clearly communicate that:

- no one has the right to expect personal or sexual "gratitude" from them,
- they have the right to report any situation that makes them feel uncomfortable,
- making a report will not affect their access to assistance.

You can do this through:

- simple leaflets and posters in support locations,
- brief information during registration or first contact,
- clearly indicated reporting channels (email address, phone number, complaint box, focal point).

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Regular drills**
**Organize occasional short simulations for your team: how to receive a report, how to respond to a suspicion, how to ensure the safety of the affected person while also securing evidence or documentation.**

**Cooperation with specialized entities**
**Establish contact with crisis intervention centers, support centers for people experiencing violence, and organizations specializing in assistance after sexual violence. It is also useful to use existing databases (e.g. maps of support points for people experiencing violence on mapujpomoc.pl) to know who in your area can provide immediate support.**

**Using existing PSEA policy examples**
**You do not need to write a PSEA policy from scratch. You can draw on publicly available documents from other organizations (Polish or international) and adapt them to the scale**

**of your activities. For example, you can use the documents developed by the IB Polska Foundation[1] as a reference.**

### Clear Reporting Procedures

People receiving assistance are often unaware that they have the right to file a complaint if abuse, inappropriate behavior, or a breach of safety rules occurs during the provision of support. It is also frequently unclear where and how they can report a problem. Information materials are sometimes not easy to understand or are not adapted to different groups of recipients (e.g. older people, persons with disabilities, illiterate individuals, or those who do not speak the language).

***Challenge: Lack of awareness of the possibility to report abuse and/or lack of clear reporting channels***

Recommendation 1. Introduce diverse, easily accessible complaint channels

Your goal is to ensure that a person in crisis can realistically report abuse. Therefore, you should provide several different complaint channels, such as:

- staff duty hours dedicated to receiving reports,
- physical complaint boxes placed in public areas,
- a phone number or hotline—especially important for older people, persons with disabilities, and those who cannot come in person,
- the option to submit complaints electronically (a dedicated email address or a simple online form).

Make sure all these channels are clearly described in the languages used by beneficiaries. Information should also be visible (at support points, on the website, and on social media).

**IMPORTANT**

**Regularly check the channels through which abuse can be reported. Ensure that there is a designated person in your organization responsible for regularly checking complaint boxes, reading emails, and listening to messages.**

**The diversity of contact methods is especially important for older people, persons with disabilities, those who are non-literate, and individuals with limited language proficiency—groups that are particularly vulnerable.**

**Channels specifically adapted for minors (e.g. simple forms, complaint boxes, contact with a trusted adult) are a separate topic, covered in the section on child protection.**

Recommendation 2. Publish a schedule of safeguarding focal point duty hours

If someone wants to report a concern verbally, in person, they need to know who they can approach and when. Ensure that the schedule of safeguarding focal point duty hours is publicly available and clearly indicates the person's name, role, location for receiving reports, and duty hours.

This is especially important for people who do not want to write emails or fill out forms, are afraid of formalities, but are willing to describe a situation in a conversation.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Place information about reporting channels in visible locations**
**Ensure that information about the possibility to file a complaint is clearly visible—on posters, notice boards, at reception points, in aid distribution**

**1** *Policy on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*(PSEA) – IB Polska Foundation,https://ib-polska.pl/psea/(accessed: December 2025).

**locations, as well as on social media, including a link to the form or an email address.**

**Regularly test whether the channels actually work**
**Periodically check in practice whether the complaint box is being emptied, emails are being received, the phone line is working, and the online form functions properly. It is better to detect issues yourself than to later learn that someone tried to report abuse but had no way to do so.**

**Adapt communication to different audiences**
**Information about reporting can take various forms: leaflets, posters, short videos, or presentations during information sessions. The key is that it should be understandable for people with limited language proficiency, reading difficulties, or those who are very stressed due to the crisis situation.**

**Simplify the language of messages**
**Avoid formal legal language, which is often incomprehensible to people in crisis. Instead of "complaint submission procedure," you can say: "What to do if something goes wrong" or "How to report a problem."**

### Tracking the Progress of a Complaint

For a person who decides to file a complaint, this is often a very difficult step. If they do not receive any feedback, they may quickly lose trust—both in your organization and in the system as a whole. They may conclude that no one takes them seriously, that "there is no point in reporting," and may refrain from reporting future issues.

The lack of clearly defined timeframes, excessively long waiting periods, and absence of communication about what happens next with the complaint weaken the effectiveness of protection mechanisms. Victims are left with a sense of helplessness and may even experience secondary harm. Potential perpetrators, on the other hand, may feel that they face no consequences.

***Challenge: Lack of beneficiary awareness about what happens after a complaint is submitted***

Recommendation 1. Explain from the outset what will happen after a complaint is filed
A person submitting a complaint should know in advance what the next steps will be. It is good practice to include a clear, simple description of the process in the same place where information about reporting channels is provided (e.g. posters, leaflets, website). You can outline a straightforward and understandable process, for example:

1. Information about the possibility to submit a complaint
2. Receiving the report and acknowledging receipt (e.g. via message, phone call, or brief conversation confirming that the report has been received and recorded)
3. Assessment of the report
4. Follow-up and/or corrective actions (e.g. protective measures, organizational changes, consequences for the perpetrator, referral to external institutions)
5. Feedback (including how and in what form it will be provided)

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Clearly define who handles the case**
**When a complaint is submitted, inform the reporting person that their case will be handled by a qualified, designated person or team (e.g. a safeguarding focal point). This strengthens the sense of safety and trust—there is clarity that the report will not be lost or ignored.**

**Agree on the preferred form of response with the reporting person.**
**Discuss and agree with the reporting person how they would like to receive feedback. Provide responses in a way that protects privacy (e.g. an individual conversation in a safe place, a**

**phone call to a provided number, or an encrypted email).**

**IMPORTANT**

**Inform the reporting person in advance that the process may also conclude without confirmation of the allegations. You may limit the feedback to a statement such as: "the case has been closed and appropriate actions have been taken," without disclosing details of any consequences for the reported individual.**

**The goal is to protect privacy and avoid public judgment, while still ensuring that the organization has taken the matter seriously.**

Recommendation 2. Establish internal timeframes for handling complaints

To ensure that the complaints mechanism works effectively, you need clear deadlines for each stage. Otherwise, cases may drag on, and trust in the system will decrease. You can adopt a model such as:

1. Complaint registration (acknowledgement of receipt – within 48 hours or another short, realistic timeframe)
2. Initial assessment and risk evaluation (determining the type of case and urgency – within 7 days)
3. Investigation process (information gathering, interviews, analysis – within 30 days)
4. Decision and feedback (deciding on actions and informing the reporting person – within 14 days after the investigation is completed)

The most important points are:

- every complaint should receive an initial response within a short time (e.g. within 48 hours),
- the reporting person should be regularly informed if the process is delayed ("the case is ongoing, we need more time, next update by").

Good communication is just as important as the corrective actions themselves.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Check complaint channels daily**
**Introduce a simple rule: email inboxes, physical complaint boxes, and other reporting channels are checked at the start of each working day. This builds a habit and allows you to quickly identify situations that require immediate action.**

**Prioritize complaints by risk level**
**Implement a simple priority system (e.g. high – risk to physical/psychological safety, medium, low) and start with cases that require the fastest response. This ensures that people in real danger do not have to wait in line alongside less urgent organizational matters.**

**Response within 24 hours**
**For urgent reports, introduce a requirement to take initial action within 24 hours of receiving the complaint to ensure the safety of the affected person and to preserve evidence.**

### Mitigating Fears about Reporting Abuses

People in crisis often refrain from filing complaints because they fear consequences and losing access to support. This is especially true when they depend on a single source of assistance—your organization, a specific location, or a specific person. If you do not clearly communicate that reporting abuse is safe, the complaints mechanism will exist only formally.

***Challenge: Fear of reporting due to fear of losing access to support***

Recommendation 1. Emphasize confidentiality and absence of negative consequences for filing a complaint

From the outset, clearly communicate that:

- reports are treated confidentially and will not be disclosed to unauthorized persons,
- the reporting person will not face any negative consequences for submitting a complaint,

- using the complaints channel does not affect access to assistance.

You can, for example, include in your reporting information materials (leaflets, posters, website, social media) a statement that filing a complaint does not affect the right to receive support. Also remind people that the reporting system is separate from the assistance delivery system (one person receives the complaint, another decides on the provision of aid).

Communications in this area must be simple, clear, and adapted to the context so that people in crisis are not afraid of retaliation or of their identity being disclosed.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Emphasize the option of anonymous reporting**
**Clearly inform beneficiaries that they have the right to submit a complaint without providing their personal data. Indicate which reporting channels allow full anonymity (e.g. a physical complaint box, an anonymous online form).**

**Restricted access to reports**
**Ensure that access to information about reports is limited only to designated individuals—e.g. members of the safeguarding team—who are trained in handling sensitive data confidentially. This helps minimize the risk of gossip and informal disclosure of complaint content.**

**Clear data storage rules**
**Explain (e.g. in leaflets, on the website, or during the complaint intake process) how long and where report-related data is stored, who has access to it, and what protection measures are in place (e.g. secure servers, restricted access permissions, no sharing of complaint details via unsecured email).**

**Additional safeguards for the reporting person**

**In serious situations (e.g. violence, threats, repeated abuse), consider additional forms of protection, such as access to legal assistance or offering psychological support.**

**The key is to clearly communicate: you can report abuse without the risk of losing access to support, and your safety—physical, emotional, and legal—is a priority for the organization.**

### Mitigating the Risk of Abuse

Even the best procedures will not work if there is no clarity within your organization about what behaviors are unacceptable and what consequences will follow for violations—both for employees, volunteers, and partners. If someone feels that there will be no consequences, the risk of abuse increases.

Additional risk arises when establishing partnerships. Your organization is responsible not only for its own staff but also for those it works with. A partner without safeguarding policies, with outdated procedures, or with policies that exist only on paper is a real source of risk.

It is also crucial to build awareness within the team: everyone should know how to recognize inappropriate behavior, how to report it, and that they have full organizational support in doing so. All team members should respond to misconduct, regardless of whether it involves colleagues, partners, or beneficiaries.

***Challenge: Lack of staff awareness regarding the consequences of violating beneficiaries' rights***

Recommendation 1. Regularly train your team on safeguarding principles
Training has already been discussed in section 5.1.2.2, but here the key emphasis is this: during each training, clearly show which behaviors are prohibited and what consequences follow from violating them (disciplinary, employment-related, and in serious cases—criminal consequences). The goal is to ensure that no one can say: "I didn't know this was a problem."

Recommendation 2. Clearly describe consequences and the investigation process—and make them accessible to the team

A zero-tolerance approach to safeguarding violations must be visible not only in statements but also in practice. In your policies and internal regulations, specify:

- what steps are taken after a report of abuse is received (who receives the report, who analyzes it, who decides on actions),
- what types of consequences may be applied—from warnings, through termination of cooperation, to reporting the case to law enforcement authorities,
- that the process is transparent and that every employee and volunteer is informed about these rules (e.g. through contracts, internal regulations, and training).

**IMPORTANT**

**If a case involves a suspicion of a criminal offense, the organization may—and should—report it to the appropriate authorities in accordance with national law. A criminal proceeding conducted by public institutions may run in parallel with internal disciplinary proceedings within the organization.**

Recommendation 3. Identify areas of highest risk

Review your activities and ask yourself: in which situations is the risk of abuse highest? These may include, for example:

- individual home visits,
- work in closed facilities,
- distribution of aid where one person decides who gets what,
- meetings in secluded places without witnesses.

List these situations and treat them as points that require special safeguards.

Recommendation 4. Practice reporting and response (simulations)

Organize simple simulations: what the reporting pathway looks like from a beneficiary to the safeguarding focal point, what happens in the first 24 hours, and who is responsible for each stage. This allows the team to “practice” the procedure before a real crisis occurs.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Develop mitigation plans for identified risks**
**For situations with the highest risk, introduce concrete measures (e.g. working in pairs instead of alone, requiring a brief report after visits, avoiding one-on-one meetings in closed rooms, monitoring attendance in facilities, etc.).**

**Require completion of recognized courses**
**You can require team members (including partners’ staff) to complete recognized safeguarding or PSEA courses—e.g. those developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee or CHS Alliance—before they start working with beneficiaries.**

**Include separate PSEA clauses in contracts**
**In employment and volunteer agreements, include dedicated PSEA clauses with a clear description of prohibited behaviors and consequences (e.g. immediate termination of cooperation in case of a confirmed violation).**

**Protect whistleblowers**
**During trainings and in documentation, emphasize that individuals who report abuse are protected from retaliation. Ensure that reporters know the organization stands by them when they act in good faith.**

***Challenge: Risk of violations by partner organizations***

Working with partners who do not have safeguarding policies, do not implement them, or fail to update them transfers the risk of abuse to your organization as well. You are effectively endorsing joint activities with your brand and reputation.

