

# AGENTS OF CHANGE

report



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The tools of local democracy are the best means for communities to create their future. However, often people do not know how they can influence the government authorities: by organizing public hearings, submitting their own initiatives to community budget contests, drawing attention to important issues through the electronic petition service, and by other means. The “We Have Influence in the Regions” project was implemented with the support of the United Nations Development Programme in Ukraine within the framework of the project “Civil Society for Enhanced Democracy and Human Rights in Ukraine”, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. The project showed community residents how they can change the lives of their communities, using the tools of local democracy. A total of 30 communities from six Ukrainian oblasts took part in the project.

As part of the UNDP project “Civil Society for Enhanced Democracy and Human Rights in Ukraine,” funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark

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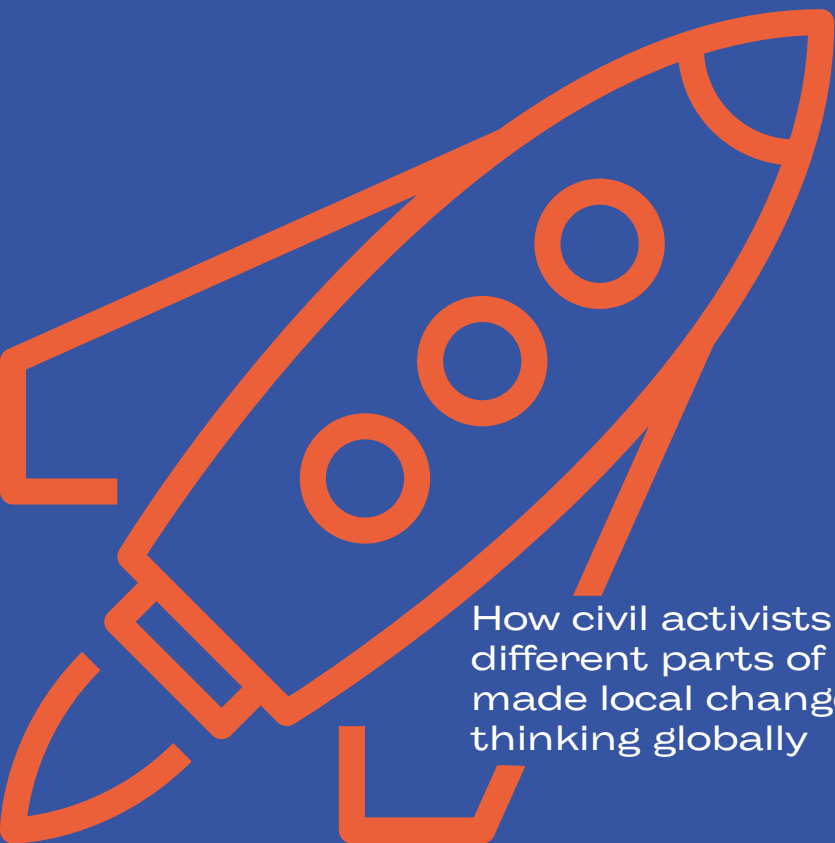
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How civil activists from different parts of the country made local changes by thinking globally

The CSO hubs Network was established seven years ago, with the support of UNDP, in order to promote the development of communities, initiative groups and budding activists in larger or smaller populated areas. It was created by the NGOs and charitable foundations from around the country. Over the years, the CSO hubs Network has expanded, extending its area of influence to 15 oblasts. The Networks activities are determined by the reforms carried out in the country.

After the launch of decentralization and administrative reorganization, amalgamated territorial communities were allocated larger budgets, while also having to shoulder greater responsibility. “The changes in the country have encouraged people to become more involved in the lives of their communities and to get rid of the misconception that local politics can be influenced only once every few years by ticking a ballot during local elections,” said Viktoriya Zolotukhina, a manager of the Non-governmental organization “CIVIL HOLDING “GROUP OF INFLUENCE”. “Of course, the duty to vote is sacred for a democracy, but this in no way means that one should let processes that do not involve elections just run their own course.”

This is how, in the spring of 2019, the need to develop local democracy – among other things by improving people’s access to their right to influence the operation of local governments – gave rise to the idea to launch the project “We Have Influence in the Regions”. This project builds on the achievements of the CSO hubs Network by involving the largest possible number of residents of the communities that were selected via a contest: five each from the six oblasts that have civil society hubs (Volyn, Vinnytsia, Kyiv, Zakarpattia, Poltava, and Donetsk oblasts). In each of these oblasts, an analysis was conducted to find out to what extent various local democracy tools encourage people to be civically active. Does a community budget make the everyday lives of residents easier? Do the websites of local councils provide one with a broad idea of what life in a particular populated area is like? Is the information about the composition of community councils, and the dates and subject matter of their meetings in the public domain? What do members of the general public know about local democracy tools? The project’s coordinators were faced with these questions right after they started working on the project. It was clear even then that they would have to do some fieldwork.

Before that, however, the coordinators had to find local like-mind-

ed people who would tell them what was going on in their communities, and what problems were most pressing for them. Active people could be found everywhere – from representatives of NGOs to people in initiative groups. They had to carry out an analytical study to get a more objective picture, so as to understand what they had to change in future, and how best to do it.

“ One of the project’s objectives is to provide people with an understanding that the tools of local democracy can be used to systematically influence various aspects of community life

They started developing a methodological study on 1 April 2019, with the involvement of the following partners from the regions: Iryna Haiduchyk, executive director of CSO “Volyn Institute of Law”, Oleksandr Tkachenko from the “Institute of Analysis and Advocacy”, and Oleksandra Kalashnikova from the CSO “Association for Supporting Self-Organisation of Population”, an NGO. They compiled a list of questions that served as indicators for determining to what extent a particular local democracy tool was used in a given community, and drew up regulations for the future charters of local governments. The researchers had to find out to what extent the rules laid down in the regulations of local councils comply with Ukrainian law, whether or not they violate human rights. And most importantly: how realistic these documents are, and whether or not they are ready for practical application.

At that stage, experts requested access to public information from local councils, and browsed through the information that was available on local council websites – these sources formed the basis for future analyses.

Each hub had to conduct an analysis of five communities. Overall, they covered 30 villages, cities and towns under various types of ad-

ministrative divisions (amalgamated territorial communities, village or town councils) across the entire country – although the data obtained cannot be considered a sociological sample, they provide a clear idea of the general treatment local democracy tools receive in Ukraine. As it turned out, there was no homogeneous treatment even across one oblast. Some communities considered the needs of people with disabilities by putting in place ramps leading to public hearing places so as to provide all interested people with easy access, other communities installed special applications on their websites for the blind. Meanwhile, there were communities that did not even think about regulations and charters. Local councils, at their own discretion, decided who can be considered a community member, despite the fact that this was in breach of the law, and deprived internally displaced persons of their rights.

Viktoria Zolotukhina says that one of the project's objectives is to provide people with an understanding that the tools of local democracy can be used to systematically influence various aspects of community life. With a view to making this method useful not only for the selected six communities, but also for all those who will want to use the tools of local democracy by themselves, the experts created a separate document in universally comprehensible terms.

In the summer, after conducting the analytical study, CSO hubs Network agents and their partners from the regions attended a five-day training event on advocacy and analytics, which was held in Kyiv. The participants learned how to make their voice more influential in dealing with local authorities, how to engage in a dialogue with these authorities, and how advocacy is different from lobbying. After the event, the participants went to their home communities – everyone had lots to do. The main thing, however, was that they had developed an understanding of what they can influence, and how.

That marked the beginning of the most important – advocacy, i.e. practical – part of the project. Since the autumn of 2019, each of the six oblasts has been dealing with its own challenges, and each has produced its own results. However, one result was reported by all of the communities: all of the communities involved have changed their attitude to the activities of the local government and, in particular, by re-evaluating the extent to which they participate in these activities. Every voice counts in bringing about global changes.



# THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY

How public hearings united the residents of the Stara Pryluka amalgamated territorial community in Vinnytsia Oblast



Some Ukrainian villages are dying out, the only activity there being perhaps the rustling of lonely trees. That's too bad, thinks Inna Feshchuk, but this definitely is not the case in their Stara Pryluka amalgamated territorial community, where she works as a chief accountant and is a member of their local community council.

The two villages that united are growing and developing. They boast 4,000 residents, an ancient estate that once belonged to a local lord and a legend-shrouded spring as tourist attractions, beautiful scenery for painting landscapes, and strong farming businesses, which are the major source of local budget revenues.

