

THE ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL WORK NEEDS AND PRIORITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

In the context of the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine, the research endeavors to unravel the multifaceted challenges faced by social work practitioners as they navigate the complexities of providing support during conflict. This research is motivated by a deep commitment to understanding the complex interplay between social dynamics and the evolving needs of individuals and communities affected by armed conflict. Drawing on a comprehensive review of existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and empirical data, the study explores the complex dynamics of social work within the challenging landscape of armed conflict. Highlighting the ethical considerations inherent in such contexts, the research examines the evolving needs of conflict-affected individuals and outlines priorities for effective intervention. This study aims to make significant contributions to informing and improving social work practice in the specific context of war in Ukraine. In doing so, the research aims not only to respond to the immediate needs of those affected, but also to contribute to a broader discourse on effective humanitarian interventions and the role of social work in conflict zones.

Keywords: Needs assessment, social services, intervention strategies, social work, conflict in Ukraine, community well-being.

Résumé

Dans le contexte du conflit armé en cours en l'Ukraine, la recherche s'efforce de démêler les défis à multiples facettes auxquels sont confrontés les praticiens du travail social lorsqu'ils naviguent dans les complexités de la fourniture d'un soutien pendant un conflit. Cette recherche est motivée par un engagement profond à comprendre l'interaction complexe entre la dynamique sociale et les besoins changeants des individus et des communautés touchés par le conflit armé. S'appuyant sur un examen approfondi de la littérature existante, des cadres théoriques et des données empiriques, l'étude explore la dynamique complexe de l'assistance sociale dans le contexte difficile des conflits armés. Soulignant les considérations éthiques inhérentes à de tels contextes, la recherche examine l'évolution des besoins des personnes touchées par les conflits et définit les priorités d'une intervention efficace. Cette étude vise à contribuer de manière significative à l'information et à l'amélioration de la pratique du travail social dans le contexte spécifique de la guerre en Ukraine. Ce faisant, la recherche vise non seulement à répondre aux besoins immédiats

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des personnes touchées, mais aussi à contribuer à un discours plus large sur les interventions humanitaires efficaces et le rôle du travail social dans les zones de conflit.

Mots clés : évaluation des besoins, services sociaux, stratégies d'intervention, assistance sociale, guerre en Ukraine, bien-être de la communauté.

Rezumat

În contextul conflictului armat în curs de desfășurare din Ucraina, cercetarea încearcă să descopere provocările cu multiple fațete cu care se confruntă practicienii din domeniul asistenței sociale atunci când navighează prin complexitatea furnizării de sprijin în mijlocul conflictului. Această cercetare este motivată de un angajament profund de a înțelege interacțiunea complexă dintre dinamica socială și nevoile în continuă evoluție ale persoanelor și comunităților afectate de conflictul armat. Bazându-se pe o analiză cuprinzătoare a literaturii existente, a cadrelor teoretice și a datelor empirice, studiul explorează dinamica complexă a asistenței sociale în cadrul peisajului provocator al conflictului armat. Subliniind considerațiile etice inerente în astfel de contexte, cercetarea examinează nevoile în evoluție ale indivizilor afectați de conflict și trasează prioritățile pentru o intervenție eficientă. Acest studiu își propune să aducă contribuții semnificative pentru informarea și îmbunătățirea practicilor de asistență socială în contextul specific al războiului din Ucraina. În acest fel, cercetarea urmărește nu numai să răspundă nevoilor imediate ale celor afectați, ci și să contribuie la un discurs mai larg privind intervențiile umanitare eficiente și rolul asistenței sociale în zonele de conflict.

Cuvinte-cheie: Evaluarea nevoilor, servicii sociale, strategii de intervenție, asistența socială, conflictul din Ucraina, bunăstarea comunității.

1. Introduction

In the wake of contemporary global challenges, the intersection of social work, conflict dynamics, and the imperatives of human well-being stands as a critical focal point. This study delves into the intricate landscape of social work, examining the nuanced dimensions of needs assessment and priority identification within the compelling context of armed conflict in Ukraine. Against the backdrop of geopolitical unrest and humanitarian crises, this scholarly exploration aims to unravel the complexities inherent in the provision of social services, shedding light on the multifaceted responsibilities and ethical considerations that confront social workers amid turbulent circumstances. Through a comprehensive examination, we endeavour to illuminate how social work endeavours to address the diverse and evolving needs of individuals and communities impacted by armed conflict, offering insights that contribute to the ongoing discourse on effective intervention and support in conflict-affected regions.

