

# ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN UKRAINE

Emergency Response inside Ukraine  
Thematic paper



# Thematic Paper on the Role of Civil Society Organizations in Ukraine

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*Cover image: Ukrainian women help each other register for assistance at an IFRC cash distribution in Warsaw. Carina Wint*

## Contents

Table of Contents .....	1
List of Abbreviations .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Methodology and limitations .....	3
Theoretical considerations.....	4
The Ukraine response .....	5
Local CSOs as leaders of the first-line emergency response .....	5
CSOs and CVA programming – a shortfall.....	7
Recommendations .....	10
Partnerships.....	10
Entry points into CVA.....	11
Coordination .....	11
Funding .....	12
Key Learnings .....	12
Bibliography .....	13

## List of Abbreviations

CBPF	Country-based Pooled Funds (of Ukraine, unless otherwise specified)
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CVA	Cash and Voucher Assistance
CwG	Cash Working Group (of Ukraine if not specified)
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
KI	Key Informants
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
MoSP	Ministry of Social Policy
NGCAs	Non-Government-Controlled Areas

## Introduction

Six months after the Russian invasion, Ukraine has rapidly become one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. As of 23 July 2022, 6.3 million people are internally displaced. Of the 10.4 million people recorded to have crossed into other countries, approximately 4 million have returned to Ukraine. With functioning markets in most of the territory, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) prioritized Multipurpose Cash Assistance (MPCA) as the most appropriate humanitarian assistance for the Ukraine crisis. According to the Ukraine Cash Working Group (CWG), there are currently 28 cash actors with operational presence in Ukraine<sup>1</sup> reporting their activities to the CWG, and the current cash sector is delivering \$492 million to people in need.

The CALP Network is the co-facilitator of a learning group working with the CWG. The overall objective of this group is to strengthen the ongoing cash response in Ukraine through the analysis of existing learning and documentation of lessons and good practices to inform other cash responses globally. The Learning Group voted Linking Humanitarian Cash to Social Protection as a first priority; Enabling Local Responders as a second; and Registration, Targeting and Deduplication as third priority. Other themes included coordination of cash assistance, minimum expenditure basket and transfer values, Protection and inclusion, and accountability to affected populations. This thematic paper will contribute to learning by documenting key lessons learnt, emerging critical issues, and real-time recommendations.

## Methodology and limitations

The researchers have used participatory approaches to ensure that the perspectives and insights of all key stakeholders are taken into consideration. Primary data collection was conducted mainly through key informant interviews (KIIs) with Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) actors; the researchers did not interview recipients, nor government officials. Due to the scope of the study, the researchers were not able to assess the role of faith actors and leaders, the local private sector, communities and diaspora groups. The list of key contacts was provided by the CWG co-leads and complemented by CALP. The consultants interviewed a total of 33 key informants from the humanitarian sector. Two workshops were organized with the Learning Group, one to conduct a prioritization exercise and select the three-priority thematic learning areas,<sup>2</sup> and the second one to discuss some of the key findings from the KIIs. Secondary research was conducted via a review of key publications relevant to the selected theme, from various contexts. The Humanitarian Outcomes<sup>3</sup> report on *Enabling the Local Response* is one of the main resources used for this paper. The research paper was reviewed by the Learning Group and Task Team members.

The researchers conducted all the data collection remotely during the months of July and August 2022, through video conferences and online workshops, therefore, the conclusions reflect the collective actions of the preliminary phase of the response (approximately first six months). Due to the scope of work, the researchers did not directly interview cash recipients to ascertain how the different programmes implemented by members of the CWG have been perceived. Equally, the depth of the analysis has been

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<sup>1</sup> As reported by the CWG co-leads.

<sup>2</sup> The Learning Group voted Linking Humanitarian Cash to Social Protection as a first priority; Enabling Local Responders as a second; and Registration, Targeting and Deduplication as third priority. Other themes included Coordination of Cash Assistance, MEB and Transfer Values, Protection and inclusion, and AAP .

<sup>3</sup> Stoddard et al. (2022).

contingent on the availability and the information shared by Key Informants (KIs). **Specific to localization, KIs shared only limited information with the researchers, and very few had a clear picture of localization in the Ukraine crisis. Also, no local actor was present during the Learning Group discussions and very few responded to the interview invite from the researchers – a revealing indication of the state of the localization efforts of the humanitarian sector in Ukraine.** The secondary data review was limited to studies available in the public domain, documents shared by CALP, and the researchers' own experience. More broadly, only limited research has been published on the Ukraine crisis escalation to date.

