



CONFLICT SENSITIVITY REPORT

Kharkiv Oblast

Ukraine 2025



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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
CL	Community Liaison
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EO	Explosive Ordnance
EORE	Explosive Ordnance Risk Education
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRP	Gross Regional Product
HMA	Humanitarian Mine Action
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KII	Key Informant Interview
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MSME	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise
NACP	National Agency on Corruption Prevention
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NTS	Non-Technical Survey
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

Executive Summary

Kharkiv Oblast continues to face the cumulative effects of Russia’s full-scale invasion, including large-scale displacement, infrastructure damage, ongoing security threats, and Explosive Ordnance (EO) contamination. This conflict sensitivity analysis examines how war-related pressures shape community relations, trust dynamics, and perceptions of fairness—factors critical to effective humanitarian and recovery programming. Based on assessment data from nine communities collected in November 2025, the report identifies key conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities, providing actionable recommendations for conflict-sensitive assistance.

Key insights

Economic strain and risks of aid-related tensions

Households face severe financial strain from lost income, destroyed assets, and rising costs. Local governance budgets are depleted, limiting service delivery. These pressures create fertile ground for tensions when assistance is perceived as insufficient or unfairly distributed. Communities closely compare who receives support and why, making transparency about targeting criteria essential.

Trust depends on visible performance and transparent communication

Trust in local authorities and humanitarian actors is shaped by their visible crisis response, transparent decision-making, and clear communication. While internally displaced person (IDP)-host relations are generally positive, tensions emerge where resources are limited or aid distribution seems unfair. Perceptions of corruption, particularly in reconstruction and aid allocation, can rapidly undermine legitimacy, even without evidence of systemic wrongdoing. Some groups, including older people, people with disabilities, and those in remote areas, may have limited access to commonly used communication channels such as social media, local bulletins, or community meetings, which can reduce their awareness of decisions and aid processes.

Fairness judged through observable micro-level signals

Residents judge fairness based on visible allocation decisions, for example, who gets housing repairs first, aid distribution or beneficiary selection. Lack of clarity about why certain neighbourhoods are prioritised fuels grievances and rumours. Communication becomes a substitute for participation under wartime constraints, making transparent explanation of criteria and timelines critical.

Multiple groups face heightened exclusion risks

Overall intergroup relations in the region remain largely positive, with communities demonstrating solidarity and relatively low levels of open tension. However, the prolonged impact of the war has affected groups unevenly. Certain vulnerable and at-risk populations experience more acute socioeconomic strain, barriers to services, and reduced coping capacity, which increases their exposure to exclusion even in otherwise cohesive communities. For instance, IDPs experience discrimination in employment and housing. Older people struggle with mobility and service access. People with disabilities encounter physical barriers and limited support. Single-parent households face economic vulnerability. Veterans experience social distance due to gaps in reintegration programming. Addressing these overlapping vulnerabilities requires intentional inclusive approaches.

Main connectors and dividers

Key connectors: Local volunteerism and grassroots networks; shared war experience and local identity; functional cooperation between communities, Civil Society Organisations (CSO), and local authorities on urgent needs; cultural and religious practices; Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) building collective safety awareness.

Key dividers: IDP-host competition for resources; unequal assistance distribution; perceived corruption, unfairness in aid, clearance prioritisation, and compensation; limited community participation due to security constraints; Information gaps, rumours, and limited transparency under prolonged emergency governance.

Strategic recommendations

1. Prioritise transparent communication

- Sustain and expand existing practices of proactively explaining targeting criteria, priorities, and timelines through multiple channels and trusted local messengers (authorities, NGOs, volunteers).
- Continue ensuring accessible feedback mechanisms, including the existing DRC's Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM) and two-way communication embedded in community liaison (CL), outreach, assessment, and other engagement activities, to systematically capture concerns and clarify decisions. Clear communication prevents rumours and maintains legitimacy even when universal coverage is impossible.

2. Leverage connectors, mitigate dividers

- Proactively consult volunteer networks on accessibility needs and barriers to EORE and non-technical survey (NTS) uptake. Coordinate with them ahead of distributions and monitoring to align targeting and coverage.
- Integrate EORE as a common safety concern across groups.
- Proactively address IDP-host tensions through inclusive programming and dialogue.
- Use CSOs to mediate emerging conflicts before they escalate.

3. Reinforce local governance and civil society

- Engage with hromada authorities rather than creating parallel systems.
- Support local CSOs and volunteer networks as trusted intermediaries.
- Build CSO capacity in conflict sensitivity and inclusive programming.

4. Ensure intentional inclusion of marginalised groups

- Actively reach IDPs, older people, people with disabilities, single parents, and veterans through targeted outreach, adapted participation formats, and accessible assistance modalities.
- Create safe spaces for different groups to voice concerns.
- Adapt participation methods to security constraints and accessibility needs.
- Address overlapping vulnerabilities through integrated approaches.

5. Coordinate to reduce visible disparities

- Coordinate with local authorities and ensure compliance with Ukrainian regulations to reinforce legitimacy and reduce confusion.
- Share targeting approaches across organisations to avoid conflicting messages.
- Coordinate geographically to prevent stark gaps between neighbouring areas.
- Establish joint monitoring of community perceptions and tensions. Inconsistency breeds suspicion.

6. Embed conflict sensitivity as core practice to ensure adaptive management

- Conduct conflict sensitivity assessments before programme design.
- Train staff on Do No Harm/Conflict Sensitivity principles and local power dynamics.
- Monitor perceptions regularly and create feedback loops that influence programming.
- Plan exit strategies that do not create sudden gaps or resentment.

7. Balance targeted and universal approaches

- Combine vulnerability-based targeting with area-based or universal components.
- Assistance that creates visible collective benefits reduces resentment over individual targeting. When targeting individuals/households, ensure criteria are objective, transparent, and validated with communities.

I. Introduction

Kharkiv Oblast continues to experience the cumulative effects of the full-scale invasion, including large-scale displacement, damage to civilian infrastructure, pressure on essential services, and ongoing security threats. These conflict-related dynamics shape daily life and influence how people interact with one another, how institutions operate, and how different population groups perceive safety, fairness, and belonging. The social landscape is therefore characterised not only by humanitarian needs, but also by shifts in trust, relationships, and expectations toward authorities and humanitarian actors. Understanding these interactions is essential for designing programmes that meet needs while also avoiding the unintended aggravation of local tensions and helping communities retain or rebuild resilience.

This report presents a conflict sensitivity analysis of selected communities in Kharkiv Oblast, based primarily on data collected through an assessment conducted in late 2025. The assessment focuses on communities affected by Explosive Ordnance (EO) contamination-related risks and humanitarian interventions, where issues of safety, access, and recovery, including fear of contamination, intersect with broader social and institutional dynamics. The analysis explores how demographic changes, socio-economic pressures, access to services, local governance practices, and the security situation interact with social relations and community dynamics. Special attention is paid to people and groups who may face barriers to participation or assistance, including IDPs, older people, veterans and their families, and people with disabilities.

Although empirical data were collected in a limited number of locations, the report situates these findings within broader oblast-level patterns observed across conflict-affected communities. A case study approach is used to capture variation across different settlement profiles, allowing insights to remain relevant beyond the immediate assessment sites. The analysis therefore discusses both community-level issues and wider regional dynamics, such as population mobility, economic disruption, prolonged insecurity, and the expanding role of local authorities and humanitarian organisations. It identifies factors that help communities maintain cooperation and mutual support, as well as those that contribute to tension, exclusion, or mistrust between groups. In doing so, the report adopts a conflict sensitivity perspective, focusing on how assistance and public policies may interact with existing divisions or connectors.

1.1. Purpose and scope

The purpose of this report is to provide an evidence-based analysis of conflict sensitivity dynamics in Kharkiv Oblast and to support the design and implementation of humanitarian and recovery programmes that are conflict-sensitive, inclusive, and grounded in local realities. It examines how the war since 2022 has affected communities, how different groups experience access to services and participation in local life, and how structural, economic, social, and security-related factors interact with local conflict dynamics. The analysis is intended to inform in particular Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA), protection, and recovery programming by highlighting conflict sensitivity risks, potential unintended effects of assistance and connectors that may be opportunities for collaboration/social cohesion.

The report also serves as a pre-assistance conflict sensitivity baseline for two DRC projects: Support to Ukraine Recovery through Mine Action Response (funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC) and Mine Action and Cluster

Munitions Programme III (funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs). It supports reflection on how planned or ongoing interventions may influence local tensions, perceptions of fairness, power relations, and trust in institutions or humanitarian actors. The analysis is building on DRC Conflict Analysis report from 2024, ensuring continuity rather than a stand-alone assessment.

The scope includes developments since the escalation of the full-scale invasion, with particular attention to community relations, trust in local institutions, socio-economic pressures, and psychosocial well-being. Both positive and negative dynamics are considered: factors that strengthen cooperation and shared identity, and those that increase polarisation or exclusion.

1.2. Methodology and data sources

This report is grounded in DRC's operational principle of conflict sensitivity—defined as understanding how aid interacts with conflict in a given context,

in order to mitigate unintended negative effects and influence conflict positively wherever possible across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding interventions. The analytical framework and recommendations draw on DRC's Conflict Sensitivity—A Global Toolkit [37], which provides the conceptual and practical basis for conflict-sensitive programming across DRC's operational contexts.

The analysis is based on a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and secondary data sources. Primary data collection included key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in nine settlements of Kharkiv Oblast, located in Derhachivska, Bezliudivska, Rohanska, and Vilkhivska hromadas. Locations were selected using a purposive case study approach to reflect different types of conflict-affected settings, rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. The selected settlements were chosen primarily because they are communities with ongoing DRC HMA operations or where DRC anticipates future mine action activities. The methodology also ensures that research was conducted in hromadas where HMA and integrated programming are both planned and operationally feasible, creating a basis for longitudinal analysis supported by data generated through ongoing CL and NTS activities throughout 2026. Selection also considered variation in proximity to the frontline, displacement patterns, access to services, infrastructure condition, humanitarian presence, experience of occupation, and settlement type (city, village, or peri-urban). This approach allows for comparison of how conflict sensitivity risks and connectors manifest across different contexts.

Key informants included representatives of local authorities, service providers, CSOs, and informal community leaders, who provided perspectives on governance, service delivery, security, and emerging risks. Focus group discussions engaged residents, both long-term and displaced, to explore perceptions of inclusion, trust, fairness, access to support, and change since 2022. The discussion guides were structured around key conflict sensitivity themes such as connectors and dividers, barriers to participation, interaction with humanitarian aid, and community priorities.

A total of 55 Key Informant Interviews and 18 Focus Group Discussions were conducted in November 2025. The FGDs engaged 108 participants in mixed-gender and mixed-age groups, intentionally composed to include diverse population categories such as IDPs, returnees, veterans, older people, youth, and long-term residents, with the aim of maximising diversity

of perspectives and interaction across social groups. Discussions were facilitated by trained DRC staff, who ensured balanced participation, managed power dynamics, and created space for sensitive topics to be discussed safely. Facilitation was conducted in Ukrainian, while participants were free to use either Ukrainian or Russian, reflecting everyday communication practices and reducing barriers to participation.

CL teams involved in NTS and EORE activities served as enumerators for field data collection, which not only leveraged their existing community knowledge and networks but also provided an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the local context, conflict sensitivity, and community leadership dynamics, supporting their forthcoming activities. These teams received training on conflict sensitivity concepts and qualitative data collection methodologies prior to fieldwork, helping to standardise approaches and strengthen analytical consistency. Secondary sources included administrative statistics, humanitarian situation analyses, and reports from national and international organisations, which were used to contextualise and triangulate findings. DRC Protection Monitoring data provided additional insights into access to services, well-being, and priority concerns of affected populations.

Data analysis was guided by a Do No Harm and connectors-dividers framework, complemented by conflict sensitivity markers focusing on perceptions of fairness, inclusion, power relations, and trust in institutions and humanitarian actors. This framework supported systematic identification of how assistance and broader interventions may interact with existing social dynamics, either reinforcing cohesion or exacerbating tensions.

Although the main evidence base comes from a small number of hromadas, the report discusses implications at oblast level. This extrapolation is qualitative and interpretive rather than statistical; it aims to highlight trends and risks rather than provide exhaustive coverage of all communities.

To strengthen credibility and relevance, preliminary findings underwent internal validation through review by DRC technical managers and CL teams involved in the assessment. Subsequently, key findings were discussed with representatives of local authorities in the hromadas where the assessment was conducted, allowing for factual verification, contextual clarification, and reflection on interpretation, while maintaining the independence of the analysis.

1.3. Limitations and considerations

The findings should be interpreted with an understanding of several methodological and contextual limitations. First, the assessment is based on a limited number of communities and therefore does not capture the full geographical scope of Kharkiv Oblast. While this approach allows for in-depth analysis, it reflects conditions in selected locations rather than across all settlements. As such, the findings should be understood as indicative of broader trends and dynamics rather than as a comprehensive representation of conditions across the entire oblast.

Second, the analysis relies heavily on qualitative methods. Perceptions gathered through interviews and group discussions reflect how people understand and interpret their environment at a particular moment in time. These perceptions may be influenced by recent events, local narratives, fatigue, fear, or expectations toward assistance. They are important in their own right, because perceptions influence behaviour and relationships, but they do not necessarily describe all objective conditions in the same way across locations.

Third, mobility and displacement continue at a significant scale. Population figures, household composition, and community structures are fluid and change rapidly. Secondary demographic and socio-economic data are being continuously updated, and inconsistencies between different sources remain common. As a result, some quantitative contextual information should be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

Fourth, security conditions limit access to certain areas. Approximately 5% of Kharkiv Oblast remains affected by occupation and active hostilities, rendering some settlements inaccessible. Conditions in these areas may diverge substantially from those included in the fieldwork. The report therefore avoids strong generalisations regarding communities under occupation and acknowledges the absence of direct engagement there.

Fifth, Kharkiv City was intentionally excluded from the sample. Its scale, complex urban economy, and different service environment distinguish it sharply from smaller towns and rural settlements. Including it would have influenced the results toward urban dynamics and masked the challenges of smaller communities where reliance on local institutions and humanitarian actors is greater. For this reason, the report primarily reflects the experiences of smaller settlements.

Finally, the situation in Kharkiv Oblast remains highly dynamic. Security conditions, assistance coverage, and governance arrangements may evolve after data collection. The report should therefore be understood as a snapshot that identifies key trends and risks rather than a static or exhaustive diagnosis.

Despite these constraints, the combination of multiple data sources and systematic triangulation provides a sound analytical basis. The findings offer valuable insights that can serve as guidance for conflict-sensitive programming and help identify areas where further monitoring and engagement would be beneficial.

II. Context overview

Kharkiv Oblast is one of Ukraine's largest and most populous regions, a key industrial and agricultural hub that before 2022 played a central role in the country's economy, education, and transport networks. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, it has become one of the most heavily affected frontline regions. Large-scale displacement, extensive infrastructure damage, explosive ordnance contamination, and repeated attacks on energy and civilian facilities have fundamentally transformed the demographic, economic, and security landscape. This section provides an overview of the oblast's administrative structure, the main impacts of the invasion, displacement patterns, and current access to services.

2.1. Administrative and demographic profile

Kharkiv Oblast occupies a strategically significant location in north-eastern Ukraine, bordering the Russian Federation along a long and highly exposed frontier. This position has shaped both its pre-war development and its current vulnerability.

Administratively, the oblast is divided into seven raions following the 2020 decentralisation reform. The reform aimed to strengthen local governance capacity and fiscal autonomy, but its implementation was interrupted by the full-scale invasion before many intended efficiencies could be realised. The oblast comprises a mix of large urban centres, peri-urban settlements, small towns, and rural communities, each with distinct governance structures, resource bases, and exposure to conflict-related impacts. The administrative centre, Kharkiv city, functions as a separate administrative unit and serves as the primary economic, educational, and cultural hub for the region, though its capacity to fulfil these functions has been severely constrained by sustained attacks on critical infrastructure.

Following the declaration of martial law in February 2022, Military Administrations were established at oblast and raion levels, with 27 hromadas (predominantly in occupied, frontline, or high-risk areas) operating under military rather than civilian administration. These Military Administrations supersede elected civilian authorities in security, emergency response, and crisis management functions, while civilian bodies continue routine administrative tasks. This governance arrangement creates operational tensions around accountability, community participation, and preservation of democratic norms under prolonged martial law, with implications for how communities engage with recovery planning and institutional legitimacy.

Local governance structures operate with skeleton staff due to mobilisation, displacement, and casualties among civil servants. Administrative boundaries determine access to assistance and reconstruction priorities, yet often do not reflect pre-war economic activity zones or service areas, complicating coordination and resource allocation.

Before 2022, demographic trends reflected gradual population decline, ageing, and youth out-migration. The full-scale invasion accelerated these dynamics unevenly: urban centres experienced both outflows and later IDP inflows, while frontline rural areas saw steep depopulation with only partial returns. A broader demographic restructuring is underway, characterised by shrinking working-age populations in frontline communities, concentration of IDPs in safer urban areas, rising proportions of older people living alone in high-risk settlements, and increased prevalence of female-headed households due to mobilisation and casualties.

