

## FICE SPECIAL TASK FORCE “HAND IN HAND”: IMPROVING SAFETY AND WELL-BEING FOR DISPLACED UKRAINIAN CHILDREN

Alexander Schneider, Marianna Bilyk, and Yelyzaveta Moroz

*In loving memory of Professor Emmanuel Grupper, a visionary educator and researcher whose pioneering spirit helped forge the Hand in Hand task force.*

**Abstract:** FICE International is a network of professionals and organizations from over 30 countries that is committed to child and youth care. Its members work in social pedagogy, social work, psychology, and education to ensure high-quality support for children and young people. To assist vulnerable children during crises such as the war in Ukraine, FICE created the “Hand in Hand” task force in August 2022. Its mission is to improve safety and well-being for displaced children, especially those in alternative care. These children face trauma, loss, disrupted education, and mental health challenges, including acute stress and post-traumatic stress disorder. Hand in Hand provides vital social–emotional resources and ensures access to education and services, making a meaningful difference in the lives of crisis-affected children.

**Keywords:** FICE International, child and youth care, social pedagogy, Hand in the Hand task force, crisis in Ukraine, displaced children, alternative care, safety

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FICE International is a global network dedicated to the care and well-being of children and youth, bringing together professionals from various fields including social pedagogy, psychology, and education. Its mission is to ensure all children and young people have access to the care and support they need to thrive. One of its key initiatives is the “Hand in Hand” task force, which focuses on helping vulnerable children, such as those displaced by war or living in alternative care settings, during crises.

The task force’s first major mission was aiding children affected by the war in Ukraine, who have faced trauma, displacement, and disrupted education. Its efforts to provide essential emotional support and access to education make a significant impact on these children’s lives. This article sheds light on the history, objectives, and activities of the task force, highlighting its crucial role in supporting children during crises.

### ***Background: The Crisis in Ukraine***

The present full-scale phase of the Russian–Ukrainian war began on February 24th, 2022 when Russia launched air strikes and ground invasions from three different fronts — north, south, and east. Millions of Ukrainians have been displaced as a result, and humanitarian crises have emerged, producing massive casualties.

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has also had a devastating effect on children and teenagers who have been exposed to violence, trauma, displacement, and disruption of their education. According to various sources, some of the impacts include:

- Many children have lost, and many continue to lose, their parents, relatives, friends, or homes in the war.
- Millions of children have had to flee their towns and villages or live in areas under constant threat of shelling and shooting.
- Children experience high levels of stress, fear, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the war.
- Children’s access to education has been severely interrupted as schools and kindergartens have been closed for safety reasons or moved underground.
- Power outages and internet disruptions have hampered remote learning.
- Children’s physical health and nutrition have been affected by lack of food, clean water, and medical care in the war zone and in temporarily occupied areas.
- 6,471,600 Ukrainians have fled the country due to the Russian–Ukrainian war, including approximately 1.3 million children.

Impacts for children (as of September, 2025) include:

- 654 have been killed
- 2,161 have been wounded
- 2,169 are missing
- 19,546 have been deported or forcibly displaced
- 20 have been victims of sexual violence

This crisis in Ukraine has prompted FICE International to explore ways to support young people affected by the conflict. As a result, the Hand in Hand task force was established to provide targeted assistance to children displaced from their homes, those in alternative care institutions, and other crisis-affected children. The task force's primary aim is to enhance the safety and well-being of these children and their families, and they have been doing an effective job in achieving this goal.

### ***FICE and Other International Organizations' Immediate Response in Support of Ukraine***

In the early days of the full-scale war, FICE International reached out to the Ukraine Educational Platform (UEP) to offer support for children in crisis. Efforts included financial and logistical aid to families with children, including donations from FICE Austria and FICE Switzerland that provided food, hygiene products, and shelter for displaced families in Ukraine. FICE also supported an orphanage evacuated from Zaporizhzhia, providing essential supplies for over 170 children. These actions were part of a broader effort by FICE to protect and assist children affected by the war.

With support from FICE, Mulberry Bush, a therapeutic community in the United Kingdom, organized several training courses for social workers, psychologists, and educators in Ukraine to help them support children traumatized by the conflict. In addition, FICE Switzerland donated funds to Peaceful Sky, a UEP partner, to provide meals for children in the affected regions. Other initiatives included translation services to facilitate training for Ukrainian refugees and international participants, and the publication of the *My Life Journey* book, which helped displaced children stay connected to their roots. An adaptation of the more traditional “life book” tool, this book was distributed in Ukraine, Poland, and Italy to address the psychological needs of young refugees.

