Letting go of control

Empowering locally led action in Ukraine

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Local to Global Protection: L2GP works to change the humanitarian system, pushing for meaningful localisation through documenting and promoting local responses to protection in humanitarian crises. L2GP was founded in 2009 with research into community responses to crisis. This research provides the foundation for the survivor and community-led response approach. L2GP partners with international, national and local organisations to implement this approach in humanitarian contexts around the world. www.local2global.info/about/

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Cover: Natalia received an energy-efficient stove through HIA's flexible small grants programme. HIA supported the local organisation The Youth of Zmiiv, which uses creativity and technology to help families save on the costs of cooking and heating.

Photo credit: HIA

List of acronyms

APH	Alliance for Public Health
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
FSG	Flexible small grant
HIA	Hungarian Church Aid
IDP	Internally displaced people
L2GP	Local to Global Protection
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
sclr	Survivor- and community-led response

Executive summary

In the first weeks of the war after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ordinary people, host communities and spontaneous community groups sprang into action as first responders together with other local actors, including Ukrainian NGOs, church groups and volunteers. These first responders organically formed a humanitarian response based on their own resources and networks, connecting with like-minded helpers and local governments to expand and scale up.

One year on, these local actors and groups continue to make a significant contribution to the aid response, despite receiving only a small fraction of direct funding. But throughout the crisis, as in any crisis across the world, local efforts have been stifled and ignored by the wider humanitarian response. Not only is there a lack of support to enable community groups to respond, even when they are best placed to do so, the traditional humanitarian system holds no space for these volunteer efforts and fails to engage with them.

Despite years of reform efforts to put local actors in the driver's seat of humanitarian responses, the system throws up barriers. People affected by crisis bring an understanding of their own community resources, challenges and capacities. It's time to proactively support people who intuitively work to meet community needs holistically.

Programming approaches such as survivor- and community-led response (sclr) ensure power is not taken away from communities and community groups who are already responding. Ideas on how to spend the group microgrants come from communities and individuals, rather than being dictated or influenced by externally led actors such as international or even national NGOs. Agencies can scale up these approaches to complement the traditional humanitarian response, and follow local agencies' lead in identifying areas and individuals in greatest need.

Ukraine is not unique. While it is one example, the sclr approach has worked in many different sudden-onset or protracted crises. Christian Aid is currently implementing sclr in the East Africa drought crisis, Lebanon, and Haiti after the earthquake. It works well anywhere where the nature of the crisis demands a response that reaches across the triple nexus, meeting humanitarian needs while also looking at ongoing causes like poverty, inequality and the climate crisis.

Building on Christian Aid's previous paper 'Ripping Off the Band Aid: Putting people at the centre of the humanitarian system',

and the work of peer agencies that are part of Local to Global Protection, this paper aims to provide a window into transformative community-led approaches. It describes these approaches and their key differences, provides two detailed case studies of the experiences of partners, reviews challenges and lessons, and provides recommendations for practitioners and donors.

We offer the following recommendations to operational and donor agencies:

1. Donors and intermediaries should live up to Grand Bargain commitments and increase direct funding at scale to local actors, including mechanisms and incentives to support sclr for a real participatory revolution.
2. The sector, including donors and international and national NGOs, need to overcome the instinct to maintain tight control of local organisations' and groups' work. They need a mindset shift to let go of power and tolerate more flexibility and unpredictability.
3. Donors – both institutional donors and NGOs providing grants – must shift the centre of accountability to people implementing the response, by minimising compliance and eliminating due diligence at the lowest level for a more inclusive and effective crisis response. The current structures of compliance and due diligence are both fragmented and structured around the donor as the centre of accountability because they put up the money. A more people-centred response would employ a compliance and accountability structure that says affected populations will feel the impact of misuse of funds today more than auditors several years down the line.
4. Humanitarian architecture needs to be reformed to centre community-led responses that do not fit neatly into sector boxes. Area-based coordination facilitates the inclusion of local actors and gives them a voice and decision-making power. Nevertheless, it is how local actors engage with the community that counts, and practices such as flexible small grants and slcr allow greater leadership, accountability and empowerment of people during a crisis. Their agency is key to building back better. These community initiatives cut across multiple sectors and do not fit into sectoral boxes. To avoid overlooking or undermining spontaneous local responses it is important to acknowledge their existence, create inclusive spaces for participation, and capture the work in reporting.

Introduction

In the first weeks of the war after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ordinary people, host communities and spontaneous community groups sprang into action as first responders together with other local actors, including Ukrainian NGOs, church groups and volunteers. These responders organically formed a humanitarian response based on their own resources and networks, connecting with like-minded helpers and local governments to expand and scale up. Local actor profiles varied, with a relatively small number of formally registered national NGOs joined by more than 1,700 local community groups, including volunteer groups and church groups from diverse backgrounds.[1]

The media covered their efforts, capturing stories[2] of how local community groups were responding to the crisis, based on a real-world understanding and lived experience of what was needed, expanding their activities and linking up with neighbouring or complementary groups as those needs spiralled. One example of the work of community groups is that of church groups – they were already doing significant community outreach before the war, running soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless, which could easily be scaled up and repurposed for an influx of displaced people from eastern Ukraine.

