



PROTECTION OF CHILDREN THROUGH VOUCHER ASSISTANCE FOR EDUCATION

Latvian Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Voucher assistance for education artwork developed by Latvian Red Cross
Photo credit: Latvian Red Cross

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Background

According to the Council of the European Union in 2023, there were over 35,000 Ukrainian refugees who had been granted asylum in Latvia and 48,045 Ukrainian refugees included in the information system of the register of natural persons in Latvia (FPRIS) and 48,112 Ukrainian refugees have received Residence permit or D visas. While there is a noticeable trend of Ukrainian refugees choosing to return to their homes in Ukraine, many of them opt to remain in Latvia.

The Latvian Red Cross (LRC) provides support for Ukrainian refugees in 10 regional branches and operates two accommodation facilities for individuals fleeing Ukraine. Additionally, LRC is one of the partners for the Society Integration fund in Latvia and distributes The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) food and basic material support packages for refugees from the Ukrainian war in Latvia, providing approx. 4,231 food packages and 1,688 hygiene packages for Ukrainian families per month (April 2023). Almost half of them are distributed in the Joint Support Center for Ukrainian citizens in Riga operated by the Riga City Council. The LRC also implements livelihood activities for Ukrainian refugees, such as integration programs, language courses, job search assistance, and social support.

In accordance with the Law on the Support of Civilians of Ukraine, Latvia provides Ukrainian residents with 120 days of accommodation and 30 days of free meals for those who started receiving services on May 25, 2022. Certain groups of persons (persons with disabilities, orphans and children without parental care, older people, single parents, families with three and more children, unemployed individuals, homeless individuals) who, for objective reasons, may find it difficult to provide housing after the period of accommodation provided by the state, have the possibility to receive accommodation support also after a period of 60 or 120 days, but no longer than until December 31, 2023. Additionally, residents of Ukraine in Latvia can receive the following benefits: one-time benefit in a crisis – EUR 272 for an adult and EUR 190 for a child, additional monthly allowance of EUR 109 for the first person and EUR 76 for each subsequent person in the household of a Ukrainian citizen and other material support or social services according to the individual needs of the person.

Furthermore, the Latvian government allocates EUR 257 per Ukrainian child attending school. However, these funds are not directly transferred to families but rather to school accounts. Schools are responsible for providing books, additional help, etc., while other expenses are covered by the families themselves. The Ministry of Education does not oversee the financial transactions of school administrations. The LRC has prior experience in distributing vouchers. In March 2023, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), LRC organized the distribution of pharmacy gift cards worth EUR 20 each. A total of 200 cards were distributed to Ukrainian households with children.

Who was Supported and How

The LRC implemented a Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) programme to support Ukrainian refugee children in preparing for the school year. With many families facing high living costs, language barriers, and low motivation to enroll children in Latvian schools, the National Society identified a gap in assistance: although the government allocates funds for school-related expenses, these resources go directly to schools and not to families.

In order to support Ukrainian children from families with low-income status to prepare for school in September 2023, the LRC distributed gift cards/vouchers of EUR 50.

The programme targeted school-aged children and later expanded to include preschoolers and youth in vocational or technical education.

There was no limit to the number of children per household who can benefit from the gift cards, ensuring that all eligible children receive the necessary support for their educational needs.

The value of the gift cards was determined by estimating the prices of essential school supplies required for children starting school. The priority of the assistance was to purchase school supplies, but families could also purchase basic goods, if needed. The only limitation was against purchasing alcohol and tobacco.

The requirement for registration was the school enrollment form for each child who would be attending school. The school enrollment form is an official document issued by the school, serving as proof of the child's enrollment in the educational institution.

For the registration process, the focal points of the households were requested to bring the following documents: international Ukrainian passports, temporary protection certificates, and stamped school enrollment forms for each child. All registrations were done through LRC branches. The local branch representative verified the arrival date to Latvia by checking the temporary protection documents.

Successes

One thousand five hundred vouchers of EUR 50 each were delivered to families to support children's preparation for the school-year. This was achieved through 6 LRC branches: Dienvidlatgales, Kurzemes, Latgales, Rigas, Vidzemes, and Zemgales.

Monitoring by LRCS found:

- 91% of respondents were satisfied or fully satisfied with the amount of information shared before the voucher distributions;
- 99% of respondents reported feeling safe during distribution monitoring; and
- The assistance provided by the Red Cross, while intended for a specific purpose, also helped alleviate more pressing concerns related to basic necessities and financial stability. For instance, food and non-food items, winter clothing, and payment of utilities.

Overall, the programme demonstrated that cash and voucher assistance can play a meaningful role in supporting education, provided it is aligned with families' broader financial realities and implemented at the right moment in the school year.

Challenges and Difficulties

Through the implementation of the project, several challenges were encountered. Specifically:

- The vouchers were delivered to families between September and December. However, this was considered as too late for some families to provide meaningful support for school supplies because the school-year had already started. As a result, a significant number of families spent their vouchers on food rather than school supplies.
- Delays and inefficiencies in the distribution process can be examined in order to make the process more timely.
- The needs were higher than the capacity of the LRC to meet all requests.

Lessons Learned

1. Due to the limited number of gift cards available, registrations and **distributions can be done through a staggered manner** rather than simultaneously.
2. **Provide extra time for planning, registration, and distribution of vouchers.** For instance, if the school-year begins in September then distribute vouchers in August to allow more time for families to purchase school-year supplies.
3. To enhance economic impact, **increase the amount of EUR per voucher.**
4. **Pre-schools and vocational schools are also important partners** to provide voucher assistance because of the high numbers of children and families needing support.