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THE DIGITALIZATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN RESPONSE TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. The article examines the digitalization process of social services in response to the war in Ukraine. The research results prove that although the war in Ukraine is continuing, technologies positively influence the work of social providers and government / non-government organizations. Through mixed method study that incorporated qualitative analysis of the existing digital platforms that produce social services as well as an online-based quantitative study with NGO representatives and social workers (N=14) providing social services for IDPs and refugees, the authors support the argument that digitalization of social services promotes the social protection of IDPs and refugees. However, technology is a tool. Its outcomes depend on the needs it is expected to meet, the goals it is deployed to pursue, and the specific ways it is designed and implemented. The author's question of whether digitalization has not only the advantages of using digitalization in providing social services remains for discussion. Nevertheless, digitalization can pose severe risks for already vulnerable groups. The research explores the challenges and risks of the increasing digitalization of social services, such as a lack of interpersonal contact with clients, the inability to develop social work relationships, identify surface and deeper feelings, and the disability to convey accurate empathy, respect, and contact with clients.

Keywords: digitalization; social services; internally displaced people (IDPs); refugees; non-government organizations (NGOs); the war in Ukraine.

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INTRODUCTION

Digitalization is becoming integral to everyday life for many average people and specialists. However, it continues to be difficult for social researchers to find ways to examine how and in what ways digitalization influences the practice's social services, especially in crisis or war. Given the increasing prevalence of digital technologies, they have come to play a key role in the field of social work. The problem of access to social services in the local and host communities is particularly relevant for internally displaced people and refugees.

The concept of Digitalization in Social Support is not new. When we define digitalization, we mean a broad concept that includes all digital tools used in the relationship with the client (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023, pp. 45-46). Many researchers studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the developing social services, primary health care, rehabilitation, mental health, and psychosocial support of vulnerable groups (Truppa et al. (2023), Xiong et al. (2023), Lowe, C. (2022), Sandhu, K. (2021). The effects of digitization are felt across labor and social relations, marketing and sales, and technology dimensions (Almeida, F., 2020).

Another research (Javakhishvili et al., 2023, pp. 727-732) focuses on a study of immediate digital mental health interventions and psycho-trauma support via the digital platform Samopomich, which provided psychological counseling to victims of state repression. Javankhishvili et al. claim that such a strategy ensures access to safe, ethical, evidence-based, and confidential support amid any political crises or due to military actions followed by occupation, such as in Ukraine (Javakhishvili et al., 2023, pp. 727-732).

European scientists actively discuss the digitalization of social security as directly related to local government's activities. Schou and Pors (2019) note that since welfare provision is based on digital technologies, often in the form of "self-service" solutions, new demands are placed on citizens. Another article argues that local digital social welfare agencies simultaneously support existing lines of social stratification and reinforce them by creating new forms of digital inequalities (Schou & Pors, 2019).

The digitalization of social services in response to the war in Ukraine can have several benefits. It can improve aid distribution's efficiency and transparency, ensuring resources reach those in need more effectively. Digital tools can also help track and manage relief efforts, improving coordination among organizations and governments.

However, it is essential to ensure that digitalization does not exclude vulnerable populations who may not have access to technology. The problem of access is particularly relevant for refugees. They often depend on their mobile phones in many ways: to find their way to a safe region and take advantage of education, jobs, housing, and medical services upon arrival. Many refugees must stay in touch with friends and family left behind in their home countries (Preiß, 2019).

The Internet has also thrown up new dimensions of ethical decision-making for social researchers. For example, it is very tempting to use newsgroups, chatrooms, listservs, email discussion groups, and so on as interesting fodder for examining interaction or a focus of interest (Bryman,2012). If participants have not consented to use their postings this way, it could be argued that the principle of informed consent has been violated.

However, it could also be claimed that, in some cases, such postings are in the public domain, much like letters to newspapers, so seeking consent is unnecessary. Social workers perform these functions while recognizing "the central importance of human relationships" (NASW, 2008, p. 26). This principle suggests that social workers engage clients as partners to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the client's well-being. This value is reflected in another Code of Ethics principle: "Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner" (Hepworth, 2013).

