



LOCALISATION IN PRACTICE: IMPLEMENTING RESPONSIBLE HUMANITARIAN PARTNERSHIPS IN UKRAINE

Nonviolent **Peaceforce**

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Introduction

More than 2 years since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began humanitarian protection responses continue to be insufficient, resulting in high levels of risk for civilians, especially those volunteering to support frontline humanitarian efforts. Gaps in protection often arise from asymmetries in risk-burden between International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and the National Non-governmental Organisations (NNGOs), self-organised volunteer collectives, and community activists most often providing frontline responses (referred to collectively throughout this brief as frontline humanitarian workers). Ukrainian responders continue to be the primary actors delivering aid and providing services in high-risk settings where INGOs have deemed implementation to be too risky.

This brief will share the programmatic interventions implemented by NP in its attempt to bridge risk gaps between responders and assess their impact on asymmetric relationships between international and local actors, identifying where local actors are still absorbing disproportionate risk. Over the course of implementing different strategies, NP and our partners have learned instructive lessons, and this brief seeks to illuminate these so that other organisations and donors can learn from these experiences. We provide these broader recommendations for responsible partnerships for the implementation of localised humanitarian responses and for the better protection of civilians throughout Ukraine and beyond.

Background

In May 2023, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) published a [policy brief](#) highlighting the significant risks facing frontline humanitarian workers, predominately volunteers, in the most severely impacted and hard-to-reach communities. These local responders often bear an inequitable risk burden to reach and support the most vulnerable communities and individuals, going where INGOs often will not. A [recent report](#) by ACAPS revealed that many of the challenges facing frontline humanitarian workers that were previously highlighted by NP have not been adequately addressed, hindering humanitarian aid delivery and leaving humanitarian workers at risk.

As highlighted in the ACAPS report, asymmetrical relationships between INGOs and NNGOs persist, often resulting in the outsourcing of risk to local partners without adequate physical, technical, and psychosocial protection supports. Despite duty of care for local partners and volunteers being increasingly in rhetorical focus at INGO forums, international/national coordination meetings, and donor priorities, practical implementation remains challenging. While more INGOs have duty of care policies towards their partners and are more conscious about pressures that may be put on them to deliver aid in frontline areas, duty of care guidelines for non-aid delivery activities, such as trainings, are less clear.

NP's programming in Ukraine is guided by its [Responsible Partnerships Strategy](#) which goes beyond duty of care guidelines, aiming to collaborate with partners on an even playing field, ensuring that risks are appropriately addressed and not outsourced. This has led NP to adopt programming oriented toward preventing and mitigating protection risks faced by frontline volunteers, while strengthening and centring the pre-existing civil society-led emergency response.

Methodology

This brief reflects an analysis of over 420 volunteer and staff testimonies from 45 different local partners, collected from April-July 2024. These testimonies were gathered through Focus Group discussions (FGs), Key Informative Interviews (KIIs) and surveys with NNGOs, CSOs and volunteer collectives who have received organisation support from NP or are individually enrolled in NP's Volunteer Insurance Program (VIP) or Volunteer Resilience Program (VRP).

By using the testimonies collected from 2022-2023, for the previous brief on responsible partnerships as a baseline, NP has been able to draw comparative evaluations regarding volunteers' safety and perceived safety, while working on the emergency response along the frontlines.

Beyond Duty of Care: Programming underlined by civilian protection

What does it look like to move beyond rhetoric to implement duty of care in practice? In developing programming with local partners, NP in Ukraine has sought to address the risks local partners face from different angles including physical safety, psychosocial impacts, and sustainability over time. This has focused on five key approaches, detailed below.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Lending

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) has proven to be lifesaving in Ukraine, protecting frontline humanitarian workers from significant risk of death or injury from airstrikes, shelling, and mine incidents. Since 2022, in response to inaccessibility of PPE for frontline humanitarian workers, NP has developed and implemented a Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) lending program to ensure that humanitarian workers and first responders in de-occupied and frontline areas can carry out their activities more safely.

Two years on, this program remains crucial and impactful for local partners who continue to bear primary responsibility for emergency response. Inadequate protection for first responders leads to overall insufficient protection for civilians, creating a cycle of protection issues that undermine the humanitarian response. One year into the PPE lending programme, NP remained the only INGO that partners were aware of that provided access to PPE.