FICE Israel also made significant contributions, particularly by assisting Jewish teenagers fleeing Ukraine. Through the Naale program, youth were quickly integrated into Israeli youth villages for education and support. The Israeli Teachers Union further supported Ukraine by inviting Ukrainian educators to share their experiences at a leadership convention in Israel, where they discussed the challenges of continuing education in a war zone. These international collaborations demonstrate a wide-reaching, collective effort to support children and educators in Ukraine during the crisis.

### ***Principles Guiding the Establishment of the Hand in Hand Task Force***

The Hand in Hand task force was established by FICE International in August 2022 to support children and youth affected by the war in Ukraine. Its mission is to connect professionals worldwide in child and youth care, ensure effective communication, and develop concrete ways of providing support during crises. Ukraine became the first focus of this newly formed permanent structure.

The task force is led by Dr. Alex Schneider (FICE Israel) and Marianna Bilyk (FICE Ukraine), in partnership with the Revived Gymnasiums of Ukraine Association (RGU), which works closely with principals and teachers across the country. The initiative also engages international experts, humanitarian aid representatives, educators, parents, and young people from multiple regions of Ukraine. The main objectives and activities of Hand in Hand are:

- Provide psychosocial and educational support to children and teenagers, helping them cope with trauma, regain hope, and enjoy their childhood.
- Strengthen welfare, child protection, and education systems, and provide training for teachers, social workers, and volunteers who work with traumatized children.
- Develop action plans and recommendations based on real-time information from Ukraine, ensuring that vulnerable children have access to care and resources.
- Organize online roundtables, seminars, and lectures to support educators and welfare staff, focusing on crisis response skills.
- Monitor and coordinate FICE-related operations to ensure well-structured and effective interventions.

A key challenge identified was the language barrier: many Ukrainian professionals struggled with English-language materials. The task force decided to provide all content in participants' native languages, supported by translation services. This has ensured meaningful communication and better outcomes for training and cooperation.

In addition to providing direct support, the group spreads awareness about the situation of Ukrainian children, including tragic developments such as forced deportations to Russia. Despite difficulties in securing international funding, the task force continues to explore opportunities to launch new projects, especially in youth mental health.

Ultimately, Hand in Hand seeks to make a tangible difference in the lives of children affected by war, believing that every step — from training professionals to providing psychosocial care — helps restore safety, stability, and hope for Ukraine's young generation.

### *Adapting the Task Force to the Ukrainian Realities*

The actions required to establish the special task force included:

- Maintaining regular and continuous contact with representatives of FICE Ukraine to examine the current situation.
- Forming a complete picture of the activity of FICE elements in the crisis area.
- Monitoring all conflict-related activities carried out by FICE representatives in other countries, including the Netherlands and Germany.
- Monitoring all economic support operations of groups related to FICE.
- Initiating aid and support operations such as support centers for the treatment of post-trauma victims by FICE Members.
- Increasing the involvement of FICE representatives in host countries receiving refugees by gathering data and transferring information, addressing emerging challenges, and raising ideas based on what is happening on the ground.

The Hand in Hand special task force is involved in initiatives such as hosting online roundtables for teachers. The task force believes that it is essential to prioritize the well-being of children, who are often the most vulnerable group in crises, and that every action can make a difference in the lives of children affected by war. The task force has worked to enhance the safety of children and families who have been forced to hastily leave their homes and move to other towns or countries, and to support children in alternative care institutions, by all of the following:

1. Providing emotional support to children and families affected by the crisis.
2. Ensuring access to education and other necessary services, including health care, nutrition, and psychosocial support.
3. Creating safe spaces for children to play and interact with their peers.
4. Developing targeted interventions for children with special needs or disabilities.
5. Building resilience centers to provide children and families with long-term support.
6. Facilitating cross-border cooperation and networking to enhance the safety and well-being of children affected by the crisis.
7. Advocating for children's rights and promoting child protection policies.

**The Returning Children's Project:** Led by the Hand in Hand task force, the Returning Children's Project supports children displaced by crises like the ongoing war in Ukraine. It addresses their security, documentation, psychosocial well-being, education, health care, legal needs, and community reintegration. The project focuses on creating a safe environment, providing necessary support, and offering long-term assistance to help these children and their families rebuild their lives. A key initiative of the project, supported by FICE Switzerland, is a seminar focused on supporting Ukrainian youth in out-of-home education. This seminar seeks to provide a

platform for knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and collective action to better support displaced youth in their educational journey.

**Seminar on supporting Ukrainian youth:** In cooperation with the Tipiti organization from Switzerland, we intend to convene a meeting of representatives of civil society organizations who work with Ukrainian children evacuated abroad from institutional care facilities. The core idea of this plan is to discuss how they can achieve a better future for themselves, and the creation of conditions for their possible return (or non-return) to Ukraine.

