

# THE TANGIBLE VALUE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY:

How collaborative local governance supports crisis response  
in Ukraine amid the Russian full-scale invasion



## Executive summary

This brief highlights how collaborative local governance aids Ukrainian communities in responding to crises caused by Russia's full-scale invasion and boosts societal resilience. Co-production between local governments, residents, nonprofits, and businesses has led to practical solutions for challenges like internal displacement. Three recommendation areas are key to strengthening the crisis response: 1. maintaining a functioning self-governance system while setting up feedback loops to other levels of government, 2. fostering communication through joint emergency planning within communities and creating community spaces, and 3. improving digital readiness to support communication and local government operations. The experience of Ukrainian local governments showcases the tangible benefits of local democracy.

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**Coverphoto:** Rally in support of Ukraine in Milan, one year after the full-scale invasion.

**Photo** Castello Sforzesco — Stock Editorial Photography.

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## Introduction

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 created many crises, such as massive displacement and destroyed critical infrastructure. Despite the horrific human and material toll of the invasion, Ukraine maintains its statehood. It shows the capacity to respond to multiple war-related crises emerging as the war rages on.

Local self-government authorities (LSGs) have played a crucial role in Ukraine's wartime resilience. LSGs have responded to the immediate humanitarian needs of affected populations, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other vulnerable groups, providing shelter, food, and essential supplies. They have undertaken efforts to restore and maintain municipal infrastructure, ensuring that critical services such as water, electricity, and heating continue to function. The significance of LSGs in Ukraine's societal resilience highlights that decentralised local governance can offer context-specific solutions during crises.

The *collaborative* response of the Ukrainian local self-governments embodies the practical value of local democracy. Indeed, many solutions to war-related crises emerged from the joint efforts of local self-governments, residents, local NGOs, entrepreneurs, and affected populations, such as IDPs. Previous public information and engagement practices had often established the initial trust, essential skills, and communication tools necessary for coordination between local governmental and non-governmental stakeholders during crises. The experiences of Ukrainian local self-governments offer valuable lessons for local authorities worldwide, especially as operating environments become increasingly volatile.

