

Report

Strengthening Cooperation Between Local Governments and Civil Society for Ukraine's Recovery

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Summary

Over the past decade, Ukraine has witnessed the strengthening of its local governments and civil society organizations (CSOs). The decentralization reform launched in 2014 empowered local authorities as key actors in governance and public-service delivery, while, following two revolutions, civil society emerged as a crucial force advancing democratic values.

Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 triggered an unprecedented challenge that required rapid and coordinated responses across all sectors. Local governments and CSOs quickly mobilized, stepping into central roles in supporting resistance efforts, delivering essential services, and addressing the immediate needs of affected populations. Their cooperation became vital to sustaining community resilience and initiating early recovery work.

There are valuable lessons to be drawn from successful partnerships in the regions directly impacted by the invasion. The Chernihiv region, which borders Belarus and Russia, was heavily affected in the early stages of the war. In municipalities like Nizhyn, Mena, and Horodnia, collaboration between local governments and CSOs has produced tangible outcomes despite ongoing security risks.

In Nizhyn, a strong partnership between the two sides led to the creation of the region's first veterans support center, among other initiatives. In Mena, local authorities and CSOs have focused on energy resilience and civil defense, including the installation of solar panels and the construction of bomb shelters. Horodnia prioritized housing renovation for displaced persons and support services for families affected by the war. These cases highlight several factors that enable successful cooperation between local government and civil society: committed local leadership, mutual trust between stakeholders, access to international donor funding, and participatory governance approaches.

There are several ways in which this cooperation can be strengthened to further support Ukraine's recovery. CSOs should align their projects with local strategies, engage in continuous dialogue with authorities, and tailor their work to the specific needs of communities. Local governments, in turn, should increase transparency, actively include CSOs in recovery planning, and treat them as strategic partners. The central government can facilitate their collaboration by decentralizing reconstruction funds, streamlining bureaucratic procedures, and ensuring oversight mechanisms that encourage joint efforts. International donors should prioritize funding models that promote local partnerships, build local capacity through training and technical assistance, and create accountability frameworks that include civil society.

Overall, sustained cooperation between local authorities and civil society is essential to an inclusive and effective recovery process. Institutionalizing their partnerships will not only improve service delivery and community resilience but also lay a stronger foundation for democratic reconstruction in postwar Ukraine.

Introduction

A decade after the Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine has made noteworthy strides in various areas. Despite confronting Russia's full-scale invasion since 2022, it has steadfastly stayed on the path of European integration and democratization. The EU recognized this when, in December 2023, it decided to initiate accession talks with Ukraine. Now, it is imperative to align this path and the country's ongoing recovery efforts.

Successfully navigating the recovery process, which is on a scale unprecedented for any European country since the end of the Second World War, requires daunting investments in human and physical capital. The projected cost of \$524 billion over the next decade, as estimated by the World Bank,¹ highlights the monumental scale of the task that lies ahead. To tackle this challenge, it will be crucial for Ukraine not only to involve its international partners and donors but also to optimize the utilization of all of the country's available resources. A strategic approach that more fully leverages domestic resources can foster a more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable recovery.

Civil society has been consistently acknowledged as a pivotal actor in driving Ukraine forward and a significant contributor to its wartime resilience. According to the European Commission, civil society organizations (CSOs) are key partners for the government and international donors. Even with the imposition of martial law with its limitations on basic freedoms, they have maintained their watchdog role and increased their engagement in service provision, volunteering, and humanitarian efforts, complementing government initiatives.²

Empowered by decentralization, which is considered by many the most successful and popular reform since 2014,³ local and regional authorities have become another asset for the country. Mayors and local officials have played a crucial role in organizing essential wartime support and services, from distributing food to managing evacuations, particularly during the perilous initial weeks of the invasion. Even in extremely dangerous security environments, they have displayed commitment and preparedness to take responsibility and to act for the benefit of their communities. Local governments were also among the first actors to begin financing recovery efforts.

The decentralization reform and the invasion have spurred collaboration between CSOs and local governments.

The decentralization reform and the invasion have spurred collaboration between CSOs and local governments. In some cases, CSOs have effectively partnered with authorities, assisting them with obtaining funding, creating technical documentation, and executing projects. Supported by donors such as the US Agency for International Development and the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), certain CSOs have also participated in formulating recovery plans for communities and in providing capacity-building training in subjects like urban planning, project management, and budgeting.⁴

But, despite the notable instances of collaboration between local governments and CSOs, recent surveys and studies show there is still a lot of room for improvement. This paper examines how cooperation between local governments and CSOs can be strengthened to support effective recovery efforts. Here, recovery is understood in a broad sense, covering infrastructure repair and the development of human capital to support long-term

growth and transformation. The research included in-depth interviews with members of both to explore current collaboration practices, challenges, and opportunities for improvement; analysis of successful cooperation models in recovery initiatives to identify key mechanisms and success factors; and a review of existing literature and documentation, including reports and studies by relevant organizations, to uncover broader trends. To ground the analysis, the study focuses on three municipalities—Nizhyn, Mena, and Horodnia—in the Chernihiv region, which was selected based on CSO recommendations.

Local Governments and Civil Society Before 2022

Over the past decade, Ukraine has undergone changes that strengthened local government and civil society (formal organizations and professional associations, as well as informal groups and grassroots movements).

The process of decentralization that began in 2014 has led to an increase in the budgets, powers, and responsibilities of local governments alongside the amalgamation of all local governments into Unified Territorial Communities (the level of municipalities, or hromadas in Ukrainian). For the first time since independence, there was a shift from a Soviet-style centralized system to decentralized governance, giving local authorities the opportunity to take ownership of community development. The rationale is that local self-governments, equipped with a deeper understanding of community needs, can respond more effectively to these. Although the reform is not yet complete, largely due to necessary constitutional amendments not yet having been adopted, many communities have begun to experience improvements in areas like administrative services, infrastructure, and education as a result of decentralization efforts.

