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From the Ground Up: Ukraine's Civil Society in Recovery

A Political Economy Analysis of Civil Society Dynamics and Perspectives for the Future

Daily life resumes as people walk through the streets of Chernihiv
Julia Kochetova/ActionAid

Front cover image: Young people envisioning the future of Ukraine beyond war
Carol García/ActionAid

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Introduction

The unprovoked and unjustifiable full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, along with its consequences across Europe and the globe, led to an unprecedented decision within ActionAid International: to initiate humanitarian action work in a region where the Federation had no prior presence. Between March and June 2022, ActionAid developed or strengthened strategic partnerships in Poland, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine, deploying small teams in these countries to support a locally led humanitarian response. Since then, ActionAid and its partners have implemented programmes supporting more than 2.3 million people, including women, people with disabilities, refugees and those from Roma, LGBTQIA+ and other marginalised communities, for whom the war has made life even more dangerous.

ActionAid's humanitarian approach is grounded in a feminist and decolonial framework that prioritises collaboration with national and local partners. This approach aims to foster resilience and long-term sustainability, shift power to affected communities, and address underlying inequalities at every level. By embedding these principles, ActionAid not only enhances the effectiveness of crisis responses but also tackles systemic issues, power imbalances, and structural marginalisation.

This document presents the findings of a Political Economy Analysis developed in collaboration with a range of national and international stakeholders working in different fields in Ukraine, including several ActionAid partners. It provides practical recommendations to help national and international humanitarian stakeholders adopt a more politically informed approach across the humanitarian-peacebuilding-development nexus, working towards a locally led, just, and feminist recovery -one in which the most affected communities take the lead in driving systemic change. As ActionAid, we recognise that we are continually learning how best to support humanitarian responses rooted in decolonial and anti-racist principles, with a focus on shifting power to our partner organisations and those most in need.

Workshop session with Ukrainian civil society organizations, fostering dialogue and collaboration
Anastasia Vlasova/ActionAid

This report is authored by ActionAid, and is the result of collective team work, with methodological support and contributions from Paul Taylor, an independent researcher.

Design: Katy Abbott

Structure of this report, methodology and limitations

This report provides an overview of the important existing literature produced on the evolution of Ukrainian civil society and its further development in response to Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion. This is presented alongside conversations we had during a series of interviews with different civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders. These dialogues represented a wide-range of different viewpoints and positions about the participation of the Ukrainian CSOs in the humanitarian response, their relationships with other stakeholders, and their role in the recovery agenda. Finally, the authors offer a series of recommendations in response to these findings. We invite you to join us in reflecting on these thoughts, as part of an ongoing process of inquiry and dialogue.

We would like to thank people who agreed to give their insights, share their stories and advise us on the next steps of the research and its findings. The primary data presented below were gathered during key informant interviews (KIIs) interviews carried out with representatives of national and local organisations as well as other important stakeholders. These included INGOs, a consultant to the multi-donor fund, a former Deputy to the Minister of Social Policy of Ukraine, and an advisor to the Ministry of Social Policy. The interviews were conducted in April 2025, based on the premilinry findings from the previous research work of ActionAid team – Civil Society in Flux. The semi-structed interview format and questions are provided as an annex to this report. Insights from these interviews informed recommendations and change pathways identified. Additionaly, in June 2025 took place a close-door presentation of a first draft of the report, under the Chatham House Rule, with different international and national institutional and civil society representatives, including PEA experts, think-tanks, and prominent individuals.

We want to thank them for their generosity in the contributions, which have been integrated in the final version of the report.

The KIIs were serving the following objectives:

- To identify barriers organisations are facing to cooperation with the state authorities, INGOs and between themselves, as well as the openness of the different stakeholders for cooperation and involvement of the CSOs expertise in the state policy creation and reform;
- To identify the ways for INGOs to better support national organisations in accessing platforms serving for recovery planning and to influence long-term programming.

Finally, as with all research conducted in conflict-affected contexts, methodological limitations are frequently encountered. Access to, and availability of, respondents may be physically limited or impossible due to active conflict or airstrikes both as respondents and researchers seek to prioritise their own safety and as they respond to the immediate humanitarian and other needs generated by new emergencies. Conflict routinely affects communications, both transport and internet connectivity, placing further constraints in the ability to safely conduct interviews. The psychosocial impacts of conflict can also generate major limitations. Respondents may be at risk of being re-traumatised when recalling tragic incidents and may find it difficult to speak openly to researchers. The power dynamic between researcher and respondent is also an important consideration in such contexts. CSO respondents for this study may be aware of ActionAid's potential as a future intermediate funder, and this may create an optimism bias in the way they report on their organisation's activities. At the same time, respondents in crisis contexts can become frustrated with research and the feeling of 'being studied', sometimes repeatedly, without immediate promise of material support. All these limitations were mitigated, although not eliminated, in the research design. For example, interviews were carried out by a Ukrainan expert on civil society development in Ukrainian language in order to build rapport and trust, times and locations (or if online) were determined in response to routine monitoring of conflict dynamics and early warning systems, and ethical approaches were taken, including the centrality of free, prior and informed consent, to ensure respondents felt in control of the information they were providing and what happens with their data.

As well as these methodological limitations, several limitations with the sampling approach taken with respondents limits the generalisability of the findings and must be taken into account when drawing conclusions:

- The research focuses on CSOs engaged in humanitarian response and development activities; organisations with a military focus and media-focused NGOs were not included;
- The study primarily reflects the experiences and perspectives of CSOs formalised in NGOs, Charitable Funds or other legal entities, with limited insights from informal or grassroots initiatives;
- Organisations and groups working on NGCA/TOT (Non-Government-Controlled Area; Temporary Occupied Territories) are not represented in the current research.

Further work should be done to evaluate these findings, and to explore their applicability to the sample groups we were unable to represent. Thus, feedback on the research will be highly appreciated.

Ukrainian youth taking part in emergency response efforts and helping rebuild the future of their country
Carol García/ActionAid

Leading the way: the role of Ukrainian civil society

Between 2014 and 2025, Ukrainian civil society evolved from a fragmented collection of activist movements into a diverse ecosystem responding to society's needs and contributing to national resilience and governance. Through successive waves of Russian aggression, CSOs have stepped in where the state has struggled – providing humanitarian assistance, supporting internally displaced people, advocating reforms, and increasingly shaping national recovery policy. Their role continues to deepen, expanding the delivery of essential services, particularly to frontline communities.

However, despite public trust and operational growth, Ukraine's civil society faces mounting challenges. Structural issues include donor dependency, short-term funding cycles, bureaucratic overload, and psychological burnout. Local actors remain marginalised within international humanitarian architecture and receive little direct funding despite delivering most frontline work. Legal and political uncertainties, compounded by martial law and war-related displacement, have further strained organisational capacity. Nonetheless, CSOs continue to collaborate, build networks, and advocate for an inclusive, locally led recovery.

As Ukraine approaches the fourth year since Russia's illegal and unjustified full-scale invasion. CSOs have played an essential part in supporting the resilience of society in the face of such aggression and is looking increasingly towards the role they will play on the road to recovery. While there are many challenges and dynamics internal to civil society in Ukraine, the outbreak of war has brought with it new challenges of responding to large-scale humanitarian crises and responding to the huge influx of international funding, and associated involvement of international aid agencies. It is the right time for international organisations like ActionAid to ask important questions such as: What is our appropriate role in the Ukraine context? How can we support immediate needs while helping to build a more equitable system? What do our partners and the communities we serve see at the highest priorities? When should we intervene, and when should we step back? Are we carrying our share of the risk in the programmes we are funding? What is our place in the mixed ecosystem of national and local NGOs, international agencies and government? Ultimately, does our organisational vision, mission and strategy align with the vision Ukraine's civil society has for their role in the nation's recovery?

