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Human-made disasters and social work

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Introduction

Since March 2014, a violent armed conflict has been taking place in Donetsk and Luhansk, densely populated regions in eastern Ukraine. At the time of writing of this chapter, despite all diplomatic peace efforts, the situation remains very tense and could be characterised as catastrophic in many ways. As of mid-2016, more than 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had to relocate to the safer regions of Ukraine had been registered by Ukrainian authorities (MSPU, 2016).

This chapter is based on the idea that human-created disasters stemming from war represent an equally important dimension of a disaster (Harding, 2007). The ideas of the ‘green social work’ model (Kemp, 2011; Dominelli, 2012a; Norton, 2012) are based on structural and interdisciplinary approaches whereby social workers can deal with the consequences of disasters. A valuable point in the application of such ideas is that the environmental agenda considers the mobilisation of people and resources as the basis for enhancing resilience among disaster survivors and communities. The other important theoretical frame for this study is the sustainable development model of social work (Lombard, 2016). It looks at ways of modernising practice and making social work more political in demanding the resources needed for ensuring social justice, including environmental justice. One question that needs to be asked, however, is how to utilise these modern approaches in a country where economic development is low, the level of corruption is high, and social work is underdeveloped.

Based on reflections, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with IDPs and service providers, as well as group discussions with leaders of NGOs and a desk review of the literature, this chapter explores the support provided to war-affected populations in Ukraine. It discusses existing challenges for social work interventions in the context of mass displacement caused by human-made disasters.

While this chapter is focused mainly on social work interventions for IDPs undertaken in 2014–2016, it also examines lessons from the post-Chornobyl displacement of populations. The analysis updates the knowledge about the nature of the social work paradigm in Ukraine and argues for a change towards implementation of the alternative views of post-disastrous
interventions from the green social work prospective, as well as seeking solutions based on solidarity which green social workers also practice.

The nature of warfare and its immediate social consequences

In late 2013, the president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, resisted, quite unexpectedly, the signing of the long-anticipated Associate Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine. As a result, mass protests started in the Maidan, the central square of Kyiv (Kiev). Thus, the movement acquired the name of Euromaidan or the Revolution of Dignity. In three months, peaceful protests grew to the point when mass violence erupted in Kyiv (Kiev) and other Ukrainian cities. In February 2014, when security forces started shooting the protesters, Yanukovych lost support even of his own Party of Regions and fled to Russia (Haran, 2015).

As Kudelia (2015: 21) has pointed out, the ouster of Yanukovych provided ‘a pretext for Russian interference with Ukrainian sovereignty, as Moscow disputed the legitimacy of his removal, seized control of the Crimean Peninsula, and promoted a violent separatist drive in the south and east [of Ukraine]’. The Provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk each declared itself a ‘people’s republic’, being formally independent, but fully controlled and supplied by Russia (Mitrokhin, 2015). Ukraine had announced an ‘anti-terrorist operation’ to fight the separatists (President of Ukraine, 2014). However, clashes between Ukraine and ‘people’s republic’ were so extensive that they were regarded as ‘war’ on both sides. It has been reported that by mid-2016 nearly 10,000 people have been killed in this conflict, while the number of wounded and disabled combatants, as well as non-combatants, is significant, yet officially unavailable.

In August 2014, there were 56,000 officially registered IDPs. In August 2015 this number rose to 1.4 million, and in 2016 it reached 1.8 million. IDPs from the eastern Ukraine now account for 98 per cent of the total number of displaced Ukrainians, while those from Crimea account for 2 per cent. In August 2014, IDPs were composed as follows: 32 per cent children; 14 per cent were older people or people with disabilities. By August 2016, around 60 per cent of IDPs were retirees, 4 per cent were people with disabilities, and 14 per cent were children. Half of all IDPS moved to the areas close to their previous homes; others moved to other regions (MSPU, 2016). Statistics show the tendency of IDPs to return, especially to Donetsk Oblast, including both governmentally controlled and uncontrollable areas (Demchenko et al., 2014). As the movement between the two areas is possible with minimal challenges, people actively cross the boundaries between them to get registration as IDPs and obtain pensions from the Ukrainian state, while in reality still being residents of the separatist controlled territories. So, official statistics of IDPs do not reflect the real situation regarding displacement. It is also worth mentioning that this migration was not organised by the state. It was a voluntary choice of the people forced to leave their homes in order to avoid shelling or because of their pro-Ukrainian position.

