

Capacity of civil institutions of sustainable development in Ukraine

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Abstract

Objectives: Peculiarities of civil organization activities for supporting the goals of sustainable development by citizen engagement during the full-scale invasion in Ukraine to explore opportunities and directions of digital civil participation in time of crises; to support its best practices as the prerequisites of institutional capacity and democratic resilience; to implement digital tools of smart social activities (foundings, social projects, informational campaigns ect.) during the post war reconstruction and european integration. **Prior work:** The main concept of the paper is built on the idea of institutional capacity in Ukraine as a result of crucial role of volunteers, charity organizations, civil society growth in general. It relates to other research in the area of the interaction between technology, public policy, and sustainable urban development, models of citizen engagement, actual practices of citizen participation in the context of smart cities' contemporary challenges and innovations. **Approach:** Neoinstitutional analysis of civil society's contribution to urban sustainable development using the results of sociological pulls, statistics, and exact volunteer organization cases. **Results:** The efforts, initiative, ingenuity, and mobilization capabilities of civil society institutions, in particular local governments, volunteer and charitable organizations are a prerequisite for the adaptability of the institutional system. The level of capability depends on the ability to continue to respond quickly to new challenges, consolidate society, involve all sectors of society in the implementation of strategic goals of state building, and shape civic positions and the national idea through informational activities on civic education. **Implications:** This can be useful for both researchers and policy makers as the outputs for deepening theoretical analysis and developing public strategies of civil institutions' engagement to achievement of sustainable development goals. **Value:** The paper contributes to the new mechanisms of sustainable development by using the synergy of the government, public and private sectors in times of crisis, which is based on the Ukrainian experience.

Keywords: volunteering, civil engagement, participation, military threats, civic education.

1. Introduction

War action, without any doubt, is a great threat to institutional capacity, a crucial challenge for sustainable development. The conflict causes a clash of norms and rules. Material law restricts many rights and activities. Main values are rethought by society. Usual things become different. Total instability, lack of general rules is a great threat to institutions, especially for civil institutions.

Anywhere, despite almost 11 years of war action on its territory (from Crimea annexation in 2014), Ukraine still has legislative institutions that provide and deepen changes in many directions of sustainable development. Searching for the factors of its resilience, we can impact the models of crisis smart governance and formulate main recommendations for further periods.

The phenomenon of institutional capacity can be explained by the active participation of civil organizations in the fields that had lack of state regulation, where government organizations were too slow or bureaucratic. The volunteers, charity organizations and advocacies fundraised resources, mobilized people, shared national goals amount society, and solved emergency problems. Thus, democratic civil activities became a main

prerequisite of resilience. The growing role of civil society after the Revolution of Dignity gives the whole social system a chance to survive and adapt more easily to social changes. That is why the detailed analysis of the institutional capacity of civil organizations will be useful to create new public policy strategies of sustainable development and postwar reconstruction.

2. Research methodology

This paper explores the concept of civil institution capacity in sustainable development based on the author's research model [1] and focuses on Ukrainian cities, which are analyzed through the prism of the smart development concept [2]. The theoretical aspects are analyzed with the accounting of previous research conclusions and outcomes, benchmarking Moldovan [3], Romanian [4] experience in particular. The successful cases of the mentioned countries are rather helpful in comparative analysis with Ukraine, because of the stage of the European integration process, as Romania is already a member of the EU and Moldova, the same as Ukraine, is on its way to integration.

Empirical aspects of research highlight various civil activities and strategies for implementing sustainable development goals. The cases of exact civil organizations (Ecoaktion), Ukrainian cities (Kyiv), and civil projects. The author's hypothesis is based on the evaluation of achievement in sustainable development. It has grown up despite global ecological devastation and social crisis because of numerous military attacks.

