



Polaris

Supporting Multilevel
Governance in Ukraine

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POLARIS LOCALLY LED RECOVERY BRIEF

Supporting Ukraine's Decentralisation
through Locally Led Recovery

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SALAR International works globally to strengthen democracy and good governance at the local level. We focus on the development of well-functioning local and regional administrations. Our vision is a world where all people have the power to shape their own lives in inclusive local democracies and sustainable communities.

The Polaris Programme supports Ukraine in strengthening local self-government, improving multi-level governance, and enabling hromadas (territorial communities) to plan and implement recovery and development priorities.

Disclaimer: This publication presents an overview of the Polaris Locally Led Recovery (LLR) component. It is intended as an overview of the approach, logic, and methodology, rather than a detailed planning guide for local authorities. The brief was developed upon the conclusion of phase one of Polaris LLR, later iterations to the methodology are therefore not captured. The views presented herein are those of Polaris and SALAR International, and not those of any central or local self-government bodies in Ukraine, nor those of the funding partner.

About this publication: This brief introduces the Polaris LLR approach and methodology. It outlines how integrated and aligned planning processes can support local and regional authorities navigate complex recovery challenges while strengthening Ukraine’s decentralised governance framework.

The “*Strategic Foundations for Sustainable, Integrated, and Phased Recovery in Ukraine: Key Results from the pilot phase of the Locally Led Recovery component*” brief provides an overview of the activities and results during the first phase of Polaris LLR, offering overview of partner hromadas and oblasts and reflections of lessons learned.

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Principle Authors: Polaris Locally Led Recovery Team

Graphic Design and Layout: Serhiy Kharchenko, Polaris LLR

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Abbreviations and Glossary

Abbreviations

Concept	Integrated Urban Development Concept (in Ukrainian legislation Concept for Integrated Development of the Territory of Territorial Community)
CP	Comprehensive Plan for Spatial Development of the Territorial Community
CRPT	Comprehensive Recovery Program for the Territory of the Territorial Community
DREAM	Digital Restoration Ecosystem for Accountable Management
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessments
EU	European Union
GIS	Geographic Information System
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LLR	Locally Led Recovery
LSG	Local Self-Government
MinDevelopment	Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine
Nefco	Nordic Green Bank
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMA	Oblast Military Administrations
PESTLE	Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental analysis
PIM	Public Investment Management
RDS	Regional Development Strategies
RURI	Rapid Urban Re-Innovation Training Program
SALAR	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
Sida	The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats analysis
TC	Territorial Community (Hromada)
ToR	Terms of Reference
TOWS	Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses, and Strengths analysis
UN	United Nations

Glossary

Comprehensive Plan for Spatial Development of the Territorial Community (CP): A local-level planning document that includes land-use planning. It defines how the territory should be organized and used, including its functional zoning, public services, road network, engineering and transport infrastructure, land protection, environmental protection, civil protection, and cultural heritage preservation. It also sets out the sequence and stages for implementing development decisions.

Comprehensive Recovery Program (CRPT): A formal planning document that defines the main spatial, urban development, and socio-economic priorities for recovery. It includes a set of measures to support the recovery of areas within a community (or its part) that were affected by armed aggression against Ukraine or face significant social, economic, infrastructure, environmental, or other challenges.

DREAM platform: Ukraine launched the DREAM platform as part of a Public Investment Management (PIM) reform to strengthen transparency and how public funds are planned, allocated, and monitored, in particular for recovery and development investments—and effective preparation for EU accession.

EU Acquis Communautaire: The accumulated legislation, legal acts, and court decisions forming the body of European Union law that candidate countries must adopt.

Integrated Territorial Development Concept of the Territorial Community (Concept): A strategic planning document that can be developed at the request of a local self-government authority, with the involvement of residents and businesses operating or planning to operate in the community. It defines long-term development priorities, including spatial and socio-economic aspects. The document serves as a basis for preparing local urban planning documents and is guided by sustainable development principles. Its goal is to improve quality of life, ensure accessibility and equal opportunities, support social cohesion and business activity, and improve local governance. It is aligned with national and regional development programs and is approved by the relevant local authority.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): Citizens of Ukraine, foreign nationals, or stateless persons who are legally present in Ukraine and have the right to permanent residence, and who were forced to leave or abandon their place of residence as a result of, or in order to avoid, the negative consequences of armed conflict, occupation, widespread violence, human rights violations, or natural or man-made emergencies.. IDPs are a key consideration in local recovery and planning.

Hromada: A territorial community in Ukraine, often consisting of amalgamated local councils, responsible for self-governance, planning, and service delivery.

Hromada Development Strategy (Strategy): A mandatory seven-year local strategic document aligned with regional and national strategies, defining goals for sustainable development and supported by an action plan and environmental assessment.

Locally Led Recovery (LLR): An approach empowering hromadas to take leadership in war recovery and reconstruction through participatory planning, data-driven analysis, and integration with national/EU frameworks.

Multi-level Governance: The coordination between national, regional (oblast), and local (hromada) levels to align planning, decision-making, and resource allocation, ensuring coherence between top-down policies and locally led recovery efforts.

Oblast (Region): A territorial-administrative unit in Ukraine serving as the regional level for planning and governance.

PESTLE analysis: Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental analysis tool to examine external factors that may influence planning directions.

Public Investment Management (PIM): A system for evaluating, prioritizing, and financing public investment projects.

Public Investment Management Reform: Systemic changes in the processes of planning, selection, appraisal, financing, implementation, and monitoring of investment projects funded by public resources, aimed at improving the efficiency, transparency, and effectiveness of public spending in Ukraine.

Recovery: The process of restoring and rebuilding war-affected communities, encompassing infrastructure, housing, services, governance, livelihoods, and social cohesion, with attention to resilience and long-term sustainability.

Regional Development Strategy (RDS): The key strategic planning document at the oblast level, defining long-term priorities, sectoral directions, and investment frameworks, aligned with national policies and EU integration processes.

Scenario Planning: A participatory method used to assess alternative future development pathways under conditions of uncertainty, such as war, demographic shifts, or EU integration.

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA): A formal procedure for identifying, describing, and assessing the environmental impacts of implementing state planning documents, including impacts on public health, as well as considering reasonable alternatives and developing measures to prevent, reduce, and mitigate potential negative effects.

SWOT analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis tool to inform project or organizational strategies.

SymbioCity Approach: A Swedish methodology promoting integrated, sustainable, and participatory urban development.

Territorial Community (TC): A community of residents of settlements (villages, small towns, and cities) united by shared interests in their livelihoods, who independently, within the limits of the law, address local issues either directly or through local self-government bodies.

TOWS analysis: Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Strengths (TOWS) analysis tool derived from SWOT to develop operational strategies.

Ukraine Facility: The Ukraine Facility (2024-2027) is an instrument by the European Union to address the war impact in Ukraine, providing EUR 50 billion in financial support for resilience, recovery, sustainable development and EU integration efforts.

Veterans: Former members of the armed forces who have completed service, including those mobilized during the war. In recovery planning, veterans' needs—such as reintegration, livelihoods, housing, healthcare, and psychosocial support—are a priority to ensure inclusive and resilient communities.

Foreword

Over the past two decades, the global community has recognised that recovery from crises—whether driven by conflict, natural disasters, or complex emergencies—cannot be reduced to the physical reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure alone. It is a fundamentally political, social, and spatial process, shaped by how communities reorganise themselves, how institutions respond, and how displacement reshapes territories. Yet, structured approaches to urban and territorial recovery that fully integrate these dimensions are relatively recent. Since the Joint Declaration on Post-Crisis Assessments and Recovery Planning,¹ the field has evolved—gaining momentum in international fora and through practice in increasingly complex recovery contexts.

What distinguishes the present moment is the recognition that recovery is not merely a technical exercise but a governance challenge—one that must respond to shifting population patterns and to the layered vulnerabilities that crises expose. In this context, local governments stand at the forefront. As the level of governance closest to citizens, they are uniquely positioned to understand needs, mediate priorities, and translate national frameworks into tangible outcomes.

Their leadership is essential not only for restoring services and infrastructure, but also for safeguarding and advancing the democratic gains achieved through decentralisation. By remaining accountable to citizens, local governments play a critical role in rebuilding trust in public institutions, strengthening social cohesion, and ensuring that recovery processes reinforce participatory governance. In crisis contexts, this democratic proximity becomes even more vital—anchoring recovery efforts in legitimacy, inclusion, and responsiveness while shaping sustainable long-term development pathways.

This publication reflects an approach grounded in that principle of local leadership. With support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Polaris Programme has sought to operationalise locally led recovery as a structured, iterative process—one that connects immediate response with long-term planning, and local priorities. This effort has been influenced significantly by the SymbioCity² approach, which promotes holistic, systems-based urban development. By highlighting the interdependence of social, environmental, economic, and spatial dimensions, it has contributed to shaping an approach to recovery planning that is both integrated and forward-looking.

What makes the work presented here distinctive is not only its conceptual grounding, but its iterative development through practice. Building on earlier experiences, including the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes in Türkiye of 2023, the methodology has been refined through real-world application. In Ukraine, this learning has been adapted to a context of ongoing conflict. The result is an approach that moves beyond static planning models—embedding learning-by-doing with multi-level coordination into recovery processes.

The Polaris Locally Led Recovery framework demonstrates how integrated planning—linking strategic vision, spatial analysis, and investment prioritisation—can serve as a bridge between immediate recovery needs and long-term resilience. A defining feature of the approach in Ukraine is the use of scenario planning, enabling local and regional authorities to navigate profound uncertainty by testing decisions against multiple plausible futures. This forward-looking dimension strengthens the robustness of recovery strategies, ensuring that they remain viable despite shifting demographic, economic, and security conditions.

At the same time, the framework places strong emphasis on structured investment prioritisation, translating strategic objectives into coherent pipelines of feasible, high-impact projects aligned with available financing mechanisms. This is critical in a context where resources are constrained and demands are vast, requiring transparent, evidence-based choices about where and how to invest for maximum long-term benefit.

The approach further underscores the importance of aligning local planning with broader policy agendas, including preparations for European Union (EU) integration. Embedding EU-related

¹ The Joint Declaration, signed in 2008 by the European Commission, the United Nations, and the World Bank, established a shared framework for conducting post-crisis needs assessments and planning recovery processes, emphasizing local ownership.

² The SymbioCity approach is a Swedish framework for sustainable urban development promoting a holistic, systems-based perspective on cities, encouraging participatory planning, resource efficiency, and long-term resilience through coordinated solutions across sectors.

standards and requirements into recovery planning is not only a matter of compliance; it is essential for enabling access to future funding, avoiding regulatory bottlenecks, and ensuring that investments made today remain compatible with tomorrow's institutional and legal frameworks. In this way, recovery planning becomes a vehicle for both immediate reconstruction and long-term transformation, grounded in the lived realities of communities.

As recovery approaches continue to evolve globally, there is an acute need to move from fragmented interventions to coherent, territorially grounded approaches led by local governments. This publication contributes to that shift. It offers not a prescriptive model, but a tested and adaptable methodology—one that places local governments at the centre, values iterative learning, and recognises recovery as a pathway not only to rebuild, but to reimagine inclusive, resilient and sustainable communities.

In doing so, it affirms a simple but powerful premise: that the most enduring recovery processes are those led by the people and institutions closest to the challenges—and the opportunities—on the ground.



RYAN KNOX

Managing Director

SALAR International

Supporting Ukraine's Decentralisation through Locally Led Recovery

Ukraine's recovery from the effects of war will be one of the most complex reconstruction efforts in recent European history. Beyond rebuilding damaged housing and infrastructure, recovery must also restore institutions, strengthen communities, and support economic and social resilience across the country.