These shifts carry profound implications. Frontline areas face acute labour shortages in agriculture and local services while losing tax base and economic activity. IDP-receiving areas face pressure on employment, housing, and utilities not designed for expanded demand. Service delivery systems are strained: depopulated rural settlements cannot sustain schools and healthcare at prohibitive per capita costs, while urban areas report overcrowded facilities and inadequate services for trauma-affected populations. Traditional mutual aid networks have fractured under displacement pressures, while tensions between residents and newcomers periodically emerge over competition for scarce resources, weakening social fabric precisely when coordinated community action is most needed for recovery.

2.2. Impact of the full-scale invasion on Kharkiv Oblast

The full-scale invasion in February 2022 had an immediate and profound impact. Russian forces advanced quickly from the north and east, subjecting Kharkiv city and surrounding communities to intense bombardment and occupying large parts of the oblast. A Ukrainian counter-offensive in autumn 2022 liberated most territory, yet frontline areas in the east and border zones remain under constant threat. Since 2023, violence has shifted from ground combat to sustained long-range attacks with civilians experiencing regular strikes, especially in border hromadas and Kharkiv city. Governance arrangements have been reshaped by martial law and centralised decision-making through the Oblast Military Administration, which coordinates defence, emergency response, evacuations, and humanitarian logistics. The suspension of local elections and altered political landscape affect institutional trust, particularly where isolated collaboration cases during occupation have raised accountability concerns.

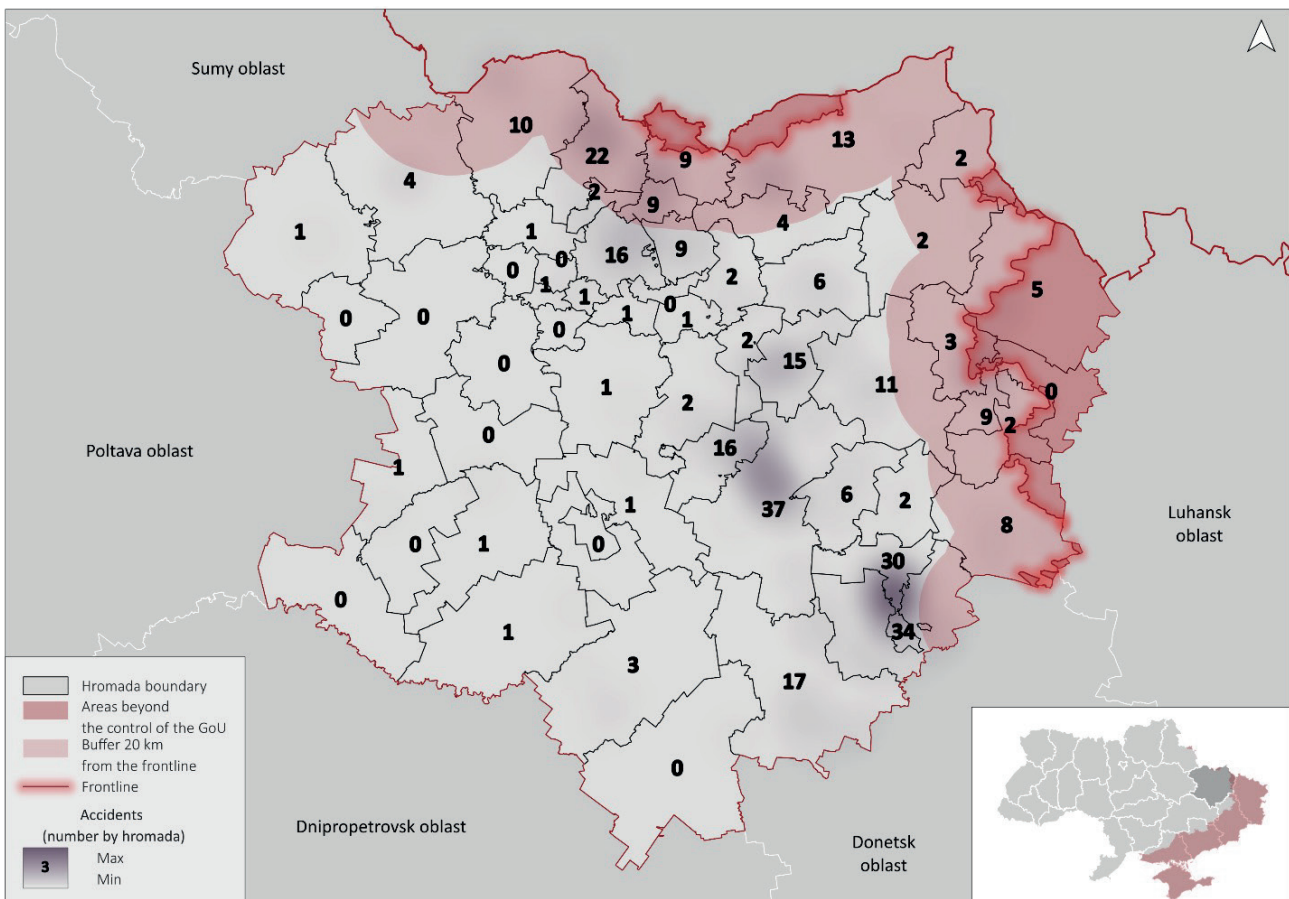
Economically, the oblast has suffered extensive disruption. Industrial facilities, logistics hubs, and

agricultural infrastructure have been damaged, destroyed, or relocated, while many small and medium enterprises closed during peak hostilities. Signs of adaptive recovery exist—new business registration, public works programmes (“Recovery Army”) and partial agricultural resumption—yet livelihoods remain fragile and highly uneven across the oblast.

One of the most severe long-term impacts is explosive ordnance contamination. Kharkiv Oblast is among Ukraine’s most heavily mined regions, with estimates indicating over 40% of territory potentially contaminated [1]. Fields, forests, roads, and household plots are affected, particularly in formerly occupied areas. EO contamination poses immediate life risks while blocking reconstruction, farming, and safe movement. In 2024–2026, renewed offensives and targeted strikes on energy and civilian infrastructure created additional shocks, with rolling power grid attacks causing recurrent blackouts and service disruptions.

2.3. Displacement, returns, and population mobility

The full-scale invasion triggered massive displacement



EO contamination-related accidents by hromada, Kharkiv Oblast

from Kharkiv city and surrounding communities. Approximately 80% of Kharkiv city’s nearly 2 million residents fled in early 2022, while northern and eastern villages were almost completely depopulated. Following the 2022 counter-offensive, returns began significantly, with some communities reporting 70–80% return rates by 2023, at least seasonally. However, displacement has not stabilised. Mandatory evacuations from high-risk border and frontline settlements, particularly in Kupiansk raion, moved thousands of residents, including large numbers of children, to Kharkiv city or safer oblasts throughout 2023–2024. Humanitarian reporting indicates that some residents were reluctant to leave their homes and farmlands despite the danger; others left but later attempted short visits to check property or harvest crops, sometimes at great personal risk [5].

As of November 2025, over 508,000 IDPs are officially registered in Kharkiv Oblast, with the vast majority (87%) originating from other parts of the same oblast [6], reflecting predominantly short-distance, intra-regional displacement. Kharkiv city hosts over 210,000 registered IDPs, placing sustained pressure on housing, infrastructure, education, healthcare, and transport systems. Safer hromadas within Kharkiv raion and neighbouring districts also absorb large displaced populations without commensurate service expansion. Field data indicate that IDPs typically constitute approximately 10–20% of the population in settlements across Kharkiv Oblast, though this proportion varies significantly based on proximity to frontline areas, availability of housing, and employment opportunities. This demographic shift places visible pressure on local services and resources while also generating new economic activity through remittances and consumer spending.

These movements have reshaped the oblast’s demographic profile. Safer areas host mixed communities of residents and IDPs, with visible increases in women, children, and older people from exposed locations. Rural frontline settlements experience population depletion and demographic imbalance as families evacuate, leaving predominantly older, less mobile residents. Humanitarian assessments identify overlapping mobility patterns: population density increases in safer areas straining services and cohesion; sparsely populated frontline villages with limited economic activity; and households engaging in circular or “pendular” movement between displacement locations and areas of origin to manage agriculture, safeguard property, or access assistance.

Displacement in Kharkiv Oblast is best understood as protracted and fluid rather than linear. New displacements continue during escalation periods; some returns are premature or driven by deteriorating displacement conditions; and mobility remains highly responsive to security changes, assistance availability, and seasonal economic needs. These dynamics shape social relations, service demand, and protection risks across the oblast.

2.4. Humanitarian presence, access to services, and security context

Humanitarian presence in Kharkiv Oblast has evolved since 2022 from emergency life-saving assistance (evacuations, food, water, shelter) toward stabilisation and early recovery as access improved in liberated areas. The current response is mixed: emergency aid remains critical in border and frontline hromadas exposed to recurrent attacks, while safer areas increasingly focus on service restoration and reconstruction in coordination with local authorities. Despite the scale of assistance, access to services remains uneven and strongly shaped by geography and security conditions.

Healthcare

Health service availability varies sharply. Urban centres retain comparatively better access to specialised care, while rural and frontline areas rely on primary healthcare posts, mobile teams, and modular facilities. As of August 2025, only about 65% of health facilities in Kharkiv Oblast were fully operational, with around 13% fully damaged [34]. DRC Protection Monitoring identifies healthcare as the top unmet need for 25% of respondents. Key barriers include distance and transport (47.4%), lack of specialised services (41.6%), and cost of treatment or medicines (37.8%) [25]. Staffing shortages remain acute due to displacement, mobilisation, and burnout, leading to delayed care and interrupted management of chronic conditions. Humanitarian actors mitigate gaps through mobile clinics and referrals, but reliance on temporary solutions creates uncertainty and confusion over responsibilities between state and humanitarian providers.

Education

Education has been severely disrupted by security risks and infrastructure damage. Kharkiv Oblast has recorded the highest number of damaged

educational facilities among government-controlled regions, resulting in widespread reliance on hybrid or remote learning. Power and internet outages significantly reduce learning time, with children losing an estimated 60–160 hours per month in fully remote settings [2]. To mitigate risks, underground schools and metro-based classrooms have expanded, enabling limited in-person instruction under protected conditions. While these models reduce protection risks, they remain partial substitutes for regular schooling. Higher and vocational education operate largely online, restricting practical training and weakening pathways to employment and recovery.

Utilities and water infrastructure

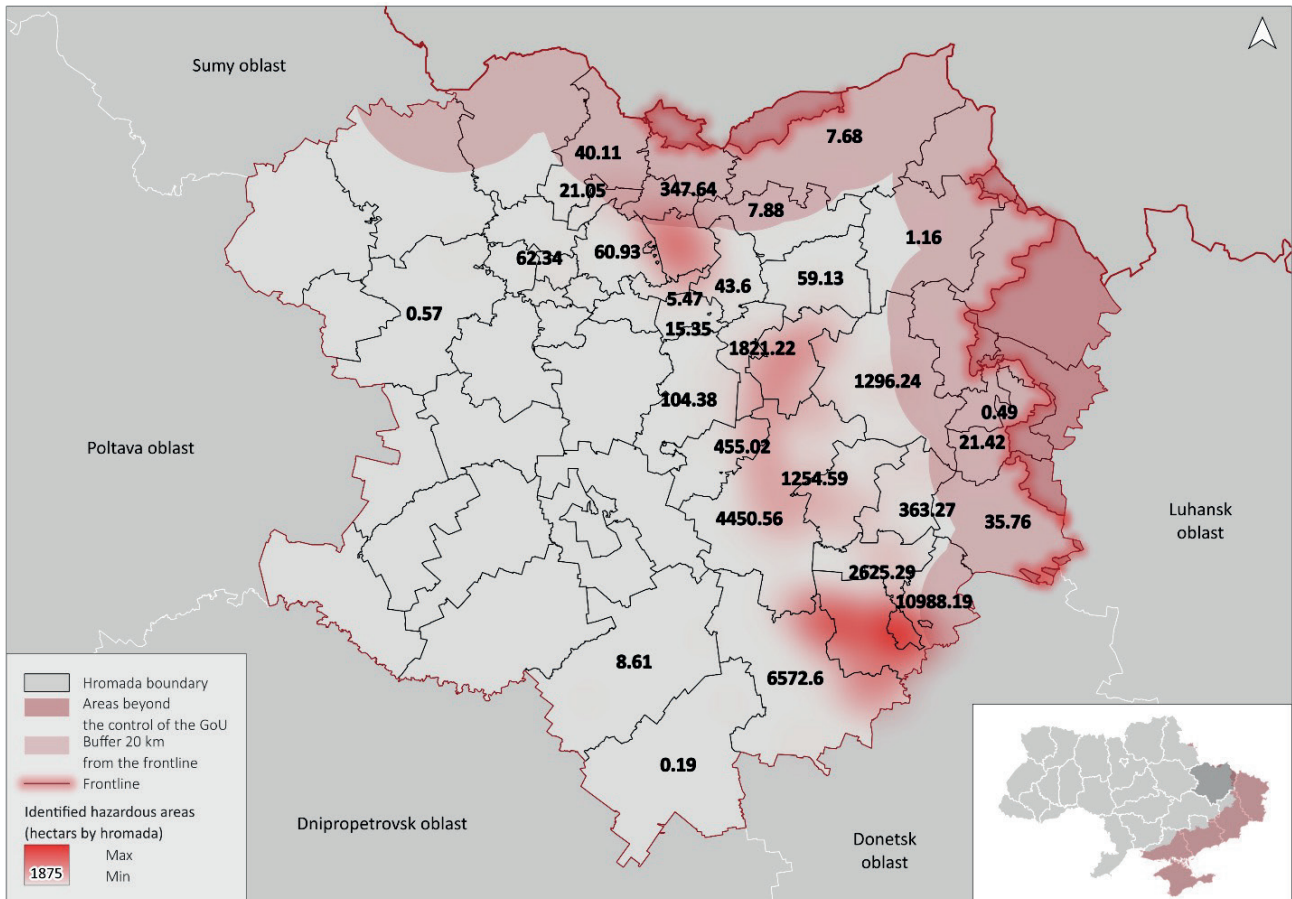
Repeated attacks on energy infrastructure have caused chronic power instability, affecting heating, water supply, sewage, and telecommunications. Damage to major heat-generating facilities in 2024 significantly reduced centralised heating capacity. Distributed solutions, generators, modular boilers, and co-generation units, have improved resilience for critical facilities but remain vulnerable and resource intensive. Water systems are similarly affected by infrastructure damage and power dependence. In rural and frontline-adjacent areas, reliance on trucked water and humanitarian support remains common. Decisions on rehabilitation prioritisation carry conflict-sensitivity risks when criteria are unclear or services remain uneven.

Shelter

Housing damage remains widespread, leaving many households in temporary or inadequately repaired accommodation. Winterisation needs are acute, particularly in areas combining heavy damage with high proportions of IDPs and older residents. Rising rental prices in safer urban areas further constrain options for displaced households. While shelter and cash assistance have improved conditions for some, uneven coverage remains highly visible and fuels perceptions of inequity.

Security environment and explosive ordnance contamination

Persistent shelling, missile and drone attacks continue to shape daily life and humanitarian operations. Movement restrictions, evacuations, and checkpoints affect access to services and livelihoods, while prolonged insecurity contributes to psychological exhaustion. Explosive ordnance contamination is a defining feature of the oblast's recovery context, restricting access to land, delaying reconstruction, and limiting humanitarian reach. A late-2024 assessment estimated that 5.4 million people nationwide require mine action assistance, with contamination continuing to expand faster than clearance capacity [3]. For both residents and humanitarian actors, insecurity has become a structuring condition rather than an exception, shaping decisions about return, land use, service access, and future planning.



Hazardous areas by hromada, Kharkiv Oblast

III. Conflict and social dynamics

Kharkiv Oblast’s social dynamics since February 2022 have been shaped by an unusually intense combination of factors: repeated waves of displacement and return; large-scale damage to housing, energy and social infrastructure; persistent security threats (including EO contamination); and prolonged psychological stress. These pressures have not only affected household welfare and service access, but also influenced how people relate to institutions, how communities negotiate fairness and solidarity, and how residents cope with uncertainty.

This section analyses conflict- and war-related social dynamics through four interlinked lenses: socio-economic pressures and livelihoods; community relations and trust; psychosocial stress and coping; and perceptions of fairness in aid and local decision-making.

3.1. Socio-economic pressures and livelihoods

Socio-economic pressures in Kharkiv Oblast stem from three overlapping realities: extensive physical destruction; persistent disruption to markets and services; and prolonged household-level strain driven by displacement, reduced incomes, and high uncertainty. National recovery and damage

assessments consistently identify Kharkiv among the oblasts most affected by the war, alongside other frontline and near-frontline regions, with damages concentrated in housing, energy, transport, and social sectors.

Destruction and service disruption as long-term economic stressors. Across Kharkiv Oblast, damage to housing and public infrastructure has had direct

livelihood consequences. Housing loss and partial damage translate into recurring out-of-pocket costs (temporary repairs, winterisation, relocation), while damaged schools, clinics, and utility networks increase time and transport costs and reduce productivity at household level. National-level damage tracking highlights the continued expansion of damaged residential stock as hostilities persist, reinforcing the reality that “recovery” is not a linear process in areas under periodic attack.

According to the results of FGDs, residents’ descriptions of everyday hardship often return to the same practical constraints: irregular utility supply during attacks on energy infrastructure; the cost of basic items and transport; and limited options to restore housing quickly enough to feel stable. These constraints are not merely “material” problems; they shape decision-making on whether to return, whether to keep children in the area, and whether households invest in livelihoods locally or shift toward short-term coping.

