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Social Redevelopment in the Donbass Region — a Microcosm for a Country in Transition

- by Keith MacKenzie

Donetsk, November 2001 - The Donetsk oblast in the east of Ukraine was once traditionally considered to be a powerhouse centre for coal mining in Ukraine, with a highly developed industrial infrastructure. Additionally, it was the centre for high education and science in the Donbass region. The mass restructuring of Ukraine, however, has led to a severe dismantling of the coal industry, which has nearly obliterated what was once one of the most prosperous regions in Ukraine. During the past few years, over a hundred coal mines have been closed, resulting in over 200,000 miners suddenly losing their only source of income. Smaller towns in the region that were dependent on the coal industry as a primary and sometimes solitary source of income and growth were suddenly found themselves in a state of paralysis, like the limbs of a body that has had a severe and unexpected heart attack.

As if the bleak economical situation wasn't enough, Donetsk is also faced with an HIV/AIDS crisis. It has the highest rate of intravenous drug use in Ukraine, which in turn has led to widespread HIV infection. In the Pevromaisky rayon, it is estimated that there are over a hundred primary sources of drug distribution.

"I am spending my last hryvna on drugs. I'm glad that I at least have a source for clean needles, because otherwise I wouldn't care about that," said Dmitro, a long time drug addict and a volunteer at a needle-exchange point in Donetsk. "Just this morning, over the span of three hours, I have handed out over 700 clean needles in exchange for dirty ones. This is still not enough — we still need a lot more."

Marina, another drug addict and a worker in the sex trade industry, agreed. Because of the overpowering need to feed her drug addiction, she is often willing to provide sex at a much lower cost than her peers. Only yesterday, she gave birth to a baby and today, she is already back at work in the sex trade. "I must earn money for myself and my husband so we can obtain drugs," she said, gesturing to a man standing not far from her.

We do not know whether Marina is HIV-positive, but we do know that three months ago, the first orphanage in Ukraine especially designed for children borne by HIV-positive mothers was opened in Donetsk. Today, the orphanage is currently home to thirty children, but many more are expected soon. At last count, some 120 HIV-positive children are still living with their parents, and over 250 pregnant women have been categorized as HIV-positive.

This is only one segment of what is an increasingly shocking tragedy in a once proud and prosperous region. Hopelessness and frustration continue to be the

dominant feeling in many parts of the Donetsk population, and people long for bygone days where they were adequately provided and cared for by a reliable and powerful state.

On 6–7 November 2001, the UN agencies of Ukraine paid a working visit to the region, with a focus on assessment of the current situation in Donetsk and the region, the impact of ongoing UN projects in the area, and discussion with local authorities on future UN projects.

At one of the conferences, a man was overheard saying half-jokingly; “Just give me money — I need to eat!” Where a large number of men had lost their only means of income and a large part of their identity through unemployment, women are expanding their role in the family and society and doing their part to help revive the region. UN representatives observed that all the computers in the new vocational centre in Donetsk are constantly being used by women working intensely on their business plans, determined to provide for their families.

Two community centres have also opened within the framework of the UNDP project, focusing on computer training and creative activities for youngsters, and providing a social gathering point for adults to assemble for confidence and self-esteem training in generating new employment opportunities. Most importantly, the centres are encouraging local communities to come together to discuss pressing social issues and jointly reach consensus on moving forward as a group with common interests.

There is, however, a prevailing mindset in the region, a mindset based on the understanding that an authority whether in a political, religious, or social form will provide for them and pave the way for them to have a better life. In reality, in Ukraine and many other countries of the old Soviet bloc, this way of thinking has become obsolete. There needs to be a shift in the mindset from dependence to empowerment, from reliance on the system to self-sustenance and self-motivation. This is the greatest challenge faced by the people of the Donbass region.

“There are two main objectives of the project;” said Viacheslav Koval, leader of the project and head of the regional development agency. “First, we aim to further develop the community in Donetsk and the surrounding region, and second, we aim to revitalize the local economy after the closing of the mines. People are accustomed to waiting for the State to make amends to the current situation, and to make decisions for them. Now, it is essential that people get involved in the local community to discuss issues, increase their knowledge, and feel empowered in solving their social and economic problems themselves.”

It is important to clarify that there is a long uphill climb in returning to the prosperous times of the past. Some have experienced success in their various ventures, such as the 78 who have started up their own businesses in the area. The reality is, however, that this is only a fraction of the 200,000 miners who are out of work and are struggling to feed themselves and their families. The most important thing to realize is to break down the prevailing mindset of dependency on others, and develop a pioneer spirit of self-reliance amongst the people of the

Donbass region, and this is a shift in thinking that is critical to the success of Ukraine's transition.