

# VULNERABLE AND FORGOTTEN: OLDER PEOPLE IN EASTERN UKRAINE

HOW OLDER PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY THE CONFLICT, AND WHAT CHANGES IN PRACTICE AND POLICIES CAN HELP MEET THEIR NEEDS



## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### The Government of Ukraine to:

- **Take into account age peculiarities and needs** when developing and implementing governmental programs, and create referral mechanisms with other actors;
- **To facilitate access of older people to services, in particular medical ones**, through improvement of public transportation and a strategic restructuring of the service provision networks;

### Donors to:

- Ensure elderly people are targeted appropriately in their strategies, including for emergency assistance;

### Humanitarian organizations to:

- **Simplify procedures** for older people to access assistance, namely reduce requirements for document submission;
- **Include older people in** relief efforts to strengthen overall community resilience.

## KEY MESSAGES

**31%**

of the population in the 10km-wide area along the Line of Contact (LoC) is **aged over 60 years old**

**1,000,000**

people aged 60 and above in the conflict-affected area are **in need of humanitarian assistance** (30% of the total figure of people in need)

**35% and 21%**

of people of 60 or above in, respectively, the Non-Government Controlled Area (NGCA) and the Government Controlled Area (GCA), **are food insecure**

**1.6 million**

people in eastern Ukraine are older people who **suffer from at least one chronic illness**



Victoriia levgeniievna (76) and her husband Rudolf Nikolayevich (78) spent many nights in their pantry, a dark room with no windows. Long ago when they built their dream house in the village of Vodyane, they could never have imagined that this pantry might come in handy one day. *"Yes, it was at night. The airport is right next to us. The shells were outdated, so they were flying around like birds. One of them hit the foundation of our neighbor's house, but did not explode, it just stuck there,"* Victoriia levgeniievna recalls the first time she faced real fighting.

Back in February of 2015, the outbuildings suffered a direct hit that resulted in a blast wave damaging the house. *"It was a terrible night, one of many within the past three years."*

*"During the day we were not afraid usually, but sometimes we had to hide in the basement,"* she says and adds, *"We wouldn't go anywhere in the morning, because it was dangerous, but we had to go out to find food."* The village of Vodyane is located approximately 9 km north-west from the Donetsk airport and it remains a hot spot on the 500 km long conflict line.

## YOUTH LEAVE, OLDER PEOPLE REMAIN: NEARLY ONE THIRD OF PEOPLE IN THE CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREA ARE OLDER PEOPLE

As the conflict in eastern Ukraine is about to enter its fifth year, it maintains its own peculiarity: the high percentage of older people affected by the conflict. It is thus no surprise that most images from the front line portray elderly women and men fetching water from distant water points; struggling to cross the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point; or again queuing at the bank office hoping to receive their meager pension. Globally, people aged 60 and over make up 13% of the population. According to [REACH July 2017 Area Based Assessment \(ABA\)](#), in the 5kms-wide area along LoC on the GCA side alone **they represent 31% of the population**, against 23% in the whole of Ukraine.

While many among the younger have left, looking for economic prospects in non-conflict-affected areas, older people—who have in most cases no opportunities elsewhere have been left behind. As reported by the [September 2017 Analysis on Humanitarian Trends](#) by REACH, "the area along the LoC has a population with low percentages of children and young people, and high percentages of residents above 60 years of age, particularly older women. The trend towards older populations is potentially the result of working-age residents moving to more economically active regions as disruptions in markets have reduced employment opportunities in the area most affected by conflict."

Older people represent a particularly vulnerable group. As highlighted by OCHA's [2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview](#), almost **30% of those in need in Ukraine are older people**. Half million of them live in the Non-Government Controlled Area (NGCA), where pension and social benefits payments were suspended by the Government of Ukraine in 2017 and food insecurity affects over one fourth of the overall population. 200,000 live in a 10km-wide area on both sides of the LoC, under the constant threats resulting from the 40 fighting-related incidents recorded every day, the lack of transportation, and the difficulties in accessing public services—including healthcare. The remaining 300,000 live in the rest of Ukraine. Regardless of where they reside, nearly all older people affected by the conflict have been left with no choice but to manage with insufficient economic resources, low pensions (if any), lack of access to basic services such as health ones, and lack of adequate means to face the harsh Ukrainian winters. Many are separated from relatives and friends, which compounds the psychological distress due to the conflict.

