

# Social Protection in Rural Hromadas Near the Frontline

Research Report



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## ● Introduction

The decentralization reform in Ukraine gave hromadas a significant scope of powers in the field of providing for the population's needs and ensuring access to services. Such changes have taken place in the fields of education, healthcare, and social protection of the population. One of the main principles of the decentralization reform is the principle of subsidiarity, which states that the quality of public services will be higher when they are closer to the beneficiaries. That is why decisions regarding the funding and organization of these fields must be made at the hromada level, which is the closest to the level of the consumers of these services.<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, it becomes more relevant to focus state policies and international programs specifically on the hromada level in the context of recovery and sustainable development. At the same time, state government bodies, donors, and non-governmental organizations lack understanding of whether local government bodies can fulfill the obligations assigned to them, whether they have sufficient resources to do so, what difficulties they face, and what kind of support they need.

This is especially pertinent to small rural hromadas. They faced difficulties in the field of social and economic development even before the start of the full-scale invasion. The war has only deepened existing problems and made the situation of the population in these hromadas even more difficult. Many residents have left hromadas near the frontline, while internally displaced people from more dangerous or occupied settlements have moved into these hromadas. In hromadas near the frontline, budget revenues have decreased due to the departure of the working-age population; frequent shelling causes destruction of housing and infrastructure; there is a lack of personnel to rebuild destroyed houses and maintain infrastructure; and in de-occupied hromadas, the level of land contamination with mines is high. In addition, the number of people in need of support from the hromada has increased, which creates a significant burden on the field of social protection of the population.

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about the changes that have taken place as a result of the decentralization and social service reforms in the report on [Cooperation Between Hromadas and the Non-Governmental Sector in the Field of Social Service Provision](#).

The factors listed above indicate that there is a high need for emergency response to difficulties which arise in frontline hromadas. This hinders the transition to recovery and the implementation of sustainable solutions. Hromadas need support in overcoming the consequences of the war and minimizing their negative impact. For this purpose, we have conducted a study on the state of social protection in hromadas near the frontline, examining what kinds of support they lack and whether existing policies and support programs address the situations faced by hromadas near the frontline.

## ● Methodology

The research covered two fields: social protection and housing in rural hromadas near the frontline. The aim was to describe the context and challenges of rural hromadas near the frontline in the fields of social protection and housing, to determine the ways to support the recovery process and the transition to sustainable solutions in these hromadas. To publish the obtained data, we divided the research findings into two publications: *Social Protection in Rural Hromadas Near the Frontline* and *Housing and Housing Policy in Rural Hromadas Near the Frontline*. This publication presents an analysis of the social protection sector and general observations on the situation of rural hromadas near the frontline.

### **Key objectives of the study:**

1. To examine the general context and challenges in the activities of local government bodies of rural hromadas near the frontline.
2. To find out which challenges and difficulties are faced by rural hromadas near the frontline in the field of social protection and housing.
3. To research the steps that can be taken by state authorities as well as international and Ukrainian non-governmental organizations to support hromadas in providing for the population's needs.
4. To examine the feasibility of the transition from humanitarian response to long-term sustainable solutions in the fields of social protection and housing.

To carry out these tasks, we chose a qualitative method for both data collection and data analysis. Data collection involved conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews.

In collaboration with IMPACT, our international partner organization, 4 hromadas were selected to more comprehensively examine the current situation with social protection and housing in rural hromadas near the frontline using their examples. In addition, as part of the project, a workshop was held for frontline hromadas from different oblasts of Ukraine. The findings from the group discussions during the workshop are included in the research report findings.

**The field stage of the study was conducted in November 2024–March 2025.**

In total, 50 in-depth interviews were conducted within the study. Of these, 26 interviews were conducted with representatives of local government bodies from 4 hromadas in Kharkivska and Zaporizka Oblasts (Savynska, Oskilska, Komyshevaska, and Ternuvatska Hromadas), 14 with non-governmental organizations that conducted various types of activities in these hromadas, and 10 with experts in the fields of social policy, housing, and local development.

The authors of the study conducted an exploratory visit to the Savynska Hromada in the Kharkivska Oblast in November 2024, during which they held in-person interviews with representatives of local government bodies. The other interviews were conducted online via the Zoom platform or by phone. Recruitment of the research participants was carried out by the Cedos Think Tank with the support of the international non-governmental organization IMPACT Initiatives.

The composition of the sample was determined by the specific characteristics of each hromada, which is why the number of interviews and the statuses of informants varied across the four hromadas. In each hromada, we conducted interviews with the head of the hromada and/or the deputy head, the head of the Department of Social Protection of the Population, the director of the Center for the Provision of Social Services, the head of the Department of Housing and Utility Services, and head of the Commission for Reviewing Issues Related to Compensation for Destroyed Real Estate. If such positions or institutions were not present in the hromada, we spoke with the people whose responsibilities included similar duties.

Additionally, in some hromadas, interviews were conducted with representatives of other departments, Centers for the Provision of Administrative Services (CPASs), as well as with starostas.

The group discussions took place during the [Housing and Social Protection in Frontline Hromadas](#) workshop, which was held on February 26–28, 2025, in Kyiv. More than 20 representatives from fourteen rural hromadas near the frontline were present at the workshop:

- Malomykhailivska Hromada of Dnipropetrovska Oblast;
- Komyshevaska, Novooleksandrivska, Mykhailo-Lukashivska, Stepnenska, Ternuvatska, Shyrokivska Hromadas of Zaporizka Oblast;
- Voskresenska, Mishkovo-Pohorilivska Hromadas of Mykolayivska Oblast;
- Yampil'ska Hromada of Sumska Oblast;
- Oskilska, Savynska, Starosaltivska Hromadas of Kharkivska Oblast;
- Novovorontsovska Hromada of Khersonska Oblast.

To ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, the obtained data was accessible only to the research team. The quotes used in the report have been anonymized and do not contain any information that could identify a person.

#### **The study has a number of limitations:**

- **The study is not representative of all rural hromadas near the frontline.** Its goal was to describe the cases of 4 hromadas, as well as to collect the experiences of other hromadas during the workshop, identify the main difficulties faced by the hromadas, and determine their needs. The ability to draw conclusions about the prevalence of problems among all rural hromadas near the frontline is limited.
- **The study does not include a comparison with hromadas that are not located near the frontline.** Some of the problems described in the report may not be specific to frontline hromadas and may potentially occur in other hromadas.
- **Limited representation of the experience of local associations and volunteer initiatives which are not officially registered.** We spoke with organizations mentioned by representatives of local government

bodies during the interviews in the context of providing assistance and working with different population groups. All of them had the status of officially registered non-governmental or charitable organizations. At the same time, some local initiatives may not have official registration and may carry out unsystematic activities, so they might not have been mentioned by local authorities, and the research team did not conduct interviews with them. The activities of such initiatives require separate research.

- **Uneven representation of the experiences of hromadas from different oblasts.** Despite the inclusion of findings from the workshop for hromadas in the research report, this study is more representative of the situation typical for hromadas in Kharkivska and Zaporizka Oblasts. Frontline hromadas in other oblasts may face different difficulties that may not have been sufficiently covered in this study.

**This study focuses on hromadas located more than 15 km from the combat line.** The findings of this study cannot be extrapolated to hromadas located closer to the frontline, where, in particular, mandatory evacuation of families with children has been declared. These hromadas may face different problems and needs that are not covered by this study.

# Part 1 ● Situation and Challenges of Rural Hromadas Near the Frontline

Hromadas near the frontline face challenges related to or caused both by their proximity to the combat line and by the generally low level of infrastructure development in rural hromadas. Bombing, damage to infrastructure and destruction of buildings, land contamination with mines, shortage of transport vehicles, and the need to constantly respond to these challenges place a significant burden on local government bodies.

In February–March 2022, Russia occupied parts of Kharkivska and Zaporizka Oblasts. In particular, 22 out of 56 territorial hromadas in Kharkivska Oblast were under occupation (in Chuhuivskyi, Bohodukhivskyi, Iziurnskyi, Kupyanskyi, and part of Kharkivskyi Districts). Most of Kharkivska Oblast was de-occupied during September 2022<sup>2</sup>. About 70% of Zaporizka Oblast was occupied during February–March 2022 and remains under occupation as of March 2025 (47 out of 67 hromadas in Melitopolskyi, Berdianskyi, Vasylivskyi, and Polohivskyi Districts are partially or fully occupied).<sup>3</sup>

First and foremost, most of the hromadas that were the focus of this research suffer from **regular bombing** by Russia. This especially affects those hromadas or settlements where bombing with guided aerial bombs, artillery systems, and FPV drones is possible. Because of this, local authorities have to constantly work on **ensuring public safety and civilian protection**. In particular, hromadas need to equip stationary and mobile bomb shelters. In addition, there remains a need to improve the systems for alerting the population about the threat of bombing, to provide workers of critical infrastructure and local government bodies with personal protective equipment, to organize first aid training, and so on.