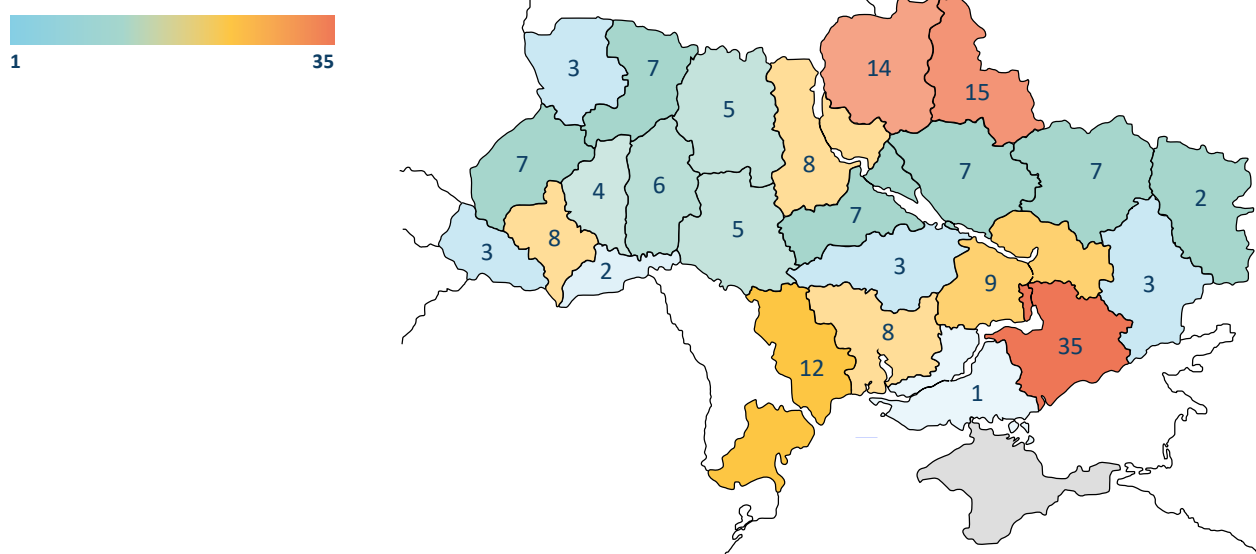


## Context and methods

Ukraine is a unitary state that has recently undergone decentralisation reforms (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2014). These reforms established contemporary LSGs as locally elected administrations within the lowest administrative units (hromada, or community), with guaranteed shares of tax revenue (OECD, 2018). During the martial law imposed due to Russia's full-scale invasion, LSGs experienced some reductions in their competencies. However, in most areas under Ukraine's governmental control, LSGs remain relatively autonomous in providing local public services and socio-economic development.

This brief is based on a survey conducted among Ukrainian LSGs between January 1 and March 12, 2024. The survey was primarily distributed via the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities (All-Ukrainian Association of ATCs). The dataset from the survey comprises 181 responses, representing 14% of municipalities under the control of the Ukrainian government (see Figure 1). Most respondents (89%) were public officials from municipalities with a population of 50,000 residents or fewer, both rural and urban. Most of the responding municipalities are in the rear or have been liberated (67%), while 14% of the sample is currently under temporary occupation by Russia, and 19% is located in areas of active hostilities. Interviews and a validation workshop with LSGs and civil society representatives provided additional qualitative evidence for the conclusions<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 1 Surveyyed LSGs by region



1. See the full report on the details of survey distribution and methodology (Keudel et al., 2024, p. 13). In case of occupation, LSGs physically relocate to government-controlled territory but maintain the status of a temporarily occupied territory.

## Research results

This section briefly reports Ukrainian LSGs' practices for engaging non-governmental stakeholders in crisis response, followed by a summary of enabling conditions and challenges analysis.

### The purpose and extent of public engagement

Most surveyed LSGs (71%), including those in temporarily occupied areas (64%) and in the territory of hostilities (69%), report having had initiatives to inform and/or engage citizens or businesses within their hromadas in the year before the survey. They did this for two main purposes:

1. **Pragmatic:** attracting resources to the community, meeting the needs of vulnerable social groups, and coordinating supply and demand for help, such as for the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) and IDPs.

**Pragmatic public engagement** ranges from a doctor of a municipal clinic in Novovolynsk (Volyn region) mobilising his medical contacts abroad for medical support and advice<sup>2</sup> to inter-organizational cooperation such as the [UNBROKEN](#) rehabilitation center, established with the support of Lviv IT Cluster.

2. **Legitimacy:** almost 80% of respondents with information and engagement initiatives introduced them to involve stakeholders directly in problem-solving and include diverse opinions.

**Legitimacy through multi-stakeholder consultations**, exemplified by Makariv (Kyiv region). The hromada was massively damaged because of the Russian full-scale invasion, and the LSG involved the community – including the vocal opposition – to the discussions on revival. After about a year of difficult interaction and dialogue during facilitated urban planning workshops, the community now cooperated with its publics as partners. An informal Community Development Council emerged out of these conversations. An important factor to manage the diverse opinions was the invitation of independent NGO whose members facilitated the discussions (Darkovich et al., 2025, p. 34).

The primary critical problem for which LSGs reported public engagement has been the **integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs)**, with 34% of the total sample reporting it. Some municipalities saw IDPs and displaced enterprises as a source of economic growth and cultural revival, which prompted a more collaborative approach to meeting their needs.

2. Interview, September 2023.

LSGs may proactively create enabling conditions for relocated businesses. This includes providing production premises free-of-charge or at a discount, looking for housing for the relocated employees or facilitating links to local education providers to prepare local skilled labour. Examples include [Kopychyntsi \(Ternopil region\)](#) that accommodated a furniture factory and [Kosiv \(Ivano-Frankivsk region\)](#) which revived its traditional rug manufacturing thanks to a relocated textile business.

Besides, LSGs report stakeholder involvement in organising civilian security and defence (21%) and meeting residents' immediate needs, such as food and personal items (17%).