However, the community's main asset are its own residents. After the community council introduced regular public hearings, the villagers realized that they bear the greatest responsibility for their own well-being.

# THE PATH OF LEARNING

The Old and New Pryluka villages in Vinnytsia Oblast united into an amalgamated territorial community in 2018. Inna Feshchuk, a representative of the local government, regrets only one thing: they should have done it much earlier.

The “before and after” villages are hardly comparable, she says: after the villages united, tax revenues started flowing into the local budgets. These taxes are paid by local entrepreneurs, mostly farmers, on whom the local economy hinges. The budget has risen by several times, and the people have realized that they can take care of themselves. That is why they want to enhance their involvement in community life.

Feshchuk worked as an accountant in the Old Pryluka village council since 1998. She was given the same position in the new amalgamated territorial community. She thinks that the main difference between the administrative structures is as follows:

“After creating our amalgamated territorial community we embarked on learning. Everyone in the community wants to know how they can employ knowledge to make their lives more comfortable. The world is becoming more open and is offering new solutions. And we should jump at this opportunity.”

One such step for the community has been its participation since April 2019 in the “We have Influence in the Regions” project. Local activists have been working together with the CSO hubs Network, and in particular with volunteer lawyer Oleksii Smishnyi from the Non-Governmental organization “The Spring of Hope”, a legal aid agency in Vinnytsia Oblast. When he worked in a centre for providing free-of-charge legal aid to people who needed to protect their rights in court, Smishnyi travelled to remote villages and gave legal advice to people from vulnerable groups of the population. However, he admits that people did not show much interest: not that many people visited the mobile consultancies they had set up. Here things are completely different – from the very start, the community appointed motivated members to participate. These people embraced change, were capable

of self-organization, and had previously demonstrated a willingness to develop or improve documents that affected the lives of their communities. Out of the five selected communities, the Old Pryluka community was the most active in learning and putting its knowledge to practical use, Smishnyi says.

An analytical study the experts conducted before undertaking advocacy, i.e. practical work, revealed that practically no communities had brought their regulations into line with their local specifics, but instead used old charters (for example, the Hnivan amalgamated territorial community used the charter of the town of Hnivan, which was adopted as far back as 2003). The experts also found out that in one community people only used e-petitions, while in another they relied only on participatory budgeting. It was impossible to get an idea about the real lives of the communities from their websites, as these sites mostly contained official information about the composition of the local councils. No populated area made use of local democracy tools in a comprehensive manner, as a result of which people did not regard these tools as a way to improve their lives. No document envisaged the participation of internally displaced persons in community life, effectively excluding these people. In short, there was lots of work to do.

The expert group of which Oleksii was in charge presented the findings of these studies to the communities, and suggested that they jointly address the shortcomings in their documents that had been identified. The Old Pryluka amalgamated territorial community was the first to respond: right after the presentation, the community head ordered that a task force be created to draw up a new regulation. The task force consisted of eleven representatives of the local government and active community members.

This community will have more than one surprise in store for Smishnyi. After all, having no staff lawyer to assist them in drawing up legal documents, they had to rely on themselves to do everything. That was because they did not skip task force meetings, and treated them as an activity in which they were engaged for the common good, rather than seeing it as a formal duty. But, most importantly, it was because their community was the only community among the participating community that had adopted a regulation on public hearings. And this is the best way to influence the government authorities, and to shape the future of their villages by themselves.

# A SMALL CENTRE WHERE EVERYTHING STARTS

In the autumn of 2019, the task force held three meetings to decide on how to apply the knowledge they had gained to their best advantage. The introduction of public hearings was their most significant achievement. Since then, all important decisions – such as budget allocations, setting up street lights, or road repairs – have been taken only after a joint discussion. To call such a meeting, all you need to do is collect the signatures of 15 community members. If the issue in question concerns only one village, ten signatures will suffice. When an issue concerns a neighbourhood, a residential district, a street, one or more houses, five signatures are usually enough (this rule was laid down in a regulation based on the number of community residents – it was the first document of this kind). Under the new rule, young people who are not yet adults can also participate in public hearings – they have the right to cast an advisory vote, i.e. to express their own views on the issues being discussed.

Once the regulation was approved by the village council, a two-day training game was organized for all interested people in the village school. They played out various scenarios: how to initiate a proposal, how to file a proposal for a new idea and make sure it gets considered, acting in accordance with the regulations approved by the council. People became uneasy when they learned new things, recalled Smishnyi. One could read in their eyes, “Can we really do this?”

“At first, people did not realize that they could influence the local authorities, and that they would pay heed to their words,” Smishnyi said. “They discovered the tools of local democracy, which a community can use to get organized and improve its well-being, and to put private ideas up for general discussion, and, hence, implementation.”

Natalia Kravets was one of the 11 people in the task force who made their community more transparent. Kravets, who is now 25, was born and grew up in the village of Old Pryluka. She started a family there, and is currently working as a shop assistant. Although Kravets works in the city of Vinnytsia, she takes a keen interest in the life of her home village. Kravets is one of the informal leaders of the village. She helps organize recreational activities, such as festivals and concerts. Her two-year old daughter also lives in the village. That is why Kravets and other active parents are now thinking about setting up a creative space for children in their local school to provide them with a place for informal socializing that is just as good as children areas located in cities. If you invest in your children today, you can hope for a better future tomorrow, Kravets says. This same issue was discussed at one of the village's public hearings.

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“The communities became more independent after the reorganization, and now they can change things from within,” Kravets said. “However, we lacked an understanding of how to go about it. It was the training event that taught us how to write a proposal for a new idea, and how to make sure that it gets considered. In the past, all activities boiled down to discussing things with your neighbours. Now we know that the tools give us power, provided we take a more active position. The amalgamated territorial community is our little centre from which everything starts. Public hearings provided us with the opportunity to get to know each other better, to understand what troubles other people have, and how we can jointly address these troubles. We have a lot of potential: we can invest in our school, and we

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can develop tourism. The main thing, however, is that we know how to do it ourselves.”

The Stara Pryluka amalgamated territorial community has already held four such public hearings. Each of these hearings brought together local entrepreneurs, school teachers, librarians, kindergarten teachers and house of culture workers – all those who wanted to know how budget funds are managed, and had ideas about what they should be spent on.

After each meeting, a commission is set up to take people’s ideas into account. During the hearings, it was decided how the 2020 annual budget should be allocated, which roads need to be repaired most of all, and on which streets street lights need to be installed. The results of the meetings are now available to all interested people, as they are now published in the local newspaper and on the community website, rather than just being available on the community’s bulletin board. Communications are also an important way to encourage community members to get involved in community affairs, Feshchuk argues.

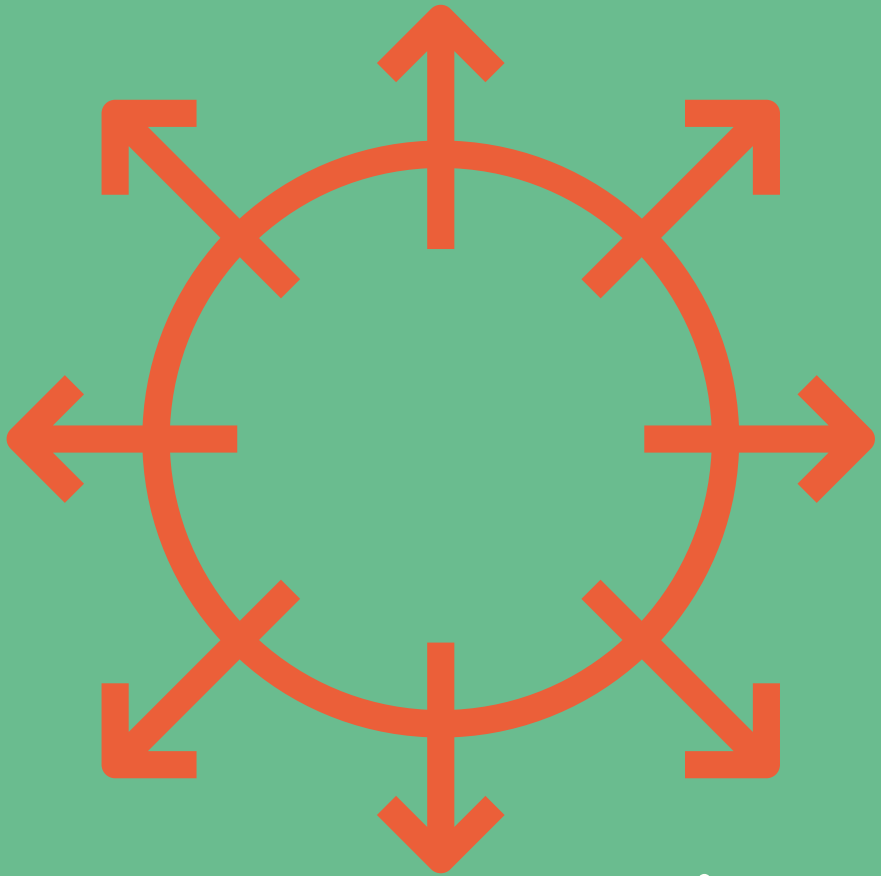
“We improve in accordance with global change,” Feshchuk said.

