

The War in Ukraine & Challenges for the Humanitarian Sector

Introductions by Hugo Slim and Ed Schenkenberg

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Hugo Slim - Senior Research Fellow the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford. Author of *Humanitarian Ethics* (2015) and *Solferino 21* (2022).

Ed Schenkenberg - Executive Director HERE Geneva.

Tineke Ceelen - Executive Director Stichting Vluchteling & Chair KUNO:

The following lines from Hugo Slim's recently published book *Solferino 21*, resonated with me: "Humanitarians should seek out simplicity. Its current direction of travel is too complicated, too international, too bureaucratic, and too extensive. The new generation of humanitarians now have a choice: they can become masters of their own complicated bureaucracies or they can work to a simpler ambition. They can decide that global humanitarian aid is not a utopian project of perfection that should repair, adapt and reform every part of a person and the society around them."

Mister Hugo Slim, I hope you can help us reflect on how this crisis in Ukraine could or should force us to change for the likely very difficult future that lies ahead of us, with challenges such as climate change and migration.

Hugo Slim - Senior Research Fellow at University of Oxford:

There are six areas of potential needs where humanitarians might want to get involved.

1. The **contested areas** where battle is still in play and fighting occurs.
2. The **occupied areas** where Russia has taken over. These first two are difficult areas for humanitarian organizations to operate.
3. The **government areas** where Ukraine is still in control and where there are still good organizational structures and service provision. The crisis there is with the many IDPs and the declining economy. This is an easily accessible area for humanitarian organizations.
4. The **areas of exile** where millions of Ukrainians have fled into diaspora in the surrounding countries. Many of you are already present there.
5. The **military wounded and prisoners of war**. This group is often overlooked, but there are more military wounded than civilians and also many prisoners of war. Humanitarian organizations are also mandated to work with this group of people.
6. The **deportees and detainees**. There is no doubt that the Russians have deported and detained people, and will continue to do so. This constitutes another area for humanitarian organizations to get involved.

I foresee three areas in which humanitarian organizations will be tested in light of the Ukraine war:

1. Politically:

You will be tested around the humanitarian principle of neutrality. You will have to make a moral choice whether you want to practice neutral or liberationist humanitarianism.

Today in Ukraine you deal with belligerent donors, who are seriously one-sided and are partners to Ukraine. Western aid organizations are one of the three pillars in the struggle for victory (aid, arms and economic warfare). Your main backers are not at all neutral. Moreover, unlike in most conflicts, the population in Ukraine is almost unanimous in this nationalist struggle for survival. Therefore, you operate in a context that is not tolerant of neutrality. Even if you try to remain neutral, you will still be perceived as agents of the west by Russia, which is going to war to prevent the spread of western values. Finally, you will be tested by your organizational conscience. You may have a moral sense that this is not a situation for neutrality. You may decide not to be neutral, and work for a wider sense of justice that is not based on the principles of humanitarianism alone. In this case you will adopt liberationist humanitarianism, in which you take sides and work in solidarity for a Ukrainian victory. This kind of humanitarianism must be covert and courageous.

2. **Locally-led aid:**

In the last sixty days, an enormous humanitarian network of local and national volunteer and government organizations has been spontaneously set up in Ukraine. Some will become incredibly effective, others will fail. At the moment, the international response is playing catch-up to this nationally and locally-led effort that is already in place. The international elite system is now raising money and scaling up. Your test is to complement, not to crush and colonize locally led aid. You must welcome this locally-led effort, invest and enable it, instead of competing with it and overpowering it. Institutional interests like money, power and jobs may ruin the national response and thereby engineer an occupation of your own. You must pass this test and enable the Ukrainian response as a part of their freedom.

3. **Internationalism:**

You must prove that you are still an internationalist organization. How can you maintain a morally balanced international portfolio when Ukraine is such a big European crisis, so central to your government donors? We have not seen this since the Yugoslav war. Back then it was the same situation where everyone became obsessed with the nearby crisis, and did not see the wars in Africa anymore. Now that we have a major war in Europe again, you must prove that you are truly an internationalist organization by keeping a balanced international portfolio, and figuring out how to balance this war against other great challenges like climate emergencies. You must find an operational equity in order to live up to the universal values of humanitarianism.

Ed Schenkenberg - Executive Director HERE Geneva:

I will share some remarks and nuances in addition to what Hugo has said.

1. **Unpreparedness of international society:**

There was an interesting article in the [New Humanitarian](#) by Lily Hyde, who asks why the international system was so unprepared for the war in Ukraine. This is precisely what I hear in the corridors from both UN organizations and NGOs. I think that on the one hand it has to do with the disbelief that the crisis would escalate this quickly. But another reason might be the perverse effect of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. What we see in humanitarian action plans from the UN, is that they all start with a positive scenario that leads to development and peace. But is that really our duty? And is it even realistic? We should make sure that the scenarios we make are realistic so that we can be prepared for reality.

2. Localisation:

Hugo advocates that international NGOs should take a step back and let the Ukrainians lead the aid response. However, this is such a big crisis with so many urgent needs, that I wonder if local channels can be brought up to a scale where they can deal with those needs. I think it is not about complementing them as such, but about supporting them. Moreover, when it comes to the last mile, the delivery of assistance, there is also a neutrality issue. Can you expect local organizations in Ukraine to deliver aid to Russian minorities for example?

3. Distribution of funds:

Huge sums of money have been coming in since the start of the crisis in Ukraine. How will we be able to spend all of it? As said before, we are still just setting up shop, so where will the money go? Moreover, what does this funding for Ukraine mean for other conflicts? I think we should make it clear to donors that there are other conflicts in the world that need just as much money and attention, and use the money for those situations too.

Discussion:

In the discussion that followed the above contributions by Hugo Slim and Ed Schenkenberg, several remarks were added and some new points were raised as well.

- **Preparedness of international organizations:** At the beginning of the crisis, when numerous refugees were entering Poland, there was almost no presence of international humanitarian NGOs. Hundreds or thousands of volunteers, coming from all over Europe, were present however, and 'we' (international NGOs) were still making assessments, writing concept notes and raising funds. While we were discussing how to respond, they were handing out food and other necessary items. We were running far behind those volunteers. Our bureaucracy is slowing down what should not be slowed down: saving lives.
- **Internationalism:** One issue related to internationalism that was raised was the difficulty of staying internationalist when your own support staff also feels like this crisis is closer to home and therefore more important. It is a natural reaction but it makes it more challenging to remain focused on all the other conflicts and needs around the world. It was added that NGOs have a responsibility to sensitize their public to the interconnectedness of crises around the world. For example, the war in Ukraine causes hunger in Africa. These issues should not be presented as separate from each other, we must connect the dots for the public.
- **Neutrality:** A point that was added about neutrality of humanitarian organizations regarded the increasingly polarized context that these organizations operate in, both in terms of states and civilians. The western definition of neutrality may differ from that of the governments of the areas where we operate. Russia, for example, views agencies who operate in Ukraine as partial to the war, regardless of whether this NGO claims to be neutral or not. This was confirmed by the fact that organizations with offices in Russia are very careful in their expressions, to make sure that they can keep working there.
- **Localization:** Hugo Slim's worry that international NGO's will crush and destroy the locally-led aid responses in Ukraine was challenged. It was brought up that there are so many urgent needs in Ukraine and the surrounding countries, that there is rather a shortage of people. Therefore, organizations can really use the help of local NGOs and there is no risk of "colonizing" the local response.