When NP partners were asked whether PPE was still serving intended purposes, they all stated that the PPE lending programme has been critical to keeping them safe when operating near the frontlines. Conversations with just under 100 volunteers from 25 different organisations confirmed that NP is the only international organisation that is providing PPE to their partners. This is even though more than half of the interviewed volunteers are in partnerships with other INGOs and carrying out similar programming with them (front-line service provision and civilian support).

"Before signing the memorandum with the NP, the volunteer team did not have access to personal protective equipment. Thanks to the PPE distribution program, volunteers feel more secure when going to the red zone."

--- Kataryna, frontline humanitarian worker in Kherson*

"We came under fire from the Russian occupiers several times. At the time of the shooting, I was wearing a bulletproof vest, thanks to which I did not receive shrapnel wounds, since all the shrapnel got stuck in the vest. The lives of several of my colleagues were also safe, thanks to the equipment they were wearing."

-- Igor, frontline humanitarian worker in Kherson*

"The situation in Kherson and the Kherson region is not getting better, shelling is becoming more frequent and the risks of threats to the lives of volunteers while carrying out our missions are growing. PPE provided by NP with a high degree of protection make it possible to carry out their tasks more often and more efficiently."

-- Oleksandr, frontline humanitarian worker in Kherson*

*Anonymized

While partners reflected positively on the importance of access to PPE, half of all NP partners also reported that the PPE provided was too heavy resulting in some volunteers changing plates to lighter ones or sometimes choosing not to wear PPE at all. This was especially during summer when PPE is particularly uncomfortable due to the heat. Flak jackets are bulky and designed to fit men rather than women and children, making them uncomfortable for an increasingly female-led humanitarian response. While NP has acquired child-sized PPE in response to requests, the need to make PPE more size-inclusive is clear and a reflection of existing accessibility issues in PPE production.

At the same time, the need for volunteers to wear PPE and do so properly is critical. As recently as in June 2024, volunteers were protected from potential injury and had their PPE and helmets damaged when a first-person view (FPV) drone targeted their vehicle in Antonivka, Kherson Oblast. This incident is one of the many examples of safety and security risks faced by frontline humanitarian workers in their efforts to reach the affected population in frontline communities. The high intensity and often indiscriminatory character of attacks limits the range of effective mitigation measures, leaving physical protection through PPE as one of the most needed and applicable responses.

This incident serves also as a reminder of the ‘normalisation’ of risks, which is a common result of prolonged conflicts. It is important for the civil society actors operating in exposed locations to develop robust security Standard Operating Procedures and follow them meticulously to counteract the risks of fatigue. Where this development is challenging, it is important for donors to promote integration of this technical support into partnership strategies. This remains a key programmatic focus for NP, and a key component of NP’s responsible partnership approach.

Technical safety and security training and support – first aid and trauma responses

It is essential - for their own safety and the safety of the communities they serve - that frontline humanitarian workers are trained and supported in first aid and trauma responses. The First Aid and Psychological First Aid training courses NP provides are designed to enhance community resilience during emergencies and safeguard first responders in high-risk settings. These courses aim to equip participants with the skills needed for effective emergency response and first aid in the field, ensuring there are trained individuals throughout frontline and de-occupied areas. The training is primarily hands-on, with the goal of enabling participants to retain critical skills through muscle memory. Acknowledging that such knowledge usually fades within six months, NP is committed to regularly training and retraining community members and frontline humanitarian workers, emphasizing the importance of avoiding risk normalization as the conflict continues.

All partners reported that the First Aid Training (FAT) and Psychological First Aid Training (PFAT) significantly enhanced their safety while operating along the frontlines. They also noted that the training materials were thoughtfully tailored to address the specific threats in Ukraine, such as artillery, missiles, mines, and explosions. Trainings are not static and evolve as needs on the ground shift. For example, NP recently introduced a new FAT training specifically for those involved in evacuations of low-mobility persons. All partners requested further training on first aid topics, underscoring the ongoing demand for such critical knowledge and reflecting a strong awareness of the risks faced by frontline humanitarian workers and their organizations.

