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Multilevel Trust in Humanitarian Organisations in Ukraine: Beneficiaries' Perceptions and Interactions

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Abstract

Trust is widely recognised as a precondition for effective humanitarian action, yet little empirical work examines whom crisis-affected people in Ukraine trust, why, and with what consequences for access and programme design. This thesis maps beneficiaries' trust across actor types and identifies the factors that strengthen or erode it, interpreting results through a multilevel lens of relational, institutional, and generalised trust. A convergent mixed-methods design combined a computer-assisted self-administered (CASI) survey (n=150; April–May 2025) with five semi-structured interviews with intermediary practitioners (R1–R5) in Poltava Oblast who observe beneficiary behaviour at distribution points and municipal offices. Survey data provide breadth on baseline trust and factor salience; interviews supply depth on mechanisms and context. Integration proceeds through triangulated interpretation.

Findings show high baseline support for "humanitarians" as a category (84.4% answered yes to "should humanitarians be trusted?"), but trust becomes selective when specific actors are named: international NGOs attract the most consolidated confidence (61.3% rating 4–5/5), national NGOs sit in the middle, while local NGOs and governmental actors receive more neutral or fragmented ratings. Across methods, transparency dominates as a trust-builder by a wide margin; corruption/embezzlement, broken commitments, and opaque processes are leading drivers of distrust. Identity-linked cues—especially language use and perceived stance toward the war—operate as relational signals of respect or misalignment. Interviews highlight additional dynamics: barriers to access (cost/distance, digital literacy), local-level politicisation that contaminates perceptions of NGOs, the importance of needs-based adaptation, and the risk of aid dependency in frontline communities.

The thesis argues that multilevel action is needed to achieve durable trust in Ukraine: institutional signals (clear rules, visible reporting, fair targeting) must be paired with relational practice (predictable presence, respectful communication, rapid feedback loops). Recommendations translate this into programme adaptations for international and local actors and inform localisation strategies that rebalance roles without sacrificing accountability.

Keywords*: trust, humanitarian action, Ukraine, transparency, neutrality, relational trust, localisation, mixed methods*

List of Abbreviations & Aacronims

ATO — Anti-Terrorist Operation (term used by the Government of Ukraine)

CASI — Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing

CSO — Civil Society Organization

IDMC — Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

IDP — Internally Displaced Person

ICRC — International Committee of the Red Cross

INGO — International Non-Governmental Organization

IOM — International Organization for Migration

KIIS — Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

MSF — Médecins Sans Frontières

NGO — Non-Governmental Organization

OCHA — (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OECD — Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PIN — People in Need

R1–R5 — Interview respondent codes

UN — United Nations

UNHCR — United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USD — United States Dollar

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem

During the first six weeks following the full-scale invasion, the majority of humanitarian aid within Ukraine was coordinated and delivered by local actors. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians joined volunteer initiatives, often risking their own lives to help people in hard-to-reach areas. This included approximately 150 established national NGOs, religious organizations, and around 1,700 newly formed grassroots aid groups (Stoddard et al., 2022). In response to urgent needs, an informal humanitarian sector developed organically, building on pre-existing civil sector which has been developing intensely since 2014 as a response to the beginning of Russo-Ukrainian war. Local humanitarians relied on volunteer efforts, personal resources and local networks. These groups primarily operated by responding to immediate assistance requests within their communities and gradually expanding their efforts as resources became available. Alongside local authorities, they have remained the primary providers of aid in those first weeks of invasion. However, as the crisis continued, these local actors faced severe limitations, including financial depletion, fuel shortages, and physical exhaustion. Those who have managed to scale up and formalize into registered aid organizations have largely done so through funding from sources outside the traditional humanitarian system.

Concerns about corruption in Ukraine remain high, particularly with the massive inflow of international aid and limited possibilities for oversight during wartime. Although no misuse of direct budget support has been proven, perceptions of corruption alone could weaken humanitarian assistance. Scammers have been known to exploit the situation by posing as well-known local charities which are more susceptible to such a threat than international NGOs. Also, some local organizations have struggled coordinating with foreign donations, resulting in delivering unnecessary or expired goods (Fenton & Lohsen, 2022).

International humanitarian organizations that have been present in Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, despite having previous experience, were not prepared for a full-scale invasion. After the first few weeks, they decided to return, but all these processes of adjustment and scaling up took time, which was critical in this situation. In cases of great danger, humanitarian actors often use remote support from local actors during evacuations. These mechanisms were not used despite a robust and extensive system of local

humanitarian actors which have proven to be inclusive and effective (UN Women & CARE International, 2022).

The public discourse further complicated matters. A “war of words” in politics and media, where euphemisms and dysphemisms are used to legitimise one side and delegitimise the other, drew international organisations into controversy over language choices and framing (Al Sawi & Alaa, 2023). International humanitarian organizations became part of the narrative due to their use of ambiguous language and euphemisms when reporting on the Russo-Ukrainian war. Humanitarian organizations have been analyzed for this tendency in academic literature (Jaufillaili et al., 2021), (Campagna & Fernández, 2007) and the public-political sphere. In Ukraine, such positions were often perceived as siding with the enemy, which could have further eroded trust among Ukrainians.

Compounding this, state and local actors have not always understood how international humanitarian organisations operate, whether because inter-organisational relationships lacked transparency, because accountability systems use different “languages” of proof (Cooley, 2024), or because the sociopolitical climate has shifted during wartime (Shinoda & Fedorchenko-Kutuyev, 2025). Against this backdrop, new and revived concepts, such as “humanitarian resistance” (Slim, 2022), with earlier antecedents in practice (Mouradian, 2021)—have gained traction in public debate and among local responders. These differing ethical framings (neutrality vs. solidarity) shape expectations about what humanitarian actors should do and say, thereby influencing trust.

Perceptions of international VS. local organisations are not uniform: in 2014 many INGOs were firmly present in frontline oblasts and provided systematic assistance at a time when much of the local sector was only beginning to professionalise. By contrast, in early 2022 local groups mobilised faster, while many international actors were slower to resume in-country, visible operations (Noe, 2022). Whether this contrast in mobilisation speed affected beneficiaries’ trust is unknown. Multiple concurrent changes described above could have pushed perceptions in different directions. In the absence of systematic, respondent-level research for that period, existing accounts remain speculatory, and no causal inference can be drawn.

What we do know is that Ukrainians report high trust in civic and volunteer organisations—63% and 86%, respectively (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2023)—and, as of December 2024, 81% said they trust volunteer movements, with only 5% expressing distrust (Hrushetskyi, 2025). Yet these categories are broad in Ukraine as they often include initiatives that supply the military (Pankova & Kasperovich, 2022), and existing surveys do not differentiate trust by type of humanitarian actor (local, national, international, governmental). Nor do they identify which specific factors raise or erode trust among aid recipients in this context. Without this granularity, it is difficult to design effective, context-appropriate trust-building strategies across international organisations, state actors, and local humanitarians.

Addressing this gap is also essential for meaningful localisation. The goal is not "localisation for localisation's sake," but the co-production of response capacity that strengthens (rather than disrupts) existing infrastructure and progressively rebalances power between actors. To do so responsibly requires evidence about whom beneficiaries trust, why, and under what conditions—so that accountability requirements are proportionate, identity-sensitive practices are adopted where relevant, and partnerships are structured to amplify local effectiveness while managing genuine risk. This study is designed to take the first step in identifying which factors most strongly influence beneficiaries' trust, with a view to informing both research and practice.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to assess the level of trust among aid recipients in Ukraine, identifying the most influential factors and determining which types of trust are most critical. The study focuses mostly on local and international humanitarian organisations. Additionally, it examines trust in government representatives, who may be viewed both as providers and mediators in humanitarian action (Weissman, 2023) and in national NGOs to capture the broader dynamics.

A second objective is to investigate positionality and how the local–international distinction shapes trust. In light of ongoing localisation efforts, the research seeks to determine which trust-building approaches are most effective within localisation, where partnership and collaboration (rather than top-down delivery) may help bridge gaps between international and local actors. Localisation cannot rest on ideals alone; understanding trust dynamics will

indicate whether increased local engagement enhances trust among aid recipients and what configuration of humanitarian actors is most likely to yield the highest trust.

The study is exploratory and descriptive rather than causal; its contribution is to map trust dynamics across actor types, link factors to specific types of trust, and propose practice-ready steps for future testing.

Operational objectives:

1. Measure baseline trust by actor type (local, national, international, governmental).
2. Identify and rank trust and distrust factors (a) self-reported by beneficiaries (survey, open-ended) and (b) observed by intermediaries in their interactions with beneficiaries (interviews).
3. Map each factor to a trust level (relational / institutional/ social) and note cross-level effects.
4. Compare patterns by positionality (local vs international).
5. Integrate survey and interview evidence to highlight convergences/divergences between attitudes and observed behaviours.
6. Produce actionable, beneficiary-centred recommendations for trust-building

1.3. Research Questions

This study is exploratory and applied: it maps and prioritises the factors that drive beneficiaries' trust and translates them into concrete programme choices. It does not claim causality; findings are descriptive and hypothesis-generating.

RQ1. What factors influence beneficiaries' trust in humanitarian actors in Ukraine, and which type of trust do these factors primarily engage (relational, institutional, or social/generalised)?

RQ2. What is the current baseline level of trust among beneficiaries in different actor types?

RQ3. What concrete actions and programme practices can humanitarian actors take to increase trust among beneficiaries in Ukraine?

1.4. Previous Research

Research on trust spans sociology, political science, psychology, anthropology, and management. For the present study, three strands are most relevant: (i) work on social,

relational and institutional trust and how it is measured; (ii) humanitarian studies linking transparency, accountability, politicisation, and neutrality to community acceptance; and (iii) Ukraine-specific evidence on public trust in civil society and volunteerism.

Ukraine offers a distinctive pattern. A comprehensive sociological study by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2023) shows that after the full-scale invasion, trust in civil society organisations (CSOs) and volunteers rose markedly, placing them among the country's most trusted actors. Volunteers have consistently enjoyed higher trust than formal NGOs, a trend that persisted into 2023–2024. At the same time, the KIIS data reveal ambivalence: while roughly half of Ukrainians see CSOs as more effective than state or business in solving social problems, others criticise NGOs for donor-driven agendas that may be misaligned with local needs (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2024). This dual perception suggests strength—broad goodwill toward civic initiative—paired with fragility when organisations are perceived as distant from community priorities.

Complementing this picture, Cooley (2024) examines how Ukrainian nonprofits use online transparency and accountability tools to signal legitimacy. Trust is not the direct outcome variable, yet the analysis implies that many local and grassroots organisations under-invest in routine public reporting and two-way communication. Set against the high trust reported in surveys, these weaker accountability practices point to a potential legitimacy gap: confidence can be high in crisis moments yet vulnerable to erosion if transparency is not institutionalised over time.

Taken together, prior research indicates that trust in Ukrainian NGOs is a dynamic asset: elevated during mobilising crises, but contingent on credible transparency, fair processes, and visible responsiveness. What remains under-studied are (a) beneficiaries' trust in humanitarian actors disaggregated by actor type (local, national, international, governmental); (b) the specific factors beneficiaries say raise or lower trust, alongside what frontline intermediaries observe people actually respond to; and (c) how different levels of trust—relational, institutional, and generalised—interact in shaping acceptance. The present study intend to address these gaps by pairing a CASI survey of beneficiaries with interviews of intermediary practitioners, mapping trust by actor type, and linking reported factors to a multilevel trust framework.

1.5. Relevance to Academia and the Humanitarian Field

Despite increasing evidence that trust between crisis-affected communities and humanitarian organisations is eroding (IMREF, 2021; Vammen et al., 2021), our understanding of how trust actually operates in these contexts remains limited. We still know too little about which actors people trust, why they choose certain organisations or individuals over others, and how those perceptions shape their willingness and ability to seek and receive aid.

Given the critical role that trust plays in the effectiveness and acceptance of humanitarian aid, understanding how trust is formed, maintained, or repaired is essential for improving humanitarian responses. There is an urgent need for more context-specific and globally relevant research that examines the intricate trust dynamics between aid recipients and humanitarian organizations. Such research would provide insights for developing more effective strategies to build and repair trust, ensuring that humanitarian organizations can better serve affected populations during crises. Humanitarian organizations, in particular, can improve their trust-building efforts by actively listening to and addressing the concerns, fears, and doubts expressed by the affected populations about both their current situation and the assistance and protection they receive.

Practically, this study aims to generate insights that humanitarian actors can turn directly into action. Potentially, the findings can guide the development of trust-building strategies, inform policy briefs, shape staff training, and refine communication approaches. Besides that, understanding trust patterns can reveal the strengths and weaknesses of different humanitarian actors and accelerate the localisation process. Above all, they can help organisations listen more closely to affected communities and respond meaningfully to the concerns, fears, and doubts people express about both their situation and the assistance they receive.

Academically, the research addresses a clear gap in the literature. While existing studies connect trust to humanitarian effectiveness, none offers an in-depth, empirical analysis of trust in humanitarian organisations in Ukraine. By grounding its findings in the local context, this study not only fills that gap but also contributes to wider discussions about trust in humanitarian action, especially during times of upheaval, and calls for localization reform. It also provides a foundation for future longitudinal research, making it possible to track how

trust evolves, uncover key patterns, and develop strategies for building trust that can endure over time.

1.6. Study Design

This exploratory, applied study uses a mixed-methods design to balance breadth (beneficiary perspectives at scale) and depth (contextual insight from practitioners who observe service interactions). Specifically, it combines a computer-assisted self-administered (CASI) survey of beneficiaries with semi-structured in-depth interviews with local humanitarian intermediaries, followed by thematic analysis and triangulation.

A structured CASI questionnaire captures: (a) baseline trust in different actor types (local, national, international NGOs, and governmental actors) using 1–5 scales; (b) the relative salience of predefined trust and distrust factors (multi-select items); (c) short open-ended prompts to surface factors not covered by fixed categories; and (d) basic demographics to contextualise variation. The instrument is disseminated online and face-to-face to widen reach. Analysis includes descriptive statistics, cross-tabs by actor type, and frequency tables of selected factors. Open-ended responses are coded hybridly (deductive codes seeded from the interview codebook + inductive codes for new ideas), acknowledging that self-reported attitudes may diverge from behaviour (Dang et al., 2020).

Semi-structured interviews with five local humanitarian practitioners, who interact daily with beneficiaries, document observed behaviours, concrete programme features perceived to affect trust and examples of collaboration with other actors. Interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, anonymised, and translated into English. Analysis follows an inductive thematic approach.

1.7. Limitations

This research faces several limitations that must be acknowledged.