### Recommendation 5. Verify partners and include safeguarding in agreements

Before starting cooperation, check whether the partner has safeguarding / PSEA policies and whether they are actually implemented. If not, offer to share your own procedures and materials (policies, templates, training). Include in the partnership agreement a requirement to comply with defined safety standards, rules for reporting incidents, and the possibility of terminating cooperation in the event of serious violations.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Introduce periodic reviews of partners' safeguarding practices. Check whether they have incident reports, how they communicate safeguarding topics, and whether they conduct analyses. You can define specific indicators (e.g. number of reports, response time) and a schedule for these reviews.**

### *Challenge: Lack of a sense of shared responsibility within the team for upholding safeguarding standards*

Safeguarding cannot be the coordinator's responsibility—every team member should feel responsible for responding when they notice something concerning. If staff believe that "it's not my role," the protection system simply does not work.

### Recommendation 6. Strengthen a sense of shared responsibility within the team

Ensure that the topic of reporting concerns is present:

- In educational activities – organize sessions focused on recognizing abuse, violence, harassment, and other inappropriate behaviors, including concrete real-life examples,
- In internal communication – regularly remind everyone that each person has a duty to report concerning situations,
- In daily meetings and supervision – ask whether anyone has noticed something that raised concern.

### Recommendation 7. Ensure that everyone knows reporting and support channels

**CONTROL QUESTIONS**

**Do members of my team know what the channels for reporting abuse are? Do they have the option to report anonymously? Can they consult their concerns with a safeguarding coordinator or another designated person (e.g. a data protection specialist) before taking formal action?**

**This helps reduce the fear of "doing something wrong" and makes it easier to respond at an early stage.**

**Safeguarding and Vulnerable Groups**

Safeguarding must take into account people from groups exposed to additional risks: children, persons with disabilities, older adults, LGBTQ+ individuals, victims of violence, migrants in difficult situations, and people who do not know the local language. If procedures are not adapted to their needs, in practice they may not be able to report abuse or receive support.

### *Challenge: The need to adapt activities to the needs of vulnerable groups*

### Recommendation 1. Adapt your approach to the needs of vulnerable groups

Ensure that safeguarding personnel are sensitive to cultural and gender considerations (e.g. the option for a woman to speak with a woman, or for an LGBTQ+ person to speak with someone who understands their context). Make sure that the way conversations are conducted and reports are collected is appropriate to the person's abilities (pace, language, format).

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Prepare materials in simple language and in multiple formats**
**You already know that simple language and translations into**

beneficiaries' languages should be used. Also ensure you provide accessible formats for persons with disabilities (e.g. audio, subtitles, large print, Braille—if available).

**Consult vulnerable groups when designing your approach**
Before implementing reporting tools, consult representatives of vulnerable groups. Ask whether they know how to report abuse, whether the format is accessible to them, and what is missing. Their perspective will help identify gaps.

**Prepare your team to work with vulnerable groups**
Train staff and volunteers on communication barriers, cultural biases, and specific forms of violence and abuse that may affect different groups.

**Cooperate with organizations specializing in vulnerable groups**
Establish relationships with organizations that regularly support these groups. They can help you design solutions, train your team, and support you in complex cases.

# Health and Life-Saving Preparedness

# Checklist: Health and Life-Saving Preparedness

**Are you ready to act in a crisis?**

❑ I have a simple written protocol for the first 72 hours of a crisis (physical and mental health)
- ❑ The protocol includes a division of roles: who coordinates information, who maps the situation, who contacts healthcare institutions
- ❑ I have prepared short forms to collect information from partners (what specialists they have, their availability)
- ❑ I have a simple reporting system (e.g. table/online sheet) known to key health partners

❑ I have designated a "mini crisis team" for health (members, roles, backups)
- ❑ We have established communication channels (e.g. dedicated chat, short briefings)
- ❑ It is clear who can quickly decide to deploy a team (including psychologists, volunteers) to the field

❑ I have mapped healthcare providers in the region (hospitals, clinics, private providers, mental health services, NGOs)
- ❑ For each provider I have: phone, email, scope of services, hours, languages, contact person
- ❑ I use mapupomoc.pl (Health category) to complement this list

❑ I have initial protocols for information sharing between healthcare institutions and my organization

❑ I have a template for a shared table to collect data on provided assistance
- ❑ I have GDPR (RODO) consent templates (including for health data)

❑ I have rules for storage, transport, and disposal of medicines and medical equipment (if I store them)

❑ I have clearly defined the limits of my organization's competencies (what we do and do not do in the health sector)

❑ I have an up-to-date list of institutions to which I refer cases that go beyond our capacity
- ❑ I have a documented list of particularly vulnerable groups in the context of my organization's activities
- ❑ In health response plans, their needs are marked as a priority
- ❑ I know how to adapt support to these groups (language accessibility, physical accessibility, communication methods, safety)

❑ Part of the team has been trained in psychological first aid (PFA)

❑ The team has up-to-date basic first aid training (minimum), and key staff at least at an advanced level
- ❑ I provide the team with a basic form of supervision (external or peer-based)

❑ I have a plan to ensure access at operational sites to: drinking water, water for handwashing, and toilets

❑ I have rules for waste segregation and disposal (including post-flood waste and medical waste)

❑ I have minimum stock of water disinfection supplies if operating in flood- or disruption-prone areas

❑ For each health/psychological program, I define the expected duration in advance
  ❑ From the beginning, I clearly communicate this timeframe to beneficiaries, partners, and the team
  ❑ I inform about planned reduction or closure of activities in advance (at least 1–2 months)
  ❑ I know which institutions/organizations I can refer people to if they still need support

❑ After completing activities, I organize a debriefing meeting with the team
  ❑ I collect feedback from partners and—if possible—from beneficiaries
  ❑ I document concrete lessons learned and incorporate them into plans, procedures, and checklists
  ❑ I ask the team what they need after an intensive period (rest, supervision, psychological consultation)
  ❑ I provide—where possible—support for those particularly burdened (e.g. psychologists, frontline staff)
  ❑ I have practical guidelines on sanitation: toilets, handwashing, and basic isolation of symptomatic individuals

❑ I maintain a stock of basic personal protective equipment (gloves, masks, hand disinfectants)

❑ I am aware of the vaccination status of key field staff (at minimum tetanus/diphtheria, hepatitis—according to medical advice)

❑ I keep vaccination records/booklets for employees and key volunteers
  ❑ There are team members who speak the main languages of beneficiaries or I have a list of available interpreters/language volunteers

❑ I understand task rotation principles, so the same people are not always assigned to the most demanding shifts
  ❑ I ensure breaks and working time limits are respected during crisis situations

# 5.2. Health and Life-Saving Preparedness

In crisis situations, issues related to health and lifesaving arise very quickly—often before medical services are fully operational on site. Your organization will not replace the healthcare system, but it can be one of the first actors to notice a problem, call for help, organize basic support, and help people reach the appropriate specialists.

This section focuses on that kind of preparedness. It explains what you can do so that, in a moment of crisis, you are not improvising in the most critical areas—physical and mental health—but instead acting according to simple, well-thought-out principles.

### 5.2.1. PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS

Whether health support—especially psychological support—will be meaningful and truly accessible in a crisis depends largely on what you do in advance. This section outlines the preparatory steps worth taking before a sudden threat to life or health occurs (including mental health). These actions primarily include:

- expanding knowledge and awareness within the organization,
- mapping resources and partners,
- developing simple procedures,

Recommendation 1. Prepare a simple protocol for the first 72 hours of a crisis

Develop in advance a short action plan for the first 72 hours of a crisis in the areas of physical and mental health. Such a protocol should include, among others:

- Division of roles: who coordinates information flow, who maps the situation on the ground, who contacts healthcare institutions,
- Simple forms for quickly collecting information from partners (e.g. who has access to psychologists/psychiatrists/nurses/paramedics, what kind of support they offer, and their availability),
- A basic reporting system (e.g. a short, repeatable table in an online sheet).

It is beneficial if key organizations and health institutions in your region are also aware of this protocol—so that in a crisis you do not have to start coordination from scratch.

Recommendation 2. Develop a simple plan for managing a dynamic health situation

Establish a “mini crisis team” within your organization responsible for health and mental health. In practice, this means:

- A clear structure: who makes decisions, who collects data, who maintains contact with institutions (e.g. hospitals, clinics, emergency services, social welfare centers),
- Defined communication channels: e.g. a dedicated working chat, short daily briefings,
- Clear rules for rapid resource allocation: for example, if a new crisis hotspot emerges, who is authorized to decide on deploying a team (including psychologists and volunteers) to the field.

The key is to avoid improvising decision-making structures during a crisis and instead rely on a simple, predefined framework—regardless of whether the crisis affects your city, region, or the entire country.

Recommendation 3. Map entities operating in the field of health and mental health

Before a crisis occurs, prepare as complete a list as possible of actors operating in your region, including:

- hospitals, clinics, and out-of-hours medical services,
- mental health clinics and community mental health centers,
- NGOs supporting persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or experiencing mental health crises,
- private providers (psychologists, psychiatrists, therapy centers) with whom cooperation or discounted services could be negotiated.

For each entity, include: contact details (phone, email), scope of services, availability hours, languages in which support is offered, and the name and role of a contact person (focal point).

**IMPORTANT**

**You can use the database available**

**on the mapujpomoc.pl website. In the "Health" category for your region, you will find places offering information on access to healthcare and medical consultations, as well as medical centers and specialist assistance, rehabilitation and physiotherapy services, and support related to sexual and reproductive health. This makes it easier to quickly find support in your region.**

Before a crisis, it is also worth preparing:
- Protocols for information exchange between healthcare institutions and aid organizations (e.g. who can share data, to what extent, and on what legal basis),
- A simple, shared system for collecting data on provided assistance (e.g. an Excel sheet or an online system) to avoid duplication of efforts and reach those most in need,
- GDPR (RODO) consent templates, including those covering sensitive health data,
- Agreed communication procedures (who contacts whom, in what type of situation, and during which hours),
- Rules for storage, transport, and disposal of medicines and medical equipment (if you store them).

### Recommendation 4. Establish a clear referral system

Your organization does not have to—and often should not—handle everything. If you see that a person's needs go beyond your team's capacity (e.g. requiring psychiatric intervention, hospitalization, or specialized therapy), it is better to refer them to appropriate services. To ensure this works effectively:
- Define your organization's scope of competence in advance (what you do not handle and at what point you refer to other entities),
- Develop a simple referral (referral) flow: who refers, where, when, and under what conditions a person is directed to the appropriate institution,
- Maintain an up-to-date list of regional partners (see Chapter 3),
- Use simple data collection forms that can be shared onward (in compliance with GDPR and with the person's consent).

Referrals are not about passing the problem on—they are a way to ensure that the person reaches a place that has the capacity to provide real and appropriate support as quickly as possible.

### Recommendation 5. Identify vulnerable groups in your context

In every crisis, there are individuals who require special attention—without additional support, they may not be able to exercise their rights or access available services. Vulnerable groups typically include, among others:
- older persons,
- persons with physical and intellectual disabilities,
- people with chronic illnesses or in palliative care,
- pregnant women and individuals caring for young children on their own,
- people experiencing acute mental health crises,
- survivors of violence or human trafficking,
- unaccompanied children and adolescents,
- persons from ethnic and cultural minorities (e.g. Roma communities),
- other marginalized or excluded groups in your local context.

This list is never exhaustive—every crisis and every community is different. What matters is to:
- identify the presence of such groups in your region as early as possible,
- treat their needs as a priority,
- adapt forms of support to the specific characteristics of each group (e.g. language accessibility, physical accessibility, how conversations are conducted, safety considerations).

In humanitarian response, there is no one-size-fits-all "package" of assistance that can be mechanically applied across different groups. Some level of assessment and contextual adaptation is always necessary.

### Recommendation 6. Training: Psychological First Aid (PFA/PPP) and basic first aid

Train your team in Psychological First Aid (PPP / Psychological First Aid) so that they can:
- provide basic support to people experiencing high stress or trauma during the first days of a crisis,[2]

- better understand what may happen to them (volunteers and staff) after several days of working under prolonged stress,
- respond in a simple, non-intrusive way to disclosures of violence, loss, or life-threatening situations.

