

Refugee Support Impact Report

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Prepared by Dr Jonathan Newman CMRS

Deep Research Insights Ltd
info@deepresearch.co.uk
+44 7897 200 929

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Executive Summary

- The Dignity Centre is appreciated by volunteers, service users (*aka* 'members') and partner organisations. It is a well-organised project with a widely respected model of service delivery that has user-choice as a core function.
- The choice-model allows users to choose not just what they need but also what they want. In contrast to warehouse distribution of pre-packed food parcels, the Dignity Centre turns aid delivery into a normal shopping experience.
- The Dignity Centre offers users a safe space, with physical and emotional warmth, where members feel a sense of their own agency and can make their own choices, thus facilitating self-prioritisation and self-care. The provisions for children - a creche, milk, nappies - are also greatly appreciated by many members
- Volunteering gives people a sense of purpose and a way to do some good in the world within the integrity of a robust and professional model of service delivery. Volunteers report that their experience at the Dignity Centre has nurtured and heightened their sense of compassion and kindness. For some volunteers, their experiences at the Dignity Centre have been life changing and they are now more involved in this sort of work.
- For partner organisations, the Dignity Centre is good to work with and a fully functioning, tried and tested model that fits in well with other parts of the relief effort in Moldova. The Dignity Centre responds quickly to communications and has a robust reporting system. Some of these partners now would like the Dignity Centre to develop more partnerships, expand and perhaps be part of the solution to reach the most vulnerable people.
- The central location and open-plan design of the Dignity Centre supports good safeguarding practices: i) in contrast to large aid-distribution centres, the Dignity Centre's city-centre, shop-style setting does not signal loudly that the people there are vulnerable (e.g. to traffickers and scam artists) ; ii) inside the shop there is not much private space, which reduces opportunities for exploitation to take place

- A separate, supplementary report details questions, which arose during the research, that could be reflected on to further improve the organisation, however, these mostly address wider issues e.g. how does an organisation based on equal access address the specific needs of the most vulnerable?
- The views of the Dignity Centre collected during the research were overwhelmingly positive. Most people were given the space to be critical but said nothing that contradicted the above conclusions. Rather than complain about the ways the Dignity Centre was getting it wrong, they spoke about their desire for the Dignity Centre to be able to do more.
- In short, the central research finding is that the Dignity Centre has a strong and respected foundation for service delivery and volunteering experience from which to move forward and, potentially, widen their reach

Research Questions

- The purpose of the research is to evaluate the impact of the Refugee Support Europe operation at the Dignity Centre, in Chisinau, the capital city of Moldova.
- The research considers how volunteers and refugee members talk about the Dignity Centre.
- In addition to these voices, the perspectives of other organisation helping refugees in Chisinau are also examined.

Core Research Questions are:

1. What are the views of volunteers' at the Dignity Centre and how does their work affect them?
2. What are the views of members¹ at the Dignity Centre and how do their visits affect them?
3. What do other organisations, who work alongside or in partnership with the Dignity Centre, think about the Refugee Support Europe model and their on-the-ground synchronisation with the wider relief effort?
 - a. What do these organisations need from Refugee Support Europe in the future?

Supplementary Research Questions are:

1. What is the context of the Dignity Centre?
 - a. The background to refugees arriving in Moldova and their current status

- b. Other relief work going on in the city
2. How does the Dignity Centre support the members' resilience?

Methodology

In February 2023, I went to Chisinau for one week to carry out the research using a method called rapid ethnography.

The principal activities I undertook during this time are as follows:

- I stayed in the apartment shared by volunteers and spent much of my time with them
- I spent most of the days at the Dignity Centre every day, discovering how it operated and observing its daily operation
- I visited other relief operations
- I interviewed and had informal conversations with volunteers, members, volunteers and staff at other relief organisations

Methodological Considerations

Ethical Approach

The research had to be done within the rules and practices of the Dignity Centre:

- The needs of the members come before the needs of the research
- The priority is respect for the privacy and autonomy of the members, allowing them to shop at the Centre without disclosing information about their life or opinions to volunteers.

Therefore, it would have been inappropriate to ask members arriving to do their shopping to tell me about their life story or why they come to the Centre or what they think about the place and how it affects their lives.

Additionally, research around conflict and violence is an area of extra sensitivity whereby precaution must be taken to avoid encouraging respondents to explore traumatic issues. Research is not therapy.

In light of these factors, I only interviewed members who were also regular volunteers or staff within the wider relief effort.

They were in a better position to:

- Understand the purposes of the research
- Understand the boundaries of the interviews
- Provide meaningful consent to participate in the research

Moreover, from daily conversations within their communities, these people had an excellent ‘inside’ perspective on how other members felt about the Dignity Centre.

Once the fieldwork was complete, in response to news that the Dignity Centre might close for some weeks, members mobilised to leave reviews on Google about the centre. These views were unsolicited by the Dignity Centre and put into the public realm by the members. As these views do not conflict with the ethical approach, they are included within the report.