A community group is defined as a loose group of people who share a common interest. These can be either registered organisations or non-registered, such as a football club, church group, book club or group of neighbours.

One year on, these local actors and groups continue to make a significant contribution to the aid response, despite receiving only a small fraction of direct funding.[3] But throughout the crisis, as in any crisis across the world, local efforts have been stifled and ignored by the wider humanitarian response. At the beginning of the crisis, community groups were functional within days, whereas the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)-led response and cluster coordination structures were still not fully functional three months into the conflict. The clusters did not formally evaluate the local response capacity and hosted meetings exclusively in English, effectively excluding local responders. International NGOs entering the response also subsumed the nascent community response by hiring the local volunteers and NGO staff, redirecting their energy back to the mainstream humanitarian architecture and top-down ways of working.[4] The response struggled to support some of the hardest-hit areas, such as Bucha and Irpin, as international agencies met with security and compliance challenges and failed to find enough local staff. Even setting up a system to register and deliver basic household-level transfers took an inexcusably slow four

months. Issues around coverage of remote areas, narrow criteria and delays of payments continued until late summer, after which families were offered only $75 a month, a woefully inadequate amount considering the high inflation.[5] According to Ground Truth Solutions, cash is the biggest need, and 89% of people who received cash said the support was inadequate.[6]

Despite years of reform efforts to put local actors in the driver's seat of humanitarian responses, the system throws up barriers. Research from the COVID-19 response highlighted that volunteering was at the core of mutual aid and collective action, and volunteers offered not just time but physical space, money, food and other resources.[7] In Ukraine, as in all humanitarian crises, people themselves were the first responders with a shared sense of humanity and solidarity.[8] But not only is there a lack of support to enable community groups to respond, even when they are best placed to do so, the traditional humanitarian system holds no space for these volunteer efforts and fails to engage with them.

People affected by crisis bring an understanding of their own community resources, challenges and capacities. They are able to address the short-term needs while considering long-term development and managing localised conflict. It's time to proactively support people who intuitively work to meet community needs holistically. It's time for donors, including grant-making NGOs, to surrender control and take a step back to let communities lead. It's time to reform the cluster system to an approach that allows for a holistic, multisector response across 'the triple nexus' that funds and supports the leadership of local actors.[9] It's time for donors and NGOs to rewrite compliance rules to put accountability in the hands of communities, minimising compliance and due diligence at the lowest levels for a more inclusive and effective crisis response.[10]

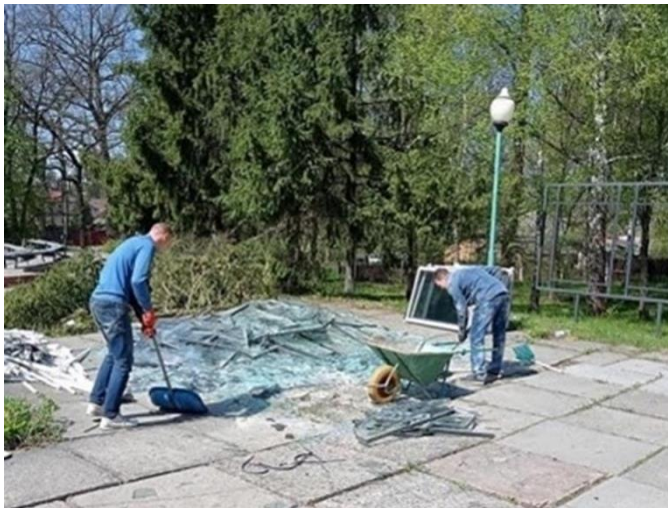
Triple nexus: The nexus is a policy concept within the aid sector that is largely understood as stronger collaboration, coordination and interlinkages among actors from the fields of development cooperation, humanitarian action and peacebuilding and the cohesiveness of the agencies involved.

Programming approaches such as survivor- and community-led response (sclr) ensure power is not taken away from communities and community groups who are already responding. Microgrants, combined with accountability, learning by doing, capacity strengthening and focus on improving community-led processes, enable community groups to speedily address the needs they see and take advantage of opportunities in their communities in a way that encourages inclusive scale-up of support. Sclr differs from traditional individual or group cash transfer programming because it is driven by communities' analysis of opportunities and gaps. Ideas on how to spend the group microgrants come from communities and individuals, rather than being dictated or

influenced by externally led actors such as international or even national NGOs. Agencies can scale up these approaches to complement the traditional humanitarian response, and follow local agencies' lead in identifying areas and individuals in greatest need.

Building on Christian Aid's previous paper 'Ripping Off the Band Aid: Putting people at the centre of the humanitarian system', which calls on humanitarian and development actors to invest in community resilience both during and before a crisis, this paper aims to provide a window into transformative community-led approaches, including survivor- and community-led response and flexible small grants. It describes these approaches and their key differences, noting the opportunities for transitioning from existing traditional cash programming. It provides two detailed case studies of the experiences of partners and their community networks implementing these approaches on the ground during the first six months of the Ukraine war. The paper reviews the challenges faced in these case studies and the lessons learned that will be critical for agencies taking up the approach. Finally, it provides recommendations for practitioners and donors.

