

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Empowering Youth in Humanitarian Action in Ukraine

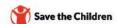
Lessons Learned and Pathways Forward

February 2025









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Research team:

The Research Team on this project consisted of representatives from two organisations:

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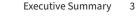
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Introduction

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally transformed society, affecting all spheres of life, including education, employment, social connections, and civic participation. Within this changed reality, young people, who made up to a quarter of Ukraine's pre-war population, navigate experiences of displacement and disrupted opportunities, many find ways to contribute to their communities. The number of young people with volunteering experience has steadily increased each year since pre-invasion times.

This growing involvement in humanitarian activities, particularly notable against the backdrop of broader societal fatigue after two years of full-scale war, signals young people's potential as vital partners in humanitarian action. The evolving pattern of youth engagement – from immediate crisis response towards systematic humanitarian support – creates opportunities for sustained civic activism even during prolonged crisis periods and demonstrates young people's capacity for contributing to Ukraine's long-term recovery.

To better understand these dynamics, the study examines patterns of youth engagement in humanitarian action, exploring motivations, approaches, and challenges. Based on the findings, the report offers recommendations for key humanitarian stakeholders – from international organisations, local NGOs and educational institutions to government bodies and donors. These recommendations focus on practical ways to support youth participation, strengthen educational pathways, enable youth-led initiatives, and develop sustainable leadership opportunities in humanitarian action.



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Key Findings

1. Multiple engagement pathways enable different forms of participation

Despite broader engagement fatigue, Ukrainian youth show increasing commitment to volunteering, combining military-focused support and diverse humanitarian activities, highlighting their resilience and potential for sustained civic activism. Youth involvement spans various roles and responsibilities, from short-term volunteering to sustained coordination positions. Their engagement encompasses emergency response, child-focused initiatives, reconstruction efforts, and crisis cleanup. While many start with spontaneous volunteerism, structured mentorship enables progression to leadership roles.

2. Emergency response drives core youth engagement

Youth humanitarian engagement encompasses distinct operational spheres, with emergency response activities with food, cloth and hygiene distribution forming the core domain of involvement, particularly during the initial phase of the full-scale invasion in 2022 and continuing into 2023. Educational and child-focused initiatives stand out as another sphere, characterised by structured, long-term programmes aimed at supporting crisis-affected children. Physical recovery, reconstruction efforts, and emergency cleanup operations constitute additional domains where youth demonstrate substantial capacity for both immediate crisis response and long-term community development.

3. Grassroots understanding shapes youth engagement

Ukrainian youth engage in humanitarian action primarily through community-based initiatives and local networks. While young people often equate humanitarian action with volunteering, their engagement extends beyond traditional volunteering activities. Local youth centres played a crucial role during the full-scale invasion, transforming into humanitarian hubs that coordinate aid distribution and support to displaced persons. This transformation was particularly successful when supported by national coordination initiatives, as demonstrated by the network of humanitarian hubs rapidly established in youth centres across 21 regions of Ukraine.

4. Diverse motivations drive sustained participation

Youth engagement is driven by multiple factors, with empathy and personal connections to crisis-affected individuals serving as primary motivators. Additional drivers include opportunities for social connection and career development. Through participation youth develop project management, leadership and soft skills.

5. Social media reaches active youth while personal networks expand reach

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram serve as key recruitment tools but mainly reach already active youth. Educational institutions show potential for youth engagement, though this remains largely unrealised across Ukraine. Community-based approaches with local authority partnerships prove effective in reaching youth, especially in rural and less connected areas. Personal networks and friend referrals are powerful engagement mechanisms, while parental influence can either facilitate or hinder participation, particularly in rural communities where traditional values may conflict with volunteering.

6. Professional development pathways remain underdeveloped

Despite active involvement and skill development, leadership positions remain limited. Career pathways in the humanitarian sector are underpromoted, requiring better support systems to help youth transition from volunteering to professional roles through structured mentorship and training programmes which became an important pillar enabling sustaining engagement during social disruptions caused by displacement and remote learning.

7. Mentorship and skill-building drive sustained engagement

While younger teenagers typically enter through school or family connections viewing activities as social, older youth demonstrate more strategic approaches focused on professional development. The humanitarian sector functions as a vital platform for social connection and community integration, especially valuable during displacement and social disruption. Mentorship proves particularly crucial in this developmental journey, facilitating comprehensive skill development in strategic planning, project management, and stakeholder communication while helping address challenges created by disrupted social connections.

8. Geographic and social barriers create engagement gaps

Rural youth face significant logistical and financial barriers to participation. Family influence plays a crucial role, particularly in rural areas where traditional values may discourage civic participation. Educational institutions represent vast but untapped potential for systematic engagement, limited by rigid administrative structures. Simultaneously, successful youth-led initiatives can drive community development inspiring previously passive local authorities to actively support the project after witnessing its impact.

9. Strategic development requires enhanced leadership pathways

Youth participation manifests across multiple levels of engagement, though leadership positions remain less common among young people who typically join existing initiatives. As Ukraine moves from crisis response towards recovery, young people are actively seeking to transform their humanitarian engagement from reactive assistance to strategic initiatives, pursuing formal education and creating sustainable organisations. This transition requires systematic support to help youth develop from emergency volunteers into professional actors in community recovery, with appropriate institutional backing and professional development opportunities.

10. Structural barriers create uneven access to participation

Youth centres have emerged as crucial humanitarian hubs, though their potential remains constrained by limited decision-making access and resources. A pronounced urban-rural divide creates distinct challenges in resource access and participation opportunities, particularly affecting transportation and economic constraints in rural areas. Educational institutions present significant but largely unrealised opportunities for systematic youth engagement, complicated by rigid administrative structures and academic pressures.