For de-occupied hromadas, **land contamination with mines** is a significant challenge. The demining process is quite lengthy and cannot cover all requests. Priority is given to demining critical infrastructure and residential buildings. At the same time, there is no capacity to clear agricultural land.

Some representatives of local government bodies reported that they had an **evacuation plan** for the population and ensured the availability of sufficient resources: fuel, vehicles, and one

<sup>2</sup> More details about the course and consequences of the war in Kharkivska Oblast can be found in OPORA Civil Network's publication [Political Map of Kharkivska Oblast: Trends of Two Years of War](#).

<sup>3</sup> Order No. 376 of the Ministry for the Development of the Hromadas and Territories of Ukraine "On the Adoption of the List of Territories Where Hostilities Are (Were) Conducted or Territories Temporarily Occupied by the Russian Federation."

representative of a hromada said she would take part in a bus driving training for women in order to be able to evacuate people if necessary. Some hromadas acknowledge the need for an evacuation plan, but local government bodies require assistance in developing and practicing it, as within the resources of the hromada they cannot prepare for this on their own.

Another challenge is the **damage to infrastructure** as a result of hostilities and bombing. During conversations, research participants mentioned damaged power lines, water supply and sewage systems, and so on, as well as a lack of funds and specialists to restore them. This highlights the need for repair equipment and specialists who can carry out repair work.

For some hromadas, a significant difficulty is the **lack of centralized water supply and access to drinking water**. During the interviews, people spoke about situations where it is necessary to drill a well in a village, but due to the small population, donor organizations do not want to fund such projects. At the same time, they deliver drinking water to the population. In addition, some settlements are not connected to the gas supply.

Representatives of all the hromadas we spoke with reported significant **problems with transport infrastructure and transportation links** in their hromadas. First and foremost, the transport network remains underdeveloped: the quality of some roads is low, and access to certain villages is difficult. In some hromadas, railway connections with suburban electric trains are helpful. At the same time, due to railway track damage, railway service is sometimes temporarily suspended.

An additional challenge is the **lack of vehicles**. In the hromadas of the Kharkivska Oblast that were once under occupation, vehicles have been destroyed as a result of hostilities or stolen by the Russian military. The hromadas have lost both public transport, which provided regular passenger transportation, and social transport, such as social taxis.

The **fare** for scheduled buses and minibuses, according to the informants, is not affordable for the population of the hromadas. In addition, private carriers do not travel to settlements near the combat line. This creates barriers to accessing medical and social services. In some hromadas, regular free social buses operate, which may run daily or less frequently, once a week, to ensure that the population can receive medical and administrative services. In organizing such

transportation, hromadas are mostly assisted by non-governmental organizations. At the same time, representatives of some hromadas reported that donor organizations denied their request for social transportation due to concerns about the security situation.

Difficulties also arise in the provision of administrative services. Some of the hromadas that participated in the study **have Centers for the Provision of Administrative Services (CPASs)** within the hromada. Some hromadas **had difficulties in opening them** due to the requirements for CPAS premises. Furnishing and equipping with technical devices was carried out with the support of donor organizations. Several informants reported having mobile CPAS suitcases.

At the same time, some hromadas **did not have a CPAS**, which created difficulties for the population and the need to travel to other hromadas to receive administrative services. In addition, some hromadas lacked vehicles that would allow CPAS workers with mobile suitcases to travel to remote starosta districts. One representative of local government bodies also mentioned a lack of funds to purchase devices for the mobile suitcases.

## The work of local government bodies

Representatives of the local government bodies of frontline hromadas that participated in the study face many challenges in their work: a lack of budget funds, a shortage of personnel, the need to quickly master new skills and to attract funding.

First and foremost, these are limited revenues in the hromada budgets. **The existing revenues do not cover all necessary expenses** under conditions of destruction caused by the war, changes in the population composition (more on this in the next section of this part of the report), and an increase in the number of people in need of support from the hromada. The technical equipment of the premises of village and rural town councils, social service institutions, and centers for the provision of administrative services is also insufficient.

One of the biggest challenges faced by local government bodies is the **shortage of personnel**. In almost all the hromadas we spoke with, vacancies had remained open for a long time, and they were unable to find people to fill them. For example,

in one of the departments of a rural town council, there is only one person instead of three. One person may combine several functions and be responsible for the duties of several different positions. According to the informants, the barriers to employment are the low salaries, as well as the mismatch between education or skills and the job requirements.

The shortage of personnel can sometimes lead to the merging of several departments into one. People working in such a department have to figure out issues that are outside their area of competence on their own. The lack of staff leads to **excessive workload for employees and irregular working hours**. In addition, the workload has increased due to activities related to the provision of humanitarian aid, communication with regional military administrations, non-governmental organizations, and so on.

The majority of the representatives of local government bodies whom we spoke with aimed to develop their hromadas and attract funding. To do this, they also often had to work overtime and make efforts to understand the financial and legal aspects of the projects being implemented in their hromadas.

For effective work, hromadas need data about the population; however, local government bodies face difficulties in **collecting data and accessing existing data**. For example, during interviews, the need for access to the unified IDP register<sup>4</sup> and the register of war veterans<sup>5</sup> was mentioned. In addition, local government bodies face the issue that ministries, non-governmental organizations, and other institutions request data from hromadas, but they often require different data and documents. This creates difficulties in the work of local government bodies and highlights the need to unify these requests.

Some representatives of local government bodies also had the impression that state authorities had a lack of understanding of the particularities of the challenges and problems faced by rural hromadas near the frontline. They spoke about situations

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<sup>4</sup> According to paragraph 9 of the [Resolution](#) of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine “On the Approval of the Procedure for the Creation, Maintenance, and Access to the Unified Information Database on Internally Displaced Persons,” local government bodies are recipients of information from the Unified Information Database on IDPs.

<sup>5</sup> According to the [Resolution](#) of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine “On the Unified State Register of War Veterans,” local authorities are providers of information to the Register but cannot submit their own requests for information from the Register.

in which they received assignments from ministries without receiving proper explanations on how to implement them or what their goals were. Some research participants felt that state authorities only perform a supervisory function, while they are not ready to provide support to hromadas to the extent that they require it. Some informants did not feel that the context and challenges of their hromadas were taken into account or reflected in legislation, public discussions, or in the focus activities of organizations that unite hromadas and were created at the initiative of state authorities.

Several informants mentioned the **impact of the level of media coverage of a hromada** or settlement on the amount of donor assistance received and opportunities for cooperation. For example, after the de-occupation of the Kharkivska Oblast in 2022, some hromadas faced situations where **non-governmental organizations bypassed them**, as they primarily offered assistance to those hromadas whose stories were covered in the media. Because of this, they had to make additional efforts to attract non-governmental organizations.

Another problem mentioned by some representatives of local government bodies was the lack of understanding by international organizations of the context in which local governments operate under martial law. For example, according to one informant, international organizations did not want to cooperate with their hromada because its government body is named “Military Administration.”

## Changes in the composition of population

Research participants reported that the composition of the population in rural hromadas near the frontline changed after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. First and foremost, there has been a general **decrease in the population numbers** in such hromadas. Hromada representatives whom we spoke with shared that the population decreased by one-third, and in some cases, by half.

Part of the population left the hromadas for safer regions of Ukraine or abroad. Research participants reported that the number of children in hromadas near the frontline has decreased, as parents with children are more likely to try and

move to safer regions. According to the informants, a significant factor for leaving is also the impossibility of offline studies in schools. At the same time, in hromadas located 20–30 km or more from the combat line, families with children remain. This has highlighted the need for the **construction of underground schools and bomb shelters** for them.

Among those who have left, the majority are people of working age, while **among those who remained in the hromadas, the majority are people of retirement age**. In particular, in some hromadas, according to the informants' estimates, half of the population consists of people aged 65 and older. During the interviews, representatives of local government bodies and non-governmental organizations emphasized that **older people, people with disabilities, and low-income families are more likely to remain in hromadas near the frontline**. They are unable to leave due to a lack of financial resources, and in the case of population groups with limited mobility, also due to logistical difficulties. Research participants also mentioned that some elderly people were left without support from relatives who had evacuated from the hromadas, and therefore now require assistance from local authorities and social protection institutions.

In addition, **internally displaced people** from hromadas and settlements located closer to the combat line have relocated to hromadas near the frontline. These people also require support from the hromadas to which they have moved. Representatives of local government bodies shared that they had encountered difficulties with keeping records of IDPs in the hromadas, as some people do not register as IDPs, and others leave the hromada without notifying local authorities. As a result, research participants encountered discrepancies between the number of officially registered IDPs in the hromada and those actually residing there. Some informants spoke about cases of abuse of the opportunity to obtain IDP status in order to receive financial or other types of support. These refer to cases where people may have moved within the same settlement or between neighboring settlements of the hromada. Representatives of non-governmental organizations also emphasized the challenges of verification and preventing duplication of assistance for internally displaced people.