### ***Ukrainian Educational Platform (UEP)***

The UEP, formerly the Lviv Education Foundation, is a non-profit organization established in the year 2000 to unite and strengthen regional capacities across Ukraine through social initiatives and educational programs. Bringing together a national network of over 500 organizations and 11 support centers, UEP focuses on emergency response, humanitarian aid, and community development. Through sub-granting and partner training, it has supported over 40 active communities in 11 regions, helping them identify local needs and implement crisis response projects.

With over 20 years of experience in social transformation, the UEP rapidly adapted its work after the full-scale Russian invasion, prioritizing humanitarian relief and psychosocial support. It created a “hub station” in Lviv with SOS Children’s Villages and UNICEF; opened 20 children’s support centers in regions including Lviv, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhya; and launched Humanitarian Mission groups to evacuate over 10,000 people, deliver more than 2.6 million kilograms of aid to 130,000 beneficiaries, and provide psychosocial assistance to over 15,000 individuals. The UEP continues to drive positive change by strengthening communities, supporting local leaders, and meeting the urgent needs of families and children affected by war. The UEP leads the following programs and initiatives in Ukraine, covering a diverse range of methodologies and thematic priorities:

- **Community-Child-Family:** This program supports families, orphans, and care institution graduates by developing tools and training professionals, government officials, and volunteers in children’s rights. It also includes services focused on building resilience.
- **Leadership and Ministry:** Focused on developing Christian teams, church leaders, and activists across Ukraine, this program includes three key areas: community development, mental health support, and leadership development.
- **Civic Education:** This program educates citizens on their role in governance at local and national levels, aiming to increase participation in decision-making and promote democracy in Ukraine.

- **Women’s Leadership:** This program aims to empower women by providing support, mentorship, and resources to help them create local social projects and strengthen their influence within communities.
- **Resilience Development:** In partnership with the Ministry of Social Policy, the UEP is implementing a resilience-building service in response to the war. This includes promoting mental health and establishing community resilience centers in Lviv and Dnipro.
- **Support Centers:** The UEP has created a network of support centers that unite civil sector organizations, local authorities, and other partners to provide coordinated humanitarian assistance and social services, especially in war-affected regions.

### *Revived Gymnasiums of Ukraine Association (RGU)*

The RGU is a key partner in the Hand in Hand initiative, collaborating with school principals and teachers across Ukraine. It includes some 300 school principals and plays an active role in organizing online roundtables for teachers. The RGU is led by Yaroslav Turianskyi and Tetyana Zhornytska, both of whom are active members of Hand in Hand.

Tetyana Zhornytska, principal of School No. 26 in Odesa, highlights the resilience of Ukrainian education. She shared that many of her students have fled to over 30 countries due to the war. Despite the challenges, they maintained daily 15-minute meetings, ensuring continuity in their education. Some students have continued their studies abroad or in Ukraine, demonstrating the priority given to education even in times of crisis.

### *Hand in Hand Activities*

The task force has organized general and weekly online meetings to address challenges in Ukraine’s welfare and education systems, bringing together experts, humanitarian aid representatives, and educators to share firsthand insights and develop best practices. These platforms foster collaboration across organizations, while also engaging children and youth through solidarity projects such as message exchanges, creative activities, and the distribution of the *My Life Journey* book. In addition, the task force provides specialized training for social workers, in partnership with Mulberry Bush, to strengthen their capacity to support traumatized children. The main activities of the task force include operation meetings and professional development.

### *Operation Meetings*

The FICE Hand in Hand task force holds weekly and monthly meetings to organize work plans, prioritize tasks, and evaluate progress. This regular planning ensures the task force can effectively support vulnerable children in Ukraine, adjusting its approach as needed to meet its objectives. The task force also held four strategic meetings with other organizations to define its goals and explore potential collaborations. These discussions helped establish key partnerships, enabling the



task force to combine resources and expertise to provide better care and support for children affected by crises.

