

Double crisis: Addressing the impact of protracted conflict and Covid-19 in Ukraine

The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating already existing protection needs and unveiling new ones. In eastern Ukraine, already exhausted by the ongoing conflict, the vulnerabilities are particularly high due to the high proportion of elderly population, damaged infrastructure and deteriorating healthcare and water supply systems. A properly resourced and coordinated response must be provided to address these systemic issues and to prevent them from being impacted beyond repair.

Background

As a result of the conflict in Ukraine, which is entering its seventh year, more than 1.4 million people are registered as internally displaced¹ and 3.4 million people require urgent humanitarian assistance – a third of whom are elderly.² The first confirmed coronavirus case in Ukraine was detected on 3 March 2020 and, as of June 10, the rate of positive cases has reached 27,856.³ The Covid-19 pandemic is now deepening the vulnerabilities of many conflict-affected people across eastern Ukraine and particularly threatens the populations living in the area closest to the contact line – which separates the areas under and outside Government control – and who are suffering the severe socio-economic consequences caused

by years of conflict. Communities here already have limited access to healthcare facilities and basic essential services, including water, sanitation, and hygiene, and are now seeing their livelihood opportunities shrink even further – meaning many will now be struggling to meet their basic needs.

A recent NRC Ukraine food security and livelihoods assessment has shown that over three quarters of the 381 households interviewed in both urban and rural towns in Luhansk and Donetsk regions reported adverse socio-economic impacts resulting from Covid-19. The primary concerns cited were increases in the prices of food and hygiene items and in transport costs, as well as a loss of household income and crowded living conditions due to quarantine measures. Worryingly, many households reported using negative coping strategies such as

¹ [According to the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, as of June 1, 2020.](#)

² [Ukraine: 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview.](#)

³ [According to the Ministry of Health of Ukraine.](#)

spending savings and reducing health expenditures. Only a third of the households assessed had received humanitarian assistance in the last 2-months, and 93% said they would prefer cash assistance.⁴

The residents of non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) have been significantly impacted by suspension of movement across the contact line due to Covid-19: people here are now unable to make these critically important journeys. From the 1.1. million journeys made across the contact line each month, nearly 60% are made by elderly persons – mostly crossing to access their pensions, social payments, state administrative services, hospitals, markets, medication and to withdraw cash.⁵

While restrictions should be the least intrusive of available means and should not last longer than strictly required by the circumstances, transparent regulations on humanitarian exceptions for crossings must also be articulated.⁶ Safety of movement across the contact line and transitional regulations enabling the affected populations to access their social payments, pensions, civil documentation and basic services should be paramount considerations. In addition, steps need to be taken urgently to help improve the sanitation, hygiene and safety conditions at the check-points to prepare these areas for civilian movement and to minimize the risks of further transmission of the virus during the crossings.

NRC Ukraine has been operating in Ukraine since late 2014 to assist conflict-affected and displaced populations in Ukraine, especially along the contact line, providing emergency relief and contributing to recovery through its programmes and strong evidence-based advocacy. To address the double humanitarian crisis, which is a result of protracted conflict and Covid-19, NRC Ukraine has developed an integrated Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA), WASH and Livelihoods and Food Security (LFS) programmatic response.

Find more:

<https://www.nrc.no/countries/europe/ukraine/>

⁴ NRC Ukraine, Food Security and Livelihoods Assessment, May 2020: NRC carried out a rapid Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL) assessment from May 5th-15th, 2020 to better understand the secondary impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations along the contact line in Eastern Ukraine.

⁵ UNHCR Ukraine. "Eastern Ukraine Checkpoint Monitoring 2020", updates as of 6 April 2020.

The 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan calling for \$205 million

The 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Ukraine has been recently revised to integrate new humanitarian activities related to Covid-19 in conflict areas. Built upon the existing Humanitarian Needs Overview and available new information about Covid-19, it seeks to address response needs resulting directly from the public health impact of the pandemic as well as the indirect humanitarian consequences of the crisis. The plan calls for \$205 million, including an additional \$47 million funding requirement for Covid-19 on top of the original 2020 appeal. The 2020 Ukraine HRP seeks to address the needs of some two million people by providing emergency assistance and protection across six sectoral areas – water and sanitation, health, shelter, food security and livelihoods, education, and protection. As of June 2020, according to Financial Tracking Service, the 2020 Ukraine HRP is only 15.4% funded, which equals \$31.5 million received.⁷

Legal protection of conflict-affected populations

The situation with Covid-19 has brought into sharp focus the gaps and deficiencies of the national policy and legislative frameworks in Ukraine. This includes the linkage of pensions and social payments to one's formal registration as an internally displaced person (IDP) and possession of an IDP certificate, which has the effect of limiting access to vital welfare payments for many residents of NGCA. While a draft law to address this discriminatory practice and de-link payments from the requirement to have IDP registration and a certificate was registered in the Parliament,⁸ the legislative process has now stalled as a result of Covid-19. The draft law is currently sat with the Parliamentary Committee and it is critically important that it be signed into law by the Government at the earliest opportunity.