As a database of the article, the official statistic is used. It overrides the period of analysis from 2022 to nowadays. This period was chosen because Ukraine has a long history of implementing sustainable development strategies, but at the beginning, it was just a state initiative. Since 2014, civil organizations have been becoming stronger and more active in managing social processes, including the achievements in sustainable development goals such as equality, inclusion, counteracting to poverty and any kind of discrimination.

It is rather important to use an institutional approach to civil activities because non-organization participation is always a threat of unconventional actions, especially in times of crisis. New institutionalism is used as an approach to define institutional capacity in the context of its ability to restrict and change people's behavior [5]. According to the classical understanding of institutions, they can provide a stable existence with dynamic adaptation to changes. Thus, viewing smart city as an institutional field can provide the tools to have a general strategy of implementing SDG in the national and global context, while efforts of local authorities and separate organisations are rather particular.

As main indicators of institutional capacity, those chosen were relevant to the research aims, the criteria of OECD Report [6]. They are: citizen engagement level, transparency, and legitimacy.

To summarize research conclusions, SWOT analysis was used as it helps best to illustrate how some threats can be transformed to opportunities, which weaknesses should be under attention and control.

3. Literature review

The previous researches give numerous definitions of institutional capacity. As it is a main term of this article, first of all, we'll define it. A paper rethinks the classical understanding of institutional capacity as the ability to resolve conflicts and make decisions [6]. In the condition of total turbulence, it is difficult to examine capacity with the criteria of effective and organized governance, the ability to perform its own basic functions, in particular to guarantee security, order, justice, respect for the rights and freedoms, as well as the social benefits of its citizens. The representatives of all management levels can't always demonstrate the competence and ability to achieve performance results. Obviously, for Ukraine which government couldn't guarantee security and stability of the society because of military aggression, other indicators should be found.

Unstable political systems, with any doubt, require new approaches to institutional capacity. Measuring the level of trust in institutions seems appropriate because capable governments contribute to the perception of legitimacy, while poor institutional effectiveness reduces the degree of trust people have in their government [7].

Also, this is a reason to reference to J. Bath, who suggests considering institutional capacity rather as a process and points to such indicators as the assessment and consideration of new socio-economic realities in the decision-making process, the use of modern forms and methods of interaction, the validity of the collection, efficiency of information processing and exchange, opening new information channels [8]. In other words, he talked about effective communication between the government and citizens.

Finally, we should mention the liberal approach to institutional capacity. For example, A. Sen points to its ability to create conditions and opportunities for the realization of individual interests and needs [9]. F. Fukuyama considered in his works the institutional quality derived from social capital [10]. These social abilities are created during civic participation.

It was useful for the research to analyze the proceedings of the previous SCIC. They highlighted many indicators of Smart Governance connected with civil engagement and participation, so it can clarify and explain the chosen criteria. For example, they are mentioned by K. Mkhitarian in the context of performing the smart city paradigm in the 21st century [11]. I. A. Drobot proves that "Citizen participation is also part of a smart city" and underlines that smart cities should seek a balance between nature and human beings, new technologies and historical heritage [4]. C.-L. Pau discusses how the development of human resources in local public administration forms the foundation of good governance: management efficiency, the provision of high-quality public services, accountability, transparency, inclusion, and citizen participation [12]. M. and A. Romanelli highlight the role of cities in driving environmentally friendly and responsible citizens. The author of this paper totally agrees with the idea that the needs of people and their communities should be a priority for the Sustainable Development Goals. C. Vrabie analyzes the digital aspects of civil organization activities [13]. We used their summarized conclusions to explain the chosen indicators to describe similar Ukrainian achievements.

Also, there are interesting papers examining different aspects of sustainable development in Ukraine [14] [15]. These papers pay attention to different aspects of the Smart city concept and digitalization. K. Radchenko's methodological approach is rather close to ours, but her paper focuses on other indicators.

In general, this paper aims to conduct in-depth research on the institutional capacity in the field of sustainable development based on civil engagement, government transparency, and the level of legitimacy, and to provide recommendations on how to make the capacity stable and systematic.