Decentralization has also contributed to a revitalization of local democracy in many areas, as the giving of more powers and financial resources to local authorities has often led to greater scrutiny by residents. Practices like participatory budgeting have begun to spread across the country and cities have increasingly adopted transparency principles and practices.⁵ This has fostered greater accountability and opened more opportunities for citizens and civil society to get involved in decision-making as well as increased interest in local politics and participation in local elections.⁶

Civil society has also undergone positive changes, particularly during and after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. It has played a vital role in driving and overseeing key reforms, a contribution regularly recognized and valued, especially by Ukraine's international partners. Civil society has influenced almost every significant progress in the country in the last decade, including in decentralization, public procurement, healthcare, and the fight against corruption. Civil society has increasingly complemented and even in some cases replaced some state functions across various sectors. And there has also been a flow of human capacity from civil society to government, with many individuals from the civic and business sectors joining the central and local authorities.⁷ CSOs have also been involved in various aspects of local community development, infrastructure projects, and the creation of communal spaces, and they have cooperated with authorities to address the needs of vulnerable groups.⁸

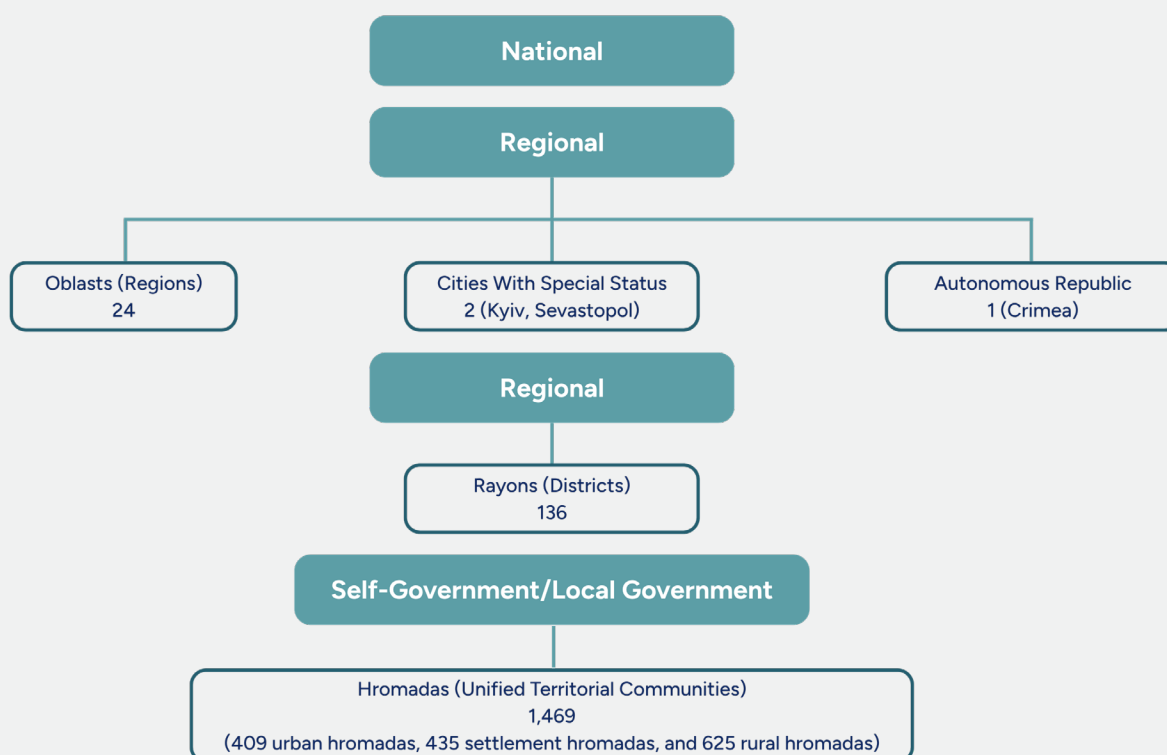
Response to and Impact of the Invasion

The full-scale invasion in 2022 created an unprecedented crisis that required all sectors of society and levels of governance to adapt and to respond quickly. In these conditions, the previous advances noted above proved valuable as both sets of actors rapidly stepped up as key contributors to resilience and resistance efforts.

While the central government organized and coordinated the overall response to the invasion and secured crucial international support, local governments and civil society were essential actors at the level of various communities across Ukraine. They found and delivered humanitarian aid to affected populations, organized the evacuation of civilians from high-risk areas, and relocated vulnerable individuals to safer regions. They established temporary shelters to accommodate internally displaced persons, providing them with basic services and refuge. Their efforts also involved organizing territorial defense units, supporting the military with critical supplies and logistical assistance, and reporting the movement of Russian troops to the armed forces.

Despite the new wartime realities, such as shellings and energy blackouts, most local authorities continued to deliver public services where possible. Except in active-combat zones, regular operations were either maintained

Figure 1. Levels of Government in Ukraine



or resumed within two weeks of the invasion or after liberation from Russian occupation.⁹ A majority of Ukrainians and experts believe that decentralization was crucial in strengthening resistance to the invasion.¹⁰

The cooperation between civil society and local governments also increased, contributing to communities' ability to manage the new challenges. Authorities recognized that addressing the complexities of war requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, and they have, for example, engaged residents, internally displaced persons, and local businesses in a wider range of activities.¹¹ This approach is also evident in the resources and support local authorities provided to various civic initiatives that emerged in response to the full-scale invasion. One study found that 44% of such initiatives received infrastructural support from local governments, such as the allocation of communal premises and land for volunteer and humanitarian activities.¹²

However, the full-scale invasion also introduced new sources of friction, one of which is martial law. Despite Ukraine's proportionality in applying martial law, for which it has been commended by the European Commission, the restrictions involved have impacted the work of civil society and local governments.¹³ There has been a shift back toward centralizing governance to respond more effectively to the invasion. The administrative powers of Ukraine's oblasts (regions) were transferred to larger district military administrations. This approach was justified in active-combat zones but it has raised concerns elsewhere where there are effective local councils, leading in some cases to duplicated responsibilities, community dissatisfaction, and conflicts with the central government.¹⁴ Local governments have also faced reduced budget revenues since the 2023 reallocation of the "military" personal income tax, which was paid by military and security personnel to the communities where their units were registered. While this became a significant source of local funding after the start of the full-scale invasion, it has since been reclaimed by the state to finance national defense needs, worsening the already difficult financial situation of many municipalities.

Civil society and independent media have also encountered challenges in fulfilling their watchdog role as restricted access to data and decision-makers hampers their ability to monitor government activities effectively. While it is understandable that security takes precedence over transparency during wartime, some officials at the central and local levels have used martial law to justify restricting access to information and limiting public participation in important decision-making, such as procurement or granting of permits, even when such measures are unnecessary.

