UKRAINE

REACH Report: Information Flows In International-Local Partnerships

January-February 2024

REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

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About REACH

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT). For more information please visit our website. You can contact us directly at: geneva@reach-initiative.org and follow us on Twitter @REACH_info.

SUMMARY

According to research by ACAPS and the NGO Resource Center, including local actors in decision-making is a particular weakness within localisation efforts in Ukraine.[1] [2] At the same time, local Ukrainian actors often have a significant amount of ground-level information about needs and preferences of the affected population, relevant to the decisions being made among international humanitarian actors who control the majority of humanitarian funding.[3] In terms of localisation, national-level assessments, discussions, and strategies have been increasingly taking place, and broader issues such as funding, coordination, and safety/security are already largely assessed and understood. However, with decision-making flagged as a weak point, some of the underlying mechanisms affecting decision-making warranted further assessment in order to aid improved localisation in 2024.

In this context, REACH conducted an FCDO-funded[4] assessment of **information flows within partnerships between international and Ukrainian humanitarian actors,** and their **influence on decision-making,** with support from the NGO Platform in outreach to key informants. The assessment aimed to identify the mechanisms facilitating information flows, including people, modalities, and processes, between international and local partners. The assessment also investigated the perception of effectiveness for different information flow mechanisms and information-sharing in partnerships on the whole, as well as how information from one partner influences the other partners' decision-making. The assessment and subsequent report aimed to aid international and local actors by offering possibilities for improved or enhanced communication between the two, and for greater decision-making influence for local organisations.

This assessment used qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives from international organisations (IOs) that had local partners in the East and South regions of Ukraine on the one hand, and representatives from Ukrainian civil society organisations (CSOs) operating in the East and South regions and that had international partners on the other hand. On the CSO side, REACH targeted a mixture of small, medium, and large, and targeted a mixture of interational non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and UN agencies on the IO side. Fifty-two qualitative KIIs were conducted by REACH assessment and field teams from **9 January to 12 February 2024,** using language and modality (in-person or phone/video call) as preferred by KIs.

In terms of information flow mechanisms (i.e. people, modalities, and/or processes used to transfer or share information), both IO and CSO respondents consistently reported that the top modalities of information-sharing are **e-mails, meetings, messengers, and phone calls**; both also generally shared the understanding that the main type of information CSOs pass or should be passing on to their IO partners is information about beneficiary needs and organisational information about the CSO partners' policies, activities, capacities, and finances. Many IO respondents also highlighted trainings, workshops, and other means of building their CSO partners' capacity as means of passing information (with knowledge or expertise considered as a type of information) back to their CSO partners. When considering people or roles as information flow mechanisms, different organisational structures were observed among CSOs vs. IOs. More than half of CSO respondents reported **no direct or individual roles in their organisation specifically responsible for sharing information** with their partners—an approach of using whoever is relevant or available was often reported, which sometimes included heads of CSOs—whereas IO respondents commonly reported receiving information from local CSO partners, particularly about needs and context, almost equally via **partnership roles or programmatic roles**. IOs often having clear and dedicated roles with the time and capacity for information exchange may be

[1] ACAPS, Perceptions of Localisation in the Humanitarian Response, June 2023.
[2] NGO Resource Center, ICVA, A Humanitarian Localisation Baseline for Ukraine, September 2023.
[3] Refugees International, Efforts to Localize Aid in Ukraine One Year On: Stuck in Neutral, Losing Time, February 2023.
[4] Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office

beneficial; however, the fact that some CSOs named the heads of their organisations as information exchange focal points while IOs typically did not may also point to lowered ability of CSO information to affect IO decision-making.

Both international and local groups of KIs **perceived the mechanisms used for transferring information as effective on the whole**. The top reported mechanisms, namely meetings, messenger apps, and e-mails, tended to be reported by both IO and CSO KIs as at least moderately effective and often very effective, and although some small deviations between preferences of IOs and CSOs existed, only a few KIs noted individual mechanisms that weren't very effective. Overall, IO and CSO KIs were united in saying that what makes different information flow mechanisms effective is that **partners combine various channels and adjust which mechanism to use depending on the type of information being shared.** Among the smaller number of IO KIs reporting factors decreasing the effectiveness of information flows, IO KIs often pointed to **low CSO staff capacity** hindering modalities such as in-person meetings or e-mails, or delaying reporting. Although fewer CSOs reported experiencing information flow mechanisms as ineffective, some also flagged **short timelines** for communication or off-target information from IOs as limiting the effectiveness of exchanges. Finally, although more than half of IO respondents reported that at least some of their CSO partners attend cluster meetings, a similar amount of IO KIs reported challenges their partners faced in attending them, with the main challenge being that **the content is considered less relevant to CSOs' needs,** particularly the timelines and administrative levels with which they work.

In terms of the inclusion of CSOs and CSO information in IO partners' decision-making, findings suggest that **CSOs have limited understanding of how and where their international partners make decisions**, leading to less confidence in the uptake of their information even if information flow mechanisms for passing up information are perceived as functional. CSOs' best guesses on their IO partners' decision-making mechanisms in fact over-emphasise the role of CSO information when compared to IOs' own perception of the main mechanisms driving their decisions, which centered more on centralised planning via senior staff at the country level, strategic and/or programmatic plans for their organisation, and donor influence. Notably, both CSO and IO KIs perceived information provided by CSO partners about beneficiary needs, locations, and context as a key source of information for more operational decision-making for IOs' **project implementation or security decisions,** a perception that was generally supported by the examples of CSO information influence that both CSO and IO KIs were able to give. But although uptake of CSO information to influence IO operational planning seemed to be happening effectively, **higher-level influence of CSOs or their information was reportedly lacking,** with few instances of such influence reported by KIs in either group. One barrier to higher-level influence apparent in descriptions of information flow mechanisms and roles vs. IO decision-making processes could be that few CSOs have direct lines of connection to the senior circles or centralised offices in which the majority of IO decisions are reportedly made, making **the uptake of CSO information and proxy influence reliant on roles that themselves have less strategic focus or decision-making power**. Alongside gaps in CSO awareness on how some of their information is used, a lack of apparent impact on higher-level IO decision-making could explain why findings showed an imbalance in perceptions of inclusion of CSOs in the decision-making of IOs, with about three-fourths of IO KIs reporting that they **include local CSO partners in their decision-making,** compared to slightly more than half of CSO KIs reporting that **they or their information are either not included, or only partly included.**

Both gaps in awareness of the end use of shared information and possible structural barriers preventing use of CSO information echoed in broader international humanitarian processes that affected IOs themselves, including donor decision-making and the HNRP process. Cases in which partner IOs were willing to act on CSO information but unable to do so due to donor priorities or requirements were named by both KI groups. Meanwhile, although **nearly half of IO KIs reported that they use their partner CSOs' information in contributing to HNRP,** many were uncertain as to whether the CSO information they had passed on was ultimately used, and **only a few IO KIs were able to name any**

direct examples outside of CSO partner reporting feeding into clusters overall. Among CSO KIs, a slight majority of those who were aware of the HNRP believed their information was not used, but more pressingly, **nearly half of CSO KIs reported that they were not aware of the HNRP at all.**

When examining information flows from IO to CSO and how IO information affects CSO decision-making, responses by IOs and CSOs diverged. Nearly all IO KIs reported that they share information with CSO partners for making their decisions, with donor- or grant-related information and specific technical expertise named as the most frequently reported type of information shared. However, many IO KIs are reportedly **not aware of how or whether it affects their CSO partners' decision-making,** and less than half were able to give examples of the information they had shared clearly impacting a CSO partner decision, suggesting that gaps in awareness of information's end use also exists in the IO-to-CSO direction. Meanwhile, CSO KIs' reports of how effectively the information they *needed* from IOs was reaching them was less positive, with **nearly half of CSO KIs reporting receipt of the desired information from IOs as not very effective.** CSO respondents did report a desire for information on grant or donor opportunities, and for technical expertise and capacity-building that they deemed relevant for organisational growth, all of which were commonly reported as being shared by IO KIs. However, many CSO KIs seemed less aware of the information or trainings that IO KIs indicated were available, with the CSO sample skew towards small and medium-sized CSOs possibly playing a role. In addition, CSO KIs reported a greater need for **information about international partners' activity and location priorities** as well as on **how IOs decide their aid priorities,** not only in the short or medium term but also in the in the long term. About half of CSO KIs saw this type of information as necessary to be able to plan their activities and expand their work more sustainably to better help the affected population.

Based on assessment findings, possible steps for IOs to improve information flows with their CSO partners could include better informing their partners about long-term priorities or possibilities for cooperation, making their own decision-making process more transparent, and sharing feedback on how the CSO information already being shared is included in internal and system-wide decision-making, while noting that IOs themselves might benefit from demystification of how information is taken up in higher-level processes such as the HNRP. Meanwhile CSOs might also consider clearer explanations to IOs of their own decision-making processes, and of what information CSOs feel they need to make decisions for the future of their programming.

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List of Acronyms

CSO: Civil Society Organisation
FCDO: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
HNRP: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
IASC: Interagency Standing Committee
INGO: International Non-governmental Organisation
IO: International Organisation
NGO: Non-governmental Organisation
OCHA: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PiN: People in Need
UN: The United Nations

Geographical Classifications

Region : Subdivision below the national level as used by OCHA
Oblast: Highest form of governance below the national level
Raion: Subdivision of oblasts
Hromada: Subdivision of raions

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INTRODUCTION

Including local actors in decision-making is a particular weakness within localisation efforts in Ukraine, according to research by ACAPS and the NGO Resource Center.[5] [6] At the same time, local Ukrainian actors often have a significant amount of ground-level information about needs and preferences of the affected population, relevant to the decisions being made among international humanitarian actors who control the majority of humanitarian funding.[7] On the one hand, assessments and strategic discussions regarding localisation (i.e. the integration of the international humanitarian system with and support for the local systems in place)[8] have been increasingly taking place at the national level. In addition, issues such as funding to and coordination with local responders, as well as local actor safety/security needs and inequalities, are already largely assessed and understood (see footnotes 5-7). However, with decision-making flagged as a weak point, some of the underlying mechanisms affecting decision-making warranted further assessment in order to aid improved localisation in 2024.

