



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

REPORT

Empowering Youth in Humanitarian Action in Ukraine

Lessons Learned and Pathways Forward

February 2025



t o r s p a e



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Executive Summary

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, clothing 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 long-term 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.

Introduction

This research examines the evolving landscape of youth participation in Ukraine's humanitarian response, highlighting key learnings and identifying strategic approaches to mindful youth engagement. The analysis captures both successes and challenges in youth-led humanitarian initiatives, offering insights into how young people's contributions can be more effectively integrated into humanitarian action across Ukraine.

The study was conducted in September-December 2024 by Open Space Works Ukraine in partnership with the Educational Centre «Tolerance Space», with the support of the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA).

Research process has been built on literature and relevant statistics review, key informant interviews with local and international youth organisations, groups of teens and young adults. Additionally, participatory three-day creative workshops with youth aged 14-18 and 19-24 complemented interview data, ensuring youth perspectives and experiences actively shaped the research findings and outcomes.

Through this analysis, the **research aims** to uncover the barriers that hinder meaningful participation of young people in humanitarian efforts, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the gaps and opportunities within current engagement methods.

The study pays particular attention on:

- how different approaches to youth engagement operate in practice, identifying the role of youth in humanitarian action in Ukraine while analysing structural and cultural barriers that limit participation;
- providing evidence-based insights for strengthening youth engagement in humanitarian action;
- developing concrete, applicable solutions that can be implemented by organisations working in conflict-affected contexts to transform traditional power dynamics and institutionalise meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes.

Research context

At the beginning of 2022, a group of young people aged 14-35 accounted for approximately 10 million individuals, constituting 24.3% of the general population in Ukraine¹. The full-scale Russian invasion has altered Ukraine's youth landscape, with 36% of young women and 10% of young men fleeing the country², while 685,000 (aged 10-29) are internally displaced³. Those remaining faced disrupted access to essential services, 79% reported direct war-related losses, including reduced income and mental health challenges.

The severity of war losses faced by young people is intensifying: the proportion of those who reported deaths of friends or family members doubled in 2024 compared to previous year reaching up to 28%; the share of those who reported broken relationships with

¹ based on the data published by [State Statistic Service of Ukraine](#)

² M. Emerson (2023) [Ukraine's Alarming Demographics](#) / SCEEUS Report Series on Ukrainian Domestic Affairs

³ IOM (October 2023) [REPORT ON INTERNAL MOVEMENT POPULATION IN UKRAINE. SURVEY OF THE GENERAL POPULATION](#)

friends or family members increased from 18% to 27%, indicating erosion of social bonds; and the percentage of those with mobilised family members grew from 9% to 21% in 2024⁴.

Despite these, teenagers and youth are looking for the possibilities to be actively engaged in community-level initiatives building their skills and leadership through supporting those in need. Since the start of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, youth engagement to volunteering has increased more than twice (51% of young people have volunteered during 2024), with every third young person engaged volunteering for the first time⁵. This engagement manifests across various domains, including military support through fundraising, assistance to internally displaced persons and refugees, non-military charitable initiatives, activities of local and international NGOs/implementing aid organisations, and general assistance to vulnerable populations.

As of 2023, 53% of young people under 24 have made money donations, 28% have volunteered to help people in need, and 26% have supported the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Despite this surge in engagement, the assessed level of civic engagement among young people is relatively low, indicating an inclination to be civically engaged but a hesitancy to act⁶. Moreover, another research depicts that 72% of young people express readiness to join recovery efforts, only 1% currently participate⁷.

This disconnect between youth potential and actual involvement, combined with evidence of their increased civic consciousness, creates a pressing need to examine:

- How do current approaches to engaging young people in humanitarian action vary, and what are the successful strategies employed?
- How do youth-led humanitarian initiatives in Ukraine influence both young people and their communities?
- What structural and cultural barriers, enablers and challenges shape impede youth meaningful participation in humanitarian action?
- What actionable steps can humanitarian stakeholders take to meaningfully engage youth in decision-making processes while promoting their leadership and addressing participation barriers?

These insights will help bridge implementation gaps and strengthen the humanitarian-development-peace nexus through enhanced youth engagement. Crisis situations highlight youth's dual role - as both affected populations and active change agents.

⁴ UNDP (2024), [Impact of War on Youth in Ukraine - 2024](#)

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ D. Martínez· M. Machlouzarides· S. Uretici· M. Korkut· A. Guest (2023)· [Navigating Change: Perspectives of Youth in Ukraine from 2021 to 2023](#)

⁷ UNDP, UNFPA (2023), [Impact of War on Youth in Ukraine. Findings and Recommendations](#)

While humanitarian approaches often overlook young people's capabilities, their leadership in response and recovery efforts is increasingly vital for strengthening the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Recognising youth as essential partners, rather than passive recipients, is crucial for effective humanitarian action and addressing young people's unique needs and priorities effectively.

Target audience

The report targets **humanitarian stakeholders** involved in youth engagement, including:

- **International and national humanitarian organisations:** to help design youth-centered programmes, strengthen mentorship initiatives, and create professional pathways for young volunteers.
- **Civil society organisations (CSOs) and local NGOs:** to foster inclusive youth engagement, particularly in rural and frontline areas, and amplify youth voices in decision-making.
- **Government bodies and local authorities:** to promote policy reforms, integrate volunteerism into educational curricula, and support youth centres as hubs for humanitarian action.
- **Educational institutions:** to establish structured volunteering programmes, collaborate with humanitarian organisations, and create pathways for youth civic engagement.
- **Donors and funding agencies:** to invest in youth-led initiatives and professional development programmes supporting the transition from volunteering to leadership roles.

Methodology

This research employed a multi-method approach to examine youth engagement in humanitarian action in Ukraine. The methodology combined documentary analysis, in-depth interviews, and participatory workshops to capture diverse perspectives and experiences.

Data Collection

A comprehensive desk review of English and Ukrainian sources, including 5 think tank reports and academic researches, 6 INGO and international implementing organization reports, 3 statistical bulletins, legal framework documents and 2 public opinion researches. The primary data collection comprised 40 key informant interviews – 20 with youth (14-24 years) engaged in humanitarian activities and 20 with representatives from organisations implementing youth initiatives.

The interviewees were recruited with the help of youth organisations involved in humanitarian activities from diverse geographic locations, including safe zones, unoccupied and frontline areas, to ensure representation of varied experiences, including

- areas remote from the front line in the west and centre of Ukraine (Chernivtsi, Lviv, Ternopil, Rivne, Kyiv, Cherkasy oblasts);
- areas close to the frontlines / liberated locations (Kharkiv, Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts).

Interview participants recruitment also ensured representation of varied experiences encompassing both local and displaced youth and various settlement types from rural communities to large cities. The selection criteria has been focused on young people who are actively involved in humanitarian initiatives or youth centre activities to provide valuable insights about community-led support for war-affected populations.

Table 1. Youth Key Informants distribution sample

Age group	Close to the frontlines/ liberated areas		Remote from the frontline		Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
14-17 y.o.	2	1	5	2	10
18-24 y.o.	2	1	4	3	10
Total	4	2	9	5	20

Organizations implementing youth initiatives in Ukraine were represented by 9 national-level NGOs; 5 international organisations working either in youth development, humanitarian spheres or combining both components; and 6 local organisations aiming at youth engagement in Chernivtsi, Sumy, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Lviv and Vinnytsia regions.

*Table 2. Youth-oriented organisations:
Key Informants distribution sample*

Type of organization	Number of Key Informants
National organisations	9
Local organisations	6
International organisations	5
Total	20

Participatory workshops with two age groups from different regions of Ukraine (14-18 and 19-24) completed in October 2024 complemented the interview data. These three-day workshops used creative methods to explore barriers and enablers to youth participation, culminating in the development of actionable recommendations. Detailed breakdown of KIIs and workshops participants are available in Annex C.

Interview transcripts were analysed using systematic MAXQDA coding and thematic analysis. Workshop outputs were thematically

analysed to identify patterns in barriers, enablers, and proposed solutions for youth engagement.

Study limitations

Several important limitations shape the boundaries of this study, particularly:

- The parental consent requirement for teenage KIIs participants and in-person workshop format may have restricted participation despite covered expenses.
- Sampling used in the research for KIIs can only be described as indicative and providing useful insights rather than representative of entire groups
- Ongoing security challenges prevented comprehensive coverage of all conflict-impacted regions
- The single time point data collection provided a snapshot rather than capturing the evolving dynamics of youth engagement during ongoing conflict.

Despite these limitations, the methodology's triangulation of documentary evidence, firsthand accounts, and participatory elements provided robust insights into youth engagement in humanitarian action.

I. Framing humanitarian action and youth engagement

Brief summary:

- The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 saw youth take their role in relief efforts, from volunteering and aid distribution to community rebuilding. Currently, unlike broader societal trends of declining participation, **youth involvement in humanitarian action has increased, particularly in fundraising**, aid collection, and support for IDPs.
- **Humanitarian action and volunteering** are viewed by young people as deeply interconnected spheres, often using these terms interchangeably while recognising nuanced distinctions in scale and formality.
- As communities have adapted to prolonged crises, **humanitarian engagement has become normalised** as an essential component of civic life among proactive young people, who successfully transitioned their activities from pre-war recreational initiatives to systematic crisis response.
- Young people's personal connections, particularly with mobilised community members, have led them to intentionally reconfigure traditional **boundaries between civilian and military support**, developing innovative approaches to humanitarian action that reflect local realities.
- **Motivations for engagement are multifaceted**, driven by empathy, shared experiences, opportunities for self-actualization, and the desire to combat isolation through social connection and peer networks.