## Stakeholders engaged

Ukrainian LSGs engaged non-governmental stakeholders in various dimensions of citizen participation (Rosenzweigova et al., 2016). There were almost no respondents who did not inform any of the stakeholder groups in connection to a critical issue (e.g. IDPs' issues). At the same time, only about 1/5 of all respondents did not engage the public in the remaining consultation, dialogue and partnership dimensions. These high numbers indicate the collaborative nature of crisis response (Figure 2 on next page).

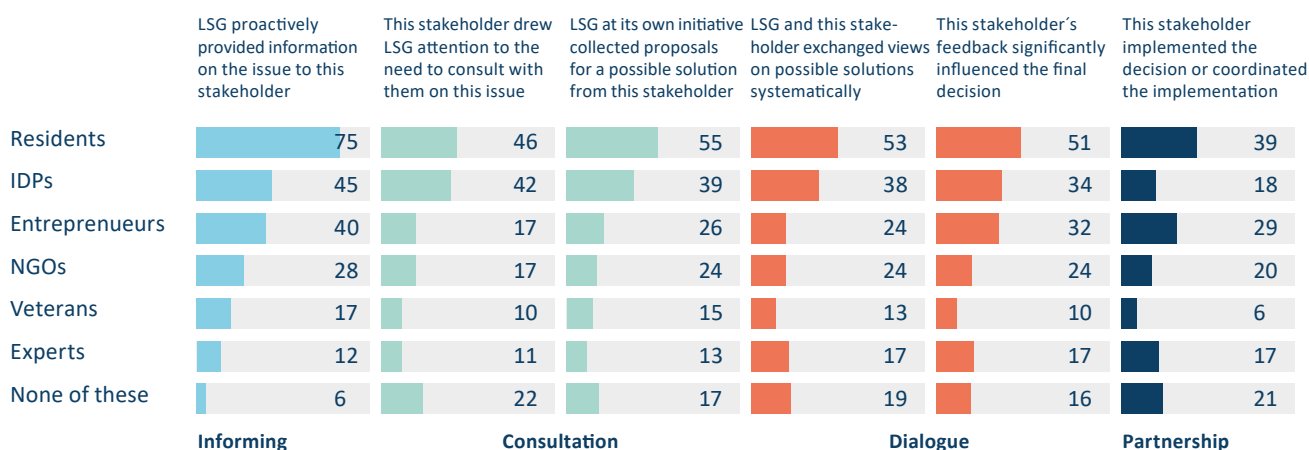
Between 2022 and 2024, **IDPs** marked the most significant rise in engagement with LSGs, notably in proactively providing information and engaging in regular discussions. LSGs would rely on IDP initiatives or initiatives and NGOs that support them as information facilitators to adjust their IDP programs to their needs. Increased engagement of IDPs in consultations also indicates the appreciation of more nuanced and everyday knowledge for problem-solving, even if the participants criticise the responsiveness of LSGs to their proposals.

**The pattern of IDP engagement** is exemplified by IDP Councils. These are advisory platforms, consisting of LSG and community representatives, set up in over 750 governing entities (mostly, LSGs, but also district and regional councils). IDP Councils often involve IDPs and NGOs that represent their interest, allowing the circulation of information on needs and possibilities of support between the LSG and the affected groups.

**NGOs emerge as crucial players in collaborative crisis response** who proactively address LSGs. In Ukraine, an advanced legislative framework for public consultations and a highly active civil society generally enable local NGOs to participate in discussions with LSGs. However, NGOs' feedback influences LSGs' decisions in fewer instances than it is provided. Examples of NGO involvement include a participatory approach to the construction and design of bomb shelters (NGO Dobrochyn, Chernihiv region)<sup>3</sup> and the facilitation of inclusive community centres across ten different hromadas ([NGO Cedoss](#)).

**Entrepreneurs also gained importance.** Although they do not necessarily seek to engage in policy consultations. However, when they provide feedback, it becomes crucial for local government structures (LSGs) because entrepreneurs have co-production resources and contribute to local taxes. Furthermore, more frequently than NGOs, entrepreneurs act as partners in implementing solutions to local issues. For instance, local taxi drivers offered free transportation for individuals with reduced mobility, and a solar cooperative supplied electricity to the LSG during power outages.