Theories about localization opportunities for and through CVA have been treated extensively in the literature<sup>4</sup> and will not be outlined in detail in this analysis. Limitations exist, including an insufficient attention to evaluating the effects of localization on the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian responses and outcomes for those in crisis, and there is no thorough value-for-money analysis of localization.<sup>5</sup>

## Theoretical considerations

This present paper focuses on enabling locally led response in the Ukraine response. The engagement with government authorities has been explored in a Learning Group paper on linking humanitarian assistance and social protection in the Ukraine response, as well as other reports. Therefore, in this paper, **there is a strict focus on working with local civil society organizations (CSOs), volunteer groups, community-based organizations, and national organizations.**

'Localization' means increasing international investment and respect for the role of local actors, with the goal of increasing the reach, effectiveness, and accountability of humanitarian action.<sup>6</sup> It is also a way of recognizing that the overwhelming majority of humanitarian assistance is already provided by local actors. Localization also refers to the relationship of international actors with local civil society organizations, governments, the private sector, and market actors. The Grand Bargain outlines commitment to 'making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary'<sup>7</sup>, increasing direct funding to local stakeholders. The Charter for Change commits to actions that address inequalities in the humanitarian system.<sup>8</sup>

Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, both localization and CVA have received considerable attention within the humanitarian sector. While the adoption of CVA has increased significantly, localization has so far made much slower progress. Obstacles remain, including structural barriers in the humanitarian funding mechanisms and the unwillingness of international actors to transfer knowledge, resources, and power. While there is evidence of some progress (e.g. local organizations are increasing their access to pooled funds, like those administered by OCHA), the vast majority of CVA funding still goes to international actors, where local actors are mainly seen as implementing partners.<sup>9</sup> Development Initiatives' Tracking Cash and Voucher Assistance report<sup>10</sup> highlights the tension between the commitments to increase the use of CVA and to localize humanitarian funding, as direct CVA funding tends

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<sup>4</sup> CALP (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Barbelet (2021).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ifrc.org/localization>

<sup>7</sup> UN Secretary-General's Call at the World Humanitarian Summit 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Barbelet (2018); CALP (2020).

<sup>9</sup> CALP (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Rieger (2022).

to be concentrated among international, rather than local and national agencies. International agencies accounting for 97% of requirements for CVA activities in 2022 funding data shows that projects with CVA components by international actors were more than twice as likely to be funded as other projects, compared to only 7% for local and national NGOs (LNGOs).

The 2020 Grand Bargain<sup>11</sup> report notes a tension between the drive to build a more inclusive system and the push towards further large-scale programmes that can marginalize local responders. As the use of CVA increases, fewer, larger actors will dominate,<sup>12</sup> whilst local responders take a secondary role as implementing partners – often with very limited voice in programme design and implementation. **As long as the main metric for success remains scale, this tension will play out in large-scale responses, such as in Ukraine.** Here, as the focus was on direct delivery at scale, local actors have been almost completely left out of the initial phase of the cash response, with very few exceptions.<sup>13</sup>

## The Ukraine response

### Local CSOs as leaders of the first-line emergency response

Driven by solidarity, the Ukraine first-line humanitarian response was primarily led by local organizations at the beginning of the crisis. **According to the Humanitarian Outcomes report,<sup>14</sup> nearly all of the humanitarian assistance provided during the first six weeks following the invasion was planned and carried out by local actors, including 150 existing national NGOs (NNGOs), church organizations, and approximately 1,700 new local aid groups.**<sup>15</sup> This dynamic is not specific to the Ukraine response. There were already many NNGOs working in the east of the country, yet many lost staff and very few were able to relocate to other parts of the country.

