

CITIZENS FOR CITIZENS

Setting up your own relief action in response to the war in Ukraine? 5 questions to consider

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Collecting goods to send to people in Ukraine or neighbouring countries, protesting against the war or acting as a host family for refugees: in recent weeks, thousands of citizens have taken action in order to support their fellow citizens in response to the war in Ukraine.

Maybe you are one of these front-runners. Or maybe you are considering setting up a relief action as well. How do you make sure that the time (and sometimes the money) you invest has the best possible effect? Based on 5 questions, we share the lessons we learned from our research into small-scale, voluntary development organizations. We hope this may help you further.



What type of help is really needed?

Only by engaging in dialogue with the (intended) recipients and organisations already working on the ground will you get a good understanding of the situation: is your help needed and what kind of help would be appropriate? What you consider a problem is not always experienced as such by the people affected by it. In addition, not every solution you think of might be appropriate or effective.

For example, it might be more effective and efficient to organize a fundraiser and donate money to a trusted charity than to collect goods. Well-intentioned help that has not been set up in consultation with the recipients can be disruptive. Hence, you should always include recipients in the design and implementation of your initiative. And, keep up the dialogue with them: needs may change over time and problems may solve themselves. Due to the current circumstances, direct dialogue with recipients may seem impossible. Yet, it does not mean that contact with those close to them is impossible.



Will you be teaming up with other organizations?

Initiatives are often set up in isolation from one another for various reasons. Maybe you do not know who else is providing support or maybe you feel like there is simply no time to align your actions with those of others. Some people also prefer to work alone because they like to keep control and ownership over their initiative. Working with others is then seen as threatening or even delaying the action. Yet, teaming up with other (existing) organizations is an important precondition to provide targeted support. Several organizations have already been active in Ukraine for a long time and therefore have experience working in the context. These organizations might be able to provide you with valuable advice on what is really needed. They are also likely to have a good overview of who else is working in the area. It's only by working together that you will manage to coordinate your help and provide help in the best possible way. You can find an overview of European organizations working in Ukraine and neighbouring countries [here](#).



Do you have an idea of the duration and the type of action you will be providing?

The implications of the war are likely to be long-lasting and people might need continued support. From the very moment you start offering help, you create expectations. People may assume that you will be offering the same support for a longer period of time. Therefore, it is important to be explicit about how long you expect to provide help, as well as about the type of help you have in mind. And if this is not yet clear, make sure to let people know that as well. Be realistic as to the commitments you make. Today you still may have a lot of time and can rely on a large group of enthusiastic volunteers but your commitment might decrease over time. You want to give your recipients the opportunity to look - in time - for any alternative help.



Do you know when you are going to quit?

All too often, the initiators spend all their time and energy in the day-to-day business of their initiative, dealing with questions such as: do we still have enough volunteers, does everyone know what is exactly expected from them, is everything going as planned? Therefore, thinking about quitting is not that obvious. In addition, your initiative has probably been enthusiastically received by family, friends, and strangers. You don't want to disappoint people, especially those counting on your support. Hence, quitting is often easier said than done. Still, it is good to think about this in time and to ask yourself: when may the support provided no longer be relevant, if other parties might be more appropriate to proceed with the help and when do you expect that you will no longer be able to do the job all by yourself? This is the only way allowing you to work towards a good completion of your action, to organize any transfer and to properly and timely communicate on this with the people relying on your support, any other volunteers and anyone else who is involved in this.



Do you take your time?

This is a fast-moving situation and initiators of relief actions are often strongly motivated to help as many people as possible and in the shortest possible time. That's exactly why there is often (very) little time between you confronting a problem, coming up with a solution and offering that solution. Moreover, when the initial results of your initiative become visible, the desire to continue and perhaps expand your action becomes stronger. Far too often, there is little time to sit and reflect on everything you have been doing. And reflection is just what it takes to stay sharp and focused on the help you are offering: is your help still needed, does your action require any adjustments, can you (still) meet expectations? So, occasionally, allow yourself to step out of the day-to-day issues, in the knowledge that, at any given moment, standing still may be necessary to move forward...

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