This scientific paper highlights the process of needs assessment and social work provision in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine. By understanding the priority needs of the affected population (refugees in Ukraine) and tailoring social work services, social workers can provide effective and appropriate support during this difficult period. As reported by UNHCR (2023), there are 5.9 million individual refugees from Ukraine distributed across Europe. Of these, 3.8 million

have crossed the border into Romania, and there are approximately 96,000 refugees from Ukraine who remain in Romania.

Save the Children International (2023), reports that more than 60% of Ukrainian children have been forced to abandon their homes, schools and communities. And 7.5 million children in Ukraine are at serious risk of physical harm, severe emotional distress and displacement. Of the nearly 18 million people in Ukraine in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, more than 4 million are children. The ongoing conflict is exacerbating children's needs for protection, mental health and psychological support, food, health care, education, clean water, sanitation and hygiene.

The theoretical approach of this study is based on studies by James Lind Alliance (2018), Rostad et al., (2017), Berg-Weger (2019), Denov and Shevell (2019), Seifert (2022), Vintila et al. (2023), Stenner and Taylor (2008). The studies of these authors, associated with the theme of needs and priorities in social work, play an important role in providing an overview of those formative experiences that underlie the foundation of effective social work practice.

In seminal work, Rostad et al., (2017) provide a comprehensive examination of assessment processes within the realm of child welfare. Their research not only emphasizes the critical importance of identifying the unique needs of vulnerable children and families but also highlights the necessity of recognizing and leveraging inherent strengths. Rostad et al., (2017) insights hold significant weight in discussions surrounding Evidence-based practices in child welfare, offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in assessing and addressing the multifaceted needs of this vulnerable population. This work serves as a cornerstone reference, providing invaluable contributions to the fields of research and policy, ultimately influencing the development of interventions that are informed, effective, and tailored to the distinctive needs and strengths of children and families in the child welfare system.

'Social work practice with war-affected children and families: the importance of family, culture, arts, and participatory approaches' authored by Denov and Shevell (2019), stands as a seminal contribution to the evolving discourse within the field of social work. Published at the intersection of social work and conflict studies, this work navigates the complexities of providing social services in environments marked by strife, unrest, and upheaval. Their comprehensive analysis encompasses the challenges and opportunities faced by social workers in conflict zones, shedding light on the complex intersections of political, social, and cultural factors that shape the practice of social work in such environments. Denov and Shevell (2019), work delves into the strategies, ethical considerations, and lessons learned from international experiences, providing an essential foundation for understanding the unique demands placed on social work practitioners in conflict-ridden settings. This scholarly exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of the potential impact of social work interventions in the context of conflict, making it a pertinent reference for academics, practitioners, and

policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of social work responses in regions grappling with the aftermath of conflict.

In the illuminating article, Vintila et al. (2023) provides valuable perspectives on navigating the psychosocial challenges faced by communities impacted by war. Their insights delve into the specific context of the Ukraine Conflict, offering nuanced understanding and practical strategies for addressing the psychosocial needs of affected populations. This authoritative source contributes essential knowledge to the discourse on social work priorities and needs in the context of conflict, providing a foundation for practitioners and policymakers seeking effective interventions in Ukraine and beyond. The research underscores the significance of incorporating psychosocial considerations into social work practices during periods of armed conflict, emphasizing the broader implications for the well-being and resilience of war-affected communities.

Expanding on the previous point, the article by Stenner and Taylor (2008) provide a comprehensive examination of the ethical challenges faced by social work practitioners in the midst of armed conflicts. One notable sentence from the article is: 'We raise the idea that we have entered an epoch in which the `psycho' resonates as surely as the `social' alongside `welfare', and this perspective suggests a necessity to reevaluate the knowledge approaches within social and psychological disciplines, especially in response to evolving welfare configurations.'

The article by Seifert (2022) highlights a crucial focus on the evolving role of social assistance in the context of globalised armed conflict. This evolution is characterised by changes in social work, impacting on post-conflict social policy and social work practices globally. The complexity of social work and education in the context of grassroots initiatives during post-conflict neoliberal reconstruction highlights the complex nature of their involvement. In addition, it highlights the importance of social work involvement in international politics and navigating the complexities of violent conflict for effective post-conflict interventions. These dynamics pose substantial theoretical, policy and practical challenges, requiring deliberate analysis and strategic responses within the social work field.

