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Social Work Ethics in Action: Ukraine

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As this issue goes to print, I can report on the social work's role in co-building dignified options with Ukrainian refugees and the latest developments of our profession's work within Ukraine's war-torn borders. It is an incredible story. A story of people under war conditions co-constructing a social economy and leaderful communities. It is a story of social workers applying learnt wisdoms from other war and crisis zones that will potentially change the world's understanding of social development.

Let's first set the scene by describing what life is like for social workers in Ukraine...

Darya, a social worker in Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi, just turned up to work. As she entered the office, her colleagues hugged her because they knew where her husband is fighting. Nearly all social workers have a son, husband, brother, father at the frontline. Darya had received a phone call from her husband early that morning. During their brief call, he explained that his platoon had been completely surrounded by the Russian army. There was no escape, they would hang on as long as they could, until being captured or killed. Darya didn't tell us if it was a farewell call, sending his last message of love to her and their children, or if he conveyed his own terror of what lay ahead. She just turned up to work.

Social workers in Ukraine have a great sense of duty and commitment, largely informed by their own experience of war. Scratch the surface by asking the social workers a question like, 'do you have someone at the battle-field?' and everything changes. Tired faces turn white, tears roll down checks, to be pushed away by a tensely closed fist. They then return to their professional composure, not only because of the work they need to complete, but also because of the unbearable pain and a sense of collective trauma, experienced by all members of their community.

As the Social Work Community Centre in Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi launches the Social Investment Partnership, the air raid sirens keep going on and off. The next town is under drone attack, but this is normal, everyone is on hyperalert. Yulia, another social worker, told me she wakes several times each night, "Was that someone at the door or was I just dreaming". She explained that when the sirens go off at night the people living in the flats above hers knock on the doors as they race down to the basement. One of the men volunteering at the Centre, Pavlo, told me his great fear is the size of the Russian army, "They don't have good weapons", he explained, "but there is so many of them, they just keep coming and coming". How do you defeat an army with an endless supply of conscripted soldiers, he asked me while wiping away an unwanted tear. He has two sons fighting.

Despite the enormous landscape of trauma, Darya, Yulia, Pavlo, along with their colleagues in IFSW, are advancing new approaches built on learnings from other war zones; approaches that have the potential to change the global ideas of social development in crises situations.

Like much of social work, this is a 'cross the river by feeling the stones experience'. It is an approach based on ethical principles, shaped by experiential knowledge and guided by a commitment to a world that is safer and more just. Social workers in Ukraine, with the support of IFSW develop new approaches based on key principles such as 'self-determination', which we call self-led development, 'the recognition of strengths', which we call resourceful and leaderful communities and 'solidarity'. These principles, tested in other war and crises zones have assisted us in applying a multi-faceted and dynamic approach:

First-Stage: Working with refugees at Ukraine border and in the asylum countries

Meeting the immediate needs of communities seeking refuge.

The first phase of this social work approach began with IFSW Europe members rallying to the borders during the first days of the invasion. Our colleagues assembled at the geographical region where Ukraine “touches” Romania, Poland, Hungary and Moldova. They knew what to do, and what not to do, as the profession had learnt a lot from the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis and the complexities of supporting communities fleeing war and the impact on established communities of new arrivals. In this instance, the social workers were determined to change the culture of top-down tools applied by the international community and, instead, co-build dignified options for refugees and the communities receiving them.

Typically, as refugees passed through the check points, they were greeted by a plethora of government services, NGOs as well as organised criminal activity in the guise of a helping hand. Most of the refugees at that time had no concrete plans. Until that moment their full concentration involved the painful reality of having to leave by foot or car to seek safety. Many, already traumatised, had to say goodbye to loved ones that were drafted into the army. They had to make a gut-wrenching choice between staying - and thus putting their children at risk- or leaving the country to seek refuge elsewhere. Some had no choice because their homes, town and cities were destroyed. At the border, it was mostly mothers, juggling a baby in one arm, holding the hand of a small child and plastic bags with nappies, passports and few clothes strung from the shoulders.

A number of NGOs operating at the border offered water, tea, biscuits, bibles and the opportunity to find their god. Other NGOs as well as international aid agencies presented their big glossy signs in front of a tent stand where refugees could have tea, water, biscuits and the opportunity to have

their photo taken for the organisation's magazine. There are good NGOs of course but how does a refugee know.

