FROM KOSOVO TO UKRAINE: LESSONS FROM THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT IN EUROPE

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
COVID-19	novel coronavirus disease 2019
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisation

Introduction

Before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the last large-scale forced migration and displacement to happen within Europe was the 1999 Kosovo crisis. The situation was described at the time as the 'largest and fastest movement of people in Europe since World War II' (Wiles et al., 2000), words that are now being used to describe the even larger flow of people displaced by the Ukraine crisis.

While there are many differences between the two crises, not least in terms of their primary cause and the scale of the humanitarian emergencies, there are also similarities (Table 1), particularly in the international humanitarian response. Both crises triggered record levels of funding, especially from private donations, and most international humanitarian agencies in receipt of those donations had limited or no presence and experience in the countries affected.

This paper highlights key lessons from the international humanitarian response to the Kosovo crisis that could have relevance in guiding the response to Ukraine. The lessons are drawn from the three-volume 'Independent Evaluation of Expenditure of DEC Kosovo Appeal Funds' (Wiles et al., 2000) and ALNAP's meta-evaluation of the Kosovo response, from its 2001 Annual Review (Apthorpe, 2000).

Table 1: Similarities and differences between the humanitarian crises in Kosovo (1999/2000) and Ukraine (2022)

	Kosovo (1999/2000)	Ukraine (2022)
Context		
Related to	A decade of wars of secession from former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	Armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, from 2014; Ukraine's interest in joining NATO and associated tensions with Russia (Kirby, 2022)
Backdrop	An economic crisis associated with collapse of government and of socialist-era welfare systems in Former Yugoslavia	A global economic downturn associated with COVID-19 Pandemic Relatively strong government institutions
Cause and scale of conflict		
Immediate cause	NATO air strikes as part of a military campaign to force the Serbian government to withdraw from Kosovo after negotiations had failed. (NB military operations short-lived: 78 days – but impact of crisis continued for longer)	Invasion of Ukraine by neighbouring Russia
Geographic range of conflict	Centred on one province of Serbia: Kosovo	Entire, large country affected
Level of destruction	Substantial destruction of infrastructure and civilian housing in the air strikes	Large-scale destruction of infrastructure, including civilian infrastructure, by warfare
Forced population movement		
Movement of population	Rapid outflow of over 800,000 Kosovo Albanians when NATO's military campaign began The majority of displaced Kosovo Albanians returned within one month	Large and rapid outflow in weeks following invasion, over 4 million refugees by early April 2022 Large-scale displacement within Ukraine
Direction of population movement	Mostly into neighbouring (and very poor) Albania and Macedonia, thus becoming a multi-country crisis	Mostly to neighbouring countries, especially Poland, and poorer countries including Moldova and Romania, thus becoming a multi-country crisis likely to last for some time
Main groups displaced	Kosovo Albanians, Kosovo Serbs, also other groups including Roma and Gorans, when NATO entered Kosovo	Ukrainians and some other groups (e.g. refugees and students of a range of nationalities)
Humanitarian need and response		
Humanitarian need	Dominance of protection needs	Dominance of protection needs
Funding	Record levels of private donations to INGOs and others (largest DEC appeal at that time), alongside other	Record levels of private donations to INGOs and others (second-largest DEC appeal to date), alongside other major

	major humanitarian emergencies in the world receiving much less media attention and funding	humanitarian emergencies in the world receiving much less media attention and funding
International agency presence	Most international agencies had few or no pre-existing presence, nor partnerships with national and local organisations	Most international agencies have few or no pre-existing presence, nor any partnerships with national and local organisations
Challenges for international agencies	International agencies struggling with absorptive capacity, to scale up and find staff, and to spend appeal funds within a relatively short time frame	International agencies struggling to scale up

An ethical compass and international standards to guide the response

In Kosovo, as with Ukraine, international agencies were operating in the less familiar conditions of a major humanitarian crisis in Europe. A key learning from Kosovo is the importance of being guided by the humanitarian principles and sector standards that are intended to provide an ethical and moral compass as well as technical parameters for humanitarianism worldwide. As the Kosovo crisis demonstrated, it is easy to be pulled away from these normative frameworks.

