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Educational and Socio-Psychological Needs of Internally Displaced Children in Ukraine

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Abstract

In 2014 the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine forced thousands of people to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. The number of officially registered internally displaced persons (IDPs) has exceeded 1.76 million. More than 300 thousand of them are children. The aim of the paper is to present the results of sociological research “Study of socio-psychological needs of school-age children, displaced from the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone (ATO)”. Quantitative and qualitative research methods, the survey of parents and teachers who work with IDP children have been applied. Results show IDP children do not have specific needs the satisfaction of which would require a separate intervention. On the contrary, there is a need for maximum integration in the social environment of the host community. The research was conducted within the framework of the project “Integration Through Dialogue”, 2015–2017, with the support of the European Commission.

Keywords: *internally displaced person (IDP), IDP children, educational needs, socio-psychological needs of IDP children, communication and rejecting problems, adaptation and integration in host community*

Introduction

An alarming number of people worldwide have had to abandon their homes and livelihoods in the face of civil conflict, natural or economic disasters, or other threats. As they do not cross an international border, they are considered internally

displaced persons (IDPs) and not refugees (Hines & Balletto, 2002, p. 9). In 2014, Ukraine was included in the list of ongoing armed conflicts. For the first time in modern history, Ukraine faced the war problems, such as death, destruction, violence, and internal migration. More than three years into the conflict, with more than 1.7 million people being officially registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Donbas and Crimea, those directly affected and host communities are facing a multitude of complex and interrelated challenges. According to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, IDPs are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border (UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, p.6). People who have been forced into another socio-cultural space feel confused and frightened. The experience of limiting their social, psychological, communicative, and other capabilities will be able to become an insurmountable psychological barrier to successful integration into the new social environment. The influx of IDPs into communities across Ukraine has been a strain on local budgets as well as on the local social infrastructure. This causes numerous problems, which IDPs and host communities now have to overcome jointly. Different perceptions generated by the government’s response to the specific needs of IDPs represent another source of possible tension among conflict-affected populations in terms of unequal access to civil and political rights as well as socio-economic opportunities and create barriers hampering future integration (Conflict-related Displacement in Ukraine: Increased Vulnerabilities of Affected Populations and Triggers of Tension within Communities, 2016, p. 6).

The most vulnerable IDP group of this integration process is the group of teenagers, due to its specific age-characteristics. Until now, there has been no comprehensive study of the peculiarities of their socio-psychological adaptation, actual educational needs and socio-cultural expectations of their families. A major dilemma in situations of displacement is that a lot of the institutions (governmental, non-governmental, and international) pay great attention to humanitarian assistance – food aid, housing, medical care, employment – but not to the socio-cultural indicators for teenagers, which might help them in the integration process.

The aim of the paper is to present the results of sociological research “Study of socio-psychological needs of school-age children, displaced from the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone (ATO)” and to provide recommendations to professionals who

work with IDP children, how to optimize the processes of creating an adaptive environment for IDP children in the host community.

Research Methodology

This research is based on the findings of focus group discussions with adults, parents and professionals who work with IDP children (qualitative methods) and executing a survey of school-age children (quantitative methods). In designing a survey of children, it was decided to organize it at schools. The sample was based on clusters covering different regions of the country. Focus group discussions and a survey of school-age children were conducted between March and June 2016 in six regions across Ukraine: Kyiv, Brovary, Lviv, Odessa, Severodonetsk, and Nova Kahovka. The choice of the territory was due to the need to obtain the data on the IDPs' social adaptation in different types of socio-cultural environment and regions of Ukraine.

The methodology for the focus groups and the questionnaire for school-age children were developed by Zoya Garkavenko, Olena Karagodina and Anna Shaposhnikova.

The questionnaire consists of three parts: instructive, basic and passport. The first part contains brief information on the research group, the purpose and objectives of the study and instructions for respondents. The basic part includes three blocks of questions. These blocks are aimed at identifying the features and level of educational satisfaction (Block A), at socio-psychological (Block B) and socio-cultural (Block C) needs. It also detects indirect maladaptation manifestations of the target group.

The passport section is placed at the end of the questionnaire and contains 6 questions about the respondent and his/her family. The passport part includes the question-filters of collective belonging to a group of IDPs (Garkavenko, Z., Karagodina O., Kendzor, P., Kolesnyk, L. & Shaposhnikova, A., 2016, pp.38–50).