Answering these questions is a long-term effort, and requires a process of continuous inquiry, consultation and reflection, whose answers do not lie in any single research project or report. This report represents, therefore, one contribution among many to an ongoing conversation about how to best situate ourselves to support the voice and agency of Ukrainian civil society. Their leadership is central to the national recovery, and the leadership they have shown in recent years stands testament to their bravery and determination. International actors must stand ready to recognise and support this leadership.

Ukrainian civil society: 1960 to 2025

The origins. Challenging Soviet repression

Contemporary civil society in Ukraine has its origins in the 1960s and 1970s, when social movements began to challenge Soviet repression. Groups formed in response to Russification and press censorship, for example, aiming to promote political reforms and preserve Ukrainian language and culture, as well as advocating for the legalisation of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

In the 1980s, civil society further took shape, catalysed by the Chernobyl catastrophe and the Perestroika and Glasnost reforms. Mobilisation increased around environmental and democratic concerns, and the mobilisation capacity of Ukrainian civil society was exemplified by street protests such as the Donbas miners' strikes in 1989 (Worschech, 2017).

With the weakening of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, civil society organisations (CSOs) became more visible, developing a role they would go on to play in shaping Ukraine's independence. Notable moments include the Granite Revolution, which mobilised students in 1990 to demand political reform. However, civil society at this time remained relatively new and fragmented. While it contributed to key protests, many Ukrainians still struggled to name or identify local CSOs (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025).

A major moment of mobilisation occurred during the Orange Revolution in late 2004, in response to electoral fraud. This triggered a surge in civic activity, with more than 20,000 new organisations and charitable foundations registered in the two years that followed (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025). However, even amid such rapid growth, civil society often remained limited in scope and reach. Civic actors frequently 'did not succeed in translating these efforts into larger structures of influencing and programming policies and decision-making processes' (Worschech, 2017).

Over the 34 years since independence – including in the decade before Euromaidan – Ukraine saw the development of a vibrant and increasingly institutionalised civil society. This growth was shaped by a combination of factors:

- weak state institutions, which created space for NGOs to step in;
- a level of state repression that was motivating but not incapacitating;
- the legitimacy gained through civic leadership in the Revolution of Dignity, and;
- domestic and international support for civil society development

(Andrieieva et al, 2023)

Reflecting this trajectory was a clear expansion in formal civic participation. The political upheavals of the past decade have 'motivated many Ukrainians to become more politically engaged and active within civil society' (Andrieieva et al, 2023).

These developments show a civil society that has moved from underground dissent to broad-based mobilisation, and gradually toward institutionalisation, transforming protest into sustained influence on policy and governance.

From Dignity to Reanimation

The 2013-2014 Euromaidan uprising, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, marked a profound transformation in Ukraine civil society. Prior to this, civil engagement was widely perceived as weak, struggling to maintain cohesion amid the public distrust of organisations common in East European post-socialist contexts. The Euromaidan protests disrupted this narrative, and gave rise to mass civic mobilisation that grew to an unprecedented dimension.

Civic initiatives that emerged to support the protest movement soon expanded their work, in areas such as self-defence, legal aid, fundraising, and public advocacy. These groups then also played a key role maintaining basic state functions during Ukraine's institutional breakdown in early 2014. A new public sphere emerged from this period that was more open, interconnected, and engaged in democratic dialogue. Volunteering surged, and civil society became more interconnected with society at large, involved in democratic opinion building and decision making (Worschech, 2017).

Some organisations or networks formed directly out of the Euromaidan experience, including the Reanimation Package of Reforms[1], a coalition of 26 NGOs and experts established to coordinate reform advocacy and implementation. Civil society actors, once confined to the margins, now took on a central role in shaping Ukraine's future, earning what some described as 'broad legitimacy as the beating heart of the nation' (Andrieieva et al., 2023).

> "There is no - and will not be - genuine demand from the state for civil society expertise. What's the issue? The Reanimation Package of Reforms was a good initiative, but the process of sending out the Cabinet of Ministers' agenda in advance - so that the expert civil society sector could review it and engage with Ministers - was based entirely on informal agreements. No one ever formalized it in the official regulations.
>
> And yet the agenda is not supposed to be a secret - it should be shared with all interested stakeholders and publicly available on the website. This should have been clearly enshrined in the regulations."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

Annexation of Crimea and Occupation in the East

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military occupation of parts of Luhansk and Donetsk in 2014, Ukrainian civil society further consolidated and expanded. Russian aggression triggered an internal displacement crisis, with approximately 1.7 million Ukrainians forced to flee their homes. In response, new IDP-focused civil initiatives emerged, including the now-notable SOS organisations, which became the core of an IDP advocacy movement. For example, among these was Vostok SOS (East SOS), founded in Kyiv by former civic activists from Luhansk and Crimea[2]. Forced from their homes, they continued their work in exile, providing legal aid, humanitarian support, and integration assistance to other displaced Ukrainians. The IDP crisis expanded the reach and diversity of civic activism. Unlike earlier human rights work which arguably affected only a few people – usually activists or journalists – the IDP response brought together activists and volunteers from different societal spheres, creating new forms of civic participation.

However, the rapid substitution of state functions by civil society raises concerns, with some arguing that the legitimacy civil society gained by stepping in 'could help to legitimise the government's release of responsibility' or become reluctant to relinquish the power they acquired during the crisis (Worschech, 2017). As it turned out, new and more devastating crises due to Russian aggression were just around the corner.

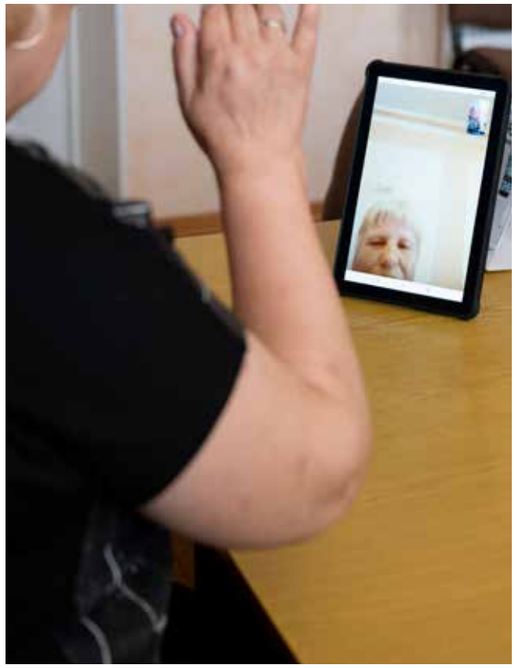
Responding to the Full-Scale Invasion

The full-scale unjustified and illegal Russian invasion in February 2022 marked yet another turning point for Ukrainian civil society, unleashing a massive wave of mobilisation and adaptation in response to Russian aggression.