4. Results

4.1. Citizen engagement level

The most overviews methods of citizen participation in the public policy of sustainable development are: the role of local authorities in decision-making, participating in civil organization activities, digital voting for petitions or participating in some polls using apps.

Since 2014, communities have gained more opportunities for local budget revenues. At the same time, their responsibility for the use of environmental resources has increased. Similarly, local business entities are now more interested in the economic prosperity of the community, supporting the development of infrastructure and improvement. For this reason, local authorities, as well as charity organizations, played a main role in the implementation of SDG, in particular, managing refugee flows.

Unfortunately, the legal regime of martial law limited the functions of regional and district councils. The creation of military administrations and the redistribution of powers at the regional and district levels exacerbated the problem of the institutional capacity of these representative bodies. This is a threat to the strengthening of the power vertical under certain political conditions in the post-war period due to the weakening of local government bodies at the district and regional levels.

At the same time increased the number of appeals from communities to government institutions. Here are just a few examples of them. Representatives of Ukrainian civil society, including Environmental Initiative (EPAIU), grantees of the EU4USociety project and programs of the Renaissance Foundation, have formed a collective appeal with a demand to rebuild Ukraine on the principles of sustainable development and taking into account the European Green Deal [16].

As a result of local authorities' activities in Ukraine, the modern principles of SMART-city are implemented. They are [17]: information support systems for city executive authorities; efficient use of energy resources; pedestrian orientation, minimization of individual transport; "greening" of the city; remote access to all types of services; communicativeness of urban space; optimization of the education system, development of distance education; public health system focused on disease prevention.

The main sustainable development initiatives in Kyiv are implemented on the basis of the Comprehensive Urban Target Program for the Ecological Well-being of Kyiv (2022–2025). It provides for the maintenance of green areas, the renewal of forest and park territories, tree planting, environmental education, environmental monitoring, water quality control, the creation of nature reserves, the fight against the harmful effects of water, the maintenance of city beaches, the improvement of recreation areas near the water, and the holding of environmental and educational events - this is exactly the area where public organizations can be involved as partners [18].

Gender initiatives are implemented by the Coalition “1325. Kyiv”, which unites civil society organizations to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (“Women, Peace, Security”). In 2024, the Gender Profile of the City of Kyiv was presented, which includes an analysis of key gender equality issues, as well as an action plan to address these issues [19].

Some Ukrainian cities (Khmelnyskyi, Lutsk) have joined the Zero Waste Cities program to implement separate collection, recycling, and waste reduction systems [20]. Many authorities are successful in the consumption of energy from renewable sources, construction of solar and wind power plants is underway in Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Odessa and other regions, projects to switch to biomass are being implemented (Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr, Kamianets-Podilskyi). Energy efficiency programs are implemented through the installation of smart meters, modernization of power grids, provision of loans to the population (“warm loans”), financing of insulation of condominium buildings, and modernization of heating systems (“Energodim”). Over the past 3 years, 968 residential buildings in Kyiv have purchased independent power sources under the city's program to reimburse the cost of such equipment - generators, batteries, and solar power plants. The city allocated UAH 320 million for the implementation of the energy-efficient “70/30” competition. It is important to note the contribution of Kyiv citizens themselves: their share of investments has already exceeded UAH 519 million [21].

Thanks to the development of hydrogen energy in partnership with the EU, the development of electric transport: supporting the production of electric buses, creating networks of charging stations. The restoration and strengthening of power grids after Russian shelling (transformers, substations, and microgrids) contributed to their gradual modernization according to the principle of "smart grids" in large cities or decentralized generation and microgrids (generators, rooftop solar power plants, microgrid projects) to increase the resilience of the system. According to a statement by DTEK Kyiv Electric Networks, by 2025, 41% of consumers in Kyiv will have “smart” electricity meters [22].

