

HOW UKRAINIANS PERCEIVE NGOs DURING WARTIME

*A Pilot Study on Public Trust, Civic Engagement,
and Resilience-Building*



February 2026

*This document starts with the courage to imagine a future,
and the work that makes it possible.*

In November 2025, WeWorld and Peaceful Heaven of Kharkiv conducted an exploratory consultation with 201 voluntary and anonymous respondents, primarily in Eastern Ukraine, to assess perceptions of NGOs, their effectiveness, transparency, and social role. Findings show strong recognition of NGOs as essential contributors to resilience (87% consider their work socially useful; 79% believe NGOs contribute to national resistance). Trust levels are moderate to high (approximately 75%), yet conditional and experience based. Nearly 46% perceive financial transparency as unclear or express uncertainty about how funds are used. While humanitarian work is largely recognized as a legitimate civic contribution, structural sensitivities related to salary differentials and legal conscription deferrals for employees of critical enterprises require proactive communication and strengthened accountability systems.

Introduction: Why Perception Matters in Prolonged War

Ukraine's humanitarian landscape is defined by high civic mobilization, strong volunteer networks, and sustained national solidarity. In this context, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) do not operate merely as service providers; they are visible social actors embedded within communities, shaping and reflecting social expectations, values, and collective resilience. National, local, and international NGOs are part of the lived social fabric — they interact daily with citizens in contexts of acute need, repeated trauma, and existential uncertainty, and their presence shapes how individuals and communities interpret assistance, legitimacy, and agency.

In contexts of prolonged conflict, perception becomes an essential dimension of legitimacy and effectiveness. Traditional evaluations of humanitarian performance — focused on outputs such as delivery volumes, beneficiary numbers, or compliance with standards — risk overlooking how communities experience and interpret aid. Yet trust in humanitarian actors has profound implications for cooperation, coordination, and sustained engagement: it influences whether people seek help early or late, whether they view organisations as allies or outsiders, and whether community leaders support or contest programming priorities. Research on humanitarian accountability highlights that trust and transparent engagement with affected populations are key drivers of perceived legitimacy and sustainability of organisations' work, beyond technical performance alone (e.g., through accountability mechanisms and community feedback loops).

Moreover, the push for localisation — a strategic and normative shift in humanitarian policy that seeks to transfer responsibility, decision-making, and resources closer to affected people — underscores the centrality of perception. Literature on localisation emphasises that community acceptance and trust are among the primary motivations for shifting roles to national and local actors, with the argument that proximity, cultural sensitivity, and shared identity can enhance relevance, accountability, and responsiveness. However, evidence also shows that localisation remains uneven, and perceptions of NGO roles are shaped not only by proximity but by transparency, fairness, and relational practices on the ground.

In the Ukrainian case, prolonged war has intensified the visibility of humanitarian action. NGOs are not only channelling assistance but are often seen as mediators of values such as equity, dignity, and solidarity — or, conversely, as symbols of external intervention or bureaucratic distance. Perception, therefore, is not a peripheral variable: it is integral to the social contract between humanitarian actors and the populations they serve. It affects cooperation with local authorities, integration into community structures, and the long-term sustainability of programmes that will eventually intersect with post-war recovery, social cohesion, and institutional trust.

Understanding how Ukrainians perceive NGOs — including whose experiences are prioritised, which actors are trusted, and under what conditions trust erodes — is critical not only for evaluating current humanitarian responses but for shaping policies that support accountable, resilient, and people-centred action in protracted wartime settings.

Methodology

The consultation aimed to explore how the Ukrainian population perceives NGOs and their staff during wartime, with a particular focus on men working in humanitarian organizations instead of military service. The primary goal was to identify emerging narratives, tensions, and potential stigmas, providing a foundation for future, larger-scale research and awareness campaigns. This exercise was **exploratory and non-representative**, designed to capture qualitative and quantitative insights rather than to produce statistically generalizable findings.

A pilot, exploratory survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire on KoboToolbox. The survey combined closed-ended questions to identify quantitative trends with open-ended questions to capture nuanced qualitative insights into public attitudes, trust, and the perceived civic value of NGO work. The survey targeted adults primarily from Eastern regions of Ukraine, including both aid beneficiaries and members of the general public. Data collection followed a mixed-method approach:

1. QR code distribution within communities and online, allowing participants to access the survey independently.
2. Phone interviews integrated into routine post-monitoring calls conducted by call-center staff.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and a total of **201 responses** were collected. No stratified or probabilistic sampling was applied, reflecting the exploratory nature of the exercise.