Despite the high level of vulnerabilities, **the specific needs of older people have not been systematically addressed**. While government programs, relief actions, development interventions should all work toward meeting the needs of the most vulnerable ones, too often older people in eastern Ukraine—yet constantly present as a distinctive feature of this conflict—seem to have gone forgotten.



Oleg Zagoruiko is 77. He is a resident of Nyrkovo village located in Popasna raion of Luhansk oblast. He could never imagine that he and his wife would be facing mobility issues in their old age. His daughters are not with him. The youngest died, and the older one went to Moscow. He and his wife are left on their own.

*"My legs are not good. A while ago, I fell down and my pelvic bone was hit so hard that it cracked. For six months, I received treatment in the hospital. I'm not able to walk normally any more... My wife is in an even worse situation. She survived amputation of one leg. For us it is better not even to go to the hospital, because once you are there, you need to spend the entire pension on the medications."*

The couple lives on the pensions, which are not sufficient to cover their needs.

*"I want to live and to see one day my granddaughter and great-granddaughter!"*

## EVERYDAY REALITIES FOR OLDER PEOPLE: LOW OR NO PENSIONS, DISRUPTED ACCESS TO SERVICES, POOR HEALTHCARE AND INADEQUATE TRANSPORTATION FURTHER CHALLENGE OLDER PEOPLES' LIVES

Older people are particularly affected by external shocks such as conflict, hazards, and economic declines—all contributing to increasing their vulnerabilities. This is even more so the case in a country such as Ukraine, which has the second lowest GDP per capita in Europe and where service provision is often inadequate. As a result, four years into the conflict, older people's vulnerabilities have continued to increase, while little action was taken to address both the humanitarian and the structural challenges.

### 1. HINDERED ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES

The conflict has resulted in a severe disruption of services in the Donbass region, in particular ones that were once centralized in the oblast capital cities of Luhansk and Donetsk, now located in NGCA.

#### A) ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

1.6 million people among those living in Eastern Ukraine are older people who suffer from at least one chronic illness and need life-saving care and essential health services. For the population with preexisting chronic diseases, the continuity of care has been disrupted, as secondary and tertiary level care in the nearest proximity is currently located in NGCA, leaving them with no access to essential treatment and medicines. As reported by Medecins du Monde/Doctors of the World (MdM), often such patients do not seek medical services in GCA, practicing self-medication or stopping taking their prescriptions altogether, which can create severe complications in cases such as diabetes, cancer or severe mental health conditions.

There remains a need for intensive case management and psychosocial support to refer those people to the new points of medical care accessible in GCA.

Despite such needs, facilities in the area, affected by the separation with NGCA and by the fighting, are limited. Within 5kms from the LoC, up to **66% of health care facilities have been damaged due to conflict** with 46% of these in need of rehabilitation. In addition to damage of healthcare facilities, specialized medical staff is not sufficiently available. Access to pharmacies as well has been disrupted in several settlements.

Furthermore, due to the intensity of cumulative stress related to the shelling and inadequate coverage of basic needs, populations residing in the conflict line are quickly developing chronic conditions, with a limited capacity of timely identification, due to the absence of diagnostic equipment, intensive care, and medicines, not accessible due to both transportation limitation and economic reasons.



## OLDER PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Many among the older people cannot easily move independently. According to a needs assessment conducted by Help Age International in the conflict-affected area (June – July 2017), among older people interviewed 11% have a disability status, 72% reported they cannot move independently outside the house/ on the street, and **20% (one in five people) are immobile.**

This represents a serious obstacle to access services in general, and even more so when it comes to crossing the Line of Contact through the five existing entry/ exit crossing points (EECP).

The Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point is pedestrian only: people have to walk for over one km, besides the fact that the wooden bridge is dangerous—especially in winter time—for older people who have to cross.

In addition to this, due to the limited check-point schedule, people at times have no choice but to take from 2 to 5 km-long walks to get to the nearest transportation—which is unrealistic in case of mobility impairment.

## B) LACK OF ADEQUATE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Even in situations where health facilities or other social services are available, older people find a further obstacle: access to adequate transport. While 54% of the population in the 5km-wide area on the GCA side of the LoC relies on public transportation, as reported by [REACH ABA](#), public transportation is highly inadequate.

This is particularly true for those who used to cross the LoC (where official public transportation have not been fully restored and where current alternatives are private ones, out of reach of people with limited means), and in villages where transportation used to reach towns now in NGCA, which have been cut off.