In this context, REACH conducted an assessment to understand information flows within partnerships between international and Ukrainian humanitarian actors, and their influence on decision-making, with support from the NGO Platform in outreach to key informants. In particular, the assessment aimed to identify the mechanisms facilitating information flows (including people, modalities, and processes); the perception of effectiveness of information-sharing in partnerships on the whole; and the role of information on each side of international-local partnerships in influencing partner decision-making, with particular attention paid to the influence of information from Ukrainian actors on the decision-making of their international partners.

The assessment aims to aid international and local actors in overcoming localisation barriers by offering possibilities for improved or enhanced communication between the two, and for greater decision-making influence for local/civil society organisations (CSOs).

This report provides a detailed description of the methodology and why it was chosen, and then outlines the key assessment findings, organised into the following sections:

1) Information flow mechanisms and effectiveness

2) CSO information and IO decision-making

3) IO information and CSO decision-making

[5] ACAPS, Perceptions of Localisation in the Humanitarian Response, June 2023.
[6] NGO Resource Center, ICVA, A Humanitarian Localisation Baseline for Ukraine, September 2023.

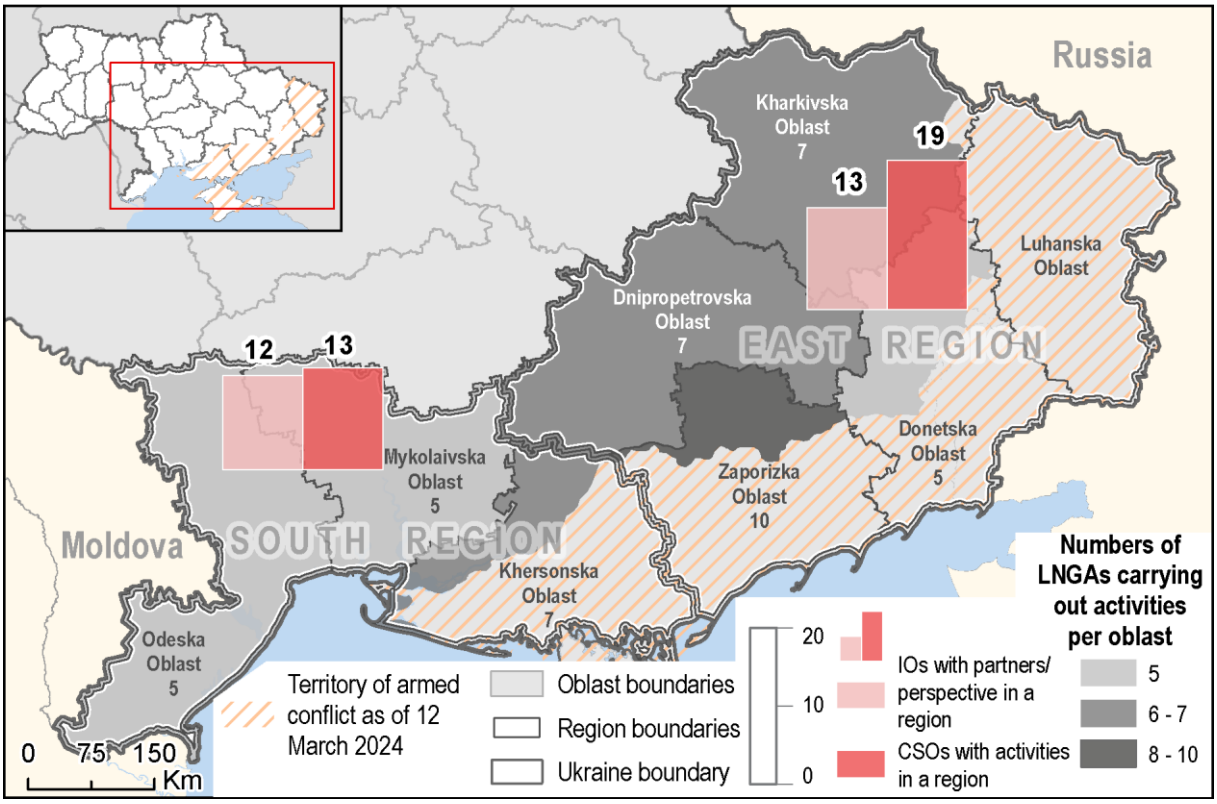
[7] Refugees International, Efforts to Localize Aid in Ukraine One Year On: Stuck in Neutral, Losing Time, February 2023.
[8] This internal definition of localisation represents a best effort at amalgamating both international guidance on localisation and ongoing debates, discussions, and practices for "localisation" taking place in Ukraine, but REACH acknowledges that multiple definitions exist. Some of these include the broad commitment in the Grand Bargain to ensure that aid is "as local as possible and as international as necessary" including through commitments to funding and investing in capacity of local actors, the International Federation of the Red Cross's definition of localisation as "strengthening international investment and respect for the role of local actors, with the goal of reducing costs and increasing the reach of humanitarian action," or guidance from the Interagency Standing Committee's (IASC) guidance on localisation, which prioritises "strengthening the meaningful participation, representation, and leadership of local and national humanitarian actors (L/NAs) within IASC humanitarian coordination structures" in order to ensure "more robust, meaningful participation and representation of local actors in shaping humanitarian action on the ground."

METHODOLOGY

Geographical scope

This assessment was focused on international-local partnerships that included local partners who operated in the East and South regions, given the high needs in these areas, but was not assessing a specific geographic area per se. International partners met inclusion criteria so long as they had local partners working in the East or South regions, and were not ruled out for having national coverage or other partnerships with local partners operating outside of the East or South regions.

Map 1: Key informant organisation coverage in the East and South



Note: Among assessed organisations, 11 international organisations had CSO partners with activities in both the East and South regions and 2 CSOs had activities in both regions; key informant organisations that had coverage in both regions are counted twice (once for each region) above.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used for this assessment, targeting representatives from international organisations (IOs) that had local partners in the East and South regions on the one hand and representatives from local (Ukrainian) organisations operating in the East and South regions and that had international partners on the other hand. Sampling on the CSO side included a range of organisation sizes, but intentionally targeted a higher number of medium and small CSOs, in order to ensure the inclusion of local actors whose voices otherwise risk often being overlooked. Selection on the IO side included both UN agencies and INGOs, who had CSO partners representing a range of sizes. Some further effort was made to include perspectives from partnerships involving frontline Ukrainian actors as well. Because the purpose of the assessment was to provide findings in aggregate and not to specifically evaluate individual partnerships, the two sets of actors were not required to be each other's partners, though a few such cases did occur.

Overall **14 IOs** were sampled, but with 1-2 KIIs per IO, for a total of **22 KIIs.** Within most, but not all IOs, one partnership coordinator/manager and one additional senior staff was interviewed, to best capture well-informed perspectives relating to both information coordination with partners and to decision-making. Meanwhile, **30 unique LNGAs/CSOs** were interviewed with 1 KII per organisation (**30 KIIs**). On the CSO side, senior staff were interviewed, with senior roles anticipated to be able to capture both partnership and decision-making perspectives within their organisational structures. This design was intended to conform to the realities of smaller numbers of IOs having multiple CSO partners, as well as IOs typically having more staff per organisation with time available for interviewing compared to CSOs.

Figure 1: Sampling Strategy

Although the planned sample called for a more equal number of KIIs from both the Ukrainian actors and international actors, obtaining enough interviews for the IO sample was more challenging, resulting in slightly uneven representation between the two. This was particularly true for the UN sub-sample, for which only one KI per agency was typically possible. Nonetheless, 4 UN agencies were represented in the sample, believed to be a sufficient sampling given the small number of UN agencies on the whole. In addition, a slightly greater level of detail was often achieved in interviews with IO KIs, which used in-person modalities more often; as such perspectives from both UN agency and INGO representatives were assessed as well-represented and in balance with CSO perspectives.

Data collection methods

Qualitative KIIs were conducted by REACH assessment and field teams from 9 January to 12 February 2024. Slightly different question routes were used for CSO interviews in comparison to IO interviews, though most questions were designed to get the same overall information from different perspectives. Interviews with CSOs were carried out by REACH field teams in Ukrainian, primarily by phone due to CSO interviewees' preference or time constraints. Most interviews with IO representatives were conducted in-person in Kyiv and in English, as preferred by interviewees. For IO KIs located outside of Kyiv, some virtual video call interviews were conducted, and 2 interviews were conducted in-person in Odesa. Out of 22 interviews, 2 were conducted in Ukrainian, based on the language preference of the KI.

Analysis

The assessment team used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, to conduct in-depth qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts/notes. Although the question route determined the categories of analysis (data topics) guiding coding, overall, the qualitative data was reviewed and coded inductively, in order to balance the ability to identify and compare trends systematically across the two sets of actors with the aim of allowing unanticipated ideas and trends to emerge. Responses from both

actor groups were first analysed individually, and then analysed comparatively to track similarities and differences in their perspectives.

Challenges and Limitations

As noted in the sampling strategy section above, some challenges were encountered in reaching the full intended sample of IOs, and although the IO perspective on the whole is believed to be adequately represented, the smaller proportion of UN interviews included could mean that perspectives of centrally-impactful actors are under-represented relative to their importance. On the CSO side, the common preference for interviews by phone also may have led to slightly less depth in comparison to in-person interviews more often conducted in person, though overall a range in level of detail was seen in both interview sets.