**The Ukraine response has been emblematic of where humanitarian efforts, the vast majority of international funding for humanitarian relief assistance is now being led or channelled primarily to UN agencies.** There continues to be a large disconnect between the international aid sector with its record levels of international funding, and the under-resourced locally led response. According to the Humanitarian Outcomes report published in June 2022, 71% of total humanitarian aid funding for Ukraine went to UN agencies, 11% to country-based pooled funds, 10% to Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 6% to INGOs, and 2% to others, including 0.5% to national government, 0.0022% to Ukrainian Red Cross and 0.0003% to national NGOs.<sup>16</sup> With a staggering \$3.59bn reported to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) by 23 November 2022 and more than 6 million people displaced inside the country (of which 4 million assisted), international actors are set to deliver humanitarian cash at scale. The allocation followed a similar trend: 64.7% going to UN agencies, 26.4% to INGOs, 7.4% to the Red Cross, 1.2% for the GoU, and 0.2% for the Local CSOs/NNGOs.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

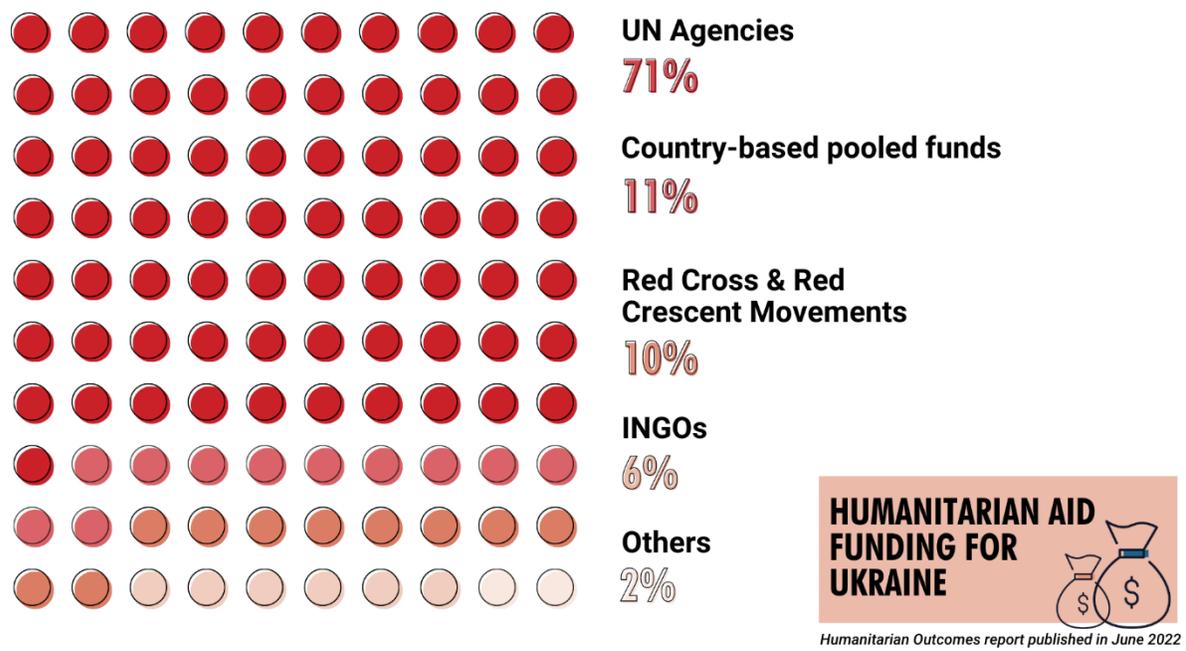
<sup>12</sup> Ibid. *The State of the World's Cash Report* (2020) reports that almost two-thirds of all global CVA is now delivered by just two actors – WFP and UNHCR.

<sup>13</sup> Stoddard et al. (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> National Network of Local Philanthropy Development (2022).

<sup>16</sup> According to the UN Financial Tracking Service (FTS), May 2022.



Localization has not been prioritized in the response agenda in Ukraine since the conflict escalation in February 2022, compared to other themes such as CVA integration with social protection. The majority of the CVA actors in Ukraine did not consider enabling a locally led response through local CSOs from the onset of the response. There is no dedicated Task Team as for other topics such as deduplication, aligning cash with social protection, or targeting. That said, OCHA, as the Country-based Pooled Funds (CBPF) administrator, is interested to engage with local CSOs, including the increase in earmarked funding for local CSOs. As a result, criteria favouring NNGOs have led to 19% of the CBPF reaching NNGOs directly as of November 2022– a higher percentage than that delivered to other CBPFs.<sup>17</sup> While discussions are ongoing regarding entry points for local organizations as implementing partners for international organizations, the reality has not changed. The issues around co-design, direct funding, mutual learning, and thinking from the local perspective have not yet been considered, outside of a handful of organizations.