The NGO sector underwent a dramatic shift in focus. Seventy-five per cent of CSOs changed or expanded the scope of their work in response to war-related challenges. Organisations that had previously focused on culture or education pivoted toward assisting the army, veterans, and IDPs (Andrieieva et al., 2023). According to UN Women, by 2022, over 66% of CSOs were delivering new services, 57% had adopted remote support mechanisms, and more than 52% had reallocated funds to address new humanitarian and defence-related needs (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025)

Volunteerism once again surged, echoing Euromaidan. Thousand of spontaneous initiatives emerged, even if maybe sometimes overlapping or chaotic, they were nonetheless critical in delivering aid to all sectors of society. This period reinforced public trust in CSOs due to their personal connections, clear communication, and commitment to transparency and accountability (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025).

However, the full-scale war also introduced new pressures. International NGOs (INGOs) arrived in large numbers, reorienting Ukraine's ecosystem of aid and advocacy within the global aid-industrial complex. Meanwhile, domestic organisations based in the South and East – many near the line of contact – were forced to relocate their offices and staff, often fragmenting teams and creating organisational vulnerability (Philanthropy in Ukraine, 2024). Integration of relocated staff presented new political and operational challenges. Both the increased reliance on international funds, and the loss of access to local communities and networks, places enormous constraints to achieving the aims of localisation.



A sign language interpreter supports a deaf individual through a videoconference.
Daria Svertilova/ActionAid

"In the humanitarian response up until 2022 there was a limited role for CSOs, and they were concentrated in the East of the country; in Donetskyi, Luhanskyi regions and some of Kharkivskyi, Kherson, and Zaporizhia. And, in fact, these communities, organizations and volunteer groups that were the most affected could not quickly deploy at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

I am making the following conclusions based on the experience of Mariupol civil organizations; when the occupation of Mariupol was going on in February - at the beginning of March 2022, all organizations involved [in the humanitarian response] since 2014 very quickly deployed and went to work. They collected food, necessary medicines and provided assistance in evacuating from the eastern part of the city to the western part, and so on. But then in March these organizations were very badly affected, and it was difficult for them to restart their work. They had to escape from the occupation, and it was difficult to restart.

Anonymous contributor

"2022 was a turning point. The sector to grew very quickly, quantitatively. More people began to get involved, because needs grew sharply and became more urgent and critical. On the other hand, they also had to develop qualitatively in order to optimize their effectiveness. When you have an infinite number of needs, almost infinite number of people who need support, you have to organize processes as qualitatively as possible so that every penny and every effort, every person-hour, goes to good use. Moreover, new formats for humanitarian work appeared. In Ukraine, humanitarian organizations have existed since 2014, but at that time there were not many, and they were not super noticeable in Kyiv. In some fields – international humanitarian law, on human rights violations – they were louder and more visible than the humanitarian sector. Because the humanitarian work took place in a geographically fairly narrow area, with some local organizations, not many known in Kyiv.

The state [government] has no request for a civil society, speaking broadly. The officials perceive it since the times of the Communist Party [Soviet times] as some dissidents who wants to overthrow the government, they must be kept away, and there is always a constant temptation to grow some kind of public councils, one-day organizations, which has nothing to do with the democratic governance.

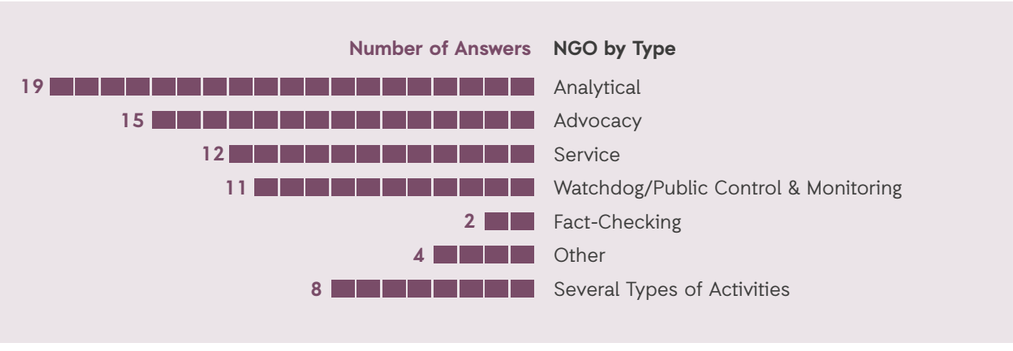
Anonymous contributor

Ukraine Civil Society Today

In 2016, the number of registered CSOs in Ukraine was around 250,000 (Worschech, 2017). From 2021 to 2023, the number of charitable organisations saw the most significant increase (by 43%)[3]. Notably, this growth continued throughout both 2022 and 2023. Opinion polls show that Ukrainians trust CSOs, particularly volunteer organisations, more than government institutions. For example, 70% of Ukrainians trust volunteer organisations, while 68.5% distrust public servants' (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025). In one survey (see charts below), NGOs work most prominently in education, with IDPs and veterans, and on local/community-led governance. Other areas include developing the capacity of the sector as whole, health care, digitalization, public finance and anti-corruption, and human rights advocacy (Andrieieva et al, 2023).

NGO Areas of Expertise Mid-2023

NGO by Type



(Andrieieva et al, 2023)[4]

A study from Philanthropy in Ukraine (2024) highlighted the strengths, weakness, opportunities and challenges facing the sector today which are summarised in the diagram below. Many of these topics are covered in more detailed in the remainder of this chapter.

	Positive Factors	Negative Factors
External	**Opportunities:** • Cohesion, cooperation and coordination of organizations from the public sector. • Closer cooperation with international organizations and donors, larger amount of funds for projects. • Establishing a deeper cooperation with the diaspora. • Openness to cooperation with the representatives of authorities.	**Threats:** • Security risks and uncertainty. • Non-committed employees in the sector. • Fewer charitable donations from citizens. • International organizations poaching staff. • Lack of social capital. • Fiercer competition for resources. • Rigid state regulation. • The requirement to conduct audit and monitoring of funds attracted from donors. • Insufficient flexibility of donors in their work with Ukraine. • Regular power outages.
Internal	**Strengths:** • Revitalization of fundraising activities and work with donors. • Increasing scope of projects. • Larger budget for organizational development. • Rapid development of organizational structure. • Higher quality of the team (support, common vision). • Active networking and cooperation.	**Weaknesses:** • Staff shortage (employees, narrow-profile experts). • High staff turnover. • Fatigue, exhaustion, burnout of employees. • Lack of organizational potential and experience against a backdrop of quick growth. • Outdated internal organizational rules and terms. • Shortages of resources for institutional development.

(Philanthropy in Ukraine, 2024)

The Operating Space: Legal, Political, and Institutional Context

Ongoing war conditions and dependency on foreign funding create a fragile enabling environment, which civil society must navigate with caution, innovation, and solidarity. Despite these challenges, Ukraine's civil society continues to operate in a comparatively open and resilient space. CSOs are not subject to onerous legal restrictions, and they benefit from a high degree of societal trust.

However, Martial Law in Ukraine adds a layer of complexity for organisations. While intended to enhance accountability, it imposes stringent registration and compliance requirements on CSOs, creating significant administrative burdens that divert resources from their core missions (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025). Many volunteer organisations or other non-profits are not registered legally or refuse to register out of fear of bureaucratization and slowing down the pace of procurements. Respondents to one survey mentioned that for registration of the not-for-profit organization, they need the help of an accountant and lawyer, when they do not even have enough funding to cover their work (Kucheriv, 2023).