Below: Home reconstruction – the clean up and destroyed building. Several villages around Buchansky, Kyiv were decimated by shelling. APH's partner Public Ray of the Future's sclr project arranged to provide construction tools and materials free-of-charge for community members to rebuild their homes. (Photo credit: Convictus Ukraine)



Supporting collective action for survival, protection and wellbeing

Christian Aid humanitarian work around the globe has focused on strengthening community resilience, from rapid-onset through to protracted crises.[11] Research has shown that for crisis-affected populations, resilience means 'having the skills and capacity to look after yourself whilst knowing how and where to ask for support when needed'.[12] These studies provide compelling evidence that humanitarian actors should support the spontaneous community initiatives started by people themselves to address their holistic needs and promote mutual aid.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) tested and co-developed the survivor and community-led approach with national actors to support these community resilience efforts. L2GP is an initiative of aid workers and activists committed to the meaningful transfer of power and agency to local and national actors in crisis.[13] Acknowledging that crisis-affected people are the first and last crisis responders, the sclr approach has to be adapted to every single context – and continually adjusted over time. Sclr aims to 'increase the scale, impact and momentum of crisis-affected people's initiatives to help each other to survive with dignity, strengthen communal wellbeing and to start addressing root causes of vulnerability'. Sclr complements other modalities within mainstream humanitarian response, as well as local government interventions, by supporting and strengthening the existing holistic initiatives of local crisis-affected populations. Sclr uses the word 'survivor' to refer to people living through crisis.

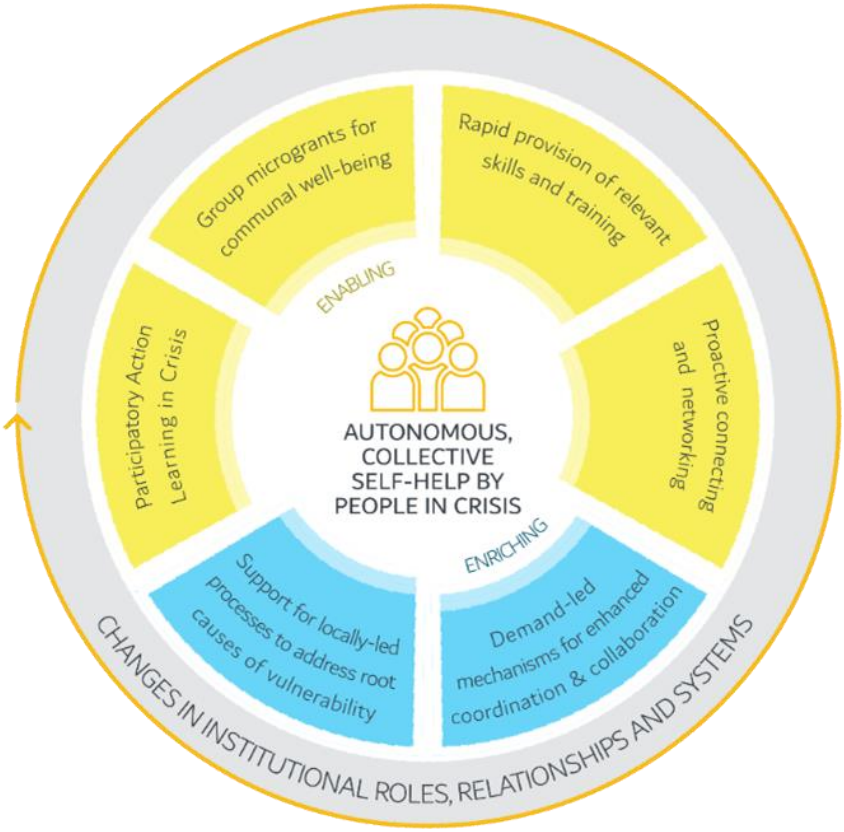
The 'software' within sclr that accompanies the microgrant process (the 'hardware') includes appreciative enquiry, do less harm, experiential learning and connecting and networking, all of which are integrated into both the sclr toolkit and local NGOs' ways of working. The local NGO giving the microgrants, often called the facilitating agency, works alongside groups in the community to design a microgrant giving process that is inclusive. The process considers locally appropriate measures that ensure accountability and minimise conflict and the negative influence of imbalanced power structures. Ideas from the community are then funded with microgrants and implemented by the community groups. The facilitating agency takes a mentoring and supportive role, strengthening groups' capacities based upon the objective of their initiatives.

The acronym for sclr is purposefully written with all lower-case letters. The way of writing is meant to reflect the open-source nature of the process because it is not owned or originated by any one agency. sclr is not a 'plug and play' blueprint for action. Instead, it can be picked up by any agency that is inspired by the principles, and must be contextualised and adapted in each context where it is used.

Experiential learning, or capturing real-time learning from action, is central to sclr. This allows quick adjustments and/or improvements to be made to immediate plans and activities, resulting in a process that is flexible, adaptable, responsive, immediate and relevant. An environment that encourages and enables collective learning is important; all members of a group (and wider community) have crucial learning and experience that if applied in a group setting can contribute to the resilience of the group and the community. The facilitating agency plays a proactive role in connecting the community groups with crucial learning as well as with duty bearers and other organisations, strengthening local coordination, structures and solutions.