Ukrainian law states as a general rule that all documents issued in NGCA are invalid, except documents certifying the facts of birth or death. However, an effective and accessible administrative

⁶ [UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Ukraine Osnat Lubrani calls for urgent action to systematize vetting and approval of exceptions for civilians to cross the contact line.](#)

⁷ [Ukraine 2020: Humanitarian Response Plan.](#)

⁸ [Draft Law on Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Exercise of the Right to Pension No. 2083-d.](#)

procedure for the recognition of these documents has not yet been introduced by the Ukrainian government. Thus, people from NGCA have to undergo lengthy and costly court procedures in order to validate their civil documentation. Due to the suspension of movement across the contact line due to Covid-19, there will be an increase in the numbers of unregistered births and deaths in NGCA which will result in a backlog of cases in the courts when the quarantine measures are lifted. This problem can be prevented by ensuring that effective administrative procedures are set up in a way which caters for the needs of families from NGCA.

Last, but not least, the vulnerabilities and needs of IDPs are being compounded by the significant economic impacts of Covid-19 and associated quarantine measures. Thousands now find themselves in a situation of protracted displacement and need support to achieve long-term and sustainable solutions. This requires the implementation of the existing revised nation-wide Durable Solutions Strategy and an Action Plan (as the current ones are expiring in 2020), supported by sufficient budgetary allocations, as well as the introduction of effective compensation mechanisms and increased funding for housing programmes.

Humanitarian solutions and political dialogue about conflict resolution

The conflict in eastern Ukraine has affected more than 5 million people, dividing a once-integrated community by a 427-kilometre-long contact line. Notwithstanding Covid-19, direct physical threats to people's security remain due to continued hostilities as well as mine and UXO contamination. Responding to UN Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire in connection with the Covid-19 outbreak,⁹ it is crucial to strengthen the political messages towards conflict resolution and ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. Humanitarian space in Ukraine must be preserved and there is a need for humanitarian response in the areas outside of the Government of Ukraine control. Thus, increased and meaningful access of humanitarian agencies to these areas must be facilitated. The dialogue about resumption of movement across the contact line and measures to mitigate the risks of virus

transmission, humanitarian exceptions for crossings and opening of the new crossing points in eastern Ukraine (Zolote and Shchastia), should be reinforced at different political platforms, including Minsk format, against the backdrop of applicable international law.

WASH response

While water and sanitation are globally recognized as a right and acknowledged as life-saving,¹⁰ access to these services has been routinely denied or compromised for millions of people living on both sides of the contact line, especially in isolated communities, due to the conduct of hostilities and an increasingly protracted crisis. Moreover, the WASH Cluster regularly reports about the shelling incidents further affecting the provision of water to conflict-affected communities along the contact line.¹¹ All the above-mentioned is seriously heightening the risk of the Covid-19 spread. The need for WASH assistance is greater for rural households living within 20km of the contact line, particularly among certain vulnerable groups like low-income families, the elderly and people with disabilities.

According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020, more than one in four families on both sides of the contact line reported that the water situation has deteriorated over the past five years. Water stoppages, unavailability, inability to treat water and a lack of money to pay for water, sanitation and hygiene products are among the commonly identified critical problems. The WASH response with strong community engagement, being indispensable for the protection of public health during all infectious disease outbreaks, is essential to prevent the transmission of the Covid-19 in eastern Ukraine. The hygiene and sanitation conditions at the crossing points, which serve as corridors for more than one million crossings each month, must be improved. The current situation makes such actions as scaling up the hygiene promotion campaign nationwide and increasing availability of running water and hygiene items in eastern Ukraine, critically urgent.

⁹ [Secretary-General Reiterates Appeal for Global Ceasefire, Warns 'Worst Is Yet to Come' as COVID-19 Threatens Conflict Zones](#)

¹⁰ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, The Human Right to Water and Sanitation, A/RES/64/292, 3 August 2010;

United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24, United Nations, New York, November 1989

¹¹ [WASH Cluster Incident Reports](#).

NRC recommendations:

- Ensure the revised Ukrainian Humanitarian Response Plan 2020 addressing both existing needs induced by the conflict and new response needs related to Covid-19 is fully funded.
- Redouble efforts to ensure political dialogue is ongoing about the need to work towards conflict resolution in eastern Ukraine.
- Promote rights-based approach to facilitate increased humanitarian access and freedom of movement in eastern Ukraine, in particular safe and progressive easing of restrictive measures at the crossing points.
- Call on the Government of Ukraine to strengthen legal protection of conflict-affected and displaced populations to ensure their full and non-discriminatory enjoyment of human rights and freedoms, as well as to engage in timely and honest communication with people to increase their access to information about any restrictions imposed or eased.
- Keep protection of the conflict-affected population as a central goal of all humanitarian efforts in eastern Ukraine and urgently step up efforts to support the provision of water and sanitation services to populations in need.

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