Guerrilla warfare, including the use of heavy weaponry and indiscriminate shelling in populated areas, was combined with economic, propaganda and cyber war, so the conflict turned into the ‘hybrid war’ (Polese et. al, 2016). This war evoked tremendous changes in the environment of the people and the country. The UN has stated, ‘armed conflict [in Ukraine] has caused great damage to the economy, the social infrastructure is ruined, and people are suffering’ (UN, 2014).

In September 2014 and in February 2015, two Minsk Trilateral Agreements were signed by Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), supported by the US and UN Security Council. The documents outlined the ceasefire, exchange of prisoners, withdrawal of foreign troops, removal of illegal military formations from Ukraine, and Ukraine’s control of the border with Russia. As of mid-2016, the contradictory agreements have not been implemented, and only the ‘ceasefire’ is in place. However, with daily sporadic
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shelling and casualties among combatants, Ukraine still does not control over 400 kilometres of its borders and 3 per cent of its heavily populated and industrialised territory. The Annexation of Crimea is not a subject of the negotiations at all.

All in all, in spite of the disputable causes and multiple realities of the armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine, and the vague political consequences, it has to be regarded as a complex meta-problem as any violent warfare would be. It has inflicted wide-scale damage to civilian life in all parts of Ukraine, not only in the Donbas area, and worsened the humanitarian situation in the whole of the country.

Socio-political environment in Ukraine from 2014–2016

Ukraine, a former Soviet country, with current population of 45.5 million people, lies at the bottom threshold of middle-income jurisdictions (World Bank, 2011). Since proclaiming independence in 1991, Ukraine has experienced systemic crises, when numerous political, economic, social and cultural problems suddenly became urgent. Major political and social transformations were accompanied in Ukraine, as well as in other post-socialist countries, by dramatic growth in poverty, juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and an HIV/AIDS epidemic, among other issues (Semigina and Boyko, 2014).

By 2014, the Ukrainian political context was characterised by the dominance of rich elite groups. They intend to preserve their own power position over that of developing the society. Meanwhile, the public discourse is focused on socialist political rhetoric: populist proclamations of helping poor people, the provision of social guarantees, and equality. It resulted in the ambivalent combination of state paternalism with intentions of the state regulating all areas of society, and neo-liberalisation. The Constitution adopted in 1997 proclaims Ukraine a welfare state. However, standards of living are rather low, the socialist-style system of privileges for elite groups has been preserved (Semigina and Gusak, 2015).

The 2014 Ukrainian ‘Revolution of Dignity’ was aimed at changing corrupt post-Soviet state governance structures. The election of Petro Poroshenko as the new president of Ukraine in May 2014 and the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) of Ukraine in October 2014, as well as local elections in October 2015, created grounds for radical changes in the political landscape of the country and inspired hope for improvement of the overall situation in Ukraine.

However, no substantial reforms have been implemented in two years, while the overall economic situation and social conditions have dropped to critically low levels all over the country, not only in the regions where armed conflict had occurred, and people felt disillusioned. Mass perceptions of being poor among the populace, their mistrust of authorities, intolerance, xenophobia and regional divisions have been leading features of public opinion in Ukraine for years (KIIS, 2016). Additionally, as in many post-totalitarian countries, human dignity and human rights are still not valued, and the discrimination of people with any special needs is a common practice in the country. At the same time, more public discussions on tolerance and people’s special needs have been taking place since 2014.

Social support during the armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine in 2014–2016

Communication with IDPs, service providers, leaders of NGOs, as well as review of the literature and various documents (UN, 2014; Balakiryeva, 2014; MLSP, 2016; OHCHR, 2014; Semigina and Gusak, 2015; Sereda, 2015) make it possible to define the key target groups for social work interventions during the ongoing armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine.
These are: (1) IDPs; (2) populations in conflict zone (especially vulnerable groups); (3) combatants (those with disabilities and veterans); and (4) relatives of combatants.