In parallel, ensure regular training in basic first aid. If you work in the health sector, it is recommended to train your team in advanced first aid (e.g. certified first responder level) or at least extended first aid, based on the assumption that:
- professional medical assistance may not arrive within standard response times,
- actual waiting times for an ambulance or medical professional may be several hours.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**If possible, provide your team with regular external supervision (e.g. with a psychologist or a professional supervisor). If your budget does not allow this, consider introducing simple forms of peer supervision—regular, safe spaces where the team can discuss difficult situations and find ways to cope with them.**

Recommendation 7. Ensure access to water, sanitation, and waste management

Physical health—and also mental well-being—is closely linked to sanitation conditions. It is essential to avoid compounding the effects of a crisis, such as the spread of diseases. The key actions include:

1. First and foremost, ensure access to safe drinking water (an absolute priority).
2. Next, ensure access to water for basic personal hygiene—especially for handwashing.
3. Also monitor access to water for healthcare facilities (including hospitals and clinics).
4. Another key step is ensuring access to toilets or other safe systems for disposing of and containing human waste.
5. In parallel, if needed, consider running simple hygiene awareness campaigns (handwashing, toilet use, water use under scarcity conditions).
6. Provide affected people with basic hygiene items (soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste, sanitary pads, diapers, etc.).
7. An important complementary element is a system for collecting and disposing of waste, including proper segregation and labeling (e.g. medical vs. municipal waste). Improper waste management—especially in summer or after floods—can create biological hazards (spread of bacteria, vermin, mold, fungi, insects, and rodents).

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Prepare in advance at least a minimal stock of water disinfection supplies (e.g. tablets), especially if you operate in areas at risk of flooding or other natural disasters.**

Recommendation 8: Ensure rapid and professional waste disposal by establishing contact with companies responsible for waste collection and management within the municipality

All of these elements—water, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management—are an integral part of health-related response in a crisis, including mental health. Without them, any intervention will remain only partial.

### 5.2.2. PHASING OUT ACTIVITIES

In the area of health—especially psychological support—the way activities are concluded is very important. Abruptly stopping assistance without information and without a plan can create additional burden for people in crisis, leading to feelings of abandonment or loss of trust in aid institutions.

Therefore, already at the planning stage of an intervention, it is worth considering an exit strategy: what you will do when funding ends, the project comes to a close, and needs are still present.

**2** The WHO guide to psychological first aid can be found at:https://www.who.int/poland/pl/publications/9789241548205(accessed: December 2025).

Recommendation 1. Plan the closure of activities and communicate it clearly

As far as possible, plan your activities with a defined time horizon and communicate it to all stakeholders:

- people receiving support (e.g. participants in psychological consultations),
- partners (organizations, institutions, volunteers),
- your internal team.

In practice, this means that:

- from the outset, you communicate how long the support is planned (e.g. "the program runs until the end of the year," "we provide at least X months of support"),
- you inform stakeholders in advance about the planned reduction or closure of activities (e.g. 1–2 months before closing a service point),
- you identify who can take over care for individuals who will still need support—e.g. other organizations, clinics, or public institutions.

This is part of the responsibility of the aid sector: not only to provide assistance, but also to ensure that exiting from activities does not leave the most vulnerable people "in a void."

Recommendation 2. Conduct a thorough evaluation and document concrete lessons learned

After completing activities, take time for a careful review:

- what worked well in practice (tools, solutions, cooperation with partners),
- what did not work or worked less effectively than expected,
- where the gaps were—for example, lack of support for specific groups, weak communication, or insufficient procedures.

Do this in a structured and practical way:

- organize a debriefing meeting with your team,
- collect feedback from partners and, if possible, from beneficiaries themselves,
- prepare a short, practical list of recommended changes (what should be improved in plans, procedures, training, and structure).

These insights should not remain only in people's minds—they need to be documented within the organization (e.g. in crisis plans, procedures, checklists) so they can be actually used in the next crisis.

Recommendation 3. Take care of the team after intensive operations end

People who have worked in a crisis for many weeks or months are often overburdened, tired, and sometimes at risk of burnout. The phase of winding down activities is a moment to intentionally focus on their well-being:

- ask your team directly what they need (rest, supervision, psychological consultations, an internal debriefing meeting),
- provide—where possible—support for those working in mental health (e.g. supervision for psychologists, a support group for field staff),
- allow activities to be symbolically "closed" through a joint summary, expressions of appreciation, and acknowledgment of what was difficult and what went well.

Simple actions—clear communication about the end of activities, expressing gratitude, and creating space to share experiences—help the team transition from crisis mode to more stable functioning and better prepare for future challenges.

### 5.2.3. SPECIFIC CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE AREA OF HEALTH

Many members of aid teams have experience working in "normal" conditions—within a stable healthcare system, with predictable workloads and access to services. In a crisis, realities change rapidly: there is a lack of time and resources, systems become overloaded, and decisions must be made faster and under greater uncertainty. It is important to consciously switch from a standard mode of operation to a crisis mode—without lowering safety standards.

In crisis situations—especially in overcrowded accommodation settings, evacuations, or refugee crises—the risk of diseases increases due to:

- lack of adequate sanitation conditions,
- reduced access to water,
- crowding and lack of privacy,
- increased sexual activity in conditions of insecurity, violence, and dependency.

This includes risks related to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. In such contexts, vulnerable groups (e.g. young people, individuals without safe accommodation, survivors of violence, people migrating alone) are also more exposed to abuse and human trafficking—which requires close coordination with the safeguarding team.

An additional challenge is access to vaccinations—both for beneficiaries and for staff. In a crisis, several issues tend to emerge, including:

- difficulties in verifying previous vaccinations (e.g. medical documentation from other countries),
- requirements to translate medical records, which create costs and delays,
- lack of clear information on who can get vaccinated, where, and under what conditions,
- insufficient preparation of staff to take care of their own vaccinations (e.g. tetanus, hepatitis B, and other vaccines recommended for fieldwork).

***Challenge: Lack of specialized knowledge about crisis operations, low awareness of infectious diseases and sanitation-related risks,***

Recommendation 1. Provide additional training on infectious diseases and sanitation conditions

Ensure that at least part of your team has up-to-date knowledge of:

- the basic modes of transmission of infectious diseases in crisis settings (water, food, sanitation conditions, sexual contact),
- the specifics of refugee and migration contexts (including HIV, other STIs, tuberculosis, and droplet-transmitted diseases),
- practical ways to minimize risks in resource-limited settings (e.g. organization of sanitation facilities, handwashing, isolation of symptomatic individuals).

Training does not need to be highly advanced at the outset—the key is to equip the team with practical tools for decision-making in the field, rather than purely theoretical knowledge.

Recommendation 2. Equip the team with basic personal protective equipment (PPE)

In crisis work, basic personal protective equipment is not a "nice-to-have" but an obligation. Ensure that your team has access to:

- disposable gloves,
- masks (especially in enclosed spaces and when in contact with sick individuals),
- hand sanitizers,
- basic protective equipment when handling potentially infectious materials (e.g. during post-flood cleanup or contact with blood or bodily fluids).

It is also important to clearly define when and how each type of equipment should be used (simple instructions, checklists), so that its use does not depend solely on individual "common sense."

***Challenge: Difficulties in access to vaccinations and medical documentation***

Recommendation 3. Ensure vaccinations and documentation for your team

Before a crisis occurs, try to organize the vaccination status of the people who are likely to work in the field. You can:

- maintain vaccination records for staff and key volunteers,
- coordinate with a local clinic, infectious disease unit, or travel medicine center to establish vaccination procedures in case of crisis (e.g. tetanus, hepatitis B, and other recommended vaccines),
- ensure that people working in direct contact with beneficiaries know which vaccinations are recommended for them.

This is not only a matter of team safety, but also a way to reduce the risk of further spread of diseases within the community.

Recommendation 4. Include vaccinations in information and preventive activities

In crises such as floods, it is important to inform the local community about the availability and usefulness of preventive vaccinations, for example against tetanus and diphtheria for adults who may have been in contact with contaminated water, soil, or debris.

According to vaccination schedules, the last booster dose for tetanus/diphtheria is usually administered around the age of 19, and immunity lasts for approximately 10 years. In practice, many people over the age of 29 may already have waning protection—it is important to communicate this clearly and indicate where they can get vaccinated.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**In cooperation with infectious disease physicians, a protocol was developed to facilitate obtaining medical documentation from Ukraine. Such a solution (a template for requests, a contact scheme for healthcare facilities, and a basic list of required data) helps shorten the time needed to verify vaccinations and treatment, while also reducing translation costs and administrative burdens for beneficiaries.**

***Challenge: Language barriers and communication with medical personnel***

The lack of interpreters or staff who speak the languages used by beneficiaries directly reduces the quality of care. It can make medical history-taking more difficult and increase the risk of misunderstandings regarding diagnosis and recommendations.

Recommendation 5. Strengthen the language capacity of your team

If possible, include people in your team who speak the languages of your beneficiaries—preferably individuals from the same countries or communities. You can:

recruit volunteers with migration experience,

- create a list of people who can act as ad hoc interpreters (e.g. a few hours per week),
- prepare basic materials (leaflets, consent forms, instructions) in the most commonly used languages.

Even simple measures (a few phrases in the beneficiary's language, a bilingual leaflet, or the presence of one person who speaks their language) can significantly increase a sense of safety and trust.

***Challenge: Rapid burnout among aid staff***

Work in the field of health and mental health in crisis conditions is highly demanding: daily exposure to suffering, high responsibility, time pressure, and blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Without consciously addressing team well-being, the risk of rapid burnout is very high.

Recommendation 6. Support the well-being of the team working in the health sector

In practice, you can:

introduce task rotation (not everyone is constantly on the front line),

- ensure breaks and reasonable working-hour limits,
- provide access to psychological consultation or supervision (even in group form, periodically),
- clearly communicate that reporting overload is not a sign of weakness, but part of responsible crisis work.

By taking care of your team's well-being, you protect not only the people you work with, but also the quality of the support provided to beneficiaries[3].

**3** More about ways of supporting the team can be found in the section on safeguarding.

# Education and Childcare

## Checklist: Education and Childcare

**Are you ready to operate in a crisis?**

❑ I am familiar with and apply the provisions of the “Kamilka Act” and other regulations concerning the care of children aged 0–3

❑ I am familiar with the basic regulations regarding organized leisure activities for children and youth
❑ I apply GDPR (RODO) principles when handling data of children and parents

❑ My organization has a documented child safeguarding / protection policy
  ❑ The child safeguarding policy takes into account crisis-specific conditions (evacuation, temporary accommodation sites, large numbers of volunteers)
    ❑ Staff and volunteers have been familiarized with the child protection policy and have signed the required declarations

❑ We have defined staff roles during emergencies (who gathers children, who checks bathrooms, who contacts parents, etc.)

❑ Staff are trained in working with traumatized children and in basic crisis psychology

❑ Staff are trained to work in multicultural environments

❑ Staff are trained in responding to violence and discrimination (in classrooms and beyond)
    ❑ We cooperate with specialized organizations (e.g. FRR, PFM, intercultural dialogue organizations) in staff training

❑ We have personnel prepared to work with children from different groups (e.g. Roma children, refugee children)

❑ Our program includes elements on coping with stress and strong emotions
  ❑ We conduct sessions on responding to hate speech and bullying (in school and online)
    ❑ We teach children who they can turn to for help (trusted adults, institutions, helplines)
  ❑ We involve parents in activities that support children (meetings, workshops, informational materials)

❑ We treat our educational/care activities as a complement to the public system, not a permanent substitute
  ❑ Temporary facilities (e.g. day centers, childcare points, “temporary schools”) have a planned pathway for children to transition into the public system from the outset
  ❑ I know what documents are required to enroll children in nurseries, kindergartens, and schools
  ❑ I maintain contact with the municipality, schools, and educational authorities regarding the admission of children in crisis situations

❑ We invest in the competencies of people working with children (pedagogical courses, trainings, certifications)
  ❑ We ensure that acquired qualifications are useful within the public system as well (e.g. for recruitment to schools or institutions)
  ❑ We document staff professional experience (scope of duties, time spent working with children, references)

❑ We support families during relocation in transferring children to new schools or preschools
❑ We avoid creating separate, refugee-only classes in schools and instead support integration within a shared school environment

## 5.3. Education and Childcare

In working with children in education and care during a crisis, you are responsible not only for the quality of activities but, above all, for the safety of minors. The same legal and organizational standards apply as in everyday operations—crisis situations do not suspend the law, and the risk of harm to children often increases at such times.

In Poland, the minimum reference point includes the provisions of the so-called "Kamilka Act," regulations governing the care of children aged 0–3, personal data protection regulations (GDPR), and rules concerning organized leisure activities. In addition, many organizations adopt internal policies—child safeguarding standards—often more detailed than the statutory requirements[4]. In crisis situations, these should be applied in full and, where possible, supplemented with procedures specific to emergency contexts (e.g. evacuation, temporary shelters for children, working with large numbers of volunteers).

If your organization does not yet have documented child protection standards, it is advisable to develop them in advance, before a crisis occurs. The Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation provides example documents outlining standards for working with children[5]. These can serve as a template for creating your own policies, including those adapted to the realities of emergency situations[6].

### 5.3.1. PREPARING FOR POTENTIAL CRISES AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

Schools, kindergartens, nurseries, and other care facilities are places where children spend a large part of their day—even when a crisis is unfolding simultaneously (war, natural disaster, mass displacement, or a wave of hate directed at a specific group). It is in these environments that tensions, anxiety, conflicts, and the need for additional psychological support first become visible.