The Role of Local Governments and Civil Society in Recovery

Estimating the cost of Ukraine's recovery is extremely challenging, given that the war and its continuous destruction of infrastructure is ongoing. However, for an illustration of the scale of the challenge, one study found that, as of January 2024,

At least 250,000 residential buildings, 160,000 units of agricultural machinery, 16,000 units of communal transport, 3,800 educational institutions, 1,800 cultural institutions, 580 administrative buildings of state

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and local government, 426 hospitals, 348 religious institutions, 50 administrative services centers, 48 social services centers, 31 boarding schools, 31 shopping centers, and other facilities have been damaged, destroyed, or captured.¹⁵

Ukraine's recovery faces significant challenges while the war is ongoing, with persistent security risks and limited financial resources complicating the process. The destruction of energy infrastructure further exacerbates these difficulties. Yet, despite them there is an immediate need to restore essential services and to support displaced communities through housing and livelihood programs. Successfully rebuilding during the war can also provide hope and a sense of at least some stability for the affected population. Finally, early recovery efforts can be focused not only on meeting immediate needs but also on building long-term resilience.

The central government naturally plays the leading role in the recovery process and has taken steps to establish a recovery framework. In 2022–2023, it created key structures, including a specialized post of deputy prime minister, the State Agency for Recovery, and the Fund for Elimination of the Consequences of Armed Aggression. It also presented the National Recovery Plan during the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Lugano, Switzerland in 2022. In agreement with its international partners heavily involved in mobilizing resources for Ukraine, the government established several key principles essential for recovery: partnership, a commitment to reform, transparency, accountability, rule of law, democratic participation, multi-stakeholder engagement, gender equality, inclusion, and sustainability.

Local governments play a key role in recovery by planning and implementing a wide range of recovery projects, with a primary focus on restoring essential services and infrastructure disrupted by the war.

Despite the efforts to guide recovery, challenges in implementation remain. One of the most comprehensive studies of the recovery efforts to date found that the plan presented in Lugano has not become a practical roadmap, and that the National Recovery Council is failing to fulfil its intended role of coordinating reconstruction efforts.¹⁶ Furthermore, while 57% of Kyiv-based CSOs report very active or active state engagement of civil society in the recovery effort, a notable improvement from 37% in 2022, many still find participation frameworks insufficient.¹⁷ Initiatives like DREAM,¹⁸ developed by the civil society coalition RISE in cooperation with the government to collect and to publish real-time open data on reconstruction projects, have so far been only marginally effective, as they lack direct connection to funding allocation and appear fragmented.

At the regional level the situation is worse. Around 63% of CSOs report marginal or no involvement in recovery processes.¹⁹ This shortcoming is also found at the level of Ukraine's international partners as the Multi-Agency Donor Coordination Platform continues to ignore the requests to set up a civil society advisory group and international recovery conferences lack representation of civil society at the decision-making table.²⁰

Local governments play a key role in recovery by planning and implementing a wide range of recovery projects, with a primary focus on restoring essential services and infrastructure disrupted by the war. In 2023, 71% of reconstruction projects were funded from local budgets.²¹ These efforts include rebuilding schools, repairing critical infrastructure such as water and power systems, and restoring damaged roads and bridges.²² In addition to physical reconstruction, local authorities are also involved in enhancing community resilience through programs to support and to prepare long-term recovery.

In a 2024 public-opinion survey, while most respondents said they saw the central and local authorities as responsible for driving recovery efforts, nearly a third said that citizens and CSOs also have an important role to play.²³ Key areas where the public feels CSOs can contribute include the rebuilding of housing and infrastructure, as well as efforts to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals who have been directly affected by the war. This reflects a growing sense of shared responsibility for rebuilding and strengthening communities.

Despite often not having a clear institutional framework to get involved in it, civil society is playing a crucial role in the recovery process, contributing across a broad spectrum of activities. In one study, 55% of surveyed CSOs said they engaged in planning for postwar recovery with local and national authorities.²⁴ CSOs are involved in assessing the damage caused by the war, in creating registries to track progress, and in assisting with the digitalization of public services to streamline efforts.²⁵ They are also directly engaged in rebuilding homes and critical infrastructure, in supporting demining operations in war-affected areas, in providing psychological support to those traumatized by the war, and in monitoring potential corruption risks to ensure transparency in recovery projects. A recent study by the German Marshall Fund of the United States found that, among local stakeholders, civil society is the most positively rated for agility and ability to overcome challenges, followed by the private sector, demonstrating its critical role in local response and recovery efforts.²⁶

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Several initiatives illustrate civil society's impact. Projects such as B50 Restoration and Building Ukraine Together (BUR) among many others are dedicated to repairing and rebuilding homes damaged in the war. They focus on tasks such as clearing debris, preserving structurally sound buildings, cleaning up war-torn areas, and constructing temporary and permanent housing for internally displaced persons and communities most affected by the war.²⁷ In another example, Ecoclub, has supported local governments in implementing sustainable energy solutions in communities by installing solar-power plants in critical facilities like hospitals and water-utility facilities, which offer a safeguard against loss of power supply.²⁸

Many of these projects are in regions where the need for reconstruction is particularly urgent. Through these efforts, civil society is providing essential support to war-affected populations, helping to restore a sense of normalcy and to rebuild livelihoods.

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At the same time, although the importance of collaboration between local governments and civil society in the recovery process is widely recognized by internal and external stakeholders, the momentum of increased cooperation had declined by the end of 2023, according to some studies.²⁹ This stems from institutional resistance to participatory governance, information opacity, and past negative experiences of citizens participation.³⁰ Furthermore, most local collaboration remains informal and dependent on personal networks rather than institutionalized mechanisms.³¹

Given this trend, examining the cooperation between local governments and civil society is crucial for several reasons. First, such collaboration is vital for enhancing community resilience, particularly in crisis contexts where local needs are complex and rapidly evolving. During the initial stages of the full-scale invasion, grassroots initiatives and CSOs played a pivotal role in mobilizing resources, in supporting displaced populations, and in addressing urgent community needs. It is essential to understand how to continue reaping the benefits of cooperation. Furthermore, effective collaboration fosters social cohesion and trust between citizens and local authorities, which is critical for long-term stability and democratic governance. Examining successful practices and current challenges, and identifying opportunities, can suggest practical steps for strengthening cooperation.