Local and regional governments play a central role in this process. Ukraine's decentralisation reform, initiated in 2014 with the *Concept of Reforming Local Self-Government and Territorial Structure of Power*, empowered hromadas (territorial communities) with greater responsibilities for planning, development, and service delivery. The aim of the reform was to advance transition to a decentralised and territorial organisation of power, improving the multi-level governance system, and bolster regional development. Through territorial consolidation and fiscal decentralisation, local authorities gained greater responsibilities and resources for development planning, infrastructure management, and public service delivery.

The reform significantly strengthened the role of local governments. However, it also exposed disparities in institutional capacity. Many newly formed hromadas lacked experience in strategic planning, data management, and investment prioritisation. These capacity gaps became more visible as hromadas took on expanded responsibilities for local development.

Similar disparities exist at the regional level. Oblasts (regional administrations) have a defined role within Ukraine's three-tier planning system at national, regional and local levels, responsible for preparing strategic, spatial and recovery frameworks and coordinating development priorities across hromadas within the region. However, their capacity to fulfil this role varies considerably. In practice, oblast administrations often face constraints in planning capacity and data infrastructure, as well as in enabling effective multi-level governance, coordination and participation. This limits their ability to consolidate local needs into coherent regional strategies and to translate them into investment-ready pipelines aligned with national priorities and EU accession processes.

The War's Impact: From Service Providers to Crisis Managers

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further intensified these challenges. Communities experienced widespread destruction and economic disruption. The invasion has precipitated the most severe housing crisis in Ukraine's modern history, with an estimated 14 per cent of the national housing stock—impacting approximately 3 million households—damaged or destroyed.³ Widespread destruction of infrastructure and built structures continues with attacks, with energy, transport, education and science, commerce and infrastructure, and agriculture other sectors with significant damage. Damage is concentrated in frontline regions and metropolitan areas, including Kyiv and Kyiv oblast. Socioeconomic losses are estimated at US\$666.7 billion. The commerce and industry sector account for the largest share of losses, at 34,5 per cent, capturing the effect of damages to infrastructure and built structures, high costs of maintained services during war, and reduced productive capacity.⁴

At the local level, this physical destruction is compounded by profound demographic shifts, including the displacement of millions of people and a significant rise in female-headed households as men are mobilized for military service. These population dynamics have created an over-representation of vulnerable groups in displacement contexts, including older people, children and youth. Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues are recorded, relating to among other housing restitution and compensation, protection risks in temporary housing, and gendered vulnerabilities.

Local and regional administrations have been on the frontlines, tasked with managing widespread infrastructure destruction, population displacement, a severe socio-economic crisis, increased demand for administrative services, and tailored response for vulnerable groups. The loss of staff due to mobilization and displacement has hollowed out administrative capacity just as the demands on local self-government bodies have spiked.

Recovery needs therefore extend beyond basic reconstruction. For instance, rebuilding a resilient

³ World Bank, the Government of Ukraine, the European Union, the United Nations. 2026. Ukraine, Fifth Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment, RDNA5. Main Report. February 2022 – December 2025. World Bank Publications, Washington.

⁴ Ibid.



Photo: Housing damages in Oleksandrivka, one of Polaris LLR partner hromadas. Credit: Oleksandrivka Hromada.

society requires dedicated focus to veteran infrastructure enabling transition back into civil society, attention to the protection and well-being of children and youth, restoring and developing local economy and value chains, as well as mitigating the extensive environmental stressors caused by hostilities, such as the contamination of land by unexploded ordnance. To be sustainable and “future-proof,” local planning and recovery need to apply a holistic approach to ensure that immediate restoration efforts contribute to long-term community resilience and social cohesion.

The Decentralisation Perspective: Strengthening Multi-Level Governance and Vertical Linkages

Establishing clear political, legal, and financial foundations is a necessity for the functioning of a decentralised system of governance. This involves synchronizing recovery efforts across hromada, oblast, and national tiers to ensure that local interventions are not fragmented. Vertical integration ensures that recovery needs identified at the village and city levels are integrated into broader regional and national scales. For instance, regional administrations, with Oblast Military Administrations (OMAs) serving as the current wartime executive authority, consolidate recovery

needs across hromadas, support resource prioritization, and ensure coherence between local interventions and national priorities.

Regional Development Strategies (RDS) provide the overarching framework within which hromada-level plans are integrated, ensuring that local strategies contribute to a coherent regional vision rather than being developed in isolation. Moreover, as the territorial consolidation and amalgamation of small territorial communities were still in early stages when the full-scale invasion started, a continuation of this process post-war will see consolidation of more hromadas. Without an effective regional tier, recovery risks remaining fragmented, lacking the coordination and vertical integration required to translate local needs into strategic, investment-ready pipelines.

Strengthening these linkages is essential to uphold the gains of the decentralization reform. While the current security environment has necessitated centralized administrative coordination, it has also introduced new complexities regarding the roles and coordination between different tiers of government. Enhancing structured vertical dialogue is critical to ensuring that regional-level planning is fully informed by the leadership and unique insights of local self-government bodies. A functional multi-level governance system preserves hromada and oblast leadership in recovery, ensuring that national policy remains grounded in local practice. Furthermore, it strengthens the capacity of both local and regional authorities to synchronize international support and guarantee the active participation of their communities.

EU Integration: Future-Proofing the Planning System

Ukraine's candidate status for EU membership has introduced a decisive driver for local planning standards. The accession process fosters the alignment of strategic, spatial, and budgetary planning at all levels of government with the principles of EU cohesion policy to ensure effective use of funds. In addition, several chapters of the *acquis communautaire* contain regulatory requirements with concrete implications for local planning—especially Environment (Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA), Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), protected nature areas, waste, water, air quality, pollution control, etc.) but also the chapters on energy, transport, rural development, public procurement and more.

Planning documents now could be “future-proofed” by aligning with the *acquis*, thus preparing for future requirements and systematically addressing key recovery needs. However, this requires foresight and capacity: in previous accessions, local governments have faced compliance problems (ultimately leading to financial penalties or disruption of services in some cases) and have found EU funds more difficult than expected to access.

At the regional level, this alignment carries particular significance. Oblast military administrations are consolidating recovery priorities across hromadas, coordinating with national and international partners, and tracking emerging funding opportunities, making regions active actors in Ukraine's EU accession process, not merely administrative intermediaries. Regional Development Strategies (RDS) are a key entry point for this transition. By embedding EU cohesion policy principles such as place-based development, partnership, and multi-level governance, RDS documents evolve from domestic planning instruments into a critical interface between locally grounded recovery priorities and EU programming requirements, guiding investment prioritization at scale.

This alignment is also critical for accessing the Ukraine Facility,⁵ which reserves 20 per cent of the grants under Pillar I (over EUR 1 billion) for sub-national authorities. To be investment-ready, local plans must mirror the Public Investment Management (PIM) cycle—mandatory from 2026—and all projects must be registered on the Digital Restoration Ecosystem for Accountable Management (DREAM) platform⁶. This connectivity ensures that local priorities are not just formal exercises but are structured to meet strict EU investment standards for transparency, procurement, and safeguarding.

Synchronizing Strategy, Space, and Recovery through Integrated Spatial Planning

Recovery planning requires a robust spatial dimension to transform abstract strategic goals into concrete, implementable actions on the ground. Success in post-war reconstruction depends

⁵ The Ukraine Facility (2024-2027) is an instrument by the European Union to address the war impact in Ukraine, providing EUR 50 billion in financial support for resilience, recovery, sustainable development and EU integration efforts.

⁶ Ukraine launched the DREAM platform as part of a Public Investment Management (PIM) reform to strengthen transparency and how public funds are planned, allocated, and monitored, in particular for recovery and development investments—and effective preparation for EU accession.

on understanding the territorial organization of services, infrastructure, and land use to avoid fragmented, “standalone” project solutions that lack a cohesive vision and conflict sensitivity to circumvent risks. To bridge these gaps, recovery planning must adopt an integrated spatial approach. Unlike traditional planning, which often relies on static tabular data, integrated spatial planning utilizes Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and analytical mapping to reveal patterns and clusters—such as infrastructure damage, service coverage gaps, and environmental risks—that are less visible in isolation. This means transforming raw data into “actionable spatial intelligence” through the creation of priority zone maps. By layering diverse datasets—such as population density, economic activity, and land-use pressure and land use prioritisation—decision-makers can visually answer the critical question of “where to intervene first” to achieve the highest strategic impact.

This synchronization is essential because reconstruction occurs within a legal framework where land management and urban planning are inseparable; for recovery to be implementable, strategic goals must be tied to the functional organisation of the territory. In this regard, territorial and urban planning provides the necessary regulatory tools to manage both recovery and development of territories, ensuring that new investments are synchronized with the local communities’ long-term spatial structure—and consider linkages to neighbouring hromadas and regional systems. Only then, enhanced impact and transformational outcomes can be achieved.

Furthermore, an integrated approach is the only way to effectively address the compounded cross-cutting crises triggered by the war, including the destruction of housing and infrastructure. Addressing this demands a spatial understanding of profound demographic shifts, including permanent degrowth of some communities, and new demographic compositions in other due to general migration trends and influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and/or potential return of displaced. Integrated planning also provides the framework for future-proofing hromadas and oblasts against environmental stressors—including from land contamination as a result of the conflict — and establishing clear rules for land use and environmental protection, such as nature protection zones and air quality buffers.

This linkage ensures that immediate restoration efforts do not conflict with long-term sustainability goals or the requirements of international investment standards. Ultimately, harmonizing strategic, spatial, and budgetary planning is not just a technical necessity for recovery; it is a prerequisite for the implementation of cohesion policy principles across all levels of government.

Overcoming Regulatory Gaps in the Planning Ecosystem

A core challenge in the current recovery and planning ecosystem is the existence of unsynchronized and overlapping planning documents. At the local level, hromadas often face a confusing array of mandatory and recommended instruments. This regulatory fragmentation is compounded by incomplete or conflicting laws that leave responsibilities across government tiers poorly defined. Consequently, this reinforces a “siloe” planning culture where socio-economic goals are developed independently of spatial land-use realities and budgetary constraints.

At the regional level, a parallel challenge exists. Regional Development Strategies are often developed with limited systematic engagement with hromada-level planning processes, which can hinder the integration of local knowledge and evidence into regional decision-making. Oblast administrations face constraints in planning capacity and data infrastructure, affecting their ability to generate robust spatial and regional intelligence, understanding territorial patterns, modelling future scenarios, capturing the differentiated needs of diverse population groups, and translating these insights into coherent planning and investment priorities.

These challenges affect not only the quality of regional planning documents but also the ability of oblast administrations to effectively coordinate recovery efforts across hromadas and fulfil their broader governance role. Similar to many especially smaller hromadas, oblasts experience limitations in data quality, structure, and disaggregation which further narrow the evidence base available for strategic decision-making. Participation mechanisms tend to remain expert-led or project-based, rather than systematically embedded within planning and governance processes.

Taken together, these challenges limit the quality of strategic planning and the credibility of planning documents as investment-ready instruments. Planning and recovery support offers an opportunity to ensure synchronization and phasing of planning documents, and ensuring vertical linkages.

Polaris Locally Led Recovery

The Polaris Programme, implemented by SALAR International, aims to strengthen Ukraine's local self-government institutional capacities and the multi-level governance system by reinforcing local and regional authorities' capacities to respond to needs, provide essential services, and lead and take ownership of recovery and development planning. The programme is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Sida has also allocated additional funding to the Nordic Green Bank (Nefco) for projects identified through the recovery planning.

Among central elements of the Polaris programme is the Locally Led Recovery (LLR) component, which supports hromadas and oblasts affected by the war in developing strategic and spatial planning frameworks that guide recovery and reconstruction. The approach recognises that recovery is not only a technical challenge but also a governance challenge that requires co-ordination between national institutions and local self-government bodies and with their communities. It responds to the need for structured, locally driven recovery planning, providing tools and guidance to analyse the impacts of the war, define recovery priorities, identify opportunities, and translate strategic goals into investment projects.