As a result, the share of the population in need of various forms of support from the hromada has increased in hromadas near the frontline. This creates a significant burden on hromada budgets under conditions where budget revenues may have

decreased due to the departure of population and a decline in employment levels.

## Employment

Representatives of all the hromadas that participated in the study reported **a shortage of jobs** in the hromadas and, as a result, **a high level of unemployment among the population**. According to the research participants, this is the main obstacle to the return of the working-age population, especially young people, to these hromadas. In some rural hromadas, these problems existed even before the full-scale war due to the absence of large enterprises. As a result of the war, some enterprises ceased their activities.

Representatives of local government bodies reported that **the problem of unemployment affects villages the most**, especially those that are remote from the hromada center or other settlements. This is related, in particular, to limited transport connections and the lack of opportunity to commute to work in another settlement and return home. In addition, a large share of people are employed in agriculture in the rural hromadas that were the focus of this research. Some of them have lost the opportunity to continue working due to land contamination with mines, including agricultural land — this is typical, for example, in the Kharkivska Oblast. Demining is taking place in the hromadas, but its pace is not sufficient to ensure rapid return to work for people engaged in agriculture.

Alongside the lack of jobs, according to research participants, another challenge is the **shortage of qualified workers**. During the interviews, the informants mentioned a lack of specialists in engineering, medical, economic, and legal fields, social work specialists and others.

The largest employer in some hromadas is the local government and educational institutions. However, there is **a problem of mismatch between the education and skill level** of job seekers and **the requirements of the available vacancies**. This leads to situations where a village or rural town council has unfilled vacancies for months or even years. To address this issue, one hromada involves specialists from a neighboring urban hromada by organizing daily bus transportation.

Another challenge mentioned by representatives of de-occupied hromadas is the need for additional background checks of people when hiring them into local self-government bodies regarding possible collaboration with occupation authorities.

Vacancies also remain unfilled in professions where the share of employed men used to significantly exceed that of women (for example, construction, repair work, truck driving, etc.), which is a result of the mobilization process. Hromada representatives whom we spoke with mentioned a shortage of workers in emergency services, repair and construction crews, and so on. At the same time, due to mobilization, some men avoid official employment and therefore do not consider such vacancies for themselves. This highlights the need to train women in these professions.

Another barrier to employment is the shortage or absence of preschool education institutions (due to security factors, among other things). Therefore, because of the need to care for children, parents have fewer opportunities for employment.

Representatives of local authorities shared that they **lack data on the unemployed population**, as people may be registered with employment centers in different settlements. This complicates the search for solutions to reduce the unemployment rate.

The potential solutions to the personnel shortage mentioned during the interviews included various strategies. First and foremost, these include **retraining and professional development** of people. In several hromadas, there was successful experience in implementing such programs, within which people acquired a different profession, and women were trained in professions where the share of employed women was significantly lower than that of men. However, representatives of local government bodies reported that despite the existence of retraining programs, people do not join them, and they also mentioned the unsystematic nature of these programs.

In some hromadas, unemployed people are involved in **socially useful works**. In particular, informants spoke about the Recovery Army,<sup>6</sup> through which it was possible to create jobs

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<sup>6</sup> Recovery Army is a project through which people who have lost their jobs can carry out socially useful work to rebuild the country. See more: <https://me.gov.ua/Documents/Detail?lang=uk-UA&id=89190821-886b-45dd-b5d5-8918eaa00198&title=ArmiiaVidnovlennia-VidbudovumoKrainu>.

for between 8 and 100 people in different hromadas. At the same time, not all of these positions remained filled due to people's unwillingness to participate.

## Transition from humanitarian response to sustainable solutions

We asked study participants whether rural hromadas near the frontline have the capacity to transition from humanitarian response and meeting the basic needs of the population to development and the implementation of long-term solutions. This capacity primarily **depends on proximity to the combat line**. Representatives of local government bodies from hromadas located closer to the frontline spoke about difficulties in medium- and long-term planning due to uncertainty about the further course of the war. For them, the priority is still to meet the population's basic needs and maintain the current level of social and administrative service provision.

Representatives of hromadas located 30 km or further from the combat line said that for them, the issues of development and long-term solutions were relevant. They emphasized the need to begin the transition from humanitarian response to other solutions that would help their hromadas become self-sufficient.

During the interviews, the informants emphasized the need to expand employment opportunities for the working-age population, particularly through job creation, support in job search, and courses for professional development or retraining. If people are confident that they can make a living independently, they are more likely to stay in the hromadas and contribute to their development. Accordingly, representatives of the hromadas spoke about the importance of support from non-governmental organizations and **the need to transition from in-kind aid to measures that can help the working-age population independently ensure a decent standard of living**. Such measures can help hromadas be more resilient in the event of the termination of funding or support from non-governmental organizations or donors.

At the same time, maintaining support for the population unable to work is important. In order for local government

bodies to effectively assess the population's need for social services, training and **support in data collection and analysis** are necessary. According to the informants, this will help create evidence-based plans for supporting the population and opportunities for the development of the social protection sector.

Among the possible paths for transitioning toward long-term solutions, research participants mentioned **the need to develop the capacity of local government bodies and municipal institutions**. They pointed out the unsystematic nature of support from non-governmental organizations and also expressed concerns that funding or projects may end. At the same time, the institutions and government bodies present in the hromada have the ability to work with the population on a systematic basis, so developing their capacity may help transition to sustainable solutions.

"That is, money needs to be invested, this is my opinion, in strengthening the existing municipal infrastructure. I mean, that it will remain in the future, you have to strengthen it. [...] Well, I understand that NGOs may have a different view on this now. You shouldn't be handing out a bunch of subgrants to different NGOs so that they come for a year, I don't know, and hire three psychologists. And then the project ends, and those psychologists disappear. You have to somehow strengthen the capacity of local self-government bodies and the service providers established by them."

*Expert in the field of social protection*

Representatives of local government bodies also spoke about the need for training in project management, grant application writing, the functioning of the public budget, and so on — both for government representatives and for the population. Many of them mentioned that exchanging experiences with colleagues from other hromadas is important. Such communication promotes the formation of partnerships, new projects, and also provides ideas for solutions and community development. For some research participants, the experience of traveling abroad and communicating with international partners was also valuable.

Some research participants identified **engaging hromada residents in decision making and strengthening civil society** as the foundation for hromada development. Engagement helps government bodies to better understand the needs of the population, find optimal solutions, and establish dialogue

between different groups of people, among other things.<sup>7</sup> During the interviews, informants also gave examples of successful involvement of hromada residents in writing project proposals, rebuilding premises, and volunteer projects. These residents later initiated the creation of youth councils and other initiatives in the hromadas. According to the research participants, thanks to civil society, a hromada becomes more resilient to challenges and can become less dependent on external aid.

“It is [population engagement] that can actually further give a strong push toward community development and internal change within the hromada. Because it's like... it seems to me that it can work like a kind of chain reaction. After all, good examples are inspiring. Someone will look at someone else, and be like: oh, great, my friend went there, or my acquaintance, or, say, my grandmother's grandmother told me about it, and I also want to join in.”

*Representative of a non-governmental organization*

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<sup>7</sup> Read more on engaging residents in decision making in hromadas in the guide on [How to Engage Residents in Decision Making in Hromadas: An Overview of Examples](#).

Part 2 ●  
Social Protection:  
Needs of the  
Population  
and Capacities  
of Hromadas

## 2.1 ● Challenges in Social Protection

Participants of the study said that since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, meeting the population's needs in social protection has become more difficult. This is due to the fact that the full-scale war has not only **deepened already existing difficulties** in the field of social protection but also **caused the emergence of new problems**. Hostilities have led to the partial destruction of social protection infrastructure, and mass population displacement resulted in significant changes in the population composition and often an increase in demand for social services in hromadas. According to estimates by representatives of local government bodies, **about half of the residents of their hromadas require support from social protection services** – both in the form of financial, material assistance and in the form of social services. We spoke with representatives of local government bodies in hromadas, some of which had experienced occupation and were later de-occupied. This experience also led to changes in the population composition, the loss of community property, the loss of jobs, and a reduction in the hromada's budget. Due to these factors, fully providing people with support through social protection is a significant challenge for rural hromadas near the frontline.

