Despite its disappearance from the international media spotlight, the conflict in eastern Ukraine is still ongoing. The hostilities have decreased significantly since the beginning of the conflict, but 3.4 million people are still in need of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, there are a lot of other humanitarian and development challenges faced by local authorities, frontline communities and first responders.

In 2014 a decentralization reform was launched across Ukraine. The main objective of the reform is to delegate governance and decision-making to the local level through the creation of new, smaller territorial units called “hromadas”, and ensure proper resource provision from the State so that the Hromadas can independently provide services to their communities.

However, the process of its implementation poses challenges to the authorities and society. The disruption of the government’s administrative structure also disrupted the availability of social services, forcing some community members to travel great distances to meet their basic needs, and making certain services non-operational entirely for long periods of time. Moreover, 2020 brought new challenges when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and worsened an already difficult situation: increased pressure on the health care system, difficulty in meeting basic needs, and, in particular, an increase in sanitation problems.
The newly-established Hromadas face difficulties in organizing their disaster risk management systems due to gaps in human and financial resources. In response, ACTED together with Danish Red Cross and URCS are developing local preparedness/response plans jointly with hromada authorities which will enhance community and local authority emergency response capacity and resilience. At the same time, ACTED with partners are procuring and donating disaster risk management supplies that will reduce community vulnerability to risks identified in the plans, and increase the authorities’ capacity to manage them.

In this context, ACTED has partnered with IMPACT Initiatives, Right to Protection (R2P), and the Danish Red Cross and Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) to implement a 12-month Sustainable Humanitarian Interventions for Transition (SHIFT) project, funded by the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF). This project provides humanitarian assistance and access to essential services in three frontline hromadas of Volnovaka raion in eastern Ukraine (Volnovakha, Olhynka, and Myrne), as well as supports strengthened government ownership and response capacity in coordination with development actors. Moreover, it is a pilot project and an important step for the humanitarian system. It shifts away from the direct delivery by external NGOs, who have been implementing the humanitarian response for the past 7 years, and moves toward sustainable and cost-effective response managed by local authorities.

Building local resilience to COVID-19 is a priority for SHIFT and the decentralization government. In coordination with Hromada authorities, ACTED distributed hygiene kits over 600 vulnerable households and people with special needs, as well as public institutions frequently visited by the community. The distribution itself served a dual purpose – one, to make sure the most vulnerable community members have access to key hygiene items to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, but also to train local authorities via live exercise on how humanitarian distributions are conducted, so that they are prepared to undertake them on their own in the future.

ACTED also provides material investments to repair and strengthen water infrastructure in frontline Hromadas. The key infrastructures were identified and assessed in consultation with local authorities, and their repair will increase the surrounding communities’ access to safe drinking water. For the first time, Myrne will have its own dedicated water tower so that costly and inefficient humanitarian water trucking is no longer required.

"Now seven years into the conflict, it is our responsibility as humanitarian actors to make sure that authorities in Eastern Ukraine are equipped and trained to handle future shocks and disasters on their own. As international attention on this crisis diminishes, so will the funding, and the time is now to "pass the torch" and empower the local authorities to look after the most vulnerable once the INGOs have transitioned out" Zachary Oser, SHIFT Consortium Coordinator
INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

A key gap that emerged through the decentralization process is the Hromadas’ technical ability to track, store, and manage actionable data on social services within their territory. Through AGORA, an interagency initiative between ACTED and IMPACT focused on strengthening local crisis response capacities, IMPACT produces evidence-based assessments for local planning that identify community vulnerabilities and gaps in availability of social services. These assessments help local authorities plan their services more holistically, as well as to inform humanitarian actors where resources are most needed.

R2P also supports the professional development of social workers, local authorities, and civil society organizations via capacity-building seminars and trainings on financing and administrative management of social services. By the end of 2020, R2P will develop case management guidelines to be adopted by social and legal service providers across Volnovakha Raion. R2P’s efforts within SHIFT fill an acute human resource gap in social service provision, but also set up the Hromadas for successful future management of their own services once the necessary human resources are in place.

In addition, IMPACT provides Hromadas staff with technical trainings on geographic information systems (GIS) and software tools for information management, thus increasing the capacity of local authorities in their ability to analyze data and use it effectively for planning purposes. Furthermore, AGORA produces periodic “snapshot” assessments that track Hromadas’ in setting up social service provision across the year of the SHIFT project timeline.

PROTECTION

R2P fills an important human resource gap for social workers in the new government by providing basic social services to rural beneficiaries with vulnerabilities. In areas where the Hromadas do not have enough social workers on staff to cover the local caseloads, R2P deploys social workers to make household visits and support community members facing difficult and sensitive life circumstances as well as those in need of primary legal aid.
The 2014 conflict lead to a breakdown in social cohesion in frontline Hromadas that was later exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, URCS together with Danish Red Cross identified 20 volunteers among local activists who were trained to provide basic psychosocial support (PSS) sessions in their communities. Taking into account that there is a big problem with public transport in eastern Ukraine, volunteers were provided with phones and bicycles to ensure access to vulnerable people. These PSS efforts reduce distress among affected populations, strengthen their coping capacity in times of protracted crisis, and promote conditions for healthy socialization and information exchange. An example of such work is the establishment of mobile public cinemas managed by URCS volunteers. The mobile cinemas serve as a shared space where community members congregate, share experiences, and build support networks with each other.

In November, the Red Cross will launch their mobile social services in close coordination with Hromada authorities. URCS will procure and equip one car in order for social workers and local professionals to deliver social and other services (such as hairdressing, plumbing work, cleaning, cutting wood, clothes and shoes repair) that are unavailable in hard-to-reach locations in the target Hromadas or for people with limited mobility. An expected 2,000 most vulnerable people including IDPs, UXBs/URW victims, homebound persons and/or with disabilities, single/multi child parents, and isolated elderly will benefit from this service.

In addition, URCS will provide a separate van to transport people with disabilities for non-urgent medical visits and delivery of food, medicine and essential goods. These vans will gradually be handed over and integrated into the Hromada social service systems.

“Everyone is delighted with this initiative. For example, people had an opportunity to discuss their concerns before the film watching during the session for the elderly people. They are usually the same for everyone - the distance from children and grandchildren who have moved from the village to find a better life and rarely visit them. " - recalls Tatiana Grigorieva, a URCS volunteer in Kamianka.

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