Household welfare strain and “thin margins.”

Evidence from national and international monitoring points to significant household-level pressure across frontline and near-frontline regions. The World Bank monitoring documents rising food-related coping indicators and reduced dietary diversity in targeted regions, alongside broader signs of sustained vulnerability [7]. In practical terms, such patterns are consistent with qualitative findings in Kharkiv Oblast: households frequently describe spending priorities narrowing toward food, heating, medicines, and the minimum needed for children’s schooling, with anything else deferred. When living conditions are “thin” like this, small shocks—temporary job loss, a new round of shelling, a delayed cash payment, a damaged roof—have outsized social effects.

In parallel to household-level strain, the financial capacity of hromadas in Kharkiv Oblast has declined significantly as a result of the war: the sharpest deterioration has occurred in formerly occupied and frontline communities, where revenue bases were disrupted by population loss, business closures, physical destruction, and prolonged insecurity. The occupation of approximately one-third of the oblast’s territory at its peak in 2022 severely undermined the economic potential of the region as a whole. In the early days of the HMA response, all formerly occupied areas were listed as “potentially contaminated,” which slowed returns to work, land use, and general economic activity—not only due to necessary safety precautions but also because of widespread

concern, fear, and limited information. As a result, several previously industrial and economically self-sustaining hromadas have shifted into dependency on intergovernmental transfers, exhibiting low or critical levels of fiscal capacity [8]. This constrains local authorities’ ability to maintain services, co-finance recovery initiatives, or respond flexibly to emerging social needs, reinforcing residents’ perceptions of stagnation and institutional fragility.

Inflation and price volatility reinforce this dynamic. While macroeconomic trends are national, their felt impact is uneven: households in regions with damaged infrastructure and disrupted local markets experience higher effective costs (fuel for generators, transport, repairs, heating alternatives), and often fewer ways to compensate through stable income. National Bank of Ukraine reporting through 2024–2025 underscores the continued inflationary pressures affecting household budgets, with food and energy-related costs remaining central to perceived hardship [9].

Livelihood disruption and uneven adaptation.

Employment patterns in Kharkiv Oblast are shaped by direct destruction of workplaces and local enterprises, relocation of firms and workers, the partial shift of employment into activities indirectly or directly linked to the wartime public and security sector, and the growth of informal coping-based income [4]. In the case-study hromadas, this is visible as a patchwork: peri-urban areas closer to Kharkiv’s economic gravity or located along key arterial roads can sometimes reconnect to urban labour markets when transport links function, while more exposed localities face interruptions to economic activity driven by security and infrastructure reliability.

Many large enterprises that previously constituted the local tax base have been permanently relocated or closed due to sustained attacks and market disruptions. The remaining businesses operate at reduced capacity, constrained by labour shortages, damaged supply chains, and ongoing security risks. This industrial collapse has fundamentally altered hromada fiscal structures. In some frontline communities, military presence has become the primary revenue source: in Derhachivska hromada, according to local authorities, approximately 90% of local budget revenues derive from military-related sources, including personal income tax contributions from stationed personnel and related military expenditures. This dependency emerged as a direct consequence of lost industrial tax base, effectively replacing former economic anchors with military economic activity. While this stabilises immediate

fiscal operations, it creates structural vulnerability and raises questions about post-conflict economic transition pathways.

At oblast scale, recovery narratives often emphasise resilience and adaptation, but the dominant picture remains constrained by security. This is particularly evident in agriculture and land-based livelihoods, where the limiting factor is not only destroyed equipment or market access, but the sheer scale of suspected EO contamination. The Government’s public communications on humanitarian demining highlight the scale of the challenge and the prioritisation of agricultural land clearance, indicating the long-time horizon required to restore safe economic use [10].

Agriculture under mine/EO risk. In and around the case-study hromadas, small-scale cultivation (kitchen gardens, household plots) often functions as a coping mechanism, but larger-scale farming faces structural constraints linked to EO contamination, damaged assets, and disrupted logistics. Government and partner reporting repeatedly highlights mined or potentially contaminated agricultural land in frontline oblasts, including Kharkiv, as a major barrier to productivity and rural income recovery [11]. While oblast-wide figures vary by method and reference period, the consistent conclusion is the same: without systematic survey and clearance, agricultural livelihoods remain both dangerous and economically fragile.

This interacts directly with household decisions on return. Where land is inaccessible or risky, families may return to damaged homes but find limited pathways to rebuild livelihoods beyond aid, short-term work, or commuting. Where clearance has progressed, returns may become more sustainable but still remain vulnerable to renewed attacks.

Compounding effects of displacement and mobility. Displacement and mobility are not only demographic dynamics; they are economic stressors that reshape labour availability, service demand, and local price formation. IOM displacement and living conditions monitoring highlights how displacement affects employment, income composition, and housing conditions for both IDPs and host communities, with persistent constraints around decent housing

and stable work [11]. The assessment data shows residents consistently referenced this dual burden: host areas describe pressure on services and housing markets, while heavily damaged areas describe the loss of working-age population and the difficulty of restarting local economic life.

3.2. Community relations and trust dynamics

Community relations in Kharkiv Oblast have been shaped by the war’s simultaneity: many people have experienced displacement and return, while others remained under prolonged threat; some communities have absorbed new residents, while others depopulated; and households have faced unequal damage and uneven access to assistance. Despite these differences, qualitative evidence from the case-study hromadas consistently points to a core pattern: solidarity and mutual help remain prominent, but trust is increasingly “conditional” and closely linked to perceived responsiveness and fairness.

Solidarity under prolonged stress. Across frontline contexts, community solidarity often expands early in a crisis and later becomes harder to sustain as fatigue accumulates. In Kharkiv Oblast, the persistence of volunteer networks, informal assistance (neighbours helping with repairs, sharing resources, checking on older people), and collective coping practices suggests that solidarity has not collapsed, even after multiple years of strain. This is consistent with broader analyses linking displacement contexts to social cohesion patterns, where shared threat can strengthen “bonding” ties within communities while also creating pressure around resources and recognition.

Assessment findings indicate that solidarity is frequently described through practical actions rather than abstract attitudes: who helps with a damaged roof, who brings water during outages, who shares transport, who checks on an isolated older neighbour after shelling. These behaviours matter for conflict sensitivity because they function as stabilisers in an environment where formal service provision is intermittently disrupted.

“ When my neighbor’s roof was damaged in the shelling, we didn’t wait for anyone—three of us fixed it together in two days. That’s how we survive here, by helping each other.

Male, 52, host resident, Derhachivska hromada ”

IDP-host relations and “shared war experience.”

The integration of IDPs into host settings is often assumed to be a key tension risk, but evidence across Kharkiv Oblast shows a more nuanced picture: tensions tend to become salient where resources are extremely limited, where housing is scarce, or where aid targeting is perceived as unfair. In Kharkiv Oblast, the high ratio of IDPs in some areas increases the visibility of these potential stress points, yet does not automatically produce open conflict. The IOM social cohesion analysis underscores that trust levels and perceptions of institutions matter significantly for how displacement affects social relations, and that cohesion risks are closely tied to whether people believe local systems are fair and responsive [12].

Within the case-study hromadas, many residents describe IDPs not as an “out-group” but as people with similar experiences—often relatives or extended family, or neighbours from nearby locations in the same oblast who fled shelling or occupation. Where local networks exist (family ties, shared labour markets, common institutions), integration is often described as pragmatic and relationship-based. Where housing and jobs are scarce, residents more commonly describe tension as “quiet frustration” rather than direct confrontation.

Trust in local institutions: visibility and performance under crisis. Trust dynamics in the case-study hromadas are strongly shaped by the wartime role of local authorities and service providers. Under martial law and security constraints, local governance has shifted toward crisis management and rapid coordination with military structures and humanitarian actors. In this environment, trust tends to be linked to whether residents see leaders as present, communicative, and practically effective. National polling on trust in institutions shows significant variation by institution type and time period, reinforcing that trust in Ukraine is not uniform and can shift as the public re-evaluates performance under crisis conditions [13].

At the same time, trust is fragile where procedures are complex, communication is poor, or residents perceive that assistance is inaccessible to those without digital skills, connections, or the ability to navigate bureaucracy. Even where interpersonal trust

in specific local leaders is high, institutional trust can be undermined by delays and perceived opacity.

Trust in humanitarian actors: gratitude alongside scrutiny.

Humanitarian presence remains a critical factor in daily survival and early recovery. OCHA reporting for 2025 emphasises both the scale of humanitarian needs and the operational constraints created by ongoing attacks, including risks to aid delivery and infrastructure [3]. In high-need environments, humanitarian assistance often becomes part of local social dynamics: communities discuss who receives what, why some households were selected, and whether distribution was fair. This creates a paradox: aid can be a stabiliser, but it can also become a focal point for grievances when demand exceeds supply.

In the case-study hromadas, residents typically describe humanitarian actors positively when assistance is predictable, criteria are explained, and communication is respectful. However, international organisations are frequently perceived as slower and more procedural than national or local actors, particularly in emergency or recovery contexts requiring rapid decision-making. National actors are often viewed as more flexible and, in the case of humanitarian demining, as operating at a faster pace, reinforcing perceptions of responsiveness. Frustration tends to emerge when information is unclear, when multiple organisations apply different criteria, or when households perceive that damage severity and vulnerability do not align with what assistance actually reaches them. These perceptions link directly to the fairness dynamics discussed in Section 3.4.

3.3. Psychosocial stress, fatigue, and coping

Psychosocial stress in Kharkiv Oblast is not a secondary consequence of the war; it is a central feature of how communities experience insecurity, make decisions, and sustain social functioning. Prolonged exposure to threat, repeated displacement, and persistent uncertainty produce a cumulative “fatigue effect,” which shapes both individual wellbeing and social interaction.

Chronic threat and cumulative stress. Protection analysis for Ukraine underscores continued civilian

“ **The displaced family living next door—they’re from Kupiansk, just 100 kilometres away. Their children go to school with mine. We don’t think of them as outsiders; they’re running from the same war we are.**

Female, 38, host community resident, teacher, Rohanska hromada ”

harm over 2024–2025 and highlights the ongoing impact of conflict-related violence on households and communities [14]. In Kharkiv Oblast, the combination of periodic strikes, air alerts, disrupted sleep, and persistent worry about family members (including those in military service) contributes to chronic stress patterns reported across qualitative sources. For households in or near exposed localities, stress is compounded by practical constraints: the need to keep “go bags,” the avoidance of travel, the repeated repair of windows and roofs, and uncertainty about winter energy reliability.

Children and adolescents experience distinct stressors: disrupted schooling, limited peer interaction, and repeated exposure to alarms and displacement. OHCHR reporting on children’s rights in Ukraine documents the broad impacts of the war on children through deaths and injuries, displacement, and the damage to homes and schools, reinforcing how prolonged conflict conditions translate into developmental and psychosocial risks [15]. In the case-study hromadas, these dynamics appear in everyday descriptions of children’s anxiety, learning gaps, and the strain placed on parents and caregivers.

Fatigue and reduced coping capacity over time. Where acute stress dominates early phases of crisis, prolonged conflict produces a different pattern: emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, irritability, and a reduction in people’s capacity for participation in community life. This is not always described in clinical terms; more commonly it appears as “tiredness,” “no strength,” or “we just live day by day.” Such fatigue affects willingness to engage in collective decision-making, to volunteer, or to invest time in bureaucratic procedures to access assistance. Over time, this can reduce the informal community capacity that was strong in earlier periods of the war.

MHPSS services: growth alongside gaps. National and international actors have expanded mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in Ukraine, but coverage remains uneven, particularly in rural and exposed areas. IOM’s MHPSS overview for the first half of 2025 illustrates the breadth of needs and the emphasis on community-level approaches alongside specialised services [16]. OCHA’s 2025

planning documents also reflect that protection, and psychosocial needs remain significant and that service delivery occurs under operational constraints and insecurity [3].

In the case-study hromadas, residents’ access to psychosocial support often depends on whether mobile teams visit regularly, whether local social services have trained staff, and whether there are functioning community spaces that can host activities safely. Where services exist, uptake is influenced by awareness, stigma, and practical barriers (transport cost, security risks, limited hours). The gap between “availability on paper” and “accessible in practice” remains a recurring theme.

Informal coping and community-based resilience. Despite high stress, communities employ multiple coping mechanisms that support social functioning. These include family and neighbour support, volunteer engagement, religious practice, small-scale gardening and household production, and participation in child-focussed activities that restore routine. The protective value of such practices lies in their ordinariness: they create small islands of predictability and shared meaning in an unpredictable environment.

Importantly, volunteering and mutual aid function both as practical support and as psychosocial coping: they provide purpose, social connection, and a sense of agency. However, the same networks can become overstretched, particularly when the same individuals carry “helper roles” for long periods without rest. This pattern contributes to volunteer burnout and can reduce the sustainability of informal support systems.

The number of active volunteers has significantly decreased since 2022 due to multiple intersecting factors: prolonged burnout from sustained crisis response, emigration and displacement, depletion of personal financial resources invested in volunteer activities, and in some cases injuries or fatalities resulting from Russian strikes on civilian areas where volunteers operate. This attrition directly weakens one of the oblast’s strongest social connectors and underscores the urgency of systematically consulting volunteer networks on the accessibility needs of vulnerable groups, barriers to NTS and EORE uptake, and gaps in humanitarian coverage—and coordinating

“ I’m tired in a way I can’t explain—not physically. We just live day by day now, and I don’t have the energy to think beyond tomorrow.

Female, 44, single parent, IDP, Rohanska hromada

with them ahead of distributions and monitoring activities to ensure reach and avoid duplication.

Overall, psychosocial dynamics in Kharkiv Oblast are characterised by chronic stress and fatigue, uneven access to MHPSS, and continued reliance on informal coping and community support. These dynamics intersect with trust and fairness: when people are exhausted, they often have less tolerance for opaque procedures, inconsistent criteria, or perceived disrespect in service delivery.

3.4. Perceptions of fairness, aid, and local decision-making

Perceptions of fairness are a central dimension of conflict sensitivity in high-need environments. In Kharkiv Oblast, where needs remain large and resources are limited, residents' interpretations of who receives assistance, how decisions are made, and whether processes are transparent can influence trust in institutions and social relations within communities.

Aid as a focal point for fairness judgments.

Humanitarian response planning for 2025 highlights both the scale of needs and the operational environment in which aid is delivered [3]. In practice, when assistance does not cover everyone, or when criteria vary between organisations, FGDs indicate that communities often develop informal narratives of who is “deserving,” who is “overlooked,” and whether distribution is equitable. These perceptions are not necessarily expressed as open conflict; it often appears as quiet resentment, withdrawal from participation, or reduced trust in information provided by authorities or humanitarian actors.

The compilation of beneficiary lists reflects complex power dynamics and coordination patterns. In most cases, lists are developed by local authorities or by local volunteers working in coordination with authorities, creating potential for both legitimate needs-based prioritisation and informal influence. Local authorities often attempt to balance assistance by approaching humanitarian organisations with specific requests that correspond to identified priority needs among different population groups. However, there were reported instances where local authorities expressed reservations about targeted distributions, noting that support directed toward specific groups could risk creating perceptions of inequity or community tension. In some cases, this dynamic may reflect a tendency to prioritise broader social cohesion considerations over strictly vulnerability-based targeting. Additionally, some aid recipients reportedly

inform authorities or humanitarian actors that they have not received assistance despite having done so, functioning as a coping strategy to increase likelihood of receiving additional support in contexts where aid has become more limited. These practices, while individually rational responses to scarcity, complicate targeting accuracy and can erode trust when patterns become visible to excluded households.

In the case-study hromadas, the strongest fairness concerns are typically linked to high-stakes items: housing repair support, winterisation, cash assistance, and access to compensation. Perceptions of responsibility tend to be shared rather than clearly differentiated: residents frequently view local authorities and humanitarian actors as part of a single assistance system, particularly where coordination is visible or roles are not clearly communicated. When households have experienced similar damage but receive different levels of support, or when people do not understand the basis for selection, perceptions of unfairness become more likely.

Housing compensation and procedural legitimacy.

Housing damage and destruction has made compensation mechanisms a major arena for fairness perceptions. Government reporting on eVidnovlennia (eRecovery) indicates substantial volumes of compensation disbursed and continuing financing needs [17]. However, the gap between centrally reported progress and local-level experiences reveals significant implementation challenges that shape how communities perceive the legitimacy and fairness of compensation processes.

At the local level, eVidnovlennia is widely perceived as a bureaucratically exhausting and slow-paced process. Some respondents report waiting to receive compensation since 2022, with applications stalled in verification, documentation review, or commission deliberations. The complexity of documentation requirements—proof of ownership, damage assessment reports, contractor estimates, photographs meeting specific criteria—places a particular burden on older residents, people with disabilities, and those who evacuated without securing complete paperwork. For households living in damaged accommodation while awaiting compensation, these delays compound material hardship with a growing sense that the system is inaccessible or indifferent to their circumstances.

Nationwide, based on the UNHCR Protection Survey as of November 2025, nearly 13% of respondents with damaged or destroyed property report having received either full or partial compensation. Almost 30% report

having applied for compensation but are yet to receive any payment. Lack of relevant documentation is a barrier to accessing compensation for over 28% of respondents, while lack of awareness of the compensation procedure affects 20% of respondents [18].

