



CASE STUDY 2024

Out of Reach

The Impact of Explosive Weapons in Ukraine – Focus on hard-to-reach areas

When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, they have direct and indirect impacts on the provision of services, community cohesion, humanitarian access, regular support for basic needs, physical safety, mental health and psychological well-being, as well as other social and economic impacts. The challenges and human impacts in hard-to-reach areas – such as in Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblasts – exemplify the specific and systematic pattern of harm caused by explosive weapons during and after armed conflicts.



Introduction

Since the escalation of the war in February 2022, **the needs of the civilian population in Ukraine have become immense**, including in the areas of health, education, livelihoods, housing, food security, clean water, energy services, social services, gender equality and protection of persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups. OCHA estimates that more than 14.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Ukraine. There are currently more than 3.6 million internally displaced people (IDP) in Ukraine and the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance not displaced remains high.

From 24 February 2022, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded **29,330 civilian casualties in the country**: 10,191 killed and 19,139 injured.¹ Of this total number of civilian casualties, **8,586 people have been killed and 18,131 injured as a result of explosive weapons with wide area effects**.² Additionally, 339 people have been killed and 757 injured as a result of mines and explosive remnants of war.³ The actual figures are believed to be considerably higher, as confirmation in areas where there are, or have been, intense hostilities, such as Mariupol, Lysychanks, Popasna, and Sievierodonetskis still pending corroboration. **There is also considerable damage to education and medical facilities**, with 437 medical facilities and 972 education facilities destroyed or damaged.⁴

The war has also exacerbated pre-existing inequalities for persons with disabilities and other persons facing higher risk of discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation and/or violation of their rights. The Human Impact Assessment (June 2023) identified that households experiencing displacement alongside other conditions of vulnerability, including older persons, large families, and people with chronic illnesses or disabilities, are those whose living standards, health, and education are the most severely impacted by the war. In particular, **unequal access to services** disproportionately affects people with disabilities, older adults, low-income households, the wider Roma community, and is reflected in geographic disparities.⁵

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA), which include cities, towns and villages, or any other places where civilians live, has both direct and indirect impacts. The impact of explosive weapons is often associated with large urban centres, which are densely-populated and contain extensive networks and infrastructure. However, hard-to-reach areas, including smaller towns and villages, sometimes closer to the frontlines and highly dependent on limited resources and infrastructure, also exemplify the specific and systematic pattern of harm caused by explosive weapons during and after armed conflicts. This report focuses on case studies in Kharkiv, Kherson and Mykolaiv Oblasts to highlight

¹ OHCHR, 15 Jan 2024, "Ukraine: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - December 2023 Update," p 3. https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/Ukraine%20-%20protection%20of%20civilians%20in%20armed%20conflict%20%28December%202023%29_ENG_0.pdf

² Defined by OHCHR as "incidents in which civilians were killed or injured by shelling from artillery, tanks and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), by cruise and ballistic missiles (air, sea and land-based) and by air strikes, including loitering munitions and other unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)."

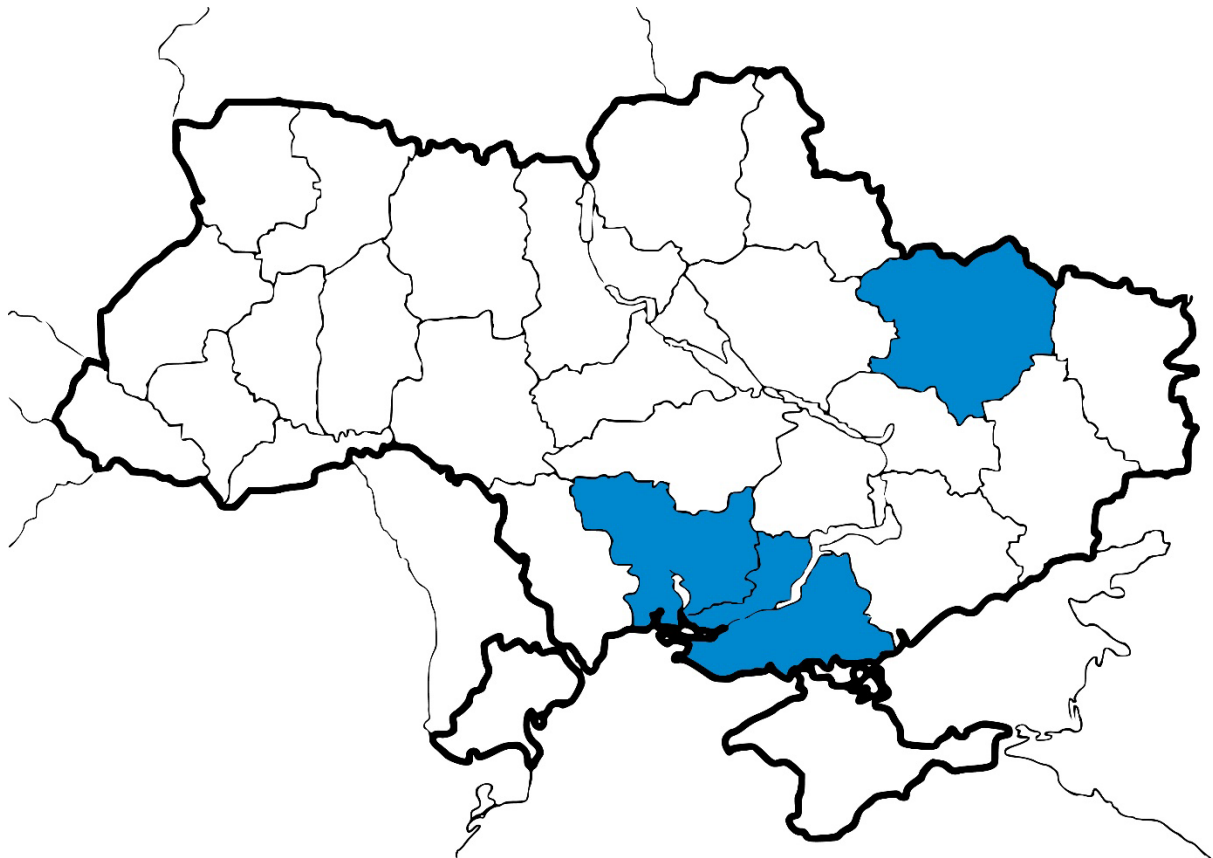
³ OHCHR, 15 Jan 2024, "Ukraine: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - December 2023 Update," p 3. https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/Ukraine%20-%20protection%20of%20civilians%20in%20armed%20conflict%20%28December%202023%29_ENG_0.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ UNDP, June 2023, "Human Impact Assessment [Ukraine]," p 11. https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/undp-ua-hia-p_1.pdf