The LLR approach directly contributes to the sustainability of Ukraine's decentralisation reform by ensuring that hromadas and oblasts remain the primary drivers of recovery, spatial and development planning. By empowering local governments to take ownership of mandatory and recommended planning documents the LLR methodology reinforces and upholds the transfer of competences and resources initiated in 2014. Furthermore, it addresses capacity gaps exposed by the war, equipping local and regional administrations with the data-driven and participatory tools necessary to exercise their self-governing powers effectively and provide basic services to all citizens. Ultimately, this strengthens the multi-level governance system by creating a feedback loop where local implementation informs national policy reforms, ensuring that recovery frameworks are harmonized with the principles of local self-government (Figure: 1. Polaris LLR Theory of Change).

This brief introduces the Polaris LLR approach and methodology. It demonstrates how integrated and aligned planning processes can support local and regional authorities navigate complex recovery challenges while strengthening Ukraine's decentralised governance framework.

Enhancing Multi-Level Governance: A Framework for Local Leadership in Recovery

Future-proof, integrated and phased planning for resilient recovery from the effects of war, developed through the leadership and engagement of affected communities and regions in Ukraine.

The Polaris LLR is a hands-on approach with technical support provided to hromadas and oblasts for strategic and recovery planning. The approach supports local and regional authorities lead data collection, community and stakeholder engagement, and sound analysis, planning and investment prioritisation from the short- to long-term. Furthermore, the approach considers horizontal and vertical linkages, including the interrelation between neighbouring hromadas, to ensure recovery priorities are integrated at various scales.

The approach combines participatory planning processes, focusing on transparency and accountability, with evidence-based analysis and institutional capacity building. Aligned with five cross-cutting principles (BOX: A principled approach) attention is given to gender and the needs of different vulnerable groups, and restoration of human capital as part of recovery planning.

The approach is tailored, taking into account different methodologies and tools for holistic and integrated planning that consider future needs, risks and resilience, sustainability and EU integration perspectives. This ensures that hromadas and oblasts will be able to consider a range of recovery scenarios, whilst also defining overarching longer-term planning priorities, and identifying priority projects with indications on scope, budget and timeframe.

Polaris Locally Led Recovery: Theory of Change

IMPACT:

War impact on local communities in Ukraine is mitigated

Through improved, inclusive, evidence-based, and future-proof locally led recovery processes, anchored in comprehensive and multi-sectoral planning at hromada and oblast levels.



UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

- National and local governments remain committed to decentralisation and recovery reforms.
- Communities and civil society are willing and able to participate despite war-related disruptions.
- Adequate financial and technical resources are available to sustain planning and implementation.
- Political/security environment allows for participatory planning and data collection.

A PRINCIPLED APPROACH

Polaris five grounding principles:



Human Rights Based Approach

Identifying and addressing inequalities to ensure no group is left behind, focusing on accountability and participation.



Gender Equality and Mainstreaming

Using sex-disaggregated data to ensure recovery plans reflect differentiated socio-economic needs.



Anti-Corruption

Enforcing risk-management, transparency, and public oversight to ensure integrity in procurement and project prioritization.



Climate and Environmental Sustainability

Integrating Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) and GIS mapping to build long-term resilience against climate change.



Conflict Sensitivity

Ensuring recovery efforts do not exacerbate local tensions and support social cohesion between host communities, IDPs, and returnees.

Figure 1 Polaris Locally Led Recovery Theory of Change.

A principled approach

Key features of the LLR approach are:

Local ownership and participation; recovery planning processes are led by local authorities and involve active participation from communities, civil society organisations, and local stakeholders.

The LLR approach is fundamentally designed to empower hromadas and oblasts to take owner- and stewardship in their own post-war recovery and development. Rather than imposing top-down solutions, the methodology ensures that recovery planning processes are tailored to and led by local and regional authorities, who act as the primary drivers of strategic and spatial documentation. This ownership is reinforced by a learning-by-doing model, where technical support is provided alongside the actual development of mandatory and recommended plans.

Active participation is a core requirement, involving a broad spectrum of communities, civil society organisations, and local stakeholders. By establishing gender-balanced Working Groups (WGs) and technical coordination teams, the approach ensures that local knowledge and community needs are at the centre of the decision-making process. This participatory structure is essential for building the long-term legitimacy and sustainability of recovery efforts.

Inclusion and sustainability: guiding the planning process to ensure that recovery benefits diverse population groups and contributes to long-term resilience.

The planning process is guided by the principles of inclusion and sustainability (in line with the Polaris principles) to ensure that recovery benefits all segments of the population, particularly the most vulnerable. Inclusion and gender mainstreaming is emphasised in all planning steps, from data collection and analysis, through planning document development, to project prioritisation—identifying and addressing inequalities in access to services and economic opportunities. Special attention is given to the reintegration of veterans, the needs of IDPs, and the restoration of human capital as central components of resilient communities.

Long-term resilience is further supported by integrating climate change and environmental sustainability into local planning. By using geo-spatial mapping to detect environmental stressors caused by the war and conducting Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA), the LLR approach ensures that recovery activities do not compromise hromadas' or oblasts' future ecological health. Environmental improvements and sustainability are also promoted by prioritised investment projects, e.g. transition to renewable energy sources, improved waste management solutions etc. This commitment to sustainability helps communities transition from crisis response to stable, long-term development.

Strategic and spatial planning integration: using the planning tools as “connective tissue,” linking socio-economic goals with spatial land-use and budgetary realities horizontally.

The methodology overcomes the common challenge

The Locally Led Recovery approach, in line with the overall Polaris programme, is grounded in five principles:

- 1. A Human Rights Based:** By collecting and analysing data to identify and address inequalities and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress or result in groups of people being left behind and unequal distribution of benefits and services. The human-rights principles (universality, indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation, accountability) guides the approach, strengthening capacities of both 'duty-bearers' to meet their obligations, and 'rights-holders' to claim their rights.
- 2. Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming:** emphasis on gender equality, representation and mainstreaming in all analysis, planning and implementation efforts. The methodology entails collection and analysis of disaggregated data to inform recovery planning considerate of gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities, differences in access to basic and social services and economic opportunities, as well as gender and intersectional dimensions in future development scenarios.
- 3. Accountability and Anti-Corruption:** Risk management and safeguarding measures are put in place, including strengthening of local capacities and systems, transparency, openness and accountability, and compliance procedures are enforced and monitored. To prevent “elite capture” and corruption, the planning process emphasizes digital data management, transparent project selection, and open public hearings.
- 4. Climate change and Environmental Sustainability:** Polaris LLR addresses climate change and environmental sustainability, among other by using geo-spatial mapping and data analysis as a starting point to detect climate change impacts over time, environmental stressors caused by the war, and scenario planning to analyse future impacts on local development trajectories. This ensures planning with climate change and environmental sustainability in mind, including forecasting longer term changes and impacts.
- 5. Conflict Sensitivity:** The approach is sensitive to conflict issues derived from the occupation, community tensions over the distribution of resources, assistance and displacement, as well as any political or community tension deriving from the recovery planning process itself.

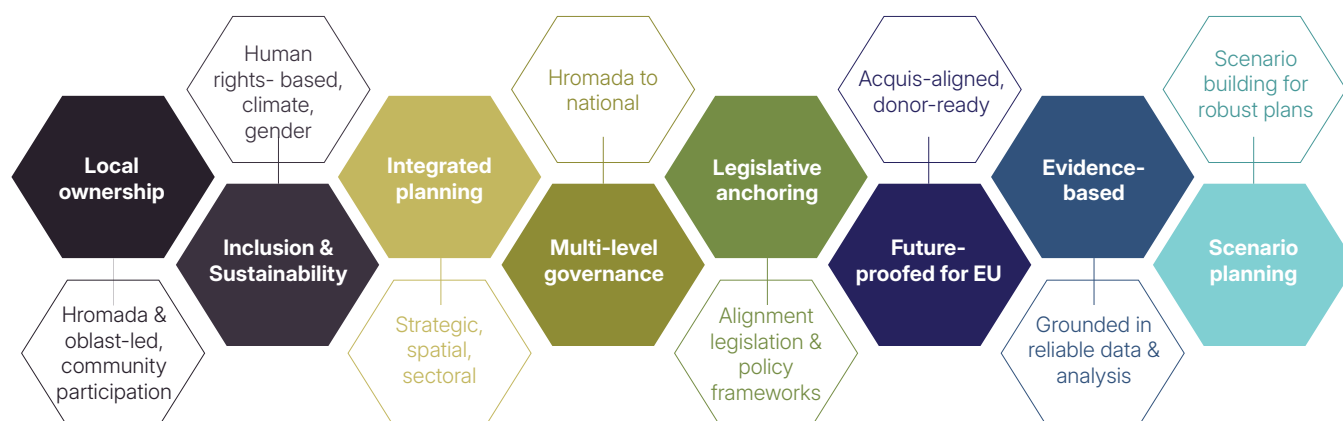


Figure 2 Key features of the Polaris Locally Led Recovery.

of overlapping or unsynchronized plans by synchronizing strategic documents, such as local development strategies with spatial urban planning documents.

This integration ensures that spatial solutions—such as infrastructure placement and land-use zoning—are directly informed by data-driven socio-economic priorities. At the regional scale, this means analysing functional dynamics and shared service systems to create a coherent spatial picture of the region that can directly inform strategic investment choices, building on the functional types of territories and classification spearheaded by the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine (MinDevelopment). Furthermore, integration of various sectoral plans is sought — such as those for mobility, energy, and climate—into a holistic and integrated framework. In particular for small hromadas, hromadas that have experienced significant pre- or post-conflict population decline, or hromadas that may be amalgamated in the future, the analysis seeks to identify opportunities for planning alignment and/or catalytic interventions with catchment area beyond one single hromada.

Multi-level governance; synchronising recovery efforts across hromada, oblast, and national tiers.

The LLR methodology connects local planning processes with regional strategies and national frameworks, ensuring that recovery is not fragmented. For instance, local development strategies are designed to be consistent with the State Strategy for Regional Development, creating a cohesive pathway from community-level needs to national-scale reconstruction goals.

This interlinked support is a core component of the LLR Theory of Change (Figure 1), which argues that linking local evidence and practice to national policy reform is essential for a sustainable recovery. By equipping local governments with the tools to design robust plans and then feeding that learning back to the national level, the approach aims to strengthen and harmonize Ukraine's decentralization and recovery frameworks. Furthermore, the methodology ensures that local planning is functionally connected to national systems like the DREAM digital platform and the Public Investment Management (PIM) system, supporting local projects to be investment-ready and aligned with national institutional reforms and EU accession requirements.

Legislation and policy frameworks alignment; outputs remain relevant and actionable within Ukraine's planning system.

To ensure that outputs, e.g. strategies and plans, remain relevant and actionable, the LLR methodology is strictly anchored in Ukrainian planning and recovery legislation. The approach focuses on the development of mandatory and recommended planning documents rooted in legal frameworks, such as the Law of Ukraine No. 156-VIII (2015) "On the Principles of State Regional Policy" for strategies and Governmental Resolution No. 926 for spatial planning. This legal anchoring and alignment to the Ukrainian planning cycles, ensures that the documents produced are not mere formal exercises but have the broad-based community and legal mandate required for long-term implementation.

The methodology is also designed to be agile, allowing it to adapt to evolving policy and legislative changes as the national planning system undergoes transformation, and using the learning from the local and regional planning support as basis for informing policy dialogue. By adhering to these standards, the approach helps local governments meet current mandates.

Legislative anchoring of Strategic, Spatial and Recovery Planning

Strategic Planning

In accordance with the Law of Ukraine “*On the Principles of State Regional Policy*” No. 156-VIII of 5 February 2015, local and regional strategic planning documents are developed considering local characteristics and focus on security. These documents outline the specific aspects of the state’s activities regarding the recovery and development of regions and territories.

