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Improving data on children in alternative care

Leveraging Primero data in the benefit of the most vulnerable: national-level statistics on subgroups of the child population

Note by the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption and UNICEF Romania*

Abstract

In humanitarian contexts, the exposure of children to various risks sharply escalates, calling for robust and efficient systems to improve protection. Primero, an innovative digital platform managed by the National Authority for the Protection of Children Rights and Adoption, emerges as a pivotal tool in these scenarios.

In line with the 2022 Guidance endorsed by the 70th plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians, the platform produces, among others, disaggregated data on unaccompanied and separated children, on violence against children, on children in alternative care, and on children with disabilities. Primero plays the double function of management and statistical tool, with the ultimate goal of being repurposed into serving all categories of refugee children, irrespective of their country of origin.

The present paper delves into the data-related benefits of utilizing Primero in the context of the Ukraine refugee crisis, emphasizing its impact on addressing children's needs. Starting with July 2022, Primero has facilitated the collection and management of critical data for more than 35,000 children in Romania, supporting the production of statistics at a national scale, on a sub-set of the child population, namely refugee children from Ukraine.

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NOTE: The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

I. Introduction

1. As of the beginning of 2024, over 4.7 million Ukrainians and over half a million third country nationals Ukrainians entered Romania since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of the Ukraine, and almost 50% of them are children[1]. Currently, it is estimated that almost 80,000 Ukrainian citizens are residing in Romania[2]. Similar to other bordering and destination countries part of the first reception and temporary protection and integration of Ukrainian refugees, Romania immediately set up mechanisms to provide initial support to those crossing its borders, as well as to identify the most vulnerable population in need of additional support. One of these mechanisms, whose adaptation for the use in the Romanian context begun just a few weeks after the escalation of the context is Primero.

2. Primero is an open-source software platform composed of two separate and interconnected modules:

    *   A Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS+), designed for child protection case workers and social services providers;

    *   A Gender-based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS+) for survivor-centred GBV case management, referrals and incident monitoring.

3. Developed starting from 2013, as of the end of 2023 Primero was active in 56 countries, with over 11,000 active users reaching more than 1.5 million vulnerable people.

4. After one year and a half from its initial deployment, the Primero database in Romania has become the largest of the world, with over 35,000 children registered in the platform, as well as over 30,000 adult caregivers. It is also the first example of complete handover of the management of the platform from UNICEF to the host Government. Given the positive results and the pathfinding nature of the use of Primero in Romania, this paper explores and takes stock of the Romanian experience and the role that the system has acquired as both a case management tool and a statistical tool in favour of the most vulnerable migrant and refugee children.

II. The use of Primero in Romania: from launch to integration in national information and case management system

5. Given the readiness of the software infrastructure and its documented success, the decision to employ Primero in Romania was taken in a matter of weeks after the escalation of the conflict of February 2022. On the other hand, the full deployment of the system required its translation and adaptation to the specific needs of the country, the procurement and distribution of the hardware, as well as the training of the outreach personnel in charge of the identification, registration and follow-up of cases in the platform.

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1 Data from General Inspectorate for Border Police, Department for Emergency Situations as of 21st of January of 2024
2 Ibid.

6. As of mid-March 2022, the platform was already fully translated in Romanian and by the end of April a Primero working group composed of the National Authority for the Protection of Children Rights and Adoption (NAPCRA), County General Direction for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) from Timis and Vaslui, UNICEF, UNHCR and the NGO Sera. In less than a month from there, a context-specific Primero registration form was tailored. In June the platform was ready for implementation in Romania and in the following weeks the personnel in charge of using it was trained and deployed to the border crossing points and main transit areas of the country. As of July 25th, Primero was rolled-out in Bucharest and all 41 counties of Romania. With the technical and financial support of UNICEF and Sera, the NAPCRA counted with almost 400 people registering and conducting the initial assessment of Ukrainian children entering Romania.