the direct and indirect effects of explosive weapons in populated areas, as well as the main challenges and best practices to address humanitarian needs and ensure the protection of civilians. **It focuses on hard-to-reach areas in these regions to demonstrate the impacts on access to services, including specific impacts on infrastructure, considering how explosive weapons exacerbate vulnerability factors and limit both the population’s ability to access vital services and access for humanitarian actors.** The report also considers the impact on civilians, including from direct attacks and long-term contamination, in terms of casualties, destroyed houses and infrastructure, forced displacement and limitations on livelihoods.

This report seeks to highlight the humanitarian consequences of the use of EWIPA in Ukraine and how the protection of civilians can be strengthened, taking into account the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, adopted by 83 States in November 2022.⁶ The impact of the war in Ukraine exemplifies the challenges and the devastating impacts of EWIPA, which the Political Declaration seeks to address.



Caption: Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblasts.

⁶ Government of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs, 18 Nov 2022, “Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.” <https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/ourrolepolicies/peaceandsecurity/ewipa/EWIPA-Political-Declaration-Final-Rev-25052022.pdf>

Methodology

The evidence and conclusions in this report are based on HI expertise and experience in Ukraine, as well as 38 key informant interviews, conducted with 13 internal stakeholders and 25 external stakeholders, including with international and national non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, people accessing HI services, and public authorities. These interviews provided key examples and context regarding the impact of explosive weapons in Ukraine. Interviewees were identified based on their area of expertise, area of operation, and role in the humanitarian ecosystem to ensure a broad range of evidence and perspectives. The interviews took place between May and November 2023. This work is complemented by secondary data review, including research and reports from NGOs, international organisations and civil society in Ukraine, as well as local media.

This study is also informed by a Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviours, and Practices (KABP) survey on explosive ordnance and Conflict Preparedness and Protection in Ukraine, which was jointly commissioned by HI and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).⁷ The KABP survey included data from 2,294 respondents, 11 key informant interviews and 24 focus group discussions, collected in September 2023. The KABP survey also included an analysis of casualty data using official accident records from OHCHR and the Ukrainian National Mine Action Authority Secretariat regarding explosive ordnance, which informs the conclusions in this report.

While this report seeks to illustrate the impact of explosive weapons, it does not provide an exhaustive list of the effects of these weapons in Ukraine. Data and evidence collection was limited due to access constraints, including to communities in occupied territory. Furthermore, the study does not seek to address attribution or purport to understand the intention behind the use of explosive weapons in the cases highlighted. Rather, it aims to highlight the pattern of harm caused by explosive weapons, its devastating human impact and its specific long-term consequences in hard-to-reach populated areas in Ukraine.

⁷ Conflict Preparedness and Protection (CPP) aims to address the use of explosive weapons in populated areas during armed conflicts by empowering civilians to improve preparedness, build resilience, and protect themselves from conflict related risks.

Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas

The *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas* was drafted through a consultative process with Member States, bodies within the UN system, the ICRC and civil society organisations coordinated within the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW). It responds to **a need to strengthen compliance with, and respect for, international humanitarian law (IHL) and to protect civilians in urban warfare**. The consultation resulted in the adoption of the Political Declaration in November 2022 to address the harms arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, i.e. “a city, town, village or other area containing a similar concentration of civilians or civilian objects.”⁸

Neither Ukraine nor Russia has signed the Political Declaration. However, at the 2022 Dublin Conference on EWIPA, Ukraine stated that “Ukraine fully supports the spirit and objectives of the Declaration. The main goal and principles of the declaration are the quintessence of IHL as well as the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and its protocols [...]”⁹ Russia did not actively participate in the consultative process regarding the Declaration. Both Russia and Ukraine have signed and ratified the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.

In the context of this study, HI seeks to highlight the importance of operationalising the humanitarian commitments set out in the Political Declaration. Specifically, there are two operative sections in the Political Declaration. The first addresses the restriction on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and the development of new military policies and practices. The second, interlinked with the first and highlighted in this report, is the importance of providing adequate humanitarian assistance, taking into account the specific challenges associated with contexts where explosive weapons are being used in populated areas. This includes, *inter alia*, standards relating to **humanitarian access**; ensuring the **marking, clearance and removal or destruction of explosive remnants of war** as soon as this is feasible and the provision of **risk education**; providing **assistance to victims and affected communities** in a holistic and non-discriminatory manner; ensuring **disaggregated data** is collected to take into account both direct and indirect impacts; as well as promoting the **dissemination and respect of IHL**, including through the policies and practices of States and their armed forces.

⁸ ICRC, 2016, “Q&A on the issue of explosive weapons in populated areas,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 98 (1), p 99, War in cities. https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irc_97_901-8.pdf

⁹ Government of Ireland, Irish Foreign Ministry, 2022, “Watch back. Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas,” YouTube, Dublin Conference – Afternoon Session. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmkCPwSq5M4>

Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas in Ukraine

In Ukraine, there is a **high prevalence of the use of explosive weapons**, especially those with wide area effects. Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) estimates that 95 % of civilian casualties in Ukraine have occurred in populated areas.¹⁰

The bombing and shelling of Ukrainian cities, towns and villages is directly harming the civilian population, who face a high risk of death, war-related injuries and psychological trauma, increasing the need for rehabilitation, mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS), and other services. Since 10 October 2022, attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure have escalated significantly, in addition to other essential infrastructure, which is further **exacerbating humanitarian needs**. The Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (2023) estimates that the war has resulted in more than 135 billion USD in direct damage to buildings and infrastructure.¹¹