There is a strong possibility that not all IDPs are in need of social work interventions, as many ‘local migrants’ belong to wealthy groups who fled zones of armed conflict at the very beginning, bought apartments in other cities, transferred businesses to establish places of safety and so on. The remaining IDPs used opportunities provided by NGOs and the local authorities of other regions of Ukraine to escape. A study conducted in 2014 (Sereda, 2015) also demonstrates that IDPs actively exercised social capital (i.e. mutual support between neighbours, friends, community groups, and other social networks) to adapt to a new environment, whether temporary or permanent.

The main target group at the initial stage of the conflict was the population in pre-displacement, in the process of displacement and post-displacement situations. In the absence of a state assistance programme, most IDPs have been seeking assistance from grassroots civic or religious groups. The response from these groups has been tremendous, supported by private donations, active use of social media and a civic spirit (OHCHR, 2014).

International organisations responded quite fast to the new social challenges. For example, UNHCR, UNDP, The Red Cross and IOM created special aid programmes inside organisations. In partnership with national NGOs, they provide targeted humanitarian, medical, psychological and legal assistance. Moreover, they helped in finding housing and employment for IDPs. The study findings support the common belief that social workers from the statutory services were restrained by the formal procedures of their institutions and by the lack of skills and knowledge of how to tackle the problems, although activists from NGOs lack such skills as well. So, at the first stage of the conflict (March 2014–August 2014), only the basic needs of the war-affected population were met, and mainly by non-state actors.

By the end of 2014, almost each region gradually introduced its own system of rapid response to the internal displacement of people. This included hotlines (round-the-clock telephone lines), helplines, checkpoints of citizens, road and location maps that are available on the websites of regional state administrations, list of important phone numbers of public services and public organisations, latest statistics of IDPs in Ukraine and so on. Also, regions with a larger percentage of IDPs have assistance groups that include psychologists and social workers (Semigina and Gusak 2015). In 2015, the state adopted programmes to support IDPs and military veterans. The existing accounts from IDPs and providers demonstrate that so far, not many social services are available and their quality could be questioned.

In 2015, following the welfaristic approach that assumes that social workers should deal with ‘clients’ according to entitlement criteria which are not based an individual needs assessment, although payments of in-cash social assistance play an important role in social support, the state introduced the rigid, bureaucratic system of getting an official IDP status and minimum cash benefits. Additionally, the state launched a housing assistance programme, while putting to one side the psychological and numerous other social needs of the people. The cash and in-kind assistance for war veterans and their families was also set up by the state, while social and psychological rehabilitation implemented in other countries was not considered as tools required to overcome the consequences of post-war traumas (Cabinet of Ministries of Ukraine, 2015). Perhaps the most serious disadvantage of this approach is absence of livelihood enhancing, capacity rebuilding or empowering programmes. Such programmes are widely used to tackle both structural and individual issues among disaster-affected people and hosting communities within the green social work paradigm (Dominelli, 2012a). In interviews, leaders of NGOs were rather critical of the new governmental policies on IDPs and war-affected populations.
The study reveals the peculiarity of the divided society in Ukraine. Findings confirm that social workers were not able to influence the partially negative perceptions of IDPs within hosting communities. The data revealed the strength of the assumption that social workers might have their personal views that are different from the views of IDPs affected by pro-Russian propaganda or those with relatives serving in ‘separatist’ military units. Social workers confessed that it was extremely difficult for them to keep their neutral position and to overcome the ethical challenges inevitable in ambivalent politically based humanitarian disaster.