Funding and Localisation

Ukrainian civil society operates in a space of strong public trust and legitimacy, but its long-term sustainability is under threat from volatile funding, and dependency on external donors, amid the rising operational demands of protracted conflict.

From 2014, civil society in Ukraine experienced a dramatic increase in public engagement and financial support. According to the World Giving Index, 38% of Ukrainian reported donating to charities in 2014, a significant jump from just 8-9% in 2012–2013. One iconic example of this new public financial support, Come Back Alive[5], an NGO founded in 2014 by Kyiv IT specialist Vitalii Deineha, began crowdfunding support for the Ukrainian military, in particular night-vision devices. Its website proudly declared its grassroots identity: "We were coders, designers, journalists. War changed everything." It operated solely on individual donations and publishes fully transparent accounts online (Worschech, 2017).

Today, despite this strong tradition of grassroots support, international donor funding is the sector's backbone, with 84% of CSOs in one survey citing it as their primary source. Local support from business partnerships, crowdfunding, and government remains secondary, with each contributing to a third of organisational funding or less (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025).

> "The availability of funding was initially a large and open question; there was a problem with the capacity of those who actually operate in the field to take and use these funds according to expected standards. At this point, resources have become very limited and highly bureaucratic. Regulatory policy and legislative instruments only developed more thoughtful and developed outlines in 2024. Our focus is, at least at this point, is to contribute to the triangle of the power sector, the government and international partners, with a fourth corner - Ukrainian business. Now there is a phenomenon when the civil society sector has an expertise that will be needed by business (for example, working with veterans and their families), and business can occupy the niche of a donor instead of the same USAID. It is a win-win story.
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

However, CSOs face a critical funding crisis. Around 80% of organisations lack guaranteed funding beyond 2024, undermining long-term planning and reducing the ability to invest in organisational capacity (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025). The dominance of short-term project-based funding has resulted in high staff turnover, as most employees are hired temporarily. This instability limits continuity and institutional memory (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025).

> "In 2022, there was a lot of available funding. Roughly speaking, if you were able to write a somewhat clear project proposal, draft a concept in English (even using automatic translation), and get in touch with someone connected to the humanitarian sector, there was a good chance that your project would receive support. That's how many of our projects were launched and actively implemented. I was the manager of one such project - it addressed all the needs we were seeing around us. At the same time, people were lacking food, they were internally displaced and had nowhere to live, or if there were temporary shelters, they needed repair. People had no jobs, schools were overwhelmed - and in 2022, it was realistic to propose a project that addressed all these needs in one community, receive funding for it, and respond comprehensively.
>
> However, at that time, very few people had heard of localization — especially its financial aspect. Indirect costs were generally not discussed in such projects; it was only possible to include them if donors were much aware and had their own commitments to localization. In general, Ukrainian organizations, especially newly established ones, did not know in 2022 that it was even possible to ask for indirect costs.
>
> Now, funding is decreasing, and the dynamics between international organizations - which continue to receive the largest share of funding from institutional humanitarian donors - and their national partners is becoming increasingly tense. Over the past three years, national organizations have grown significantly - and not just in scale, but in quality. They have learned to manage humanitarian budgets independently. And so, the question of the role of international humanitarian organizations is becoming more and more pressing.
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

Core operational costs such as office rent, logistics, and transportation are often excluded from donor budgets, forcing NGOs to divert energy toward securing supplementary funds for basic functioning (ActionAid, 2024). Smaller and regional CSOs are particularly disadvantaged, as limited resources and complex local governance systems present further barriers to accessing support (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025).

One comparative study highlighted the inefficiencies in international humanitarian funding. UN project budgets are significantly more expensive than those of local counterparts, with international staff costs at the UN five times higher than national staff, and 17 times higher than local staff at national NGOs. These discrepancies highlight the potential gains of localising aid and reallocating funds more directly to Ukrainian-led organisations (Cabot Venton, 2024).

As noted above, since Russia's full-scale invasion began in 2022, civil society has played a central role in the humanitarian response, delivering frontline aid, mobilising volunteers, and responding to community needs. Despite this, international funding and decision-making power remains centralised among global humanitarian actors, revealing a disconnect between rhetoric and practice when it comes to localisation (Cabot Venton, 2024).

While 'a shared understanding of the importance of localisation is already discernible among increasing numbers of humanitarian stakeholders in Ukraine', efforts remain largely rhetorical. There is a widespread failure to enact concrete changes, risking both the current humanitarian response and the long-term resilience of local actors (NGO Resource Center (NGORC) et al. 2024).

Between February 2022 and October 2024, just 0.8% of the $9.95 billion in humanitarian aid went directly to local or national NGOs, despite evidence that they are 15.5% to 32% more cost-efficient than international responders (Center for Disaster Philanthropy et al, 2024). International agencies openly acknowledge that L/NNGOs deliver most frontline work but receive a minority of funding. Local NGOs consistently report being trapped in a donor-driven, project-based model that restricts their autonomy, innovation, and local responsiveness. 'Strict procedures and instructions... leave little room for finding better ways to engage with partners and beneficiaries,' resulting in activities that sometimes lack relevance or appropriateness – for example, distributing unnecessary aid or organising events for displaced populations who have already relocated (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025).

> "The initial response was so hectic. There wasn't much space for capacity building, but I think there was definitely some skills sharing and I think that goes back and forth as well. On the other side, it really created much greater dependency on international aid flows."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

The administrative burden reported by NGOs is overwhelming. Some organisations report spending up to 80% of their time on compliance rather than direct service delivery. During the siege of Kyiv (February-April 2022), one CSO was instructed to obtain multiple price quotes for procurement, even though only a few stores were operational (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025). Another foundation reported halting operations for five months just to reconcile its accounts and reporting after the initial crisis phase (Kucheriv, 2023). Reporting requirements are reportedly complex and time-consuming, draining staff capacity and delaying program delivery (ActionAid, 2024). These challenges are particularly acute for smaller, regional CSOs who often lack the administrative infrastructure to meet international demands (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025).

> "The problem of large Ukrainian organizations - and this is where they currently lose to international organizations - is that they do not so effectively cascade all their best practices to the level of field employees."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

When it comes to decision-making, despite international claims of partnership, local CSOs feel marginalised. Around 80% NGOs in one survey believe they have only partial or no influence over how humanitarian programmes are designed (Center for Disaster Philanthropy et al. 2024). This is compounded by indirect communication with donors, inappropriate or disrespectful data requests, and long delays in disbursements. Participation in coordination clusters has been found to have improved modestly, but significant barriers remain. These include a lack of funding to attend meetings, meeting formats that are often irrelevant to local actors, and limited transparency in how international agencies make strategic decisions (REACH, 2024) (Center for Disaster Philanthropy et al. 2024).

Even as most UN agencies now have localisation strategies and designated staff roles, their written policies and monitoring systems remain largely unchanged. As a result, localisation remains so far more a strategic narrative than a structural transformation (Center for Disaster Philanthropy et al. 2024).[6]

In response to these challenges, civil society actors and their allies have articulated a clear vision for a locally led response grounded in shared leadership, empowerment, inclusion, and resilience (Alliance UA CSO, 2024). These principles include:

- Devolving planning and decision-making closer to affected communities
- Recognising and addressing gendered, age-related, disability-specific, and minority vulnerabilities
- Protecting and strengthening Ukraine's diverse civil society ecosystem at all levels
- Ensuring affected populations are not just beneficiaries but co-creators of aid responses

Yet, the failure to invest meaningfully in this vision continues. 'Donors often prioritise working with large, well-established organisations because it is more convenient,' reinforcing the marginalisation of smaller, community-rooted actors (ActionAid, 2024). Moreover, 'a meagre percentage of funding in the first two years of the war was directly allocated to local actors,' despite significant increases in overall aid to Ukraine (Koriukalov & Chermoshentseva, 2025).