### *Professional Development*

Hand in Hand has undertaken a number of professional development activities, including:

- On December 29th, 2022, Dr. Irit Ben Mordechai and Dr. Bob Chernick held a lecture on children's coping mechanisms in traumatic events, giving over 60 Ukrainian social workers valuable tools and resources to improve care for vulnerable children.
- In March 2023, Ukrainian school principals and education officials visited Israel to study how educational services are organized during and after wartime, gaining best practices to apply in their communities and schools.
- The *My Life Journey* book (May 2022) was created by FICE Netherlands and shared with the UEP to be distributed among Ukrainian children who were forced to leave their homes because of war and its consequences. This adaptation of the Life Book methodology that allows a child to record their personal memories, experiences, feelings, and aspirations can provide them with a new and expanded view of their past and present, from which they can draw strength and confidence for their future. The book is also available to Ukrainian children who relocated to Poland and Italy.
- Beginning in November 2023, a series of roundtables on “Educational Dialogue” has been conducted for Ukrainian educators. These events are organized by the FICE International Hand in Hand task force, FICE Israel, and the RGU to develop best practices and research ways of implementing them in the Ukrainian education system. These events aim to acquire knowledge and ideas that can be used to bring about qualitative changes in the Ukrainian education system.
- Dr. Alex Schneider provided training to 40 Ukrainian primary school educators on social–emotional learning, adapting Israeli practices to help children manage emotions and strengthen peer-to-peer communication, family support, and global connections for greater child security.
- In cooperation with the Office of the Educational Ombudsman, we conducted teacher training on the topic of “Social and Emotional Literacy”. The trainer was Dr. Alex Schneider, who shared essential knowledge about the role of emotions in children's learning. More than 60 teachers attended the training, prepared homework, and received additional credits for their professional development. This professional training enabled specialists to better understand children, especially in times of crisis; to better interpret their behavior; and to recognize that there is no such thing as “bad” behavior in a child. The skills and knowledge gained also helped specialists identify trauma in children and interact with them in a way that avoids causing harm or retraumatization.



### ***Professional Development Conducted by Mulberry Bush***

Mulberry Bush conducted and hosted a series of training courses for social workers to enhance their skills and knowledge in working with traumatized children. Mulberry Bush has been actively supporting social workers in Ukraine since 2022, providing valuable training and resources aimed at improving care for children and families, particularly those affected by trauma. They held their first training session for over 40 social workers in 2022, introducing attachment theory and its relevance to children's behaviour and stress responses. In 2023, they hosted webinars focused on childhood trauma that were tailored to professionals working with children impacted by the war. These sessions aimed to enhance the therapeutic skills of social workers and psychologists.

In addition to online resources, Mulberry Bush conducted in-person courses including the April 2023 training on “Reflective Practice, Behaviour as Communication, Attachment Theory, and Working with Trauma”, which was attended by 60 professionals. These courses provided crucial knowledge and practical tools for those dealing with childhood trauma. In 2024, Mulberry Bush launched a new course for 100 social workers across Ukraine, focusing on resilience, communication, and self-care. These initiatives continue to build the capacity of Ukraine's social workers, equipping them to better support children and families during challenging times.

### ***International Relations***

Hand in Hand has also participated in many events and initiatives of international scope. These include:

- **January 24, 2023:** Tetyana Zhornytska, principal of School No. 26 in Odesa and vice president of the Ukrainian High School Principals' Association, spoke at the Israeli leadership convention in Tel Aviv about leading a school of 650 children since the start of the war in Ukraine, sharing firsthand experiences of students and educators.
- **March 2023:** The late Professor Emanuel Grupper (FICE Israel), Sarah Israeli (Israeli Teachers' Union), and Nahum Rintzler (Neve Haddasa Youth Village) hosted a reception with a musical performance, giving young Ukrainian teenagers in Israel a platform to share their voices.
- **May 2023:** FICE International, UEP, and 35 countries issued a joint statement on the forcible transfer and deportation of Ukrainian children by Russia, calling for urgent action to protect children taken from their families and homeland.
- **Children's Day Campaign:** UEP, supported by FICE International, led the “Country of Responsible Adults” campaign in Warsaw and Lviv, emphasizing adults' key role in children's well-being.
- **September 2022 (Serbia):** During the FICE General Assembly and Jubilee Conference, Marianna Bilyk presented the situation of Ukrainian children, showcasing the Hand in Hand task force's efforts to provide emotional support, education access, and resilience centers for displaced and traumatized children.

- **October 2025:** At the FICE Congress in Split, Hand in Hand organized three events dedicated to the situation of Ukrainian children in the context of war. The first event was a workshop, where we analyzed the roles and aspects of life lost by children who were forced to relocate to other cities and countries because of the war. The second event, within a separate working group, was a presentation on the situation of Ukrainian children, with contributions from experts from the Ukrainian Catholic University and Social Synergy, an NGO. The third event was a panel discussion on the situation of children affected by the war, in which Hand in Hand leaders participated alongside representatives of the organization Partnership for Every Child.
- **September 2025:** During the FICE International Federal Council, Hand in Hand carried out activity planning and welcomed new members to the team. One of the main areas of focus we identified was working with trauma experienced by children, including trauma caused by the war.
- **Ongoing Initiatives:** The task force continues to aid refugee children, establish post-trauma support centers, gather data, and identify emerging challenges to strengthen protection and care.