Firstly, while efforts will be made to collect data from various regions across Ukraine to ensure some degree of variability, it will not be possible to achieve full geographical coverage. Particular challenges arise in accessing occupied territories, where data collection is both logistically unfeasible and could pose security risks to participants. However, internally displaced persons (IDPs) will be included to ensure representation of those who

have fled war-affected areas. Additionally, demographic information about respondents will be gathered and presented to highlight potential limitations related to sample diversity.

Secondly, the researcher's personal connection to the subject presents both strengths and challenges. While familiarity with Ukrainian society, language proficiency, and a strong commitment to achieving practical outcomes enhance the study's relevance, there is also a risk of overlooking certain "blind spots" due to unconscious biases. To mitigate this, the researcher will remain conscious of these potential biases throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Thirdly, the dynamic and evolving nature of the research context presents both an opportunity and a limitation. While this study will provide valuable insights into the shifting dynamics of trust in humanitarian organizations during wartime, these findings should be viewed as a snapshot rather than definitive conclusions. Future research will be necessary to track longer-term changes and trends in post-war trust dynamics.

Lastly, the research could be influenced by the researcher's preliminary observations and access to NGO employees and affected populations. While these insights were valuable in identifying the trust gap as a significant issue, they may also introduce some degree of bias. To minimize this risk, steps will be taken to maintain objectivity during data collection and analysis.

By acknowledging these limitations, this research aims to remain transparent about its scope and potential constraints while still contributing meaningful insights to both academic discourse and humanitarian practice.

1.8. Ethical Considerations

This research will adhere to key ethical principles to ensure the protection and well-being of participants.

To protect the anonymity of participants, no personal data will be collected from survey respondents. The survey will focus solely on relevant information linked to trust in humanitarian organizations, avoiding any data that could identify individuals. In the case of in-depth interviews, all identifying details will be removed from transcripts to further ensure privacy.

Another important consideration is the potential concern that participants may believe the researcher is affiliated with a particular NGO, which could influence their willingness to share honest views. To address this, participants will be clearly informed that this research is independent and not conducted on behalf of any organization. Clear communication about the purpose of the research and the guaranteed anonymity of responses will be emphasized to build trust and encourage openness.

Respondents will be fully informed about the purpose of the study, their role in it, and their right to withdraw their data at any point before the study is published. For survey participants, consent will be obtained through a tick-box confirmation at the start of the questionnaire. For in-depth interview participants, a written consent form will be provided for them to sign, ensuring they understand the nature of the research and their rights as participants. This approach ensures that all participants provide informed and voluntary consent.

2. Context of the Ukrainian Humanitarian Response

2.1. Historical Overview to 2014

In 2014, the United Nations declared a humanitarian emergency in Ukraine following the outbreak of hostilities in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions between Russian-backed separatist groups and the Ukrainian government. This escalation marked the culmination of long-standing tensions between Ukraine and Russia — tensions deeply rooted in Ukraine's struggle to navigate between Western integration and Russian influence, known in Ukraine as a “multi-vector” foreign policy (Aleksiievets & Seko, 2017).

Scholars have linked the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict to broader patterns of Russian imperial policy, including the 1932–33 Holodomor (Lib, 2022) — a man-made famine orchestrated under Stalin that resulted in the mass extermination of Ukrainians and the demographic replacement of rural populations. However, for the purposes of this overview, it is useful to begin with more recent historical events, particularly the Chornobyl disaster of 1986. The Soviet state’s concealment of the scale and consequences of the catastrophe significantly eroded public trust and catalyzed political mobilization in Ukraine, contributing to the disintegration of the USSR and the 1990 Revolution on Granite (Plokhy, 2019). This

protest movement is widely seen as a precursor to subsequent waves of civic activism in Ukraine's post-independence era.

Following Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, repeated divergences emerged between the aspirations of the Ukrainian public and the interests of post-Soviet political elites. These tensions led to a series of mass protests that played a crucial role in the development of civil society. The Orange Revolution in 2004 was triggered by electoral fraud (D'Anieri, 2010), while the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan) erupted after then-President Yanukovych abandoned plans to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. State violence against peaceful protesters escalated the movement into a nationwide human rights movement that ultimately resulted in Yanukovych's removal from office (Lough and Solonenko, 2016).

In the aftermath of Yanukovych's ousting and amid political instability, Russia occupied Crimea in February 2014. This prompted the internal displacement of at least 20,000 people, although civil society sources estimate the number to be between 50,000 and 80,000 (IDMC, 2015). Shortly thereafter, armed groups supported by Russia seized parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In response, the Ukrainian government launched what it termed an Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). Despite official Russian denials, the presence of unmarked Russian troops among the insurgents was widely documented (Vallet, 2016). Many civilians were caught in a grey zone between government-controlled and non-government-controlled territories, where public services collapsed and humanitarian access was nonexistent.

At this stage of the conflict, analysts largely agreed that Russia continued its policy of regional destabilisation in order to weaken Ukraine and limit its Western alignment. The Minsk peace process failed to produce sustainable outcomes and has been compared to earlier strategies employed by Russia during its 2008 war with Georgia (Van Metre et al., 2015).

During this period, Ukraine was often not regarded as a fully sovereign political actor, but rather as a peripheral issue in broader geopolitical negotiations — especially given Russia's role in the fight against Islamic State (Vallet, 2016). This may explain the limited scale of international humanitarian assistance provided to Ukraine between 2014 and 2022, despite a substantial humanitarian crisis. By 2016, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2016b) estimated that 3.1 million people in Ukraine were in need of

humanitarian assistance. Over an eight-year period, the international response amounted to approximately USD 1.4 billion — an amount surpassed within just the first three months of the full-scale Russian invasion that began in 2022 (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2022) and had been much more politically consequential.

2.2. The 2014-2022 Humanitarian Crisis

As the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine unfolded following the 2014 conflict, scholars and practitioners noted several atypical features compared to other humanitarian emergencies. First, this was the first humanitarian emergency of such scale and complexity that Ukrainian society had faced since gaining independence in 1991. Second, international humanitarian organisations were not present in large numbers. Prior to 2014, only Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and People in Need (PIN) were operating in Ukraine. The lack of precedent meant that Ukrainian legislation was not adapted for the operations of international humanitarian actors. As a result, part of the humanitarian community's early efforts included advocating for legal reforms to facilitate their work (NGORC, 2024) .

The humanitarian cluster system was activated in December 2014. From the outset, gaining access to populations in the so-called “gray zones” proved especially challenging. These were areas along the frontline where control was ambiguous, and safety risks were extremely high. In territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government, de facto authorities implemented a restrictive accreditation that permitted only the ICRC (revoked by 2016) and PIN to operate. Meanwhile, in government-controlled areas, aid delivery was hindered by a lack of legal frameworks and bureaucracy, resulting in significant delays and a lack of understanding between humanitarian actors and authorities.

Trust was also a significant barrier at this stage. Many Ukrainian government officials were unfamiliar with humanitarian principles and often viewed international aid as potentially aiding the opposing side. In this first stage, local actors — mostly charitable foundations and religious groups — began reorienting their work to address new humanitarian needs. The overwhelming demand for assistance spurred the creation of a new generation of local NGOs. In 2014 alone, over 1,500 new organizations were registered, followed by another 1,100 in 2015. These grassroots groups typically emerged in direct response to local needs, operating informally and relying heavily on community donations and volunteer labor.

Some of these organizations evolved over time into more formal structures. For instance, Vostok SOS emerged from volunteer groups and eventually became an implementing partner for the UN, scaling up to operate regionally and nationally. Others, such as Building Ukraine Together, began as humanitarian initiatives - rebuilding war-damaged homes - but transitioned toward broader civic engagement, using volunteerism as a tool for community development. While not strictly humanitarian, some groups and NGOs retained elements of humanitarian response in their work (Refugees International, 2024).

Even after obtaining formal registration, many of these organizations maintained decentralized structures, often operating through small, locally embedded volunteer groups with flexible roles and responsibilities. Rather than developing into fully institutionalized entities with standardized procedures, their activities continued to rely heavily on informal community networks and interpersonal trust. Studies of civil society development in Ukraine during this period highlight the significance of these horizontal networks and locally driven initiatives in sustaining humanitarian responses (Oleinik, 2018). These characteristics contributed to the rapid mobilization of local actors during the initial stages of the full-scale invasion in 2022, when pre-existing community ties facilitated a swift scale-up of aid delivery efforts.

However, after the initial years of the crisis, local actors increasingly turned to institutional sources of funding, including international humanitarian agencies. As more skilled volunteers emerged, these individuals began to form the core staff for new humanitarian organizations entering Ukraine or evolving from volunteer groups, thereby contributing to the professionalization of the sector. In government-controlled areas, volunteer groups either transformed into fully-fledged NGOs or scaled back their activities. In non-government-controlled areas, informal volunteer groups often avoided formal accreditation by de facto authorities by employing opportunistic rather than systematic access strategies, thereby reducing their visibility. When local groups opted for greater formalization, increased visibility, or partnerships with international institutions, they faced a higher risk of expulsion or even imprisonment. Volunteer groups from government-controlled areas that crossed the contact line to deliver aid in non-government-controlled territories similarly adopted “low visibility” tactics and attempted to conceal their affiliation at checkpoints. In these uncontrolled areas, humanitarian assistance primarily consisted of food,

medicine, and clothing, as efforts to provide psychological support and human rights education were halted by the de facto authorities.

To fully understand the humanitarian context in Ukraine, it is important to note that in 2014, approximately 23% of the population was involved in volunteering (Konrad et al., 2023). Much of this volunteering was directed toward humanitarian relief and was seen as an act of resistance against injustice, a collective national response to an external threat - something Slim (2022) described as “humanitarian resistance” relying on many humanitarian contexts, including Ukrainian.

With the growing professionalisation of the humanitarian sector in Ukraine, there has been increasing recognition of the need to distinguish between assistance for civilians and for the military. However, for many Ukrainians and grassroots volunteer groups - often funded through private community donations - this distinction is not always evident or meaningful. For them, both forms of aid are rooted in solidarity, and supporting the military is viewed as essential to ensuring civilian safety and minimising broader humanitarian suffering (Oleinik, 2018).

This perspective has at times clashed with the principles upheld by international humanitarian organisations, particularly the principle of neutrality. Ukrainian civil society actors have criticised these organisations for failing to understand and respect local motivations. These tensions only deepened during subsequent phases of the war.

2.3. The 2022 Full-Scale Invasion and System Shock

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked by rocket attacks and troop movements. In the first year, approximately 6 million people fled to other countries and 5 million became internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2023a).

The volunteer networks that had been developing since 2014 once again proved critical. Drawing on prior experience and resilience, Ukrainian society rapidly mobilized during the initial weeks of the invasion to address urgent needs—primarily evacuation, medical care, and shelter (Civicus Lens, 2023). Civil society quickly established humanitarian operations in the host countries receiving Ukrainian refugees, and subsequently, international humanitarian organizations joined these efforts.

Initially, most international humanitarian organizations were evacuated and operated via remote programming. However, as the situation stabilized, these organizations gradually returned to the field. For example, the UN Ukraine Flash Appeal received $3.77 billion (UN Financial Tracking Service, 2023). This sudden influx of funds created a "bottleneck" effect: the funds could not be immediately mobilized for aid because of administrative delays, and local NGOs — already burdened by extensive work — often lacked the time and human resources needed to meet stringent compliance requirements (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2022). While the established trust between local actors could have facilitated cooperation with less rigid requirements, it is important to note that UN agencies and institutional donors, due to their size and scale usually lack the flexibility needed for such localised strategies.

The onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022 reignited and intensified long-standing debates around humanitarian principles — most notably, the principle of neutrality. While these discussions had been ongoing since 2014 (Barbelet, 2017), the escalation of violence and the scale of human suffering brought renewed urgency to these ethical dilemmas. According to the ICRC, neutrality is defined as follows: “In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature” (Harroff-Tavel, 2010). Although this approach is foundational for maintaining access and impartiality, especially for international actors, it often clashes with the perspectives of local and national humanitarians who are embedded within the conflict and whose motivations are frequently driven by solidarity rather than neutrality.

Solidarity, by nature, is not neutral—it implies a position, a connection to specific people and communities. This creates inherent tensions when international organizations promote strict neutrality while local actors view their work through a moral or ethical lens rooted in justice and empathy (Ross et al., 2022). Hugo Slim’s concepts of “humanitarian resistance” (2022) and “activist humanitarianism” (2020) are an alternative way to understand humanitarian action and often closer to the ethics of local humanitarians, especially in contexts of international armed conflicts like Ukraine.

These tensions were exemplified in the Ukrainian context when the ICRC came under intense criticism for negotiating with Russian authorities and announcing plans to open an office in

Rostov-on-Don—a city associated with the deportation of Ukrainians from occupied territories. This raised public concern that such a presence might legitimize or even facilitate unlawful deportations (Suspilne Media, 2022). Although the ICRC denied these allegations and reaffirmed that forced deportations violate the Geneva Conventions, the controversy illustrates the deep ambiguity and contested interpretations surrounding neutrality in active war zones.

While this paper adopts a somewhat critical stance toward international humanitarian actors, it seeks to provide an objective analysis of these challenges. A nuanced understanding of such tensions is essential for improving coordination between local and international actors. The goal should not be to discredit one approach in favor of another - there is still need for both of them - but to foster horizontal dialogue and cooperation that leverages the strengths of each.

2.4. Localisation in Ukraine

A locally led response, a robust civil society sector, and a history of collaboration provide a strong foundation for implementing the principles of the Grand Bargain and promoting more equitable partnerships between local and international humanitarian actors. However, despite these favorable conditions, local volunteer groups and NGOs that sustained operations during the initial weeks of the full-scale invasion received very limited direct funding from the United Nations in the first year - only 0.1%. National NGOs received slightly more, but still less than 0.2% in direct funding (UN Financial Tracking Service, 2023a).

As a result, many local and national NGOs had to redirect all available resources toward providing immediate assistance to those in urgent need. It is important to recognize that local humanitarians usually operate with far less protection than their international counterparts and therefore face significantly higher risks. According to data, local humanitarian workers in Ukraine are 20 times more likely to be killed than international staff (Stoddard et al., 2023).

This pattern, observed in Ukraine, is not an anomaly but reflects a broader systemic issue: large humanitarian organizations often raise the majority of funding, while those closest to the crisis—local and national actors—receive only a fraction (Barbelet, 2019). This underscores that competence, experience, and motivation at the local level are not enough without the active support and structural changes within major humanitarian institutions.

Both academic literature and practitioners, including the National Network of Local Philanthropy Development (2022) in Ukraine and international groups such as the Migration Consortium in Poland, have consistently criticized the bureaucratic hurdles and lack of trust faced by local responders tackling humanitarian emergency in Ukraine. They advocate for a reciprocal approach that centers on the needs of affected communities and strengthens partnerships across all levels of response.

