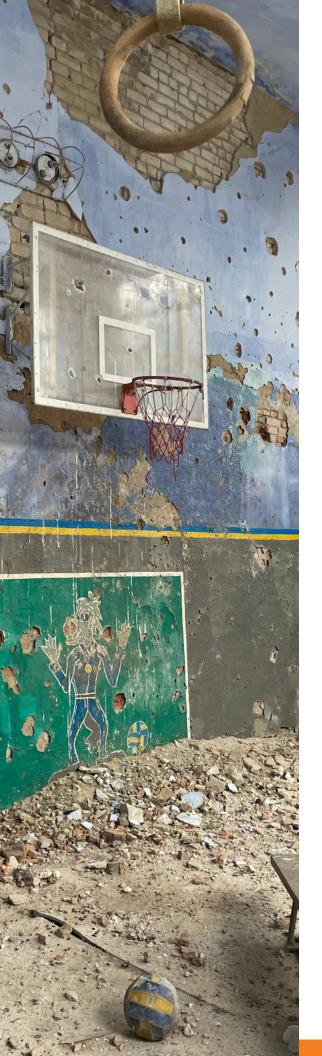# RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIPS?
RISK, PROTECTION, AND LOCAL ACTORS IN THE UKRAINE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

MAY 2023

Summary

Amid ongoing violence against frontline communities in Ukraine, international humanitarian actors continue to struggle to establish presence. Citing unacceptable security risks against staff in these areas, international actors are relying heavily on local formal and informal response mechanisms for urgent frontline work. This includes National Non-Government Organisations (NNGOs), self-organised volunteer collectives, and community activists, who are continuing to deliver aid and provide services in high-risk settings.

Although some partnerships between International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and local actors are formalised in signed agreements, the reality is that the bulk of emergency aid for the most affected communities is delivered by informal networks and community groups, mostly staffed by volunteers who have been willing to shoulder extreme risk to ensure hard-to-reach communities have access to essential humanitarian aid and services, and who are sometimes less restricted in their access. These local response mechanisms take on a disproportionate share of the risk required to support the most vulnerable communities and individuals. Such mechanisms are consistently not being prioritized: the international community is not adequately equipping and supporting them through the resources, both physical and structural, needed to stay safe and to sustain their essential humanitarian work.

Methodology

Building on the [protection assessment](#) conducted by NP in April 2022 and [follow-up analyses in specific Oblasts,](#) this briefing note on responsible partnerships reflects engagement with over 100 local and national organizations throughout 4 Oblasts, including Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Kharkiv. It includes over 50 Key Informant Interviews representing at least 38 local organizations over the course of 9 months. This document is aimed to address the major protection risks faced by local and national NGOs, CBOs, and volunteer networks who are in partnership with international actors, as well as aims to provide a possible framework in which to address these relevant and critical gaps.

Background

The renewed military offensive and subsequent temporary occupation of parts of Ukraine by Russian forces in late February 2022 left countless communities and individuals reliant on humanitarian aid to survive. As of May 2023, Russia's attack on civilians and critical infrastructure across Ukraine continues to aggravate an already widespread humanitarian crisis. As the war enters its second year, civilians continue to be forced from their homes by increasing attacks by the Russian forces. At the same time, other civilians previously displaced by the conflict (within Ukraine or abroad) have been consistently returning to their places of origin despite insecurity and lack of services in their places of origin.

Meeting the multisectoral and widespread needs of affected populations in the context of ongoing, volatile security situations poses a particular challenge to the humanitarian community in Ukraine. International humanitarian actors many of whom were not present in the country prior to the February 2022 invasion struggled to register and were consequently unable to establish a presence at the required scale and timeline to address immediate and urgent needs within Ukraine. Additionally, the international humanitarian actors who were previously present in Ukraine have struggled to maintain and rapidly expand their operations—which, prior to the February 2022 escalation, were concentrated in the east of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

Within days after the initial shock of the renewed large-scale offensive by Russian forces, NNGOs, volunteer collectives, and community activists mobilized and began to source local and international funds as well as in-kind materials from public and

private donors in response to civilian needs. As a result, these local formal and informal response mechanisms were (and still are) providing the vast majority of humanitarian aid in Ukraine, supporting those most affected by the war both in areas of displacement and frontline communities. Many INGOs suspended their operations and evacuated their staff, leaving local civilian groups and volunteers to shoulder the burden of aid delivery with little support.