Volunteering and Human Resources

Ukraine's civil society is powered by volunteer spirit and public trust. Since 2014 – and even more since 2022 – volunteering has become both a civic norm and a survival strategy. Yet this strength is undermined by a growing reliance on overstretched volunteers, and fragile human resource systems destabilised by displacement, burnout, and international organisations competing for talent. Addressing these challenges will be essential for sustaining current activities, and for ensuring long-term resilience of Ukraine's civil society.

Volunteering has become one of the most powerful and visible expressions of civic mobilisation in Ukraine, especially during periods of national crisis. The volunteer movement first surged in response to 2014 Russian aggression, when thousands of citizens joined efforts to support displaced persons, provide humanitarian relief, and assist the Ukrainian military. A civic–military volunteer infrastructure emerged, as active citizens organised supply chains and support networks for front-line forces (Worschech, 2017).

The 2022 full-scale invasion by Russia triggered an even more dramatic mobilisation. According to UN and other studies, between 60% and 80% of the population have participated in public or civic activities since the invasion began. A Zagoriy Foundation survey found that by August 2022, one in three Ukrainians was actively volunteering. The Volunteer Platform initiative alone connected more than 400,000 users to opportunities in the months following February 2022 (Andrieieva et al, 2023). Volunteers in Ukraine have earned high levels of public trust. This trust has helped anchor volunteer groups as essential actors in the national response effort and as legitimate providers of humanitarian and civic support. Volunteer-based CSOs have therefore emerged not just as stopgap responders but as core institutional actors within the country's response framework. They have addressed critical gaps in state service provision and showcased civil society's resilience and adaptability (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025).

Despite this remarkable volunteer mobilisation, Ukrainian civil society faces human resource challenges that threaten its sustainability. The shortage of qualified personnel has become a persistent problem, with serious operational consequences. As Open Space Works Ukraine (2025) highlights, multiple factors have converged:

- Military mobilisation, which has drawn many young and skilled men away from civilian roles
- Internal displacement and external migration, leading to the departure of many workers to safer areas or abroad
- Brain-drain to international NGOs and agencies, which often offer better pay and security

These trends have left many CSOs understaffed or reliant on volunteers without long-term employment prospects or adequate training.

There are also signs of volunteer fatigue and emotional burnout. As the war continues, a significant risk of attrition looms among volunteers and across the entire civil society sector. According to interviews, some civic actors are already planning to leave Ukraine after the war, citing exhaustion, trauma, and frustration with state institutions. This could result in a substantial post-war outflow of experienced personnel, undermining the continuity and institutional memory of the sector (Kucheriv, 2023), mirroring the wider challenge Ukraine faces in loss of human capital as a result of the war (Tokariuk, 2025).

Reliance on short-term, project-based staffing – driven by external donor funding models (see above) – further compounds the instability of the human resources system in Ukrainian civil society.

Organisations are frequently unable to secure or retain staff due to lack of long-term contracts and insufficient support for administrative and well-being needs.

Civil Society Collaboration: Coalitions and Networks

One of the most notable shifts within Ukraine civil society has been the increase in collaboration among CSOs. While person-to-person trust remains foundational to Ukraine's resistance, there is now a discernible trend toward greater collective action and strategic cooperation between organisations working together based on shared goals, with joint initiatives emerging across the country to address the consequences of war, resist aggression, and contribute to recovery.

This collaborative ethos reflects a recognition that complex, large-scale crises require coordinated responses, and it signals the growing maturity and solidarity within Ukraine's civil society sector. Many national organisations are also actively investing in the capacity strengthening of regional partners, helping to strengthen the civil society ecosystem beyond urban centres. Network-based CSOs – such as the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union[7], the 100% Life Network[8], and Building Ukraine Together[9]– have played a central role in this process. With regional offices or affiliates across nearly every oblast, these networks ensure that local initiatives are supported, connected, and empowered, even under conditions of instability and displacement (Andrieieva et al, 2023).

> "The existence of some kind of platform of dialogue [for organizations] is already a good opportunity, a place to catch-up and to understand what is their position on this or that issue. The approach we [all together] are not working on enough is the possibility of some kind of coalitions at a grassroots level."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

Civil Society and Governance

The relationship between civil society and the state in Ukraine is unusual and evolving. Unlike in many other countries, where CSOs play a consultative or advocacy-based role, Ukrainian civil society has developed into an active co-creator of policy.

This expanded role means that activists and CSO representatives now frequently assist in writing laws, provide technical and policy expertise, advise central and local government bodies, and advocate or lobby for reforms at national and regional levels. Civil society also often coordinates implementation efforts and plays a watchdog role. This active role in governance reflects a blurring of boundaries between the state and civic actors, where CSOs increasingly function as both partners and outsiders within the political system.

Young volunteers share good practices on supporting internally displaced people, fostering solidarity and learning
Carol García/ActionAid

One important example of institutionalised cooperation is Ukraine's engagement in the Open Government Partnership[10]– a global initiative aimed at promoting transparency, accountability, civic participation, and innovation. The OGP process has become one of the core frameworks through which civil society and the government interact on strategic governance reform (Andrieieva et al, 2023).

However, despite these advances, gaps in democratic governance practices remain. Many CSOs report that decision-making processes remain opaque, especially within regional and district administrations. Civil society actors frequently find themselves excluded from meaningful participation in reconstruction and recovery planning. Even when organisations are invited to meetings, they often describe these as tokenistic, with authorities showing limited interest in genuine collaboration or power-sharing (Open Space Works Ukraine, 2025). These contradictions reflect a broader tension within Ukraine's state–civil society relationship: while CSOs are often invited to co-create policy, they are still confronted by top-down cultures, lack of transparency, and bureaucracy.

> "The bill [on Youth] should be revised. Here again we have a question: how good can it be be if there is no transparent procedure for discussing it with young people. This is answered in different ways. Someone says that there are experts, that its not practical that a million people are writing a draft of a law, that there are a group of experts with an understanding of the topic who can write it. But if there is a group of experts, it still could be shared for discussion, to collect feedback and suggestions. Therefore, it is complicated. The law, it seems, contains useful tools, but also a number of debatable points. And here we have another thing; the legislation is very important and it determines policy - how the youth policy itself will be conducted; but in this situation, when we are in an era of turbulence, there are simply not enough resources for this process. Because now we have the very acute question of survival, and you are simply not able to get involved as you would like in these topics. In fact, wartime is, on the one hand, defining and existential. And on the other hand, there is a threat that society will simply wave its hand and just accepts new polices as good only because many other important things are happening at the very same time. And it also raises the question of whether the need to change the legislation [on Youth] is so critical and if it a convenient time for this, considering all our problems.
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

Gender and Psychosocial Impacts of War

Despite the severe disruption or the war, Ukraine has made some formal strides in advancing gender equality. The State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men for the period up to 2030 was approved by Ukraine's Cabinet of Minister in August 2022 and, also in 2022, Ukraine ratified the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – a major legislative step towards safeguarding women's rights. The following year, the government updated its National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, which prioritises the role of women in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and post-war recovery, acknowledging both their vulnerability and their leadership potential in times of crisis (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025). The process of developing a new National Action Plan for the implementation of the Security Council Resolution for the period 2026-2030 is ongoing, with the input of civil society (UN Women, 2025).

