

Navigating humanitarian dilemmas in the Ukraine crisis

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May 2022

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This paper was made possible by the generous support of the British Red Cross.

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How to cite: Saez, P. (2022) *Navigating humanitarian dilemmas in the Ukraine crisis*. HPG emerging analysis. London: ODI (<https://www.odi.org/en/publications/navigating-humanitarian-dilemmas-in-the-ukraine-crisis>).

Acknowledgements

About the authors

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Introduction

The Ukraine crisis presents **heightened tensions and dilemmas** for humanitarian actors – some familiar, others new. These are informed by a fraught geopolitical context and a rapid series of developments.

This could be a very long war, with no end to the violence in sight. A second phase has already begun: Russia has intensified hostilities in Eastern and Southern Ukraine – which have been the most severely impacted – while rebuilding its capacity to carry out attacks elsewhere. The conflict is reverberating globally through rising commodity prices, food insecurity and energy shocks (Pantuliano, 2022). It is also seen as a pivotal moment in geopolitics: a nuclear power, and a permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council (or P5), triggering a conflict in Europe paves the way for turmoil and challenge to other multilateral institutions, such as the European Union and NATO, and the current rules-based international order.

The humanitarian impact is severe: the civilian death toll stands at over 5,000 (OHCHR, 2022). Almost one-third of the country's population has been forcibly displaced, including 7.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 5 million refugees, the fastest-growing refugee flow since the Second World War (DTM, 2022; UNHCR, 2022). There has been heavy shelling of populated urban centres. Russia is increasingly targeting strategic fuel stocks and industrial facilities. Hundreds of thousands of people in Ukraine are without electricity. There have been numerous attacks on healthcare facilities and schools.

Humanitarian needs and the ability to respond to them will vary according to context. These include:

- Contested areas where fighting is the most intense or are under siege. This is where needs will continue to be most acute and most difficult to respond to.
- Areas occupied by Russian forces, or are under Russian influence but where authority is unclear. This is where Ukrainian resistance will continue to be active. Needs here are also likely to be acute and difficult to respond to. While in some contexts Russia might want to be seen to be minimising suffering, in others it could also collectively punish populations for resisting, or continue to deport civilians to Russia.

- Areas of relative peace under Ukrainian government control. These areas will continue to struggle with the influx of IDPs and the impact of the war on the economy, infrastructure and services.
- Neighbouring and other countries with refugees. People in this situation will continue to need short-term relief while on the move, but above all access to jobs and services to become self-reliant.
- Russia itself, which might see a rise in the number of people facing extreme poverty and vulnerability as a result of the economic impact of the conflict, including international sanctions.

The crisis has triggered extraordinary levels of solidarity. National and local governments in neighbouring countries have mobilised quickly. In contrast with their response to refugees from other conflicts, EU countries are providing temporary protection and access to jobs and services to Ukrainians seeking refuge. The UN humanitarian flash appeal for Ukraine is one of the largest, fastest and most generously funded ever, and the United Kingdom's public emergency appeal from the Disasters Emergency Committee (only one example of public donation instruments) has attracted more funding for Ukraine than all previous nine appeals combined (FTS, 2022; DEC, 2022). With these resources, international organisations have been mounting large operations inside Ukraine and in neighbouring countries, with varying levels of coordination with and support to national authorities.

What are the options for humanitarian actors in this crisis? The following are extreme positions towards which these actors might be pulled, rather than exclusive binary choices.

Humanitarian dilemmas

Aid or solidarity?

International humanitarian organisations and their donors are structured around a concept of aid that has been challenged in recent years, whether explicitly through calls to decolonise the sector or implicitly through calls to shift towards locally led humanitarian action and improved accountability to affected people (Peace Direct, 2022; HPG, 2022; Lough and O’Callaghan, 2022). Advocates of 'solidarity over charity' criticise an aid model based on the idea of people having some sort of deficit instead of recognising the structural roots of their needs; on the giver having the expertise to decide what affected people need and how to respond, instead of recognising their right to decide; and on inward and upward accountability to governing boards and donors instead of accountability to people they serve (Whitley, 2020).