Based on these interviews it is possible to suggest that the lack of psychosocial assistance, combined with cumbersome and often fruitless effort to collect benefits, has created demand for greater political representation of and advocacy for war-affected populations. To date, no credible information about the efficacy of the undertaken interventions to solve the problems of the war-affected population is available. Conducted interviews and the desk review of the literature suggest that the current approaches have a number of serious drawbacks. This is evident from low level of re-employment among the IDPs reported by the Ukrainian government (MSPU, 2016). A shrinking economy, high unemployment rates and policies of austerity are not the only determinants of this situation. Some IDPs also expect that social workers solve all their problems and satisfy all their needs, urgent and long-term, a view that is in-line with the post-socialist paternalistic tradition (Semigina and Gusak, 2015). By way of an illustration, Belevsky’s (2015) work exposes the inefficiency of the state housing programme for IDPs.

Turning now to the situation on the territories that are not controlled by the Ukrainian government it is worth stressing that no reliable information is available on activities of social services run by the ‘authorities’ of the self-proclaimed ‘people’s republics’. According to the Charity Fund ‘Dobrota’ (2016) operating in Donetsk, local and Russian humanitarian support is provided to people in need in the forms of both in-kind and cash benefits. To sum up, the findings from the study suggest that the interventions aimed to support the war-affected population in Ukraine have not been based on green social work ideas. They were undertaken in the framework of the traditional post-Soviet ‘welfaristic approach’ and were almost certainly ineffective in tackling the needs of people and their communities.

Lessons learnt from human-made disasters on the territory of Ukraine

Additionally, 30 years ago the Ukraine (Soviet Era name) had already experienced a horrific human-made disaster. In 1986, there was a terrible catastrophe at the Chornobyl nuclear plant (commonly used Chernobyl is the transliteration from Russian, while Chornobyl is the Ukrainian name for this city located not far from the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv). In the post-Chornobyl years, over 350,000 people were displaced as ‘ecological refugees’ (Brown, 2011: 32). The disaster had a huge ‘sociological, economical and psychological effect’ (Davies, 2015: 228) in Ukraine and beyond.

At the time of the Chornobyl catastrophe, professional social services did not exist in the country and the socio-political environment of Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union, was different. In the case of the Chornobyl disaster, people were evacuated immediately by the state to the safer regions with no prospects of ever returning. No public attention was drawn to the displaced population as the Chornobyl catastrophe became a ‘classified’ issue. The IDPs were entitled to long-term, minimal in-cash assistance, and they received housing, sometimes in villages or specially built settlements, with no possibilities of finding employment. Bromet’s and Havenaar’s (2007) research shows that the psychological and social needs of the displaced
people have never been met. This happened partly because professional social work did not exist in the country then, and neither did professional psychological help or civil society organisations. In the 1990s, when the Ukraine became independent, civil society organisations began to advocate for the rights of the IDPs from the Chornobyl zone and work directly with the IDPs' communities.

The comparison of the responses to two human-made disasters in Ukraine – a technological catastrophe and an armed conflict, with the international standards for such services (UN, 2004; IFSW, 2012), actual experience (Lai and Toliashvili, 2010; Kang, 2013; Lindgren, 2013; Petrini, 2014; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2016) and modern social work paradigms (Dominelli, 2014b; Pulla, 2014) provides a sketch of several quick lessons.

Despite the experience of the internal displacement in post-Chornobyl years, Ukraine was not ready for the new wave of mass forced migration that occurred in 2004. Ukrainian governance system and social workers were not prepared to deal with the wide-scale consequences of human-made disasters. A possible explanation for this might be that Ukraine had not been involved in any armed conflicts since WWII, and lacked experience of severe natural disasters.

In both cases – dealing with the Chornobyl catastrophe and armed conflict – social workers did not play crucial roles in solving the social needs of the affected populations in Ukraine. In the second case, the evacuation from the war-affected zones was voluntary and spontaneous with a lot of public attention and media discourses. A huge challenge to modern social work is that the Ukrainian state chose the same approaches in dealing with the IDS as those used during the post-Chornobyl period. In 2014–2016, Ukrainian social workers focused on meeting the immediate needs of people, mainly displaced persons. But, they ignored the structural factors of the disaster’s aftermath, and did not move from the direct provision of basic services and crisis interventions to shaping an enabling environment for new vulnerable groups, overcoming the low resilience of the war-affected populations and hosting communities with their limited resources as advocated by green social work (Dominelli, 2012a).