Snapshot Study

The research mainly reflects findings gathered in a seven-day time frame which could impact on the findings in the following ways:

1. Refugee Support Europe adjusts its operations according to circumstances and the needs of the day. Details of the system operating at the time of this research may subsequently change
2. Refugee Support Europe has a high turnover of volunteers – often on two-week placements – it is possible, that one month later volunteer views would differ (to some extent) from the ones recorded
3. The geo-political situation is unstable and events have the potential to change suddenly, which would impact on the Dignity Centre

The Context of the Dignity Centre in Chisinau

- Almost 110,000 Ukrainian refugees have settled in Moldova since the conflict in Ukraine began ([last UNHCR update 19/2/2023](#)).
 - About 60% of adults are women, 50% children and 20% elderly.²
 - There are strong gendered and age-related aspects to the conflict and refugee lives
 - In Chisinau, the UNHCR have had contact with 50,000 people coming from Ukraine
- Nevertheless, there is considerable movement in both directions over the Moldovan-Ukrainian border
 - Since 28th February 2022, there were almost 776,000 crossings from Ukraine to Moldova and also almost 406,000 crossings from Moldova to Ukraine
- These figures show large numbers of refugees who are settled in Moldova still make visits to Ukraine
 - The reasons for this include supporting family, unavoidable business or a de-escalation or shift in where the high intensity fighting areas are at any given time.

- Care provision is another aspect of the conflict and refugee lives – some people are too sick or have such high care needs that they cannot leave Ukraine so their families must find ways to look after them
 - Those who do leave need to find care provision in Moldova
 - People under care need products – the provision of adult diapers was mentioned by interviewees a few times during the research
- Interviews with Ukrainians and Moldovans highlighted increasing pressure on refugees to start working but a high proportion of them are mothers with young children and the Moldovan schools already cannot accommodate many of the Ukrainian children
- Moldova is a poor country but with visible middle-class and elite shopping and residential areas
 - The state pension was reported to be €100/month
 - The average wage was reported as €400/month
 - Meanwhile, the UNHCR reportedly give €100/month to each refugee
- Rents are rising in the city. Reasons given for this by Moldovans and Ukrainians was the rise in demand and price inflation from
 - The influx of Ukrainians
 - Between 1,000 - 2,000 relief agency workers (reportedly paying up to 70% more than, previously, standard local rates for their accommodation)
- The Ukrainian refugees in Moldova either stay in a private rented apartment, a room with a family or at one of 65 reception centres
 - Those living in the reception centres get three meals a day but must buy their own hygiene items and things like biscuits or snacks
- The situation for refugees in Moldova is unstable
 - Conflict frequently changes (there are different intensities of fighting in different areas at different times) causing waves of those running away and drifts of those returning
 - Moldovan politics is split between pro-Russian and Pro-European sentiments (the orthodox church has a Russian and Romanian split too³). Both Romanian and Russian are spoken in the country. The current pro-European government, who are seen by many as elected by votes of citizens living outside the country, believes that Russia is actively trying to destabilise them. There have been

pro-Russian protests and missiles possibly crossing Moldovan airspace.

- The Transnistria region of the country, on the border with south-west Ukraine, has a highly contested identity that is located 35 miles from Chisinau. There was a separatist war in 1990. Since 2022, the Council of Europe has declared the region as under military occupation by Russia⁴.
 - On February 21st 2023, Russia cancelled a 2012 decree that recognised Moldova's sovereignty in Transnistria
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) have worked with 61 partners in Moldova (29 of which were based in Chisinau)⁵.
- These partners include [Action against Hunger](#) (Accion contra La Faim or **ACF**)
 - So far, **ACF** have run 17 programmes with UNHCR in Moldova, most of these based around food and hygiene provision
 - ACF are also a direct funder of the Dignity Centre
- **Moldova for Peace** (Moldova para Pace) who are implementing two distribution programmes for i) food and ii) hygiene items
 - The food distribution programme is mandated by a larger UNHCR partner called [Plan International](#)
 - The Dignity Centre works closely with Moldova for Peace
 - Members come there after being officially referred from Moldova for Peace's allocation system based on its dopamoha.md website
 - Moldova for Peace are also an umbrella organisation for hosting psychological, legal and accommodation support services
 - Additionally, they provide educational and leisure workshops for adults and children

At the time of the research, Moldova for Peace said that there were only about 10 organisations in Chisinau providing help including the UNHCR and Red Cross

They mentioned that there are also small churches that very discretely help refugees

- Moldova for Peace operates another food distribution site in Chisinau called **Moldova Film** (Moldova Film), which offers an alternative food relief system to the Dignity Centre.
 - A waiting list operates for refugees expressing a preference for either the Dignity Centre or Moldova Film, the waiting list for the Dignity Centre is longer because it is a more popular option.

- Moldova Film operates from a rented 1950s film sound-stage on the outskirts of the city. It is essentially a warehouse.
- They offer – pre-packed bags with staple packed foods (e.g. buckwheat, pasta, sugar, 250ml vegetable oil, a bag and can of beans, can of chicken pate), a bag of vegetables (like potatoes and beetroot), an relief organisation's emergency

hygiene pack (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo), UNHCR blankets, a second-hand clothes section for those who want to use it

- A minority of recipients leave behind the vegetable bag either because they do not need it or because it is too heavy to carry back
- Moldova Film get their food from wholesalers, direct from manufacturer, or at discount prices
 - They get between 10-50% reductions compared to supermarket costs

For further details and photos of Moldova for Peace and Moldova Film see [Appendix A](#).

