

“It is important to give people responsibility for their own lives”: Social Work and Internally Displaced People in Ukraine



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Students from the Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University give sweet presents for 40 social vulnerable children and their families (including IDPs) while social worker Natalia Cheporniuk work with their parents. (Christmas&New Year's party, Kyiv, December 20, 2014). Author : Olha Martseniuk

Armed conflict in Ukraine and its consequences

Since March 2014, Ukraine has been experiencing a violent separatist conflict in the heavily populated regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (supported by Russian military units without insignia) and annexation of the Crimea peninsula by the Russian Federation. Due to the military actions people in Ukraine are suffering humiliation, deprivation of basic human rights and forced internal displacement. The UN has stated, “armed conflict [in Ukraine] has caused great damage to the

economy, the social infrastructure is ruined, and people are suffering” (UN, 2014).

At the time of writing this paper, despite all diplomatic peace efforts, the situation Donetsk and Lugansk regions remains very tense and could be characterized as catastrophic in many senses; especially for people who stay there and for those who had to flee from their homes to the safer regions of Ukraine or neighboring countries. It's a 'hybrid' war, a political conflict, a conflict of values and senses with severe social implications.



Social workers organized 'sweet table' for vulnerable children and their parents. (Christmas&New Year's party, Kyiv, December 20, 2014 cited in Olha Martseniuk)

Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine

By February 2015 the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine has dramatically increased. According to information from the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine by the August 2014 there were 156,000 officially registered IDPs and until February 2015 this number kept rising to 1,042,100 (MSPU, 2015). IDPs from eastern Ukraine now account for 98 % of the total displaced Ukrainians, while those from Crimea account for 2% (UNHCR, 2015). But the UNHCR Regional Representation for Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine stressed that while the process of centralized registration is still ongoing, the real figure of IDPs remains unknown and is likely to be higher.

The largest number of IDPs is hosted in the areas immediately surrounding the conflict-affected area: in

peaceful areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia regions. Many IDPs have returned to northern parts of Donetsk oblast, and following the ceasefire, some of them have returned to conflict-affected area. Among the IDPs, highest numbers are women (35%) and children (34%), while men constitute about 20%, elderly and disabled people are about the 11%. The IDPs are living with their relatives / friends, in rented houses or in collective centers.

Migration has traditionally been viewed as a three-stage process: pre-emigration experiences, transit, and post-migration resettlement. For IDPs, there may be peril and trauma at every stage (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2014). Thus, they also need first psychological aid. It should be mention that children and women have some special needs such education, feed for infant etc.



Children and actors after the performance, conducted by students from the Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University. (Christmas&New Year's party, Kyiv, December 20, 2014). Author : Olha Martseniuk

The results of the need assessment, conducted by NGO 'Labor and Health Social Initiatives' among IDPs families in Ukraine showed that the most important needs of the IDPs are: financial (employment), humanitarian (food and clothes), housing (permanent or temporary lodging) and medical need. Less important are: social (participation in community life), legal (protection of rights), psychological, cultural and political (participation in political life) needs (LHSI, 2015). While social workers directly involved in supporting people who had fled to Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, stressed that the most common basic needs of IDPs are food, clothing, hygiene kits, medicine, and accommodation:

'IDPs families had sufficient life in places which they have left. But they were forced to flee from home without season clothing, steady income and food for tomorrow' (Olha Martseniuk, MSW, social worker at Charitable foundation 'Bethany Social Services').

Lack of clarity about the Ukrainian legislation and assistance mechanisms, bureaucracy and difficulties in accessing relief programmers creates confusion, frustration and an increasing sense of isolation among IDPs. IDPs who fled from non-government controlled areas have been left 'shocked and traumatized' and many are struggling to integrate. Despite the generosity shown by local residents, negative perception has arisen among host communities who see IDPs being favored by 'positive discrimination'. This increases stigmatization and affects their ability to rent accommodation or find jobs (Quintanilla et al., 2015).