Organizations that support educational institutions often see primarily difficult situations—where the system has failed. However, it is important to take a broader perspective: crisis preparedness is not only about responding to emergencies, but also about strengthening schools and staff in advance, during stable periods. This way, when a crisis occurs, basic procedures will already be in place, adults will be prepared, and children will know where to seek help.

***Challenge: Lack of comprehensive preparedness of schools and care institutions to operate in crisis conditions***

Recommendation 1. Prepare shelter and evacuation plans

In cooperation with the school or kindergarten leadership and local services, identify which areas within the facility can serve as temporary shelters or safe zones (e.g. internal corridors, windowless rooms). Establish evacuation procedures to these locations, define how children will be supervised during an alarm, and assign roles among staff. Ensure that the entire team is familiar with the plan and that it is reviewed and rehearsed regularly.

Recommendation 2. Ensure staff are properly trained

Independently or in cooperation with partners (organizations, counseling centers, teacher training institutions), organize training on:

- the basics of working with traumatized children and crisis psychology,
- working in multicultural environments,
- responding to violence and discrimination.

Ensure that the team has access not only to one-off trainings but also to ongoing support (supervision, individual consultations, self-study materials).

**4** Legal basis: Act of 13 May 2016 on combating threats of sexual offences and the protection of minors

**5** See:https://standardy.fdds.pl/(accessed: December 2025)

**6** You can read more about how to build child protection procedures in Section 5.1.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Training for intercultural assistants and teachers**
**The Foundation for Social Diversity (FRS) and the Polish Migration Forum (PFM) conduct training and provide support for intercultural assistants. The Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH) trains teachers and trainers who then pass on the acquired knowledge to others (“knowledge multiplication”).**

**Preparing to work with children from different cultural groups**
**A good practice is training staff in cultural codes, for example when working with Roma children. Such training is provided by the Foundation Towards Dialogue.**

Recommendation 3. Teach children resilience and safe response strategies
Incorporate into your work with children elements related to:

- coping with stress and strong emotions,
- responding to hate speech and bullying (both in the classroom and online),
- seeking help from trusted adults and institutions.

Remember that intensified negative behavior toward a specific group (e.g. children with migration experience, Roma children) can itself constitute a form of crisis—it therefore requires a planned response, not only ad hoc reactions.

**IMPORTANT**

Support should be multi-directional. If you are building resilience in children, involve parents in the process. If you are supporting the fulfillment of compulsory education for children with refugee or migration backgrounds, work with parents as well—without their trust in the school and understanding of the value of education, your efforts will have limited impact.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Activities also for parents**
**In one facility, while remedial classes were organized for students, parallel educational meetings with a psychologist were held for parents. Adults were able to discuss their concerns, better understand their children’s behavior, and receive concrete guidance on how to support them at home.**

**Crisis education sessions**
**The TRATWA Association runs classes for students that include elements of crisis education.**

**Workshops for students**
**Caritas has conducted workshops for older students on coping with conflict and seeking help.**

**Remedial classes**
**In response to needs reported by children and parents, one organization expanded its initial remedial Polish and English classes to include Ukrainian language lessons. This helped children function in a bilingual environment and reduced their stress levels.**

### 5.3.2. STRENGTHENING THE PUBLIC SYSTEM IN EDUCATION

In crisis situations, civil society organizations often quickly create their own educational and care solutions (day care centers, temporary schools, substitute classes). This is sometimes necessary in the initial phase, but if such activities are not connected to the public system, a parallel, long-term system can emerge that is difficult to sustain and does not provide children with stability (e.g. lack of continuity in education, difficulties with school enrollment).

Recommendation 1. Plan the inclusion of children in the public system from the outset
If you set up temporary solutions (e.g. care centers, adaptation classes), treat them as a transitional stage. From the very beginning, plan how children will enter nurseries, kindergartens,

and public schools: what documents will need to be prepared, what language support will be required, and with whom admission procedures must be coordinated (municipality, school, educational authorities).

### Recommendation 2. Invest in the competencies of staff who can continue working

If you employ staff to work with children during a crisis, ensure that the qualifications they acquire are also useful within the public system (e.g. pedagogical courses, vocational training, documented experience working with children). This will increase the chances of these staff being employed in nurseries, kindergartens, and schools after the project ends.

### Recommendation 3. Support "soft" integration into the education system

Organize activities that help children and families become familiar with the realities of the local school: preparatory classes for starting first grade, short adaptation programs, and joint projects involving both refugee children and local children. This helps ensure that the transition into the public school system is not sudden or overwhelming.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Support in getting accustomed to the Polish school system**
**In one program, a "primer" of the Polish language was prepared for children aged 5–6, along with week-long adaptation sessions designed to help them become familiar with the Polish school environment.**

**Support in relocation**
**When the voivode announced the closure of collective accommodation centers, the Barka Foundation supported families during relocation, also helping transfer children to new schools and kindergartens closer to their new place of residence. As a result, children did not lose continuity in their education, and parents were not left to manage this process alone.**

**Integration activities for childre**
**Various organizations—following recommendations from UNHCR and UNICEF—implemented projects in which both Polish children and children with refugee experience participated together. Instead of creating separate "refugee classes," relationships and a sense of safety were built within a shared environment.**

Proper preparation of schools and care institutions for crises does not require complex plans, but rather a set of simple, consistently implemented actions: planning safe spaces, equipping staff with basic knowledge, using existing support tools, and building the resilience of children and parents. Temporary solutions provided by civil society organizations can then serve as a real bridge to the public system, rather than a permanent substitute for it. As a result, when another crisis occurs—regardless of its nature—the institution does not start from scratch but activates procedures already familiar to both adults and children, with the safety and well-being of minors remaining the primary point of reference.

# Volunteers

## Checklist: Volunteers

**Are you ready to operate in a crisis?**

❑ Defined levels of volunteer roles (e.g. coordinator/leader/volunteer)
- ❑ For each role, documented: tasks, scope of responsibility, decisions made independently / with a supervisor
- ❑ Roles assigned by the organization based on competencies, not solely on volunteer declarations
- ❑ Description of roles and responsibilities known to the entire team
- ❑ Role identification used in the field (e.g. armbands, vests)

❑ A single, up-to-date volunteer database exists (online, with data protection measures)
- ❑ The database includes: contact details, competencies, availability, trainings, collaboration history, contracts
- ❑ At least two data administrators are responsible for the database (maintenance, updates, security)
- ❑ A roster (schedule) of volunteer availability exists and is updated regularly

❑ Persons responsible for volunteer coordination (recruitment, training, roster) are designated
- ❑ These persons receive regular organizational training
- ❑ Defined priorities for volunteer tasks depending on the crisis phase (0–48 hours, up to 2 weeks, 1–3 months)
- ❑ If minors are involved, they are assigned only to clearly defined low-risk tasks

❑ Recruitment is based on an online form (e.g. KoBoToolbox, Google Forms), not spreadsheets or paper forms
- ❑ The form includes: availability, preferred roles, health status, e-certificates, basic identification data
- ❑ A short verification interview is conducted after application (motivation, limitations, expectations)
- ❑ A criminal record certificate and checks in the sex offenders registry are required
- ❑ Only adult volunteers are recruited

❑ Prepared templates for volunteer agreements (different variants depending on duration and scope of tasks)

❑ Prepared list of insurers and available personal accident insurance – NNW options (and possibly liability insurance – OC) for volunteers

❑ My organization has a basic e-learning package for volunteers: health and safety (BHP), GDPR (RODO), humanitarian standards, psychological first aid, PSEA/safeguarding, and, where applicable, radio communication
- ❑ A training system is planned at least once a year, also outside of crisis periods

❑ My organization maintains operational contact with the municipality (including social welfare centers) regarding the organization of volunteer activities

❑ I use previously established contacts (local, regional, national) instead of building everything from scratch

❑ My organization has a shift system with a clearly defined number of volunteers per shift (including role allocation)
- ❑ A daily briefing system is in place

❑ A HR duty officer role exists (remote support handling applications, updating the database, responding to team needs)

❑ Each operational site has a suggestion log / feedback box; inputs are discussed during the stabilization phase and incorporated into procedures

❑ Volunteers are visibly identified (e.g. badges, vests)

❑ Key personnel are equipped with communication devices (radios, walkie-talkies, phones)
  - ❑ A person responsible for equipment is designated (charging, maintenance, issuing and collecting after shifts)

❑ Clear procedures are in place for transmitting and receiving information from volunteers (who communicates with whom, via which channel, and at what times)

❑ I use autoresponders and short daily briefings (on-site or online)

❑ I have a documented procedure for handling an excess of volunteers (limits per shift, reserve list, redeployment to other tasks/organizations)

❑ I have a simple procedure for volunteer shortages (who makes decisions, how recruitment is intensified, how the scope of activities is adjusted)

❑ I have a prepared “volunteer document pack” in PDF: agreement, GDPR (RODO) information, insurance information, safety procedures
  - ❑ Documents are adapted for electronic signatures (various forms, not only qualified electronic signatures)
  - ❑ Volunteers are insured (personal accident insurance – NNW, and preferably liability insurance – OC) from the first day of work
  - ❑ The organization has liability insurance (OC) covering its humanitarian activities
    - ❑ Formal procedures, including SOPs (standard operating procedures) for contracts, GDPR (RODO), and insurance, are reviewed and updated at least once a year
  - ❑ A procedure exists for the safe termination of cooperation with a volunteer (reasons, conversation, handover of tasks, possible referral to support services)

❑ A well-being management procedure is defined: who monitors workload, how to report overload, when to suspend a volunteer from tasks

❑ Each volunteer has access to information about free psychological support (helplines, partner organizations)
  - ❑ In larger NGOs, a contract is in place with an on-call psychologist or an external provider supporting volunteers

❑ At the recruitment stage, I clearly communicate working conditions and psychological demands

## 5.4 Volunteers

Volunteers are one of the key resources in a crisis—thanks to them, you can quickly scale up your activities. At the same time, volunteering is where the most common problems arise: lack of a prepared database of people, chaos in roles and responsibilities, difficulties with last-minute recruitment, or conversely—too many willing volunteers that you cannot meaningfully deploy. Additional challenges include formal requirements (contracts, insurance, GDPR/data protection) and the need to take care of volunteers' well-being over time, as they often work under high pressure and in difficult conditions.

In this section, you will find recommendations on how to prepare for working with volunteers before a crisis (database, role structure, recruitment, training, support infrastructure, and funding), as well as how to organize volunteer work during operations—from rapid recruitment, coordination, and communication, to managing an excess or shortage of people. A separate block addresses formal requirements and the psychological support and safeguarding of those involved in providing assistance. Solutions are presented for both smaller organizations, which often operate with limited resources, and large NGOs that must manage hundreds of volunteers simultaneously.

### 5.4.1. PREPARING OPERATIONS

**Database, Role Structure, and Responsibilities**

A well-designed volunteer team structure and clearly defined roles are the foundation of effective and safe humanitarian operations. When everyone knows their responsibilities, work runs more smoothly, and support reaches those who need it most—without chaos or duplication of tasks.

In a crisis, you typically operate under difficult conditions and time pressure. That is why it is crucial that individuals with the appropriate qualifications are assigned to tasks that truly require their competencies— e.g. first aid, psychological support, or working with children. A clear structure and assigned tasks facilitate rapid response in emergencies and reduce the risk of errors due to lack of knowledge or experience.

A transparent division of roles also helps monitor activities, identify emerging problems, and draw lessons for the future once the operation ends. A strong organizational structure increases flexibility—when new needs arise, you can quickly reassign volunteers and better adapt activities to the changing situation.

***Challenge: Defining the structure of work, authority, and volunteer roles***

Recommendation 1. Define different volunteer roles

Define at least three levels within the volunteer structure, with clearly described roles and responsibilities—for example: coordinator, team leader, and volunteer.

For each role, it is useful to document:.
- main tasks,
- scope of responsibility,
- decisions that can be made independently versus those requiring approval from a supervisor.

This structure makes team management and information flow easier, and helps new volunteers quickly understand their place in the organization—they know who to contact with questions and what is expected of them from the start.

**IMPORTANT**

**Assigning roles is the responsibility of the NGO representative, not the volunteer. You may include a question in the recruitment form about willingness to take on a specific role, but your decision should not depend solely on that answer. Roles should be assigned based on the volunteer's skills and your prior experience working with them.**

**In small and medium-sized NGOs, these roles may be combined within one person. In larger organizations, they are usually separated, but in all cases it is important that roles and levels of responsibility are clearly defined and known to the entire team.**

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Introduce a system of armbands used to identify different volunteer groups according to their tasks. This makes it easier to identify roles in the field and improves team communication.**

Recommendation 2. Maintain a volunteer database

An up-to-date volunteer database should include:
- contact details,
- key competencies and experience,
- declared willingness to participate in crisis response,
- information about completed trainings,
- collaboration history (including agreements/contracts).

If you maintain an organizational contact database, review the list of volunteers and complete their profiles so that specific roles can be quickly assigned to specific individuals. If your organization does not have such a database, create one.