The following sections provide a **data-driven analysis** of Ukraine's evolving humanitarian landscape, youth resilience, and global shifts in crisis response. Using statistics, case studies, and personal narratives, this section explores **not only how youth have mobilised but also the barriers they face and the long-term implications of their engagement**.

1.1. Recognising youth an important actor in humanitarian action: why and how

Ukraine's humanitarian landscape and civic response

The humanitarian landscape in Ukraine has undergone visible transformation over the past decade. The initial armed conflict caused by the Russian occupation of Crimea peninsula, part of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine in 2014 saw a limited-scale humanitarian response primarily focused on eastern Ukraine. However, the full-scale Russian military invasion into Ukraine in 2022 marked a dramatic shift, introducing new stakeholders and non-traditional actors into the humanitarian sphere. This expansion of humanitarian response has been notably characterised by

the emergence of community-led initiatives, where local actors, including youth, have taken active roles in addressing emerging needs both inside the community and related to the support of promptly mobilised military forces.

At the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian society demonstrated remarkable resilience and unity, when two-thirds of citizens actively participated in national resistance through volunteering, support for the military and providing assistance to internally displaced persons⁸. However, since then public sentiment has undergone some transformation. For example, a substantial decline in civic participation across population groups has been depicted: non-displaced persons involvement dropped in 2024 from 63% to 47%, while IDP participation decreased from 36% to 23%⁹. The KIIS reports that the long-term optimism about Ukraine's future diminished considerably, with the proportion of citizens believing Ukraine would become a prosperous EU member within a decade falling from 88% in late 2022 to 57% by December 2024¹⁰.

Youth resilience and evolution in humanitarian action

According to «Impact of war on youth in Ukraine» research, youth volunteering indicators during the same period of time have increased: while 42% of young people were engaged in volunteering in 2023, this share grew to 51% in 2024¹¹. The primary focus of mentioned volunteering activities has been aimed at fundraising for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which is associated with the increased number of military personnel in respondents' close circles. However, there is also a positive trend in growing interest in non-military volunteering, including assistance to IDPs and refugees (from 20% in 2023 to 23% in 2024), fundraising for non-military charitable causes (from 17% to 23%), organising and collecting humanitarian aid (from 15% to 18%), and helping those in need (from 13% to 18%)¹².

Provided data suggests an important trend in civic resilience among Ukraine's youth population. Even as broader society shows signs of engagement fatigue after nearly two years of full-scale war, young people continue to demonstrate increasing commitment to humanitarian and volunteer activities. Their gradual shift from immediate crisis response toward diverse forms of community support opens opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration between young people and humanitarian actors. This pattern of youth engagement may prove particularly significant for Ukraine's long-term recovery and development, as it demonstrates the potential for sustained civic activism even during prolonged periods of crisis.

⁸ Democratic Initiatives Foundation and Razumkov Centre (2023) [Results of 2023: public opinion of Ukrainians](#)

⁹ ENGAGE (2024) [Civic Activity of Ukrainians During War: Survey Results](#)// Info Sapiens LLC

¹⁰ KIIS (2024) [Ukrainians' Vision of the Country's Future and National Unity](#)

¹¹ UNDP (2024), [Impact of War on Youth in Ukraine - 2024](#)

¹² *ibid*

Global transformation of humanitarian action

This evolving pattern of youth engagement in Ukraine reflects broader global shifts in humanitarian action. Traditional approaches have typically centered on large international organisations and formal aid delivery, viewed as technical processes carried out by professional aid workers who maintain political neutrality. However, the modern humanitarian landscape has transformed notably, with humanitarian causes becoming integrated into consumer culture and business practices¹³. Digital platforms have fundamentally changed how crisis situations are communicated and addressed, making humanitarian engagement more accessible to young people who can now participate even through their smartphones.

Within this evolving context, local youth actors represent a distinct category: young individuals who experience crisis first hand due to their geographical location and must personally face its consequences¹⁴. The goal of youth participation isn't to transfer power completely from external humanitarian actors to local youth, but rather to establish meaningful partnerships in humanitarian response¹⁵. This approach aligns with global frameworks such as the United Nations' Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action (CYPHA), launched at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which emphasises youth engagement across service delivery, data and knowledge, resources, participation, and local action¹⁶.

Operationalising youth engagement: benefits and approaches

Experience from various contexts demonstrates that youth engagement in crisis response offers benefits while presenting important challenges. Through participatory projects, young people can increase their self-confidence, improve access to services, and create opportunities to preserve their communal identity. However, this involvement requires careful management, particularly regarding security considerations in conflict zones and the risk of overburdening youth with excessive responsibilities¹⁷.

To maximise these benefits while mitigating risks, meaningful youth engagement requires structured phase-specific approaches. During the preparedness phase, focus should be placed on integrating youth with community response mechanisms, developing relevant skills, and building partnerships. The immediate response phase requires including youth in needs assessment and formal decision-making structures, supported by clear role definitions and safety protocols. Finally, the recovery phase should emphasise sustainable impact through continued skills development, educational continuity, creation of safe spaces, and support for youth-led community rebuilding initiatives¹⁸.

¹³ Richey, L. A. (2018), [Conceptualising "Everyday Humanitarianism": Ethics, Affects, and Practices of Contemporary Global Helping](#)

¹⁴ Kristina Roepstorff (2019): [A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action](#)

¹⁵ Haynes, K. and Tanner, T.M. (2015) Empowering Young People and Strengthening Resilience

¹⁶ A. Apollo and M.F. Mbah (2022): [Engaging local youths in humanitarian response is not a matter of if but how](#) *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*

¹⁷ Hart, J. (2004). [Children's Participation in Humanitarian Action: Learning from zones of armed conflict](#)

¹⁸ ActionAid and Restless Development (2019), [Shifting Power to Young People – How young people can lead and drive solutions in humanitarian action](#)

1.2. Local youth perspectives on humanitarian action

Having established the importance of youth in humanitarian action, it is important to understand how young people themselves conceptualise and engage in humanitarian work. Their perspectives and approaches provide valuable insights into the evolution of humanitarian response in Ukraine.

The following sections present key findings about how young people understand and implement humanitarian action, beginning with their conceptualization of humanitarian work and its relationship to broader civic engagement.

As the research data shows, the perception of humanitarian action among youth in Ukraine is a dynamic and evolving concept, shaped significantly by their experiences during the ongoing conflict and socio-political challenges. Generally, understanding often extends beyond traditional notions of international humanitarian aid, emphasising grassroots, community-based initiatives, the diverse forms of support and a strong sense of personal responsibility: «who, if not us», in addressing humanitarian challenges. For many young people, the term «humanitarian action» is relatively new, with some encountering it for the first time during this research.

Humanitarian action and volunteering: interrelated, but different

There's a strong association between humanitarian work and volunteering, with respondents using these terms interchangeably. These concepts are «synonymous» in the understanding of many young people reflecting the concept of humanitarian work as grassroots, community-based action rather than solely institutional aid.

«Well, for me, humanitarian work is about volunteering. I don't know, it just comes to mind immediately, I mean, for me these are identical concepts, like synonyms,» – woman, 20 y.o., big frontline-distant city, centre of Ukraine.

Despite active involvement in humanitarian work, some respondents express uncertainty about labeling themselves as humanitarian workers or civic activists addressing the sentiment of «not doing enough.» Instead, they often align themselves with broader civil society activism or volunteering, viewing their contributions as part of a larger collective effort:

«I identify myself as a civil society activist. When I talk about what I do, I always talk about humanitarian work - it can be unpaid or paid. I would like it to be paid, of course. But it's always about volunteering - being where you need to be,» – woman, 24 y.o., big city close to the frontline, east of Ukraine.

Based on discussions with young people during the participatory workshops, they define volunteering – as a distinct form of social

engagement centered on uniting people, where individuals form connections and communities around the shared purpose of helping others, with some identifying themselves as humanitarian workers or activists taking leadership roles, while others prefer supporting roles as volunteers.

Humanitarian action as an integral part of civic life

The normalization of humanitarian work as an essential part of civic life emerged as a distinct theme, particularly intensified during the full-scale invasion in 2022. Many respondents view their contributions not as extraordinary but as essential. Young people's engagement evolved dramatically, shifting from recreational and environmental initiatives to addressing the immediate needs of displaced persons and supporting military efforts.

«The perception of volunteering has changed significantly since the full-scale invasion. Before, it was about organising leisure activities or civic initiatives. Now, it's about helping displaced persons, mental recovery, and volunteering related to the military. Now I see a sense in it for myself: to do something to overcome the effects of the war» – woman, 17 y.o., big frontline-distant city, west of Ukraine.

A common trend among active young people is to organise public cultural or leisure activities with a whole or partial donation fee for the participants to be donated to support humanitarian or military cause:

«First of all, these are always charity collections. For the latest event, you had to donate a certain amount to [military unit name] to enter the event,» – man, 18 y.o., frontline-distant city, west of Ukraine.



Military support and humanitarian action: personal connections reshape traditional boundaries

Military support has become deeply intertwined with humanitarian action in young people's understanding, reflecting the realities of living in a conflict-affected society. Many respondents indicate that their parents or friends are mobilised members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, meaning they were not professional military personnel but rather civilians before the full-scale invasion who were called up to serve.

Personal connections with mobilised civilians-turned-soldiers shape how young people engage in humanitarian activities, leading to a complex integration of civilian and military support.