In addition, although interviews were semi-structured, in some cases KIs did not answer every question, particularly certain follow-up probes. When KIs were less responsive on a particular question this is typically noted in the analysis that follows, but sometimes this issue impacted the ability to clearly compare between IO and CSO perspectives.

FINDINGS

Information flow mechanisms and effectiveness

The findings that follow draw from a number of concepts that were intentionally given a fairly broad scope during data collection. "Information flows" is understood throughout as the transfer of information from one entity to another (or to multiple entities), while noting that the assessment attempted to ask about flows moving from CSO to IO and vice versa. The type of information discussed for these information flows was left open to encompass whichever type of information the KI noted as important for receiving from or passing onto partners, but KIs were particularly probed for information about the needs of the affected population and contextual information including security context on the one hand, and policies, procedures, and budgetary information about their partner organisation on the other. An "information flow mechanism" was explained to KIs as any person, modality, or process that facilitated an information flow. Meanwhile, "effectiveness" of information flow mechanisms was largely left to the interpretation of the KI, in order to prioritise their own understanding of what makes an information flow or a mechanism effective. Although many answers on effectiveness seemed to center on whether or not information is transferred efficiently, accurately, and in a manner that is well-suited for both partners' ways of working, the report attempts to draw out different interpretations where they were apparent, such as when mechanisms had additional positive benefits beyond information exchange.

Both international and local groups of KIs **perceived the mechanisms used for transferring information as effective on the whole**. The top reported mechanisms, namely meetings, messenger apps, and e-mails, tended to be reported by both IO and CSO KIs as at least moderately effective and often very effective, and although some small deviations between preferences of IOs and CSOs existed, only a few KIs noted individual mechanisms that weren't very effective. Overall, IO and CSO KIs were united in saying that what makes different information flow mechanisms effective is that **partners combine various channels and adjust which mechanism to use depending on the type of information being shared or the circumstances of the moment.**

(a) Information sources and information flow mechanisms

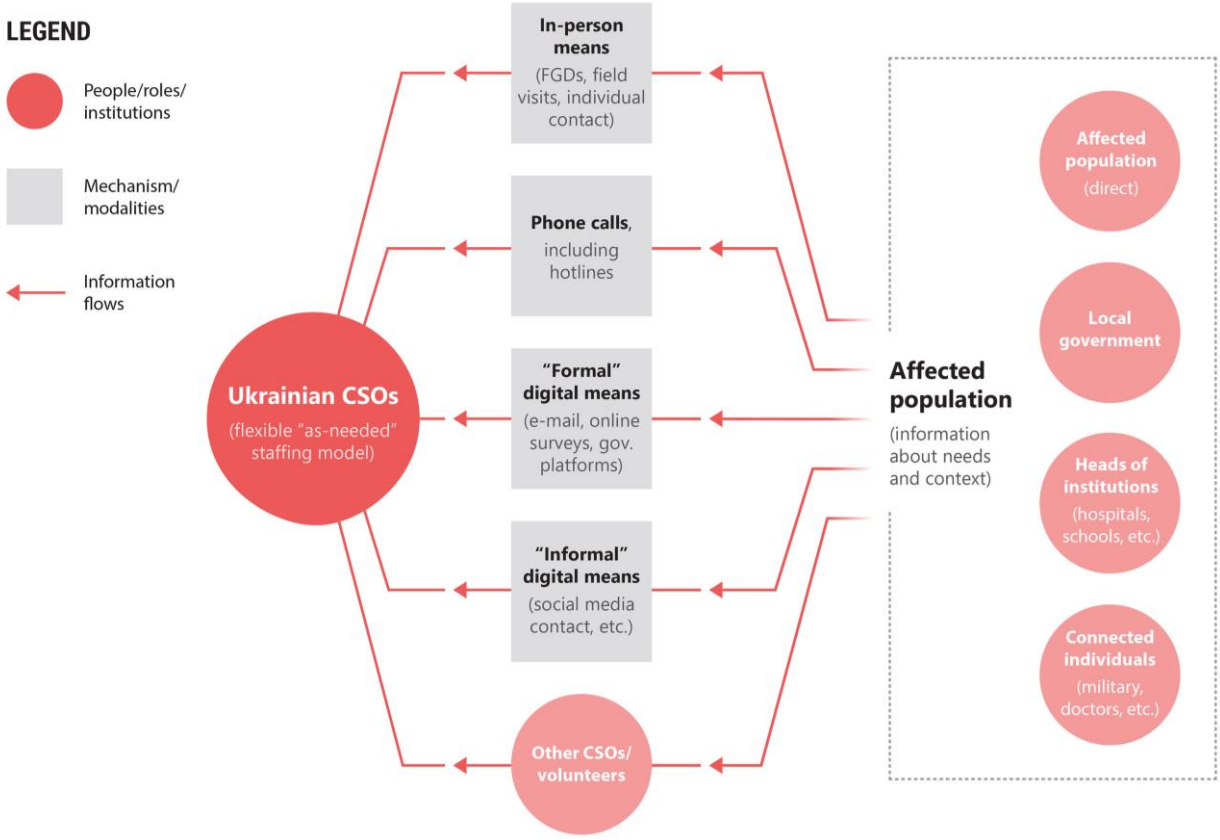
Types and sources of CSO-to-IO information

For effective work, partner organisations need to share information, and CSO and IO KIs were largely aligned on what type of information was shared within partnerships. When interviewed, both international and Ukrainian groups of respondents reported that the information passed from CSOs to their IO partners tends to include the needs of the affected population, the CSO partner's procedures, policies, and budget or financial information, and sometimes information about the security context. **Both IO and CSO respondents understood information about beneficiary needs and organisational information** about the CSO partners' policies, activities, capacities, and finances as being the top type of information CSOs pass onto their IO partners—generally showing consistent understanding between both sets of actors. However, IO respondents placed a slightly greater emphasis on CSO organisational information gathered in order to launch a partnership, while CSOs placed greater emphasis on information about the needs of beneficiaries or general context information affecting what assistance should be delivered where, possibly highlighting marginally different priorities.

In terms of frequency, respondents from international organisations mentioned that in some cases CSO partners give them needed information regularly (daily, weekly, or monthly reports, or at fixed monitoring points), while some information is requested once at the beginning of partnership during a due diligence or capacity assessment process at the stage of assessing a potential partner.

CSOs were also asked how and from whom they got most of their information about beneficiary needs, as this was one of the most common types of information they reportedly shared with IOs. Reportedly, **CSOs usually get information from the affected population themselves through direct or in-person means**, as reported by about three-fourths of CSO KIs. This happens via CSO field visits, focus group discussion, in-person questionnaires, or individual outreach when people contact CSOs they know. Several CSO respondents mentioned that information reaches them via "word of mouth," using in-person communication from relatives, residents of the region, internally displaced persons, families with different sizes and vulnerabilities, doctors, military personnel, and volunteers. When combining in-person and phone-based modalities, some CSOs reportedly receive information about the needs and situation from the heads of local territorial communities or cities, as well as heads of enterprises operating in the region, unions of people with disabilities, children's institutions such as schools and kindergartens, hospitals, and evacuation centers,. While in-person communication was commonly mentioned, more than half respondents, particularly from medium- and large-sized CSOs, noted that they also receive information indirectly through communication technology such as Telegram and Viber channels, phone calls (including hotline calls), e-mail requests, online platforms ranging from CSO Facebook pages to government-run data-sharing platforms, and CSO-administered questionnaires, with Google form questionnaires being somewhat popular. **Many CSO KIs reported innovative use of technology to connect with the local population.** One KI stated that "people contact us through our Facebook and Instagram pages. Sometimes we leave our QR code, our car has a QR code that can be used to leave us a message."

Figure 2: Information flows between CSOs and CSO information sources



Information flow mechanisms between IOs and CSOs: modalities as mechanisms

In terms of receiving information from CSOs, the top modalities of information-sharing mentioned by both international and Ukrainian partner KI groups were **e-mails, meetings (both in-person and online), messengers, phone calls, and to a lesser extent, online platforms.** IO respondents also emphasised reports or project reporting (mentioned about as often as meetings and e-mails) as a key mechanism for receiving information from partner CSOs, along with related mechanisms such as project monitoring visits or joint field visits. In addition, many IO respondents reported using a due diligence assessment to receive information from partner CSOs. On the other hand, CSO KIs reported sharing information with IOs via messengers (Telegram, Whatsapp, Viber) or social networks (Facebook, Instagram) much more often than IOs mentioned this mechanism, with CSO respondents noting that they are convenient for sending fast requests, situation updates, and photos. A few CSOs also mentioned Google docs as a means of sharing information quickly and easily. Partially echoing the types of information stressed by IOs vs. CSOs, the greater attention paid to formal process-related mechanisms such as due diligence and reporting processes by IOs, compared to CSOs more frequently highlighting mechanisms that enable fast and flexible sharing, may point to slightly different information priorities even though the top reported mechanisms were aligned across both actor groups, and variations in

perceptions of effectiveness of individual mechanisms (discussed in subsequent sections) were not strong.