7. Users of Primero in Romania are divided into three different roles, with Users, County Coordinators and the central level Country Coordinator. Users are responsible with identifying the children, conducting the interview, which entails real-time data entry in Primero, updating the annexes and reporting, on a regular basis, on the situation in the field. The **user** role is assigned to social workers and psychologists employed by the General Directory of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) the county level child protection authorities, and by NGOs accredited as service providers, under DGASPC's coordination. The coordination of users falls under the responsibility of a **county coordinator**, designated as well by DGASPC, and includes the following tasks: coordinating field activities and keeping a close contact with the other county administrators, supervising, guiding, and planning the registration process in advance, checking on the status of the registration process in the field and extracting reports on a regular basis. At the central level, a **country coordinator** is in charge of overall monitoring and coordination of other users as well as data consolidation, analysis and production of reports. This role was initially co-held by UNICEF and the NAPCRA until the completion of the handover process towards the latter.

8. While at the beginning of the implementation of Primero in Romania, in order to speed up the process of deployment and implementation of the platform in the country, UNICEF held a co-management position from the operational point of view, this role was progressively handed over entirely to the NAPCRA. The process of progressive integration of Primero as a new tool in the national case management system was facilitated by involvement and leading role played by the NAPCRA from the initial steps of the process. After the initial set up of the system for Romania, a first Memorandum of Understanding between NAPCRA, SERA Foundation and UNICEF was signed in July 2022 with the goal of clarifying roles and responsibilities in the initial phases of joint work. A second Memorandum of Understanding, this time focused on the handover of Primero, was signed between UNICEF and the NAPCRA in December 2022.

9. Currently, Primero is managed by the NAPCRA who is also in charge of the more complex architecture of the National Informatic System on Adoption (SINA) which includes different modules aimed at ensuring the identification and support to all children in needs in the country, like the National Child Observatory for the registration and case management of all cases of vulnerable children in Romania and the Adoption module for the registration of all cases of children entering Romania's Special Protection System.

III.   The role of Primero as a case management tool

10. Since its initial launch in Romania, the primary role of Primero was to be able to identify and then follow up to cases of particularly vulnerable categories of migrant and refugee children, such as unaccompanied or separated children, or children at risk or victims of violence, exploitation, or abuse. The use of Primero is based on seven guiding principles: i) Do no harm; ii) Prioritization of the best interest of the child; iii) child participation; iv) Non-discrimination; v) informing the child/caregiver about the process (authorization); vi) Respect confidentiality; vii) Maintaining professional boundaries.

11. The case management process in Primero was carried out according to the Standard Operating Procedures developed following seven consecutive steps, as presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Primero Registration Process Flow
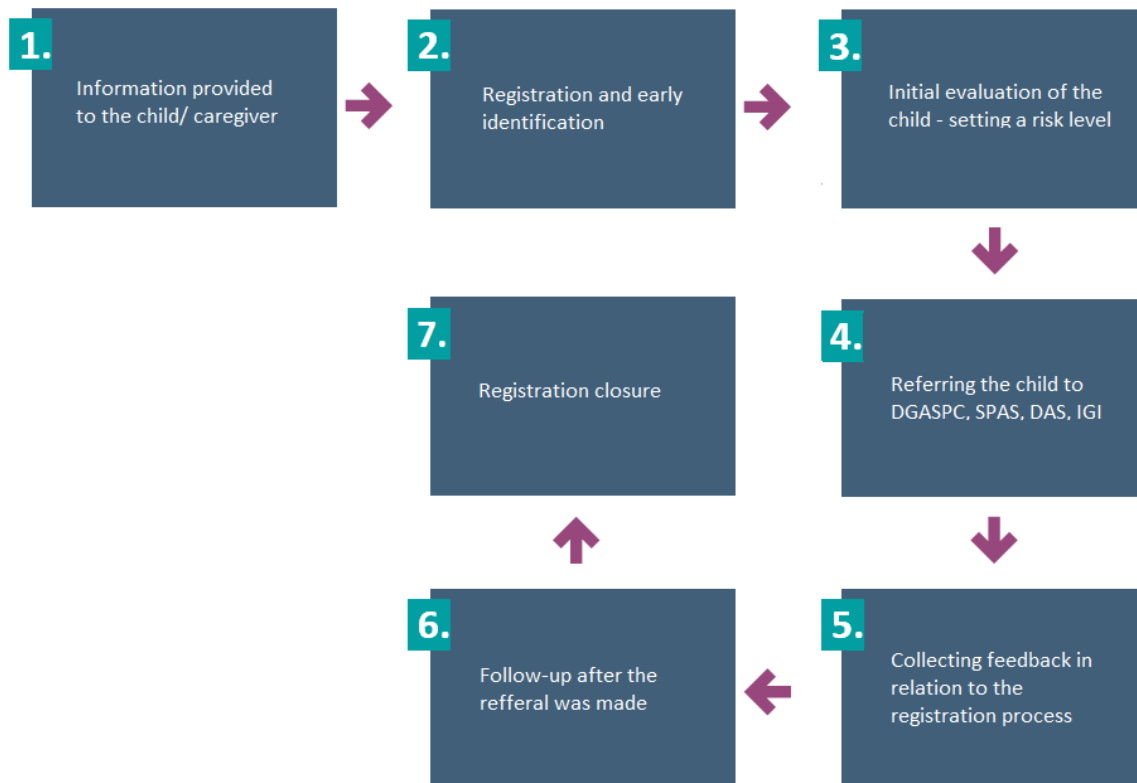
12. The registration process, which is conducted through a form of 56 different questions, spaces from bio data of the child and his/her caregiver and other accompanying children and adults, information on current and planned temporary location of residence, possible transit towards other countries, caregiving arrangements as well as protection concerns. The latter are identified through general dialogue and if directly raised by the interviewee and not asked directly and include the following: physical abuse, bullying, violence in school, online violence, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, abandonment, child labour and hazardous work, sexual exploitation, trafficking, other forms of violence against children, child/adolescent pregnancy, adolescent mother, child marriage, victim of a crime, begging, street children, threat or attempt to suicide,