The other issues are privacy and data security, which should also be a top priority to protect sensitive information and prevent misuse. Thus, security standards for confidentiality should be followed when using different online meeting platforms (Zoom, Teems, etc.). On the one hand, organizations should not ignore well-tried analog strategies to ensure everyone is reached (Preiß, 2019). On the other hand, it is advisable to use established and familiar communication channels. Especially when it comes to spreading information, it is helpful to use well-known channels like Facebook, WhatsApp, or SMS instead of developing new technologies that are not yet tried and trusted. Moreover, it was found that user-friendly digital tools could make social workers more positive (Borodin, 2021).

Digital tools such as digital meetings reduce travel, increase time efficiency, and new client contact possibilities. Such contributions resonate with the findings of Mishna et al. (2022), who found that using ICT (Information and communication technologies) gave practitioners the flexibility to meet and handle client meetings, making it possible to maintain the social worker-client relationship.

Finally, the digital divide is shrinking, and in the future, modern technologies will be accessible to those who need them most. However, in line with Agenda 2030 and its "leave no one behind" principle, even today, nobody should be excluded from these services - especially not those who find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation after having fled their home countries (WHO, 2022).

The literature analysis shows that digitalizing service encounters leads to two overall types of change in casual and professional life. Firstly, technology increases frontline workers' availability to the clients. Second, the technology leads to increased transparency of the service interactions, which is coped with by being careful about the content of client communications (Andrew et al., 2023).

Aim of the research. The study aimed to identify the results of using digital technologies in social support to internally displaced people and refugees among state and nonprofit organizations in Ukraine and in what way would ensure effective coordination and reach vulnerable people, including refugees and IDPs, during the war.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed methodology was used in the study. In particular, the qualitative study incorporated the narrative content analysis of digital platforms that provide social support for IDPs and vulnerable populations in Ukraine. In addition, we conducted quantitative research based on the web questionnaire (N= 14) with NGO representatives and social workers providing social services for IDPs and refugees. They are united to work on humanitarian aid, the conditions of the war in Ukraine, and working with IDPs and refugees.

This methodology is appropriate to our research in circumstances limited to moving. The questionnaire "Digitization of the provision of social services to IDPs and other vulnerable categories during hostilities" contains 13 questions to determine how much digital technologies help provide social services and assistance to internally displaced persons and other vulnerable categories during the war in Ukraine. The respondents were asked to consider the effective ways of collecting data in their organization/institution and the advantages and disadvantages of digitalization in the social service system. Some questions relate to the scope of services the institution/organization provides for IDPs. The research was carried out in August 2023. The responses were divided into three main parts. **The first part** comprises five questions that deal with **opportunities** and advantages using technical methods in the practice of social workers during the war. **Part two** outlines the **challenges, concerns,** and how digital technologies affect the effectiveness of social services for IDPs and how the full-scale invasion of Russia affected the provision of social services to IDPs at work (meaning the use of digital technologies). **Part three** concerned **examples of successful practices** and **best achievements** in using digitalization to work with IDPs and other vulnerable categories. So, there are possible measurement questions, each of which contributes some inferential evidence, that can be responses to the main questions: (1) whether digital technologies (including mobile phones and personal computers) assist internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and other vulnerable populations. (2) What would do better to increase the effectiveness of social services?

FINDINGS

Below, we present our findings revealed from our qualitative and quantitative research data:

(1) Case studies and best practices

The best and most fantastic digital initiative that has provided social support in Ukraine is "Diia," an online government service funded by the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, which works fully in Ukraine and partly in conflict zones. Since February 24, 2022, 49 services have been launched on the portal and within the "Diia" application. "Diia" has become a tool for facilitating rapid interaction between Ukrainians and the state, even in the most complex situations, such as evacuation to other regions or facing issues with documents at checkpoints and crossing borders. In "Diia," most users comprise the adult population of Ukraine. The largest age group is 35-44 years old. Interestingly, users aged 55 and older comprise approximately 4.7 million individuals. The "Diya" portal also has services for canceling the IDP status, home loans for IDPs, and applications for participation in the program of preferential mortgage loans for IDPs, etc. (Diia, 2023).