A majority of KIs on both sides reported that the mechanisms used to pass information **from IO to CSO** are the same as those used for IOs receiving information from CSOs. However, more than half of the IO respondents highlighted separate mechanisms used specifically when passing information to CSOs, particularly trainings (including first aid, security, and legal trainings, as well as trainings on humanitarian principles and the humanitarian architecture), workshops, and other means of building their CSO partners' capacity. As an example, one IO KI noted:

> **"[Our organisation] provides access to security trainings for local CSOs, reminds them of the importance to use PPE when conducting activities in dangerous areas, and shares INSO policies."** *INGO KI*

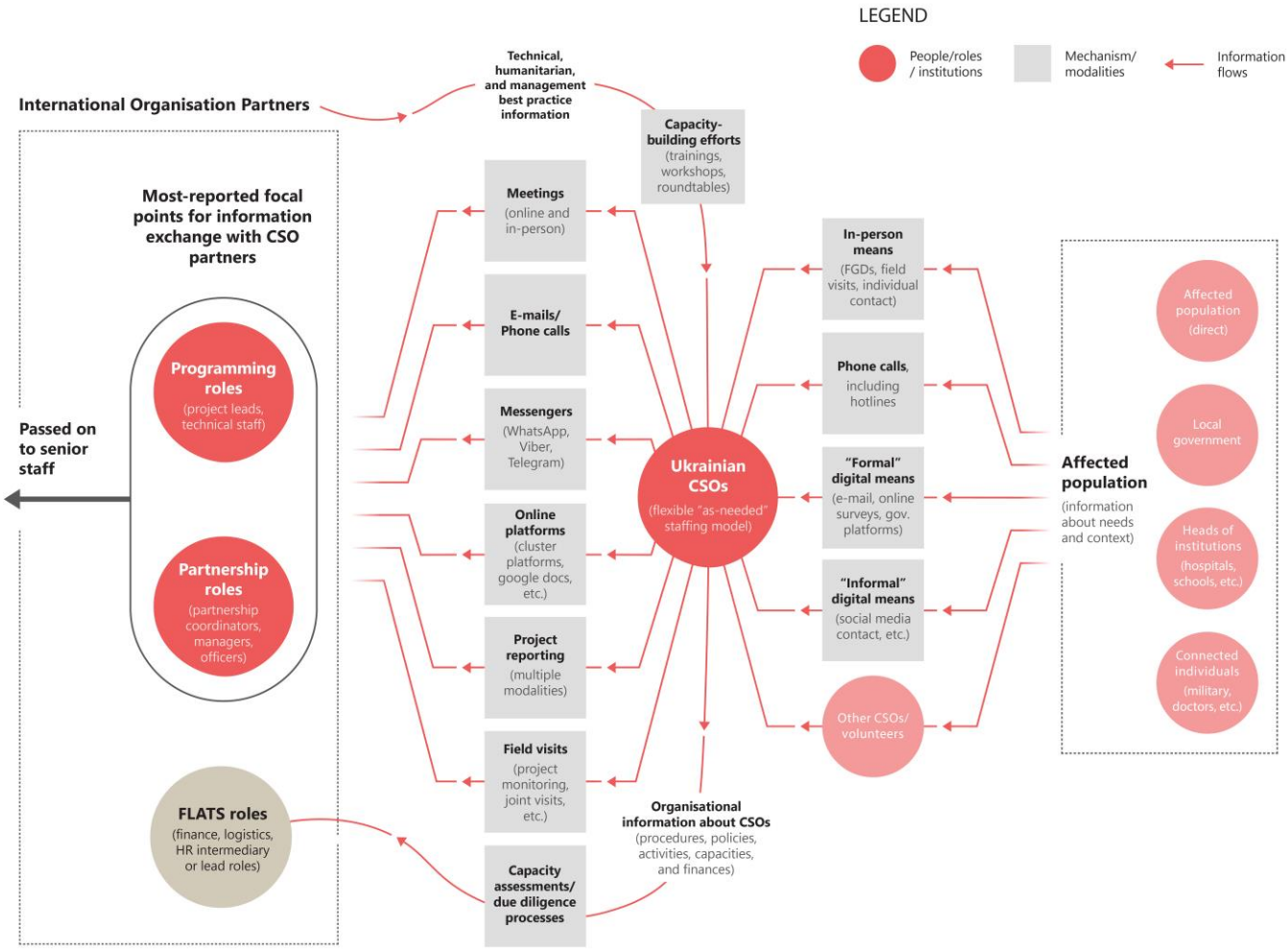
Another KI shared the idea that "it is a priority to make sure [we] transfer knowledge and skills based on the scope of work". In some cases, IOs articulated less formal means of sharing information with CSOs, such as providing space for CSOs to connect, sharing guidance or examples of past work, or sharing assessment and monitoring information. Overall, IO respondents perceived capacity-building more strongly as a mechanism for passing information compared to CSOs themselves, and seem to consider **modes of sharing information that improve capacity or knowledge of the international humanitarian system** to be important—though this discrepancy could be explained by differing levels of awareness of capacity-building opportunities, as discussed in later sections.

Information flow mechanisms: roles as mechanisms

When considering roles within their organisations dedicated to exchanging information between local and international partners, CSOs and IOs had slightly different responses. More than half of CSO respondents answered that there are **no direct or individual roles** in their organisation deciding which information to pass to IOs. In some CSOs the focal point(s) for exchange were reported as communication department staff, with project managers preparing the information, while in others it is reportedly the head of organisation or their deputy. A few KIs noted they have meetings in their organisation where "all make decisions together with colleagues". Many KIs from CSOs also said that they didn't encounter precise roles when receiving information from their partner IOs, as "everything is very individual." It could be "the project coordinator, almost always there is an assistant project coordinator for logistics, a financial officer, a separate branch of communication with MEAL by officers of international organisations, and at the beginning there are also briefings from their communication staff" (according to a KI from a small CSO).

From the IO respondents' perspective, although individual roles within finance and logistics departments were relevant for receiving certain specific information from CSOs, they mainly receive information from their local CSO partners almost equally via their **partnership roles** (including partnership manager/coordinator, or partnership officer) or their **programmatic roles**, including technical specialists and project leads. Some KIs mentioned that partnership managers could be in the field in a variety of locations, and said that this decentralised and field-based model contributed positively to better communication. This being said, while IOs often having clear and dedicated roles at less senior levels with the time and capacity for information exchange may be beneficial, it is notable that some CSOs named the heads of their organisations as information exchange focal points while IOs typically did not.

Figure 3: Information flows between CSO information sources, CSOs, and IOs



Language in information flow mechanisms

A **mixture of Ukrainian and English** was reported as the language of information exchange by a majority of respondents in both KI groups, and although language barriers were reported by a few KIs as challenges in the information flow process in specific cases, this was more often because of the extra time and effort of translation or interpretation.

Almost half of the respondents from the CSO side noted that they use a mix of English and Ukrainian (with slightly different proportions) to receive information from international partners, though a few mentioned English mixed with translation to Ukrainian and Russian, or sometimes other languages (i.e. German or Polish). CSO KIs also mentioned that international organisations often require reports translated into English, so their organistions provide it that way; some also noted that they communicate in English if the there is no representative office in Ukraine and the CSO is working with IO partners remotely. However, they also noted that if the representative working in the IO is Ukrainian, CSOs mostly communicate in Ukrainian.

From the IO perspective, a majority of KIs reported receiving information from CSOs in a mixture of English and Ukrainian (or English, Ukrainian, and Russian), though smaller, similar proportions mentioned either only receiving information in Ukrainian, or only in English, especially for certain types of information such as reporting, similar to CSO reports. Several IO KIs also reported passing information to CSOs in Ukrainian, especially in cases where IOs' partnership officers speak the language. However, some IO KIs stated that "if their partner knows English, then it is only in English" or reported using whichever language their partner prefers, suggesting that language choice is sometimes a balance of CSO preference and IO staff capability.

(b) Effectiveness of information flow mechanisms

Perceived levels of effectiveness

Both international and local KI groups tended to report that the **mechanisms used for transferring information were effective on the whole**: about two-thirds of each KI group indicated overall effectiveness of information flow mechanisms. In some cases, effectiveness was evaluated by whether or not CSO needs were met: "in 2 years, we have raised $21 million USD in assistance, so I think these mechanisms are effective" (reported by a KI from a large CSO). About a third of CSO KIs perceived information flow mechanisms overall as partly effective, with some mechanisms being more effective than others, or with some partner IOs using effective mechanisms while others do not. One KI gave the example of a mismatch between Ukrainian legislation and reporting forms used by IOs, noting that when an IO partner agrees to combine them, it is effective, but if they don't the CSO must fill or keep two parallel forms (reported by a KI from a small CSO).

Some KIs did not concretely describe overall information flow mechanisms as effective or not, but IO KIs in particular noted that effectiveness varied depending on a variety of factors. One of the main factors influencing effectiveness reported by IO KIs was **the level of relations with the CSO partner**, including the past work experience or length of collaboration between IO and CSO partners, the feedback provided, and the communication frequency between the two. A few IO KIs also reported that regardless of effectiveness, these mechanisms are "essential" and important to building mutual trustworthy relations over time with CSO partners.

Following on from the perception of general effectiveness, most KIs on both the international and local side rated the **individual information flow mechanisms** they had raised (i.e. e-mail, trainings, program officers, etc.) as either **very or moderately effective,** with few noting mechanisms as not very effective. Interestingly, IO and CSO KIs together mentioned the top three very effective mechanisms as meetings, different messenger apps, and e-mails, although these were also the top three information mechanisms reportedly used according to both groups. There were some minor discrepancies between IO and CSO KI responses. Phone calls, for example, were reported by more IO KIs as very effective ("between the right people [using the same language]"), in comparison to being rated as just moderately effective by CSO KIs. In addition, IO KIs were more likely to report e-mails as very effective than CSO KIs, and a few CSO KIs identified sharing information through e-mails as not very effective. One CSO KI reported that their IO partner wants to use e-mail exclusively for communication and correspondence, while the CSO prefers messengers. While differences were fairly small, some differences in perceptions of effectiveness echoed the trends among the most reported information mechanisms by CSOs vs. IOs, with CSOs showing slightly less preference for more traditional modalities popular among IOs.

