

Rapid Reflection on Cash Coordination for the Ukraine Response

Romania briefing paper

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The opinions expressed are those of the Key Aid Consulting team, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the DEC. Responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report rests solely with the authors.

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Acronyms

| | |
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| CAG | Global Cash Advisory Group |
| CWG | Cash Working Group |
| CVA | Cash and Voucher Assistance |
| IFRC | International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies |
| ISCG | Inter-Sector Coordination Group |
| KI | Key Informant |
| LNA | Local and National actors |
| MEB | Minimum Expenditure Basked |
| MPCA | Multi-purpose Cash Assistance |
| RCM | Refugee Coordination Model |
| RRP | Refugee Response Plan |
| SP | Social Protection |
| StC | Save the Children |
| ToR | Terms of References |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |

Since February 2022, Ukraine and the neighbouring countries are facing a humanitarian crisis of unparalleled scale, ranking among the fastest-growing crises observed in the past decade and the largest in Europe since the end of World War II. In the first two months of conflict, more than 30 percent of Ukraine's population had been coercively displaced and by October 2023, 6,240,400 Ukrainian were refugees.¹

In light of needs, vulnerabilities and capacities, cash transfers have been prioritized by the humanitarian community in Romania as the preferred and default modality wherever feasible to respond to the needs of people affected by the crisis. This led to the fastest and largest cash programming scale-up in history, shedding further light on the importance of quality cash coordination.

Using the Global Cash Advisory Group (CAG) key performance indicators for cash coordination as a guide, this paper reflects on the extent to which cash coordination was (1) timely and effective and (2) inclusive, transparent, and accountable. It draws from 11 semi-structured key informants' interviews (KII), desk review of available literature and a round table organised on November 2nd 2023 with key cash stakeholders.

I. Context

Over 3.7 million border crossings from Ukraine into Romania have been registered since the 24th February 2022, from which 83,765² refugees currently remain in country.³ In an attempt to respond to the basic needs of these individuals, 43,129 refugees⁴ were supported with multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) in 2022.⁵ In 2023, in locations where it is contextually and operationally feasible, cash transfers have been used at scale to respond to the Ukraine crisis. The 2023 Regional Refugee Response Plan⁶ appeals for \$1.7 billion across 243 partners, among which the third largest share is (\$153,603,900) is dedicated to Romania to support 350,000 Ukrainian refugees living there. Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) funding requirements represent 27 percent of the regional requirement (\$450,792,321) and 5 percent of the funding requirement in Romania (\$21,797,200) with 57 percent of CVA intended to be MPCA in Romania relative to 89 percent regionally. While not being exhaustive the below describe a couple of unique context identifier that influenced the effectiveness and accountability of cash coordination:

¹ UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Situation," 2023. Accessed October 12th, 2023

² Last updated 12th December 2023

³ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10782>

⁴ As of 30th December 2022

⁵ UNHCR, "UNHCR Romania: Ukraine Refugee Situation Update, Annual Overview, 30 December 2022," December 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/romania/unhcr-romania-ukraine-refugee-situation-update-annual-overview-30-december-2022>.

⁶ UNHCR, "Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Plan", 2023.