"After the training, I understand more than ever the need for such knowledge (on first aid). In the conditions and times that we live in Ukraine, thanks to the NP team for such support in knowledge."

-- Alina, frontline humanitarian worker from Mykolaiv*

"Coming to your trainings, I increasingly begin to understand and expand the boundaries of my knowledge (on first aid), which can be useful in my life and the lives of people around me. This helps you become more aware of how to act and behave with people who need help."

-- Kostya, frontline humanitarian worker from Kharkiv*

Partners shared that all international organisations that they have received support from, in addition to NP, require volunteers and staff to be trained before conducting activity implementation along frontlines, and commonly send them elsewhere in the country to carry out such trainings. This is something they record as a shift from the beginning of the full-scale invasion, with more importance being placed institutional capacity building in the form of meeting certain security knowledge and standards.

Humanitarian Principles Trainings

In response to the full-scale invasion many Ukrainians, with a variety of professional backgrounds, began dedicating their lives to the humanitarian emergency response. People used their personal vehicles for humanitarian distributions, opened their homes to IDPs, and utilized crowdfunding to support the war-impacted civilian population. To organise this grassroots response, an increasing amount of volunteer collectives and NNGOs were established, most with little or no prior experience in the humanitarian field.

Due to their lack of background in the humanitarian field, many of these organisations were not aware of and did not comply with humanitarian principles. This exposes them and those they support to increased risks of being targeted by militaries and prevents them from being protected under International Humanitarian Law. Additionally, failure to comply with humanitarian principles prevents them from being funded by international donors.

In response, NP rolled out a 'Humanitarian Principles' Training. The training has become obligatory to all NP partners as part of our 'duty of care' package – recognizing the risks created by noncompliance. The training also improves partners' institutional capacity, improving their eligibility for external funding.

“Until today, we did not know at all about humanitarian principles and how to prevent violence. Now we have a goal to study this topic more deeply and train our volunteers in similar trainings with support from NPs.”

-- Maksym, frontline humanitarian worker from Mykolaiv*

Volunteer Insurance Programme & Volunteer Resilience Programme

When seeking to implement partnerships in a responsible manner, it is important that local humanitarian workers are provided the same comprehensive supports that international workers traditionally receive. This includes insurance coverage for accidents that occur while performing humanitarian duties and comprehensive psychological support to address trauma and/or stress resulting from the role.

One way in which NP has reduced the gap and discrepancies between local and international actors is through its Volunteer Insurance Programme and Volunteer Resilience Programme (VIP and VRP respectively). These programmes focus on delivering accident insurance coverage (VIP) and psychological support (VRP) to volunteers serving in challenging, hard-to-reach areas, addressing the specific challenges inherent in their roles. It has been a year since NP rolled out the VIP and VRP programs, and over a thousand volunteers from 53 different organisations in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odesa Oblasts are enrolled in both programmes. While the results have been largely positive, there is also clear space for improvement to encourage further maximisation of the programmes.

When asked **'How has the Volunteer Insurance impacted your daily life?'** 80% of volunteers stated that they feel more secure and comfortable carrying out their work, whereas 20% stated that they were indifferent. Of those who stated that the programme had a positive impact, many said that knowing that their families would receive financial support following their death, provided them with mental rest.

“My wife feels happier with me volunteering along the frontline now that I am insured. Overall, it has allowed me to do a better job, as I am not worrying about my family members being as worried. Especially as they now live in a different country.”

-- Mykola, frontline humanitarian worker from Kherson*

“Receiving the insurance has increased my confidence when volunteering. I do not feel as vulnerable, but I am also better aware of the risks, following NP’s security training. These two things together have really helped me.”

-- Hanna, frontline humanitarian worker from Kramatorsk*

From the same group of volunteers, 80% also expressed doubts that the insurance would work in case of need. This reflects an overarching distrust in these kinds of institutions and authorities among Ukrainians, and insurance is not an exception. INGO partners must select providers thoughtfully to secure that the insurance coverage they provide is truly effective and create opportunities for those covered by such policies to learn more about how to make claims, increasing their trust in the support.

The outcomes of the Volunteer Resilience Programme have also varied across different regions and organizations. Overall, it has been welcomed as an initiative, as such services have previously not been provided.