Christian Aid and other peer agencies that are part of L2GP, including Dan Church Aid (DCA), Act Church of Sweden, Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits (ECOWEB) and East Jerusalem YMCA, have been implementing sclr programming alongside partners and communities since 2016, in diverse contexts such as the Philippines, Kenya, Gaza,[14] Myanmar, and more recently in Haiti[15] and Lebanon.[16] Communities and partners have seen the benefit of sclr in responding to a variety of crises and diverse challenges, such as chronic poverty, natural hazards, escalation or protracted conflict and displacement.

Figure 1: Components of sclr



Guiding principles of sclr

1. Communities are the first and last responders to crisis.
2. How external actors engage with people in crisis affects how they behave and respond.
3. All communities have rich knowledge, skills and insights to respond to crisis and long-term vulnerabilities.
4. Given the chance, communities respond to crises holistically, unconstrained by humanitarian and development divides, and looking to long-term resilience.
5. Locally led response can be much faster and more cost efficient than conventional aid or humanitarian interventions.
6. Strengthening psychosocial wellbeing is crucial to recovery.
7. Crisis response is strengthened when women and other marginalised groups are also given a chance to lead.
8. Local agency and accountability requires local ownership and mutual trust.
9. Innovation and learning require a safe-to-fail environment.
10. Social connection and cohesion strengthen crisis response and resilience.

Source: L2GP

Approach in Ukraine

Christian Aid's humanitarian work in Ukraine focuses on empowering a locally led response to the crisis. We encourage our implementing partners to move beyond consulting people impacted by the crisis to supporting people to take the lead and take ownership of the implementation of their actions. In Ukraine, there were a significant number of community volunteer-led and local faith-based group initiatives responding from the first days of the invasion, as well as large flexible funding available via the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) appeal. These conditions were conducive to introducing and scaling up two approaches that Christian Aid proposed to partners during the first six months of the response: flexible small grants (FSGs) and sclr. Both sclr and FSG approaches are meant to complement, not replace, the traditional humanitarian response.

Many staff working for our partners, especially local Ukrainian staff, had never worked in a humanitarian context before. They had to learn about both humanitarian response and the sclr approach very quickly. Christian Aid had to balance what they could do with what support they would need.

At the start of the crisis, Christian Aid partnered with two international NGOs and ACT sister alliance agencies working in Ukraine and Hungary – Hungarian Interchurch Aid (HIA), and the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (HRCA) via HEKS-EPER/Swiss Church Aid (HEKS-EPER). These were joined two months later by a local Ukrainian NGO, Alliance for Public Health (APH), responding on the frontline in eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.

Christian Aid and the partners worked together to identify the most appropriate approaches to support the spontaneous initiatives in their contexts, according to the partners' structure, work culture, geographical focus and expertise. Based on these considerations, each partner took a slightly different approach. HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER supplemented their existing work with their own network with FSGs. APH sub-granted funds to their large network of partners and each of the partners adopted the sclr approach to receive proposals from local informal community groups, such as internally displaced people (IDPs) residing in a shared space.

Below: Viktor Oleksiyovych Zolotov was evacuated from his home in Kharkiv to a rehabilitation center that was repurposed as a home for more than 400 internally displaced people. The APH partner Building the Future Together ran an sclr programme that aimed to meet basic needs, including providing Viktor with a modern wheelchair so he could continue his work as a music teacher for local children and evacuees. (Photo credit: Building the Future Together).

Flexible small grants (FSGs) are a rapid-response, low-compliance, small granting mechanism to fund local and national NGOs, formal community-based organisations, registered professional associations, and parishes who are providing services to people in need. FSGs can be easily reported through the cluster system according to the service provided. FSGs are one of the holistic innovations for cash programming that still sit within the humanitarian architecture, providing flexibility but also fitting with donor/upwards accountability. Although FSGs can sit within the humanitarian architecture their multisectoral nature means coordination is a challenge. Implementers will not know what types of work will be done in each area beforehand, so the approach is better suited to an area-based coordination system rather than a sector-based system.

As noted in Table 1, there are important distinctions between FSGs and the microgrant process within sclr. Sclr is a more transformative approach because it puts the power in the hands of survivors and is survivor-led, but FSGs also have strengths in the early stages of a humanitarian response because they can be provided quickly and support the existing capacity of local organisations. HIA found that, with time, local organisations got faster in applying for grants as they learned the process. More organisations also joined their network as they heard about the opportunities for FSGs through word of mouth. Transitioning to sclr is operationally relatively simple if an agency has the capacity and willingness to provide FSGs. However, it involves a change of mindset to give power back to communities and let them lead.

Table 1: Comparing sclr and FSGs

	Sclr microgrants	Flexible small grants
Mostly driven by	Ideas based on opportunities and/or gaps	Service provision based on needs and/or preparedness
Ideas generated by	Individuals, groups	Local actor providing a service
Value per grant	Up to US$5,000, typically $1,500 – $3,000	Upwards of $5,000, can be $10,000–20,000
Decision made by	Locally represented selection committee	International NGO or local NGO
Implementer of activities	Group of individuals (registered or unregistered)	Local actors implementing the service
Accountability	Horizontal (mostly community level)	Vertical (service provider to local/international NGO funding agency, and upwards to donors)
Reporting	Outcome focused, by groups to local NGO	Output-focused, by service providers, local NGO and upward to international NGO

HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER's experience with FSGs

This method of cash programming has been adopted by HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER to support their networks of local parishes and local NGO partners who were already providing relief to IDPs and refugees. In the first six months of the crisis (up to the end of August 2022) **the two organisations and their networks disbursed 41 FSGs in Hungary and 73 in Ukraine (the majority in the west), providing services to 39,036 individuals with a total of £584,877**. This method worked well for HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER because their networks of local NGOs and parishes were already providing services that were immediately transferrable to meeting the needs of people on the move.