Ongoing fighting and attacks, in addition to the legacy of explosive ordnance (EO) from conflict prior to 2022, are resulting in civilian deaths and injuries, damage to civilian infrastructure and widespread contamination. The National Mine Action Authority (NMAA) considers that **25% of Ukraine's territory has been exposed to war** and, while survey activities are necessary for better identification, the cost of clearing explosive ordnance in Ukraine is currently estimated at \$37.6 billion USD.¹² According to the 2023 Landmine Monitor, Ukraine recorded the second highest total of casualties from mines and explosive remnants of war in 2022.¹³

Areas affected by the use of explosive weapons, including by EO contamination, **may be isolated as a result of repeat bombing and shelling. This creates a feeling of 'invisible threats'** within communities: large areas have been identified as potentially contaminated, and without humanitarian mine action planning and activities, movement may be restricted or people may adopt dangerous behaviours in potentially heavily contaminated areas or routes. Beyond the issues relating to contamination, the use of **EWIPA in Ukraine has other long-term impacts**, resulting in the disruption of social and economic opportunities, as well as the interruption of services and access to vital infrastructure. It also has reverberating effects on education, mental health and psychosocial well-being, as well as on the environment, with specific impacts on vulnerable communities.

In this context, there are specific and sometimes exacerbated needs in hard-to-reach areas.

For HI in Ukraine, areas are identified as hard-to-reach based on dynamic factors, including distance to the frontline, the kinetic context around the location, developments in the

¹⁰ AOAV, 26 Jan 2024, "Ukraine: AOAV Explosive Violence Data on Harm to Civilians." <https://aoav.org.uk/2024/ukraine-casualty-monitor/>

¹¹ United Nations in Ukraine, March 2023, "Ukraine: Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment February 2022 – February 2023," p 10. <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/P1801740d1177f03c0ab180057556615497.pdf>

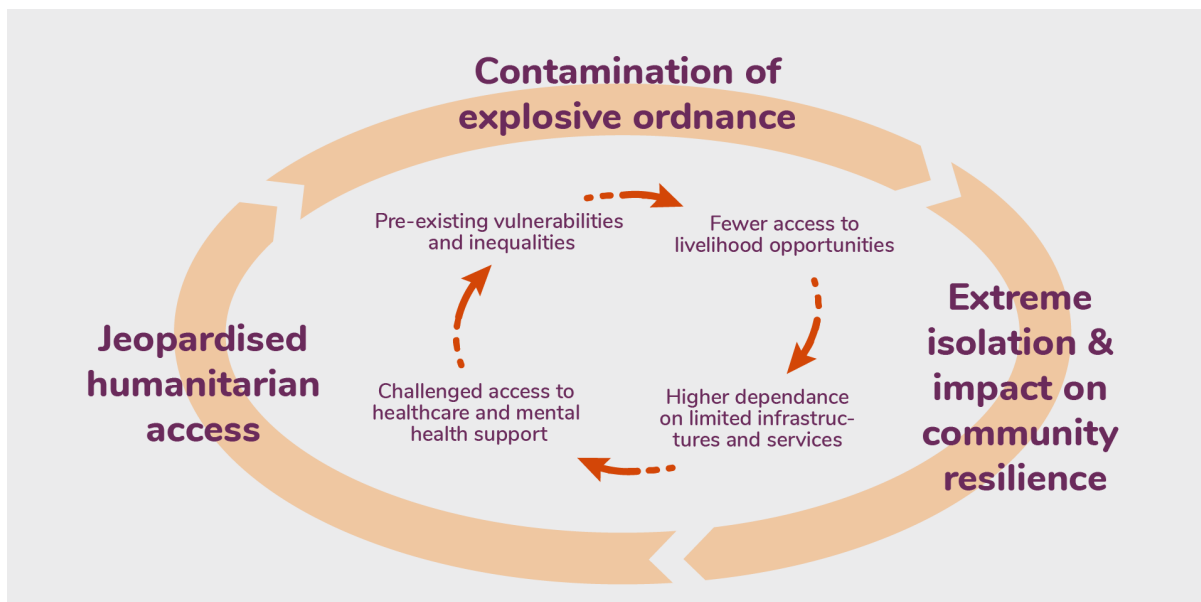
¹² HALO, 23 June 2023, "HALO Trust calls for public-private coalition to fast-track landmine clearance in Ukraine." <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/halo-trust-calls-public-private-coalition-fast-track-landmine-clearance-ukraine>

¹³ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Nov 2023, "Landmine Monitor 2023," p 2. http://www.icbl.org/media/3389440/landmine-monitor-2023_web.pdf

conflict, the frequency of shelling, and suspected or proven contamination. Areas can also be identified as hard-to-reach based on criteria that are not necessarily linked to conflict dynamics: for instance, their pre-existing geographic isolation, distance from medical facilities, or their access to and level of dependency on vital services, infrastructure and transportation systems (such as roads, bridges, etc.). More broadly, the definition of hard-to-reach areas can vary between actors and depend on factors such as risk tolerance and capacity, including financial and technical capacities.

There is a widespread pattern of harm resulting from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. This analysis demonstrates the specific harms which exacerbate vulnerabilities in hard-to-reach places. **In each example, the report highlights how each location and incident reflects the complex direct and indirect effects of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.** Finally, not only do these incidents connect across geographical areas, but the pattern of harm also extends over time. After an incident, the vulnerability factors created or exacerbated as a result remain present six months, one year, two years later, and experience shows that these impacts will continue to evolve.

Consequences of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in hard-to-reach areas





Velyka Komyshuvakha, Kharkiv Oblast – Social impacts of explosive ordnance



Background

The village of Velyka Komyshuvkha, in the Iziur district of Kharkiv Oblast, has been affected by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including **shelling, missile attacks, and mine contamination**, since the escalation of the invasion in 2022. It is a farming village which had 521 inhabitants before February 2022, the majority of whom have now fled. There are currently, 95 people living in the community. From April to September 2022 the village was occupied by Russian forces and is now 90% destroyed, according to the village authorities.

Impact

According to HI's Armed Violence Reduction team, all the fields surrounding the village are contaminated. The specificity of the village – remote and spread over a large area, including a number of farms – combined with the extent and diversity of the contamination, has created a widespread **sense of an 'invisible threat'**, as noted in the interviews. It is impossible for the few remaining farmers to cultivate their land. In Velyka Komyshuvakha, Nazar, aged 11, took part in an Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) activity.¹⁴



Caption: Nazar, 11, poses in front of his old school. "The village school has been bombed a dozen times; it survived the Second World War, but not the current conflict," says a community focal point who wishes to remain anonymous. Velyka Komyshuvkha. October 2023. ©M. Monier/ HI.