In Europe, solidarity-oriented groups have burgeoned in the context of the so-called migration crisis since the mid-2010s and the growth of 'mutual aid' in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Ukraine and neighbouring countries, responses by national and local governments, civil society and local communities have dominated since the beginning of the crisis. Mutual aid has found ways to flow on platforms as unlikely as Airbnb (The Independent, 2022). While traditional humanitarians recognise the value of community-led responses in theory, they often displace or circumvent them through their traditional top-down response models. That approach might become wholly unacceptable in a context where local responses are so strong. There are also potential opportunities for the Red Cross Movement, for example, or faith-based international networks that are based on local volunteering to take a more prominent role.

Neutrality or political resistance?

There have always been two humanitarian traditions: one fostered by the Red Cross and based on the principle of neutrality and a position outside of the influence of political actors and development aid, and a second that frames humanitarianism within broader objectives of peace and justice, which engages with development and peace-building activities and is often close to governments. Some have described the 'Solidarists' mentioned above as a third tradition of 'resistance humanitarianism', which has played a key role throughout the history of

wars, independence movements and struggles against authoritarian regimes (Slim, 2022).

The Ukraine crisis will challenge the principle of neutrality. How neutral should humanitarian organisations remain in the face of unprovoked military aggression and gross violations of International Humanitarian Law, without running the risk of being accused of aiding and abetting those violations? This was illustrated by the uproar generated by the visit of the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to Moscow in his role as neutral intermediary, clearly exploited by Russia as a photo opportunity to project respectability.

On the other hand, being perceived as partisan inevitably raises other risks such as being blocked – or even targeted – by Russian forces. Russian authorities are likely to reject any assistance on Russian soil from organisations seen as Western. When faced with a conflict involving two member states pulling the organisation in different directions, the UN's adherence to neutrality does not necessarily enhance its ability to respond in contested areas.

How neutral are international actors funded by governments involved politically and militarily in Ukraine – including the ICRC – actually perceived to be? How does the perception that Ukrainian actors are politicised and sometimes militarily active affect the response of international actors? How are humanitarian organisations managing their public messaging and image when information is used as a key instrument of warfare? The neutrality/partisanship dilemma is not new, but given the geopolitical background to the crisis, the global implications thereof and the continuous real-time visibility it receives online, it might take on new and greater import.

Independence or budget growth?

Mainly Western governments and multilateral organisations have allocated or pledged billions of dollars in bilateral aid to the governments of Ukraine and refugee-hosting countries. The same donors are providing military aid to Ukraine, and they are the main funders of the traditional international humanitarian network of UN agencies, Red Cross/Red Crescent organisations and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) coordinated largely by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Like the question of neutrality, sources of funding often determine where humanitarian organisations operate. Those mainly funded by Western governments predominantly operate in Ukrainian government-controlled areas. They might be even directed to do so by their donors, to signal their solidarity with the Ukrainian government and contribute to alleviating the burden on its economy and infrastructure. Some NGOs could deliberately reject funding from Western governments to avoid

such co-option and maintain their ability to independently identify the most pressing needs and the best way to respond. The proportionally high levels of private funding for this crisis make this option more feasible than in many crises, when it has been an isolated practice by the likes of Médecins Sans Frontières or very small solidarity groups.

Yet even these organisations could struggle to access areas occupied or besieged by Russian forces, or in Russia itself, where local and international NGOs receiving foreign funds are criminalised. Even in areas under Ukrainian control, humanitarian organisations might be targeted by Russian forces. They could also be subject to cyberattacks or digital disinformation campaigns (such a campaign was particularly effective against the White Helmets in Syria) (Chulov, 2020). Such attacks are also likely to target local Ukrainian social services, the Red Cross and faith-based organisations. Small-scale mutual aid groups operating under the radar might be able to continue in occupied or besieged areas, but often only for a time given the parlous conditions.

Impartiality or coverage?

The sheer speed and volume of humanitarian funding made available by donor governments and private sources will put pressure on organisations to spend quickly, which may challenge the principle of impartiality.