This and other studies (Ground Truth Solutions, 2015) show that Ukrainian IDPs and ex-combatants sometimes face negative attitudes, because they were held partly responsible for the events that caused this hybrid warfare. Problems within the hosting communities occurred during the post-Chornobyl displacement as well (Davies, 2015). However, they were hidden from public view, and no interventions to overcome their problems or improve cohesion and tolerance were undertaken.

As discussed in the section on social support during the armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine in 2014–2016, Ukrainian social workers were unlikely be capable to work with the hosting communities. It is almost certain that the ideas of rebuilding sustainable caring relations and resilient communities (Dominelli, 2012b), economic livelihoods for disempowered populations and sustainable development (Drolet et al., 2015) were not used by Ukrainian practitioners. Up until now, no activities for rebuilding solidarities within communities or within the conflict-torn society are likely to be undertaken by social workers (Jones and Lavalette, 2013; Basic, 2015).

Taking into account the observed inefficiency of the social interventions undertaken, the shift from a welfaristic approach to the green social work practice and sustainable development paradigm could be the solution for Ukraine with its underdeveloped social services and lack of economic resources. The main limitation for green social work practices in Ukraine, however, is associated with lack of relevant knowledge and skills, and this would require capacity-building in both the field and academy.
Prospective innovations and steps for social work in Ukraine

The ongoing armed conflict as a complex humanitarian disaster alongside the lessons from the post-Chornobyl displacement are calling for the revision and updating of social workers’ education and work practice. The following steps may be helpful to ensure a sustainable social work response to the current armed conflict, and any future disaster.

1 Social work interventions have to be more ‘green’

In 2014–2016, innovative crisis services and long-term interventions for Ukraine were created step-by-step by NGOs and some municipal service providers. Focused on the therapeutic approaches aimed at elimination of the disaster consequences of conflict for an individual and society (Ramon and Maglajlic, 2012), they broadened the repertoire for social work with groups exposed to disaster. Ukraine began to learn new concepts and paradigms of eco-social approaches which were new for local social workers, but well known in many other countries. These included: help with the assessment of relationships and resources held by a person or a family, art-therapy interventions to deal with trauma, brief psychosocial behavioural interventions to restore self-efficacy, among others.

However, all these traditional approaches aimed at restoring the social and cultural environment, and are insufficient for effective social work responses to disasters that aggravate the vulnerability of people, communities and society. Green social work practice that helps people to understand better the connection between consumption, production and reproduction and the extent to which sustainable development can promote more enduring investments in their society (Dominelli, 2014) should be introduced. The focus of prospective long-term interventions has to be shifted from the provision of social welfare (humanitarian assistance) for the war-affected population to activities aimed at strengthening livelihoods and the development of the social entrepreneurship alongside social and psychological adaptions to the new environment, building individual and community resilience, community cohesion and tolerance.

2 Community interventions have to become a core of social work practice

IFSW (2012) stresses that social work with displaced persons should enhance autonomy and empower communities, not simply focus on their survival. Ukrainian experience supports the idea that long-term social work interventions with disaster-affected populations must focus on recovering the relations between a person and social systems, developing local support systems, involving community resources, including volunteers, to help people who find themselves outside their usual environment and relationships. Researchers claim that assistance could be effective only if it is based on the community development approach (Lai and Toliashvili, 2010; Dominelli, 2012b; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2016).

The research findings demonstrate that the same is true not only for IDPs, but for ex-combatants who need an enabling community environment to successfully transition home and adapt combat skills so that they are just as effective at home as they were in combat. Support will be effective when it incorporates not only soldiers but also their extended support system, including significant relationships, families, and external resources (Brusher, 2011).

More empowering strategies have to be used by Ukrainian social workers to avoid dependency and social exclusion of disastrous survivors within hosting communities. For example,
social workers should advocate changes in housing assistance to eliminate social exclusion among those Ukrainian IDPs who were accommodated in special settlements. Ukrainian experience and studies from other countries (Arooj and Zubair, 2012) provide evidence of the negative psychological and social effects of such intervention causing segregation, unemployment and mental health problems.