« I know there are explosive remnants in my village and it scares me. I've even seen some that have exploded. It's really scary, you don't know if they can explode or not. For example, I have to help my grandmother with her vegetable garden so we've started checking for mines. We used to check ourselves by walking and ploughing. [During the EORE session] I understood that if I found a suspicious device, I should keep my distance and call 101, 102 and 112, the emergency services. »

In addition to the direct danger caused by explosive ordnance, the threat has led village members to **reduce or interrupt their movements, to stop cultivating their land or to cease their social, economic or professional activities**. Inna, a community member, said that the presence of explosive ordnance is a huge obstacle, "Many people are afraid to cultivate their

¹⁴ EORE refers to "activities which seek to reduce the risk of injury from unexploded ordnance by raising awareness of women, girls, boys and men in accordance with their different vulnerabilities, roles and needs, and promoting behavioural change." See IMAS.

vegetable gardens and their land plots, many people. We used to be mostly farmers, and people worked for farmers, and now the fields are mined.”

The disruption of services and contamination has impacted the livelihoods of community members, especially agriculture which makes up a significant proportion of Ukraine’s economy. Additionally, access to services, including shops and medical services, is also limited due to the war. **According to the Human Impact Assessment (June 2023), 60% of surveyed households and 73% of surveyed IDPs, reported that their livelihoods had been affected since the start of the escalation of the war;** many of them stated that the effect was a result of safety and security concerns.¹⁵ Notably, individuals working in farming and agriculture are statistically more likely (61.6% increase) to **engage in risky behaviour** in relation to explosive weapons compared to other reference groups.¹⁶ Across all Oblasts, men are overwhelmingly more like to be affected by explosive ordnance accidents (82%), while children (boys and girls) represent 10% of explosive ordnance casualties in Ukraine.¹⁷



Caption: Inna, 53, participant in a risk education session: "Before the war, we had a cafe here. Young people used to come here to relax. There were tables, shops, cafes, everything was great. Now many people are still afraid to cultivate their gardens, their plots of land. A lot of people, in our area, lived mainly from agriculture. People used to work for the farmers, but now the fields are mined. 90% of our village is destroyed". Velyka Komyshevka. October 2023. ©M. Monier / HI

Response

According to an HI EORE Agent, “it is very important [...] to provide awareness-raising sessions in isolated villages like this one, because there are so many explosive remnants of war. That’s why it’s important to educate civilians about the dangers of mines, not just in Ukraine’s major cities, but also in isolated villages cut off from the rest of the world by war.” Here, the impact of explosive weapons has resulted in the disruption of services, increased mental health and psychosocial needs, as well as social and economic impacts. The community relies on **mobile medical services as well as a social bus and postal car** that comes to the community once a week. Inna says, “Those with their own transport can live in the village [comfortably]. They can go somewhere, but otherwise, it is difficult. There are no shops, no post office. There is nothing.” In such contexts, a comprehensive victim assistance approach to clearance and destruction of explosive remnants of war is critical to strengthen the protection of civilians, meet their needs during and after hostilities and limit their exposure to explosive ordnance and weapons. This refers to a set of activities addressing the needs and rights of victims of explosive ordnance and EWIPA. It incorporates data collection, emergency and ongoing medical care, rehabilitation, psychosocial and

¹⁵ UNDP, June 2023, “Human Impact Assessment [Ukraine],” p 33. https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/undp-ua-hia-p_1.pdf

¹⁶ Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and Humanity & Inclusion (HI), Dec 2023, “KABP Survey Report: Ukraine 2023,” p 61.

¹⁷ Ibid, p 37.

psychological support, socio-economic inclusion, laws and policies – not just for survivors but also communities impacted by contamination – as per IMAS 13.10.¹⁸

« It is a disaster and will be for a lot of years, that we will find things that impact or kill people. It will be a long, long time of us not being able to rest, not being able to relax in [our] minds. It will be a long time that people will be in stress, thinking that something can hit them, that something can kill them.” – Serhiy, HI Ukraine, Area Humanitarian Access and Security Manager.



Snihurivka, Mykolaiv Oblast – Disruption of agriculture and livelihoods opportunities



Background

Snihurivka is a small city in Bashtanka Raion in Mykolaiv Oblast. It is the administrative centre of the Raion, which was under occupation for nine months, until November 2022. It is a small town but important railway hub. The city and surrounding communities have had **significant damage to infrastructure and there is extensive risk of explosive ordnance contamination**. Before the war, Snihurivka had a population of almost 22,000 in 22 settlements, but according to local authorities, only 4,000 people applied for humanitarian aid after fighting between Ukrainian and Russian forces for the city ended.

Impact

For many months, Snihurivka was a “frontline town”. It suffered significant destruction due to devastating shelling. Not one settlement in the entire municipality has gone undamaged, according to the head of the municipality: “Administrative buildings, schools, kindergartens were destroyed. In particular, two of our 14 schools are now piles of bricks. The degree of destruction is different everywhere: in some places, only the windows are broken, and others are reduced to rubble. The total scope of the damage is still unknown, because we can’t reach everywhere due to a high number of landmines around.”¹⁹

In addition, **local economies and industries have been severely impacted**, restricting operations, including the tomato plant in Snihurivka, which is the third-biggest producer of tomato paste in Europe and the main revenue-generating company in the city and the region. The factory was occupied by Russian forces and used as a military base for nine months. Agribusinesses were unable to harvest crops, which resulted in reduced tax income and a 70% reduction in the city’s budget.²⁰ The facility was 60% destroyed because of the heavy fighting between Ukrainian and Russian forces. According to one employee, “the production shop and laboratory burned down to the ground. The finished goods warehouse was badly damaged too. About 35 thousand pounds of tomato paste were

¹⁸ UNMAS, 1 Sept 2021, “IMAS 13.10: Victim assistance in mine action.”

https://www.mineactionstandards.org/fileadmin/uploads/imas/Standards/English/IMAS_13.10_Ed.1_Am.1.pdf

¹⁹ Decentralization, 2 Dec 2022, “Where once was a flourishing municipality, there are ruins.”

