On Mothers, Necessity and Invention..

When someone says the word ‘innovation’, what comes into your mind? Historically, it might have been the image of a man in the 1800s with a new-fangled invention or more recently, maybe someone sitting on bean bag chair in a start-up office? (Still probably a man though?) What probably doesn’t first come to mind is trying to urgently reach children and families in the middle of an active conflict. And yet, UNICEF’s recent experience in Ukraine suggests that humanitarian crises both necessitate innovation to enhance responsiveness; and can be critical in driving innovation forward.

While the human cost of this war has been well-covered, it is worth underlining the magnitude of these impacts. The United Nations estimates that within Ukraine there are 17.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and 7 million people have been displaced. The impacts on women and children have been disproportionate – at least two-thirds of children have been displaced, and 90% of refugees who fled the country were women and children.

As in other large crises, the scale and rapid onset of the Ukraine war required swift action. A key pillar of UNICEF’s humanitarian response within Ukraine has been the provision of cash transfers to households with children, in order to enable them to provide for their families’ needs with dignity and flexibility. In agreement with the Ministry of Social Policy, UNICEF’s Humanitarian Cash Transfer (HCT) Program focused on reaching families within Ukraine with young children and/or children with disabilities. For more background on the program, check out this socialprotection.org podcast.

Ukraine presented both opportunities and challenges in reaching vulnerable households. On the one hand, Ukraine’s population is highly digitally literate and many state systems are digitized. Humanitarian agencies, including UNICEF, were keen to leverage existing social assistance and data systems. In coordination with national and local authorities, humanitarian organizations expanded cash transfer coverage to reach newly vulnerable populations. This included direct delivery by humanitarian agencies due to a combination of the urgency of need and legal restrictions in sharing government data. Furthermore, humanitarian access to populations in many areas was limited at the beginning of the war; and as the war has continued, the borders -physical, digital and financial - of access have continued to shift. Data security and protection was also a considerable concern, given the cyber capabilities of the protagonists in the war.

In the middle of a major and developing crisis, UNICEF took a risk by building something new: introducing an online, self-registration form to apply for the HCT Program. UNICEF already had in place a web-based data management system known as HOPE, supported by USAID’s Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), which provides the tools to needed to manage high amounts of sensitive data during the implementation of Humanitarian Cash Transfers. However, prior to the Ukraine crisis, HOPE’s registration module was based on in-person registration or using existing household data from partners (e.g. government or NGOs). With the intention to both accelerate the speed of getting cash to households and reach those beyond the frontline who could not be accessed physically, UNICEF nimbly developed an online registration platform to allow self-registration which went live on 30 March.

Jumping to the “end” of this story, taking this risk enabled UNICEF to reach 584,870 children in 225,000 households in 2022 – a total of 1,026,746 people, with typical payments of approximately USD 900 per household. Women and children made up 83 percent of those reached. Via online registration, 13,000
applications were submitted on the first day, 145,000 in April, and 232,000 in May; between 30 March and September a total of 677,433 applications were received. The use of online registration was particularly critical to the geographical reach of the programme; by early May, UNICEF was making payments to households in all 25 oblasts of Ukraine. This included 8 oblasts where no other organization was reaching – those hardest to reach and in the middle of the conflict, e.g. Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk.

Far more powerful than the numbers though are the stories of Ukrainians participating in the programme, people like Yulia, Khrystyna and Vira and their families. Their stories underline the human cost of the war especially for women and children, and the transformational effects that cash transfers can enable in people’s lives. The stories of these mothers put in stark relief the ‘necessity’ driving our work and to whom we are accountable.

So when we look into this mirror, what are our reflections?

1. **Innovation and risk taking are critical in humanitarian contexts... but expect costs**

The nature of humanitarian contexts requires us to take weighted risks and to do things differently: standard solutions don’t always work and the ground is constantly shifting. Crises can be opportunities to enhance the delivery of humanitarian assistance by pushing innovation to find solutions to new problems or circumstances, and humanitarian agencies must embrace the digital revolution to harness its transformative potential. Risk management should not be about avoiding risks, but rather about making informed judgements about prospective costs and benefits. As individuals and as institutions we need to be prepared for these potential costs.