«At the start of the war, I had many friends in the military—some, unfortunately, are no longer with us. When they text me saying: ‘We don’t have this or that, and it’s cold,’ I couldn’t just sit idly by. For me, humanitarian work often involves fundraising, sending money to different funds, or directly paying for what the soldiers need.», – illustrated by a 15 y.o. woman, frontline-distant city, centre of Ukraine.

«Young people view military and humanitarian support as complementary, considering both as contributing to the protection of their community, identity, and values. This integrated approach extends beyond individual actions to include cultural and leisure activities where participation fees are channeled toward both humanitarian and military causes.

While some basic categorization exists – with food and clothing support being viewed differently than weapons and military equipment. This pragmatic approach is reflected in how they conceptualise humanitarian action, as expressed by another 17 y.o. woman:

«Humanitarian» means something that’s probably not directly connected to military operations, but perhaps helps in civilian life or helps make conditions easier for people defending our country»

1.3. Motivation to participate in humanitarian action

Young people's motivation to engage in humanitarian activities in Ukraine demonstrates a complex interplay of personal, social, and professional factors. Their engagement is shaped by both immediate crisis response needs and longer-term aspirations for community development and personal growth.

Empathy and personal connection

Youth engagement in humanitarian action stems from a deep sense of empathy and personal connection to the struggles faced by their peers. Their involvement has potential going beyond providing aid – they help reshape crisis narratives by creating spaces for joy, connection, and empowerment even in difficult times.

For many, the motivation to help stems from a desire to offer others what they themselves may have lacked – support, encouragement, and the reassurance that they are not alone. As one young volunteer reflects:

«Through self-reflection, I came to realise that I want to do something - specifically helping people, helping teenagers because I know how difficult it is, looking at challenges - I know how hard it is to find something for yourself or start something even with great desire.»

Having navigated similar hardships, many young volunteers recognise how difficult it can be to find a sense of purpose or direction in turbulent times. The drive to create environments where children and teenagers affected by crisis can experience a sense of normalcy, even if temporary, shapes their actions. This often takes the form of creating spaces where children and teenagers feel valued, heard, and engaged in meaningful activities that counterbalance the difficulties surrounding them. As one young woman working near the frontline explains:

«Ensuring that children remember more than just the horrors of war is a driving force behind my efforts.»

Intrinsic value and self-actualization

While men are legally obliged to serve in the army, for some women, volunteering and humanitarian work is a way to join the process of defending the country and not feel excluded. A 24 y.o. volunteer reflects this sentiment:

«I found my validation in this. I had been looking for a long time for a way to do something about what's happening in our country. Since the issue of the army was still more or less open to me at that time, I was not sure whether I could do it at all, because as a woman I was faced with this choice. I realised that I found myself better in this humanitarian work.»

Understanding of intrinsic motivation and self-actualization highlights the importance of creating volunteer opportunities that not only serve community needs but also provide clear pathways for personal growth and meaningful contribution, particularly in crisis contexts where traditional roles may be limited by gender or age.

Community integration and social networks

The humanitarian sector plays a crucial role in fostering social connection, particularly in times of displacement and disruption. For many young people, crises not only bring physical hardship but also fracture their social circles, leaving them isolated from familiar faces and support systems. In such moments, humanitarian initiatives become more than just relief efforts – they serve as spaces for rebuilding community, forging new relationships, and restoring a sense of belonging.

With friends and family members displaced, many find themselves having to navigate unfamiliar social landscapes, seeking new connections in environments that feel drastically different

from what they once knew. This search for companionship and community becomes a driving force behind their engagement in humanitarian efforts, where they can meet like-minded individuals, collaborate toward a shared purpose, and reestablish the sense of connection that was disrupted by the crisis. As one young volunteer from eastern Ukraine shares, *«Many people I knew and communicated with before left. I was left without the people I knew here, so I had to find ways to meet new acquaintances, new friends.»*

Beyond personal relationships, involvement in humanitarian work also serves as a buffer against isolation. In times of prolonged crisis, young people may withdraw from social engagement, struggling with a sense of helplessness and detachment from the world around them. Recognising this, local civil society organisations have emphasised the role of volunteering and activism in counteracting this disengagement.

II. Young people in humanitarian action: how youth fit in

Brief summary:

- **Youth participation has proven examples of reshaped perceptions within communities**, with local authorities increasingly recognising their capabilities and supporting youth-led initiatives, often after initial skepticism.
- **Youth engagement in humanitarian action spans diverse roles and responsibilities**, from short-term, situational volunteering to sustained coordination and leadership positions, showcasing their adaptability to various needs and contexts.
- **Humanitarian engagement spheres include emergency response, child-focused initiatives, reconstruction efforts, and crisis cleanup**, with young people addressing both immediate needs and contributing to long-term community recovery.
- **Youth develop project management and soft skills** – humanitarian work helps young people build organizational and leadership abilities while fostering professional connections and rebuilding social networks disrupted by displacement.
- While **underrecognised among youth**, some youth transition from volunteer to paid roles, inspired by hands-on experience and observing professional opportunities within organisations, however the **career pathway in the humanitarian sector** requires further promotion among youth.

Young people in Ukraine play a key role in humanitarian action, contributing across various spheres of crisis response and recovery. Their engagement fills critical gaps in aid efforts, strengthens community resilience, and fosters social cohesion, while also offering personal growth and leadership opportunities.

2.1. Impact of youth involvement to humanitarian action

Youth engagement in humanitarian efforts extends beyond immediate crisis response, fostering long-term community resilience and development. Their increasing role as local actors is reshaping perceptions, securing institutional support, and driving tangible improvements in community infrastructure.

Youth-led initiatives contribute to community development

Youth engagement can lead to tangible improvements in community infrastructure and resources, particularly in small- and medium-sized communities. An example from an international implementing organization illustrates how youth initiatives can catalyze broader community support. The project initially enabled local volunteers to create a youth space in their community. What began with just a formal letter of support from the local government transformed into active engagement after officials witnessed the impact firsthand. As the organization representative explains:

«While local authorities are often rigid structures that tend to be reactive rather than proactive, youth serve as catalysts for change. They show authorities: we can help bring international funding to the community - just support us.»

Growing recognition of youth as local actors

Youth humanitarian engagement has influenced how communities perceive young people's capabilities and contributions. This transformation is particularly evident in how local authorities and community members have come to recognise youth as capable actors in community development. As a youth worker from a local NGO operation in east of Ukraine notes:

«The reputation of youth is changing... People now see that young people can actually accomplish things and bring resources to the community. This creates a positive image for youth.»

2.2. Humanitarian engagement spheres

Young people in Ukraine are actively involved in various spheres of humanitarian action, demonstrating both structured and spontaneous engagement. Their contributions extend beyond traditional aid distribution, encompassing emergency response, child-focused initiatives, physical reconstruction, and crisis cleanup efforts. These activities not only address immediate needs but also foster community resilience, skill development, and social cohesion. The following sections explore how youth participation has evolved across different humanitarian domains.

Emergency response

The first sphere encompasses immediate crisis response activities. Youth actively engage in distributing humanitarian aid (food, water, hygiene products) and responding to urgent community needs. As shared by the respondents during the interviews, this area of involvement was most prevalent immediately after the start of the invasion in 2022 and in some areas continued into 2023.

«I worked for a year and nine months as a volunteer in a humanitarian hub based in the local NGO office premise. I was preparing food parcels. Over time, the number of volunteers decreased, but the work did not become less, because a lot of people came after various events even in 2023,» – woman, 17 y.o., frontline-distant city, west of Ukraine.

The physical nature of humanitarian work emerged as a frequently mentioned aspect, with young people filling labor gaps in aid

distribution chains at the local level. Teenagers were often called upon to handle packages and participate in sorting operations. This work was particularly intense during the initial response period, with youth engaging in time-sensitive operations such as unloading humanitarian aid trucks and preparing supplies for immediate distribution. One of the male underage volunteers describes this dynamic:

«When a large truck arrives, it could be food or mattresses, beds, sleeping bags. There aren't many men. Pensioners come, elderly men who find it difficult to do this work. We had to carry heavy boxes to the second or third floor... We managed it together in about two hours.»

Educational and child-focused initiatives

Youth humanitarian engagement in child-focused initiatives demonstrates a clear focus on two primary vulnerable groups: internally displaced children and those residing in frontline communities. The initiatives evolved to address the specific challenges faced by these groups, with young volunteers contributing to targeted support initiatives that combine educational content with psychosocial support.

In frontline communities, young volunteers needed to adapt their educational support to security realities with bomb shelters to ensure safe learning environments¹⁹. During the extended period of remote learning, creating safe spaces for youth activities and education outside of school became critically important. A young woman volunteering in a children's space located in the frontline-proximity area, describes the evolution of such initiatives:

«We initially conducted mobile classes, seeking relatively safe locations with bomb shelters where we gathered local children from various settlements in Donetsk oblast. Later, we wanted to create something more sustainable... We decided to create a place where young Kramatorsk residents could come and gather. We had architectural courses... programming courses, automotive mechanics classes, and certainly some artistic activities.»

For internally displaced children, the programmes prioritise integration and adaptation to new communities. Young volunteers, often being displaced themselves, establish inclusive spaces where both local and IDP children can interact and learn together.

«We organised various activities for displaced persons: initially for displaced children (to reduce their stress during wartime) - these included outdoor activities, indoor activities, various lectures, watching and discussing films,» – shares a 16 y.o. old internally displaced man.

¹⁹ Until September 2024, schools in frontline areas operated primarily online. After proceeding with shelter construction, they were able to shift to a hybrid learning model with one week of in-person classes followed by three weeks of online instruction.»

