

Rebuilding Together

Putting local governance, communities, and civil society at the centre of Ukraine's recovery

The Ukraine Recovery Conference in June 2026 represents an opportunity to recognise displacement as a long-term local governance challenge for human-centred recovery. Efforts and policies should focus on investing in municipal capacities, local participation, and durable solutions pathways for IDPs, returnees, and non-displaced yet conflict affected communities. Local integration – whether in place of displacement or other chosen location – and return and reintegration will only be sustainable if the necessary preconditions are created at community level, with local authorities fully capacitated and resourced, and with meaningful participation of local civil society, displaced people, returnees, and host communities.

Background

After over four years of full-scale war the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine continues to deteriorate, with deepening pockets of needs and continued risks being faced by civilians across the country. Since the most recent Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC) took place in Rome, in July 2025, the conflict has significantly escalated bringing increased destruction and loss of lives amongst the civilian population. The past 12 months have brought an increase in civilian casualties of 31 percent, reaching the highest point since 2022, as well as USD 588

billion in destruction related costs.¹ This has been the result of the growing use of new technologies, including Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), on an unprecedented scale, and the intensification of attacks towards urban centres close and far from the frontlines.

Against this backdrop of growing needs and escalating conflict, recovery and reconstruction efforts in Ukraine continue to advance. While covering a broad range of issues, recovery policies have mostly focused on the significant challenge of addressing the physical destruction of a significant portion of Ukraine's infrastructure, accompanied with continued support to the Ukrainian state. The prioritisation of some of the more visible elements related to Ukraine's economy have often led to a lack of space for local perspectives and voices, particularly in terms of displacement-related issues. Since 2025, a clearer plan for displacement has been taken forward by the Ukrainian government, which under the leadership of the Ministry of Social Policy has adopted a renewed strategy for internally displaced people (IDPs).² These positive steps forward must now be met by a strong focus on implementation and follow-up, aiming to address the critical challenges that IDPs and returnees face across Ukraine.

Displacement should not be treated exclusively as a humanitarian or social protection issue; it is also a core governance challenge that will shape Ukraine's recovery, decentralisation, and democratic resilience. At the same time, because displacement results from rights violations and civilian protection failures, **recovery discussions should be grounded in a strong rights-based framing**, rather than focusing only on service delivery or governance.

As global leaders and decision-makers prepare to meet in Poland for the 2026 URC, a **human-centred recovery approach remains essential for sustainable progress, requiring the meaningful inclusion of displaced people and marginalised communities, in all their diversity, in recovery planning and implementation.** In particular, the Ukrainian government, international donors, and the humanitarian community should:

- Strengthen the capacity, resourcing and accountability of local authorities, accompanying the decentralisation of responsibilities with a significant decentralisation of resources.
- Support NGOs and CSOs to cover gaps between emergencies and recovery, drawing on their expertise of service-delivery in complex and insecure operational environments.
- Systematically include local communities and IDPs into recovery decision and policy-making processes.

Gaps in local integration and reintegration

Both IDPs and returnees have a right to make informed and voluntary choices on what solution they want to pursue, in line with global durable solutions frameworks. Durable solutions, understood as when people no longer have “any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement”, identify three main pathways for people displaced by conflict: local integration, return and reintegration, and resettlement to a third location or country.³

Achieving durable solutions for IDPs in Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees who decide to return, and non-displaced but conflict-affected communities represents an essential step for the country’s recovery, ensuring that displaced people can positively contribute to recovery while reducing the risk of social tensions across groups and the potential for future violence. Currently, **displaced people continue to face significant barriers in Ukraine both in terms of local integration and return and reintegration.**

Challenges faced by IDPs trying to integrate locally

Since 2014, local integration has been one of the clearest pathways toward durable solutions for IDPs in Ukraine. Before the full-scale war started in 2022, integration efforts and policies were largely framed around social adaptation, access to housing, employment, education, social protection,

and participation in community life. While these factors remain central, the conflict has fundamentally changed the environment in which local integration takes place.

Barriers to access housing, livelihoods, education, and social systems

Today, IDPs are trying to integrate into communities that are themselves under severe pressure. Many host municipalities face damaged infrastructure, reduced local revenues, overloaded social services, labour market disruptions, and continued security risks. At the same time, displaced households often experience declining savings, loss of assets, repeated trauma, family separation, and long-term uncertainty about return. This means that **integration can no longer be understood only as an individual process of adaptation.** It depends on whether local systems have the capacity to absorb additional needs while continuing to serve the wider population.