Digital documents in the "Diia" application have legal force and are defined in several regulatory and legal acts. These are digital analogs of paper documents; copies of digital documents are signed and encrypted. Because of the war in Ukraine, many homes were damaged, and people lost property and documents. "Diia" is an opportunity to quickly rebuild and save identical papers in a smartphone without bureaucratic protraction. It also ensures access to many social and medical services. Services for

candidates in foster parents are also available. From the point of view of the risk of separated children and their social protection, this is the best practice in protecting children. For people with disabilities, the educational series "Digital Technology for People with Disabilities" provides practical advice on how digital technologies can simplify and facilitate the daily lives of people with a natural type of disability. “However, it is necessary to state that there is a shortcoming in the legal regulation of the "Diia Portal,” which includes a significant number of facts of accumulation of impact on the rights of citizens (ensuring the protection of personal data, access to information about the sphere of citizens' interests, which is accumulated in computer networks, et.” (Yehorova-Lutsenko, 2020, pp. 80-84).

Another example of a successful story is “The Social Education Platform,” launched in January 2023 by the Ministry of Social Politics of Ukraine (2023). Here is the last information that links to development and providing social services. The reformation of central government institutions gave territorial communities a mandate and additional responsibilities to local governments and social workers. It needs to improve the professional level and competition of local authorities and social workers as providers of social services. Nowadays, the platform offers two courses: "Provision of Social Services on an Emergency (Crisis) Basis" and “Organization of Social Services in the Territorial Community.” In addition, the platform offers a variety of valuable manuals, methodological and informational materials, links, etc. (The Social Education Platform, 2023).

Moreover, international organizations actively support reforming many spheres, including developing digital platforms. United National Children Fund (UNICEF), with the support of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, launched the Ukrainian Volunteer platform. The project “Palyanytsya” was created to speedily search for humanitarian help and volunteer assistance. The open data-based organizations provide social services covering Ukraine’s territorialities (Palyanytsya, 2023). Since the war began, the Volunteer Platform has played an essential role in volunteer mobilization. Through an online volunteer platform, 400,000 Ukrainians were connected with volunteer opportunities as the war continues to cause displacement and suffering across the country (UNICEF, 2023).

The fact that refugees and displaced persons felt a total lack of information (UNHCR Georgia, 2022) led to the need to create digital information platforms. Information platforms were created all over the world. For example, the information online platform “Dopomoga Ukraine” was launched in Georgia. All actual information about medical services, suggestions for adaptation, advances to parents, legal issues, employment, education, accommodation, services for children, social services, events, and charity initiatives were united and collected in a single space. In virtual time joint, the chat board answers all questions (Dopomoga Ukraine, 2022). Official institutions, state and nongovernment organizations, and partner platforms put their information and updates. The platform includes a website, a Facebook page, a public Facebook group, an Instagram page, and a Telegram channel.

(2) Quantitative data analysis

a. Opportunities and advantages of using technical methods in the practice of social workers during the war

According to the obtained data, interviewed social services organizations very actively use digital technologies to work with IDPs and other vulnerable categories (by digital technologies, we mean all tools, programs, devices, and systems that use computers and the internet to process, transmit, and store information) in psychological consultations, educational and information activities. The frequent activities are information, consultations on IDPs, social adaptation and psychosocial support, and humanitarian aid (issuance of in-kind aid, hygiene kits). There is limited use of a technical online approach to organizing self-help groups for psychosocial rehabilitation of war victims, social integration, and events for IDPs, which was confusing. The results presented in response should be interpreted in light of the pathways to reach refugees and internally displaced people. Even though most representatives use gadgets to maintain electronic databases with data on IDPs and social networks for information work and communication, some use mobile applications for communication and access to information and provide electronic communication between staff and clients. The reasons for using digital technologies in organizations' activities were as follows: (1) convenience and data collection speed (85%); (2) an increasing accuracy of information (71%); an improved analytics and data processing and reduction of costs for paper documentation (64%), and creation of unique social services for a client's requirements (43%).

b. The challenges, concerns, and how digital technologies affect the effectiveness of social services for IDPs and the provision of social services during the war

It was revealed that the full-scale invasion of Russia affected the provision of social services to IDPs using digital technologies. In fact, digitalization has changed. In particular, due to the deepening need for security and privacy, social workers began to focus more on cyber security and data encryption and develop more effective means of detecting and preventing cyber-attacks. However, half of the participants indicated limited changes. In other words, the Russian invasion caused a slight change in their approach to digitization. Although security has become more of a priority, the overall digitization strategies have remained unchanged. Respondents continue to improve and develop digital solutions based on existing strategies and methods.

