

Snapshot from Donbas, Ukraine

supporting local actors to improve aid delivery



Authors: Arthur Quesnay & Marie Courraud

This report focuses on the challenges and opportunities for humanitarian aid delivery in the government-controlled areas of the Donbas region in south-eastern Ukraine. It is based on a series of field visits conducted over five weeks of qualitative fieldwork between April and June 2022 in the cities of **Dnipro, Pavlohrad, Pokrovsk, Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, Bakhmut, Lysychansk, and Sievierodonetsk**. Interviews with civil-military authorities (CMAs), Ukrainian organizations, volunteer networks, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)/ international organizations (IOs) were cross-checked with the direct observations of local institutions and solidarity networks.



Lysychansk, June 2022 – Sayara International

The Ukrainian conflict has become a war of position, the outcome of which depends in part on the strength of the logistical lines, i.e. the capacity of the civil-military authorities (CMAs) to administer the territory with the support of volunteer networks. However, the lack of international aid and the risk of a humanitarian crisis raise fears of a possible collapse of the state institutions, which would render the logistics on which the Ukrainian army depends to hold the front line. Indeed, the level of international aid for Donbas remains relatively low while the conflict is intensifying with several hundred casualties every day.

On one hand, very little international aid is reaching the conflict zones in the east of the country. The cities of Donbas lack resources, which endangers their resilience to Russian aggression. Indeed, international aid favors international NGOs which are mainly positioned in the west of the country. While Ukrainian society is massively mobilized in the form of networks of volunteers coordinated with the civil-military authorities, international actors do not often use these networks, which are nevertheless capable of both

transporting aid to the most dangerous areas and carrying out rigorous monitoring and control processes to prevent corruption.

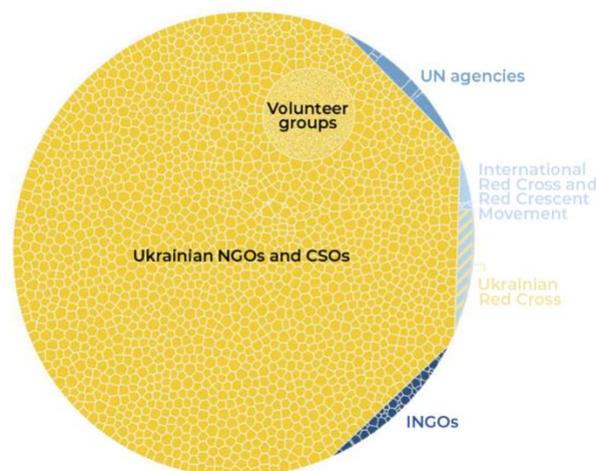
On the other hand, this development of international aid networks disconnected from local institutions risks creating demobilization as local resources are exhausted. While the coordination of volunteer networks with CMAs explains the resilience of Ukrainian society, the lack of coordination with the international organizations can create demobilization of the networks that ensure the current success of the Ukrainian resistance.

As a result, the first signs of a health and food crisis are already visible for hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped in the fighting areas. The remaining inhabitants of the Donbas region are mainly poor, disabled, and elderly people, but also IDPs returning due to a lack of support in western Ukraine. The feeling of abandonment is very strong among these populations. The cessation of the economy, the closure of shops, and the lack of transport mean that these already marginal and fragile populations are becoming poorer and more isolated. As a result, the inhabitants suffer from malnutrition, the infant and senior mortality rates have increased significantly, and chronic diseases are on the rise. The lack of medical coverage, hygiene, and clean water creates a strong risk of infectious diseases and epidemics.

In this critical situation, state institutions and local actors are showing strong resilience but are struggling to continue to operate. The destruction of infrastructure by Russian bombing is absorbing the resources of the CMAs, while the lack of water, electricity, and gas is reinforcing the humanitarian crisis. The reduction in hospital capacity and poor or non-existent communications are isolating the inhabitants and limiting the arrival of aid and the means of evacuation. After three months of war, volunteer networks and local Ukrainian organizations cannot rely on their own resources to help the civilian population. Coordinated with the CMAs, these networks continue to carry out effective aid distribution by leveraging their deep knowledge of the terrain, but they are in urgent need of financial, material, and coordination resources.