First, the political context in Kosovo meant that military and humanitarian objectives were in danger of becoming too closely intertwined,[1] particularly because much agency funding was coming from donor governments that were part of NATO and therefore party to the 'humanitarian war', thus compromising the independence of the humanitarian response. In practice this revealed itself in massive support given to Kosovo Albanian refugees and returnees over displaced Serbs, which 'gave the impression of a selective and biased response by the international community within the region' (Wiles et al., 2000). The relevance for the Ukraine response is ensuring that all humanitarian needs are being taken into account and assessed, as far as possible, on all sides of the conflict, and although predominantly funded by western countries, that the humanitarian response can and does remain independent of political objectives, also when coordinating with local authorities in neighbouring countries.

Second, the outpouring of funding from the public and from governments for the high-profile Kosovo crisis severely compromised the impartiality of the global humanitarian response. Funding and human resources were diverted to Kosovo from elsewhere in the world: through the 1999 United Nations Humanitarian Appeals, per capita allocation was US$207 for Kosovo, US$16 for Sierra Leone, and US$8 for the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This led the DEC evaluation to conclude that 'at a global level the humanitarian system is not impartial, but selective and influenced by political factors as much as by humanitarian need' (ibid). And the same pattern may be being repeated in 2022. While the UN's Humanitarian Flash Appeal for Ukraine was almost 90% funded within a few weeks, the appeal for Yemen is less than a third funded, and the Somalia Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022 only 4% funded (Alexander and

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[1] The British Secretary of State for International Development at the time, famously commented that: 'our humanitarian and military objectives are completely intertwined' (Wiles et al., 2000).

Rozzelle, 2022; FTS, n.d.).[2] Individual agencies will need to engage in advocacy and direct their fundraising efforts to ensure their responses to less high-profile yet equally severe humanitarian crises elsewhere receive the attention and resources they need. They might also consider determining the point at which funds raised for the most high-profile crisis are 'enough'.[3]

Third, during the Kosovo crisis, awareness and application of the then-new Sphere humanitarian charter and minimum standards for response[4] was limited (Wiles et al., 200), with some agencies questioning their relevance in a European setting and a few suggesting that there should be maximum standards, given the large amounts of assistance provided in sectors like shelter. The DEC evaluation, however, concluded that most of the Sphere standards were applicable, particularly those relating to assessment, monitoring and information systems. The technical Sphere standards for health, education and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) have since become widely accepted and are now applied in most humanitarian crises. But there is no similar set of widely accepted standards for protection, a sector where the international humanitarian system still struggles to deliver consistently and adequately, and where needs are greatest, in Ukraine as in Kosovo. The ICRC's Professional Standards for Protection Work[5] are regarded by some specialists as one of the best sets of standards for the sector. As with Sphere in the early 2000s, however, they are not yet as widely known nor used by all humanitarian actors. In addition to the ICRC protection standards there are other relevant protection standards including the 2019 Child Protection Minimum Standards, which are companion standards to Sphere.[6]

The DEC evaluation concluded that the Sphere standards on assessment, monitoring and information systems were particularly important to the Kosovo response. A key learning was ensuring needs assessments were neither overlooked nor disincentivized by the large sums of funding available, and ensuring that targeting was carried out according to need rather than pressure to spend resources. This may be an important pointer for the well-funded Ukraine response as well.

Scenario planning, preparedness and agility

Most international agencies were regarded as poorly prepared for the Kosovo crisis, caught off-guard by the scale and speed of the exodus of people and deterred by the political sensitivity of

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[2] Noting that countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia and DRC have similar or higher levels of displacement in 2022 to Ukraine.

[3] Médecins Sans Frontières made this judgement call for its response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami when donations far exceeded its forecast requirements, first requesting that private donations be 'derestricted' so that they could be used for other emergencies and forgotten crises and then, one year after the disaster, publicly announcing that it needed no further resources (MSF, 2005).

[4] The Sphere handbook, which set out the Humanitarian Charter and the minimum standards, was piloted in 1998; the first edition was released in 2000. The latest edition can be found here: https://spherestandards.org/handbook-2018.