It is worth noting that smart grids create conditions for "interactivity" and self-management. In particular, they provide two-way data exchange between the consumer and the energy company, optimal energy transmission routes, rapid detection and localization of accidents, integration of a large number of renewable energy sources (solar, wind), and energy savings through accurate measurement and automatic regulation. The main components of the Smart Grid include smart meters, sensors and monitoring systems, and automated substations. For example, in large cities (Kyiv, Lviv, Vinnytsia, Dnipro) projects

of “smart” districts are being implemented, which provide automation of substations, remote control, and smart equipment. Some universities, hospitals and municipal facilities are implementing microgrids with solar power plants and storage systems that can operate autonomously. DTEK Kyiv Electric Networks is testing automatic power restoration systems (AFS, FDIR) [23].

Summarising the civil initiatives and public engagement, we can mark a high level of consciousness and deep understanding of the sustainable development value for society. To evaluate contemporary results, the mentioned activities should become more systematic and worldwide. It is possible because of the development of national programs, the practical exchange of best achievements and experiences.

4.2. Transparency (Quality of digital tools)

In conditions of dynamic changes in the external environment, the institutional system must be sufficiently open to influences, evolve under the influence of various social factors (economic, social, and ideological). Transparency as an indicator of institutional capacity is the adaptability of institutions to the challenges of the time, the speed of the system's response to new factors of its functioning and the formation of a relevant response to them, a new system of relations.

The development of digital technologies helps to increase and facilitate civil participation, communication between government and civil society, and to receive feedback for decision-making. The implementation of SDG requires engagement of such instruments as the civil budget, electronic petition, and apps with city services. Ukrainian cities use all these tools very successfully.

One of the most famous and useful instruments for citizens’ decision-making is the public budget, or “participatory budget”. It was established in Kyiv in the fall of 2016. It is a democratic process of discussion and decision-making in which every resident of a territorial community has the opportunity to register a proposal for a project on what to spend the local budget or to vote for one of them using Bank ID or DIIA. During the 5 years from 2017 to 2021 public budget has become more popular (see table 1).

Table 1. Public budget.

Year	Budget, millions, hryvnia	Number of applications	Number of projects	Number of voters
2016	50	497	62	50 000
2017	100	809	141	131 000
2018	150	1137	341	154 000
2021	170	1429		726 519
2022	200	-	-	-

Source: https://kyivcity.gov.ua/news/u_kiyevi_realizovano_37_proektiv_gromadskogo_byudzhetu-2017/

The public budget in Kyiv has ceased to function since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Due to the introduction of martial law in Ukraine by Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 64/2022 dated February 24, 2022, public budget projects were not

implemented during 2022-2024. The reason for the program suspension is also cited as the Cabinet of Ministers Resolution 590, which prohibits unnecessary expenditures during martial law [24].

Kyiv City Council provides advanced technologies in city services and communications with citizens using the best world practices. Kyiv Smart City was established in 2015 for online registration and support for city projects with the implementation of an open data portal, online doctor's appointments, an electronic queue for kindergartens, a comprehensive video surveillance system, an electronic petition system, etc. In 2020, it was replaced by the Kyiv Digital application. It is a simple and convenient app with many city services (see fig. 1).