witness of domestic violence, alcohol consumption/substance abuse in the family, school abandonment, delinquency/predelinquency, behavioural problems, medical problems, runaways, child with disability, precarious living resources, lack of documentation/birth registration, family history of domestic violence, highly vulnerable care arrangement and other residual category. Based on the outcomes of the initial registration and assessment of vulnerabilities, the case is assigned a priority level, supported, and referred to the necessary services. Based on the assigned level of risk, follow-ups need to be conducted between every 2 weeks (high risk) and 2 months (low risk).

13. As of the 31st of December of 2023, the total number of children registered in Primero in Romania was of 33,936, each one with its own case management process and over half of which (18,208 corresponding to 53,6%) already closed. Graph 1 below shows the number of registrations completed each month, which reached a maximum of 3,781 in August 2022 and a minimum of 470 in December 2023.

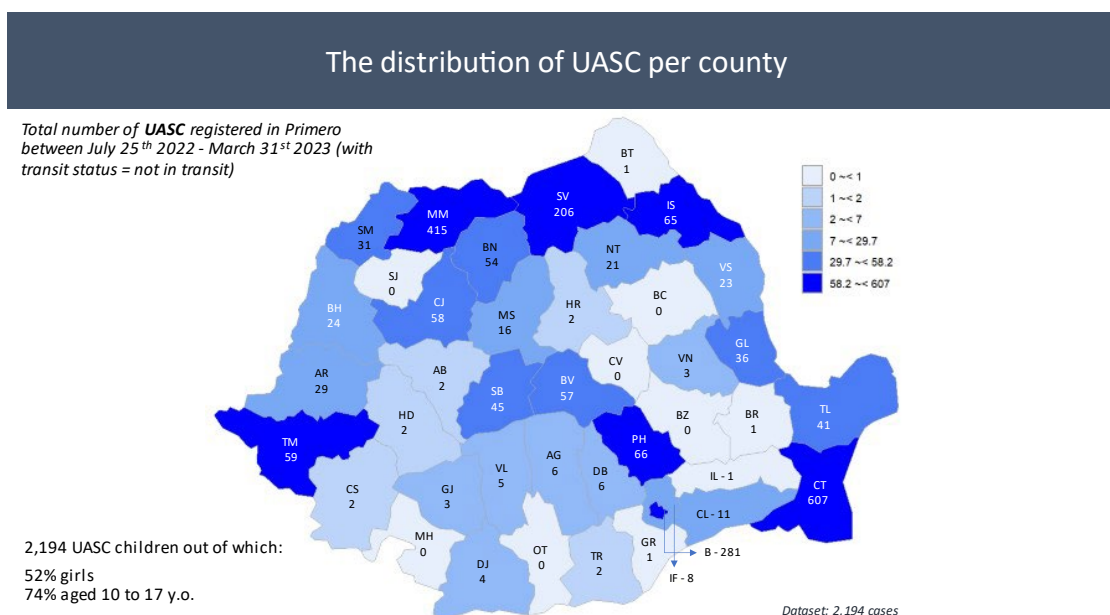Graph 1
Registrations in Primero per month
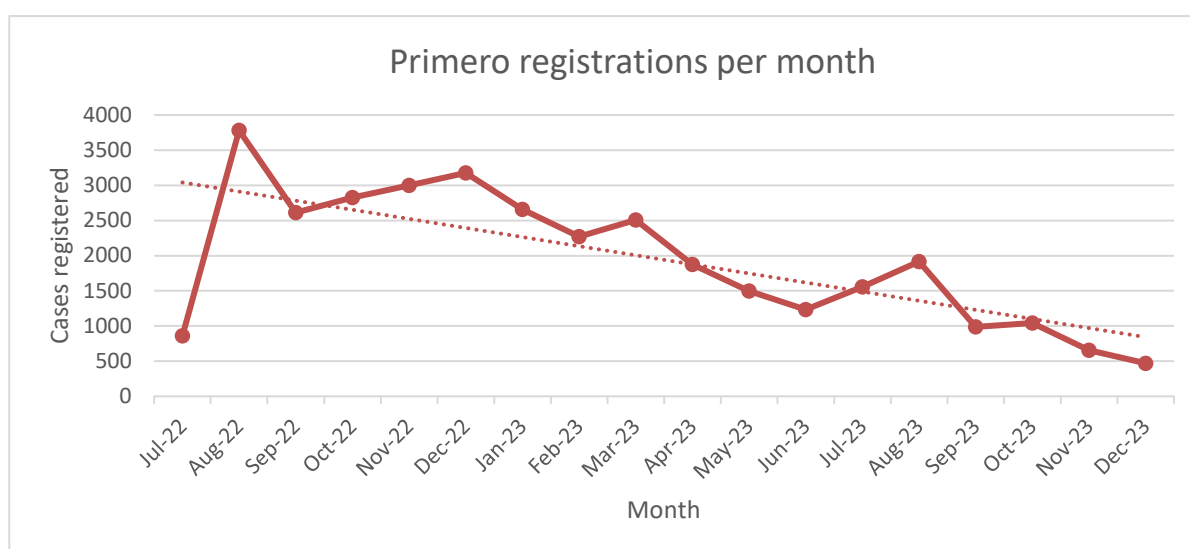
14. Of the total number of cases, in around 11% (3,763) a protection concern was identified, and in 57 cases the risk level was considered high. The vulnerabilities more commonly identified related to disability, insufficient income, school abandonment, health problems, emotional abuse, and neglect.

15. Disaggregated data on the total number of children registered show an overall balance between boys (50.2%) and girls (49.8%) and the division per age groups 0-5 years (24.1%), 6-13 years (24.1%) and 14-17 years (24.1%). Additionally, 30,085 caregivers were also registered.

16. Through the work of the different Primero users and relevant authorities at local (Public Service of Social Assistance – SPAS), county (DGASPC) and national level (NAPCRA), 6,192 cases (18.25) were referred to institutional and private service providers, including 119 cases referred to the Special Protection system for placement in alternative care.

IV.   The role of Primero as a statistical tool

17. In addition to its primary role of case management system, Primero is now being used in Romania also as a tool to generate consolidated figures and statistics. After a year and a half from its launch, as of January 2024 the database of cases includes over 35,000 entries which allow to identify trends on population movements, needs, and use the data for different goals.

18. Given the level of disaggregation available in the system, including geographical disaggregation, data from Primero have been used by the DGASPC and other local authorities to have an overview of the presence of children and families from Ukraine in each county of Romania and to plan responses tailored to their expressed needs. Consolidated data has also been used inter-institutionally, for example in preliminary analysis of the cost of the integration of recipients of temporary protection in the national social protection system currently in the agenda of the Romanian Government.

