The ‘secret’ of Ukrainian NGOs’ performance during disaster relief actions

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Abstract: This paper examines the performance and evolving roles of Ukrainian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in providing disaster relief during the full-scale Russian invasion that began in February 2022. Drawing on scholarship on the nonprofit sector, disaster governance, and humanitarian response, the analysis situates NGOs within the broader context of Ukraine’s mobilized civil society, which has developed through successive waves of political contention and civic activism since 1991. While NGOs are normatively expected to “do good” and “be good”, that is, to deliver public benefit ethically, transparently, and effectively, they also face enduring structural vulnerabilities including funding instability, governance challenges, and fluctuating public trust. These vulnerabilities are magnified during crises, making Ukraine a critical case for examining NGO capacity under extreme conditions.

The study distinguishes between two phases of NGO disaster response. In the immediate phase (2022-early 2023), Ukrainian NGOs and volunteer networks acted as first responders, rapidly delivering evacuation support, shelter, food, medical supplies, humanitarian logistics, and information services, often faster and more flexibly than state institutions or international humanitarian agencies. In the subsequent recovery phase (2023-2025), NGOs increasingly shifted toward structured, professionalized activities such as housing repairs, livelihoods support, psychosocial rehabilitation, veterans’ reintegration, community rebuilding, and assistance to social service systems.

The findings show that Ukrainian NGOs have functioned as a resilience infrastructure, linking communities, municipalities, and international donors, while sustaining social cohesion under conditions of protracted war. The case demonstrates that civic trust, horizontal coordination networks, and embedded local knowledge are critical drivers of effective disaster relief. However, for such performance to be sustained, long-term support must include predictable funding, institutional capacity-building, and equitable resource distribution. The Ukrainian experience highlights both the potential and the constraints of localized humanitarian action in contemporary crisis governance.