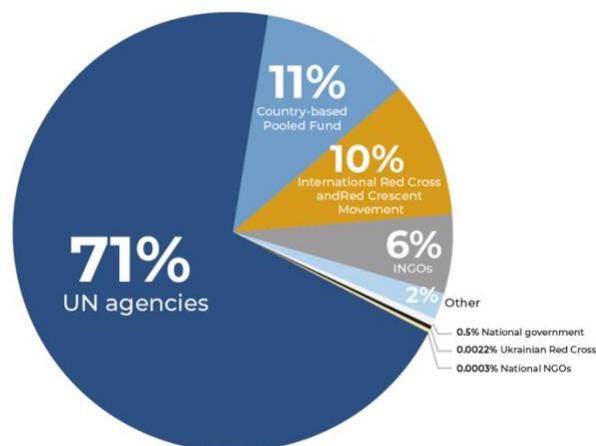
Operational presence

Humanitarian providers inside Ukraine are depicted here by number of organizations and their average staff size.

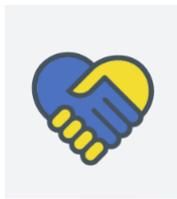


Sources: United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub. Enabling the local response: Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March–May 2022
 GDHO (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org) and
 OCHA (www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/ukraine)

Allocation of humanitarian contributions as of 23 May 2022

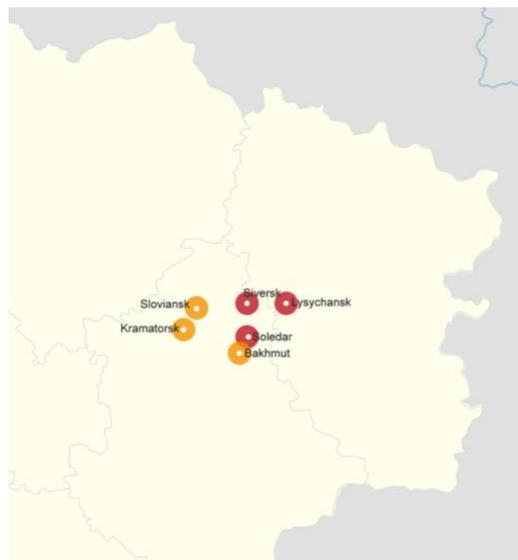


Sources: United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub. Enabling the local response: Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March–May 2022
 UN FTS 2022



Urgent need for more effective international aid delivery across Donbas:

Emergency aid must prioritize the **red zones** – such as the cities of Lysychansk, Siversk, or Soledar – where the bombing has drastically affected the administration and the volunteer networks. For example, the Lysychansk administration has only a few dozen municipal employees, about fifty fire fighters, and about thirty volunteers to help more than 30,000 inhabitants. The civil hospital has only two doctors and five nurses left, and without support it is about to close. Food, medical aid, solar generators, and Starlink satellite internet devices are a priority.



Stabilization aid should be targeted at the **orange areas** – such as the towns of Bakhmut, Sloviansk, and Kramatorsk – which are under moderate shelling. Despite the departure of about 70% of municipal employees, the CMAs are still fully functional and coordinate effectively with volunteer networks. International assistance can boost their capacity as evacuated populations begin to return (for example, more than 28,000 people have returned to Kramatorsk).



Access to Donbas: Strengthening civilian structures and the principle of humanitarian neutrality

Since May, various international NGOs have returned to the Donbas region, while the UN resumed its assistance to the CMAs. This return is still largely insufficient and too slow to stem the humanitarian crisis. Several factors specific to the international aid sector explain these difficulties, but the principle of humanitarian neutrality seems to be the main blockage due to confusion linked to the civil-military status of the CMAs and the volunteer networks. Martial law makes it unclear how to work with the Ukrainian civilian administration and challenges the principle of impartiality of the UN and international NGOs. However, the strengthening of Ukrainian civilian institutions can be done separately from the military.

Indeed, several examples of humanitarian action in coordination with the CMAs show that it is possible to obtain guarantees that aid will reach civilians. To do so, it is important to respect the institutional hierarchy: from oblast governor to municipality to municipal departments (water, electricity, health,

infrastructure, fire brigade, etc.). The Ukrainian administration has the means to guarantee the delivery of aid and, above all, to resolve the problems of confusion and competition between civilians and soldiers created by the war and martial law.

Two ways of working with Ukrainian actors are possible:

1. Memoranda of understanding with CMAs

Several UN agencies and INGOs have signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the CMAs, which allows direct aid to be delivered to Ukrainian institutions. For example, the cities of Kramatorsk and Bakhmut receive several tons of food packages per day (from UNICEF and WFP). Municipal employees and a network of volunteers distribute these packages to the population using a system of lists signed and verified by designated officials. These lists and the participation of volunteers are guarantees of transparency. Nevertheless, lack of UN staff access or presence in these areas prevent monitoring which would allow for increased aid delivery.

2. Cooperate with Ukrainian civil society organizations

Many Ukrainian organizations have structures that meet international criteria. Their experience since 2014 and their networks of volunteers enable them to carry out accurate mapping and optimal coverage of the population. Partnership with international NGOs can professionalize these local networks and strengthen the resilience of society to the crisis.