The transportation infrastructure has been as well severely damaged by the conflict, making travels more time-consuming and dangerous: according to the [Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment by the United Nations and World Bank](#) of March 2015, **total damage to transport infrastructure amounts to USD 352 million.**

Several minor settlements along the LoC, where mostly older people live, suffer particularly poor connectivity to transport networks. As a result, to get medical and social services or to withdraw money, many have to pay high sums in transportation—while many live on minimum pensions, as low as EUR 44 a month.

Due to this lack of adequate public transportation, other crucial services such as IDP registration (needed to receive pensions and social benefits) become challenging for older people who often live in remote, rural or front line areas, and need to go to the Department of Social Protection of Population (DoSP) located in a different town/township to receive IDP certificates.

In order to shorten the walking distance to transportation, many choose to walk through fields, thus taking the risk to step on mines or unexploded ordnances.

## 2. INSUFFICIENT ECONOMIC RESOURCES

People in Ukraine, particularly in the conflict-affected areas, have experienced significant reduction in their economic security, as consumer prices have doubled between 2014 and 2016 alone. Older people, who often rely on meager pensions, are among the most affected.

As in a context of worryingly increasing food insecurity all over the conflict-affected area during the past year alone, **older people of 60 or above have showed to be the most vulnerable group, with up to 35% food insecure in NGCA and 21% in GCA.**

## A) TERMINATION OF SOCIAL PAYMENTS AND PENSIONS FOR NON-REGISTERED IDPS

Since 2017, in accordance with Provision of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 637, pensioners from NGCA need to be registered as an internally displaced person (IDP) in order to be entitled to receive a pension. This requirement represents a highly politicized discrimination towards those who, for various reasons, are either still living in NGCA—and cannot therefore receive pensions they have contributed to throughout their lives—or have moved to the rest of Ukraine but have not registered as IDPs. Many end up undertaking long journeys to cross the LoC, thus exposing themselves to risks, just to be able to claim their right. Regular [surveys by Right to Protection](#) have indeed shown that **the main reasons for crossing for respondents aged 65 and over were to solve issues with documents and access cash,** highlighting that the main motivation they have to cross the LoC is accessing pension payments.

This is particularly worrying as people in eastern Ukraine are highly dependent on social benefits (53% of households in GCA of Donbass, and 33% in NGCA). Many IDPs who rely on state financial support as their prime source of income, indicated that they may be forced to return to NGCA or dangerous areas if social payments are not restored.

### B) INADEQUATE WINTER PREPAREDNESS

During the winter in Ukraine temperature averages from November to March are below zero with extremes reaching -20°C, and many older people are unable to provide for their own fuel or coal. Wintertime payments for fuel amount to 5,200 hryvnas (around EUR 150) — nearly three months of an average pension of UAH 1,900 (EUR 57) per month. Unable to pay for fuel, some among the older people resort to a cheaper yet potentially dangerous activity—collecting wood in the forests. This practice, however limited (only up to 15% of households in rural areas used wood as a fuel for heating), puts their lives at risk, as the territory in eastern Ukraine is heavily mined: **up to 62% of households living within 5kms of the contact line in GCA have reported seeing mines and unexploded or dstances (UXOs) close to their houses.** This practice also exposes them to the possibility of being fined for having taken on an activity that is illegal according to the Ukrainian legislation.

### 3. LACK OF CLARITY AROUND THE PENSION REFORM

A pension reform was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in October 2017. While for many pensioners the reform has resulted in a significant increase of the pension payment, **pensions remain well below the minimum subsistence level (UAH 2,930/ EUR 87).** The reform has also led to social tension among older people, due to the widespread misunderstanding of the pension recalculation mechanisms, and ineffective communication of the recalculated amounts when IDPs had changed place of residence.

Finally, the reform has resulted in a work overload for the employees of the Pension Fund of Ukraine (PFU). Since the reform was adopted, many IDP pensioners have applied for registration to the Pension Fund for the first time. Still, employees are seeing reduced capacity to meet pensioners' requested due to work overload resulting from the recalculation of pensions.



**Larisa Ivanovna and Vladimir Petrovich live in the village of Umanskoe, eastern Ukraine.**

*"In our village you cannot buy coal, because no one will bring it here. In any case, we couldn't afford to buy it because it is too expensive,"* says Vladimir Petrovich. The average price of coal is around 2350 UAH (70 EUR) per ton. An average family would require at least three tons for the winter, which would mean more than 7000 UAH (210 EUR). Considering that the average retirement pension is 1300 UAH (39 EUR) per month, this amount is out of reach for most people living here.