2.5. Conclusion

The period from Ukraine's independence to the present has been shaped by repeated political upheavals, deep-seated mistrust of authorities, and the persistent challenge of building institutions that command public confidence. The 2014 conflict fundamentally changed both the humanitarian landscape and the fabric of Ukrainian civil society, leading to the rapid emergence of local volunteerism and new forms of civic mobilization. Over time, this grassroots energy professionalized and scaled up, but persistent tensions between local and international actors, between neutrality and solidarity, and between resource availability and need, continue to shape the field.

The events of 2022 brought these dynamics into even sharper relief, as local groups mobilized at unprecedented speed while international organizations struggled with bureaucratic and operational barriers. The limited direct funding to local actors, the risks they face, and the ongoing debates over humanitarian principles underscore that effective response in Ukraine requires more than resources alone; it demands a genuine partnership and recognition of the knowledge, experience, and agency of local actors.

Understanding this historical context and how interaction between local and international humanitarians were shaped is important for interpreting patterns of trust and distrust demonstrated by beneficiaries in humanitarian organizations operating in Ukraine.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Why Trust Matters in Humanitarian Action

Trust is fundamentally a complex and dynamic concept, encompassing both emotional and cognitive dimensions. It serves as a foundational assumption that underpins social order,

which is essential for cooperation and organisational performance (Fragouli, 2020). Without trust, systems that require a high degree of abstraction and interdependence could not function. The humanitarian system is an example of such a system—every stakeholder must trust one another, at least to some degree, in order to continue their work. Trust is recognised to be “the foundation of humanitarian action” (ICRC, 2019).

Trust is a form of social capital and, therefore, a key factor in ensuring efficiency and growth. However, unlike physical assets or human capital, trust cannot be directly bought or sold in the market (Mosley & Abrar, 2005). Building trust often follows a hidden, non-linear logic, making it impossible to develop universal strategies for fostering it. This challenge is further complicated by the difficulty of measuring trust (Glaeser et al., 2000) — since it is highly context-dependent, no single framework can be applied effectively in all situations.

Trust strongly correlates with the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions—the higher the level of trust, the better the outcomes. Trust in aid providers influences not only the acceptance of assistance but also the willingness of communities to engage in humanitarian processes (Jaspars & Chard, 2010; Baines & Nip, 2012). Research shows that when local communities feel their voices are heard and their needs understood, they are more likely to collaborate with organisations, leading to improved outcomes (Benton et al., 2020). Conversely, a lack of trust can result in resistance to international aid, which undermines the effectiveness of interventions (Barakat et al., 2018).

In addition to the widely recognized link between trust and the effectiveness of partnerships, research has shown that a lack of trust among stakeholders can hinder communication from the very beginning (Roepstorff, 2021). This mistrust may prevent a partnership from progressing and ultimately from meeting the needs of affected populations. However, this impact is often difficult to observe, as it involves identifying what didn't happen—missed opportunities, failed collaborations, or unrealized outcomes—which are inherently harder to measure than tangible successes.

The war, forced displacement, and significant changes in Ukraine's demographic structure are severely damaging the country's social fabric and the trust that once supported it (Strang et al., 2020). This gradual erosion of trust extends not only to specific institutions or actors but also to the general ability to trust at a societal level.

Of course, this trend varies depending on the context. For example, according to the World Values Survey (World Values Survey, 2022), trust in the armed forces and police has increased disproportionately over the past decade due to their key role in meeting the population's existential needs during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Meanwhile, trust in other institutions has gradually declined. By the time the full-scale invasion began, *generalized trust* - trust in strangers or those outside one's immediate social group - was slowly increasing.

These trends may be understandable given the circumstances, but they raise an important question: where do humanitarian organizations fit within this trust landscape? Are they perceived as part of established institutions? Are they linked to volunteer initiatives that enjoy high levels of public trust? Or do they benefit from generalized trust as external actors?

It's important to recognize that humanitarian organizations are not homogeneous; different types of actors may align with different sources of trust and rely on varying trust dynamics in their operations.

As evident, there is limited data on trust in humanitarian organizations, their various forms, and the factors influencing it. Efforts to build trust strategies are often based on assumptions and fragmented information, despite trust being a crucial factor in the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. On the other hand, as will be discussed later, failed localization attempts could potentially be revitalized by understanding the dynamics of recipients' trust in humanitarian actors. Since trust is one of localization's core attributes - yet remains underexplored - investigating this phenomenon could serve as a bridge between improving humanitarian effectiveness and achieving meaningful localization. This approach would help avoid the risk of pursuing "localization for localization's sake" and instead provide concrete insights to inform future strategies.

3.2. Types of Trust

Trust has been conceptualized across multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology, philosophy, management, and economics. Since humanitarian action intersects with these fields, studying trust requires insights from various perspectives. However, the type of trust being examined also determines which academic framework is most appropriate.

For instance, when exploring trust within humanitarian organizations, management studies offer valuable insights, particularly regarding trust-based leadership and organizational dynamics (Bentzen, 2022). Understanding trust between state actors involved in providing and receiving humanitarian aid may draw more heavily on political science, though this area still offers room for further exploration.

In this study, the focus is on the practical implications of trust—specifically, the mechanisms that shape trust among potential humanitarian aid recipients. For this purpose, sociology provides the most comprehensive conceptualization and typology of trust, while insights from adjacent disciplines offer valuable context. Institutional trust, for example, is rooted in sociology but also overlaps with political science and economics. Similarly, interpersonal trust, while studied extensively in sociology, is closely linked to psychology and anthropology.

3.2.1. Social Trust

Social trust, often referred to as "generalised" trust, is trust in strangers—individuals within one's society with whom one has little personal familiarity (Cook & Reidhead, 2022). The most well-known and comprehensive study of social trust is the World Values Survey, which expands annually and provides researchers with a broad picture of values and, in particular, trust in different societies.

Social trust research can be divided into two starting points rooted in different presuppositions — individual and societal. The individual perspective, which partially draws on psychology and dates back to the 1950s and 1960s, views trust as a personality trait shaped by natural inclinations and learned behavior (Erikson, 1950; Allport, 1961). This view suggests that trust correlates with other characteristics such as optimism and a tendency to cooperate.

Later, Uslaner (2000) expanded this line of research, arguing that trust is independent of reciprocal actions: people who generally trust others do not necessarily do so because of previous positive experiences or out of gratitude. Uslaner also linked trust to optimism and found that an individual's sense of control over their life significantly influences social trust.

Placing too much emphasis on individual factors, however, raises questions. If trust is rooted in personality, why do trust levels vary so dramatically between societies? Personality traits

alone cannot explain these differences. Moreover, trust levels often correlate with social conditions. Research shows that low trust is associated with low levels of education, social status, and income. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, exploitation, and social exclusion also contribute to lower trust levels. Additionally, victimization - a common experience among those receiving humanitarian aid - has been shown to undermine trust, further complicating the dynamics of humanitarian engagement (Hall & Werner, 2022)

These criticisms highlight the need for a balanced approach that considers both individual and societal factors. Notably, Uslaner's link between trust and personal control is particularly relevant to humanitarian action. There is growing concern that passively receiving aid without involvement in decision-making can have disempowering effects. Prescriptive aid delivery, victimization, and paternalistic attitudes not only reduce the long-term effectiveness of aid but may also weaken individual and communal trust, ultimately fostering suspicion and distrust toward all actors, including humanitarian organizations.

The societal perspective on trust emphasizes the role of social norms, institutions, and collective experiences. Here we see a convergence with the institutional theory of trust, which emphasizes system-wide trust mechanisms. According to Putnam, social trust is not based on personal traits but on how trustworthy the surrounding environment appears to individuals. In this view, trust reflects a society's experiences and is not fixed but evolves with social conditions. For example, in West Germany, trust levels rose from 9 percent in 1948 to 45 percent in 1993 (Cusack 1997), demonstrating that social dynamics can significantly influence trust, often outweighing individual traits. In Ukraine, we can observe a similar trend. Over the past few decades, social trust has gradually increased alongside growing social cohesion and greater public involvement in shaping community and national life.

It is also worth mentioning that while there have been studies on the impact of war on social trust, they have not produced a definitive conclusion (Hall & Werner, 2022). One view suggests that social trust decreases because warfare not only destroys infrastructure but also disrupts social ties, as people are displaced, injured, or killed in the chaos of conflict. In such new and unstable environments, people may no longer know whom to trust (Mooren & Kleber, 2001). Not only direct experiences but also social mechanisms contribute to trust dynamics. Distrust can stem from indirect sources such as the experiences of friends or neighbors, or narratives from the media (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015).

Humanitarian workers may also be affected by this shift more than others. Often rooted in idealism, they are perceived as altruistically assisting those in need. Consequently, the public tends to hold high expectations regarding the ethical and humanitarian values of individuals in the sector. Previous studies show that when an organization is endowed with a high level of trust, a sudden loss of trust, such as is possible in armed conflicts and emergencies, is further exacerbated by the criticality of the situation (Kramer, 1999). This dissonance between expectation and reality can produce negative public reactions. In Ukraine, for example, the sudden evacuation of international humanitarian organizations before and at the onset of the full-scale invasion may have clashed with societal expectations.

At the same time, more recent literature indicates that war can also act as a catalyst for trust. Some argue that catastrophic events encourage communal resilience and cooperation, fostering trust among those who endure hardship together (Bauer et al., 2016). The need to protect themselves and others from external threats becomes a factor of solidarity and unity around the needs of their communities (Tucker & Ferson, 2008). This perspective helps explain the rise of the volunteer movement and civic engagement in Ukraine during 2014 and again in 2022, as well as the corresponding increase in trust toward local institutions.

This is where the potential role of localization becomes especially important. Local humanitarians share the same experiences as the communities they support, so trust in them tends to come from a sense of shared reality, not just their professional role. In the case of Ukraine, when the war strengthens social trust among the population, that trust was likely extended to local humanitarian workers, as it is rooted in solidarity and the shared experience of crisis. However, this trust may not extend to international humanitarian organizations, which are seen as outside actors, guided by formal mandates and principles rather than shared lived experience. It's important to note that these elements are often referred to as trust factors, but the dynamics of social trust processes differ for local and international actors.

3.2.2. Institutional Trust

Institutional trust refers to confidence in formal structures such as bureaucracies, governments, the police, the military, and humanitarian organizations (Nicholls & Picou, 2013). This type of trust is based on the belief that the organizational actor possesses the necessary competencies and experience. When Institutional trust prevails, individuals may

trust or distrust an organization's ability to deliver aid effectively - even without direct, personal experience.

It can be assumed that social trust plays a more significant role in shaping perceptions of local humanitarian actors, while Institutional trust is more influential in shaping views of international humanitarian organizations, which tend to be larger and more established.

Some researchers in the humanitarian field identify an even narrower category known as mandate-based trust (Billaud, 2023). However, this study focuses on organizational trust, as it examines a variety of humanitarian organizations—including local ones—that do not operate under formal mandates but still function as organizational actors.

There is also a conceptual framework that positions these types of trust on different levels. At the most personal level is relational trust, which arises from direct interaction with individual humanitarian workers, regardless of whether that interaction occurs in a professional setting. The next level is organizational trust, which is grounded in the reputation, track record, and perceived professionalism of the organization.

Together, relational and organizational trust contribute to social trust. In comparison to organizational or relational, social trust is more difficult to build, as it requires sustained effort, long-term engagement, and consistency across actors and contexts. As Kramer (1999) observed, trust is fragile: it takes significant effort to build but can be broken easily. In the case of social trust, the actions of one actor can damage the credibility of others, whereas in relational or institutional trust, the effects are more contained and specific.

3.2.3. Relational Trust

Relational trust refers to confidence placed in particular people based on a history (or credible anticipation) of fair, competent, and benevolent behaviour in interactions (Rousseau et al., 1998). It is built interpersonally between a beneficiary and a frontline worker, a municipal caseworker and an NGO liaison, or a volunteer and a household. It differs from institutional trust, which is confidence in an entity's systems and reputation, and from social trust, which is a diffuse expectation about strangers. Relational trust is therefore situated, experiential, and reciprocal: it accumulates through concrete encounters and can be rapidly strengthened or undermined.

Relational trust develops through sequences of exchange in which each side takes small risks that are positively reinforced (Blau, 1964). Early on, people rely on visible role cues (logos, badges, introductions) and borrowed credibility from an organisation. As interactions repeat, knowledge-based trust emerges (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Because it is anchored in lived encounters, relational trust is highly sensitive to breaches - missed callbacks, unclear refusals, perceived queue-jumping, or broken promises can undo months of steady work (Kramer, 1999).

Relational trust is socially embedded (Granovetter, 1985): information about conduct travels through kin and neighbour networks. In practice, a single poor encounter can diffuse beyond the individual to shape community attitudes while consistently fair interactions build reputational capital that spreads the other way. This underscores the importance of boundary spanners (Coleman & Stern, 2017) - local social workers, community-centre leads, health mediators. Their dual credibility with organisations and residents allows them to translate rules, de-escalate tensions, and humanise procedures. These intermediaries often carry the day-to-day burden of trust maintenance even when institutional policies are sound.

Relational trust and organisational trust are complementary, not substitutes. Organisational systems (eligibility criteria, complaints channels, reporting) provide predictability; relational practice provides meaning. In many contexts beneficiaries will “forgive” an unfavourable outcome if the process feels respectful and intelligible; conversely, impressive procedures will be distrusted if the interpersonal encounter feels dismissive. Over time, relational performance aggregates upward into organisational reputation; likewise, organisational safeguards cascade downward as scripts that structure fair interaction.

3.3. Trust, Humanitarian Principles and Practice

Depending on the context, trust manifests in different dimensions—operational, accountability (Slim, 2019), relational, mandate-based (Billaud, 2023), institutional, swift (Dubey et al., 2019) and so on. These various types of trust coexist and often overlap, creating multilevel trust with its own checks and balances. When studying aid recipients and the state institutions mediating the aid process, it is important to analyze trust from multiple perspectives in order to understand which types are most crucial in a given humanitarian context. The history of interaction between aid recipients and humanitarian actors, other

institutions, and the broader cultural context—along with factors such as the political environment, levels of transparency and accountability, media narratives, and the presence of local leadership—collectively shape which types of trust play a key role in humanitarian contexts. Some types of trust are more dynamic and flexible, while others require prolonged effort—particularly institutional and mandate-based trust.

