



international
alert

Donbas conflict:

Taking stock of peacebuilding

Research summary



About International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace.

We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

www.international-alert.org

© International Alert 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

Layout: D.R. ink

Cover: © Le Pictorium/Michael Bunel/Alamy



international
alert

Donbas conflict:

Taking stock of peacebuilding

Authors: Marina Nagai, Iryna Eihelson and Maxim Ieligulashvili

August 2021

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to particularly thank Sophia Pugsley and Stuart Moir of International Alert for their input in shaping the analysis and editing the report.

The authors extend further thanks to the internal and external reviewers, whose comments and insights strengthened the report: Julian Egan, Jessica Banfield and Alex Azarov. The authors are also grateful to all the respondents who participated in the research.

International Alert is grateful for the continuing support from our key funding partners: the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Their flexibility and cooperation over the last year has allowed Alert's team to invest time in greatly needed research on peace and conflict within the rapidly changing pandemic context.

The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of International Alert's donors.

Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	5
Key findings	7
Politics and policies	7
Civic peacebuilding – local civil society and international actors	8
The promise of peace and dashed expectations	10
Relational peacebuilding	12
Recommendations	14

Executive summary

This report analyses research findings on perceptions of peacebuilding efforts by local, national and international actors in the context of the armed conflict in the Donbas region. It considers the main gaps, risks, and challenges, and then explores opportunities for improving policies and practices aimed at transforming the conflict.

The analysis draws on data from a qualitative study examining the views and experiences of 22 experts and civil society activists. International Alert (Alert) carried out individual semi-structured in-depth interviews in early 2021 with representatives of national and international civil society, and experts from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (including non-government-controlled areas - NGCA). The study also includes extensive desk research, internal reflections and a series of consultations with a wide range of stakeholders led by International Alert in Ukraine in March 2021 as part of the Interpeace Principles for Peace initiative.

The main gaps and challenges identified are the **lack of fundamental elements** of best peacebuilding practice, such as:

- participatory context analysis,
- strategic and conceptual coherence of policies and interventions,
- inclusive programme design that responds to jointly identified peacebuilding needs.

Essentially, the report argues that instead of being driven by vision and strategies to address the conflict's root causes, peacebuilding in the Donbas is defined by donor-driven project activities that focus predominantly on its consequences. The cumulative effect of these shortcomings can be seen in disillusionment and burnout within the sector, sceptical attitudes both towards and from external actors (donors and policy-makers), and a shared feeling of dashed expectations.

Building on these findings, the report advocates for the reform of conceptual, methodological and structural approaches to peacebuilding in the Donbas context, and in Ukraine more broadly. The primary aim is to stimulate reflection and debate among key stakeholders which would help build a shared sense of priorities and momentum in the peacebuilding community in Ukraine.

Introduction

Seven years after the start of open warfare between Russia-backed local armed groups and pro-governmental forces, around 50% of the Donbas, including the major cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, remain outside Ukrainian government control. These areas are administered by Russia-backed de facto authorities in the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DNR) and 'Luhansk People's Republic' (LNR). The official peace process, known as the Normandy Four format (Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France), has been ongoing since 2014 and is in deadlock. Ukrainians' frustrations over the unresolved conflict are often manipulated, by both internal and external actors. Public discourse is increasingly polarised about how to reintegrate the non-government-controlled areas and what kind of peace deal would be acceptable or desirable.

Alert has worked in Ukraine since 2015, pioneering provision of psychosocial support to those affected by the conflict, promoting social cohesion across the country, and providing in-depth analysis of local and regional conflict dynamics beyond the Donbas.¹ From the outset, our work consciously took a countrywide perspective, focusing on strengthening social cohesion across Ukraine's vast territory, including parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts under governmental control. As a peacebuilding organisation, however, and having worked in Ukraine for seven years, we recognised the need to explore what our role can and should be in advancing prospects for peaceful resolution of the armed conflict in the Donbas region. To this end, we carried out an analysis of the peacebuilding landscape in the region to identify needs, gaps, risks, and opportunities for conflict transformation.² Although this analysis was intended to inform Alert's own strategic and programming responses, its findings are shared in this paper to a wider group of stakeholders to stimulate reflection and debate more broadly.