In the months that followed, the international community was able to re-establish its presence in Ukraine to some extent. INGOs absorbed most of the funds from international donors but remained ill-placed to match the operational reach and contextual understanding of community needs when compared to local and national actors. In the meantime, grassroots organisations, particularly along the dynamic frontlines, have expanded considerably in response to growing humanitarian needs. In coordination with local authorities, volunteers have been supporting civilian evacuations, building out and servicing bomb shelters, as well as providing medical, food, and other aid throughout the country on an outstanding scale.

Responding on the frontlines: operational risks

One year into the response, many international actors are still limited in their operations with at-risk communities in de-occupied areas or in proximity to the contact line. Unable or unwilling to operate in these areas—citing high levels of violence and risk to personnel—many organisations have elected to establish or expand partnerships with local Ukrainian organisations in lieu of deploying their own staff. Local mechanisms and NNGOs, most of which are staffed by volunteers, remain at the forefront of emergency aid delivery and services. As a result, local actors disproportionally take on the risk required to support the most vulnerable communities.

Some actors interviewed during this research suggested this is linked to access, with one sub-implementing partner for an international actor sharing that they were being asked to expand their operations to high-risk locations "due to INGO inability to access these locations". As international actors engage both NNGOs and local volunteer collectives, there is an urgent need to highlight concerns around outsourcing of operational risks to implementing partners, without the provision of essential safety and security backstops.

Amidst this risk burden and lack of access and control over resources to scale up safety and security frameworks around their work, frontline volunteers are increasingly struggling to sustain their work. Fuel shortages limit the scale and the scope of their humanitarian work, while months of unpaid work push many volunteers to seek employment opportunities that provide stable incomes. Working in a high-stress environment is also taking a toll on volunteers' physical and psychological health, with many volunteers expressing serious signs of burnout and psychological distress.

In frontline areas, the risk of death or injury by explosive weapons remains high and having good quality Personal protective equipment (PPE) such as flak jackets and helmets is essential. Local volunteers, however, have limited to no access to adequate PPE. For local volunteers, purchasing PPE that costs an average of 450 to 1000 USD have been largely impossible. Additionally, with many INGOs declining to cover volunteer operational costs, local groups have prioritized spending on fuel for the distribution of humanitarian aid over purchasing PPE or other safety items. In addition, some NNGOs operating in formal partnerships with large international

actors have had requests for safety and security support declined by their donors. As demonstrated in the case study below, requests from sub-implementing partners for support with PPE, trauma kits, the use of these items, and broader safety and security training have been actively denied by some donors.

Prolonged exposure to traumatic events and burnout also poses significant risks to the health and well-being of local volunteers. INGOs have a responsibility to conduct regular de-briefings with their implementing partners and ensure that local staff and volunteers have equal access to mental health support services as needed.

CASE STUDY

Extractive partnerships: information without support

When a national NGO* in Mykolaiv asked their donor, an INGO*, to support them with contingency planning weeks prior to the February 2022 invasion, they were denied any guidance on the matter. When the invasion did happen, the donor reached back out to the NGO to request information on the situation on the ground, but once again declined requests for support and guidance related to the safety and security of NNGO staff. As hostilities quickly escalated, the NGO repeatedly reached out to their donor INGO, requesting support for their staff, such as PPE and first aid kits, so they could carry on with their humanitarian work in a safer manner. All requests were declined.

