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FBA Policy Brief

A Community-Based Approach to Veterans' Reintegration in Ukraine

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UKRAINIAN VETERANS' SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION to civilian life depends on strong community support and local connections to prevent social isolation. However, initiatives that focus solely on veterans rather than a wider range of war-affected groups as well as their wider host communities risk deepening divides and creating tensions within communities. This FBA policy brief examines how a community-based approach to reintegration (CBR) can address these challenges. It shows how supporting veterans as part of wider local development efforts can build social cohesion and strengthen institutions.

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Policy recommendations



1. *Strengthen local participation and CBR:* National, regional, and international actors could strengthen reintegration efforts by integrating and promoting a community-based approach to reintegration in policy, guidelines, and programming.
2. *Pair community-based reintegration with targeted interventions:* Community-based approach to reintegration can yield significant results when paired with targeted initiatives that seek to address the specific needs and expectations of male and female veterans.
3. *Improve funding for sustainable veteran reintegration:* Local governments and civil society groups could be helped by access to decentralised funding that enables sustainable community-based efforts that actively involve veterans alongside other groups in the host communities.

Introduction

The successful return of Ukrainian veterans to civilian life is strongly reliant on community support systems, resources, and relationships. While many veterans return to familiar environments, others must rebuild their lives in new settings, adding complexity to their transition. A significant reintegration barrier stems from the experiential divide between veterans with battlefield exposure and civilians who adapted to wartime conditions at home. This divergence in lived experience often creates social disconnection that hinders effective reintegration.

Community-based reintegration (CBR) fosters social cohesion by integrating veteran support into local development efforts and strengthening institutional capacity. Design elements that serve to bridge the civilian-military gap include community-led initiatives, trauma-informed and conflict-sensitive approaches, decentralized funding models, and direct local resource allocation. Evidence shows that programs focusing exclusively on veterans can inadvertently reinforce societal divisions, creating tensions with civilian communities.¹ CBR evolved out of these findings to instead promote mutual understanding over isolation by embedding support within broader community development. When leveraged strategically, this approach creates a sustainable framework aligning with national policies while ensuring local adaptability.

While CBR strengthens community inclusion, veterans with disabilities, mental health challenges, or employment barriers require specialized services like trauma-informed therapy or vocational training. A hybrid model combining community integration with targeted interventions ensures all veterans receive tailored assistance when needed, delivered in ways that resist further separating them from communities or creating perceptions of preferential treatment that could fuel resentment.

The Concept of Community-Based Reintegration

CBR supports veterans' sustainable transition into civilian life by empowering and assisting the communities into which they reintegrate. It focuses on enhancing the community's ability to socially and economically absorb these individuals, ensuring they

have access to services, are in a supportive environment, participate in community affairs, and establish viable livelihoods. It fosters receptive attitudes and builds capacities to integrate veterans alongside vulnerable groups, such as internally displaced people, while addressing tensions between returnees and local communities.

CBR emphasises community-led and community-owned initiatives, with full participation of their members, including underrepresented groups, in decision-making processes. By strengthening local networks and aligning veteran support with broader development efforts and interests, CBR fosters social cohesion, local ownership, and resilience, enabling communities to adapt and sustain in ongoing armed conflict and insecure settings.²

In contrast to CBR, targeted veteran support addresses specific needs without community integration. While providing specialized assistance efficiently, these approaches risk isolating veterans and creating perceptions of favouritism that generate resentment, at times inadvertently prolong the civilian-military divide. Still, some targeted interventions remain essential for veterans with severe trauma or complex needs requiring niche professional expertise. A balanced policy approach combining community-embedded support with integrated specialized services for highest-need cases can build on the strengths of each approach.

Capacity and Resource Constraints

With 5-8 million veterans and their families in Ukraine expected to need reintegration support, CBR faces significant logistical challenges.³ War-damaged infrastructure, economic instability, and limited institutional capacity strain local authorities, who must balance essential services, employment, and veteran support: resource competition and widespread trauma risk deepening inequalities and weakening social cohesion.

A layered approach integrating CBR with targeted reintegration support ensures that veterans benefit from grassroots inclusion efforts while accessing state-led or international support mechanisms tailored to their needs. While CBR fosters resilience by

embedding reintegration within broader community development efforts, it cannot fully address the complexities of all veterans. For those with severe physical injuries, PTSD, or employment barriers, specialised services such as trauma-informed therapy, vocational training, or long-term rehabilitation must complement community-based models.