Physical recovery and reconstruction

Youth engagement in reconstruction has emerged as another component of humanitarian response, operating through both participatory national programmes (Vidnova:UA and Building Ukraine Together) and local initiatives (Repair Together, Dobrobat) which both combine community infrastructure restoration with engaging young people in the reconstruction process to build skills and foster social connections. As the representative of one of the physical recovery activity efforts explains:

«Communities initially see us just as a reconstruction organization. However, when we explain our mission, they understand that [Ukrainian NGO] focuses on youth development through the process of rebuilding.»

Emergency cleanup and debris removal

Youth engagement in emergency cleanup and debris removal demonstrates young people's capacity for rapid mobilization and community support following crisis incidents. This sphere of humanitarian action represents both spontaneous individual and group responses to address immediate post-incident needs. Young people often make independent decisions to participate in humanitarian activities, sometimes navigating family concerns and safety considerations to do so. This highlights the need to recognise youth agency while ensuring appropriate safety measures and support systems are in place. As illustrated by experience of underaged woman from a big city in central Ukraine:

«I informed my parents after the fact that I am going to remove debris after the missile strike. It's not nice to do that, but they worry about me and might not have let me go.»

2.3. Levels of youth participation and roles in humanitarian action activities

Youth engagement in humanitarian action manifests across various levels of participation and responsibility, ranging from occasional volunteering to leadership positions. This diversity in roles reflects both the capabilities of young people and the evolving nature of humanitarian response. Rather than being consistent, long-term participation, engagement often follows an episodic pattern of opportunities presented by local/national organisations and fluctuations between emergency and relative stability.

Occasional and sporadic participation

At the foundational level, young people engage in humanitarian action through occasional or spontaneous volunteering, addressing immediate response needs or supporting specific events. This type of participation often involves logistical tasks, such as unloading aid trucks, sorting donations, or assisting with distribution. While these contributions may be limited in duration, they are vital for maintaining the capacity and efficiency of humanitarian operations, particularly in times of heightened demand.

Youth often serve as the primary volunteer force during such activities, filling critical gaps when adults are unavailable or unable to contribute. As a representative of a local CSO, centre of Ukraine observed:

«When we have some activities, some events, youth essentially represents the main volunteer force, because adults often don't have time or, perhaps, some even lack the energy to do such things,» -

shares a representative of a local CSO from a small city in the centre of Ukraine.

Coordinating roles

Beyond occasional participation, some young people take on sustained roles as team members and process coordinators in established humanitarian initiatives of local and international organisations. This level of involvement represents a structured form of participation where youth assume defined responsibilities in managing resources and implementing programmes:

«For eight months, I coordinated work at UNICEF's Together: Meeting Point. We organised activities for both local children and those who relocated due to war... For younger children, we had a STEM laboratory where they conducted experiments and explored basic physical phenomena,» – a woman, 18 y.o., frontline-distant city, west of Ukraine.

Leadership and initiative

Throughout the research it was found that leadership positions in humanitarian action tend to be less common among young people, who often join already existing initiatives. However, some examples of leadership exist on a non-formal level. As a 16 y.o. woman from a big city in frontline proximity area, east of Ukraine, shared:

«I heard that there was an air raid in our city and people were left with nothing at all, so I organised all my friends, all my acquaintances - we gathered things, because there was a small child, we helped them financially and in general in any way we could.»

2.4. Skills and professional development through humanitarian engagement

Youth involvement in humanitarian activities facilitates development across multiple skill domains, though awareness of these activities as career pathways remains limited. While young people primarily focus on immediate skill gains and contribution opportunities, some organisations recognise the potential for transforming volunteer experience into professional development.

Project coordination skills

Youth develop substantial organizational abilities through hands-on humanitarian work. These range from basic self-discipline (within the group of younger volunteers) to complex project coordination. More experienced volunteers progress to managing comprehensive projects acquiring substantial management skills through hands-on humanitarian work, often progressing from basic activities to

complex project management. As a man from the south of Ukraine who first joined a local organization as a volunteer from southern Ukraine illustrates: *«I can build the work, make the right schedule there, make some news in our chats, groups, and so on. That is, to fully coordinate the process of our project. To reach the target group for whom this project is aimed, and thus reach more people.»*

Communication networks and soft skills

The humanitarian sector serves as a powerful space for developing soft skills and building professional networks, especially in times of social disruption. For displaced youth, involvement in humanitarian activities is more than just a means of support – it becomes an opportunity to rebuild connections and find a sense of belonging. As one young volunteer who experienced internal displacement woman reflects: *«Simply sitting and doing nothing was never an option; instead, I chose to connect with new people and create opportunities.»*

Beyond immediate social bonds, humanitarian work also fosters soft skills development. Young people learn to navigate diverse social environments, collaborate with different stakeholders, and develop networks that can shape their future opportunities: *«In humanitarian activities, you often meet people who are really worth getting to know,»* - shares a 21 y.o. woman relocated from a temporarily-occupied city in the south of Ukraine.



Underrecognised career potential

The humanitarian sector serves as an informal training ground for young people in their early twenties as they prepare to enter the workforce. Through hands-on experience, youth develop valuable skills in operational management, problem-solving, and teamwork – often in high-pressure environments that accelerate their learning and adaptability. While not all young volunteers seek long-term careers in the humanitarian field, their participation can inspire professional ambitions and open pathways to paid roles. However, many young people find the transition from volunteer to professional unclear, as formal career pathways and guidance are limited.

This organic progression is evident in the experiences of those who have transitioned from volunteers to paid engagement. Some begin by engaging in training programmes and later take on leadership roles, applying what they have learned to independently manage projects. As one youth worker from an NGO in eastern Ukraine shares: *«We already have cases - the girls were trained and implemented the programme themselves. They are now implementing their next project: they have found a donor. It already includes administrative costs - these will be their salaries. And it's happening gradually.»*

III. Youth engagement in humanitarian action: supporting and constraining environments

Brief summary:

The landscape of youth engagement in humanitarian action across Ukraine reveals diverse pathways that both enable and sometimes hinder young people's participation. Through our research, we identified several interconnected channels that organisations use to reach and engage youth, each offering unique opportunities while facing distinct challenges in different contexts.

- **Youth centres and adaptive infrastructure:** Pre-existing youth centres rapidly transformed into humanitarian hubs during the full-scale invasion, showcasing the critical role of embedded community institutions in mobilising youth for crisis response and fostering local resilience.
- **Social media as a bridge, not a solution:** Platforms like Instagram and Telegram have proven effective for youth recruitment and engagement, but their impact is limited without complementary direct outreach, especially in rural areas where trust-building and face-to-face interaction remain essential since the war may strain trust between people.
- **Educational institutions** present vast but largely untapped potential for systematic youth engagement, while direct **community outreach** and collaboration with schools proves crucial in reaching youth beyond urban centres.
- **Personal networks and family support** systems form the foundation of sustainable engagement, often determining whether young people can transform initial interest into long-term participation.

Successful outreach often combines multiple communication channels: direct visits, formal institutional cooperation (through official instructions from regional authorities), and social media presence. Understanding how these channels work together - and where they sometimes fall short - provides insights for organisations seeking to strengthen youth participation in humanitarian action.

3.1. Local authorities and youth centres: role in youth engagement

The full-scale invasion in Ukraine catalysed rapid transformation of existing community institutions, with youth centres emerging as one of the important points for organising humanitarian response in the initial phase of the crisis. Research demonstrates how these centres, already embedded in local communities, quickly adapted their recreational and educational focus to serve immediate humanitarian needs. This evolution reveals broader patterns in institutional adaptation while highlighting how pre-existing youth infrastructure contributed to community resilience.

CASE STUDY.

From community spaces to humanitarian hubs: youth centres in action

Local youth centres quickly adapted to provide humanitarian support.

In the western part of Ukraine, a local youth centre swiftly shifted its focus in response to the full-scale invasion. Almost overnight, it became a humanitarian hub, with youth workers and volunteers adjusting their efforts to meet the immediate needs of displaced individuals. What was once a space for youth programmes and social activities became a centre for volunteer coordination, aid distribution, and support services. “Our youth work simply changed its specifics slightly,” recalls a representative. “We operated this hub for a long time, engaging volunteers in various necessary tasks, including work with IDPs and registration.” This ability to pivot allowed the centre to remain a crucial part of the community, ensuring that young people played an active role in supporting those in need.

National organisations scaled up efforts by mobilising youth centres across the country.

At a national level, organisations recognised the potential of youth centres as key actors in crisis response. What began as isolated efforts soon grew into a coordinated network spanning 21 regions, with nearly 2,000 people mobilised to provide humanitarian aid. This widespread activation of youth centres demonstrated how existing community spaces could be repurposed into outposts of relief, creating a nationwide support system that extended far beyond its original scope. However, not all centres were able to adapt. Those that successfully transitioned proved their ability to remain relevant and functional in times of crisis, while others that struggled to shift their focus ultimately faced closure. This stark contrast underscored the importance of flexibility in ensuring that community hubs could continue to serve their purpose under rapidly changing circumstances.

New opportunities for relocated organisations through partnerships with youth centres.

A civil society organization displaced from Luhansk oblast found a lifeline in Dnipro, where a local youth centre provided space for their humanitarian aid warehouse. This partnership not only facilitated immediate relief efforts but also fostered long-term development. «Through our relocation and positioning, we brought them development in project activities,» shared a CSO representative. «We began writing projects together, and now they fully cooperate with major donor organisations.» This collaboration illustrates how youth centres, even in times of upheaval, can serve as catalysts for growth, connecting organisations with new resources and expanding their impact beyond their original location.