The analysis is based on extensive desk research, informal conversations with Ukrainian experts and practitioners, and 22 individual semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in early 2021 with experts and civil society activists in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (including NGCA), representatives of national civil society, and international experts. The analysis is further informed by a series of consultations with a wide range of stakeholders (54 people took part in four focus group discussions) led by Alert in Ukraine in March 2021 as part of the Interpeace Principles for Peace initiative.³ Reflections in this report also draw on field observations by Alert's team during implementation of various projects.

The formal research interviews took place in February and March 2021, but the analysis came together in the aftermath of the April 2021 escalation, during which tens of thousands of troops and hardware amassed near the conflict zone in the Donbas and Crimea. At the time, foreign media and Western expert analysis expressed concerns that the highest military concentration since 2014 "could set off a confrontation" and produced a plethora of mostly alarmist military and geopolitical scenarios.⁴ Since the withdrawal of these additional forces, the conflict has disappeared from the headlines again and the international perspective appears to have evolved into that of 'crisis averted', at least temporarily.

The escalation has, however, had a profoundly negative impact on conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts. In the words of one interlocutor contributing to this research, many men and women working in the field have begun to feel "useless, demotivated and disorientated", as political and social discourse increasingly marginalises peace-orientated narratives:

"If you are doing peacebuilding now, you are either a fool or a traitor."

Our research suggests that this negativity is not simply a result of the April 2021 escalation; in fact, it stems from years of deeper structural problems within peacebuilding. While the current conflict dynamics are not favourable for peacebuilding, this presents a moment in which to take stock, draw lessons and reimagine peacebuilding in Ukraine to make it more relevant, effective and sustainable.

Key findings

Politics and policies

Unlike his predecessor Petro Poroshenko, who took a tough and uncompromising stance on the conflict, its resolution and dealing with the self-proclaimed republics, President Zelensky initially positioned himself as a strong proponent of a 'winning hearts and minds' strategy for reintegration.⁵ The unprecedented conciliatory tone was supported by measures aimed at, among other things, simplifying communication with people from the NGCA and their access to Ukraine's administrative and social services, education, and healthcare. This pivot in the political rhetoric and policy was welcomed by many (particularly external actors) as presenting a real opportunity to push the peacebuilding agenda.

Two years on, the initial impetus at the highest political level has not translated into positive shifts in peacebuilding practice or public attitudes. Respondents explain this with reference to the following factors:

- **A pervasive trust deficit characterises fundamental relationships in Ukraine.**⁶ The lack of trust in key political, social and financial institutions has a long history, considering the nation's experiences of balancing among regional empires for centuries, decades of Soviet rule and the Holodomor⁷, and more recently, deeply entrenched corruption and oligarchy. Mistrust and a lack of effective communication between the state and its citizens, particularly those in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (under governmental control), mean that many state policies are viewed as *"unsafe, inconsistent and unfair"* (interviewee). Government declarations on the need for dialogue, inclusive approaches, and improved human security do not translate into conducive practices on the ground. The situation is even less encouraging for residents of the self-proclaimed republics. The experiences of people from those areas who cross the line of contact (LoC) into government-controlled areas (GCA) have been extremely negative. For example, for a long time, as part of a communications campaign, arrivals were met by billboards threatening prosecution for separatism and supporting terrorism. "Come back [here] and we'll punish you" was how the message from Ukraine was heard by people on the other side of the line. This intimidating atmosphere extends not only to those from the other side of the LoC. The high levels of suspicion and disproportionate censorship (even considering that this is a heightened security area) are a significant deterrent for citizens to express views that diverge from the government narrative. As one interviewee put it:

"You can get a cautionary visit from the security services just for posting a TikTok video."

- **There is no coherent strategic vision for reintegration and a reunited Ukraine,** or conflict-sensitive, flexible policies from the Ukrainian government which would help implement this vision. The policy vacuum around reintegration serves to cement divisions and further alienates people on both sides of the conflict divide from the state. One stark example often cited is Kyiv's measures on shutting down crossing points on the LoC in 2020 as part of the national response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This left thousands of people stranded, cut off from their livelihoods and access to vital services. Although the checkpoints were later reopened, this and other COVID-related policies sent a loud message of neglect and 'othering' amidst the ongoing health crisis in NGCAs.⁸ As hurdles for cross-divide engagement pile up from both sides, even for humanitarian activities, there is a worrying trend summed up by a respondent in the 'DNR':



© Le Pictorium/Michael Bune/Alamy

People taking shelter from the rain in Donbas, while a man with a gun and hood stands nearby.