The Dignity Centre

Model

- The Dignity Centre is not a fully-autonomous operation, going into a sensitive area and doing its own thing, regardless of the wider needs of the refugee community. On the contrary, the Dignity Centre is a carefully selected partner organisation in a large, co-ordinated relief effort.
- When members are at the Dignity Centre they find themselves in a clean and warm building quite near the centre of the city. Staff welcome members at the door, guiding them to the nearby reception area and offering them teas, coffees, biscuits and sweets. After their details are checked at reception (to ensure they are eligible to shop there) members are given points to 'spend' on the items they want. There is also a small creche area with toys where the children can play.
- The location and design of the Dignity Centre also support good safeguarding practice. Just before the fieldwork finished, a new volunteer,

who had spent the last five years working as a Safeguarding Policy Officer for different charities, joined the team. They noted that:

- The creche is in the main area with lots of people, so avoids 1-2-1 contact out of sight of others where exploitation can take place
- As a shop near the centre of the city, the Dignity Centre has a much lower profile than large aid distribution centres, which signal vulnerability to those who want to exploit people



Operations

The referral process

- One 'ticket' is issued to a person's phone via the Dopomoha website. It tells people that they can go to the Dignity Centre or Moldova Film
 - Users have an *option* to request their preference of either the Dignity Centre or Moldova Film
 - This choice is respected but can lead to a longer wait time
- The waiting time varies. People are given a set number of days to come to the Dignity Centre with that ticket (e.g. within the next five days)

- Because Dopomoha have more people than capacity sometimes it can take up to six days for the ticket invitation to come through
- During the research there were 450 requests (either for individuals or family groups) waiting who still had not been issued with a ticket
- One person or one family can be accommodated on one ticket
 - Therefore, tickets can accommodate more than one person
 - The average is about 2.4 – 2.9 people per ticket
 - Sometimes up to 10 people might be on one ticket
- The system gives people the flexibility to go at a time which works best for them but also means that the numbers arriving at the Dignity Centre on any given day fluctuate
 - Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday tend to be the busiest days
 - During the research approximately 90 tickets were processed in an average day
 - The busiest day processed 135 tickets
- Once someone arrives at the Dignity Centre with a ticket, they must show the passports and the relevant refugee documents of each person in their group that they want to collect provisions for
 - Volunteers check the information against the Dopomoha system
 - It should not be possible to claim provisions from Dignity Centre and Moldova Film in the same period
 - Passports are checked to ensure that there have not been any border crossings to the Ukraine in the past three days, which prevents people running a business picking up provisions and selling them in Ukraine
- The Dignity Centre run a points system whereby each ticket is worth 140 points for an adult and 70 points for a child
 - One point is more or less equivalent to one Lei (the Moldovan currency)
 - 20 points is, therefore, almost £1.00 (GBP)
 - Different goods on the shelves at the Dignity Centre are priced by points e.g. a packet of biscuits could be 20 points

'The points system is our system. If we had more money we could give them 200 points instead of 140' - Dignity Centre coordinator

- The Dignity Centre use their own point of sale of sale app, called 'loyverse' (which includes their Cyprus-based operation)
 - The app acts as a till, with items shown as thumbnails which volunteers click to add to the basket
- Calculators are available for members and volunteers to help work out the expenditure as people shop so that they remain within budget
- Once a ticket has been used, people cannot re-apply for another ticket at dopomoha.md until six days have passed
- The reception area of the Dignity Centre has information translated into Ukrainian, Russian and English



Impacts

Members' selection of items reveals how the choice model works.

The Dignity Centre superimposes the experience of shopping over what is really an aid distribution process.

Shopping is a journey where consumers are incited to desire, action and participation. Therefore, as an experience of exercising *their own* choice, the goods they decide to reject are as important as the ones they choose.

1. A taste of normality

In daily shopping behaviours around the world, consumers opt for a blend of goods - from basic necessities to a couple of treats. The treat is important, it is how people invest in small measures of self-care. **The top five chosen items demonstrate how the choice model reflects a return to normal living amid crisis (and in the context of standard NGO crisis response packages).**

The most popular items chosen by members reflect goods that are important for shoppers in Ukraine. These are (in order of preference) : Milk; Tuna; Oil; Buckwheat (*kasha*) and Coffee. Honey and pickles, which are relatively new additions to the shelves, are quickly gaining popularity.



Members say that the milk is often for their children, a can of tuna is something they usually bought back home for celebrations (like birthdays) and that they enjoy a coffee in the day. Unlike the oil and the buckwheat, these items are not 'basic staples' included in the food packages from Moldova Film. Instead, the milk is an overlooked necessity for their children, the coffee (like honey and pickles) is a 'nice to have' item and the tuna is a small but meaningful 'treat'.