“The introduction of local democracy tools has improved our reputation – we no longer hear villagers complain that they don’t know what budget funds are spent on, and how much gets spent. Now all those who are helping change the community can express their own opinions.”

The coming year will be a busy one for the Old Pryluka amalgamated territorial community: the strategy for community development envisages continued repairs of the roads, the development of schools, kindergartens, libraries and houses of culture, as well environmental initiatives , fire safety and other programmes. These programmes include providing community members with information about community affairs to the fullest possible extent, and the introduction of electronic self-governance. Joint effort, joint responsibility.

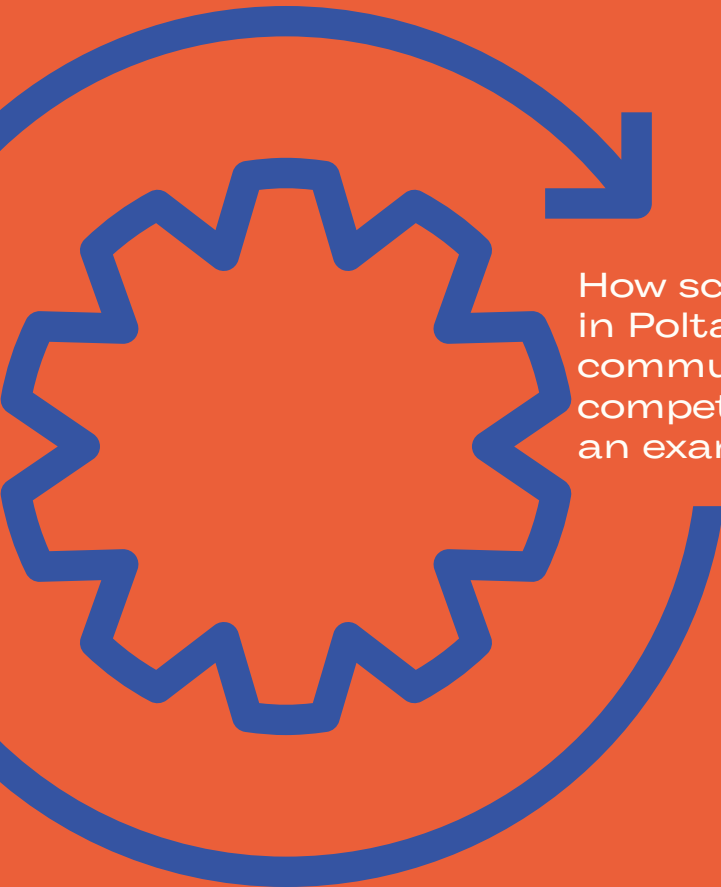


JOINT EFFORT.



JOINT  
RESPONSIBILITY

# THE KEY TO CHANGE



How schoolchildren  
in Poltava Oblast win  
community budget  
competitions, setting  
an example for others



Reshetylivka is a small town in Poltava Oblast where people cherish the whitework embroidery tradition and want to see it on the UNESCO Word Heritage List. Apart from traditions, however, people also think about future prospects there. Among other things, they are actively introducing local democracy tools.

Andriy Romanov is a local councillor and the head of the economic development, trade and investment division. Romanov, who is now 33, came to the local government from the civil society sector. For four years in a row, he has been encouraging community members to work together. He admits that not all initiatives take root immediately. Last spring, they launched, in test mode, a public consultations web-service in an attempt to move armchair discussions to the public domain. To check if this service would appeal to the locals, Romanov posted a funny test questionnaire entitled “Do you have domestic animals: yes or no?” The only activity it generated was slightly over 100 views. The second attempt was more serious – Romanov launched a discussion about local business. He asked if the residents were willing to pay more for goods created by entrepreneurs from their amalgamated territorial community to support local producers. This experiment showed that Reshetylivka residents were not prepared to use this seemingly simple democracy tool. The 9,000 residents of Reshetylivka use social media to discuss things, which is why they have no interest in the public consultations web-service. The use of electronic petitions is also yet to take off. When people have an urgent issue, they collect physical signatures. Romanov says that even councillors are faster to respond to physical signatures because there are more emotions involved.

In contrast, the people of Reshetylivka have mastered the idea of a community budget pretty well. Last year, the first winning projects were partially implemented: they financed the neutering of pets, and purchased kayaks, which are now being freely used by Reshetylivka residents. Overall, UAH 500,000 was allocated to such projects. However, the regulation on participatory budgeting was imperfect and did not provide equal opportunities for participation. They got proof of this when they were participating in the UNDP-supported project “We Have Influence in the Regions.” The Reshetylivka amalgamated community and five other communities represented Poltava Oblast in an all-Ukrainian project that aimed to bolster local democracy. At first, experts conducted an analytical study of the communities, and

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listed all betrayals and victories to enable advocacy experts to come into play. Aliona Honcharenko was such an expert in Poltava Oblast. Together with local activists, councillors and representatives of the executive branch, she developed recommendations for the amalgamated territorial communities, and provided support with the process of decision-making – a process that was not always easy.

“Sometimes local authorities simply don’t know how to make their lives easier, or how to boost community involvement. And they don’t know why they should do it,” Honcharenko said. “My task is to come up with compelling arguments to convince local people not to overlook their rights and opportunities.” She explains that many legislative issues can be adequately resolved locally: from the number of seats in the session hall to the format of people’s proposals. It is a lack of knowledge that sometimes forces local authorities to use complicated procedures. Sometimes policymakers are hampered by their many years of experience and deeply ingrained habits, which make it hard for them to change. That is why the most difficult thing is to find counter-arguments for those who say something to the effect, “We have somehow managed to live without this before, and we’ll be able to do without it for another 100 years.”



Young people always have ideas, and they have the energy to bring them to life. And providing support to them does not requires a great deal of resources

Honcharenko refers to Reshetylivka as the best example of the successful implementation of a project in Poltava Oblast – amendments to a regulation on the community budget were approved there almost immediately after they were discussed, taking into account the recommendations provided. The right wording was the key to success. To put a project to the vote, its author no longer needs to

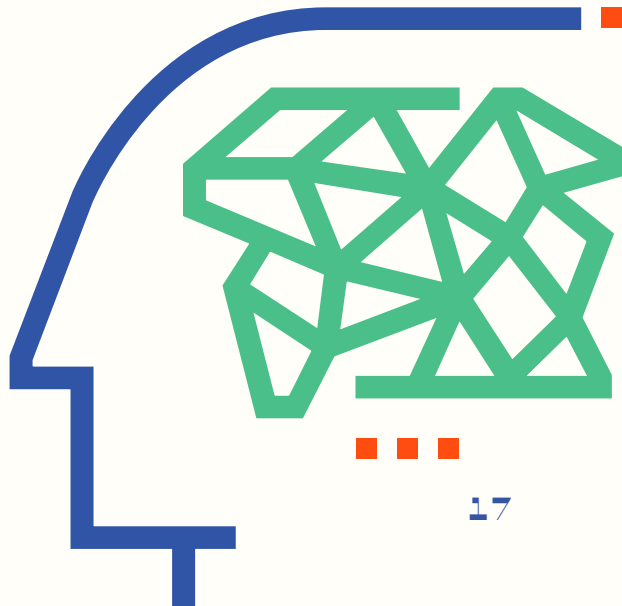
be registered there – simply living in the community is enough. This is an important change for internally displaced persons, who were excluded by the previous regulations. The age limit was also decreased. In 2020, teenagers aged 14 and older will be able to participate in the community budget competition. They adopted this practice from Poltava Oblast State Administration – last year it launched participatory budgeting for schoolchildren.