At the same time, IO KIs placed a stronger emphasis on the value of in-person meetings or other in-person modalities—**in-person meetings were the most-reported "very effective" mechanism for IO KIs**—and sometimes named online meetings as only moderately effective or occasionally as not very effective. However, this preferential view towards in-person exchanges was in fact not especially visible in CSO KIs' responses, and as one IO KI mentioned, small CSOs in particular may not always have enough

staff capacity for in-person modalities. Although the location of in-person meetings was not always specified by respondents, it was sometimes noted that in-person meetings take place when IO representatives invite CSOs to their offices or organise common workshops, which could be fruitful for more personal exchanges but less convenient in terms of time and travel, potentially affecting CSOs' perceptions. Finally, due to being more likely to mention these mechanisms at all, IO KIs also reported on the effectiveness of capacity-building mechanisms and reporting mechanisms, which CSO KIs didn't report on. IO KIs tended to see capacity-building mechanisms such as trainings and workshops as very effective, and reporting as moderately effective. It is possible that, while IOs repeatedly stress the importance of trust in general and perceive certain mechanisms as facilitating trust and sharing, CSOs are less concerned with this additional role of information flow mechanisms when compared to the more essential role of simply exchanging information quickly and accurately. However, as discussed in later sections, another explanation may be lower awareness of CSO KIs of the capacity-building mechanisms available to them from partners or the international humanitarian system more broadly, especially among smaller CSOs.

What makes information flow mechanisms effective or ineffective?

Both IO and CSO KIs mainly reported the same primary reason for why certain information flow mechanisms were effective – **both reportedly use them by combining various channels differentially depending on the circumstances or type of information being shared** ("informal ways of communication are complementary to formal"). For example, one KI reported that using WhatsApp to check something results in a quick response, while meeting in-person allows direct observation of project implementation and easier exchanges in the case of having many questions for a partner. These responses echoed other KIs who said that effectiveness depended on the purpose of exchanging information, where using different modalities was effective depending on the information type.

Aside from flexibility in using different mechanisms for different purposes, some IOs also mentioned that decentralised approaches increasing IO-CSO connectivity at the sub-national level and in the field, as well as ongoing informal communication, seemed to improve effectiveness, particularly because they heightened trust:

> **"If you're sitting with these guys in person while there is shelling going on and you're waiting it out in a basement drinking coffee, building that rapport, trust, and relationship is what allows that type of sensitive information to be shared."** *INGO KI*

As noted, information flow mechanisms and information exchanges were largely perceived as effective, but some IO KIs mentioned challenges in receiving information from CSOs on the whole, including "everything related to timely reporting," lower capacity or lack of experience, or unclear policies of the CSO making information-sharing difficult. One KI noted that "sometimes we ask partners a lot and partners simply do not have needed capacity…For example, small partners might not have a Data Officer or have a MEAL Officer who also acts as an accountant and have many other roles within their organisation, so [our organisation] helps them in this case." Another IO KI noted that lack of capacity or experience was not always related to size; particularly for having more strategic discussions, they noted that small but established organisations could be easier to communicate with than a newer organisation with 100 volunteers.

IO respondents expressed similar concerns when asked why they considered certain mechanisms ineffective, with some IO KIs reporting that CSOs sometimes lacked staff capacity for modalities such as in-person meetings or detailed e-mails. Other causes of ineffectiveness were also noted; some IOs indicated that exchanges can be ineffective when the information they share does not end up being used by CSOs. A few IO KIs also highlighted impersonal mechanisms such as online meetings or e-mails

as less effective because they lacked connection or failed to build trust for strong partnership relations. In a similar vein, one KI reported:

> **"An inequitable relationship in which IOs often tell CSOs what to do while local partners with creative or innovative ideas have limited ways to influence IOs also contributes to less effective exchanges."** *INGO KI*

Interestingly, overall, CSO KIs were less likely to report concrete difficulties in communication with IO partners, and many answered that they are satisfied with the quality and completeness of information from IOs, although social desirability bias could have influenced this trend. Fewer CSOs reported encountering mechanisms that were not effective in comparison to IO KIs. The few that did raised concerns about data or contextual information being off-target or incomplete, or limited timelines for more effective communication ("due to [the] heavy workload there is no time for communications"), suggesting that that **individual mechanisms are not the main barrier perceived by CSOs.**

Generally, responses indicated that **the approaches both IO and CSO partner organisations use for communication are largely perceived as relevant and efficient,** especially when different modalities are used for different types of information-sharing and when IOs adapt to their CSO partners' capacities or preferences. However, a lack of experience, capacity, and structured work systems on CSOs' side, combined with an in-built tendency to use more formal or structured approaches to information exchange on IOs' side can reportedly detract from generally effective information-sharing, even though many IOs seem to appreciate CSOs' local input as essential and are ready to help build partners' capacities.

Cluster meetings as information flow mechanisms: challenges to effectiveness

More than half of IO respondents reported that some of their CSO partners attend cluster meetings and others do not, with just a few reporting that their partners actively participate in clusters in leadership roles, for example by co-leading cluster working groups, or through involvement in strategic advisory groups overseeing pooled funding and other impactful cluster decisions. In addition, just over half of IO KIs reported on challenges their partners faced in attending cluster meetings. The most common challenge was that the **content of the cluster meetings is less relevant to CSOs' work, especially their rapid timelines and their level of operations** ("the cluster looks at the oblast level and isn't interested in a small specific village"). The second-most common challenge IO KIs noted was that CSOs lacked capacity for "time-consuming and long" meetings, and had difficulties attending cluster meetings due to the limited size of their teams. One KI added that CSOs' lack of staff capacity could be caused by not being aware of the possibility of budget allocation for staffing, and thus not including overhead and administrative costs in their budgets—pointing to the need to increase awareness of this possibility among CSOs. A few IOs mentioned language barriers as an obstacle, sometimes noting that even where available, consecutive interpretation added to the meeting duration, or raising overuse of less accessible humanitarian terminology as a concern.

Yet, some interviewed international actors still emphasised the importance of CSO partners attending cluster meetings, not only for CSOs to integrate themselves into the international system but also because of the value of CSOs' information and response activities. One respondent suggested "it is important to have information from local partners to understand the local context and [their] needs," and another added that "it is important [for them to attend], especially because they [CSOs] are often working in the frontline areas," and consequently having the most up-to-date information.

In terms of challenges for CSOs to participate in cluster meetings, a few IO KIs shared their ideas for improvement. One KI said that small NGOs should be included more in the agenda setting and provided with space to speak about their projects. To resolve the noted issues of humanitarian jargon, trainings were suggested to make cluster meeting language more accessible. For ensuring that cluster meetings

include useful information for CSOs, another KI observed that area-based coordination and decentralisation approaches have worked well and are of more interest to CSO partners based on the level they work at and the information they need, and allow for more partner empowerment.

CSO information and IO decision-making

Overall, IO perspectives on including CSOs in decision-making were mixed. While many IO KIs were able to name examples of using CSO information in more operational decision-making when specifically asked, few were able to name examples of their inclusion in "big picture" or higher-level decision-making, and most IO KIs emphasised other sources of decision-making when asked about how they make decisions for their organisations on the whole. CSO perspectives revealed uncertainty when asked how IOs make decisions. Although many CSO KIs reportedly believe that some of their information is used in IO decision-making, very few had awareness of IOs' own self-reported decision-making processes, and perhaps as a result, CSOs had lower perception of their inclusion in decision-making processes generally.

(c) Sources and centers of IO decision-making: CSO vs. IO perspectives

In order to better understand how CSO information might influence decision-making by IOs, both IO and CSO KI groups were first asked about how **IOs** make decisions. Different answers across the two sets of actors suggests that, although CSO information may be influential at certain levels, **CSOs themselves have limited understanding of IOs' own decision-making processes**, which may also impede their ability to effectively influence them.

When IOs were asked how they make their own decisions overall, most of them clearly stated that programming decisions are either made by their senior staff at the central level or are aligned with their organisation's annual or multi-year strategic and/or programmatic plan. When asked about their general decision-making process, **only a few *initially* replied that their programming decision-making stems from inputs by CSO partners** (i.e. without probing on inclusion of CSO information), which may suggest that CSO inclusion is not seen as a primary part of the decision-making process. Some IO KIs did report without probing that their long-term decisions on *proposals* and which activities to include in them are sometimes made cooperatively with CSO (strategic) partners, or at least based on information from programming or partnership roles liaising with CSO partners. However, a similar number of KIs reported that such decision-making is still largely made at the country level or driven by donors and their timelines, the latter of which did not always allow for thorough (or any) partner consultation. Positive examples of intentionally CSO-driven IO decision-making did exist: In one case, a KI emphasised that their long-term planning specifically tried to ensure "shoulder-to-shoulder training, capacity building, [and] mentoring" for their CSO partners so that their own organisations' work would eventually become superfluous—aiming to "work [themselves] out of a job." However, this degree of "exit strategy"-focused decision-making was not commonly mentioned.

At the same time, **when IO KIs were also asked about the main information sources used in their decision-making,** information provided by CSO partners **specifically about beneficiary needs, locations, and context *was* a frequent response** among those who answered, which may indicate that although CSOs are not highly included in the most-reported decision-making processes, certain types of CSO information *is* being used. Apart from CSO information, a few IO KIs mentioned that information for decision-making came from program teams and field units, less often mentioning cluster information, HNRP priorities, assessments, or global plans and priorities approved by donors.

Across both programming and longer-term decision-making, a few IO KIs stressed **the role of programming teams as the link between CSO partner information as well as other information from IOs' own field staff,** and the decisions being made by senior management teams and/or country offices. Similarly, a few specified the importance of collaboration and effective information flow between

the central/country and field offices to ensure needs-based programming, noting that without this connection, the country-level response could be off-target for people's needs.