Respondents identified a few challenges that their organizations face in using digital technologies in working with IDPs, including the following aspects:

1) Remote villages where IDPs live have poor internet coverage, limited technical capabilities in families of difficult life circumstances, and digital illiteracy remain the top concerns and challenges of Ukrainian "helper";
2) Information processing during an online survey;
3) Data with errors when customers fill out Google forms;
4) Questions of confidentiality and data storage;

5) Awareness of social workers and beneficiaries about new computer applications, social networks, digital platforms, etc.;

6) Elderly beneficiaries do not always understand the importance of a digital system.

The answers regarding the obstacles hindering the more effective utilization of digital technologies to aid internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other vulnerable categories during the war in Ukraine include: (1) Technical Limitations: Insufficient technological infrastructure or outdated equipment can impede the adoption and implementation of digital solutions; (2) Lack of Financial Resources: Limited funding may prevent organizations from investing in the necessary digital tools and platforms to assist IDPs effectively; (3) Low Computer Literacy Among Clients: Many IDPs and vulnerable individuals might lack the necessary skills to navigate digital platforms, inhibiting their access to services; (4) Internet Access Problems: Unreliable or limited internet connectivity can obstruct seamless communication and service delivery through digital channels; (5) Data Privacy and Security Issues: Concerns about data breaches and privacy violations can deter organizations from fully embracing digital technologies, especially when dealing with sensitive information; (6) Physical Security Concerns: The threat of physical incidents such as fires or other disasters may discourage the reliance on digital systems, as the potential for data loss and disruption looms. Almost all participants mentioned that addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including investment in infrastructure, digital literacy training, cybersecurity measures, and efforts to ensure consistent and reliable internet access.

c. Examples of successful practices and best achievements

Most respondents underlined that the most significant achievement in using digitalization in their work with IDPs and other vulnerable categories is expanding access to information, increasing the speed of data collection and processing, and improving interaction with beneficiaries.

Many respondents pinpointed that they would like to improve infrastructure and technical support, education and training of personnel regarding digital technologies, cyber security, data protection, availability and ease of use of digital solutions, and development and implementation of new digital services.

The following points underscore the impactful strategies that have emerged. In the question, “In your opinion, what technologies still need to be implemented to reduce the gap between organizations and recipients of aid in crises?” NGO representatives highlighted several potential technological advancements to bridge the gap between aid organizations and recipients during crises: (1) Technical Mobile Units: Deploying mobile units to reach remote villages and towns swiftly, ensuring aid delivery even in hard-to-reach areas; (2) Integrated Aid Bases: Creating collaborative hubs where different organizations pool resources, enabling comprehensive assistance to crisis-affected individuals; (3)Unified Service System: Establishing a cohesive platform that connects various social service providers, streamlining aid distribution for internally displaced persons (IDPs); (4) Enhanced Digital Access: Improving IDPs' connectivity to digital tools, facilitating their access to critical information and aid services; (5)

Empowering IDPs with the skills to effectively use digital technologies, increasing their self-sufficiency in accessing aid; (6) Digital Awareness Campaigns about available digital resources, fostering a broader understanding of technology's role in crisis response.

These proposed technological solutions can potentially revolutionize crisis response by minimizing barriers and maximizing aid accessibility for those in need.

Continuing the discussion on responses from NGO representatives, when asked to provide examples of successful digital initiatives that have aided IDPs in conflict zones, several insightful cases and best practices emerged:

1) The creation of dedicated Telegram channels offers a direct communication channel, providing them with up-to-date information, assistance, and support of IDPs.
2) Establishing connections with settlements in active conflict zones allows for swift response and evacuation support, especially for vulnerable groups like children, orphans, and families.
3) Social media groups enable rapid response during crises, such as the aftermath of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station explosion, facilitating quick assistance and coordination.
4) Posting humanitarian aid announcements and registration details on social networks streamlines aid distribution, allowing IDPs to access necessary resources easily.
5) Enabling online registration for humanitarian aid simplifies the process for IDPs, ensuring efficient and organized assistance delivery.
6) Mobilizing volunteers to support people with disabilities from conflict zones provides personalized assistance and care.
7) Utilizing Viber and Telegram chats for information dissemination and data collection helps categorize clients for tailored assistance and psychosocial support.
8) Online counseling and meetings virtually extend psychosocial support to IDPs, ensuring continuity despite physical barriers.
9) Applications like Shelter, Help, and various Viber/Telegram channels have proven invaluable in helping IDPs find housing, assistance, and resources.