The local aid response has grown organically and mostly revolved around private donations (in-kind or cash), rather than institutional funding. Most CSOs have adopted a similar operational strategy, with volunteers moving in-kind donations, pooling personal funds when needed, responding to incoming aid requests in their region, and gradually expanding their reach and scope as funds and donations permit. Several CSOs had linkages with diaspora networks that fund them directly. The CSO landscape has been evolving, with several registering as NGOs, while many others ended their relief efforts due to diminishing human and in-kind or financial resources. Although some donors simplified their funding application requirements to enable more local partnerships, there is a lack of direct funding mechanisms from institutional donors to local CSOs, and many argue the changes are not enough – the level of requirements (including due diligence, fiduciary risks, and reporting requirements) are still hard to achieve and CSOs are unable to access funding to continue their work.

<sup>17</sup> According to OCHA’s latest figures, the funds received by local NGOs amount to 19%, see: OCHA (2022).

**While scale appears to be the single most important success measure in the Ukraine response, the primary focus has been on international actors which are known to donors and can absorb large amounts of funding, at the cost of existing and functional national social protection mechanisms and local CSOs.** As the literature<sup>18</sup> describes, this model marginalizes local CSOs, the majority of which are currently not involved in the international response and coordination structures. There is growing criticism of the large-scale, one-size-fits-all model of cash transfers, driven primarily by efficiency and scale. This is also the case for Ukraine, where most international actors were focusing on large-scale delivery of cash to accessible populations, as opposed to reaching the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations trapped along the frontline or non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs). These populations were mostly assisted by local volunteer groups.

Several of the interviewed KIs spoke about the lack of mutual trust between international and local organizations, which is fomenting a narrative about local actors' 'lack of capacity'. This narrative is further developed by donor expectations that the direct funding recipient, typically an international organization, holds full control in a hierarchical relationship in which the implementing partners, often local actors, are subordinate. These dynamics are often exacerbated by the relative lack of finance and compliance systems and the capacities of local organizations compared to international organizations.

In Ukraine, volunteer groups have been praised for the effectiveness of their work with little funding. Some KIs point out a lost opportunity to engage with the volunteer groups driving the life-saving work in NGCAs. Although not unique to Ukraine, one challenge faced by international humanitarian organizations around the world is finding ways to support volunteer groups lacking legal registration. Navigating the restrictive legal framework in Ukraine<sup>19</sup> to work effectively with informal groups should be on the localization agenda.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, international organizations should not lose sight of the fact that national organizations can drive ownership and responsibility for the response, and can add significant value, but might have little understanding of how the international aid community works and its technical jargon.

**There are considerable barriers to enabling a locally led response through CSOs, such as the limited entry points into the cash response focused on scale, unrealistic compliance expectations from international actors, and a limited understanding of how humanitarian responses work.** As argued in the published paper on Targeting, Deduplication and Registration,<sup>21</sup> the current CVA delivery model, which primarily relies on self-registration or government lists and is used by some of the largest cash actors, is cutting out local implementing partners and is limiting their entry points into CVA programming. The model does not harness the competitive advantages of local CSO actors, which often rely on having a more community-centred approach based on in-person outreach.

## CSOs and CVA programming – a shortfall

### Capacity constraints

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<sup>18</sup> Jodar (2020).

<sup>19</sup> Only legally registered organizations can receive funding in Ukraine.

<sup>20</sup> One KI compared this with microfinancing or savings groups, also without a legal entity.

<sup>21</sup> CALP (2022).

Some of the interviewed KIs working with international organizations or donors argued that there are barriers and shortfalls in working with local CSOs in CVA programming. Most local CSOs and NNGOs lacked prior experience with CVA, and as one reviewer stated, it was unlikely that they would implement CVA on their own initiative, even if CVA was feasible and preferred by those in need.<sup>22</sup> Several KIs stated that local civil society actors have experience on human rights but have never implemented CVA programming. As one KI stated: ‘A big leap is required in having human rights actors doing cash.’ Other KIs argued that local organizations were unable to absorb high levels of funding through their minimal systems, nor did they have the capacity to deliver cash assistance at scale. **Most CSOs do not have the structures, resources, or capacity to partner with international organizations or donors and directly channel CVA resources to recipients.** Generally, there is also a limited understanding of how the international humanitarian system works, and local CSOs need training on humanitarian standards, protection, humanitarian principles, accountability towards the affected population, and safeguarding against sexual abuse and exploitation – in addition to CVA.