The hromadas whose representatives we spoke with mostly had only one municipal provider of social services. In one of the hromadas, there were no municipal providers at all, so they provided their population with social services through cooperation with another hromada in the oblast. Most hromadas faced challenges that we also recorded during our research on the provision of social services in various hromadas across Ukraine. These include problems such as a shortage of personnel, overburdened social workers, low accessibility of the buildings where social service providers work, a lack of premises operated by the social protection institutions, poor condition of existing facilities and lack of necessary equipment, problems with transport connections and the absence of social taxis, difficulties in conducting assessments of the population's needs for social services, insufficient funding for the social protection sector.<sup>8</sup> However,

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<sup>8</sup> These and other issues in the field of social protection, faced by Ukrainian hromadas in different regions, were described in more details in the following publications: [Cooperation Between Hromadas and the Non-Governmental Sector in the Field of Social Service Provision](#) and [Social Services for Veterans in](#)

in the hromadas we spoke with during this study, these **problems were often exacerbated by their location in an area near the frontline**, as well as the fact that some of them **had been under occupation** for a certain period.

## Staffing and working conditions of social workers

Informants reported that the growing need for social services has led to **significant excessive workload for social workers**. One research participant specified that in their hromada, social workers provide services to twice as many people as stipulated by regulatory documents. At the same time, there is no possibility to increase the number of social workers. This is due, in particular, to a lack of qualified personnel, low salaries, and a certain stigmatization of the profession in Ukrainian society. In addition, the number of social workers in some hromadas has decreased as a result of the full-scale war, as some specialists have left the hromadas. Hromadas also **lack the capacity to provide supervision for social workers**. In most cases, this function is attempted by the heads of social service provider institutions, but their ability to do so is limited due to being overburdened with other work tasks.

The majority of social workers in the hromadas where we conducted interviews provide services in the settlements of a single starosta district. Informants said they tried to create situations in which a worker **provides services specifically in the starosta district where they themselves live**. This practice is a response to the lack of transport connections between settlements in the hromada and the simultaneous inability to provide social workers with vehicles other than bicycles (in one hromada, electric bicycles were purchased with the support of a non-governmental organization). Therefore, cases when a social worker in a given starosta district resigns present a significant challenge for the hromada.<sup>9</sup>

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[Hromadas: Challenges and Needs.](#)

<sup>9</sup> Read more on the working conditions of social workers in our study [“They are waiting for us”: The impact of the full-scale war on the working conditions of social workers.](#)

"Basically, at the moment, there are nine such girls [social workers] in our hromada. There's a problem with one starosta district. The social worker there resigned, and they still haven't been able to find anyone to replace her. She was serving, I think, about 8 people. And now they've been left somehow with nothing and nobody."

*Representative of local government bodies of a rural town hromada*

Research participants shared that as a result of the shortage of personnel in the social protection sector, sometimes **a certain portion of the population who need support do not receive social services**. They said that in such cases, they try to prioritize certain groups of people based on the urgency of their needs and provide services to them first. To ensure services for the remaining people, they try either to find alternative ways of providing support or to increase the number of social workers. However, informants expressed concern that sometimes neither of these options can be implemented.

Representatives of hromadas that were under occupation for a certain period emphasized the importance of carrying out **a comprehensive evacuation of the population in the event that the frontline approaches** the hromada. Because a situation may arise in which social workers leave the hromada after an evacuation announcement. However, some people who receive services from them cannot evacuate on their own and are left without the services that helped them maintain their daily lives.

Regarding the shortage of personnel, representatives of local government bodies also spoke about the lack of specialists who could provide services to veterans and their family members, the shortage of psychologists, specialists who can provide social support to individuals or families in difficult life circumstances, and specialists who can conduct assessments of a person's need for social services.

## Lack of funding

Another problem common among Ukrainian hromadas is the lack of funds in the local budget to finance the social protection sector. In our [previous study](#), we found that representatives of the social protection field often linked the level of funding in this sector to the position of the hromada heads regarding the priority of this sector. However, this trend does not apply to the frontline hromadas whose representatives we spoke with as part of this project. Most research informants expressed the view that the social protection sector is a priority in their hromadas, and this view is shared by the leadership of their hromadas. However, **the local budget of the hromada has significantly decreased** as a result of the full-scale war, past occupation, and location in an area near the frontline. Therefore, the budget lacks funds to cover the needs of many sectors, not just social protection.

Research participants mostly said that their hromada tries to allocate sufficient funds to cover the most urgent needs in the sector. However, the launch of new support programs for the population or the expansion of the list of social services are not currently feasible.

## Equipment and premises

In some hromadas whose representatives we spoke with, the buildings of social service provider institutions and social protection departments had been **partially or completely destroyed** as a result of hostilities. In one hromada, the social protection department is now located in a House of Culture, where people work in a shared space without separate offices. During the occupation, **the Russians also looted the social protection premises**, so the hromadas required assistance with purchasing new equipment and supplies.

In other hromadas, where the premises were not destroyed and equipment was not stolen during occupation, problems were still present. These problems largely overlap with those we recorded during interviews with hromadas in various regions of Ukraine as part of other research projects. The primary issue is **the lack of municipal buildings** that the hromada could allocate for the needs of social protection

services. For example, informants mentioned that they would like to open a center where social services would be provided, but they are unable to do so primarily due to the lack of available premises in the hromada, and secondly due to the cost of renovation and setting up such a center. Additional problems are caused by **the poor condition of social protection premises**: outdated renovations, the absence of indoor restrooms, and low accessibility of the spaces. Another issue is **the outdated equipment and technology, and the lack of rehabilitation equipment in municipal ownership**.

For unhindered access to social services, not only the accessibility of social protection premises is important, but also the surrounding space, including the availability of pedestrian pathways and transport suitable for use by people with limited mobility. However, informants said that in their hromadas, the space mostly does not meet these requirements.

## Transport connections

Research participants reported that regular transport connections between settlements within the hromada mostly do not exist. This is partly because hromadas have donated their available municipal transport vehicles to the Defense Forces, and also because vehicles were **stolen or destroyed by Russian troops** during occupation. In several hromadas, a social route was introduced and a social taxi was available. In most cases, non-governmental organizations assisted the hromadas with this. In the case of the social taxi, the assistance involved transferring minibuses with the necessary equipment to the hromada's balance. After that, maintenance and servicing of the vehicles became the responsibility of the hromada. Informants shared that such **maintenance is expensive, and the hromada is not always able to conduct it**. If the hromada did not have a social taxi, then instead they used ambulances, school buses, or the vehicles of local government bodies (often the personal vehicles of the hromada head or other staff members). In the case of the social route, these are mostly projects implemented by non-governmental organizations, which take full responsibility for their operation, covering both travel and maintenance costs. According to informants, such **projects are not sustainable**, as transport

connections in this case depend on whether the NGO is able to prolong the duration of its project.

**Social workers mainly use bicycles** to reach the people to whom they provide social services. One hromada managed to obtain electric bicycles. Study participants reported that people with disabilities and elderly people often cannot come on their own to the location where humanitarian aid is distributed. Therefore, these packages are delivered to them by social workers. However, it is difficult for them to do this when they have only bicycles as a means of transportation.

## Assessment of needs for social services

In the vast majority of hromadas whose representatives we spoke with, **assessments of the population's need** for social services<sup>10</sup> **were not conducted**. This was due, in particular, to the lack of specialists who could carry out such assessments and the excessive workload of existing staff. Likewise, according to informants, **there is a shortage of specialists who could assess the need for social services of individuals** who turn to the social protection department. Research participants emphasized the need to have such specialists. Assessing the population's need for social services would help them better understand how the demand for social services will change, which services will become more necessary, and accordingly, plan for ways to provide services to the population. In turn, assessing an individual's need for social services, according to representatives of the hromadas, would allow them to develop an effective support plan for the person, help them return as quickly as possible to a dignified standard of living, and compensate for their lost abilities in maintaining their daily lives.

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<sup>10</sup> According to the Law of Ukraine "On Social Services," local government bodies must conduct assessments of the population's need for social services. We described in more detail how this process is supposed to be conducted [in the first part of the report Cooperation Between Hromadas and the Non-Governmental Sector in the Field of Social Service Provision](#).

## People's personal documents

The allocation of social services is complicated in part by the fact that **potential recipients do not have all the necessary documents**. Informants shared that this may be caused by several situations: (1) a person lost their documents while leaving occupied territories or during other displacements, due to a fire, the destruction of their home, or under other circumstances; (2) a person failed to apply for obtaining or updating their documents in time (for example, an informant mentioned a case where an elderly woman did not have an ID as a citizen of Ukraine, only a Soviet ID); (3) a person is unable to apply for certificates in person at certain institutions, because health issues and the lack of transport connections make it impossible for them to reach these institutions (for example, they cannot visit a pension fund office located in another hromada). Regarding the third situation mentioned above, informants said that in such cases, social protection representatives collect all the necessary documents themselves when possible. However, if this is not possible and the person's presence is mandatory for obtaining the documents, then **the allocation of social services becomes difficult or even entirely impossible**.

It was also mentioned that some people cannot receive rehabilitation equipment<sup>11</sup> because they **must have a conclusion from the medical and social expert commission** to access it. However, people have **a low level of awareness** about where they need to apply to undergo this commission and what the procedure for undergoing it is.