In total, 708 people (605 children and 103 adults) participated in the study.

In the end, a total of 491 questionnaires were answered by children at school, among them 287 (58.5%) were internally displaced persons, and 192 (39.1%) were the control group, were sent to the research team. 12 respondents (2.4%) did not answer this questionnaire.

The group of respondents included 11 – to 18-year-old children, from 6th–11th grades. The average age of the respondents was 14.7 years.

58 professionals 45 parents took part in the focus group discussions.

The majority of the parent-respondents (42, or 93.3%) moved from the ATO zone (Donetsk, Donetsk and Luhansk regions), three of them (6.7%) from Crimea.

The group of professionals included 47 teachers (81.1%), 1 (1.7%) methodologist of the Department of Education, 5 (8.6%) school psychologists and 5 (8.6%) social pedagogues. Among the respondents, there were 2 school principals. In all focus groups, the participants represented a wide range of subject specializations (Ukrainian and Foreign Languages, Mathematics, Computer Science, History, Physical Education, Labor Studies, Music and Art). A significant proportion of the respondents (23 persons – 42.6%) performed the duties of class manager. With regards to pedagogical experience, the teachers were distributed as follows: up to 5 years – 8 persons (13.8%), 5–10 years – 10 persons (17.2%), over 10 years – 40 persons (69.0%).

Research Results and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to identify the features of socio-psychological adaptation and development of the target group. In particular, the aim was to identify real educational, socio-psychological and socio-cultural needs of beneficiaries and give recommendations to professionals and parents of how to improve the situation of integration in the host communities.

This study is based on the following assumptions:

1. The needs of school-age children are not fully satisfied with the available types of educational activity.
2. The satisfaction level of these needs depends on various factors (lack of access to resources, some problems with adults and peers, lack of psychological support, lack of control over their behavior and emotions, etc.)
3. Children of IDP families have a different structure of educational, socio-psychological and socio-cultural needs from their peers who permanently live outside the military conflict.
4. Children of IDP families more often face communication and rejection problems in their environments than their peers in host communities.
5. IDP children rely on other sources of support in a state of psychological discomfort than their peers who permanently live outside the military conflict.

Comparing the results of the quantitative and qualitative surveys, we partially confirmed the main hypotheses of the research. Thus, the first assumption regarding the satisfaction level of the educational, socio-psychological, socio-cultural needs of IDP children is only partially confirmed. This is due to the influence

of several factors. In fact, all educational institutions (in the opinion of teachers and parents) provide the best possible conditions for the satisfaction of students' basic educational needs. It was evidenced by the discussion in the focus group interview with representatives from all the regions of the survey. In this case, we are talking about the general possibilities of educational institutions to provide high-quality educational services. There are several indicators in the educational needs structure, determined by the survey of the students, which turned out to be the least satisfied. They are: "help in defining interests, life plans, and the choice of profession", "help in the identification and development of abilities", "skills to use the acquired knowledge to solve life problems", and "the development of life skills and creative abilities". Interestingly, this result is the same for both the host community children and the IDP children.

In relation to the foregoing observations, we can assume that the problem of the partial satisfaction of the students' educational needs refers to the general organization of the educational process in the education system. It is not an exception and it is not due to regional peculiarities or certain events that happen. In support of this assumption, most respondents said they had abilities that could not be disclosed or implemented in the educational institutions' conditions. Current curriculum and programs do not meet the modern requirement of preparing a child for a successful life under uncertainty conditions and quickly changeable situations. Therefore, we cannot resolve this problem at the local level. A partial solution is possible by introducing additional training programs into the educational process and after-school work. The aims of these programs should be devoted to the life and communication skills development, interaction, professional orientation, etc.

With reference to the second assumption, various factors determine the level of IDP children's needs and their satisfaction. It was almost completely confirmed. First of all, it is revealed through the influence of external factors: the possibility of providing educational services at the high level, social environment and social support availability, the psychological climate in educational groups, the presence of "significant adult", etc. The influence of the first (the availability of opportunities) has already been considered above.