Housing remains one of the main barriers to local integration. Rental costs, lack of affordable housing, damaged housing stock, and limited municipal housing instruments continue to restrict IDPs’ ability to settle in host communities. Employment also remains uneven, especially for older people, women with care responsibilities, people with disabilities, and those whose previous professional experience does not match local labour market opportunities. Access to education, healthcare, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and social services are often available formally, but limited in practice by institutional overload, distance, documentation barriers, and lack of specialised support.

The displacement crisis in Ukraine has also had a distinct gender dimension. Women make up a significant proportion of the displaced population and often carry disproportionate caregiving responsibilities while navigating housing, employment, access to services, and administrative procedures. At the same time, women have emerged as key actors in local recovery processes, leading community initiatives, civil society organisations, and participation mechanisms such as IDP Councils. As displacement becomes increasingly protracted, recognising and supporting the role of women in both community resilience and local governance will be essential to ensuring inclusive and sustainable recovery outcomes.

In the longer-term recovery perspective, these **barriers are less about access to basic services following displacement, and more about whether communities have the resources, mandates, and planning tools to support long-term integration** while simultaneously responding to new damage, preparing for recovery, and managing possible return movements. Recovery of housing, infrastructure, and services is taking place at the same time as their continued destruction. This creates a moving target for local integration and makes short-term assistance insufficient.

For local integration to become a viable durable solution, support must move beyond individual assistance packages and address the question of capacity from a whole-of-community, or area-based, perspective. This includes predictable financing for local services, affordable housing solutions, employment pathways, psychosocial support, and structured participation of IDPs in local planning. Without this, **IDPs may remain physically present in safer communities**

while still being excluded from stable housing, income, services, and decision-making.

In Ukraine, the very foundations of local integration remain unstable as a result of the housing crisis. Currently, safe and adequate housing is not available as a realistic category for many displaced households. Private rental markets are unaffordable, municipal housing stock is limited, and existing state housing programmes are largely accessible only to those IDPs who already have sufficient income, creditworthiness, or formal employment. Education, while formally available, is also increasingly fragile in practice. For displaced children and youth, access to education is one of the clearest indicators of whether local integration is working in practice. While enrolment may be formally available, meaningful access is often disrupted by air alerts, damaged school infrastructure, lack of shelters, limited remedial support, psychosocial distress, digital exclusion, language or curriculum gaps, and pressure on teachers and local education authorities. Recovery planning should therefore support municipalities to maintain safe, inclusive and continuous learning for IDP and host-community children, including through school-based psychosocial support, remedial and catch-up learning, teacher wellbeing, and flexible learning modalities.

Reduced assistance following displacement

IDPs face a recurring gap after the initial phase of displacement. Once people leave frontline areas, pass through transit sites, or settle in relatively safer regions, the intensity of support often decreases faster than their needs. **Humanitarian assistance is still largely designed around emergency**

response and immediate vulnerability, while many IDPs enter a prolonged period of instability after displacing: they need housing, income, access to services, legal support, and psychosocial support, but no longer fit clearly within existing emergency assistance models.

This gap is particularly visible after the first months of displacement. Initial support may cover transportation, temporary accommodation, cash assistance, or basic items, but it rarely creates a pathway toward stable integration. After this stage, **responsibility often shifts to local systems that are already overstretched and unevenly resourced**. As a result, IDPs may find themselves in safer locations without the conditions needed to rebuild autonomy, while municipalities lack the resources and tools to provide structured post-displacement support. Integration also represents an opportunity to strengthen rather than undermine vertical and horizontal social cohesion in communities. **Area-based interventions that build integration as a two-way process between displaced and host communities can be effective but require investment in inclusive, long-term planning.**

Reduced support creates a risk of prolonged dependency, secondary displacement, or unsafe return. For many households, remaining in a host community becomes financially unsustainable, while return may appear to be the only available option despite potential insecurity, damaged housing, or limited services in areas of origin. Reduction of assistance after displacement should be treated as a recovery gap, not only a humanitarian gap, requiring strengthened transition mechanisms between emergency support, local integration, and durable solutions planning.