<https://decentralization.gov.ua/en/news/15824>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

stored there. The paste burned.”²¹ The company had two other plants, one outside of Mykolaiv, which was regularly shelled. “Some of the staff were literally under fire” another employee said in a TV interview.²²

According to the Global Agricultural Information Network, cited by UNOCHA, “over half of Ukraine’s 14.7 million households are involved in small-scale agricultural production, and 8.3 million households provide for the food needs of their families and communities.”²³ Furthermore, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the **war has created obstacles for food access and exacerbated the vulnerability of rural food systems**. Additionally, UNOCHA notes that the lack of income generation, disruption of critical services, displacement, and the adoption of negative coping mechanisms to access food and supplies continue to pose threats to the civilian population, including a threat to food and livelihood security both in Ukraine and internationally.²⁴ Indeed, the termination of the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2023 saw an increase in attacks on ports and grain facilities, impacting civilians in the area as well as agriculture exports. Prior to the war, agriculture in Ukraine accounted for ten percent of the country’s GDP and generated 41% of total exports.²⁵ In 2023, research showed there was a 40% reduction in the winter crop harvest.²⁶



Caption: Markings of suspected mine fields in Snihurivka, June 2023. © M. El Hawz / HI.

Response

Public authorities, humanitarian organisations and private actors have already begun to **ensure the marking, clearance and removal or destruction of explosive remnants of war in the community**, as well as finding innovative solutions, including mobile homes, to

²¹ RFDTV, 7 July 2023, “The Ukraine Report: Largest tomato processor that was under fire is making a comeback.” <https://www.rfdtv.com/the-ukraine-report-largest-tomato-processor-that-was-under-fire-is-making-a-comeback>

²² *Ibid.*

²³ UNOCHA, Dec 2022, “Humanitarian Needs Overview: Ukraine,” p 20. <https://www.unocha.org/ukraine>

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 64.

²⁵ United Nations in Ukraine, March 2023, “Ukraine: Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment February 2022 – February 2023,” p 60. <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/P1801740d1177f03c0ab180057556615497.pdf>

²⁶ UNOCHA, Dec 2022, “Humanitarian Needs Overview: Ukraine,” p 64. <https://www.unocha.org/ukraine>

address the housing needs.²⁷ For example, a grain company based in Mykolaiv, gained its own accreditation for non-technical survey, which is the first step in implementing land release, in order to assess the extent of contamination and support demining efforts in the region. This process supports the assessment of contamination through information gathering, desk assessments and field visits to support evidence-based decision-making processes to allow surveyors to classify an area as being free from any suspicion of Explosive Ordnance or being a Suspected or Confirmed Hazardous Area.²⁸ Nevertheless, “the primary responsibility for mine action lies with the Government of an affected state.”²⁹ Mine action remains first and foremost a humanitarian concern as the main goal is the protection of civilians.³⁰

In December 2023, humanitarian actors and international organisations estimated that 6.7 million people in Ukraine are in need of mine action assistance in 2024.³¹ Mine action refers to “those activities which aim to reduce the social, economic and environmental impact of explosive ordnance.”³² It is **imperative that all actors respect humanitarian mine action standards** to provide and coordinate EORE, non-technical survey activities, technical survey, clearance and ensure that victim assistance is incorporated into the mine action response, including referral services, as well as disability, gender and age-disaggregated data collection and information management.



Kotlyareve, Mykolaiv Oblast – Community self-organisation and needs assessment disrupted



Background

In 2022, Kotlyareve, in Mykolaiv Oblast, was on the frontline of the war, which faced **shelling and missile attacks on a daily basis**, impacting the school, houses, farm workers’ dormitories and destroying the village shop. In August 2022, residents reported that 180 people remained in the community, which had a pre-war population of 1,600 people.³³ The regional authorities estimate that the population is now more than 300 people.

Impact

The constant use of explosive weapons in the area – especially shelling – has massively limited civilians’ access to services. It has also made it extremely difficult for community focal points and NGOs to reach those in need, including people who have been displaced

²⁷ U.S.-Ukraine Business Council, 22 March 2023, “Saving Ukraine’s Economy: the Grain Giant Fighting for Survival.” <https://www.usubc.org/site/recent-news/saving-ukraine-rsquo-s-economy---the-grain-giant-fighting-for-survival>

²⁸ Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), August 2019, “A Guide to Non-Technical Survey,” pp 10-12. https://www.gichd.org/fileadmin/uploads/gichd/Publications/a_guide_to_non-technical_survey__NTS_GICHD.pdf p. 10-12.

²⁹ UNMAS, 1 Jan 2003, “IMAS 01.10: Guide for the application and development of International Mine Action Standards (IMAS),” p 3. https://www.mineactionstandards.org/fileadmin/uploads/imas/Standards/English/IMAS_01.10_Ed.2_Am.10.pdf

³⁰ *Ibid*, p 4.

³¹ UNHCR, Dec 2023, “Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Ukraine,” p 80. <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2024/01/Ukraine-HNRP-2024-Humanitarian-Needs-and-Response-Plan-UA-20240110.pdf>

³² UNMAS, 1 Jan 2003, “IMAS 01.10: Guide for the application and development of International Mine Action Standards (IMAS),” p 2. https://www.mineactionstandards.org/fileadmin/uploads/imas/Standards/English/IMAS_01.10_Ed.2_Am.10.pdf

³³ Anthony Borden, 19 August 2022, “Ghost Villages on the Mykolaiv,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/ghost-villages-mykolaiv-front>

and are looking to return home.³⁴ In Kotlyareve, missile strikes and shelling **damaged or destroyed houses, a farm workers' dormitory, the school, the church and the village grocery shop.**³⁵ In 2022, there was constant shelling with 82mm to 152mm calibre munitions, as well as the use of incendiary weapons such as white phosphorus ammunition.³⁶ It became very challenging for local authorities and humanitarian organisations to identify people at risk and assess their needs. Few buildings are left standing and mandatory evacuations became necessary, resulting in a massive reduction in the population of the village. For those who remained, the shelling became a new normal. One resident said: *"I'm not leaving. Sometimes there is a lot of shelling. My house is almost undamaged, just some shrapnel. I'm lucky as my house is not in the first line of the village, so it's not dangerous. You get used to it."*³⁷

Those who have returned or who are in the process of returning, have to cope with damage to their homes and the absence of the local store selling equipment and goods, which was burned down. The ability to purchase food and non-food items is severely limited, with many relying on humanitarian and community support.³⁸

Response

In Kotlyareve, as well as other frontline communities, community focal points have been key in ensuring humanitarian access to and from areas largely inaccessible as a result of occupation and shelling. In Shevchenkove Hromada, a priest acted as a **focal point to connect communities** including Kotlyareve, by providing food, generators and meeting other basic needs. He also helped with evacuations, often driving along muddy or destroyed roads to provide support, taking alternative routes and travelling over 100 km to connect civilians in Kotlyareve with services in Mykolaiv (normally a 25 km trip) or further east in Kryvyi Rih.