There were also traps; the possibility of escaping war and terror only to stumble into a web of nightmares. Organised crime is clever. A tent with a "refugees welcome" sign offered free goods and a place for children to play, eventually turned out to be an entrance into the underworld of sex slavery and abuse. Men, many good, some not, waited in cars at the border to offer the confused women a ride to free accommodation.

But this chaos was at several borders stopped by social workers. Through working with government services, social workers at Ukraine/Romanian border, for example, were able to recognise, report and thus "confront" criminal activities. Most importantly, social workers were able to nurture relationships of trust with the disoriented and traumatised refugees. It was through these relationships of trust that the communities of displaced people felt supported and safe. At the Romanian border, social workers were successful in having all people and groups moved well back from the border crossing, so that the first information point could officially provide safe and meaningful information. These centres provided essential information on the different options that were available for refugees. Which transport systems were free, what countries were welcoming refugees, where they could stay one or two nights while they worked out what to do next, and how to obtain, clothes, food, hygiene products, medications and when necessary specialised services.

At the information centre, social workers also encouraged the hundreds of thousands of refugee mothers to make contact with the other refugees that they met of their journey and swap their What's App numbers. The mothers were told that almost everyone they meet will genuinely welcome them, but it was also important to keep in contact with their group. If someone offered one of them a ride in a car, first take a photo of the registration plate and driver for circulation in the What's App group before getting in the car. If the driver didn't agree, then naturally the women should not go with them.

I visited some refugees and social workers 200 kilometres from the border in Bucharest. The social workers had worked with the city council to gain access to a building that had been unused since the pandemic. At the time of my visit in May, the refugees were painting and decorating a central city building to create longer term accommodation. They had created a communal kitchen and as they showed me around, they told me with a pinch of pride of the wonderful Ukrainian meals they were preparing. They had also constructed a play space for their children with colourful walls and tables laden with games and puzzles.

Paid work was also on the refugee's agenda. Consequently, with the help of the social workers they had established 'contracting services'. Their assets included trades, childcare, teaching, gardening and so on. Social workers arranged for a local supermarket chain to employ the refugees. Other sources of employment were hotels and other industries that were left with staff shortages after the pandemic. Schools were visited to make way for Ukrainian children to attend classes and teachers amongst the refugees volunteered to continue their standard educational process. In these early weeks of the crisis, the key point for social work was to support refugees to form their own resourceful communities - for them to have a role making their own futures.

For those of us in the profession who have worked in war zones or places of natural disaster, we know that when affected people have a role and are recognised as being the main key actors in the solutions, that their trauma symptoms are significantly reduced. Like, people who have been supported by similar social work approaches in other crisis, the Ukrainian refugees reported they preferred to be active than waiting for aid.

IFSW Europe chose not to focus on building tent cities, as often takes place in similar crises. Refugees can easily get stuck in such 'cities' for months, often years, and sometimes even for decades and report that they experience these make-shift environments as dehumanizing and causing much frustrating and sometimes fear. Alternatively, IFSW Europe focused on refugees being provided with essential information and for them to make their own decisions on where they wanted to stay. Social workers also

worked with local communities in the asylum countries to provide welcome messaging, housing, schooling for children and jobs.

Getting essential items to refugees.

During this phase, IFSW collected donations and organised for the refugees and vulnerable local populations to get access to essential food, clothing, sim cards and medicines. These were and are distributed at the border points, hot points on the asylum routes, and within Ukraine. So far more than 500 tons of products have been distributed. But while this phase still continues, aid is something that social workers treat with extreme caution. As global experience has repeatedly shown, aid when not linked with self-led development, can inadvertently have significant negative psychological effects and cause damage to local economies, disrupting development.

This concern was a major focus when IFSW went on to form a partnership with a province within Ukraine in June. The situation here didn't involve people on the move, rather it concerned a mix of local people and tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) who remained in Ukraine. People that wanted not only short-term assistance, but longer term sustainable strategies.

Second Stage: The Work of the Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi / IFSW Partnership

Building a pilot programme.

Based IFSW Europe's effective strategies at the borders the District Mayor of a Ukraine province, Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi, invited the Federation to partner with the council and its communities to address the social challenges they were experiencing. From this partnership a high-level, visible pilot has been established that can be seen and examined by local and national leaders to potentially be expanded across the country.