When examining **CSO KI responses on IO partner decision-making,** it is apparent that **most of them do not clearly know how and where their international partners make decisions**, although many still perceive that their information plays a role in decision-making. Just a few CSO KIs each seemed aware of the most commonly reported decision-making approaches mentioned by IO KIs, namely centralised decision-making approaches such as decision-making by senior staff and/or in head offices, or decisions being made in response to donor suggestions or priorities.

Close to half of CSO KIs reported the perception that their IO partners make programming decisions after discussing the situation with CSO partners, but nearly as many said they don't know how and where such decisions are made: "To be honest, somewhere in a black hole," said one KI. Still, some CSO KIs mentioned decisions being made because IO partners trust them, as "[they] already have [their] own name, a reputation that [they] have built up" based on their previous results and the feedback from beneficiaries. Furthermore, when asked what sources of information their IO partners' decisions are based on, more than half of CSO KIs said that IO partners use contextual information about beneficiary needs, security and locations, and aid delivery priorities provided by local CSOs—fairly in line with IO KI perception of information sources for their decision-making. On the other hand, **awareness of *other* information sources used by IO partners for decision-making was extremely low,** with only a few able to give any other answer besides CSOs' own information. When asked about how IOs make longer-term decisions such as for proposals, respondents felt even less sure than for programming decisions, with not all answering. Those who did reply mainly reported that such decisions are probably done based on area assessments and information about changes in needs from local CSOs. Only 1 CSO KI was able to name strategic plans as a source of long-term decision-making for IO partners despite such plans being a key reported driver of IO decision-making, which might imply that CSOs would have difficulties knowing *when* in an IO planning cycle to influence decision-making—namely, leading up to the drafting of strategic plans. Overall, **while Ukrainian organisations seemed to assume that their information was driving some decision-making by their IO partners, many reported strong uncertainty about how and where international partners make decisions about programme development.**

Overall, CSOs reportedly believe that their IO partners value the information they provide, but the mechanisms of making decisions are very unclear to them—in fact CSOs' best guesses on decision-making mechanisms seem to over-emphasise the role of CSO information in IO decision-making when compared to IOs' own perception of the main mechanisms driving their decisions. Meanwhile, IOs do reportedly use CSO inputs to an extent, but more often describe highly centralised and sometimes bureaucratic planning subject to their donors. The difference in CSOs KIs' perception of IO decision-making and what IOs themselves report suggests that **even though CSO inputs may be taken into account by IO partners, staff within CSOs are not included in these processes well enough to be able to describe them.**

(d) Perceived inclusion of CSOs and CSO information in IO decision-making

Very different responses were received from international vs. CSO KIs regarding overall perception of CSO inclusion in IO decision-making, when directly asked whether they feel CSOs are included. **While over two-thirds of IO KIs reported that they include local CSO partners in their decision-making, slightly more than half of CSO KIs reported that they or their information are either not included, or only partly included.** One possible reason for IOs to feel that they are including CSOs in decision-making may be the many efforts and initiatives devoted to localisation on the whole. Aside from the many efforts at capacity-strengthening and strong valuation of trust-building reported by many IO KIs, one IO KI noted that they have staff with a focus on localisation in both field and country offices in Ukraine. Indeed, a few CSO KIs did report being involved in decision-making at the level of deciding on

activities, though only within the framework of their common project activities. On the other hand, many CSO KIs highlighted **a one-way information flow with a perceived lack of connection with actual decision-making processes,** stating that they only inform or consult with their IO partners—for example, on areas in which to conduct activities, on population needs, or sharing their experience in a particular project. Some observed that IO partners listen, but CSOs "don't know if [the IOs] make their decisions based on [CSO] information." This perception reinforces the previous finding that CSO KIs who were interviewed seem not to be aware of how and where their international partners make decisions, and therefore have lower perception of the inclusion of their information in IO decision-making, assuming instead that decisions are made by IOs themselves "in their offices outside Ukraine." As such, a possible improvement for IOs could be **making their own decision-making process more transparent, and sharing feedback on how CSO partners' information is included.**

Interestingly, **when asked directly whether they include CSO information,** many IO KIs perceived that they do include contextual or reporting information from CSO partners or make decisions such as on funding or proposal decisions jointly with their local partners. Looking at IO KI responses in more detail, **it appears that CSO information often influences their partner's *operational* decisions on project implementation, activity locations, or security decisions.** For example, some IO KIs present the number and type of assistance in given areas as reported by their CSO partners at monthly IO coordination meetings or similar, and use this information for upcoming assistance planning. Most CSO KIs' perceptions complemented this practice: **even if they did not feel very included in IO decision-making generally, they reported feeling that their information influences what their international partner decides about which services to deliver, and where, on project implementation—at least partially.** However, according to half of CSO respondents, this information is only moderately effective in influencing their partners' decisions: CSO KIs stated that depending on the context, partner, or project, some IO decisions are reportedly very drawn-out (i.e. taking "more than one month"), with slow change to existing processes or priorities, and consequently that decisions that are really needed are not always made. In addition, although CSO and IO KI agreement on the uptake of CSO information to influence IO operational planning suggests that this level of influence is happening effectively, **higher-level influence of CSOs or their information was reportedly lacking.** Just a few KI IOs mentioned involving CSO partners at a more strategic level and welcoming their initiative, while a few others reportedly request their partner's feedback and regularly organise meetings to discuss best partnership practices, implicitly using this information to influence their policies in the longer term, but both were in the minority. Meanwhile, CSO KIs mainly named project implementation decisions as areas in which they perceive that they or their information influenced IO decisions.

While not necessarily often observed by KIs themselves, some of the gaps in CSO influence in higher-level decision-making could be the result of structural information flow arrangements. In considering roles carrying out information-sharing between partners, alongside decision-making processes noted by IO KIs (and frequently inadequately understood by CSO KIs), it is apparent that **few CSOs have direct lines of connection to the senior circles or centralised offices in which the majority of IO KIs report their decisions are made.** As such, a key information transit point that could determine whether CSO information is able to effectively influence IO decision-making is roles such as programming or partnership officers and managers that act as intermediary conduits of two-way information flows between IOs and CSOs. Importantly, these roles have notable advantages for both sides of the partnership, including acting as clear and available focal points for specific topics, and offering faster and more individualised attention to CSO partners. Often, perception of communication through these roles was fairly positive. However, if **CSO information and proxy influence relies on roles that themselves have less strategic focus or decision-making power, lowered ability of CSO partners or their information to impact higher levels of decision-making** may be the outcome. As one KI observed:

> **"[There] is sometimes the problem that the communication that the [CSO] partner has…what is the profile of that person [receiving information]? How much of that communication gets passed to the individual who has the power to change the design?"** *INGO KI*

A possible solution to this potential blocking point could be more strategy-setting events including CSO feedback or CSO participation, such as those mentioned by one KI who held programmatic and partnership workshops getting in-person and survey-based feedback on overall practices from partner CSOs, which fed into discussions at their annual country strategy workshop. Notably, using feedback instead of in-person attendance to link CSOs with senior management and strategic decision-making processes might be more effective than in-person mechanisms specifically for small CSOs, who were frequently noted throughout responses as having low staff capacity and less time for extra events. However, even if mechanisms increasing connectivity between CSO information and senior-level decision-making are not always fit for purpose, **"information transit" roles such as programming and partnership roles are crucial for ensuring that CSO information is able to impact IO decision-making,** and their ability to perform this information transit function could be supported and strengthened.

(e) Positive examples of CSO inclusion IO decision-making

Despite apparent weaknesses in inclusion of CSO information in higher-level decision-making, when asked, many IO respondents shared positive examples of times when local CSOs' information on needs or context influenced their programmatic and operational decision-making, particularly about **where and how to deliver aid, increasing or decreasing the amount of aid, affecting the timing of aid, or redirecting the programming modality such as for MHPSS or cash vs. in-kind assistance.** One IO KI noted an example of a winterisation project in which they (the IO partner) wanted to use a cash modality, but their CSO partners pushed for in-kind goods in certain areas, due to local contextual knowledge that a certain type of stove was the only thing that would work in those areas. This reportedly resulted in the IO listening and adjusting their proposal. Another KI noted a recent example in which efforts by local partners to ensure a rapid response after a large-scale attack pushed IOs to respond more quickly than they would have otherwise. While not common, a few IO KIs gave examples in which their scope of work shifted entirely, based on discussions with local partners about their needs for their own activities: "All of the programs we do in the country have been based upon what we've heard, which has been a fight with HQ to allow us to make adjustments…[to providing] things outside of our [usual] protection [activities]. All [these] other activities have been in response to what we hear on the ground [from local partners]."

On the CSO side, about half of CSO KIs gave positive examples of joint decisions with international partners, although an equal number either couldn't give examples of influence or gave examples of when their information didn't influence their IO partners' decision-making. Among those who gave examples, **similar trends in comparison to IO KIs were seen, with most examples focused on CSO information influencing where, when, or sometimes how to deliver aid, and fewer examples of mutual decision-making at the activity level or higher.**

As an example, one CSO KI reported affecting change in distribution locations in Kherson:

> **"When we distributed this aid among different foundations, we realised that many of them were going to the same city. The village that was closer to the area of active hostilities did not receive the necessary assistance, and there was an imbalance. When we commented on the misdistribution of aid and pointed out the need to compile a list of villages and organisations so that several foundations could direct their aid to one village and others to another, this led to changes."** *Small CSO*

Another CSO KI was able to give an example of fairly direct influence of their information on a sudden-onset response: as a CSO well-connected to communities in Kherson, after the Kakhovka dam explosion they immediately started receiving calls and requests for information about needs from IOs, which they quickly shared to international actors, leading to an immediate response that the KI perceived as efficient and effective.

