

Humanitarian action in an evolving Russia-Ukraine conflict

Virtual roundtable, 15 September 2022

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Key messages

Ukraine is comprised of several humanitarian contexts, each with different needs and challenges. This requires different types of response to occur in parallel. There is also the chance for recovery in areas no longer directly affected by conflict.

Winter will bring greater humanitarian demand and there are concerns that preparations to date have been insufficient. The dynamic conflict requires collective action to press for cross-line access. Upholding humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence is key in negotiating this access, but has proved challenging.

Now is the time to start planning for the medium and long term. The Ukrainian government and civil society should be better supported to meet needs themselves wherever possible. Humanitarian funding from donor governments needs to be more flexible, multi-year and more directly accessible to Ukrainian organisations. Strong coordination will be required between humanitarian and recovery and state-building actors - including multilateral development banks.

Funding to local actors remains unacceptably low and the relationship between international and national/local organisations in the response is strained. Policy commitments to localisation face an important test in Ukraine: if meaningful support for locally led humanitarian action does not happen in Ukraine, where local aid groups have high levels of capacity and long-standing interconnections, there is no reason to suggest it will be done at scale in any other response.

Acknowledgements

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Purpose of the note

This note summarises the discussion points of a private online roundtable held by the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI with support from the British Red Cross on 15 September 2022. Participants comprised senior staff from key donor governments, multilateral development banks and international and national humanitarian organisations operating in Ukraine.

The discussion sought to understand how donors and operational agencies should prioritise resources to reach those most in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, in accordance with humanitarian principles, and how the humanitarian sector can best aid recovery efforts.

Challenges and opportunities of an evolving conflict

The dynamics of the Ukraine conflict shifted again over the summer of 2022, with Ukrainian forces retaking large swathes of territory, including population centres and transport hubs important for Russia's invasion. These recent developments also highlight the diverse and evolving levels of need present across the country. One-third of Ukraine's population is in need of humanitarian assistance. While frontline and newly liberated areas are a focus for humanitarian emergency response, areas more indirectly affected by the conflict are hosting the majority of the country's 7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees who have returned from abroad. These areas have the potential to transition to recovery. In Ukraine, a strong government and civil society network continue to provide opportunities for ensuring effective and sustainable provision in such areas.

However, economies in IDP-hosting areas have been severely impacted. Without rapid foreign assistance in terms of budget support and private sector support that would allow the Ukrainian authorities and markets to respond themselves to the needs of IDPs, foreign humanitarian aid will need to continue even in those more stable regions. High expectations have been placed on the forthcoming Berlin donor conference on 25 October (Ukrinform, 2022), but bilateral donors and multilateral development banks are faced with significant risks. The Ukrainian government's architecture to manage humanitarian and recovery efforts is getting stronger but is still a work in progress. In addition, more needs to be done to ensure the participation of grassroots groups of displaced persons in the government's recovery and reconstruction plan and reintegration efforts.

Yet arguably the most pressing challenge facing humanitarian responders is accessing and operating in Russian-held areas of Ukraine, and accessing Ukrainian refugees in Russia itself. Occupied areas of Ukraine are also hosting high numbers of displaced people, but access

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negotiations for organisations perceived to be affiliated with Ukrainian or Western powers have proved very difficult. This makes carrying out needs assessments and response almost impossible, with this situation likely to deteriorate. Constant requests for access have had very limited success. Very few humanitarian organisations are present in the occupied areas and, as a result, populations are underserved compared with the rest of the country.

Winter is expected to bring more displacement and increased need for emergency relief, with organisations now focused on scaling up the provision of heating systems and shelters. Concerns that a frustrated Russian army will step up its targeting of civilian infrastructure have led to humanitarian organisations seeking to identify and sustain essential infrastructure, including power-generating infrastructure, ahead of the winter months. While winter preparations are crucial, they are short term and limit the capacity of humanitarians to plan for further ahead.

Crucially, humanitarian principles have proved challenging to uphold. On the one hand, the interstate nature of the conflict provides strong normative frameworks regarding the obligations and duties of the warring parties, including on the protection of certain categories of persons and the provision of relief. Neutrality, impartiality and independence are key tenets used by humanitarian agencies in their negotiations with the Ukrainian and Russian authorities to access all areas affected by the conflict. On the other hand, blurred divisions between civil and military actors and support to them has made it difficult to maintain the strictly civilian nature of humanitarian aid and has increased the risk of diversion, fraud and corruption.