As the literature converges on the importance of community-based interventions, a gap becomes apparent in the discussion regarding the sustainability and scalability of these approaches in long-term conflict contexts. While the immediate impact of such interventions is evident in fostering community resilience, there remains a dearth of research exploring the enduring effects and the potential challenges associated with sustaining these initiatives over an extended period. This raises critical questions about the long-term viability of community-based models in addressing evolving needs and dynamics within conflict-affected populations. The need for a more nuanced exploration of the durability of community-based interventions in protracted conflicts becomes particularly pertinent in crafting comprehensive strategies that extend beyond immediate relief efforts to foster enduring positive change.

Moreover, the existing literature, encompassing the diverse insights of various authors, underscores the imperative for ongoing interdisciplinary collaboration in the field of social work during armed conflicts. The intersectionality of challenges necessitates a cohesive approach that integrates perspectives from sociology, psychology, public health, and international relations. Building on the lessons learned from different conflicts, it becomes evident that a holistic and collaborative framework is essential for navigating the complex web of psychosocial, ethical, and practical considerations inherent in providing effective social services during and after armed conflicts.

2. Research methods

The techniques used in data collection were: documentary analysis and focus group and the data were collected in May-June 2023. If the documentary analysis concerned the activity of NGOs specialized in refugee assistance, the focus groups were composed of Ukrainian refugees arrived in Iasi, Romania. The respective focus groups were organized in the same period of May June 2023.

I. Formation of Focus Groups

Three separate focus groups were strategically formed, each comprising a diverse cohort of refugees directly affected by the armed conflict. The aim was to capture a comprehensive range of experiences, ensuring a rich and varied data set for analysis. Group composition considered factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic background, and duration of displacement to ensure a representative sample.

II. Description

The research design incorporated three distinct focus groups to gather nuanced insights and perspectives. The research sample consisted of adolescents aged 11 to 18 and participants aged 37 to 55. Participants were selected based on their relevance to the topic and engaged in open conversations to explore and express their views on the most pressing needs and priorities in social care. This method allowed for a dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the field. The data collected from these focus group discussions is analysed to inform and improve the development of effective strategies and interventions in social work practice.

3. Results and discussion

The outcomes of the focus group analysis revealed a spectrum of needs among the refugee population, spanning from immediate necessities such as shelter and healthcare to legal protection and educational opportunities. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by refugees in the context of armed conflict in Ukraine, offering valuable insights for

both academic scholars and practical interventions in the realm of social work and humanitarian aid.

Ukrainian refugees in Romania need support and assistance in several key areas to start a new life in a foreign country. By analysing the answers of the subjects regarding the needs and priorities in social work we obtained these results.

The main areas of need for Ukrainian refugees

These needs may include the following:

1. ***Healthcare*** - many refugees in Ukraine may be traumatized by the events that led to their fleeing the country. Medical and psychological assistance is essential to help them overcome trauma and integrate into the host society.
2. ***Housing*** - Ukrainian refugees need a safe and stable home to start integrating into Romanian society. They often do not have the money to pay rent, so they need support from the authorities and non-governmental organizations to find suitable housing.
3. ***Education*** - Ukrainian refugees need access to education to learn Romanian, integrate into the community - and have a chance at a better future. Educational institutions and non-governmental organizations can provide resources and support to help refugees learn and develop.
4. ***Work opportunities*** - Ukrainian refugees need work opportunities to provide an income and support their families. The government and non-governmental organizations must provide support in finding a job and facilitate access to vocational training programs.
5. ***Legal protection*** - Ukrainian refugees may need legal protection to defend themselves against the authorities or to protect their rights. They need access to lawyers and relevant legal information to defend their interests.
6. ***Promotion of cultural diversity*** - The integration of Ukrainians in Romania can be improved by promoting cultural diversity and tolerance of cultural and ethnic differences. It is important to organize cultural and educational events that encourage interaction between Ukrainians and Romanians and to value their contribution to Romanian culture and economy.