Compensation limits frequently prove insufficient to cover actual damage, particularly where inflation in construction materials and labour costs has outpaced official compensation ceilings. The gap between compensation received and repair costs generates frustration and perceptions of inequity, especially when residents observe that similar damage elsewhere received more adequate support.

In many hromadas, especially close to the frontline, the shortage of qualified contractors undermines implementation efficiency even where compensation is approved. Construction firms are reluctant to operate in high-risk areas, while those willing to work demand premium rates that exceed compensation levels. Local markets cannot absorb sudden demand for specialised materials and skilled labour, leading to price inflation, delays, and quality concerns.

Damage assessment commissions, typically formed from local government staff, often lack personnel with relevant technical qualifications in construction, engineering, or property valuation. This technical deficit contributes to inconsistent damage classifications, disputes over compensation eligibility, and decisions that residents perceive as arbitrary. When local officials without clear expertise make determinations that significantly affect household recovery, trust in local authorities erodes.

These structural weaknesses also create vulnerabilities to manipulation and power abuse. Where assessment processes lack standardised protocols, independent oversight, or transparent documentation, discretionary decision-making can be influenced by personal relationships, political affiliations, or informal payments. Residents in smaller communities or those socially marginalised may face disadvantage if commission members prioritise cases based on social proximity or pressure from influential actors. The absence of accessible appeals mechanisms means that disputed assessments often cannot be challenged without significant time,

resources, and administrative knowledge—barriers that disproportionately affect vulnerable households.

Corruption perceptions. In Kharkiv Oblast, perceptions of corruption are primarily associated with recovery and reconstruction processes rather than routine service delivery. Even in the absence of evidence pointing to systemic corruption at the local level, suspicion alone significantly shapes trust dynamics, grievance narratives, and social cohesion. Research aligned with the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) indicates that while reported direct corruption encounters in humanitarian assistance remain limited, sectors such as reconstruction, compensation, and infrastructure rehabilitation are consistently perceived as high-risk and therefore require robust integrity safeguards [35]. In January 2026, corruption allegations related to the HMA compensation scheme operated by the Centre for Humanitarian Demining [36] further heightened public sensitivity around transparency and accountability in recovery-related assistance. In a context of widespread physical destruction and urgent recovery needs, these perceptions are formed through continuous comparison of visible outcomes across communities and neighbourhoods.

Residents' judgments of fairness tend to be based on observable, micro-level signals: the sequencing of housing repairs, the allocation of generators or modular boiler houses, the composition of beneficiary lists, and the accessibility of information about decision-making processes. In heavily affected raions of Kharkiv Oblast, scarcity and repeated disruption intensify scrutiny of these signals. Where recovery efforts progress unevenly or criteria are insufficiently communicated, delays or exclusions are often interpreted as deliberate rather than capacity-driven. NACP-supported regional perception studies highlight that limited transparency in reconstruction decision-making amplifies assumptions of favouritism, even when objective prioritisation frameworks are in place but poorly explained. Rumours of corruption among humanitarian organisations are widespread across the oblast, shaped both by broader public distrust in national and local institutions and reinforced by Russian propaganda narratives that deliberately seek to undermine confidence in Ukrainian authorities and

“

My application for compensation has been stuck since 2022. They keep asking for more documents, more photos, more signatures. Meanwhile, my neighbour got his payment in six months—I still don't understand why.

Male, 67, returnee, pensioner, Vilkhivska hromada

”

international assistance actors. While reported direct corruption encounters in humanitarian assistance remain limited according to NACP research, the persistence of these narratives (regardless of their factual basis) significantly shapes trust dynamics and requires proactive transparency measures rather than defensive silence.

These dynamics are particularly acute in housing repair, infrastructure rehabilitation, and compensation mechanisms, where entire streets or settlements may be affected simultaneously and differences in outcomes are highly visible. Comparative grievance emerges rapidly when neighbouring households experience divergent timelines or levels of support without clear justification, shifting frustration from material loss toward moral judgments of authorities or implementing actors. Similar perceptions occasionally extend to humanitarian organisations, especially where assistance criteria are complex, change over time, or are inconsistently applied across locations. Although humanitarian actors are generally viewed as neutral and supportive, perceived opacity in targeting or limited feedback mechanisms can foster suspicion and undermine trust. As broader post-conflict research demonstrates, perceived procedural injustice—rather than unequal outcomes alone—carries a particularly destabilising potential for social relations and institutional legitimacy [32].

Local decision-making under constraint.

Governance in Kharkiv Oblast operates under acute wartime constraints that significantly shape how decisions are made and perceived. Security risks restrict public gatherings; missile and drone threats limit predictability; and emergency decision-making often prioritizes speed over consultation. In addition, digitalisation of administrative procedures, accelerated during the war, has altered access pathways for compensation, aid registration, and service requests. While digital tools increase efficiency, they also disadvantage older residents, people with disabilities, and those with limited digital literacy, particularly in rural and near-frontline hromadas of the oblast. Residents reported difficulties using mobile applications, online portals, and QR-based registration systems without in-person support, leading to reliance on intermediaries or informal assistance. In some communities, limited internet

connectivity, damaged telecommunications infrastructure, and frequent power outages further constrained access, reinforcing perceptions that digital-first systems favour younger, urban, or better-connected households.

Under these conditions, participatory mechanisms that might otherwise mitigate grievance—public hearings, community consultations, participatory budgeting—are frequently absent or conducted formally. Research on governance under martial law in eastern Ukraine shows that residents are often willing to accept centralised or expedited decision-making if they perceive it as rule-based, temporary, and oriented toward collective survival [13]. However, where decisions appear inconsistent, unexplained, or selectively communicated, acceptance rapidly erodes. In Kharkiv Oblast, this has been mainly observed in relation to shelter repair sequencing, distribution of winterisation assistance, and prioritisation of infrastructure rehabilitation.

Communication therefore becomes a substitute for participation. Local authorities and implementing actors that provide clear explanations—why certain neighbourhoods are prioritised, what criteria apply, what timelines are realistic—tend to retain higher levels of community trust even when resources are insufficient to meet all needs. This dynamic applies equally to humanitarian operations: when agencies rely on technical language or limit communication to formal reporting formats, communities often interpret this as intentional concealment rather than capacity constraint. In such contexts, trust is shaped less by the scale of assistance than by the perceived openness of decision-making. NACP regional monitoring highlights that perceived integrity is strongly correlated with the visibility of decision rationales rather than with outcomes alone [35].

Fairness as a bridge between material hardship and social dynamics.

In Kharkiv Oblast, perceptions of fairness function as the interpretive layer through which material loss, insecurity, and prolonged hardship acquire social meaning. Two households experiencing similar damage, displacement, or income loss may develop markedly different attitudes toward their community and local authorities depending on whether they feel informed, recognised,

“ I can't use the online system for registration— I don't have a smartphone, and the internet doesn't work half the time anyway. My grandson helps me when he visits, but without him, I'd be completely lost.

Female, 71, host community resident, pensioner, Rohanska hromada ”

and treated with dignity. Fairness perceptions thus mediate the relationship between structural conditions and social trust.

Field data indicate that when processes are perceived as opaque or discretionary, frustration tends to be externalised toward institutions and, over time, toward other social groups perceived as “benefiting more.” This dynamic can subtly reinforce horizontal tensions—between returnees and those who never left, between residents of different settlements, or between those included and excluded from assistance cycles. Conversely, when procedures are explained and framed as rule-based—even if imperfect—communities are more likely to contextualise hardship as a shared condition rather than as evidence of deliberate neglect.

Importantly, fairness is not solely about outcomes but about relational conduct. Respectful communication, acknowledgement of loss, and the availability of

appeal or inquiry channels significantly shape whether residents interpret recovery processes as legitimate. In Kharkiv Oblast, where repeated disruption has eroded patience and reserves, these relational dimensions carry heightened weight. Integrity, in this sense, becomes not only a technical safeguard but a conflict-sensitivity instrument: it reduces the risk that scarcity, delay, or unequal recovery trajectories translate into entrenched grievance and mistrust.

In summary, fairness perceptions in Kharkiv Oblast are shaped by the interaction of large-scale needs, uneven assistance coverage, procedural complexity (especially around housing compensation), and constrained local decision-making environments. These perceptions are central to how residents evaluate institutions, interpret aid, and sustain or withdraw from community-level solidarity.

IV. Key conflict sensitivity factors

In Kharkiv Oblast, conflict sensitivity risks do not operate in isolation—governance fragility, economic strain, identity pressures, and EO contamination interact and compound one another in ways that have direct consequences for how assistance is perceived and whether it strengthens or destabilises communities.

4.1. Structural and governance-related factors

The structural and governance context in Kharkiv Oblast has undergone profound shifts since the full-scale invasion of 2022, shaping social dynamics and influencing how communities interpret risks, access services, and engage with authorities. These factors operate at multiple scales—from state level wartime governance frameworks to local administration capacities, the organisation of basic services, and patterns of accountability and participation within communities.

At the national and oblast level, the imposition of martial law and the centralisation of decision-making in response to security threats fundamentally altered administrative procedures. Especially in frontline and near-frontline oblasts such as Kharkiv, normal democratic processes, including regular elections and routine civic engagement activities, have been constrained for an extended period to

prioritise security and emergency response. Military Administrations, both at the oblast and district levels, assumed expanded roles that combined traditional civilian functions with crisis coordination responsibilities, including evacuation planning, demining prioritisation, and humanitarian logistics. These hybrid governance structures reflect the exigencies of prolonged conflict but also influence how residents perceive institutional legitimacy and responsiveness.

The disruption of governance functions has been compounded by extensive damage to public infrastructure. Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment data indicate that housing, transport, energy systems, and commerce sectors across Ukraine, including frontline oblasts, sustained high levels of direct physical damage, with associated reconstruction needs exceeding billions of dollars [2]. Kharkiv Oblast alone has experienced significant losses in infrastructure and assets, estimated at over \$27 billion as of late 2023, contributing to the scaling back of

administrative functions and public services in affected districts [3]. The destruction of municipal buildings, registry offices, and service centres not only interrupts daily life but also weakens the visible presence of legitimate institutions in localities, which can erode confidence in governance and complicate residents' ability to interact with formal systems.

At the same time, the necessity for rapid coordination between civil authorities, military structures, and humanitarian actors has generated multilayered decision-making environments. Local Military Administrations have often had to navigate competing priorities—ensuring security, negotiating humanitarian access, and managing damaged services—under conditions where roles and responsibilities can become blurred. While such coordination is pragmatic in crisis, it can blur accountability lines in residents' perceptions, particularly where communication is unclear or where assistance criteria appear inconsistent. A notable source of tension arises in HMA prioritisation: Military Administrations tend to prioritise large-scale agribusiness areas due to economic priorities. Smaller farms, market gardens, and private plots are frequently deprioritised, leaving limited scope for HMA actors to respond while remaining aligned with Mine Action Centre orders. When institutional actions are not clearly explained, community members may attribute delays or uneven support to administrative failure rather than operational constraints, undermining trust.

The shift toward crisis-driven governance has also affected citizen participation. Restrictions on movement and assembly, combined with displacement and demographic shifts, have reduced opportunities for regular community consultation and public dialogue. Although some local governments have attempted to maintain communication with residents through digital platforms and remote meetings, technology gaps, security concerns, and uneven access to reliable internet limit these efforts. In contexts where participation feels constrained, perceptions of exclusion can intensify, particularly among groups with limited digital literacy or mobility.

Despite these structural challenges, certain longstanding trends in regional governance provide countervailing dynamics. Prior to the full-scale invasion, decentralisation reforms in Ukraine had strengthened local government capacities and enhanced community engagement in service delivery and development planning. In parts of Kharkiv Oblast, these pre-existing institutional capacities have enabled local authorities to adapt governance

practices to wartime conditions, sustain basic service provision, and mobilise volunteer networks and civil society partnerships to address emerging gaps. However, adaptive capacity varies significantly across communities. Hromadas that have experienced extensive damage or prolonged insecurity face greater constraints in maintaining institutional continuity and effective service delivery.

The operational capacity of local authorities thus varies considerably across hromadas, directly affecting both service delivery and humanitarian response efficiency. Humanitarian organisations, facing resource constraints and operational pressures, tend to prioritise cooperation with more administratively capable counterparts, inadvertently contributing to disparities in the volume and quality of assistance received across different communities. This creates a reinforcing dynamic: hromadas with stronger pre-war institutional capacity and less conflict damage receive more humanitarian support, while weaker or more damaged administrations struggle to attract and coordinate assistance effectively, widening existing inequalities. From a conflict sensitivity perspective, this pattern risks generating grievances in overlooked communities and reinforcing narratives that assistance follows political connections rather than need.

Governance legitimacy in this context is often closely tied to performance under stress. Visible efforts to restore basic services, distribute aid fairly, and provide clear information about security and recovery planning have been linked to higher levels of public confidence. In contrast, opaque processes or slow responses can amplify perceptions of neglect. These structural governance dynamics, where institutional behaviour under duress intersects with daily experience, are central to understanding conflict sensitivity, since they directly shape residents' expectations, trust in authorities, and willingness to engage collaboratively in recovery and social cohesion efforts.

4.2. Economic and resource-related factors

Economic and resource dynamics in Kharkiv Oblast have been deeply affected by the war, with significant implications for social cohesion and conflict sensitivity. While macroeconomic indicators illustrate structural disruption, field assessments reveal how these pressures are experienced and interpreted at the community level, influencing everyday social interactions, trust in authorities, and perceptions of fairness.

Macroeconomic disruption and regional impact

The Ukrainian economy has experienced profound contraction and structural disruption since February 2022, with gross domestic product (GDP) falling sharply in the early phases of full-scale war. While some recovery trends have emerged, the overall economic environment remains constrained by ongoing insecurity, inflationary pressures, and damaged infrastructure. National assessments place Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery needs at hundreds of billions of dollars, with key sectors such as commerce, industry, transport, and agriculture among the most heavily affected [19]. Regions proximate to the front lines, including Kharkiv Oblast, have sustained a disproportionate share of direct damage, reflecting the geographic concentration of hostilities.

A regional analysis indicates that Kharkiv Oblast experienced a significant contraction in gross regional product (GRP) relative to its prewar levels, a pattern consistent with heavy damage to infrastructure, displacement of labour, and disrupted market connections [8]. While official GRP figures for 2024–2025 remain incomplete, estimates suggest a substantial decline compared to the prewar economy, reflecting both lost output and displaced activity (estimated 20–30% contraction). At the local level, community interviews and FGDs indicate that, beyond the macroeconomic impact, perceptions of the pace and fairness of reconstruction support—such as delays in infrastructure rehabilitation, variability in cash or in-kind assistance, and uneven access to rebuilding materials—strongly shape social relations and can create sources of tension.

Livelihoods, employment, and labour market shifts

The disruption of formal economic activity has directly affected employment and household livelihoods. In many communities, businesses downsized operations, relocated to safer areas, or closed entirely in response to security threats and damaged infrastructure. Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which traditionally account for a large share of employment and economic output in Ukraine, have shown varying levels of resilience but remain vulnerable due to limited capital buffers, constrained access to markets, and ongoing operational risks [20].

FGD participants reported that informal economic activities have become critical, particularly for

households unable to access formal employment. Subsistence agriculture, casual labour, small-scale trading, and community barter networks were repeatedly cited as coping mechanisms. Interviewees noted that older and IDPs often rely disproportionately on these informal strategies.

Agricultural losses attributable to war-related damage in Kharkiv Oblast, were estimated at nearly US \$940 million by mid-2024 [21], with impacts resonating through rural livelihoods and supply chains. As discussed in Section 3.1, EO contamination is a primary structural constraint on both smallholder and large-scale farming, limiting access to land and depressing rural income recovery across the oblast.

Household incomes in impacted regions often reflect multiple pressures: reduced employment opportunities, increased cost of living, and reliance on government social protection and humanitarian assistance. Analyses show that in frontline settings, a meaningful proportion of households report food security vulnerability and an inability to meet basic needs despite external support [19]. These patterns reflect the complex interplay between resource scarcity and socioeconomic stress.

Access to markets and economic infrastructure

Physical access to shops and transport links has improved in some areas but remains constrained, particularly for households with limited mobility or income. Community discussions highlighted that residents perceive high transport costs, damaged roads, and intermittent public transit as key barriers to accessing goods and services, especially for older adults and IDPs.

Damage to storage facilities, warehouses, and transportation infrastructure further disrupts local economies. Attacks on economic infrastructure can sever supply chains and increase transaction costs, hindering both commerce and employment in critical sectors. These disruptions often require makeshift coping strategies, including reliance on humanitarian aid deliveries or informal market arrangements.

Inequality in economic outcomes and resource distribution

Economic hardship is unevenly distributed across population groups, reflecting differences in access to resources, social networks, and economic opportunities. Young people, for example, face a challenging labour market environment with limited formal job prospects, which can drive outmigration

and diminish longterm investment in local economies if opportunities remain scarce. Older adults, dependent on fixed incomes such as pensions, are highly vulnerable to price increases and often lack opportunities to supplement earnings through labour due to health or mobility limitations.