## Differentiated payment for social services

All research participants said that **services in their hromadas are currently provided free of charge**. They explained that after the full-scale invasion, the financial situation of the residents of their hromadas significantly worsened, and social services are usually needed by the poorest people in the community. Thus, introducing payment for social services

<sup>11</sup> More details about the list of assistive rehabilitation devices can be found in the [Handbook of Assistive Rehabilitation Devices](#).

would make them inaccessible to the people who need these services.

## Unmet needs for social services and other support

Research participants shared that their hromadas are currently **unable to provide certain social services for which there is a lot of need among the population**. This includes, in particular, services such as residential care, day care, and supported living. In most cases, hromadas do not provide these services due to the lack of premises where they could be organized. In cases where premises are available, hromadas lack the funds to renovate and equip the existing buildings as service provision centers. These problems also make it impossible to provide temporary accommodation for people who have suffered from gender-based violence. One informant said that in her hromada, there are not enough resources to provide in-home care services. Therefore, this service is provided by non-governmental organizations, in most cases bypassing the procedure for procuring social services from non-governmental providers. The service is provided as part of projects initiated and implemented by NGOs.

Informants also said that their hromada **lacked the resources to develop comprehensive support programs** for various groups of people. They specifically mentioned people with disabilities, low-income people, people with cancer, people who have undergone complex surgeries, and people affected by fires or the destruction of their homes. Representatives of local government bodies were also concerned about the fact that there was a certain tension between those who receive assistance and those who do not, due to a sense of unfairness. Informants shared that, in their opinion, much **broader groups of the population are currently in difficult circumstances and in need of support**. However, support programs — both at the state and local levels, as well as those from non-governmental organizations — do not cover these people.

The issue of hromadas lacking resources to ensure **the evacuation of elderly people and people with disabilities from dangerous areas** was also raised. Study participants said that in order to evacuate these people, it is important not only to

organize transportation but also to provide them with housing in another hromada and with necessary care. However, local authorities lack information about which hromadas can be expected to offer such conditions for a person. In such cases, they often turn to non-governmental organizations for support.

## Ways to address the problems

Informants said that their hromadas tried to use various ways to provide people with all the necessary social services despite existing difficulties. Mostly, they **turn to non-governmental organizations** – either to receive direct assistance in providing a certain service or to obtain grants for a specific project. The hromadas whose representatives we spoke with actively cooperate with different non-governmental organizations and try to attract external funding to improve the social protection system in their hromada. More details about the work of non-governmental organizations in the field of social protection are provided in Chapter Three. For representatives of local government bodies, attracting grant funding requires additional time investment, often outside of working hours.

Another approach used by hromadas is **intermunicipal cooperation**. In such cases, social service providers of one hromada also provide services to the residents of another hromada. This cooperation helps ensure access to social services for the population of hromadas where there are no providers. However, it also leads to additional workload for social workers who provide services to residents of two hromadas. In addition, such cooperation may not cover all social services. For example, one informant shared that in their hromada, only the in-home care service is provided through cooperation, while the population also needs consulting and social accompaniment services.

## Needs for support among the hromadas

Hromadas need assistance in addressing the existing problems in the field of social protection, which are described above. In most cases, the problems are quite considerable and cannot be resolved at the local level, within the means and budget available to the hromadas. In addition, informants also mentioned specific changes that would be helpful in overcoming the difficulties in the field of social protection:

- 1) Informants said they would like to receive **more expert support from regional and state social protection bodies**. They shared that in non-standard situations, they need professional advice on how to act. However, when they turn to regional and state social protection bodies, they do not always receive support.
- 2) Research participants shared that they need changes to the procedure for collecting documents required for the allocation of social services. They would like to have **access to electronic registries with the necessary data** and be able to collect all of a person's documents independently **online**.
- 3) It is important, according to informants, to **improve the working conditions of social workers**. This includes several components, particularly the following.
  - increasing the salaries of social workers, in which case frontline hromadas will need assistance to fund higher salaries (informants said that, according to current regulations, local authorities can introduce additional payments to supplement the salaries of social workers in the hromada, but the size of their hromadas' budgets does not allow them to do so);
  - improving the public image of the profession of a social worker;
  - developing mechanisms to protect social workers in cases of unethical treatment by service recipients.
- 4) Hromadas need support in providing people with residential care, supported living, and day care services. Such support could take the form of **assistance in developing and equipping the necessary facilities** to provide these services. Another approach, according to informants, could be **establishing coordination between hromadas** and increasing access to information about which hromadas local government bodies can contact

with a request for assistance in providing such services to a person.

- 5) Research participants shared that they need assistance in **organizing an accessible environment** in the hromada, as people's ability to apply for social services depends on this, among other things.

## 2.2 ● Provision of Humanitarian Aid

According to the estimates of study participants, **the need for humanitarian aid remains high** in rural hromadas near the frontline. This is caused by the previously mentioned changes in the population composition and the large share of people with low incomes, particularly elderly people, people with disabilities, internally displaced people, unemployed people, and others. Some hromadas are also regularly bombed, and people affected by it need support due to the loss of personal belongings. In addition, a representative of one hromada explained the high demand for humanitarian aid by noting that, due to logistical difficulties and security factors, goods in their hromada are more expensive than in Ukraine overall. As a result, the population's purchasing power is low.

Regarding the composition of humanitarian aid, research participants mostly mentioned food, solid fuel, sanitary and hygiene kits, drinking water, medicine, and so on. Informants often spoke about the population's unmet need for hygiene products, particularly for people with limited mobility. These products are expensive, so some people cannot afford to purchase them on their own.

Humanitarian aid is mostly provided by international and Ukrainian non-governmental organizations. Research participants noted that **the amount of aid from international and Ukrainian organizations is decreasing**. This may be related, in particular, to a reduction in funding received by organizations in Ukraine and a shift in priorities in the activities of international organizations.

At the same time, the issue of the effectiveness of humanitarian aid provision remains relevant, particularly in **identifying groups of people** who need humanitarian aid and **verifying recipients**. During interviews, informants said that previously the entire population of hromadas near the frontline was eligible to receive humanitarian aid; however, at the time of the study, some organizations had narrowed the circle of beneficiaries to the people they viewed as belonging to vulnerable groups. At the same time, different organizations have different interpretations of the concept of vulnerability and include different population groups in this category. This creates difficulties for local government bodies while planning

support for the population, as they do not have an understanding of which specific groups will receive assistance from non-governmental organizations.

A number of organizations have also introduced approaches to categorization of hromadas, based on which they determine the volume of support provided to the population. For example, according to one categorization, in hromadas located at a distance of 0 to 30 km from the combat line, the entire population is eligible for assistance; while in hromadas located 30 to 70 km from the combat line, only specific categories of the population are eligible.

Some non-governmental organizations carry out the verification of humanitarian aid recipients themselves (collecting and verifying the accuracy of information, avoiding duplication of aid). However, representatives of local government bodies reported cases where they were the ones conducting the verification and preparing lists of people eligible to receive humanitarian aid. This work became **an additional burden on local government bodies**, especially on social protection departments and social service providers.

A certain share of local government representatives were critical of providing the entire population with food packages, mentioning cases where food items were excessively accumulated in households within the hromada. They acknowledged that for some people, this behavior is linked to the experience of occupation and food shortages, which is why they try to keep food reserves in case of problems. At the same time, there were cases where stockpiling occurred on a large scale, which led to spoilage and disposal of food products. Additionally, this hinders the development of local businesses, as people do not purchase food and products within the hromada. Informants emphasized that they would like the population to receive not only in-kind aid but also **opportunities for education, employment, or starting their own businesses**, since the results of such measures are more sustainable.

Representatives of non-governmental organizations also mentioned that in some cases, the supply of humanitarian aid encourages people to remain in the hromada rather than evacuate, because in other hromadas or regions they would not receive the same amount of support. This choice is often made by the most vulnerable categories of the population, who are unable to independently ensure a decent standard of living.

If the security situation worsens, the delivery of humanitarian aid to such settlements may cease, leaving these people without means of subsistence.

## 2.3 ● Mental Health Needs

Research participants also spoke about the growing need for mental health support in hromadas near the frontline. They noted that the **mental state of the population is deteriorating** due to prolonged living in a country at war, frequent bombing, anxiety related to the enlistment of loved ones in the Defense Forces, as well as their death, captivity as prisoners of war, or being reported missing. Mental health assistance was also needed by people who had recently left areas closer to the frontline, as well as those who had experienced domestic violence. Representatives of hromadas said that residents still tend to have a biased attitude toward mental health care. However, regular mental health measures help build trust in these services. Therefore, according to informants, an important element for both **providing quality mental health assistance** and **developing a culture of seeking** such assistance is **the presence of psychologists in the hromada**. However, in all the hromadas where we conducted interviews, such specialists were not part of the staff of social service provider institutions.