That same year, Reshetylivka schoolchildren started to come up with their own ideas in order to compete for the implementation of the project in their oblast.

The results surprised the teenagers themselves – the winners included three schoolchildren from the Reshetylivka amalgamated territorial community. Each of them is now waiting for their idea to be brought to life. These ideas are gigantic street chess pieces similar to those in the first Harry Potter movie, a school gazebo, and sports equipment. All of this has been planned for 2020.

The children’s activities have inspired the local council to expand opportunities for young activists in their hometown. Councillor Romanov, who is currently in charge of the task force on participatory budgeting, says that it is much easier to change the community by involving young people.

“Young people always have ideas, and they have the energy to bring them to life. And providing support to them does not require a lot of resources.”



## Poltava Oblast

In 2019, Reshetylivka launched a youth council. It is an advisory body that enables local young people to actively participate in decision-making, and try their hand at civil activism. These young activists include both schoolchildren and university graduates. Together, they organize events, take part in discussions, and draw up projects. In February, these activists attended an intensive session, which was organized by the youth council and involved a lot of practice.

“Those were five crazy days,” Romanov said. “Lectures, training events, practical experience in council sections, and a final report – they had a very busy agenda. This, however, has enhanced their knowledge of the council’s activities, taught them how to fill out project applications, and how to participate in public discussions. The young adults were able to see that people in the council are not couch potatoes, and to encourage older people to engage in community life by setting an example for them.”

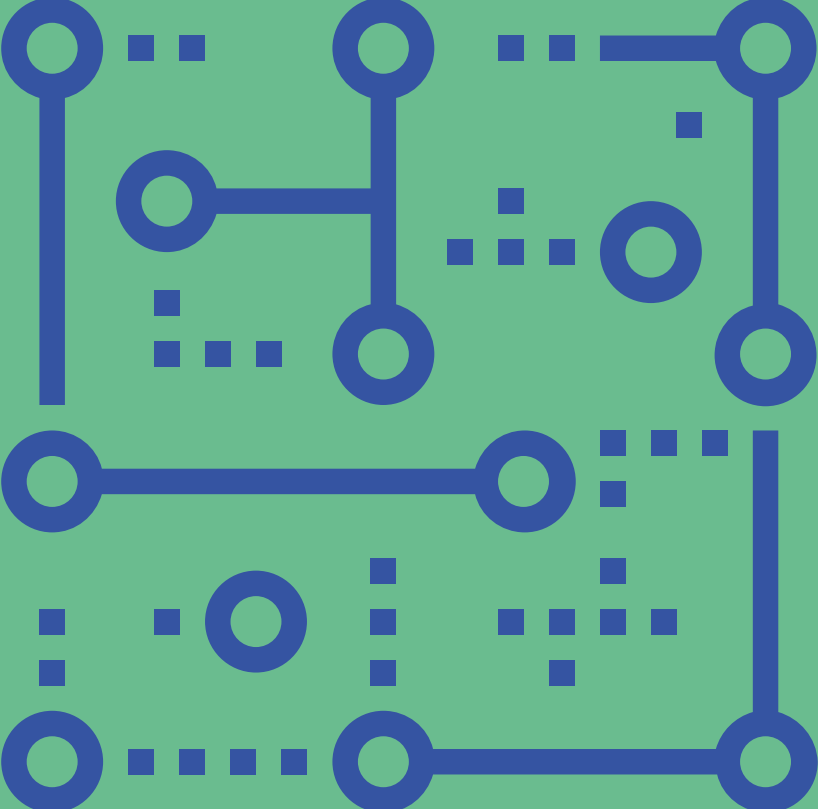
The councillor pointed out that this would make the activities of the local government more transparent to the residents. Involvement in local projects increases the chance that people will not keep their ideas under their hats, but will rather try to implement them together with local activists and authorities.

Expert Honcharenko said that bilateral interaction was important for the process of local decision-making. The essence of the changes needs to be correctly communicated to the local authorities to make sure that the head of the community does not veto the decisions made.

“For example, we plan to amend the regulation on people’s proposals in the Shishaky amalgamated territorial community,” Honcharenko said. “Once a decision is made, people will be able to make proposals online instead of submitting them on paper or in person.” She explains that this is a good strategy not only for people but also for the government authorities.

Changes are significantly more likely to actually be made if there are joint discussions and a constructive dialogue beforehand. That is why Honcharenko refers to effective communications at all levels as the main key to change.

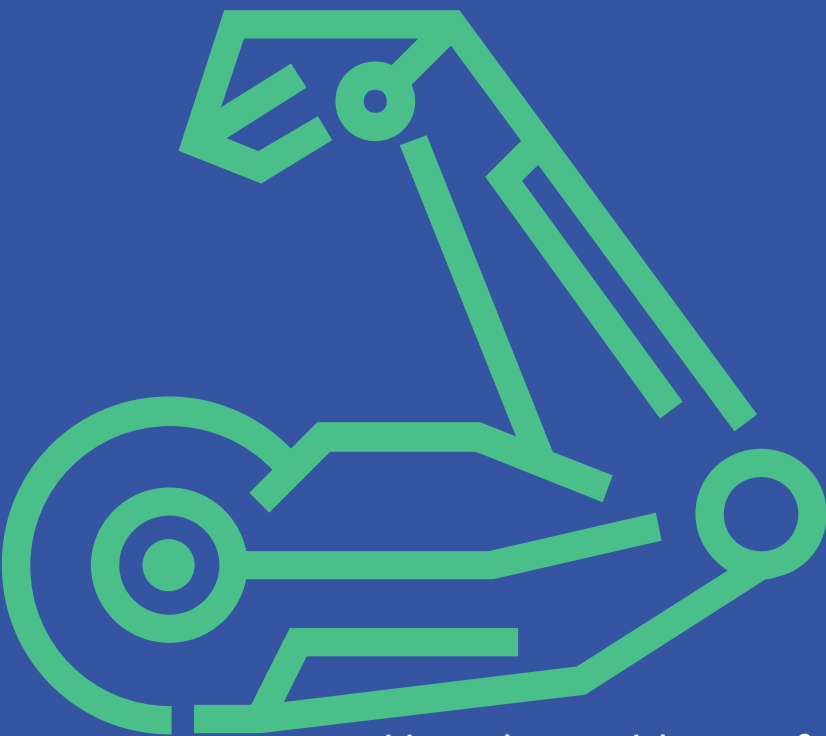
# EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS



AT ALL LEVELS



# WHEN A COMMUNITY IS POWER.



How the residents of the Turiisk amalgamated territorial community realized that Small steps lead to big changes

Roman Marchuk is a legal advisor in the Turiisk amalgamated territorial community in Volyn Oblast, and a local councillor. He lives in the village of Perevaly, which also belongs to the Turiisk amalgamated territorial community. His young daughter also lives there. That is why Marchuk thinks about developing his home village. The desire to develop his village was what motivated Marchuk the most to join the project “We Have Influence in the Regions,” and to draw up documents that will affect the life of the community.

# FOR THE PEOPLE

After the Turiisk amalgamated territorial community was set up in March 2017, the government of the newly created entity drew up its charter. However, an analysis conducted by experts from the Oblast Youth Civil Society Organization “Volyn Law Institute” and representatives of a local task force revealed that it was unfeasible. The official document contained only general information and nothing that was specific to the community, such as the number of its residents, the community’s representatives, and their needs. The document was never officially approved. Marchuk, who later joined the local government, admitted that it was a draft document that outlined regulations that were yet to be knocked into shape. Very often regulations had to be drawn up from scratch or drastically changed. They were up to their ears in work. Nevertheless, the Turiisk community managed to produce four regulations and to approve a charter, thanks to the enthusiasm of those on the task force and their well-coordinated joint efforts. Marchuk undertook to deal with all organizational issues: he called task force meetings, involved representatives of local NGOs, was most active in drawing up future documents. To do this, he had the required professional knowledge and the interest of a local resident in improving the well-being of his village.

“No document is more important for a community than its charter, since it affects practically all aspects of its life,” Marchuk said. “It is a prerequisite for creating prospects for the future for villages and their residents. In addition, when residents learn how to do this properly, they will bring important ideas to life by themselves.”