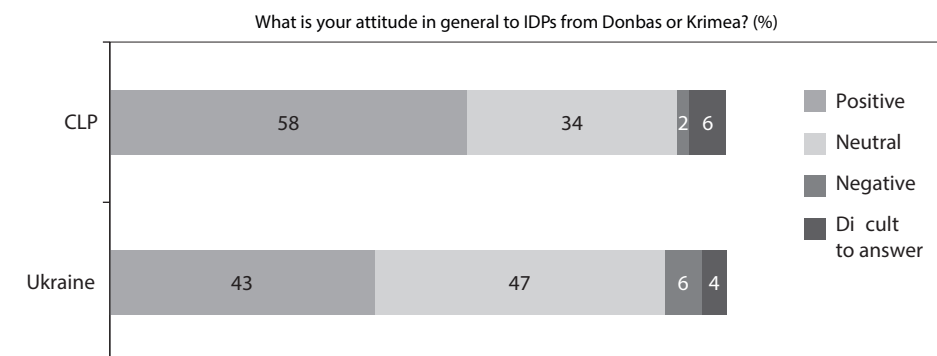
The analysis of the results and comparison of the children's and adults' vision has revealed several regularities.

In the process of the research, we found out that the length of a child's adaptation to the new sociocultural conditions depends both on personal factors (gender, age, temperament), and external factors (new lifestyle, the attitude of the local population, the social status of parents). For example, according to the research of the Kiev International Institute of Sociology, almost all respondents have positive

or neutral attitudes towards IDPs from Donbas and Crimea. In the general population sample, 43% reported a positive attitude and approximately 47% a neutral attitude (comprising 90%). Only 6% expressed a negative attitude, and 4% were undecided. In the cities with the largest population of IDPs (CLP), the attitudes were even positive: 58% of the people perceived IDPs positively, 34% neutrally, 2% negatively, and 6% were undecided.

The highest percentage of those who expressed a positive attitude to IDPs is found in the East, Center and South of CLP (63%, 63% and 57% respectively). The regions in Western Ukraine have the lowest percentage of people who expressed positive attitudes to IDPs (35%) (Ukrainians' Attitudes Towards Internally Displaced Persons from Donbas and Crimea, 2016, p. 9).

Figure 1. Attitudes of local population to IDPs (% in Ukraine and CLP)



In particular, if we speak about personal factors, we note that junior students adapt to new conditions faster than senior students do, and adolescent girls integrate into new environments more quickly than adolescent boys do.

It is important to know IDP children's needs and values, which are the basis of their lifestyles. They play the key role in the adaptation process and help to better understand the individual and psychological characteristics of students in the process of integration. Children from IDP families are less dependent on the school environment, more on their parents' position and the atmosphere in the family (choice of support sources, place of comfortable stay, communication needs, etc.). The most likely reason for such a situation is the fact that in families where immediate prospects are not identified (staying at the temporary place or return home), children are more likely to face future problems (profession choice, education at universities, etc.). This fact was confirmed during the focus group

interview. In an extreme situation and stress, which causes the uncertainty of the future, families' separation, low-income for families, parents and children usually solidarize, get closer. Sometimes such families artificially isolate themselves from the environment and have fewer contacts. Quite often these families need comprehensive social and psychological assistance aimed at restoring, increasing the ability to solve current problems.

IDP children feel the influence of the general political events in the country more acutely. This is not only about the changes of the place of residence and the possibilities of the family, but also the change of their own interests and life plans, their requirements and their attitudes to the country in which they live. In fact, it can be argued that IDP children "grow up faster" than their peers from peaceful regions. Educational institutions should take these changes into account when they build their relationships with them. But, as the World Food Programme report (2000a) shows, on the one hand, IDPs do have special needs, on the other, there is a growing consensus that IDPs should not be singled out for special treatment. Our research confirms this statement. People and especially children do not wish to be classified as IDPs. They prefer to give up help, just not to stand out from the new environment. Therefore, organizing formal and non-formal education, we should ensure the forms of IDP children's participation "not for them, but with them". Access to partnerships adds confidence and energy to the development of the child's identity. Another important feature that can be considered regular is the lack of favorable school environments. The survey results indicate uneven expectations and intentions of the respondents regarding the level of trust and assistance in school teams. 91% of the respondents are ready to help. But the assessment of classmates' readiness to help (70%) is an indicator of a not-so-favorable socio-psychological situation. At the same time, we have not found a differences in the assessments of the IDP children and the general group of respondents. It only confirms the existence of the problem.