3.2. Social media: balances accessibility and limitations in youth engagement

The effectiveness of social media engagement requires a nuanced understanding of platform capabilities, careful attention to newcomer experiences, and recognition of digital outreach limitations, particularly in reaching diverse youth populations.

Core functions and implementation

Young people's engagement through social media platforms reflects the need to balance accessibility with credibility. While platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram offer efficient outreach channels, their effectiveness depends heavily on communication style and organizational approach. Organizations utilise social media across several interconnected dimensions: (1) spreading information about volunteering opportunities, (2) facilitating direct volunteer recruitment, (3) maintaining spaces for existing volunteer networks to build community. This multi-functional approach allows organisations to both attract new participants and sustain engagement with active volunteers.

Key success factors

The effectiveness of social media engagement varies based on several key factors:

1. Communication style and youth appeal. Organizations should carefully calibrate their communication approach for youth audiences. Formal, bureaucratic language often creates barriers to engagement, while casual, accessible messaging proves more effective. As a 17 y.o. woman from a big city aptly noted: *«It's better when they say 'This Friday we're gathering here to do this and this. We'll be happy to see you' - with a heart emoji at the end.»*

2. Platform-specific strategies. Different platforms serve distinct purposes in youth outreach. While Instagram and TikTok excel at initial engagement through visual content, Telegram proves more effective for maintaining established volunteer communities. One humanitarian centre successfully demonstrated this by using TikTok videos to show *«how fun it is to put together aid packages,»* trying to quickly attract new volunteers through accessible content.

3. Addressing first-time volunteer concerns. Social media outreach must explicitly acknowledge and address newcomers' anxieties about participation. Organizations find success when they include reassuring messages about welcoming first-time volunteers. A 17 y.o. volunteer from a big city shared this perspective: *«It's really important to add a note saying 'Even if you don't have volunteering experience, our event will be a great way to gain that first experience.»*

Limitations and complementary approaches

However, social media alone cannot serve as a complete engagement strategy. Organizations recognise that digital outreach must be complemented by direct fieldwork, particularly

in rural areas where social media may have limited effectiveness. A youth CSO representative from Chernivtsi highlighted this challenge, emphasising the importance of fieldwork in engaging underrepresented youth: *«Instagram isn't always very effective; direct fieldwork yields better results,»* – underlying the need for organisations to adapt their engagement strategies, combining digital outreach with in-person efforts to ensure that youth from diverse backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate in humanitarian initiatives.

3.3. Educational institutions: unrealised potential for youth engagement

Educational institutions represent critical but largely untapped platforms for engaging youth in humanitarian action. The research reveals three key patterns: limited systematic integration of humanitarian engagement in curricula, emergence of innovative but isolated programmes, and a pronounced demand from students for more structured engagement pathways.

Emerging institutional support and access challenges

Most respondents noted that structured discussions about volunteering and humanitarian action are uncommon in educational settings, with successful examples being more exceptional than systematic. Some institutions have developed innovative approaches to fostering humanitarian engagement. A 17 y.o. student from a private university in Lviv describes a mandatory university programme: *«In my university, we have a required first-semester course called 'Service Course,' where we must familiarise ourselves with 30 volunteering opportunities, choose one, and volunteer there throughout the semester while developing a volunteer project. This is mandatory for all first-year students.»*

However, such structured programmes appear to be rare. While schools and universities have natural access to youth populations, programmes for youth civic and volunteering engagement remain exceptional rather than systematic.

- **Schools** often organise basic initiatives like charity fairs, where students sell baked goods and handmade items for fundraising. However, there remains potential for deeper collaboration with professional organisations to better develop humanitarian and civic engagement.
- **Universities** (with very few exceptions known for a strong tradition of self-governing organisations), focus primarily on academic studies and rarely actively encourage volunteering. Students frequently criticise this formalism, noting they typically engage through social networks rather than official university channels.

Youth organisations recognise this gap and some take direct action, as one local youth organization from western Ukraine describes:

«We visit schools and educational institutions to present our organization's work... and engage those interested in collaboration and development opportunities.»

Recent legislation (January 2025) has also attempted to address the gap by enabling students to include volunteering experience in university admission motivation letters and count volunteer activities toward practical training requirements²⁰. However, students face challenges in accessing these opportunities. As a 17 y.o. woman from central Ukraine notes: *«We're told that volunteer experience is very important for motivation letters. But where do we go to gain this experience?»*



Students need for clear entry points

Students themselves express strong interest in more structured engagement pathways. The research indicates that many young people feel uncertain about how to start volunteering and would welcome more institutional support. A 17 y.o. student captures this sentiment: *«Many students don't know where to start with volunteering. If organisations worked directly with schools and provided structured opportunities, it would motivate more students to get involved.»*

These findings highlight the need for stronger collaboration between interested organisations and educational institutions to create systematic, sustainable engagement programmes that can be integrated into existing educational frameworks. While recent policy changes provide a foundation for such integration, realising this potential requires coordinated effort from both sectors.

²⁰ <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/43945>

3.4. Community-based approaches: building local engagement networks

Direct community presence and local partnerships as crucial elements for sustainable youth engagement, particularly in areas where traditional outreach methods prove insufficient. These approaches require careful attention to local dynamics and systematic relationship building.

Beyond digital reach: direct community engagement

Organizations find particular success through direct presence in communities, especially in reaching youth outside urban centres. This approach proves essential where digital and institutional channels may have limited effectiveness. Organizations find that building understanding about volunteering requires step-by-step introduction rather than immediate calls to action which helps to overcome initial hesitation about volunteering. As demonstrated by the representative of a youth organization from west of Ukraine: *«For people who have never volunteered and barely understand how it works, we need to explain volunteering basics first. That's why it's important to come and explain first, then engage in specific activities.»*

Local authorities and opinion leaders partnership opportunities

While local authorities can play a significant role in youth engagement, their potential often remains underutilised. Despite having formal channels for information dissemination, many local governments struggle with effective youth communication and don't fulfill their potential role as messengers and advocates for youth opportunities: *«Unfortunately, while local self-government bodies perform certain functions in spreading information, there remains a lack of trust or lack of skills in popularising information in youth-friendly language.»*

Organizations have found that working through **local opinion leaders** also can help overcome trust barriers that prevent direct engagement through social media or even school announcements and extend reach to both youth and their families. As one organization notes: *«We sought out opinion leaders who could convey information effectively to parents, so they would let their children participate.»*

Rigid administrative structures

Educational and local government institutions often maintain rigid administrative structures that create barriers for youth-led initiatives. **Institutional reluctance to collaborate** with unfamiliar organisations without prior approval from “upper bodies” limits young people's ability to implement community projects. As one youth worker observed, local schools and institutions hesitate to engage with grassroots initiatives unless explicitly endorsed by higher authorities, highlighting a top-down decision-making culture that stifles independent youth action.

3.5. Personal networks: the power of social connections in youth engagement

Peer networks may also serve as one of the most effective pathways for youth engagement in humanitarian action. The «buddy system» — where friends introduce and accompany new volunteers to initiatives — emerges as a particularly effective strategy for overcoming initial hesitation and building sustainable participation.

Informal networks as entry points

Personal relationships and social connections play the role in sparking youth involvement in humanitarian activities. A recurring theme is the prominent influence that friends, acquaintances, and one's immediate social circle have in motivating young people to participate. Individual experiences often cascade into broader engagement through personal sharing. Volunteers frequently become recruiters themselves, naturally spreading information about opportunities through their social circles. As illustrated by a volunteer from a big city in the frontline proximity region: *«I once had a woman come to get a tattoo, I told her about my work, she said she wanted to come and help, and she did.»*

Referrals and personal introduction

Beyond direct personal connections, the narratives highlight the importance of referrals and introductions through one's existing social networks. Having a friend who can introduce and accompany newcomers to volunteering initiatives helps overcome initial hesitation and builds confidence through shared experience. This social proof becomes particularly effective in encouraging long-term participation and inspiring others to get involved. As a 17 y.o. woman emphasised, having a friend who can introduce you to an event or initiative is often *«the most effective way to engage youth, as those personal relationships and social proof can then inspire others to get involved.»*

For tennagers, in particular, peer relationships emerge as a fundamental driver of engagement, directly contributing to their psychological well-being and sustained participation. The effectiveness of peer-to-peer approaches in this age group reflects adolescents' developmental need for social connection and peer validation.

3.6. Family support: enabling and constraining youth engagement

Geographic and social contexts deeply shape engagement opportunities. Urban youth benefit from greater access to institutions and more accepting family attitudes, while rural participants face both practical barriers and stronger traditional values that can conflict with volunteering.

Parents as initial bridge to volunteering

In supportive family environments, parents often serve as active enablers of youth volunteering. Some young people discover

volunteering opportunities directly through their parents, who act as both information sources and encouragers . As one volunteer from a big city in eastern Ukraine notes: *«I found out through my mother that we have open applications for volunteering... Parents usually want their children to do something.»*

Rural-urban divide in family attitudes

However, the examples also suggest that parental resistance can pose a challenge to engaging youth, especially in more rural communities. A local NGO representative from Chernivtsi noted that when working with Romanian-speaking villages and families, they had to carefully navigate parental concerns, as some viewed social and volunteering activities as distractions from the expected priorities of studying and getting married.