Social Services for IDPs

The International Federation of Social Workers recommends arranging services for displaced populations as collective and autonomous rather than individual and fragmented (IFSW, 2012). In working with IDPs, social workers can use short-term (crisis intervention, outreach work, strength-development, and task-oriented model of social work) and long-term intervention strategies focused on system-ecological model of social work and community development (Ramon and Maglajlic, 2012).

In Ukraine, there are three categories institutions providing assistance for the IDUs: government agencies, NGOs and volunteers (individuals or groups of people, organized platforms or chaotic, spontaneous help). Each of them has its own way of solving IDPs problems and helping them. But their services are rather individualistic and fragmented than collective and autonomous.

Governmental agencies provide mostly informational services for IDPs and partly cooperate with NGOs in providing humanitarian services, psychological, medical, and social aid. Also these agencies assist IDPs with social assistance such as pension, supplementary benefits etc.

International and national NGOs responded quite fast to this social challenge in the country. For example, UNHCR, UNDP, The Red Cross and IOM created special aid programs inside organizations. In partnership with national NGOs they provide targeted humanitarian, medical, psychological, and legal assistance. Moreover, they partly help in finding housing and employment.

However, IFSW is aware that humanitarian assistance and alternative or developmental solutions for displaced persons cannot replace the political will of governments in their quest for solutions for internal conflicts that caused the displacement (IFSW, 2012). In Ukraine, as International Organization of Migration pointed out, 'as displaced persons' basic needs are not yet fully covered, the ability to integrate so far remains vague' (IOM, 2014).

The most quickly response to internal migration was initiated by newly established volunteer organizations. Most of these organizations were originally simple associations of concerned citizens, volunteers, and students who participated in the massive actions ended by ousted of the former President of Ukraine. All of them have their own websites, hotline phone numbers for rapid response, pages in social networks with an established search system of the housing areas, warehouses of humanitarian aid etc. But volunteer organizations that actively started to be involved in helping the IDPs, lack systematic approaches and qualified professionals, while they are not using empowering strategies but passive tactics of meeting basic needs.

All in all, the role of civil society, charity organizations and volunteers was and are playing crucial role in supporting IDPs in Ukraine.

Challenges for social work in Ukraine

Social work is rather new profession for the country and social services are underdeveloped. Public social services have very few professionals with appropriate training levels meeting modern social work standards.

Since the WWII Ukraine had never been involved in any military conflicts and didn't have internal civic conflicts. Public services as well as specialists were not ready to deal with this totally new problem for the country – both professionally and psychologically.

Interviews conducted with Masters' level social workers are involved in helping IDPs on everyday basis, demonstrates that practitioners meet some challenges in their practice related to increasing number of IDPs, limited resources, professional burnout, consumer attitude from some IDPs etc.

'Social work with IDPs is different from social work with vulnerable families, what we previously do. IDPs families were good in their parental responsibilities. The main challenge was to ensure the basic needs of these families. We began fundraising for helping to provide basic needs' (Olha Martseniuk, MSW, social worker at Charitable foundation 'Bethany Social Services');

'For me, the main challenge was the large number of those who need help here and now. The numbers of those who need help outweigh the resources we have. I also understood how important it is for a social worker to take care of their safety and needs. The social workers should clearly understand for themselves that they must firstly meet their own needs and only then the client's needs. If you don't care about yourself, you cannot provide quality services. Another challenge was the client attitude of some IDPs. It is important

to feel the distinction of working with them when they need help and support, and when it is important to give people responsibility for their own lives' (Natalia Cheporniuk, MSW, social worker at Charitable foundation 'Bethany Social Services').

Another challenge for social workers is the personal attitude to military conflict and IDPs. Sometimes women with their children looking for assistance as IDPs while their husbands take part in the military conflict as 'separatists' or Ukrainian army soldiers. Social workers face considerable ethical dilemmas when have to work with IDPs who support the 'side of the conflict' which differs from their personal one.

These challenges raise questions regarding the content of social work education, in particular how to make future social workers ready to provide services in the situation of emergency, making choice between paternalistic and empowering approaches. The very first lesson Ukraine has to learn is how to work with conflicts of values and negative perceptions, and – of course- how to develop social services for the new types of needy people in times of economic collapse caused by this 'hybrid war'. 🌐

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