“It is just easier to deal with Russia. Before, we were up for reintegration – now [we are] not.”

With this shift in the context, peacebuilders will have to deal with the challenges of transforming resentful attitudes and addressing new coping practices of ‘managing without Ukraine’.

- **There has been harmful politicisation and hijacking of the ‘peace narrative’** by central and local political elites, particularly during election cycles, as well as by Russia-sponsored ‘hybrid’ interventions that are increasingly injecting anti-Western narratives.⁹ Ukrainian society has split into two potentially irreconcilable camps: those who advocate ‘peace at any cost’ (that is, even going so far as to give up on the reintegration of the NGCAs) and ‘the party of war’ where any peacebuilding is deemed futile or damaging until Russia withdraws support from the NGCA. This radicalisation leaves limited space for genuine dialogue which would lead to a more nuanced understanding of the prospects for peace.

Civic peacebuilding – local civil society and international actors

Local civil society

The spontaneous civic mobilisation in response to the immediate post-war humanitarian crisis from 2014 to 2016 marked the accelerated growth of civil society in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, which had hitherto been represented mainly by a handful of organisations. Initially, Donbas civil society focused on performing the more understandable and readily acceptable functions of protection and service delivery in terms of humanitarian aid and human rights. In 2017, a new agenda was ushered in by donors and the international community – dialogue and peacebuilding. However, there was no clearly defined vision, strategy, or even demand within Ukrainian society or the government. Significant resources were allocated to the agenda within a relatively short period of time which led to the rapid establishment of “an entire sector whose main purpose is to service donor contracts” (interviewee).

The risks here are that scarce social capital and human resources at the local level are, perversely, fully absorbed by donor-oriented project delivery, whilst having little input into strategic planning. Indeed, respondents stated that decision-making on programming needs and priorities for the Donbas takes place elsewhere, led by international actors and large, established, national non-governmental organisations. This feeling of disenfranchisement among local peacebuilders has been compounded by the fragmentation of the community into various groups that have become siloed, exclusive cliques. Respondents emphasised the role of external actors/donors in fostering competition at the expense of collaboration and pursuing ill-informed approaches that institutionalise the fragmentation of the sector.

The 2019 report 'Mapping civil society and peacebuilding in Ukraine' concurs with these perspectives, concluding that although it is a relatively small sector, "there are many dividing lines in terms of approaches to conflict resolution, attitudes to coordination, professionalisation, use of donor support, and issues on the peace agenda such as dialogue with people from Crimea, NGCA, or Russia".¹⁰ These divisions can be also explained by the lack of basic consensus on what peacebuilding in the Donbas context means and what it can realistically achieve (see section 'The promise of peace and dashed expectations').

Another overlooked issue that adversely affects local civil society is professional burnout and mental health issues. Individuals in the fields of humanitarian aid and peacebuilding – those dealing with men, women and children in crisis or affected by conflict – face specific pressures that often cause stress and impact on emotional and psychological health. In this protracted conflict, the lack of political and social support or of an integrated sectoral response to the mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) needs of peacebuilding practitioners lead to decreased personal satisfaction, waning commitment and, increasingly, professional burnout.

International actors

The debate on paternalism in aid, development and peacebuilding is not unique to Ukraine. There is a body of research¹¹ and ongoing practitioner discussions¹² in many other conflict contexts (particularly those that attract a lot of international and donor attention) about the utility of 'imported expertise' and cookie-cutter approaches. It is argued that "host populations often resist, challenge or reject the international programmes that are meant to help them".¹³

Indeed, respondents in this research expressed strong opinions about international actors in the context. They questioned the peacebuilding impact of external interventions, referring to them as "chaotic", "an imposition of ideological frameworks", and "detached from realities on the ground". Their criticism did not stop there, accusing international actors of not understanding local culture, social practices and complex relationships, of exacerbating conflict drivers and intensifying feelings of alienation between populations.

"[External interventions] are ripping up the social fabric, connections spanning hundreds of years, and practices that hold communities together." (Interviewee)

The policies and approaches of donor and international organisations were perceived as 'unfit for purpose' for three main reasons:

- a) they prioritise short-term interventions, activities that can be delivered quickly, and that rush indicator development in a way that satisfies the donor rather than the community;
- b) their programmatic focus is not based on thorough analysis and therefore is often irrelevant;
- c) ubiquitous training programmes seem to be a default 'cure-all' methodology.