At least two people should be responsible for the database (data administrators) who ensure its organization, security, and regular updates.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Create a permanent volunteer database in advance, including individuals who have signed agreements and completed basic training. Based on this, maintain a "roster" (availability list) updated at least once a month (or at minimum once a year in smaller organizations).**

Recommendation 3. Assign people responsible for volunteer coordination

Appoint one person or a small team responsible for recruiting, training, and organizing the volunteer roster. These may be lead volunteers or a paid staff member. Ensure these individuals receive regular training from your organization, as they will be responsible for maintaining the overall volunteer operations.

Recommendation 4. Set priorities for volunteer activities

Volunteer tasks should stem from your organization's area of expertise—you define what is critical at each stage, and volunteers help scale those priorities.

Experience from organizations assisting flood-affected communities in 2024 showed that chaos is usually greatest in the first days of a crisis. It is essential to focus on the most urgent forms of support during this phase. Volunteer priorities will also depend on the stage of the crisis. A three-phase division works well:
- The first 48 hours – ensuring safety, food, water, and basic information for people,
- Up to 2 weeks – organizing an operations base/center, equipment, information point, food provision, childcare, and collecting data on needs,
- 1–3 months – organizational activities and recovery, more systematic support aligned with your organization's specialization.

**IMPORTANT**

**Minors generally do not participate in crisis operations. In exceptional cases, they may be involved in low-risk tasks such as:**
**· sorting and packing donations at a collection point,**
**· assisting in organizing a warehouse (e.g. labeling packages, arranging items on shelves),**
**· collecting information (e.g. lists of needs or contacts),**
**· helping manage social media.**

### Preparing Recruitment and Contract Templates

***Challenge: Preparing and implementing digital tools***

Recommendation 1. Structured volunteer recruitment and verification system

Prepare a simple but consistent system for volunteer registration and verification before a crisis occurs. Base recruitment on online forms rather than paper or email correspondence. Recommended tools include KoBoToolbox or Google Forms. Avoid Excel spreadsheets and manually maintained lists as primary database tools.

An online application form may include:
- availability (when and how often the volunteer can work),
- role preferences,
- declaration of physical and mental health,
- scans of e-certificates (e.g. first aid, PSEA, CHS, etc.).

After registration, verify the volunteer's readiness and suitability—ideally through a short interview to understand their motivations, limitations, and expectations. Require a certificate of no criminal record and a clearance from the register of sexual offenders as a condition for participation. Recruit only adults.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**The Sahana Foundation (sahanafoundation.org) develops an application for managing volunteers, needs, and tasks in crisis situations. In the event of a disaster or crisis, you can contact the foundation to adapt the system configuration to your organization's needs.[7]**

### Recommendation 2. Plan availability in time slots

Include predefined time slots in volunteer surveys to simplify scheduling and shift planning. Instead of open-ended responses, use closed options such as:
- 10 hours within 7 days
- 3 hours daily Monday–Friday
- morning availability (7:00–12:00)
- afternoon (12:00–18:00)
- evening (18:00–22:00)

Volunteers can select multiple options, allowing you to quickly organize shifts and match people to specific time needs.

### Recommendation 3. Prepare template forms for volunteers and assistance activities

Prepare in advance three types of templates:
- volunteer application form,
- self-referral (referral) form,
- needs assessment form (for individuals or institutions receiving assistance).

The forms should include in particular:
- questions about previous volunteering experience, including organizations and roles,
- completed courses and trainings relevant to the applied role,
- understanding of key principles of providing assistance,
- expectations regarding assigned tasks,
- for psychologically demanding roles: a clear description of working conditions and potential mental health risks, along with a question about the volunteer's psychological well-being to ensure informed participation.

The form should also collect basic identification data and information on allergies, illnesses, or other relevant health conditions.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**The Centre for Migration Research at the University of Warsaw and SGH Warsaw School of Economics recommend including questions (with closed answer options) about: foreign language proficiency, number of hours available per day/week, specific available dates (calendar-based), and selected tasks—both primary and supplementary—that the volunteer is willing to perform.**

**Also include a section where volunteers can indicate what they enjoy doing, their skills, and their profession. This helps better match them to tasks that utilize their competencies.**

7 At the time of preparation of this handbook, the tool is being implemented by the TRATWA Association.

*Challenge: Preparing contract templates and volunteer insurance*

Recommendation 4. Prepare templates for volunteer agreements and accident insurance (NNW)
Prepare in advance templates for volunteer agreements, accident insurance (NNW) documents, and a list of insurers offering crisis-specific packages. This ensures that in the event of a crisis, you do not waste time searching for offers or drafting agreements—you can immediately use ready-made templates and quickly provide insurance coverage for volunteers.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**In online recruitment forms and other digital documents, introduce clickable acknowledgments such as: "I have read and understood...". This reduces email exchanges and speeds up document processing—especially useful in crisis situations when volunteers may not have access to electronic signatures (qualified signature, trusted profile, etc.), but you still need confirmation that they have reviewed the required information.**

**Preparation of Training**

*Challenge: Preparing a training package*

Recommendation 1. Basic e-learning package
Prepare in advance an "e-learning package" for volunteers, including at least:
- occupational health and safety (BHP),
- GDPR (RODO),
- basic humanitarian standards,
- psychological first aid,
- PSEA/safeguarding,
- optionally: radio communication handling.

Such a package should be a standard requirement for all new volunteers, regardless of their role.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Make sure the e-learning materials are ready to be sent even before the volunteer arrives. Some trainings can be conducted online—this strengthens volunteers' competencies while not overburdening the core team, which does not need to repeatedly conduct onboarding sessions. E-learning can also serve as supplementary training for people already active in the field.**

Recommendation 2. Two-stage training system
Implementing a two-stage training system will better prepare volunteers for crisis work:
- Stage I – a 3-day introductory training, including field exercises, first aid sessions, safety training, and team integration activities.
- Stage II – an additional 3 days of working with an experienced team, already within the organization's real structures, focused on integrating into existing processes and standards of operation.

This model combines theory, practice, and team-building before the volunteer is placed in the middle of crisis operations.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Coordinators and team leaders should be trained directly by a representative of the organization. They can then train other volunteers ("train the trainers"), which helps scale operations during a crisis.**

Recommendation 3. Maintain training throughout the year
Design a volunteer training system that operates not only during a crisis but year-round. Aim to train volunteers at least once a year. A good solution is a three-day training covering: medical and psychological first aid, fire safety (PPOŻ), evacuation procedures, crowd management, and safeguarding and well-being. This ensures that when a crisis

occurs, you do not lose time on basic training—you can immediately activate a prepared team.

***Challenge: Lack of volunteers for transport and equipment handling (quads, off-road vehicles)***

Recommendation 4. Train volunteers in vehicle operation and movement in crisis conditions
If your NGO uses vehicles in relief operations, ensure volunteers receive proper training in operating these vehicles and moving safely in crisis conditions. This reduces accident risk, improves team safety, and enables more efficient field operations.

**Providing Infrastructure and Funding**

In a crisis, you need not only people to act, but also infrastructure to support volunteers and funds to maintain it. For smaller NGOs, a major challenge is the lack of resources for volunteer agreements, meals, accommodation, and insurance. At the same time, you must ensure a safe place for work, rest, and lodging—otherwise volunteers can quickly become overburdened and operations may become disorganized.

***Challenge: Lack of financial resources in small NGOs to maintain volunteer support infrastructure (meals, accommodation, insurance)***

Recommendation 1. Establish dialogue with the municipality regarding infrastructure and funding
Engage early in a working dialogue with the municipal administration team (including social welfare centers) to jointly plan volunteer operations and secure financial and logistical support for volunteers.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Consult with the Social Welfare Center (OPS) on which expenses can be covered from crisis funds—for example, accommodation, meals, and volunteer insurance. Prepare a simple checklist for the municipality outlining what must be ready to host volunteers within the first 72 hours of a crisis (including accommodation, meals, sanitation access, and basic insurance coverage).**

**IMPORTANT**

**Providing accommodation and meals should primarily be the responsibility of the municipality, not aid organizations. Your role as an NGO is mainly to assign and coordinate volunteers' tasks. Therefore, it is worthwhile to invest time in dialogue with local authorities and include them in planning the infrastructure for your team.**

### 5.4.2. IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIVITIES WITH VOLUNTEERS

In a natural disaster situation, such as a flood, what matters is a fast and well-organized response—so as to save lives, protect property, and limit the long-term effects of the disaster. Volunteers play a key role in this: they often act selflessly, under time pressure, and while potentially putting their own safety at risk. To make their involvement truly effective, however, proper coordination is essential.

Many organizations face significant challenges in mobilizing enough people to load and unload supplies and to distribute aid. Demand for volunteers often exceeds available resources—both internal and from existing partner networks. Therefore, it is crucial to be able to quickly recruit new volunteers, verify them, and integrate them into the existing operational structure.

**Recruitment of New Volunteers**

Recommendation 1. Use social media and local volunteer groups
In a crisis, leverage social media and existing volunteer networks, especially local ones. In your communications, clearly describe the needs, the location of activities, the expected duration of involvement, and the method of application.

**IMPORTANT**

**Messages published on social media are fast, direct, and often reach people living in a given area more effectively than official announcements.**

Recommendation 2. Designate a single contact point and collect information on resources
Clearly define where volunteers can report with their resources—specify a concrete address, phone number, or application form. Based on this, create a resource inventory (e.g. who is available, when, with what skills or equipment) so you can quickly assign tasks according to current needs.

***Challenge: Rapid volunteer verification vs. safety***

In a crisis situation, you must balance speed of action with ensuring the safety of both the people you are assisting and your own team.

Recommendation 3. Verify e-certificates and basic qualifications
Introduce volunteer verification based on a set of required e-certificates (online), which serve as a condition for assigning certain tasks—as described in the training section (5.4.1.3). These may include confirmations of training in basic humanitarian standards, first aid, PSEA/safeguarding, or other required competencies. This allows you to more quickly assess who can be assigned to more responsible roles.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**The Folkowisko Foundation uses a transparent task division system, applied both during festivals and in crisis operations. At the outset, volunteers are divided into main groups: technical team, medical team, social media and communications, drivers and transport, and warehouse/logistics. If individuals have specific skills ("superpowers"), the organization seeks to make the best use of them. There are also volunteers responsible for registration and translation, psychosocial support, and individuals in charge of safety and safeguarding.**

**This division is generally universal but is always adapted to the type of crisis. For example: at the border during a migration crisis, the main tasks include registration, translation, providing hot meals, and directing people to accommodation; during floods, priorities include logistics, transport, preparing clean-up kits, and securing homes.**

**Coordination of Activities**

A lack of coordination among volunteers can quickly turn assistance into a problem: it may cause chaos, waste of resources, blockage of access and evacuation routes, and even hinder the work of emergency services.

A key role in organizing these efforts is played by civil society organizations. Thanks to their experience, knowledge, and networks at the local, regional, and national levels, they can effectively manage volunteer work, directing it to where it is most needed. NGOs often become a bridge between people in need and public institutions, ensuring that assistance is coordinated and appropriate.

The following sections describe the main challenges faced by organizations coordinating volunteer work, along with solutions developed in response to these difficulties.

Recommendation 1. Adapt activities to the situation and phase of the crisis
In the first 24 hours, focus on assessing the situation and needs, and on identifying the resources you actually have: people, equipment, and financial means. Rely on verified sources of information and local partners who know the area well—this speeds up decision-making and reduces the risk of mistakes.

Between 24 and 48 hours, aim to stabilize operations: introduce a fixed shift schedule, establish consistent teams, refine supply logistics, and begin preparing initial reports for partners. During the 48–72 hour period, transition into continuous operations: plan activities for the following days, address staffing gaps, ensure volunteer rotation and rest, and analyze risks and opportunities that may arise in the coming days. NGOs can often act faster than public services due to simpler procedures—your role is to support them and fill gaps where they are unable to respond.

It is also beneficial to rely on contacts established during previous activities. This allows you to mobilize support more quickly without having to build everything from scratch in the first hours of a crisis.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Prepare a risk analysis from the perspective of volunteers: assess how realistically they are able to perform the assigned tasks well. Good intentions alone are not enough—formal qualifications are also required. If you are verifying qualifications (e.g. medical, technical), ensure they are properly documented and confirmed. This task should be assigned to a team leader.**

### Recommendation 2. Organize an operational base / coordination center

Operational points (bases), also for coordinating volunteer activities, can initially be organized:

- on the social side – in places where people already gather: schools, community centers, churches;
- on the technical side – in locations where shipping containers can be set up on a large, hardened surface with parking and access to water, sewage, and electricity, e.g. near large hotels or agritourism facilities.

The location should be as close as possible to the homes of affected people, so that they can reach the base even without a car.

### Recommendation 3. Introduce a shift system

Establish a clear shift-based work system for volunteers. Define how many people you need per shift (including role distribution, e.g. warehouse, transport, registration) and stick to these limits—this helps avoid overcrowding and prevents wasting the time of people who "have nothing to do."