19. Similarly, the NAPCRA has been providing periodic updates on the number of cases registered in Primero and needs identified to relevant stakeholders involved in the response. Figures 2 and 3 below provide just few examples of use of consolidated Primero data, in the reports provided to the Child Protection sub-working group (CPSWG) established in the country as part of the response to the inflow of people from Ukraine and to a Primero Global Meeting. Figure 2 for example provides an insight on the distribution throughout the country of the over 2,000 unaccompanied and separated children arrived from Ukraine in the first year since the escalation of the conflict. This information served as a tool for child protection authorities and other stakeholders at both national and county level to plan and implement the necessary measures to ensure support to this particularly vulnerable population category.
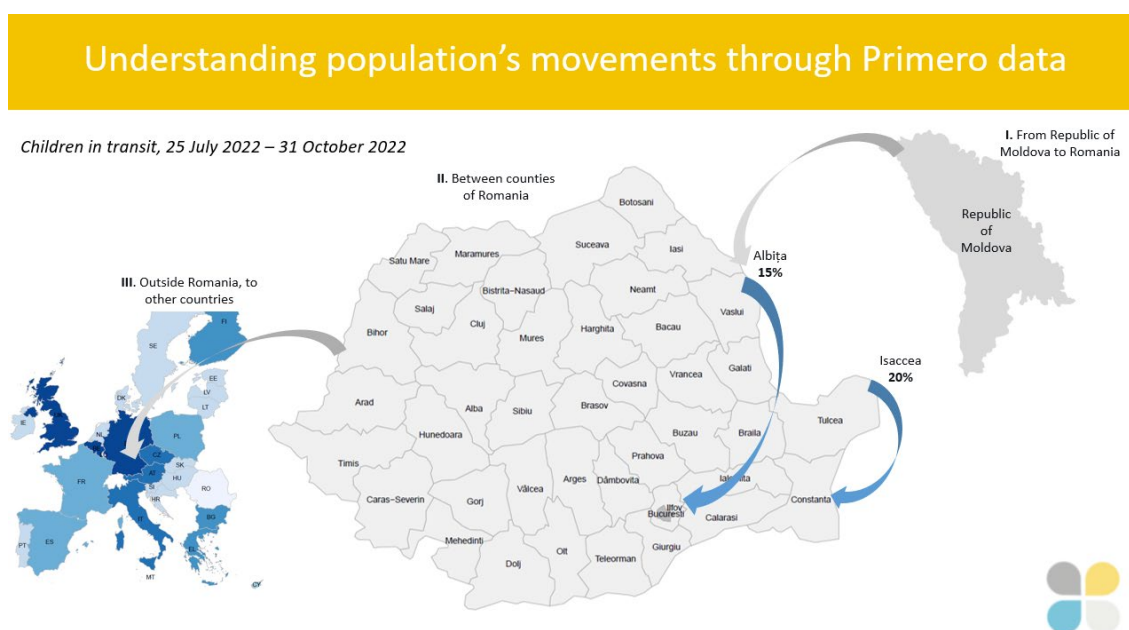
Figure 1
Primero data on UASC provided to the CPSWG in April 2023

The distribution of UASC per county

Total number of **UASC** registered in Primero between July 25 th 2022 - March 31 st 2023 (with transit status = not in transit)

2,194 UASC children out of which:
52% girls
74% aged 10 to 17 y.o.

Dataset: 2,194 cases

20. In another example, figures such as those provided in figure 3 below served the purpose of comparing trends of population movement from different entry points of the country, between the

different counties of Romania, and in transit from Romania towards other countries with the purpose of anticipating the flows of movement of people, setting up the necessary reception measures as well as being able to monitor the evolution of the refugee crisis from a cross-country perspective. Establishing similar interconnecting systems in neighbouring countries could provide a useful network to monitor the movement trends of displaced people even beyond the specific instance of the response to the Ukraine crisis, having at the centre the benefit of the populations on the move.

Figure 2

Report on intention of travel generated using Primero data to the Primero Global Meeting 2022

21. While as presented above the data has been shared with relevant stakeholders in technical fora, non-sensitive aggregated data are published externally in a quarterly basis by the NAPCRA as shown in figure 4 below to contribute to the dissemination and public use of data as well as transparency and accountability of public institutions[3].