“The capacity to assist civilians has significantly improved, as volunteers now have the opportunity to seek psychological support to alleviate stress. This support is vital for addressing both the immediate effects of traumatic incidents, such as coming under fire, and the long-term stress accumulated from working in challenging conditions.”

-- Viktor, frontline humanitarian worker from Kramatorsk*

At the same time, most volunteers and organizations who have access have not utilised the service. When asked why, half of the partners indicated that they do not feel the need for mental health support and would seek it through other avenues, such as spending time with friends and family if necessary. Some participants also noted that such services were perceived as being more appropriate for women than men, reflecting social stigmas often associated with receiving psychosocial support.

For partners whose teams had utilised the programme, they reported that the service was invaluable. Even among the initially hesitant, many were impressed by the quality of care and the deep understanding and compassion shown by the service providers. They took comfort in knowing that additional sessions were available if needed and appreciated that the psychologists were from Ukraine, which created an immediate connection to the shared experiences and suffering in their surroundings.

“This programme has allowed representatives of our direct assistance departments to receive individual psychological support they desperately needed when working with communities who were in difficult and traumatic life circumstances.”

-- Bogdan, frontline humanitarian worker, Kharkiv*

As the need for life insurance coverage and psychosocial support among frontline responders in Ukraine persists, there is a clear requirement to learn from these experiences and develop new communication strategies about such services. Providing accurate information can help dispel social stigmas surrounding psychosocial support and build trust in the insurance program. For instance, as some organisations have utilised these services, one approach may be to provide peer-to-peer information sessions led by volunteers who have felt the benefit of the programmes. This could support in addressing some of the stigmas and negative perceptions associated with receiving mental health support or with the insurance scheme. Additionally, offering VRP sessions in an offline format could encourage more volunteers to fully utilise the service and take advantage of professional support.

The Volunteer Hub: Kherson City

In order to appropriately coordinate responses and improve locally led programming, it is important that frontline humanitarian workers have a dedicated space to plan activities, exchange best practices and rest. To address this NP established a 'Volunteer Hub' in Kherson, which has been operational since December 2023. The space has evolved into a vibrant and dynamic centre where they can connect and coordinate their efforts. The importance of this space became especially evident in conversations with workers. They frequently mentioned how the hub has enhanced their work by bringing them closer to other organizations. When searching for collaborators to assist with tasks like civilian evacuations, volunteers can now easily reach out to others within the shared space.

This improved coordination has not only strengthened the various organizations involved but has also bolstered individual resilience by fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. A recurring theme among workers is the significant toll that high-stress environments have taken on their physical and psychological well-being, with many showing serious signs of burnout and distress. The hub provides a safe space for frontline humanitarian workers to connect with one another, relax, and recharge.

"We finally stopped playing solo and we are now making small steps towards a fruitful cooperation."

-- Alina, Co-Director of locally-led organisation Spravzhni, Kherson

The hub has also been useful in addressing coordination challenges that persist between national and local levels. For example, in the past when mandatory evacuations were announced, these announcements did not come with information on how such evacuations should take place, often resulting in rushed actions with little protection focus. The hub has reduced such gaps between policy and implementation by supporting relationship-building between different organisations, which can complement each other's evacuation efforts. NP fulfils a facilitatory role which has been appreciated by volunteers as they previously were not aware of support available through certain INGOs or government structures.

As a result, NNGOs have become more familiar and connected with the INGO and donor communities and their policies and practices and have been able to implement joint efforts with greater positive impact.

“By participating in Hub meetings, we always have the opportunity to meet with partners and share our knowledge or coordinate our activities.”

-- Volodymyr, frontline humanitarian worker in Kherson*

This year, the hub structure matured to further reflect the complementary aspect of the different active Volunteer Hub members. Different organisations have become thematic focal points and co-leads for protection issues most relevant to their work. This is also contributing to the efficiency of the response and reducing duplication of efforts.