Informants spoke about **the difficulty of attracting psychologists to work in the hromada**. They identified the following reasons for this: 1) the low level of salaries that the hromada could offer; 2) the absence of professionals with the relevant specialized qualifications among the hromada's population; 3) the hromada's location in the frontline zone, which discourages some specialists from agreeing to relocate there; and 4) the fact that these are rural hromadas, which reduces the likelihood of specialists agreeing to move.

Local authorities try to compensate for the absence of such specialists in the following ways: 1) involving school psychologists in providing support to wider groups of the population (if such specialists are present in the hromada); 2) encouraging social workers to undergo training on how to provide psychological first aid and support people in difficult emotional states; 3) and reaching out to non-governmental organizations with requests for mental health services. **These measures only partially and temporarily help meet the population's need** for mental health support, as NGO projects usually last only a certain period for which they have received funding, and these projects are not always extended. Additionally, the internal safety policies of some organizations

do not allow their staff to travel to areas close to the frontline. Therefore, the list of organizations that frontline hromadas can turn to is limited. As for additional training for social workers and involving school psychologists, these practices are more likely to cause further overburdening of these people. One informant also mentioned a case where a school psychologist in the hromada was provided with professional development courses, after which she resigned from her position at the school to seek a better-paid job in the private sector.

In some hromadas, **there was no opportunity to receive mental health support in person at all**. Residents of these hromadas could only access such support by calling the hotlines of non-governmental organizations. At the same time, interview participants believed that receiving mental health assistance online could only be effective if the psychologist had already established initial contact with the person offline. This conclusion was based on the population's distrust of mental health care and a lack of awareness about its potential benefits.

Informants paid particular attention to **the need for children to receive mental health assistance**. This was primarily related to children **spending extended time in bomb shelters due to regular bombing and the traumatic experience of occupation of the hromada**. Specialists who could provide such services were also absent in the hromadas. Therefore, representatives of local government bodies try to provide training in psychosocial support for educators in preschool education institutions, and they also turn to non-governmental organizations for assistance. However, informants noted that NGO projects are mostly focused on providing mental health support to children of high-school age (15 years and above), while for younger children, opportunities to work with a psychologist are generally lacking.

"We had to get the children out of the basements, and then get the 'basements' out of our children's heads. That was our most important task — proper socialization. That is, properly taking these children out of it."

*Representative of local government bodies of a rural town hromada*

## 2.4 ● Working with Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families

In the context of social protection of the population, most representatives of local government bodies spoke about their hromadas' work with veterans, military personnel, and their families. First and foremost, they tried to keep records of people from the hromada who joined the military in order to understand which families needed support. Most of the hromadas involved in the study provide one-time payments to the families of fallen or missing soldiers. These payments are initiated by local authorities and funded from the hromada budget; they are provided regardless of state payments or financial compensation for military personnel. Hromadas also covered expenses or organized the funerals of fallen soldiers. Some representatives of local government bodies shared that they provide financial support to wounded soldiers, one-time payments after mobilization or contract signing, and support for military families during the heating season.<sup>12</sup>

In some hromadas, departments have been established to handle veteran policies, and in one hromada, there is a local non-governmental organization that addresses these issues on a volunteer basis. At the same time, the number of people working on this topic in the hromadas is usually insufficient for the volume of work they face.

During the interviews, research participants spoke about the following challenges:

- A shortage of psychologists who can work with veterans and military families. Due to low salary levels, hromadas struggle to retain and recruit new specialists. In addition, psychologists who work with the civilian population do not always have the necessary skills to work with military personnel.
- The unsystematic nature of mental health support provided by non-governmental organizations. For instance, during the interviews, it was mentioned that psychologists sometimes come to hromadas and stay for

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<sup>12</sup> Hromadas provided this kind of support as part of local support programs. Measures within these programs are mostly funded entirely from the hromada budget.

a few days or weeks. This lack of a systematic approach discourages military personnel from seeking help.

“Well, there are organizations, they come, but the guys don’t want to go there themselves yet. [...] Well, you know, the guys are in such a state now that coming once just to talk about something — it’s, well, difficult. If there were ongoing work with them, [...] then maybe they would treat the situation with more, let’s say, trust. But just to come for one session — well, they don’t see, how should I put it... the point.”

*Representative of a non-governmental organization*

- Difficulties with finding specialists in accompanying veterans..
- The lack of opportunities for veteran rehabilitation in the hromada.
- The lack of funding in the hromada’s budget to support wounded soldiers or military families.
- A low level of inclusivity and accessibility in rural hromadas near the frontline.
- The unwillingness of some international organizations to fund sectors related to military personnel and veterans.

We asked representatives of local government bodies whether they had plans for developing the area of veteran policies in their hromadas. Most of them said that it is currently difficult for hromadas to assess how many veterans there will be and what their needs will be. However, study participants believed that this would become a challenge for their hromadas, particularly due to difficulties in finding rehabilitation and mental health specialists, as well as securing funding, for example, to organize a veterans’ space.

## Part 3 ● Assistance to Hromadas Near the Frontline from Non-Governmental Organizations

During the Russian-Ukrainian war, most of the population remaining in the territories of rural hromadas near the frontline requires social support measures. At the same time, these hromadas critically lack the resources needed to meet even the basic needs of the population. Local budgets are small due to economic problems and a lack of jobs, and local government bodies are understaffed. Under these conditions, the function of providing support to rural hromadas near the frontline has been partially taken on by non-governmental organizations (NGOs): international organizations, Ukrainian and foreign civil society and charitable organizations.

“The hromada, of course, cannot cope with such challenges on its own. It’s just unrealistic.”

*Representative of a non-governmental organization*

In the field of social protection, the assistance of non-governmental organizations for hromadas near the frontline can be summarized under the following categories:

1. **Humanitarian aid:** provision of food, solid and liquid fuel, sanitary and hygiene kits, drinking water, medicine, and targeted financial assistance.
2. **Legal assistance:** assistance with obtaining disability certificates, documents for internally displaced persons and individuals entitled to government social assistance for care; assistance with preparing documents for receiving pension payments and resolving other issues related to pensions and other benefits.
3. **Information assistance and training:** informing the population about evacuation; conducting training sessions for social workers and the staff of local government bodies; conducting training sessions on psychosocial and legal assistance, first aid, and mine safety; activities to raise awareness of gender-based violence.
4. **Material and technical assistance:** provision of bicycles and office equipment for local government bodies, medical facilities and social workers; provision of rehabilitation equipment for the population; installation of purification systems for drinking water; provision of equipment for resilience centers and Points of Invincibility, provision of medical and other equipment for medical facilities.

5. **Mental health assistance:** the work of psychologists with adults and children; psychological training sessions.
6. **Medical aid:** the work of mobile medical crews.
7. **Social services:** transporting people from population groups with limited mobility; provision of in-home care services.

The non-governmental organizations we spoke with have **different safety restrictions** regarding their work with frontline hromadas. Sometimes, the safety policies prohibit NGO representatives from working closer than 40, 30, or 20 kilometers from the frontline. However, some organizations are able to operate closer to the combat line.<sup>13</sup> International or foreign organizations may have safety officers who plan logistical routes and accompany missions. In some organizations, these are the people who determine situationally whether it is possible to work in a given area. In settlements located directly next to the frontline, humanitarian aid from NGOs is delivered by representatives of local government bodies. In such cases, aid is delivered directly to individuals due to the danger of large gatherings in one place.

## Cooperation between non-governmental organizations and local government bodies

Overall, NGOs can provide high-quality assistance to the population of hromadas near the frontline only if there is **well-established cooperation with local government bodies**. Sometimes this cooperation begins with requests from representatives of local government bodies. For this reason, according to some of our informants, the number of donors working in a hromada depends not only on the condition of the hromada but also on the proactiveness of the local authorities.

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<sup>13</sup> The respondents mentioned the existence of competition between non-governmental organizations for donor resources. It is noteworthy that in such circumstances, the fact that a certain organization can work as close to the front line as possible becomes a kind of "competitive advantage."

"We went out to the [name of the road] highway with the [name of the hromada] hromada's flag. And we stopped cars. A foundation [name of the foundation] is just driving by. And they asked: 'Who are you?' 'We are from [name of the hromada]. We can be found in that direction.' [...] That's how we got them involved. Later, when we already gained some positive experience in implementing things, the foundations started spreading information about us among themselves."

*Representative of local government bodies of a rural town hromada*

A respondent from one non-governmental organization indicated that before the potential start of cooperation, her organization could assess how proactive the hromadas were. Representatives of local government bodies were also additionally informed that the assistance would involve an extra workload for them. This was because, according to the informants, **different hromadas may facilitate the work of NGOs in different ways**. From the observations of one respondent, it was mostly difficult to interact with local government bodies in certain regions, which complicated the provision of humanitarian aid. Representatives of NGOs noted that due to the additional work and documentation, local authorities in some hromadas might refuse help altogether. In contrast, hromadas with previous experience of cooperation with NGOs may have a better chance of continued cooperation with other organizations, partly because NGOs may recommend hromadas to one another for cooperation.