The mechanism for developing the “*State Strategy for Regional Development of Ukraine*” and the Action Plan for its implementation, as well as regional development programmes, is set out in Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 817 of 4 August 2023 “*On Certain Issues Concerning the Development of the State Strategy for Regional Development of Ukraine and the Action Plan for its Implementation, as well as Monitoring the Implementation of the said Strategy and Action Plan*”.

The development of regional development strategies is regulated by Resolution No. 816 of 4 August 2023 (as amended by Resolution No. 81 of 28 January 2026) “*On the procedure for the development, approval, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of regional development strategies and action plans for their implementation*”. At the local level, the Government of Ukraine regulates the development of strategies by Order No. 265 of 21 December 2022 “*On the Approval of Methodological Recommendations on the Procedure for the Development, Approval, Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Implementation of Territorial Community Development Strategies*”.

Recovery Planning

If a territory has been significantly and adversely affected by the war, Recovery Plans and Comprehensive Recovery Programmes are formulated for both regions and hromadas, based on the priorities set in the national strategies. Resolution “*On the Approval of Procedures for the Recovery and Development of Regions and Territorial Communities*” No. 731 of 18 July 2023 sets out the procedure for identifying the recovery areas for which these documents are being developed and also defines the procedure for developing Recovery Plans. These are aimed at accelerating restoration of destroyed and/or damaged critical and social infrastructure, as well as residential and public facilities. The Comprehensive Recovery Programme establishes priorities for the spatial, urban planning and socio-economic development of territories that have suffered from the war or show signs of socio-economic, infrastructural, environmental or other crises. The procedure for their development is established by Resolution No. 1159 dated 14 October

2022 “*On the Procedure for the Development, Public Consultation and Approval of Comprehensive Recovery Programmes for Regions, Territorial Communities (or Parts Thereof) and the Introduction of Amendments Thereto*”. The documents are valid until 2028.

Spatial Planning

The vision for future development set out in strategic documents is operationalised on the ground through spatial planning documents. In accordance with the Law of Ukraine “*On the Principles of State Regional Policy*” dated 17 February 2011 No. 3038-VI, at the regional level the main spatial planning document is the Spatial Planning Scheme for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, regions and districts, and at the local level – the Comprehensive Spatial Development Plan (CP) for the territorial community. The Regional Spatial Planning Scheme is urban planning documentation that sets out the fundamental principles for the development, planning, construction and use of the territory.

CPs ensure coordinated decision-making regarding the spatial development of hromadas. The basis for developing CPs may be an Integrated Urban Development Concept (Concept)—a strategic document that defines long-term, interdisciplinary, spatial and socio-economic priorities for the development of the territory—or a Comprehensive Recovery Programme.

The procedure for developing urban planning documents is established by Resolution “*On the Approval of the Procedure for the Development, Updating, Amendment and Approval of Urban Planning Documentation*” dated 1 September 2021 No. 926.

Financial Planning

Strategic and spatial planning at hromada and oblast levels, is implemented through the development, approval and implementation of socio-economic development programmes in accordance with the Law of Ukraine “*On State Forecasting and the Development of Economic and Social Development Programmes of Ukraine*” dated 23 March 2000 No. 1602-III. Procedures for developing the programmes is established by Resolution “*On the Development of Forecast and Programme Documents for Economic and Social Development and the Drafting of the State Budget*” of 26 April 2003 No. 621.

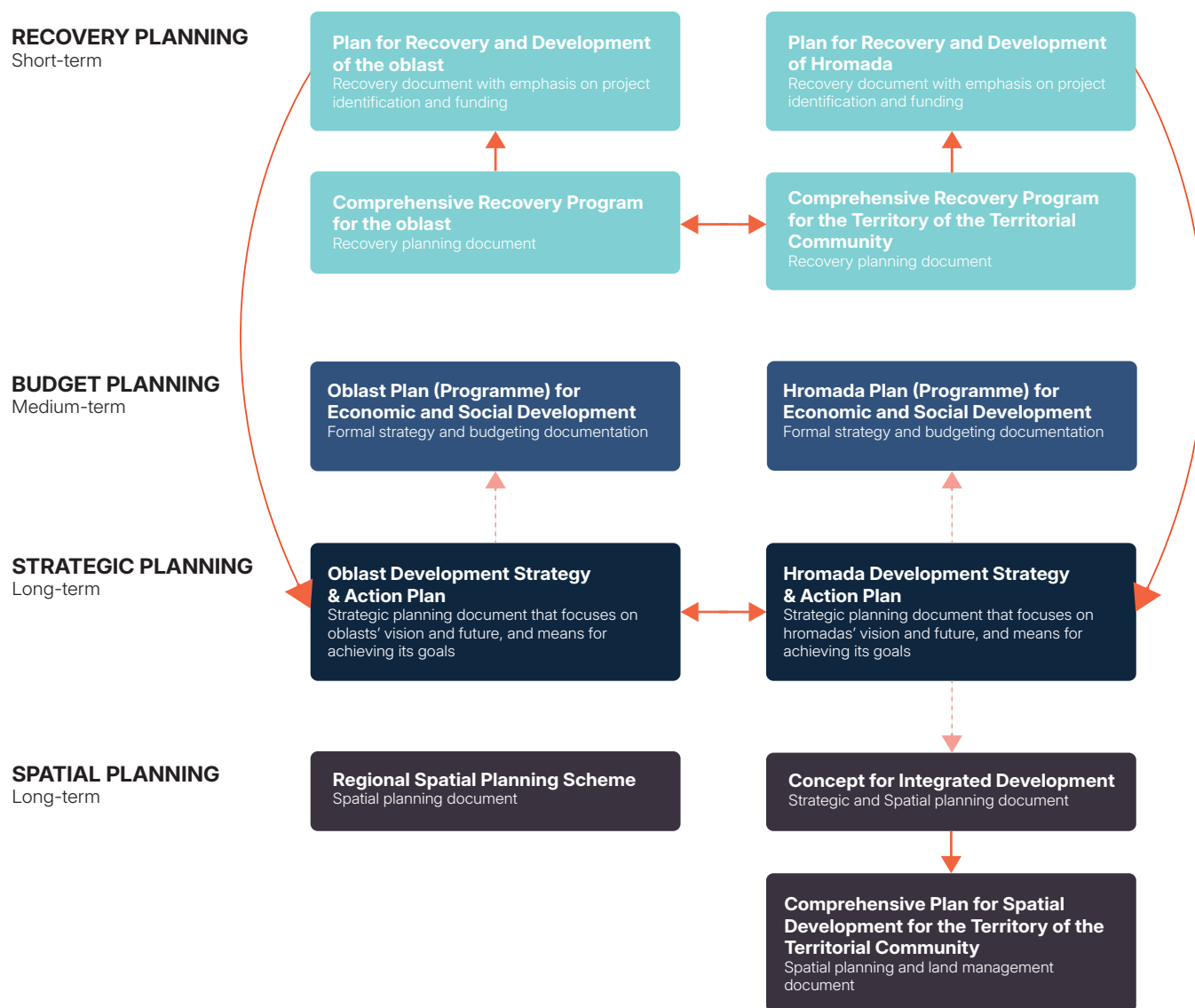


Figure 3 System of planning documents related to recovery. The red arrows indicate which documents has a strong link or influence each other, light red indicate a weaker link.

“Future-proofed” by aligning local planning with EU integration requirements

A primary objective of the LLR approach is to “future-proof” local development by aligning planning processes with EU integration requirements and the *acquis communautaire*. This is particularly critical in areas such as environment, transport and energy, where EU legislation has many concrete implications for the work of local planners. The methodology prepares hromadas and oblasts for the “Europeanisation” of their planning culture, ensuring they can meet the high transparency and sustainability standards required for EU accession.

Furthermore, the approach ensures that local plans are investment-ready for donors like Nefco and the EU’s Ukraine Facility, the latter of which requires a minimum of 20 per cent of Pillar I grants (over EUR 1 billion) to be allocated to subnational authorities. This is achieved by connecting local planning to national systems like the DREAM digital platform and the reformed PIM system.

Building the evidence base; development priorities are grounded in reliable data and analysis.

Development priorities in the LLR approach are grounded in reliable data and comprehensive analysis, to ensure that local and regional authorities develop an integrated and territorial evidence base that supports prioritisation and future decision-making. This spatial perspective is particularly important for recovery planning, as many recovery decisions involve land use and infrastructure placement. The data collection process also strengthens local capacity for managing and analysing information—a critical skill for long-term planning.

The methodology emphasizes the development of a robust evidence base through sectoral data collection, demographic studies, and financial capacity assessments. Where conventional data is

unreliable due to war-related disruptions, proxy methods and remote sensing analysis is utilised—such as satellite imagery for damage assessments, land use change, and infrastructure disruption—without requiring physical presence on the ground.

A key feature is the use of GIS to transform raw data into “actionable intelligence”. This spatialization of data allows for mapping and overlaying coverage and accessibility gaps, buildings and infrastructure damage, conduct multi-layered vulnerability assessments (environmental, social, infrastructure), analyse land-use patterns and visualise findings and planning scenarios. Moreover, the mapping help identify priority intervention areas based on multi-criteria spatial analysis, moving away from isolated project lists towards an integrated understanding of local and regional challenges.

Scenario Planning; building plausible future scenarios to ensure robust plans

Given the extreme volatility and uncertainty of a war-time context, the LLR approach utilizes Foresight and Scenario Planning to move beyond static models. This structured method explores multiple plausible futures over a 10–20 year horizon, identifying key “Critical Uncertainties” such as war duration, demographic shifts, economic trajectories, and security conditions, to ensure that local visions are resilient across different possible futures.

By developing 3–4 vivid narratives—such as an “inertia” scenario versus a “recovery-driven” scenario—hromadas and oblasts can test their assumptions and identify “no-regret” and robust strategies. These are strategic choices and investments that remain sound regardless of which future trajectory unfolds, ensuring that local recovery plans are resilient and capable of adapting to changing conditions.

In the LLR application of scenario planning, a spatial dimension has also been added to the exercises. During scenario planning workshops with hromada and oblasts representatives spanning several days, potential future scenarios are discussed spatially drawing on a solid evidence-base, allowing to consider potential variations within the territory.

Demographic Forecasting

Polaris LLR recognises the particular challenges in planning in a war-time context, where hromadas and oblasts are impacted by significant demographic shifts with both outflow of pre-war residents and inflow of IDPs. This means local and regional authorities are developing planning documents with limited certainty in the population figures they are planning for. Polaris therefore mobilise specific expertise in demographic forecasting to analyse and provide diverging forecasts (optimistic, baseline and pessimistic) for the next 15-year time horizon to help inform the planning processes.

The demographic forecasts are developed using the cohort-component method, which projects future population size and age structure by modelling fertility, mortality, and migration separately. This approach allows for flexible scenario building appropriate in a situation when historical demographic trends have been disrupted. A key factor influencing all projections is the war and the uncertainty surrounding the year of its end (2026 for optimistic, 2027 for baseline and 2030 for pessimistic scenario), as this directly affects migration patterns, mortality, fertility, and the pace of recovery.

The forecasts are primarily based on demographic data collected by local and regional administrations, supplemented by official statistics and administrative sources, including the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, the National Health Service of Ukraine and others. At the same time, the quality of local demographic data is often limited due to inconsistencies, incomplete records, and the suspension of official population statistics since 2022. Where necessary, the data is reviewed and adjusted, while additional regional and district-level analysis is used to validate assumptions and identify broader trends.