As this was a new way of working, there was some scepticism among partner staff in the early days of FSGs. Staff that had more experience of traditional hands-on relief activities struggled to adopt a new approach while scaling up their main response. However, before long, it became widely recognised by all involved that the approach was very valuable in the first months of the crisis, enabling support for people in need in a decentralised, fast and effective way. In the second phase of the DEC appeal (September 2022–August 2023) both HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER are aspiring to support their parishes and local NGOs to complement FSGs with sclr to provide more depth in the community-led aspect of their response. This represents an important reform for the organisations and their partners.

The HIA and HCRA/HEKS-EPER process for awarding FSGs was straightforward from a compliance perspective and had the advantage of being quick and flexible in a dynamic context. Due to Ukrainian law, only registered entities can receive grants with this modality. Grants can be a maximum of €20,000, and the local NGOs and parishes must report on the use of funds not only to HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER, but also to the local authorities. The grants are treated as an unconditional cash transfer, and member parishes and local NGOs in the HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER networks applied for funding with short project proposals using a simple format. After review and approval, a contract was signed with reporting requirements. Finding the right balance between speed and accountability in the bureaucratic culture of eastern Europe was not easy.

In the early days, as we collectively learned the best ways forward, there was sometimes a tendency to expect local NGOs to fill in complicated contracts and due diligence processes, which slowed down the process of disbursing grants. Due to the

size of the grant, the pre-existing relationships with HIA and HRCA/HEKS-EPER and the fact that the cash transfer was unconditional, no additional due diligence of the grant recipients was needed. The cash disbursement to local NGOs/parishes is where the financial reporting ends for back donors. All of these elements allowed HIA and HRCA/HEKS to push grants out to parishes quickly to deliver the relief services to IDPs.

The FSGs were functional interventions that disbursed funds to community groups at oblast (provincial) level enabling them to provide services to the population on the move and meet their basic needs. They can be considered 'offer-led' because the NGO proposes the intervention, based on their understanding of the needs, rather than the crisis-affected population. Parishes and local NGOs had certain capacity, which they put to work where they thought it would be useful for the IDPs. Activities and services supported by FSGs included: providing shelter to host IDPs in churches, kitchens to provide food, hygiene kits, children's summer camps or art therapy for psychosocial support, and rehabilitation activities for children with disabilities. The parishes set up quickly – in the first few days of the crisis – using their own financial resources and volunteers. Their actions were effective and efficient and strongly based on solidarity and compassion.

The FSGs were well received. They refilled the parishes' and local NGOs' depleted resources, they didn't disrupt the existing workflow or work modalities as they built on what they were already doing, and they gave the parishes and local NGOs confidence that their work was good and useful, boosting self-esteem and commitment. The services the parishes and local NGOs provided were run by volunteers with limited resources. Therefore, the injection of FSGs not only enabled them to provide further support but also offered a great opportunity for HIA, HRCA/HEKS-EPER and Christian Aid to improve standards, such as safeguarding, inclusion, accountability and setting up of complaints and feedback systems. Additionally, their service points provided a perfect opportunity to share lifesaving information with the IDPs and refugees.

The significant scale of cash that was distributed within six months demonstrates that FSGs can be used as a frontline response in the earliest days of a humanitarian response. Imagine the impact if the aid system as a whole placed the same emphasis on this type of localised collective approach, as well as providing unrestricted cash transfers, such as multipurpose cash assistance or cash for protection, that people can use to meet basic needs on top of the existing social protection systems.

'Some congregations in March–May offered their congregation rooms as temporary shelters, [and] money [was] used to renovate [them], [and they] can now be easily converted to shelters, [as well as] community space. Refugees who settled in the neighbouring area go back to [their previous] temporary shelters as meeting spaces for local refugees and local congregation. [As a result] more people networks have formed, [they can] find jobs, some got safe assistance from the networks of people, who were not related to each other before the crisis.'

HRCA coordinator

APH's experience with survivor- and community-led response

Two months after the start of the war Christian Aid began a new partnership with APH, a Kyiv-based organisation, to implement sclr. APH coordinates a network of NGOs working in the field of public health across Ukraine. Because of their pre-existing presence, the local NGOs were responding in and around frontline areas that most international NGOs cannot or will not access. For two decades, APH have been treating people living with HIV and TB and supporting vulnerable and marginalised communities in Ukraine. Because of their reach, APH was approached by their health-focused donors in the initial stage of the war. However, the funding came with too many strings attached. APH felt the donors' offers were too rigid in terms of activities and compliance hurdles and were not suitable for the evolving and unpredictable context. Christian Aid – supported by the DEC – offered both flexible funding and an approach, sclr, that resonated with APH. APH recognised how sclr would fit with their ways of working and aspirations, and enthusiastically embraced the approach.