Marchuk has established that there is a clear link between the degree of people’s knowledge of communal participation tools and the rhythm of life in the community. The greater the knowledge, the more initiatives people can come up with, and the higher is their level of activity. For instance, many people learned about participatory budgeting when participating in the project. And although this year no money has been allocated to implement people’s initiatives (the



relevant regulation has not been approved by the local council yet – it is a prospect for next year), people have already started generating useful ideas. There is a lot talk around the community villages, and around Turiisk, about where children’s playgrounds should be placed, where recreational areas should be located, and where to place public transport stops.

After the regulations that had been drawn up were distributed by the elected elders of each of the villages around their communities, the villagers started talking about what they could change themselves, and how they could do it. The villagers, however, are not only making plans for the future. They are living full lives today – a centre for inclusion and resources, under the umbrella of their amalgamated territorial community, has been organizing events for people with disabilities (from art therapy and making candles, to educational inclusion). Talk of involving the greatest possible number of people in community affairs is on everyone’s lips.

## TOOLS SHOULD BE USED

For Haiduchyk, who coordinated the project in the Turiisk amalgamated territorial community and four other communities in Volyn Oblast, the results achieved by the Turiisk community show more than just clear changes in several communities. Haiduchyk thinks that there is a much larger story about new trends in Ukrainian society.

“People are not as activity involved in community affairs as one would wish, so we need to promote this kind of involvement more,” Haiduchyk said. “People need to be taught to talk about their rights, just as they need to be taught to take on responsibility for their own community. The more powers a community has, the more responsibilities it will have to shoulder, such as engaging residents in holding talks, and paying heed to their thoughts. The main task of our project was to ensure that local democracy tools are actually used for practical community development. And we did it.”

When in the spring of 2019, the organization started to implement the project in Volyn Oblast, the five selected communities had already declared their willingness to improve their regulations, and to involve people in decision-making.

However, Haiduchyk admits, no community had a basis for setting the conditions for community participation. Some communities rapidly developed their participatory budgeting, while others also launched competitions for the support of small initiatives. Other participatory tools were, however, unavailable.

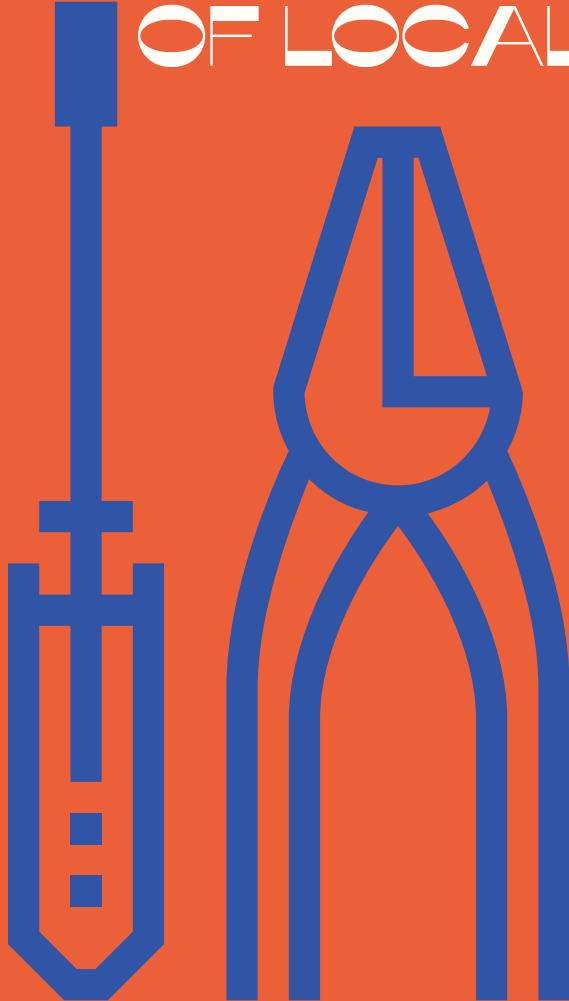
After conducting an analysis of the extent to which various tools were used in communities, experts, together with local activists, appointed task force members and determined how work would be done in future. The task forces included councillors and elected elders of the amalgamated territorial communities, and civil activists. The participants met in person and also worked online, with each community creating a separate space for virtual communications, where they asked questions, made comments, set deadlines, prepared draft regulations, and eventually resolved disagreements. After that, they presented their work to community councillors, heads and elected elders.

They organized additional training events for councillors and council workers to clarify the benefits of charters and regulations, and why these documents, through their high legal force, provide the strongest protection and contribute to the development of their communities the most. They also explained why it is important to share responsibility with community members, and how this boosts trust between those members and the government authorities.

Haiduchyk believes that the most important achievement of the project is that it has taught people that they can use local democracy tools to influence the lives of their communities. In addition to the current tangible results, there are prospects for future work with local communities. The Volyn Institute of Law has already made prior arrangements with local governments to regularly hold training events on local democracy tools to teach people how these tools should be used, and why. So, work is underway.

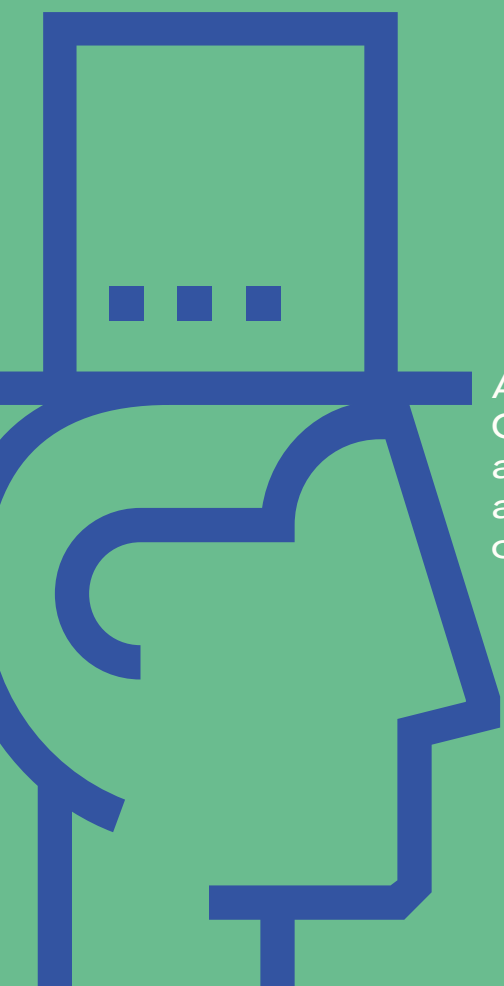
TOOLS

OF LOCAL



DEMOCRACY

# SENIORS FROM SLOVIANSK.



Activists from Donetsk Oblast have created an advisory body for people aged over 50, the first of its kind in Ukraine

They learn English and how to use computers, hoping one day to become Youtube bloggers with lots of subscribers. They also do Pilates and Nordic walking, and travel. The members of the Happy Age Organization in Sloviansk are aged 50 and over. Their activities prove that one doesn't have to spend one's retired life just watching soap operas on TV. The Happy Age Organization, which was established more than two-and-a-half years ago, has shown to local residents that life can be different and bright. Then they decided that they were ready for more. After joining in the project "We Have Influence in the Regions" in the autumn of 2019, activists launched the creation of the Council of Seniors, an advisory body, under the umbrella of Mayor's Office and the first of its kind in Ukraine, for people aged 50 and over who want to get involved in community life.

# RISING TRUST

Sloviansk activists represent one of the five communities that were selected to participate in the project “We Have Influence in the Regions”. After an analytical study of the communities identified, the major barriers to community members’ participation in local governance, active representatives of these communities attended a regional training event on advocacy and analytics. It was June 2019. Anastasia Prokopenko and Serhii Pronkin, experts from Access Point, an NGO in Kramatorsk, taught the participants how they could communicate better with local authorities, how to make proposals that get considered, and how to think through projects that can be implemented later. During the training, the participants realized that they wanted to influence the development programmes of their hometowns, and found the main answer as to how they should go about it. The training event marked the next, most practical stage of their work: the teams that had been formed were preparing to create the conditions for people’s participation in town life. In this, they were supported by mentors.

In Slaviansk, the Happy Age Organization undertook to carry out most of the changes, while in Druzhkivka (another community that took part in the project) the creators of the projects that required funding from the community budget were the most enthusiastic. The programme, through which residents submit truly valuable initiatives for Druzhkivka, has been running in the town for two years in a row. Over that time, the residents whose initiatives required funding from the community budget have proposed to reconstruct a sports ground, create a hub for parents where they can learn and gain new knowledge about how they should bring up and educate their children, set up a Lego room for children, and so on.