As this was a **pilot study**, representativeness was not a priority. The findings should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the broader Ukrainian population, but rather as an initial snapshot of existing perceptions, narratives, and emerging patterns regarding NGOs and their role during wartime.

Due to the self-administered and phone-based data collection, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly on sensitive topics related to the war and humanitarian work. Despite these limitations, the survey provides valuable first insights into public attitudes, contributing to understanding trust, legitimacy, and the social positioning of NGOs in Ukraine. All participants were informed of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the survey. Data were collected and stored in compliance with ethical standards for research involving human subjects, ensuring confidentiality and respect for respondents' safety and privacy.

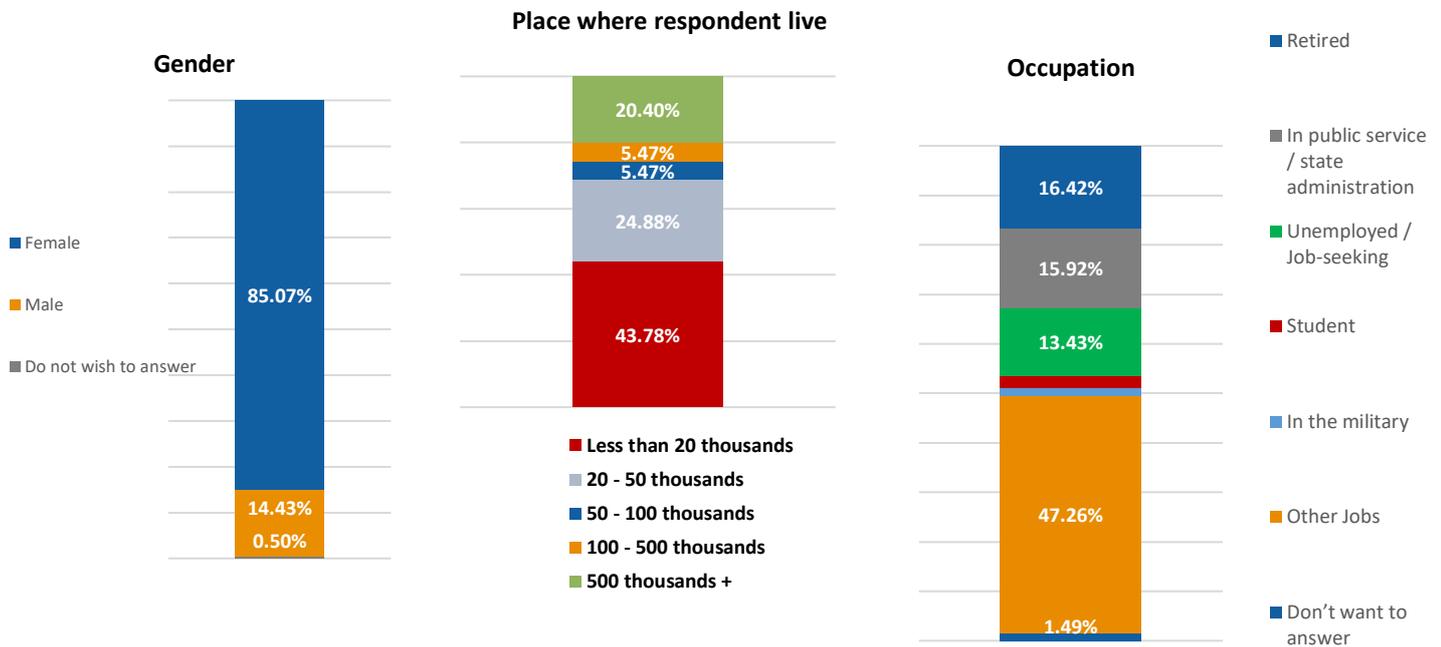


Findings

Although this survey is not statistically representative, the findings offer valuable early insights into how Ukrainians perceive NGOs during wartime. The results are organised into sections on demographic profiles, humanitarian aid experience, trust and perceived effectiveness, transparency, social value, and gender perceptions.