Community focal points are one of the ways Ukrainians are responding to the use of explosive weapons in cities, towns and villages. A report published by the Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) highlights the **wide range of practices that Ukrainians have adopted to keep themselves, their communities, and homes safe.** Nevertheless, "despite the impressive self-organisation and creative strategies civilians have adopted to avoid harm, they remain at significant risk and face large protection gaps." CIVIC recommends, for example, publishing clear evacuation routes, increasing the number of accessible shelters, and improving early warning systems.³⁹ Disseminating clear and consistent messages on EORE and Conflict Preparedness and Protection is key to ensuring and strengthening the protection of civilians.

Across all regions, local authorities and humanitarian actors expressed concerns about the normalisation of air raid alarms and civilians' diminished responses to the risks. Evidence shows that "frequent exposure to certain hazards can lead to a sense of normalisation or

³⁴ See for example the village of Shevchenkove, which faced challenges in supporting the reconstruction and repair of buildings and homes damaged by shelling: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/20/ukraine-people-back-first-needs-glass-broken-windows>

³⁵ Anthony Borden, 19 August 2022, "Ghost Villages on the Mykolaiv," Institute for War and Peace Reporting. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/ghost-villages-mykolaiv-front>

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ UNICEFusa, 12 Jan 2023, "UNICEF Provides Warm Winter Clothes for Ukraine's Children." <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/unicef-provides-warm-winter-clothes-ukraines-children>

³⁹ Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), "Self-protection in Practice: Ukrainian Efforts to Avoid Harm During the Russian Invasion." https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CIVIC_Ukraine-SelfProtect_ENG.pdf

desensitisation, where risks are perceived as part of daily life and may not be seen as severe compared to perceptions in less exposed areas.”⁴⁰

Due to the pervasive environment of alert and caution in Ukraine, including regular air raid alarms warning of potential shelling and bombing, **the entire population can be considered as exposed to explosive weapons**.⁴¹ According to the 2023 KABP Survey, more than 50% of respondents were found to have engaged in risky behaviour towards explosive weapons.⁴²

To promote safe behaviours, local authorities and humanitarian actors, including HI, provide education sessions on Conflict Preparedness and Protection, which aims to **empower civilians to improve preparedness, build resilience, and protect themselves from conflict related risks**. This includes taking action to prepare essential items and key documents, taking specific action and adopting safety positions during an emergency, steps to take to avoid harm and what to do following exposure to explosive weapons, for example.

« I wanted to say an important thing about risk. There is a big difference between knowing the risk or threat and understanding what to do about the risk or threat. There is a difference between being prepared and being ready. Unfortunately, people who live in dangerous areas lose that awareness very quickly because they get used to living near the threat.»

– Serhiy, HI Ukraine, Area Humanitarian Access and Security Manager.



Various towns and villages affected by the Kakhovka Dam Disaster, Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblasts – Direct impact on access to drinking water



Background

In June 2023, the breach of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant Dam resulted in **mass flooding, increased humanitarian needs, and the urgent evacuation** of communities along the Dniro River.⁴³ The Kakhovka Reservoir, one of the largest in Europe, was known as the “Kakhovka Sea” due to its massive expanse of 18 cubic kilometres.⁴⁴ The reservoir was the main water source for many towns, villages, and farmland in southern Ukraine. In addition to the impact of the flooding, many of these areas continued to face regular shelling.

⁴⁰ Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and Humanity & Inclusion (HI), Dec 2023, “KABP Survey Report: Ukraine 2023,” p 83. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/kabp-survey-report-ukraine-2023>.

⁴¹ Ibid, p 70.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Humanity and Inclusion (HI), 8 June 2023, “Statement: Destruction of Nova Kakhovka dam in Ukraine.” <https://www.hi-us.org/en/statement-destruction-of-nova-kakhovka-dam-in-ukraine>

⁴⁴ UN News, 16 June 2023, “Ukraine: 700,000 people affected by water shortages from dam disaster.” <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137797>

Impact

The destruction of the dam resulted in **flooding in 80 towns and villages** along the Dnipro River. More than 37,000 residential units were impacted, 15% beyond repair.⁴⁵ It forced more than 3,600 people, including 600 children, to leave their homes and communities.⁴⁶ It also resulted in more than 150 tons of engine oil leaking into the Dnipro River, in addition to other environmental impacts.⁴⁷ The destruction of the dam, along with other water related infrastructure, has resulted in a number of domino effects and interconnected consequences, such as the impaired irrigation of farmland in the south (in July 2023, 94% of all farmland in the region of Kherson were reported to be dehydrated), and a **massive impact on agriculture and people's livelihoods** due to the depletion of water in irrigation channels.⁴⁸ The long-term ecological impact will be immense.

One of the major consequences was a lack of access to water. REACH estimates that the depletion of the Kakhovka Reservoir has had a **severe or catastrophic impact on the water supply for almost 1 million people** in the Dnipropetrovska, Khersonska and Zaproizka oblasts.⁴⁹ Nearly 700,000 people relied on the Kakhovka Reservoir for safe drinking water.⁵⁰ Towns and villages in the southern Dnipro region were severely impacted, as water levels in the Dnipro River were depleted by 70%. According to the United Nations, the breach has affected pumping stations and deprived riverbank communities of a water source.⁵¹ The flooding also had a significant impact on wells which in some places were filled with dirty water, and in others had no water at all.

Access to occupied territory on the left bank of the Dnipro River remains restricted, making it difficult to assess the true human and environmental impact.⁵² Furthermore, in addition to the reverberating impacts on livelihoods, humanitarian access and infrastructure, the floodwater also present risks relating to the relocation of landmines and unexploded ordnance.