The slow sellers provide a more mixed picture. These include: Maize/Polenta; Water; Dog Food (expensive); and Canned Pate ('doesn't taste good')

- They might not be that sought after by consumers in Ukraine
- Unless there is a problem with the water supply, bottled water is an (unnecessary) luxury more than a treat
- The can of pate is not tasty, at least for some shoppers
- It is unclear how many members have pets, where they would normally get the pet food or how they prioritise the pet food among the family shopping budget

Nevertheless, even though these items are chosen more slowly should not lead to conclusions that they are not worth stocking. Slower selling items provide a background picture of business as usual and help the shopper become aware of their agency and the importance in their own lives of the other goods that they did decide to get. **The very presence of these less chosen items on the shelves further exemplifies the shop as a normal shop rather than an aid distribution centre.**

2. Catering for a range of needs

The choice-based model also respects the different circumstances of members.

This point is highlighted by reception centre residents. In this type of accommodation, residents do not cook their own meals, so have no use for pasta, buckwheat or oil. But they might want a packet of biscuits, their own jar of coffee or diapers for their children.

3. Offering emotional support

The Dignity Centre is more than a shop, it is a place to feel supported and where children have a space to play too.

The Dignity Centre is a clean and warm environment where members are welcomed with empathy and warmth. Interaction is professional – members are neither

befriended or provided with the support to resolve many of their problems. The operation procedure is tight but delivered with kindness and understanding, which members really do appreciate (see feedback from members)

4. Where children are welcome

There is a creche area for children to play which is great for members with children. Some sit down and drink a coffee while their children play. I was told that when some people left Ukraine they could not bring lots of their children's toys. The creche is also featured with positive reviews in members feedback on the centre.



Volunteer Experience

Why do people volunteer and what does it do for them?

The volunteers at the time of the research came from a range of ages (20s-60s), from the UK and United States. Some had worked for Refugee Support Europe before while others it was their first Refugee Support Europe placement. All had

done volunteering before, mostly with human relief organisations but also with animal charities. Many originally found Refugee Support Europe through the internet and others, who already worked in the relief sector, volunteered after hearing positive reviews about Refugee Support Europe from colleagues. Placements varied between 2 – 8 weeks.



Many volunteers share accommodation (€10/night) a 10 minute walk from the Dignity Centre. The apartment is rented by the Dignity Centre for this purpose. While I was there I encountered a friendly and welcoming community of people. Despite the high turnover of volunteers (caused by short placements) there was a great atmosphere to get to know people and share time, food and drink with them. After a day's work many volunteers regularly go out together for a meal, a drink or to the theatre. During my visit, the translators (who work with the volunteers) were also invited to some of these gatherings.

Volunteers are motivated by practical compassion for others, a connection with the humanity in other people and finding a better purpose for themselves. Yet, by volunteering, these attributes grow stronger. Moreover, the responses of the members reinforces that they are doing the right thing.

The following volunteer profiles highlight themes of: Doing good in the world; Giving (rather than receiving); Avoiding judgement of others; Learning the importance of care when growing up; Providing quality professional care that truly benefits the service users; A meaningful vocation; Good standards of service provision; Seeing the positive impact of the service on users; Compassion

(All names have been anonymised)

Emma

After graduating from university, Emma worked at an animal sanctuary in Moldova (found on <https://www.workaway.info>) and enjoyed going travelling in the region. Once the war started, Emma wanted to help. Brief family-related visits to Ukraine followed but she questioned her own motivations for being there and realised that, without speaking the language, there was little that she could do to help. Emma reflected on the situation and concluded that, in volunteering, her contribution was more important than her own experience. With this renewed focus, she volunteered at the Dignity Centre.

'It is hard to know how to be ethical in the world we live in. For years, I tried ethical consumption – buying the 'right' products and avoiding 'bad' products - it doesn't work for me. Therefore, I try to do good in my life, and here I can actually see that I am doing good...

*People think of refugees like drops in the ocean – they see them as all the same thing – but here I see the individuality every time they make a choice about what they want in the shop, or playing with their kids or joking among themselves...**And I keep seeing the same faces coming back. That shows me that this place has an impact on people's lives and that is a nice feeling... it's not dramatic, like rescuing people stuck down a well, but out of a desperate situation they are improving their lives'***

Anna

Anna is reaching retirement age but has no intention of slowing down. After a career as a nurse and social worker, Anna currently lives of a working farm some of the year and the rest is spent working with organisations like the Dignity Centre. A lover of freedom and adventure and an experienced traveller, she first volunteered after the tsunami hit Sri Lanka in 2004. When the refugee crisis began in Europe, Anna volunteered with small organisation in Leros but soon left because it was run by someone 'acting like a saviour – it was all about them'. She found the Dignity Centre

through <https://www.indigovolunteers.org> and has been back many times, usually for spells of two-months.

'My father always told me "It is a sin to walk past anyone in need and walk past them"... care is compassion, here we all feel for people.. and that is what motivates me into doing something...

