



“Now I see a sense in it for myself: to do something to overcome the effects of the war”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Empowering Youth in Humanitarian Action in Ukraine

Lessons Learned and Pathways Forward

February 2025



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

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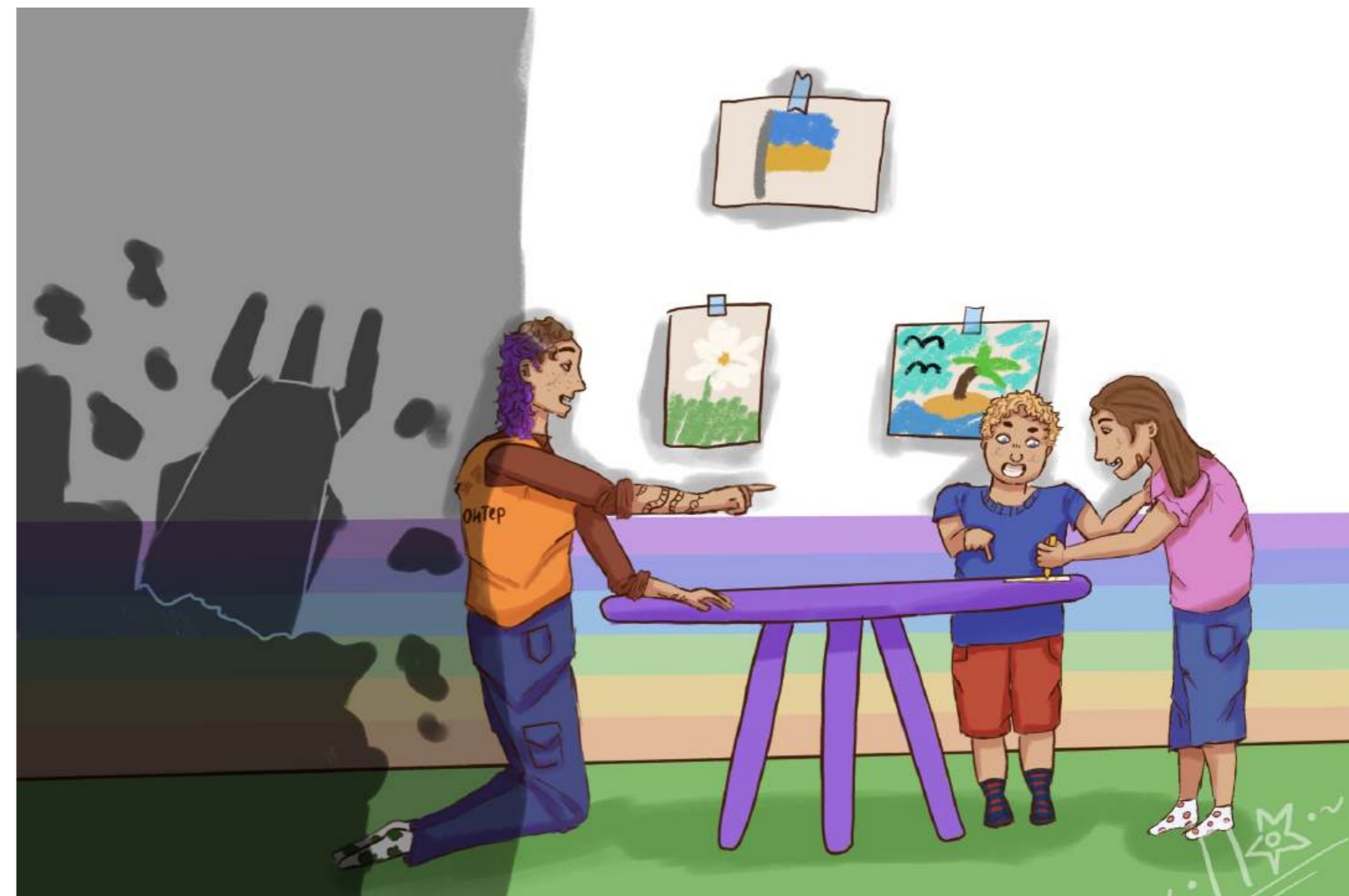


Introduction

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.



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.

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).

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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>