This pattern of donor-driven ‘fast peacebuilding’ does not allow for flexibility and feedback loops between design and implementation, which undermines overall impact and fosters cynicism towards peacebuilding.

Furthermore, the transactional relationships between external actors and the Donbas ‘peacebuilding industry’ breed toxic competition among all involved – both local implementers and international actors. While competition for resources is, to a degree, ‘natural’ and expected in the sector, in the highly sensitive Donbas context it reinforces the public image of peacebuilding as being something “secretive”, “muddy” and even “corrupt” (interviewees). This narrative and the lack of public understanding of peacebuilding purposes are especially damaging for dialogue initiatives because they exacerbate participants’ perceptions of reputational risk and make them vulnerable to social condemnation and personal attacks.

Bitter criticism of donor and international organisations (including international non-governmental peacebuilding organisations) is not limited to local peacebuilders in the Donbas but is in fact pervasive at all levels. These deeply negative impressions warrant closer examination (this paper has not begun to map the majority of them) and they underline the importance of the reflective practice principles of peacebuilding.¹⁴ These principles help with questions around effective roles for ‘outsiders’ in promoting peace and their accountability for their contributions, as well as their role in managing expectations on the ground in terms of what is possible and within what timelines. Ukraine cannot afford further division; to avoid undermining the essence of peacebuilding practice there needs to be a revitalisation of robust and inclusive peacebuilding analysis, long-term strategy, and donor commitment to support less immediately tangible, but strategically important efforts.

The promise of peace and dashed expectations

The research found conceptual, methodological, and structural issues with current peacebuilding in the Donbas. The cumulative effect of these shortcomings can be seen in disillusionment and burnout within the sector, sceptical attitudes both towards and from external actors (donors and policy-makers), and a shared feeling of dashed expectations.

Conceptual issues

Conceptual complexities are inherent in peacebuilding and must be acknowledged and accepted. Unlike more tangible and measurable premises of humanitarian aid and development, peacebuilding seeks to bring social change through shifts in attitudes and behaviours and through structural and systemic change. This process is by definition patchy, experimental, lengthy, and non-linear. As conflict is always a complex system with multiple simultaneously moving parts, peacebuilders operate amid considerable uncertainty. A working solution that peacebuilding practitioners exercise is through developing conceptual frameworks and a vision for what peacebuilding looks like in each specific context, depending on a conflict’s causes, drivers, actor relationships, interactions between elements, and the best ways to influence them.

In the Donbas context, the first conceptual difficulty is the definition of ‘peacebuilding’. The term is used loosely in almost any kind of programming (from technical assistance and education to agriculture and tourism) which asserts that, among other things, it will also be good for peace. Indeed, the term has been heavily mainstreamed in the ambitious internal reform agenda. It is a requisite add-on for international actors (adding to the mix of jargon and terminology around social cohesion, dialogue, mediation, gender, and conflict sensitivity). While this practice might have sought to address the issue of ‘siloing’ and might have helped ‘legitimise’ the term, it has done it a disservice in the longer run. Peacebuilding has been shorn of coherence, purpose, accountability, and clarity in programming



© Sandro Macdalen/ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy

A man gets his hair cut within the barricades

and policymaking. Instead of being driven by vision and strategies to address the conflict's root causes, Donbas peacebuilding is defined by project activities that focus predominantly on its consequences. The multiple (mis) interpretations of peacebuilding have led to unrealistic and misplaced expectations which have shaped a very specific understanding of what peacebuilding should be. These cognitive dissonances have led to a sense of failure among those practising and supporting conflict transformation efforts, as well as wider society.

Rigid normative prescriptions never work in peacebuilding. That said, there is a case to be made for forging a common vision and framework for peacebuilding in the Ukraine context that would articulate values, set core principles, prioritise long-term holistic approaches, and help to deal with sensitive issues (e.g. modalities of engagement with NGCA; reintegration etc.).