### **Solidarity versus humanitarian principles**

Another challenge is presented by the fact that the underlying principles driving the relief operations of international and local actors diverge: **while international humanitarian organizations aim to uphold the humanitarian principles, a majority of local actors are primarily driven by solidarity against the Russian invasion and with the Ukrainian army.**<sup>23</sup> One of the main barriers outlined by international organizations has been the lack of adherence to humanitarian principles by local CSOs. As combatants are members of the community, the local responders find it hard to differentiate and apply neutrality principles *sensu stricto*. According to the Humanitarian Outcomes report, for many Ukrainian volunteer organizations and local authorities, there is no justifiable distinction between providing support to the military and delivering aid to civilians, which feeds concerns of possible selection bias of recipients by local CSOs. Also, there is anecdotal evidence that local organizations channel aid to civilians and the military at the same time. However, too much focus on the divergent values between local and international actors could amount to a risk of applying double standards. In the first months of the response, several international organizations adopted a ‘no regrets’ approach, waiving the verification steps required in the CVA programme cycle, to allow for a fast delivery. As the assistance was provided to all IDPs, it is unclear whether all the necessary checks were put in place to prevent CVA assistance going to military personnel. Nevertheless, one could also argue that the international support to humanitarian efforts is very much driven by Western governments in solidarity with Ukraine; which are also channelling significant funding and support directly to the military.

### **Unrealistic compliance requirements**

Key Informants are well aware of the perceived double standard: while international organizations waived some of the implementation requirements that normally apply when programming CVA, such as allowing large-scale blanket distributions, the same organizations demanded high standards of compliance from local organizations. There is also a dissonance between the upstream request from international organizations to donors to standardize and streamline processes to access and manage funds, while the same organizations implemented stringent compliance rules to local partners downstream. As one KI

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<sup>22</sup> One reviewer also noted that the Ukrainian legal framework makes the transfer of funds potentially eligible for taxation, thus acting as a disincentive for local responses, as they are not necessarily aware of the exemptions available for CVA assistance.

<sup>23</sup> National Network of Local Philanthropy Development (2022).

pointed out when referring to the due diligence processes and desire to control local organizations: ‘The “no regret” approach did not extend to working with local partners. We applied an “all regrets” approach instead.’

Because CVA is generally held to higher standards compared to in-kind assistance, international organizations are more risk adverse and apply more stringent control measures to prevent diversion of CVA compared to in-kind assistance.<sup>24</sup> This higher, double standard for CVA disincentivizes partnerships with local actors.<sup>25</sup> Lastly, since international organizations mostly regard local actors as implementing partners or service providers, they are often competing among themselves to partner with the limited number of national NGOs able to meet their compliance requirements. International organizations often overwhelm local partners with their specific due diligence formats, processes, and requirements, given the pressure to complete all the necessary paperwork and reporting requirements placed on organizations with limited resources.

### **New partnership model**

Quite a number of international organizations now implement programmes through CSOs, but not many of the CSOs are able to implement CVA on their own, and several have reached out to the CWG for technical support. In Ukraine, some KIs have pointed to other partnership models outside of traditional sub-granting, with international organizations playing an intermediary facilitation role between local organizations and donors by fulfilling grant management requirements and facilitating funding that would otherwise be out of reach for local actors. It is unclear whether this model simply replicates the implementing partner model or offers a more equitable partnership relationship, with equal visibility, decision-making, and adequate support funding.

Other models mentioned include the secondment of key staff to local partners, twinning with smaller organizations, the provision of small grants, and support to CSOs to register.<sup>26</sup> Several KIs cited the successful model of engagement between the Estonian Refugee Council and Unity for the Future, its local partner. The two partners are in effect maximizing each organizations’ competitive advantages by qualifying for international funding, fulfilling the grant management requirements, and accessing those most in need along the frontlines, who are mostly out of reach for the international organizations.

Despite limited capacities to manage international funds and/or to design CVA programming, there is significant scope to shift the ongoing in-kind operations of locals CSOs, volunteer and church groups into CVA assistance. As one reviewer pointed out, it is possible for local groups to switch their in-kind aid into vouchers or cash. Also, cash used as a modality by the various humanitarian sectors (such as shelter, protection, etc.) is an opportunity for the local CSOs and NNGOs to kickstart their CVA activities at a smaller scale.

