

Winterization in protracted crisis

February 2026 | Ukraine

Key Messages

- Winter vulnerability is driven by damaged infrastructure, constrained household finances, and uneven coping capacity. Cold weather exacerbates vulnerabilities. The conflict is the backdrop to this vulnerability and need.
- Winter Response Plan activities appear to be well understood and generally appropriate, though there are opportunities to review eligibility, timeliness, and roles of government and humanitarian actors.
- Fundamental drivers of need, including conflict, household finances, and extreme weather, continue to affect people in Ukraine, while the funding required to meet identified winter response needs exceeds available funding.

Context & Rational

Ukraine is going through the fourth winter since Russia launched its “full-scale invasion” in February 2022. Though this marked an escalation, there has been a humanitarian winter response every year since 2014.

The winter response needs to continuously adapt to conditions on the ground.

This research project is intended to provide qualitative evidence to inform the Winter Task Force and relevant clusters in the development and review of Winter Responses.

Assessment Overview

The project begins with the information gaps identified in the 2025/26 Winter Response Plan.¹

It focuses particularly on activities staged at the household level, leading to a particular focus on SNFI activities.

The silver boxes carry quotations from the residents that REACH spoke with.

A full-length version of the report is available [here](#).

Methodology:

The primary data are thirty-nine interviews with residents, fourteen interviews with public sector workers, and nine interviews with NGO workers.

These qualitative interviews were conducted between 28th November and 15th December 2025, in Kharkivska and Sumska oblasts.

People were invited to reflect on the situation as they saw it on the day of the interview, how they believed the situation had changed year by year, and their own priorities or challenges.

Limitations:

The primary data collected for this project is qualitative, and not intended to produce statistical information. Any participant’s viewpoint is partial.

Participants were recruited purposively. The hromadas provided assistance in identifying participants. This project focuses on the areas of Ukraine that are under control of the Government of Ukraine.

Findings are indicative, not statistically representative.

Image: a snowy street in Kyiv during a power outage, February 2026



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A persistently difficult operational context

There are fundamental drivers of need in Ukraine. Low incomes, extreme weather, and the conflict most of all, mean that need can remain relatively unchanged from year to year. Needs are dynamic.

Some of the NGO workers REACH spoke with argued strongly that their main objectives were to help people to “survive” during winter. Changing the fundamental drivers of need is beyond the scope of Winter Response activities.

The residents REACH spoke with also referred to their capacity to “survive”.

This can have a positive sense, of overcoming adversity. But, it only makes sense in the context of deprivation. People are spending their entire income on essentials, and winter brings additional costs.

The conflict intensified in 2025, and access worsened.^{2 3} This January has been far colder than previous years.

“Well, you know, no one makes plans now. Now there is one plan: work, earn a salary, and we will somehow cope. We are already accustomed to knowing how to save, to survive in these conditions. [...] We live one day at a time.”

“The biggest problem [I face] is that there is no improvement! [...] And that there is no point, saying, ‘there is an omega [i.e. an end point] that we will reach’, and after that, there will be an improvement!”

Lived experience of winter during wartime

“On heating, so that you understand, we sleep clothed, and we try to use less gas to buy groceries. [W]e go dressed in the apartment, and sleep dressed under two blankets [...] And what would I use if I had money and funds? Of course, I would use everything. I would insulate, make repairs and everything. [...] I am constantly worried that I will not be able to pay for this gas.”

“If the electricity cuts out, the cold in our apartment is immediately terrible. [...] probably due to the fact that it is not very warm in the house, the wallpaper is blooming, blackened”.

People are accustomed to dealing with the challenges of winter. Households are prepared to varying degrees.

For some, these preparations were regular seasonal activities. Some were made for the first time, and others were long-lasting preparations made in previous years. Still, people have continued to report lacking essentials.

The people REACH interviewed gave various examples of living with tight household budgets. A household’s financial breathing room is an important factor in their ability to manage needs or withstand crises.

The outside temperature, falling to -20 degrees Celsius, is too cold for people to choose to economise on heating costs. This means other trade-offs must be made.

People referred to saving on medicines or food, something also found in other research.^{4 5}

As well as saving on household essentials, there was a clear connection between the inadequacy of household insulation and cost of living. People referred to living in cold, damp, energy inefficient houses.

Resilience and coping

The people REACH spoke with had a range of experiences with receipt of humanitarian aid. Some had very positive experiences which they said addressed their immediate problems. Others were frustrated by what they received, and others still said they had not been the recipient of any kind of aid despite apparently being in need.