Methodological issues

Methodological and practice issues in Donbas peacebuilding stem partly from this lack of conceptual and strategic clarity. Respondents repeatedly emphasised, for instance, the overuse of training as the main methodological tool for conducting dialogue. A whole new sector has opened up for *'dialogoviki'*, i.e. individuals who have attended training sessions on dialogue and amassed training certificates. They market themselves as dialogue experts despite having limited genuine dialogue experience and are sceptically seen to hop from grant to grant (as donor money continues to pour into eastern Ukraine) to provide their services with limited impact.

"There are a lot of dialogue projects that people 'make money off' [in Donbas] but the other side is not involved. Those groups build peace among themselves [likeminded people]." (Interviewee)

Training can be a powerful and transformative approach, especially when it is sustained over a long period of time, involves mentor accompaniment, and has high practical utility for trainees. The fallacy of training as an end in itself, however, leads not only to a *"waste of resources"* (interviewee), but demotivates and disappoints participants. Levels of training fatigue are very high. Respondents were particularly critical of projects that focus on one-off training workshops on dialogue and mediation *en masse*.

Paradoxically, however, with all the dialogue and mediation capacity built over the last seven years, genuine dialogue as an essential peacebuilding approach to addressing relational causes of the conflict has been underused, both internally (internal dialogue is important and ought to take place within society between people with divergent views) and with ‘the other side’.

Structural issues

Here lies a major structural issue of Donbas peacebuilding: the lack of policy and programming aimed at rebuilding relationships between people on opposite sides of the conflict divide. A major gap identified by respondents is the lack of understanding of and engagement with public sentiment and attitudes towards conflict transformation in the self-proclaimed republics, particularly through media and communications. This results in inadequate policies based on false assumptions.

“Whatever messages we develop, we have no idea how they are read there. We don’t even consider the need to think of the ‘recipient’ [people in DNR and LNR].” (Interviewee)

Naturally, some of this structural asymmetry can be explained through difficulties accessing NGCA and considerable personal security and reputational risks for dialogue participants. These limitations are undoubtedly significant, but not unusual for peacebuilding practitioners, especially those working with de facto state formations and closed borders. Even in a highly restrictive environment, there are opportunities for peacebuilding to play its relational role and facilitate a search for what unites people on both sides, what could trigger adverse reactions, and what could constitute a shared roadmap for reintegration.

Relational peacebuilding

For us, the notion of ‘relational peacebuilding’ describes connections and interactions between groups and individuals who might have divergent views on peace and conflict or represent different ‘sides’ to the conflict. In this sense, relational peacebuilding is different from ‘functional peacebuilding’ that focuses on performing more operational tasks, such as service delivery, protection, monitoring, and local development. Both forms are interconnected, but it is useful to make a distinction, particularly for defining change goals, designing approaches, and measuring impact.

Relational peacebuilding is often the poor cousin of the more familiar internationally-funded development, humanitarian, security or military approaches. Relational peacebuilding ‘takes too long’ for those desiring quick and easily measured results.¹⁵ This is certainly true for Ukraine, as we observe a recent shift towards increased hard security and prioritisation of economic stimulation responses to the conflict. These approaches have their place in a complex architecture of conflict prevention and transformation; however, any conflict is about broken human relationships. It is a mystery why patient support to relational dimensions of peacebuilding is such a hard case to make to the donor community, given that it goes to the heart of any conflict.

One overlooked but important phenomenon in the Donbas context is the continuing cross-border movement of ordinary people and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who maintain relationships with people on the other side. This level of contact is already shrinking and cannot be taken for granted, particularly as the conflict becomes increasingly protracted and the gap between divided populations¹⁶ grows with episodic escalations.

Currently, there is insufficient engagement of IDPs. They are not a homogenous group, but those who regularly travel to or maintain contact with their friends and families in NGCA can be engaged as a valuable peacebuilding resource. Forms of working with this population are predominantly based on project quota requirements, accommodating them in host communities, or treating them as 'needy' social support beneficiaries. In fact, many of them represent a vital connecting link between the divided societies, with a deeper understanding of realities, sensitivities, and potential conflict triggers on both sides. They are the informal opinion-makers in conflict discourse. Therefore, more should be done to:

- a) understand IDPs' views and narratives and how they can contribute to higher-quality conflict analysis,
- b) engage IDPs in developing more effective monitoring and preventative measures to improve prospects for reintegration,
- c) support them in building and sustaining social and cultural ties across divides.

