

Realising the Action Agenda on Internal Displacement in Ukraine

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The UN and its partners are grappling with ways to support the Government of Ukraine in promoting solutions to internal displacement, in line with the Action Agenda.

As of June 2023, slightly over five million Ukrainians were internally displaced¹ and over eight million had sought refuge in neighbouring countries and beyond.² At the same time, 4.7 million people had returned to their areas of origin, 20% of whom had returned from abroad.³

Alongside high rates of spontaneous return, small but significant numbers of people are seeking to integrate in their locations of displacement. As of June 2023, 15% of IDPs planned to integrate locally, with higher percentages in urban centres and among certain population groups (for example, men and women between the ages of 18 and 34). IOM data also suggests that those displaced due to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent onset of conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014 are significantly more likely to pursue solutions through local integration.

Some self-supported return and local integration is already taking place, but many households require assistance to overcome displacement-related vulnerabilities. For example, the returnee population is thought to include some of Ukraine's most vulnerable households, whose decision to return was due, at least in part, to no longer being able to meet the costs of displacement. Despite their physical return taking place, on average, more than 168 days (almost six months) ago, more than 40 per cent report continued barriers to durable solutions – including damage or destruction of their primary residence, insufficient financial resources, breakdown of public systems and services, and lack of employment.

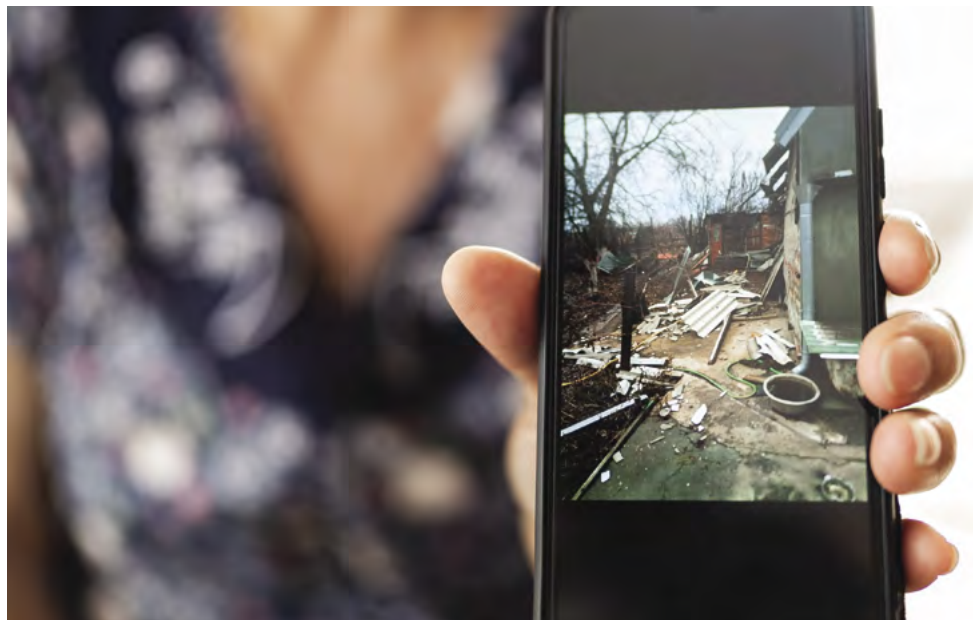
Fulfilling UN commitments set out in the Action Agenda

In 2022, the UN Secretary-General appointed a Special Advisor on Solutions to Internal Displacement and tasked the UN system with

developing an Action Agenda to take forward the recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement. Launched in June 2022, the Action Agenda sets out 31 UN commitments to better address, resolve and prevent internal displacement crises. Some of these commitments represent longstanding best practices in the provision of aid and highlight work that the UN should already be doing, while others demand new ways of thinking and working.⁴

From the onset of the crisis, in line with lessons learned during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine and priorities that the Government of Ukraine has shared at different levels, the UN and other partners have recognised that durable solutions must be central to the response. In June 2022, the UN launched the Durable Solutions from the Start initiative, with coordination and leadership arrangements later formalized through the Durable Solutions Steering Committee (DSSC) and, most recently, folded into the broader Community Planning and Recovery Steering Committee. Under the leadership of the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), the Community Planning and Recovery Steering Committee (and the DSSC as its forerunner) have supported evidence-based geographical targeting and designed and overseen pilot interagency durable solutions projects, with the aim of identifying scalable models to support different types of solutions.

The experience has shed light on some of the challenges associated with supporting durable solutions in practice. This article explores durable solutions efforts in Ukraine in relation to two of the commitments set out in the Action Agenda: Commitment #12 on the collection, management and use of internal displacement data, and Commitment #31 on leveraging the humanitarian response earlier.



A displaced woman shows a photo of the damage to her home in Bakhmut from a rocket attack. Donetsk. Photo: IOM/Raber Aziz 2023

It also considers the role and implications of a stepped-up, earlier and more predictable engagement of development actors.

The collection, management and use of internal displacement data

The Action Agenda sets out UN commitments to supporting States to “collect, manage and use internal displacement data” (Commitment #12).

The critical importance of data appears to be well recognised in the context of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Government’s IDP registration system, plus the tools and products of humanitarian and recovery actors, provide significant amounts of data on the numbers, locations, needs and preferences of IDPs, their movement intentions (including timeframes), and the principal barriers to their return, local integration and resettlement. The Ukrainian Government has historically acted as a leader in pursuing more effective, standardised data approaches to displacement; however, wartime pressures have challenged pre-existing IDP data systems, and differences in the approaches taken by the Government

and humanitarian and recovery actors have not been comprehensively discussed.⁵ UN agencies and partners have a responsibility to work with the Ukrainian Government to align data efforts and steps are now being taken to address these issues.