The results of the demographic forecasting completed during the first phase of Polaris LLR (2024–2026), indicate continued population decline by 2041 in most hromadas and oblast studied,¹ driven by ageing, low birth rates, excess mortality, and migration losses (from -7% to -39% of population decline in baseline scenario)—showing that short-term recovery does not fully offset underlying structural demographic pressures and that the population remains below pre-war levels even under the optimistic scenario. Only a limited number of hromadas may stabilize or grow under the optimistic scenario. The findings serve as a practical basis for local policy responses, including adaptation of social infrastructure, labour market planning, housing and service provision, and measures aimed at retaining and attracting population over the long term.

¹ Studied hromadas and oblast were located towards the east of the country, selected due to the direct impact of the war. Demographic forecasting for territories in e.g. the west of Ukraine could look quite different due to significant IDP influxes.

EU Integration: Future-Proofing the Locally Led Recovery

The EU accession process will have (indeed already has had) a decisive impact on the strategic and spatial planning system in Ukraine. Although spatial planning is still a matter for member states and their local and regional authorities, changes are driven in several ways: binding legislation, non-binding policy frameworks, and the conditionalities of EU funding. To ensure the Polaris LLR is future-proof, the methodology focuses on aligning local processes with the following key pillars of the EU *acquis*:

Navigating the 'Hard' and 'Soft' Acquis

- "Hard Acquis" (binding for candidate countries): in areas such as environment, energy and transport with direct implications for planning (e.g. Strategic Environmental Assessments with requirements for public participation, nature protection zones, spatial data, energy efficiency measures and sustainable urban mobility plans to name just a few of many examples).
- "Soft Acquis" (non-binding intergovernmental agreements and other strategies and recommendations): this includes the Territorial Agenda 2030, which provides orientations for strategic spatial planning, the Urban Agenda and the New Leipzig Charter, a guiding framework for sustainable urban development, and various EU strategies (e.g. on Biodiversity Strategy 2030 or the REPowerEU Plan on energy), which may point the way towards more binding obligations in the future. The Council of Europe's "Guiding principles for sustainable development of the European continent" are another part of this backdrop.

Synchronizing with EU Funding Frameworks

EU funding increasingly sets the framework for local development; in most recently acceded states, EU funds have accounted for the bulk of local public investments in the early years since accession. Local development strategies are therefore conditioned by the priorities for using EU funds, and spatial planners must also anticipate the coming investments and standards in (e.g.) waste and water, sustainable transport, renewable energy, broadband, affordable housing and more.

In addition, local planning can act as an important enabler of (or in less favourable scenarios, an obstacle to) the pipeline of investment-ready projects. By being proactive on environmental assessments, construction permits, feasibility studies, etc. hromadas and oblasts can help to improve Ukraine's capacity to absorb EU funds.

It therefore makes sense to align local development strategies with the timeframe of the EU multiannual framework. Here, it is important to be forward-looking, considering proposals for the 2028–34 period. For pre-accession countries, the proposed

Global Europe instrument would provide a combination of grants, blended loans etc. for investments, and policy-based loans based on national reform agendas – much like the current Ukraine Facility. This will prepare candidates for the National and Regional Partnership Plans that they will adopt as member states.

For the LLR methodologies, some key issues should therefore be considered:

- Local and regional authorities must be involved in inclusive partnerships that decides on reform agendas, priority investments and capacity-building.
- Local planners (and hromadas and oblasts in general) will need substantial capacity-building to understand the requirements of the EU *acquis* and how these should be implemented to avoid compliance problems and to enable EU funding opportunities.
- Spatial planning needs to be aligned with local development strategies. While integration of spatial planning elements in development strategies is a useful intermediate step, comprehensive spatial plans will be needed to make best use of funds. This will also require financial resources, especially in smaller hromadas.

Strategic Harmonization and Benchmarking

A core target of Ukraine's *National Programme for Adaptation to EU Law* (under Chapter 22: Regional Policy) is the "harmonization of strategic, spatial, and budgetary planning across all levels of government". The LLR methodology supports this by ensuring local documents are not developed in isolation but contribute to a unified national framework that meets EU benchmarking requirements.

Mitigating the "Democratic Deficit" in Regional Planning

Drawing inspiration from the "Polish model," where municipalities (*gmina*) are key spatial planning actors, the LLR methodology must safeguard local influence. As oblasts take on more responsibility for regional strategic planning, the methodology should provide mechanisms for hromadas to influence regional processes and the programming of EU funds to prevent a "democratic deficit".

Leveraging EU Standards for Local Recovery

The requirement for EU compliance serves as a persuasive lever for institutional reform. By adopting EU-aligned standards for GIS data management, sustainable urban mobility plans, energy-efficient renovations and more, hromadas and oblasts can act as an enabler for the national investment pipeline rather than a bottleneck.



Photo: Scenario Planning workshop with Polaris LLR phase 1 partner hromadas in Kyiv October 2026. Credit: Polaris

Scenario Planning using Foresight Methodology

Historical Context and Origins

Modern scenario planning and foresight methodologies originated in the post-WWII military sector, pioneered by Herman Kahn at the RAND Corporation to explore potential nuclear conflict outcomes. In the 1970s, the methodology was mainstreamed into strategic management by Royal Dutch Shell, which used it to successfully navigate the 1973 oil crisis by preparing for price volatility that traditional linear forecasting had missed. Unlike traditional “forecasting,” which seeks to predict a single, most likely future, “foresight” recognizes that the future is non-linear and unpredictable.

Global Methodology and Evolution

Foresight has since evolved from a corporate risk management tool into a standard methodology for public policy, regional development, and international assistance. It is now frequently utilized by international organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations (UN), to facilitate “anticipatory governance” in the face of complex, systemic challenges. This global approach shifts the focus from individual services to the “system as a whole,” analysing the structural interdependencies between national fiscal policies, international financing, and long-term demographic shifts. By institutionalizing these methods, governments and regional authorities worldwide aim to build adaptive systems that can maintain strategic direction despite rapid global changes or regional instabilities.

The Mechanics of Plausible Narratives

Global Foresight methodologies utilize structured storytelling and scenario matrices to ensure plans are not optimized for a single projection that may not hold, helping authorities move beyond conventional administrative routines and challenge current thinking that often leads to static planning. By forcing decision-makers to populate divergent narratives—moving from “business as usual” to radical disruptions—the methodology surfaces hidden assumptions that linear planning often overlooks. In recovery contexts, this is particularly valuable for identifying how demographic, socio-cultural, and territorial fault lines might re-emerge in a post-conflict state. Ultimately, these narratives serve as a communication bridge, allowing stakeholders to align on a shared vision while remaining agile enough to adapt if external “critical uncertainties,” such as shifts in international funding or legislative reforms, occur.

From Vision to Investment: A Structured Roadmap for Tangible Recovery

The Polaris LLR methodology is an agile and iterative framework designed to navigate the complexities of post-war reconstruction by anchoring recovery in evidence-based and participatory planning. Grounded in a “learning-by-doing” model, the methodology provides hands-on technical support to hromadas and oblasts as they develop mandatory and recommended planning documents. It is strictly anchored in Ukrainian legislation and “future-proofed” against EU integration requirements, ensuring that local recovery efforts are vertically synchronized with regional strategies and national policy frameworks. By transforming data and community insights into actionable intelligence, the methodology creates a robust pathway to move from abstract strategic visions to investment-ready recovery interventions.

To accomplish this, the LLR methodology integrates four interlinked pillars:

1. **Integrated Planning:** Synchronizing Strategic and Spatial Recovery Planning
2. **Empowering Institutions:** Capacity Building through Learning-by-Doing
3. **Operationalizing Recovery:** Project Identification and Investment Readiness
4. **Scaling Impact:** Knowledge Creation, Policy Dialogue, and Advocacy

These pillars are implemented simultaneously to ensure that planning processes lead to practical and tangible results, while contributing to sustainable planning outcomes through extensive capacity building and support. Planning exercises generate actionable priorities, capacity building strengthens municipal and oblast administrations, project preparation connects plans to financing, and knowledge sharing informs broader policy discussions.

The methodology is adjusted to the individual size and characteristics of the respective hromadas and oblasts.

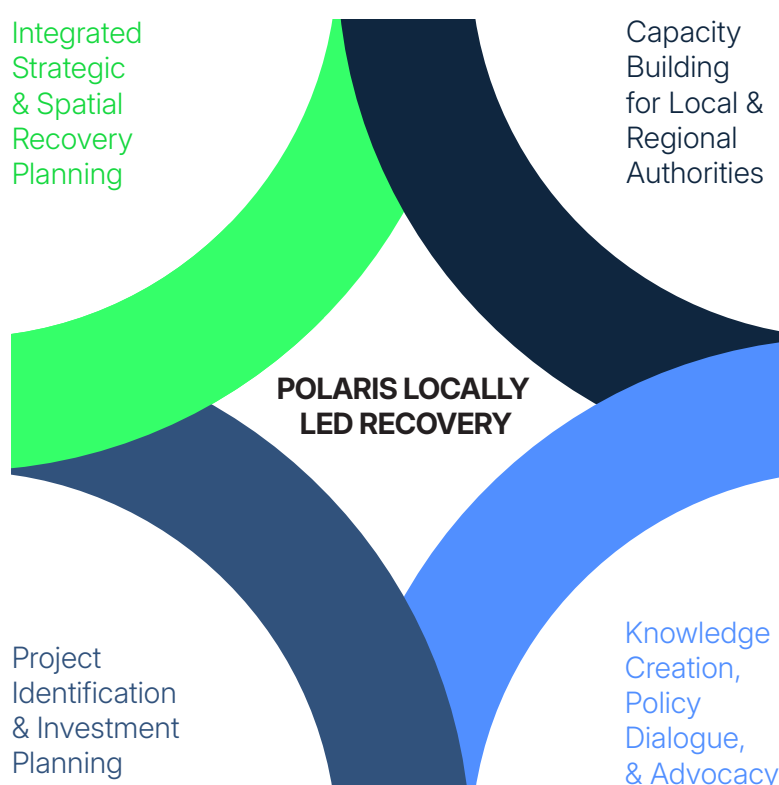


Figure 4 Polaris LLR Four pillars.

Pillar 1: Integrated Planning: Synchronizing Strategic and Spatial Recovery Planning