Returnees and IDPs also experience distinct economic pressures. Returnees may arrive back in their communities to find damaged homes and lost employment, requiring time and resources to reintegrate economically, while IDPs often start with few assets and must compete for scarce jobs in host areas. Barriers to labour market integration and perceptions of unequal access to assistance or employment opportunities can, if unmanaged, generate feelings of frustration or exclusion. When basic economic resources are perceived as unevenly distributed—whether through humanitarian aid, social protection systems, or reconstruction support—tensions may emerge between groups, undermining social cohesion.

Resource scarcity, coping, and social dynamics

Resource scarcity operates at both household and community levels. Field insights suggest that community-level coping strategies—such as shared water points, collective transport arrangements, or informal bartering networks—play a critical role in maintaining basic stability. At the same time, uneven access to resources or perceived favouritism in distributions has emerged as a potential friction point, shaping both intra-community relations and trust in local authorities and humanitarian actors.

Simultaneously, perceptions of fairness in resource distribution—whether in humanitarian assistance, compensation for damages, or opportunities to participate in reconstruction programmes—shape social norms and influence trust in institutions. Transparent, inclusive resource allocation practices can strengthen cohesion by demonstrating shared commitment to collective recovery.

4.3. Social identity, belonging, and inter-group relations

Evolving social norms and values

Since the full-scale invasion, social norms and values in Kharkiv Oblast have undergone a gradual but profound transformation. Early wartime disruption gave

way to the emergence of shared frames of meaning centred on collective endurance, responsibility, and attachment to place. A heightened sense of national identity has increasingly intersected with strong local belonging, particularly in communities exposed to repeated displacement, insecurity, and service disruption. Expressions of solidarity and commitment to remaining in, returning to, or rebuilding communities have become more prominent over time. As one older resident of a village near Kharkiv noted, “so long as there is a Ukrainian on this soil, it will be Ukraine,” reflecting how identity, territory, and resilience have become closely linked in everyday narratives. National surveys conducted since 2022 confirm this trend, showing consistently high levels of attachment to the country and a sustained orientation toward the common good, even as material conditions have remained difficult.

Civic norms have also evolved in response to prolonged crisis. While the initial phase of the invasion saw spontaneous volunteerism and mutual aid, these practices have gradually become more structured and embedded in community life. Indicators of civic responsibility have remained relatively stable since 2023, suggesting that participation and collective action have not diminished despite fatigue and ongoing security concerns. Instead, community engagement has adapted, with residents prioritising practical contributions: supporting vulnerable neighbours, coordinating assistance, and engaging with local authorities, over more visible forms of mobilisation. This evolution reflects a shift from emergency-driven solidarity to longer-term, resilience-oriented social behaviour.

Changes in social norms are particularly evident in household and community roles. Women in frontline hromadas have increasingly taken on leadership responsibilities, both within families and at community level. These shifts have been shaped by multiple, overlapping factors: prolonged insecurity, displacement, loss or absence of partners due to a range of war-related impacts, and the increased burden of navigating services, assistance, and recovery processes. As a result, women have often become key decision-makers, community focal points, and organisers of local initiatives. Over time, this redistribution of roles has contributed to greater visibility of women’s leadership and, in some cases, a redefinition of local authority structures and informal power relations.

Youth roles have also evolved significantly since 2022. Initial engagement in ad hoc volunteering has, in many communities, developed into sustained

“ **Before the war, I was just a housewife. Now, my husband is at the front, and I’m the one going to meetings with the hromada, applying for assistance, making all the decisions.** ”

Female, 42, IDP, Bezliudivska hromada ”

forms of participation. Adolescents and young adults increasingly contribute to community resilience by supporting displaced populations, assisting with information sharing, maintaining communication networks, and participating in local initiatives. This growing involvement has reinforced intergenerational cooperation and expanded the range of actors perceived as legitimate contributors to community life. Together, these evolving norms around identity, responsibility, and participation, have reshaped how communities in Kharkiv Oblast relate to one another, strengthening certain connectors while also redefining expectations of leadership, contribution, and belonging in a protracted conflict setting.

Informal institutions and support systems

Volunteer networks, grassroots initiatives, and local associations provide a critical safety net that complements official humanitarian assistance. Station Kharkiv, for example, has supported over 100,000 IDPs in Kharkiv raion, with almost half of its volunteers being displaced persons themselves, highlighting the integration of local actors in service delivery [22]. Communities also repurpose public infrastructure for practical uses: in Rohan, the local House of Culture has been transformed into a multi-purpose centre serving as an emergency shelter during bombing raids, an Invincibility Point during outages, and a space for civil society initiatives, such as the “Unbreakable Mom” project, which offers mothers and children safe spaces for socialisation and psychosocial support.

Residents maintain self-organised safety and preparedness practices, including coordination through community messenger groups, informal check-ins, and mutual support networks. Faith-based and cultural organisations supplement these efforts through volunteer brigades, charity drives, and communal celebrations. Collectively, these informal institutions foster trust, cooperation, and social capital. They operate as complementary structures alongside government and NGO programmes, ensuring that social cohesion persists even under duress.

Inter-group relations: returnees, IDPs, and long-term residents

Building on the generally cooperative IDP-host dynamics documented in Section 3.2, returnees represent a third intergroup dimension that warrants specific attention: they receive practical support from neighbours to restore homes and reconnect with services, yet face a distinct set of expectations and potential frictions distinct from those of IDPs who never returned.

The primary bridging mechanism across all three groups—IDPs, returnees, and long-term residents—is structured informal contact rather than formal integration programmes. Volunteer initiatives and community-based cultural activities increasingly serve as spaces where all three groups interact on a regular basis. Through shared tasks and informal cooperation, these activities help build familiarity, trust, and practical collaboration. Such horizontal networks of support, linking neighbours, informal volunteer groups, and local community actors, contribute to a sense of shared responsibility and help reduce the prominence of group distinctions in everyday community life.

Local cultural practices and community resilience

In Kharkiv Oblast, cultural and religious practices continue to function as important anchors of community cohesion and shared identity in the face of sustained conflict and insecurity. Traditional observances such as Easter, Christmas, and other seasonal rituals have persisted despite war conditions, with residents adapting celebrations to local realities, for example, balancing festive lighting and public displays in Kharkiv city even amid air-raid warnings and damage from recent strikes that shaped the year’s end festivities, underscoring both resilience and moral affirmation of life under fire. At the same time, longstanding festivals and cultural expressions, including music, art, and heritage events previously associated with the region, remain part of communal memory and practice, contributing to social continuity.

Local cultural activity also takes on therapeutic and identity-affirming roles. In recent years, artists, poets, and community groups in Kharkiv have organised

poetry readings, underground performances, and storytelling events that provide psychological relief and nurture solidarity among participants. Writer and activist Serhii Zhadan describes Kharkiv as needing to transition from being a military stronghold to becoming a hub for creative, innovative solutions in economics, culture, and education. This vision is supported by practical infrastructure adaptations: the city is opening a new municipal Veteran Space to support reintegration through family services, business training, art therapy, and mental health programmes [23]. Such initiatives recognize that cultural activities help mitigate the psychosocial impacts of conflict, reinforce community bonds, and sustain morale under conditions of persistent threat.

Community-driven arts and cultural projects further support intergenerational connection and skills transmission. Exhibitions such as the “Map of Ukraine ‘Hugs’” project presented in Kharkiv draw on contributions from displaced creators, including master artisans who sent crafted dolls from abroad, symbolising unity and shared heritage even amid displacement. Educational institutions such as the Kharkiv State Academy of Culture host storytelling and psychological resilience events that facilitate emotional expression and collective processing of wartime experiences, reflecting how cultural and narrative practices intersect with psychosocial support. Together, these practices help mitigate the psychosocial impacts of conflict by providing communal spaces for creative expression, reinforcing identity, and sustaining morale [23].

Throughout the oblast, both formal and informal cultural engagement—whether public festival programming, university-led cultural dialogue, or grassroots artistic expression—serves not only to preserve traditions but also to affirm a sense of belonging and shared purpose. These cultural practices strengthen horizontal social ties within and between communities, helping residents cope with trauma and uncertainty while reaffirming that life, memory, and collective identity persist amid adversity.

4.4. Security environment and EO contamination

EO contamination remains a central security concern. Landmines, unexploded shells, and remnants of military equipment restrict movement, access to farmland, and public services. Clearance by State Emergency Service of Ukraine prioritizes roads, agricultural zones, and critical infrastructure, but this rapid approach often leaves behind unexploded ordnance and other hazardous items outside cleared areas, meaning that comprehensive clearance will take years.

Community-based EORE has been widely implemented. DRC, in coordination with hromada authorities and schools, delivers EORE sessions teaching families to identify, assess, and avoid explosive hazards. In parallel, DRC conducts Training of Facilitators for teachers and other community-based actors, equipping them with the skills and standardised materials needed to independently deliver EORE sessions within their schools and broader communities, thereby extending coverage and sustainability. By late 2025, tens of thousands of residents in Kharkiv Oblast had received training, demonstrating the scale and institutionalisation of local risk education [24]. DRC also provides tailored EORE sessions to CSOs and NGOs, enabling humanitarian and community staff to operate more safely in contaminated environments and to further cascade risk awareness through their own activities. The Ministry of Education’s inclusion of mine-risk awareness in school curricula further supports long-term community resilience.

Local adaptation complements official measures. Residents maintain informal hazard mapping, safe corridors for children and older people, and community watch systems, which mitigate daily risk and strengthen social cohesion. EO contamination thus shapes not only physical safety but also patterns of cooperation, resource sharing, and communal decision-making.

V. Groups at Risk of Exclusion

This section examines groups in Kharkiv Oblast at heightened risk of social exclusion, detailing the structural and perceptual barriers they face, as well as the conflict-related risks and grievances that further complicate their integration into local communities. Drawing on FGDs, KIIs, protection monitoring, and national-level research, the analysis considers both long-established vulnerable populations and emerging vulnerabilities that have arisen due to prolonged displacement, socio-economic shifts, and ongoing security challenges.

5.1. Groups facing heightened vulnerability

Internally Displaced Persons

IDPs experience acute difficulties accessing services, employment, and education, while simultaneously encountering social exclusion and stigma. Housing is a primary concern: many IDPs reside in overcrowded rentals, temporary shelters, or damaged properties, often bearing a “double utility” cost for both former and current residences. Employment barriers persist due to skill mismatch, employer reluctance, and economic downturn in conflict-affected areas.

Education access is also constrained: displaced children often face long waiting lists, bullying, inadequate infrastructure in host communities, prompting reliance on distance learning. Social participation is uneven; while early settlement often elicits welcoming attitudes from locals, prolonged displacement can expose IDPs to discrimination or perceptions of preferential aid. This combination of barriers weakens trust between IDPs and host communities and risks long-term social fragmentation.

IDPs continue to report experiences of discrimination in employment, housing, and access to local services, which contribute to feelings of resentment, insecurity, and social distance from host communities. These challenges are reinforced by persistent stereotypes, including assumptions that people displaced from eastern regions may hold “pro-Russian” views. Such perceptions, even when not openly articulated, shape everyday interactions and limit opportunities for meaningful civic engagement. At the same time, a small number of IDP participants in FGDs—who had previously lived in both eastern and western parts of Ukraine—noted that they had encountered much lower level of discrimination in Kharkiv Oblast, describing local interactions as more neutral or pragmatic.

In response, many IDPs rely heavily on NGOs, family members, and peer networks originating from their communities of origin. These networks play a critical

role in meeting immediate needs and providing psychosocial support. However, sustained reliance on parallel support systems can inadvertently limit interaction with broader community structures, contributing to segmented social spaces rather than shared local networks.

Importantly, research and focus group discussions in Kharkiv Oblast suggest that displacement has not produced a consolidated “IDP identity” in the sociological sense. Instead, identity among displaced populations has tended to crystallise around a shared traumatic experience of war-induced migration, which often strengthens attachment to the community or region of origin rather than replacing it. Focus group participants consistently described themselves not as “IDPs” but as residents of their home towns or regions, temporarily displaced by conflict. This anchoring to place of origin serves both as psychological coping mechanism and assertion of continuity amid loss.

This identity dynamic shapes attitudes toward integration. Perspectives expressed during interviews and group discussions reflect differing views on the desirability and timing of integration into host communities. While integration is often associated with improved access to services and social stability, it is also perceived by some as carrying risks for the preservation of local identity tied to places of origin. These concerns are especially pronounced in relation to children. The integration of displaced children into host-community schools, social networks, and cultural life is at times viewed as a step toward irreversible assimilation, raising fears of the symbolic disappearance of communities currently under occupation. For many respondents, maintaining distinct identity markers is therefore closely linked to hopes of eventual return and the restoration of their home communities.

The implications for social cohesion are therefore ambivalent. Tensions may emerge when host communities perceive humanitarian or recovery assistance as disproportionately benefiting newcomers, while IDPs may interpret gaps in

support as evidence of neglect or exclusion. At the same time, protection monitoring in Kharkiv Oblast highlights the continued importance of neighbourly support and informal solidarity as stabilising factors. Everyday acts of mutual assistance and practical help—often mitigate potential conflict and help sustain coexistence despite structural inequalities and unresolved identity tensions [25].

Returnees

Returnees in Kharkiv Oblast face a distinct set of vulnerabilities shaped by the gap between expectations of return and post-return realities. Many return to heavily damaged or partially depopulated communities where housing, infrastructure, services, and local economies remain disrupted. Access to livelihoods is often limited by destroyed workplaces, contaminated land, or the absence of functioning markets, while basic services such as healthcare, education, and utilities may be only partially restored. For some households, return is driven less by improved conditions than by exhaustion of resources in displacement locations, attachment to property, or the need to care for older relatives, resulting in returns under precarious conditions.

The psychological experience of return is often characterised by dissonance between memory and reality. Communities are simultaneously familiar and fundamentally altered—physically destroyed, demographically changed, or economically hollowed. This mismatch can produce a sense of “return without arrival,” where individuals are geographically home but remain socially and psychologically displaced.

Socially, returnees may experience a sense of isolation or disappointment as community networks have fragmented through displacement, casualties, and onward migration. In areas with partial returns, social life can feel diminished, with fewer neighbours, weakened collective initiatives, and reduced informal support. At the same time, returnees are not always prioritised in assistance frameworks, as humanitarian and recovery support may focus on either IDPs or the most recently affected frontline areas. This can generate frustration and perceptions of neglect, particularly when returnees compare their situation to that of displaced households receiving targeted aid elsewhere. Despite these challenges, returnees often play a stabilising role by reactivating local life, maintaining homes and land, and symbolically asserting continuity and resilience in communities that have experienced profound disruption.

Older people

Older people, particularly those over 60, face severe challenges in Kharkiv Oblast. Many are immobile, living in damaged homes or shelters, with limited access to healthcare, transportation, and social services [18]. Isolation is compounded by lack of internet access, physical barriers, and a high dependency on informal support networks. Wartime service attrition has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in mobility, access to care, and social participation.

Implications for cohesion are profound: a marginalised older population risks creating generational divides, weakening communal trust. Conversely, where neighbours or local organisations provide targeted support, the inclusion of older people can strengthen grassroots solidarity.

People with disabilities

People with disabilities, including war-injured civilians, face heightened vulnerability due to the interaction of conflict-related damage, service disruption, and pre-existing structural barriers. Physical accessibility has deteriorated as a result of damaged roads, public buildings, housing, and medical facilities, while adapted infrastructure remains limited outside major urban centres. In remote and rural villages in particular, the lack of accessible transport and the suspension of regular public transport have significantly increased isolation, restricting access to healthcare, social services, humanitarian assistance, and community life. For individuals with mobility, sensory, or psychosocial disabilities, insecurity and explosive ordnance contamination further constrain safe movement, often confining them to their homes for extended periods.

Social isolation is compounded by reduced outreach and overstretched support systems. Family members frequently act as primary caregivers, but displacement, economic stress, or military service can weaken these informal care arrangements. Access to specialised rehabilitation, assistive devices, and psychosocial support remains uneven, with many services concentrated in urban centres and difficult to reach from smaller settlements. As a result, people with disabilities are at risk of being overlooked in both humanitarian response and recovery planning, particularly where needs assessments rely on self-registration or digital platforms. A DRC study confirms that, despite Ukraine now hosting over 300,000 war-related amputees, deep stigmatisation persists,

limiting both social participation and inclusion in recovery efforts [26]. At the same time, community-level solidarity and neighbourly assistance continue to play a critical mitigating role, with informal support networks often filling gaps left by damaged infrastructure and limited institutional capacity.

Socially, stigma and inaccessible infrastructure impede engagement in public life. These barriers can erode trust in institutions and deepen societal marginalisation. Targeted interventions such as wheelchair access, inclusive education, and public awareness campaigns have potential to enhance both social and institutional cohesion [27].

Single-parent households

Single-parent households, often headed by women widowed or separated due to war, experience multiple disadvantages. Many single parents must combine income generation with full-time caregiving responsibilities, often in contexts where childcare services, schools, and kindergartens operate intermittently or in remote formats due to security risks. This limits access to stable employment and increases reliance on irregular work, social assistance, or humanitarian support. Rising living costs, housing shortages, and utility expenses further strain household budgets, particularly for those renting or residing in partially damaged accommodation.