On 30-31 March 2022, under the leadership of the Government of Ukraine and the RC/HC, an IOM-organised symposium in Kyiv looked at challenges around the coordination and harmonisation of data for solutions. Charting a path toward common methodologies and tools for planning, delivering and measuring progress towards solutions, however, means first ensuring a common understanding of fundamental concepts. Who is an IDP? How do we measure progress toward solutions (or along ‘solutions pathways’ – a term which is increasingly common in the discourse on solutions but remains vague)? How can we determine when solutions have been attained? These questions are important and the answers are complex.

The IASC Framework identifies a durable solution as having been achieved “when IDPs no longer have specific assistance and

protection needs that are linked to their displacement and... can enjoy their human rights without discrimination resulting from their displacement." It puts forward eight criteria for measuring whether a durable solution has been achieved.⁶ Until recently however, it has remained unclear which benchmarks should be used to measure progress against these criteria, and decide when they have been met adequately.

The International Recommendations on IDP Statistics (IRIS) and the more recent proposal of the interagency Data on Solutions to International Displacement (DSID) Task Force suggest that comparisons be drawn with non-displaced communities, such that when IDPs reach parity with non-displaced communities, solutions can be considered to have been achieved.⁷ This makes sense in many contexts but in certain parts of Ukraine it presents issues. For example, where population influxes have placed essential services under strain, both IDP and host communities often suffer diminished access. In such cases, equally diminished access to services does not represent a solution, and our goal should be to scale up services to meet the needs of the increased population.

Clearly, there are challenges to applying existing durable solutions concepts and frameworks during an active conflict to the extent that it could be argued that "interim solutions" is a more relevant and appropriate objective.⁸ With continued discussion and agreement on these issues needed to inform broader "data for solutions" efforts, a dedicated workstream has been set up under the interagency Data Task Force.

Humanitarian response and durable solutions

The Action Agenda establishes UN commitments to "take steps to lay the foundations for solutions earlier in responses" through the incorporation of "pathways to solutions" into Humanitarian Response Plans, the prioritisation of "solutions-enabling" programming, and the mitigation of future displacement risks.

In Ukraine, the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), launched shortly prior

to the beginning of full-scale war, reflected the intent to "phase out" humanitarian assistance in Government-Controlled Areas and to "transition" to durable solutions by the end of 2023. The 2023 HRP, launched in February 2023, states that Russia's invasion brings "uncertainty to the timeline of transitioning affected populations from humanitarian aid to durable solutions". The unpredictable trajectory and deep impact of the war make resolving displacement to any extent difficult and at scale impossible. But, the notion of 'transitioning' from one form of assistance to another runs somewhat contrary to the idea that humanitarian action can and should be delivered in a manner which promotes self-reliance and enables IDPs to take their first steps toward solutions. Indeed, the HRP itself goes on to both identify and prioritise multiple ways in which humanitarian action can do so.

The HRP recognises the "strong ecosystem" of active local governments and civil society organisations in Ukraine and that, in most parts of the country (in line with commitments set out in the Action Agenda) the UN can "work with and through local systems, local authorities and local civil-society actors as much as possible". For example, within the WASH sector, water trucking and bottled water delivery are seen as short-term measures, which should be accompanied by exit strategies focusing on more sustainable solutions, such as developing more water sources or extending existing networks. In fact, emergency water supply and distributions comprise only 55% of the sector's estimated budget requirement, with the remaining 45% targeted towards the restoration, maintenance and upgrade of infrastructure.

Even after the Kakhovka Dam was breached on 6 June 2023, leading to massive flooding, the focus of the sector response has shifted relatively quickly from provision of short-term humanitarian assistance to evacuees and other flood-affected populations, with WASH actors now supporting the recovery of the water supply system and the utilisation of alternative water sources to ensure that communities formerly reliant on the Kakhovka Reservoir have sustainable, reliable, sufficient and safe access to water.

That said, “sustainable interventions” and support to durable solutions are distinct concepts which often, but not always, overlap in practice, and many actors are struggling to pinpoint what constitutes a durable solutions activity. For now, the answer lies in the eight IASC Criteria. For example, where the restoration, maintenance and upgrade of WASH infrastructure support IDPs who are pursuing local integration to attain an “adequate standard of living”, they can be regarded as contributing to durable solutions. In the vast majority of cases, these activities alone will not lead to the achievement of solutions: their effectiveness will depend on how, under the Government’s leadership, the UN and its partners are working collectively to address multiple needs progressively and over time.

This goes beyond the humanitarian sector. Development partner support is already crucial to keeping government capabilities and functions intact and preventing and addressing internal displacement; with Ukraine’s reconstruction and recovery needs estimated at \$411 billion, such support will remain critical, together with private investment, in the post-war context.⁹ There is no prescribed interface between humanitarian and development responses, and coordination and coherence are a challenge in many contexts. In Ukraine, however, clear efforts have been made both to ensure that the 2023 HRP and the Transitional Framework speak to one another, and to establish area-based (that is, rather than sector- or target-based) coordination mechanisms which bridge the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. With the 2024 HRP expected to include a dedicated nexus section or chapter and the Transitional Framework being extended and revised to include a stronger nexus component,

it appears that these efforts will be both continued and strengthened.

Conclusion

Despite the volatile and uncertain context, and the significant operational and financial constraints, the UN and its partners are attempting to support the Government of Ukraine to promote durable solutions to internal displacement, in line with commitments under the SG’s Action Agenda. While the ongoing conflict is testing existing concepts of durable solutions – and, indeed, ‘interim solutions’ may be a more relevant and appropriate concept to apply in Ukraine at present – the Government’s will to prioritise solutions together with the political engagement of displaced populations creates opportunities to deliver a stronger, more solutions-oriented response.

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