Challenges faced by returnees trying to reintegrate locally

Over the past four years, over 4.2 million people have returned home in Ukraine, either from abroad or following internal displacement.⁴ While returnees as a group often fare better than IDPs in national analyses, many families return under pressure from unaffordable displacement, reduced aid, weak labour-market access and unresolved housing constraints. Their ability to reintegrate sustainably also depend heavily on prior displacement duration and local conditions in areas of return. As such, returnees face significant and distinct needs as a result of their displacement and war. The needs they faced while in displacement have not been mitigated by returning home, but they have rather been exacerbated in some key areas, such as housing, and access to income and markets, due to gaps and barriers to reintegration.

Drivers of returns across Ukraine

While returns have occurred throughout Ukraine, those to areas heavily affected by conflict are particularly indicative of the challenges and barriers that returnees face in reintegrating into their home communities and the critical role that recovery should play in overcoming them. In areas that have experienced some level of occupation and have since been de-occupied, and areas that remain affected by conflict and insecurity on a continuous basis, access to services and rights can be particularly challenging due to damage and destruction of critical infrastructure and reduced financial and human resources at municipal level.

Push factors for returns are socio-emotional in nature, with the majority of returnees longing for their homes and communities, and at times not feeling welcome in

displacement, both within Ukraine and abroad.⁵ At the same time, almost half of all returnees have pointed to economic factors as pushing them into returning home, notably costs associated with housing and difficulties in finding work or accessing income.⁶ Similarly, reduction of humanitarian assistance is also widely reported amongst push factors, highlighting failures in accompanying displaced people from emergency into recovery.⁷ This also raises important questions regarding the voluntary nature of some return movements. Where returns are primarily driven by deteriorating needs and conditions in displacement, declining assistance, or economic necessity, **return should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that a durable solution has been achieved.**

The gradual erosion of resources and coping mechanisms over time, as displaced people struggle to pay for essentials such as food, healthcare and housing, is then contributing to the cross-cutting nature of the vulnerabilities and risks that people face once they decide to return home. Over time, barriers to integration and reintegration result in a deterioration of need, increasing the risks that people face while trying to cope with their situation. **Volume of returns and the passage of time are not proxies for durable solutions without investment in the necessary preconditions and systems of accompaniment.**

Barriers to access housing, livelihoods and services

Returnees face barriers to reintegration across different areas. These barriers result in needs that are often overlapping or similar to those of IDPs attempting to integrate in host communities. However, there are also some challenges that remain unique to returnee communities and that are

key to understanding the obstacles that they face.

Housing

Lack of access to safe and adequate housing has wide-ranging effects on people's lives, undermining their ability to secure livelihoods and access essential services such as education. **Unresolved housing, land and property (HLP) disputes prolong displacement, create unsafe return conditions and delay recovery.** When families cannot secure legal tenure or access formal compensation, they are often pushed into negative coping strategies, including staying in unsafe, substandard housing or exhausting their savings on informal repairs.

While return to one's home is often seen as the main benefit of going back to conflict-affected areas, this **does not necessarily result in safe, adequate housing, especially in areas exposed to continued attacks.**⁸ Nearly half of returnees in Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv regions are not living in homes they own with all documents required to secure their tenure and are instead hosted by family or friends or renting without formal contracts.⁹ Damage or destruction of primary residences, lack of property documentation and complex procedures are particularly acute for those whose housing is located in Russian-occupied territories, for whom legal pathways to compensation or alternative solutions are even more constrained.

For those without hosting options, renting is one of the most common solutions but is largely characterised by informal, verbal arrangements, **exposing tenants to exploitation, sudden rent increases and unfair evictions, including after they have invested in repairs.**¹⁰ High and rising rents, combined with limited housing supply in



areas with high displacement and military presence, place unsustainable pressure on the already strained resources of returnees and other conflict-affected people.