**Figure 2 Extent of stakeholder engagement in response to critical local war-related problems**



**Source: Authors**

*Note: N = 127 (LSGs outside combat areas, on the territory of hostilities and liberated LSGs that engaged the public or business in critical issues over the past 12 months). Question: Regarding the problem you identified in the previous question, which stakeholders were involved, and how did they participate in solving the problem? "Residents" refers to unorganised individuals, while NGOs refer to non-governmental organisations broadly as civil society organisations (formal or informal). "Experts" in the Ukrainian context are external consultants, often hired by development assistance or coming from universities (more rarely).*

3. Interview with Chairwoman Nataliya Drozd, 21 May 2024.



Finally, 10-15% of LSGs indicate they inform or consult war **veterans** about issues beyond strictly veteran policy. For example, Makariv, mentioned above, specifically reached out to the local veteran society during revitalisation discussions. This reflects how LSGs are sensitive to the composition of their communities and understand the significance of veterans' inclusion for social cohesion in their communities.

## Community spaces foster local community engagement

Our survey analysis indicates a small yet significant correlation between stakeholder involvement in crisis response and the functioning of various physical and discursive spaces within the community. The more spaces available, the more stakeholders LSGs report engaging in war-related problem-solving. The following spaces may be present in communities, listed in ascending order from the most to least common: humanitarian hubs, IDP councils, youth centres, IDP support centres, volunteer hubs, open spaces for public organisations or initiatives, adult education centres, and business support centres



## Digital tools and virtual infrastructure for local resilience

Digital tools have been critical elements of Ukraine's societal resilience (Zarembko et al., 2024). Indeed, most surveyed respondents rely on digital technology for emergency communication with residents, with social media and digital messengers like Viber and Telegram used as tools by most (77%). Still, 58% of respondents used community websites to disseminate critical information. Fewer LSGs use innovative tools, such as a “chatbot”, a mobile phone app that lets community residents receive or send information to service providers and local authorities. For example, [Sumy 15-80](#) city chatbot.

Yet, virtual infrastructure preparedness varies, with a sizeable proportion of communities vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Very few (23%) LSGs conduct vulnerability testing of IT systems, and only about half have measures to maintain a connection to a mobile network in an emergency. Partial backups of critical data are available in about 57% of municipalities. In all these categories, rural municipalities lag behind urban ones.

## Challenges

As the war progresses, sustaining collaborative relations between local authorities and their communities becomes more challenging. The outmigration and war-time exhaustion of civil society and LSG personnel make arranging active and inclusive participation more difficult. Security is a serious concern: in-person participation is virtually impossible in frontline municipalities due to constant shelling, but it is also challenging in rear municipalities since Russia may deliberately target public gatherings. The protracted state of emergency also features risks of local political conflicts and pressures from interest groups.

## Policy recommendations:

### Make the most of the decentralised crisis response

Ukraine's experience demonstrates that LSGs are essential for community resilience in a decentralised state, as they facilitate pragmatic and community-centred responses to war-related crises. Yet, they also face challenges related to centralising tendencies in multi-level governance during the war, limitations to capacity for internal collaboration, and digital preparedness. The following recommendations draw advantage of the lessons learned from the Ukrainian LSGs' crisis response practices to suggest mitigation strategies for these challenges.

#### 1. Recognise that local and central governments are partners in crisis response: intergovernmental coordination and feedback loops are necessary

Local self-governments (LSGs) can provide context-specific solutions that ease the state's efforts and lessen the burden on central authorities during war-related crises. They have a deep understanding of their local contexts, including the urgency of needs and the capacity of their communities to contribute to solutions. When local units address the local consequences of national crises, the state gains flexibility, making it less vulnerable to external shocks than centralised systems (Lebel et al., 2006). Therefore, LSGs should maintain relative autonomy over local matters, revenues, and spending despite the war.

However, coordination with other levels of government is more crucial than during peacetime. Examples from Ukraine include consultations with local authority associations and regional thematic platforms that bring together mayors and regional military administrations, occasionally facilitated by donors such as UNDP.