APH sub-granted funds to their large network of partners and each of the partners adopted the sclr approach to receive proposals from local formal and informal community groups. This worked well for APH. As a network of Ukrainian NGOs already well established and connected in communities, they could easily communicate the sclr process from the word go. The microgrant recipients varied a lot. For example, some are groups of IDPs, some are community groups working on the frontline, and some are church groups supporting people who arrive in their towns.

'[this way of working] allowed us to move away from HIV work and do humanitarian work where needed … it seems that anything will work [as a mini-grant initiative] and this motivated us.'

APH network partner

Below: A community group partnered with APH and led by local leader Lyudmyla Andreeva, with support from local group Spodivannia, established a community laundry facility, with the goal of improving housing conditions and giving the community – now a mix of original residents and newly arrived IDPs – a project to work on together.

APH were able to provide 97 microgrants to local groups across 18 oblasts in four months, reaching a total of 52,550 individuals with a budget of £296,456. These community-led interventions complemented their ongoing work providing food, protection, safe spaces, mobile health services and evacuation for people impacted by war, including those in areas of active fighting.

APH allocated the funds equally among their 20 partners, who then decided how to break down the microgrants by oblast, number and size of grant. They adapted the guidance, tools and process templates to fit the context. To maximise the number of partners they could reach, despite the legal restrictions on working only with registered NGOs, they reached out via multiple channels, including websites, social media, Telegram, Viber and in-person meetings, to reach three different types of groups: i) registered groups, ii) unregistered groups that were linked to or worked with registered group partners, and iii) unregistered groups that planned to register. APH went the extra mile and found creative solutions to reach any group that was already helping the population, regardless of registration status.

A selection committee with five to seven people – including a representative from each of the local facilitating agencies, the APH team and the local authorities, and a finance colleague or accountant – reviewed and scored the proposals against pre-agreed criteria, deciding which to award. Decision making was 'emotionally hard' noted one APH partner; being part of the community, it is understandable that APH partners at times feel too close to the crisis or to people to make a neutral decision.

Some APH partners reflected that their experience of engaging with marginalised groups through sclr projects helped their connection with new groups, for example, IDPs. As the process went on and more microgrants were awarded, APH partners were able to work with groups more quickly. Elected leaders from within the community were sought out and/or connected with groups, to share knowledge and expertise from a specific profession – for example, health professionals or accountants – for the benefit of the whole group. Furthermore, APH partners engaging with new groups or members of society, such as people who use drugs, worked with a local expert or sought advice from APH colleagues. This flexibility and ability to connect with others was valuable to the process, especially given how new an approach it was to all involved.

'I dreamt of providing grants [to groups of people] several years ago [wanting to] increase their capacity – it has increased, tenfold.'

Convictus Ukraine (APH network partner)

One of the key elements of sclr is the cross-pollination among sclr groups and the wider community, which promotes learning and accountability among existing sclr groups, and encourages other groups to take up the approach after they see it in action. In sclr programming around the world, communities often report seeing groups designing and implementing their own initiatives around a particular need or opportunity. Interest is generated among other individuals or groups in the neighbouring area, who too begin developing their own ideas. APH partners observed this happening, reporting that new groups formed as existing groups implemented their initiatives, and approached both the APH partner and other local actors with their plans. Many of these groups are now awaiting the announcement of the next round of microgrants.

As an APH staff member recalled when thinking about a group of IDPs trying to improve conditions for the local community:

> ‘[it was] part of our moral right, we [needed to] do something for [their] community’.

In smaller towns where the choice of suppliers was limited, community groups and the partner agency found workarounds, such as establishing an agreement with one supplier to purchase all the equipment needed from various sources and then deliver for free.

> ‘We didn’t stop cooperating with local authorities, [they] knew about our work and asked for access [to groups and communities] and about their needs.’
>
> APH partner

As a result of working collaboratively with many local actors and vendors, the APH partners built positive relationships with local authorities, which led in some cases to authorities funding the group’s activities.

The community groups played a huge role in public relations by documenting and sharing their progress and achievements among themselves, the wider community and across their networks. It was clear even from short videos shot by the community groups how much ownership and pride groups and their neighbours felt towards their initiatives.

Below is a small collection of examples that, despite the early stages of this approach in Ukraine, already demonstrate the value of supporting groups to self-mobilise and implement their own holistic initiatives during a crisis, especially one as volatile as a war:

- An approved proposal planned to establish a bomb shelter and had identified a location. The potential shelter/location was bombed overnight and destroyed; the next morning the local organisation, Blago, sought approval to change the plan. Funds were used instead to repair vehicles that had been damaged by shelling,

  which had been used to evacuate approximately 3,000 people, including those with disabilities (Kharkiv).
- A village implementing an initiative to repair the water station damaged by shelling and bombing used its own money to co-fund the microgrant, giving the whole village (over 900 people) access to water again (Odessa).
- In a community located in a transit area for IDPs, a simple agreement was established between the partner and the local community, and signed by a host community representative, agreeing that assets purchased for the microgrant project serving IDPs would be transferred for the community to oversee and manage (Mykolaiv).

The example of APH's work highlights the need for mainstream humanitarian architecture and response to recognise what is already happening on the ground as local actors and groups provide a rapid and relevant frontline response. APH has continued to expand its sclr work beyond the initial programme with Christian Aid, securing funds from other donors to apply sclr programming in their work with people living with HIV/AIDS. APH's leadership in expanding their sclr work demonstrates their confidence in and buy-in to the process.

