



When crisis or war comes: Shortcomings of the emergency response to internal displacement in Ukraine and a way forward

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Abstract: The case of Ukraine shows that preparedness plans are instrumental, civic involvement is crucial, and a capable state is a must for adequate emergency response to internal displacement. Otherwise, the human rights-based approach will remain a mere formal

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The Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has [openly violated](#) international law, has taken many aback. Over [11 million](#), a quarter of Ukrainian citizens, were displaced within the first months while many more were simply unable or unwilling to flee. Responsibility for addressing internal displacement, a refugee-like situation not covered by a binding treaty, is primarily delegated to national states. However, not everyone could have foreseen or was ready for the scale of the humanitarian disaster.

A research group from the Caucasus region has recently [explored](#) the emergency response to the initial phase of the war in Ukraine. Setting out with a benchmark drawn mainly from soft-law norms and guidelines, this research revealed major deficiencies related to people's freedom of movement and escape, availability of shelter and social support, identification and needs assessment, coordination of response, and the enabling of third-party assistance.

Systemic limitations in the emergency response to support IDPs

First, the Ukrainian state apparatus was completely unprepared to handle this crisis, which was manifested on [multiple levels](#): from chaotic impromptu evacuations and invisibility of internal displaced persons (IDPs) to being incapable of addressing their needs. Arguably, organising the defence against the aggressor came to the forefront, yet it does not change the fact of failing on the other terrain. However, this may explain the tactics chosen by the central government: delegating responsibility to the lower levels, deregulating the legislative framework, deploying informational resources for donors and population, and proactively calling for help from businesses and foreign governments.

Second, the [limitations](#) of both professional and volunteer-based CSOs became obvious. The former, even backed by international donors, struggled to cope with rapid expansion requiring them to relocate or open new offices, hire and train staff, and establish local connections. The latter too often had insufficient institutional capacities and at best facilitated networking by lending access to their social networks. Trade unions, on the other hand, have quickly changed their focus. Remnants of traditional mass-membership organisations, they were able to act as information brokers across the country and use their infrastructure to facilitate the involuntary mobility.

Third, local horizontal networks that appeared spontaneously bore the main burden and supported underfunded local authorities with the emergency response. However, a lack of resources, established processes, and institutional memory often resulted in improvisation, duplication of efforts, and heavy reliance on emotional engagement, which have made this solution hardly sustainable and cost-effective in the long run.

In fact, many issues in the overall response had a systemic character. The digitalisation of public services, which was justified by [cost-efficiency](#) and [anti-corruption measures](#) and legitimised by distrust of the bureaucrats, limited the accessibility of information when the civilian population was trapped at the battlefield and lost access to the broadcasting and electricity. Disability, medical conditions, care arrangements, and poverty frequently prevented people from evacuating when and where it was possible. The informality of the rental market and a virtual absence of public housing stock left no tools to tame exorbitant rents and discrimination.

Lessons learned from the case of Ukraine

The human rights-based approach puts human rights at the centre of any policy design or decision-making. [Expectedly](#), it should empower right-holders to assert their claims and develop the capacity of the duty-bearers to meet those demands. In practice, the assessment is made in regards to: (a) engaging all stakeholders, (b) identifying and fulfilling human rights obligations, (c) understanding who and how is accountable, as well as (d) how capable the agent is, (e) taking into account perspectives of the most vulnerable, and (f) making all relevant information and knowledge accessible.

Considering the case of Ukraine through this paradigm, it seems necessary to develop comprehensive emergency protocols which should be (i) available to the stakeholders, (ii) regularly updated, (iii) periodically tested, (iv) attentive to the particular vulnerabilities of different groups, and (v) envision the deployment of various means of disseminating information.

In addition, voluntary or involuntary internal displacement is inevitable in times of crisis, and so regulatory bottlenecks should be removed in order to avoid context-specific and narrow understanding of IDPs' legal status. Equally important is to have a responsible focal point ready to handle even earlier unforeseen situations and collect useful data beyond the demographic features of the IDPs stock. Stronger requirements for IDPs' protection globally, such as a binding international convention, could be beneficial to enforce these.

Taking meaningful steps towards a greater empowerment of civil society is also crucial. They are the first to react and often are more informed. Some of the options could include a wider inclusion in the decision-making and viable support options for their capacity-building, for instance through direct public funding, resource centres, or income tax [re-assignment mechanism](#). Given that workplace organising is the most intuitive and straightforward way for building up social ties and collective agency, hostile policies undermining the freedom of associations and collective bargaining must be dropped.

Finally, the existing neoliberal reforms focusing on austerity, privatisation, and means-testing should be reconsidered. They not only increase inequality and create risks of social disturbances, but also limit the capacity of the government

to adequately steer the development in the common interests, and respond to large unforeseen events.

Way forward towards centrality of protection in response to mass displacements

No state would ever be fully prepared for an expected large-scale crisis, and neither would international non-governmental organisations. The deployment of relief efforts to protect IDPs takes time, especially under the circumstances of a rapid advance of a foreign army. Vibrant civil society and local citizens' initiatives are crucial at the beginning of the crisis.

However, only a state which is equipped with institutional resources, is acting in the common interests, and is accountable to and influenced by the public, bears full responsibility and is able to provide long-term sustainable solutions to the internal displacement induced by such a crisis.