[5] https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0999-professional-standards-protection-work-carried-out-humanitarian-and-human-rights

[6] In addition to the ICRC protection standards there are other relevant protection standards including the 2019 Child Protection Minimum Standards, which are companion standards to Sphere.

being seen to prepare for diplomatic talks to fail (Wiles et al., 2000). Humanitarian agencies were critiqued for their weak analysis of the overall political context and its humanitarian consequences, which limited the readiness of the response (ibid). As the crisis evolved, some DEC agencies planned for different scenarios, often as part of regional planning processes; however, this good-practice planning was rarely translated into specific preparedness actions.

The DEC evaluation of the Kosovo response identified a number of key factors that contributed positively to agency readiness and agility. The following suggestions, which are based on the factors identified by DEC, with input from Apthorpe (2000), may help agencies responding to the Ukraine crisis to stay agile and ready to adapt amid unexpected and fast-moving changes in the crisis affecting need and population movements:

- **Incorporate strong contextual analysis (drawing on a range of sources) into strategic decision-making and adaptive management,** thus making the link between analysis and action. Where possible, do this collectively among agencies.

- **Pay attention to socioeconomic conditions and stability within nations receiving Ukrainian refugees and migrants**, which if threatened could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and fuel tensions.

- **Formulate contingency plans in coordination with other agencies.**

- **Draw on local knowledge** (e.g. that of local officials and local staff) and on existing relationships with local partners that have experience in responding to emergencies.

- **Be prepared to carry out repeated (even if light-touch) needs assessments as conditions change** and to do so in coordination with other agencies to minimise survey fatigue.

Supporting local response and local actors

Since the Kosovo crisis, the drive for international actors to find better and more effective ways of working with national partners has gathered momentum, particularly since the launch of the 'localisation' agenda at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. As the Kosovo response demonstrated, when very large amounts of funding are available to international agencies, this can have implications for ways of working and partnering with local actors. A synthesis report of evaluations of the Kosovo response described it as 'a crisis of overbearing humanitarian assistance', in danger of 'dispossessing' local institutions, particularly in a context where civil society was fragile (Apthorpe, 2000).[7] On the other hand, it was noted that agencies which did work through local partners were less likely to pursue their own agendas, implying a degree of 'letting go' and respect for the knowledge and experience of that partner (ibid).

For some agencies the predominance of national staff, for example in middle management positions, helped them to better understand needs and realities. This was in sharp contrast to what was described as the 'once again' factor: international humanitarian workers arriving ill-

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[7] Civil society is probably stronger in Ukraine than Kosovo, but the risk remains.

equipped in terms of their socio-political and cultural knowledge of the conflict-affected populations they were there to support.

Generally, in the case of Kosovo, partnerships with local actors were more successful where there was a pre-existing relationship, previous capacity-building support to local actors, and joint monitoring by international and local actors. Based on lessons learned and good practice in Kosovo, the authors make the following suggestions for local partners and agencies responding to the Ukraine crisis:

- **Local partners could draw on a large force of local volunteers**, requiring less expatriate involvement, and thus offering the potential of wider coverage. In Kosovo, **greater knowledge of communities facilitated better targeting**. However, it was important to undertake proper due diligence to guard against political and ethnic divisions and discrimination – for example, where local organisations may be politically motivated.

- **INGO support to local partners could help develop their local disaster response capacity.** For example, many local partners involved in the Kosovo response were unaware of international humanitarian principles and standards; it was important for INGOs to address this gap in understanding – particularly in terms of gathering data to guide and inform the response.

- **In poorer host communities, local partners could play a role in supporting vulnerable groups to create balance** between the response to the refugee crisis and efforts to address chronic poverty and structural problems. This may help to prevent tensions from developing between population groups.

Inter-agency coordination

The UN's coordination architecture has changed considerably since the Kosovo crisis, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was the lead agency and played the main coordination role; today it is the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Nevertheless, the crowded Kosovo response, with large numbers of INGOs, offers valuable learning, in particular:

- The onus is on agencies themselves to support coordination.

- Agencies should coordinate in running humanitarian information centres which can, for example, disseminate information on standards and lesson learning.

- In such a major high-profile and well-funded international emergency, network partners should resist the tendency to break ranks and work independently.

- Through whole-hearted support for coordination, agencies can promote humanitarian principles, contingency planning and address protection collectively.

- Well-funded and experienced international agencies should make resources available to coordinating bodies, including through secondments. In the Ukraine crisis this could be through secondments to the relevant local authorities tasked with leading and coordinating the humanitarian response.