However, talks with the activists in focus groups revealed that the system that had recently been launched had certain shortcomings, such as an imperfect voting platform and insufficient communications with project initiators.

The main shortcoming, however, was that most regulations did not specify that project results should be made public. According to statistics, most initiatives in Druzhkivka – and in Slavyansk – were won by schools, kindergartens, and hospitals. However, the old regulation did not stipulate that project results should be available to all community residents – and this is at the heart of the philosophy of the community budget. In contrast to the old one, the new regulation that has been developed by activists and mentors includes this provision.

Mentors, together with activists, compiled a list of project proposals and submitted it to the town administration. After considering the proposals it has received, the town council will incorporate them into a new regulation on 2020 participatory budgeting. This benefitted everyone, but especially the residents, as a clearer and more transparent voting system makes it possible for the projects that matter most to the residents to win.

“The main focus of the recommendations for the regulations we have developed is on information campaigns and project preparation,” said Prokopenko, the executive director of CSO “Access Point”. “We recommend organizing educational and training events. This will make initiatives more effective, while also making the community feel more empowered. Changes to the way that regulations are drawn up will improve the submission process, while also making participatory budgeting accessible to more people. This will bolster trust between people and their involvement in town life.”

“A clearer and more transparent voting system makes it possible for the projects that matter most to the residents to win

# INFORMATION AS AN IMPACT TOOL

A regional forum on local development was held in the Druzhkivka Centre for Children and Youth Crafts on 3 December 2019. There were public discussions about how to introduce innovations and comfort for community members, how to provide an inclusive community environment, and how to implement e-democracy. One of the rooms houses the CSO “Access Point”. Prokopenko held cards in her hands. The cards had questions on them, such as: “What is the phone number of the government’s hotline?”, “How many councillors are the in your town council?”, and “What is an NGO?” The quiz, which involved 20 question cards with three choices of answer, aimed to reveal how much people knew about the tools of local democracy. Those who got 15 out of 20 questions right were the winners, and got incentivising prizes, such as a brand name mug or laptop stickers. Young people were the most enthusiastic players. Prokopenko oversaw the game. She was happy even when people did not know the right answer (in such cases, a moderator was involved to provide an explanation). After all, even wrong answers get people thinking: Why? How does this work? Which organisation should I contact if I have a particular issue?

A lot of participants discovered for the first time that local councillors had to report the results of their work to the community, or that they had to hold office hours for people once a month. Prokopenko said that one of the long-term objectives of their project was to encourage people to look at the tools of local democracy from a new perspective, and to realize that they provided a way for them to participate in local self-governance and make use of the opportunities offered by such involvement.

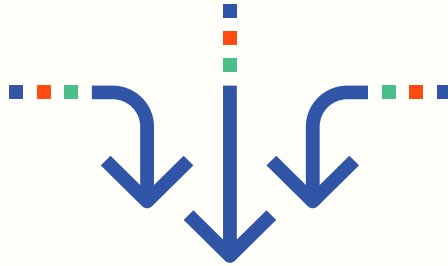
“Even after the first training session that preceded the practical work, many participants said that they had started to look at the tools of local democracy from a different perspective, and that precisely these tools provide them with the opportunity to take part in



the town affairs and to influence the decisions that affect the quality of their lives,” Prokopenko said.

“Months later, they submitted proposals and voted using electronic petitions more often, as they had an understanding of what they could change, and how.”

In the town of Bakhmut, the community of which also took part in the project, activists identified another problem – to use one tool you had to launch another one. This means that before holding public hearings, one had to call a general meeting of community members, collect the required number of votes in favour of the hearings, document everything in the minutes, and submit the minutes to the town administration. After the respective changes were made, the residents of Bakhmut no longer had to deploy one tool before using another one.



The study identified another problem – the regulations did not envisage the participation of internally displaced persons in community affairs. Since most of the documents were drawn up before some people acquired the status of internally displaced persons due to the armed conflict, these documents simply did not envisage the participation of such persons in the lives of their new places of residence. The charters stipulate that only people that have been registered in a community can attend public hearings. The amendments made to the charters have enabled internally displaced persons to take part in community meetings, as the new regulations no longer require people to be registered in a given community to attend meetings there. The new wording is as follows: “any person who is legally resident in an amalgamated territorial community or a town has the right to participate in public hearings.” This amendment has also extended the rights of university students who are registered in hostels, by making them full participants in community life.

## Donetsk Oblast

Prokopenko believes that one of the main achievements of the project is that people have re-evaluated the power they gain from the information available to them.

“Representatives of the local government in the communities in which we worked have already got used to people asking them to provide them with access to public information. These representatives provide this access willingly because they know that they will not get away with non-committal replies, and that people will get their own way anyway, rephrasing requests for information, if they have to,” Prokopenko said. “The websites of the local communities have also been given a new lease of life – unlike the old ones, these sites are informative and provide one with more detailed information about how to deploy local democracy tools, such as submitting petitions or organising public hearings.”

## SENIORS DECIDE

When two years ago, Happy Age outlined development provisions in its strategic plan, one of their objectives was to influence local politics through participation in advisory bodies. Some time later, they implemented that objective by establishing a seniors’ council.

They started by submitting a request to the State Statistics Service. Natalia Bondarenko, the founder of the Happy Age Organisation, wanted to know how many people over 50 live in Sloviansk. The reply she got said that there were 35,000 such people. In a town with a population of 110,000 people, these people account for a third of community members, and even more when you discount young children and teenagers.

“These people have the required experience, potential, energy and strength to change the life of their home town. “Shouldn’t such a proportion of the population be involved in community life?” Bondarenko asked rhetorically.

The needs of the residents gave rise to the idea of creating the council of seniors. Bondarenko explains that the council aims to bring together people who are uniquely placed to understand the needs of those aged 50 and above, those who have the enthusiasm and the will to bring change about, and those who understand the educational, social or any other needs of this age group.

And most importantly, future seniors know how the tools of local democracy work, and how they can communicate their needs to the authorities.

“The main objective of the council of seniors is to create, together with the local authorities, programmes and activities for the elderly, rather than expecting formal non-committal replies,” Bondarenko said. “The council includes representatives of NGOs that work with older people, and workers from the public sector, such as the social protection department and territorial centres, who know how to communicate their needs to the government authorities.”

“The council of seniors has proved to the entire country that the town programmes the subnational authorities implement must take into account the interests of this target audience

Prokopenko confirms that seniors from Sloviansk have become one of the most active participants in the oblast’s project. They attended a training event on how to use local democracy tools, after which they held a meeting with other community members to share the knowledge they had gained with those people. They explained how to submit proposals and requests to gain access to public information, such as when the repairs of one’s house are scheduled to take place.

Analysts from CSO “Access Point”, helped draw up regulations for the future council of seniors, and assisted in holding consultations with the head of the town administration, their deputies and heads of departments and divisions. The council of seniors was established following a dozen discussions, consultations and events.

The establishment of such a body has set a precedent not only for Donetsk Oblast but also for the whole of Ukraine, as it can change society’s general perception of people aged over 50.

“Before, retirees were, by default, regarded as people who had little interest in things, and practically no influence. The council of seniors, however, has proved to the entire country that the town programmes the government authorities implement must take into account the interests of this target audience,” Prokopenko said. “The council of seniors has demonstrated that the interests of retired people are not limited to getting together and singing on holidays in their local house of culture, as these people are ready to fully participate in the development of the community.”

Meanwhile, Bondarenko was already thinking about how to implement another initiative of Happy Age – establishing an educational centre for adults. Bondarenko’s experience of running two international projects, having partner relations with Ukrainian NGOs, and dealing with the local authorities on behalf of the newly established council of seniors, made her confident that they would be able to implement that idea as well.

“I am a fan of lifelong learning,” Bondarenko said. “One of the objectives of the council of seniors is to bring this idea to life, by getting rid of misconceptions about elderly people, and by helping those who think that they have already learned what they were supposed to, overcome their own unwillingness. Education makes change possible and broadens people’s horizons. When people learn, they develop a better understanding of what they want to do, and where they can be of use.”