Exploring Cooperation in Chernihiv

The Chernihiv region is in northern Ukraine and is the only one that borders Belarus (for 232 km) and Russia (for 225 km). This made it especially vulnerable at the start of the full-scale invasion. Although its capital was spared, many parts of the region were occupied for 42 days before eventual liberation in the spring of 2022.

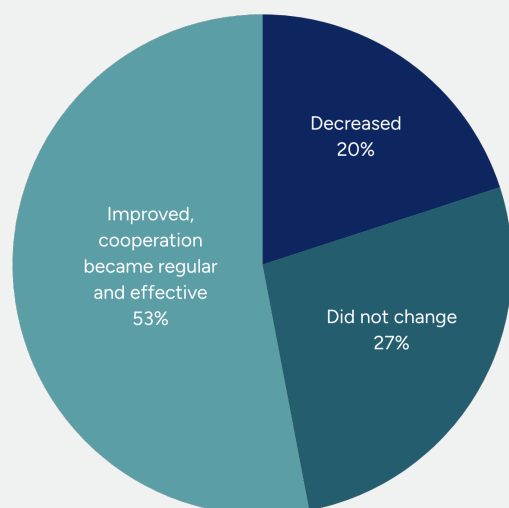
In Chernihiv, the invasion resulted in numerous casualties and some of the most horrific war crimes. More than 15,000 buildings and infrastructure facilities were destroyed or damaged.³² In the village of Yahidne, more than 300 residents, including children and the elderly, were held captive in a school basement for weeks under inhumane conditions, with little food, no sanitation, and no access to medical care. At least 11 people died in confinement, and the ordeal has been recognized as one of the most shocking and widely condemned atrocities of the war, drawing strong reactions from the international community.³³

Reconstruction efforts began almost immediately after the region's liberation. By October 2024, according to the regional authorities, approximately 50% of the damaged infrastructure, including residential and public buildings, had been restored.³⁴ The rebuilding process has been supported by local, state, and international funding, with a wide range of CSOs involved in "hard" and "soft" projects.

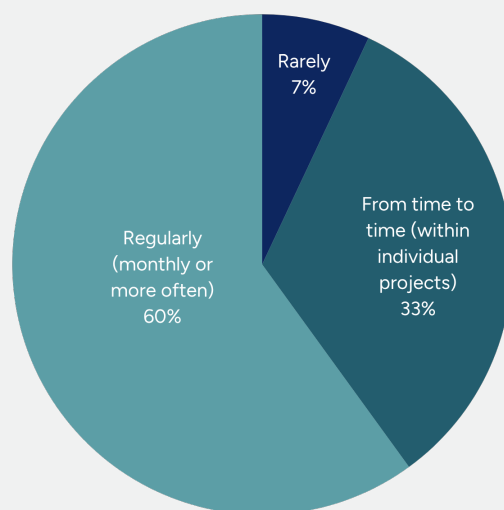
The level of cooperation between local governments and civil society in Chernihiv remains higher than it was before the invasion, as confirmed by interviewees and the majority of CSOs that completed a survey circulated as part of the research for this paper. CSOs report that the level of interaction between themselves and local governments in the region has improved over the past two years (see Figure 2). Cooperation has become more regular and effective, with 60% of the CSOs reporting having contact with local authorities at least once a month.

Figure 2. Level of Cooperation Between CSOs and Local Authorities in Chernihiv Region

How has the level of interaction between your organization and local authorities changed over the past two years?



How often does your organization maintain contact with local authorities?



Source: Survey by author.

The Nizhyn Urban Hromada

The Nizhyn urban hromada offers one of the leading examples of effective collaboration between local government and CSOs in the region. It also has one of the strongest track records in attracting international funding. In 2024, it secured external support totaling €3.2 million.³⁵ Notably, 40% of this funding was channeled through Ukrainian organizations, while the remaining support came from various international actors, including UN agencies, the EU, and its member states.

Nizhyn Urban Hromada

Population: 66,747 Area: 105.6 km²

Destroyed or damaged infrastructure:
25 high-rise buildings, 60 private houses,
2 schools, a kindergarten, energy infrastructure,
a town cemetery, and an enterprise.

Source: Cities4Cities Platform, United4Ukraine,
[Nizhyn Territorial Community](#).

Nizhyn's budget for 2024 was €15.5 million, meaning the external funding amounted to approximately 20% of it. Notably, this external support nearly offset the funds lost due to the reallocation of the "military" personal income tax from the local to the national budget, which dealt a blow to Nizhyn's financial resources. According to Nizhyn's City Council, cooperation with various state and non-state partners enabled the launch or implementation of more than 30 projects during the year. These tackled urgent needs that would have been difficult or impossible

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to address due to local budget limitations and the challenging economic conditions following the full-scale invasion. Key interventions focused on improving healthcare infrastructure, on enhancing the education system, and on promoting energy efficiency in public institutions. Projects also provided essential psychological support, social integration, and adaptation services for internally displaced persons and other vulnerable groups. Targeted assistance was offered to veterans and women affected by the war, including vocational training and access to essential services. In addition, cultural and youth-focused initiatives helped foster social cohesion, strengthen community identity, and promote civic engagement.

One example of successful collaboration between the local government and civil society in Nizhyn is the Neznamny (Ukrainian for “unbreakable”) veteran space. When it opened in March 2024, it was the first of its kind in the Chernihiv region. The initiative was the product of a close collaboration between the Nizhyn City Council and two local CSOs: Misto N and Ukrainian Indestructible Soul. Local activists, who have been supporting the armed forces for several years, identified the need for a dedicated space for veterans living in the community (approximately 750 people) and presented the concept for one to the local government. The City Council supported the initiative by allocating premises, covering the utility costs, and mobilizing funding from local businesses and partner cities in the EU. The CSOs also won startup funding from a Ukrainian think tank, CEDOS, and the Western NIS Enterprise Fund, which made it possible to renovate the chosen premises. Today, Neznamny's mission is to support veterans' social integration and transition to civilian life, to foster a supportive local community, and to assist veterans and their families through services such as psychological support, legal aid, and career counselling.

In Nizhyn, several practices appear to be helping to promote and to strengthen collaboration between the local government and civil society. For instance, working groups on different municipal issues within the City Council bring together representatives from CSOs, youth, local businesses, and other key stakeholders. International projects that are being implemented in the municipality also have working groups with diverse representation. During meetings, participants discuss current challenges in the municipality and explore ways to support one another in addressing them. Representatives of CSOs are also encouraged to present their projects, which can be put to a group vote to prioritize the most promising ones. According to local officials, even small projects, which do not involve infrastructure improvements, are valued for their role in engaging and motivating residents in different activities and in helping to enhance social cohesion during wartime.