**Olga Pavlovna (77) and Vladimir Fedorovich (82), Kamianka, Yasynuvatskiy raion, Donetsk region**

Before the conflict started, the couple brought in extra income from the sale of turkey and goose meat in Yasynuvata to make up for their small pensions. It took them 20 minutes by bus to get to the market before. Now Yasynuvata is located in Non-Government Controlled Area so they have lost access to the market due to long and expensive trips.



**Babushka Natasha (everyone in the village calls her babusha Natasha), 86 years old, village of Dacha (in total 19 villagers).**

She lives alone in a remote part of the village right on the contact line.

Sometimes her daughter comes to visit her and villagers support her with to receive humanitarian assistance and buying necessary goods, products etc.

#### 4. UNAVAILABLE ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Due to the nature of the emergency being a military conflict, regular channels of information and communications with the population are destabilized. Rumors and the absence of credible and accurate information are also major source of anxiety for those affected, contributing to confusion and insecurity. **Use of online information may not be sufficient for those who are not used to or have no access to internet or are visually impaired. Hotlines are difficult to use for the hearing impaired.** Alternatives should be put in place, including for instance texts with large characters, as well as trained staff to follow-up with older people.

Ensuring good governance during emergencies through transparency, accountability and participation will as well help improve access to information.

#### 5. ELDER ABUSE AND RISK OF VIOLENCE

Regardless of the general stigma to report and seek help, there have been identified cases of domestic violence among older people, as reported by Médecins du Monde/Doctors of the World (MdM). Economic hardship and the highly stressful conditions of residing in the conflict zone, intensify the chances of psychological, economical, psychological, and sexual violence among the elderly population.

#### 6. ACTIVE COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Interventions targeting older people often tend to forget that they are not the passive victims and a burden to the communities they live in. On the contrary—as reported by MdM, many among the older people the organization provides assistance have, for instance, become the caretakers of grandchildren whose parents have left the area for economic reasons.

While initiatives need to be put in place to ensure that the needs of older people are taken into appropriate consideration and addressed by both the government and humanitarian and development actors (and critically, in a coordinated way), **it is as well crucial that programmatic efforts aim at building on the resilience and resources of older people.** This has proven to both improve their physical and mental health status, and increase social networks. Engagement with older people in relief efforts in the communities is critical to strengthen the community resilience in general.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the large number and percentage of older people among the conflict-affected population, focused attention to this most vulnerable group of people by decision makers—but also humanitarian actors—seems to have been often lacking. In order to ensure that the needs of older people are met and their dignity guaranteed action needs to be taken at all levels.

## TO THE GOVERNMENT OF UKRAINE

- **To take into account, when developing and implementing governmental programs, age peculiarities and needs,** and create referral mechanisms to help coordinate corresponding services delivered by local and international NGOs, and other actors.
- **To facilitate access of older people to services, in particular medical ones, through improvement of public transportation and a strategic restructuring of the service provision networks.** Interventions that encourage home visits should be supported.
- **To allocate sufficient capacity to the pension fund of Ukraine** to ensure that the transition toward the new pension regime, including recalculations, information sharing with pensioners, and registration of new pensioners, are carried out in a timely manner and do not cause further distress among pensioners, in particular the most vulnerable ones such as IDPs.
- **To provide information in an accessible manner,** using means of communication accessible to all.
- **To design systems that help older community members play an active role** in recovery processes and thus be active survivors rather than passive victims.
- **To urgently delink the payment of social benefits and pensions from IDP registration,** in order to ensure that the rights of the most vulnerable ones—including elderly IDPs—are abided by. IDPs have the same rights as other citizens of Ukraine and everyone should have the right to choose whether to be registered as an IDP or not.

## TO OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- **Donors to include in their strategies focused actions targeting older people** and provide for their needs. Older people are the most vulnerable category. Those living along the Line of Contact are still in need of emergency relief and assistance (food, clothes, medicines, fuel). In view of this, programs for emergency assistance need to be maintained.
- **Donors to include older people into early recovery/development programs.**
- **Humanitarian organizations to simplify procedures required from older people to provide assistance,** namely in terms of providing documents, which may be challenging for older people in need of assistance.
- **Humanitarian organizations to ensure inclusion of older people in relief efforts** to strengthen the overall community resilience.



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**ACCESS**

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