These challenges are particularly acute in rural areas, where 60-70% of returning veterans are expected to settle. Many of these communities lack the institutional infrastructure and service networks available in urban centres, limiting their ability to provide reintegration support.⁴ Decentralised funding mechanisms and strategic partnerships between local CSOs, municipalities, and national agencies are critical to bridging this gap. Community-led initiatives such as structured veteran-civilian dialogues, peer mentorship programs, and employment schemes aligned with local labour market demands can strengthen reintegration—but only if backed by adequate resources and institutional coordination.

By integrating CBR with targeted interventions, Ukraine can develop a sustainable reintegration framework that ensures all veterans, regardless of their specific needs or location, receive the community support necessary for long-term inclusion and the specialised care required for recovery.

The Military-Civilian Gap

One key challenge in CBR is bridging the veteran-civilian understanding gap. In Ukraine, nearly two-thirds of veterans feel civilians do not grasp their challenges, while only 38% of civilians consider themselves informed.⁵ Many expect veterans to reintegrate seamlessly, overlooking the lasting effects of the visible and invisible wounds of war.

This disconnect is often gendered: while both male and female veterans in Ukraine face challenges bridging the military-civilian gap, these challenges are shaped by evolving societal expectations and gender norms. Female veterans often face underrecognition and stereotypes that limit their roles, leading to scepticism, social isolation, and barriers to support. Male veterans may struggle with post-service identity, may be pressured to appear self-sufficient and hesitant

to seek help.⁶ Thus, CBR must be gender-responsive, integrate peer networks, provide trauma-informed training, and provide mentorship while ensuring equitable access to benefits and employment, and assessing how shifting norms impact reintegration.

Veterans frequently rely on fellow service members who understand military culture and exposure to trauma for support, whereas civilians may avoid interactions altogether, being unsure of how to approach conversations about war and service. This mutual hesitation reinforces social distance, making reintegration more challenging.⁷ Additionally, 41% of veterans feel they lack community influence. Structured engagement strategies at the national and community levels—including veteran-civilian dialogues, inclusive private sector engagement, and policy collaboration—are necessary to foster long-term reintegration.⁸

Goal Alignment and Collective Action

An effective CBR strategy fosters collaboration between veterans and community members by identifying shared priorities, such as improving local infrastructure and expanding access to health and social services through initiatives such as mobile rehabilitation units.⁹ Establishing structured forums—like community dialogues, participatory town halls, and veteran advisory boards—creates opportunities for collective decision-making and encourages open communication. While broader policy issues, including budget allocations and interministerial coordination, remain outside direct community control, local initiatives can still influence reintegration efforts through engagement with municipal authorities and advocacy networks.¹⁰

Beyond formal governance, smaller-scale initiatives help strengthen social cohesion between veterans and civilians. Townscape beautification projects, recreational events, and artistic or therapeutic programs offer accessible ways to foster interaction and mutual understanding. These initiatives can promote the acceptance of veterans alongside other war-affected groups, manage expectations on both sides, reduce potential conflicts, improve communication, and provide veterans with a sense of belonging within their communities.¹¹

Building Communities Ready for Veterans

A critical aspect of CBR is fostering civilian and institutional understanding of veterans' experiences, alongside those of other war-affected groups. While public respect for veterans is evident in the Ukrainian context, it must translate into substantive support through structured engagement. Veteran-ready communities integrate veterans into civic, economic, and social spheres via support networks, trauma-informed services, and tailored employment programs.

Effective reintegration requires institutional adaptation alongside grassroots engagement. Even amid wartime constraints, organisations must adjust policies, training, and services to meet veterans' needs. While economic conditions may limit job creation, employers can implement accommodations and foster inclusive workplaces. Employment services can reduce workforce entry barriers while healthcare and social service providers integrate trauma-informed care. Local governments are key in coordinating and aligning veteran support with other initiatives, improving service efficiency, and incorporating veterans' perspectives into community development.¹²

Decentralised Funding and Civil Society

CBR benefits from a participatory programme design that generates locally appropriate solutions to enhance reintegration sustainability.¹³ The decentralisation of resources to civil society organisations (CSOs) strengthens community-driven reintegration by fostering locally led initiatives supporting veterans and their communities, ensuring more inclusive and sustainable outcomes. CSOs' credibility within communities provides essential local insight and bridges the civilian-military divide. The Veteran Hub initiative demonstrates this approach through integrated services and educational programming.