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Shift leaders can be selected from among volunteers. For each shift, designate a person responsible for day-to-day decisions, information flow, and contact with the coordinator.**

### Recommendation 4. Safe team management system

Assign the role of volunteer coordinator to individuals who have been working with your organization for a longer time and are familiar with its procedures and the specifics of its operations—not to new volunteers. This reduces the risk of errors and helps maintain standards.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Pair new volunteers with experienced ones in pairs or small teams. This pairing reduces the risk of unethical behavior—such conduct can also occur in aid settings. A new volunteer should work "under the supervision" of someone who already knows the organization, the field environment, and the operating procedures.**

### Recommendation 5. Organize daily volunteer briefings

In a crisis, volunteer teams often change frequently, so a continuous flow of information is essential. In the first days, ensure briefings are held at least twice a day—morning and evening—and, when there is high turnover and intensive activity, also before each shift, even every 4 hours.

**IMPORTANT**

**Remember that when assigning tasks to volunteers, you are delegating work with varying levels of risk—from low-risk tasks (e.g. clean-up work, digging trenches) to high-risk ones such as working with children or providing psychosocial support. Your responsibility is to continuously verify whether a given person has the appropriate competencies and predispositions for a specific role. Volunteers and the organization may perceive risk differently, so do not rely solely on self-declarations—verify qualifications.**

**In the morning, hold a short 5–10 minute briefing: assign responsibilities, set daily priorities, review safety rules, and clarify communication channels. In the evening, dedicate 10–15 minutes to a debrief: what was accomplished, what issues arose, priorities for the next day, and a brief check on the team's well-being. For larger operations, a simple "live board" (a flipchart or wall with the plan, task list, and assigned people) is very helpful, along with a single duty phone number that anyone can call if needed. These simple tools significantly reduce chaos.**

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**In border crisis situations, it is advisable to operate in "survival mode": equip volunteers with tents and sleeping bags and provide access to halls, hangars, or other overnight accommodation facilities. This allows you to keep the team in the field without unnecessary organizational interruptions.**

### Recommendation 6. Remote availability of a "HR on-duty" for volunteer management

Introduce the role of a HR person on-duty—someone who coordinates human resources remotely, receives volunteer applications, and responds to the team's ongoing needs.

Remote availability of the HR on-duty enables real-time handling of incoming requests from across the country without requiring physical presence at a single location.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**The HR on-duty should be formally provided with the necessary working tools: a telephone, an eSIM card, a computer, a headset with a microphone, a notebook, access to a secure cloud drive, and access to documents such as the Personal Data Protection Policy.**

**IMPORTANT**

**Ensure that access to volunteer and beneficiary data is governed by clear procedures (who has access, to what data, and under what conditions). The HR on-duty handles sensitive information and must operate in accordance with data protection principles.**

### Recommendation 7. Introduce an improvement log

It is worth implementing a simple system for collecting feedback from activities—an improvement log.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Place an improvement log in each operational point so that the team can continuously record comments and suggestions for change.**

**The TRATWA Association uses a "box" or improvement log in which, during the stabilization phase (usually in the recovery stage after a crisis), feedback is collected regarding solutions that should be implemented**

**in the future or avoided in subsequent crisis responses.**

### Identification and Communication

Recommendation 1. Assign a referral ID to each volunteer

Assign each volunteer a unique referral ID—an identifier used in the system, attendance lists, reports, and internal communication. This helps you organize data, report activities, and at the same time better protect personal data.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Due to personal data protection, you can identify a volunteer using a code instead of, for example, a PESEL number—e.g. two letters from the first and last name + month and year of birth + gender marker.**

**Example: JK101982M (Jan Kowalski, born in October 1982, male).**

**Foundation Towards Dialogue maintains a coded volunteer database and prepares aggregated reports at the regional (voivodeship) level.**

Recommendation 2. Identify volunteers with color-coded armbands

Mark volunteers with armbands in different colors depending on their role (e.g. medical, technical, warehouse, drivers, registration). This facilitates identification in the field, task assignment, and enables services to contact the appropriate person.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Identify volunteers by role using color-coded armbands and equip them with communication tools—especially radios (walkie-talkies).**

*Challenge: Communication with volunteers across a large area*

In dispersed operations (multiple locations, a large municipality, flooded areas), maintaining an efficient flow of information is critical to avoid duplicating tasks and losing reports.

Recommendation 3. Procedures for coordinating information flow

Establish simple procedures for how you share and collect information from volunteers (who communicates with whom, through which channels, and at what times).

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Use autoresponders—for example, on email inboxes and duty phone numbers. This allows you to manage the flow of information in real time, redirect requests, and inform people when they can expect a response.**

**Also introduce brief daily summaries of ongoing activities—held in the evening, around a fire, at the base, or online. This is a moment to gather information from the field, identify issues, and clarify priorities for the next day.**

Recommendation 4. Radio network with assigned channels

Implement and distribute a radio (walkie-talkie) network with clearly assigned channel(s) for operational communication. This is especially important in areas where the cellular network is overloaded or unavailable.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Assign one person responsible for the radios: charging, maintenance, issuing and collecting them after each shift, as well as regularly checking that they are functioning properly. This ensures the equipment remains in constant readiness and gives you control over who is using which device.**

### Managing Surplus or Shortage of Volunteers

***Challenge: Communicating excess personnel***

Recommendation 1. Define procedures for volunteer surplus

Prepare in advance a clear procedure for situations where there are more volunteers willing to help than you actually need per shift. Keep the application form open, but introduce limits on the number of available slots per shift—especially in later stages of the crisis, when operations become more stable. People exceeding the limit are automatically placed on a reserve list or assigned to later shifts.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**In the application form, add a question: When can you commit to volunteering?—with predefined answers such as: "within 24 hours," "within 48 hours," "within 7 days," "in 21 days," etc. This helps you plan staffing over time, not just for immediate needs.**

**Describe separate procedures for handling a surplus of volunteers (e.g. reserve lists, redirecting to other tasks, other organizations, or locations). You can create a demand template—for example, specifying that 20 people are needed per shift. Volunteers sign up for specific shifts, and any surplus is automatically placed on a reserve list. This helps avoid overcrowding and frustration on site.**

**When there is an excess of volunteers, apply the criterion of availability duration: prioritize individuals who declare longer-term availability first, and schedule those with shorter availability for later stages.**

Recommendation 2. Establish shift-based operations

Set clear rules for shift-based work so that each shift has exactly as many volunteers as you actually need. Define limits on the number of people per shift (with a breakdown by roles), and direct additional applicants to other time slots or to a reserve list.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Select shift leaders from among volunteers. Each shift should have one responsible "on-the-ground" person who understands the working conditions, coordinates tasks, and serves as the first point of contact for newly arriving volunteers.**

Recommendation 3. Prepare a physical waiting area for ad hoc volunteers

When there is a large number of volunteers, set up a physical waiting area—a place where people who show up spontaneously can register, wait for task assignments, receive basic information, and potentially be scheduled for later shifts. Such a space reduces chaos in the field, allows for proper screening of applicants, and improves management of surplus volunteers.

Recommendation 4. Short online training while waiting to be deployed

Introduce short online training for individuals who have registered as volunteers and are waiting for assignment. After accepting their application, provide links to informational materials (videos, presentations, texts) that serve as the first stage of preparation and at the same time an initial screening step.

Include in the materials package, among others:

- videos about volunteering and the principles of volunteer work,
- information about the specifics of your organization's activities: characteristics of beneficiaries, main challenges, difficulties, and typical risks.

This helps applicants better understand what they are committing to, while also allowing you to see who actually engages in the preparation process—the materials act as a filter of commitment and motivation.

Recommendation 5. Procedures for responding to volunteer shortages

Prepare a simple procedure for situations where there is a lack of volunteers: who makes decisions, how you strengthen recruitment efforts, and how you adapt the organization of activities to the available resources.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Intensify communication through your organization's social media. Publish specific posts: how many volunteers you need, for which tasks, within what timeframe, and at which location.**

**Communicate with other similar organizations—inform them about staffing shortages, e.g. in a team of psychologists. Sometimes another organization can delegate someone for part-time volunteer work or help with recruitment.**

**When there is a shortage of people, effective management of existing resources becomes key. Introducing shift-based volunteer work (shorter but better distributed shifts with clear schedules) can be an effective remedy for volunteer shortages.**

### Formalities – Agreements, Insurance, GDPR (RODO) Regulations

In rapid, often remote volunteer recruitment during a crisis, the challenge is to handle formalities (agreements, insurance) while also ensuring personal data protection, taking into account the 30-day volunteer threshold. If volunteering lasts less than 30 days, the law allows simpler solutions (a smaller scope of data, no obligation for a written agreement), but this is only a minimum—your organization can and should implement a higher standard of security.

***Challenge: Completing formalities (agreements, NNW insurance, GDPR)***

Recommendation 1. Prepare a ready-made package of documents and information for electronic signature

Prepare in advance a package of documents in PDF format, ready for electronic signature by the volunteer.

The package should include, among others:

- a volunteer agreement,
- GDPR (RODO) clauses and information obligations,
- information about accident insurance (NNW) and possibly liability insurance (OC) and rules of operation in a crisis,
- regulations and basic safety procedures.

Before sending documents for signature, provide the volunteer with a short information pack or video material about the specifics of your organization's activities: who the beneficiaries are, what the main challenges, difficulties, and risks are. This enables informed decision-making and also acts as an initial motivation filter.

If volunteering lasts less than 30 days, the law allows an oral agreement and a narrower scope of data processing (e.g. first name, last name, phone number). In practice, however, in a crisis it is advisable to adopt a simple, unified standard: at minimum a short agreement (even in electronic form), clear GDPR (RODO) clauses, and insurance information from the first day of work. This protects both the volunteer and the organization.

**IMPORTANT**

**In a crisis, a volunteer should be insured from the very first day of work, not only after 30 days, even though such a threshold appears in the Act on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism (Journal of Laws 2003 No. 96, item 873, as amended). Treat this as a minimum legal standard, not the ultimate goal.**

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Regularly review and update procedures—all SOPs (standard operating procedures) should be checked at least once a year, including provisions related to GDPR (RODO), agreements, and insurance.**

**It is advisable to purchase accident insurance (NNW) and liability insurance (OC) not only for each volunteer but also for the organization. Liability insurance protects you in case of damages caused to third parties during aid activities.**

Recommendation 2. Fast online signatures and automation of volunteer management

Ensure solutions that enable quick online signing of documents and automated management of volunteer formalities (agreements, consents, GDPR, trainings).

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Introduce a "booking system"—a universal application for volunteer registration, training, and management. Such a system serves as a central database with the ability to update data and assign tasks to specific individuals.**

**Provide access to a single, centralized platform for volunteer management that includes: a database, activity history, certificates, consents, and information on completed training.**

Recommendation 3. Procedure for safely ending cooperation with a volunteer

Your organization's documentation should include a clear procedure for safely ending cooperation with a volunteer—especially when their physical or mental health deteriorates. Define who makes the decision, how the conversation with the volunteer is conducted, what support you can offer, and how their tasks are transferred to others. This helps protect both the volunteer and the people they assist.

### Volunteer Well-Being

The key to effective cooperation with volunteers in a crisis is a proactive approach: awareness of risks, a pre-established support system, and a real sense of responsibility for the people who engage in aid. Your organization should have a plan, a budget, and partners ready to provide psychological support, while leaders should have the skills to recognize early signs of overload and provide psychological first aid. At the same time, it is important to remember the limits of organizational responsibility and the volunteer's autonomy—you do not "fix" their life, but you create safe working conditions.

***Challenge: Burnout and volunteer well-being***

Recommendation 1. Limit shift length and ensure rest

To prevent burnout and fatigue, schedule volunteer shifts to last a maximum of 6 hours.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Encourage volunteers to rotate tasks and take mandatory breaks—do not leave this solely to their goodwill, but include breaks in the schedule.**

**Introduce mandatory days off during weekends in later phases of the crisis—especially for those who have been engaged from the beginning.**

**Document and actually implement procedures for managing the well-being of volunteers working in shift systems: who is responsible for monitoring workload, how to report overload, what forms of support are available, and when a volunteer should be temporarily withdrawn from duties (more on this can be found in section 5.1 on safeguarding).**

Recommendation 2. Provide volunteers with a well-being area and psychological support

Ensure a space (even a very simple one) where volunteers can genuinely rest, unwind, and recover between shifts.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**A well-being area may include, for example, comfortable seating (e.g.**

**bean bags), mats for lying down, blankets, stress-relief balls, as well as access to drinks and hot meals. In small organizations with limited resources, full implementation may be difficult, but even a simple corner with chairs, tea, and blankets is better than having no such space at all.**

**Ensure volunteers have continuous access to psychological support as a minimum standard—everyone should be provided with the phone number for free psychological assistance (helpline, intervention line, or partner organization).**

**In larger NGOs, consider establishing a contract with an on-call psychologist or an external provider offering psychological support to volunteers. The assessment of needs and selection of such a partner should take place in the preparation phase, not only after a crisis begins.**

Recommendation 3. Clearly communicate conditions and psychological burden from the outset

At the very first contact with a volunteer, provide information about the conditions under which activities will be carried out—where they will take place, in what environment, and what risks they involve. Also clearly state that involvement may be challenging for their emotional and psychophysical well-being.