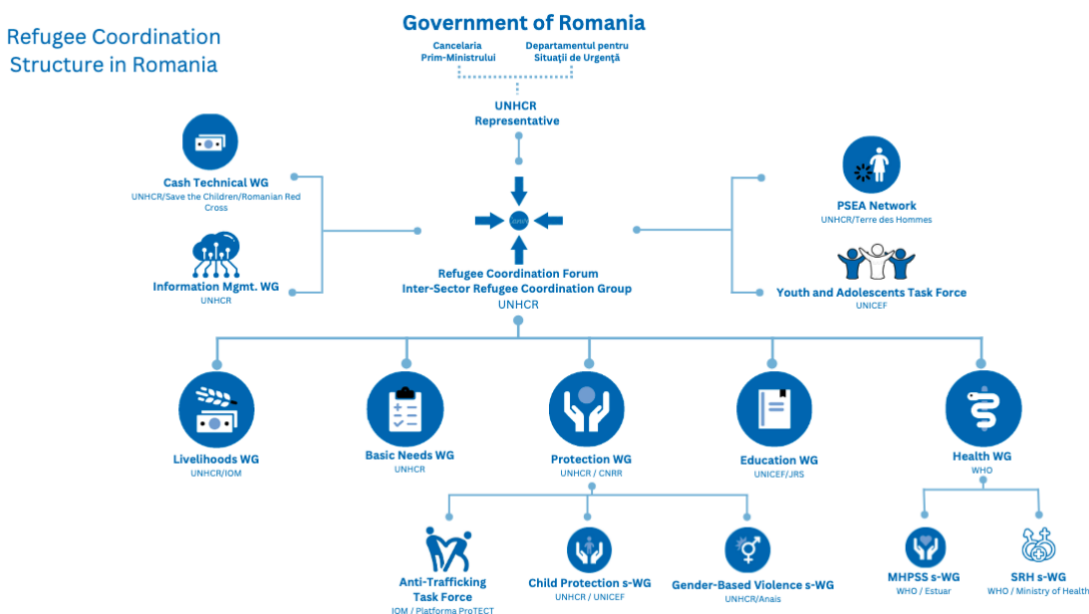
Speed and scale of the crisis

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, represented a significant intensification of the eight-year-long conflict between the two nations. This event swiftly led to the emergence of one of the most substantial and rapidly expanding humanitarian crises witnessed in the past decade. Within the initial two months of the conflict, over 30 percent of Ukraine's population was forced to flee their homes. By December 2022, the number of recorded border crossings from Ukraine had reached nearly 18.2 million, constituting the largest displacement of a population in Europe since World War II.⁷

Lack of pre-existing humanitarian footprint: a blank page for cash coordination

The Cash Working Group (CWG) was created from the ground up in April 2022. Aligned with the nature of the crisis, the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM) and the 2022 IASC model, the CWG is co-led by UNHCR, the Romanian Red Cross and Save the Children (StC). CWG co-chairs are members of the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG).

Figure 1 - Refugee Coordination Structure in Romania - last updated September 2023⁸



CWG functions, per the Terms of Reference (ToR), are aligned with the eight functions of the CWG spelled out in the new Cash Coordination Model:

⁷ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

⁸ <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/103786>

Figure 2 - Key Functions of CWG in Romania compared to the IASC Model

KEY FUNCTIONS OF THE ROMANIA CASH WORKING GROUP AS PER THE TOR

1. Provide effective coordination of cash and vouchers across the response, including compiling analysis on existing agency/CWG members' assessments and monitoring around the feasibility of cash.
2. Ensure the overall cash response is coherent avoids duplication, and finds opportunities to increase effectiveness, coordinating with the clusters/sectors to ensure coherence. Coherence in this instance means that planned CVA interventions are logical and complementary between clusters and modalities.
3. Provide effective information management on CVA delivery across the response, in close collaboration with ISIM working group through the ActivityInfo.
4. Promote use of common mechanisms, standards, and tools across partners for harmonized, quality and accountable programming.
5. Provide common services to cash partners as relevant, and if this is not done by other working groups, and programmes to identify entry points for linking, coordinated monitoring and feedback mechanisms.
6. Review and support the capacity strengthening requirements and requests of CWG members, clusters, local and national actors (LNAs) and government partners and develop strategies for addressing gaps in skills and knowledge
7. Facilitate and enable inter-agency lessons learnt sessions.
8. Advocate to create an enabling environment for cash including advocacy with partners for cash across the response; policy and advocacy with donors; and access to people in need of cash assistance.
9. Provide a clear and predictable entry point for linkages to social protection to the extent appropriate for the response and/or preparedness efforts.

KEY FUNCTIONS OF CASH WORKING GROUPS AS PER THE IASC MODEL

1. Coordination of cash across the response, including feasibility of cash as part of response analysis. Inclusive of multisectoral response analysis in order to consider the appropriateness, feasibility and relevance of MPC.
2. Ensure cash response is coherent, avoids duplication, and increases effectiveness, coordinating with clusters/ sectors.
3. Provide effective information management for cash assistance, in collaboration with clusters for sector-specific cash, including accurate and up-to-date 4Ws.
4. Promote common mechanisms, standards, and tools for harmonized, quality and accountable programming.
5. Provide common services, which may include joint frameworks, market analysis, risk assessments, financial service provider mapping, coordinated monitoring and coordinated feedback mechanisms.
6. Capacity-building of CWG members, clusters, local actors and government partners.
7. Advocate for enabling environment for cash; policy and advocacy with donors; and access to people in need of cash assistance.
8. Provide a clear and predictable entry point for linkages to social protection to the extent appropriate for the response.