Conflict escalation and urban preparedness

As the conflict intensifies, there is a need to strengthen the preparedness of the cities in Donbas. At this stage, the CMAs are managing to coordinate the distribution of emergency aid, but the municipalities are not equipped: stocks are insufficient and municipal services do not have the means to repair infrastructure or vehicles. In particular, the towns of Bakhmut, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Konstanivaka, and Pokrovsk will soon be close to the front line. Without adequate preparation, the situation could worsen dramatically, like the crisis currently being experienced in Lysychansk.

Several key sectors need to be strengthened



Infrastructure:

Municipalities need to be equipped to deal with water and electricity cuts.

- Generators (preferably solar or diesel, due to fuel shortage)
- Water pumps
- Water filtering



Logistics network:

- Fleet of vehicles to maintain mobile teams for distribution
- Armored vehicles for evacuation
- Car repair service



Communication:

Devices and networks are essential to continue delivering emergency aid and maintain communication with the population despite the bombing.

- Starlink transmitters
- GSM network repair



Supporting civilian hospital structures:

Most of the hospitals are dedicated to the military and civilians are struggling to access medical support.

- Increase stocks
- Provide mobile teams to visit people in shelters
- Local pharmacies



Preparation of bomb shelters:

UNICEF is working with the town of Bakhmut to set up 237 shelters to accommodate 30,000 inhabitants. This experience is due to be extended to other cities.

- Set up bomb shelters in the basements of houses
- Provide sanitary facilities, WASH facilities/products, generators, and other items.

Administration contacts

Donetsk oblast

Oblast Coordinator on Humanitarian Support for Donetsk Oblast

Name and phone number available upon request

Pavlohrad

Pavlohrad is the last safe city before Donbas. It is a transit town for IDPs arriving by road from Mariupol, Donetsk, and Luhansk. On average, 10,000 IDPs arrive in Pavlohrad daily, which poses a challenge in terms of aid (registration, distribution of first aid and food). A large portion of the food is financed from the municipal budget. The three reception centers can house 500 people. The railway station and the private companies' logistic infrastructure allow for efficient transit of aid to the Donbas region.

Pavlohrad Mayor

Name, phone number, and email address available upon request

Pavlohrad Deputy Mayor

Name and phone number available upon request

Pokrovsk

The population of the city is being evacuated to the west. The railway station is one of the last in the south and east of Donbas to function, despite the missile bombardment. More than 5,000 IDPs are evacuated daily. A reception center houses 1,000 IDPs who are waiting to be evacuated by train. Public services are still functioning, although the municipal administration is being evacuated to Pavlohrad from where it continues to work. Police and volunteer networks continue to assist the estimated 30,000 residents who refuse to (or cannot) leave.

Pokrovsk Mayor

Name and phone number available upon request

Pokrovsk Municipality Assistance

Name and phone number available upon request

Press Office of Pokrovsk Municipality

Name and phone number available upon request

Volnovakh Municipal Deputy

Name and phone number available upon request

Kramatorsk

Public services are functioning and 70% of municipal employees are still present. The municipality serves as a transit point for IDPs coming from eastern Donbas (2,000-3,000 IDPs/day). Before the attack on Kramatorsk railway station, 6-8 trains could evacuate 5,000 people each day but, since then, evacuation by road carries a maximum of only 2,000 people daily. The municipality has 200-300 volunteers and centralizes/coordinates the work of 30 associations to avoid duplication of efforts and to provide assistance. The hospital system of Kramatorsk is functional, but not prepared for a war of intensity. It centralizes the health networks of eastern Donbas (blood bank, medicines) but is not equipped for emergency operations. Seriously wounded people have to be sent to Dnipro.

Kramatorsk Mayor

Name and phone number available upon request

Kramatorsk Deputy for Civilian Aid

Name, phone number, and email address available upon request

Kramatorsk Deputy for Communal Services

Name and phone number available upon request

Bakhmut

35,000 inhabitants remain in the city; approximately 10% of the city administrative staff remain active. MoUs and cooperations have increased with some UN partners, such as UNICEF, UNDP, and WFP. Preparation of 327 underground shelters in building basements is half-completed. Nevertheless, shortages of water, electricity, and gas greatly limit the city’s capacity to prepare for intensified conflict. Good administrative division allows for a precise overview of the population currently present in Bakhmut, but lack of communication means (including Starlink transmitters, radio) and likely disruption to medical services will present some of the main challenges. At the beginning of the war, there were five shelters for IDPs available in the city, with a capacity of 1,000 individuals. Now, two are still active, with an average of 20 people residing there each day for the past few weeks after military evacuation from Pokrovskaya and Peretovaya.

