

Advocacy Brief

No Time for Business as Usual

Extent to which older people's rights are being upheld and their needs met in the Ukraine response



Key messages

- **UN agencies must address leadership and coordination gaps to proactively recognize and respond to the rights and needs of older people.**
- **UN agencies must strengthen data collection and analysis to ensure older people are visible.**
- **All humanitarian actors should take responsibility for responding to the rights and needs of older people.**
- **All humanitarian actors must enhance consultation with older people and make accessible information on humanitarian assistance available.**

The “Oldest” Humanitarian Crisis in the World

Older people, with and without disabilities, in eastern Ukraine have been living with the long-term impact of a conflict that started in 2014. An estimated 30 percent of people affected by the conflict in the last eight years were older people whose access to pensions, healthcare and other basic services has been severely restricted. Prior to the intensification of the crisis, Ukraine already had the largest percentage of older people affected by conflict in a single country, making this the “oldest” humanitarian crisis in the world¹.”

Since February 24, 2022, there has been a devastating escalation of the war which has resulted in the large-scale displacement of more than a quarter of the

population and one of the largest refugee outflows since the Second World War. In a country where one in four people is over age 60, the impact on older people has been dramatic.

Many older people are performing crucial roles in the response to the current crisis, whether as volunteers or as caregivers for other older adults and/or children. However, depending on their circumstances, older people are experiencing specific and significant challenges. Older people who have remained in their homes in areas of intense fighting face challenges in accessing shelter as well as essential supplies and services. Separation from families has left many exposed and isolated. For the older people who have evacuated to other areas in the country, the journey is arduous, often taking several days in cramped and over-crowded trains, buses and on foot. Older people are also among the more than five million people who have managed to cross the borders to relative safety but face the uncertainty of where they will go and when they will be able to return home.

HelpAge international's work in Ukraine and the region

Since 2014, HelpAge International has been supporting almost 5,000 older people in Eastern Ukraine with food, hygiene items and assistive products, as well as providing homebased care and psychosocial support services via community volunteers, many of whom are older people themselves.

Despite the intensification of fighting, HelpAge volunteers have continued to make psychosocial "check in" calls to older people in Eastern Ukraine where possible. HelpAge has provided hygiene kits to two local municipal authorities and two local organizations to distribute.

In Moldova, HelpAge has been providing older refugees and their communities with catering services or food vouchers as well as hygiene kits in accommodation centres across the country since the middle of March. This support includes providing three hot meals a day to some of the most at-risk refugees. In addition, HelpAge has provided the refugee accommodation centers with institutional hygiene kits to support their work.

HelpAge is scaling up its work and moving to more targeted programming, with a specific focus on older people with and without disabilities. This will include the provision of accessible multipurpose cash assistance, community-based protection services and health referrals and home-based care. HelpAge will begin working in Poland through local partner organisations in the coming months.

Older People's Rights and Needs Overlooked

It is well documented by HelpAge International² that the humanitarian system too often fails to respond to the unique needs of older people and the particular protection risks they face.

There are general protections for older people as part of the broader populations in human rights and humanitarian law, specific organizational policies in place, and commitments made in recent years to "leave no one behind"³ and ensure a more inclusive humanitarian system that respects the rights of marginalised people, including older people⁴. However, there has been limited targeted attention to older people, including those with disabilities, in the humanitarian response to the Ukraine crisis. The findings of our rapid needs assessments in Eastern Ukraine, Moldova⁵ and Poland⁶ make clear that the rights of older people are not being upheld and their needs are not yet being met.

It is widely understood that "older people face specific challenges in situations of humanitarian crises and displacement⁷." However, despite the demographics of Ukraine being skewed towards older people, and particularly older women⁸, several

early public statements and funding appeals failed to make any reference to the rights and needs of older people. Although more recent plans and appeals have enhanced their references to older people and analysis of their needs and the risks they face, this is indicative of the challenge to ensure that older people are visible from the start.