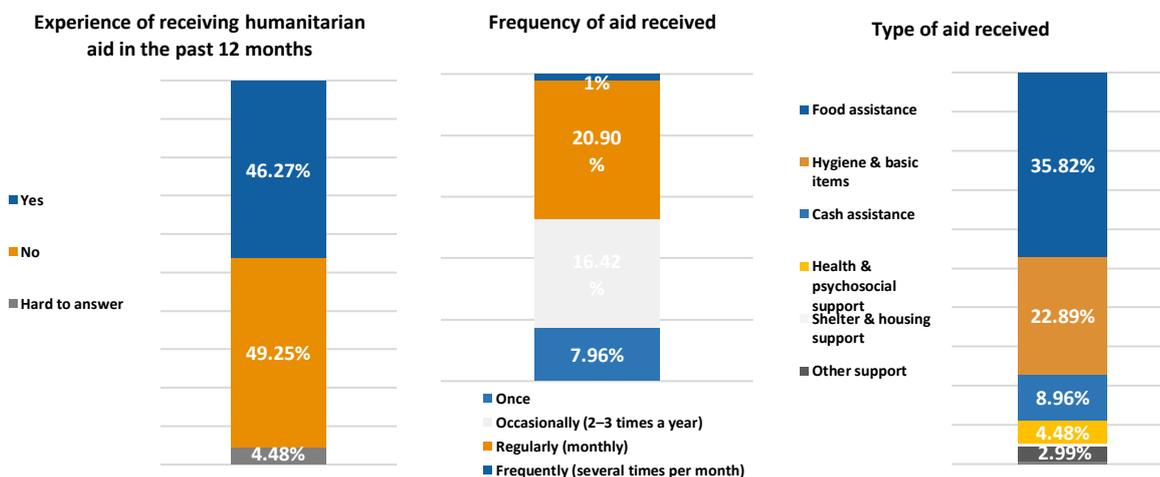
✓ Participant Demographics

The survey captured a diverse range of respondents. Before examining perceptions, the following tables and charts provide an overview of key demographic characteristics, including **gender, place of residence, and occupation**. These data help contextualize responses and understand the diversity of perspectives captured.



✓ Humanitarian Aid Experience and Access

Almost half of respondents reported **receiving humanitarian support in the past 12 months**, primarily in the form of **food and hygiene items**. The survey also explored the **frequency of aid received**, providing insight into how exposure to NGO assistance shapes perceptions of effectiveness and trust.

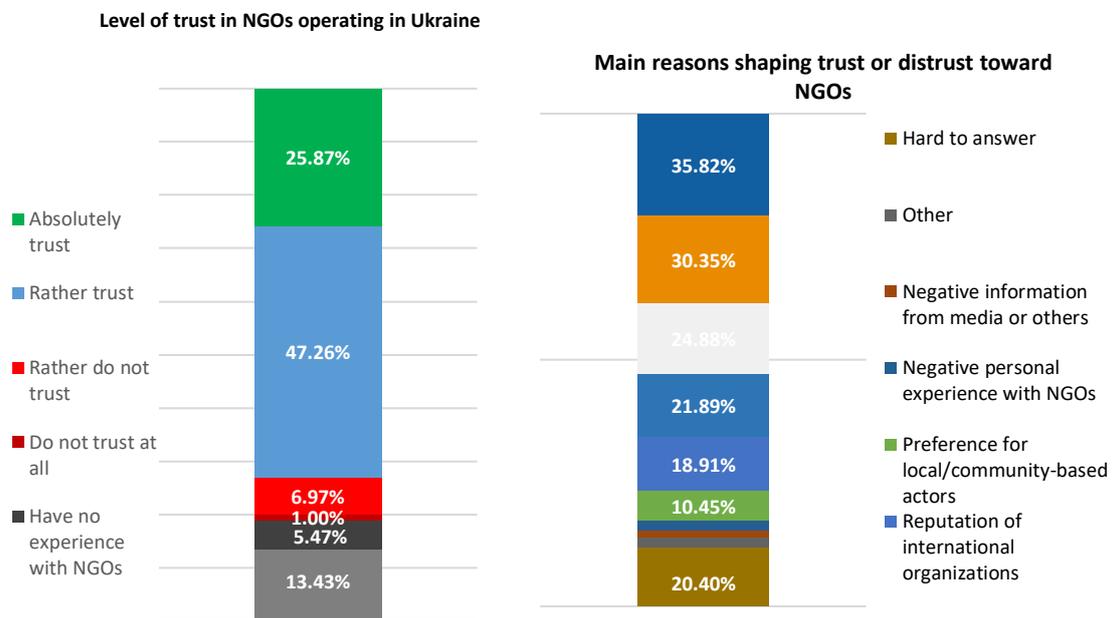


Key insights include:

- NGOs are widely seen as **essential**, especially in frontline or vulnerable areas.
- Direct experience with aid strongly influences individual trust and perception of effectiveness.

✓ **Public Trust in NGOs and Influencing Factors**

Trust in NGOs is generally moderate to high, but not automatic. Around 75% of respondents expressed full or partial trust, with confidence strongest in well-known organisations. Trust is influenced by personal experience, transparency, and a visible presence—people tend to trust specific NGOs rather than the sector as a whole.

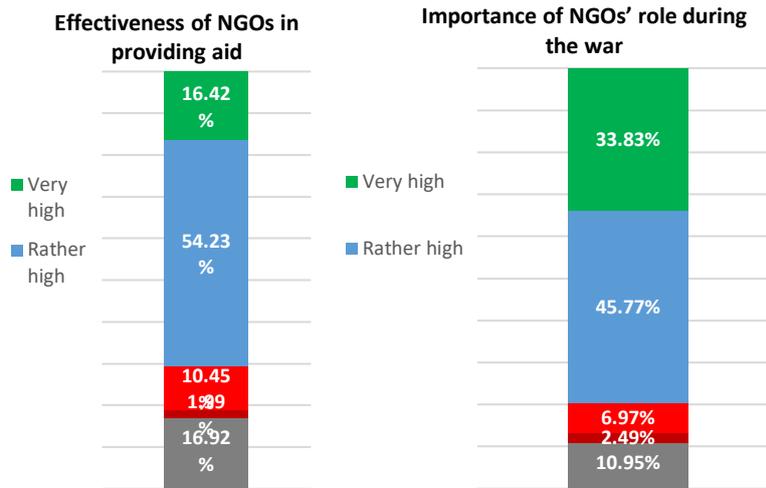


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✓ **Perceived Effectiveness and Role of NGOs During the War**

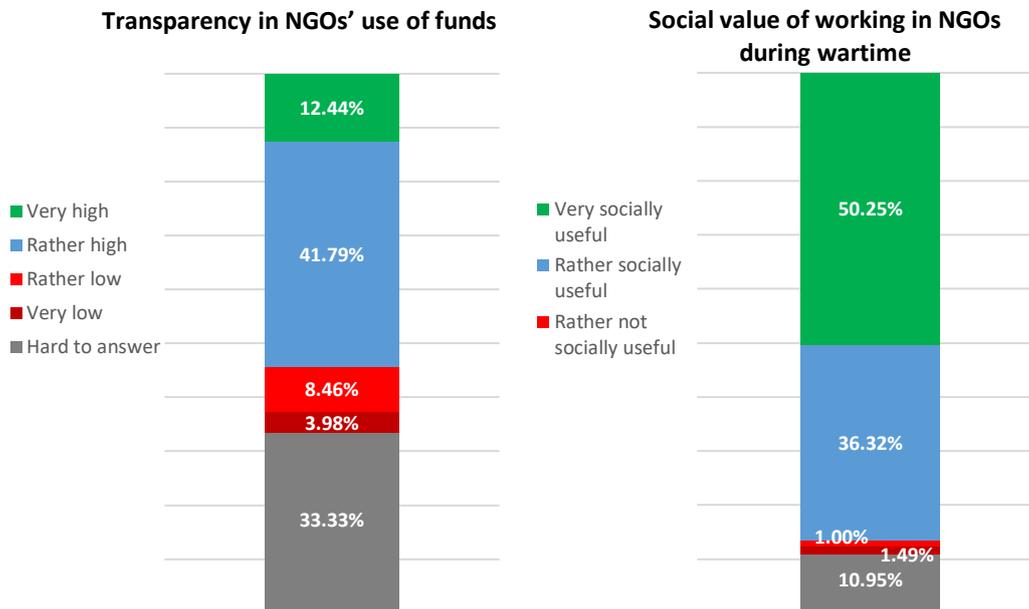
Respondents generally perceive NGOs as **effective and essential actors** during the conflict, particularly in frontline and vulnerable areas. About **70% rated NGOs' effectiveness as high or rather high**, though including those unsure, nearly **29% expressed doubts**. This indicates that **while many recognize the value of NGOs, perceptions of impact are not uniform**, reflecting variability in visibility, reach, and direct contact with beneficiaries. NGOs are seen not only as **service providers**, delivering food, hygiene items, and other humanitarian support, but also as **key social actors**: mediating solidarity, community cohesion, and hope in wartime. Direct experience with aid strongly shapes perceptions of effectiveness; individuals who have received support are more likely to rate NGOs highly.