Similarly, an international NGO representative highlighted that their partner local NGOs aiming to reach more remote rural areas often face greater resistance from parents and guardians, who may be less familiar with or accepting of non-formal educational and volunteer opportunities: *«If we talk about bigger cities, this is acceptable and understandable for parents, but when it comes to more rural areas, additional advocacy work with parents is needed.»*

IV. Challenges and safeguarding for youth in humanitarian activities

Brief summary:

While organisations across Ukraine have developed innovative approaches to address these challenges — including structured mentorship programmes, targeted rural outreach initiatives, and comprehensive safety protocols — these solutions represent initial steps rather than comprehensive remedies. The interventions documented in this analysis as case studies, though not fully mitigating all barriers, provide valuable insights and learning experiences that can inform future programme development and adaptation. The research reveals how multiple interconnected factors create both barriers and risks for youth engagement in humanitarian activities, requiring careful consideration and systematic organizational responses. Our analysis identifies four fundamental dimensions that shape youth participation opportunities and safety in humanitarian action.

- **Crisis disrupts educational engagement patterns:** The transition to online learning following the full-scale invasion has created new barriers to participation through reduced spontaneous interaction, though organisations have responded with structured mentorship programmes to rebuild social connections and support youth initiatives.
- **Geographic access shapes engagement opportunities:** The urban-rural divide creates distinct challenges, from educational migration to damaged infrastructure, particularly affecting rural youth and requiring targeted responses including transportation support and flexible programming.
- **Security demands reshape physical infrastructure:** Organizations in conflict-affected areas have developed systematic approaches to maintain youth engagement while ensuring safety, from establishing secure gathering spaces to implementing comprehensive training programmes.
- **Legal and ethical frameworks need practical solutions:** While protection guidelines exist, crisis response introduces complexities around mental health support and child safeguarding, requiring organisations to balance formal requirements with emerging challenges.

4.1. Educational disruption and social isolation

The full-scale invasion in 2022 fundamentally altered educational delivery in Ukraine, creating barriers to youth participation in humanitarian activities. The transition to online and mixed-mode education, necessitated by security concerns and infrastructure damage, has created particular challenges for maintaining youth

engagement. Young people face broken social ties and reduced opportunities for spontaneous interaction and relationship building, leading to increased social isolation. A 19 y.o. woman from a small community in the east of Ukraine captures this impact: *«Youth need to communicate; we noticed that young people have become very shy, they are afraid of judgment... It is a time when one friend is on the internet, another somewhere in the Poltava region.»*

The virtual environment has particularly affected youth initiative-taking and peer connections. As a national NGO representative explained: *«For many young people, it was a very big discovery that such teenagers who want to do something exist... interaction online between them is very distant.»*

CASE STUDY.

Mentorship as support system for youth engagement

The importance of mentorship in sustaining youth humanitarian engagement emerges clearly from organisations' experiences across Ukraine. Beyond offering practical project guidance, mentors help maintain team cohesion and provide psychological support for young participants navigating complex humanitarian work. This comprehensive support proves particularly valuable given the disrupted social connections many young people experience due to displacement and online education.

A notable example comes from one organization that places mentorship at the centre of their youth engagement strategy. As their representative explains: *«Our main focus is resource and mentorship support... supporting them as an external mentor helps determine how the team should move forward, whether it will stay together or fall apart.»*

The impact of mentorship becomes particularly evident in feedback from young participants. A 17 y.o. IDP from a big city captures the psychological value of mentor support: *«Having other organisers who can help makes you feel secure - if something goes wrong, everything is under control.»*

4.2. Structural constraints in rural youth engagement

The urban-rural divide emerges as an important theme in our research with respondents consistently emphasising that rural youth face structural barriers to engagement. Physical infrastructure limitations, particularly conflict-related damage, fundamentally restrict participation opportunities.

Educational migration impact

Local organisations typically have a compressed window for youth engagement in rural and small urban communities due to migration tendencies. It is often limited to students' final years of secondary education around age of seventeen after which young people migrate to bigger cities looking for educational opportunities. This timeline becomes even more constrained in areas experiencing security threats, as families often prioritise relocation for both safety and educational opportunities simultaneously. As one local organization leader from a small city in the center of Ukraine notes: *«We identify talented individuals we'd love to retain, but they all leave for university studies. If someone is active, they typically enroll in higher education and leave, and we lose contact with them for five years.»*

Economic and resource constraints

Rural youth face economic constraints that directly impact their ability to participate in humanitarian activities. In many villages, limited access to essential services such as schools, shops, and transportation leaves young people isolated, with fewer opportunities to engage beyond their immediate surroundings. Unlike urban youth, who may have more financial independence or access to community programmes, rural young people often bear the burden of household responsibilities. Tending livestock, working in the fields, or assisting with family businesses are not just chores – they are economic necessities that take precedence over volunteer activities.

This financial pressure creates a stark trade-off: participation in humanitarian work often means sacrificing time that could otherwise contribute to the household's income or survival. In areas where basic infrastructure is lacking, even the cost of transportation to nearby towns for engagement opportunities can be prohibitive. A local NGO representative from a suburban area captures this disparity: *«In the city, a person might still be able to afford something, but in villages, there may be no shops at all, no schools sometimes – they are kind of cut off from life.»* As a result, the very youth who might benefit most from participation in humanitarian programmes are often the least able to take part, reinforcing cycles of economic hardship and social exclusion.

Logistical issues

Youth from small communities also face transportation challenges that affect their ability to participate in humanitarian activities in urban centres. These barriers manifest not only in direct travel costs but also in the logistics of transportation schedules and evening return options.

The experience of a 16 y.o. woman from a village in the south of Ukraine illustrates how transportation limitations create practical barriers to engagement. While the physical distance to activities might be manageable, inconvenient bus schedules force participants to arrive several hours early or struggle to find transportation home in the evening: *«I often have to look for someone to travel with in the evening... I need to leave at 7 AM and wait until 11 AM for an activity to start.»*

CASE STUDY.

Adapting youth programmes for rural engagement

As shared by one international organization operating across Ukraine, they have developed point-based selection systems that **prioritise participants from remote areas**, directly addressing geographic representation challenges: *«In certain criteria we add points for participation if young people are from more remote rural areas.»*

There is another example of comprehensive **transportation support**, with one national children and youth organization providing complete coverage of travel costs for rural participants. These practical interventions help overcome fundamental access barriers that often prevent rural youth engagement.

4.3. Safeguarding youth in humanitarian action: legal and ethical dimensions

Protection frameworks and practices shape the path of youth participation in humanitarian response. While crisis conditions demand urgent action, organisations have learned - often through difficult experiences - that comprehensive safeguarding must be prioritised. This section examines how safety approaches have evolved and what challenges remain to be addressed.

Physical safety infrastructure: a critical foundation

Youth engagement in conflict-affected areas requires careful consideration of safety risks. Physical infrastructure, particularly bomb shelters that can serve as youth centres, emerges as a critical foundation for sustained youth engagement. The head of the youth organization from a small city close to the frontline emphasises the urgency: *«The situation with shelters where children are located is dire. All clubs have been moved to shelters, all school activities have been moved to shelters... This is what I would always prioritise first, because looking at them makes you want to cry. This is the first thing we'd like to continue implementing and renovating.»*

The availability and accessibility of safe spaces emerge as crucial

factors in enabling youth engagement. A young community member highlights this challenge: *«Our community has very few municipal premises where we could create a safe space for youth to engage them.»* The scarcity of appropriate facilities, particularly those meeting safety requirements during conflict, significantly impacts youth initiatives' ability to operate effectively.

Safety protocols evolve through experience

Youth safety in humanitarian work is an ongoing concern, with organisations continuously refining their approaches through both direct experience and international collaboration. While the urgency of crisis response often demands immediate action, many organisations have learned the hard way that strong safety measures must be prioritised to protect young volunteers. This learning curve is evident in the experiences of local NGOs, where initial enthusiasm for youth involvement has sometimes led to risky situations. One NGO leader recalled a particularly concerning moment: *«During autumn 2023, we had minors on the team. Watching them work on roofs in the rain gave me grey hairs. We eventually ceased the activity entirely due to safety concerns.»*

At the same time, international collaboration is shaping more structured safety policies. While Ukrainian law does not require volunteer insurance, organisations working with global partners often adopt stricter protection measures in line with international standards. This ensures that volunteers are not only supported in their work but also covered in case of accidents or emergencies. As one representative from an international organisation explained, *«When working with local partners, we follow both our internal policies and donor requirements, with volunteer insurance being an integral part of our safety protocols.»*

Legal frameworks set foundation but leave gaps

Under Ukrainian law («The Law of Ukraine on Volunteer Activities»), individuals aged 14 to 18 may participate in volunteer activities with written consent from their parents or legal guardians. Their roles are regulated to prioritise safety and development, restricting them from high-risk activities such as volunteering in military zones, emergency areas, or medical institutions dealing with conflict-related consequences.

Minors typically engage in non-profit initiatives, including education, cultural events, environmental projects, and community support for vulnerable groups. Organisations involving minors must provide supervision, ensure safety, and prevent physical or emotional harm. Written consent agreements detail the scope, duration, and nature of the tasks assigned to minors. However, the law does not require compulsory insurance for volunteers (including minors).

However practical involvement of underage participants introduces even more ethical complexities, particularly regarding their legal protections. A man from a city in the west of Ukraine reflected on his experience of driving a car without the driver licence during the very beginning of the full-scale engagement: *«I was 16, still in school, and*

driving during night shifts for humanitarian tasks. It wasn't exactly legal, but we did what we had to do. Small administrative violations happened too.»

Ultimately, the evolving landscape of youth safety in humanitarian work reflects a growing recognition of the risks young volunteers face. By learning from experience and aligning with international best practices, organisations can create safer, more sustainable environments where young people can contribute meaningfully without unnecessary risk. As a man from a city in the west of Ukraine reflected further: *«We did what we had to do, but looking back, better safeguards and guidance would have made all the difference.»*

CASE STUDY.