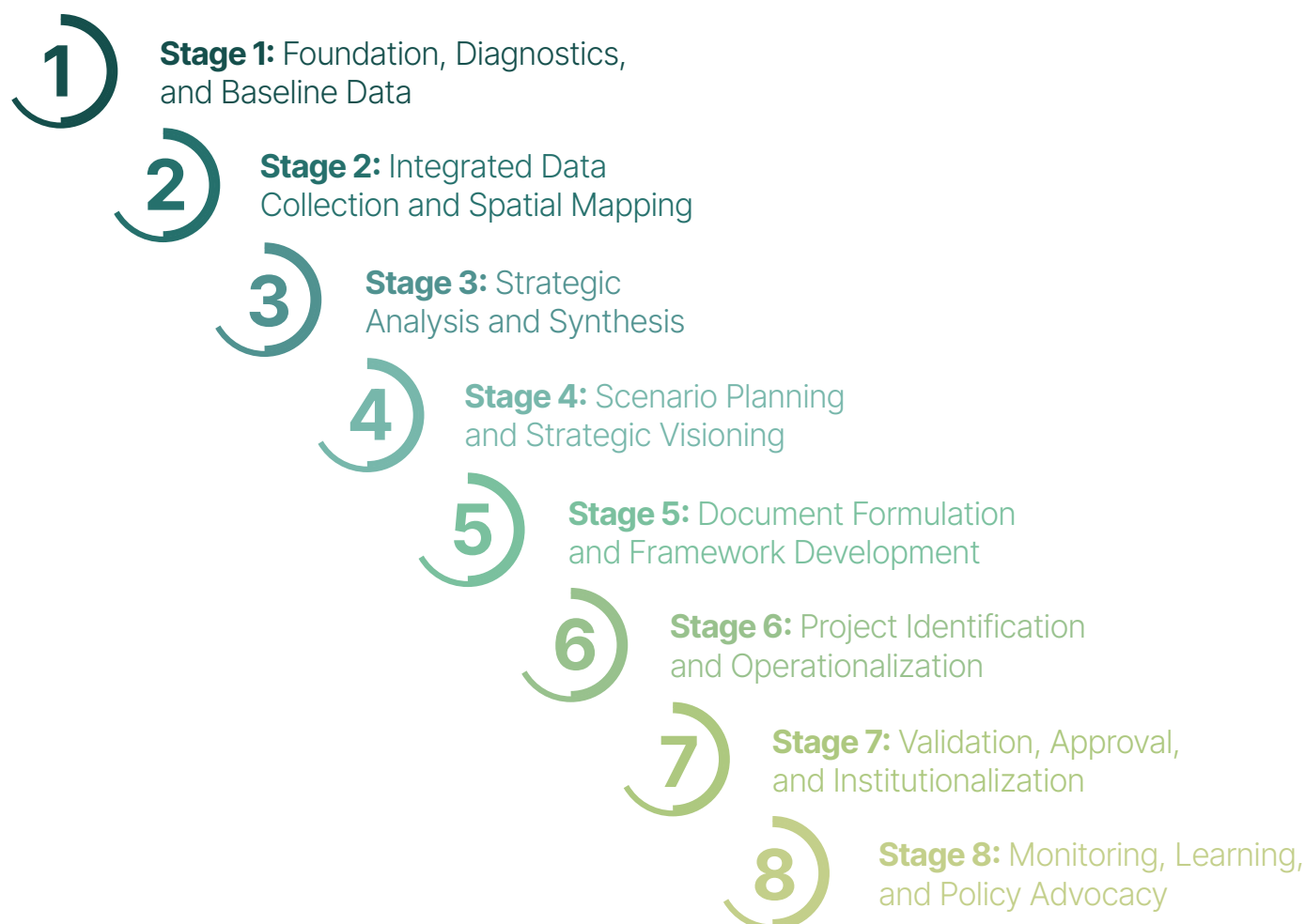


Figure 5 Polaris Locally Led Recovery Planning stages.

The comprehensive strategic and recovery planning follows a structured framework that can support the development of several types of planning documents used within Ukraine's planning system at hromada or oblast level. Although the documents differ in scope and regulatory requirements, the methodology follows a consistent and iterative analytical and participatory planning process.

The planning cycle consists of eight stages, moving from diagnostics and data collection to project identification and final approval of planning documents. Each stage builds on the previous one and contributes to developing a comprehensive understanding of community needs and development priorities.

The stages have been developed to align with key planning steps in formal planning documents yet allowing some flexibility within each stage to cater to specific activities and requirements in certain planning documents. This means partner hromadas and oblasts embarks on the same eight-stage planning cycle, tailored according to the respective planning document the hromada or oblast is preparing.

To support the planning process, Polaris not only support with dedicated national and international recovery and planning expertise, but in addition recruit and contract relevant technical expertise, including strategic and urban planning vendors, demographic forecasting specialists, scenario planning facilitators, and environmental assessment experts.

Support from the Polaris Programme has enabled the Solone community to move from reactive responses to challenges towards comprehensive development management. For us, it is important not only to restore infrastructure but to create a high-quality living environment for years ahead. Thanks to expert support, we have gained modern spatial planning tools that allow us to make informed decisions, attract investment, and ensure sustainable development even under wartime conditions.

MYKHAILO KOPEIKO

Head of the Solone Territorial Community, one of 13 partner hromadas during phase one of Polaris LLR.

For me, this work has been a valuable experience not only in strategic planning but also in organising democratic processes. Our working group reflects the diversity of the community. Listening to every voice, synthesising perspectives, and drawing the right conclusions is challenging – but we succeeded!

ANNA LUTSENKO

Department Head, the Department for Investment Projects and Socio-Economic Development of the Novyi Buh City Council, one of 13 partner hromadas during phase one of Polaris LLR.



1

Foundation, Diagnostics, and Baseline Data

This stage establishes the organizational and institutional governance required for a credible planning process. For hromadas, the focus is on forming gender-balanced Working Groups (WGs) and conducting a diagnostic assessment of existing planning capacities, management structures, and digital/GIS readiness. At the oblast level, this foundation includes securing a formal mandate, mapping stakeholders across governance tiers, and establishing coordination structures like steering groups. A robust baseline dataset is consolidated, covering themes such as population, social structure economy, land-use, environment and infrastructure, disaggregated by gender as possible, utilizing proxy methods where war-time data is unreliable.

- **Establishment of Governance:** Formation of gender-balanced hromada WGs and regional technical coordination teams.
- **Stakeholder Engagement Planning:** Inclusive stakeholder mapping and development of a structured participation and engagement plan.
- **Capacity Diagnostics:** Baselining of institutional planning practices, digital mapping systems, and resource constraints.
- **Baseline Consolidation:** Collection of national, regional, and local thematic data, relevant strategic documents and plans.

2

Integrated Data Collection and Spatial Mapping

The second stage transforms baseline information into a comprehensive evidence base using GIS. Hromadas and oblasts conduct field research—such as polls and focus groups with residents—to gather socio-economic and demographic data disaggregated by gender and age. Simultaneously, at the oblast level, regional spatial analysis goes beyond individual hromada boundaries to examine cross-territorial patterns, clusters, functional interdependencies, and territorial disparities; revealing how services, mobility, and economic activity connect across the region and where systemic gaps emerge at regional scale.

- **Evidence-Based Profiling:** Participatory data collection, implementation of community polls, focus groups, and demographic studies.
- **GIS Mapping:** Creation of spatial layers for e.g. infrastructure damage, land use, and service gaps.
- **Functional Analysis:** Identification of cross-hromada service catchment areas and regional connectivity clusters.

3

Strategic Analysis and Synthesis

This stage moves from data collection to deep sectoral analysis to identify the root causes of community and regional challenges and opportunities. Both tiers utilize tools like the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT); Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Strengths (TOWS); and Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental (PESTLE) analysis tools to evaluate external risks and internal strengths. Demographic forecasting is conducted during stage three, providing optimistic, neutral, and pessimistic scenarios to help authorities plan despite significant population shifts and uncertainties. At the oblast level, thematic analytical layers are synthesized into Priority Zone Maps, that integrate population dynamics, economic activity, and infrastructure access, translating multi-sectoral evidence into a single spatial picture to guide strategic choices.

- **Strategic Tools:** Application of SWOT, TOWS, and PESTLE analyses to define challenges and potentials.
- **Demographic Forecasting:** Analysis of IDP inflows and migration dynamics to inform service planning.
- **Priority Zone Mapping:** Synthesis of thematic layers into overlay maps that identify “where to go first”.

4

Scenario Planning and Strategic Visioning

In the fourth stage, scenario planning workshops using Foresight methodology is conducted. Based on analysis results, participants from local and regional authorities identify “Trends” (predictable shifts) and “Critical Uncertainties” (unpredictable drivers like war duration or EU integration) to build alternative 10–20-year development narratives. This process helps hromadas and oblasts test their assumptions and identify “no-regret” priorities—investments and strategic choices that remain sound regardless of which future scenario unfolds. This culminates in a verified development vision and long-term strategic goals.

- **Foresight Workshops:** Collaborative identification of “Trends” and “Critical Uncertainties”.
- **Scenario Development:** Creation of 2×2 matrices and vivid narratives (e.g., “inertia” vs. “recovery-driven”).
- **Strategic Verification:** Identification of robust, “no-regret” strategies that work across multiple futures.

5

Document Formulation and Framework Development

During this stage, the strategic vision and goals are translated into formal, actionable planning documents. For hromadas, this involves drafting the Development Strategy or Comprehensive Spatial Development Plan, ensuring cross-cutting principles like veteran reintegration and climate sustainability are embedded. At the oblast level, the regional strategy framework is formulated by translating analytical findings and the shared vision into strategic priorities and spatial logic, providing a structured, action-oriented basis for coordination and investment decisions.

- **Document Formulation:** Drafting the analytical and strategic parts of hromada and oblast planning documents.
- **Mainstreaming Principles:** Integration of veteran policy, gender equality, and Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA).
- **Regional Structuring:** Defining the roles of functional areas, service hubs, and infrastructure corridors.

6

Project Identification and Operationalization

Strategic intent is transformed into a structured pipeline of investment-ready projects. Hromadas develop a “long-list” of needs which is progressively refined into a “short-list” of 7–10 high-impact projects through criteria-based scoring. These are developed into standardized Project Cards to support resource mobilisation and alignment with e.g. DREAM and Nefco standards. At the oblast level, investment directions are structured into coherent “programme areas” (e.g., service systems or infrastructure networks) with clear sequencing and financing pathways rather than isolated projects.

- **Prioritization Pipeline:** Multi-step screening from a comprehensive “long-list” to a refined “short-list”.
- **Investment Readiness:** Development of detailed “Project Cards” including budget, timeline, and strategic rationale.
- **Programme Structuring:** Alignment of investment directions with national financing instruments and programming frameworks.

7

Validation, Approval, and Institutionalization

Transparency and legal compliance are ensured through the official approval process. For hromadas, draft documents must be published for at least three weeks to collect feedback before formal public hearings and a final vote by the local council. At the oblast level, a wider set of stakeholders, including professional organizations and civil society are engaged through structured consultation processes to provide input and feedback, while draft strategies are coordinated with relevant authorities to ensure alignment with national policies and priorities, supporting ownership and long-term accountability and implementation.

- **Public Consultation:** Implementation of structured consultation processes, official hearings and publication of drafts for transparent feedback.
- **Formal Approval:** Council votes and official publication of strategies on hromada/oblast websites.
- **Legal Validation:** Ensuring all documents meet mandatory Ukrainian legislative and recovery requirements.

8

Monitoring, Learning, and Policy Advocacy

The planning cycle concludes by institutionalizing a system for continuous improvement and national advocacy. Hromadas and oblasts participate in national-level learning events to share best practices and “storytelling” from their respective planning processes. Oblasts introduce multi-stakeholder monitoring mechanisms to track implementation, update the evidence base as conditions change, and document lessons learned. This approach improves feedback loops between local and national levels, strengthening the overall multi-level governance and decentralization framework.

- **Institutional Monitoring:** Establishment of multi-stakeholder mechanisms to track progress and identify implementation bottlenecks.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Peer-to-peer learning events and publication of policy briefs and case studies.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Feeding local and regional evidence back into national dialogues on recovery and decentralization.

Pillar 2: Empowering Institutions: Capacity Building through Learning-by-Doing

Capacity building is a core element of the LLR methodology, aiming to equip hromadas and oblast administrations with the skills, tools, and institutional strength needed to take leadership in recovery and development processes. The goal is to support both levels in developing and implementing strategic, spatial, and recovery planning documents that are not only technically sound but also inclusive, context-specific, evidence-based and aligned with national frameworks. This includes enhancing both the technical competence of staff, strengthening regional coordination and analytical capacity, supporting participatory, transparent, and future-oriented planning.

The capacity building process is designed to be practical and embedded in real-time planning activities. It combines hands-on mentoring with formal training sessions and access to tools, templates, and peer learning opportunities. Cross-cutting issues such as gender, inclusion, environmental sustainability, and conflict sensitivity are integrated into all thematic areas of support.

The capacity building also seeks to reduce disparities between hromadas with different capacities and resources. Attention is given to small or conflict-affected hromadas that may face barriers to effective participation in recovery planning. By building institutional memory, digital competence, and project implementation capacity, Polaris LLR further contributes to the groundwork for resilient, community-driven recovery.