The way humanitarian finance is usually channelled – from donor agencies with specific mandates to large UN agencies with specific mandates – will largely determine to which populations, groups or sectors resources flow, instead of an allocation based on severity of need. Western donor funding (whether labelled humanitarian or not) is likely to be deliberately channelled to parts of the country, population groups or organisations that are actively resisting Russian forces. Sanctions might also make it difficult for Western-funded organisations to operate in Russian-occupied areas, or Russia itself.

When considering the challenges to access mentioned above, it is made even more likely that the majority of funding will be directed to areas where it is easiest to operate, i.e., refugee-hosting countries and government-controlled areas in Ukraine. Hard-to-reach areas, such as those under Russian control where fewer people live, could be overlooked. This is in spite of such areas potentially having more acute needs due to the intensity of the conflict and the breakdown of national and local safety nets. The quest to quickly deliver assistance to as many people as possible also risks overlooking persons who are marginalised and discriminated against because of their age, gender, disabilities, ethnicity, or diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Such groups could be further affected by their more limited technological access, including access to multipurpose cash delivered digitally via mobile devices.

How can humanitarian actors navigate these dilemmas?

In navigating these dilemmas, **five determinants** are likely to play a key role, raising a number of critical questions.

Public narratives

Humanitarian crisis and aid narratives are shaped by governments, the media, public opinion and humanitarian organisations' own messaging, in Ukraine, Russia, neighbouring countries, the West and elsewhere. These narratives directly influence aid 'cultures'; relationships between aid organisations, with their donors, parties to the conflict and host governments; and ultimately the effectiveness of the response and its accountability to affected people. How are principles, beliefs and interests shaping these narratives? Can different narratives coexist? Who controls them, and for what purpose? How are they influenced?

Donorship

How donor governments fund, and how they communicate their funding, will affect the scale and shape of the response, and the ability of humanitarian organisations to navigate the tensions mentioned above. How – and how much – organisations raise private donations will also have an impact. Donors directing where resources are spent and how, and presenting their humanitarian aid as part of a package of political and military support to Ukraine, will affect the perceptions of the fund recipients. How can political and military objectives be reconciled with principled humanitarian donorship? Should aid organisations accept this funding or instead use solely private donations? Should they continue to fundraise even when their capacity to absorb such funding is limited by capacity or access constraints?

Architecture

The question of who leads and coordinates the crisis response will greatly influence how dilemmas are navigated. In neighbouring countries, governments have the legitimacy and capacities to coordinate all assistance, including international aid. However, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has substituted some of that responsibility

by establishing itself as the coordinator of the Regional Refugee Response Plan. In Ukraine, the presidency has set up a humanitarian coordination office while there is also a separate UN-led cluster coordination mechanism. Aid efforts across conflict lines need to be independently coordinated with both sides. Ultimately, funding flows and pressure from Western donors will shape the dominant architecture and the level of leadership afforded to governments.

Operating models

How international humanitarian organisations relate to governmental systems and frontline civil society responders will be a key determinant of the effectiveness of the response. In refugee-hosting countries – European countries with strong economies and social services but which are overwhelmed – the obvious model should continue to be to complement and support national capacities without displacing or undermining them.

In Ukraine, similar questions apply. National social services and frontline responders are active and should be preserved and supported as much as possible (Saez and Bryant, 2022). However, the conflict might erode these capacities, particularly in besieged areas. In occupied areas, Russian authorities might seek to replace them – at least on paper – with their own service delivery.

How will international agencies define their role vis-à-vis government social protection systems and civil society responders? What is the nature of donor funding in shaping this role? Which organisations have the responsibility, expertise and capacity to support rather than deliver? In particular, how will humanitarian cash transfers interface with social safety nets?

Technology

Technology has already proved to present both opportunities (e.g., the ability to deliver cash transfers at scale) and threats (e.g., targeted disinformation on social media and the risk of cyberattacks). Given the actors involved, technology is likely to continue to play a determinant role in this response, directly affecting humanitarian access; efficiency and effectiveness; equity in the response; and data protection.

In the coming weeks and months, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), with support from the British Red Cross, will convene a series of public events and private roundtables with key stakeholders in the Ukraine response to discuss ways to manage some of these dilemmas. Sign up to the HPG newsletter to stay up to date.

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