A relatively well funded response

Seventy-six per cent (\$172 million of \$226 million) of the 2022 Ukraine Response Refugee Response Plan (RRP) funding requirements⁹ were met for Romania, making it a well-funded emergency response. This has been a key enabler of the response and by extension of cash coordination.

Mature Social Protection (SP) system

Romania has a mature social protection system which has responded to shocks in the past and includes specific allowances for refugees that were in place prior to the conflict.¹⁰ Social assistance includes categorical schemes (family and care allowance) and guaranteed minimum income schemes. It uses a minimum subsistence level to determine benefits and a single registry of beneficiaries is in use. Cash transfers are delivered through banks but most largely through post office orders.¹¹ However, the system has been overflowed by the scale of the crisis, requiring humanitarian agencies to fill key gaps during the Ukraine emergency. The existence of a mature Social Protection system highlights the importance of the CWG function in creating bridges between emergency CVA and SP, but also the

⁹"Inter-Agency Financial Portal for Refugees Aid Programmes," accessed 14th November, 2023, refugee-funding-tracker.org.

¹⁰ STAAR, "Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection Linkages: Strengthening Shock-Responsiveness of Social Protection Systems in the Ukraine Crisis," July 2022, <https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/humanitarian-assistance-and-social-protection-linkages-strengthening-shock>.

¹¹ STAAR.

challenges, for humanitarian actors, most of them new to the context, of mapping and getting abreast of the different schemes and decentralised operations.

High level of digitalisation of the response

The Ukraine response is highly digitalised because of high refugee digital literacy and strong existing infrastructures. The coordination is no exception with the CWG meetings taking place online only, not necessarily as preventive COVID measure, but rather, to allow the participation of organisations who could not attend physically. While this encouraged the diversity of participation, including from local and national actors (LNA), it also reportedly reduced efficiency and social benefits of the meeting.

II. To what extent was the cash coordination effective and timely?

Key finding 1: At the outset of the crisis, there was a lack of preparedness and a fragmented response, with various stakeholders operating independently. Cash Coordination mechanisms took time to become effective.

The first CWG meeting took place on April 19th, 2022, noticeably later than in other countries, and after UNHCR started its own cash operation (April 4th).¹² This delay is reportedly due to lower corporate priority given to Romania by UNHCR¹³ but also by the complex coordination structure in country where humanitarian and government-led systems are running in parallel. Although the two Government led coordination fora and the Refugee Coordination Model were launched by the Prime Minister as complementary “two plans (i.e. the Governmental one and UNHCR’s), one response”, it de facto resulted in an absence of government stakeholders in cash coordination, which marked the CWG with challenges with regards to **timeliness and slow decision making as well as linkages with social protection**.

The CWG has made efforts not to duplicate existing architectures. Yet Romania is a country with a complex coordination structure and the government has a different focus and priorities compared to the international community’s.¹⁴ Interviewed stakeholders agree that further discussions would have been required in the beginning to align interests between the two entities. The CWG has not yet been able to find its footing as “support role” to the government, but instead taking the lead in coordinating a large proportion of the cash response independently.

The initial challenge in meeting timeliness resulted in **bilateral conversations among organisations (mainly NGOs)**, each pursuing its own path as it was acknowledged that there

¹² UNHCR Romania, “Ukraine Refugee Situation Operational Update: Romania (01 -15 May 2022),” May 2022.

¹³ UNHCR. “Evaluation of UNHCR’s Level 3 Regional Refugee Emergency Response to the Crisis in Ukraine,,” 2023.

¹⁴ UNHCR, “Evaluation of UNHCR’s Level 3 Regional Refugee Emergency Response to the Crisis in Ukraine,,” 2023.

were urgent needs on the ground that needed immediate attention (which the CWG were not supporting them to address). For instance, the Red Cross independently initiated a CVA program, operational by early May 2022, without CWG support or guidance.¹⁵ **As a result of independent implementation, it was challenging to gather all cash actors under the umbrella of a cohesive CWG led by UNHCR**, as it should be as per the RCM. Resistance was met from some participants who felt that the CWG was not fully representative of all the activities that were occurring in Romania.