Another enabler of cooperation is the City Council's Department of International Relations and Investment Activities. By offering targeted support, such as assistance with grant applications and donor identification, the department lowers barriers to entry for inexperienced groups. This is particularly significant in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion, which has catalyzed a rise in grassroots volunteerism and the formation of new civic initiatives. Many of these groups lack the institutional knowledge to navigate funding mechanisms, and the department's involvement not only strengthens their operational viability but also fosters a collaborative ecosystem in which local government becomes a helping hand. However, sustaining this level of engagement remains a challenge, particularly given the department's limited human resources, which constrain its ability to increase support in response to growing demand.

Another important asset of the municipality is the Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University. Volunteering practice is a core part of its training for future social specialists, which significantly contributes to a strong culture of civic activism and of fostering deep cooperation between civil society and local government. Since the establishment of the Department of Social Pedagogy and Social Work, students have been systematically involved in volunteer groups, public initiatives, and social projects, most notably through the Time For Us group, founded in 2016. This initiative has connected educational institutions, social service agencies, and CSOs, enabling coordinated support for vulnerable groups and expanding opportunities for civic engagement. The university has also hosted regional volunteer forums, led impactful charitable projects, and facilitated partnerships with public institutions and international organizations. This sustained and institutionalized volunteer effort not only strengthens community ties but also nurtures future leaders who are active in local development and post-crisis recovery efforts.

The Mena Urban Hromada

The Mena urban hromada, despite being just 60 kilometers from the Russian border and within the occupied zone during the early months of the invasion, managed to avoid large-scale infrastructure destruction. In this context, the partnership between local government and CSOs since 2022 has primarily centered on strengthening community resilience and advancing sustainable local development. In 2024, the municipality attracted €635,000 in funding from more than 50 donor organizations.³⁶

Mena Urban Hromada

Population: 26,014 Area: 1,026.1 km²

Destroyed or damaged infrastructure:
Bridges, cultural center, administrative building,
energy infrastructure.

Source: [Plan for the Recovery and Development of the Mena Urban Territorial Community of Chernihiv Region, 2023.](#)

The local government has a strong tradition of working with CSOs, dating back to well before the full-scale invasion. The municipality has an investment department that helps with grant applications, and each public institution in the community has a responsible person who understands the needs and strengths of the institution and is the main contact point for external organizations, in addition to the City Council.

Mena was one of the first municipalities in the Chernihiv region to pursue energy efficiency, enabled in large part by the Association of Energy Efficient Cities of Ukraine, whose guidance and encouragement helped shift the perspectives of local officials at a time when interest in the topic was still low. Since 2013, Mena has been a signatory of the pan-European Covenant of Mayors, through which it secured EU funding to modernize its street lighting. The €500,000 grant—three times the municipality's annual budget at the time—represented a major investment in local infrastructure and clearly demonstrated the value of partnering with external organizations to access international funding. Implemented between 2017 and 2019, the project installed nearly 1,500 LED lights throughout the city, along with a lighting-management system, which significantly enhanced energy efficiency and the quality of municipal services.

Despite the challenges posed by the full-scale invasion, Mena has continued to make progress in energy efficiency, working with new organizations to advance its goals. One notable recent project was the installation of a hybrid solar-power station at the Mena City Hospital, led by the RePower Ukraine Charitable Foundation, and supported

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by Germany's GIZ and Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action. This initiative enhanced energy resilience by ensuring a stable electricity supply for critical hospital departments, reducing utility costs, promoting energy independence, and ensuring uninterrupted healthcare services during grid outages.

In another project, with technical expertise from the CSO RePower Ukraine, the municipality developed a strategic concept for transitioning to renewable energy by 2050. Given its limited capacity and resources, the involvement of CSOs was crucial for conducting technical assessments, scenario planning, and aligning with broader climate and energy strategies. The resulting document outlines modernization options for the local energy system, evaluates renewable potential, identifies funding sources, and addresses regulatory barriers. With this strategy in place, Mena is now better equipped to advance its reconstruction and development efforts, including by applying for national and international funding opportunities.

As part of the Digital Shield of the Mena Community project, implemented by the CSO Good Initiatives of Mentshchyna in partnership with the City Council and with the support of the multi-donor U-LEAD With Europe Program, the City Council's digital infrastructure was successfully modernized. This collaboration led to enhanced data protection, the creation of a modern server room, digital-literacy training for staff, and the establishment of data-archiving systems. The project is a strong example of effective cooperation between local government and civil society, aimed at improving cybersecurity and the quality of public services, and it has the potential to be scaled up in other communities across the region.

Amid the ongoing war, strengthening local democracy and citizen engagement has taken on new urgency in Mena, where targeted initiatives have empowered residents to respond to wartime challenges through collective action. Two notable examples are led by BUR and the Chernihiv-based Dobrochyn Center.

BUR, an organization focused on reconstruction and civic engagement, helped Mena construct a bomb shelter beneath its House of Culture. The project united residents with volunteers from across Ukraine, fostering social cohesion and solidarity. Complementary training sessions on participatory restoration and volunteer management equipped residents with practical skills critical for wartime recovery.

In 2024, Mena also opened modern shelters at the Taras Shevchenko School and Gymnasium through a collaboration with the Chernihiv-based Dobrochyn Center and funding from the Dutch organization PAX. This project used a participatory approach by engaging students, parents, and teachers in identifying the schools' needs, ensuring that each shelter met specific local requirements. Dobrochyn Center also provided training for municipal officials on public participation in policymaking, aligned with Ukrainian legislation, as part of the Better Resilience and Strengthening Local Democracy project supported by the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

These initiatives demonstrate how inclusive, community-driven efforts can enhance resilience, transparency, and effective crisis response at the local level—even during war.

The Horodnia Urban Hromada

The Horodnia hromada is located near the borders with Belarus and Russia. It was occupied by Russian forces in the early hours of the invasion and remained under occupation for 37 days. The municipality faces severe challenges due to its location. Once a key logistics hub for cross-border trade, it has lost its primary sources of revenue. Agricultural activity is impossible on about 20% of the land due to regular shelling. Large parts of the border area are also heavily mined to prevent incursions by Russian soldiers. For these reasons, Horodnia is in a difficult position. At the same time, the City Council continues its efforts to build resilience and develop the community in order to preserve the population, which has largely remained in place despite wartime challenges and the ever-present threat of another invasion and occupation.