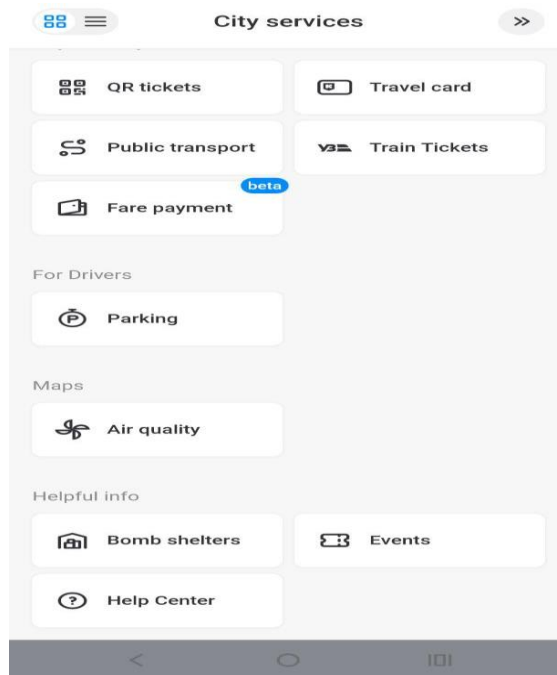


Fig.1. Kyiv Digital.
Source: Screenshot of the app

Citizens use the tool of electronic petition actively. This service works in Kyiv from 2015. The official statistics reports that in general for 10 years 8975 petitions were published, 242 received enough signatures, 160 petitions were supported by the authorities. Of these, 19.4% have already been implemented, 51.2 are in the process of being implemented. Even more impressive is the number of users – 1856432, 6643453 of whom have signed petitions. Popular areas of petition submission in the field of sustainable development at the city level of Kyiv are issues of transport, road management, housing and communal infrastructure, environment, urban planning, preservation of cultural heritage, landscaping, health and sports, social protection, education, science, environmental policy, and waste [25]. Thus, citizens' appeals cover all sustainable development goals.

The transparency of local councils has a progressive law regulation. On May 15, 2024, a law came into force, which is aimed at expanding opportunities for citizens to participate in local self-government. Meetings of local councils on the Internet in real time (after the end of the war) and publishing relevant records on the official website of the relevant council, providing public information in the form of open data (in machine-readable format) upon request, publishing it and regularly updating it on a single state open data web portal [26]. At the same time the openness of some state information, some citizen rights such as the freedom for meetings are restricted because of safety reasons during the martial law. So this field of institutional capacity needs special attention to stay open enough.

4.3. Legitimacy of civil institutions

In the context of crisis social phenomena, this is also about the implementation of the main purpose of any institution, in particular a political one, to guarantee the presence of generally recognized rules and norms that are observed by all participants in political institutions. An important indicator in this context is the legitimacy of basic institutions, as the readiness of society to implement the decisions made and the majority's agreement on the right of government bodies to impose rules of behavior.

Civil organizations nowadays have the best level of legitimacy in comparison with state institutions. Thus, at the beginning of 2025, volunteer units had 85.5% of trust, and volunteer organizations - 80%. Better score had only the Armed Forces of Ukraine (93.5%). Also, people trust the mayor of the city (village, village) in which the respondent lives (51%). In opposite, most respondents reported distrust in the state machinery (officials) (79%), political parties (77%), the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (77%), courts (the judicial system in general) (73%), the Ukrainian Government (71%), the Public Prosecutor's Office (63.5%), the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (62%), the National Agency for Corruption Prevention (62%), the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (62%). Also, distrust is reported more often than trust in the Ukrainian media (50% of respondents do not trust, and 41% trust them) and trade unions (46% and 22.5%, respectively) [27]. Moreover, the legitimacy of volunteers is stable high level during the last 5 years (see fig. 2).

