If not now, when? An open letter to international donors and NGOs who want to genuinely help Ukraine

Wednesday 24 August, 2022

Loop is proud to be a co-author and signatory to the following open letter from the National Network of Local Philanthropy Development in Ukraine

Founder and Managing Director of Loop, Alex Ross, explains:

> "The data on the Talk To Loop platform shows local organisations providing the most accountable, responsive support to the varied needs of people affected by the Ukrainian crisis. We have also received many sensitive stories where an incredibly strong network of volunteers have provided the assistance needed in the most challenging contexts. These are the people we should all be supporting, as directly as possible."

Please do take the time to read this letter, and click through to add your signature, using the highlighted link below. Thank you.

We are Ukrainian CSOs and allies who are actively working to ensure that local civil societies have the ongoing resources and power they need to respond to short-term and long-term needs in our communities.

Many of us have already been taking a leading role in the humanitarian response, both in Ukraine and neighbouring countries. From the outset of the Russian military attack, we have been at the forefront of the response to ensure people are safe and looked after in this conflict, and that systems are in place to rebuild our communities when, hopefully, the conflict subsides. In Ukraine, almost all humanitarian aid has been provided by 150 local NGOs, church associations and 1,700 newly created volunteer-based CSOs. Many of these informal volunteer groups are now permanent active organisations operating in the region.

In spite of the fact that the international humanitarian sector has raised many millions of dollars, we have failed to see resources coming our way. In May, the UN Financial Tracking Service (FTS) showed that UN agencies received about two-thirds of humanitarian aid funding to Ukraine. International NGOs received 6% of the funding, while national Ukrainian NGOs received a scant 0.003% of the total amount. This doesn't factor in the many millions that INGOs have been securing through direct appeals to the public. Yet we are the ones with access, local knowledge, connections, language and - most important of all - the personal commitment to saving lives and delivering help no matter what.

During the past four months of full-scale war, our members and colleagues have faced considerable challenges in order to gain access to the system of international funding that, even in the midst of a crisis and with local human resources and know-how at the ready, prioritises international organisations over local ones.

We call on donors and INGOs to rapidly consider a different approach in this war – one that builds on successes elsewhere, but that can also be used to model the behaviour we know will nurture stronger civil societies everywhere. Many of our allies in the #ShiftThePower movement have already pioneered the knowledge on how to do this in other contexts.

We don't have to wait until the war ends — here is a simple list of the immediate things we think you can do to shift the power to local organisations, where it is most needed:

1: Cut the bureaucracy.

Despite official statements of international organisations that they seek to support local public initiatives in Ukraine, the reality is that in order to receive these funds, tens, or hundreds, or even thousands of procedures are required. We don't have the human resources to do this, nor do we think this is a priority. Trust and accountability are basic principles for cooperation. Ukrainian NGOs cannot afford to fill out grant applications in volume, nor multiple, repetitive, lengthy due diligence procedures, by some designated International deadline. We are working in the conditions of hostilities. Small organisations need unrestricted flexible funding, provided rapidly: we can demonstrate our legitimacy in other ways,

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through our actions on the ground and the validation of our peers, the networks that we belong to and the communities we serve.

2: Let local civil society actors decide our priorities and how we wish to act in solidarity in this conflict.

In the midst of the war, we cannot ignore the needs of combatants. We know that aid is rarely 'neutral'. Yet we are being prevented from receiving much-needed resources because of a bias towards this assumption about 'neutrality.' The aid sector has documented multiple ways in which even so-called 'neutral' aid has unintended consequences, and can make inter-group divisions worse and reduce self-reliance and harm local markets.

We do not want to remain "neutral". The value of human life must come first, and supporting the needs of those on the front line can significantly reduce the amount of civilian aid needed and the number of casualties. Whilst we recognise that International organisations may want to be perceived as such, it should be up to local civil society in these circumstances to determine our own approaches and priorities.