As the field of humanitarian action expanded, the next decade saw the rise of the issue of trust. Trust research in the humanitarian context gained traction in the 2000s and 2010s, especially in response to crises such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and later concerns about the localization of aid. Since then, major humanitarian actors have sought ways to establish “evidence-based trust,” which has led to the gradual technologization of trust through reporting approaches. Paradoxically, trust is applied precisely when there is no evidence and one cannot know for sure that a person or institution is reliable. According to Professor Diego Gambetta, a pioneer of trust research, trust is “a particular expectation we have with regard to the likely behavior of others...Trust comes into play in situations of ignorance and uncertainty when the other party has genuine freedom to act or not, and so freedom to disappoint our expectations” (Gambetta, 1988). Thus, the movement towards the development of technological solutions and systems began, which marked a shift away from establishing operational and mutual trust. There is a downside to this: humanitarian organizations cease to be 'brave people who go to save people in all corners of the world' and turn into 'malevolent bureaucracies' that decide who gets help and who does not, based on complex technical procedures and speaking their own argo.

Research on trust became especially urgent recently following several scandals in prominent humanitarian organisations, which clearly damaged institutional trust. For example, the ICRC reported a trend of “declining trust in institutions and governments, an increase in public scrutiny, and calls for stronger integrity and accountability” (ICRC, 2019). In response, organizations began to invest more in researching the concept of trust, which activated the academic community. As a result of efforts to restore damaged trust, this issue has been reframed not only as an independent factor but also as a targeted strategy (Carey, 2017). since institutional trust directly affects the survival of the organization itself. From the perspective of this research, this is significant because the presence of a trust-building strategy can also influence trust among beneficiaries, thereby increasing the effectiveness and acceptance of aid.

The resilience of a community is based on the amount of trust that exists in it. Resilience and preparedness are highly relevant to humanitarian action, as they help localise efforts and produce more sustainable results (Aldrich, 2012).

3.4. Trust and Localization

As the localization agenda has taken hold and begun to influence humanitarian policies, the issue of trust has come to be seen as an important precondition for localization (Gibbons & Otieku-Boadu, 2021). Here it is important to separate it from accountability, because as will be seen later, accountability trust can often be directed at more prepared recipients, in particular those who mediate humanitarian aid - local NGOs and state representatives, while excessive technicalization can cause distrust among ordinary beneficiaries (Billaud, 2023). Of course, these intermediaries also shape a certain attitude among the recipients of aid as they do not only mediate the aid delivery but trust as well.. However there are separate “tracks of trust” for immediate recipients of aid and state representatives who are both beneficiaries, thus multi-level strategy would tackle best building trust.

However, it can also be assumed that there is a reverse process where localization efforts contribute to strengthening trust. In fact, one of the practical implications of this study is the recognition of the interdependence between trust and localization efforts. This, in turn, can serve as a practically grounded argument in favor of localization.

Localization has become a buzzword in the humanitarian field. Many organizations now routinely engage in discussions, host conferences, and establish dedicated localization departments. Despite these efforts, there remains an unspoken assumption that localization is inherently beneficial—a universal solution for all contexts. However, while these initiatives are commendable, they often overlook a critical nuance: localization is not an end in itself but a tool to be employed when it effectively contributes to the overarching goal of humanitarian work. In the case of this study, examining beneficiary trust provides additional insights into which aspects should be prioritized in localization strategies.

4. Methodology

One of the key methodological challenges in trust research is that trust is inherently difficult to measure (Glaeser et al., 2000). Unlike physical or human capital, social capital—of which trust is a key component—lacks a clear “market,” and its accumulation is neither linear nor

easily traceable (Mosley & Abrar, 2005). Although there has been growing interest in trust within humanitarian contexts, no widely accepted frameworks currently exist for measuring beneficiaries' trust in humanitarian actors. This increased attention appears to originate primarily from humanitarian organizations themselves, while academic research has yet to fully respond with appropriate methodological tools.

However, by turning to related disciplines and various sources, we can identify a general approach to measuring trust. There is a well-established tradition of measuring social trust, dating back to the seminal work of Almond and Verba (1963), as well as organizational trust, with one of the most prominent examples being the World Values Survey. Morrone, Tontoranelli, and Ranuzzi (2009) demonstrated that including questions about expectations of trust, rather than asking directly about trust itself, can yield different results. This is because expectation-based questions offer additional insight into how trust is conceptualized and experienced by an individual.

Since the early 2000s, increased attention has been given to experimental methods that compare survey-reported trust with actual trusting behavior in real-life situations. These studies enhance our understanding of the validity of survey-based trust measurements and contribute to the development of more accurate and nuanced questionnaires. Notably, their findings generally align with the broader trends observed in traditional survey data (Felte, 2001).

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining CASI (Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing) questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The decision to collect data from the general population was driven by the lack of existing data on the topic, as it was shown in previous chapters. The decision to use the CASI format was guided by the consideration that self-administered surveys tend to reduce social desirability bias compared to those conducted by an interviewer (OECD, 2017). It was made available both online and in person, where participants completed it on their own digital devices or on tablets provided by the researcher. This approach enabled broader geographical coverage by allowing both online distribution and in-person data collection. To ensure more balanced regional representation, the researcher additionally conducted in-person CASI surveys in the Ivano-Frankivsk and Sumy regions.

4.1. Survey (CASI): Instrument, Sampling, Procedures

The survey measures (i) baseline trust by actor type (local, national, international, governmental) and (ii) perceived factors shaping trust. To balance reach and feasibility, the survey combined online distribution with a smaller in-person component in Ivano-Frankivsk and Sumy oblasts (April–May 2025).

The questionnaire included: (1) informed consent and study information; (2) demographics; (3) prior experiences with different humanitarian actors; (4) trust levels and categorical trust-factor selections; and (5) open-ended questions to capture views not covered by fixed options. OECD *Guidelines on Measuring Trust* informed wording and ordering (particularly the caution about context and interpretation).

Before fielding, the researcher held informal exploratory conversations in Lviv and Poltava to test comprehension and frame terminology. A pilot (n=7) was used to refine items. Clarifications were added to distinguish local, national, international NGOs and governmental programmes (to avoid misclassification as "civil society"), and to differentiate humanitarian aid/worker from "volunteering" or support to the military - common conflations in Ukraine's decentralised response ecosystem.

The CASI format was chosen to reduce social desirability bias (Tatsuno et al., 2015) relative to interviewer-led modes. Respondents completed the survey on their own devices or on researcher-provided tablets. Eligibility required age 18+. Participation was anonymous with informed consent recorded at the start. A total of n = 150 valid responses were collected. Given sample size and sampling mode, results are analysed descriptively to indicate patterns rather than to support statistical inference.

Closed items were summarised with descriptive statistics. Open-ended responses were coded using a hybrid approach (inductive codes, supplemented by deductive categories drawn from the interview codebook and literature), then tabulated as frequencies for comparison with interview themes.

4.2. Interviews: Participants, Thematic Analysis and Triangulation

While the CASI survey captures beneficiaries' stated perceptions, local intermediary actors (municipal social-service staff, community-centre leads, local NGO workers) directly observe behaviour at distribution points and offices. Their proximity allows them to compare what people say with what they do and to explain how access and trust are won or lost in practice. To capture this depth, the study conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews and analysed them using inductive thematic analysis, then integrated findings with the survey through structured triangulation.

Using snowball sampling initiated from survey contacts, five interviews (R1–R5) were conducted in Ukrainian in May 2025 across Poltava oblast, a region with high IDP presence and ongoing humanitarian activity. Interviews followed a brief guide, were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, translated to English for analysis, and anonymised. Participants received an information sheet and provided oral consent at the start of recording.

Analysis followed a reflexive, inductive approach at the semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Audio was transcribed verbatim in Ukrainian, translated into English and cleaned with meaning-preserving phrasing. Transcripts were read repeatedly with brief analytic memos to capture early insights and contextual notes. Line-by-line descriptive coding was then applied to nearly every sentence or utterance; multiple codes were assigned where segments addressed more than one idea.

Overlapping or redundant labels were consolidated and organised into focused codes. Focused codes were assembled into candidate themes representing patterned meaning across interviews - namely Barriers to Access, Transparency & Accountability, Collaboration and Needs-based Adaptation, Experience of Help, and Trust in Local vs International Actors.

To indicate salience (not population prevalence), two descriptives were recorded for each theme: frequency (number of coded extracts) and breadth (number of distinct respondents mentioning the theme). Quotations in the Findings are translated to preserve meaning and attributed by respondent ID (R1–R5).

The study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design in which the survey and interview strands were conducted in parallel and integrated at the stage of interpretation. Methodological triangulation is used to combine the complementary strengths of each strand: the survey provides breadth and a baseline picture of who is trusted and which factors are most frequently selected, whereas the interviews contribute depth and behavioural context, explaining why patterns look as they do.

Data triangulation is achieved by comparing beneficiaries' self-reports with the observations of intermediary practitioners who witness behaviour at distribution points and municipal offices. Integration aligns survey trust factors with interview themes in the Discussion chapter. Meta-inferences give greater interpretive weight to areas of convergence, while divergences are treated as explanatory, pointing to contextual mechanisms rather than contradictions, given differences in mode, sample, and level of analysis.

Digital files (audio, transcripts, codebooks, survey data) were stored on encrypted drives with access restricted to the researcher. De-identified datasets and codebooks are archived for reproducibility; raw audio will be retained for 12 months and then deleted.

Several constraints should be noted. Qualitative findings are context-specific to one oblast and a small sample (R1–R5). The survey relies on non-probability sampling and may over-represent more connected respondents (Kalton, 2023) . CASI reduces but does not eliminate social desirability (Kreuter et al., 2008), particularly for the offline completions. Consequently, survey results are reported descriptively, and qualitative counts indicate salience, not prevalence. Triangulation improves credibility but does not remove these constraints. They are considered when drawing conclusions in the Discussion.

5. Findings

5.1. Introduction to Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, integrating results from both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews. The primary research question guiding this analysis is: What factors influence the level of trust among aid recipients in Ukraine? Two additional questions informed the structure of the findings: What is the level of trust among

beneficiaries in the context of humanitarian aid in Ukraine? and What could be done by humanitarians to increase trust among beneficiaries in humanitarian efforts in Ukraine?

The chapter is organised thematically but begins with a demographic overview to contextualise the sample and the scope of perspectives included. The survey provided a broad baseline of attitudes, capturing patterns of trust toward different types of humanitarian actors — international, national, local, and governmental — and identifying the most salient factors shaping these perceptions. This quantitative strand allows for a general assessment of the prevalence of trust and mistrust and reveals how trust is distributed across different organisational types. It also highlights where trust is generalised (applied equally to all types of humanitarian actors) and where it is fragmented (selectively placed in certain actors).

Alongside the survey, five semi-structured interviews with intermediary actors provided in-depth, context-rich insights into the dynamics underpinning trust. These participants occupy a unique position between humanitarian organisations and beneficiaries, enabling them to observe patterns of trust formation and erosion, and to reflect on how factors such as transparency, politicisation, accessibility, and communication influence community perceptions. The interviews also offered nuanced explanations for quantitative trends and drew attention to context-specific issues less visible in the survey data, such as the influence of language use, perceptions of neutrality, and the interplay between trust and humanitarian principles.

The chapter proceeds by first describing the demographic profile of survey and interview participants. This is followed by an examination of survey findings on baseline trust levels, comparative trust in different organisational types, and the categorical factors identified as most influential for trust. Open-ended survey responses expand these findings by adding detail to both trust-building and mistrust-generating factors. The latter half of the chapter presents the results of thematic analysis of the interview data, organised into five themes: Barriers to Access, Transparency and Accountability, Collaboration and Needs-Based Adaptation, Experience of Help, and Trust in Local vs International Actors. Together, these strands build a layered understanding of trust in the Ukrainian humanitarian context, setting the stage for the analytical connections and theoretical interpretations that follow in the Discussion chapter.

5. 2. Demographic Overview

5.2.1. Survey Participants

The final sample consisted of 150 respondents. The survey sample consisted predominantly of female respondents, with 78.7% identifying as female and 21.3% as male. This likely reflects two intersecting factors: the realities of displacement and mobilization in Ukraine, where many men of conscription age are absent from civilian spaces, and the online nature of the survey, which may have skewed access toward more digitally engaged demographics. The overrepresentation of women does not invalidate the findings, but it does suggest that women's perspectives may be more prominent in the results. Future studies could balance the sample by specifically targeting male respondents to achieve gender balance.

Only individuals aged 18 and over took part in the survey. The age profile is youth-leaning, with the modal group 18–24 (28.7%), followed by 35–44 (23.3%); older adults 55+ comprise 18.7% (full breakdown in Appendix Table A1). This reflects the CASI design and online dissemination, even though some offline top-ups were conducted to broaden reach. Results are reported unweighted; therefore, inferences should be read as the views of a mixed but somewhat younger sample.

Geographically, responses came from 16 different oblasts, offering a degree of regional variety. The highest proportions came from Poltava (36.7%), Ivano-Frankivsk (23.3%), Lviv (14.7%), and Sumy (10.7%), representing different areas of the country (see Appendix Table A2). Settlement types are diverse but mid-sized–leaning: most participants live in towns and small cities (≈72%), with smaller shares from rural areas (16.7%) and million-plus cities. Among respondents, 10.7% were IDPs who had relocated to their current place of residence, and another 10.7% were returnees who had returned to their place of origin.

Of the 150 survey respondents, 47.3% reported receiving humanitarian aid since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, while 23.3% had received aid in the period between 2014 and 2022. Respondents most frequently received assistance from international organizations (26.5%), local volunteer groups (16.2%), and state programs (16.9%), with some accessing aid from multiple sources. Interaction with humanitarian actors varied: 42% had never interacted with such organizations, 43.3% rarely (a few times), 11.3% occasionally (monthly), and only a small minority (3.3%) reported frequent (weekly or more) contact.

Taken together, the sample offers broad but non-probability coverage: it is female-majority, youth-leaning, and concentrated in central/western oblasts and mid-sized settlements, with a minority reporting displacement. Nearly half have first-hand aid experience, yet a large share report little or no direct interaction with humanitarian actors. Analyses are unweighted and descriptive. Future work should purposively balance gender and age, oversample frontline and metropolitan areas, and include high-contact beneficiaries to test the robustness of these patterns.

5.2.2. Interview Participants

Five semi-structured interviews (R1–R5) were conducted in person, in Ukrainian in May 2025 in a mid-sized town in Poltava Oblast. Four participants were locally based practitioners and one represented a national NGO operating in the oblast. The sample covered the main intermediary roles: local media (R1), local council (R2), municipal social protection (R3), local NGO (R4), and national NGO (R5). Demographically, the group comprised 4 women and 1 men, aged 24-52. All interviewees were directly involved in organising or coordinating humanitarian relief.

To preserve anonymity, the appendix only reports participant code, sector and position, gender, and age. Full details are provided in Appendix Table A5: Interview Participant Profile (R1–R5).