The listed trends may help explain why, according to some research participants, **certain hromadas may remain without the assistance** of non-governmental organizations (while others cooperate with many). Another reason for the uneven distribution of assistance, according to one informant, could be the differing media coverage of regions. In his view, it can be more difficult for hromadas in the Zaporizka Oblast to find donors compared to hromadas in the Kharkivska Oblast, which received media and donor attention after the de-occupation of part of the oblast in 2022.

Interaction between NGOs and local government bodies is also crucial for conducting a **quality needs assessment of the hromadas**. To provide assistance, non-governmental organizations monitor the needs of the population in frontline hromadas, including collecting information through various types of surveys and through personal communication with residents of the hromadas. One organization independently

assessed the need for geriatric and psychoneurological centers in hromadas. Data can also be requested from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Relief Coordination Centers in the Kharkivska and Zaporizka Oblasts. At the same time, representatives of NGOs also turn to local authorities to clarify the needs of the hromadas. Specifically, they require statistical information on the total population in the hromada, the number of IDPs and individuals in vulnerable situations. The most up-to-date information on this is held by local government bodies, and assistance is often provided on the basis of this data specifically. To plan their work, NGOs also use hromada passports, if they are available and up to date.

In situations where different organizations may be assisting the same hromada simultaneously, quality **management of assistance from various donors by local government bodies becomes crucial**. By knowing the needs of the hromada and the potential scope of aid from both the state government and non-governmental organizations, the heads of local government bodies strive to address the population's needs as much as possible, combining assistance from various donors and also attracting new organizations. At the same time, when NGOs informed hromada heads about planned assistance, the heads could indicate that a particular need had already been covered from other sources, meaning that the assistance could be redirected to other hromadas that needed it.

## Challenges in the work of non-governmental organizations

We recorded that by the time of the study, the volume of aid from international donor organizations had decreased compared to 2022 and 2023. This leads to two key consequences: 1) a decrease in the number of aid beneficiaries; 2) the need for changes in the focus areas of organizations' work.

Due to the decrease in resources, NGOs had to shift from providing humanitarian aid to the entire population to assisting vulnerable population groups, and later to **prioritizing recipients of aid within the vulnerable groups**. Another trend is the shift toward providing targeted cash assistance instead of aid in kind. Despite the external reasons for the decrease in

aid, according to the informants, residents of the hromadas could express criticism of the activities of local government bodies, interpreting the reduction in humanitarian aid as a result of ineffective work by the authorities.

The decrease in the number of aid recipients may cause social tension and a sense of injustice among the population of hromadas near the frontline, and representatives of both local authorities and NGOs are aware of this. According to the study participants, in some cases, to avoid provoking conflicts in the hromada, heads of local government bodies could cease providing aid altogether if it could only be provided to a certain share of those who needed it. In the opinion of our informants, such tension can be reduced by a system in which the criteria for aid recipients are determined exclusively by the donor (based on data from local authorities), and local authorities and non-governmental organizations communicate this as clearly and transparently as possible.

Due to the decrease in project funding, there is a trend among donors to reduce food and sanitary-hygienic aid from non-governmental organizations. Instead, there is a growing trend toward **a gradual shift to solutions that result in more sustainable changes**: housing restoration assistance, support for population retraining, support for farmers and small entrepreneurs. Social, psychological, and legal support from NGOs continues. According to the informants, basic food security in frontline hromadas had generally been achieved by the time of the study. At the same time, the need for hygiene products is often not fully met, even though these products are regularly delivered as part of aid — this is especially critical in the case of expensive adult diapers. In addition, due to the proximity of the frontline and the difficulty of predicting the course of the war, not all hromadas near the frontline can shift from rapid response to more sustainable economic development, so the reduction of humanitarian aid may become a challenge for some frontline hromadas.

Some Ukrainian NGOs also see the need for more sustainable solutions and programs — for example, organizing professional training or grant programs for small entrepreneurs. However, **challenges also arise for the non-governmental organizations themselves**: the number of projects is decreasing, and competition for financial resources between different organizations may increase, with NGOs that have built organizational capacity having a better chance of continuing their activities. The gradual shift in donor priorities will also

imply a change in the focus of NGOs' work. However, according to one of the informants, not all organizations are willing and ready to shift their focus from emergency response to more long-term programs.

## Successful practices in the activities of non-governmental organizations

**The humanitarian cluster structure** organized by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) helps avoid duplication of aid from different organizations. This system ensures coordination and distribution of aid from various NGOs, and, according to the interviewed NGO representatives, it works well. The unified aid standards developed in accordance with these clusters contribute to a more equitable distribution of aid among hromadas.

The **Relief Coordination Center (RCC)**, which operates in the Kharkivska and Zaporizka Oblast, also helps NGOs to distribute aid effectively. The organization has a broad list of contacts among local government bodies and NGOs and can match the needs of the former with the capacities of the latter. One of the coordination tools is a map of the humanitarian needs of frontline hromadas, maintained by the RCC. In addition, the RCC organizes evacuation routes for the population, using the work of organizations with different safety restrictions at various stages. Just like with the OCHA clusters, representatives of local government bodies can contact the RCC with their needs. Informants evaluated the work of the RCC as a positive practice that is lacking in other oblasts.

**Local civil society or charitable organizations** also help provide support to the population in hromadas more effectively. Local organizations in hromadas can provide legal assistance, help veterans and vulnerable population groups. The participation of these organizations in providing psychosocial support to the population is important. External organizations can only visit hromadas for a limited time, so it is crucial that there are specialists in the hromada who can conduct psychosocial support activities regularly and at the time that is convenient for people. Local non-governmental organizations can also help the hromada find donors and write grant project applications. Representatives of local government

bodies also feel the need for proactive local civil society organizations, as these organizations can provide services to the population which local authorities lack the resources to ensure, as well as help the hromada find new resources. At the same time, according to the informants, it is important that these civil society organizations work autonomously and are not controlled by local authorities.

It is important that, in addition to humanitarian response, NGOs also provide **social services** to frontline hromadas. In certain hromadas, non-governmental organizations handle the transportation of people with limited mobility, temporarily covering the hromada's need for a social taxi service. Some organizations have social workers among their staff, and these social workers provide services in hromadas, such as in-home care services. In addition, in one case mentioned in an interview, a non-governmental organization paid for the fieldwork of medical personnel. To do this, the NGO signed additional contracts with employees of public medical institutions. This made it possible to organize more sustainable assistance compared to involving NGO staff who do not work in the hromada permanently.

**The provision of social services by NGOs is critically important** for local authorities, who are obligated to provide such services but do not always have the required resources. The assistance of non-governmental organizations makes it possible to provide services to people who need them and somewhat reduce the workload of social workers. At the same time, NGOs can be more flexible in providing social services — for example, they can provide services to people with disabilities who have not obtained an official disability certificate. A representative of the social protection department of one hromada noted that in order to provide residential care services more quickly, they turned to a charitable organization for help. Its resources, contacts, and principles of operation allowed the situation to be resolved faster.

## Shortcomings in the activities of non-governmental organizations in the field of social protection

Support for the population of frontline hromadas from NGOs may have its shortcomings. An important criterion for NGOs is often **the number of beneficiaries of the provided aid** — this is what needs to be demonstrated in reports to donors. At the same time, in the desire to reach as many beneficiaries as possible, the quality of the provided services may be lost. Sometimes this concerns, for example, mental health assistance. To cover as many people as possible, psychologists may constantly change the settlements in which they work and provide assistance only once or for a short period of time. However, for effective mental health care, people need a continuous or at least long-term opportunity to consult a psychologist. The same problem may arise with NGO social workers who, in one organization, provide in-home care services in hromadas only during a project that lasts 3 months. In addition, some people may have particular needs for assistance related to their health condition, but due to the small number of such people, donors may not always be interested in helping them.

“When we spoke with the [name of organization] donor, we identified a gap regarding medical assistance from narrow specialists in certain frontline areas. [...] Here, the number of beneficiaries would be small, but again, for them the quality of this service would be very high. And I was told, let’s rather take on more family doctors, then the number of beneficiaries will be higher. And I tactfully suggested: we can just buy some Snickers bars, hand them out to everyone, and the number of beneficiaries will be just enormous.”

*Representative of a non-governmental organization*

This leads to another problem: in some cases, aid from NGOs **may not be sufficiently sustainable**. Sometimes it is a one-time action, and sometimes it lasts for a limited period of time. In general, it may be difficult for representatives of local government bodies to predict how long and what kind of aid NGOs will provide in the future: unlike the local authorities themselves, non-governmental organizations do not have direct obligations to continue supporting hromadas near the frontline.