The State eRecovery programme for compensation for damaged and destroyed housing is a critical tool to facilitate access to sustainable housing solutions for returnees, IDPs and other conflict-affected populations, **but is currently constrained by limited funding and systemic barriers.**¹¹ Long bureaucratic procedures, slow inspections and long queues, combined with compensation amounts that do not reflect market costs, prevent many from restoring their homes or securing durable alternatives.¹²

Livelihoods and income

Socio-economic barriers are a key driver of reintegration challenges, preventing IDPs and returnees from achieving stability and moving towards durable solutions when they cannot generate sufficient income and are forced to rely on negative coping strategies such as spending savings, cutting essential expenditures or taking on debt.¹³ IDPs often fare worst in terms of economic resilience, but **highly vulnerable returnees who depend on such coping mechanisms also struggle to stabilise their living conditions**, reflecting diverse profiles and needs among those who have returned.¹⁴

In many conflict-affected areas, returnees' main income sources include formal employment, state social benefits and agricultural activities, yet state support such as pensions, IDP allowances and social payments is widely considered insufficient to cover basic needs.¹⁵ **Returnees face compounded barriers, including exclusion from IDP-targeted aid, loss of local networks, administrative hurdles, utility**

debt and high housing costs, while access to social protection is undermined by bureaucratic delays, overloaded institutions, digitalisation gaps and documentation requirements that particularly affect older people, persons with disabilities and those without formal rental contracts.¹⁶

Remittances and certain agricultural livelihoods can enable some returnees, especially in de-occupied areas, to accumulate surplus income, whereas in rural frontline areas heavy reliance on agriculture often only allows households to break even.¹⁷ Territorial differences in labour market opportunities are stark: for example, returnees in some rural frontline areas of Dnipropetrovsk report a lack of jobs as a key barrier, while this is not the case in comparable areas of Kharkivska, reflecting how conflict has reshaped local economies and created uneven new opportunities, including in the humanitarian sector.¹⁸ These disparities underline **the need for area-based recovery approaches that address both local variations and wider systemic socio-economic deficits** affecting returnees and host communities.¹⁹

Education

Education is a critical but often overlooked dimension of returnees' local reintegration. For families with school-aged children, return does not automatically mean a return to stable, safe and quality learning. In many conflict-affected and de-occupied areas, schools continue to operate under disrupted conditions due to damaged infrastructure, limited access to shelters, electricity and heating interruptions, teacher shortages, safety risks and repeated shifts between in-person, hybrid and remote learning. Children returning after months or years of displacement may also face learning gaps, psychosocial distress, interrupted

documentation, changes in curriculum or language of instruction, and difficulties reconnecting with peers and school communities. These challenges can be particularly acute for adolescents, children with disabilities, children from low-income households and those who have spent prolonged periods out of formal education.

Supporting returnees' reintegration therefore requires not only reopening schools, but ensuring safe learning environments, remedial and catch-up support, psychosocial and social-emotional learning, inclusive education services, teacher support, transport where needed, and stronger links between schools, local authorities and social services. Without sustained investment in education recovery, **returnee children risk being educationally and socially disconnected** from the communities to which they have returned and a durable reintegration pathway.

Access to services and markets

Full access to services and markets is critical for returnees to stabilise and reintegrate, yet this is heavily constrained by both conflict-related damage and pre-existing structural issues.²⁰ Electricity disruptions, especially in frontline areas, undermine access to water, sanitation, heating and internet, with winter cuts severely affecting both households and local businesses, which either shut down or absorb high costs for generators and fuel.²¹ Affordability is an additional barrier: while healthcare and markets are generally functioning, the high cost of medicines and basic goods forces many, particularly pensioners and those with chronic illnesses, to switch to cheaper items or reduce their use of critical healthcare and other goods.²²

Targeted recovery of local services and markets requires appropriate

humanitarian modalities, with cash assistance playing a key role where markets function but remain fragile, allowing people to prioritise their own needs while supporting local traders, service providers and broader community recovery.²³

Recovery planning as a tool to create necessary preconditions

Recovery in Ukraine requires a comprehensive and holistic response that is inclusive of displaced people. The current system remains fragmented, attempting to provide IDPs and returnees with narrow and focused support addressing only some of their needs. However, it is clear that **the stability and recovery of both people and communities is cross-cutting**, as barriers to housing, services, systems and livelihoods remain critically interlinked and impact both vertical and horizontal social cohesion. Without a safe and adequate housing solution it can be more difficult to find a job or access state systems and services.²⁴ But without adequate income it remains almost impossible to access housing and markets. It is therefore unsurprising that four out of five returnees in Ukraine are facing at least one area of unmet need.²⁵

Recovery must aim to address needs comprehensively, remaining rooted in a human-centred approach while aiming for structural, systemic change. This will only be possible if solutions are built from the start, already during the emergency phase and not only in stable areas, by preparing the ground for local integration and returns and reintegration. **Recovery will only be sustainable if the necessary preconditions**

beyond security are in place: access to basic services and systems, safe and continuous education, livelihoods, housing, legal documentation, all anchored by effective, inclusive, and accountable local governance.