LIFELONG



EDUCATION

ГРУПА  
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ХОЛДИНГ



# A CHARTER AS A COMMUNITY'S CONSTITUTION



Town residents in Kyiv Oblasts  
have realized that a fundamental  
document gives them power

Irpin, Bucha, Hostomel, Bila Tserkva, and Vyshhorod are towns located near Kyiv. These towns, which strike one as being well-kept, are witnessing the construction of new buildings and new parks, while also boasting lush green vegetation. People, especially young adults, are eager to take up residence in these towns.

These towns, full of people, create the impression of movement, development, and – thanks to their proximity to the capital – the rapid implementation of innovations. One would think that the residents of these towns would be more active and quicker off the mark. However, the first meetings of Viktoria Zolotukhina, the Kyiv Oblast coordinator of the project “We Have Influence in the Regions,” with local residents revealed that people had varied knowledge about local democracy tools, and had different levels of use of these tools.

# A PLATFORM FOR DISCUSSIONS

In the spring of 2019, community council meetings were held, during which Zolotukhina explained the essence and objectives of the project. These meetings showed that in Irpin, for instance, people were the most concerned about a lack of mechanisms for protecting the vulnerable sections of the population, in particular those for protecting the rights of internally displaced persons or people with disabilities. In contrast, the Vyshhorod community had not adopted its own charter yet. They had to address that issue before dealing with anything else, since the use of all the other tools is stipulated in this fundamental community document. However, when – not without disputes with some representatives of the local government – they reached consensus that a charter was needed after all, and started drawing it up together with experts, life itself intervened with its own changes. After holding community council hearing sessions, it became clear that Vyshhorod would create an amalgamated territorial community, and that its charter had to be revised to take this new administrative structure into account.

They created a task force, which consisted of the residents of the town and surrounding villages, councillors and civil activists. When drawing up and approving the final version of the future charter, these people held a lot of discussions and talks. They had to agree on how to take the interests of all community members into account, and how to make the charter feasible. This work requires constructive discussions. In order to make sure that no single important idea gets forgotten, all of the proposals had to be synchronised, stored and updated. Where?

One of the community representatives came up with the idea of creating an online forum for uploading documents, exchanging ideas and engaging in a dialog. This idea was unanimously approved. This idea of launching an independent platform was proposed and implemented by a caring resident of Vyshhorod and his son, who is



a programmer. When the charter was approved several months later, the internet forum continued to serve as a vehicle to bring people together to discuss various issues.

At that same time, a team of experts and locals involved was working in Hostomel. Here the Agency for Hostomel Development, an NGO, became the driver of change. The twenty activists that are members of this organisation were the driving force behind the change. Before the project was launched, they were already looking into improving the e-petition service, and convincing the residents of Hostomel that a community budget was a tool everyone can use. The task force took on two issues that were the most urgent for the community.

Zolotukhina was happy to see how this cause had united the residents.

“People didn’t just participate in events or task force meetings. They read the charters and regulations from cover to cover, and worked with the documents together,” Zolotukhina said. “They remained active throughout the project, i.e. from an analysis of available tools to the start of the practical application of these tools. This is the best indicator of the residents’ strong desire to develop their town.”

During their work, they encountered bureaucratic obstacles that reduce people’s desire to use local democracy tools. More specifically, in Hostomel the minimum number of votes an initiator had to collect to have their proposal discussed at a session had been set at 300. However, this number, which is normal for a large regional centre like Zhytomyr, is unrealistic for a town with a population of only 18,000 people. When a person fails to use this tool once or twice, the chances are that the disappointed person will not try it for the third time. This is a double whammy – people lose trust, and issues that are im-

“ The town’s council engaged an advisor to help all those who want to support an initiate to vote for it online

portant to them do not get resolved.

Hostomel residents were just as interested in the community budget. Before the town took part in the project “We Have Influence in the Regions,” voting for residents’ initiatives was done only with paper ballots. This is less convenient and more time-consuming compared to online voting. An electronic account is both a more transparent and more eco-friendly tool. The town’s council engaged an advisor to help all those who want to support an initiative online but do not know how to go about it. This helped Hostomel keep abreast of innovations, and decreased the probability of vote-rigging.

The respective changes required making amendments to the charter. To do that, the activists involved in the project talked with representatives of the local authorities and collected people’s signatures. The councillors voted in favour of it at a council meeting.

That changed the lives of Hostomel’s residents.

## WHEN YOUR INTERESTS ARE NOT LIMITED TO WHAT’S GOING ON IN YOUR BACKYARD

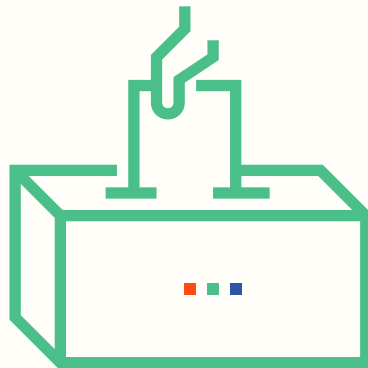
Nadia Dudnyk, a resident of Hostomel, often hears from her neighbours or acquaintances in the town, “I’m only interested in what’s going on in my backyard.” Not an unusual statement when one remembers that this small community mirrors the general way of thinking in the country. Most people are observers only, but the number of those whose activities are limited to criticizing other people’s actions is also significant. The number of those who are willing to do something themselves is the smallest. Nevertheless, it is the activities of these people that bear the most fruit. Dudnyk prefers

to think along different lines, “Although originating in my backyard, my interests are definitely not limited to it.

The life of my family is first about my street, then about my town, oblast, and, unlimitedly, my country.”

Dudnyk is a local councillor, an HR manager, and the head of the Agency for Hostomel Development. She, together with other activists that are members of the agency, joined in the project “We Have Influence in the Regions” when it was at the town environment analysis stage. They scrutinized the charter for any shortcomings and also to make sure that the community’s interests were taken into account.

Since the Hostomel council launched a petition service three years ago, it has been used 17 times – that’s going by the number of petitions registered on the website, Dudnyk says. To make matters worse, the councillors have considered only two of them, as the other petitions failed to win the required 300 votes. This discouraged the initiators from submitting any other petitions. After analysing the community’s documents, the task force decided that the 300-vote requirement was unreasonable for a town with a population of 18,000 people. Consequently, a special regulation that halved that number, to 150, was passed.



“The councillors knew about this shortcoming before. However, it was easier to preserve the status quo, as that saved them the trouble of reregistering the charter,” Dudnyk said. “Things started moving only after the community got involved. That way the residents

## Kyiv Oblast

learned that democracy gives them tools to influence things, that one should not lose heart because of bureaucratic obstacles, and that joint efforts are worthwhile.”

The use of the community budget programme picked up after the respective changes were made to the programme. Although this programme has already been running in Hostomel for the last three years, these changes made participatory budgeting more accessible to people.

“The extent by which interest in the community budget has risen can be seen from the number of people who discuss it, and the number of submitted proposals,” Dudnyk said. “On the streets, people are talking about what they should do first in their town, and how. The parents of schoolchildren came up with the idea of installing additional water filters in the school. Meanwhile, the parents of younger children said they would like to have cycling machines that can charge gadgets on the playgrounds. These ideas got support from the residents. The main thing, however, was that the initiators realized that they could contribute to the well-being of their town.”

Hostomel residents are now expecting the first elections in their amalgamated territorial community. Although the project “We Have Influence in the Regions” has officially been completed, CSO hubs Network representatives and local activists are keeping their finger on the pulse. Jointly, they are drawing up new regulations and putting forward recommendations – this time for the amalgamated territorial community. Mutual enthusiasm is the key to continued partnership.