Response

To address immediate needs, humanitarian organisations provided **emergency support, working in coordination with emergency services, public authorities, and volunteer**

⁴⁵ Government of Ukraine and United Nations, Oct 2023, "Post-Disaster Needs Assessment: 2023 Kakhovka Dam Disaster, Ukraine," p 42. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/post-disaster-needs-assessment-2023-kakhovka-dam-disaster-ukraine-enuk>

⁴⁶ Save the Children, 25 July 2023, "Ukraine: Thousands of Children Lack Safe Drinking Water as Kakhovka Dam Crisis Unravels." <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/ukraine-thousands-children-lack-safe-drinking-water-kakhovka-dam-crisis-unravels>

⁴⁷ TCH/TSN News Ukraine, 6 June 2023, "At least 150 tons of oil got into the Dnipro." <https://tsn.ua/ato/pidriv-kahovskoyi-gesu-dnipro-potrapilo-schonaymenshe-150-tonn-mashinnogo-mastila-2344507.html>

⁴⁸ Save the Children, 25 July 2023, "Ukraine: Thousands of Children Lack Safe Drinking Water as Kakhovka Dam Crisis Unravels." <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/ukraine-thousands-children-lack-safe-drinking-water-kakhovka-dam-crisis-unravels>

⁴⁹ OCHA, 7 July 2023, "Ukraine - Humanitarian Impact and Response Flash Update #10: Destruction of Kakhovka Dam." <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-impact-and-response-flash-update-10-destruction-kakhovka-dam-7-jul-2023-enuk>

⁵⁰ OCHA, 22 June 2023, "Ukraine – Destruction of Kakhovka Dam – Flash Update #8." <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ukraine/flash-update/78AZk8yKff9IXJlOaSmPx3/>

⁵¹ UN News, 7 June 2023, "Ukraine dam disaster: Lack of clean water, spread of disease, major risks." <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137422>

⁵² Kullab, Samya and Novikov, Illia, 28 Dec 2023, "Russia covered up and undercounted true human cost of floodings after dam explosion, AP investigation finds," APNews. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-dam-collapse-kakhovka-kherson-daacdc431f42912dfb91548794f03a3c>

groups, in some cases under the continued threat of explosive weapons. More than 4.3 million litres of drinking water were delivered by humanitarian organisations to affected communities in the first month of the response, in addition to the provision of water treatment units and purification tabs.⁵³ While many communities were able to resolve the problem by drilling new wells, this solution could not be deployed everywhere as generators are required to drill and not all communities had access to energy infrastructure.

In addition to the impact on drinking water, destroyed or damaged housing and infrastructure is one of the most significant immediate consequences of the dam breach, after the environmental impact. According to Right to Protection, a Ukrainian NGO, one of their most frequent requests for support was for **legal assistance** to navigate the bureaucratic processes of compensation mechanisms for damage, as well as economic and social services.⁵⁴ In addition to these requests there are also needs for psychosocial, social support, and other basic services. **Continued assessments** on the mid- and long-term direct and indirect impacts of the dam breach, including on the environment, and the compounding impact of ongoing hostilities, is necessary.

In areas that are hard-to-reach there is an **immense need for data collection and sharing** between actors for evidence-based response and longer-term recovery, but this is complicated by the security situation, EO contamination, environmental impacts such as flooding, the condition of roads and other infrastructure, and other barriers to access.



Darivka, Kherson Oblast – Disproportionate consequences on communities most-at-risk



Background

Populations in areas closer to the frontline face specific challenges regarding humanitarian access. There are only a few humanitarian actors working in the areas within a 5km north from the Dnipro River in Kherson oblast, most of which are under regular airstrikes. Many of these communities were also severely impacted by flooding as a result of the Kakhovka Dam disaster. As of November 2023, the Head of Darivska Hromada estimates that **240 houses have been damaged by flooding and more than 800 houses damaged by shelling**. The population of the Hromada is estimated at 7,000 people, including 4,000 older adults, 750 children and 300 people with disabilities, as well as 1,000 internally displaced people from nearby inaccessible settlements.⁵⁵

Impact

Like all populated areas close to a frontline, under constant bombing and shelling, the village saw most of its population forced to evacuate and flee. **Humanitarian actors estimate that 70-80% of people who remain in Darivka, in inaccessible settlements such as Poniativka**

⁵³ OCHA, 7 July 2023, "Ukraine - Humanitarian Impact and Response Flash Update #10: Destruction of Kakhovka Dam," p 2. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-impact-and-response-flash-update-10-destruction-kakhovka-dam-7-jul-2023-enuk>

⁵⁴ Right to Protection, 7 Dec 2023, "Monitoring of the consequences of the explosion of the Kakhovska Dam," p 2. https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/monitoring-consequences-explosion-kakhovska-dam-enuk?_gl=1*kj3ivr*_ga*ODk4ODEzOTIyLjE2OTg2NTk3OTY.*_ga_E60ZNX2F68*MTcwNjI1NzIxMxMC42LjEuMTcwNjI1ODEyNi4yNC4wLjA

⁵⁵ REACH, 10 Nov 2023, "Situation Update in Frontline Areas – Darivska Hromada, Khersonska."

and other similar communities, are older adults, with a high proportion of people with disabilities. People facing a higher risk of discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation and/or violation of their rights often without the physical or financial means to evacuate, have been forced to stay in their basements for days or months, alone or with their caregivers, according to the testimonies collected by HI. The trauma experienced after months of forced isolation, constant bombing and shelling and the lack of essential care will have consequences on vulnerable communities and their caregivers for years.

The impact of the war on older adults has been especially acute. In Ukraine, a quarter of the population is over 60 years old.⁵⁶ Further, over 80% of single pensioners, the majority of whom are women, live under the poverty line.⁵⁷ The war has resulted in the grave deterioration of the human rights of older adults including in regard to life, social security, adequate housing, and physical and mental health. HI has observed that many older adults remain in areas highly impacted by the conflict, because they are either reluctant, or are unable, to leave.