Local Administrations (LAs) are critically placed to create the preconditions for sustainable recovery through local capacity and accountability, while also remaining the primary duty bearers to ensure that communities as a whole have access to what they need. The escalation of the war in 2022 has accelerated many of the structural challenges that LAs face when providing recovery and stability for their communities.

At the same time, the achievement of durable solutions depends on the relationship between affected communities and local institutions. Access to housing, services and livelihoods alone may not result in sustainable integration or reintegration where people are unable to resolve legal issues, access documentation, secure tenure rights, challenge administrative decisions, or seek remedies for rights violations.

Strengthening local governance should therefore also include strengthening the accessibility, accountability and responsiveness of institutions responsible for delivering rights and resolving grievances.

Recovery is also a social cohesion challenge. As displacement becomes increasingly protracted, communities face growing pressures linked to competition over housing, employment opportunities, social services, and humanitarian assistance. At the same time, shrinking aid resources, prolonged uncertainty, and the cumulative effects of war can contribute to frustration, exclusion, and declining trust between

different groups. Recovery efforts that fail to account for these dynamics risk reinforcing existing inequalities and creating new tensions between displaced people, returnees, and host communities. **Recovery planning should therefore be conflict-sensitive and designed to strengthen social cohesion** through inclusive decision-making, equitable access to resources and services, and meaningful participation of all affected populations.

As such, governance systems must remain adaptive to repeated shocks, renewed displacement, infrastructure destruction, and changing demographic realities. Effective local governance requires more than the delivery of services and infrastructure.

Recovery planning should be built on meaningful and structured participation of local communities, including IDPs, returnees, and host populations. Participatory planning processes, community consultations, advisory bodies and feedback mechanisms can help ensure that recovery investments reflect actual needs and priorities.

Participation should not be treated as a symbolic consultation exercise, but as part of the governance infrastructure that strengthens accountability, trust in institutions, and the legitimacy of recovery decision-making. The inclusion of IDPs in municipal planning is particularly important to ensure that durable solutions are embedded within local recovery strategies from the outset. **Participation mechanisms should therefore be assessed in terms of influence rather than mere existence.** The creation of advisory bodies or consultation processes does not automatically translate into meaningful participation if communities have limited ability to shape priorities,

resource allocation, or implementation decisions.

Challenges faced by Local Administrations

The war has had a severe and multi-layered impact on the ability of LAs in responding to the crisis while addressing longer term recovery and reconstruction needs. Since 2022, many of the communities in de-occupied and frontline regions have been affected by widespread destruction of critical infrastructure, increased demand for services and social protection, and sudden waves of population movement, that have drained some communities while overwhelming others. All of these challenges are **directly resulting in reduced “absorption capacity” for LAs**, understood as their ability to effectively attract, develop and manage resources, including financial ones, to achieve specific goals.²⁶ This capacity remains essential in empowering effective decentralisation that enables sustainable and human-centred recovery.

Financial capacity

The decentralisation of roles and responsibilities towards LAs has so far not been met with a comparable decentralisation of financial resources. Limited budgets can severely hamper the ability of LAs to both support communities during the emergency phase, for instance with post-displacement support to access housing and other immediate necessities, as well as create preconditions for integration and reintegration.

Municipal budgets are made up of money raised locally through taxes, fees and other income, a share of national taxes, and financial transfers received from state and regional authorities. As over 10 million

people have left their homes since 2022, to either move internally or abroad, **many of the most affected municipalities have struggled to maintain pre-existing flows of local revenue, as well as national income.**²⁷ At the same time, transfers from the state have struggled to keep up with delegated national functions, the responsibilities that the central government assigns to municipalities to implement locally. In de-occupied Hromadas, the share of municipal expenditure on National Level Functions increased from 12 percent in 2022 to 47 percent in 2023-2024, reflecting growing challenges in responding to both locally identified and state-mandated priorities.²⁸

With national and local resources being increasingly stretched, **LAs have also systematically struggled to access international funding for recovery.** International aid accounted for about 27 percent of Ukraine’s state budget in 2022 and 18 percent from January to September 2023.²⁹ At the same time, the revenue levels from international aid to local budgets remained unchanged accounting for 0.04 percent in 2022 and 0.03 percent in 2023.³⁰ International funding for recovery is formally accessible for LAs by submitting Recovery and Development Plans. However, just a small number of Hromadas have developed comprehensive recovery programmes and corresponding plans.³¹

Recovery of education is a clear example of the gap between delegated responsibilities and available local resources. Municipalities are expected to maintain access to education, repair damaged schools, equip shelters, support hybrid and remote learning, and address learning loss, but often lack predictable and flexible funding to do so.