### **Localization in the Ukraine crisis – a lost opportunity?**

Large-scale MPCA programming and enabling a locally led response through CSOs are almost mutually exclusive, since the cash model requires CSOs to operate as international organizations, with stringent compliance mechanisms – a model that is likely to fail and hamper the agility of CSOs. **Instead, we argue**

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<sup>24</sup> Klein (2019).

<sup>25</sup> Alexander (2022).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

**that in order to achieve scale commensurate with the needs, the main driver to localization in the Ukraine crisis should be the partnership with social protection institutions and work with local organizations to provide complementary services and conduct outreach in hard-to-reach areas.** The CALP's second learning paper on social protection linkages in Ukraine highlights a lost opportunity to design the humanitarian intervention around existing and functioning capacities and systems, including that of social protection and a vibrant civil society.

**As the response evolves and more areas become accessible, there is a larger scope and role for the local civil society, as their competitive advantage lies in their community-led approaches and outreach capacities, particularly for hard-to-reach communities.** Local partners have access to some of the most vulnerable populations and will enable better targeting. However, as one KI pointed out: 'Their added value is clear, but to make it happen is a gradual process.' There are also opportunities to switch from in-kind modalities to CVA assistance for the many local CSOs and volunteer groups that are still primarily assisting the population with in-kind assistance.

## Coordination

Several KIs pointed out that, although the CWG is trying hard to involve the local civil society, the lack of representation of local actors in CVA discussions and national coordination platforms is a major barrier to progress towards localization. Despite efforts to provide simultaneous translation in Ukrainian, local participation in the CWG and the Task Teams remains limited, as the coordination environment is driven by humanitarian jargon that is unknown to local actors.<sup>27</sup>

KIs point to a lack of technical expertise, time, and staff to participate in the technical conversations held at the CWG and Task Teams. Local actors complain about a coordination system that has become too technical and is removed from operational aspects. As KIs have argued, a decentralized coordination model (at oblast level) is key to ensure greater participation from local actors, as local organizations have been more active in area-based coordination fora. Lastly, local actors point out that their limited financial resources and restrictive budgeting from international partners prevents them from recruiting for roles that are dedicated to coordination.

## Recommendations

### Partnerships

- The Humanitarian Country Team, CWG and members should reconsider the role of local CSOs as strategic partners to reach the most vulnerable populations in hard-to-access areas; to refine the targeting approaches; and to ensure that quality assistance is delivered through large-scale operational models such as social protection mechanisms.
- International actors should also partner with local organizations that have previously worked with the government-led social protection mechanisms and have expertise with the provision of complementary social services.

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<sup>27</sup> In Oct/Nov 2022, the CWG undertook a series of changes to its ToR, including having a local actor as co-lead. Also, for all coordination meetings there is an in-person attendance requirement in Kyiv or through the OCHA field offices for all cash actors. It has yet to be seen if this move will result in more engagement and leadership from local actors or whether it will further alienate local actors who cannot afford to hire staff dedicated to coordination.

- International implementing organizations and donors should explore alternative ways to partnerships like consortia,<sup>28</sup> secondments or accompaniment, as opposed to sub-awarding; or playing an intermediary support role between local organizations and donors to fulfil the grant management requirements.
- International implementing organizations and donors should harmonize, revise, and simplify the vetting requirements for local partners and streamline the partnership process.
- Organizations partnering with local organizations should allocate – and donors should fund – indirect costs for internal system building, technical capacity building, award management, and coordination.
- International organizations should identify new ways of funding informal volunteer-based networks, similar to supporting group cash assistance<sup>29</sup> or community lending groups. Volunteer groups could use small grants to identify, register, and deliver CVA assistance to hard-to-reach and vulnerable populations left out of the mainstream approaches.
- International and local actors should engage in a constructive dialogue on upholding humanitarian principles in partnerships and operations.