- When it is possible, coordination of rehabilitation efforts is particularly important to avoid different agencies making different and at times competing offers, especially as rehabilitation is likely to be better funded than most other conflict-related crises due to the level of resources that have been mobilised.

Inclusion and coverage

The Kosovo crisis affected a multi-ethnic population across diverse geographic areas. Different population groups had different experiences of displacement and need,[8] and certain groups tended to be overlooked. This has resonance for the response to the Ukraine crisis, also affecting different ethnic groups across diverse geographic areas. In the Kosovo crisis, agencies tended to focus on refugee protection, with which they were most familiar, but it is important to identify and address protection gaps for other population groups as well. See Table 2.

Table 2: Lessons for inclusion

Population groups overlooked in the Kosovo crisis[9]	Implications for inclusion in the Ukraine crisis
Refugees in host families were less well-served than refugees in camps	Understand how and where refugees and displaced people are being housed, their needs and the needs of host families, which may be less visible, to ensure that no groups are overlooked in the response
People that remained inside Kosovo during the NATO offensive were overlooked and unprotected; most of the humanitarian response was focused on refugees who had fled to Albania and other neighbouring countries	Beware of excluding groups in Russian-held areas of Ukraine and in Belarus – even when access is severely constrained. Ensure that all efforts are made to understand the needs of these people and to advocate for humanitarian support.
The crisis exacerbated the vulnerability of Roma people (residents, refugees and those who were internally displaced), who already faced poverty, marginalisation and discrimination pre-crisis. For example, Roma people in Kosovo were more vulnerable to airstrikes due to poor quality housing and lacked access to bomb shelters; other Roma in host communities were also less able to	Seek out and pay particular attention to meeting the needs of marginalized Roma communities, including addressing forms of discrimination during the crisis

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[8] There was some critique of how poorly understood ethnicity was in the Kosovo crisis, overly simplified in terms of identity politics (Apthorpe, 2001).

[9] As documented by Wiles et al. (2000).

provide support to people displaced by the conflict	
Other minority groups e.g. Serbs inside Kosovo, were generally less well-served than the majority Albanians	Ensure that minority groups other than ethnic white Ukrainians, who may be less visible, are reached and supported – e.g. refugees and migrants from other countries living in Ukraine
Poor and vulnerable groups and individuals in resident and host communities had less access to assistance than displaced people and refugees	Pay attention to, and ensure the poor and vulnerable members of host communities are not overlooked, exploring if and how social protection and other host country services could be extended, with support, to reach the refugee population

Another learning from the Kosovo crisis: in a European context disease epidemiology is very different from emergencies in poorer countries in Africa and Asia and the Middle East where there is a high risk of infectious disease epidemics, and women and children are often regarded as most at risk. In a European context, older people and institutionalised may be more vulnerable, related to chronic disease (Wiles et al., 2000).

A final word on dealing with record amounts of funding and compliance

When large amounts of humanitarian funding are raised in a short period of time, there is huge pressure on agencies to spend money, fast. The learning from the Kosovo crisis is that this urgency to disburse resources must not come at the expense of needs assessments, however rapid, nor the principles and standards that guide humanitarian response. Needs will continue for a long time, after the initial media coverage and outpouring of generosity. Eventually there will be very expensive rehabilitation needs as infrastructure, homes and public services must be rebuilt. Extending the time period over which record levels of funding can be spent is therefore essential, for example for fund-raising from the public through the DEC, as well as finding ways in which the spotlight on one high-profile crisis can be extended to others. In the Ukraine case, some agencies have begun to do this by highlighting the associated impact of food shortages and rising food prices on other parts of the world.[10]

The humanitarian sector has changed since the Kosovo crisis. One positive example is the shift to cash transfers over the distribution of physical relief resources. The sector has also become much more compliance oriented. There are critical elements to that, not least in safeguarding against sexual and other forms of abuse. But it has also resulted in much more risk-averse organisational cultures in terms of releasing funds. Responding appropriately to a rapidly evolving emergency means agencies must be prepared to take risks, at the organisational rather

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[10] See, for example, https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/global-report-on-food-crises-acute-food-insecurity-hits-new-highs/en

than individual level, responsibly rather than recklessly (see, for example, Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011).

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