Prepare a short pre-task checklist that volunteers complete themselves. It should include self-assessment statements such as:

- “I have been informed about the available psychological support resources,”
- “I feel physically and emotionally capable of performing the assigned tasks,”
- “If needed, I am willing to ask for help or withdraw from participation,”
- “I am not currently in a state of psychological crisis.”

Ensure that before applying, volunteers understand they will be working in challenging conditions (e.g. exposure to distress, noise, chaos) or that tasks may require physical effort. This is a simple way to prompt volunteers to pause and realistically assess their readiness.

**IMPORTANT**

**Leaders must be aware that working in a crisis can lead to psychological distress among volunteers. If you notice concerning signs, the first step is to recognize the issue and have a conversation with the volunteer. The next step is to propose concrete solutions: referring them to a psychologist within your organization or to a partner organization offering support. Also set clear boundaries of responsibility—you cannot take full responsibility for a volunteer’s mental health if they are not ready to accept help themselves.**

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**It is worthwhile to build an alliance with an organization specializing in mental health (if you do not have your own psychologist) and clearly inform volunteers about the availability of support in a non-stigmatizing way, e.g. by emphasizing that “it is normal for responders and volunteers to use psychological support.” It is also advisable to conduct a short, practical training in psychological first aid (max. 30 minutes) for leaders, coordinators, and volunteers.**

***Challenge: Working with volunteers experiencing psychological distress***

Recommendation 4. Assign low-risk and low-responsibility tasks

If a volunteer is experiencing psychological distress or difficulties that may affect their functioning, do not assign them to tasks that require high emotional resilience or involve significant responsibility. Ensure that their duties are associated with as low a level of stress and risk as possible.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Define and describe adjusted roles for individuals experiencing psychological distress or with disorders/difficulties (e.g. back-office logistics, document digitization, simple transport without contact with beneficiaries/affected persons). Avoid assigning them tasks that require direct contact with people affected by the crisis.**

# 6. Systemic Recommendations

In the previous chapters, we focused on what your organization can do in the preparedness phase and during crisis response.

In closing, we briefly present the areas that—according to us, the organizations involved in the "Lessons from Crisis" project—require system-wide changes: on the part of the government, voivodes, local authorities, emergency services, and public institutions.

These are not tasks that local NGOs can accomplish on their own. However, it is useful to know what to expect from authorities and what solutions to advocate for in discussions at the municipal, county, or regional level. This can help you better understand the system or prepare for advocacy efforts—within your region or at the national level.

A detailed list of recommendations can be found in the publication Lessons from Crisis: Systemic Recommendations, which complements this guide. We encourage you to review it. At the same time, we invite you to join the Crisis Management Group, coordinated by the Mapuj Pomoc Network.

In 2026–2028, a series of meetings and regional consultations are planned, during which the authors of this handbook will meet with local leaders and local government representatives. Together, we will work to translate the recommendations into practical actions.

## 6.1. Crisis Management System Architecture

At the national and local government levels, the following are needed:

- NGOs as a permanent component of the civil protection system, not an optional add-on—civil society organizations formally included in crisis management teams at national, regional (voivodeship), county (powiat), and municipal (gmina) levels, with clear rules for selection, division of roles, and responsibilities.
- Dedicated contact persons for cooperation with NGOs within public offices (voivode offices, marshal's offices, county offices, municipal/local government offices), operating also between crises—responsible for information flow, consultations, and coordination of activities.
- Planned funding for NGO activities in crises within national and local government budgets, based on a diversification principle—funds should not be allocated to a single entity; instead, existing networks and partners should be leveraged (including corporate foundations and international agencies).
- A transparent identification system for organizations and volunteers—nationwide and local databases of entities operating in crises, along with standardized identification recognizable to emergency services and the public (IDs, vests, and lists of verified entities published on official websites).

## 6.2. Information System, Data, and GDPR (RODO)

To ensure that assistance reaches where it is needed, public administration and organizations must work with shared data. The following is required:

- Standardized rules for data exchange between institutions and NGOs—clear legal bases for sharing information (e.g. with social welfare centers, schools, hospitals), ready-made agreement templates, and designated data coordinators on the side of public institutions.
- Systematic maintenance and development of maps and databases, including platforms such as mapujpomoc.pl, as centralized, regularly updated sources of information on: aid points, hotlines, warehouses, accommodation sites, potential partners, and on-the-ground needs.
- Simplified GDPR (RODO) procedures during crises—regulations that allow social welfare centers (OPS) and other institutions to share the minimum necessary data with aid organizations (e.g. to verify whether a given family has already received assistance), while maintaining privacy protection.
- Data protection (safeguarding) and information security standards in accommodation centers, schools, and aid points—uniform across all civil protection entities.

## 6.3. Education and Child Well-Being

Children in crisis situations (refugee, flood-related, health-related) should have their safety and continuity of education ensured. This requires changes within the education system:

- National standards for safety and well-being in schools and preschools—evacuation plans, sheltering procedures, communication protocols with parents adapted to different types of crises, guided by a clear "child first" principle.
- Crisis education in the curriculum—a short mandatory module for students and parents on how to respond to threats (war, flood, epidemic), how to act in emergency situations, and how to prepare an "emergency backpack."
- Strengthening schools in terms of staffing and competencies to work with children after trauma and in multicultural environments:
  – systemic support for hiring intercultural assistants,
  – teacher training in "crisis psychology,"
  – organizational solutions enabling flexible delivery of classes in extraordinary situations.

## 6.4. People in Assistance: Safety and Volunteering

Without volunteers and organizational staff, the system does not function. To ensure their work is safe and stable, the following is needed:

- Embedding crisis volunteering in regulations—a mechanism for "compensated engagement" (e.g. forms of leave for volunteering activities without loss of salary), systemic volunteer databases, mandatory affiliation with an NGO or public institution, and standardized training and identification.
- Minimum safeguarding standards for all civil protection entities:
  – procedures for protecting children and adults from violence, abuse, and neglect,
  – clear reporting channels for misconduct,
  – designated persons responsible for response,
  – accessible, free training materials adapted to the realities of small organizations.
- Systemic funding for the safety of responders—insurance, training, supervision, psychological support, and personal protective equipment should be included in crisis program budgets, rather than organized ad hoc.

## 6.5. Media and Communication

Communication determines whether assistance is targeted effectively and whether it does not harm people in crisis. The following are needed:

- Ethical standards for media coverage of crises—clear rules for protecting the privacy and image of affected persons, avoiding sensationalism, obtaining consent for the use of images, and providing special protection for children and other vulnerable groups.
- A coherent crisis communication system:
  – designated spokespersons within institutions and organizations,
  – a single local information platform (e.g. a municipal/city office website) where up-to-date NGO communications are also published,
  – clear rules for information flow upward and downward (municipality–county–voivodeship–national level).
- Ongoing public information campaigns "how to help wisely"—conducted by municipalities, counties, and regional authorities, especially in cooperation with schools and local media (covering, among others, the difference between financial aid and in-kind donations, proper packaging of donations, and the changing nature of needs).
- Transparent rules for organizing crisis hotlines—who is responsible for operating them, how they are funded, what services they provide (information, legal, psychological), and how they cooperate with local NGOs and institutions.

## 6.6. Warehouses and Logistics

Without organized logistics, even large volumes of aid will not reach the right places on time. Systemically, the following are necessary:

- Mapping potential warehouses before a crisis—at the level of municipalities, counties, and voivodeships, with pre-established rules for use (agreements, letters of intent) and a clear division of roles between local government, Volunteer Fire Service (OSP), NGOs, private property owners, and logistics operators.
- Standards for operating aid warehouses:
  – profiling warehouses (e.g. a central regional warehouse plus local warehouses),
  – agreed procedures for receiving, sorting, and distributing goods,
  – tools for rapid inventory tracking (even simple ones, but standardized).
- Organized logistics and transport rules—including the use of resources from the military, Territorial Defence Forces (WOT), emergency services, and private companies; clearly defining who can request support, under what conditions, and within what territorial scope.

## 6.7. Housing and Self-Sufficiency

In long-term crises, the key is transitioning from emergency accommodation to stable housing and self-sufficiency. System-level recommendations include:

- Comprehensive self-sufficiency programs for people affected by long-term crises (e.g. refugees):
  – limiting the length of stay in collective accommodation centers,
  – supporting entry into the rental market (cash-for-rent programs, transitional housing, supported co-renting),
  – linking housing assistance with job market support, language courses, career counseling, and psychological assistance.
- Development of Social Rental Agencies (SAN) as intermediaries between landlords and people in crisis—reducing barriers of trust, formalities, and risk for both sides, including the use of vacant properties.
- Long-term solutions for highly vulnerable groups who cannot function on the private housing market (e.g. older persons, persons with disabilities, single parents with multiple children, unaccompanied minors)—including supported housing, protected housing, and safety-net programs.
- A permanent database of accommodation and housing options (hostels, dormitories, centers, and other spaces), maintained at national and local levels, and linked to systems that track resources and needs.

## 6.8. What Does This Mean for Local NGOs?

These changes require decisions by the legislature, the government, voivodes, and local authorities. For your organization, however, they translate into concrete actions:

- you can check whether your municipality/county has designated persons responsible for cooperation with NGOs in crises and advocate for their appointment,
- you can join federations and territorial networks that engage in systemic dialogue with local authorities,
- you can use data and tools (e.g. mapujpomoc.pl), while also reporting what is missing in practice,
- you can participate in consultations on local documents (crisis management plans, social strategies, housing programs) and propose the solutions described above,
- you can join the Crisis Management, Disinformation, or Advocacy Groups coordinated by the Mapuj Pomoc Network and, together with experts from across Poland, contribute to system-wide change.

A system that includes civil society organizations from the outset reduces ad hoc, “phone-based” improvisation, speeds up response to needs, and increases the safety of your team’s work.

# 7. De-Escalation Phase: Additional Recommendations

The de-escalation phase of support begins when the most urgent intervention activities are behind you, but there are still many people who cannot cope without systemic assistance. This is the moment when projects end and crisis-funded programs expire, while at the same time the most difficult cases begin to surface: older persons, persons with disabilities, those with chronic illnesses, and people experiencing homelessness.

If there is no plan and responsible exit at this stage, it is easy to create a situation in which people are suddenly left without support, while local social welfare and healthcare systems are further burdened.

An additional challenge is the changing legal context, such as the extension of temporary protection in the EU, work on amendments to the special act, and new administrative solutions (e.g. electronic residence cards). On the one hand, these provide time to develop sustainable solutions; on the other, they raise concerns that access to collective accommodation or services may change, especially for people with specific needs.

You have already read about some ideas for actions in the de-escalation phase earlier. Below, we describe several additional actions that you can implement.

## 7.1. Support for Post-Crisis Self-Sufficiency

In this section, you will learn how to plan the exit phase in a way that does not "cut off" those most in need, while at the same time avoiding the entrenchment of a state of permanent temporariness. You will learn, among other things, how to design programs for people who cannot become self-sufficient, how to discuss financing for long-term care, how to work with people experiencing homelessness, how to maintain and develop cooperation networks, and how to plan an exit strategy from the very beginning of each intervention.

### *Challenge: Sustainable support for people who cannot become self-sufficient*

In the de-escalation phase, the greatest challenge is ensuring long-term, dignified care for individuals who—due to age, health condition, or life circumstances—will not be able to become self-sufficient. This applies in particular to:

- older persons,
- persons with disabilities,
- persons with chronic illnesses who are unable to function independently and require assistance in daily activities,
- groups at particular risk of social exclusion.

Formally, many of these individuals are entitled to healthcare benefits and care services; however, in practice the long-term care system (nursing care facilities – ZOL, social welfare homes – DPS, care homes, shelters, supported housing) is under strain in terms of staffing and financing. There is a shortage of places, personnel, and stable funding. This is further compounded by uncertainty related to legal changes—for example, concerns that new regulations may limit access to support.

#### Recommendation 1. Design separate programs for people who cannot become self-sufficient

Do not assume that all individuals receiving support will naturally transition to self-sufficiency over time. From the design stage of your activities, include a separate track for those who:

- are unable to work professionally,
- require continuous care or assistance,
- face significant difficulties in independent functioning (physically, cognitively, or psychologically).