The speed and scale of the crisis has resulted in a scramble of organizations moving into the region to respond. Recognizing that scaling up the coordination and leadership of a humanitarian response takes considerable time and resources, there continue to be gaps in leadership on inclusion and a lack of engagement about older people in the response. Age and disability working groups have been set up or strengthened to follow up on local coordination and practical issues in both Ukraine and refugee hosting countries. However, stronger leadership on inclusion in the United Nations Country Team and at OCHA and UNHCR regional and headquarters levels is needed.

Older people are frequently excluded from data collection and needs assessments⁹. So far, there is an absence of comprehensive sex and age disaggregated data to provide a clear picture of population movements within and outside of Ukraine. While some data has been collected on internal displacement since the escalation of the crisis, limitations of the data mean it is hard to give precise figures for how many older people are on the move¹⁰. HelpAge's own findings indicate that most older people are choosing to remain in place, despite the inherent dangers. In the rapid needs assessment carried out in Eastern Ukraine in early March¹¹, 99% of older people reported that they did not want to leave their homes. This trend continued; a more recent analysis of the information collected by HelpAge volunteers indicated that by the end of March, 95% of the older people remained in their homes.

Host governments' well-intentioned decision to ease entry of refugees into their territory by foregoing registration (and in some cases allowing Ukrainians in without passports or other identity documents) has resulted in a lack of data on older refugees, limiting the ability to understand their specific needs. We know that older women often face heightened risks during and after displacement. Although it is estimated that women and children make up 90%¹² of those who have left Ukraine, the number of older women this includes remains unclear.

It is critical that older people are consulted to promote their participation and empowerment. There is intrinsic value to ensuring that they have a choice, control and a voice in the way the humanitarian response takes shape. In addition, including older people's voices in decision-making processes that affect them can lead to humanitarian interventions being more effective. Anecdotal information from HelpAge staff and early findings from our latest rapid needs assessment indicate that older people's voices are being overlooked, with 70% of people over 60 stating that they have not been consulted by any other humanitarian agency about the services provided to them since the crisis began. Older women were less likely to be consulted than older men¹³. Assumptions that older people are passive recipients of care and aid ignores the diversity and complexity of their lives and overlooks their active participation in the responding to the needs of their communities. Many older people are performing crucial roles in the current crisis, whether as volunteers or as care givers for other older adults and/or children.

Although some efforts have been made to support older people, overall humanitarian actors are not meeting their obligations to deliver an inclusive humanitarian response.

Recommendations

To all humanitarian actors in the Ukraine response

- All humanitarian actors in Ukraine must ensure that older people who have not been able to leave their homes, including those living in institutions, are reached, provided with essential life-saving humanitarian support and tailored and prioritised assistance, and evacuated to safety if they wish.

- All humanitarian actors in Ukraine must ensure that older people who have fled to other areas of the country are able to access full basic services, including food and water, healthcare including mental health support, social services including pensions, transport, and information. Those who have been evacuated should not be forced to move into institutions.
- All humanitarian actors and national authorities in refugee hosting countries must ensure that older people's rights are upheld, including by ensuring prioritized and dignified reception at border and transit points, and prioritization of protection for those facing additional risks, such as older people with disabilities and older women
- All humanitarian actors in this response must provide accessible methods for older people to participate in, make decisions about and provide feedback on the humanitarian programmes and the assistance provided to them.