### *A Caregiver's Seminar on Supporting Ukrainian Youth*

In partnership with FICE Switzerland, the Hand in Hand task force is organizing an international symposium to empower professionals to support foster children and children in care from Ukraine. The seminar will address the out-of-home education sector's challenges, including required resources, coordination, and guidance. It will serve as a platform for exchanging best practices, fostering collaboration, and building a support network for educators and caregivers.

### *Friends From Around the World*

Since the first days of the full-scale invasion, members of the FICE International network have assisted the UEP. Our partners have offered to find shelter for children abroad, and have provided opportunities to create additional beds in the western regions, feed people and children, and deliver medicines and hygiene kits. Assistance from network members continues to provide expert support and to increase awareness of child protection needs during the war through friendly encouragement, regular meetings, consultations, and so on. This support is significant for the Hand in Hand task force, the UEP, and Ukraine. Some examples of support from the FICE network are:

- **FICE Canada:** In May 2023, Ms. Marianna Bilyk was invited by Professor James Anglin to present the situation of Ukrainian children at a roundtable.
- **FICE Croatia:** Ms. Lucija Vejmelka and Petra Hrvoj shared experiences of working with Ukrainian children in alternative care, highlighting challenges of integration, language, and education. Croatia supports integration through sports and education. Unfortunately, a planned social worker training had to be canceled for safety reasons.

- **FICE Germany:** Dr. Lisa Albrecht and Ms. Sophia Chabursky organized the first educators' roundtable, where Ms. Chabursky presented research on Ukrainian adolescents in Germany.
- **FICE International:** The Hand in Hand task force has worked closely with FICE International, supported by President Dr. Anna Schmid, the late Vice President Professor Emmanuel Grupper, Secretary-General Patrick Reason, Treasurer Rolf Widmer, and technical assistants Katerina Ivanova, Margarita Ihtimanska, and Cristina González.
- **FICE Israel :**Led by the late Professor Emmanuel Grupper, FICE Israel helped establish Hand in Hand, appointed Dr. Alex Schneider as leader, and organized roundtables, training, lectures, and publications. They also assisted Ukraine's Resilience Centre and provided methodological materials.
- **FICE Netherlands:** Martine Tobe and Peter Van de Pol supported children fleeing the war, and developed and introduced the *My Life Journey* book to help strengthen resilience and highlight positive aspects of children's lives.
- **FICE USA:** Charles Hooker of the United States organized a meeting online on deinstitutionalization in Ukraine, fostering expert collaboration.
- **FICE Romania:** Elena Matache provided consulting support to help develop social services in communities, inspired by the Concordia model. The Concordia Day Care Centre model is a social program, run by the international organization CONCORDIA, that provides daily support for children and families living in very difficult circumstances.
- **FICE Serbia:** FICE Serbia hosted discussions on the war's impact on Ukrainian children and facilitated live meetings with the FICE International team. At the General Assembly in Serbia in 2023, Marianna Bilyk was elected to the FICE Europe Board.
- **FICE Switzerland:** FICE Switzerland integrated over 18,200 Ukrainian refugee children into public schools with extra language classes and distance learning. They ensured professional support, funded guidance materials in native languages, and donated to Peaceful Sky to provide 500 warm meals for refugee children.

### ***Resilience Centers***

Resilience centers help individuals and communities recover from crises by offering mental health support, education, training, and practical assistance to strengthen coping skills and long-term well-being. They focus on recovery, community connection, and providing services such as counselling, health care, and social support, especially for vulnerable groups such as children and young people.

This initiative is crucial amid the sharp decline in Ukrainians' mental health. UEP operates a Resilience Centre under a Ministry of Social Policy program, with guidance from the Israel

Trauma Coalition via FICE Israel. Key project priorities include creating a community implementation guide, opening support spaces, and conducting training and consultations to ensure effective service delivery and lasting impact.

### ***Rescue Mission: Ukrainian Refugee Teenage Students Studying in Israel***

Throughout Jewish history, boarding schools and youth villages have played a vital role in educating and supporting teenagers who need to live away from home. Rooted in the Yeshiva tradition of religious study, these institutions evolved to provide physical, emotional, and educational care for Holocaust survivors and immigrant children. After Israel's establishment, youth villages became both a refuge and a "melting pot", helping integrate diverse populations and instill national values; they are regarded as prestigious educational settings.

Over the decades, youth villages adapted to changing social needs, supporting new immigrant waves from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East and, later, Israeli-born children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Managed mainly by the Ministry of Education, they offer housing, education, and therapeutic care to close learning gaps, build confidence, and develop social skills for teenagers from the social and geographical periphery. Despite budget fluctuations, these institutions have remained a cornerstone of Israel's welfare and education system.