Ensuring youth safety in high-risk areas through structured protocols

Organizations operating in conflict-affected regions have developed systematic safety measures to maintain youth engagement while ensuring participant security. By integrating structured risk management strategies, these organisations enable young people to continue meaningful participation in humanitarian and community initiatives, even in volatile environments.

A multi-layered security system ensured safe participation in youth infrastructure projects.

In Sumy oblast, an international implementing organization designed a security framework to support a youth-led infrastructure reconstruction project. Given the unpredictable nature of the conflict, the team implemented a structured approach that combined daily risk assessments with real-time monitoring. A dedicated security officer was assigned to track the proximity of shelling and handle emergency situations, ensuring that young participants could safely engage in rebuilding efforts without unnecessary exposure to danger. *«We asked for daily updates on the security situation to ensure it was safe to bring young participants. With constant shelling nearby, a security officer was assigned to monitor explosions' proximity and handle emergencies like evacuation requests.»* This system provided a critical layer of protection, allowing youth initiatives to continue in a controlled and responsive manner.

Mandatory safety training equipped youth with essential skills for high-risk environments.

In de-occupied territories, a national organization took a proactive approach by integrating safety preparedness into all youth activities. Recognising that knowledge is a crucial element of risk management, they introduced mandatory first-aid and mine safety training as part of every session. This approach ensured that young participants were not only aware of potential dangers but also equipped with the skills to respond effectively in emergencies. *«The more you learn, the more prepared you are for any situation,»* emphasised a representative of an organisation. By embedding safety education into regular programming, the organization empowered young people to navigate their environment with greater confidence while continuing to engage in meaningful activities.

Mental health challenges

While youth involvement in humanitarian efforts is impactful, it also brings emotional challenges that often go unaddressed. Young volunteers face the weight of crisis firsthand, struggling with the emotional toll of witnessing human suffering and feeling uncertain about their ability to help. Seeing people who have lost everything, living in harsh conditions, can be overwhelming, leaving volunteers unsure of how to provide comfort or meaningful support. A 16 y.o. IDP reflected on this experience after visiting displacement dormitories, sharing how difficult it was to respond to the immense suffering around them: *«The conditions there are, of course, deplorable. There were people who lost everything, and they are there. And what to say to them – you don't even know how to find the right words.»* This feeling of helplessness is a common challenge for young volunteers, who are often exposed to highly distressing situations without the necessary emotional tools to cope.

Beyond emotional distress, many young activists experience burnout from taking on too much responsibility. Their passion for helping others, while admirable, can lead them to overextend themselves, taking on multiple causes at once – whether supporting displaced families, rescuing animals, or working with vulnerable groups. In humanitarian work, this level of self-sacrifice is often normalised, making it harder for young volunteers to recognise when they need to step back and care for their own well-being. This culture of overwork not only affects their mental and physical health but can also reduce the overall effectiveness of their engagement, as exhausted volunteers struggle to sustain their efforts over time.

To ensure youth engagement remains both meaningful and sustainable, proper preparation and support are essential. Training in crisis response, ethical decision-making, and self-care can equip young volunteers with the skills needed to navigate their roles more effectively while reducing emotional strain. As a woman from a big city close to the frontline, east of Ukraine shared: *«Apart from being very fun, it's also very scary, and experiencing all this, listening to children's horror stories about the war, can be extremely difficult in the context of working with children.»*

This sentiment underscores the need for humanitarian organisations to not only provide opportunities for youth participation but also ensure that young volunteers have the necessary emotional and practical tools to manage the challenges they face. By prioritising well-being alongside impact, organisations can create a more supportive environment where youth engagement is not only encouraged but also sustained in a healthy and effective way.



Conclusions and commendations

This research underscores the complex and evolving nature of youth humanitarian engagement in Ukraine. Young people have emerged as crucial actors in crisis response, demonstrating remarkable resilience, adaptability, and capacity for innovation. Their engagement is driven by a sophisticated interplay of personal and social factors, from empathy and direct crisis experience to opportunities for self-actualization and community connection. While challenges remain in fully recognising and supporting youth potential in the humanitarian sector, their demonstrated impact suggests the importance of continued investment in youth-focused humanitarian initiatives.

1. Youth resilience and evolution of engagement

Russian full-scale invasion into Ukraine has transformed humanitarian action from an exceptional activity into an integral component of civic life, with young people successfully pivoting from pre-war recreational initiatives to systematic crisis response. The pattern of engagement has considerably evolved since 2022: initial response focused on widespread humanitarian aid distribution and emergency support, particularly intense during 2022-2023. Currently, youth initiatives in frontline-distant areas are transitioning toward recovery and development efforts, while communities close to the frontline continue to also require humanitarian activities.

2. Redefining humanitarian action

Young people's conceptualization of humanitarian action reflects a dynamic understanding shaped by direct crisis experience. Their approach intentionally integrates civilian and military support, viewing both forms of assistance as contributing to broader community resilience. This perspective extends beyond traditional international aid frameworks to encompass grassroots, community-based initiatives with youth emerging as active agents rather than mere beneficiaries of humanitarian support. For displaced youth, humanitarian engagement serves as a powerful mechanism for integration and connection building in new communities.

3. Infrastructure and implementation approaches

The humanitarian response has been characterised by rapid transformation of existing youth spaces and development of new engagement channels. Youth centres have evolved into humanitarian hubs, demonstrating the critical importance of both physical infrastructure and pre-existing human capital. Their effectiveness relied on coherent, trained teams of young people who possessed essential organising and coordinating skills before the crisis. Successful engagement strategies integrate multiple channels across digital platforms, educational institutions, and community outreach, though their implementation varies significantly between urban and rural areas. Organizations showing the greatest success implement clear progression pathways from volunteer to leadership roles, supported by structured mentorship programmes that help combat isolation and build professional capacity.

4. Barriers and protection frameworks

The research identifies disparities and challenges in youth engagement. Rural youth face intersecting challenges including limited transportation infrastructure, economic constraints, educational migration patterns, and conservative family attitudes. Educational institutions represent vast but largely untapped potential for systematic youth engagement, currently constrained by rigid administrative structures and academic pressures. Organizations face ongoing challenges in balancing meaningful youth participation with appropriate safety measures, particularly in conflict-affected areas. While organisations have developed innovative responses through mentorship programmes and safety protocols, more systematic approaches are needed to address these challenges comprehensively.

5. Growth and recognition

Youth participation showcases transforming community perceptions of young people's capabilities. Initial skepticism from local authorities has evolved into active support as youth-led initiatives demonstrate tangible impact on community development. Youth engagement spans multiple domains, from emergency response and aid distribution to educational initiatives and physical reconstruction, underlining their capacity to address both immediate crisis needs and contribute to long-term recovery. This involvement facilitates personal and professional development, though the potential for humanitarian work to evolve into career opportunities remains underrecognised.

Recommendations

Youth engagement in humanitarian action in Ukraine demonstrates potential for contributing to both immediate crisis response and long-term community development. These recommendations are intended to guide key stakeholders involved in supporting youth humanitarian engagement:

- donors and supporting organisations who shape funding approaches [3;5];
- youth-serving, humanitarian and development organisations implementing programmes on the ground [1; 2; 4];
- educational institutions serving as potential gateways for youth participation [1];
- local authorities responsible for enabling infrastructure and partnerships [2; 5].

These interconnected dimensions recognise that sustainable youth engagement requires simultaneous attention to basic enabling conditions, support for youth-led initiatives, and transformation of decision-making structures.

« We need to talk about volunteering and opportunities for youth in schools. I can't clearly define what grade to start from now - probably from grade 8 you can start,» – emphasises a representative from a national NGO operating across Ukraine.

1. Make schools a gateway for youth in volunteering and humanitarian action efforts

Building effective educational partnerships requires attention to the following fundamental elements:

- Building lasting institutional relationships, rather than relying on one-time interactions, creates sustainable pathways for student participation. Organizations should develop formal partnerships that **embed humanitarian engagement opportunities and volunteering culture within school structures**, helping overcome administrative barriers through established channels.
- Creating **flexible participation models** ensures balance between institutional requirements and youth aspirations. Organizations should identify appropriate entry points and age groups for different types of activities, carefully considering students' developmental stages and capacity for engagement that both fulfill school agenda and resonate with young people's values and interests.

« Because there are people in the city who have these opportunities but don't want them. And there are children in villages who want to, but they don't have these resources», - articulates a 16 y.o. girl from a rural area in the south of Ukraine.

2. Bridge the urban-rural divide

Geographic location influences youth engagement opportunities in humanitarian action. This insight highlights the critical need for targeted interventions in rural communities. Organizations must develop strategies that address two key dimensions of the urban-rural divide:

- Physical access poses a practical barrier for rural youth engagement, requiring direct and practical solutions. Organizations should provide comprehensive **transportation coverage** to address both cost and logistical challenges, while creating **flexible scheduling options** that accommodate rural youth's household responsibilities and limited transportation availability.
- Partnerships with **local educational institutions** have proven effective, yet they must adapt to the unique dynamics of rural communities where youth engagement often has a limited time frame due to migration for urban education. This requires developing mechanisms for tailored engagement of school-age teens (12-17 years old) maintaining connections with departed volunteers while maximising impact during their available engagement window. Additionally direct community visits can serve as a powerful involvement instrument to present the opportunities to the most difficult-to reach audience with no previous engagement experience.