Human resources and expertise

One of the critical barriers that LAs face, especially following displacement, is accessing the necessary human resources to maintain services and support running, as well as additional specific expertise to develop Recovery and Development Plans and engage with donors, the broader international community, and other actors operating in their areas, including NGOs and CSOs. **As people move to safer areas, LAs lose key roles and expertise, as well as institutional memory and capacity.** This directly impacts their absorption capacity, particularly when it comes to designing and implementing inclusive programmes.

Recovery without inclusive and conflict-sensitive local planning **risks reproducing exclusion for IDPs and returnees, and increasing social tensions**, especially where restored infrastructure does not translate into affordable housing, accessible rights and services, or viable livelihoods for all displacement affected persons. In some of the most conflict-affected areas of Ukraine, local communities overwhelmingly report exclusion from top-down recovery-related decisions at municipal level.³² Perceived lack of influence in local decision-making processes directly translates into decreased trust in governance systems and reduced civic participation.³³ This directly impacts the quality of recovery programming, misses out on the critical capacity that local communities have developed in meeting needs and challenges, and risks undermining longer term social cohesion when failing to address latent grievances and dormant conflicts.

As an example, the human resource gap significantly affects local education systems. Displacement, insecurity, burnout, and repeated disruptions reduce the capacity of

schools, teachers, psychologists and education departments to provide stable learning and psychosocial support. Strengthening education recovery at the municipal level therefore requires investment not only in schools and infrastructure, but also in education personnel, teacher professional development, teacher wellbeing, and local education planning capacity.

Capacity constraints for LAs are a significant barrier to recovery, but they are not the only determinant of recovery outcomes.

Decisions regarding resource allocation, prioritisation of investments, beneficiary selection, and participation in planning processes all have important implications for equity and inclusion. Strengthening local governance therefore requires not only additional resources and expertise, but also mechanisms that promote transparency, accountability, and public oversight.

The role of local communities, NGOs and civil society in recovery

The responsibility of ensuring a sustainable recovery through the creation of the necessary preconditions for integration and reintegration primarily lies with LAs and the state. However, after almost four and a half years, a broad community of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and local communities have proactively contributed to responding to the humanitarian crisis. In practice, **many elements of Ukraine's recovery are already being implemented through local ecosystems** of municipalities, civil society organisations, volunteer initiatives, and IDP Councils. In this time, they have developed essential capacity, expertise and knowledge that can prove

critical to support Ukraine's recovery process.

Failing to draw on this capacity means putting displaced and conflict-affected communities at increased risk of falling back into the emergency phase, when LAs are unable to comprehensively respond to their needs and help them stabilise their situation. Civil society can contribute to Ukraine's recovery by **maintaining attention on developing and implementing a human-centred approach**, ensuring that all duty bearers are accountable for their actions. Beyond this, it can help **build and support the capacity of LAs to access and manage funding** in complex operating environments, such as de-occupied and frontline areas. NGOs and CSOs are also essential in **providing direct support to IDPs, returnees and host communities** in the early recovery phase, when people need help to move from emergency to stability through temporary assistance. This is particularly relevant when organisations are able to work through cash modalities, providing additional support to local markets. Lastly, civil society can also **provide an opportunity to more effectively engage with local communities**, ensuring that they are able to influence and feel included in recovery-related decision-making.

In terms of inclusivity and expert support a particularly relevant example can be found with **IDP Councils, consultative and advisory bodies established across Ukraine** to represent the interests of displaced persons and promote their integration into host communities. Councils aim to ensure that IDPs have a voice in local decision-making processes and are not excluded from community life. By mid-2024, more than 1,000 IDP Councils had been created, covering two-thirds of all

municipalities in Ukraine. Councils typically include displaced individuals themselves—often women—and work on a voluntary basis. Their key activities include advocating for the rights of IDPs, identifying community needs, contributing to local recovery planning, and facilitating communication between displaced persons, local authorities, humanitarian actors, and service providers.

