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# Millions were raised to help Ukraine. Where was the aid on the ground?

Thursday 7 July 2022, by [COSTA-KOSTRITSKY Valeria](#), [PAKHOMENKO Varvara](#) (Date first published: 29 June 2022).

## Ukrainian volunteers and organisations did the bulk of the work helping people caught in Russia's invasion, a new report finds

Four months into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it's clear that local volunteers and organisations in the country have borne the brunt of the humanitarian response.

Ad-hoc groups and more established Ukrainian organisations came together to evacuate people from towns and villages affected by the invasion, and get food, medicine and other vital supplies to people who needed them.

Soon Ukrainians - and foreigners who had come to help at the border - started asking the same questions: why were international NGOs absent on the ground while their fundraising drives for Ukraine seemed particularly active and successful across the world?

During the same period and following continued engagement with Russian leaders, the International Committee of the Red Cross saw itself engulfed in a [neutrality row](#) marked by claims it had been supporting the evacuation of civilians to Russia.

A new [report](#) by Humanitarian Outcomes, a team of specialist consultants who advise aid agencies and donor governments, confirms that local groups performed virtually all humanitarian aid in the first six weeks of the Russian invasion. These groups remain, with local authorities, the principal providers of aid in Ukraine today. The report was commissioned by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub, which is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

openDemocracy spoke to Varvara Pakhomenko, a consultant who contributed to this report, about why international aid organisations were absent.

### **oD: Who has done most of the humanitarian response in the months following Russia's invasion?**

**VP:** Ukrainian non-governmental organisations, or, on a greater scale, volunteer groups or individual volunteers [some of whom mobilised in 2014 during the conflict in the Donbas].

Ukrainian volunteers would just go to conflict areas with humanitarian assistance which they had gotten from local businesses, or had bought using their own money, and then evacuated people on their way back. Almost all the funding for this came from private donations.

There was some assistance coming from religious groups, foreign NGOs and some donors supporting human rights or democracy promotion, mostly to Ukrainian organisations.

**oD: Why did big international NGOs leave the country? Is that something that often happens in wartime?**

**VP:** It wasn't just international NGOs which left. It was the whole international community.

In eastern Ukraine, there had been some UN agencies on the ground, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross and some other international NGOs.

Many international organisations in Ukraine had switched from humanitarian assistance to doing development and reconstruction, which doesn't require as many people on the ground.

From what I could see, and what I heard during the interviews [conducted for the report], in the first weeks, these organisations were almost all focused on just saving themselves or saving their own staff. Many were caught in the middle of fighting, because their operations were in east Ukraine, in Donbas, or they had their headquarters in Kyiv.

First, they brought people out. Then they had to start bringing people in, thinking about new logistics, security. These new realities required completely different scales of operation - much, much bigger.

When people from all over the world wanted to support Ukrainians, most of the funding went to the most well-known organisations, which were UN agencies, the ICRC and international NGOs. They received a lot of funding, but weren't able to implement it quickly enough.

**oD: Why were international NGOs so slow?**

**VP:** All the internal procedures in international organisations are built to prevent corruption, misuse of funds. This ended up completely blocking aid operations when the war started. Instead of just quickly giving money to those who were already on the ground, local initiatives, they had to do the proper due diligence, which takes months.

Local groups operating on the ground had no time to fill out proposals to get money. They couldn't provide the standard of reporting that international organisations ask for - for example, when you have to provide ID or documents for all the people receiving assistance from you. How can you ask people for their passport when you've grabbed them from shrapnel flying around or dumped boxes with food in a local central square, in a kindergarten or in a bomb shelter?

**oD: That doesn't work.**

**VP:** No. It's something that we see happening over and over again in different contexts. There's been an understanding that for such situations the international community should adopt the [concept of "no regrets"](#). This would involve acknowledging that international institutions will lose some money in humanitarian response, some money might go the wrong way, or might be lost to corruption. But the most important thing is to deliver to those in need

Now, after four months, many international actors have just started when most urgent humanitarian needs have already been met by local players.

"In the first weeks, international organisations weren't visible even on Ukraine's border with Poland, which is relatively safe"

**oD: Big international NGOs raised a considerable amount of money for Ukraine. The report mentions a lot of these funds have not been used so far.**

**VP:** Yes. We will see whether money reaches those in need. Of course, there is this constant problem that international organisations have big administrative costs. Local organisations, of course, use much, much less for administration.

And that's another problem: now we can see how all these volunteers in Ukraine are just burned out. These volunteers are now running out of money personally. Yet they are much more efficient than international organisations in understanding people's needs and where resources should go.

International institutions can deliver big projects once they manage to start doing it, and they can open the pipe that's supposed to get money flowing. But it's slow, and sometimes too late.

**oD: Do you think there is an increased awareness of international organisations' shortcomings?**

**VP:** We've seen increased criticism of international organisations in recent years about leadership salaries, insider positions, corruption and all of that, so it's nothing new.

In Ukraine, there was a lot of criticism of traditional organisations, especially the UN and ICRC, at the early stage after the Russian invasion. They were mostly [absent on the ground](#), including during the evacuation of civilians. Even President Zelenskyi was openly critical of both the UN and [ICRC](#), although ICRC and UN facilitated the evacuation of around 10,000 civilians from Sumy and Mariupol between March and May period.

The most pressing case was the evacuation from Mariupol where international organisations intervened at a much later stage, in April and May. Initially it was all done by locals.

In the first weeks, international organisations weren't visible even on Ukraine's border with Poland, which is relatively safe. You could have opened an operation immediately. But even on the Polish side, according to reports, it was almost only Polish NGOs which were active in the first weeks. And they were asking the same questions: where are all the international organisations? They only showed up much later.