The UN's 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan (NRP) identified that more than 2.1 million persons with disabilities are in need of humanitarian assistance. However, participation of persons with disabilities in the humanitarian system is limited; therefore, existing barriers to humanitarian services are not taken into account and pre-existing inequalities are further exacerbated. According to Fight for Right, persistent issues and barriers prevent timely evacuation and access to humanitarian aid, exposing persons with disabilities to significant risk. These include the failure of local authorities to initiate timely and centralized evacuations, shortcomings in the regulatory environment, lack of official and accessible information, lack of accessible transport and shelters, and the absence of statistical data to properly prepare for and respond to the needs of persons with disabilities.⁵⁸ States, humanitarian, and private actors must take into account the diversity of barriers, intersectional factors, and the spectrum of needs of all genders, ages and persons with disabilities.

In communities like Darivka, security is the main barrier to reaching people in need. The situation requires close coordination between authorities, especially local authorities in smaller towns and villages, and humanitarian actors. In areas that are under constant shelling, local authorities prefer to evacuate people, rather than focus on repairs.⁵⁹ Where communities are accessible, the main need is for fuel and generators to power water pumps, which continue to be impacted by shelling and power surges.⁶⁰ **Inaccessible communities report no electricity, no gas and no water, and rely on generators** for mobile data and internet, access to which remains limited. The food and non-food items available in these areas are also limited.⁶¹

⁵⁶ United Nation in Ukraine, 24 May 2023, "Briefing paper: The human rights situation of older persons in Ukraine in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation." <https://ukraine.un.org/en/232945-briefing-paper-human-rights-situation-older-persons-ukraine-context-armed-attack-russian>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Fight for Right, 2022, "Evacuation of People with Disabilities" international standards and Ukrainian realities." https://ffr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/funds_new_ffr_en.pdf

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The needs are acute in smaller towns or villages because **resources are often centralised in one single shop, grocery store, or post office**. In small villages the post office is often the only means for money to enter the village, for pension and social support payments, etc. As one Ukrainian NGO explains, “if there is no road or the roads are mined, it is impossible to put money into this village.” Indeed, where there is limited access or where banks, ATMs, etc., are not working, such as in some places near the front line, the situation is critical. Access to alternative funding sources may be especially challenging for people with disabilities, older adults, and people who have issues accessing other locations. As Vadim, HI’s Cash and Market Project Manager explains “[in some] settlements, there may be only one possibility to use cash at the local store, one store per one settlement.”

Humanitarian actors have also reported restrictions on people gathering in many areas near the frontline, which limits access for humanitarian actors, but also for people seeking support and services. Indeed, in most of Kherson Oblast it is impossible or extremely difficult to organise group activities or distributions, due to security concerns and the lack of underground areas to conduct activities.

Response

In order to address the humanitarian needs in these hard-to-reach areas, various measures are being taken to respond to the risks and challenges posed by EWIPA. For example, where routes are limited due to security constraints, road conditions and weather, actors must be flexible in relation to the means of transportation, including the size of transport vehicles. In areas where there are higher security risks, including the use of EWIPA, unloading times must be kept to a minimum, certain locations may be avoided, and risk mitigation often requires a shelter nearby. In many cases, the postal and bus services provide crucial support to communities by connecting settlements and supporting livelihoods, including by providing pension payments. There are still challenges regarding the safe and efficient distribution of humanitarian goods and services, which may require door-to-door delivery to avoid people gathering and to reach those who may not be able to access a distribution point. **Support to communities is most often facilitated by local NGOs and community focal points, including through the use of mobile teams.**

Strengthening and supporting local capacities remains a priority, while also seeking to avoid risk transference from donors, international NGOs or UN agencies. Reaching the most at risk in hard-to-reach areas requires adequate means and different operational strategies that may come at a higher cost. The protection of civilians and humanitarian workers must be guaranteed in all circumstances, to provide safe and unimpeded humanitarian access and principled humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion

The case studies and testimony in this report demonstrate the impact of explosive weapons in hard-to-reach, populated areas in Ukraine. When explosive weapons are used in these areas they have direct and indirect impacts on the provision of services, community cohesion, humanitarian access, regular support for basic needs, physical safety, mental health and psychological well-being, as well as other social and economic impacts. **States must ensure compliance with and respect for international humanitarian law.**

These case studies also identify the need to improve and share policies and practices in order to address the urgent and longer-term needs of civilians in such difficult contexts: **facilitate rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access close to frontlines, in highly contaminated areas, and in occupied territory; uphold humanitarian mine action standards**, including through assistance to victims as well as communities affected by armed conflict, Explosive Ordnance Risk Education and Conflict Preparedness and Protection; **ensure that the effects of EWIPA are accounted for through disaggregated data collection; take account of the direct and indirect effects that certain conduct may have on civilians or civilian objects; and adapt to and take account of specific needs of those most-at-risk and impacted by EWIPA.**

These case studies give an idea of the specific challenges encountered by the humanitarian community at large when working in EWIPA contexts. States, humanitarian organisations and all other stakeholders involved need to work together to better identify these challenges and share good practices to improve the provision of immediate and long-term assistance to affected communities. The follow-up process of the EWIPA Political Declaration offers a good opportunity to carry out this work.

« There is no chance to relax and there will be no such chance until the end of the conflict. Perhaps even longer. The threat is present at any moment, anywhere: missiles, unexploded ordnance, anything... For me, for my friends, a huge problem, including psychologically, is the inability to plan anything in their lives, at least for a month in advance. They never know if they will need to leave their city at some point or not.» – Serhiy, HI Ukraine, Area Humanitarian Access and Security Manager.

Handicap International - Humanity & Inclusion (HI)

HI has been one of the leading civil society organizations in the process that has led to the recent signing of the Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA), adopted in November 2022. As part of the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW), HI aims to continue monitoring the humanitarian impact of the use of EWIPA, the implementation of the Political Declaration and to hold States accountable to their commitments.

In Ukraine, HI operations aim to reduce the suffering of vulnerable conflict-affected populations through the delivery of an inclusive, immediate and multi-sectoral humanitarian response to address the protection, health, and basic needs of conflict-affected populations. HI's specific focus is on internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, persons with disabilities, as well as persons with injuries and signs of psychological distress, while reducing the risks caused by explosive ordnance contamination, facilitating the delivery of aid in Ukraine, and supporting the wider humanitarian response to be more inclusive.

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