What face does trauma have? It is easy to think that they do not need anything. People arrive here look well dressed, but those are the clothes they brought with them - they might not even have a home left. ...I find it heartbreaking to see people on their own coming into the centre, especially the young ones or the elderly.

...I want to spend the rest of my life usefully, not watching the TV until I die. I want to die happy that I've done my bit for other people"

Marlin

Marlin recently turned 30 and, together with his brother, has just bought a house in the north-west of the United States. He holds a senior consultancy job in finance management but he likes to spend time helping people who are in need of support. Marlin grew up in a large family, although they had little money his parents were very caring. Volunteering at the Dignity Centre gave Marlin the time to reflect on how best to live by those principles of care and his Christian values. During his stay, he visited other refugee projects in Chisinau, such as <https://ccr.md/contact-us/> . Like many of the other volunteers, Marlin was very generous helping out the Dignity Centre and other organisations while he was there. The trip to Moldova was his first time out of the United States and his experience encouraged him to get involved more regularly in voluntary projects near his new home.

'Care is doing something for others rather than for yourself. It is not easy to do that most of the time. I certainly do not live up to my ideals. But coming here it is easier.

Here, I spend my time away from the Dignity Centre visiting other projects helping refugees to see what else I can do to help... I am amazed by people who sign up for years of this type of work with no regards for what families or friends think ...

I think that I am open hearted and open minded and the other volunteers seem the same.... The underlying kindness doesn't change. I'm amazed about that especially in this work. It makes me want to be better and kinder'

Jalpa

Jalpa, who is 31 years old, has worked in this sector and region for over two years where they were responsible for long-term distribution planning, procurement, coordination and donations at [Collective Aid](#) in Bosnia and Serbia. Before getting involved in the aid sector, they studied at college and then worked as bartender and burger server in the United States. Jalpa describes themselves as a community activist and they enjoy deep conversations going beneath the surface of issues, for instance, discussing the whys and hows and the best and worst practices of NGOs. Jalpa's passion for this work and their standards of service provision provide useful insight into why they chose to work at the Dignity Centre.

'I do it because it feels like a calling ... I've always been interested in social justice – I've witnessed discrimination from a young age. I get angry at oppression... This work is fulfilling... When I wake up I want to do it, I never had that feeling in any other job I've done'

*'Service users can exist autonomously...the more choice and opportunities you can give users the better...when someone is in a vulnerable position they know what they need better than we do...we [the aid sector]can do food or certain types of clothes, but we don't know their most immediate needs...for example, perhaps it is not food, it's a cell phone to contact their meeting person in the EU or a power bank to get the phone to work. In this situation, they are staying safe by being in communication. **Choice delivers a flexible, adaptable and user specific response'***

' That professional distance, a bit like a doctor with a patient, is important. When expectations and promises are given to one person [service user] more than others, that builds tension in their community and it's hard to rebuild trust with everyone else after that person moves on ... neutrality and distance are good practice because it keeps community politics out of the service provision'

'Refugee Support gets it right. It delivers. If there is a transaction [between volunteers and the refugees who come to the Dignity Centre], it is one of mutual respect'

Peter

Until he started working with Refugee Support Europe in Greece a few years ago, he had not paid too much attention to the news stories of refugees. He was taking a six-month break, travelling slowly through Europe, when he arrived in Leros and began to help. Yet, his experiences there changed his life completely. Peter now spends much of his retirement helping Refugee Support Europe and in

any year sees thousands of people come through the doors of the Dignity Centre. He says that the work provides a useful contrast to life because it helps puts things in perspective.

'In the last year I have seen 300-350 members walk in every week I am here and 99% of them leave smiling..... Over the months I must have seen thousands of people walk in 'If you make one person happier in a day, you've done your job...They come through the door with slightly confused or bemused faces but always look happy when they leave...'

'Refugees were not close to my heart before I volunteered ...we are privileged in the West or Global North...it is unfair ...A lot of people who have things don't care about those who don't have any. But there are also a lot of people who do care...All the people here care...'

'I can't really change the political situation but can do a bit to help...If I didn't think I was making a difference I wouldn't be here... If you have a bit of human compassion in you, then you will find a cause'

Willow

After a long career running a catering firm, Willow's life, unexpectedly, took a new direction. She was living around Seattle and regularly looking after her grandson and never thought that she would spend the next few years miles from home helping coordinate Refugee Support Europe projects in Cyprus and Moldova. It all started with a photo.

'When Aleppo fell it broke my heart, especially that image of a boy with blood on him, covered in ashes, looking at his hands. He was the same age as my grandson, about three and a half. I can't explain it. It did something to me. I had to do something, to be a part of it. So I began volunteering.....and now I've got a feeling, a passion for what I am meant to do'

Willow has reflected much on what makes a good volunteer and it resonates with the views of other volunteers.

Over the years working with Refugee Support Europe, I have found that the best approach for volunteering is expect nothing. I mean nothing! It is not what you want to get out of it, instead it is just give, give, give!

The voices of volunteers at the Dignity Centre highlight how action, motivated from a place of empathy, compassion and giving, strengthens their personal sense of purpose. Judging by the reaction of the members, they also make an important difference in the lives of people fleeing from a war.