## Entry points into CVA

- Humanitarian actors should foster a learning environment – both for local partners to strengthen their CVA capacities, as well as for international actors to understand the needs of specific communities to ensure the response is well tailored to their needs.
- Capacity strengthening efforts should focus on specific issues across the CVA project cycle, such as M&E, registration, targeting, etc., and humanitarian principles. CVA training should be organized.
- Sector-specific cash should be considered as an entry point to familiarize local actors with CVA, such as cash for protection, shelter, or winterization, as well as group cash transfers. Technical support should be provided to local CSOs to substitute their in-kind delivery operations with CVA, and help them coordinate their interventions through the CWG and other relevant coordination mechanisms.
- International organizations should use flexible funding to initiate CVA programming with local partners, and with a strong learning component. More flexible fiduciary requirements should enable a more equal partnership, focused on two-way learning.

## Coordination

- The CWG should establish a Task Team dedicated to developing a clear roadmap to engage local actors in the CWG, strengthen their CVA technical capacities, streamline partnership requirements, etc.
- INGOs should support the creation of a national NGO forum and finance the forum coordinator role, as an overall advocacy body for national organizations (irrespective of CVA programming).
- To ensure meaningful participation from local stakeholders, the humanitarian architecture and the CVA system need to be built on local comparative advantages and key stakeholders, and not the other way around. This reflects a shift in power from the international community to local actors. Specifically:

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<sup>28</sup> The Kenya Cash Consortium is a positive example of consortia involving local and international organizations. In Ukraine, two out of five NGO consortia include national NGOs.

<sup>29</sup> Tønning and Kabeta (2021).

- The CWG should shift its current focus from primarily technical conversations to operational issues in the CWG meetings, in order to strengthen the response, as well as to add value for local actors.
- The CWG should include representation from national organizations in the Steering Committee.
- The CWG should continue to engage with local organizations in the area-based coordination fora, which should also be organized in the Ukrainian language and translated to English if needed.

## Funding

- Donors should adapt their compliance requirements to local realities and ensure more funds are channeled to local stakeholders (in line with their Grand Bargain commitments); and that partnerships are equitable and not solely driven by international actors (either by UN or INGOs). The CBPF should prioritize projects implemented directly or in partnership with national or local NGOs and simplify the application and reporting requirements.

## Key Learnings

Without concrete actions to advance the localization agenda at the global level, enabling a locally led response will remain rhetoric, rather than reality. The Ukraine crisis and the disconnect between the local CSOs and the international aid community is emblematic of the current status of the localization agenda. Many point to a lost opportunity to deepen contextual knowledge and targeting, and to strengthen access to some of the most vulnerable populations and those in hard-to-reach areas, if the international aid community fails to engage and effectively partner with vibrant CSOs.

The first-line emergency response was driven by ad-hoc volunteer groups, many of which have ceased to exist due to systemic issues with accessing funds and expertise. International organizations have not identified ways to finance groups that are not legally registered. Similar issues were experienced during the refugee crisis in Greece, the response to which was initially led by citizen initiatives, as the mobilization of the more established humanitarian aid ‘machinery’ took time.<sup>30</sup>

If the metrics for success remain scale and cost of CVA, working with government-led social protection mechanisms are more appropriate avenues for localization. In addition, local CSOs can add significant value by ensuring cash is delivered to the most vulnerable, with a focus on quality.

The majority of local organizations were operational in the east of the country and had experience with human rights programming. Local CSOs struggle to understand the international aid system and related jargon, and have limited capacity to deliver CVA assistance; they therefore need additional support. Although CSOs with limited CVA experience might not be the best actors to deliver CVA as a first-line emergency response, they can add a lot of value, in terms of understanding people’s preferences and local market dynamics, supporting digital literacy, and so on. New models of partnerships can capitalize on the strengths of each partner – by accessing international funding and ensuring the assistance reaches the most vulnerable populations.

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<sup>30</sup> Dittmer and Lorenz (2021); Meier (2019).

With few exceptions, local organizations have been excluded from designing or implementation CVA in Ukraine. Only international organizations that already had operations before the current crisis in Ukraine have been able to meaningfully partner with local organizations to date. This dynamic demonstrates that effective partnerships take time and must be built on mutual trust.

Compliance requirements both from donors and international humanitarian organizations mean that access to funding remains out of reach for many local CSOs. As long as CVA is held to a higher standard than in-kind assistance, international actors will be unlikely to hand over CVA operations to local partners. As CVA is scrutinized by donors and auditors, international organizations will maintain control of operations. Ultimately, enabling a locally led CVA response will require a bold move which includes the handover of power, responsibilities, and funding. A new paradigm is needed based on a partnership model as opposed to the traditional implementing partnership model.

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