Our approach and demand for solidarity-based funding is supported by the academic Hugo Slim, who has written that solidarity and not neutrality, should dictate the actions of the International humanitarian community working with and in Ukraine. According to Slim, this approach would be following the long-held tradition of 'resistance humanitarianism' that was part of the resistance to Nazi-occupied Europe; and more recently seen in places like Myanmar and Syria.

Needs are changing rapidly and are different in different parts of the country and for different populations. We are far better at identifying what divides and connects people because of our historical and cultural knowledge and our more nuanced understanding of local alliances and support networks. Funding should remain flexible for us to deliver based on the priority needs local communities are asking for. Mis-guided assumptions about neutrality shouldn't be a barrier to funding. Wouldn't you want the same if you were also in a danger crisis?

3: Invest in ways to help local people tell our own stories and to help us explain what we are doing to help. This supports deeper understanding and helps us to secure access to resources directly.

INGOs and international agencies have been appropriating our knowledge and telling the listening and giving public what they think we need. To INGOs we say, "Stop trying to speak on our behalf and stop controlling narratives in ways that advance your own institutional interests!"

The technology and methodologies exist that can enable local people to share our experiences and needs. Listening to local people will help you to understand the horrors of the war crisis and the varied and changing needs. This results in greater solidarity and accountability and can influence where and how individual donors or institutional donors and the wider public choose to support us. That's true accountability, where local people profile our own experiences and have the power to speak openly and report safely.

We therefore ask the international community to invest in strengthening these collective common systems so that we can easily and efficiently tell our own stories and communicate in our own language with a sympathetic public. We also ask you to listen to and amplify our voices and our experiences and our activities, in our name. This will actively build solidarity and understanding of the role of local actors in relief, recovery and rehabilitation work. This will also support us to secure more direct and sustainable resources.

4: Stop trying to build 'our capacity'.

We understand that a significant amount of funding that multiple INGOs have secured is being used to 'build capacity.' This is nonsense. As stated earlier, we are rooted in our communities and have the historical, cultural, linguistic and contextual knowledge and understanding of local realities to respond effectively. Many of us have organised and led civic action and community development long before the war. We think it is INGOs that often need to build their own organisational capacity and knowledge about our context, our networks and what a locally rooted civil society looks like long term. Maybe you can translate some of our resources into English to better understand our knowledge and existing approaches.

Building our capacity to learn about your bureaucracy and tick your boxes, in the midst of a conflict is disrespectful, a waste of time and resources and has a direct and negative impact on our ability to respond to the urgent needs in our communities.

The skills of community organising, which we have long developed, are something that the international community could use more of. When the conflict subsides, and we have caught up on sleep and processed our trauma, we're happy to talk to you about what we have learned.

5: Enough talking, it's time to act! If not now, then when?

There have been many commitments and conferences about 'the participation revolution', decolonisation, accountability to local people, #ShiftThePower, localisation, the Grand Bargain and equitable partnerships among others. There has been enough talk! The gap between narrative and action is wide. Now we need to see action.

Now is not the time to excuse inaction by blaming "the aid architecture", "the system", "managers," or "donors." Each person working in INGOs or donor organisations, can contribute towards this change, whether it involves relaxing some of the rigid systems, sharing risks more equitably, advocating for alternative kinds of accountability metrics, or experimenting with new approaches and new (local) partners. And *yes*, this means challenging your own power and exercising humility.

We have an opportunity here to leave what's old and doesn't work behind in ways that can improve our situation in Ukraine immediately and can have lasting impacts around the world too.

The immediate response and the long-term post-conflict response will require a strong, well-resourced and resilient local civil society. We need to be supported to be civic actors in our own right, not simply projectised mimics of INGOs or "service providers''. We are grateful to the international community that has shown solidarity and supports Ukraine by supporting this diverse, locally rooted, active and committed network of actors in Ukraine and neighbouring countries and we encourage the rest to come on board too.

By taking some of these immediate steps, your support will go a lot further to helping people affected by the war in Ukraine and many of us working on social justice throughout the world.

Please sign the letter here: https://forms.gle/QHupsNPeFWxbb8sr7

Sincerely,
National Network of Local Philanthropy Development

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