Horodnia Urban Hromada

Population: 19,841 Area: 1234.898 km²

Destroyed or damaged infrastructure:
Bridges, 2 apartment buildings and
more than 10 private households.

Source: [Plan for the Recovery and Development of the Mena Urban Territorial Community of Chernihiv Region, 2023.](#)

Cooperation with CSOs is a top priority for Horodnia, especially since some international organizations avoid the area, considering it too high-risk for any projects. It is eager to work with any CSO, even if there are no material benefits (such as reconstruction projects or equipment) in this for the community. Collaboration covers a wide range of issues, from humanitarian aid and support for vulnerable community members to the restoration of damaged infrastructure, the supply of materials and equipment, and the provision of psychological and legal assistance. Key partners include Right to Protection, People in Need, Rokada, Dobrobat, and the Red Cross Mission in Ukraine.

One of the challenges Horodnia faces is the relocation of residents from small villages near the borders with Belarus and Russia. To address this, the City Council uses its resources to purchase houses and flats for permanent resettlement; however, funding for this policy is limited. Solutions have been developed in partnership with various organizations for providing temporary accommodation. For example, a project was implemented to renovate a facility for this purpose in a joint effort with the Chernihiv branch of the Association of Ukrainian Cities and the Pontis Foundation. As part of this initiative, two one-room apartments and several dormitory-style rooms were renovated. This project supports ongoing efforts to assist affected populations and to strengthen community resilience in areas experiencing regular hostilities.

Another recent example of cooperation between local government and civil society is the launch of the Psychological Recovery and Development Studio, initiated by the CSOs Rozkvitay and Vzaemodiya Plus, with support from the United Nations Development Programme and EU funding through the EU4Recovery—Empowering Communities in Ukraine initiative. The studio offers a safe space for residents to receive psychological support and to learn self-help techniques. Serving family members of military personnel, educators, and children, it focuses on emotional stabilization, stress management, and personal development. The premises were provided by the City Council and a memorandum with the Education Department aims to ensure the studio's long-term sustainability and impact.

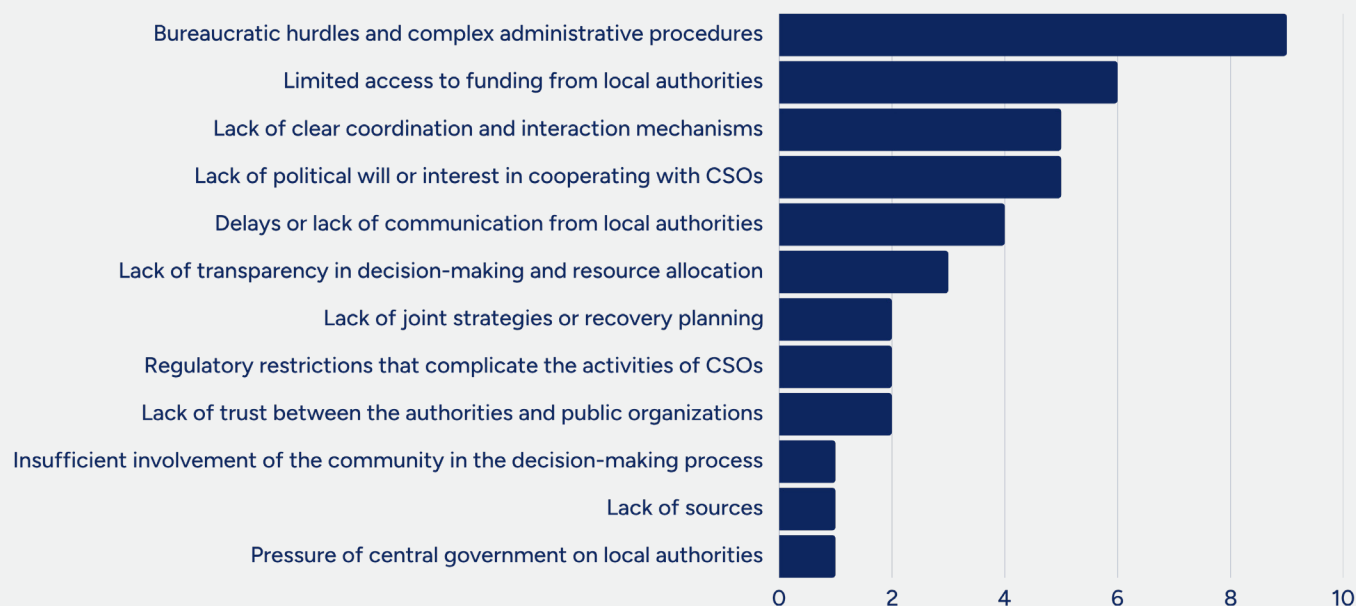
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In Horodnia, early trainings for the community by CSOs played an important role in building local capacities and in fostering a deeper understanding of the importance of cooperation. For instance, after the amalgamation of the municipality in 2017, the CSO Agency of City Initiatives conducted training sessions on project management, grant writing, and navigating grant application processes. These introduced crucial new perspectives and knowledge to the community, significantly strengthening local capacities. The skills and knowledge gained through this initiative laid a foundation that the municipality has built upon, including since the full-scale invasion.

Today, much of the new equipment in communal facilities, such as schools, kindergartens, the local hospital, and libraries, has been procured with the support of CSOs, charitable foundations, and international partners. To streamline the administration of non-state grants and external support, Horodnia has established a nongovernmental organization. Recognizing the significant transformative impact of these efforts, the mayor has made it a priority to expand and to deepen cooperation with external organizations continuously, solidifying the importance of partnerships in driving community development and in improving local infrastructure.

The municipality also strongly supports and encourages the volunteer movement. Communal institutions often serve as key hubs where volunteers gather to assist the armed forces. One notable example is the informal Culture of Action group, which produces items like nets, candles, and other goods for the military. The Department of Culture plays a central coordination role in organizing and streamlining these efforts, ensuring that the collective power of volunteers is effectively harnessed for the benefit of the armed forces and the community.

Figure 3. Challenges to CSOs' Cooperation With Local Authorities



Source: Survey by Author.