Members' Experiences

'We have been cut off from the men, our homes and from many public services'

A central theme of the refugee experience in Moldova is *separation*.

The gendered aspect to the conflict, whereby most of the men must stay in Ukraine either to fight or to support the military operation, means that families have been split. The refugees in Moldova are mostly women and children. They have been separated from their fathers, husbands, brothers, cousins and friends, from their livelihoods and from their land and their community.

The children have been separated from their friends when everyone dispersed and separated from their education (until places are found in the Moldovan system). The refugees are also separated from the things that are easily taken for granted, for instance, knowing how to receive long-term care or visiting the local doctor who has their medical records.

The brutality and precariousness of conflict changes priorities. Old pleasures, lifestyles and aspirations rapidly become focused on immediate needs

'When the war started so many things became irrelevant. For example, I wanted this type of car, this type of flat, this type of job, certain clothes and types of phone and so on. You are planning life about how you will live with your wife and parents...Once the war began only survival is the important stuff – everything narrows to being safe and having medicine... I used to notice the beauty around me – in people and places - that stopped immediately, I could not even notice what was pretty anymore...I see what is of significant importance right now today and don't spend time on anything else.'

The power cuts in Ukraine also make staying in contact with relatives left behind more difficult

'I could not reach them all day and when I got through they said my mother had a fall but had not seen the doctor yet. And now I cannot get through again'

Leaving is difficult and for some older people it is too great a step to make. Moving from Ukraine also requires a level of technological competence and practical intelligence.

'The mothers and children you see coming into the Dignity Centre, a lot of them were taken to the border by the men who then returned to fight'

'Older generations are more set in their ways...it's not four walls its your home – your home it part of your family....Most of the elderly who have left were dragged out by their children'

'They need to be tech savvy to find who can take them out of Ukraine and how to access finances and support services. I do not know how people cope if they don't know someone who has these skills and resources'

Forced relocation and the adjustment to new living conditions is not easy. Most people told me about their yearning to go back home. One person told me that they coped with this feeling of being apart by planning how to rebuild and redecorate their house and put new flowers in their garden. In such circumstances, the Dignity Centre offers more than material support: in the face of separation, it provides connection, empathy and unity.

*'We **had** to leave, we did not have a choice. We have to adapt to a new country and place. We must adapt to our loss here...And must find jobs here...For older women it is much harder still ...Somehow we hope that it will end soon and we can go back and lead our lives... When people come here they can see that they are not alone in their situation'*

'Happiness is not money, happiness is a feeling of satisfaction with the atmosphere around you...my wife is a therapist helping refugees but she is also a refugee...sometimes she says, "I'm stuck. How long can I be in this situation?" The thinking must change to what is more important to you – not what is the situation I find myself in, instead, how can I be in this situation. That is why I volunteer at the Dignity Centre as a translator – it helps me to help other people'

Views on the Dignity Centre were always positive (many are included below) but the choice-based model and warm welcome are at the heart of service impact

*"....100% it [the Dignity Centre] makes a difference. People prefer this place because they can make a choice and there is the most essential stuff....**they choose not only what they need but also what they want**'*

'We come to the Dignity Centre for more than food we want the communication. I feel the warm attitude from the people here.... it is a meeting point for little conversations between Ukrainians...The attitude and feeling is a primary experience for users – it is not secondary to the food...A warm attitude is important because it is a family attitude'



The Ukrainian refugees I spoke were also looking at needs beyond their own communities too. They had a sense of responsibility towards others in need

'We can see the poverty in Moldova...We need to help the Moldovans as well as the Ukrainians. All Ukrainians who fled the war got help...In my hometown, I never saw as much homelessness as in Moldova...maybe this is something in me that has changed with the war'

Members' views of the Dignity Centre already in the public realm

Towards the end of February 2023, the Dignity Centre starting giving members notice that the centre would close temporarily. The reason behind this decision lay in the funding conditions from Action against Hunger (ACF) who required the Dignity Centre to provide a service to Moldovan people too. The Dignity Centre would concentrate on serving the Moldovans for a while and then re-open again for the Ukrainian refugees. Many of the members, however, thought it might be shutting permanently. Without any discussion with the Dignity Centre, the community mobilised and used [Google reviews on the Dignity Centre](#) to express their opinions. Ninety-two views were left and all were positive⁶

These views were unsolicited by the Dignity Centre and they also supported the data already collected during the research from translators and volunteers – members really do appreciate the centre. Almost all refer to the choice-model and many also mention the well-organised, warm atmosphere, and the creche. The quotes below (taken from the Google reviews and Google generated translations) are representative of what the members said.

'We are very grateful to this organization for their work, such necessary positiveness, kindness. This is one of the few places where we always go with a good mood and know that we will get the necessary goods. You are incredible!'

'The best help centre, very pleasant, polite and always smiling staff, you can choose everything you need. The child is always happy to come to you, as you also thought for the children.'