1. Introduce early identification – e.g. a simple checklist to help identify individuals who require long-term support (age, disability, lack of social networks, chronic illness).
2. Provide individual case management – one designated person within your organization handles the case and assists in interactions with social welfare centre (OPS), nursing care facility (ZOL), Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), National Health Fund (NFZ), County Family Support Center (PCPR), and other institutions.
3. Plan exit pathways from short-term programs – e.g. housing or cash assistance programs—so that individuals with the greatest needs are not suddenly left without support when funding ends.
4. Seek hybrid solutions – e.g. combining financial support (additional funds for care) with community-based care (assistant, caregiver, neighborhood volunteering) to keep the person within their local environment for as long as possible.

**IMPORTANT**

**Treat these programs as complementary to the public system, not as a parallel "mini-system." Your role includes helping individuals transition to existing services—and, where this is not possible, clearly signaling systemic gaps.**

#### Recommendation 2. Develop support programs for people experiencing homelessness

In the de-escalation phase, some individuals—both Polish citizens and foreigners—may experience homelessness. This includes, among others, people who:

- have lost their temporary housing or place in collective accommodation,
- lack the resources to independently pay for rental housing,
- for various reasons do not qualify for standard housing programs.

In such situations, it is important that these individuals have equal access to shelters, hostels, supported housing, and homelessness exit programs, regardless of citizenship or residence status, provided that regulations allow it.

As an organization, you can, for example, collaborate with local institutions supporting people experiencing homelessness and encourage them to open up to refugees. You can also provide support with translation, cultural mediation, and understanding of regulations, or develop "bridge" programs: short-term financial or assistance-based support that helps a person maintain housing until they can enter a full homelessness exit program.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Some centers for people experiencing homelessness, run by civil society organizations, also accommodate refugees. Joint work on admission rules, translation support, and staff training helps avoid conflicts and ensures more equitable access to services.**

## 7.2. Collect Contacts and Good Practices

Recommendation 1. Build a database and support central databases

One of the biggest problems during the refugee crisis and the 2024 floods was the lack of an up-to-date database of contacts and resources—who offers what, where available spaces are located, which organizations are active in a given area, who has access to containers, transport, and technical infrastructure. In the de-escalation phase, you have the opportunity to improve this.

What you can do:

- In cooperation with other organizations, local authorities, and business partners, create a local database of resources and partners (containers, premises, transport, specialized services).
- Actively support central databases, such as mapujpomoc.pl or municipal databases, by regularly updating your data, scope of support, and availability.
- Ensure that the database includes not only non-governmental organizations, but also public institutions and private partners you collaborate with.

The goal is to ensure that the experiences gained during the crisis—contacts, trusted partners, and established pathways of cooperation—are not lost once media attention fades. A well-maintained database significantly reduces response time in the event of a future crisis.

Recommendation 2. Design every program with an exit/closure plan

Regardless of how long a crisis lasts and how dynamic it is, every intervention should have a clearly defined exit plan from the outset:

- when and under what conditions the program ends,
- what happens to individuals who still need support,
- which elements will be taken over by the public system, and which must be discontinued.

An exit plan is essential in order to:

- gradually transfer responsibility from crisis programs to the system of permanent services,
- strengthen the agency and independence of beneficiaries instead of reinforcing an endless state of "temporariness,"
- avoid abrupt, chaotic termination of assistance, which undermines trust and can lead to a secondary crisis.

What a good exit plan may include:

- clear eligibility and termination criteria for support—for example, when the right to participate in the program ends, what exceptions apply, and whether there is an option for extension,
- a de-escalation timeline—for example, a gradual reduction of financial support combined with more intensive work on self-sufficiency,
- clear communication rules—informing participants from the outset how long the support lasts, what the conditions are, and what will happen next.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**"Cash for rent"–type programs are often based on transparent rules: clearly defined eligibility criteria, a fixed duration known in advance, and information about possible pathways after the program ends. You can apply a similar approach to other activities—from housing support to in-kind assistance.**

Recommendation 3. Support an inter-ministerial, system-wide dialogue

A lasting solution to issues such as long-term care for refugees and migrants who cannot become self-sufficient cannot be achieved solely at the NGO level. It requires a broader dialogue involving:

- ministries (e.g. health; family and social policy; internal affairs; funds and regional policy),
- local governments at various levels,
- civil society organizations,
- healthcare and social welfare institutions,
- representatives of refugees themselves and vulnerable groups.

You cannot change the system on your own, but you can bring these issues into the public space—through your own channels, in conversations with partners, and in discussions with other organizations. The goal should be to develop solutions that:

- secure funding for long-term care (who can access it, from which sources, and under what conditions),
- do not exacerbate existing problems within the service system,
- minimize the risk of social tensions (e.g. a sense of competition for places in nursing care facilities – ZOL or social welfare homes – DPS).

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**The Ministry of the Interior and Administration developed a model of public consultations on migration policy and the special act on assistance for refugees from Ukraine. It enabled broad, substantive consultations with many partners involved in supporting refugees and migrants. You can advocate for a similar model to be applied when designing solutions related to long-term care and the de-escalation phase.**

# Summary

The purpose of this handbook is to support your organization in crisis response—not as a spontaneous effort, but in a conscious, safe, and as predictable manner as possible, both for the people you assist and for your team.

To ensure your actions are meaningful, you need to understand the architecture of the crisis management system, the competencies of public administration, the role of State and Volunteer Fire Services (PSP and OSP), as well as the place of civil society networks, UN agencies, international NGOs, and other less obvious partners. The handbook shows what you can realistically do at your level: how to build agreements, join crisis management teams, and make use of existing networks instead of trying to organize everything on your own.

This publication is not a checklist of obligations, but a tool to support decision-making. It aims to help your organization consciously choose its actions—what it undertakes, what it does not, and under what conditions. Individual chapters can serve as material for team work, a basis for discussions with local authorities, and inspiration for developing your own procedures or training. Crises will recur—what matters is whether your future responses will be improvised from scratch or built upon a system that you are already developing step by step.

# Glossary of Terms

## A

### Adult safeguarding (protection of adults)
A component of safeguarding focused on adults—especially those in vulnerable groups—and protecting them from violence, exploitation, neglect, and other forms of abuse by staff, volunteers, and partner organizations.

### Aid point
A location where affected persons can receive specific forms of support (distribution of material aid, information, psychological or legal assistance, etc.). It may operate independently or as part of a larger infrastructure (e.g. a warehouse, reception point, or accommodation site).

### Aid warehouse / crisis warehouse
A space organized for receiving, storing, and distributing donated or procured material aid. It can be a central or local warehouse, either permanent or activated only during a crisis (e.g. a sports hall, a volunteer fire station, or a private warehouse made available by a company).

### Assistance (direct aid)
Support activities that ensure access to basic goods and services—such as food, hygiene items, clothing, shelter, transport, and financial support. Increasingly, this includes cash assistance or vouchers instead of in-kind aid.

## B

### Beneficiaries / affected persons
Individuals directly impacted by a crisis who receive support (material, financial, legal, psychological, educational, housing, etc.). In this guide, they are more often referred to as “affected persons” or “people impacted by the crisis.”

## C

### Child safeguarding (protection of children)
An organization’s responsibility to ensure that all activities are safe for children and take their specific needs into account. It includes protection from intentional harm (violence, exploitation, neglect) as well as unintentional harm arising from programs, procedures, or the behavior of staff and volunteers.

### Civil protection entities
Institutions and organizations responsible for protecting the life, health, and property of the population in situations of threats (public administration, emergency services, and selected civil society organizations included in the system). In system-level recommendations, they are identified as recipients of strengthened information systems and funding.

### Civil society networks
Permanent structures of cooperation among multiple NGOs (e.g. regional federations, thematic networks, crisis and humanitarian networks) that represent organizations in relation to public institutions, facilitate information exchange, joint actions, and training. In crises, they can act as a “local umbrella” that helps integrate NGOs into planning and response.

### Core humanitarian standard
A set of principles intended to ensure that assistance is needs-oriented, accessible, properly coordinated, as well as safe and accountable. In this handbook, it is described as five principles of effective aid, including a focus on needs, cooperation among stakeholders, and the safety of both affected persons and response teams.

### Crisis hotline
A dedicated telephone number through which affected persons and their relatives can obtain information about available assistance, psychosocial support, and referrals to appropriate services. In system-level recommendations, it is treated as part of a broader crisis information system.

### Crisis housing / self-sufficiency programs
Housing solutions for individuals affected by a crisis—from short-term emergency and transit accommodation to long-term self-sufficiency programs (e.g. support in transitioning from shelters, collective centers, or transit points to more stable housing).

### Crisis management cycle
A model describing the stages of actions taken in crisis situations—from prevention and

preparedness, through response, to recovery. Its aim is to minimize the impacts of a crisis and restore the community to as normal functioning as possible in the shortest time.

### Crisis management system

A set of institutions, procedures, plans, and tools designed to prevent crises, prepare for them, respond to them, and support recovery. It includes public administration, emergency services, civil protection entities, and—at an increasing scale—civil society organizations and the private sector.

### Crisis management system architecture

The way roles, responsibilities, and information flows are structured among entities involved in preparedness, response, and recovery after a crisis—from central and local government administration, through emergency services, to civil society organizations and the private sector.

### Crisis Management Team (CMT)

A body (at the municipal, county, regional, or national level) that coordinates actions in crisis situations: it analyzes risks, prepares response plans, makes operational decisions, and cooperates with other entities, including civil society organizations.

### Crisis mode

The way an organization operates when a significant portion of its resources is devoted to responding to a crisis. It usually lasts from the onset of the crisis until the situation is brought under control, but in some organizations working with groups in very difficult conditions, it may become continuous.

### Crisis volunteering

The engagement of volunteers in response and support activities in emergency and extraordinary situations. It requires clear roles and responsibilities, defined recruitment and training procedures, formal safeguards (agreements, insurance, GDPR compliance), as well as attention to volunteers' well-being.

## D

### Database

A collection of information about entities and resources available during a crisis (organizations, aid locations, warehouses, accommodation sites, healthcare services, childcare facilities). A well-structured database helps direct assistance where it is most needed and reduces information chaos and duplication of efforts.

## M

### Mapuj Pomoc (portal)

An online portal that maps and monitors assistance points (e.g. refugee support locations, aid distribution sites). In the recommendations, it is referenced as an example of a tool that helps people find where and what type of assistance is available.

## N

### NGO / civil society organization

A non-governmental organization (foundation, association, or other non-profit entity) working for the common good. In this publication, it is presented both as a direct provider of assistance and as a partner to public institutions within the crisis management system.

## P

### Personal data and GDPR

Data identifying affected persons, volunteers, and staff. During crises, data protection regulations (GDPR) apply; however, overly strict application can become a barrier to providing rapid assistance. System-level recommendations call for simplified procedures during crises while maintaining data security.

### Phases of a crisis

The division of a crisis into successive stages (e.g. sudden emergence of a threat, stabilization, recovery). Different phases require different actions and tools, which has implications for when and how civil society organizations should engage.

### Prolonged/ongoing crisis

A situation in which "crisis mode" becomes a permanent state for an organization—for example, when working with groups living in persistently difficult conditions. It entails additional risks, such as team overload, burnout, and loss of continuity in operations.

Protection (during the provision of assistance)
Actions that ensure the protection of affected persons while assistance is being provided: access to reliable information, avoidance of stigma and humiliation, access to legal consultations and psychosocial support, and monitoring of risks of abuse (e.g. in accommodation settings).

## S

Safeguarding
An organization's responsibility for the safety and well-being of the people it supports—through preventing abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect that may arise from its activities, staff, volunteers, partners, and collaborators. It covers three main areas: child safeguarding, adult safeguarding, and team safety.

Staff safeguarding (team protection)
A component of safeguarding focused on the safety of an organization's staff and volunteers—covering working conditions, protection from violence and abuse, clear procedures for reporting violations, and support in situations of psychological crisis.

## T

Transit accommodation point
A short-term accommodation facility (usually 1–2 days) located near major transport hubs (railway stations, bus stations), providing basic meals, hygiene kits, and coordination with warehouses to enable rapid resupply. It serves as temporary accommodation for people in transit before they move on to more stable housing.

## U

United Nations agencies (UN agencies)
Institutions with an intergovernmental mandate, financed mainly from public funds provided by states and international organizations. They are not NGOs, but operate in similar areas: they carry out humanitarian activities, develop standards, and cooperate with a network of partners (including UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF).

## V

Vulnerable groups
Individuals who are particularly exposed to the impacts of a crisis and to abuse, including: children, older adults, persons with disabilities, single caregivers, large families, migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, dependent persons, individuals with low incomes, and those living in social isolation.

## W

Warehouse logistics
The planning and organization of receiving, storing, assembling, and distributing material aid (food, hygiene items, equipment, supplies). It includes a network of warehouses, prioritization rules, coordination with transport, and linkage with a database of needs.

Well-being
A state of relative physical, psychological, and social safety of individuals involved in a crisis (affected persons, volunteers, staff). In this publication, it is particularly emphasized in the context of safeguarding support teams and children (education, care, psychological support).

**Lessons from Crisis: A Practical Handbook for Local Governments, Community Leaders and Civil Society Organizations**

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