✓ **Transparency and Perceived Social Value of NGO Work**

Transparency emerged as a **key area of concern**. While only **12%** rated financial transparency as low, another **33% were unsure** about how funds are used, leaving **46% perceiving NGO transparency as unclear**. This highlights the **need for more accessible reporting and communication** to build confidence among the public. Despite concerns about transparency, NGOs enjoy **high social recognition**:

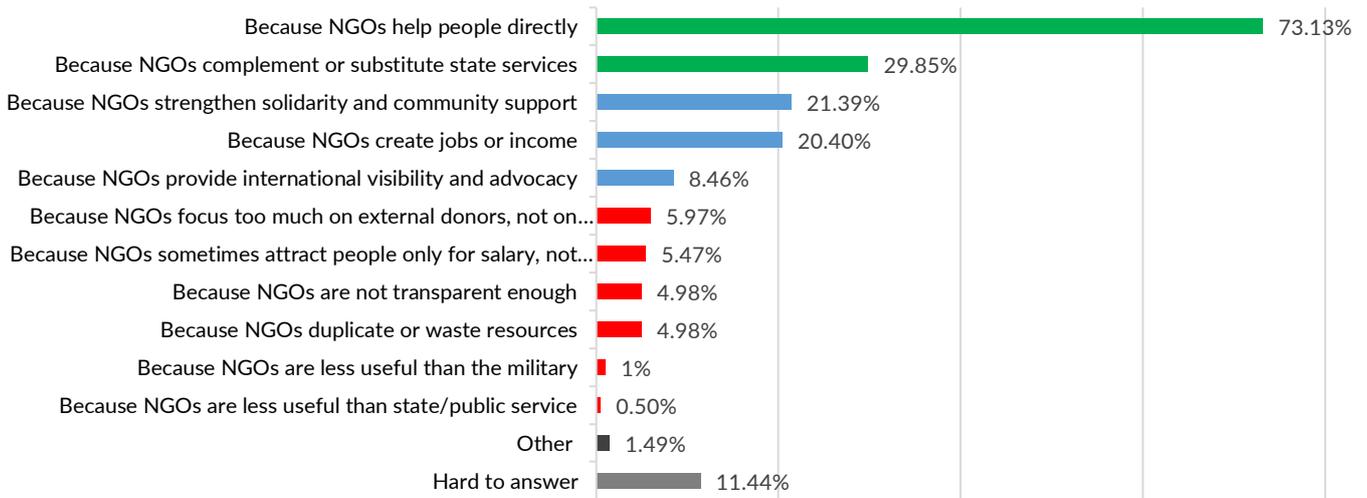
- **87% of respondents** consider NGOs' work socially useful.
- Nearly **79%** believe NGOs support Ukraine's resilience and resistance.



The **main reasons cited for NGOs' social value** include:

- Providing essential services to those in need.
- Strengthening community solidarity and trust.
- Acting as visible symbols of hope and stability during conflict.