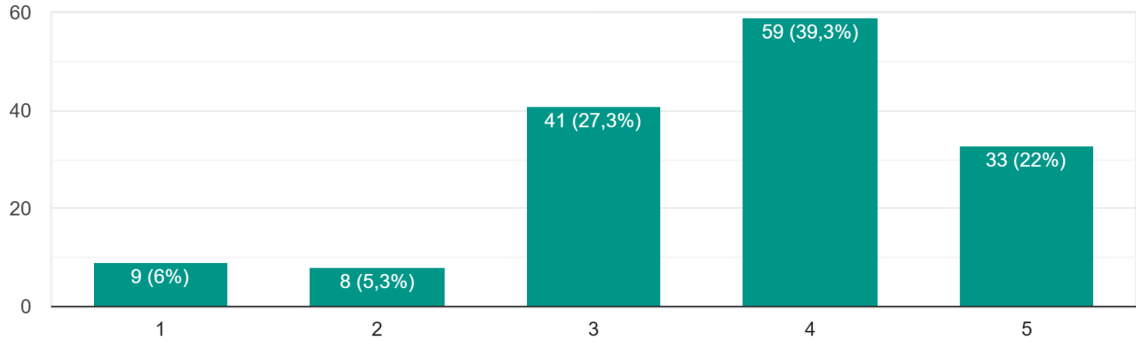
5.3. Survey Results

5.3.1 International VS Local Humanitarians - Baseline Trust Levels

One of the initial research questions aimed to establish a baseline of Ukrainian beneficiaries' trust in different types of humanitarian organizations. This was intended to provide context for understanding the prevailing forms of trust and to set the stage for further analysis of the possible factors influencing these patterns.

Respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in international humanitarian organizations providing aid in Ukraine, using a scale from 1 ("do not trust at all") to 5 ("completely trust"). The distribution of responses demonstrates that overall trust in international organizations is relatively high among the surveyed population.

Table 1. Trust in International Humanitarian Organizations

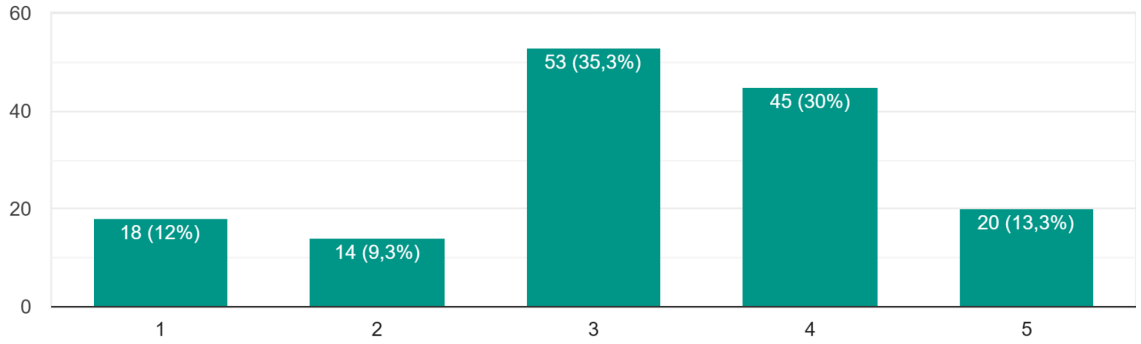


Only a small minority expressed very low trust: 6% rated their trust as "1" and 5.3% as "2." By contrast, the largest proportion selected the higher categories: 39.3% chose "4" and 22% chose "5." About a quarter of respondents (27.3%) selected the neutral midpoint ("3").

This suggests that 61.3% of respondents reported a trust level of 4 or 5, indicating a majority feel positively about the work of international humanitarian organizations in Ukraine. At the same time, a smaller segment (11.3%) remains skeptical or distrustful (ratings 1 or 2). The relatively high proportion of neutral responses may also reflect some uncertainty or limited personal experience.

In contrast, trust in local organizations is more evenly distributed across the scale, with neutral attitude to be the most pronounced.

Table 2. Trust in Local Humanitarian Organizations



Just under half of participants (43.3%) indicated high levels of trust, selecting “4” (30%) or “5” (13.3%) on the scale. However, a sizable portion expressed lower levels of trust, with 12% selecting “1” (very low trust) and 9.3% choosing “2.” The most common response was “3” (35.3%), suggesting a significant group holds a neutral or ambivalent stance toward local organizations.

As shown in the previous tables, trust in local and international NGOs follows a broadly similar pattern, but as discussed in the theoretical chapter, trust is not monolithic. It can be either generalized - rooted in a broad disposition to trust “strangers”- or more organizational, shaped by perceptions of particular institutions, their reputations, or personal experience. In our context, comparing trust in local versus international humanitarian organizations provides an opportunity to assess whether respondents display generalized trust (trusting both types equally), or whether their trust is more fragmented, with preferences for one type over another.

To further investigate this, a pivot table was constructed, tracking how many respondents assigned similar or different trust scores to local and international NGOs. This approach allows us to observe whether high trust in one type typically corresponds to high trust in the other, or if there are significant numbers of respondents whose trust is selective.

Table 3. Cross-Tabulation of Trust Scores in Local and International NGOs

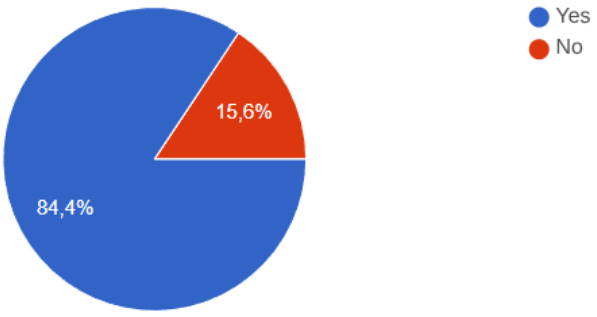
	Int NGO: 1	2	3	4	5
Local NGO: 1	7	2	1	1	0
2	1	6	2	2	1
3	0	2	12	7	3
4	1	1	6	10	12
5	0	0	1	5	9

As the table shows, most respondents who trust local NGOs also tend to trust international NGOs at a similar level, suggesting that generalized trust is a strong undercurrent in trust formation among aid recipients in Ukraine.

However, there are outliers who differentiate between the two types of organizations - for them, trust in humanitarians is fragmented rather than universal. It could be concluded that this group is more influenced by institutional trust and tends to place their confidence in either local or international actors - rarely both. As the open-ended responses reveal, their trust is often grounded in distinct, context-specific criteria. In the Discussion chapter, we will explore what factors might contribute to such strong trust or distrust toward certain types of NGOs.

As demonstrated by these sets of data, there is no homogenous logic of trust within the sample. However, generalized trust appears to have a much stronger influence overall. To further assess this hypothesis, we can turn to the respondents' overall attitudes toward humanitarians, measured by their answers to the question, "Should humanitarians be trusted?", where the type of organization was not specified.

Figure 4. "Should humanitarians be trusted?"



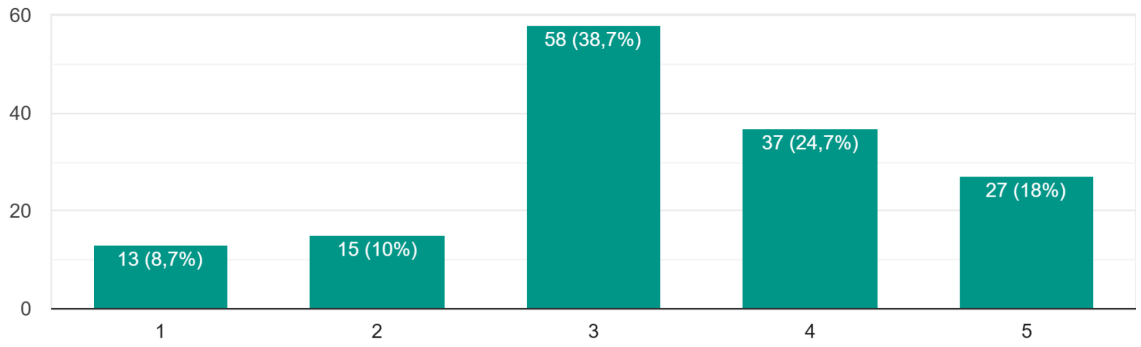
The results reveal that 84.4% of respondents answered "Yes", indicating a broad baseline of generalized trust in humanitarian actors, regardless of organizational affiliation, while only 15.6% expressed distrust ("No"). This finding supports the earlier observation that, while outlier groups exist and demonstrate fragmented trust, selectively placing trust in either local or international actors, the general tendency is toward a high level of trust in humanitarians as a category. Despite this overall trust, levels consistently decline when respondents are asked about specific types of organizations, which may suggest a strong belief in the idea of

humanitarianism, but less favorable perceptions of individual organizations or personal interactions with humanitarians on the ground.

5.3.2. Supplementary Data Baseline Trust Data for Context

Although not the primary focus of this research, responses regarding trust in national humanitarian NGOs are presented to provide additional context for interpreting patterns of trust in both international and local humanitarian organizations.

Table 5. Trust in National Humanitarian Organizations



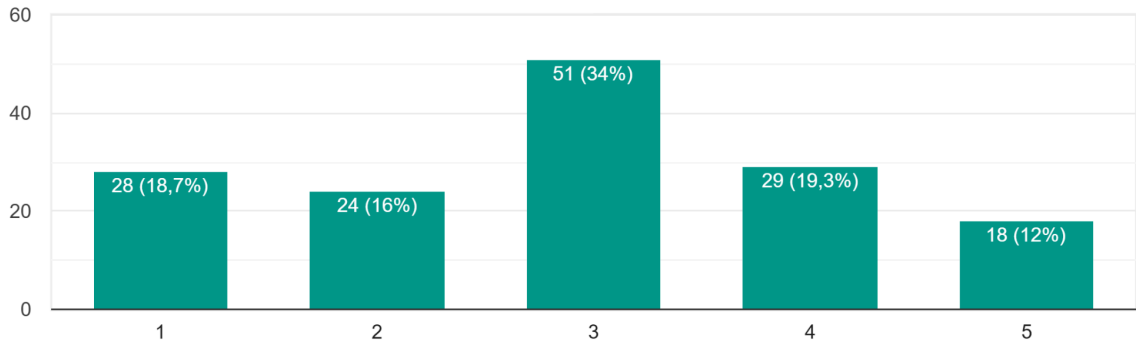
The distribution of answers suggests slightly more trust in national NGOs compared to local organizations: 42.7% selected options 4 or 5 on the trust scale, while only 18.7% selected the lowest two options. As with other organizational types, the middle option ("3") was the most common, chosen by 38.7% of respondents.

This pattern reinforces the trend observed in the data: trust tends to increase with the scale of the organization, with the lowest and most ambiguous levels reported for local actors, and the highest, most consolidated trust for international organizations. The underlying reasons for these differences will be explored further in the Discussion chapter. At this stage, including these results helps to contextualize the broader landscape of trust in humanitarian actors in Ukraine.

Trust in government institutions or local self-government bodies providing humanitarian assistance was also measured to contextualize the broader landscape of trust in Ukraine. Including this data helps to better understand the environment in which humanitarian aid is

received and provides background for certain patterns and phenomena that will be examined in detail later.

Table 6. Trust in Governmental Humanitarian Actors in Ukraine



Responses indicate that trust toward these governmental actors is both lower and more fragmented compared to civil society or international organizations: only 12% of respondents reported the highest level of trust (5), while 18.7% indicated the lowest (1). The most common answer was “3” (34%), reflecting a moderate or uncertain attitude among many respondents.

5.3.3. Factors of Trust

Since factors of trust constitute the central research question, this aspect was explored using both methods applied in the study. In this subsection, the results of categorical quantitative data obtained from the survey are presented, where respondents could select up to three key predefined factors that influence their trust in humanitarian organizations, or add their own.

Unlike the thematic analysis of interviews, categorical quantitative data does not provide in-depth insight but rather illustrates the relative importance and breadth of each factor. In this way, the findings related to the main research question acquire a more comprehensive character.

Below, a frequency table displays the number of respondents who selected each factor that positively influences trust in humanitarian organizations, based on survey data.

Frequency Table 7: Factors Positively Influencing Trust in Humanitarian Organizations

Factor	Count
Transparency in use of funds/resources	113
Recommendations from friends/family	44
Previous experience with organization	44
Long-standing operation and international presence	43
Organization considers your needs and offers choices	41
Understanding your community and tailoring programs	22
Ethical behavior	19
Staff speak Ukrainian or language of your community	15
Organization has no connection to religion	13
Organization based on religious principles	12
Staff are Ukrainian	11
Staff are foreigners	9
Organization founded in your locality	7
Organization is neutral (not supporting either side in conflict)	2
No trust	1

As shown in the frequency table above, transparency was by far the most commonly selected factor, chosen by 113 respondents. This finding highlights the critical importance of transparency, which is commonly associated with institutional trust, and demonstrates that this form of trust also plays a central role for aid recipients in Ukraine. The next two most frequently chosen factors - recommendations from close contacts and previous experience with the organization - were each selected by 44 respondents. These results underscore that both relational trust and institutional trust often coexist, creating a synergy of trust or distrust within the social networks in which humanitarian organizations operate.

As discussed in the theoretical chapter, different types of trust do not exclude one another but rather coexist, each arising from distinct sources. This makes it essential to approach the study of trust from multiple angles. For instance, when examining trust factors using categorical quantitative data, we inevitably confine respondents to the set options provided—an important limitation to acknowledge in the analysis. In this part of the survey, most options reflected factors associated with institutional and relational trust, as these are more readily assessed through self-reporting. By contrast, generalized trust is typically explored through direct questions about overall attitudes and observable behaviors, since respondents may struggle to pinpoint the specific factors that influence their generalized trust. This is because generalized trust is rooted more in belief and accumulated experience than in clear, concrete criteria.

5.3.4. Open-ended Questions

This section presents a qualitative analysis designed to broaden the scope of findings and to enable comparison between the results of in-depth interviews with humanitarian actors (who described their observations of trust dynamics among beneficiaries) and the direct opinions of beneficiaries themselves. In addition to identifying trust-building factors, this section also addresses factors of mistrust. It is important to note that mistrust is not simply the absence of trust, but often arises from specific, independent factors. Including these insights offers a more balanced answer to the additional research question: “What could be done by humanitarians to increase trust among beneficiaries in humanitarian efforts in Ukraine?” Since building trust may require not only strengthening positive factors but also directly addressing and overcoming sources of mistrust, both sets of findings are also essential for developing practical recommendations.

It should be noted that the primary material for qualitative analysis in this study was in-depth interviews, which were coded inductively: all codes and themes were generated directly from the data. In contrast, open-ended survey questions were analyzed using a hybrid approach - combining inductive, bottom-up coding, with deductive, top-down coding. The deductive aspect was guided by codes identified in relevant literature and, in particular, by the codes developed during the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews.