Social isolation is a recurring concern, especially for single parents who lack extended family support or who are displaced from their original communities. Security constraints and limited transport reduce participation in community life, while psychosocial stress linked to prolonged uncertainty, trauma exposure, and parental burnout remains largely unaddressed. Single parents also report difficulties accessing information and assistance due to time constraints and complex administrative procedures. Despite these challenges, informal support from neighbours, relatives, and peer networks often plays a stabilising role. However, uneven access to such support means that single-parent households remain at risk of falling through gaps in both humanitarian response and recovery planning, with implications for child well-being and longer-term social cohesion [28].

Men in self-imposed confinement

A distinct yet largely invisible group facing heightened vulnerability comprises men who have entered self-imposed confinement due to fear of mobilisation. For many, this is not a voluntary lifestyle choice

but a forced coping strategy shaped by prolonged uncertainty, fear of direct combat exposure, and widely shared perceptions of the recruitment process as abrupt, coercive, or degrading. Accounts from community discussions indicate that the way mobilisation is implemented, often experienced as unpredictable and aggressive, has contributed to deep mistrust and avoidance rather than engagement.

This form of confinement produces a specific pattern of vulnerability. Men deliberately limit movement, avoid public transport, markets, workplaces, and administrative buildings, effectively excluding themselves from formal employment, healthcare, and state or humanitarian assistance. Over time, social withdrawal becomes normalised, leading to economic precarity, deteriorating mental health, and an erosion of social roles traditionally associated with provision and public participation. The burden of income generation and external interaction frequently shifts to other household members, intensifying intra-household stress.

Stigma plays a central role in reinforcing this dynamic. These men are often framed as “cowards” or morally deficient, a narrative amplified by critical, dismissive, and at times openly offensive interactions with representatives of authorities. Such treatment deepens shame and fear, discouraging dialogue and driving further concealment. Community members may privately empathize, yet publicly distance themselves, creating a climate of silence.

From a conflict-sensitivity perspective, mobilisation-related confinement constitutes a structural grievance that intersects with masculinity norms, trust in institutions, and perceptions of justice. Without safe channels for communication, psychosocial support, and respectful engagement, this hidden vulnerability risks entrenching social fragmentation and long-term disengagement from civic life.

Veterans

Demobilised military personnel face complex challenges that hinder their reintegration into communities and affect social cohesion. Many struggle with psychological trauma, physical injuries, and the loss of familiar social networks, which often leads to self-imposed isolation. Substance use, including alcohol or drugs, is sometimes adopted as a coping mechanism, further limiting social participation and increasing health and protection risks.

The capacity of state institutions to respond to these needs remains limited. State reintegration

programmes are often constrained by insufficient institutional resources, limited coverage, and a shortage of personnel trained to address veterans' specific psychosocial and reintegration needs. This gap reduces the effectiveness of mental health support, vocational training, and counselling services, leaving many veterans without structured pathways to rebuild livelihoods or social ties. Communities respond ambiguously: on one hand, formal gestures of respect, recognition, and local ceremonies demonstrate appreciation for service; on the other hand, veterans can be stigmatised as “dangerous” or difficult to engage with. Residents may lack skills to communicate on sensitive topics related to war experiences, while others respond with pity toward veterans who have sustained psychological or physical harm, which can unintentionally reinforce social distance.

These dynamics combine to create parallel social spaces: veterans rely heavily on peer networks for understanding and emotional support, yet limited broader engagement maintains social separation from the wider community. In the absence of adequately resourced and specialised state-led support, these patterns risk long-term marginalisation of veterans and ongoing tension in host communities. These factors—trauma, social isolation, substance use, lack of support, and stigmatisation—tend to create a self-reinforcing cycle. Veterans withdraw from community life due to these challenges, which increases their social and economic vulnerability. The heightened vulnerability then makes reintegration more difficult, leading to further isolation and disengagement, perpetuating the cycle over time.

Ethnic and language minorities

Ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking populations historically constituted roughly half of Kharkiv Oblast's residents, with the Russian language dominating public life, education, and media prior to the full-scale invasion. Since 2022, the dynamics of language and ethnic identity have shifted significantly, influenced by the conflict and wartime governance measures, as well as changing social attitudes. Many Russian-speaking residents report increased scrutiny and social pressure to demonstrate loyalty to Ukraine, particularly in public, administrative, and professional spheres. While some maintain their linguistic and cultural practices privately, public expression is often moderated by perceived security and social risks.

Most communities in Kharkiv Oblast use both Ukrainian and Russian interchangeably, and language rarely plays a significant role in interpersonal

communication. The language question tends to emerge, and can be weaponised, primarily when interacting with authorities or humanitarian actors, because these interactions often carry formal or high-stakes consequences, such as access to services, aid, or demonstrating political loyalty. In these contexts, language use can be interpreted as a signal of political or national affiliation, so what is normally a neutral choice in everyday conversation becomes a sensitive marker.

These changes have complex social implications. Russian-speaking communities face heightened sensitivity around language use, social interactions, and civic participation, sometimes leading to self-imposed isolation or reluctance to engage in communal decision-making. At the same time, local perceptions of loyalty and identity may vary, producing tensions or mistrust between neighbours. Humanitarian and community actors must navigate these dynamics carefully: language preferences and ethnic background do not necessarily indicate political alignment, but misperceptions can exacerbate social divides.

The shifting identity landscape highlights the need for conflict-sensitive approaches that recognize linguistic and cultural diversity while promoting inclusive participation, equitable access to services, and community cohesion. Transparent communication, culturally aware programming, and avoidance of stereotyping are critical to mitigate risks of discrimination, social tension, or alienation within the Russian-speaking population of Kharkiv Oblast.

5.2. Barriers to access, participation, and assistance

Across Kharkiv Oblast, vulnerable populations encounter intersecting and mutually reinforcing barriers that restrict access to services, limit participation in public life, and undermine trust in institutions. These barriers operate across physical, financial, bureaucratic, social, and perceptual dimensions, producing patterns of exclusion that are cumulative rather than isolated.

Physical and financial barriers

Widespread conflict-related destruction of infrastructure, particularly in frontline-adjacent and formerly occupied areas of Kharkiv Oblast, continues to constrain access to healthcare, education, and employment. Damage to medical facilities, shortages of qualified personnel, and unreliable transport links

have left a significant share of households unable to obtain timely healthcare, especially specialised or rehabilitation services. Protection monitoring indicates that transport-related barriers disproportionately affect older people, people with disabilities, and residents of remote villages, where public transport routes have been suspended or reduced [25].

Educational access remains uneven. While schools in urban centres have partially adapted through hybrid or remote models, rural areas face unreliable internet connectivity, unsafe facilities, and limited psychosocial support for children exposed to shelling and displacement. These conditions contribute to learning loss and heightened stress among students and caregivers, reinforcing long-term inequalities [29].

Economic participation is further restricted by the destruction of local industries, insecurity affecting commuting routes, and informal discrimination against displaced or returnee workers. Housing shortages—exacerbated by damage, rising rental prices, and competition between IDPs and host communities—force many households into overcrowded or substandard living conditions, directly affecting health, privacy, and social integration [30].

Bureaucratic and documentation challenges

Administrative barriers remain a critical driver of exclusion across Kharkiv Oblast. Complex registration requirements, frequent regulatory changes, and insufficiently staffed social protection offices hinder access to pensions, disability benefits, housing compensation, and veteran-related assistance. Lost or damaged documents during displacement further compound these challenges.

IDPs, older persons, people with disabilities, and demobilised veterans are particularly affected, as many lack the digital skills, mobility, or institutional literacy required to navigate online platforms or multi-step application procedures. Information about available assistance often does not reach these populations effectively. Local authorities typically use messaging applications and phone calls to inform residents, but this approach systematically

excludes older people without smartphones, people with disabilities lacking accessible communication tools, and residents of remote villages with poor connectivity. Limited awareness of registration procedures, application deadlines, and eligibility criteria further restricts access. These information gaps contribute to frustration directed at humanitarian actors, local authorities, or neighbours perceived as having better access to information networks, sometimes generating tensions within communities over perceived inequitable information access rather than assistance itself. As a result, eligibility does not translate into effective access, creating a gap between formal rights and lived realities [25].

Social stigma and discrimination

Beyond structural constraints, social perceptions and stigma significantly shape participation outcomes. IDPs are often implicitly framed as temporary outsiders or competitors for scarce resources. People with disabilities are frequently approached through a charity-based lens that emphasizes dependency rather than agency, limiting their inclusion in decision-making processes. Demobilised veterans face contradictory perceptions—simultaneously respected for their service yet stigmatised as potentially “unstable” or “dangerous,” which restricts employment opportunities and social interaction [27].

Language and ethnic minorities may engage in self-censorship in public or institutional settings due to perceived social or political pressures, while single-parent households—particularly those headed by women—report patronising attitudes from service providers and community members. These dynamics contribute to withdrawal from civic spaces and reinforce social isolation [28].

Limited participation and distrust in institutions

Although formal participation mechanisms exist—such as community consultations, IDP councils, or feedback surveys—they are often perceived as symbolic rather than influential. Limited follow-up, lack of transparency, and weak accountability reduce incentives for sustained engagement by marginalised groups.

“**People in general thank me for my service, but when I apply for jobs, they suddenly have concerns. ‘Will you be stable?’ ‘Can you handle stress?’ They don’t say it directly, but I can see it in their eyes—they think I’m damaged, unpredictable.**”

Male, 31, host community resident, demobilised veteran, Vilkhivska hromada

Distrust in state institutions is further reinforced by repeated experiences of delayed assistance, inconsistent decisions, and limited communication. Over time, these experiences accumulate into a broader sense of institutional alienation, weakening social contracts and reducing horizontal trust between communities and authorities [32].

Taken together, these overlapping barriers generate multidimensional exclusion, undermining solidarity and social cohesion across Kharkiv Oblast. Addressing them requires integrated approaches that simultaneously tackle physical access, administrative capacity, and social attitudes, rather than isolated sectoral fixes.

5.3. Conflict-related risks and grievances

In addition to pre-existing vulnerabilities, the prolonged conflict has generated new and evolving risks across Kharkiv Oblast that cut across social groups and administrative categories. These risks are closely tied to displacement trajectories, economic decline, demographic shifts, and uneven recovery processes.

Protracted displacement and “in-between” status

A significant proportion of households experience prolonged or repeated displacement, resulting in a persistent “in-between” condition. Families remain formally registered in host locations while maintaining emotional, social, and economic ties to places of origin that are destroyed, occupied, or unsafe for return. This liminality weakens informal support networks, complicates planning decisions, and increases reliance on short-term humanitarian assistance rather than sustainable solutions [27],[31].

Partial and unequal return

Patterns of partial return have emerged across liberated areas of Kharkiv Oblast. Older people, individuals with limited mobility, and economically disadvantaged households are more likely to return early due to exhaustion of coping mechanisms or inability to sustain displacement elsewhere. In contrast, younger and economically active populations often remain displaced.

This uneven return places disproportionate pressure on weakened local infrastructure and services, while also generating perceptions of inequality between

those who “stayed,” those who “returned,” and those who remain displaced. Data from FGDs indicate that such perceptions can fuel localised grievances and hinder collective recovery efforts.

Downward socio-economic mobility and the “new poor”

The war has produced a growing group of households that were previously economically stable but have lost livelihoods, assets, or savings. This “new poor” population often lacks familiarity with assistance systems and may avoid seeking support due to stigma or fear of social downgrading. As a result, economic decline remains partially hidden, increasing the risk of unaddressed grievances and resentment toward perceived beneficiaries of aid [27].

Care burdens and intra-household strain

Care responsibilities within households have intensified due to injury, disability, trauma, and the absence of family members. Women disproportionately shoulder these burdens, limiting their participation in employment, education, and community life. Prolonged stress within households also increases risks of burnout, conflict, and social withdrawal, with broader implications for community cohesion [33].

Youth mobility and future uncertainty

Youth outmigration from Kharkiv Oblast, driven by security concerns, disrupted education, and limited employment prospects, poses long-term risks for social continuity and local leadership. Extended disengagement from local communities weakens intergenerational ties and reduces the pool of actors capable of contributing to recovery and civic renewal.

Implications for social cohesion

These conflict-related vulnerabilities intersect to create new fault lines that extend beyond traditional categories of vulnerability. If left unaddressed, they risk deepening social fragmentation and eroding trust between groups. At the same time, shared experiences of loss and hardship provide a foundation for collective resilience, provided that recovery efforts are perceived as fair, inclusive, and responsive.

VI. Main connectors and dividers

Understanding connectors and dividers is central to conflict-sensitive programming. Connectors are factors, actors, institutions, or practices that bring people together across lines of difference and reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation. Dividers are dynamics that create or reinforce grievances, mistrust, exclusion, or competition and may heighten tensions if not carefully managed.

6.1. Main connectors mitigating conflict sensitivity risks

Local volunteers and volunteer networks

Volunteerism remains one of the strongest connectors across Kharkiv Oblast. In 2022, spontaneous and organised volunteer networks expanded dramatically, operating across settlements affected by shelling, occupation, or displacement. Volunteers have provided food, medicines, evacuation support, minor repairs, winterisation, and psychosocial assistance, often cutting across distinctions between host communities, returnees, and IDPs. FGDs repeatedly describe volunteers as “our own people,” contrasting them with more distant institutional actors.

Local authorities across the oblast have consistently recognised volunteers as unifying actors. Across oblast hromadas official statements and public events have emphasised volunteers’ role in “uniting people in difficult times” and maintaining community morale. KIIs with municipal officials and civil society representatives confirm that volunteer networks often act as informal coordination bridges where formal systems are overstretched. Focus group discussions indicate that volunteer activity fosters trust because assistance is perceived as neighbour-to-neighbour rather than institution-driven, reducing suspicions of favouritism.

From a conflict sensitivity perspective, volunteer networks act as horizontal connectors, reducing “us vs. them” narratives by providing visible, practical solidarity. However, their effectiveness depends on coordination and inclusion. Where volunteer groups operate transparently and inclusively, they mitigate conflict risks; where competition or fragmentation emerges, tensions may arise.

Youth and youth-led initiatives

Youth engagement constitutes a second major connector. Across Kharkiv Oblast, youth councils, informal youth hubs, and volunteer initiatives have proliferated since 2022, often hosted in schools, cultural centres, or reconstructed public spaces.

Young people have played a visible role in rebuilding playgrounds, organising cultural events, supporting displaced children through tutoring, and assisting older residents. These activities foster intergroup contact at an early age, which is particularly important in communities hosting both returnees and IDPs. KIIs suggest that youth initiatives are among the few spaces where IDP and host identities are actively blurred rather than reinforced.

From a conflict sensitivity standpoint, youth initiatives help counter narratives of hopelessness and disengagement. They create shared goals focussed on recovery rather than grievance and help prevent the intergenerational transmission of trauma-based mistrust. Youth-led actions also tend to be less politicised, making them effective entry points for peace-positive programming.

Educators and schools as stabilising institutions

Schools and educators function as critical connectors in Kharkiv Oblast, especially where displacement, intermittent shelling, and EO contamination disrupt daily life. During active hostilities, schools often transformed into shelters or aid distribution points, later evolving into multi-purpose community hubs.

Teachers frequently go beyond formal duties, supporting displaced and local children together through blended learning, psychosocial activities, and

“The volunteers here are our own people—our neighbors, our former colleagues. When they bring help, we know it’s not about politics or bureaucracy; it’s because they genuinely care about us.”

Female, 63, IDP, Derhachivska hromada

parent engagement. These practices help normalise interaction across social lines and reduce stigma against displaced families.

In conflict sensitivity terms, schools are low-risk, high-trust spaces where inclusive norms can be reinforced. When supported appropriately, they reduce the likelihood that displacement or trauma translates into long-term social fragmentation. Conversely, under-resourced schools risk becoming stress points if competition over access intensifies, underscoring the importance of equitable support.

Religious and spiritual leaders

Faith-based actors have played a prominent connecting role across Kharkiv Oblast. Religious leaders from different denominations mobilised early in the full-scale invasion, offering shelter, food, and psychosocial support to all residents regardless of faith or background.

Religious congregations opened facilities to displaced families, coordinating with international church aid networks and local secular volunteers. These interfaith collaborations and shared humanitarian efforts have strengthened solidarity practices and mitigated identity-based tensions.

From a conflict sensitivity perspective, religious institutions often function as trusted intermediaries, particularly for populations sceptical of state institutions. Their legitimacy allows them to bridge divides and de-escalate tensions. However, their role requires careful engagement to avoid perceptions of partiality or exclusion.

CSOs and mixed-membership initiatives

Local CSOs operate at the intersection of humanitarian response, community engagement, and informal governance, often filling gaps left by overstretched public institutions. Initiatives such as Station Kharkiv deliberately integrate IDPs into both volunteer and staff roles, fostering mixed teams that work on legal counselling, humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support, and community dialogue. This model shifts displaced persons from passive aid recipients to active contributors, strengthening mutual recognition and trust.

Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, a wide range of community-based organisations—including women’s groups, youth clubs, veterans’ family associations, and patient and disability support organisations—expanded their mandates to explicitly include displaced populations. By creating shared

spaces for problem-solving and collective action, these initiatives reduce social isolation, facilitate the exchange of information, and normalise everyday interaction between IDPs and host communities across urban and rural areas of Kharkiv Oblast.

From a conflict-sensitivity perspective, CSOs function as bridging institutions that mediate between individual grievances and collective, non-violent responses. They provide channels through which tensions related to aid distribution, access to services, or identity can be articulated and addressed before escalating into open conflict. At the same time, their effectiveness is closely tied to inclusivity, representativeness, and continuity of support. Field data indicate that short-term or uneven funding undermines CSO credibility when community expectations remain high. Sustained investment in locally rooted, mixed-membership CSOs is therefore critical to maintaining their role as stabilising actors and credible connectors within an increasingly fragmented social landscape.