From the outset partnerships have developed to apply social work principles of recognising the strengths of all people, including the 30'000 IDPs in the region, and their potential to work together to meet the significant economic, social and psychological challenges they are experiencing under war conditions.

As food supply and food security are at the top of the agenda, support was immediately given to women in the community who volunteered to provide a Community Kitchen. On one of my visits to this kitchen, Elina an internally displaced person, showed me how they seal the plastic bags containing food. Just before placing the open ends in the heat machine, she placed a small piece of paper, about three-by-three centimetres with writing in the blue and yellow of the Ukraine flag inside the bag. Not being able to read her language, I asked her what it says. "The Ukraine people are strong" she translates. As the machine presses down to seal the bag, Elina explains that the contents of mixed grains and herbs is hydrated Barley Soup. 300 grams of the dried substance makes 5 litres of thick nutritious food. The next bag has a more reddish substance and I ask if it is Borshch, "You know Borshch" she says with some surprise and pleasure that an outsider knew something of Ukraine culture. One of the children assisting, places a handmade sticker on the bag of an angle and then it is placed in a box with hundreds of other filled bags to be distributed.

The dehydrated packets are easily distributed to displaced people, those at the front line and anyone who has lost their normal food supply as a consequence of the war. Everything in the package has been shrunk through hydration and all the necessary herbs and spices added. All that is required is for clean water to be added and brought to the boil for about 40 minutes. The women in this Community Kitchen produce about 1200 meals a day making a significant contribution to food security in their distribution network. It is one of many projects that brings the community together, recognizing their strengths, creating opportunities for mutual support and ensuring people have an active role in their own futures.

Another example of a community project is the making of bed frames and furniture. As more people seeking safety arrive in the district with nothing but the clothes on their backs the challenge for finding beds, cupboards and wardrobes has become urgent with the coming harsh months of winter and dampness. Under such pressing conditions finding the material and machinery to manufacture mattresses has not possible, so thanks to organization of the Romanian Social Work Association, these are being donated and bought in by truck from across the border. The frames and side cupboards, however, will be produced locally in an initiative supported by the Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi / IFSW partnership.

With each of these examples, the approach is to support the local communities to, where possible develop their own enterprises as the economy has ground to a halt. This comes at a time when people have not been paid since the start of the invasion and industry crashed the day that men were drafted into the army. It is an approach that prioritizes local led development over relief-aid and transforms the concept of aid into support for self-sustaining social and economic development.

The partnership between the Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi district and IFSW has worked carefully to consider the dynamics of aid and the alternative of supporting / restarting the local economy. For example, the partnership has decided to focus on facilitating community enterprises that enhance the local economic and social economies, and to use aid in their development. In support of the Community Kitchen initiative, IFSW supplied the dehydration machines in the Community Kitchen and more recently an industrial dough machine whereas the community run the business which creates belonging and solidarity as well as contributing the both the social and economic economies. Through the partnership, IFSW also funded the installation air conditioners to make the working conditions more palatable as well as supplying the much-needed mattresses. Each of these contributions was attached to local self-led development that produced many additional benefits.

Another volunteer in the Community Kitchen, Tatyana, told me, “This work is so important to me. It takes my mind off the worry that my husband is every day in battle and all the things I have lost. I feel like I am now a part of the solution and I have the support of others”. The Community Kitchen also runs informational education for children. One of the other volunteers is a math’s teacher and at the end of the kitchen the children are solving math’s challenges while their mothers are talking, supporting one another, and making a significant contribution to food security.

But these examples represent only the beginning of the partnership’s social work aims. Further down in this article we can explore other examples. Before that, however, it may be important for some readers to hear more about why the traditional aid model is not the preferred option.

The challenges of the traditional aid approaches

Globally, social workers have witnessed the unintended long-term consequences and prolonged devastation brought about through the aid model. International aid in many situations of war and extreme crisis is often blind and deaf to local strengths and does not have the necessary principles and processes to form partnerships with local communities.