Key areas of capacity support:

Strengthening urban and recovery planning competencies

Hromadas and oblast administrations are supported with capacity strengthening support with the aim to enable both levels to lead their recovery and development planning processes, including strengthening strategic, spatial, integrated and cross-sectoral planning skills, evidence-based, participatory and inclusive processes, and technical competences. Activities are structured around the actual development of the key planning documents (e.g., Regional Development Strategy, Concept of Integrated Urban Development, Comprehensive Spatial Development Plan) to ensure a learning-by-doing model. Strengthening of planning capacities entails:

- **Support to develop a planning document;** Guidance through all stages of planning: diagnostics, stakeholder mapping and participation planning, data collection, strategy formulation, regional and spatial analysis, and project identification, as well as how to ensure vertical and horizontal linkages (inter-hromada, hromada-oblast and oblast-national level). This includes targeted support to working groups, local officials, and technical staff. Training on gender-sensitive data-collection, analysis and modelling, scenario-based planning, stakeholder analysis and inclusive engagement methods.
- **Citizen engagement; inclusive and transparent planning;** Training for oblast and hromada leadership and civil society on participatory methodologies, including the development of communication plans at the outset of planning processes. Tools and templates to ensure broad-based engagement, including women, IDPs, veterans, and marginalized groups, support in organizing inclusive consultations and validating planning outputs.
- **Spatial planning perspectives;** Technical assistance on integrated regional, urban and rural planning (territorial coherence) across local, regional and national scale plans; cultural heritage protection and planning in post-conflict settings; environmental sustainability, including climate adaptation, biodiversity and natural assets; capacity to conduct and integrate Strategic Environmental Assessments into planning documents where required by law or Nefco funding conditions; Climate-smart land use planning and resilience building.

Evidence-based and digital planning, including GIS and Data Management

Robust data and information management is a foundational requirement for effective, evidence-based recovery planning and strategic decision-making. The LLR methodology focuses on equipping local and regional authorities with the tools and systems needed to process and analyse data across all recovery stages, ensuring that implementation plans are both phased and realistic. This approach enables real-time access to spatially organized data, which supports regional intelligence and ensures that local planning is interoperable with national systems like DREAM and

“Cooperation with the Polaris team within the ‘Recovery at Local Level’ Programme has been a genuine pillar of support for our community. Their expert input enabled us to professionally integrate energy independence and inclusiveness into a single planning framework, which is critically important for our frontline region.

The most valuable outcome of this process has been strengthened cohesion. We ensured that every voice was heard – local residents, representatives of civil society, and those who are currently most in need of support and protection. As a result of this genuine and inclusive engagement, the Strategy has become truly ‘living document’: it reflects the real needs and priorities of the people.”

SERHII FEDOSIEIEV

Director, Municipal Institution “Local Development Agency of the Kobleve Village Council”.

Kobleve was one of the 13 partner hromadas during phase 1 of the Polaris LLR.

aligned with EU-oriented digital standards. By building these capacities and ensuring that hromadas and oblasts retain geospatial data from planning processes, Polaris ensure local and regional authorities can continue and build on data and facilitate greater transparency and accountability in project monitoring and recovery efforts.

To operationalize this, the program provides comprehensive training on Geographic Information Systems (GIS), enabling hromada and oblast staff to apply spatial analysis to damage assessments, zoning, mobility planning, and environmental monitoring. These technical skills are reinforced by the establishment of structured data repositories and the integration of digital workflows into project development. Furthermore, the methodology promotes long-term sustainability by fostering cross-departmental coordination and empowering “data champions” within local and regional administrations to maintain high-quality data management and use. While building these local capacities, Polaris LLR simultaneously maintains a centralized data infrastructure to support strategic oversight and program-wide learning. Capacity building within evidence-based and digital planning, entails:

- **Data Management Systems;** Training on the development and use of structured data repositories (linked to national systems where possible), including guidance on storing, sharing, and updating data securely and transparently.
- **Geographic Information Systems (GIS);** Introductory and advanced GIS training tailored to relevant hromada staff (GIS department, planning staff, land management, hromada architect etc.); Support for development of spatial databases and mapping tools; Application of GIS in damage assessment, zoning, mobility planning, environmental monitoring, local economic development etc.
- **Digitalization and e-Planning Tools;** Support in adopting digital tools for planning, consultation, and communication; Capacity to manage platforms like DREAM and other national systems; Integration of digital workflows in project development and public engagement.
- **Data Coordination Across Hromada Units;** Training and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for cross-departmental collaboration (land, education, finance, social services).

Integrating Cross-Cutting Principles and Inclusive Governance

Polaris LLR focuses on strengthening the capacity of local and regional “duty bearers” to act in a more transparent, participatory, non-discriminatory, and accountable manner. This track focuses

on mainstreaming gender equality, citizen engagement, and veterans' inclusion into every stage of the recovery process. By utilizing a twin-track approach, Polaris supports hromadas in both integrating these cross-cutting perspectives into general methodology and facilitating targeted activities to address the needs of specific vulnerable groups. Strengthening capacity for inclusion and cross-cutting issues entails:

- **Inclusive and Rights-Based Decision Making;** Equipping local authorities with tools to protect rights to housing, services, and livelihoods while ensuring that recovery interventions reflect real local needs. Support includes sensitisation on the use of gender-disaggregated data to enhance the evidence base for strategic decisions and the development of institutional capacities for inclusive service provision, leveraging expertise in other parts of the Polaris programme.
- **Gender Equality and Intersectionality;** Moving beyond broad categories to ensure the meaningful engagement of women, IDPs, veterans, and marginalized groups throughout the planning process. This involves the development of targeted outputs, such as local veterans' strategies and community charters, alongside training for leadership and civil society on inclusive participatory methodologies. The Polaris programme has dedicated gender and veteran expertise supporting this integration in the LLR work.
- **Integrity and Anti-Corruption;** Establishing a foundation of transparency and corruption mitigation by open access to information about planning processes, project identification and prioritisation, timelines, and results. Capacity building focuses on institutionalizing anti-corruption measures within procurement processes and ensuring clear criteria and selection processes for recovery support to build community trust and oversight.
- **Safeguarding and Environmental Resilience;** Integrating social cohesion and environmental planning into the analytical stage to link short-term response with long-term recovery goals. This includes conducting comprehensive hromada analysis briefs—covering social, gender, and environmental impacts—and building the capacity to integrate Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) into document formulation to guarantee sustainable recovery outcomes.

Capacity Building Methods

The LLR capacity building draws on different methods, ranging from tailored trainings to the individual oblasts and hromadas (online/offline); workshops (online/offline); mentoring of technical staff; providing guides, templates, and toolkits embedded in the planning process; joint planning exercises tied to real document development; peer-learning and exchange of experiences – inter-hromada, hromada-oblast, international experiences and good-practices; and conferences and knowledge events.

Connecting Planning Priorities to Funding Pipelines

The LLR project identification process serves as a structured, multi-stage pipeline designed to transform broad local needs into bankable, high-impact investment projects. This process begins with the creation of a “long-list” of strategic proposals, which is progressively refined into a “short-list” of priority projects per hromada and oblast. These projects undergo a transparent screening process based on social impact, environmental sustainability, and catalytic effects, ensuring they are strategically aligned and technically feasible. A distinctive feature of this approach is the active support provided for developing “project cards”—standardised, investment-ready profiles that detail the strategic and financial rationale required to engage international financial institutions.

Projects specifically targeted for Nefco funding are drawn from this refined short-list, ensuring they have already cleared a rigorous multi-stage filtering system. To qualify, these projects must meet additional Nefco-specific mandates, including a focus on green recovery, energy efficiency, and economic efficiency (cost per beneficiary). Furthermore, selection is based on a project's ability to mitigate war impacts and its replicability and readiness for immediate implementation. This integrated planning-to-financing pipeline ensures that local strategies are shaped from the early stages to meet real-world funding requirements, culminating in a high-quality project portfolio ready for Nefco submission.

Pillar 3: Operationalizing Recovery: Project Identification and Investment Readiness

A core objective of the Polaris LLR methodology is ensuring that strategic planning translates into tangible, investment-ready recovery projects. To achieve this, the program bridges the gap between planning and implementation by aligning local budgeting and project preparation with national systems, specifically the reformed Public Investment Management (PIM) system and the DREAM digital platform. By mirroring the PIM cycle—mandatory for public investments from 2026—hromadas and oblasts receive specialized training in project prioritization and financial analysis. This ensures that local plans are not merely formal exercises but are structurally aligned with the requirements of international donors such as Nefco and the EU's Ukraine Facility.

Beyond project document formulation, the approach focuses on operational readiness, supporting communities to transform prioritized needs into structured, financially viable project proposals. These interventions are intended to be catalytic, addressing critical service delivery and infrastructure priorities while stimulating broader recovery and additional financing. By integrating planning directly with external financing mechanisms and establishing community feedback loops, the methodology ensures that recovery efforts are sustainable, transparently managed, and realistically implementable.

- **Budgeting and Financial Planning;** Training in budgeting and financial planning equips hromadas and oblasts with municipal budgeting fundamentals viewed through a recovery lens, ensuring that financial plans are both resilient and inclusive. This involves the integration of gender-sensitive budgeting to address the specific needs of women and vulnerable groups, alongside climate budgeting to evaluate how financial allocations support or hinder environmental and climate objectives. Furthermore, the methodology strengthens procurement procedures, emphasizing the analysis of the economic viability of projects and providing strategies to secure diverse funding at local, regional, national, and international levels to support successful implementation.
- **Project Prioritization and Readiness;** To ensure project readiness and strategic impact, the methodology provides a comprehensive set of tools for prioritizing interventions based on impact, cost-effectiveness, feasibility, and equity. This includes evaluating strategic needs alongside social, economic, environmental, commercial, financial, and managerial feasibility, to ensure projects align with the decision matrices and scoring standards required by partners like Nefco. Beyond individual efforts, hromadas and oblasts are supported in exploring options for co-planning and joint project development with neighbouring communities and regional authorities to enhance territorial synergy. Finally, the program assists in transitioning these priorities into the DREAM digital platform and developing detailed, Nefco-eligible project cards, ensuring that capital investments are fully prepared for international financing.

Expert support throughout all stages of developing the Concept proved particularly valuable. It helped us structure our data and define clear implementation priorities. This experience has significantly strengthened our team's capacity to manage development projects and engage effectively with international partners.

LIUDMYLA HAPIEIEVA

Head of the Economic Department, Konotop City Council, one of the 13 partner hromadas during phase 1 of the Polaris LLR.

Pillar 4: Scaling Impact: Knowledge Creation, Policy Dialogue, and Advocacy

Knowledge, policy and advocacy represent the final track of the Polaris LLR methodology, designed to create a continuous loop of learning, feedback, and influence across planning, implementation, and policymaking. Its strategic purpose is to ensure that local recovery experiences directly inform the refinement of national recovery strategies, legislation, and donor programming, while simultaneously supporting Ukraine's long-term governance and decentralization reforms.

By documenting and amplifying the innovations of pilot hromadas and oblasts, the methodology seeks to build bridges between field-level practice and national policy, ensuring that regulatory frameworks are grounded in local realities. This track ensures that the LLR methodology is not merely a technical exercise but a catalyst for systemic change, helping to harmonize national and local recovery policies while supporting Ukraine's broader EU integration pathway.

Knowledge and Learning: Capturing Field-Level Evidence

The knowledge and learning component focuses on capturing and generating actionable intelligence from implementation to support the replication and adaptive improvement of the LLR model as well as sharing learning with other recovery actors. By documenting what works across diverse hromada and oblasts scales and capacities, Polaris builds an institutional memory of territorial recovery. Key activities under this focus area include:

- **Thematic Inquiry and Research:** Developing evidence papers on critical recovery themes, such as the cost-benefit of recovery plans for hromadas, the impact of digitalization on planning, and the challenges of integrating strategic, spatial, and recovery documents.
- **Case Studies and Storytelling:** Producing human-focused narratives that highlight local and regional administrations which have effectively leveraged data, inclusive participation, or scenario planning to reshape local priorities.
- **Peer-to-Peer Learning:** Investing in cross-community dissemination through structured webinars, dialogues, workshops, and peer learning series to facilitate technical exchange between local and regional authorities, as well as knowledge sharing with local government associations, universities and aid working groups.
- **Self-Diagnostic Tools:** Developing tools that allow hromadas and oblasts to independently conduct sound analysis for their own future planning and recovery processes.
- **Advancing Ukraine Planning Expertise:** Contribute to educational programmes aiming to educate new or current urban planning practitioners in integrated recovery planning and sustainable reconstruction.