However, policy advances coexist with persistent structural barriers, including around the funding, sustainability, and autonomy of Women's Rights Organisations (WROs). A comprehensive 2025 study by Kvinna till Kvinna revealed that although funding for WROs has increased since the war began, it remains heavily short-term, project-based, and focused on emergency response, not on sustainable, transformative change (Koriukalov & Chermoshentseva, 2025).

For instance, only 16.7% of WROs receive core, flexible funding, and just 6.7% receive support for long-term advocacy or institutional development. The overwhelming focus on short-term humanitarian programming has sidelined efforts to build gender-responsive institutions, pursue systemic reforms, or address the root causes of inequality (Koriukalov & Chermoshentseva, 2025). Furthermore, 41.4% of WROs report significant donor-imposed restrictions on how they can use funds, which severely limits their autonomy. Funding disparities are starkest in rural areas, where grassroots and community-based organisations struggle to access even basic grants,

while larger, well-connected WROs receive more consistent support. The situation is particularly acute for organisations working with marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ women, women with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and female veterans. Although over half (52.9%) of WROs serve such communities, only 12.7% receive targeted funding for these efforts. Reportedly, donor reluctance to adopt intersectional approaches reinforces patterns of exclusion and underfunding. WROs are therefore often trapped in survival mode. A worrying 76% report having no financial security beyond 2024, and nearly 35% spend more than 30% of their working time on donor compliance tasks, leaving little space for strategy, care work, or innovation (Koriukalov & Chermoshentseva, 2025). Gender responsive programming is, in this way, contingent on localisation.

The direct and knock-on impacts of the freezing of US foreign assistance has created a further crisis for women-led and women's rights organizations in Ukraine. Seventy-three percent (73%) of 99 organizations that responded to a recent survey reported significant disruptions, and 93% said they were forced to suspend at least one Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) program. The report found that the effect is likely to be dramatic especially on the women and girls living in the most war-affected regions in East and South of Ukraine.

"Despite all efforts to make meaningful representation a priority, we could still be doing much more. Within LGBTQI+ communities, there is a strong concern that they are losing funding - and, as a result, losing the capacity to delegate people and to have enough presence to participate in humanitarian coordination.

Organizations that work with ethnic communities are severely underfunded. One of the reasons is that before 2022, they were primarily engaged in development projects - they were working on strategies, such as the Roma Minority Strategy (Strategy for Promoting the Rights and Opportunities of Persons Belonging to the Roma National Minority in Ukrainian Society until 2030). They collaborated with the government, supported reforms, worked with local departments, and promoted cultural initiatives. These organizations working with ethnic minorities have since shifted to providing humanitarian assistance - both to members of their own communities and beyond.

The inclusion of minorities at all levels is still lacking. I have serious concerns that, with decreasing funding - and especially with the current approach of the U.S. government, particularly toward LGBTQI+ communities - even greater risks may emerge..

These gender-related funding and operational pressures are compounded by a widespread mental health crisis within Ukrainian civil society. The stress of prolonged war, overwork, and chronic financial uncertainty has produced high levels of burnout, particularly among staff in small or underfunded organisations. Partners interviewed by ActionAid in 2025 emphasised the urgent need for budget lines dedicated to mental health support, including access to professional psychological care, team retreats, and other well-being measures. However, these needs are often excluded from donor guidelines and project budgets, leaving organisations without the tools to address burnout proactively.

"People [humanitarian workers] are now at the edge; the work environment is unstable, the sector, in general, is unstable. And for many we see sacrificing the family, being at the service 24/7. There is worsening psychosocial state and the health status."

Anonymous contributor

In many cases, the legal and employment context exacerbates these issues. A large share of CSO staff work under private entrepreneur contracts (ФОПи)[11], which exclude them from standard labour protections like paid sick leave, health insurance, or job security. This status not only increases personal vulnerability but also prevents organisations from establishing institutional structures that protect their teams over the long term (ActionAid, 2024). As a result, burnout is not just a personal or organisational challenge, it is a systemic issue rooted in structural funding models, legal precarity, and humanitarian working conditions.

People with disabilities must play a key role in a just reconstruction that leaves no one behind.
Anastasia Vlasova/ActionAid

Looking Ahead

Operating Context: Aid Under Threat and Ongoing Conflict

In January 2025, the US Government suspended USAID-funded foreign aid for 90 days, issuing stop-work orders that disrupted humanitarian operations globally including in Ukraine. As Ukraine relies heavily on humanitarian support, with the US historically contributing 25–30% of annual funding, the freeze poses severe risks for both international and Ukrainian organisations. The suspension led to the pre-emptive halting of some programmes, over fears that costs incurred during the freeze would not be reimbursed. According to one report, humanitarian actors were preparing to scale down operations, especially in frontline and hard-to-reach areas, and including services such as safe evacuations and assistance for the most vulnerable populations (acaps, 2025). Beyond life-saving interventions, the pause also affects programmes aimed at developing Ukraine's civil society and humanitarian sector, such as those run by UCBI and IREX (ActionAid Eastern Europe, 2025). If prolonged, disruption may increase community tensions, by squeezing government social services and deepening humanitarian needs.
The ACAPS study cited above developed three main scenarios for the future of the war Ukraine. All foresee continued – or increasing – insecurity, socioeconomic impacts, and challenges in meeting existing and new humanitarian needs, with frontline areas seeing the most acute needs, but with the greatest number of people needing aid away from the front lines. The scenarios identified by ACAPS inluded:

- Scenario 1: **Continued war without resolution:** : An agreement to end hostilities remains elusive as both parties seek to negotiate from a position of strength. Both parties continue to fight a war of attrition, exhausting each other's military capabilities and resources to achieve slow, incremental territorial gains.
- Scenario 2: **Reduction of hostilities:** Ukraine and the Russian Federation agree to a ceasefire. Weak enforcement and lack of security guarantees lead to occasional and localised military clashes, always threatening a return to full-scale war
- Scenario 3: **Escalating war:** The US withdraws military and political support and European allies' step in to fill some of the gaps. Critical delays resupplying Ukraine provide Russia with a window for intensifying air, drone, and missile attacks across the country and achieving rapid – but limited – ground advances. (acaps, 2025)

From Response to Recovery

Within the contexts of reduced funding and ongoing conflict, civil society is grappling with the enormous challenge of continuing its response to humanitarian needs across the country, while also contributing to, even driving, recovery and reconstruction. Several existing studies commentaries, or make recommendations about, how the civil society sector might pivot towards recovery, and challenges faced.