« We plan to focus more on the activities now, but first we want to institutionalise ourselves as a separate organisation», – shares a 24 y.o. woman participating in humanitarian initiative in the frontline community in the east of Ukraine

3. Shift from project-based aid to sustainable institutional support

The sustainability of youth engagement in humanitarian action requires a fundamental shift in how initiatives are funded and supported. Research findings point to three critical dimensions that require attention:

- **Long-term institutional and core funding** creates more sustainable impact than project-based support. Local organisations report that consistent programming creates natural engagement cycles, as youth can reliably plan their participation and build lasting connections. In contrast, sporadic activities make it difficult to maintain youth involvement, as irregular engagement disrupts relationship building and prevents the development of sustainable participation patterns.
- **Organizational development support** enables informal youth initiatives to grow and sustain their impact. Youth-led groups express a desire to institutionalise their work but face challenges in this transition. As demonstrated by initiatives in eastern Ukraine, youth groups benefit from structured support in developing from informal volunteer collectives into established organisations capable of sustaining and scaling their impact.
- **Leadership development pipelines.** Organizations showing greatest success in sustaining youth engagement create clear progression routes from volunteer to coordinator to leadership roles. This structured advancement, supported by mentorship programmes and professional development opportunities, helps build long-term humanitarian capacity while maintaining youth involvement.

4. Incorporate youth-led vision for sustainable recovery

Youth in Ukraine demonstrate a clear vision for transforming humanitarian engagement from emergency response to sustainable development. To support this transition effectively, organisations and institutions should focus on key areas of moving from humanitarian response to development and supporting young people professional growth:

« Now we can say that from crisis response, we've come to strategic planning of how to prevent this in the future», – states a 16 y.o. man from a city in the south of Ukraine

- Organizations should shift from supporting purely reactive initiatives **to enabling youth-led preventative and developmental projects.** For example, provide resources and technical support for youth-led initiatives that document and contribute to Ukraine's physical and social reconstruction, ensuring young people's perspectives shape the recovery narrative.

- Young people are actively seeking **ways to professionalise** their humanitarian work. Organizations should seek ways to develop structured opportunities that help youth transition from volunteer roles to professional positions in humanitarian and development work.

5. Prioritise wellbeing and safe space development

Creating meaningful youth participation in humanitarian action, particularly in conflict-affected areas, requires attention to both physical safety and sustainable support mechanisms. Research highlights three critical dimensions of support needed to enable youth engagement while protecting participant well-being and ensuring long-term impact:

« I spent a long time searching for something suitable for me, and in my city this was problematic. There aren't many places that can operate due to constant air raids. I mostly work online, with very limited offline activities. There are few places where you can be active, and engage people», – shares a 16 y.o. volunteer from a big city, close to the frontline.

- **Safe space availability.** Physical safe spaces serve as a critical foundation for youth participation in humanitarian action, particularly in communities near the frontline. Establishing adequately equipped shelters in communities near the frontline enables basic youth gathering and engagement opportunities. Proper security measures and protective infrastructure determine whether young people can safely participate, making shelter space development a critical first step in supporting youth engagement.
- **Well-being and safety.** Creating sustainable youth engagement depends on comprehensive support for participant well-being. This encompasses implementing robust safety protocols for high-risk areas and providing consistent mental health support for burnout prevention. Organizations must create safe spaces for processing challenging experiences, complemented by structured mentorship and guidance that supports youth through their humanitarian engagement journey.

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Annexes

Annex A. List of organization participating in the study

#	Organization ENG	Location	Type of organization
1	NGO "Kyiv educational centre "Tolerspace"	Kyiv // All regions of Ukraine and Ukrainian youth abroad	National
2	UNDP Civil Society and Youth Support Project	Kyiv // All regions of Ukraine	International
3	Youth Platform NGO	Luts'k// All regions of Ukraine	National
4	Chernivtsi Youth Centre	Chernivtsi oblast	Local
5	UNITY (IREX implemented, USAID-funded project)	Kyiv // All regions of Ukraine	International
6	Youth Centre Shostka Successful Youth NGO	Shostka, Sumy oblast	Local
7	Koriukivka Youth Centre	Koriukivka, Chernihiv oblast	Local
8	Association of Ukrainian Guides	Kyiv	National
9	Ukrainian-Danish Youth House	Mykolaiv	International
10	Building Ukraine Together	All regions of Ukraine	National
11	Centre for the Development of Culture, Youth and Sports	Rohan, Kharkiv oblast	Local
12	STAN NGO	Ivano-Frankivsk	National
13	People in Need	Kyiv	International
14	Charitable organization Charity Fund SPIVDIA	Kyiv	National
15	Luhansk Regional Youth Centre	Dnipro	Local
16	Youth Public Movement 'PARTNER'	Odesa	National
17	MOLODVIZH NGO	Lviv	National
18	Unique country NGO	Zhmerynka, Vinnytsia oblast	Local
19	Plast NGO	Kyiv	National
20	Save the children	Kyiv	International

Annex B. Youth Key Informant Interview participants sample breakdown

#	Gender	Proximity to the frontline	Size of community (population size)	Age, years old
1	Female	remote from the front line	more than 500,000	17
2	Male	close to the frontlines	20,000-100,000	15
3	Female	remote from the front line	more than 500,000	17
4	Male	remote from the front line	100,000-500,000	16
5	Female	remote from the front line	more than 500,000	18
6	Male	remote from the front line	5,000-20,000	19
7	Female	close to the frontlines	1000-5000	19
8	Female	remote from the front line	до 1000	21
9	Female	close to the frontlines	20,000-100,000	24
10	Female	remote from the front line	100,000-500,000	20
11	LGBTQI+	remote from the front line	100,000-500,000	18
12	Male	remote from the front line	more than 500,000	16
13	Female	remote from the front line	100,000-500,000	17
14	Male	remote from the front line	more than 500,000	25
15	Male	close to the frontlines	100,000-500,000	18
16	Female	remote from the front line	more than 500,000	18
17	Female	remote from the front line	1000-5000	16
18	Female	close to the frontlines/liberated area	до 1000	16
19	Female	close to the frontlines/liberated area	more than 500,000	16
20	Female	remote from the front line	100,000-500,000	15

Annex C. Agendas of the participatory workshops

Participatory workshop programme for teenagers aged 14-17 y.o.

Day 1

Time	Activity
09:00 - 10:00	Participant check-in
10:00 - 10:30	Breakfast
10:30 - 11:00	Participant registration
11:00 - 12:30	Welcome, morning circle, and expectations gathering (Speed networking)
12:30 - 12:45	Break
12:45 - 14:00	Experience sharing presentation ('Chamomile')
14:00 - 14:45	Pizza break
14:45 - 16:00	Concept workshop: Solidarity, Volunteering, Leadership (with drawings)
16:00 - 16:30	Break
16:30 - 17:00	Feedback session in three groups
17:00 - 19:00	Free time
19:00	Friendly dinner

Day 2

Time	Activity
09:00 - 10:00	Breakfast
10:00 - 10:20	'Reflections on Yesterday' session
10:20 - 11:40	'Take a Step' – case studies and role-play scenarios
11:30 - 11:45	Coffee break
11:45 - 13:00	Group work: Barriers to youth engagement in humanitarian response
13:00 - 14:00	Lunch
14:00 - 15:30	'Teen Centre' Concept Presentation (2 concepts, 6 jury members: mayor, social worker, neighbor)
16:30	Evening event

Day 3

Time	Activity
09:00 - 10:00	Breakfast
10:00 - 10:45	'Reflections on yesterday' (Thermometer exercise)
10:45 - 11:30	'World Cafe' session (NGOs, donors, authorities, initiatives)
11:30 - 11:45	Coffee break
11:45 - 13:00	Prioritization workshop: realistic goals for further work
13:00 - 14:00	Lunch
14:00 - 15:30	'Teen Centre' Concept Presentation (2 concepts, 6 jury members: mayor, social worker, neighbor)
16:30	Reflection session

Participatory workshop programme for young adults aged 18-24 y.o.

Day 1

Time	Activity
08:36 - 09:15	Arrival by train, transfer to the hotel
09:15 - 10:30	Check-in and buffet breakfast
10:30	Gathering in the lobby for museum visit
10:45 - 12:00	Welcome and introductions
12:00 - 12:15	Break
12:15 - 13:45	Experience sharing and presentation
14:00 - 15:00	Lunch
15:10 - 16:20	Workshop: 'Solidarity, Volunteering, Leadership'
16:20 - 16:30	Break
16:30 - 17:00	Group discussion
17:00 - 19:00	Free time
19:00 - 20:00	Dinner

Day 2

Time	Activity
08:45 - 09:50	Breakfast
10:00 - 10:20	'Reflections on yesterday' session
10:20 - 11:40	Practical game-workshop
11:40 - 12:00	Break
12:00 - 13:45	Team session: 'Identifying Structural and Cultural Barriers to Youth Participation'
14:00 - 15:00	Lunch
15:00 - 17:00	Simulation game
17:00 - 19:00	City walk and free time
19:00 - 20:00	Dinner
20:15 - 21:30	Optional evening gathering

Day 3

Time	Activity
08:45 - 10:00	Breakfast and check-out
10:10 - 10:45	'Reflections on yesterday' session
10:45 - 11:45	'World Cafe' group discussion format
11:45 - 12:00	Break
12:00 - 13:00	Workshop: 'Prioritising Pathways to Strengthen Youth Leadership in Humanitarian Contexts'
13:00 - 15:00	Lunch and practical assignment in the city
15:00 - 16:30	Practical session: Developing Recommendations for Stakeholders
16:30 - 16:45	Break
16:45 - 17:30	Group presentation of results
17:30 - 18:00	Collective reflection session
18:00 - 19:00	Pizza dinner
19:15	Transfer to the train station

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>



t o l e r s p a c e

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>