6.2. Main dividers increasing conflict sensitivity risks

Host communities vs IDPs

The key dividers driving tension between long-term residents and IDPs across Kharkiv Oblast include perceived unevenness in assistance, unequal access to housing, jobs, and social benefits, and exclusionary targeting practices. While initial solidarity was widespread, prolonged displacement and scarcity have sharpened these grievances, increasing competition over resources and humanitarian assistance. FGDs with host community members frequently frame these dynamics in economic rather than identity-based terms.

Protection monitoring documents disputes over utility payments, housing arrangements, and perceived preferential treatment of IDPs. Host community members sometimes express resentment toward displaced households perceived as receiving “free assistance”, while IDPs report stigma and reluctance to engage in community decision-making due to fear of conflict [26].

Conflict-sensitive awareness of these dynamics is needed because they can be amplified by perceived uneven aid targeting. Poorly communicated criteria or repeated assistance to visible groups risk reinforcing narratives of inequality, even where targeting is objectively justified.

Administrative and bureaucratic barriers

Cumbersome administrative procedures represent a structural divider affecting multiple groups. In Kharkiv Oblast, a significant proportion of households report difficulties obtaining documentation, compensation, or social assistance due to long procedures, travel costs, and digital barriers.

These barriers disproportionately affect IDPs, older residents, and veterans whose documents were lost or damaged during hostilities. Perceived opacity and bias deepen distrust in authorities and discourage engagement with formal systems [26].

In conflict sensitivity terms, bureaucracy becomes a latent conflict driver when it systematically excludes or delays access to rights, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation.

Stigma, fear, and social exclusion

Subtle but persistent stigma affects several groups, including veterans, IDPs, people with disabilities, and older people. Monitoring indicates that fear of trauma-related behaviour and uncertainty about “outsiders” contribute to social distancing, particularly in communities close to the front line. FGDs reveal that stigma is more often expressed indirectly, through avoidance rather than confrontation.

Veterans report experiences of apprehension or avoidance by civilians, while displaced families feel scrutinised rather than fully accepted [27]. These dynamics weaken participation and erode the sense of shared identity essential for resilience.

From a conflict sensitivity perspective, stigma functions as a slow-burn divider, rarely producing overt conflict but steadily undermining trust and inclusion.

6.3. Actors and dynamics that both connect and divide

Conflict dynamics in Kharkiv Oblast are shaped by a complex interaction of actors whose roles simultaneously contribute to social cohesion and to new or deepened lines of division. These dynamics are fluid, context-specific, and often influenced by proximity to the frontline, patterns of displacement, and the prolonged nature of the war. KIIs show that the same actor may be perceived very differently across neighbouring hromadas.

Humanitarian and development actors are widely perceived as key connectors. Their assistance often

cuts across community lines, supporting IDPs, returnees, and host communities alike, and creating spaces for interaction and mutual support. Local volunteer initiatives, in particular, have strengthened solidarity and civic engagement. However, competition for limited resources, differences in targeting criteria, and inconsistent coverage between locations can fuel frustration and perceptions of inequality. Narratives framing some groups as more vulnerable or more entitled to assistance than others have, in some locations, reinforced “aid-related” divisions. When assistance is seen as short-term, externally driven, or insufficiently responsive to local priorities, it may unintentionally exacerbate these dynamics. Field data indicate that humanitarian actors are often judged collectively, regardless of individual organisational practices.

Local political dynamics further complicate actor roles and perceptions. In some hromadas, local authorities do not actively coordinate with volunteer groups associated with local political opposition. While volunteer activities are generally not obstructed, mutual criticism is common: volunteer groups may be accused of selectively supporting populations aligned with their political position, while authorities are criticised for allegedly favouring affiliates or personal networks. This dynamic illustrates elements of the politicisation of aid and contributes to mistrust between stakeholders. Transparent communication about humanitarian principles and needs-based targeting becomes especially critical in politically divided contexts.

Local authorities play a central connecting role through coordination of humanitarian assistance, restoration of basic services, and communication with communities. In many locations, municipal administrations have become focal points for information sharing and problem-solving, helping align humanitarian actors, community initiatives, and service providers. At the same time, perceptions of uneven support, limited transparency, or preferential treatment of certain groups can generate mistrust. In areas with high military presence or frequent security incidents, the dual role of authorities as service providers and enforcers of security-related measures can further complicate relations with civilians.

Security actors, including the Armed Forces of Ukraine and territorial defence units, are generally viewed as protectors and symbols of resistance, contributing to a sense of collective purpose. Their presence can foster unity, particularly when

communities directly benefit from improved security or evacuation support. However, security measures such as movement restrictions, checkpoints, or requisition of property may strain civilian-military relations, especially where communication is limited or impacts are unevenly felt. In addition, concerns related to forced mobilisation, perceived harsh recruitment practices, and uncertainty about conscription have generated anxiety among youth and working-age men, contributing to declining trust in security institutions in some communities.

Veteran networks have emerged as influential actors in connecting communities affected by the war. Veterans often provide peer support, psychosocial assistance, and mentorship to newly mobilised individuals or those returning from the frontline. Their networks also facilitate integration of war-affected youth into local initiatives and volunteer programmes, strengthening cohesion. However, KIIs and FGDs indicate that some civilians perceive veteran networks as socially closed or inward-looking, which can limit their bridging potential beyond veteran circles.

Volunteer groups, as detailed in Section 6.1, are among the strongest horizontal connectors in the oblast. Their dual potential is most visible on the divider side: sustained operational pressure has produced burnout and depletion among core volunteers, while competition among networks for visibility, funding,

or public recognition can shift dynamics from solidarity to rivalry. Uneven recognition, where some groups receive public acknowledgement or material support and others do not, risks generating grievances that undermine the very cohesion these networks have built.

Faith-based organisations also contribute to social cohesion by providing material aid, psychosocial support, and community spaces where individuals can gather safely. Religious institutions often act as trusted intermediaries, particularly in areas where local authorities or formal humanitarian actors are less present. They can promote reconciliation, common purpose, and collective resilience. Nevertheless, faith-based initiatives can also unintentionally create divisions if support is perceived to favour adherents of specific denominations, or if messaging implicitly frames certain groups as outsiders or less deserving.

Overall, actors in Kharkiv Oblast operate in overlapping roles that can both mitigate and exacerbate conflict risks. Veteran networks, volunteer initiatives, and faith-based organisations are particularly significant in building cohesion, yet the same structures can create perceptions of exclusivity or favouritism. Conflict-sensitive programming requires continuous analysis of how actors interact, how benefits and burdens are distributed, and how narratives are formed and reinforced at the local level.

VII. Conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities for humanitarian and recovery assistance

This final section translates the analysis of conflict dynamics, connectors, and dividers into actionable guidance for humanitarian and recovery programming. It identifies key conflict sensitivity risks that programming must navigate, highlights opportunities to strengthen social cohesion, and provides practical recommendations grounded in the realities documented throughout this report.

7.1. Conflict sensitivity risks for humanitarian programming

Humanitarian and recovery interventions in Kharkiv Oblast operate in an environment where needs vastly exceed available resources, where communities are exhausted by prolonged insecurity, and where perceptions of fairness are closely scrutinised. In this context, even well-intentioned assistance can inadvertently exacerbate tensions, reinforce exclusion, or undermine trust if conflict sensitivity risks are not carefully managed. The following risks require sustained attention across all phases of programming.

Risk 1: aid targeting perceived as unfair or opaque

A key conflict sensitivity risk in Kharkiv Oblast is the perception of inequity in aid distribution. When targeting criteria are unclear, inconsistently applied, or poorly communicated, communities develop narratives about who is “favoured” and who is “forgotten,” particularly around high-value assistance such as housing repair, cash transfers, winterisation support, and compensation mechanisms. This risk is heightened where humanitarian targeting does not fully align with, or is not clearly distinguished from, eligibility requirements applied by local or national authorities.

Field data show that households frequently compare their situation with neighbours and nearby settlements, asking why others received support while they did not. Even when targeting is needs-based, limited transparency creates space for rumours, resentment, and mistrust. Several FGDs in Derhachivska, Bezliudivska, and Vilkhivska hromadas highlighted confusion over differing documentation and registration requirements between humanitarian actors and municipal offices, which residents sometimes interpreted as arbitrariness or favouritism. These dynamics are reinforced by variability in humanitarian access: security restrictions, damaged infrastructure, and logistical constraints result in uneven coverage that communities often interpret as

neglect rather than necessity, increasing frustration and the risk of localised tensions.

The risk is further amplified when multiple humanitarian actors apply different criteria and timelines, producing a fragmented assistance landscape perceived as arbitrary. In HMA, frustration is particularly acute when communities observe clearance prioritising large-scale agricultural land linked to agribusiness or economic recovery objectives, while household plots, kitchen gardens, and community infrastructure remain contaminated and inaccessible. Although international HMA actors typically lack authority over national prioritisation frameworks, they become the most visible interface with communities and therefore absorb dissatisfaction linked to these decisions. Perceptions of unfairness are further reinforced by the contrast between international clearance methodologies, which are slower but more thorough, and emergency or rapid clearance conducted by national actors, which is faster but may leave residual risk—feeding narratives that international HMA is bureaucratic and unresponsive rather than protective. Tensions are especially visible between IDPs and host communities when one group receives visible support while the other feels excluded. In such cases, the core issue is not the assistance itself, but how uneven access and opaque decision-making shape perceptions of fairness and inclusion.

Risk 2: reinforcing rather than bridging social divides

Programming that categorically separates beneficiary groups risks reinforcing divisions rather than fostering integration. Activities designed exclusively for IDPs, veterans, or returnees—while addressing specific needs—can inadvertently create parallel social spaces that limit interaction and mutual understanding. Over time, this can normalise segmentation and reduce opportunities for shared experiences that build empathy and solidarity.

For example, separate psychosocial support groups, livelihood programmes, or community events for different population categories may meet immediate needs but miss opportunities to create connectors. Similarly, infrastructure projects that serve only one part of a settlement or favour one demographic group can generate grievance among those excluded, particularly when resources are scarce and competition is high.

The risk is heightened when programming language or communication reinforces distinctions: repeatedly categorising people as “IDPs and hosts,” “returnees and those who stayed,” or “vulnerable” can subtly legitimize these labels as fixed social identities rather than fluid, context-dependent experiences. Such framing, even when intended purely as descriptive shorthand for targeting purposes, can become prescriptive over time, shaping how communities perceive themselves and others.

Risk 3: undermining local governance legitimacy and capacity

Humanitarian interventions can unintentionally weaken local governance structures if they bypass authorities, create parallel systems, or fail to visibly support legitimate institutions. In Kharkiv Oblast, where trust in local authorities is performance-based and fragile, programming that does not coordinate with or acknowledge local leadership risks creating perceptions that “NGOs are more effective than our own government.”

This dynamic is particularly problematic in contexts where authorities are already overstretched, under-resourced, and struggling to maintain services under wartime conditions. Field data suggest that when aid delivery circumvents municipal offices, it can disrupt local coordination mechanisms, confuse reporting lines, and create tension between departments responsible for service delivery and recovery. If humanitarian actors consistently “fill the gap” without strengthening local capacity or publicly recognising local contributions, communities may conclude that institutions are irrelevant or incompetent. Over time, this erodes the social contract between citizens and authorities, undermining long-term governance legitimacy.

Conversely, when humanitarian actors work too closely with authorities without maintaining transparency or accountability, communities may perceive aid as politicised or controlled by local elites. This risk is compounded in locations where Military

Administrations have assumed expanded powers, creating ambiguity about decision-making processes and accountability lines.

Risk 4: generating dependency and undermining self-reliance

Prolonged humanitarian presence can create dependency dynamics that weaken community agency and self-organised coping mechanisms. When assistance becomes the primary means of meeting needs, communities may reduce investment in informal mutual aid, local economic activity, or collective problem-solving. This is particularly concerning in Kharkiv Oblast, where volunteer networks and grassroots solidarity have been key connectors since 2022.

Dependency risks are heightened when assistance is predictable and long-term without clear transition strategies toward recovery and self-reliance. Communities may begin to expect external support as an entitlement rather than temporary crisis response, creating frustration when programmes scale down or exit. This can generate grievances directed both at humanitarian actors and at local authorities perceived as unable to “replace” departing assistance.

The risk is compounded by economic fragility: in contexts where employment is limited and livelihoods remain disrupted, humanitarian assistance may function as a de facto income source. While this addresses immediate survival needs, it can delay economic reactivation and create disincentives for households to engage in riskier but more sustainable livelihood strategies.

Risk 5: inadequate attention to exclusion and invisible vulnerabilities

Programming that relies primarily on self-registration, digital platforms, or visible community engagement risks systematically excluding the most vulnerable populations. Older persons without digital literacy, people with disabilities facing mobility barriers, men in self-imposed confinement due to mobilisation fears, and isolated rural households may remain unreachable even when formally eligible for assistance.

This exclusion risk is particularly acute in Kharkiv Oblast due to the combination of widespread infrastructure damage, security constraints, and demographic shifts. When outreach is insufficient or relies on community nominations that reflect existing power dynamics, programming may inadvertently

reinforce marginalisation. Over time, excluded groups may develop deep grievances not only about unmet needs but about being “invisible” to both authorities and humanitarian actors.

Furthermore, when assistance reaches more visible or vocal groups while bypassing isolated or stigmatised populations, perceptions of unfairness intensify. Communities notice who receives support and who does not, and patterns of exclusion become interpreted as evidence of bias, incompetence, or corruption—even when the actual cause is logistical or methodological.

Risk 6: inadequate conflict sensitivity in reconstruction and infrastructure programming

Recovery and reconstruction programming carries distinct conflict sensitivity risks. Decisions about which settlements, neighbourhoods, or facilities receive rehabilitation are highly visible and generate strong expectations. When prioritisation criteria are unclear or appear inconsistent—for example, when one settlement receives water system rehabilitation while a neighbouring settlement with similar damage does not—perceptions of favouritism or political bias emerge rapidly.

Infrastructure projects can also create localised tensions over employment, procurement, and land use. If reconstruction contracts are awarded through centralised procurement processes that systematically favour large, non-local companies, local actors may be excluded regardless of need or capacity. Even when procedures are formally transparent, procurement criteria related to scale, compliance history, or financial thresholds can unintentionally marginalise local suppliers and labour. This can generate frustration, reinforce perceptions of elite capture, and create longer-term accountability challenges as affected communities have limited access to or leverage over implementing entities. Similarly, if reconstruction alters land use or public space without consultation, it can generate conflict over property rights, access, and community identity.

Reconstruction timing also carries risks. Premature investment in areas still exposed to repeated attacks can waste resources and create false expectations of safety, while delayed reconstruction in liberated areas can signal abandonment and undermine return. Both dynamics affect community morale, trust in authorities, and social cohesion.

7.2. Opportunities to strengthen connectors and reduce tensions

Despite the challenges outlined above, the analysis also reveals significant opportunities to strengthen social cohesion and reduce conflict risks in Kharkiv Oblast. These opportunities are grounded in existing connectors—volunteer networks, youth engagement, local governance efforts, and shared experiences of resilience—and can be deliberately reinforced through conflict-sensitive programming.

Opportunity 1: leveraging local capacities and social networks

Local NGOs, volunteer networks, and community leaders are among the most effective connectors in Kharkiv Oblast. Their contextual knowledge, trusted relationships, and operational flexibility enable them to reach populations and address needs in ways international actors often cannot. Strengthening these capacities enhances programme relevance, reduces perceptions of external imposition, and supports resilience, provided expectations around their long-term absorption capacity remain realistic.

Volunteer networks have evolved since the full-scale invasion from spontaneous mutual aid into semi-organised structures with strong community legitimacy. Operating across urban and rural areas, they often reach isolated populations and bridge social divides, as IDPs and long-term residents frequently volunteer together. Because assistance is perceived as coming “from within,” volunteer-led support reduces suspicions of favouritism or hidden agendas, making these networks particularly powerful connectors.

Community leaders, including informal and faith-based actors, also play connecting roles but require careful engagement to avoid reinforcing exclusionary dynamics.

HMA programming offers a specific opportunity to shift community perceptions through sustained, transparent communication. While clearance timelines are constrained, honest explanations of prioritisation and technical limits, delivered through NTS and community liaison, can gradually transform frustration into informed understanding when used as two-way dialogue rather than solely for data collection.

Opportunity 2: creating spaces for shared community action

Programming that brings different population groups together around shared goals offers powerful opportunities to reduce social distance and build

empathy. Mixed activities, such as community cleanup days, joint infrastructure rehabilitation, collective cultural events, or intergenerational storytelling initiatives, create positive contact experiences that counter “us versus them” narratives, provided that all activities are preceded by appropriate technical safety assessments and risk mitigation measures.

In Kharkiv Oblast, where trauma and fatigue are widespread, such activities also provide psychological relief by creating moments of normalcy, collective purpose, and hope. They signal that recovery is possible and that communities can shape their own futures rather than passively awaiting external solutions.

Effective shared-action programming prioritizes genuine participation from all groups, frames activities around common interests rather than identity-based categories, and celebrates collective achievements to reinforce positive social norms. Safety requirements and realistic limitations must be communicated clearly from the outset.