Fuel and Stipend Programme

Compensating frontline humanitarian workers for their time and relieving the burden placed by fuel and repair expenses is crucial to the establishment of responsible partnerships and the continuation of frontline aid delivery. During NP’s initial assessment it was clear that many locally-led response mechanisms were severely lacking material resources to continue their work. Limitations on the scale and the scope of their work caused by fuel shortages, combined with months of unpaid work push many to give up humanitarian work in exchange for employment opportunities providing stable income. To enable crucial locally-led humanitarian mechanisms to sustain and increase the scale of their operations NP provides funds for transportation and stipends to frontline humanitarian organisations and volunteer collectives. NP views support for local humanitarian mechanisms as a crucial method for ensuring the primacy of local actors, rather than replacing them with large international operations.

HOW IT WORKS

NP creates signed agreements with partners, requiring them to estimate their monthly fuel costs per liter, based on their experience, the car model, and their work plan. Partners also specify the number of volunteers they have and their activities, and stipends are provided daily. The same volunteer cannot receive multiple stipends for different humanitarian activities if conducted during the same day. The amount also includes taxes to ensure a responsible approach and fulfillment of tax obligations on behalf of the volunteers.

The total amount is provided to partners in the form of a ‘subgrant’, meaning that partners need to report against the agreed activity log frame and budget every quarter, to request the next tranche of the subgrant.

NP visit to Zernove Transit Point , November 2024, ©NP

The Fuel and Stipend Programme has proven to be crucial in sustaining locally led operations, with 80% of all partners enrolled stating that their livelihoods and operational ability were dependent on the programme. Still, it is a programmatic approach that is not streamlined across the international emergency response to the full-scale invasion. This is a crucial resource for frontline humanitarian actors. Without such support, their responses are significantly constrained by the need to personally subsidise the costs of fuel and vehicle maintenance. Many frontline workers receive no external support for their activities and those who do have strict compliance rules restricting fuel spending as it is not commonly seen as programmatic activity but rather associated with overhead and operational costs.

"The NP organization was the only international actor who supported us with fuel costs in the first stages of war. This allowed us to more effectively and more often deliver the necessary aid (food, water, hygiene kits) to affected households and people from frontline areas in Ukraine. Now NP is still supporting us, and one of the only actors who provides this support which we know. It still provides the opportunity to deliver aid to hard-to-reach villages that, as a result of destruction, do not have all the necessary means for a normal existence."

-- Denis, frontline humanitarian worker in Mykolaiv*

Many volunteers stated that the stipends have supported them to continue to volunteer even two and a half years into the war, whereas, without it, they stated that they might have had to go back to full-time work.

"With the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, most of our comrades, without hesitation, became volunteers and began to help people who suffered from the conflict in Ukraine. Each of the volunteers gave their all and worked every day. Thanks to the material support of "Stipends activity" from the NP organization, the volunteers felt moral support from the international organization, which supported them from burnout and gave them motivation to continue their volunteer work."

-- Viktor, frontline humanitarian worker in Kharkiv*

NP visit to Zernove Transit Point, November 2024, ©NP



Throughout the course of NP implementing its Fuel and Stipend programme, NP adapted its partnerships process resulting in a two-month pause in fuel and stipend support for partners.¹ This pause had a critical impact on operations, with four organizations operating near the frontlines reporting that operations nearly came to a standstill, despite continued demand from civilians in those areas. This situation underscores the importance of having sustainability strategies in place and maintaining clear communication between partners and INGOs to prevent such disruptions.

Almost three years into the full-scale invasion, it is also crucial to reassess whether use of the term volunteer, and related stipend systems, adequately and accurately reflect that work that is being undertaken by these frontline responders. In reality, many groups operate in practice – if not in name – as professional humanitarian organisations with strong contextual expertise and skills essential to humanitarian response in their areas of operation. As the war continues, it is necessary for all donor partners to be asking such questions, and where necessary, re-orienting their responses accordingly. These reflections are one component of NP's efforts to do so and are essential to ensuring our work continues to be supportive and fit for purpose as the context changes.

Conclusion

Over the past year, NP has implemented programs in Ukraine that promote responsible partnerships, seeking to move beyond bare minimum duty of care commitments. These strategies - PPE lending, insurance provision, mental health support, trainings and coordination/safe spaces – are an attempt to practically implement responsible partnerships principles and reduce the gap between INGOs and NNGOs operating in Ukraine. In addition to NP, there has been a general improvement across INGOs in the risk mitigation and protection support provided to frontline humanitarian workers. For example, local organisations have reported an increase in receiving appropriate training on safety and security, prior to being deployed in frontline areas. These efforts lay foundations for improved and more effective localisation, ensuring that humanitarian frontline workers receive the necessary support to sustain their operations.

