

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the summer of 2021, a humanitarian crisis emerged at the Polish-Belarusian border, marked by a sharp increase in the number of people on the move attempting to cross the border in search of protection in Poland from countries such as Syria, Eritrea and Iraq. In early 2022, another crisis unfolded at the Polish-Ukrainian border, as millions fled the war in Ukraine, seeking protection in Poland and in other countries.

This report looks at how local organisations and aid workers (including volunteer groups, grassroots organisations, activist groups, and individual citizens) organised the provision of aid differently depending on what border they operated at. The research looked at the extent to which the two responses differed during the period between 2021 and 2024, investigating the potential implications for the quality and credibility of humanitarian responses in different contexts, but in the same country.

Regardless of the differences, both responses highlight the centrality of the work of local organisations and informal initiatives in responding quickly and with agility to the needs of people on the move. At the Polish-Belarusian border, they operated under significant legal and logistical obstacles. The introduction of a territorial ban at this border, coupled with hostility from authorities and criminalisation of humanitarian aid, forced aid workers to work in secrecy. International organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies, and the media were denied access and mandate to operate at this border and did not seek cooperation with local organisations because of the perceived reputational and operational risks. This response mostly received material and monetary support from public donations, foundations, and charities, with very limited help from international organisations.

In contrast, the assistance at the Polish-Ukrainian border was met with broad solidarity by a wide range of actors, including national and local governments, local and international organisations, the private sector. The Polish government organised systems to ensure legal stay, access to employment, health care, education, and other social welfare. Local governments and municipalities coordinated and provided humanitarian aid at the local level, while local organisations and volunteer groups provided support based on their previous expertise, including education, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), support to vulnerable groups, and transportation. The response to the Ukrainian crisis is considered a positive example of localisation in practice from a funding perspective, as International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGOs) relied heavily on the work of local organisations.

By looking at both responses, the research also poses crucial questions regarding the ability of international organisations to uphold humanitarian principles in all crises, even when access and mandate are denied. The duplicity of the Polish situation interrogates the role of international organisations in the current and restrictive asylum European Union (EU) regime by describing the challenges in negotiating access to certain populations, while trying to maintain their role and presence in a country. In Poland, international organisations also struggled to adapt to the specificity of the Ukrainian crisis and had to recalibrate the standard approach for humanitarian crises, as it was not fit for purpose.

The research looked at the motivations of individuals to take part in this work, as understanding reasons for participating in relief efforts reveal interesting aspects of the response itself. The initial motivations are often related to a strong sense of injustice and humanitarian imperative, which in turn lead to burnout and exhaustion after a long period of engagement in the crisis. At the Belarusian border, burnout was exacerbated by the risks of criminalisation, fear of violence and intimidation.

While at the Ukrainian border there are no known cases of criminalisation of solidarity, at the border with Belarus criminalisation and violence are described as an inevitable part of this assistance. Aid workers have resorted to covert tactics to deliver life-saving aid, but harassment and criminalisation are a daily occurrence. Five individuals currently face up to five years in prison for providing life-saving aid. In addition, aid workers have reported persistent harassment by extreme right-wing and nationalist groups.

Although humanitarian needs remain high at both borders, the future of the humanitarian response in Poland is uncertain. The drastic reduction in funding, growing anti-migrant rhetoric, the criminalisation of solidarity and general fatigue have affected local actors' ability to deliver aid, pushing some to consider discontinuing activities.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

### International Organisations and UN Agencies:

1. Uphold humanitarian principles and save all lives.
2. Recognise the highly valuable knowledge and professionalism of local organisations even when their skills are learned outside the humanitarian sector.
3. Find innovative solutions to support local organisations involved in life-saving assistance in less visible or politically sensitive crises.

### International Donors:

4. Enhance the flexibility of humanitarian funding to address less visible emergencies within the same country or region, aligning with the principles of humanity and impartiality.

### Local Organisations:

5. Recognise resources, advantages and limitations during or in preparation for a crisis and communicate them clearly in partnerships and arrangements with stakeholders.

### State Actors:

6. Provide unified protection to refugees in line with the international standards and treaties.
7. Recognise the central role of civil society in humanitarian crises by including civil society organisations in decision-making processes on humanitarian responses.
8. Decriminalise the lifesaving humanitarian assistance and provide access to people in need.