“In the beginning of the crisis no one was prepared to respond to this crisis. Everyone was going in their direction and the coordination mechanism was put in place later on” (CWG member)

The running of the CWG was also fragmented but improvements have been observed. For example, meeting minutes were published inconsistently from April to August 2022 and then from April to June 2023. During the early period, they were brief with a better, more detailed template introduced from July 2022. CWG ToRs¹⁶ are available but as they are not published on the CWG website, they are not easily accessible to all actors. The CWG successfully developed a methodological paper in April 2022 which summarizes the joint and common approaches of the actors in the country and facilitates the sharing of know-how for new actors.¹⁷ It was an interactive tool, (with the link included in the minutes) which could be built upon over time for example with direct inputs by members on inclusion and exclusion criteria.¹⁸ The updated methodological paper, released in May 2023, provides comprehensive guidance on proposed transfer values, MPCA eligibility criteria, financials service providers and deduplication.¹⁹

Key finding 2: The CWG effectively played its role in fostering the development of joint tools based on the needs of CWG members but there remain gaps in available guidance material, such as providing linkages to sectoral CVA.

Initially many organisations conducted assessments and mappings individually. Yet, **on the request of its members, some common tools were established by the CWG.** These include a vulnerability assessment and basic needs assessment, made in consultation with partners, including local organisations. A financial service provider mapping was completed in 2023 which was cited by KIs as being particularly useful.²⁰ It was initially requested by local NGOs who were not used to such assessments.

¹⁵ As per KIs

¹⁶ Romania CWG, “Romania Cash Working Group ToR,” 2022.

¹⁷ UNHCR, “Regional Refugee Response Plan: Romania Update,” April 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/romania/regional-refugee-response-plan-ukraine-situation-inter-agency-operational-update-romania-april-2022>.

¹⁸ Romania CWG, “Romania CWG Meeting Action Points - 03/05/2022,” May 3, 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/94836>.

¹⁹ Romania CWG, “CWG Methodological Paper - Romania,” May 2023.

²⁰ Accessible here: <https://romania.servicesadvisor.net/en>

More efforts could be done to address gaps in available guidance. Many organisations shifted to using vouchers to supply basic needs to beneficiaries to mitigate for bank delays in transferring cash:

"We gave social tickets like vouchers which could be used for basic needs. It was easier to distribute. During our PDM we noticed that people were happy to receive vouchers as they are received quickly and can buy everything they need quickly. So now we are still distributing vouchers." (CWG member)

Limited guidance was provided by the CWG on the appropriateness of using vouchers and of transitioning from paper to e-vouchers when it becomes possible. For example, a CWG member expressed an interest in knowing what key steps are to prepare for the process voucher distribution going forward (documents to prepare, communication with partners etc).²¹

There is a need for more guidance and inputs to sectoral CVA. Per key informants, individual organizational guidance has been acceptable until now, but as the needs and conditions of refugees evolve, a more coordinated approach is increasingly essential particularly with linking to sectoral groups (e.g. livelihoods).

Organizations planning future cash interventions deemed it necessary to include the regular updating of the cash market assessment and feasibility report in the CWG TOR. Currently, Romania lacks a comprehensive, integrated cash report, as each organization conducts its own assessment.²²

Key finding 3: Consensus regarding harmonising targeting criteria is yet to be reached amongst CWG members

When moving away from blanket CVA and towards more targeted distribution, lack of standardized targeting criteria for MPCA at the CWG level meant that organizations were operating independently until a consensus could be established.²³ Key informants mention that not everyone within the group shared the same ideas, and there were disagreements about targeting criteria, which varied among different organizations and also impacted de-duplication. For example, DEC members are prioritising specific needs rather than adhering to the vulnerability criteria established by the CWG. This approach involves concentrating efforts on specific, tailored support initiatives.²⁴

The following examples further highlight the absence of unanimity. On September 20th 2022,²⁵ the eligibility criteria for winterization were published, but it is not clear that this was

²¹ Romania CWG, "Romania Cash Working Group Minutes 30/05/2023," May 30, 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102052>.

²² Per discussion with key stakeholders in November 2023

²³ Romania CWG, "Romania Cash WG - MoM 2022.06.28," n.d., <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/94840>.