The assumption of the study that children of IDP families have a different structure of educational, socio-psychological and socio-cultural needs from their peers who permanently live outside the military conflict is almost refuted.

According to the comparative results, the structures of needs development of the IDP children group and control group (all the respondents) are almost identical. This is evidenced by the results of the FG interviews. Table 1 presents the comparison of the respondents' answers to the question "What of the above does the school give you?"

Table 1. Comparison of the structure of respondents' educational needs which are satisfied at school

Answer Options	All respondents	IDP children	CG
Reliable knowledge of the subjects	2	2	3
Imagination about the world and human relationships	6	6	6
Assistance in abilities identifying and developing	8	7	7
Communication experience with people	4	4	5
Ability to acquire knowledge to solve life problems	9	9	8
Ability to study independently	3	3	2
Help in defining interests, life plans, career choices	7	8	9
Ability to behave correctly (rules of conduct)	1	1	1
Command of foreign languages	5	5	4
Other	10	10	10

There is similarity in the assessment of the respondents' expectations of school study.

Table 2. Comparison of the structure of respondents' educational needs which are expected from school

Answer Options	All respondents	IDP children	CG
Development of mental abilities	4	4	3
Physical development	3	3	4
Development of creative abilities	2	2	2
Life skills development	1	1	1

Thus, it can be assumed that the main hypotheses of the study were only partially confirmed. The IDP children do not have specific (different from the general group) needs. According to both the parents and teachers, this group, on the contrary, needs to minimize the emphasis on the IDP status. The nature of their adaptation depends on the social status of their parents, the level of Ukrainian (as a rule, most children speak Russian), and the quality of school education. In this context, we recommend providing indirect assistance to IDP children, combine them with other students. All the educational institutions which work with IDP children should use active learning tools in the study process. Particular attention

should be paid to professional career choice, projects aimed at family psycho-education (parents and other family members), training of team building in the new educational environment, sports, business and research games involving all students in activities.

It is important that all events take place with families, children's groups and collectives are aimed at the solidarity, integration and implemented on the principle "Together, not for them".

Conclusions

In the study, 708 participants (605 children and 103 adults) were interviewed in six regions of Ukraine. In general, we can report an average-high level of satisfaction with the educational, socio-psychological, socio-cultural needs of IDP children.

We have identified a number of factors that hinder the adaptation and integration processes of IDP children:

- limiting of families' opportunities (first of all, financial) for additional education and children development;
- imperfections in the curriculum and school programs, which do not ensure full life skills development and students' creative abilities development;
- insufficient level of psychological and pedagogical competence of individual educators, psychologists, parents.

On the other hand, there are problems of individual psychological, socio-psychological nature:

- individual peculiarities of some children's adaptation;
- a complexity of the transitional age (problems with self-regulation, motivation, etc.);
- low level of social, communicative competence of children (teenagers) from small towns and villages;
- lack of social support of the school environment;
- in some cases, "stigmatization" of this category of children through the allocation of individual measures that cause forced isolation.

We did not find any fundamental difference between the IDP children and the general group in the needs structure and the level of their satisfaction. In our opinion, the lack of fundamental differences in the IDP children needs structure is caused by the general situation in the country.

A lot of Ukrainian families are living under the pressure of the circumstances of the "uncertainty of life and the future", "difficulties of ensuring the current existence", "difficulties in raising adolescents", etc. We live in a VUCA world – the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of general conditions and situations (Stiehm, Judith Hicks and Nicholas W. Townsend, 2002, p.6). These families can be classified as ones facing "difficult living conditions". Therefore, it is important to combine the efforts of all participants in the educational process in order to stabilize and harmonize the children's development and optimize the processes of their socialization.

Resources of the adaptation and integration process optimization of IDP children are:

- a fairly high level of «adulthood» (maturity) of children from IDP families, which can serve as the basis for the life values development and capability of self-fulfillment;
- readiness of the majority of educational workers who work with IDP children to increase their professional, psychological and pedagogical skills;
- readiness of the educational authorities for cooperation in the direction of optimization and harmonization of educational processes.

Taking into account the results of the study, we believe that further research should be conducted on the impact of IDP children on the educational environment of host communities.

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