There is still a long way to go. Many of NP's partners report that some of the crucial support for their operations is solely provided by NP. NP urges other INGOs and donors to review their duty of care policies and be creative in how they integrate them within partnerships.

¹ Based on lessons learned, NP recently shifted the modality of the 'fuel and stipend' provision, from MoUs to subgrants. This means that the fuel and stipend request is raised against a set of programmatic expectations with indicators and therefore gives the partner more wiggle room to sustain their operations. As part of the subgrant, taxes as well as overhead costs are included, which also contributes to institutional capacity development. This was a recent shift for NP and we are still awaiting feedback from partners on whether this has addressed issues of accessibility, and how processes can become even more accessible going forward.

Recommendations

While the programming implemented by NP has been broadly effective in improving protection supports for frontline humanitarian workers, protection gaps remain and there are many opportunities to improve and expand such supports.

Key stakeholders – the Government of Ukraine, national and international humanitarian organisations, civil society groups, and international donors - can continue to improve their partnerships with frontline humanitarian workers in the following ways:

- Standardise protection and risk-mitigation support that goes beyond duty of care minimums. Expansive protection and risk mitigation supports should be a baseline commitment of INGOs, donors, and others working with frontline humanitarian workers. While notable improvements have been made in the recognition of the risks assumed by frontline humanitarian workers in the delivery of aid and services, more steps need to be taken to practically address these risks. This includes direct support in accomplishing their work such as fuel funds, compensation of volunteers, PPE provision, and assistance with risk-mitigation and protection strategies as well as more comprehensive supports towards frontline humanitarian workers' wellbeing and sustainability through programmes like NP's VIP, VRP and volunteer hubs.
- Expand access to PPE and pursue size-inclusive options. NP remains the only organization offering access to PPE for frontline humanitarian workers and does not have the capacity or resources to support all workers who need this equipment. PPE should be a standard requirement for grant provision and of support provided by donors or INGOs relying on frontline humanitarian workers to deliver aid in high-risk areas. Additionally, stakeholders should work with suppliers to produce PPE that is suitable for people with a smaller frame. This is especially critical as women take on larger proportions of the humanitarian response as men are conscripted.
- Work with communities to explore effective and culturally accepted methodologies of mental health and psycho-social support for frontline humanitarian workers. NP's VRP revealed that many frontline humanitarian workers are hesitant to engage with traditional psychotherapy supports. Those partnering with frontline humanitarian workers need to continue to explore alternative methods for mental health and psycho-social support such as support groups and community spaces. Additionally, resourcing and delivering accurate information about psychosocial support, mental health needs and the impacts of trauma through credible messengers is important for addressing underlying stigmas. There is also significant mental health benefits associated with increasing perceived safety through programs such as VIP, PPE lending and other direct supports as the high intensity and indiscriminatory character of the hostilities Ukrainian frontline humanitarian workers are faced with, create significant mental, emotional, and social strain. Practical protection support can therefore also mitigate the pressure experienced by frontline humanitarian workers.

- Ensure the sustainability of supports in the context of protracted conflict. Those partnering with frontline humanitarian organisations must be mindful of the risk posed by external protection supports that are not planned with long-term sustainability in mind. Efforts should be made to complement protection supports with increased capacity building elements and proactively communicate timelines for any end of support with a clear exit strategy. At the same time, partners should also be supported in improving internal protection supports and securing long-term, sustainable funding without the need for intermediaries. One way in which this could be done, is by increasing the coordination and cooperation across INGOs in terms of resource and information sharing. This means that programmatic gaps can be flagged beforehand, encouraging INGOs to refer local organisations across INGOs with similar programmatic goals and activities, reducing the risks of potential funding gaps. Donors should also adopt responsible partner strategies, more accessible application processes and flexible funding mechanisms, thereby increasing their ability to work directly with frontline humanitarian workers.

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