One of the factors used to ignite and feed Ukraine's crisis was the manipulation of regional identity in the Donbas. The proud and strong industrial identity of Donbas miners, glamourised and revered for generations, was poorly woven into the new national identity-building project that was itself perceived – including through targeted propaganda – as "exclusivist and imposed".¹⁷ This resulted in growing alienation from the central state, so identity triggers clearly played a crucial role in pushing the conflict into violence.

Concentrated around dealing with the consequences of war, 'functional' peacebuilding served as a platform for some debates on conflict-related issues; however, it rarely attempted to tackle deep-seated questions of identity, belonging, and divergent narratives on history, memory and the roots of the conflict. In accordance with the social consensus on the causes of the conflict, these issues were swept aside and never made it onto the peacebuilding agenda. With no public space for open reflection, the debate has mostly migrated to the nation's kitchen tables. Occasionally, however, debates related to these questions explode on social media. With no resolution mechanisms this simply deepens polarisation.

Most peacebuilding interventions in the Donbas ignore expressions and forms of local and regional identity, perceptions, and behaviours, including personal, cultural, and economic ties with Russia. Established social practices and norms are not factored into context analysis, even when this analysis is labelled 'participatory'. As a result, they are not understood and their potential in building peace is not explored; rather, they are often presented and viewed only as conflict drivers and threats.

"There is no analysis or readiness to work with questions of cultural identity and how they are used for manipulation. All sensitive topics – language, history, memory – are like a naked wound. They do creep up in every dialogue process, but are left ignored by donors and experts." (Interviewee)

However sensitive and complex it is to engage populations in reflecting on and addressing these issues, it is of paramount importance for building lasting peace in the Donbas. Indeed, strengthening the security and social cohesion of Ukraine as a whole will depend on the nation's capacity and courage to deal with difficult relationships before they fracture. Strong regional identities are a hallmark of Ukraine's diverse social fabric; these can be both a source of strength and a tool for manipulation in "the politics of resentment" employed by populists on all sides.¹⁸

Some of the most important tasks for civic peacebuilding in the Donbas context are to find ways and approaches grounded in the analysis of different perspectives and lived experiences; to develop jointly sustainable practices that bring positive change for conflict-affected communities; and to share these hard-learned lessons with the whole country.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed primarily to local and international civil society actors, and the donor community. They offer a baseline for more strategically robust and effective peacebuilding programming on the Donbas and emphasise the importance of long-term vision and approaches for building a resilient, inclusive and lasting peace in Ukraine.

- **Support efforts to create a shared conceptual framework for peacebuilding in the Donbas** that will define core principles and a strategic vision to cope with the complexity and fluidity of the conflict as a system. Such a process will help to shape goals and approaches for sustainable peacebuilding and inform policy and programming on effective peacebuilding in the context. This will also help to demystify and depoliticise peacebuilding and mitigate unrealistic expectations of quick-fix solutions; mobilise collective civil society efforts in ways that overcome fragmentation; and develop a strong political advocacy framework.
- **Strengthen evidence-based programming.** It is important to promote the practice of inclusive and iterative context and peacebuilding analysis. Monitoring and evaluation systems that are designed specifically to support peacebuilding will help continuous learning. This will ensure accountability and the optimal use of local and external expertise, knowledge and skills. Strong evidence and analysis-based approaches will also help to hold accountable initiatives that claim a 'peacebuilding' outcome, which will further contribute to building convergence and clarity of peacebuilding efforts.
- **Understand the fabric of the peacebuilding sector,** especially beyond traditional non-governmental organisations. This includes understanding how grassroots activism, education systems, social and cultural practices as well as professional peacebuilders and their organisations contribute to peace in different ways.
- **Identify effective ways of reinvigorating and supporting those working on transforming the conflict.** This should include the provision of support for dealing with professional fatigue, burnout, and mental health issues, particularly in the aftermath of major military escalations and setbacks in negotiations. For this, a lot can be learned from the humanitarian sector that has begun to embrace and practise MHPSS as part of effective (and budgeted) human resource management.
- **Advocate for the long-term commitment of international actors to coherent and consistent peacebuilding strategies,** in place of ad hoc, short-term, project-focused interventions, and programming inertia where the same approaches are recycled with no clear contribution to long-term impact.
- **Support and promote civil society advocacy efforts and engagement with decision- and policy-makers,** including input into Track 1 and 1.5 (Trilateral Contact Group, OSCE, Minsk process) – with careful consideration of the perceptions around these processes and institutions.
- **Create spaces and sensitively facilitate internal and cross-divide dialogue on crucial aspects of reintegration,** such as polarising narratives around identity, history, and social and cultural connectors and dividers between populations.