Through their work, IDP Councils are often amongst the first to identify protection risks, barriers to accessing support, or gaps in local governance affecting displaced populations. In several regions, **IDP Councils have successfully contributed to inclusive recovery planning**, data collection on IDP needs, and the development of local strategies on housing, employment, and social protection.

IDP Councils offer an example of the positive role that civil society can play in ensuring a positive and successful recovery. Beyond their advocacy and consultative functions, IDP Councils increasingly operate as intermediary governance mechanisms that help municipalities respond to displacement-related challenges. They support the localisation of recovery efforts, generate evidence on local needs and priorities, facilitate communication between citizens and authorities, and help reduce the risk of tensions between displaced and host communities. Through these functions, **IDP Councils contribute to strengthening local governance capacity and improving the responsiveness of recovery planning and implementation**. IDP Councils should not be viewed solely as temporary displacement structures, but as emerging participatory governance institutions with long-term relevance for inclusive recovery and democratic resilience.

While IDP Councils have created important mechanisms for inclusivity and participation of displaced communities, their effectiveness still varies considerably across Ukraine.

Many Councils continue to operate with limited resources, technical capacity, institutional support, and influence over decision-making processes. Strengthening participation therefore requires not only the establishment of representative bodies, but also **ensuring that these bodies have the resources, expertise, information, and institutional access necessary to meaningfully shape recovery priorities.**

Further integrating IDP Councils into national and local recovery frameworks represents an important opportunity to strengthen participation, accountability, and community ownership of recovery processes, but can only happen through targeted and adequate allocation of resources and formal influence.

Recommendations:

To the government of Ukraine:

- Strengthen funding **mechanisms that guarantee timely, needs-based allocations of recovery resources** directly to local authorities and Hromadas, with a particular focus on rural and underserved areas hosting IDPs or with a higher density of collective sites.
- Work with Local Administrations to **invest in their technical, administrative, and financial capacity** to design and implement inclusive recovery plans.
- Strengthen **accountability and oversight mechanisms within local recovery processes**, including transparent decision-making, accessible complaints mechanisms, public consultation processes, and monitoring systems that allow displaced and conflict-affected populations to meaningfully influence recovery priorities.
- Maintain a focus on the inclusion of IDPs and returnees in state policies through **the timely implementation of the National IDP Strategy**. Increased ministerial coordination should translate into a coherent and comprehensive approach to creating the preconditions for integration and reintegration.

To international donors:

- Increase **long-term, direct, and flexible funding to local authorities, NGOs and CSOs** to strengthen temporary and longer-term solutions for displaced and conflict-affected people. Increased funding should be accompanied by stronger coordination amongst humanitarian and development teams, ensuring that programming is complementary and not duplicative across the nexus.
- Invest in and expand the **capacity and expertise of local ecosystems, including local authorities, civil society and communities**, to respond to displacement challenges. Functional decentralisation is only possible through the empowerment of local self-government, which requires both financial and human resources.
- Support the **institutional development and participation of IDP Councils** in local and national recovery processes through increased funding and advocacy support. Greater capacity and coordination can translate into increased

inclusivity and effectiveness of local decision-making, further strengthening Ukraine's social cohesion in the long term.

- Integrate **displacement, social cohesion, and public participation-related indicators into recovery financing criteria** to ensure that investments contribute to durable solutions and inclusive recovery outcomes.

To the humanitarian and development community in Ukraine:

- Develop **joint, conflict-sensitive, and socially cohesive approaches** that link emergency assistance with long-term recovery, focusing on building the preconditions for the integration or reintegration of IDPs, returnees and host communities, and enhancing the role of civil society in recovery processes.
- Adopt **area-based approaches** to build social-cohesion address tensions related to housing, employment, access to services, and competition over limited resources.
- Use existing **modality decision tools to inform decisions** on cash or in-kind modalities, with the aim of adopting cash interventions in support of the recovery of markets and systems wherever possible and appropriate.
- Strengthen **evidence generation and community feedback mechanisms** to ensure that recovery interventions remain adaptive to changing displacement patterns, evolving needs, and local realities.

Endnotes

¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2026, <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/2025-deadliest-year-for-civilians-in-Ukraine-since-2022-UN-human-rights-monitors-find>; World Bank Group, Ukraine, 2025, Fifth Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA5), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2026/02/23/updated-ukraine-recovery-and-reconstruction-needs-assessment-released>.

² Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine, 2026, <https://www.msp.gov.ua/press-center/news/uryad-skhvalyv-stratehiyu-vpo-2030>.

³ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2010, Framework On Durable Solutions For Internally Displaced Persons, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/iasc-framework-durable-solutions-internally-displaced-persons>

⁴ IOM, May 2026, Ukraine Returns Report, General Population Survey, Round 23, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-returns-report-general-population-survey-round-23-may-2026>.

⁵ An NRC Needs Assessment of returnees in eastern Ukraine found that amongst primary push factors for returns were missing home and community (53 percent) and feeling unwelcome or excluded by the host community (26 percent). Source: Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

⁶ An NRC Needs Assessment of returnees in eastern Ukraine found that amongst primary push factors for returns were included the high cost of housing and rent in areas of displacement (48 percent) and difficulty finding work or earning money (45 percent). Source: Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

⁷ An NRC Needs Assessment of returnees in eastern Ukraine found that amongst primary push factors for returns were that humanitarian aid was reduced, stopped, or not available (18 percent). Source: Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

⁸ An NRC Needs Assessment of returnees in eastern Ukraine found that being in one's own home or apartment was identified as the most widely recognised benefit experienced following return (77 percent). However, only a slight majority reported to be residing in a property they owned with the necessary ownership documents (57 percent). This was followed by returnees being hosted by family or friends (36 percent), and returnees in rental

accommodations based on informal or verbal agreements (8 percent). A significant number of returnees reported that their primary residences were habitable with minor damage (21 percent) or partially habitable with significant damage (4 percent). This share significantly increased in Kharkiv region in both rural frontlines (44 percent and 6 percent) and peri-urban de-occupied areas (33 percent and 10 percent). Source: Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ IOM, 2026, Measuring Progress Towards Durable Solutions in Ukraine, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-measuring-progress-towards-durable-solutions-ukraine-february-2026>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ An NRC Needs Assessment of returnees in eastern Ukraine found that returnees in Kharkiv region's peri-urban de-occupied areas agricultural activities as primary source of income provided an income surplus of 20 percent, while in the rural frontlines of Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions there was no surplus (0 percent). Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

¹⁸ Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Internally Displaced People (IDPs) who have access to adequate housing are over three times more likely to not rely on humanitarian assistance and twice as likely to have stable income according to a study by the International Organization for Migration's Global Data Institute (GDI). Source: IOM 2023, Periodic Global Report on the State of Solutions to Internal Displacement, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/housing-key-economic-security-displaced-people-report>.

²⁵ IOM, May 2026, Ukraine Returns Report, General Population Survey, Round 23, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-returns-report-general-population-survey-round-23-may-2026>.

²⁶ Institute of Analytics and Advocacy, 2025, Recovery and development of de-occupied hromadas: funding, governance, human resources, <https://iaa.org.ua/en/portfolio/de-occupied-communities/>.

²⁷ HAVEN, 2026, HAVEN III White Book: Strengthening Local Recovery Planning Through Data, Participation, and Targeted Support.

²⁸ Institute of Analytics and Advocacy, 2025, Recovery and development of de-occupied hromadas: funding, governance, human resources, <https://iaa.org.ua/en/portfolio/de-occupied-communities/>.

²⁹ CEE Bankwatch Network, 2023, Ukrainian communities at the forefront of reconstruction efforts Financial sources and their accessibility for municipalities, <https://bankwatch.org/publication/local-budgets-and-the-reconstruction-of-ukraine>.

³⁰ CEE Bankwatch Network, 2023, Ukrainian communities at the forefront of reconstruction efforts Financial sources and their accessibility for municipalities, <https://bankwatch.org/publication/local-budgets-and-the-reconstruction-of-ukraine>.

³¹ Institute of Analytics and Advocacy, 2025, Recovery and development of de-occupied hromadas: funding, governance, human resources, <https://iaa.org.ua/en/portfolio/de-occupied-communities/>.

³² An NRC Needs Assessment of returnees in eastern Ukraine found that the majority had either never participated (44 percent) or were unaware (27 percent) of local meetings, public hearings, or online consultations regarding local recovery needs and reconstruction efforts. Source: Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).

³³ Middle East Consulting Solutions (MECS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), April 2026, *Home to the Frontline: Assessing Returnee Needs in the East of Ukraine* (Report awaiting publication, available upon request).