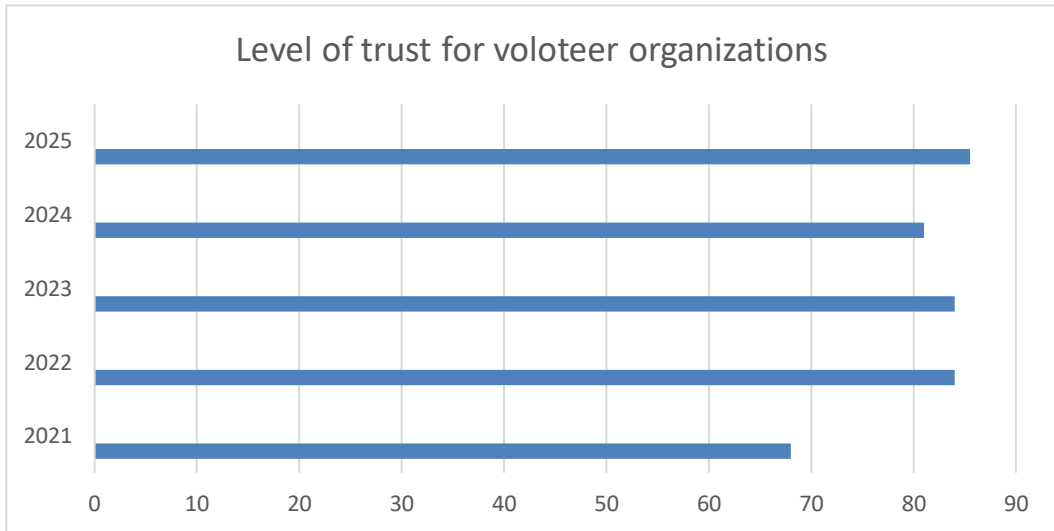


Fig. 2. Dynamic of trust

Source: <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1467&page=1>

The factors which support legitimacy are: joint projects and cooperation between government, business and civil sector. From 2022, the number of such projects increased and received state support. Here are just a few examples. On July 11, 2025, the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine announced the launch of a green platform, which opened access to over 60 green financing programs for businesses, communities and enterprises to implement energy-efficient, resource-saving and low-carbon solutions. The Green Transition Office and the DiXi Group think tank were also involved in the development of the platform with the support of the International Renaissance Foundation [24].

The international project Transformational Learning Network for Resilience Enabling Ukrainian higher education to ensure a sustainable and robust reconstruction of (post-war) Ukraine (TransLearN) and, in particular, the working group WG 2. Working group for sustainable Community Ukraine development became an exchange of experience and establishment of communication between Ukrainian higher education partners, scientists, students, associated partners, environmental organizations, experts and united territorial communities [28].

Environmental organizations in Ukraine have a long history and different directions of activities. Since 2022, they have intensified their activities to promote a comprehensive strategy and advocacy work based on the principles of "green" infrastructure recovery, energy security, and climate adaptation after the destruction of war. Basically, they implement their aims through communication and partnership with the government. For example, one of the most influential organizations, Ecoaction, influences government discussions and documents on post-war reconstruction regarding energy security, jobs, and emission reduction [29]. Another one, the National Ecological Center of Ukraine, is a key expert in shaping environmental policy [30].

So civil organizations demonstrate a high level of institutional capacity because they share the main public values, advocating for people's interests in government institutions, supporting public affairs in the most vulnerable spaces. It means that the new forms of cooperation should be developed and protected by state institutions.

5. Conclusions

Summarising the results of the paper, we can highlight the SWOT analysis of the capacity of the civil institutions on sustainable development.

Strength

- The experience of SDG implementation at the local level
- Developing digital technologies for city services and communication

Weakness

- Growing role of local military administrations
- Less transparency because of safety reasons

Opportunities

- Active communication between social sectors, international organizations' support and supervision
- Rebuilding and reconstruction based on the principles of sustainable development

Threats

- Restriction of civil activities
- Centralization of power

This makes it possible to formulate a few recommendations for the institutional capacity development in the field of sustainable development. Firstly, the implementation of SDG requires a general strategy and joint efforts on different levels. The international level of institutional capacity is ensured by the deepening of European integration processes, the strengthening of national branding and public diplomacy measures, and the availability of international assistance. At the state (national) level, the factors of institutional capacity were the consolidation of Ukrainian society around a common goal - repelling the military threat, the integration of different regions and groups to achieve this goal and, accordingly, the formation of basic national values.

Secondly, adaptation to new conditions was mainly rapid and successful due to the efforts, initiative, ingenuity, and mobilization capabilities of civil society institutions, in particular local governments, volunteer and charitable organizations, and volunteer battalions. The level of adaptability of the institutional system is certainly influenced by high civic activity and the level of political awareness of citizens. It is necessary to develop programs of green education, share the values of sustainable development to consolidate national interest around it.

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