Consequently, when food or clothing is provided free as aid, any chance of the local people maintaining or adapting their local economy is immediately broken. No one can cost-effectively produce products when the same products are being distributed by aid agencies for free. Therefore, manufacturing machinery lies dormant, workers are displaced without incomes, and an environment of dependency emerges. We know from situations of crisis that when people are dormant, waiting for their water, their meals, or their small cash payments, they often report feeling powerless, worthless, and frustrated. Such situations often prolong or exacerbate their emotional and psychological challenges such as war or disaster related trauma. Yet when people are active in their own recovery or a part of the rebuilding of their community’s future, their trauma symptoms are significantly reduced.

“At the Community Social Work Centre”, a hub created by the partnership, Yana Melnychuk the Centre’s coordinator explains, “We use the social work model. We have many resources and ideas here in Kam’yanets'-Podil's'kyi district. Yes, we are under attack and war. Yes, many of our loved ones are at the battlefields and we are so scared for them every moment. But we are still a strong people. We know what to do, we know our community and how everyone must be supported and involved for our survival now, and for our future. We welcome every donation, and we will make sure that each cent goes to supporting our sustainable survival via our interdependency, and not by the dependency aid model. By working together, we will not just survive, we will thrive”, she said.

Developing community led services – beyond humanitarian aid

The Kam’yanets'-Podil's'kyi / IFSW partnership has listened to social workers and people who have successfully co-developed sustainable responses to social challenge in other parts of the world, and are consequently using an ‘inside out’ model of development. The decisions are made on the inside, by the people in the struggle, but are informed by experiences in other places.

Social work in Yemen, for example, produced excellent examples of co-building community social systems when hospitals, education, roads and other infrastructure have been destroyed by war. Social work in war-torn El Salvador, Northern Ireland and Cyprus have shown the wisdom to think long-term, to support local visions that set a new courses of life, beyond the war, for a life even better than before the crisis. Working towards such visions in times of war has provided people with hope but it has also been a critical aspect of many social transformations as countries and communities work rebuilding new post war societies.

Other global influences include social work from India, that infuses Gandhian philosophy of ‘village economies’, and Ubuntu informed practice from the continent of Africa where every citizen has a role and contribution to make, but each person is also provided social protection. These

approaches resonate highly with the social work ethics of co-production and recognizing people's strengths. The Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi / IFSW partnership, therefore, undertakes an ongoing social assessment and skills audit of the resources in the communities. Teachers, manufacturers, trades people, community organizers, carers and scientists, gardeners, along with other knowledge groups, are being identified and supported to apply their skills in restarting or creating new enterprises for everyone's benefit.

Through recognising the skills and knowledge of members of the community, the partnership has within 3 months transformed previously unused floors of a building to create a busy Community Social Work Centre. It provides a drop-in service where everyone is greeted and given an opportunity to sit, talk and participate. Programmes are offered including child-care and schooling for children to enable parents to enter the workforce or join community projects. Respite care programmes have also been developed giving overburdened parents time-out when needed. Support groups have been created so no one feels isolated, and displaced people who are newcomers to the district are welcomed. To assist with the challenges of traumatized soldiers coming home and trauma across the whole community, the Centre provides social education courses so that everyone can understand the symptoms of war related trauma and can act upon them and build community health and well-being.

Building on these community activities a community social supermarket (The Social Investment Partnership) has been created. This involves the Community Social Work Centre issuing vouchers to community members who volunteer their time in the Community Kitchen, in making clothes for others, repairing community use buildings, caring for elderly people in the area and on. With these vouchers, the community can purchase products in the social supermarket.

"Shopping in this supermarket is totally different to receiving the food bags" Maria, a community member commented as she selected the products to make a pasta and vegetable sauce. "In the bags (aid distributed through international NGOS) we have to wait in line and get given a bag. Once I got 3 cans of mushrooms and 1 can of peas". Afterwards a local social

worker who observed this conversation said to me, “I am so happy that this supermarket can restore people’s dignity”

At the opening of the social supermarket, District Mayor, Mr Mykhailo Simashkevych said, “This is a wonderful and powerful system that is building our social economy. The people have roles and are fully active in supporting each other. It brings a force of positivity to people who are under immense pressure”.

Conversations are already taking place in the community on the need for a permanent food and accommodation social security strategy ready for the refugees return after the war ends. ‘What will happen when the bus loads of institutionalized children return after the invasion ends’, one person asks. This question refers to the pre-war social service systems that were based on former Soviet systems. Under such systems many children with disabilities are placed in large institutions away from their families and communities. ‘We will need to rebuild our communities to include them’, came a reply.

These conversations bounce through the Community Social Work Centre, across the tables and cups of coffee, the stacked boxes of winter jackets waiting to be distributed, the emergency food kits, the teaching whiteboards and the children’s toys. Conversations focused on making food today or thinking ahead to after the war, they each speak of hope, mutual support and the recognition of each person’s role in fulfilling that vision.

Supporting the development of the pilot programme and co-production approach

Establishing a Professional Association of Social Workers.

With the support of IFSW, a National Association of Social Workers (NASWU) has been established and registered by the government. The Association will be able to play a key role in supporting the social work workforce and advancing the profession’s co-building approach across Ukraine.

NASWU has already commenced partnerships with others in social service sector along with university social work departments.

At the launch of the Association last month, Olga Lugach from the office of the Prime Minister commended social work and the launch of the association. The Prime Minister, she reported, has been examining different models of social support and after learning of the outcomes from the Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi district he wants to see this approach grow across the country.

As this article goes to print, the NASWU has had its application for full IFSW membership sent out for the other members to vote on. Each of these developments speak to a system of strengthening the role of social work in Ukraine. They speak to the commitment of supporting and working with people under war conditions for social resilience and transformation. They further speak to global shared learning as the models advanced here have been adapted from social work experience in other parts of the world and in turn will contribute to enhancing the profession's role in other places.

A Learning Experience

All of the work described above is based on social work ethics in action, a belief in people co-building, unlocking potential and leaderful societies working towards their shared futures. Locally led development, with the support of key professional expertise, has been essential in this process. The partnership has combined local strengths with international solidarity and learnt professional wisdom from across the social work world. This approach is, unfortunately, not the common way of supporting people in war and disaster situations. Nearly all international NGOs and country aid organizations work within a culture of 'rescue', where aid is the dominant objective and little or no attention is given to local strengths and locally led sustainable development. The danger of this is that aid can therefore unintentionally undermine the organic community practices and people's role in co-leading solutions and replaces them with cultures of dependency on charity.

IFSW has therefore invited international funding agencies and all policy makers concerned with the journey from crisis to confidence and sustainability, to come, observe and participate in this transformational approach to international development.

Across the world we have seen waves of refugee migration initially responded to with rescuing people from terror, turn into political rhetoric for right wing political parties. Their voices in the media highlighted messages such as 'Refugees are taking all our resources and jobs. Vote for us and we will kick them out. Vote for us and we will make sure our country stays pure'.

To defuse the growth of the reactionary political environment of division, social workers invited the local vulnerable populations to receive and access the same benefits as refugees. For example, local people could, and can, make use of the same aid supplies that had been generated for the refugee. Local vulnerable people can also offer their services in the entrepreneurial services that were established. Co-building dignified and respectful diversity for all. Consequently, the right-wing political parties were not successful in creating false hysteria and 'refugee blame', as they did in 2015 during the Syrian refugee crisis, to advance their own political advantage.

Expanding the learning

The social work co-production approach advanced here represents new ways and models for the international aid organisations to consider. This example is possibly the most visible and largest model in the political West for them to observe. The challenge for international aid organisation is recognising that sustainable development has its roots in local leaderful communities. This requires a paradigm shift moving from the rescue model with its principles centred in economic growth and the concentration on GDP, to politics and economics that support wellbeing, peace, respect for diversity and equity.

IFSW has therefore invited international funding agencies and all policy makers concerned with the journey from crisis to confidence and

sustainability, to come, witness and participate in this transformational approach to international development.

I asked Elinor in the Community Kitchen if she would mind officials coming to see what they are achieving in the Kam'yanets'-Podil's'kyi district. She said to me,

“This work, this place, these people, give me hope, I want everyone to have hope. I want them to come from every country to learn how to make this food, to see how we do it. I want them to learn that their people are strong, like ours are. When we respect each other at home and in other countries, maybe then we will stop having wars”.

Note: This report was written on the move and in a hurry. It has drawn on the short reports and statements made on the IFSW and Ukraine Social Workers media sites, as well as some of my own discussions with the people involved. It, I hope, will contribute to a more full and robust documentation on the incredible work of refugees, Ukrainian communities and the social workers working alongside them.