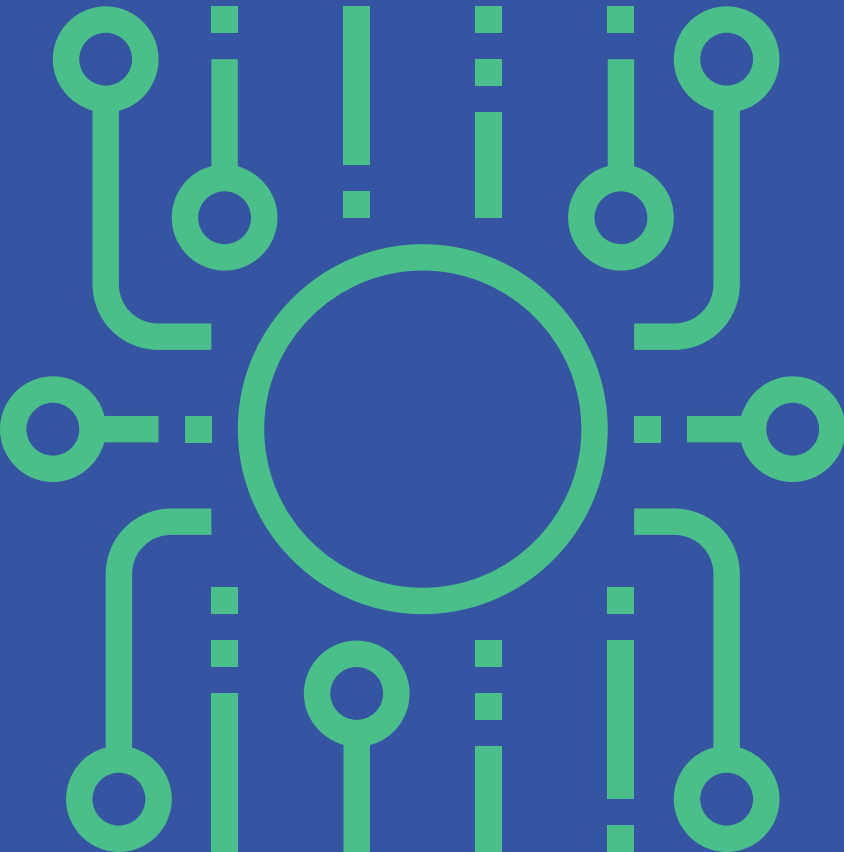
MUTUAL  
ENTHUSIASM  
IS THE KEY



TO CONTINUED  
PARTNERSHIP

# A HUB IS NOT A PUB

How young people who live  
in small towns are learning  
to take on responsibility for  
positive changes in their  
community



16-year old Erika Stanko was genuinely surprised to see that a post in their local Facebook group provoked a heated discussion. This post said that a hub for young people would open in their town. Some residents of her home town of Perechyn, which is in Zakarpattia Oblast, were upset at the decision to create a space for young people in a time when a hospital was being closed down.

“It took us a lot of effort to prove to some older people that a hub wasn’t a pub,” Stanko said. “And that having such a space and youth politics was just as important to the development of their town as other things.” Erika knows how to convince people – she has been actively involved in her school’s governance for several years, while also heading the town’s newly established youth council since recently. This advisory body was officially registered by the local authorities in November last year. That enabled proactive young people to have some say in making decisions that affect their community.

The establishment of the youth council in Perechyn grew organically from the participation of the Perechyn amalgamated territorial community in the UN-supported project “We Have Influence in the Regions.” As in other regions, they started by conducting an analytical study of barriers to the residents’ active participation in self-governance.

“Zakarpattia Oblast has the smallest number of amalgamated territorial communities compared to other oblasts – there are only six of them,” said Eleonora Vyshniak. Vyshniak is a representative of the CO “Centre for Community Initiatives”, a charity foundation of the Zakarpattia Hub of Civil Society Organisations. She is also the regional coordinator of the project “We Have Influence in the Regions.” “We sent requests for information to the local governments of each of these communities. We wanted to know if they had specific documents, such as regulations on public hearings or electronic petitions, and whether or not their residents had access to the tools of local democracy.”

Once they analysed the replies they had got, it became clear that in most cases local residents had the opportunity to influence the decisions of their local governments, but often did not know about it. As a result, they made practically no use of local democracy tools.

## Zakarpattia Oblast

The study also revealed that internally displaced persons and young people were the most poorly placed to use these tools.

“Zakarpattia Oblast doesn’t have as many internally displaced persons compared to neighbouring oblasts – there are only about 4,500 of them,” Vyshniak said. “However, all those people have been living in their local communities for over five years, and have had their rights limited for all of that time.”

The expert also said the absence, in most communities, of documents allowing for the establishment for youth councils was a form of discrimination. Their project envisaged change in the status quo.

The coordinator said that Perechyn was the most successful case. They had a constructive dialogue there – the local council expressed interest in creating this collegial body, while local young people volunteered to participate in resolving issues that were important for the town. The initiative group they set up consisted of young people aged from 14 to 30 years old. It was these people who assisted the town council in drawing up a regulation on the youth council by outlining its powers and duties.

““ Before, public hearings were attended by 10 to 15 people. Now some hearings bring together from 500 to 700 people

“It’s interesting to watch local people become more aware of what’s going on,” said Vyshniak, who has been working in the civil society sector for over 20 years. “Maybe not as quickly as one would want, but things are definitely changing. Before, public hearings were attended by 10 to 15 people who only wanted one thing – to yell at each other. Now some hearings bring together from 500 to 700 people who are ready to engage in a constructive dialogue.”



Vyshniak also said that when Uzhhorod held its first community budget contest five years ago, no more than four projects were submitted for consideration. These projects did not even cover the total budget amount.

People are starting to realize that they can influence local government decisions. And not only those that concern them themselves or their closest neighbours, but also decisions that affect the entire community. People put forward proposals to build sports grounds, install streetlights, and to do other things that are important for their town.

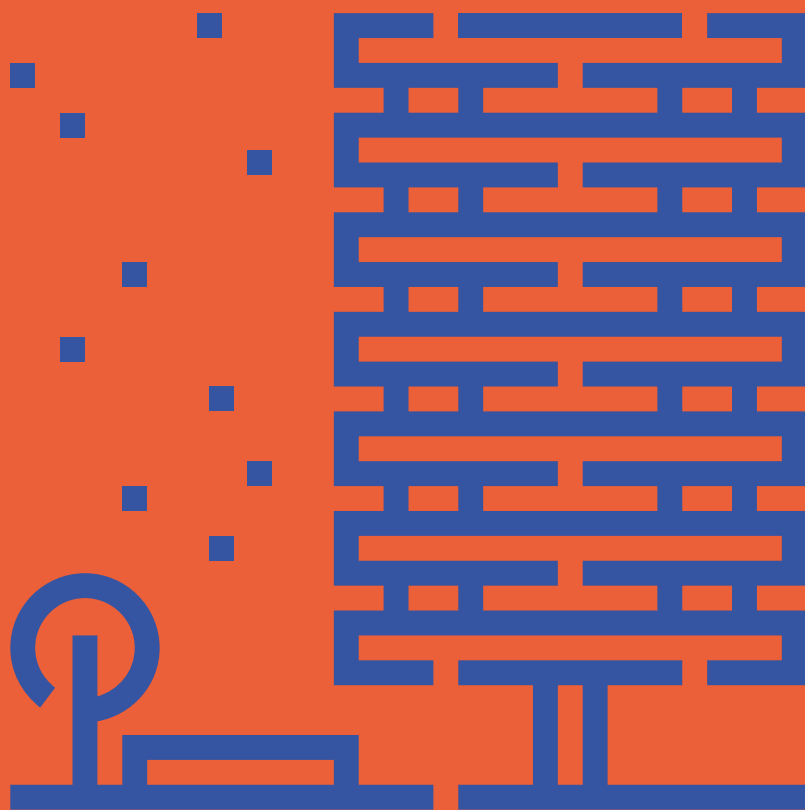
A youth hub opened in Perechyn on the last day of February. The town authorities allocated a space for young people in one of the community's premises. Young people tidied the place up, and were planning their first events, while awaiting the official opening, which would be attended by the head of the town administration.

“We have decided to organize a special event “Coffee with the Mayor” so that people our age can talk to the town’s main manager, and ask him any questions they want,” said Stanko, the head of the youth council. Stanko’s team has a lot of things planned, such as organizing cultural evenings or holding human library events about travelling or studying abroad. “We’d like our town to have a space where every young person could feel at home, where they could hold events, or simply get together and do something creative.”

The town of Perechyn has 41 streets, six lanes, and two squares. It has a population of slightly less than 7,000 people. Although the town is small, Stanko does not plan to leave it. After finishing school, she plans to apply for admission to the Uzhhorod National University – it only takes half an hour to get from Perechyn to the regional centre by bus.

“I want my home town to develop,” Stanko says confidently. She, together with other like-minded persons, has already started working on that. The youth council won a community budget contest with a project it submitted. Once bureaucratic procedures are completed, a residential district located far away from the town’s stadium will get its own sports ground.

INFLUENCING  
LOCAL



GOVERNMENT  
DECISIONS

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