It is important to bear in mind the fact that in Ukraine, community social work is practically undeveloped, with the minor exception of the community of people living with HIV/AIDS. This highlights an emerging prospect for scaling-up community social work in the country.

3 Social workers have to be ready to counter inequalities caused by disasters

In 2014–2016, Ukrainian social workers did not advocate for the rights of war-affected groups or use effective macro-practices. This can be explained by the lack of skills in political social work, the profession's marginal status in society, and the absence of a nationwide, strong professional organisation (Semigina and Boyko, 2014).

However, social workers must be ready to raise their voice on behalf of people in a disadvantaged position, uphold human and citizenship-based rights (Dominelli, 2012a). They should ensure that the state does all it can to mitigate the effects of any disaster (Drolet et al., 2015). Social workers can also pursue issues of cohesion and national reconciliation, and protest against war (Ioakimidis, 2015). As Bašić (2015) pointed out, educating for peace should also become part of community work and social work education.

4 Social work educational programmes need to be revised to incorporate the lessons of 2014–2016

Social work as an academic discipline was introduced in Ukraine in mid-1990s. Universities created their own programmes that are not always in line with international social work standards, but mostly based on its post-Soviet legacy as sort of indigenous knowledge. The evident challenges to social work caused by the armed conflict raise questions about the content and format of its social work education.

In 2016, the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv launched a new Master’s programme in social rehabilitation with a specific focus on supporting military personnel and IDPs. The Ukrainian League of Social Workers arranged training for state social workers and psychologists to improve their skills in tackling new challenges. Training on topics related to social interventions for IDPs were also arranged by the UNDP.

Nevertheless, lessons learnt from 2014–2016 social interventions to war-affected population point to the necessity of going beyond ad hoc trainings and the exemplary Master’s programme. A more comprehensive approach would include reshaping the existing Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes in social work. They have to be enhanced with courses that provide students with the skills and knowledge in: (1) techniques to work with disaster survivors’ traumas, and with people suffering from negative adaptation to high-stress emergency events; (2) up-to-date methods of community development, community education and community research, including environmental issues and preservation of resources; (3) work within conflict situations in communities using techniques from mediation, facilitation and methods of political advocacy (political social work); (4) social work in situations of emergencies and mass migration, including skills commonly utilised during survival situations; (5) techniques for building resilience and
economic livelihoods. Social Work in Disaster Situations might be introduced as an optional course or even an academic concentration for a Master’s programme in some universities, while the concepts of green social work and environmental justice have to be broadly promoted among academics and practitioners via exchange information and study visits.

Concluding remarks

Some of the notable characteristics of Ukrainian social work responses to human-made disasters were: unpreparedness of public services in dealing with a new problem for the country, and low levels of professionalism in the newly emerged social services. These drawbacks relate to the observed low efficiency of interventions undertaken to counter the consequences and challenges of ‘hybrid’ warfare.

While civil society groups, with the support of other actors, have already resolved the issues of evacuation and immediate post-evacuation intervention, Ukrainian social workers still need to develop long-term intervention strategies for IDPs and other war-affected groups. These strategies could follow more ‘green’ approaches than either classical therapeutic approaches or Soviet-style welfaristic programmes. To be efficient, the strategy has to be designed as multilevel and multidisciplinary, as advocated by green social workers. Thus, it has to include the following interventions: individual assistance for restoration of livelihoods; regaining access to resources; connection with the community; advocacy; and participation in collective political actions, including those aimed at reconciliation. To implement these strategies and be ready to deal with the aftermath of disasters, social workers must be equipped with relevant knowledge and skills. These include the methods and techniques of green social work model in situations of survival, emergency and mass migration, and enhancing community resilience (Dominelli, 2012a). These new courses and programmes have to be introduced within the universities.

The recent challenges experienced by Ukraine in 2014–2016 raised the issue of social solidarity, tolerance, and social values. They questioned the nature of the welfare policy and social services, social workers’ responsibilities and the level of their professionalism. These challenges also created the ambivalent task of developing inclusive social services for the new types of people in need during economic collapse and shifting them from ‘welfaristic’ approaches to a sustainable development model and green social work practice.

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