To UN agencies, funds and programmes

- Designate age-inclusion focal points to provide internal leadership and coordination and promote empowerment through the meaningful participation of older people:
 - Fill a longstanding gap in OCHA's focal points for at risk groups by appointing a global focal point on older people mandated to provide coordination and support on this issue.
 - Ensure OCHA appoints an inclusion lead in the country team reporting directly to the HC, following the example set in Syria.
 - Ensure UNHCR provides sufficient staffing capacity at regional and global levels to engage and respond on issues related to older people.
- Review public statements and public appeals about the conflict to ensure that references to the rights and needs of older people are included.
- Use the tools at their disposal to ensure sex, age and disability data is collected and age-sensitive analysis and reporting undertaken for people falling within their mandate so that the needs, perspectives, rights and challenges faced by older women and men are highlighted.
- Invest in capacity-building and skills training of humanitarian actors to understand and respond to the needs and rights of older people in the humanitarian assistance they provide.
 - This would include promoting and using UNHCR's Need to Know Guidance on Older Persons in Forced Displacement¹⁴ and the Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities¹⁵.

To government donor agencies

- Highlight the specific impact on older people in high level and political statements about the crisis to ensure sufficient visibility for an at-risk population.
- Ensure appropriate prioritization of older people through institutional relationships with UN bodies and other donors.
- Strengthen humanitarian policies and agency staffing structures where there are gaps in policy and expertise in relation to the inclusion of older people.
- Ensure that any funding provided to the crisis includes older people as a priority at-risk group, and that there is specific attention to sub-groups of the older population that face specific risks.
- Ensure through contract management that the entire project cycle is informed by age, sex and disability disaggregated data, and that funded partners are accountable for monitoring and reporting on older people.
- Directly fund organisations that have expertise in the delivery of humanitarian support to older people.

Endnotes

- ¹ Humanitarian Response Plan Ukraine, 2022 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ukraine_2022_hrp_eng_2022-02-10.pdf
- ² HelpAge International, *If not now, when?* 2020 <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/if-not-now-when/>
- ³ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution A/RES/70/1, *Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, 21 October 2015, www.un.org/qa/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E
- ⁴ . World Humanitarian Summit secretariat, *Restoring Humanity: Synthesis of the Consultation Process for the World Humanitarian Summit*, New York, United Nations, 2015, pp.40–41, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/restoring-humanity-qlobal-voices-calling-action-synthesis-consultation-process-world>
- ⁵ HelpAge International *Rapid Needs Assessments carried out in Eastern Ukraine and Moldova*, 2022 <https://www.helpage.org/where-we-work/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/ukraine>
- ⁶ HelpAge International and Bonum Vitae *Rapid Needs Assessment in Poland*, 2022 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Needs%20of%20Older%20Refugees%20in%20Poland-%2002-04-22%20-%2003-Pager%20.pdf>
- ⁷ UNHCR *Need to know guidance: Working with older persons in forced displacement*, 2021, p. 6 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4ee72aaf2.pdf>
- ⁸ Direct Relief, *Gender, Health, and the War in Ukraine*, 2022 <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/gender-health-and-war-ukraine>
- ⁹ HelpAge International Asia Pacific Regional Office, *More at risk: how older people are excluded in humanitarian data*, Thailand, , 2019 <https://ageingasia.org/how-older-people-are-excluded-in-humanitarian-data/>
- ¹⁰ International Organisation for Migration, *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey Round 4 (29 April – 3 May 2022)* <https://displacement.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-4-29-april-3-may-2022>
- ¹¹ HelpAge International *Rapid Needs Assessments in Eastern Ukraine*, 2022 <https://www.helpage.org/where-we-work/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/ukraine>
- ¹² UNHCR *warns of rising needs in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, calls for cessation of hostilities* <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2022/3/623453f14/unhcr-warns-rising-needs-ukraine-neighbouring-countries-calls-cessation.html>
- ¹³ HelpAge International *Rapid Needs Assessment report to be released in May 2022.*
- ¹⁴ UNHCR *Need to know guidance: Working with older persons in forced displacement*, 2021 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4ee72aaf2.pdf>
- ¹⁵ ADCAP *Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities*, 2018 <https://spherestandards.org/resources/humanitarian-inclusion-standards-for-older-people-and-people-with-disabilities/>

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

For more information, questions or advice, contact Hester Clark, Humanitarian Advocacy Advisor at hester.clark@helpage.org