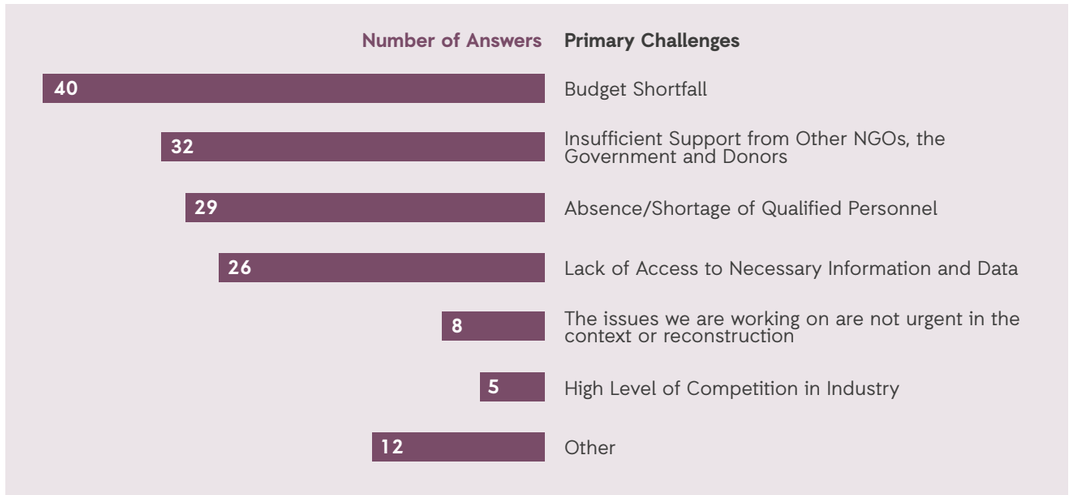
In the current phase of the war, many NGOs are now actively shaping Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction agenda. Leading coalitions such as RISE Ukraine, RRR4U, and the Reanimation Package of Reforms (RPR) are at the forefront of efforts to promote transparency, accountability, and civic oversight. Their initiatives include:

- The DREAM platform: a national digital ecosystem for recovery management
- The "Russia Will Pay" project: documenting war damages for future reparations
- Public advocacy for citizen inclusion in reconstruction planning and funding oversight

Civil society is no longer merely delivering aid; it is helping to design and govern the systems that will rebuild the country (Andrieieva et al, 2023). Despite its promise, the transition to recovery is not without obstacles, with key barriers mirroring the same challenges faced within the humanitarian response, namely:

- Lack of direct access to donor coordination mechanisms
- Limited core and multi-year funding, especially for small or regional organisations
- Human resource shortages, exacerbated by displacement and burnout
- Institutional underdevelopment, particularly in financial management and compliance

Challanges for NGOs in Reconstruction



(Andrieieva et al, 2023)

Supporting the Change

The relevance from international stakeholders, including ActionAid, to support a locally-led response. And for this to be possible, is necessary to address the main challenges identified by the different stakeholders involved

Cooperation between organizations: lack of common voice

As we approach the 4th year since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, informants for this report reflected that while informal coordination among NGOs is strong (via WhatsApp groups, peer networks, and referrals), interviewees repeatedly highlighted the absence of a unified, strategic voice in shaping national recovery and donor strategies. Current civil society engagement remains fragmented, reactive, and largely sidelined from top-level policy and funding decisions. Without a structured coalition, NGOs risk being consulted but not empowered.

Looking forward, they believe Ukrainian civil society has a crucial role in shaping recovery — not just in service delivery, but in visioning what kind of society emerges after the war. Without this, the imbalance of power remains entrenched, and local expertise risks being ignored in Ukraine's long-term reconstruction. Multiple speakers call for a "Reanimation Package for Recovery"— a civil society platform with a facilitating responsibility could proactively draft, advocate for, and monitor reforms across critical sectors like housing, social protection, and inclusion.

> "Recovery isn't just rebuilding infrastructure. It's about trust, dialogue, and dignity. That's what civil society can bring."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

- "If civil society doesn't draft tomorrow's policies today, someone else will." (Anonymous contributor)
- "We need a 'Reanimation Package' for 2025—an ad-hoc coalition of NGOs, experts (e.g., labor lawyers, social policy analysts), and diaspora professionals who can draft policy reform proposals in advance, not scramble at the last minute." (Anonymous contributor)

What INGOs could commit to:

- To committ to the involvement of population to the programmes and support the grassroots initiatives;
- Support the formation of strategic platforms and cross-sector working groups where local CSOs, researchers, and activists can jointly work on the reform proposals and recovery priorities;
- Support dialogue with the government (where needed);
- Facilitate inclusive, safe dialogue spaces and co-creation;
- Promote peer-to-peer learning across thematic areas and organizational levels — including between urban and rural actors, large and small NGOs, formal and informal initiatives.

Issues in partnerships between local NGOs and INGOs

Many local NGOs expressed ambivalence and frustration regarding their relationships with INGOs. Despite the language of "localization" and "partnership", INGOs often act as gatekeepers—controlling funding, setting priorities, and engaging in transactional rather than strategic relationships. Local actors are frequently asked to implement projects but are excluded from program design, strategic decision-making, and high-level advocacy. It should be support and promotion of the production of knowledge based on the real experience of local civil society to support peer-to-peer learning across thematic areas and organizational levels.

Another recurring issue is INGOs' recruitment practices, which drain talent from local organizations. Furthermore, duplicated trainings waste limited staff time, while opportunities for meaningful capacity-sharing and co-creation remain rare. The promise of localization thus remains largely unfulfilled in practice, perpetuating dependency rather than building equal partnerships.

> "I don't want us to become like some international NGOs I've seen — bureaucratic, slow, emotionally distant. But we also can't keep working like this."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

- "They ask us to implement, but not to design. That's not partnership." (Anonymous contributor)
- " Don't just build capacity — shift power." (Anonymous contributor)

What INGOs could commit to:

- **Practice programme co-creation:** involve local partners in the earliest stages of program design, theory of change development, and budget planning of the whole programme / project, not just a fragment of it; provision of support in a process;
- **The reinforcement of local leadership and meaningful participation:** provide long-term mentorship, leadership development, and organizational strengthening, including the administrative area;
- **Align HR practices with localization values:** develop ethical recruitment guidelines to explore exchange models;
- **Streamline and coordinate training:** cooperate and communicate with other INGOs to reduce duplication and prioritize need-based, context-specific training through a process of joint identification of the gaps and its coverage;
- **Shift from control to trust:** recognize that managing risk does not require managing partners. Build funding relationships based on transparency, shared goals, and mutual accountability—not compliance alone.

Cooperation with state authorities and access to state funds

The relationship between civil society and state authorities is marked by vertical weakness. While some local NGOs coordinate well at the local (hromada) level, engagement at oblast and national levels is often opaque and selective. NGOs without political connections find themselves unable to influence policy or access recovery processes in meaningful ways. Access to state funding is similarly limited, with a lack of clear mechanisms for grassroots or marginalized groups to apply and participate.

As this report notes, civil society's role during the crisis proved indispensable — but institutionalizing this role in recovery remains a challenge. There is a clear call to re-center civil society in planning and delivery, ensure equitable access to state funds, and move beyond performative consultation toward genuine, empowered participation.

> "Only those NGOs with direct liaisons to individual ministers or parliamentary deputies gain traction on policy. Others simply never receive a response to their position papers."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

> "Ensure equitable access to state funds for grassroots and regional organizations, including those representing marginalized groups."
>
> **Anonymous contributor**

What INGOs could commit to:

- Support voices that are not heard and listened to, at different levels;
- Support exchange between different local NGOs and other actors through creation of the open and safe-scaped platforms;
- Provide technical and financial support to local leaders in international advocacy, establishing direct contacts with institutional donors, and promoting equal partnership.
- Support initiatives that create lasting infrastructure for monitoring government accountability, citizen engagement, and civil society participation in budgeting, oversight, and planning.