Reasons to NGOs social usefulness



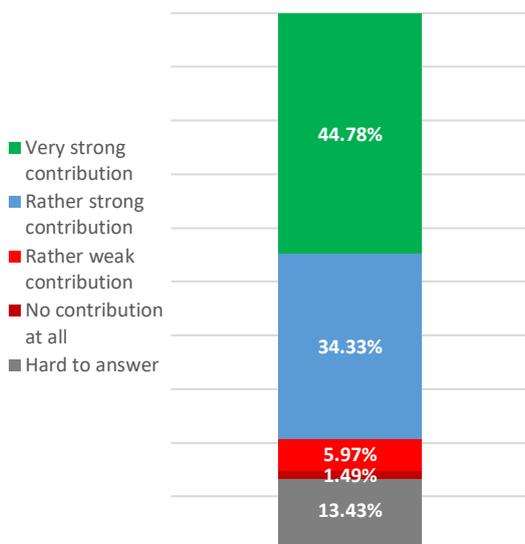
✓ **NGOs' Contribution to National Resilience and Preferred Civic Roles**

NGOs are broadly viewed as **contributors to national resilience**, not only through immediate aid but also by **enhancing community capacity, coordination, and preparedness**. Respondents highlighted that NGOs help:

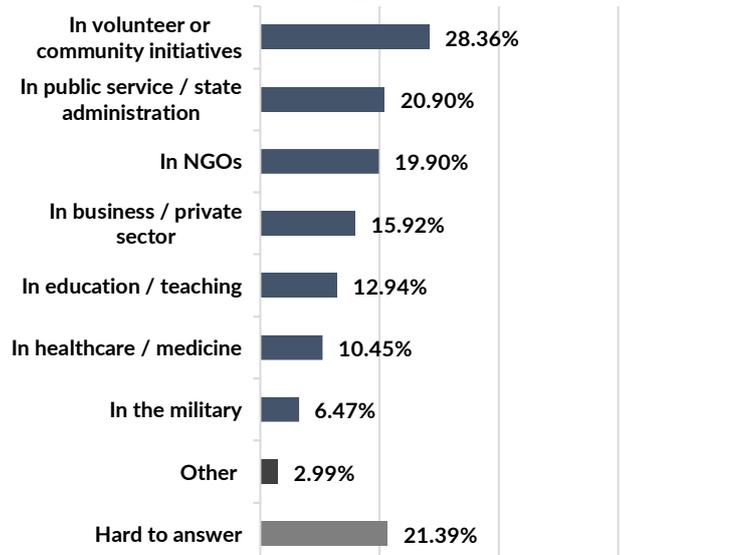
- Maintain social cohesion in affected areas.
- Bridge local communities with authorities and international partners.
- Support recovery efforts even under ongoing conflict.

Survey data suggest that the public perceives NGOs as performing **civic roles that complement, rather than replace, state functions or military efforts**. Respondents value NGOs' ability to respond flexibly, to work on long-term recovery, and to **empower communities to act collectively**.

Views on whether NGO work contributes to Ukraine's resistance and resilience



Preferred area of contribution during wartime



✓ **Gender Perceptions and Community Views of Men in NGOs**

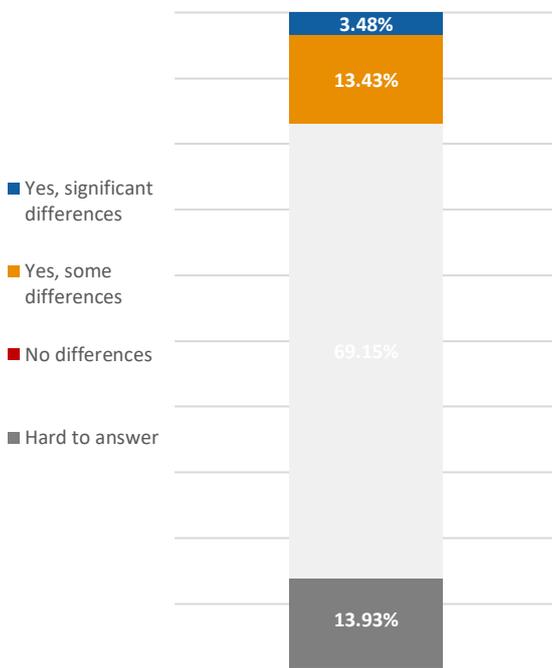
Gender perceptions of humanitarian work are largely balanced. About **70% of respondents** saw no distinction between the roles of men and women in NGOs. Where differences were noted:

- **Men** were associated primarily with **logistics, transportation, and physical tasks**.
- **Women** were linked to **coordination, communication, and administrative tasks**.