In general, it appeared that aid was seen as part of a bigger picture of a household budget - whether it was provided as cash assistance or in-kind.

Both cash and in-kind assistance appeared to be satisfactory to the people who received them. This is in

line with findings from the Shelter Cluster, and other “post-distribution monitoring” reports which REACH has seen from previous winters.⁶

Whilst there appears to be satisfaction with the aid that people did receive, not everyone REACH spoke with had received the help they had hoped for.

For the 2025/26 “heating season”, the solid-fuel assistance was stipulated in Resolution 985.⁷ There were some concerns about the design of the legislation. NGOs have mentioned finding that their own assessments of need differed from those of the local authority. The timeframe for

registration was narrow, just a few weeks in August.

Income is an important factor of self-sufficiency. Aside from this, social and familial networks are likely important. Different people have stronger or weaker social networks to turn to. When these networks are weakened, people may be more vulnerable. They may also miss out on important information.

The changing economic landscape in Ukraine means that local government budgets are also stretched. This affects their capacity to meet the public’s need.⁸



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Conclusion

This project had three objectives: to assess how winter-related humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities evolve over multiple years; to examine how institutional actors (local authorities, CSOs) perceive and support winterisation efforts, and; to contribute to collective situational awareness to support humanitarian partners in shaping context-appropriate responses.

The research indicates that, as the war enters its fifth year since the full-invasion, there are fundamental drivers of need. The conflict, stretched household budgets, and the cold weather, combine to put people in a vulnerable situation. People's ability to meet their needs is affected by not only the capacity of local government or NGOs, but also their own household income and social network.

It is unknown how the war will develop in the coming months. Past experience indicates that, regardless of how the conflict evolves, another winter response will be needed in 2026/27. If the conflict scales down, there will be a wealth of humanitarian experience from before 2022 that will remain relevant. Unfortunately, the trend has been for conflict to intensify over the past two years. If it remains at an elevated level, or intensifies further, people's ability to cope will be stretched even more.

To understand winter need, it is important to understand need year-round. People begin to get ready for winter well ahead of time. They buy in fuel, store food, insulate their homes, and seek assistance in the spring, summer and autumn. The determinants of their resilience may not be winter-specific at all. For example, people's social network, housing quality, and financial capacities. Similarly, people referred to needs which were not winter specific. Still, the winter brings extra strain to bear. Assistance that helps people to manage in the warmer months can also help in the winter; for example, by making it more manageable to cover the cost of essential expenditures or providing the moral support that enables people to manage in times of crisis.

The general consensus from post-distribution monitoring, personal experience and qualitative research appears to be that the overall objectives of winter response plans are relevant. However, it is also generally acknowledged that the delivery and operationalization of the objectives can be made more efficient.

The new Unified Cash Transfer approach should be monitored closely as it is applied in 2026. There are always cases where in-kind assistance or services will be more appropriate, but unconditional cash has the potential to be highly relevant for people who struggle to manage during the winter. It will be important to assess whether cash transfers as currently envisioned are ambitious enough to enable people to meet their needs in the long-term.

Apart from interventions at the household level, the resilience of critical systems like energy, WASH and health need to be assured. Again, these are not necessarily winter-specific problems, though winter exacerbates already difficult conditions. The local government are the primary actors supporting the public. Their capacities are constrained by funding and staffing. Similarly, this is a structural issue which makes it harder to manage winter stress.

Endnotes

- 1 UN OCHA, [Ukraine Winter Response Plan \(October 2025 - March 2026\)](#), July 2025
- 2 ACLED, ["Exhausted Ukraine faces military and diplomatic pressure to cede the Donbas"](#), December 2025
- 3 ACAPS, ["Ukraine: May–August 2025 humanitarian access update"](#), September 2025
- 4 REACH, ["2025 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment \(MSNA\): Overview of humanitarian needs in Ukraine"](#), December 2025
- 5 International Rescue Committee, ["Multisectoral Needs Assessment Report 2025"](#), December 2025
- 6 For example, Danish Refugee Council, ["Ukraine Winterisation Needs Assessment Winter 2025 – 2026"](#), July 2025 and Norwegian Refugee Council, ["Winterization Market and Needs Assessment: September 2024 Open Application"](#), March 2025
- 7 Cabinet of Ministers, ["Деякі питання надання допомоги населенню на придбання твердого пального побутового палива протягом опалювального сезону"](#), trans. "Issues related to the provision of assistance to the population for the purchase of solid household heating fuel during the heating season", August 2025
- 8 REACH, ["Emergency Livelihoods Profiling In Frontline Areas"](#), January 2026

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).



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