Ukrainian NGO staff engage in a peer-to-peer exchange and learning of good practices.
Anastasia Vlasova/ActionAid

Women take the lead in the Protection Committee in Sad, Sumy Oblast, strengthening community resilience and safety
Daria Svertilova/ActionAid

Recommendations for Changes

Ukraine's civil society has proven itself as a vital force in the country's defense, humanitarian response, and now, in shaping the trajectory of recovery. However, to fully realize its transformative potential, the systems surrounding civil society must be reimagined. The recovery of Ukraine stands the best chance of success if it is rooted in local leadership, institutional resilience, and inclusive governance. This requires a shift from fragmented, short-term project support to sustained, flexible, and strategic investment in the civil society ecosystem.

Currently, donor practices remain heavily oriented around project-specific grants that often overlook the foundational needs of local NGOs. For civil society to thrive as a strategic partner in recovery, funding must evolve to support organizational infrastructure, staff wellbeing, and long-term planning. This includes multi-year grants that bridge the gap between emergency response and recovery, resources for mental health and administrative overheads, and leadership development opportunities—especially outside of Kyiv and other key urbanised areas. At the same time, the broader aid architecture must shift to rebalance power and resources toward local actors. Ukrainian NGOs—often more effective and better placed for frontline response—should receive direct support, with international actors acting as facilitators rather than gatekeepers. Pooled funds and anchor organizations can help direct funding to smaller or regional civil society groups, ensuring that diverse voices are included in the recovery process.

For Ukraine's recovery to be inclusive and democratic, civil society must not only be funded but actively embedded in governance structures. Ukrainian NGOs should have a meaningful seat at the table in donor coordination platforms and reconstruction initiatives—public and private alike. Civil society coalitions offer an entry point into local contexts and should be recognized as holders of valuable knowledge and trust. Investment should go beyond projects to support systems—shared physical spaces, data-sharing tools, psychosocial support services, and mechanisms for collaboration and learning. Tools like DREAM and digital innovations developed by Ukrainian actors can strengthen transparency and accountability. Ultimately, recovery should not be seen as a series of isolated projects but as an opportunity to build durable, interconnected systems that empower Ukrainian civil society to lead.

"I know that only in Kharkivska oblast 32 volunteers died; but who knows how many volunteers died in Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Poltava, Kropyvnytskyi, or Kryvyi Rih? And the most problematic thing is that even Kryvyi Rih itself does not know how many volunteers died, because their organizations do not communicate with each other. They communicate in very small groups, those who are friends with each other, but there is no general coordinating body there, which can unite the entire sector. So when you are asking about recovery programs, the question is if they are ready for those programs, if they know about these programs, what do they know, and what do they know about it in general, do they know how it differs from [emergency] response, do they know what NEXUS is. No one can clearly tell what it is, when it will be, how it will look like, and what it includes.

Anonymous contributor

An internally displaced woman turned volunteer, now supporting others across different regions of Ukraine.
Anastasia Vlasova/ActionAid

Acronyms

BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
ICVA	International Council for Voluntary Agencies
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IO	Intermediary Organisation
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTQI+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer/Questioning Intersex +
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organisation
MEAL	Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning
NGCA	Non-Government Controlled Area
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGORC	NGO Resource Center
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
RPR	Reanimation Package of Reforms
TOT	Temporarily Occupied Territory
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WCSO	Women's Civil Society Organisation

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Endnotes

1. Reanimation Package of Reforms is a 'coalition of leading non-governmental organizations and experts from all over Ukraine who have pooled their efforts to facilitate and implement reforms'. Read more here: https://rpr.org.ua/en/
2. Vostock (Восток) SOS (or East SOS) provides comprehensive assistance to victims of armed conflict and internally displaced persons (IDPs), support for democratic transformation, and promotion of human rights values in Ukraine. Read more here: https://east-sos.org/en/
3. In Ukraine, CSOs can be registered under several legal forms, depending on their structure, purpose, and activities. The main forms include Public Associations (Громадські об'єднання); Charitable Organisations (Благодійні організації); Religious Organisations (Релігійні організації); Trade Unions (Профспілки); Professional Associations (Професійні об'єднання); and Self-organised Bodies (Органи самоорганізації населення). All CSOs in Ukraine must register with the Ministry of Justice or local justice departments and can receive non-profit status from the tax authorities to be eligible for tax benefits.
4. NGO types can be defined as follows: Analytical: Research and analysis. Advocacy: Advocacy primarily towards Government or international actors. Service: Providing aid or public services. Watchdog: accountability through awareness' raising eg investigative journalism. Fact-checking: fact-checking Russian propaganda or other politicians or state bodies.
5. 'Come Back Alive' is a charitable foundation for competent assistance to the army, as well as the CBA Initiatives Center, a non-governmental organisation that helps strengthen Ukraine's security and defence sector. Read more here: https://savelife.in.ua/en/about-foundation-en/
6. While this report is being produced, there is an ongoing reform initiative intended to reshape the humanitarian system called "Humanitarian Reset". Aiming to improve efficiency and effectiveness, includes a theorical strong focus on localisation, but remains to be seen what is going to be the final set-up and how transformative will be in terms of national and local organisations leadership. For more information, see https://www.icvanetwork.org/humanitarianreset
7. The Ukrainian Helsinki Union is the largest association of human rights organizations in Ukraine. It defends human rights, gives advice, and provides representation in court. Read more here: https://www.rights.in.ua/en/themes/organisations/non-govermental-organisations/ukrainian-helsinki-human-rights-union
8. The 100% Life Network works to provide 100% access to treatment to Ukrainian patients by improving the quality of live for HIV-positive people, promoting the rights and freedoms of people living with HIV, TB and HCV. Read more here: https://network.org.ua/en/
9. Building Ukraine Together - is a non-governmental organisation that creates opportunities for youth to make a difference in the country through volunteering. Read more here: https://www.bur.org.ua/en/about-us-new/
10. Despite the armed aggression against the country and the martial law restrictions, the implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative continues in Ukraine. Read more here: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/ukraine/
11. In Ukraine, a Private Entrepreneur (FOP; ФОПи) contract is a civil law agreement between a company and an individual who is registered as a private entrepreneur. It's a way for companies to hire individual service providers, allowing them to avoid the complexities of employment contracts and associated tax liabilities.

Annex 1

Questions to semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs)

1. Tell me about your organisation and/or your role, and how you have come to be associated with the humanitarian response?
2. How would you describe the response's impact on civil society actors in the country?
3. Prompts:
   - How has funding availability changed over time? (who are you donors?)
   - What capacity strengths/constraints were there from CSOs at different points in the response?
   - What impact has regulatory / political environment for the response?
4. What do you think are the opportunities to strengthen civil society? (resilience/effectiveness/sustainability)
5. How do gender and LGBTQI+ dynamics play out within the response and within the civil society organisations responding?
6. What role can civil society play in leading system change in the civil society and what are the barriers to this?
7. Could you please have a look at the preliminary findings (ActionAid, 2025) and tell us if you agree or disagree and on which points; what is the most influencing stakeholder that civil society should address the main concerns / issues to? What role should play an international NGO (like ActionAid) in the process?
8. If you were leading this research, what questions would you most like to ask local/national civil society partners?
9. How can we best use the research process, and the research findings, to amplify the voices of civil society and empower their advocacy efforts?

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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