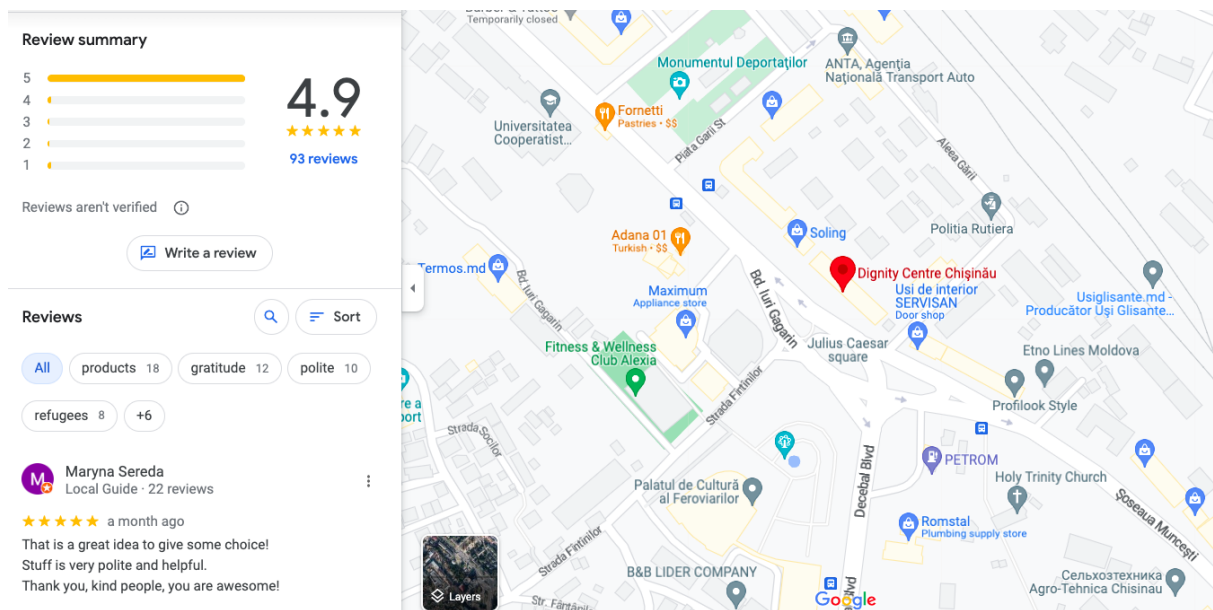
'You simply the best, greatest attitude, your smiles, point system. Thanks a lot for your help, your team will be always in our hearts!!!'

'One of the best distribution points for humanitarian aid for Ukrainians'

'The centre is very necessary for us as refugees from Ukraine. Its advantage is that you can choose exactly what the family needs in the first place. Thank you for your kindness to us 🥰🥰🌸🌸💕🥰'

'I want to express my gratitude to the workers and organizers of this humanitarian centre for their work and responsiveness in this difficult time. You are helping us a lot.'

'Thank you very much for your help for us, a very convenient system is organized, the choice is by points, you can choose exactly what you need at the moment. Very friendly volunteers, with smiles on their faces, with warmth, in my presence helped an elderly woman open the door and go down the stairs, a corner with toys for the children, and sweets in a vase, you can drink tea, it would seem like small things, but life is made up of these small things! And this is exactly what is remembered! 💙💛 Thank you again!!!!'



Views from Other Organisations

Moldova for Peace

In a series of interviews, Moldova For Peace explained the context of working with the Dignity Centre:

- When the war started there were lots of people and organisations wanting to help but there was no centralised support or coordination – which is why they developed the dopomoha website
- At first, local people and organisations really helped but as time moves on the support and resources are fading away. Currently, they are finding it hard to find donors for the Moldova Film warehouses.

Staff at Moldova for Peace shared a similar sense of common humanity found in the Dignity Centre volunteers. One Moldovan worker described how, during the past year, their perspective had changed:

'At the beginning I was motivated by the thought that they [the people from Ukraine] would do the same for us and, then as time passed, I could see that they are our brothers and sisters, we are so alike...we have a common language, similar mentality and way of life...it becomes like a family thing'

For Moldova for Peace the strengths of the Dignity Centre are:

- Offer people choice
- Provide items not accessible in warehouse packages e.g. milk, honey and pet food
- Integrate smoothly with existing services while offering something different and useful
- A good central location which is warm and welcoming with friendly staff and a creche
- *'They don't just offer choice, people feel less vulnerable when they visit the Dignity Centre'*

What Moldova for Peace would like from the Dignity Centre

- To take more people
- To take more vulnerable people who would find Moldova Film too difficult to get to or carry the packages or who need that extra support and care

Action against Hunger (AcF)

Action against Hunger is an international NGO that has been operating in Moldova since 2022 who see their main purpose as providing expertise and funding. Wherever they operate in the world, they have a policy of providing 30% of their support to local populations (which also helps reduce political tensions caused by refugees getting support while locals live in poverty). Since autumn 2022, once the situation in Moldova has stabilised, Action against Hunger partnered with the Dignity Centre becoming an important funder.