These practices highlight the role of digital tools in efficiently reaching and aiding IDPs during conflict situations, emphasizing the importance of communication, coordination, and tailored support to address their diverse needs.

In a landscape marked by upheaval, these practices underscore the critical role of digital tools in effectively reaching and aiding IDPs. These initiatives provide essential services and emphasize communication, coordination, and customized assistance, ultimately promoting resilience and inclusion in the face of conflict-induced displacement.

CONCLUSION

After the full-scale Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, millions of people left their houses because of the war, leading to the displacement of refugees and internal

displacement of people. In this situation, the social support system for addressing many needs, such as psychosocial support, medical counseling, education, protection of civilians, and mine awareness, is essential for special vulnerable populations. However, innovative communication methods are needed when all is destroyed and damaged and access to social services is limited (Lowe, 2022). According to previous studies (e.g., Mishna et al., 2022), the present research showed that digital tools effectively increase time efficiency and create opportunities for flexible meetings with clients in need. Digitalization enhances the maintenance of the social worker-client relationship during crises.

The digital transformation of local government in Ukraine is gradual but, in our opinion, very slow. Meanwhile, of all the sectors of public administration, it is local governments that can benefit most from investments in digital technologies. Namely, documents that are stored in the cloud, protected from cyber and physical threats; a vast network of Wi-Fi and mobile devices means that employees can access and update data anytime, anywhere, and time previously spent searching for paper files and entering data can be spent on more pressing issues to address higher-level issues. Thus, digitalization means that services can be provided to residents of communities more quickly and transparently (Borodin, 2021).

The NGO survey results highlighted various gaps in their practice that contribute to the digital technologies providing social services and uses of services, especially older adults and vulnerable groups. The research demonstrates that a lack of understanding and knowledge about data protection and security often causes violence rights, especially during war. Moreover, challenges are using reliable and secure information sources. The responses from NGO representatives emphasize a notable trend: the increasing adoption of digitalization for delivering social services during conflict. Proposed solutions such as technical mobile units, integrated aid bases, and digital training underline the role of technology in enhancing aid distribution and connecting organizations with recipients. This trend aligns with the global shift towards tech-driven humanitarian efforts, aiming for efficient and inclusive assistance. The focus on raising awareness and promoting digital literacy among aid recipients reflects a comprehensive approach to harnessing digital tools' benefits. These responses highlight digitalization's transformative potential in reshaping social services amidst conflict, offering streamlined aid and empowering affected communities. Finally, data privacy is crucial in digitalization as the internet brought new dimensions of ethical decision-making for social researchers (Bryman, 2012).

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ДІДЖИТАЛІЗАЦІЯ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ ПОСЛУГ У ВІДПОВІДЬ НА ВІЙНУ В УКРАЇНІ

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Анотація. *У статті розглядається процес діджиталізації соціальних послуг у відповідь на війну в Україні. Результати дослідження доводять, що, незважаючи на те, що війна в Україні триває, технології позитивно впливають на роботу соціальних провайдерів та урядових/неурядових організацій. Через порівняльний аналіз кейсів цифрових платформ, які надають соціальні послуги, автори підтримують аргумент, що діджиталізація соціальних послуг сприяє соціальному захисту ВПО та біженців. Однак технологія - це лише інструмент. Її результати залежать від потреб, які вона покликана задовольнити, цілей, які вона переслідує, і конкретних способів її розробки та впровадження. Питання автора про те, чи має діджиталізація не лише переваги використання цифрових технологій у наданні соціальних послуг, залишається дискусійним. Тим не менш, діджиталізація може створювати серйозні ризики для і без того вразливих груп населення. У дослідженні розглядаються виклики та ризики зростаючої цифровізації соціальних послуг, такі як відсутність міжособистісного контакту з клієнтами, нездатність розвивати відносини в соціальній роботі, виявляти поверхневі та глибинні почуття, а також не здатність точно передавати емпатію, повагу та контакт з клі єнтом.*

Ключові слова: *діджиталізація; соціальні послуги; внутрішньо переміщені особи (ВПО); біженці; неурядові організації (НУО); війна в Україні.*

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