²⁴ As per the roundtable discussion

²⁵ Romania CWG, "Romania Cash Working Group Meeting Action Points - Sept 2022," September 20, 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/97442>.

a result of collective agreement within the CWG. Moreover, by April 2023, while the CWG co-leads may have agreed on eligibility criteria for the top up of cash assistance to address the 50/20 gap²⁶, the lack of involvement of other CWG members in the meeting suggests a continuing lack of agreement/ involvement.²⁷

The inability to find consensus is mainly driven by organisation's preference to identify targeting criteria that align with their organisational mandate and being wary of imposed criteria (e.g. Save the Children want to focus on children not the elderly, etc).²⁸ It is accepted that stakeholders will treat forthcoming criteria as optional guidelines, akin to the recently presented and agreed-upon inclusion and exclusion criteria for winterization 2023 by CWG members.²⁹

Key finding 4: De-duplication mechanisms have been established from the onset but have witnessed inconsistent uptake among CWG members.

Relevant and early on efforts for data sharing and de-duplication (on RAIS) were set up by UNHCR. The inclusion of de-duplication as an action point in the initial CWG minutes underscores its importance. The efforts have proven successful, detecting up to 10,000 duplications as of October 2023.³⁰ However, **uptake has been inconsistent amongst members**, despite orientation work done on the use of RAIS by UNHCR to encourage organisations to participate. Only about 10 organisations have signed the data sharing agreements since they have been in place since November 2022. Challenges identified by KIs, preventing organisations from more fully participating in de-duplication efforts are:

- **The RAIS platform only covers cash transfers, not sectoral vouchers** – with de-duplication through sectoral working groups not available.³¹
- **The RAIS platform is very time and resource intensive for local NGOs and is not sufficiently adapted for small projects.** Large organisations such as the Red Cross found the deduplication process easier than local NGOs. As expressed by LNAs, a more user-friendly platform would improve wider de-duplication.
- **An identified gap is a need for de-duplication between non-UNHCR actors.** For example, for winterisation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has a data sharing agreement with UNHCR but not with LNAs. As they

²⁶ The 50/20 is a social protection programme initiated by the Romanian Government on the 27 February 2022. The programme aims to ensure the provision of accommodation and food to refugees residing in Romania by facilitating the payment of RON 50/person/day for accommodation and RON 20/person/day for food to Romanian citizens hosting Ukrainian refugees. (UNHCR, "Rapid Survey of the 50/20 Programme," December 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/97974>.)

²⁷ Romania CWG, "Romania CWG Minutes of Meeting - 11th April 2023," n.d., <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102051>.

²⁸ As per KIs and the roundtable discussion

²⁹ Romania CWG, "Romania CWG Meeting Minutes-31.10.2023," n.d., <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/104920>.

³⁰ Per a UNHCR KI

³¹ Romania CWG, "Romania Cash Working Group Minutes 30/05/2023."

have to go through the time-consuming process one by one with organisations it is often avoided.

Many lessons learnt have been drawn from the deduplication process to date, and how to make it as simple to use as possible for stakeholders in Romania. An example of such adjustment is that data sharing agreements are now multipartite as opposed to be a sum of bilateral agreement as was the case previously.³²

III. To what extent was the cash coordination inclusive, transparent, and accountable?

Key finding 5: Cash coordination is driven by the large cash actors, leaving little space for smaller organisations to participate actively in decision making.

The cash response was mostly coordinated by a handful of organisations (UNHCR and Red Cross). There was limited space for participation and decision making by other organisations, especially local actors.

“We stopped our programme when reached 65,000 to let the remaining 25,000 be covered by other NGOs. We covered more than 70 percent of refugees.” (Red Cross)

From the CWG minutes it can be observed that **the participation of local actors and variety of actors in CWG meetings is decreasing**. For example, in the April 2023 CWG, only Red Cross and UNHCR representatives were present in the meeting.

The planning process, including critical elements like transfer value, MPCA frequency, and minimum expenditure basket (MEB) lacks comprehensive involvement of all actors and sectors, with decisions predominantly driven by the CWG chairs, indicating a need for enhanced inclusivity in decision-making.

Lack of resources is a key aspect preventing small organisations from fully participating in the CWG, as some NGOs don't have the time or staff to participate in CWG meetings. As meetings are held in English, it prevents some organisations from joining or engaging in discussions as much as they should. As observed in discussions with stakeholders, smaller organisations use the CWG to obtain information rather than having the intention participate actively. The desire for more inclusivity depends on each organization's goals and how they see their participation in the CWG.