Now the criticism has calmed down. International organisations are now much more present on the ground than they were initially. I still can see that Ukrainians feel everything is in their hands, whether assisting the army or helping civilians.

**oD: What kind of support do smaller volunteer organisations need now?**

**VP:** Smaller groups have just run out of resources. There was massive support at an individual level, across the world, but now it's running out. They need more funding now. They need people as well: many of those who were involved at the start are burned out. They need volunteers to come. But there's a situation now where there are no jobs. It's very hard to maintain your volunteering when you are unable to provide for your family as well. Many initiatives are trying to get officially registered so they can get some funding and pay their volunteers.

There's also logistical technical issues, like access to fuel, which has become a nightmare in Ukraine. Refineries have been destroyed, as have fuel storage facilities. Fuel is now imported from the EU. It's not only that it's doubled in price but also in many areas close to the frontline you can't get more than 10 or 20 litres [due to rationing].

Security for volunteers is an issue. There have been cases reported where volunteers have been killed or injured while trying to evacuate civilians or delivering assistance.

Many need training on how to apply for money from international organisations and donors as they don't know how it works.

Another challenge for small organisations is that international organisations are hiring people on much higher salaries, basically draining local staff from local organisations.

**oD: Several international organisations have set up [cash assistance programmes](#) for Ukraine. Is sending cash to people in Ukraine who need it a good response in the current situation?**

**VP:** There are definitely people who need cash. And cash has sort of a multiplying effect: people get money, they go to markets, buy something, pay for services – and help revitalise the economy.

What I kept hearing, and this is also from my personal experience of working in conflict zones, is that it's important not just to provide cash, but also to assist with employment.

Many, many people I talk to are saying that people need jobs. They want it much more than food or money. They need it for their self-respect, to be able to provide for themselves.

This is very important, because many people are trying to [understand what they want to do next](#), whether to stay in Ukraine, or just leave for good and remain in Europe. I heard [Ukrainian refugees] in Poland say: "Yeah, it's pretty safe in my city but there's no jobs now, that's why I'm staying in Poland."

It's crucial to get people working. It could be cleaning rubble or construction work. There are plenty of areas in this country where it's possible to work, but people have lost so much that it's hard for them to restart by themselves.

"What happens when you create parallel structures and pipelines? You make everyone dependent on you. And then when you leave, there are no systems created on the ground."

**oD: Should international aid feed into what is already being offered by the Ukrainian government, or operate independently through parallel structures?**

**VP:** The final goal for the international community, including humanitarian organisations, should not involve replacing the Ukrainian government. It is to help the government and society to get back to normal as soon as possible. What happens when you create parallel structures and pipelines? You make everyone dependent on you. And then when you leave, there are no systems created on the ground.

Ukraine has a pretty strong and capable government. There is, of course, the risk of corruption, which Ukraine has long been criticised for. And this is why so many international organisations are trying to create their own systems. But there are ways of operating alongside the government - to assist rather than replace them - and this is important for people's trust in Ukrainian institutions. Trust plays a crucial role in countries in conflict. If people don't trust their own authorities, it's very hard to [recover].

**oD: Do you think the debate on whether organisations should remain neutral or show solidarity is important?**

**VP:** I've seen this discussion going on for so long, in almost every conflict I've worked on. And this neutrality/solidarity debate affects assistance delivery as well, this time.

Ukrainian initiatives have been assisting, and are still assisting, civilians and the military. They see the army as a part of society. And that's understandable. Everyone has someone fighting. Particularly in areas where it's hard to deliver assistance, many bring assistance to the military and civilians in the same car. Or crowdfund to buy some non-lethal weapons, like thermal imaging equipment or helmets, and also assistance for civilians. This scares international organisations from cooperating with local organisations, because of the neutrality principle and the risk that the assistance can become a military target.

Neutrality is one of the cornerstones of humanitarian assistance. It means that you have to deliver to everyone in need, no matter who they are, and under whose control a territory is. In this case whether somewhere is under Russian control, Ukrainian control or separatist control.

The idea is that if you assist the fighting parties, and the army on one side, or even the government on one side, it might jeopardise your access to the civilians on the other side.

Because of this, you have to try as neutral as possible. But it's hard, it's very hard, physically and emotionally, especially when you only have access to one side. When you don't get access to the other side, you don't see what's going on there. You sympathise with the side where you are.

In all the international funding for conflict and post-conflict zones you have the same phases, traditionally: humanitarian emergency relief followed by early recovery and reconstruction and development.

But in the case of Ukraine, now and for the last eight years, there's almost no clear border between these three stages. You could see all three at the same time. You have conflict-affected areas where people need water, and you have parts of Ukraine where almost normal life is going on.

Most of the funding that international organisations receive, so far, they receive from the humanitarian assistance pipeline. And that's how they're supposed to act. Being neutral, delivering the most basic assistance, which is not what many Ukrainians are asking for. Because Ukraine is currently going through this very difficult stage where you don't just need to help people survive, but you need to stabilise the economy and support the government. Unlike what happened in 2014, when the government structures collapsed in many conflict-affected areas, local authorities remained in place up until the last moment, when the area was occupied.

This is important because it's about being able to function, being able to organise a life during the war. And for people to be able to trust this government, to see that the government is going to stand up for them.

**oD: Access to occupied territories in Donbas has been very limited in the last eight years. That fact is not encouraging in terms of what could happen next.**

**VP:** Yes, access was very limited. The problem is that it's now such a huge territory. There's so many people there. To think that all these millions of people could just stay in limbo is terrifying. And international organisations have to keep trying to get access and assist people there. But it is going to be very, very difficult politically to achieve this.

**And for that neutrality is key?**

Yes, it is.

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