Bakhmut Deputy for Communal Services

Name and phone number available upon request

Bakhmut City Council Deputy

Name and phone number available upon request

Luhansk Oblast

Deputy Governor for Humanitarian Aid, in charge of Bakhmut coordination center for supplies

Name and phone number available upon request

Oblast Coordinator of Humanitarian Aid for Luhansk Oblast

Name and phone number available upon request

Lysychansk

Lysychansk still hosts at least 15,000 individuals in the city, and another 15,000 in the surrounding villages. The local police service says it has a good mapping and identification of the basements where people are currently taking shelter. Despite the collapse of the city administration, three municipality employees are still present and 150 communal services employees are very active in repairing targeted infrastructure. In addition, 50 police officers and 50 firefighters are also working on rotation in the city, both contributing to food distribution and evacuations. Firefighters also provide water supply from two lakes to the population and for fire extinction. No other source of water is currently available (all reservoir systems have broken down and no storage is yet prepared). Two MAZ-type trucks (10-ton capacity) are driven to the city daily to bring food and aid (14,000 units of aid each week). Doubling this transport would allow for preparation of stocks in the city center. Transport, maintenance of vehicles, and communications devices/systems are high priorities. In Lysychansk city, 4 Starlink transmitters are currently available in the city (in the aid distribution center, fire station, police station, and military hospital). An absence of internet access forces the population to gather around these four transmitters, which can attract the attention of Russian artillery. Spreading out these transmissions and increasing the number of Starlinks would ensure communication with highly isolated inhabitants (restoring capacity for medical

assessments and communication with families, organization of evacuations, etc.) and avoid very insecure gatherings.

Sieverodonetsk Mayor

Name and phone number available upon request

Doctor at Lysychansk civilian hospital

Name and phone number available upon request

Head of Luhansk Police

Name and phone number available upon request

Lysychansk Deputy Mayor

Name and phone number available upon request

Head of Fire Station in Bakhmut/Lysychansk

Name and phone number available upon request

Ukrainian NGO contacts

Vostok SOS

Names and phone numbers available upon request

info@vostok-sos.org

<https://vostok-sos.org/en/>

Proliska

This organization evacuates civilians from the areas of active military conflict in Ukraine, providing people with humanitarian assistance as well as psychological support and training.

National supervisor for the organization

Name, phone number, and email address available upon request

<https://proliska.org/en/>

Plech o Plech NGO

This NGO is carrying out distribution of humanitarian aid and investigations into human rights violations in Bakhmut and the Ukrainian-held Donetsk oblast areas.

Head of Plech o Plech and advisor on humanitarian support to the Oblast

Name and phone number available upon request

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/952023241509303>

VBD

(Vse Bude Dobre – translates as “Everything will be fine”)

This NGO distributes humanitarian aid in Donbas.

Head of the organization’s humanitarian hub in Kramatorsk/Pokrovsk (main hub for Donbas)

Name and phone number available upon request

Manager in Uzhgorod and Kramatorsk

Name and phone number available upon request

<https://www.facebook.com/vsebydeUkraine/>

Sloviansk Church

The Good Star Church is part of a network of Protestant churches located in most cities of the Donbas region (Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Drizhkivke, and others).

Good Star Protestant church Pastor

Name and phone number available upon request

Volunteer in charge of evacuations

Name and phone number available upon request

<https://www.facebook.com/dobrayavest.church/>
<https://dobrayavest.org/events/bratskie-vstrechi>

About us



SAYARA INTERNATIONAL is a social enterprise combining rigorous research and communication to create positive change in fragile and conflict-affected societies. Sayara has evolved across unstable contexts. Our decentralized structure – with a global leadership network and investment in local talent – enables agility and rapid start-up, while equipping us with unique values and competencies.

Sayara provides complex monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) and data-driven communication in the most challenging environments. Our work focuses on countering disinformation, fostering inclusive governance and social cohesion, and improving service delivery in emergencies.

Since 2015, Sayara has managed complex, rapid response, and multi-year projects in Eastern Europe. Sayara’s regional team comprises 20 experienced full-time staff – country-level leadership and program staff and a network of over 50 trusted technical experts who work remotely or from our offices in Kyiv (until recently) and Warsaw.

Figure 3: Sayara's geographic coverage in Eastern Europe (July 2022)



CONTACT

Nama Vanier
CEO

✉ nama@sayarainternational.com

☎ +33 6 95 22 89 07

John-Paul (JP) Gravelines
President

✉ jp@sayarainternational.com

☎ +38 097 164 48 65

hello@sayarainternational.com
sayarainternational.com