The following tables summarize the most frequently mentioned factors contributing to trust and mistrust in humanitarian organizations, as identified in open-ended survey responses.

Frequency Table 8. Trust Factors from Open-Ended Survey Questions

Focused Code	**Frequency**
Transparency and Reporting	51
Fair & Needs-based Distribution	15
Honesty and Integrity	9
Use of Ukrainian language/Pro-Ukrainian Attitudes	4
Active Communication & Public Presence	3

Let's look at the most common factors. As evident from the table, transparency and reporting was the most frequently mentioned trust-building factor (n = 51). Respondents expressed this priority in statements such as: *"Post regular reports with receipts for every penny," "Transparent activities, so aid really goes to those who need it,"* and *"Provide open reporting about the use of resources and delivery of aid."* This factor is often central to trust-building in humanitarian contexts, but in Ukraine, its prominence is amplified by the country's long-standing struggle against corruption.

The importance of fair and needs-based distribution was also widely highlighted. As one respondent wrote: *"Help according to real needs of each person."* Several participants emphasized that humanitarian aid should not be allocated solely on the basis of formal statuses: *"It is important [to provide aid] not just by lists, but according to real needs…"* One respondent, for example, observed that only IDPs consistently receive aid in their community, while local elderly residents have not received any assistance. It is not only perceived as unfair by local residents, but may also foster social tensions over time and ultimately hinder the integration of IDPs into the local community (Duncan, 2005).

Frequency Table 9. Distrust Factors from Open-Ended Survey Question

Focused Code	**Frequency**
Corruption, Embezzlement, Fraud	39

Deception, Broken Commitments, Unethical Behavior	26
Lack of Transparency or Reporting	12
Use of Russian Language / Pro-Russian Attitudes	7
Lack of Communication	4
Unfair or Biased Aid Distribution	3

Corruption, embezzlement, and fraud rank first among the factors of distrust, reflecting the seriousness of this problem in Ukraine and its impact on public attitudes toward humanitarian organizations. Interestingly, lack of transparency or reporting, while a major source of distrust (ranking third in frequency), is not simply the inverse of the most common trust-building factor (transparency and reporting). This distinction illustrates that distrust is an independent concept, shaped by its own set of factors rather than merely being the absence of trust.

Therefore, when working with groups that exhibit high levels of distrust, humanitarian organizations should not focus solely on trust-building efforts, but also investigate how distrust developed and whether it can be actively addressed. Such a combined approach is likely to yield faster and more meaningful results than simply attempting to build trust in environments marked by deep skepticism toward humanitarian actors.

In addition to these "typical" trust and distrust factors, identity also emerges as a salient dimension. Several respondents expressed strongly negative attitudes toward humanitarian organizations that do not adopt a clear pro-Ukrainian position regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war - or even toward those that are neutral and avoid the topic altogether. For them, a lack of explicit support for Ukraine is automatically equated with pro-Russian sentiment: *"Use of Russian language, justifying aggression, or organizations like the UN and Red Cross being on Russia's side..."*

The widespread practice of international organizations using the Russian language when communicating with Ukrainian aid recipients also causes distrust: *"I do not trust humanitarian workers who speak the language of the occupier..."* and *"Do not hire Russians or employees who support Russia or pro-Russian narratives; hire staff and provide services in Ukrainian..."*. Due to Ukraine's colonial history, the right to use the Ukrainian language - and the choice not to speak Russian - is a matter of dignity, and for some, a question of

personal security, particularly among those who have experienced or been threatened by occupation.

5.3.5. Conclusion

In summary, the survey results reveal a generally high baseline of trust in humanitarian actors among Ukrainian beneficiaries, with international organizations enjoying somewhat greater confidence than local or governmental actors. While the majority of respondents express generalized trust in humanitarians as a category, trust becomes more selective when specific types of organizations are considered. This selectivity reflects impact of both relational and institutional dimensions of trust.

Transparency and reporting stand out as the most significant factors underpinning trust, closely followed by fair, needs-based distribution and ethical conduct. Conversely, corruption, embezzlement, and fraud remain the most prominent sources of distrust, with lack of transparency, unethical behavior, and breaches of commitment further undermining confidence. The analysis also highlights the unique salience of identity factors in the Ukrainian context, where language use and perceptions of national alignment play a critical role in shaping attitudes toward humanitarian organizations.

These findings suggest that, while trust in humanitarian action in Ukraine is generally strong, it is neither uniform nor unconditional. Effective strategies to build and sustain trust must address not only the presence of trust-building practices but also the active management of factors that generate or reinforce distrust. The intersection of institutional, relational, and identity-based factors underscores the complexity of trust in crisis settings and points to the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches by humanitarian actors operating in Ukraine.

5. 4. Insights from Interviews

This section summarises the insights drawn from five semi-structured interviews with key “intermediary” actors (R1 – R5) who bridge international and local humanitarian organisations with crisis-affected populations. Because these practitioners work daily at distribution points, municipal social-service units and community centres, they observe first-hand how beneficiaries talk about their trust or mistrust in aid providers. Their dual vantage point allows them not only to gauge prevailing trust levels, but also to trace how those attitudes shift in response to programme design, communication style, language use and

wider conflict dynamics. Equally important, their experience collaborating with both international NGOs and locally rooted groups enables them to compare the two "tracks" of humanitarian action and to suggest concrete trust-building strategies tailored to each.

Table 10 summarises how often each major idea surfaced in the five interviews. The left-hand column lists the themes that were developed after the initial, line-by-line coding stage and consolidation. The adjacent frequency figure records how many separate quotations, across all respondents, were tagged with that theme. These counts indicate how recurrent and widely shared a perception is within this small qualitative sample. The right-hand column shows an extent to which a particular theme was shared among the interviewees.

Table 10. Frequency and Breadth of the Themes

Theme	**Frequency (n)**	**Respondents Mentioning Theme (breadth, n / 5)**
Barriers to Access	**24**	**4**
Transparency and Accountability	**11**	**3**
Collaboration and Needs-based Adaptation	**10**	**2**
Experience of Help (Positive and Negative)	**8**	**4**
Trust in Local vs International Actors	**7**	**3**

Themes scoring high on both frequency and breadth are especially salient: they were discussed often and by most interviewees. Themes with high frequency but low breadth may reflect a few respondents' intense experiences; low-frequency, low-breadth themes capture more specialised or emerging concerns. Because this analysis draws on only five interviews, the numbers signal relative salience, not statistical prevalence. More interviews would be required to reach data saturation and to support broader generalisations.

5.4.1. Theme 1: Barriers to Access

This was the most frequently raised theme and spans practical, procedural, and psychological obstacles. A first layer of barriers is geographic and financial. Many programmes are concentrated in regional centres, making access prohibitively costly for people in smaller settlements. One participant captured the arithmetic that deters uptake:

"...such assistance is usually organised in large cities, but our people, to get to Poltava, for example, to register for this aid or to receive it, they need to spend 500 UAH, you see? And the assistance they are offered is worth 500 UAH. So people don't go there" (R3)

Respondents added that the very groups deemed "most vulnerable" often lack the mobility, money, or digital literacy to navigate long travel and multi-step registration, which generates a secondary barrier: the feeling of being sidelined. Perceptions of unfairness intensify when eligibility criteria prioritise IDPs while equally vulnerable local residents are excluded:

"...there are also groups who have long needed assistance, but, according to international organisation guidelines, these people can't receive aid. So, that causes conflicts." (R4)

As we can see, this theme resonates with the survey findings: the observations of beneficiaries and humanitarian actors coincide. Local humanitarian actors often concluded that greater flexibility in how local organisations can distribute aid, given they demonstrated transparency and consistency, would enable more mobility and need-based responsiveness, rather than a blanket approach.

Another sub-theme concerns psychological, rather than physical or formal, barriers. In some cases these are linked to generalised mistrust, whereby people in need do not seek help because they "look for a catch." Several participants traced this mistrust to experiences of living under a totalitarian system in the Soviet era, which created collective trauma:

"...they grew up in a totalitarian country and don't believe that there are people who genuinely want to help." (R1)

In addition, reluctance to engage with humanitarian actors is sometimes linked to a lack of understanding of or disagreement with humanitarian principles, particularly the principle of neutrality:

"Often large humanitarian funds, like IOM or other humanitarian structures, try to do good here [in Ukraine], but, for example, also assist on the Russian side. And this causes a lot of misunderstanding."

This aligns with previous research, particularly the concept of "humanitarian resistance" (Slim, 2022), and also emerged in the survey results.

Regarding this last type of mistrust, respondents tended to believe that sustained community engagement by local organisations, supported by international actors, together with transparent and consistent communication from international organisations, are actions that would gradually strengthen trust within communities.

In sum, some obstacles are logistical and solvable through decentralisation or flexible eligibility, others are embedded in historical memory and perceptions of fairness. These findings suggest that improving access is not merely a question of moving distribution points closer or simplifying forms, but of reshaping how aid is framed, communicated, and justified to affected communities.

5.4.2. Theme 2: Transparency and Accountability

This topic not only aligns with the results of the survey but also stands out as a leading factor by a considerable margin. Interview participants frequently discussed it, adding deeper nuances and concrete examples - precisely the kind of insights that make in-depth interviews valuable.

They emphasised that transparency and accountability influence trust at all levels. As intermediaries between global humanitarian actors and beneficiaries, they see themselves as trust-builders, with transparency being a central component:

"Meticulous accounting, maintaining registries, controlling distribution. I completely trust them." (R3)

On the other hand, participants noted that smaller organisations need to strike a balance, as extensive reporting requirements can become a barrier given their lower institutional capacity. In practice, this sometimes means relying on trust in the full sense of the word—placing confidence in the honesty of partner organisations without exhaustive documentation. The same applies to beneficiaries, although their trust can be eroded by poor experiences with a single NGO, leading them to form a negative opinion of humanitarian organisations as a whole.

One participant described another phenomenon related to transparency that has the potential to undermine trust:

"...the process here is heavily politicised. Local charities often evolve into political projects." (R1)

According to respondents, people tend to prefer NGOs, whether international or local, because they wish to distance themselves from the politicisation of humanitarian aid at the local level. However, political party representatives have recognised this preference and created NGOs that function as "shadow political parties," pursuing party-political objectives while outwardly resembling humanitarian organisations. Another pattern occurs when a humanitarian organisation operates for several years, gradually becoming more politicised and eventually transitioning into the category of political actors.

Even cooperation with local government actors can take on political overtones if authorities fail to uphold humanitarian principles. For example, one interviewee described a case in which a municipal representative presented aid from an international NGO as assistance from his own political party in an effort to gain favour with local residents.

Such cooperation with political actors undermines trust and is viewed negatively by both beneficiaries and local humanitarian actors, as it is seen as serving a hidden agenda, whereas humanitarian workers are expected to remain apolitical. In this context, the principle of neutrality can take on heightened importance at the local level: humanitarian workers must remain neutral toward all internal actors. While opinions in society are mixed on whether neutrality is acceptable when it involves providing aid to the adversary populations, views on

politicisation at the local level are far more consistent. Respondents clearly favoured actors unaffiliated with any political parties other than the state itself - and only on the condition that state actors do not abuse their position to promote partisan interests, as in the example above.

Thus, the interviews reveal that transparency in the Ukrainian humanitarian context mediates not only the relationship between organisations and beneficiaries, but also between local and international actors themselves and could be trickled down. When transparency is absent, the resulting vacuum is often filled by suspicion and perceptions of hidden agendas, eroding trust far beyond a single project or organisation.

5.4.3. Theme 3: Collaboration and Needs-based Adaptation

Collaboration and needs-based adaptation in humanitarian response refers to sustained, trust-driven engagement with affected communities to ensure that assistance remains relevant over time. While survey data reflected this theme, interviews revealed deeper cause-and-effect dynamics shaping the effectiveness of aid strategies.

A recurrent challenge identified by participants was the difficulty local populations have in clearly articulating their needs. As one respondent noted:

"The local population rarely communicates its needs clearly and sometimes cannot even formulate them" (R4)

This observation highlights that effective needs assessment cannot rely on brief consultations or one-off engagements. It demands sustained presence in the community, as well as a nuanced understanding of its underlying problems, how these have developed over time, and where its strengths and vulnerabilities lie. Such understanding emerges only when trust has been established - a process best supported through the combined involvement of local implementers, who bring contextual insight, and international partners, who provide resources:

"When you have meetings with such frequency, such synchronizations, at some point a certain barrier will drop, and you will be able to discuss the project as equals." (R5)

Linking with the Theme 1, several participants cautioned that neglecting host communities in favour of supporting only internally displaced persons (IDPs) undermines both integration and broader social cohesion. This imbalance often stems from incomplete or overly narrow needs assessments, which fail to recognise the full scope of "needs" beyond immediate material shortages. While such omissions may seem minor in the short term, they have lasting consequences for community sustainability. Selective aid provision erodes the social fabric and can deepen divisions.

A related consequence of failing to consider long-term impacts is the emergence of aid dependency - a risk particularly acute in frontline communities, where population numbers and job opportunities are already diminished, and humanitarian actors are more concentrated:

"They didn't seek jobs or support local businesses or small shops because they knew they would always have food packages, so they didn't need to do anything. It led to obstacles for rebuilding the local economy and to the decrease in proactivity among residents." (R5)

Without systematic and ongoing reassessment after the initial emergency phase, humanitarian action can unintentionally weaken community resilience for years and slow post-war recovery.

Unexpectedly, and in contrast to much of the literature, respondents expressed generally positive attitudes toward reporting requirements, viewing them as essential to building and sustaining trust. Here, the findings intersect with Theme 2: Transparency and Accountability. In that theme, transparency was identified as both a trust-builder and, if overly burdensome, a potential operational barrier. In the context of Theme 3, however, participants stressed that accountability procedures, when proportionate, play a constructive role in sustaining collaboration and adaptive planning:

"I understand that this is a kind of insurance for them - 'Look, we received everything, we distributed everything, everything is fine.' But, is it necessary to look for balance? Yes, it is." (R1)

This insight reinforces Theme 2's emphasis on balance between accountability trust, grounded in transparent procedures and verifiable records, and relational trust, based on

interpersonal familiarity and shared experience. Respondents generally felt that this balance is achieved more often than not, and they acknowledged the role of reporting in sustaining trust both between partner organisations and with beneficiaries.

To conclude, the interviews suggest that collaboration and needs-based adaptation are not merely operational preferences but essential preconditions for effective and sustainable humanitarian action. When trust is cultivated through long-term engagement, local and international actors are better positioned to identify genuine needs, avoid exclusionary practices, and mitigate the risk of aid dependency. In this context, reporting is not seen as an administrative burden but as a mutual safeguard that reinforces both accountability trust and relational trust. The challenge, therefore, lies in striking a balance: ensuring rigorous transparency without creating barriers that exclude smaller organisations or alienate beneficiaries. Achieving this balance requires sustained dialogue, equal partnership, and an adaptive approach that keeps community realities—not just programme frameworks—at the centre of decision-making.