Organisation names redacted

Many volunteers were unfamiliar with humanitarian work prior to the escalation of the war and had little knowledge of humanitarian or safeguarding principles. Due to the informal and grassroots nature of the widespread volunteer response, there has not been sufficient humanitarian engagement on issues of sub-implementor protection, safeguarding, or efforts to connect local organizations with well-resourced international humanitarian organizations that can and should support in protection mainstreaming.

There is a gap in sharing technical protection frameworks and expertise which has resulted in breaches of beneficiary privacy and consent when international actors require photographic proof of distribution for reporting. This is not to diminish the efforts and/or intent of volunteers—who have been at the forefront of the humanitarian response from day one—but to highlight the urgent need for technical protection support and increased resourcing redirected towards these ends.

CASE STUDY

KHARKIV, UKRAINE 2022

Local actors have blacklisted individuals that were considered "troublemakers", while others were blacklisted due to the personal preferences of volunteers. These blacklists were then shared with other groups providing humanitarian aid, provided by INGOs, making it impossible for individuals on this lists to access aid within the Oblast. This is an example of a practice that directly goes against the humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality, yet has been employed by the local response mechanisms at the behest of the international community.

Mitigating Risks: What makes a responsible partnership?

It is paramount that international actors initiate humanitarian partnerships with local response mechanisms responsibly and in consideration of do no harm principles for the safety and welfare of both local actors and aid recipients. INGOs should provide ongoing support to their implementing partners in assessing and understanding safety and security risks related to their work, as well as putting effective measures in place to mitigate those risks.

At a minimum, donors must ensure that local actors have access to PPE, first aid and trauma kits, training in emergency first aid, psychological first aid, and mine action awareness. Further, INGOs need to increase their informational and technical support, including knowledge and operationalising safety and security procedures, such as field risk assessments, and contingency and movement planning. INGOs themselves also need to consider if their own context analyses are reflective of real risk on the ground: where might there be more space for direct action and implementation, alongside local partners? Where are partnerships reflective of risk-outsourcing, rather than risk-sharing, and how can this be mitigated?

CASE STUDY

RESPONDING TO RISK: NP's PPE LANDING PROGRAMME

In 2022, NP established a PPE landing programme to ensure volunteers and first responders in de-occupied and frontline areas are able to conduct their activities in a safer manner, a response to risk outsourcing and massive gaps in safety and security support received by these groups. As of May 2023, NPUA has supported the provision of at least 115 sets of PPE representing at least 23 volunteer groups and NNGOs, including first responders, in Kherson, Mykolaiv and Kharkiv are benefiting from this programme. NP has been receiving an increasing number of requests for PPE, including flak jackets and helmets, since we launched this program, indicating the demand for and the relevance of the programme.

Further, volunteers who previously did not want to wear PPE have also begun reaching out to NP for support, prompted by the deteriorating security situation. Volunteers are regularly caught under shelling themselves and are seeing their fellow volunteers die or become injured. It is essential that the broader international community in Ukraine, particularly those outsourcing activities to local partners, take responsibility within these partnerships and prioritise the safety of their implementing partners. This means providing PPE and trauma kits, appropriate training in the use of these items, as well as technical safety and security support.

Further, looking outside of the local response mechanisms, civilian government employees and contractors, such as social workers and other essential staff such as utility repair crews servicing civilian infrastructure should have access to PPE and safety equipment and tool such as First Aid Kits. Although this falls outside the scope and remit of the humanitarian mandate, this group should also be prioritized.

As demonstrated in the case study above, there are a number of practical ways to address risks and operationalise the partnership principles outlined in this report. These recommendations include:

Providing physical and technical safety and security materials and resources for partners

The humanitarian response in Ukraine has been locally led. The international community should recognise this and find creative solutions to sustain the work of local actors. Listening to the needs and concerns of local actors and communities on the ground is key to responsible and sustainable partnerships. With the renewed conflict now in its second year, the international community needs to critically reassess its approach to partnership: Are responsibilities to implementing partners and communities being upheld? Are resources for safety and security being efficiently mobilised? Is the 'do no harm' principle being taken seriously and operationalised at all levels of humanitarian implementation? The rights of local actors to protection—including PPE, first aid and trauma kits, and health insurance in case of emergency—should be outlined and upheld as priorities in partnership agreements. Donors supporting international organisations that use sub-grant mechanisms need to ensure that these provisions and principles are upheld by all parties through their own accountability frameworks and donor reporting requirements.