According to an APH staff member, seeing this group of IDPs install a communal laundry room that both children and local residents now use was:

'challenging but [a] big joy to do it and cooperate with residents, and [seeing] IDPs' commitment is something that gives me inspiration and joy.'

The experience and benefit of sclr can be well summarised by the following quote by an APH partner:

'I was surprised to see people unite in difficult times, and work for the common goal ... everything was transparent, [people] could resolve [their] own problems, and find solutions ... [we got a] very good impression of community and how we worked ... [it] impressed us how [the] whole community was united for dismantling damaged windows, procurement, and installation.'

- Over the summer, local farmers planned a project to build a greenhouse in which to grow vegetables, to ensure a good supply of fresh food ahead of the long winter (Poltava).
- A group provided equipment and space for a laundry, which became a meeting place, connecting IDPs and local people, giving them an opportunity to talk and connect (Zaporizka).
- Spodivannia established a chatbox and software to check needs and create shopping lists for IDPs, saving time and connecting IDPs (Zaporizka).
- A community group opened a space to provide art therapy for children and distribute food and hygiene kits, promoting social rehabilitation (Vinnytsia).
- A community group provided equipment and arranged speech therapy for IDP children with autism, providing psychosocial recovery and adaptation following trauma/stress from the war (Lviv).
- Convictus Ukraine cleaned drinking water wells so they can be used if the central water supply is damaged in future attacks (Kyiv).
- New Family conducted four two-day trainings on providing pre-medical care (Chernivtsi).
- Vidrodzhennya Natsiyi repaired/replaced damaged windows in homes, shelters and public buildings used by locals and IDPs (Chernikivska).

Lessons learned and ongoing challenges

Below are some of the reflections from Christian Aid and partners' first six months of implementing FSGs and sclr in Ukraine in 20 oblasts with a budget of £881,133 given out through 221 grants – 170 in Ukraine and 41 in Hungary. Although staff from all partners reported similar lessons learned, the difference between FSGs and sclr is evident as sclr transfers decision-making power and resources further down from local actors to the people impacted by the war themselves with significant transformative outcomes.

Lessons learned

At community and group level:

- Despite the challenges of the conflict, and the legislation and restrictions in Ukraine, it is possible to shift power and resources to groups of individuals affected by the conflict.
- The response in Ukraine has shown that FSGs and sclr can be effective in high-conflict environments. All those currently involved in the approach report that it was speedy, transparent and accountable to communities. The major barriers to scaling up are the willpower and knowledge of other humanitarian actors, and the difficulties reporting the cross-cutting work done under sclr through the cluster coordination system.
- Local groups and self-help groups feel a strong sense of ownership in the process when they are involved in planning, executing, promoting and monitoring. They are proud of the initiatives that help the community, which improves their mental wellbeing and capacity to deal with the trauma of war.
- Seeing groups designing and implementing their own initiatives around a particular need or opportunity generates interest among other individuals or groups in the neighbouring area, who also begin developing their own ideas that would not be funded by traditional humanitarian funding. New groups form while existing groups are implementing their initiatives.
- Many of the grant applicants experienced a steep learning curve managing the proposal process and the grant. They have all been supported by the partner organisations, keeping paperwork to a minimum. However, it is the first time these groups have formally put together proposals, budgets and reports of any kind. Though a challenge, this

'This project has demonstrated the need for making people more active, to involve people who were victims, or [have faced] losses, such people find the inner force to help others – this direction shows the world a light at the end of the tunnel. [It is a] roadmap showing where to go and where others can go.'

Maryna Varban, APH secretariat/Alliance

has also been an opportunity to transform from an aid recipient to being in control, and in the case of some of the local organisations, to being a grant giver facilitating sclr grants in their local area.

- In the first six months of the war, many of the initiatives led by community groups understandably were to meet basic needs. Nevertheless, there were several projects – such as the greenhouse project mentioned above – where even in the height of crisis communities took a holistic approach, demonstrating that they were looking to strengthen their resilience for the future.

At facilitating agencies level (HIA, HRCA/HEKS-EPER and APH network):

- The best results from FSGs and sclr in terms of meeting needs, satisfaction, ownership and effectiveness were seen when our partners had pre-existing long-term relationships with parishes, local NGOs or network members that are embedded in the communities, where trust and personal relationships play a critical role for accountability and promoting mutual aid.
- Ukrainian legislation was a challenge, but the Ukrainian (and Hungarian) organisations that Christian Aid partners worked with found workarounds. The relevance, efficiency and adaptability of FSGs and the sclr approach made this possible. The flexibility offered by DEC appeal funds maximised the impact of the sclr and FSG approaches.
- Ukraine's regulations on providing cash to non-registered groups constrain who can receive grants. However, based on evidence from more than seven years' experience with sclr, there is nothing to suggest that this approach would be more open to fraud or corruption than other aid modalities.[17] Indeed, the diffuse use of small-scale grants could even be viewed as de-risking, in contrast to other approaches that rely on large, centralised procurement.
- APH was quick to pick up the sclr approach as it fitted with their aspirations and ways of working. As they were already active on the ground, the approach allowed them to use all their existing resources and knowledge of the community.
- Local organisations and the APH network have strengthened relationships and trust with local authorities by showing leadership and offering solutions. The reputation and profile of the smaller NGOs (APH's network partners) has increased within their areas and among their local peers, as well as with the local administration. As one staff member reflected, 'the attitude of the public administration changed [and they] looked at us with wide

open eyes'; as a 'grant giver', their authority increased among local stakeholders.