5.4.4. Theme 4: Experience of Help (Positive and Negative)

This theme focuses on beneficiaries' previous experiences of interacting with humanitarian organisations and how these experiences influence current perceptions of aid. Respondents observed that most beneficiaries perceive humanitarian aid—whether provided by local or international NGOs, businesses, or the state—as a single, undifferentiated entity. As a result, one particularly positive or negative experience with any actor can significantly shape attitudes toward humanitarian workers as a whole. This finding echoes the survey results, where respondents tended to either trust all types of NGOs or distrust them entirely.

For people in extremely difficult circumstances, the mere fact of receiving assistance, regardless of the provider, often outweighs concerns about the quality of the interaction itself. As discussed in Theme 1, the legacy of collective trauma, compounded by the urgency of survival, means that many aid recipients cannot approach the interaction as equals. Even when they are dissatisfied, they may feel unable to refuse assistance or withdraw from the relationship:

"Without the humanitarian sector, things would be very difficult for many people…." (K4)

Given the deep historical roots of these perceptions, there is no quick remedy; the patterns have developed over decades and will take time to change. Nonetheless, recognising this historical and cultural backdrop is essential for avoiding actions that might deepen mistrust and for identifying gradual pathways to rebuild confidence. This insight also connects to Theme 3, where trust was shown to be a prerequisite for effective needs-based adaptation as past negative experiences can limit the willingness of communities to articulate their needs openly, thereby reinforcing the barriers to accurate assessment identified earlier.

Local NGOs are often well placed to address these trust deficits due to their cultural embeddedness and long-standing community ties, while international actors can contribute fresh perspectives and resources to tackle entrenched challenges. Both approaches hold value, and their complementarity offers opportunities for strengthening trust in the long term. However, because many beneficiaries see "humanitarian aid" as a single category rather than a collection of distinct actors, trust or mistrust can easily spill over from one organisation to others, regardless of their actual behaviour. This amplifies the importance, highlighted in Theme 2, of consistently respectful, transparent, and principled engagement across all humanitarian actors. A single breach of trust can undermine collective credibility, making sector-wide commitment to ethical conduct essential.

5.4.5. Theme 5: Trust in Local vs International Actors

This theme explores whether there is a difference in attitudes toward local and international NGOs in the humanitarian context, in order to understand what aspects of trust exist for each type, how these can be leveraged to increase beneficiaries' trust in humanitarian workers, and how this might inform the localization of humanitarian response. There was no unanimous opinion on this topic, which makes it noteworthy and important for careful study and further exploration in future research, preferably with a larger number of respondents.

One respondent took a clear position:

"In my circle, people trust international organisations more than local ones." (R1)

This participant linked their perspective to the politicization of local humanitarian NGOs, mentioned in Theme 2, as well as corruption and embezzlement, which, when exposed, tend

to become widely known within communities. Another respondent agreed that corruption was a central factor in mistrust but also highlighted a significant regional nuance:

"In communities with high corruption levels people often have a very negative view of national or local organizations like ours. At the same time, they fear large humanitarian actors. Situation is completely different in the frontline and de-occupied communities: there, people are much more open to local NGOs, local movements and volunteer groups..." (R5)

This distinction may reflect what occurred during the early stages of the full-scale invasion, when many international humanitarian actors evacuated, leaving local actors to bear the brunt of the initial response. In these extreme conditions, frontline communities and grassroots groups may have built substantial trust through their visible, direct, and immediate aid delivery. Another possible factor is the way these groups often assist both civilians and military personnel without distinction, blending humanitarian and non-humanitarian support. While such indivisibility of aid might challenge strict humanitarian neutrality, it may strengthen trust in certain communities. More institutionalized NGOs, even local ones, cannot easily replicate this, especially if they receive significant institutional donor funding and are bound by formal humanitarian principles.

One participant also pointed to capacity limitations as a factor shaping perceptions of local actors:

"...our civic organizations in Ukraine wouldn't be able to meet the demand [from the population for] all this [humanitarian] aid without them." (R2)

This view, linked to findings in Theme 4, suggests that individual negative experiences, such as being excluded from assistance, can have a disproportionate effect on public trust. In many cases, these limitations stem from the fact that local NGOs operate with significantly fewer financial and logistical resources than their international counterparts, restricting their ability to reach all who need help. When people see that local actors cannot provide aid at the same scale or speed as larger international agencies, it can reinforce perceptions of weakness or unreliability, even if the cause is structural rather than intentional. The way assistance is communicated to the population also matters. If joint humanitarian projects are presented as solely the work of international donors, without adequate recognition of the time, resources, and effort invested by local NGOs, this can reinforce perceptions of power imbalance and

diminish trust in local actors. Conversely, more collaborative communication that visibly credits both international and local contributions may help strengthen perceptions of legitimacy and partnership equity.

The findings in this theme reveal that trust in local versus international humanitarian actors in Ukraine is shaped by a complex mix of reasons. While corruption and politicization erode confidence in local NGOs, proximity to crisis and visible early-response efforts can enhance it, especially in frontline and de-occupied communities. International actors are often perceived as more resource-rich and less vulnerable to local political pressures, yet may also be viewed with caution and anticipation of unequal relationship. Capacity gaps, rooted in resource disparities, further affect perceptions of local actors, particularly when unmet needs lead to individual negative experiences. Communication strategies and the visible recognition of local contributions emerge as important factors in shaping trust levels. These dynamics speak directly to the core research question on factors influencing trust and will be further analysed in the Discussion chapter to identify strategies for strengthening trust in humanitarian response.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the key findings from both the survey and interview components of the study, addressing the primary research question on the factors influencing trust among aid recipients in Ukraine, as well as the two subsidiary questions concerning baseline trust levels and strategies to increase trust.

The survey results show that generalised trust in humanitarian actors is high: over four-fifths of respondents believe that “humanitarians should be trusted.” However, trust levels vary when specific organisational types are considered. International organisations enjoy the highest levels of trust, followed by national NGOs, with local NGOs and governmental humanitarian actors receiving lower and more fragmented trust ratings. Cross-tabulation suggests that while many respondents extend similar trust to both local and international actors, a significant minority hold selective trust, favouring one over the other.

Transparency and reporting emerged as the most important trust-building factors, with fair, needs-based distribution and ethical behaviour also ranking highly. Conversely, corruption, politicisation, and a lack of transparency were the most frequently cited sources of mistrust.

Open-ended responses highlighted additional context-specific dimensions, particularly the salience of language use and perceived national alignment in shaping trust and mistrust.

Interview findings deepened this picture by revealing how barriers to access, perceptions of politicisation, and capacity limitations influence trust at the local level. Respondents underscored that trust can be strengthened through consistent transparency, equal recognition of local and international contributions, and genuine collaboration based on sustained needs assessment. Frontline and de-occupied communities often exhibit stronger trust in local actors, partly due to their visible role in the initial response phase, while in other areas international actors are preferred for their perceived impartiality and greater resources.

Overall, the findings portray trust as multi-dimensional, shaped by a combination of institutional, relational, and identity-based factors. While positive perceptions of humanitarianism remain strong, they are neither uniform nor unconditional. Building and sustaining trust in Ukraine requires a dual focus: reinforcing the presence of trust-building practices, and actively addressing the specific drivers of mistrust. The next chapter will interpret these findings in light of existing literature, exploring how the observed dynamics can inform more effective, locally grounded humanitarian strategies.

6. Discussion

6.1. Do Ukrainians Trust Humanitarians?

Across the survey sample, baseline trust in “humanitarians” as a general category was high: 84.4% answered “Yes” to the question “Should humanitarians be trusted?”. When respondents were asked about specific organisational types, trust became more differentiated. International organisations attracted more consolidated confidence - 61.3% selected 4 or 5 on the five-point scale whereas trust in local organisations was flatter, with 43.3% selecting 4 or 5 and a larger share choosing the midpoint. This pattern converges with interview evidence: practitioners repeatedly described strong endorsement of the humanitarian ideal, tempered by caution toward particular organisations and practices (e.g., politicisation, opaque selection, or costly access). In other words, generalised trust in humanitarianism coexists with more selective institutional and relational trust shaped by lived experience.

6.1.1.Ideal Humanitarian vs. On-Site Actor

The gap between the abstract and the particular is visible in both strands. The survey's high "yes" to trusting humanitarians reflects attachment to humanitarian values and an a priori willingness to cooperate; however, ratings dip when respondents consider named types of actors. Interviews complement this by explaining the mechanism: beneficiaries judge specific encounters and procedures - how transparent the registration is, whether travel costs outweigh the value of aid, whether promises are kept, and whether staff communicate respectfully.

Practitioners also observed a "bleed-over" effect whereby one poor interaction colours perceptions of the sector as a whole, especially where people experience humanitarian actors as a single undifferentiated bloc. Conversely, visible fairness and traceable reporting can lift confidence beyond a single project, reinforcing the survey's finding that transparency is the most salient trust factor. The strands therefore converge on a two-step logic: endorsement of the ideal creates openness to help, while specific organisational conduct converts that openness into sustained trust.

6.1.2. "Neutral" Humanitarians: What Does Neutrality Mean?

Neutrality emerged as a context-dependent issue rather than a simple virtue. Open-ended survey responses and interviews converge that apolitical conduct at the local level (i.e., not instrumentalising aid for party gain, avoiding campaign branding) is valued and read as a trust cue.

At the same time, several respondents treated language use and stance toward the war as identity-coded signals: the use of Russian language, "both-sides" framing, or cooperation narratives with the aggressor were cited as distrust triggers. Practitioners complement this picture by noting that beneficiaries often interpret international actors' formal neutrality not as principled impartiality but as moral distance in a context of national survival.

The strands thus show a controlled divergence: neutrality as non-partisanship in local delivery is desirable, while neutrality as public stance can be read as misalignment. The implication for practice is not to abandon impartiality, but to communicate it differently - anchoring neutrality in clear, verifiable fairness (who is helped and why), distancing

programmes from party politics, and avoiding language choices that inadvertently signal indifference.

6.1.3. International or Local?

Survey ratings suggest comparatively higher trust in international actors, with local actors eliciting more neutral positions. Interviews explain this asymmetry through two mechanisms.

First, institutional trust: international organisations are perceived to have stronger reporting, audit, and consistency, which aligns with the survey dominance of transparency as a trust factor. Second, politicisation risk: several practitioners described local charities evolving into "political projects" or local officials presenting external aid as party assistance; such dynamics depress trust in the local track. At the same time, interviews highlight where local actors can outperform: proximity, responsiveness, and language/cultural fit - all relational levers that beneficiaries notice in everyday contact. The strands therefore complement one another: international actors are advantaged on institutional assurances, local actors on relational credibility.

Where respondents depart from the general pattern - trusting one track but not the other - interviews point to specific experiences (e.g., unfair distribution lists; broken commitments; or, conversely, consistent face-to-face delivery) as decisive. This suggests a practical division of labour: pairing international organisations' accountability infrastructure with local groups' situational responsiveness, while jointly insulating programmes from local-level politicisation.

Reflecting on additional reasons for the asymmetry between trust in local and international actors, the historical context is salient and points to a clear avenue for future research. Ukraine has, de facto, experienced colonial domination (Kuzio, 1998; von Hagen, 2014), and in many colonial/postcolonial settings there is a tendency to distrust "one's own" institutions while valorising the foreign as inherently superior (Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011). Although these mechanisms are documented elsewhere, they remain under-examined in the Ukrainian case; analysing how colonial legacies shape trust in humanitarian actors would be a natural narrowing of this exploratory study and a productive direction for subsequent work.

A further mechanism that may explain higher ratings for international organisations is exposure asymmetry. Many INGOs deliver through local partners or government channels, which means most beneficiaries have few direct encounters with INGO staff. As a result, internationals are more easily associated with the abstract ideal of the "humanitarian" (principled, impartial, well-resourced), while local organisations, who interact with people daily, accumulate both the benefits and the frictions of contact (queues, eligibility disputes, language or tone, delayed follow-up). This asymmetry lowers opportunities for negative experiences with internationals while amplifying variance in experiences with locals, helping to reconcile the survey pattern (higher consolidated trust in INGOs) with interview evidence about the decisive role of relational encounters in shaping trust.

Taken together, the data indicate that high baseline support for humanitarianism can be converted into durable trust when programmes are (a) visibly transparent, (b) needs-based and fair in ways communities can verify, (c) apolitical in local delivery while communicating neutrality as procedural fairness, and (d) responsive through credible local interlocutors. Where any of these signals are absent, trust fractures.

6.2. Trust factors

Findings from the survey and interviews align with the wider literature on trust in humanitarian settings, but several features stand out in the Ukrainian context.

6.2.1. Transparency Dominates

Across methods, transparency and reporting emerged as the most salient trust-building factor by a wide margin (survey: n = 113; open-ended responses and interviews converged on the same point). Importantly, respondents did not limit "transparency" to financial stewardship: they also wanted clarity about motives - who stands behind a programme, why it operates in a given place, and how eligibility is decided. This emphasis reflects long-standing anti-corruption concerns, but it also addresses fears of a hidden agenda or political instrumentalisation. In other words, transparency is simultaneously a safeguard against misuse of resources and a signal of clean intentions.

6.2.2.Relational Trust Travels Through Networks

The next most frequently selected survey factors were recommendations from family/friends and one's own previous experience (each n = 44). Interviews help explain why: a single bad

interaction can fracture trust beyond the individual, diffusing through personal networks and shaping community perceptions. Conversely, consistent, respectful delivery builds reputational capital that also travels socially. The practical implication is that personal encounters have outsized effects. Everyday reliability, clear information, and follow-through matter as much as formal guarantees.

6.2.3. Institutional Trust Advantages International Actors

Institutional trust featured prominently in participants' reasoning. Many local NGOs are young, small, and less visible; they often lack the resources to maintain the reporting systems that audiences associate with institutional reliability. International organisations, by contrast, benefit from recognised procedures, audit trails, and name recognition. This does not mean local actors cannot gain institutional trust. Rather, they must borrow and build it - through transparent targeting, public reporting scaled to capacity, joint complaint/feedback channels, and partnerships that make procedures legible to communities.

6.2.4. Religious Affiliation: a Split Preference

Survey responses showed nearly equal groups who preferred religiously affiliated organisations and organisations with no religious links. This ambivalence is consistent with Ukraine's history of religious repression and revival (Kindrachuk & Vasylchuk, 2022). The operational takeaway is not to avoid the topic but to name it clearly: state whether a programme is faith-based or secular, articulate how principles translate into non-discriminatory practice, and keep financial and eligibility rules transparent. Where transparency is weak, religious affiliation can become an additional layer of mistrust.