In 1992, the Ministry of Education and the Jewish Agency launched the Naale program, inviting Jewish teenagers worldwide to complete high school in Israel on full scholarship. When Russia invaded Ukraine, this existing framework enabled Israel to quickly host Ukrainian refugee teenagers, providing safe housing, schooling, and emotional support within days. Today, youth villages and Naale continue to serve as unique, successful models of out-of-home education and integration for both Israeli and international youth. A representative of the Administration for Residential Education & Youth at the Ministry of Education described the project:

In March 2022, about a month after the war began, Israel's Residential Education Directorate, the Youth Aliyah organization, and the Naale program, together with the Jewish Agency, organized the emergency reception of Ukrainian children fleeing the war with one parent (mostly mothers). Within four months, around 350 teenagers aged 12–17 were placed in 14 youth villages across Israel. Many arrived with almost no belongings, carrying trauma from the war and unable to say goodbye to loved ones.

The villages provided housing, medical care, Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking staff, psychological support, initial budgets, and intensive Hebrew classes. Each teen was personally met by a village representative who supplied clothing, school materials, and an initial assessment by an educational-therapeutic-medical team. Students received individual or group therapy, stayed in contact with parents, and spent their first months studying Hebrew and core subjects, while some continued online learning with their Ukrainian schools.

The teens were fully integrated into school and social life, joining trips, activities, and celebrations alongside Israeli peers. Local students helped prepare rooms and welcome the newcomers, creating a warm atmosphere. Most Ukrainian teens have remained in Israel and continue their education in the youth villages, gradually returning to a normal teenage routine.<sup>1</sup>

This project, which began as a rescue mission, will operate as long as the war continues. There is still a need to provide refuge for Ukrainian refugee youth. In this project:

- The youth village is where immigrant children can receive basic necessities. The village accommodated 300 to 400 children from Ukraine.
- The children were integrated into the education system of the youth village, received psychosocial support, and participated in many activities, such as sports, music, and farming.
- Children received both individual and group therapy.
- Cooperation was fostered between parents in Ukraine and Israel.
- There are many experienced therapists and social workers who assist the children.
- There are two special challenges for children in the youth villages: They are poised between two worlds, Israel and Ukraine; and they must continuously wait for news et cetera.

### ***Hand in Hand Plans for Future Activities***

The work of Hand in Hand will continue to move forward. The task force's plans for the future include:

- Conduct roundtable meetings with teachers and principals concerning protecting children's rights in educational institutions.
- Create a demo version, based on the Israeli model, of a children's monitoring system for Ukraine. The Israeli system involves monitoring the status and movements of all children residing in the country. In Ukraine, this could help in responding to situations like the deportation of children to Russia; currently, it is extremely difficult to determine the exact number of children displaced.
- Research the main challenges of Ukrainian children in interacting with the education and welfare systems in other countries.
- Establishing recommendations concerning Ukrainian children's education processes in other countries.

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<sup>1</sup> From Binyamin Dorozhkov is the coordinator of the Naale program in Wizo Nachalat Yehuda youth village. For more information on the Naale program, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naale\\_program](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naale_program).

- Establish mental health support centers for teenagers in schools in the cities of Odesa, Lviv, and Boryspil.
- Conduct an open discussion concerning the topic of institutionalization in Ukraine.
- Support establishing Ukrainian resilience centers with an emphasis on emotional literacy.
- Support in organizing a seminar/course for emotional caregivers in cooperation with Tipiti (a Switzerland-based service organization).
- Establish a database about the psychoemotional and social status of Ukrainian children to create a plan for their reintegration into Ukraine society upon their return and to evaluate the impact of such reintegration.
- Establish a computerized child monitoring system to unite the welfare and education systems and monitor the status of Ukrainian children who live abroad.

### **Conclusions and Insights**

The accomplishments of Hand in Hand operations can be attributed to several key factors.

#### ***Commitment and Involvement***

The achievements of the Hand in Hand task force are the result of joint commitment and effective teamwork. Under the coordination of national representative Marianna Bilyk, the group has developed a strong operational infrastructure and fostered meaningful collaboration among partners in Ukraine and abroad.

#### ***Personal Relations***

The almost weekly routine meetings conducted with Ms. Bilyk, and her participation in the RGU's visit to Israel in March 2023 that enabled a team from FICE Israel to meet her in person and establish a strong personal bond, have aided in establishing a solid and meaningful relationship. Based on mutual understanding and respect, this relationship has constituted a cornerstone in the task force's achievements. It has enabled the team to work together effectively and face mutual challenges.

