

The Crisis in Ukraine: A Health Promotion Perspective - Another Wake-up Call

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July 2022



“All around you missiles
 Are falling. Churches
 You once knew won’t
 Be there any more.
 The streets you walked
 Will be changed by
 Blood and shelling
 And bombs. It seems
 The world’s gone mad.”

From To Katya, aged seven/In a bomb shelter in Kyiv by Ben Okri

At the time of writing rockets and missiles are still raining down on the people and cities of Ukraine, as they have been since 24 February this year. Lives have been lost and families separated. It is difficult to imagine that the government of the country and its people are currently focusing minds on how to promote their health and well-being, rather than trying to survive both physically and mentally.

From a broader perspective it is important to reflect on how the situation in Ukraine (and indeed in other parts of the world where armed conflict exists and persists) represents the absolute antithesis of health promotion.

In this context, let’s revisit the Ottawa Charter and consider the more recently published Geneva Charter for Well-being. In the face of direct threats to life itself, envisaging health promotion action that enables ‘people to increase control over, and to improve, their health,’ let alone to ‘reach a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment,’ is a challenge. Health promotion can help develop skills in coping with adversity and strengthening resilience. However, I doubt that the authors of the Ottawa Charter had a war environment foremost in mind when drafting the document.

Each of the prerequisites for health identified in the Ottawa Charter is compromised, if not rendered unachievable, by armed conflict of the kind being visited on the people of Ukraine, and other war-ravaged areas. The same is true of attempts to build healthy public policy, create supportive environments, strengthen community action of the kind envisaged, develop personal skills, or reorient health services. Indeed, health services in war-torn areas will be focused entirely on dealing with survival and managing on-going care in crisis circumstances. In its call to action the Ottawa Conference argued that Health for All by the year 2000 would ‘become a reality’ if all concerned ‘joined forces in introducing strategies for health promotion, in line with the moral and social values that form the basis of this Charter.’ Such moral and social values are conspicuous by their absence in the face of militaristic aggression.

And so to the Geneva Charter. In a somewhat prescient manner the Geneva document, published a mere two months before the Ukraine crisis erupted, states that ‘Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, rapid urbanization, **geopolitical conflict and militarization**, demographic change, population displacement, poverty, and widespread inequity create risks of future crises even more

severe than those experienced today.’ The Geneva Charter sets out the ‘foundations of well-being’, including how to ‘[steward] a flourishing future.’ Core elements include a respect for planet earth and its ecosystems, a focus on human development and working for the common good: again, hardly what is currently possible in Ukraine.

All aspects of health promotion depend to a great extent on transparency of policy intentions, public accountability of governance, freedom to participate in societal debates, and availability of truthful information, yet it is a well-known saying that the first casualty of war is the truth. “False news is news/ With the pity/ Edited out./ It’s war again:” (From *Resistance*: By Simon Armitage).

This also raises questions about the universality of health promotion values. Evidence of effectiveness may be universal, but health promotion specialists recognise that cultural differences must be taken into account in implementation strategies. But is a full health promotion approach, including the facilitation of health literacy, ever possible in regimes that control the media and press, discourage public/civil society engagement with policy development, and punish those who disagree with government policies?

Perhaps most significantly the Geneva Charter asserts that ‘well-being is a political choice.’ Whilst acknowledging that countries do not always share the same views, there surely must be a better way to resolve differences than resorting to the deployment of lethal weapons. The Geneva Charter suggests the need for ‘investments that integrate planetary, societal, community and individual health and well-being’ and calls for ‘fundamental redirection of societal values and action consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.’ It thus highlights the need for global/international cooperation and governance structures. In this context does the current veto system of the UN Security Council really seem appropriate or consistent with these aims?

The First World War was supposed to be the ‘war to end all wars.’ The economic crash of the Great Depression, and more recently the 2008 financial crisis were meant to signal opportunities to do things differently, and better, for the world’s population. How many wake-up calls are needed for our international/national leaders and governance structures to prevent such calamities? At a time when the world is still reeling from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and should be facing up to the climate crisis, we should be expecting political leaders across the world to be pulling together. Only then might the aspirations and *raison d’être* of health promotion, to create a world of improved health and well-being for all, stand a better chance of being realised. In Ukraine, and in other conflict-riven regions, we can cling to the hope that:

“The church will be rebuilt
The streets will be made new
There will be festivals in the square.....
And one day your laughter
Will defeat the vacuum missiles
And the bombs will fade
Into the depths of your freedom.”

From To Katya, aged seven/In a bomb shelter in Kyiv by Ben Okri



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