6.2.5. Identity-Linked Cues: Language, Stance, and Nationality

Open-ended responses and interviews highlighted language and perceived civic stance as potent trust signals. The use of Ukrainian and a visibly pro-Ukrainian position increased trust for some respondents; conversely, Russian-language communication or "neutral" messaging that ignored the context of aggression was read as disrespectful or even provocative. Where international staff were perceived as foreign but impartial they sometimes attracted higher trust among respondents wary of local politicisation or corruption. These patterns suggest that identity cues are not free-standing "preferences": they are often second-order reflections of other concerns (respect, safety, responsiveness, and procedural fairness). When language

preferences or feedback about communication are ignored, people report a loss of agency and drift toward passive receipt of aid as it erodes trust further.

To sum up, the factors again point to a two-track strategy: pair institutional signals with relational practices. In Ukraine, transparency must speak both to resources and to motives. Finally, the data indicate plausible interactions among factors - for example, identity cues amplifying (or mitigating) the effects of transparency and fairness. Testing these interactions would require a larger, saturation-level sample and inferential analysis. In the present study, results are presented descriptively; they nonetheless provide a clear roadmap for programme design that is both procedurally credible and experientially respectful.

6.3. Multilevel Trust

The results point to a layered architecture of trust rather than a single, unitary construct. Three levels operate simultaneously - generalised trust, institutional trust, and relational trust. Survey items that asked about “humanitarians” in general primarily tapped into generalised trust and the ethical appeal of humanitarianism as an ideal. Items that named specific organisational types, and the interview material focused on concrete encounters, drew out institutional and relational trust.

A broadly positive disposition toward “humanitarians” emerged as an undercurrent shaping many responses. Yet the baseline is not determinative: a sizeable ambivalent group remains, and their views appear movable. For practice, this suggests prioritising interventions that target the “moveable middle” rather than assuming high generalised trust will automatically translate into confidence in specific programmes.

The data point to two complementary logics. Institutional trust rests on accountability and transparent procedures (open reporting, clear eligibility, accessible complaints), while relational trust rests on the perceived intentions and care of frontline actors. In this context they are not zero-sum. Programmes that pair light-but-visible reporting (scaled to local capacity) with predictable presence, local-language communication, and quick corrective action after feedback convert generalised goodwill into stable confidence. Conversely, over-engineering procedures without attention to relationships can feel opaque; relying solely on goodwill without minimal transparency invites suspicion of hidden agendas.

In short, trust in this setting is fragmented across levels of abstraction: people can affirm the humanitarian ideal (generalised trust) while doubting particular organisations (institutional trust) or specific interactions (relational trust). Effective practice treats these layers as complementary building blocks. By deliberately integrating institutional signals with respectful, responsive encounters, programmes can convert abstract approval into durable, situated trust.

6.4. Recommendations

The evidence shows that trust in the Ukrainian humanitarian context is multilevel and asymmetric across actor types. Accordingly, trust-building should be tailored, combining institutional signals of probity with everyday signals of respect. The recommendations below translate the findings into practice for international and local organisations, while preserving a cross-cutting focus on depoliticisation, proportionate accountability, fair access, and continuous learning.

6.4.1 Cross-cutting

1. Build trust on multiple levels. Deliberately balance institutional trust (systems, rules, reporting) and relational trust (respectful interactions, responsiveness). By maximising both, organisations can also leverage the relatively high level of generalised trust in "humanitarians." Strategy should fit local context and the current trust baseline. Work in parallel on strengthening trust and reducing mistrust drivers.
2. Publish concise but accessible by general public information: purpose, funding, eligibility, out-of-scope items, complaint channels. Engage the community to identify accessible formats and shared communication touchpoints through quick consultations and user testing.
3. Maintain strict distance from party politics: no co-branding; non-partisanship clauses with municipalities; issue corrections for misattribution. This requires active awareness of the local political context, not just generic policies.

6.4.2. For International Humanitarian Organisations

1. Explain humanitarian principles in practice: what impartiality/independence/neutrality mean for today's activity. Before activities, spell out how impartiality, independence, and neutrality shape today's targeting and delivery. Clarify that neutrality governs how aid is delivered and does not imply moral equivalence. Aid recipients often

interpret principles through their own context, so make the operational implications explicit.

2. Select partners for community legitimacy as well as compliance. Combine due diligence with rapid perception scans to avoid party-proxy NGOs. These scans can be informal, but where in-person presence is limited, rely on data-driven tools to approximate community views.
3. Keep visible presence: periodic community meetings to close feedback loops and explain decisions. Listening must be paired with action: when people see their input implemented, they feel like agents rather than passive recipients, and trust grows.

6.4.3. For Local Humanitarian Organizations

1. Use your comparative advantages. Leverage granular knowledge of the community and local context. In partnerships, "borrow" each other's trust types: INGOs contribute institutional trust, while local NGOs contribute relational trust; exchange this for resources and capacity where appropriate.
2. Publish anti-corruption safeguards and enable complaints. Develop and publicise simple anti-corruption policies; provide clear channels for reporting corruption or other problems; act on reports and communicate results.
3. Study your audience and tailor communication accordingly. Even with limited budgets, small, low-cost feedback and basic stats (quick online forms, micro-polls, exit cards) are feasible for the typical population size served and can yield disproportionately large gains. Many perceptions of "non-transparency" are produced by communication gaps, not misconduct - close those gaps deliberately.

7. Conclusion

This thesis set out to map how trust in humanitarian actors is formed, sustained, and fractured in Ukraine, and to translate those insights into practice. Using a mixed-methods design— a CASI survey of beneficiaries and semi-structured interviews with local intermediary practitioners— the study examined baseline trust across actor types, identified the most influential trust and distrust factors, and interpreted the findings through a multilevel trust lens (generalised, institutional, relational).

7.1. What the Study Found

High baseline, selective application. Most respondents affirm the humanitarian ideal: more than four in five said "humanitarians should be trusted." Yet when asked about specific organisational types, trust becomes more selective. International organisations draw the most consolidated trust; local organisations attract more neutral or ambivalent views; governmental actors are the most fragmented. Interviews explain this asymmetry: people distinguish between the ideal humanitarian and specific organisations and encounters. Everyday procedures - who qualifies, how fairly aid is distributed, whether travel costs outweigh the value of assistance, whether promises are kept—convert abstract approval into durable or brittle trust.

Transparency dominates. Across methods, transparency is the most salient trust-builder by a large margin. In the Ukrainian context shaped by long anti-corruption efforts transparency functions both as proof of probity and as an antidote to suspicions of hidden agendas or politicisation.

Relational trust travels through networks. Recommendations from family/friends and one's own prior experience rank just behind transparency. A single poor interaction can fracture trust beyond an individual, diffusing through social networks. Conversely, consistent, respectful delivery builds reputational capital that also travels.

Identity-linked cues matter because they signal other things. Language use and perceived stance toward the war act as potent trust signals. Ukrainian-language communication and visible, context-aware positioning increase trust for many. Russian-language delivery or "both-sides" framing are often read as disrespectful or unsafe. These cues typically reflect second-order concerns (respect, safety, fairness), not free-standing identity preferences.

Barriers to access are practical and psychological. Concentration of services in regional centres, travel costs equalling or exceeding the value of aid, complex registration, and eligibility rules that prioritise one group while overlooking equally vulnerable locals create both logistical and dignity harms. Historical memory and generalised mistrust add a psychological layer that requires more than procedural fixes.

Neutrality is context-dependent. At the local delivery level, apolitical conduct (no party branding; clear separation from campaigns) is read as a trust cue. Public "neutrality" framed as moral distance, however, can be distrusted in a war for national survival. Interviewees suggest communicating neutrality as procedural fairness rather than as moral equivalence.

Collaboration and needs-based adaptation are preconditions, not add-ons. Sustained presence and equal partnership enable more accurate needs assessment, reduce exclusion effects, and mitigate aid dependency. Proportionate accountability is not viewed as a burden but as a mutual safeguard—provided it remains legible and scaled to capacity.

7.2 Answers to the Research Questions

RQ1: Which factors influence beneficiaries' trust, and what types of trust do they engage?

The leading factors are:

- Transparency and reporting (institutional trust);
- Fair, needs-based distribution and kept commitments (institutional + relational);
- Recommendations and prior experience (relational);
- Respectful communication, language fit, visible apolitical delivery (relational);
- Perceived professionalism and longevity (institutional).

Primary distrust drivers are corruption/fraud, deception/broken commitments, opaque processes, politicisation, and dismissive communication.

RQ2: What is the baseline level of trust by actor type?

Generalised trust in "humanitarians" is high. Trust is more consolidated for international organisations, more ambivalent for local organisations, and most fragmented for governmental actors. A notable minority exhibits fragmented trust, favouring one track over another based on concrete experiences.

RQ3: What practical actions can increase trust?

Pair institutional signals (plain-language reporting; clear eligibility; accessible complaints) with relational practices (predictable presence; local-language communication; rapid feedback-to-action loops). Depoliticise local delivery; communicate neutrality as procedural fairness; credit local partners visibly; use proportionate accountability that smaller

organisations can meet; and keep decisions transparent at points where people actually experience programmes (registration desks, distribution lines, community meetings).

7.3. Contributions

Empirical. The study provides one of the first mixed-methods snapshots of beneficiary trust in humanitarian actors in Ukraine, distinguishing international, national, local, and governmental tracks and linking trust/distrust factors to concrete features.

Theoretical. It operationalises multilevel trust in a live conflict setting, showing how generalised trust coexists with institutional and relational trust, and how identity cues often function as proxies for respect, safety, and fairness.

7.4. Implications for Localisation

Trust is both a precondition and an outcome of meaningful localisation. International organisations bring institutional trust (systems, auditability); local actors bring relational trust (proximity, language, cultural fit). Programmes that borrow and build across these types are best placed to convert abstract approval into stable confidence if they insulate delivery from local politicisation and share credit transparently. Local capacity for community-facing transparency (not just donor-facing compliance) is pivotal and fundable.

7.5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Findings are descriptive, not causal. Interviews (R1–R5) are context-specific to one oblast; the survey uses non-probability sampling and is youth-leaning and female-majority. CASI reduces but does not eliminate social desirability. These constraints temper generalisation.

Future work should: (i) field a larger, stratified sample to enable inference; (ii) run longitudinal panels to track trust through phases of the response and recovery; (iii) compare frontline, de-occupied, and rear regions. Exploring how colonial legacies and exposure asymmetries shape trust in local vs international actors in Ukraine is a separate but promising line of inquiry.

7.6. Final Reflection

In this study, Ukrainians express strong support for humanitarianism as an ideal but they insist that **conduct** matches **claims**. Trust grows where programmes are transparent in

purpose and process, visibly fair, linguistically and culturally respectful, and anchored in long-term, equal partnership. It fractures where people encounter opacity, politicisation, and promises that do not turn into action. Bridging that gap is not a matter of rhetoric but of design: pairing proportionate accountability with everyday respect, and combining international systems with local credibility. Done deliberately, this turns general goodwill into durable, situated trust strengthening both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of humanitarian action in Ukraine.

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Annex 1. Figures and Tables

Figure A1. Age distrubution for survey respondents

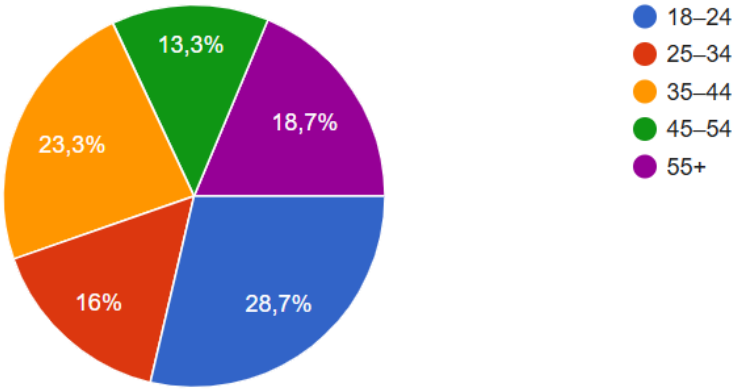

Figure A2. Geographic distribution of survey respondents

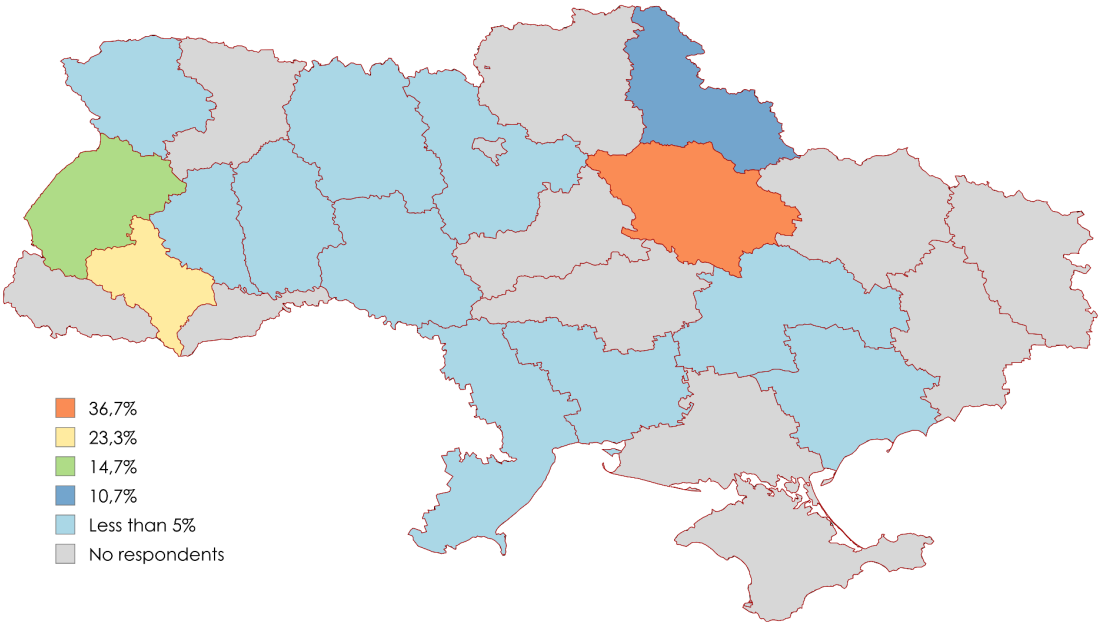

Table A3. Interview Participant Profile

ID	Gender	Age	Position

R1	male	25	Local media representative; volunteer; activist
R2	female	44	Local councilwoman
R3	female	37	Head of social protection department in municipality
R4	female	52	Local NGO representative
R5	female	24	National NGO representative