One of their key operating principles in *localisation*. that is, they prefer to work with local rather than international partners

- The Dignity Centre is not a local organisation (unlike Moldova for Peace) but Action against Hunger worked with them because they were on the ground, had a good, established model and were highly competent.
- When asked why they decided to work with the Dignity Centre despite it being outside their usual remit, Action against Hunger said, 'We make partnerships working on strengths'
 - The choice-based model works extremely well

- The Dignity Centre is a successful operation that did not have to start from scratch – they came in with knowledge and experience
- Unlike other partners, who need capacity building support, the Dignity Centre demonstrated independence and self-sufficiency
- The Dignity Centre reporting systems were well-defined and did not need additional reporting templates
- During monitoring visits to the Dignity Centre they observed that, ‘Everything was going like clockwork’
- The Dignity Centre provides a rapid response to Action against Hunger requests for information and other communications
 - They normally reply within five minutes
- *‘It is a pleasure to work with them’*

For the full-time experienced coordinators of Action against Hunger in Moldova, the two-week Refugee Support Europe volunteer placement also provides another advantage over long-term work contracts. They explained one of the personal challenges doing relief work:

- *‘You come with huge enthusiasm, but your own resilience is consumed in time. I always see emails about this ongoing crisis but I can do little about much of it. ...so the question as a humanitarian worker is am I doing enough’*
 - Little by little, workers burn out and cannot give so much
- They then pointed out that the Dignity Centre has a fresh, warm atmosphere because the volunteers keep their enthusiasm for the two-weeks. The level of motivation and commitment at the Dignity Centre remains high at all times.
- Moreover, they thought that working at the Dignity Centre was an excellent way to introduce people to humanitarian work

Action against Hunger needs further support around working with more vulnerable people

- Action against Hunger explained that vulnerable people are less vocal and, therefore, more hidden
 - Middle-class and well-educated voices (especially those who speak English) get heard by international NGOs more than others, but what about the others?
- They identified four vulnerable groups
 - Mothers with babies (which is a core target Action against Hunger operations worldwide)
 - Refugees outside main urban areas, like Chisinau

- The refugees who are Roma - and, without the funds to rent private accommodation, often in refugee centres
 - Local people living in extreme poverty
- Moldova does not have not large refugee camps, instead, the refugees are spread out through Chisinau and the rest of the country. Therefore, it is hard to identify and reach out to them.
 - They are looking for ways to expand outside the capital but looking for models which would work best with a greater dispersal of services
- Support provision usually leads to some people benefitting from an overlap of services while others fall through the gaps – so they want to find a way to identify those who are not getting sufficient provision (but who might not be so vocal about it)

When asked what they needed from the Dignity Centre in future, Action against Hunger explained that they wanted better cooperation with other organisations, including more funding partnerships, as part of a possible expansion of operations.

Appendix A

Moldova for Peace

- Moldova for Peace was founded on 24th February 2022 as a civil initiative that was initially unregistered: it was an immediate response by concerned Moldovans to the war
- Currently works with a few main organisations: including [Choose Love](#), [Platforma. Laolalta](#) (a Covid response organisation that became a co-founder of Moldova for Peace) and [Plan International](#)
- If refugees have data roaming switched on when they arrive to Moldova from Ukraine (at least on the Orange network), they automatically get a text that includes a link to Moldova for Peace's dopomoha.md website
 - The website asks them for information including: name, phone, number of men, women and children in their family and the pets they have with them
 - This information forms the basis of the referral process
- Moldova for Peace monitor the resources and services of other organisation in order to send people to the right places

Moldova Film

- Allocate food bags according to the following ratios
 - Each family up to 3 people = 1 bag of provisions, 1 vegetable bag, 1 hygiene pack, 1 baby food
 - Each family up to 5 people = 2 bags of provisions, 2 vegetable bags, 2 hygiene pack, 2 baby foods
- Average attendance is 300 tickets per week or 1,500 – 2,000 people/month
- Estimate they spend €21,000/week on the products bag
 - *[Note: I am unsure if these figures are correct. There might be a confusion between days, weeks and months]*
- It costs them about €25/person, so 2,000 packets a month costs €50,000
- They have a volunteer team of about 30 – 40 people
 - 12-15 volunteers come in every day
 - 50% are Moldovan, 50% are Ukrainian
 - The team meet to discuss what items they will buy and put into the bags
- They buy direct from Bunnello, Vis and Vitta Baby, always look out for offers and try to make deals with wholesalers and retailers to buy at a discount
 - Estimate they achieve 1-50% reduction in prices this way
 - For Example, kasha (buckwheat) costs them 20 lei but its 30 in the supermarket
 - But they can buy in bulk – the bottles of oil are filled by them from a large container
- Clothes are donated via [Diaconia](#) who collect from the drop-off container collection points in the city
 - They are in an area of the warehouse separated by cardboard boxes. There is a tent where people can try the clothes on.
- They opened three warehouses in March 2022 but only have finances guaranteed for the next two months so the warehouse in Bâlti (*pronounced Belt-tz*) will have to close in one month
 - Funders take the situation to the brink before providing further support
 - Currently, the costs of premises rental, staff costs and carrier bags are covered