Detailed examples for each area

Table 1: Targets followed by action areas

Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The initial medical assessment; • Primary health care; • Mental health services; • Trauma and injury care; • Reproductive health care; • Vaccinations and prevention of infectious diseases; • Access to medicines and medical equipment; • Translation and interpretation for medical services.
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Housing and basic needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing and safety; • Nutritious and adequate food; • Personal hygiene items; • Sanitation services; • Clothing and footwear; • Communication and information.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to education; • Language learning programme; • Adaptation to the education system; • Emotional and social support; • Skills reassessment and recognition programme; • Non-formal education and personal development programs.
Work opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to the labour market; • Recognition of skills and qualifications; • Job search support; • Entrepreneurship and self-employment initiatives; • Protection against exploitation and precarious work; • Socio-professional integration
Legal protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to legal information; • Free legal assistance; • Fair and transparent asylum procedures; • Protection of refugee minors • Legal integration and the right to work
Promotion of cultural diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural respect and appreciation; • Access to cultural expressions; • Intercultural education; • Community participation and involvement; • Protection and promotion of cultural heritage.

Discussions with focus group participants show that children's basic needs (as identified: housing, food and safety) are largely ensured. We can consider that there has been a shift from meeting basic needs to needs related to the continuation of the educational process, medical services (not emergency medical services, but medical care services for chronic conditions or dental visits), or the need for translators to facilitate access to different services.

By employing focus groups as a research method, this study aimed to amplify the voices of refugees, ensuring their perspectives are central to the discourse surrounding their needs and priorities. The results contribute to a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by this vulnerable population, guiding future endeavours in social work and humanitarian assistance.

4. Priorities in Social Work

Following the study, we concluded that these are the priorities in social assistance that reflect the immediate needs of the conflict-affected population and

aim both to ensure immediate survival and well-being and long-term reconstruction and stabilization:

- a) Safety and security of the population
- b) Protection of children and vulnerable groups
- c) Healthcare and health services
- d) Reintegration and rehabilitation

James Lind Alliance (2018) highlight the crucial role of social workers in providing essential services to individuals, families, and communities. Their primary objective is to assist people in finding effective solutions to both social and practical challenges, ensuring access to appropriate care and support. Social workers actively work towards safeguarding individuals from harm or neglect, advocating for their human rights, and facilitating opportunities for them to live their desired lives to the fullest extent possible. Those specializing in adult care operate across diverse organizations and settings, such as local authorities, hospitals, private residences, and communities. Their expertise is applied to address a wide spectrum of health and care needs, encompassing mental health, physical and learning disabilities, as well as catering to the unique requirements of older individuals and those in end-of-life care.

In the insightful work 'Social Work, Armed Conflict and Postwar Reconstruction' by Seifert (2022) the author provide a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the realm of social work within conflict zones. Grounded in theoretical perspectives and enriched with practical insights, the book delves into the complexities of delivering social services amidst the turmoil of war. The authors navigate the intricate landscape of humanitarian efforts, offering a nuanced understanding of how social work can effectively address the unique needs and priorities that emerge in such contexts. Drawing on global experiences, the book contributes valuable perspectives that may offer resonance and guidance in understanding and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced in the specific context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

'In a time of war, professional social work expands the areas, methods and forms of work, which, on the one hand, are based on many years of experience, including international experience, and the other hand, the phenomenon of social work is formed based on moral duty, mutual support, and commitment of each citizen in combination with the professional activities of social work professionals' as remarked by Kravchenko (2022). Also, she revealed that community-based social work during wartime operated on four distinct levels: social work within local government, social work within the territorial community, social work within social institutions, and social work involving community residents.

In social work, effective prioritization is the compass that guides practitioners to navigate the complex terrain of human needs, ensuring that the most vulnerable are attended to with empathy, equity, and unwavering commitment.

In the context of prioritizing social work, Berg-Weger (2019) emphasize the importance of recognizing and leveraging individual and community strengths. Their insights align with the concept of a strengths-based perspective, encouraging practitioners to focus on the assets and capabilities of individuals and communities rather than solely on deficits. Berg-Weger (2019) work is particularly relevant when discussing the ethical implications of prioritization in social work interventions. Their insights can inform discussions on how practitioners grapple with the ethical complexities inherent in determining priorities, ensuring that interventions align with professional values and ethical standards.

5. Conclusion

The qualitative research highlighted first of all the needs of the refugees and to what extent the civil society represented by NGOs managed to cope with this avalanche of needs. On the other hand, we identified the need for organization from an organizational perspective of all efforts directed towards refugees. We have also observed situations with refugees supported through programs that overlapped, so the consumption of resources doubled.

Continuous needs assessment and monitoring of the effectiveness of social assistance interventions are essential to adapt and adjust strategies and programs to the changing situation and needs of the population. This flexible and responsive approach ensures that social workers can respond efficiently and effectively to the complex and diverse needs of the war-affected population.

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