Overall, at least some positive examples of inclusion, particularly at the operational level or in urgent responses in which international organisations may have more flexibility and discretionary power, are evident. **The discrepancy between IOs' stronger ability to report examples of CSO influence in decision-making vs. CSOs' hesitance in doing so may again suggest that even when CSO information is being used, CSOs are not often aware of *how* it is being used due to weak connections with or visibility over IO decision-making.**

(f) Examples of CSO information failing to influence IO decision-making

KIs in both groups were also asked about cases in which CSOs' information didn't influence IO partners' decisions. Some IO KIs reported such examples, **especially when an idea for an activity or change in approach proposed by the CSO fell outside the IOs' scope of activities.** For example, an IO KI noted that one of their partners is involved in psychosocial support and education activities, while the IO is not involved in any education projects, so when their partner approached them with an idea to provide trainings for teachers, the IO lacked the relevant expertise to support the project and therefore turned down the idea. CSO representatives also provided examples of when their information does not influence IO decision-making, but unlike IO KIs, CSO KIs emphasised cases in which IO partners rejected CSO information or suggestions without clear explanations as to why. Comparing the responses of IO and CSO KIs may suggest that **although IOs may have valid reasons for turning down information or ideas, more communication on reasons for rejections is needed,** as seen in other areas in which CSOs lacked awareness.

At the same time, some CSO KIs noted that the "blocking point" for uptake of CSO information from the ground was not always their IO partners but rather donors. One KI from a large CSO described a case in which they were involved in discussions to set vulnerability criteria for assistance in a recently de-occupied area. They noted that "the category of a single mother with a child fell under the assistance programme, while the category of a single father with a child, whose mother died, did not fall under the assistance programme" and pushed for a broader and more inclusive criteria based on their understanding of the needs and realities of the affected population. However, while their input was reportedly taken into account at least partially by IO partners within Ukraine, their proposals were ultimately rejected at the donor level. Other KIs gave additional examples that extended beyond the decision-making power of their IO partners, noting times when their contextual information failed to influence broader decisions by the international humanitarian community:

> **"When I was at a meeting with UN representatives, I talked about the fact that the global stereotypes that only women and girls suffer in wars are not realistic for the Kherson region. In the Kherson region, the majority of victims are men. I said that we need to take into account our statistics of identified cases and not lump us together, creating only spaces for women and girls. They listened to us, but donors came to [the] Kherson region and created spaces exclusively for women and girls."** *Medium-sized CSO*

Donors and pre-existing bureaucratic restrictions resulting from donor requirements as potential blocking points for the incorporation of CSO information was an issue **also reported by some IO KIs,** even when they were motivated to act on CSO information. Overall, while some improvements within IO structures to more proactively link CSO information to decision-making mechanisms or actors could be made, other barriers to IO use of CSO inputs seem to be beyond the control of the IO themselves, existing at the country or even global level.

(g) CSO information and the HNRP

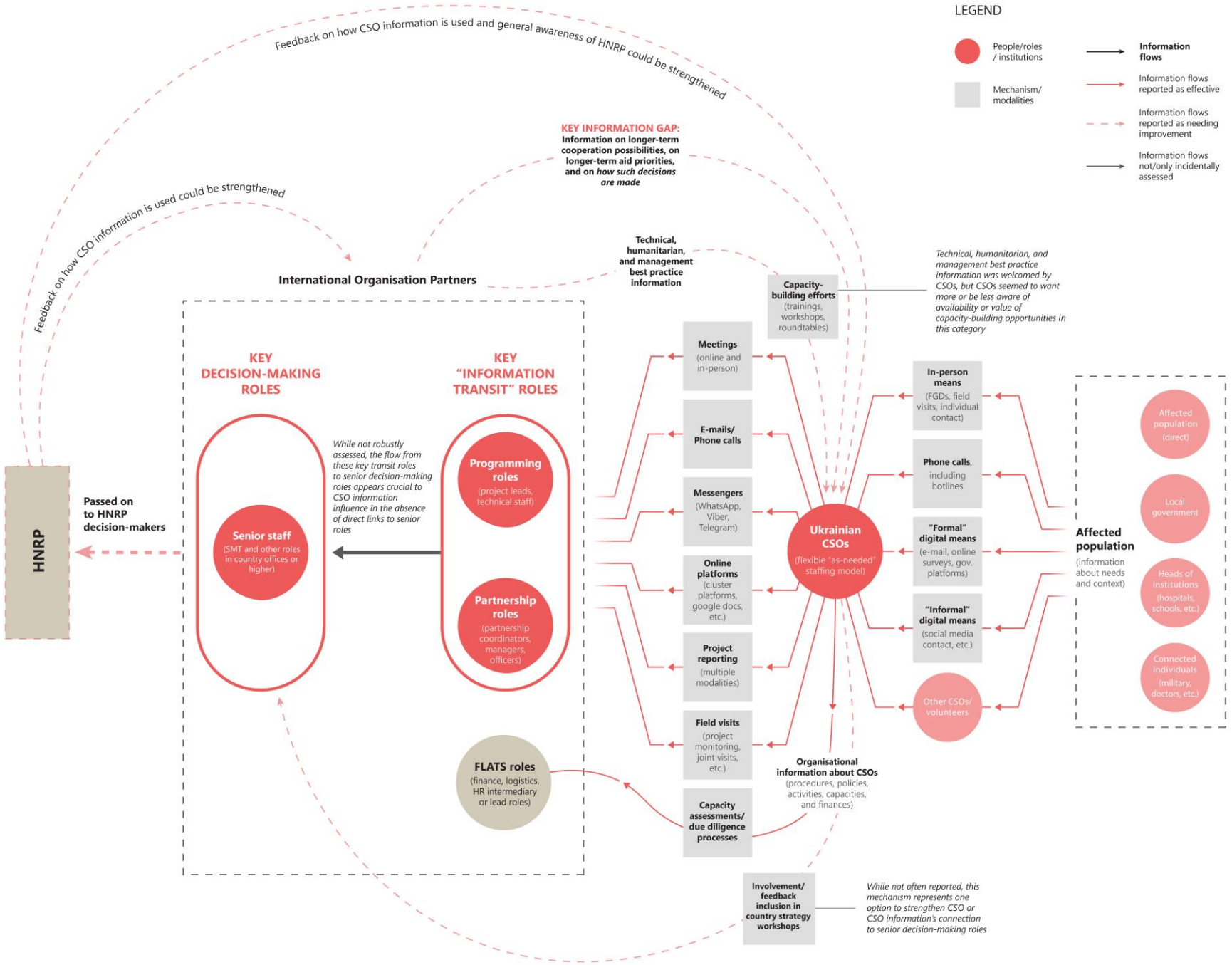
Respondents were also asked about the inclusion of CSO information in the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP), from the perspective of international-local partnership participants. On the CSO side, **nearly half of CSO KIs reported that they were not aware of the HNRP at all**. Unsurprisingly, this trend was strongest among KIs from small CSOs. Among the CSO KIs that reportedly did know about the HNRP, there seemed to be mixed perceptions of inclusion: a few of them believed that their information was partially taken into account within the HNRP process, though slightly more believed their information was not used. In a few instances, active inclusion in the drafting process was noted, albeit with less confidence of the final result. One CSO KI mentioned specifically "We are a regular participant in coordination meetings where the HNRP is discussed. We are its [co-]developer. We make our suggestions for this plan. It is difficult to say to what extent they are considered or not." Another added that their organisation wants to be included, but a few noted that HNRP activities do not fully cover the most updated or area-based needs that their CSOs see on the ground. It is worth noting that **although many CSOs are not aware of the HNRP, they are still interested in knowing about it.**[9]

Among IO KIs, response on CSO inclusion in the HNRP were mixed. On the one hand, **nearly half of IO KIs, who may have more insight into the HNRP drafting process, answered that they use their partner CSOs' information in contributing to HNRP.** On the other hand, several KIs were not able to answer due to partnership roles having less visibility on HNRP consultations, or otherwise didn't know if information was used, and when probed for examples of using CSO information in the HNRP, **only a few IO KIs were able to name any.** A few respondents reported attending cluster consultations and passing CSO information on to clusters but, similarly to their CSO colleagues, were not certain it was used in the HNRP. Those KIs who said they pass CSO information on typically reported doing so informally by using CSO regular reports as part of the information shared with the clusters during the HNRP process. In summary, potential barriers to CSO information contributing to the HNRP process include a **gap in awareness of whether and how CSO information is finally used from *both* KI groups,** and on the CSO side in particular, an apparent lack of CSO involvement in the creation of the HNRP and subsequent lack of knowledge of its purpose.

Notably, a few IO KIs did report clear inclusion of CSOs (at least those participating in clusters) in HNRP consultations, or other direct influence of CSOs in the HNRP. One KI noted a case in which direct inputs from CSO partners influenced the HNRP People in Need (PiN) total. Another KI speaking from a cluster perspective reported an example in which national CSOs' information influenced costing used in the HNRP: reportedly, the cluster lowered their unit cost following a survey sent to national and international cluster partners because of the comparatively lower costs of national partners' activities. Overall, more positive examples of inclusion of CSO inputs in the HNRP may exist, and the small proportion of UN KIs may have had some influence on findings—but as seen in the previous findings on use of CSO information for IO partner decision-making, IOs and CSOs alike sometimes do not have a clear understanding of the end use of information shared. In both cases, **closing the information feedback loop with better communication on how the information shared is being used may be one option to redress uncertainties or doubts that CSOs and their information is meaningfully included in decision-making within partnerships, and in broader decision-making processes such as the HNRP.**

[9] During the interview process, when CSO KIs said they were not aware of the HNRP, REACH data collection teams gave a short explanation of the document, and about one-third of respondents independently asked for it to be sent to them; all who asked then received the HNRP via electronic means.