- **Re-examine approaches to working with IDPs and populations that regularly cross the LoC.** There needs to be a shift away from viewing them as ‘problematic’ groups to a powerful peacebuilding resource that connects the two sides and can prevent total isolation as the conflict remains protracted. Understanding their views and the roles they play in shaping conflict discourse and attitudes on both sides will improve understanding of conflict dynamics and advance peacebuilding prospects.
- **Promote conflict sensitivity** beyond exercising the ‘do no harm’ principle. While there is a shared (at least theoretical) acceptance that interventions should not reinforce any negative dynamics, the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity remains a long-standing issue. Conflict-sensitive peacebuilding goes further than not causing immediate harm but seeks to gradually reduce structural risks and root causes of conflict and alleviate divisions and exclusion.
- **Explore reinforcing links and dynamics between the Donbas conflict and other regions with potential conflict escalation** (particularly Kherson oblast and Crimea, as well as Ukraine’s border regions). This should be done with a view to developing preventative measures based on peacebuilding principles and methodologies, and lessons learned from the Donbas.

Endnotes

- 1 M. Nagai, Synthesis situational assessment report, Ukraine: South of Odesa, Kherson and Zakarpattia regions, International Alert, 2019, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine_Synthesis%20Report_EN_2019.pdf
- 2 The research was not carried out for conflict context analysis, which would have a different purpose and require a different methodology.
- 3 For more information see Interpeace website: <https://www.interpeace.org/2019/11/interpeaces-initiative-recognition/>
- 4 EU warns 'spark' could set off escalation at Ukraine borders, Al Jazeera, 19 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/19/russia-has-150000-troops-near-ukraines-borders-eu-estimates>
- 5 S. Kudelia, Could a Zelenskiy presidency prove a breakthrough for conflict resolution in the Donbas?, Wilson Centre, 11 April 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/could-zelenskiy-presidency-prove-breakthrough-for-conflict-resolution-the-donbas>
- 6 Level of trust in politicians, electoral rating and attitude to certain initiatives/events: January 2021, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2 February 2021, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1003>
- 7 D. Stern, Holodomor: Memories of Ukraine's silent massacre, BBC News, 23 November 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25058256>
- 8 A. Sopova, How seven years of war and COVID-19 split Ukraine in two, The New Humanitarian, 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2021/4/5/Ukraine-war-COVID-19-division-permanent>
- 9 P. Pomerantsev et al, Pro-Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine changes tone, Atlantic Council, 10 June 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/pro-kremlin-propaganda-in-ukraine-changes-tone/>
- 10 T. Kyselova, Mapping civil society and peacebuilding in Ukraine: Peacebuilding by any other name, Mediation and Dialogue Research Center, 2019
- 11 S. Autesserre, *The frontlines of peace*, Oxford University Press, 2021
- 12 Peace Direct, Adeso, the Alliance for Peacebuilding and Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security, *Time to decolonise aid: Insights and lessons from a global consultation*, 2021
- 13 S. Autesserre, *Paternalism and peacebuilding: Capacity, knowledge, and resistance in international intervention*, in M. Barnett (ed.), *Paternalism beyond borders*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp.161–184, doi:10.1017/9781316799956.006
- 14 CDA, *Reflecting on peace practice (RPP) basics: A resource manual*, 2016
- 15 P. Vernon, *Redressing the balance: Why we need more peacebuilding in an increasingly uncertain world*, International Alert, 2017
- 16 K. Bakke, J. O'Loughlin, G. Sasse and G. Toal, A new survey of the Ukraine-Russia conflict finds deeply divided views in the contested Donbas region, *The Washington Post*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/12/new-survey-ukraine-russia-conflict-finds-deeply-divided-views-contested-donbas-region/>
- 17 E. Giuliano, The social bases of support for self-determination in East Ukraine, *Ethnopolitics*, 14(5), pp.513–522
- 18 F. Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018

International Alert

346 Clapham Road, London, SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800 **Fax** +44 (0)20 7627 6900

info@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org

Registered charity no. 327553

