

## Duty Of Care For Humanitarian Personnel Is Our Obligation, Not A Luxury

More than three years after the escalation of the war in Ukraine, the toll on civilians and humanitarian personnel keeps on rising. Despite the hardship caused by continued attacks and recent funding cuts by major humanitarian and development donors, civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to provide humanitarian aid close to the frontlines amid rising security risks. Funding cuts affect the quality of security preparedness of the humanitarian staff. In 2024, 11 aid workers were killed and 20 wounded in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. In just two months in 2025, 25 incidents affecting humanitarian activities were recorded<sup>2</sup>, with significant impacts on service provision to affected populations.

*'There were cases when we had to cancel important missions as we lacked personal protective equipment. It impacted people who were waiting for help,' - mobile team worker, NGO Girls.*

In less than two months at the beginning of 2025, 24 civilians were killed and 54 were wounded by air strikes in the Donetsk region, where the NGO Avalyst operates. The capacities of state emergency services are extremely stretched there, with an active frontline lying less than five kilometers away. Providing the wounded with first aid before emergency services arrive is core to what NGO staff responding in the area do.

The International NGO Safety Organization (INSO) highlights that conflict levels were nearly 50 percent higher in the last quarter of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, it suggests that conflict resolution processes may in fact increase conflict intensity as both sides seek to strengthen their position in any prospective negotiations<sup>4</sup>. It might also impede humanitarian access in case of a time-bound

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-access-snapshot-january-february-2025-enuk>

<sup>3</sup> <https://indd.adobe.com/view/ac6063e0-3011-4f98-9c5b-c59280e20c93>

<sup>4</sup> <https://indd.adobe.com/view/bc3572f3-3dbd-412b-9b17-7e4bcc687814>

ceasefire and further exacerbate the security challenges for local humanitarian responders operating close to and on the frontlines due to the potential movement of troops and arms and strengthening fortification.

*'Ukraine is the most mine-contaminated country in the world, with a high risk of encountering explosive hazards. In the Kharkiv region, which was partially occupied, this danger is even greater. On top of that, the area faces frequent heavy shelling and drone strikes, often targeting residential buildings, playgrounds, and crowded places. Security training and the provision of personal protective equipment can be lifesaving – helping humanitarians protect themselves and assist others, especially with a personal first-aid kit,'* – project manager, NGO Green-Landiya.

CARE Ukraine supports its local partners by offering specialised training in security and first aid, equipping 186 national partner staff in 2024 to operate in high-risk environments. It takes a gender-sensitive approach by involving female trainers and addressing gender-specific risks, such as trauma care, hygiene access, and safety during travel. CARE Ukraine is also reviewing equipment to better meet the needs of women, such as providing lighter bulletproof vests. However, according to INSO, the overall training needs in Ukraine for 2025 greatly surpass training capacities.

*'Donors must take into account that we are working in a full-scale war, which entails daily massive attacks on civilians and infrastructure. It is unimaginable to deliver aid without adequate safety and security measures under such conditions. To do anything, a humanitarian should be alive. To stay alive and not be frightened to go where you need to work – one should have relevant skills, knowledge, and equipment – and constantly improve them,'* – Inna Maniv, a Safety and Security Capacity Building Coordinator, CARE Ukraine.

We call upon parties to this war to respect their obligations under IHL to protect civilians and aid workers. But, given the blatant violations of IHL since the beginning of this war and fatalities among aid workers, donors have a moral responsibility to

adequately resource local actors' safety and security. **Local actors have access and expertise. But they are not shields against bullets.**

*'It is incredibly painful to see how Duty of Care is simply being removed from projects, justified by budget cuts. A sense of security is a foundation, not a privilege. It is a necessity that should never be questioned,'* – Daryna Ivchenko, advocacy and partnership manager, NGO Girls.

### **Recommendations to humanitarian donors, NGOs and decision-makers:**

- The definition of minimum and optimum Duty of Care packages suggested in a review by the SDC, the Humanitarian NGO Platform in Ukraine and the Alliance of Ukrainian Civil Society organisations<sup>5</sup> should be adopted by all actors within the humanitarian community. A common framework agreement signed by donor agencies, UN agencies and NGO/CSO umbrella organisations could harmonise safety and security practices and procedures.
- Provision of safety and security support (insurance, psychosocial support, first aid kits, personal protective equipment, training) to local and national NGOs and smaller grassroots CSOs should be adequately and consistently resourced.
- Safety and security training programmes should reflect on gender-specific risks, including the specific and different risks that female and male humanitarians and staff with special needs face.
- Personal protective equipment should be gender-sensitive and as adapted to various needs as possible.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://ngoplatformua.org/en/publications/duty-of-care-package-for-local-humanitarian-responders-in-ukraine/>