- By engaging with local people in a different way – that is, receiving proposals to address specific needs and gaps – these organisations have a better understanding of what people need and of their capacity to respond, which they did not know before.
- The process was a lesson in humility. Partners with long experience in traditional humanitarian response had to learn to go against their instinct and let go of control and put their trust in communities. International NGOs had to admit their own limitations, recognise the capacities of local actors and question the relevance of some of their assumptions, compliance norms and standard operating procedures.

Challenges

- Partners still refer to 'needs' and prioritise proposals that address urgent matters rather than considering what capacity, resources and connections groups have to offer, or going even further, the opportunities available. In the next rounds of funding, partners may be able to look beyond urgent needs – however this will depend on the evolving nature of the crisis.
- APH found it hard to prioritise the experiential learning meetings with community groups following their interventions to capture (and then share) what worked and what didn't and encourage reflection by the communities. In the next phase of the programme this will receive priority.
- Although some groups have spontaneously worked together, to date there has been little chance to effectively connect community groups and help them collaborate on more ambitious plans of mutual interest (pooling ideas, knowledge labour, in-kind resources, funds and so on).
- A core aim of sclr is to help community groups evolve from their initial efforts to address immediate needs to build longer-term resilience, and, where possible, tackle root causes. Despite the enormous challenges, this longer-term aim should not be forgotten.
- FSGs can be reported through the humanitarian cash architecture, but the sclr microgrants very often do not fit neatly into a 'sector' box, making them challenging to report, and possibly causing double counting of the cash provided. The knock-on effect is an exclusion of local actors from the formal humanitarian system, because their cash-based work is not easily captured in sector reporting.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite years of attempts to reform humanitarian response to make it more localised and community led, the humanitarian system continues to exclude and stifle locally led humanitarian action. The incredible outpouring of volunteer support and solidarity in Ukraine was undermined and boxed in by the humanitarian architecture. Local efforts have gone unfunded, local impact is uncounted due to the difficulties of engaging with the cluster system, and local knowledge of opportunities and needs are unvalued.

This paper has shown that survivor- and community-led response and flexible small grant approaches can work at speed to put power and accountability back into the hands of communities and meet needs in a bespoke way, working in complementarity with traditional humanitarian response approaches. Transitioning to these approaches is well within the operational capacity of organisations that are already running large-scale cash programming. A shift of mindset is required to tolerate a flexible and community-driven approach. These transformative approaches each have their pros and cons depending on the context and organisational capacity of the facilitating agencies and communities where they work, as laid out in the cases and lessons learned above.

Ukraine is not unique. While it is one example, the sclr approach has worked in many different sudden-onset or protracted crises. Christian Aid is currently implementing sclr in the East Africa drought crisis, Lebanon, and Haiti after the earthquake. It works well anywhere where the nature of the crisis demands a response that reaches across the triple nexus, meeting humanitarian needs while also looking at ongoing causes such as poverty, inequality and the climate crisis. But sclr and FSGs are not a one-size-fits-all blueprint; they can and must be contextualised and adapted in any situation where communities are responding to crisis or building resilience.

We offer the following recommendations to operational and donor agencies interested in incorporating transformative, community-led approaches into their programming:

1. **Donors and intermediaries should live up to Grand Bargain commitments and increase direct funding at scale to local actors, including mechanisms and incentives to support sclr for a real 'participatory revolution'.** Local actors are already rooted in their communities and best placed to respond quickly and effectively.
2. **The sector, including donors and international and national NGOs, needs to overcome the instinct to maintain tight control of local organisations' and groups' work**. They need to let go of power, and tolerate more flexibility and unpredictability. It takes a mindset shift to trust people with money and to help them develop their ideas if they need to be guided.
3. **Donors – both institutional donors and NGOs providing grants – must shift the centre of accountability to people implementing the response, by minimising compliance and eliminating due diligence at the lowest level for a more inclusive and effective crisis response**. The current structures of compliance and due diligence are both fragmented and structured around the donor as the centre of accountability because they put up the money. A more people-centred response would employ a compliance and accountability structure that says affected populations will feel the impact of misuse of funds today more than auditors several years down the line. Reforms are required, but from today FSGs and sclr can be a bridge between institutional funding and community groups who do the heavy lifting in humanitarian responses.
4. **Humanitarian architecture needs to be reformed to centre community-led responses that do not fit neatly into sector boxes.** Area-based coordination facilitates the inclusion of local actors and gives them a voice and decision-making power. Nevertheless, it is how local actors engage with the community that counts, and practices such as FSGs and slcr allow greater leadership, accountability and empowerment of people during a crisis. Their agency is key to building back better. These community initiatives cut across multiple sectors and do not fit into sectoral boxes. To avoid overlooking or undermining spontaneous local responses it is important to acknowledge their existence, create inclusive spaces for participation, and capture the work in reporting.

Endnotes

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