Pursuing integrated, collaborative partnerships

When international and local organisations work alongside each other in meaningful partnerships, all of our work – and by extension, the broader humanitarian response – benefits. There is much to be learned through meaningful partnerships, by both international and local actors. Joint trainings, implementation activities between partners, and working together on processes like security assessment and context analysis can result in better responses from all parties. Responsible partnerships are those that enable this knowledge and skills exchange on all sides, strengthening capacities of international and local partners across different areas of expertise. By the same token, this kind of collaboration and active skill sharing and capacity-strengthening is a core aspect of partnership agreements, not an afterthought or forgotten alongside other partnership functions like programming and material aid distribution.

From risk-outsourcing to risk sharing

Effective, conflict sensitive risk analysis – and therefore, effective risk management for humanitarian programming – requires timely and continuous context analysis, local context analysis and understanding, and collaborative partnerships with local actors. This inclusive approach builds trust and facilitates better information sharing, leading to more nimble and effective operations. Unfortunately, this is not the approach taken by many INGOs and other international actors, who's on the ground operations are hindered by overly risk-averse approaches and bunkerisation. More fair and effective emergency responses require INGOs to share risk, rather than outsource it. This requires a shift away from generalized and disconnected context analyses that extract knowledge from local actors, and instead the adoption of more collaborative approaches that centre local communities and prioritize their insights. By doing so, INGOs can better identify space for direct action and implementation and create space for active collaboration and integrated action with and alongside local partners.

Implementing humanitarian principles through partnership

Alongside building operational capacities of local actors—from the provision of PPE and logistical support to putting risk management systems in place—there needs to be an investment of resources to increase integration of humanitarian and safeguarding principles in partnerships and humanitarian implementation. NP's engagement with the local actors in frontline areas has repeatedly demonstrated that when partnerships with local actors are approached with respect, there is a willingness to listen, learn, and improve our collective work. It is critically important to enhance the capacity of all actors to implement protection mainstreaming and monitoring in their work, particularly for actors who have had limited previous exposure to these frameworks. Ultimately, this is about ensuring that people impacted by the conflict and receiving humanitarian assistance are protected from unintended harm throughout interactions with all humanitarian responders.

Supporting local responders over the long term

Addressing the scale and the scope of humanitarian needs created by Russian military action in Ukraine will require multi-year donor engagement, and international actors should already focus on sustaining local humanitarian responses in Ukraine long-term. Part of the responsibility international donors have toward local partners is ensuring this work is both flexible and sustainable – which means making sure that grant mechanisms are as well. Making sure that local partners have what they need to do their work safely, over the longer term, is also about ensuring this is reflected in the structures of grant agreements. Ideally, funding arrangements can be quickly mobilised for emergent humanitarian needs and sustained over multi-year grants. This directly influences the health and psychosocial pressure on local organisations and volunteers operating on the frontlines, by providing greater certainty and allowing time for meaningful relationships to be developed with donors.

IN SUMMARY, WHAT MAKES A RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIP?

The inclusion of physical and technical safety and security materials as essential components of partnership agreements, and accountability mechanisms to uphold these commitments

Genuine integration and collaboration between international and local actors on shared programming and training

A shift from risk-outsourcing to risk-sharing by international actors and donor institutions

Integration and implementation of humanitarian principles by all parties to a partnership

Supporting local responders and partners over the long term

Photos
- Cover, p.4, p.7, back cover: NP Ukraine safety and security training. February 2023. ©NP
- P.2, p.8: Shevchenkove, Mykolaiv, February 2023. ©NP
- P.9: Damaged PPE lent by NP to volunteer, Kherson, May 3. ©Henadii/All who cares

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