Respondents recognize that men working in NGOs – rather than serving in the military – play an **essential civic role**, providing life-saving support to civilians, maintaining social services, and contributing to **community resilience**. These perceptions underscore the value placed on humanitarian action as a form of **active citizenship and patriotic service**, complementing defense efforts on the front lines. Humanitarian work is broadly recognized as a legitimate civic contribution. Around 70% of respondents saw no difference between men’s and women’s roles in NGOs. Under Ukrainian legislation, organizations classified as critical to national functioning may apply for reservation (deferral) of employees from military conscription, in accordance with Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 76 (as amended) and Ministry of Economy procedures governing reservation of employees of critical enterprises.

While this legal framework reflects recognition of humanitarian work as part of national resilience, structural differences in employment stability and income levels may generate sensitivities in a highly mobilized wartime society. Proactive communication is therefore essential to prevent misperceptions.

Is there differences between men’s and women’s roles in NGOs



Community perception of men working in NGOs

- **Positive / respectful (~60%)**
 Words like “good,” “positive,” “normal,” “with respect,” “professionals” dominate.
 Many see men in NGOs as **hard-working, helpful, needed for logistics or delivery work**.
- **Neutral (~25%)**
 Frequent use of “normal,” “no difference,” “hard to say.”
 Suggests **normalization of men’s presence**, though not strong emotional engagement.
- **Negative / skeptical (~10-15%)**
 Some responses express **distrust toward men’s motivation** for working in NGOs. Beyond the idea of avoiding conscription, several participants suggest that **certain men join NGOs for personal gain rather than to help others** – seeking *financial benefits, job security, or protection* (“for money or for the badge”). This reflects a perception that humanitarian work may sometimes be used as an opportunity for profit rather than service.

Suggestions for Improving NGOs' Accountability and Effectiveness

Based on survey responses, several avenues emerge for strengthening NGO legitimacy, accountability, and impact:

- **Strengthen Transparency and Reporting:** Respondents consistently call for clearer, accessible reporting. NGOs should publish financial summaries, beneficiary lists, and visible project results, including human stories, to reinforce trust and credibility.
- **Improve Communication with Communities:** Direct engagement is preferred over reliance on local authorities. Actions include providing timely updates, maintaining regular contact, simplifying feedback processes, and reducing bureaucratic barriers. Visibility and dialogue are seen as essential to accountability.
- **Ensure Fair and Needs-Based Distribution:** Equitable access is critical. NGOs should verify beneficiary lists, avoid favoritism, and include often-overlooked groups, such as the elderly, people with chronic illnesses, or non-displaced residents in frontline areas. Fair distribution is closely linked to legitimacy.
- **Strengthen Internal Control and Ethics:** Stronger oversight is recommended: independent audits, partner monitoring, and transparent procurement. Staff should be motivated by humanitarian values, ensuring integrity and professionalism.
- **Expand Programs for Youth and Vulnerable Groups:** Beyond immediate aid, respondents highlight the importance of resilience-building initiatives, psychosocial and educational support, and ongoing assistance to the most affected populations. Fair pay and recognition of field staff are also emphasized.
- **Increase Public Visibility and Recognition:** Communities want to know who NGOs are and what they achieve. Suggestions include online updates, local meetings, and showcasing humanitarian impact. Public presence strengthens legitimacy and fosters appreciation for field teams.

Expected Role of NGOs in Post-War Ukraine

Survey participants outlined expectations for NGOs in Ukraine's reconstruction and long-term recovery:

- **Support Recovery and Reconstruction:** NGOs are seen as essential partners in rebuilding housing, infrastructure, local economies, and public services, acting transparently and flexibly.
- **Provide Psychosocial and Community Support:** NGOs are expected to support psychological rehabilitation, trauma recovery, and social cohesion through safe spaces, counseling, and community-level programs for civilians, veterans, and families.
- **Promote Employment and Economic Reintegration:** Respondents anticipate NGOs assisting in job creation, small business support, and IDP employment, driving local economic revitalization via training and entrepreneurship.
- **Continue Assistance to Vulnerable Groups:** Aid for the elderly, people with disabilities, single parents, and low-income households remains necessary, as humanitarian needs will persist post-war.
- **Strengthen Education and Youth Development:** Respondents prioritize education, youth engagement, and skills development, aiming to rebuild an active civil society.
- **Support Veterans and Military Families:** NGOs are expected to assist veteran reintegration with mental health support, training, and community initiatives.
- **Foster Civic Participation and Democracy:** Long-term expectations include monitoring government transparency, advocating for reforms, and ensuring accountability in recovery efforts.
- **Maintain Humanitarian Presence and Flexibility:** Even post-conflict, NGOs should remain visible and responsive to emerging crises, ensuring continued proximity to communities.
- **Encourage Partnerships and Coordination:** Collaboration with government, local authorities, and businesses is crucial, with international NGOs advised to empower local actors rather than dominate.
- **Continue Building Resilience and Hope:** NGOs are expected to help restore stability, dignity, and purpose, supporting the transition from survival to recovery and rebuilding social cohesion.