Some informants pointed to the possibility of the population of frontline hromadas becoming dependent on humanitarian aid and cash payments. **Providing social services** may be a more complex but higher-quality way to ensure a decent standard of living for people from vulnerable population categories. However, when local authorities do not procure social services from NGOs, they cannot rely on the stability of such support. One of the informants also noted that it was difficult for her to prove to international donors the importance of providing social services to people in hromadas near the frontline.

Ultimately, according to some of our informants, not all NGOs **monitor the needs of the population** regularly enough — and therefore, they are not always able to respond promptly to changing priorities and needs in hromadas. This may particularly apply to large non-governmental organizations, which may lack flexibility and may continue to operate according to established long-term plans, even if those plans have already lost their relevance.

## ● Conclusions

In this study, we examined the state of the social protection sector in rural hromadas near the frontline. The study focused on the situation and challenges faced by local authorities in their work, the difficulties and needs present in the field of social protection in these hromadas. We also described how non-governmental organizations work with frontline hromadas in the field of social protection and what challenges exist in this cooperation.

The full-scale **war has deepened the problems in the fields of social protection and economic development** that rural hromadas had previously. Among such difficulties are the departure of the working-age population, high unemployment rates, lack of qualified personnel, underdeveloped transport network, transport connections and infrastructure, and so on.

As a result of the full-scale war, hromadas near the frontline **have faced new difficulties**, most of which are related to their proximity to the combat line, and for some hromadas to having been under occupation for a certain period of time. They suffer from bombing, which leads to damage to infrastructure, destruction of municipal buildings and residential houses. A significant part of the territories of de-occupied hromadas is contaminated with mines. As a result, hromadas have a need to strengthen public safety and civil protection and to carry out regular repair work.

At the same time, the resources of rural hromadas near the frontline are limited. **Local government bodies face significant difficulties in their work** with the constant need to respond to challenges. The study participants spoke about such difficulties in the work of local government bodies as a lack of budget funds, shortage of personnel, the need to quickly master new skills and attract funding. Due to the lack of staff and additional workload related to cooperation with partners and donors, employees of local government bodies often combine several positions in one, are overloaded with work tasks, and work overtime.

One of the major consequences of the full-scale war has been a significant **decrease in the population** of rural hromadas near the frontline: the population has decreased by one-third, and in some cases by half. It is mainly **the working-age population**, especially families with children, who have left the hromadas for safer regions. Those who remain in the hromadas are more often elderly people, people with disabilities, and low-income families. People of retirement age make up about half of the

population in some hromadas. In addition, internally displaced people have relocated to frontline hromadas from areas located closer to the combat line or currently under occupation.

These changes in the population composition have led to a decrease in hromada budget revenues due to the departure of the working-age population and, at the same time, to an increase in the share of the population that requires support from the hromada. This creates **a significant burden on the field of social protection of the population.**

A significant problem for the hromadas that participated in the study is the lack of jobs and, as a result, **the high level of unemployment among the population.** This problem existed in the hromadas even before and has only deepened due to the war, particularly because of insufficient transport connections between settlements and the contamination of lands in de-occupied hromadas with mines. Despite the high level of unemployment, another challenge is the shortage of qualified workers in various specialties. Vacancies remain unfilled in professions where the share of employed men significantly exceeded the share of women before the full-scale invasion. This creates difficulties in the work of emergency services, repair and construction crews, etc., and highlights the need to train women in such professions. Hromadas use various strategies to address these challenges: they implement retraining and professional development programs and involve unemployed people in socially useful works.

Meeting the population's social protection needs became more difficult with the start of the full-scale invasion, which deepened existing challenges and caused new problems to emerge. Representatives of local government bodies estimated that **about half of the population in their hromadas require social protection**, namely social services, financial and material assistance. Limited hromada budget revenues, caused by changes in the population composition, result in hromadas being able to cover only the most urgent social protection needs of the population.

Most of the problems in the field of social protection were the ones that could also be found in other hromadas across Ukraine, but they were deepened by the close proximity to the frontline and/or the experience of being under occupation. Due to the growing need for social services, social workers are

significantly overburdened, while hromadas often do not have the capacity to expand their staff.

Another challenge for hromadas is the shortage, poor condition, and inaccessibility of social protection facilities, outdated equipment and machinery, and the absence of rehabilitation equipment in municipal ownership. In some hromadas, the buildings of social service providers and social protection departments were partially or completely destroyed as a result of hostilities. In addition, hromadas faced difficulties in the transport sector, and not all of them had social taxi services. This leads to a situation where part of the population has limited access to social services.

As a result of the challenges listed above, hromadas **are unable to provide certain social services that are in high demand among the population**: residential care, day care, and supported living services. In addition, they lack the resources to develop comprehensive support programs for different groups of people. A significant challenge is still posed by the evacuation of elderly people and people with disabilities from dangerous areas and the provision of housing and care for them in another hromada.

The study has identified some unmet needs of the hromadas. Among them are expert support from regional and national social protection bodies, access to electronic registries with necessary data, improvement of working conditions and pay levels for social workers, and the establishment of coordination between hromadas. In addition, informants noted the need for support in developing and equipping facilities to provide people with residential care, supported living, and day care services, as well as creating an accessible environment in the hromadas.

The mental condition of the population in hromadas near the frontline is deteriorating, thus **increasing the need for mental health assistance**. This highlights the need to provide quality regular mental health support, yet none of the hromadas that participated in the study had psychologists on the staff of social service providers. Non-governmental organizations' projects on mental health support are often short-term and unsystematic. They only help to temporarily and selectively meet the need for support.

**The need for humanitarian aid remains high** in hromadas near the frontline due to changes in the population composition and the large number of people affected by the

war. At the same time, the volume of aid from international and Ukrainian non-governmental organizations is decreasing. In addition, **the issue of the effectiveness of humanitarian aid delivery** — identifying groups of people who need humanitarian aid and verifying recipients — remains relevant.

A challenge for the hromadas that participated in the study is **establishing work with military personnel, veterans, and their families**. Difficulties remain in the regular involvement of psychologists who can work with this group of the population; the lack of rehabilitation opportunities in the hromada; the lack of funds in the hromada budget to support wounded military personnel or military families; the low level of inclusivity and accessibility; and the reluctance of some international organizations to fund sectors related to military personnel and veterans.

Some of the difficulties are addressed by hromadas through **cooperation with non-governmental organizations**. They provide humanitarian, legal, material and technical, psychological assistance to hromadas, conduct information campaigns and training for the population and local government bodies, and also provide social services. **Established cooperation with local government bodies** is important for the quality provision of aid by non-governmental organizations. This is necessary, in particular, for a proper assessment of hromadas' needs and, accordingly, the ability to support them more effectively.

The study has recorded **a trend of decreasing volumes of aid** provided to hromadas by non-governmental organizations. At the same time, some organizations have shifted their priorities and begun to focus more on areas such as housing reconstruction assistance, support for population retraining, and business support. In addition, some organizations are facing reduced donor funding and are forced to adjust their activities to the new conditions.

The effectiveness of non-governmental organizations' work in hromadas can be improved by **coordination between organizations** — for example, coordination led by the humanitarian cluster structure organized by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as well as the Relief Coordination Center in the Kharkivska and Zaporizka Oblasts. Such coordination helps avoid duplication of aid and effectively distribute support among hromadas.

This study identified the following problems in the work of non-governmental organizations with hromadas: the prioritization of quantitative indicators over qualitative ones (number of beneficiaries instead of the effectiveness of the aid provided); unsystematic aid and, as a result, the lack of opportunity for hromadas to plan for the future; lack of flexibility in responding to changes and the needs of hromadas among large international organizations; and a mismatch between the priorities of organizations and the needs of hromadas.

The possibility for frontline hromadas to transition from humanitarian response to the development and implementation of long-term solutions is primarily determined by their proximity to the combat line. Representatives of hromadas located more than 30 km from the frontline considered it necessary **to shift from providing in-kind aid** to measures that can help the working-age population independently ensure a decent standard of living for themselves. In this way, the hromadas will be more resilient in the event of the cessation of support from non-governmental organizations or donors.

An important aspect in the context of implementing sustainable solutions is **the development of the capacity of local government bodies and municipal institutions** working in the field of social protection of the population. One of the biggest challenges for hromadas is the lack of qualified personnel and the inability to retain them in the hromada due to low salaries. This may become one of the priority areas where the involvement of non-governmental organizations and international partners is needed.

To enhance the resilience of rural hromadas near the frontline, it is important to involve the population in decision making and to **develop civil society**. Local initiatives and civil society organizations have a deep understanding of the context and could work effectively and systematically to improve the well-being of the hromada's population. Thanks to civil society, the hromada can become less dependent on external aid. At the same time, such initiatives face a significant lack of funding, which highlights the need for systematic support of local civil society organizations.