

Ukraine : Situation Overview: Kharkivska Oblast

June 2022

Context and Methodology

Since Russian forces shifted military tactics to focus on the Donbas area in early April 2022, the Ukrainian army has gradually regained territory lost in the early days of the invasion in the immediate vicinity of Kharkiv. While humanitarian partners have been on the ground providing assistance since the first days of the invasion, with access to Kharkiv city and its rural surroundings now improving, a scale up of the response is both required and expected. This brief presents a concise overview and update on displacement trends, the most immediate humanitarian needs, and the key characteristics of the local response currently in place. The aim is to inform partners on primary considerations in regards to setting up or scaling up a response in Kharkiv.

The findings presented in this brief are based on 13 Key Informant (KI) Interviews with local actors including civil society organisations, volunteer networks, international NGOs and local authorities, conducted by REACH from 30 May to 3 June. The findings should be considered as indicative only.



Summary of Findings

- Kharkiv is still not safe for return:** frequent shelling and unexploded ordnance still pose a significant risk to life of local communities and volunteers.
- Some households are returning to their places of habitual residence, and re-opening their businesses, despite safety risks.
- Priority needs are for medicines and fuel, multi-purpose cash and livelihoods support.**
- Local actors and volunteer networks are best positioned to identify needs and deliver assistance,** with international actors and donors providing financial and in-kind support.
- While effective at delivering food, non-food and hygiene items, **local volunteer networks are less equipped to respond to shelter needs in terms of rehabilitation and repair works.**
- The locally-led response by volunteer networks will not be sustainable in the longer term, due to limited funds and human resources.**
- Some KIs reported concerns about the safety of volunteer staff,** in particular when utilised by international partners to deliver assistance in areas they have not been traditionally operating in. Security risks remain present and local organisations often lack the capacity to conduct detailed assessments of risks.

Security and displacement

- While an increase in return movements during May was reported, KIs reported that **Kharkiv and surrounding areas are not safe for return.**
- Frequent shelling both inside and outside the city, as well as the presence of unexploded ordnance, still pose a significant threat to human life. KIs reported that they do not expect the security situation to improve in the short-term. KIs reported that previously, favourable media reports on military operations around Kharkiv prompted premature returns, which put people at risk.
- Many people have emerged from underground shelters and subway stations in an attempt to return to their homes. However, **in many cases houses have been damaged or destroyed and do not allow for safe return.**
- Despite reports of return movements, KIs also reported that **displacement disproportionately impacts the rural surroundings,** with key informants reporting the pressure of IDP influxes and the difficulty in meeting needs is much higher in surrounding villages compared to Kharkiv city.
- KIs reported that **small shops and pharmacies are re-opening in increasing numbers.** Some KIs reported that this is due to financial needs rather than an improvement in the security situation. **Pharmacies in particular are reportedly struggling with supplies.**
- Public transport inside the city is slowly resuming its service.
- Several KIs reported that **the risk of providing humanitarian assistance in the countryside to the North and East of Kharkiv is significantly higher than in the city,** with much of that risk currently borne by local volunteers.

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Acute Humanitarian Needs

- Responses as to whether in-kind or cash assistance was most needed were mixed. Some KIs reported that food and non-food items (NFIs) are a priority need. Others, however, reported that cash support is the priority as basic items are sufficiently available, but the population lacks the financial means to buy them. **Items that were definitively reported as scarce are fuel and medicine.**
- KIs reported that many people returning to the city or emerging from underground shelters are returning to significantly damaged homes and belongings. KIs also reported that prior livelihood activities such as salaried jobs and small businesses have been disrupted. **Livelihood and multi-purpose cash assistance was therefore reported as a key short-term need.**
- While local organisations and volunteer networks are able to successfully deliver food, non-food and hygiene assistance, **there is an acute problem with shelter needs in the form of repair and rehabilitation** that cannot be met through local organisations and volunteer networks alone. **Currently, people are returning to homes that are unsuitable and unsafe for living.**

The Response

- **Local civil society organisations (CSOs) and volunteer networks are best positioned to identify needs and deliver assistance**, according to KIs. In many cases, CSOs are able to deliver food, medicine and hygiene items directly to homes – ensuring people's access to vital assistance.
- **Private businesses have also been involved in the local response**, for example food businesses have transformed their activities to provide food donations to those in need. These are possibly being funded by traditional donors or by large enterprises.
- **In some areas, local organisations have organised themselves in consortia or hubs to improve coordination.** These hubs coordinate closely with the municipal authorities, although some respondents noted there was still room for improved communication. The hubs coordinate activities, volunteers and funding and share security information to protect volunteers.
- In other areas, KIs reported that there is currently no formal coordination between local organisations, but they suggested that coordination platforms would be helpful in improving communication with local government and international partners.

Challenges

- Multiple KIs reported that **the response by local organisations and volunteer networks is approaching the limit of sustainability, both in terms of funding and human resources.** They reported that many organisations are run entirely by volunteers, who have been at the front-line of the response since the 24 February. Several KIs reported concerns that this will not remain tenable if volunteers do not receive any form of compensation.
- The majority of KIs reported **the need to reduce bureaucracy by international partners, donors, and the local authorities** in order to speed up the response and ensure that assistance can reach those most in need in a timely manner. They also reported a lack of clarity regarding protocols and procedures when dealing with large institutional donors.
- Respondents reported the need for **greater transparency in the logistics and delivery of humanitarian assistance.** KIs involved in the local response reported concerns that humanitarian assistance did not always reach those most in need. The plurality of actors involved, in combination with multiple layers of coordination complicates planning and can make it hard for local actors to determine accountability when assistance expected and planned for does not reach its final destination. Some KIs suggested direct contact between donors and local NGOs, while others advocated for a centralised fund for each area, distributed by local authorities to local aid actors.
- Finally, while the majority of KIs reported that local CSOs and volunteer networks are best positioned to lead on identifying needs and deliver assistance, even on behalf of international partners and donors, they also expressed **concerns about the safety of volunteer staff.** They reported that most local organisations are not capable of conducting detailed security assessments, meaning that the use of such organisations to deliver assistance outside of their regular area of operations entails a significant increase of risk that must be carefully considered.