2. Policy and Advocacy Influence: Bridging Practice and Legislation

This component translates findings and analysis into advocacy briefs and technical recommendations to influence national policy dialogue and legislative reform. The focus is on ensuring that national frameworks for recovery and planning are grounded in locally anchored evidence. Key objectives for policy and advocacy include:

- **National Policy Engagement:** Engaging directly with the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine, relevant national agencies, and international donors to advocate for a simplified planning framework that reduces the burden of overlapping and unsynchronized documents.
- **Support for Legislative Reform:** Providing technical input into critical national developments, such as the New Urban Planning Code, the National Housing Strategy, and the revision of the State Strategy for Regional Development.
- **Learning Events:** Organizing events to showcase pilot results to national and international stakeholders, serving as a platform to present policy recommendations on how to enhance and vertically align localized recovery efforts.
- **Policy briefs:** Develop policy briefs and advocacy notes to inform and influence planning reform. Among other, these will draw on the learning from the Polaris LLR piloting and iterative methodology development, capturing learning from both hromada and oblast levels.

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Updating the regional development strategy is a mandatory element of public investment management reform, which involve close integration of strategic and budget planning.

With expert support from the Polaris Programme, we are working on updating the Regional Development Strategy of Kherson Oblast up to 2027. Today, we are not only analysing challenges — we are shaping a vision of what the region should be in 5, 10, and 15 years. Which sectors will drive development? How to ensure security, economic growth, infrastructure recovery, and the return of people? How to make the region comfortable and competitive?

”

Artem MISHYN

Director of the Department of Economic Development of Kherson Oblast

Kherson was the single partner oblast during phase 1 of the Polaris LLR.

Learning input to the Rapid Urban Re-Innovation (RURI) program

The Rapid Urban Re-Innovation (RURI) training program aims to strengthen the professional competencies of Ukrainian architects and urban planners to lead complex recovery and reconstruction efforts. The project is led by Innovation Leadership Group and its Ukrainian partner Ro3kvit Urban Coalition, funded by the Swedish Institute's Ukraine Cooperation Programme. Polaris LLR is part of the advisory board and contributes to training modules aligned with the Pillar 4 objective.

The RURI training focuses on urban recovery design methods that are evidence-based, multisectoral, and collaborative, using a case-study-based learning approach. A core component of RURI is facilitating collaboration and exchange between professional associations—such as the associations of Swedish and Ukrainian architects—to exchange international best practices in resilient design and sustainable urban development. This professional engagement is further supported by academic partnerships, equipping planners with advanced methodologies for spatial analysis and long-term territorial visioning.

Safeguarding: Ensuring Integrity and Sustainability in Recovery

Safeguarding within the Polaris LLR methodology is designed to protect communities, promote transparency, and manage risks in alignment with international standards and Ukrainian legislation, and anchored in the five core principles: a human rights-based, gender equality, anti-corruption, conflict sensitivity, and environmental sustainability. By embedding these principles across all eight planning stages, the methodology ensures that recovery efforts do not exacerbate existing inequalities or create new risks. In addition, the methodology addresses safeguarding by:

Sustaining Results through Action Plans and Quality Assurance

To ensure that planning leads to durable and implementable outcomes, the methodology emphasizes the development of phased and realistic Action Plans during the document formulation stage. These plans translate strategic visions into a “long list” of prioritized measures, clearly defining responsible executors, implementation timelines, and potential funding sources. Polaris LLR provides rigorous quality assurance throughout this process, verifying that all planning documents and Action Plans are grounded in the data-driven diagnostics conducted in earlier stages. This oversight ensures that results are technically sound and account for cross-cutting priorities such as environmental compliance and veteran reintegration.

Accountability: Answerability and Governance

Accountability is operationalized through a framework of “answerability and governance,” which clarifies the roles and obligations of local, regional, and national agencies. The LLR process empowers “duty-bearers” (local authorities) to meet their obligations while training “rights-holders” (citizens) to participate in planning and oversight. Stakeholder mapping, consultations and participatory processes are key to promote both inclusiveness and accountability in preparation of strategies and plans for recovery. Similarly, a primary mechanism are community vetting workshops, where prioritized project cards are presented to residents for feedback and endorsement. Collectively, this ensures that local recovery is anchored in a legitimate public mandate and that authorities remain answerable to the specific needs of their communities.

Transparency: Open Access and Digital Disclosure

The methodology requires open access to information regarding planning processes, funding allocations, and project timelines. All draft strategic and spatial documents must be published on local administration websites for at least three weeks to collect public feedback before formal hearings and council votes.

Transparency is a fundamental safeguard against corruption and “elite capture” in the project identification process. A due diligence mechanism is therefore put in place, including ensuring community involvement in the selection and design process, grievance protocols, and capacity building of local administrations on handling contractors to ensure correct project deliveries (quality standards, non-corrupt etc.). This commitment to openness and diligence is reinforced by integrating local priorities into the DREAM digital platform, which provides public visibility into project documentation, financial coverage, and implementation progress.

Support to enhanced digital systems and development of online hromada portals, offering online access to certain services (e.g. land and title registration, business registration) and information and regular news feeds about local planning processes, also enforces transparency and accountability.

Follow-up of Plans and Capacity Enhancement

The long-term success of recovery plans depends on continuous follow-up and the institutionalization of planning capacities. Instead of standalone training, capacity enhancement is embedded directly into real-time activities to build institutional memory and professional competencies within hromada and oblast staff. The Polaris support at oblast level concludes by establishing multi-stakeholder monitoring mechanisms to track progress, update baseline evidence as war-time conditions shifts, and document lessons learned. Additionally, the methodology assists local and regional administrations in developing feedback loops to report results back to their residents, ensuring that the community remains engaged throughout the planning cycle.

After the conclusion of the planning process, Polaris continues to engage and provide support to partner hromadas and oblasts. Continued engagement related to the implementation of priority interventions and continued capacity building (e.g. on GIS and data management), ensures that the concluded planning process is followed up.

Looking Ahead: Advancing Resilient and Integrated Recovery

As Ukraine continues its recovery journey, the Locally Led Recovery (LLR) approach serves as a critical bridge between immediate reconstruction and long-term territorial development. Beyond the physical rebuilding of infrastructure, the future of the Polaris recovery support lies in strengthening institutions and multi-level governance, ensuring that recovery remains a fundamentally democratic and inclusive process. Reflections from the first phase of Polaris LLR underscore that resilience must be understood as the capacity of local systems to adapt dynamically to uncertainty and respond to evolving conditions.

A Holistic and Integrated Approach to Recovery

Looking forward, recovery planning must remain holistic and integrated, addressing the complex interdependencies between social, environmental, economic, and spatial dimensions. Central to this is a commitment to cross-cutting issues, including gender equality, human rights, and the integration of veterans and internally displaced persons (IDPs). To be sustainable and “future-proof,” local planning must continue to move away from fragmented, “siloed” interventions toward spatially grounded methodologies that can respond to shifting demographic and economic realities. Integrated approaches also imply adhering to principles of multi-level governance, i.e. vertical and horizontal coordination and collaboration in for example spatial planning, land use and provision of infrastructure.

Strengthening Multi-Level Synergy and Regional Coordination

A core priority for future iterations of the LLR methodology is ensuring that support provided at the local level is not isolated. Instead, the methodology emphasizes combining support at both local and regional levels to foster territorial coherence, as well as ensuring local planning documents are the guide for prioritised recovery assistance by both national and international actors. Efforts at the oblast level will focus on enhancing the capacity of regional administrations to effectively coordinate recovery efforts, consolidate local needs into coherent regional strategies, and generate robust spatial intelligence. In this context, cooperation and coordination with the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine (MinDevelopment) is essential to synchronize recovery efforts across all tiers and ensure that national policy remains grounded in local practice.

Expanding Reach through Targeted Training

While the program will continue to provide deep technical engagement for partner hromadas and oblasts, a training and capacity building component is being introduced to reach a broader number of hromadas and oblasts. This initiative is designed to disseminate learning and provide more targeted support, peer-learning and knowledge sharing across the wider local government system. By leveraging the “learning-by-doing” model and tools such as GIS and data management, the program aims to build institutional memory and professional competencies nationwide.

Adapting to Structural Reform and Demographic Shifts

Iterations of the LLR methodology will also need to account for the evolution of Ukraine's administrative-territorial structure, particularly the needs of small hromadas that may face barriers to effective participation. As the post-war environment may see the further consolidation and amalgamation of territorial communities, the LLR methodology will be adapted to support clusters of hromadas in co-planning and regional coordination to uphold the gains of decentralization.

Furthermore, the LLR approach will continue to place a strong emphasis on diverging future demographic scenarios. Planning processes must move beyond static assumptions to explore how new demographic compositions and permanent degrowth in certain areas impact the spatial organization of services, infrastructure and economic activities. By utilizing demographic forecasting and scenario planning, local authorities can adapt their social infrastructure, labour markets, and housing strategies to these structural pressures, ensuring that today's investments are resilient to multiple plausible futures.

Strategic Continuity and Future Engagement

Building upon the foundations of the first phase of the Polaris programme, future engagement will focus on the iterative refinement of the LLR methodology, taking on board lessons learned on focus

areas such as scenario-based planning and structured investment prioritization. This involves providing continued technical support to hromadas and oblasts to develop strategic and spatial planning documents that transition from broad visions toward investment-ready project pipelines. Furthermore, the program will deliver targeted institutional and technical capacity building through specialized trainings in critical areas such as land management, GIS, and data coordination. This work is complemented by ongoing advocacy and policy development, ensuring that recovery frameworks are harmonized with national reforms and aligned with the requirements of Ukraine's future EU integration pathway.

Concluding Reflections: Building a Cohesive Recovery Ecosystem

The success of Ukraine's recovery depends on a holistic, integrated, and inclusive approach that recognizes the deep interdependence of social, environmental, and economic resilience. By placing local and regional governments at the centre of this process, the LLR methodology ensures that recovery is not merely a technical exercise in reconstruction, but a governance challenge that strengthens democratic institutions. To achieve this, it is essential to combine support at both the local and regional and national levels, ensuring that interventions are never isolated but are part of a coordinated territorial vision. This vertical synergy—facilitated through close cooperation and coordination with MinDevelopment—is a prerequisite for a sustainable multi-level governance system that remains grounded in local practice.

By remaining agile and iterative, the Polaris LLR will continue to adapt to shifting on-the-ground realities and recovery needs, transforming the challenges of war into a catalytic opportunity to reimagine and build back better inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities for all of Ukraine.



Photo: Panorama of Zlatopil, one of Polaris LLR partner hromadas. Credit: Zlatopil Hromada.

About the cover

The cover of this publication and the cover of the “Strategic Foundations for Sustainable, Integrated, and Phased Recovery in Ukraine: Key Results from the pilot phase of the Locally Led Recovery component” publication form a diptych: the black fractures of the first publication become the golden seams of the second. The visual draws on kintsugi — the craft of mending broken ceramics in which the cracks are not concealed but filled with gold. The metaphor speaks to the idea of locally led recovery: recovery is not a return to what was, but a deliberate rethinking of what is being rebuilt. Hromadas and oblasts lead this work themselves — not as recipients of recovery, but as those shaping it.



Polaris

Supporting Multilevel
Governance in Ukraine

