INSTITUTIONAL CRISES OF THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN UKRAINE: THE CHALLENGES OF THE TIME AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA OF HUMANITARIAN POLITICS

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Summary. Russia’s war against Ukraine has sparked the world’s largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. The reaction of the world humanitarian community was predictably active and intense. However, the essence of the ongoing events has become a challenge for the humanitarian community itself, since the challenges that organizations had to face while implementing programs in Ukraine require intensive institutional reflections and development. These theses contain a description of the main challenges faced by the humanitarian community in Ukraine, as well as what prospects for the development of the situation as a whole can be expected in the next decade.

Keywords: humanitarian crisis, humanitarian response in Ukraine, humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, consequences of Russia’s war against Ukraine, humanitarian crisis 2022.

With the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the world has changed. Daily confrontation with the aggressor, both national resistance and the efforts of the whole world supporting Ukraine, form a new way in many planes of the world order.

And one of the dimensions of global change is humanitarian practice.

The humanitarian crisis formed as a result of Russia’s armed aggression is based, among other things, on the most massive migration crisis: more than 16 million residents of Ukraine became refugees in one way or another, leaving their homes and leaving the country, more than 8 million became internally displaced persons.

The statistics of migration processes also show that most of those who left returned to Ukraine. As of the end of July 2023, about 6 million citizens of Ukraine officially continue to stay abroad in need of assistance.

The dynamics of the development of events is very intense and 17 months after the start of the invasion, active armed operations are still ongoing, the line of contact has changed, passing through various phases: affecting land from 11 to 5 regions of Ukraine, including the occupied territories. Rocket fire continues with varying intensity, affecting all regions of the country.

The global community actively responded to the formed humanitarian crisis in
Ukraine, and more than 100 humanitarian organizations deployed their presence in the country.

The goals of the unfolding programs with the onset of the crisis were developed on the basis of many years of humanitarian experience and, as a rule, had the following scheme:

Phase 1 - promote survival, meet the primary needs of the population, including assistance for physical displacement,

Phase 2 - close the basic needs of the displaced, promote social resilience,

Phase 3 - develop projects for sustainability, promoting recovery,

Phase 4 - recovery and development, promote prosperity.

It was assumed that it would be possible to move to the sustainability support stage 6 months after the start of active hostilities. However, the reality is that the duration and intensity of the conflict, its consequences and possible development scenarios require an adaptive humanitarian policy, strong and qualified project management in humanitarian organizations and a willingness to create new experience, rather than trying to repeat best practices from existing experience.

In essence, the situation requires proactive leadership in humanitarian practice, the creation of new policies and rules for a conditional humanitarian market.

Challenges faced by the international humanitarian community in Ukraine.

1. Personnel/ HR work.

1.1. Staff shortage

Recruiting the humanitarian work segment proved to be a difficult and often almost impossible task. This is due to a number of factors:

• very high demand - the number of organizations that have launched their activities in Ukraine is more than 100 and continues to grow,

• low capacity of the national labor market: a significant outflow of personnel as refugees, the general disorder of the population and being in the focus of survival, frequent changes of residence within the country due to changing security conditions, military service,

• low response of international employees due to the unprecedented security situation and the employer’s virtual inability to guarantee control over the security situation.

1.2. The need for highly qualified personnel

As a consequence of the above, the second significant and complex challenge is the need not just for personnel, but for highly qualified personnel.

The intensity of events and the essence of the presence of humanitarian response in the active phase differs significantly from dealing with the consequences of crises. In the active phase, the qualification of managerial decision-making, adaptive management at all stages of the program comes to the fore: from practical steps of implementation to strategic program planning.

This requires updating the internal policies of organizations, leadership and involvement in all processes, high-quality team building and the presence of top managers capable of implementing projects in conditions of high risks and turbulence. Such an approach can ensure the successful implementation of
programs, but in many respects it contradicts the well-established practices of working with donors, formed in the era of projects for recovery and development. An attempt to resolve this issue by the presence of technical advisers in areas has not proved to be effective, since the qualifications of most advisers are based on examples from past experience, which is not very suitable for the situation in Ukraine, and even if experience is relevant, it requires a high quality of reflections for the implementation of experience into an effective managerial solution.

2. Strategic Communication and Advocacy

Intensive project work, the high presence of humanitarian organizations, the mass nature of beneficiaries and the personnel crises described above, as well as the need for coordination with the state and donors, creates a high need for the formation of strategic communications for each significant humanitarian player.

Strategic communication, or communication policy, should become part of such processes as:

- Coordination at the level of joint humanitarian efforts, work with governments of countries (often this is not only Ukraine itself, but also neighboring countries that have taken on mass refugees),
- Corporate culture (including as a significant compensator in solving personal problems),
- Communication with the affected population (not only purely within the framework of programs, but also within the framework of the overdue large-scale communication between the humanitarian presence and the affected population), as well as advocacy and partnerships with donors, including to support the only possible way of effective management - adaptive.

Closing this need also requires highly qualified personnel, both international and national.

3. Context

As a rule, humanitarian work is based on the fact that the leading strategic positions are occupied by international employees, and the implementation level is occupied by local ones. This allows effective averaging of qualifications: the experience of implemented programs with international employees and knowledge of the context with local employees allows us to develop a strategy that is relevant to a specific context.

However, often the practice of humanitarian response in large-scale, rather than situational programs, was implemented in developing countries or countries of the so-called “third world”. This leaves a certain imprint of bias on the part of the humanitarian presence: the belief that most problems are solved simply, as they arose as a result of a shortage of a number of generally accepted practices for developed countries.

However, the crisis in Ukraine is of a completely different nature - it is due to the war, which has made refugees and internally displaced persons highly qualified and well-to-do people. This, among other things, does not make it possible to predictably apply already tested and familiar indicators in program activities.

Thus, the level of higher education in the country is at the level of 70%, the level of entrepreneurial activity in the country is also extremely high and continues to remain so even during the war (about 50 points of the index of business activity
expectations as of April 2023, that is, 14 months after the start and continuation of a full-scale military invasion).

Including the fact of the speed of recovery of the local market in the conditions of the liberation of Ukrainian territories from occupation is also important - experts call two weeks before the restoration of the main market functions after the liberation.

Separately, it is worth mentioning the quality of work of representatives of local authorities in the country: for example, after the destruction of the Kakhovskaya hydroelectric power station, within a day, local communities completed and included in the application lists assessments of immediate needs, which is a necessary documentation in humanitarian practice.

The level of general cooperation of the population and volunteer activity within the country forms a strong structure of the formed internal humanitarian response, however, often not documented in order to become partners for international funds, albeit broadcasting actions of super-high efficiency and professionalism.

All this makes it difficult for the international humanitarian response to work effectively, as experiences and contexts often become highly heterogeneous.

Summarizing the above, it becomes quite obvious that the international humanitarian community is facing an evolutionary crisis in Ukraine and will have to develop rapidly and effectively in order to be effective.

Most likely, no more than a dozen players will be able to cope with this, who in the future will become new leaders in humanitarian practice.

In fact, those agencies that can develop a programmatic response with high efficiency and adaptive management in Ukraine will be the main implementers of the donor presence in the current crisis, which, under the most optimal prospects, will one way or another last until the full recession stage of a decade. Which will make them the new leaders in the world of humanitarian influence.

References: