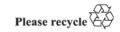United Nations

General Assembly

Human Rights Council
Fifty-third session
19 June–14 July 2023
Agenda item 10
Technical assistance and capacity-building

Written statement* submitted by Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 May 2023]

Please recycle

International Support to Civil Society in the Context of Crisis: Case Study of Ukraine

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety welcomes the report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Implementation and enhancement of international cooperation in the field of human rights.

While finding essential information highlighting existing cooperation efforts and programs, we consider that more attention shall be placed on the role of civil society in the international movement for human rights. Indeed, as mentioned in the report, "the civic space is core to nurturing trust and building a new social contract". Its contribution to global advocacy efforts is often underestimated. At the same time, sometimes, its operation is a unique source to ensuring a clear and transparent reporting on the situation with human rights within a particular member state. Thus, as much as the in-country presence of OHCHR is an essential tool in ensuring cooperation, a more structured and impactful approach shall be adopted to empower local and international civil societies.

In this regard, we propose to study the situation of Ukrainian civic space, which has been tremendously affected by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and reconsider the support given by the international community to the NGO sector on a global level.

The General Role of Ukrainian Civil Society During the Ongoing Conflict

During the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, civil society has played a crucial role in various ways. The war in Ukraine, particularly in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, has led to significant challenges and humanitarian crises. In this context, civil society organizations have stepped up to address the needs of affected communities, advocate for human rights, promote peacebuilding efforts, and support the overall well-being of the population. Here are some key aspects of civil society's role during the war in Ukraine:

1. Humanitarian Aid and Assistance: Civil society organizations have been instrumental in providing humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict.

2. Human Rights Monitoring and Advocacy: Civil society groups in Ukraine have closely monitored and documented human rights violations committed during the war. They have highlighted cases of violence, forced displacement, arbitrary detentions, and other abuses. These organizations play a critical role in raising awareness about human rights issues, advocating for justice, and seeking accountability for the perpetrators.

3. Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution: Civil society organizations have actively engaged in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts in Ukraine by organizing dialogues, reconciliation initiatives, and negotiation processes at various levels to facilitate peaceful resolution and mitigate tensions.

4. Independent Media and Information Dissemination: Civil society has supported independent media outlets that provide unbiased information and counter propaganda during the war. These organizations strive to ensure accurate and diverse news reaches the public, countering disinformation and fostering a well-informed citizenry.

5. Advocacy for Political Reforms: Civil society organizations have advocated for political reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of the conflict and promoting good governance.

6. Community Building and Support: Civil society groups have worked to strengthen community resilience and social cohesion in conflict-affected areas.

7. Monitoring Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Process: Civil society organizations have monitored ceasefire agreements and peace processes, providing independent assessments and recommendations. They have pushed for inclusive and participatory peace negotiations, ensuring that the voices of affected communities are heard and considered in the decision-making processes.

The role of civil society in Ukraine during the war has been critical in providing humanitarian assistance, advocating for human rights, promoting peacebuilding efforts, and fostering community resilience. Despite the challenges, civil society organizations have shown resilience, determination, and a strong commitment to supporting the affected population and working towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Case Study: Ukrainian Civil Society During 2022

Insightful data on the change in the situation of Civil Society in Ukraine is provided by a sociological study, "Ukrainian Civil Society under the War – 2022" conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) within the project "Ukraine Civil Society Sectoral Support Activity", which is implemented by ISAR Ednannia in a consortium with the Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research (UCIPR) and the Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law (CEDEM) thanks to the support provided through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The report presents the results of a survey of public associations and charitable organizations, 12 in-depth online interviews with the most active representatives of CSOs, as well as one focus group discussion to fix an expert assessment of the current state of civil society.

The Study provides extensive data on the challenges faced by civil society in Ukraine during the pandemic and the full-scale invasion. According to the report, "91.0% of long-standing organizations continued their operations and maintained a team during the pandemic, slightly less than 88.3% did the same thing during the war. Fully or to a large extent, 86.9% maintained communication with target audiences during the pandemic, and 81.8% did the same thing during the war. In general, 76.2% of COs/PAs managed to maintain and develop new partnerships during the pandemic, and almost the same – 73.5% during the war. 78.0% successfully implemented projects and activities during the pandemic and slightly less – 71.5% during the war. The most problematic area appears to be financing activities for organizations, which 63.6% of COs/PAs managed to provide during the pandemic and only 57.6% of COs/Pas – during the large-scale invasion."

PAs/COs that started their activities before February 24, 2022 mentioned the following main challenges of adapting to work conditions during the war: creating safe work conditions for the team (40.8%), establishing effective interaction with partners (29.8%), reducing the number of employees (29%) and loss of financial support (28.2%).

Among the main challenges, participants of the in-depth interviews most often mentioned the difficult psycho-emotional state of the team against the background of work overload, which leads to professional burnout. The financial and strategic uncertainty of the organization's existence prevents it from carrying out the current activity and planning for the future, which additionally worsens the emotional state of the employees of the PAs/COs..

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the civil society situation in Ukraine, highly affected by pandemic and the ongoing conflict, the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety joins and issues the following recommendations to be applied on an international level to provide a better international cooperation in the civic sector:

1. Provide more institutional support from the authorities or donors to enable the organizations to work more systematically and focus less on the search for funding. Support and organizational development of newly created initiatives. In this regard – create a special emergency fund for civil societies affected by armed conflicts.

2. Extend the duration of grant projects and provide greater flexibility to adapt and adjust projects based on evolving needs and the situation which will allow for better responsiveness and effectiveness in addressing changing circumstances.

3. Foster initiatives that encourage cooperation among authorities, civil society, and businesses, while also facilitating active exchange of experiences between regions and with other countries. This will promote collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective problem-solving.

4. Implement measures to address retreats, provide psycho-emotional support, combat burnout, and restore teamwork within public agencies and civil society organizations. These efforts will enhance well-being, resilience, and effectiveness in working towards common goals.

5. Offer trainings on digital literacy, information security, and personal security for civic leaders and local activists. This will empower them with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the digital landscape safely and protect sensitive information.

6. Provide easier access to UN institutions and mechanisms to NGO and civil society representatives.

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Link to the study:
Ukrainian Civil Society under the War – 2022"
https://ednannia.ua/attachments/article/12447/Ukrainian%20civil%20society%20under%20the%20war.pdf