The space for neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action continues to be squeezed between military and political actors and narratives, not least by many Ukrainians who see little justification for strictly delineating humanitarian from military action. Humanitarian organisations are growing concerned at reports of misuse of humanitarian symbols, discrimination in humanitarian assistance on religious grounds, and legislation being proposed that would criminalise engagement with non-state parties in Russian-held areas, potentially constraining cross-line aid delivery even further.

Humanitarian response funding is high and has rapidly scaled up. Some donors are providing 12 times more money now than they were in February. Yet much of this funding is worryingly short term and at the project level, and there are concerns for the sustainability of operations once funding inevitably falls, or humanitarian needs shift with a dynamic conflict. Time pressures on spending limit sustainability and effectiveness, and increase the risk of misuse. And in such a context, with high funding and a strong civil society, the strained relationships between international and local organisations are striking. Funding to local organisations remains insufficient and raises serious doubts of the ability and willingness of the international system to localise in this and every other humanitarian response.

Shaping the future of humanitarian action in Ukraine

Participants in the roundtable converged around a number of actions required to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the evolving context. These are as follows.

More collective action is needed – involving both humanitarian and political actors – to advocate for humanitarian access to all conflict-affected areas for all humanitarian actors.

Currently, many humanitarian organisations are advocating for access individually – this needs to shift to a collective approach. The international agreement to unblock Ukraine’s export of grain sets a useful precedent for the type of accord needed to alleviate suffering. Humanitarians should advocate for a similar agreement on accessing populations in need in Russian-held areas. In doing so, supportive governments should be more assertive in protecting principled humanitarian action.

Collective strategies are also needed to preserve humanitarian principles. Donors and international humanitarian organisations are well aware that the window for upholding the neutrality, impartiality and independence of humanitarian action in Ukraine is narrowing. They should be vocal in their support for the value of principled humanitarian action, as well as advocating for displaced people being properly included in reconstruction and reintegration planning led by the Ukrainian government and proposed legislation in this regard. For example, there are precedents within the government’s legal frameworks for municipal-level youth councils that could be replicated with displaced people, to improve their buy-in to, and participation in, recovery efforts.

Humanitarian action in Ukraine should be planned for the long term. The current model based on emergency response everywhere in Ukraine will not be sustainable in the long run. The government’s proposed reintegration strategy for displaced persons is a positive move that humanitarians should engage with and influence. As recovery and reconstruction funding and programmes start to come on stream, humanitarian agencies need to reflect on their future comparative advantage. They should focus the provision of emergency relief in the areas of highest need inaccessible to governments systems, i.e. Russian-occupied areas or those recently liberated by Ukrainian forces. At the same time, they should develop programmes that strengthen resilience. Some non-governmental organisations are already focusing on strengthening agricultural systems and markets, and programmes that can pivot to government systems in the future: cash-transfer programmes and their link to government social safety nets are one obvious example. Humanitarians are also uniquely placed to provide technical assistance to multilateral development banks and Ukrainian line ministries, to ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalised, including IDPs, are included in recovery efforts and to help manage risks.

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Financing mechanisms and donor practices must be adapted. To ensure sustainable and effective responses, funding needs to move from current short-term, project-level grants to multi-year, flexible grants which allow organisations to adapt to a rapidly changing humanitarian picture, and which ensure that they are adequately supported when funding inevitably decreases in the future. Donors and international humanitarian organisations need to invest more in the capacity of Ukrainian authorities and civil society to respond to humanitarian needs. Following the good precedent set by some donors, more funding should flow directly to Ukrainian aid organisations – particularly those able to access areas that international agencies cannot – while making sure that risks are not merely transferred to them. Reporting requirements need to be harmonised to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on local organisations. As the only multilateral fund able to provide grants directly to Ukrainian organisations, the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund¹ should be adapted to provide multi-year, flexible grants that include overheads.

1 See www.unocha.org/ukraine/about-uhf.

References

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