Challenges to Cooperation

Amid the generally positive environment in the Chernihiv region, there are still several challenges that local governments and CSOs must navigate to strengthen their cooperation. Despite the positive momentum, the responses from the survey conducted highlight key obstacles to effective cooperation. Bureaucratic hurdles, limited funding, lack of political will, and unclear coordination mechanisms were identified as the biggest challenges (see Figure 3).

Bureaucratic Hurdles and Lack of Coordination Mechanisms

Civil society organizations are accustomed to operating at a faster pace and with fewer top-down, bureaucratic processes than local governments. Many have argued that CSOs were quicker and more reliable in responding to the full-scale invasion and in delivering services sometimes than the authorities or even the most professionalized international organizations.

While local governments have adjusted to new realities, becoming faster and more responsive to needs due to heightened wartime expectations, bureaucracy remains an integral part of the system, with outdated practices persisting, and in some cases officials avoiding responsibility under the guise of bureaucracy. This can be frustrating for CSOs that are unaccustomed to navigating such systems.

There is also a lack of coordination mechanisms and a limited understanding of how CSOs can get involved in reconstruction-related projects. For their part, local governments also do not always understand how decisions are made at the central and regional levels regarding which projects will receive funding.

Funding

Following the full-scale invasion, funding available to CSOs in the Chernihiv region increased as many international donors began working, often for the first time, with regional or national organizations to implement programs on the ground. However, the funding started to dwindle in 2024. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, aid to Ukraine, which had dramatically shot up in 2022, declined by 16.7% last year, with humanitarian aid cut by 43%.³⁷ Only the funding from the EU institutions remained unchanged, most of it in the form of short-term budget support and financing of recovery, reconstruction, and modernization.³⁸

This decline in funding threatens not only service delivery but also partnerships with local authorities, which are often involved in the implementation of donor-funded initiatives. In the survey conducted, a decline in international funding was cited as a key factor in reduced cooperation with local governments. The survey was carried out before the sudden ending this year of US funding and the situation has likely only gotten worse since then.

According to one assessment, the halt in US support has disrupted essential programs across Ukraine, particularly affecting frontline CSOs that had come to rely on it for stability and continuity.³⁹ The impact has been particularly severe in sectors such as healthcare, legal aid, and local media, where many CSOs have paused operations, cut

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staff, or closed. With anticipated grants and programmatic support withdrawn, organizations face growing local needs but have shrinking capacity to respond.

Lack of Human Resources

One of the key challenges faced by local governments and civil society in the Chernihiv region is lack of personnel. For example, having a dedicated person, let alone a department, responsible for building partnerships with CSOs, developing joint projects, and applying for funding is a “luxury” for most communities. Only the largest can afford it. The issue is compounded by the ongoing brain drain, which has several dimensions. One contributing factor is the proximity of Chernihiv to Kyiv, where higher salaries and more diverse career opportunities attract skilled professionals away from the region.

Local governments and CSOs are also losing qualified staff to international projects, which often offer salaries two to three times higher than what they can. People working in local CSOs are in especially precarious situations since most of these do not have long-term institutional funding and salaries depend on short-term projects. This makes it very challenging to retain highly qualified individuals and many of those remaining in the civic sector do so because of a very strong belief in the importance and added value of their work, especially during wartime.

Additionally, many people have joined the military, while others have moved abroad. Nevertheless, some interviewees noted that emigration could have been even more severe, considering the difficult circumstances.

Meanwhile, reconstruction efforts demand a wide range of highly specialized expertise in complex topics of urban planning, engineering, construction management, procurement, and environmental assessment, among other things. Without the necessary knowledge to lead all stages of project development and implementation, some local governments and CSOs, end up receiving only a small fraction of the funding as “junior partners” to more experienced national CSOs and international donors. Some of them gain valuable skills along the way, especially when projects have a component to build up relevant expertise through hands-on implementation and provision of relevant trainings. Others do not and participate as passive beneficiaries of services provided or buildings built, which prevents them from developing local capacity.

Lack of Motivation

As demonstrated in the cases of the Nizhyn, Mena, and Horodnia municipalities, the level of cooperation between local governments and CSOs often hinges on the willingness of the former not only to be open to collaboration but also to seek it out. Proactive efforts to engage with CSOs and to promote the value of such partnerships among municipal staff are essential for meaningful cooperation. In practice, however, collaboration is frequently initiated by CSOs or external donors. This dynamic reflects a broader reluctance or lack of initiative at the municipal level. One key barrier is the limited motivation among local government employees, who may view cooperation with CSOs as an additional burden rather than a strategic opportunity, especially given workloads that were large before the full-scale invasion and are now even larger.

Also, for some local governments, cooperation with CSOs is often associated with “soft” projects such as training, civic engagement, and the organization of events, which are not seen as a priority. Even when they do engage in such activities, they often merely imitate participatory practices in order to receive material benefits or to access follow-up activities related to “hard” components such as rebuilding infrastructure or receiving equipment.

Blurring Lines Between Local Governments and CSOs

Local governments sometimes resort to establishing nongovernmental organizations that they then de facto run to overcome bureaucratic and legal obstacles to implementing projects. Some of these obstacles are tied to the centralized State Treasury system, which often delays or blocks payments to local governments for donor-funded projects, even when they have been approved. At the same time, international support programs often have criteria that exclude local governments from applying as independent entities, unlike nongovernmental organizations. From the perspective of local governments, registering a nongovernmental organization is thus beneficial for the community because it creates more opportunities to secure additional resources, especially amid the fall in their own revenues. By working through nongovernmental organizations that they set up, local authorities can more easily make flexible and timely expenditures on projects as well as avoid legal and technical bottlenecks. It also makes it possible to hire qualified project managers and specialists, something not easily done within public-service frameworks, enabling local governments to respond more effectively to implement initiatives with greater speed and efficiency.

However, this approach also blurs the lines between local government and civil society and risks diminishing the role of CSOs as independent advocates and watchdogs. For example, nongovernmental organizations set up and de facto run by local governments are less likely to investigate corruption in reconstruction projects. They could also be advancing the political interests of mayors or those close to them, especially around elections. While elections are not being held for now due to the ongoing war and martial law, this could become an issue in the future, particularly once normal political cycles resume. Currently, some international donors inadvertently contribute to this by neglecting proper due diligence, overlooking conflicts of interest, and failing to verify whether organizations are genuine CSOs.