Reflections and Experiences Related to NGOs During the War

Survey responses reveal predominantly positive perceptions with constructive feedback:

- **Predominantly Positive Experiences and Gratitude:** NGOs are described as “brave,” “attentive,” “helpful,” and “essential,” often providing life-saving aid when state support was delayed or absent.
- **Recognition of NGO Workers’ Dedication:** Field staff and volunteers are admired for courage and empathy, seen as symbols of solidarity and compassion.
- **Calls for Broader Inclusion and Fairness:** Some respondents highlighted gaps in coverage or reliance on local authorities’ lists, stressing the need for equitable and direct distribution mechanisms.
- **Desire for Clearer Communication and Coordination:** Limited information about aid availability led to frustration. Better outreach, simplified procedures, and coordinated platforms are suggested.
- **Mixed or Critical Opinions:** A minority expressed skepticism about corruption, inefficiency, or opportunism. These views highlight the need for integrity, transparency, and professional standards.
- **Appreciation for Psychosocial and Children-Focused Programs:** Projects addressing mental health, education, and youth engagement were particularly valued for restoring a sense of normalcy.
- **Overall Perception:** The overarching narrative is gratitude and respect, with NGOs seen as indispensable actors complementing or substituting state functions, while constructive feedback points to areas for improvement.

Conclusions

The findings reveal that Ukrainians see NGOs as essential actors in wartime, providing critical support and contributing to national resilience. Nearly half of respondents received humanitarian assistance in the past year, and a majority rated NGOs’ effectiveness as high, recognizing their social value and impact on community survival. Trust is generally positive but conditional, shaped by direct experience, visibility, and clear communication, and often stronger for well-known organizations. Transparency remains a concern, with many unsure how funds are used, highlighting the need for accessible reporting and participatory accountability mechanisms. Humanitarian work is broadly viewed as a legitimate civic contribution, with gender roles seen as largely balanced, although structural employment differences and legal protections can create sensitivities. Some respondents also noted challenges such as duplication and bureaucratic complexity, emphasizing the importance of coordination, local ownership, and strengthened partnerships. Overall, while Ukrainians deeply value NGOs, sustained trust and legitimacy will depend on **ongoing transparency, effective communication, and proactive engagement with communities**, ensuring that humanitarian action continues to support resilience, recovery, and the rebuilding of a hopeful, inclusive post-war society.

The Birth of Peaceful Heaven of Kharkiv: A Testimony of Resilience and Commitment Serhii Chubukov, CEO

Peaceful Heaven of Kharkiv (PHK) was born in the first days of the full-scale invasion of 2022. After evacuating my family abroad, I returned to Kharkiv determined to contribute. Together with two colleagues, we began preparing and distributing 150–200 hot meals daily using leftover restaurant supplies.

More volunteers joined every day, and within weeks our team grew to over 70 people. With support from organizations like World Central Kitchen and Medico, we officially registered PHK on May 15, 2022, transforming a spontaneous initiative into a structured humanitarian organization.”

“What inspired me most,” Serhii reflects, “was seeing that for many people in Kharkiv, our support was their only means of survival. Every challenge strengthened our commitment, and every life we helped reinforced why this work matters.”

Today, PHK operates across multiple regions with over 400 dedicated staff and more than 35 active projects in food assistance, protection, shelter, WASH, and education. *“Helping my own population is not just about delivering aid,” Serhii emphasizes, “it is about giving hope, dignity, and ensuring no one feels abandoned – even in the darkest moments of war.”*



PHK’s story illustrates the critical role of national NGOs in wartime: combining resilience, professionalism, and empathy to ensure that communities can survive, recover, and rebuild.