At the same time, a mixed approach ensures that CBR and targeted support work in tandem—while CSOs strengthen community networks, national and international partners must provide access to specialised, gender-responsive services such as healthcare, legal aid, and vocational training.¹⁴

Conclusion

CBR bridges the civilian-military gap and contributes to veterans' sustainable reintegration. By engaging local communities, the framework strengthens social cohesion, improves access to services, and fosters shared responsibility. Without it, support structures weaken, increasing health risks, economic marginalisation, and social tensions. As Ukraine navigates war and recovery, CBR must balance veterans' needs with inclusive development through participatory decision-making, decentralised resources, and coordination among veterans, authorities, civil society, and international partners. Grassroots initiatives highlight CBR's potential—scaling and systematising these efforts are key to building resilient, veteran-inclusive communities.

Recommendations

Based on this analysis, the following recommendations enhance CBR by integrating it into local governance, strengthening community capacity, and fostering long-term civilian-veteran collaboration. They expand best practices, boost local participation, and embed veteran-inclusive approaches in recovery and resilience strategies.

1. Strengthen local participation and CBR through structured engagement

To enhance veteran reintegration, stakeholders are encouraged to incorporate a CBR approach into national-level policy as well as into local governance and decision-making processes. The Ministry of Veterans Affairs is central in guiding policy and providing technical support, while local governments facilitate implementation. Community mapping, town halls, and veteran advisory boards—coordinated by local NGOs with international support—can help assess needs and allocate resources effectively.

The Ministry for Communities and Territories Development can further integrate veteran reintegration into regional recovery efforts, ensuring alignment with national frameworks. The Cabinet of Ministers is key in embedding CBR logic into recovery strategies, while the Ministry of Social Policy can incorporate veteran reintegration into broader social protection policies. Continued financial and technical support from international donors would help sustain these efforts and maximise their impact.

NGOs and CSOs can contribute through data collection and community engagement, and social cohesion may also benefit from veteran-civilian dialogues, mentorship programs, and community-led initiatives supported by CSOs, peer networks, and international donors.

2. Pair community-based reintegration initiatives with targeted interventions

Community-based reintegration initiatives are particularly useful in contributing to social cohesion among war-affected groups in communities by strengthening the domain that veterans reintegrate into. However, the Ukrainian context showcases the need for support that targets the specific needs that come with having served in the armed forces, be that physical or psychosocial. Furthermore, Ukrainian veterans deserve recognition for the sacrifices of their civic rights in defence of their country. The inability to meet the specific needs and expectations of female and male veterans risks alienating them from the civilian socio-economic life as well as creating a divide between those who have served and those who have not.

A combination of assistance that aims to increase recipient communities' ability to receive veterans with efforts that target the specific needs and expectations of veterans leverages the potential of the two approaches and presents avenues for sustainable results. This approach could be reflected in policy at the national level, in project implementation at the sub-national level, and among international donors.

3. Enhance decentralised funding mechanisms for sustainable veteran reintegration

Establishing a decentralised funding model is essential for local governments and CSOs to design and implement tailored CBR initiatives. The Ministry of Economy, in coordination with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs and the Ministry for Communities and Territories Development, could play a central role by creating a national fund, drawing contributions from government, international donors, and private sector partners to facilitate direct resource allocation to oblasts and communities.

Local governments and municipal administrations lead the implementation of participatory budgeting mechanisms, ensuring that veterans and community stakeholders are actively engaged in determining reintegration priorities. The All-Ukrainian Association of Communities, working alongside CSOs and veteran organisations, could support public engagement in these budgetary discussions, strengthening community ownership of reintegration efforts. To enhance transparency and accessibility, the Ministry of Digital Transformation is well-placed to develop digital platforms that track funding allocations and facilitate public oversight. International donors can provide technical assistance and financial support for transparent application processes and capacity-building initiatives tailored to smaller organisations, building capacity for efficient grant management and impact assessments.

Endnotes

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Authors biography

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The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. Since 2014, the FBA has been actively engaged in supporting Ukraine's reform and development efforts. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, supporting veterans' reintegration and transition to civilian lives has become a critical component of Ukraine's recovery and long-term resilience. FBA contributes to these efforts by working with stakeholders at national and local levels to develop inclusive reintegration strategies, enhance coordination among state institutions, civil society and international partners, and promote gender-responsive approaches that advance social cohesion, equality and a sustainable recovery.

THEMATIC POLICY BRIEF SERIES: UKRAINIAN VETERANS' REINTEGRATION

This policy brief series is the outcome of an initiative by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) to explore key dimensions of veterans' reintegration in Ukraine. The aim of the series is to contribute to policy development by providing evidence- and experience-based insights into the challenges veterans face in their transitions to civilian life and to offer recommendations that seek to enhance Ukraine's reintegration frameworks. The brief series sets out to present a succinct overview of central dimensions of reintegration processes, viewed through a Ukraine-specific lens, within four key areas: Political reintegration, economic reintegration, gender dimensions of reintegration, and community-based reintegration (CBR).

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