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[3] Data can be accessed in the Statistics section of NAPCRA's website available here: https://copii.gov.ro/1/date-statistice-copii-si-adoptii/

Figure 3
NAPCRA's report on children from Ukraine based on data obtained through Primero.
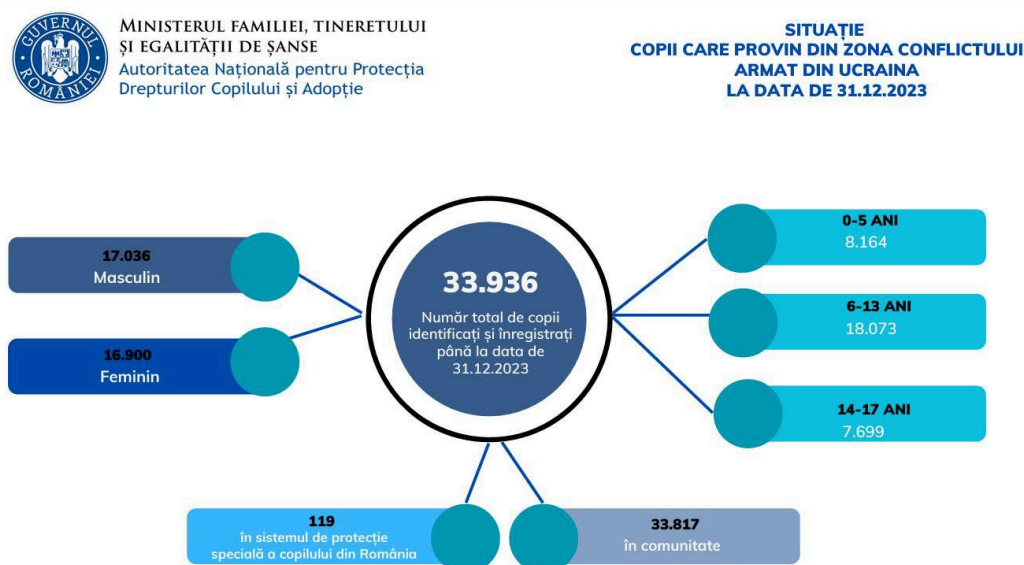
V. Conclusions

22. Taking stock of the use of Primero after one and a half year from its deployment in Romania allows for several reflections and discussions on lessons learned. While from one side the implementation of Primero posed different challenges, the process showed clear results, among which it stands out the fact that in such a short timeframe the system has become part of the institutional case and information management architecture in Romania.

23. Between the major challenges faced in the implementation process, three are worth being highlighted:

- Mistrust in registration: especially in the initial phases of the crisis, many instances of refusal to be registered in the platform were received, due to a mix of general mistrust caused by the uncertainty of the initial displacement and suspicion in providing personal data upon arrival in a new country. To face this, increased efforts were made in providing a comprehensive and clear explanation of the purpose and goal of the registration in Primero, including GDPR compliancy, and public communication around the platform was strengthened. Another solution was found in applying a snowball sampling technique in registration, relying on referrals among acquaintances who already benefitted of being included in Primero to surpass the initial suspicion.

- Open/closed questions: in the first months of deployment, several different adjustments had to be made to the platform to ensure the right balance between open and closed questions, balancing from one side the need to obtain the more precise possible information to facilitate case management, but at the same time ensuring a sufficient level of rigor to allow for data to be consolidated and used for statistical purposes.

- Data analysis, sharing and use: throughout the whole implementation process, difficulties were experienced in coordinating and promoting the effective analysis and sharing of data. While for a long time consolidated data were requested and released on an ad hoc basis by the different institutions and stakeholders, the positive initiative of the periodic data sharing conducted by the NAPCRA with data from Primero is promoting a more regular and constructive data sharing system

24. Despite these challenges and progressive adjustments, it has to be recognized that in just a matter of months Primero has become a reality in the day-to-day efforts to provide support to people fleeing from Ukraine and has already become one of the entry points for the identification and referral of cases to the Romanian child protection system. In a year and a half only, Primero has shown high level results both as a tool for individualized support to the most vulnerable children, but also as a tool to support evidence collection and use for planning interventions.

25. Beyond these two crucial achievements, Primero is also contributing to a broader process, aimed at strengthening the level of digitalization of social services in a Romania. By providing quality real-time data, Primero is also a crucial component in advancing evidence-based and needs-oriented planning at different institutional and non-institutional level and promoting a culture of data throughout the country and beyond, showing Romania's achievements in protecting displaced children and their families.

26. Because of its readiness the use of Primero in Romania has proved its value as an available and adaptable open-source tool, and the results obtained contributed to a better response in favour of children and families from Ukraine.