Opportunity 3: strengthening inclusive local governance

Programming that visibly reinforces legitimate, responsive, and inclusive local governance can strengthen both vertical trust (between citizens and authorities) and horizontal trust (among community members). Opportunities include: supporting transparent communication systems (community notice boards, SMS updates, regular public meetings); strengthening local capacity for participatory planning and feedback mechanisms; and facilitating dialogue between authorities and marginalised groups who may feel excluded from decision-making.

In contexts where military administrations have assumed expanded roles, humanitarian actors can support the maintenance of civilian governance functions and participatory norms, ensuring that wartime centralisation does not permanently erode democratic practices. This might include supporting community consultations on recovery priorities, facilitating joint planning between authorities and civil society, or providing technical assistance for transparent compensation and assistance processes.

Opportunity 4: investing in youth leadership and intergenerational initiatives

Youth engagement represents a strategic opportunity to build long-term social cohesion. Young people

in Kharkiv Oblast have demonstrated remarkable resilience and civic commitment, often leading volunteer initiatives, supporting displaced peers, and assisting older neighbours. Programming that nurtures this energy can foster inclusive leadership and prevent the entrenchment of conflict-related grievances across generations.

Youth-focussed programming should be designed to avoid creating a separate “youth sector” disconnected from broader community life. Instead, initiatives should integrate youth into intergenerational activities, recognize their contributions publicly, and ensure they have voice in decision-making processes that affect their futures.

Opportunity 5: building on shared identity and collective resilience narratives

The analysis reveals that shared experiences of hardship, resilience, and attachment to place have strengthened collective identity across many communities in Kharkiv Oblast. Programming can deliberately reinforce these narratives through communication strategies, public events, and cultural initiatives that celebrate solidarity, mutual support, and local agency.

For example, documenting and sharing stories of community resilience—how neighbours supported each other during occupation, how volunteers coordinated evacuations, how schools adapted to serve displaced children—can reinforce positive social norms and counter narratives of victimhood or division. Similarly, supporting cultural heritage activities, local history projects, and commemorative events can strengthen shared identity without politicisation.

These efforts should be community-driven and inclusive, ensuring that diverse voices and experiences are represented. When done well, they help communities process collective trauma, affirm their values, and articulate a shared vision for recovery.

Opportunity 6: promoting inclusive economic recovery

Economic programming offers opportunities to reduce tensions by addressing one of the primary drivers of grievance: competition over scarce resources. Initiatives that create employment, support small businesses, and restore livelihoods can reduce household vulnerability and ease pressure on aid systems.

The conflict sensitivity relevance of economic recovery goes beyond material welfare. In Kharkiv Oblast, socio-economic pressure is a key driver of inter-group tension: households compare their situations with neighbours, and perceived inequalities in access to livelihoods quickly translate into grievances toward institutions and other groups. The emergence of a “new poor” (previously stable households that lost assets or income due to displacement or destruction) often falls outside standard vulnerability frameworks and remains poorly targeted. Economic programming that reaches this group, and clearly explains its rationale, directly addresses one of the oblast’s most sensitive fairness fault lines.

Economic interdependence also functions as a social connector. When IDPs, returnees, and long-term residents work together—shared economic purpose reduces group distinctions and fosters cooperation. Conversely, parallel and segmented

livelihood pathways risk reinforcing social distance, making the design of economic interventions critical for social cohesion outcomes beyond household-level gains.

Opportunity 7: facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms

Local mechanisms for managing tensions and resolving disputes represent a significant but often underutilised opportunity. Where formal justice systems are overstretched, community-level dialogue processes offer accessible, lower-stakes alternatives that reinforce norms of negotiation over withdrawal or confrontation. Critically, such mechanisms are most effective when designed to address structural drivers of grievance, not just interpersonal disputes, and when linked to formal decision-making processes to ensure accountability.

Risk	Linked Opportunity	Programming implication
<p>R1: Aid targeting perceived as unfair or opaque</p>	<p>O1 Leveraging local capacities and social networks</p> <p>O3 Strengthening inclusive local governance</p> <p>O7 Facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms</p>	<p>Embed local volunteer networks and CSOs as intermediaries who communicate targeting criteria in trusted, accessible language. Support hromada-level transparency mechanisms (notice boards, public meetings, etc.). Create accessible grievance channels before distributions.</p>
<p>R2: Reinforcing rather than bridging social divides</p>	<p>O2 Creating spaces for shared community action</p> <p>O4 Youth and intergenerational initiatives</p> <p>O5 Building on shared identity and collective resilience narratives</p>	<p>Design mixed-group activities (community clean-ups, joint cultural events, EORE sessions) that create positive contact across IDP-host and other category lines. Reframe programming language around shared stressors rather than group labels. Invest in youth-led intergenerational initiatives that bridge divides across generations.</p>
<p>R3: Undermining local governance legitimacy and capacity</p>	<p>O1 Leveraging local capacities and social networks</p> <p>O3 Strengthening inclusive local governance</p> <p>O7 Facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms</p>	<p>Position DRC and partners visibly as supporters of hromada authority, not substitutes. Facilitate joint planning between authorities and civil society. Support civilian governance functions where Military Administrations have expanded their role, preserving participatory norms under wartime centralisation.</p>
<p>R4: Generating dependency and undermining self-reliance</p>	<p>O1 Leveraging local capacities and social networks</p> <p>O6 Promoting inclusive economic recovery</p>	<p>Strengthen local CSO and volunteer capacity as sustainable infrastructure rather than project-cycle intermediaries. Communicate transition plans from the outset. Link livelihoods programming to community-wide economic recovery to reduce over-reliance on external assistance as a de facto income source.</p>

<p>R5: Inadequate attention to exclusion and invisible vulnerabilities</p>	<p>O1 Leveraging local capacities and social networks</p> <p>O4 Investing in youth leadership and intergenerational initiatives</p> <p>O3 Strengthening inclusive local governance</p>	<p>Use volunteer networks and youth as active out-reach conduits to elderly, mobility-impaired, and self-confined populations that formal channels miss. Supplement digital and self-registration approaches with home-based and community-nominated follow-up. Track exclusion patterns through post-assistance perception monitoring.</p>
<p>R6: Inadequate conflict sensitivity in reconstruction and infrastructure programming</p>	<p>O3 Strengthening inclusive local governance</p> <p>O6 Promoting inclusive economic recovery</p> <p>O7 Facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms</p>	<p>Communicate prioritisation criteria for DRC support visibly and in advance. Ensure local suppliers and labour are included in procurement where possible. Monitor community perceptions during implementation and create a clear escalation path for grievances arising from prioritisation decisions.</p>

7.3. Practical recommendations for conflict-sensitive programming

The following recommendations translate the conceptual opportunities identified in §7.2 into concrete, actionable guidance for humanitarian and recovery actors in Kharkiv Oblast. Recommendations are organised thematically to facilitate integration into sectoral and cross-sectoral programming.

A. Foundational principles and strategic recommendations

Conflict-sensitive programming requires adherence to core operational principles and strategic approaches that address systemic challenges. The following recommendations provide an integrated framework for humanitarian and recovery actors, adaptable across sectors and local contexts.

1. Embed conflict sensitivity as core practice

Conflict sensitivity must be integrated into organisational culture and programme cycles, not treated as a standalone assessment. Conduct assessments at pre-design, implementation, and transition phases to map risks, monitor perceptions of fairness, and evaluate long-term social impacts. Focus on qualitative perception data alongside quantitative metrics to capture how communities interpret assistance. Designate dedicated staff and budgets for conflict sensitivity activities and provide sustained capacity building for staff and partners to recognize tension triggers, adapt programming, and document considerations.

2. Communicate transparently and proactively

Transparent communication builds trust and mitigates grievance. Clearly explain who receives assistance, what support entails, why selection occurs, and when interventions happen, while acknowledging limitations and gaps. Use multiple channels suited to local access and provide proactive explanations to excluded populations to prevent assumptions of favouritism or neglect.

3. Balance targeted and universal approaches

Combine needs-based targeting for high-value assistance with community-wide investments that generate collective benefit. Explicitly communicate the link between individual support and universal programming to reduce perceptions of winners and losers. Adjust the balance according to local context, damage patterns, and population composition to ensure inclusion of both IDPs and host communities.

4. Reinforce rather than replace local governance

Coordinate with local authorities to maintain legitimacy without ceding humanitarian independence. Engage authorities in planning, verification, and communication while investing in their capacity for transparent, inclusive service delivery. Maintain clear roles and accountability, ensuring assistance adheres to humanitarian principles. Critically, this support must not substitute for governance: humanitarian actors should position local authorities as the primary service providers and decision-makers wherever possible, with NGOs and UN agencies in explicitly supporting roles.

This approach reinforces institutional legitimacy, avoids creating parallel systems that erode public trust in state structures, and prepares communities for the eventual transition out of emergency response.

5. Inclusive participation and addressing exclusion

Proactively engage marginalised and hard-to-reach populations through accessible feedback channels and targeted outreach. Close feedback loops to demonstrate responsiveness, and adapt participation mechanisms to local constraints, ensuring input informs decision-making.

6. Support local civil society and volunteer networks

Strengthen local CSOs and volunteer networks through flexible, trust-based support that avoids over-formalisation. In practice, this means consulting volunteer networks on vulnerability and accessibility gaps, including which groups are hardest to reach for NTS/EORE, and distributions. Inclusive public recognition of volunteer contributions further reinforces social cohesion and the perceived legitimacy of community-based action. CSOs and volunteer networks should be positioned as primary implementers where contextually appropriate, with international actors playing enabling rather than substituting roles.

7. Align coordination with local structures and across organisations

Engage proactively with hromada-level authorities as the primary coordination entry point, recognising their central role in managing humanitarian response on the ground. Humanitarian actors should participate in and align programming with hromada-led coordination processes, rather than relying solely on inter-agency platforms. Where relevant, establish complementary inter-organisation working groups for joint analysis and collective response to prevent cumulative negative effects.

8. Plan for sustainability and transitions

Communicate programme duration and exit plans, linking interventions to longer-term recovery and development pathways. Build local capacity to sustain services, infrastructure, and community initiatives post-external support.

9. Monitor perceptions and adapt continuously

Establish systems to capture evolving community perceptions and social impacts. Use findings to guide rapid adaptations, ensuring flexibility in programme design and transparent communication about changes. Document lessons and share knowledge across programmes to enhance collective learning and prevent repetition of mistakes. Post-assistance monitoring should include targeted questions on whether communities perceived assistance as fair and transparent, whether exclusion of any group was observed, and whether tensions increased or decreased following the intervention.

B. Sector-specific recommendations

Protection

Protection interventions carry heightened conflict sensitivity risks due to their focus on sensitive personal information, stigma-related vulnerabilities, and the potential for exposing individuals to social, psychological, or security harm if services are perceived as intrusive, biased, or unsafe.

Transparent and inclusive targeting for protection

Protection assistance should be based on clear, transparent criteria that reflect actual vulnerability rather than formal status. Ensure programmes consider the needs of both IDPs and long-term residents (especially in frontline communities), recognising that different groups may face distinct but equally serious risks. Communicate targeting decisions openly to communities to reduce perceptions of favouritism and enhance trust in protection interventions. Where repeated assistance is required due to cumulative harm, communicate clearly that this reflects repeated exposure rather than preferential treatment.

Confidentiality and safe access

Protection services must be accessible without exposing beneficiaries to stigma, surveillance, or security risks. Discreet referral pathways, flexible appointment systems, and safe locations are critical, particularly for men avoiding public exposure due to mobilisation fears and for survivors of violence. Flexible delivery modalities (mobile services, home-based follow-up, or remote options where feasible) can further reduce exclusion of individuals with limited mobility or fear of public exposure.

Balancing group-based and individual support

Group-based PSS activities can strengthen social cohesion but may exclude individuals unwilling or unable to participate publicly. Programmes should offer parallel individual support options and ensure that group activities are conflict sensitive, inclusive and non-stigmatising.

Addressing stigma and social tensions

Protection messaging should actively challenge harmful narratives that blame or marginalise certain groups, including displaced persons, veterans, men practicing self-imposed confinement, or individuals with psychosocial distress. Community-level awareness activities should be framed around shared stressors and collective coping rather than “vulnerable groups” alone.

Referral systems and trust

Protection actors should ensure that referral systems are trusted and functional, avoiding referrals to institutions perceived as disrespectful or abusive. Where trust in authorities is low, clear explanations and informed consent are essential.

Community-based protection teams

Community-based protection teams, complemented by mobile units, enable humanitarian actors to reach populations who are geographically isolated, socially marginalised, or reluctant to access centralised services due to fear of mobilisation, stigma, or security concerns.

Economic recovery

Economic recovery interventions can either reduce tensions by restoring dignity and self-reliance or exacerbate them by privileging certain groups.

Conflict-sensitive targeting

Livelihood support should be based on transparent vulnerability and feasibility criteria, avoiding over-reliance on formal status. Programmes should acknowledge that economic vulnerability affects both IDPs and long-term residents, often in different but equally severe ways. Where possible, invest in sectors that benefit entire communities, such as agriculture, local services, or small-scale manufacturing, rather than focusing only on individual entrepreneurs. Transparent

communication is particularly important where some households receive repeated support due to repeated losses, to prevent perceptions of favouritism.

Avoiding market distortions

Cash grants, business support, and vocational training should be designed with awareness of local market dynamics to avoid unfair competition or inflation. Coordination with other actors is essential to prevent saturation of specific trades or services. Support small business development through inclusive criteria that do not require extensive documentation or high digital literacy, ensuring broader access and reducing exclusion of vulnerable entrepreneurs.

Inclusive participation

Programmes should accommodate individuals with limited mobility, caregiving responsibilities, or fear of public exposure. Flexible schedules, home-based activities, or remote components can reduce exclusion. Short-term, visible community-wide economic inputs (e.g. small communal assets or services) can complement targeted support and help mitigate perceptions of unequal benefit.

Linking economic recovery to social cohesion

Where appropriate, Economic Recovery interventions can be designed to encourage collaboration across groups—for example, joint business initiatives, cooperatives, or community-based services—while ensuring participation is voluntary and not forced.

Humanitarian mine action

HMA interventions carry particular conflict sensitivity risks due to their direct relationship with land access, livelihoods, and perceptions of safety and prioritisation.

Prioritisation and communication

Mine clearance and risk education priorities should be communicated clearly to communities, emphasising technical and safety-based criteria rather than the perceived value of land or political importance of locations. Humanitarian actors should explain transparently why certain areas are addressed before others in both demining and NTS processes, including realistic timelines and operational constraints, to manage expectations. Where possible, demining priorities should be visibly linked to broader recovery

goals—such as restoring access to agricultural land or enabling infrastructure rehabilitation—to demonstrate collective benefit and reduce perceptions of arbitrariness.

Community engagement and inclusion

While community consultation is a standard element of NTS, its depth and inclusiveness vary in practice. HMA actors should ensure engagement goes beyond information extraction, particularly by including groups often under-represented in consultations, and by explaining how community inputs inform prioritisation decisions. Clear feedback loops can strengthen trust, reduce misperceptions around clearance priorities, and improve the credibility of risk education activities. Participatory approaches should explicitly address expectations where not all contaminated areas can be addressed immediately.

HMA actors should function as intermediaries between communities and mine action authorities, systematically documenting and elevating community priorities (household plots, market gardens, community infrastructure) to Oblast Mine Action Centres. While humanitarian actors do not control national prioritisation frameworks, strengthening coordination between communities/NGOs, local authorities, and mine action authorities creates transparent channels for community voices to influence sequencing within existing constraints.

Risk education as a social connector

EORE should be designed not only as a safety intervention but also as a community-wide activity that brings together IDPs and host communities, adults and children, reinforcing shared responsibility for safety. Where appropriate, these sessions can be expanded into broader community activities by integrating conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding elements, such as facilitated dialogue on shared risks, collective problem-solving, and mutual support in crisis situations. High-visibility incidents can be used to explain broader patterns of contamination and risk, rather than focusing narrowly on single events.

Avoiding land-related tensions

While the assessment did not identify significant land-related disputes arising from clearance activities, maintaining standard HMA-HLP coordination practices, tailored to Ukraine's land administration systems, remains essential as operations scale. This includes continued pre-clearance coordination with local authorities on land tenure documentation and maintaining accessible grievance mechanisms. These preventive measures, standard in HMA operations and already applied in Kharkiv Oblast, help mitigate potential future tensions as contaminated agricultural and residential land returns to productive use.

By adopting these recommendations, humanitarian actors can maximize positive impacts while minimising unintended harms. Programmes that actively engage communities, reinforce connectors, and mitigate divisive risks contribute to durable cohesion and resilience across Kharkiv Oblast.

DRC is committed to integrating these findings directly into its own programming, rather than treating this report as a standalone resource. In practice, this means embedding conflict sensitivity considerations into sectoral assessments, community engagement approaches, and targeting criteria across its programming. Working in partnership with local organisations and community structures, DRC will use these findings to strengthen conflict-sensitive programming and ensure that cohesion is treated as a programmatic outcome in its ongoing response across Kharkiv Oblast.

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displaced persons in becoming self-reliant and included into hosting societies—and we work with communities, civil society and responsible authorities to promote protection of rights and peaceful coexistence.

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