Conclusion

Cooperation between local governments and civil society in the Chernihiv region appears to be strong, as suggested by the examples of the municipalities of Nizhyn, Mena, and Horodnia. In these communities, joint projects, often supported by various international donors, are being implemented, addressing urgent wartime needs and contributing to local resilience.

The success of such partnerships is rooted in a combination of factors. Mutual trust plays a central role, whether built through transparent procedures, previous positive experiences of cooperation, or strong personal relationships. Equally important is a shared commitment and strong will to work together toward common goals. These partnerships also rely on sustained hard work, often across multiple parallel and complex projects, with both

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sides operating under tight deadlines and limited resources, especially human ones. Other contributing factors include clear communication, aligned priorities, flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances, and a mutual understanding of each side's roles and limitations.

For local governments, this cooperation does not only enhance institutional capacity, foster innovation, and enable more targeted and responsive action based on community needs; it also opens the door to additional opportunities. These include improved access to funding, which is especially important amid declining financial resources, as well as increased visibility on national and international platforms, particularly when successful practices can be demonstrated. For CSOs, partnering with local governments provides a pathway to scale impact and to access critical logistical and infrastructural support.

Despite positive momentum, effective cooperation still faces several persistent challenges. Bureaucratic hurdles, limited funding, lack of will to cooperate because of mistrust, and unclear coordination mechanisms often hinder progress. Strengthening and institutionalizing good examples of collaborative mechanisms will be essential for Ukraine's recovery and the building of a resilient, democratic future.

Recommendations to Strengthen Cooperation Civil Society Organizations

Before launching initiatives, take the time to study the local government's strategies, policies, and budget plans. Understand its reconstruction and development goals and the constraints it faces. CSO project proposals that are aligned with these frameworks are more likely to gain support and be integrated into the official agenda. This alignment also shows respect for local planning processes and ensures the work of CSOs complements rather than competes with the efforts of the local government.

Foster ongoing collaboration with the local government beyond individual projects or short-term funding cycles. Establish regular communication channels, schedule regular meetings, and participate in open public discussions. This helps build mutual trust, institutional memory, and shared ownership of initiatives. By positioning themselves as reliable, long-term partners, rather than temporary actors, CSOs can contribute more meaningfully to reconstruction and local development.

While holding the local government accountable is essential, effective collaboration requires more than criticism. CSOs should position themselves as problem-solvers by offering concrete, actionable suggestions to address identified issues. This includes developing policy briefs, offering technical expertise, and facilitating stakeholder dialogues. Constructive engagement builds credibility, opens channels for cooperation, and increases the likelihood that the local government will be receptive to feedback.

Avoid replicating standard project templates across different communities without adaptation. Each community has unique needs, priorities, and capacities. Therefore, conduct needs assessments, engage community members, and co-design interventions with the local government that reflect the specific context. Tailored, inclusive approaches are more likely to gain local support, to create lasting impact, and to foster sustainable collaboration with local authorities.

Local Governments

Host regular open days at the municipal level to showcase joint projects and collaborations with CSOs. Use these events to invite and engage new CSOs, particularly those that have not previously cooperated with local authorities.

Communicate all opportunities for cooperation in an open and transparent manner. Establish inclusive working groups that bring together diverse stakeholders, with a focus on engaging local CSOs.

Involve CSOs in the delivery of public services through open, transparent, and competitive procurement processes. Ensure fair access and equal opportunity for all organizations.

Demonstrate genuine interest and commitment to working with civil society. Approach collaboration as a long-term strategic partnership rather than a one-off engagement.

Incorporate openness to civil society as a core element of the local development strategy. Clearly define strategic priorities, especially when it comes to topics related to reconstruction or development, so that CSOs can align their initiatives and proposals accordingly.

Include CSOs in the development of strategies, programs, and policies. Their participation ensures that these will be more inclusive, community-centered, and responsive.

Support the creation and functioning of authentic, effective public councils. Avoid establishing token or superficial structures; instead, ensure these councils have real influence and a broad, representative membership.

Central Government

Design and allocate reconstruction-related funding to encourage joint implementation by local governments and CSOs. Avoid excessive centralization by ensuring that resources are not concentrated in the hands of a few large actors and instead promote inclusive access across various regions and actors.

Improve communication and transparency regarding the allocation of reconstruction funds at the local and regional levels. Include representatives of local governments and CSOs in project-selection committees to ensure accountability and to foster trust in the funding process.

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Reduce administrative barriers that hinder access to state funding for reconstruction and related initiatives.

Simplify procedures to enable local government treasuries to work more efficiently with international donor grants, ensuring that funding is not delayed or blocked due to unnecessary bureaucracy.

International Donors

Design programs to encourage collaboration between CSOs and local governments. This can be achieved, for example, by adjusting project-selection criteria to require that they are co-implementers.

Require the establishment of oversight bodies within reconstruction-related projects that include balanced representation from local governments and CSOs to ensure transparency, accountability, and mutual trust.

Assess the history and effectiveness of prior cooperation between local governments and CSOs in the target region. Doing this prior to signing new memorandums of understanding or launching new initiatives will help tailor interventions based on local dynamics and existing partnerships.

Promote within Ukraine and in international forums positive examples of collaboration between local governments and CSOs.

Offer technical assistance and remote expert support to strengthen project-implementation capacity through training, partnerships, and talent-exchange programs.

Annex . List of interviews

Oleksandr Kodola, mayor of Nizhyn

Andrii Bohdan, mayor of Horodnia

Yurii Stalnychenko, secretary of Mena City Council

Nataliia Drozd, head of Dobrochyn Center (CSO)

Oleksandr Pidhorniy, head of Chernihiv Centre for Human Rights (CSO)

Yulia Kuzmenko, head of Misto N (CSO); head of the Department of International Relations and Investment Activities, Nizhyn City Council

Oleksandr Samoilenko, rector of Nizhyn State University

Inna Kulyenko, head of the charity fund Ukrainian Unbreakable Soul and Neznamny veteran space (CSO)

Halya Bondarenko, head of Chas Dlia Nas (CSO)

Hanna Shcherbakova, deputy of Horodnia City Council, director of the Public Library

Maksym Koryavets, president of the Polissya Foundation for International and Regional Studies

Natalia Vysikanets, Women's Format, expert in the development of CSOs

Oleksii Pryshchepa, journalist, editor of the media organization Susidy.City

Agency of City Initiatives (CSO)

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