#### ***Complete Equality and Recognizing Each Other's Strengths***

The task force's ability to operate can be attributed to the fact that both chairs, Dr. Alex Schneider and Ms. Marianna Bilyk, were viewed as equal partners, with complete equality in decision-making. Each task force member's unique mix of personality, life experiences, cultural background, and language barriers were considered while emphasizing that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute. By recognizing and valuing the strengths of each team member, the chairs worked together to enable the task force to function efficiently and effectively in its efforts to achieve the best possible outcomes.



### ***Understanding the System***

Understanding the system is one of the most crucial elements in working with national systems. Different countries have different ways of operating, and comprehending the system is critical to achieving success. Cultural differences and barriers are some aspects that need to be considered, especially when dealing with people. Failure to understand these factors can eventually lead to a situation where individuals or groups will not be supported despite their good will. This emphasizes the importance of having a native language partner who can help translate the intentions of each team and direct them to the appropriate channels. Language barriers can present a complicated obstacle.

One of the primary strategies involves conducting short briefs, seminars, and lectures for welfare staff and educators on ways to support young people in difficult situations. A language barrier was revealed during the initial attempts to organize sessions in English to assist professional care workers in Ukraine. The lessons learned from these attempts were analyzed. It was agreed that it is essential to eliminate any language barrier in guidance and instruction when dealing with delicate matters such as handling crises. All the contents should be conveyed to the participants in their native language.

However, a translator is needed to achieve this objective, and thus a budget is required. Fortunately, Rolf Widmer, former FICE president and supporter of Hand in Hand, responded to the need and provided a generous sum for this mission. His contributions helped Hand in Hand achieve its goal of providing valuable assistance to care workers in Ukraine. Continued funding may be required to sustain the work of the translation working group, as there is a need to cover expenses for translation and to engage specialists who work on topics relevant to the group.

### ***Identifying Needs***

As discussed, one of the primary objectives of Hand in Hand's initiative is to identify the needs of children and teenagers, both those who remain in Ukraine and those who have temporarily fled to neighboring countries during the war. This was challenging since numerous necessities were called for, from food and shelter to emotional and educational support. The supporting organization UEP focuses on providing fundamental physical needs, while the RGU aims to respond to the emotional and educational needs of children and teenagers.

After much debate and consideration of our abilities and budgetary constraints, we decided to concentrate on two primary fields: welfare and education support. Our approach involved training and qualifying professional personnel to care for the children and teenagers in these areas. While it is still too early to determine if this approach has been successful, there is no doubt that the right approach was taken: identifying the real needs of the children and teenagers in Ukraine and finding the means to address them.

After two years of intense activity, we have made significant progress in identifying the needs of children and teenagers in Ukraine, such as: improving their psychoemotional well-being (sleep



is often disrupted in both children and adults in Ukraine); maintaining connections with their school and class; access to services of a psychologist, psychotherapist, and psychiatrist; fostering healthy relationships between parents and children; protecting children from trauma caused by shelling; and access to inclusive education. Our approach to training and qualifying professional personnel to provide care has been fruitful, and we are confident that it will continue to yield positive results.

### ***Setting Realistic Aims and Targets***

Over the last three years, we have engaged in several brainstorming sessions to advance our work in two areas. First, with regard to welfare, child protection, and education, we have cooperated closely with specialists who work with families. This involves providing courses to educators and social workers and increasing the proficiency of educators operating in crises. We have made significant progress in this area thanks to the hard work, involvement, and support of the UEP and the RGU. Second, we have attempted to work directly with youth and teenagers to address their mental health through a newly planned project in conjunction with the European Youth Foundation. The aim was to conduct educational and psychological activities among young people and work directly with them. Unfortunately, we still have not succeeded in this endeavor due to insufficient funds. We recognize that the ability to set realistic aims that can be implemented is crucial in such a mission. As such, we plan to analyse the reasons for this failure to date and put to use the lessons learned to set realistic targets and achieve success in the future.

### ***Capabilities and Limitations of the Task Force: The Importance of Networking and Personal Connections***

When establishing a non-funded voluntary task force, it is crucial to set realistic aims and targets while also recognizing the capabilities and limitations of the group. Leaders must utilize their resources and recruit the right personnel for the mission for the team to operate effectively. It is essential for the appointing organization to support and back the established group and ensure that the leaders have the necessary resources and personnel to successfully carry out the task at hand.

