*Figure 1APH Art Therapy. Credit: David Green. Partner: Alliance for Public Health.*

# Do we need to find a ‘home’ for community led initiatives within the aid architecture?

## Case study 3

*Christian Aid (CA) has been supporting community led response in Ukraine since the days following Russia’s full-scale invasion, working with partners such as Alliance for Public Health, Blythewood, Heritage Ukraine, Light of Reformation and Serve Now.*

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*This case study elaborates a major programmatic challenge the Christian Aid team has continually discussed with partners as part of our learning journey.*

Christian Aid has been able to pursue the SCLR approach in Ukraine due to relationships with supportive funders (The DEC, and ACT Alliance sister agencies and Appeals). However, in order to leverage additional funding from institutional sources, the question often arises of how SCLR coordinates with the conventional humanitarian architecture (the cluster system).

There has been an SCLR community of practice in Ukraine in different guises since the first agencies started piloting it. However, these have been practitioner focused for those implementing SCLR, or Group Cash Transfers[1], rather than an advocacy forum for embedding it into the international system. Group Cash Transfers have gained a prominence in Ukraine, possibly because of their inclusion in the Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) user journey research[2]. In May 2024, findings from the GTS workshops recommended that the Ukraine Cash Working Group should "*Create linkages between existing Survivor and Community-Led Response (SCLR) Communities of Practice (COP) and the Cash Working Group (CWG*)." To that end, a new Community Led Initiatives COP was set up[3], with the express mandate to increase coordination with, and gain access to funding from, the conventional humanitarian system.

<u>There are several recurring topics this group grapples with:</u>

- If CLI's are working at community level, how can they be deduplicated with conventional aid and government systems? The fear is inclusion and exclusion errors.
- We cannot predict or control what sectors initiatives will respond to, how can they therefore be coordinated and reported with other responses?
- How do CLIs meet specific cluster standards[4], when the focus of the initiative is on a cluster specific issue, e.g. WASH and shelter engineering standards.

[1] How can we Distinguish a 'supporting community led response' from a Group Cash Transfer? - The CALP Network

[2] Mapping the user journeys of cash recipients in Ukraine — Ground Truth Solutions

[3] Co led by Christian Aid, DCA and APH, with a CWG focal point.

[4] Many of the debates around this are also played out in the GCT and sclr paper (1). Although for transparency the learning from Ukraine helped inform a lot of the discussion behind the paper.

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Asking a soup kitchen how they are cross referencing with those receiving other Food assistance, or how volunteers mobilising to rebuild homes of older people are fitting into shelter sector standards feels more like '*being coordinated by*' rather than '*coordinating with*'. Ultimately, the question SCLR practitioners have to ask is, are the requirements of mapping, reporting, and harmonisation, worth the potential ability to scale initiatives with the funding the system can provide?

During 2025 the CLI COP will continue to try and work on these issues. A lot of the coordination burden falls on local implementing actors, but informal feedback leads us to believe that local actors prefer coordinating with local authorities and existing networks when implementing this type of response. In many respects the international system feels duplicative.

**Wider implications:**

The international humanitarian architecture has come under numerous criticisms some of which are rooted in its lack of relevance to the people it serves. SCLR is an emerging practice which is designed to both complement and challenge conventional approaches. "Today, if you are working in the UN-led cluster system, coordinating with SCLR is not possible because of sector-specific requirements, which demand restrictions on the scope of design."[5] In practice does the complementarity mean teams should not ignore the clusters, but at the same time, they do not need to be 'coordinated by' them.

Sclr practitioners should also continue to challenge structures that hinder locally led response. Reforms are needed and there is a wealth of experiential learning which can help inform these discussions. We recognise that the benefits of mutual aid and locally led approaches being recognised within the international aid architecture must be balanced against the potential negative effects.

The potential benefits include:

- Community Led Initiatives being included in the OCHA flash appeal. This could link CLIs to funding whilst also supporting OCHA funding to be used in a more locally led and localised way.
- Increasing the visibility and fundability of CLIs globally. This could link more organisations that supporting CLIs with funding that is currently not available to them.

[5] How can we Distinguish a 'supporting community led response' from a Group Cash Transfer? - The CALP Network

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- Increasing the number and type of agencies willing to fund CLIs which could enhance locally led response globally.

Some potential drawbacks include:

- Community led initiatives, becoming projectized away from their original principles, becoming only group cash transfers or grants to only formal CSOs.
- A lack of understanding and capacity could lead to non CLIs being funded. This could result in conventional top-down approaches being funded and reported as CLAs, therefore not bringing about true change to people and communities affected by crisis, or the sector.

CA, and our ACT sisters globally have pushed for recognition and support of Community Led Initiatives from funders, and the international aid architecture. Some achievements to date include the establishment of the CLI workstream in Palestine which has successfully advocated for funding from the OCHA flash appeal[6], via the Protection Cluster. In Sudan the Emergency Response rooms have garnered much attention for mutual aid as a powerful response approach[7]. Interestingly, both of these contexts are ones where conventional humanitarian access has remained low.

In contrast, Ukraine (excluding the occupied territories) access has not been as large a challenge. One hypothesis the team has considered is that increased access leads to an environment where the international system is more comfortable localising responses (trying to include more local actors within it), than pushing for a more locally led response (facilitating local actors to run the response)[8]. Overall, it is incumbent on those who are committed to locally led humanitarian assistance to continue to advocate for reform and build an evidence base to drive change.

[6] OPT_Flash_Appeal_2025_EN.pdf
[7] Mutual aid in Sudan: the future of aid? | Humanitarian Practice Network
[8] Localisation_ALNAP-FINAL.pdf

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