Figure 4: Information flows and decision-making: strengths and weaknesses



IO information and CSO decision-making

(a) IO perspectives on information shared for CSO decision-making

In addition to questions on the role of CSO information in IO decision-making, **KIs were also asked about the influence of *IO* information on *CSO* decision-making,** including whether such influence was seen as needed or appropriate. On the IO side, nearly all IO KIs reported that they share information with CSO partners for making their decisions, but **some are reportedly not aware of how or whether it affects their CSO partners' decision-making.** When asked about *what* type of information they share with CSO partners, most respondents mentioned sharing donor- or grant-related information as well as specific technical expertise. For example, one IO KI observed that "partners are sometimes blind to trends – for example donor trends or midterm planning....if two big donors are going to give less money – [our IO] informs them so they can adapt to the new context." Several IO KIs also said that they give recommendations to CSO partners on organisational risks and issues, including advising on project management, best practices for HR and logistics, structural aspects such as the value of having a board, and best humanitarian practices such as avoiding political affiliation or taking certain safety and security measures. According to one KI, "most [CSOs] really try to go everywhere without proper planning and visible signs of them as a humanitarian. So, [we] really try to bring this information to our partners, to encourage them to make their decision to go somewhere more safely." A few other IOs reportedly share information aimed at enhancing the CSOs' capacity or opportunities, including offering trainings or directly connecting CSOs with donors, other NGOs, or clusters. Still, although nearly all IO KIs reported sharing information with their CSO partners, **less than a third were able to name specific occasions on which they knew that the information or approaches they had shared had altered or impacted a choice by a partner.** Notably, a small number of IO KIs viewed this as positive as they did not feel it was appropriate to influence CSO decision-making. This finding may suggest that gaps in awareness of what is done with information once it has been passed on **do not only exist in the CSO-to-IO direction, but also in the opposite direction.**

(b) CSO perspectives on information desired for CSO decision-making

When asked about **information that they felt wasn't being shared by IO partners,** more than half of CSO KIs reported that there *may* be types of information that international partners have that are not fed back to CSOs, though many noted they are not sure one way or another about whether they are missing information. According to some KIs, they don't know the full extent of information that their IO partners have, or what IOs can share with CSOs, so "maybe [we] just don't need to know it". As in the previous responses related to decision-making, **uncertainty continued to be a trend.**

In terms of what information CSOs *wanted* to receive from their partners, there was some overlap with the information types that IO KIs said they shared, but there were also some pertinent **gaps between the information CSOs received (according to IOs) and the information desired by CSOs,** or the degree to which they felt they received it. CSO KIs reportedly *were* interested in information about available grants or prospective donors, especially when given on a long-enough timeline for forward planning. A small CSO noted, "Every small organisation operates only on the percentage of grants. To plan our work in advance, we need to know whether we will be able to pay our people's salaries, office rent, and repair cars." However, many CSO KIs reported the **need to receive information about international partners' priorities,** particularly in terms of activity types or geographic areas where they intended to focus aid in the longer term, as well as **how IOs decide on aid priorities,** both within organisations as well as more broadly. Some CSO KIs expressed the sense that IO decision-making

processes within and across IOs seemed to exist beyond what was formal or stated. One KI said that "we would like to receive information on how international organisations meet and make decisions and, if there is a discrepancy in information, whose opinion is considered. It is interesting how international organisations exchange information after joint forums"; another observed that "there is formal information about decision-making, and there is actual information about how decisions are made, for example, about funding initiatives or choosing areas of work" (interestingly, both observations were made by KIs from small CSOs, which may indicate that IO decision-making processes seem particularly opaque for smaller or newer organisations).

Importantly, for their own decision-making CSO KIs highlighted needing information about IOs' aid priorities and decision-making as well as the possibilities for cooperation, **not only in the short or medium term but also in the in the long term.** About half of CSO KIs saw this type of information as necessary to be able to plan their activities, to hire more staff and thereby help more people, and to have more permanent projects. CSO respondents noted that by having information about aid priorities, decision-making, and potential for collaboration in advance they could make long-term plans and better understand the possibilities for who and how they can help. A smaller number of KIs also reported that area-level information they perceived IOs to have, such as information about local aid priorities or security conditions, would further enable CSOs to plan in the longer term. Lastly, a few KIs noted that beyond their individual IO partners, having information about which international organisations are doing what activities and where would help them to pursue additional partnerships, where activities and locations overlapped with their own organisational priorities.

Another information need expressed by CSO KIs was **information that could strengthen their capacity,** including trainings on grant management, technical expertise, and support with how to manage and grow their organisations—all topics that IO KIs reportedly shared with CSO partners, from their perspective.

> **"Our organisation really needs information about training opportunities and support for local organisations in the technical part - in particular, [for using] software. We want to know how international organisations build their teams from within, how they motivate them, even how they decide where to hold a retreat and who goes to it."**
>
> *Small CSO*

Despite the fact that several IO KIs reported sharing precisely this type of information, **across interviews CSO KIs sometimes appeared to have low awareness of what trainings were available, *or* of which would be useful for their goals,** which might indicate that extra efforts are needed from IOs to advertise or clarify the benefit of the many on-target capacity-building mechanisms on offer. At the same time, low staff capacity may be a limiting barrier to capacity-building access even when appropriate trainings are available: a small number of CSOs reported that they simply do not have staff capacity to attend such trainings. Additionally, noting that the assessment largely targeted small or medium-sized CSOs over large ones, it is possible that CSOs with less staff capacity also lack time to understand the capacity-building opportunities available to them, while large CSOs are more aware of and able to take advantage of such information and expertise-sharing.

Unfortunately, the disconnect between IO and CSO responses on capacity-building information exchange repeated itself in the broader question of IO-to-CSO information-sharing effectiveness. CSO KIs' perception of how effectively the types of information CSOs want from IOs actually reach them was lukewarm: **almost half of CSO KIs reported this receipt of information as moderately effective, but**

nearly as many said it was not very effective, and just a few reported it as very effective—despite fairly positive perceptions in many other questions. Since the information flow **mechanisms** themselves were rated positively by CSO KIs in earlier questions, this may mean that the bigger block to information flow effectiveness in the direction of IO-to-CSO is **not the modality of information sharing, but rather not always receiving the desired *type* of information.** In particular, CSOs are reportedly not receiving enough information about longer-term priorities or plans for cooperation, or information about how IOs make decisions on aid priorities, which was also shown in the previous section to be a gap. At the same time, matches between information that IOs reportedly shared and information that CSOs felt they needed *did* exist for **donor opportunities and capacity-strengthening in particular,** implying that either more of the same type of information is desired, or that additional efforts in outreach might be necessary to ensure that CSOs are leveraging the information available to them.

CONCLUSION

The results of previous studies have indicated a localisation gap in Ukraine, namely the inclusion of local Ukrainian actors in humanitarian decision-making.[10] [11] At the same time, local actors have a significant amount of primary information about the context and needs of the affected population, which is important for decision-making by international humanitarian organisations and for the overall humanitarian response. Aiming to contribute to improved localisation in 2024, REACH conducted an assessment to identify information flow mechanisms that facilitate information-sharing between international and local humanitarian actors, and their impact on humanitarian decision-making. The study aims to help improve communication between international and local partners and increase the influence of local organisations in decisions made for the Ukrainian humanitarian response.

Regarding information flow mechanisms, KIs generally agreed on the primary modalities of information-sharing and the main types of information CSOs are passing on to their IO partners. Ultimately, KI responses suggest that the exact modality of information-sharing mechanism is not the most crucial factor in effective sharing of information, so long as the information itself is accurate and timely. Most of the main information flow mechanisms reported had both supporters and detractors, but were considered effective overall, and more so for specific uses—messengers and phone calls were considered effective for urgent information needs, e-mails and reporting questionnaires or platforms were helpful for information that needed to be documented, and in-person meetings were advantageous for sensitive communication or trust-building. The most consistent finding on effectiveness across both groups of KIs was that **flexibly adapting the mechanism to the type of information being shared or the needs of the moment** was the main source of effective information exchange.

What appears more important than the mechanism used is **who** ultimately receives the information, and **how much power to make decisions they have.** While CSO information commonly passed on to partnership and programming roles within IOs seemed fairly influential at the operational level, evidence of influence at higher levels of IO decision-making, usually made by senior roles with which CSOs had little communication, was minimal, potentially leading to a lower sense of inclusion by CSO KIs. Another consistent issue apparent throughout findings was uncertainty on whether and to what extent ground-level information about needs of the affected population was being incorporated into final decisions after being passed on—notable especially among CSOs but also among IO representatives with respect to the HNRP process. This suggests that even when information does reach key decision-making platforms both within partner organisations and in the wider humanitarian landscape, another important factor may be **communicating back how the information was used** to those who gathered or passed on the information in the first place, particularly to Ukrainian actors often taking considerable risks to get vital on-the-ground information.

Finally, more than the mechanism, the type of information being shared seemed to matter, especially from IO to CSO. While efforts to share information from the international to the local did exist, including some on-target efforts that may simply benefit from increased awareness-raising, gaps between the information shared by IOs and that desired by CSOs reportedly persist, especially information for long-term planning that will reportedly allow CSOs to grow as organisations. CSO respondents reported a need not only for technical expertise and trainings on grant or non-profit management, but also for **clearer information on international actor priorities and plans for cooperation, and better visibility on how such plans are decided,** to enable for planning long-term projects with partners.

[10] ACAPS, Perceptions of Localisation in the Humanitarian Response, June 2023.

[11] NGO Resource Center, ICVA, A Humanitarian Localisation Baseline for Ukraine, September 2023.

While this assessment has made an effort at untangling information flows and barriers to their effectiveness within international-local partnerships, it is only a first step. Many actors assessed in this report seem to see clear value in better inclusion of local partners; as such, improving existing feedback loops, potentially by establishing surveys within individual partnerships to better understand the information that local CSOs require to support their growth seems to be a highly feasible next step.