11. Lack of protective mechanisms puts youth well-being at risk

The engagement of youth in humanitarian activities presents complex challenges for participant well-being. While humanitarian work serves as a powerful coping and integration mechanism, it simultaneously exposes young volunteers to emotional strain and potential burnout. Despite implementation of safety training, significant gaps remain in both emotional support systems and practical protective mechanisms. This highlights the need for comprehensive support frameworks that address both physical safety and mental well-being while preserving the positive aspects of youth humanitarian engagement.

Recommendations

Youth engagement in humanitarian action in Ukraine demonstrates potential for contributing to both immediate crisis response and long-term community development. The following recommendations outline both immediate actions and future development pathways for key stakeholder groups, aiming to transform current humanitarian response into sustainable development over the next 5-10 years.

For donors and supporting organisations

Current priority: Sustainable institutional support

A shift from project-based funding approaches towards longterm institutional and core funding would enhance sustainability. Consistent programming creates natural engagement cycles, allowing youth to reliably plan their participation and build lasting connections. Supporting organisations should prioritise organisational development, enabling informal youth initiatives to grow into established entities capable of sustaining and scaling their impact.

Long-term vision: Infrastructure for sustainable impact

Developing permanent funding mechanisms would help support youth-led humanitarian organisations. This approach includes creating sustainable financial structures that enable youth initiatives to evolve from informal volunteer collectives into established organisations. The goal lies in building a robust network of youth-led humanitarian organisations capable of maintaining consistent programming and long-term impact.

For youth-serving, humanitarian, and development organisations

Current priority: Well-being and safeguarding infrastructure

Organisations implementing programmes on the ground can enhance their impact by prioritising comprehensive protection of young participants. This involves establishing adequately equipped shelters in frontline communities, strengthening safety protocols in high-risk areas, and implementing robust child safeguarding policies for underage volunteers. Integrating consistent mental health support and burnout prevention strategies helps ensure sustainable participation. Creating structured mentorship programmes and clear progression routes from volunteering to leadership roles helps build long-term humanitarian capacity while maintaining strong ethical frameworks for youth engagement.

Long-term vision: Youth-led recovery and innovation

As articulated by youth themselves, organisations should support the transition from emergency response to strategic planning for prevention and development. This involves enabling youth-led preventative projects and supporting their contribution to Ukraine's physical and social reconstruction. Creating structured pathways for youth to progress from volunteer positions to professional humanitarian work aligns with existing trends, as exemplified by youth volunteers transitioning to formal social work roles.

For educational institutions

Current priority: Gateway for youth engagement

Schools and universities serve as critical entry points for youth participation in humanitarian action. Educational institutions should enhance their impact by collaborating with youth-led initiatives and humanitarian organisations that bring practical expertise in civic engagement and humanitarian action. These partnerships create opportunities to embed humanitarian engagement within educational structures while drawing on existing field experience.

Long-term vision: Professional development pipeline

Educational institutions should develop specialised programmes in humanitarian action and disaster preparedness, creating clear academic pathways for youth interested in humanitarian careers. This approach benefits from close collaboration between universities, humanitarian organisations, and youth leaders to design curricula that combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Supporting youth-led research initiatives and establishing direct connections with humanitarian practitioners helps ensure educational programmes remain relevant and effective.

For local authorities

Current priority: Access and safety

Geographic disparities significantly impact youth engagement opportunities. Addressing physical access barriers in rural communities through transportation coverage and flexible scheduling options increases participation. In conflict-affected areas, enabling basic youth gathering through appropriate security measures and protective infrastructure supports engagement.

Long-term vision: Institutional integration

Local authorities should work towards establishing permanent youth consultation mechanisms in local governance structures. This approach includes creating formal channels for youth input in community development decisions and disaster preparedness planning. The goal centres on integrating youth participation in local decision-making processes related to humanitarian action and community recovery.

About research partners



Open Space Works Ukraine is a female-led private social change enterprise established in 2016, expanding its focus to humanitarian research in 2022. Its aim is to provide evidence-based support to humanitarian and civil society actors, enhancing local leadership in Ukraine's humanitarian response. This study complements. Open Space Works Ukraine's broader portfolio of research initiatives on the role of Ukrainian civil society and local actors in humanitarian efforts. Other research projects include studies of humanitarian narratives in Ukraine, studies on perception of humanitarian aid in Ukraine, and studies on the roles of Ukrainian civil society organisations in the humanitarian response in Ukraine.

Open Space Works Ukraine is a member of a Humanitarian Observatory for Central and Eastern Europe, based in Poland. Hosted by Migration Consortium and the University of Warsaw is a member of the international network initiated by the Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre and International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA).

More: https://openspace.works



NGO «Kyiv educational centre «Tolerspace»

The centre trains and creates educational materials about human rights, non-discrimination, diversity, historical memory, and psychosocial support for teenagers and adults.

- We change the lives of individual teenagers. We treat every teenager with respect. We support their initiative and development. We believe that teenagers are capable of making conscious choices and can unite for positive change.
- We create an atmosphere of respect and care for educators.
 We support academic freedom for educators. We create an
 atmosphere where ideas, thoughts, and doubts can be shared
 and solutions to challenges can be found. We provide relevant
 knowledge in various formats: from interactive lectures to
 TikTok videos.
- We help cope with challenges in times of change. We are sensitive to changes, in our work we rely simultaneously on our skills, abilities, and values, as well as on the needs of participants, seeking an individual approach for everyone.

More: https://www.tolerspace.org.ua