Key finding 6: Connections between Humanitarian CVA and Social Protection are hampered by the absence of government stakeholders in the CWG

³² As per KII

The absence of the government from the CWG is seen as a significant gap by all consulted stakeholders. This has led to a lack of a harmonized response, particularly concerning the integration of social protection (SP) programs.

The CWG repeatedly tried to invite local and central Government representatives but without much success to date. Informants explained the limited governmental uptake by the limited time spent at the start of the response to explain humanitarian architecture but also a result of language barriers, CWG meetings taking place in English and poor general interest. Romania is also the country with the most complex coordination structure for the Ukraine response as there are effectively two coordination fora. One is government led (one under the Department of Emergency Services and one under the Prime Minister Office) and UNHCR rolled out the RCM.³³ As the CWG falls under the RCM, it can explain why the government is less involved.

Lack of communication from the government makes it challenging to keep abreast of changes/ evolutions in SP. Decisions (e.g. regarding eligibility and targeting criteria) are made separately to the CWG³⁴ with CWG members struggling to keep beneficiaries updated of SP protection programmes they are eligible for.

IV. Implications for the future

Cash coordination in Romania had a slower start than in other countries but as it is now further established, it has major endeavours and opportunities lying ahead to support the response to pivot towards more sectoral cash (as refugees' needs evolve with the response), build stronger bridges with SP and ensure a broader participation in light of the scaling down of international actors.

As per the 2023 RRP: "a large proportion of assistance for basic needs through MPCA will be delivered by the Member States through their respective national social protection systems. Humanitarian actors will increasingly focus on cash assistance in support of specific vulnerabilities across the RRP sectors, such as health and education, complementing national systems."

This statement highlights the importance of linkages between sectoral and multi sectoral cash coordination and of the implications of national governmental actors in Cash Coordination, both areas for which the CWG has faced challenges to date.

On the sectoral element, Cash Coordination of the Ukraine response, including in Romania prompts a broader reflection on the role of the CWG in contexts where CVA and especially MPCA is significant. Support to sectoral cash has been rather consistently highlighted, across

³³ UNHCR, "Evaluation of UNHCR's Level 3 Regional Refugee Emergency Response to the Crisis in Ukraine."

³⁴ From KII

contexts, as one of the weak points of the CWG.³⁵ Though not officially laid out in the 2022 Cash Coordination Model, CWG has become the de facto coordination body for MPCA. Considering limited resources traditionally allocated to cash coordination, this add on to the CWG function is likely to divert CWG efforts from supporting sectoral CVA.

With regards to ensuring broader participation of actors, progress is noticeable. Conversations being held among CWG on how to further support the capacity building of local actors given their limited funding and resources.³⁶ Strengthening their capacity will be key to ensure their more active participation going forward and is a component of the CWG 2023 strategic direction: *"Facilitate cash-based interventions related empowerment and capacity building trainings to CWG members and mainly local partners"*.

On the linkages between emergency CVA and SP, stakeholders agree that participation of the government is a recurring challenge in coordination mechanisms, especially in newly established responses which needs to be addressed.³⁷ Recommendations identified are to:

- Engage the government by making them host the coordination group or venue and/or explore closer synergies between the RCM and the government led structure so that the CWG sits across both.
- Establish high-level communication channels, particularly with UNHCR and leading NGOs, to collaboratively define a roadmap for engaging the government in sectoral coordination and linkages with SP.

This is aligned with **Romania's Cash Working Group 2024 strategic direction discussed in the October 2023 CWG meeting**. The CWG in Romania should retain a strong leadership in providing clear and predictable entry point for linkages to social protection, including: *"Pursue with advocacy and technical support for inclusion of refugees into national social safety nets"*.³⁸

³⁵ CALP, "Rapid Reflection on the Scale-up of Cash Coordination for the Türkiye Earthquake Response," 2023, <https://www.calpnetwork.org/publication/rapid-reflection-on-the-scale-up-of-cash-coordination-turkiye-syria-earthquakes/>.

³⁶ Findings from the November 2023 roundtable

³⁷ Findings from the November 2023 roundtable

³⁸ Romania CWG, "Romania CWG Meeting Minutes-31.10.2023."

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