The task force recognized that its own capabilities are defined by the personal skills of its team members and that networking and personal connections are crucial to achieving its goals. The task force contacted FICE members, international organizations, and personal contacts to expand the team but needed help to recruit new members. Despite the challenges, the task force received excellent support from FICE members worldwide, including those in Israel, Great Britain, Mulberry Bush (UK), Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Romania, Moldova, Croatia, Austria, Finland, Canada, Brazil, and the United States. The task force realized that personal relationships and a strong commitment significantly motivated people to participate and take action.

Hand in Hand has expanded its support base by utilizing efforts and personal relationships with organizations such as UEP and the RGU. These partnerships, established with the endorsement of

their leaders, have played a pivotal role in enabling the task force to engage more individuals in its activities. It is also commendable that these organizations have become an indispensable part of the task force, actively participating in its daily and long-term planning activities.

### ***Funds and Finance***

A voluntary organization must have a finance and budget plan to ensure its smooth operation and long-term sustainability. One key aspect that should be considered when establishing an operational task group is ensuring that the organization has sufficient funds and finances to support the task force's operation.

Initially, our task force operated without funds and solely relied on donations and the resources brought in by the task force heads. However, when the translation challenge was identified, we were fortunate to receive support from Rolf Widmer, who generously supported us for three years. Mr. Widmer has also shown his willingness to help us organize the finances for our future seminar in Switzerland, for which we are very grateful.

However, we should rely on more than the goodwill of external donors or supporters to finance our operations. We must have a solid financial plan and establish collaborations with organizations such as FICE to ensure we have sufficient funds to operate effectively. With proper funding and financial planning, the task force's ability to operate may be further improved, facilitating our ability to make a meaningful impact.

### ***Strengthening the Task Force***

Hand in Hand is looking for new members from the national sections of FICE to join the task force. Building efficient and effective communication between members is crucial in order to achieve the best results and assist professionals in Ukraine. The sessions organized by Hand in Hand provide a valuable platform for gathering first-hand information and ideas from experts, humanitarian aid representatives, welfare professionals, and educators about the situations and challenges the Ukrainian education and welfare systems face. Involving different organizations and people from all over Ukraine to work together to support the country and its people is essential. By working together and sharing knowledge, we can significantly impact the lives of vulnerable children and young people affected by the crisis in Ukraine.

### ***Lessons Learned***

We should try to find ways to promote at least two issues that we have not been able to promote and implement in the past two years although both are of great importance for enhancing our effectiveness:

- **Youth empowerment:** Empower young people by training, teaching skills, providing job opportunities, and opportunities to participate in community service. Encourage them to become actively involved in rebuilding their communities.

- **Monitoring systems:** The team will continue to develop computerized monitoring systems for children, to integrate the welfare and education systems and track the well-being of Ukrainian children abroad. This initiative aims to improve the status of children in Ukraine and ensure the safety and protection of those who are away from home.

### *The Day After*

It has been two years since the special task force Hand in Hand started operating. After lengthy deliberations, a decision was made to create a roadmap for the “day after”, when the war is over. The main challenge for Ukrainians will be to rebuild and to achieve new victories. The reconstitution of Ukrainian society will be the primary national mission.

When that time comes, the Hand in Hand task force plans to focus on the following areas to provide comprehensive care and support for vulnerable children:

- **Psychosocial support:** It is essential to set up resilience centers that will provide counselling services and safe spaces for children to express their feelings, deal with trauma, and receive emotional support during and after the conflict. This will help ensure their mental well-being.
- **Educational continuity:** Education should be prioritized by providing learning materials, supporting distance learning, and rebuilding damaged schools. Ensuring access to quality education can help alleviate the impact of disrupted schooling and living situations.
- **Protection measures:** Implement child protection programs to safeguard vulnerable unaccompanied children from exploitation, abuse, and trafficking.
- **Community engagement:** Engage local communities, parents, and caregivers in decision-making processes to create safe environments for children.

Accomplishing these plans will require: (a) prioritizing the mental health and psychosocial needs of children affected by the conflict in Ukraine to prevent long-term scars; (b) providing essential social–emotional resources to children and families affected by the conflict; (c) ensuring access to quality education and other necessary services, even during times of crisis; (d) developing and implementing effective monitoring systems to assess children’s well-being and track their progress; (e) supporting the professional development of practitioners and professionals working with vulnerable children to ensure they have the skills and knowledge necessary to provide high-quality care; and (f) conducting research to better understand the impacts of conflict on children and young people as a basis for future interventions.

By prioritizing these areas and working collaboratively, FICE International and Hand in Hand hope to positively impact the lives of children and families affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

*Let us work together to support Ukraine’s children during this challenging time and beyond.*

### **References**

Many organizations, resources, and programs have been mentioned in this article, all of them complex and evolving. Readers interested in more information are asked to contact either of the lead authors, Dr. Alex Schneider or Marianna Bilyk.