#### 2. Create conditions for collaborative crisis response by fostering communication between local public officials and non-governmental stakeholders

##### 2.1 Involve community members in crisis response planning.

Local actors, including NGOs and entrepreneurs, can collaborate with local authorities in crisis response, as they often possess the necessary knowledge, social networks, and resources. To enhance the effectiveness of their involvement, local governments should integrate these actors into civil defence planning. Joint action planning can expedite the establishment of cooperation during crises. In the context of Ukrainian municipalities, there is a lack of such prior involvement, which represents a missed opportunity for preparedness.

## 2.2 Invest in physical community spaces

Local governments and their international partners should invest in physical community spaces that adhere to security and accessibility standards, such as equipped bomb shelters and facilities for individuals with reduced mobility. Our statistical analysis indicates that the more spaces, such as youth or community centres, are available, the more stakeholders engage in war-related problem-solving within a community. Indeed, both physical and discursive spaces enable local communities to convene and cultivate interpersonal trust through shared activities, which is essential for public engagement.

## 2.3 Support the work of facilitators

Facilitators—individuals and organisations that professionally structure dialogue—can help alleviate intra-community tensions arising from differing personal experiences of a shared tragedy (e.g. war or a significant disaster) and, consequently, create pathways for collaboration. In Ukraine, community enterprises focused on development ('city institutes') or NGOs typically support community communication. Occasionally, business entities may engage professional facilitators to assist local government in structuring community dialogue on specific topics. Youth councils, village elders, university professors, and religious leaders can facilitate communication with diverse stakeholders.

## 2.4 Build communities' capacity for internal communication beyond official appointees.

Building the skills of officially designated communications officers in local governments for precise, targeted, and constructive communication tailored to the diverse needs of stakeholders is essential. Nevertheless, LSGs and other stakeholders, such as donors, should think creatively about engaging new groups as communicators (e.g., youth organisations and NGOs), as local authorities may be stretched to their limits while managing and responding to crises during the war. These groups must be trained in the same skills as the public officials mentioned above.

### 3. Invest in LSGs' resilience through a mix of digital and analogue solutions

#### 3.1 Digital solutions must consider the skills and accessibility of digital tools within a community.

The Ukrainian experience demonstrates that digital technologies are essential for communication and coordination among local governments in Ukraine. This enhances agility and speed in public information dissemination, which is crucial in times of high uncertainty. However, a heavy reliance on digital platforms also risks deepening the digital divide, potentially leaving behind those without access to the internet or digital skills.

Thus, combining digital and traditional communication methods is essential. In Ukraine, LSGs use stationary emergency alarms ("sirens"), telephone notifications, vehicle loudspeakers, and community radios alongside digital tools. Communicating through elders is feasible for rural communities.<sup>4</sup> It may be beneficial to designate well-known local places as meeting points in the event of power or mobile connection outages during an emergency.

#### 3.2 Invest in LSGs' digital preparedness.

Increased reliance on digitised data (e.g., for storing resident information) and digital communication between communities and agencies necessitate data backups and vulnerability assessments. Local government services often require support in planning these activities, acquiring suitable equipment and software, and hiring IT professionals.

<sup>4</sup> A Ukrainian version of an 'elder' is a starosta. It is an elected village representative who liaises between LSG and village residents; it is an official position with duties established both by the national laws and the regulations of a particular hromada council (Read more: <https://decentralization.ua/en/starosta>).





Local self-government leaders discuss opportunities and limitations of citizen engagement during the war at a research validation workshop in August 2024 in Kyiv, Ukraine.

## Discussion questions for local officials and politicians

- What pre-existing participatory practices and physical spaces for community encounters has your municipality, that could be reused for coordination in an emergency?
- To what extent are all relevant actors in your municipality (authorities, businesses, NGOs) engaged in planning emergency action?  
Do these actors know their roles? What are their communication tools?
- How well is a municipality's digital and analogue infrastructure prepared for external shocks, such as cyber-attacks and water, power, or food supply interruptions? Are there up-to-date and renewable stocks and energy sources for municipal services and bomb shelters? What measures are taken to reduce the risks of a larger divide?

## Further reading

Keudel, O., Hatsko, V., Darkovich, A., & Huss, O. (2024). Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities' Crisis Response in War (Research Report No. 33). Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy. <https://icld.se/en/publications/local-democracy-and-resilience-in-ukraine-learning-from-communities-crisis-response-in-war/>

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