In the case of developing the online registration in Ukraine, the circumstances forced UNICEF to identify a different way to register households in an environment where in-person registration would have been difficult and severely limited our ability to reach some of the people most in need. This was also an opportunity to register people faster than in other responses, thanks to widespread digital connectivity in Ukraine. It took several iterations and a few sleepless nights to get the platform up and running. The first day the platform went live it crashed due to the overwhelming demand. In the end, delivering $ 150 million to 0.7 million individuals was a remarkable result. However, there have been real challenges and lessons learnt along the journey.

A number of factors facilitated this innovation and its speed. A critical one was that funding was immediately available to start development once the need was identified, thanks to the flexibility of USAID BHA support. Also key to achieving results was executive leadership support for risk taking, which underlined that taking risks was critical for the institution’s ability to innovate and effectively deliver and that learning is part of this process.

2. **Accountability and people-centered data! (easier said than done)**

As in all of UNICEF’s work, accountability to affected populations in humanitarian contexts is a key principle driving our humanitarian cash transfer response in Ukraine. This includes related principles such as data protection of personally identifiable information (PII), transparency, and timely response. Beginning online registration as quickly as possible was part of translating these principles into practice for example. Furthermore, UNICEF also leveraged Ukraine’s high penetration of digital tools and social
media to create both 1-way and 2-way programme communication channels. It established a helpline with partners which people could call to make inquiries and seek support, and used diverse channels to communicate with those who had registered, programme participants, and the public more generally – including social media and SMS notifications.

Ultimately this experience helped UNICEF better determine what accountability as a humanitarian agency means in practice: constantly finding the balance between speed of response, data accuracy, data protection, transparency, responsiveness to feedback. For example, in the first few days of opening the online registration form, there were many complaints on social media that it was taking too long to register, including because people were being timed out while trying to register. In an attempt to be responsive to this feedback, original restrictions for registration data were loosened. However, loosening these restrictions resulted in an enormous number of applications received with insufficient or incomplete information to assess/verify eligibility or to make payment (e.g. incorrect or missing bank information) and a large number of repeat applications. This made it more difficult to sift through the volume of applications to determine who was eligible and not a duplicate household, and complete prerequisite information. In response to these challenges, UNICEF made critical adjustments to the online registration in both May and June to tighten data quality and restrict registration only to eligible households. Maintaining these restrictions from the beginning probably would have meant shorter turnaround times for earlier applicants between registration and payment.

There has been strong public engagement with the HCT programme, including vocal expression of frustrations, which have pushed the programme and HOPE to improve delivery and communication. Although not always easy, this called on the UNICEF team to be open to this feedback and accept the need for ongoing learning and transparency on processes, as well as outcomes. Drawing from these lessons, UNICEF has brought together a set of approaches – the helpline, digital tools, and ongoing program operation adjustments – which enabled a high level of responsiveness to applicants and complaints. At the same time, the organization is working to identify ways in which HOPE can continue to strengthen accountability to affected populations – both on its own as a data management system, and as a tool for humanitarian cash delivery. One of the many innovations emerging from this experience is that HOPE, with BHA support, has begun development of multiple functions to better engage with the beneficiaries (or its “clients”), such as enabling people who have registered to check the status of their application and more broadly exploring ways in which programme participants can access their own data and information. This experience is also informing updates to the design of HOPE’s Grievance and Feedback functions. For other, less digitally connected contexts with lower literacy rates, we would also like to test modalities – for communication, registration, data access, etc. - that combine online and offline functions that enhance access, transparency and communication for all populations.

Parting thoughts

In writing this blog, we found ourselves thinking about the proverb, ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’. Its original meaning is certainly relevant – the way in which the acute needs and challenges of humanitarian contexts are drivers of program change, adaptation and innovation as we have to find new ways of doing things. But slightly shuffling the idea around, we also think about it from the accountability perspective. What does innovation look like that is not only driven by necessity, but that is accountable to people in need (or more progressively, about rights holders and their entitlements). How is it different, how does it change how we approach innovation? What does it really mean to put people – putting the
realities of mothers like Yulia, Khrystyna, and Vira - at the center of data, design and delivery? We don’t have all the answers to these questions, but we are going to keep asking them to ourselves and with the people to whom we are accountable.