



2025

Annual
results
report

About SALAR International

Being a fully owned subsidiary of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), SALAR International has its roots firmly in the Swedish system, with its long tradition of local and regional self-governance and advances in terms of service provision, social welfare, and quality of life for communities across the country. SALAR has a unique organisational profile as one of the strongest and oldest Local Government Associations (LGAs) in the world; it is active domestically and internationally. From this extensive tradition of working at the local, regional, national and international level, SALAR created SALAR International to be a conduit for supporting sustainable local development and local democracy internationally and gleaning lessons from other countries that may be relevant for Swedish local authorities and regions. SALAR International is committed to facilitating positive change and fostering inclusive governance. This is achieved through collaboration with national, regional and local governments and their communities, in its countries of operation.

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Abbreviations

AECD	Arab European Cities Dialogue
AGIR	Appui à la gouvernance inclusive et redevable (Support to Inclusive and Accountable Governance)
AMC	Association of Municipalities and Cities
ASC	Administrative Service Centres
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CEMR	Council of European Municipalities and Regions
CPC	Child Protection Committee
DEALOG	Support to Decentralisation and Local Government in Armenia
DOC	Domain of Change
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
FBA	Folke Bernadotte Academy
INLOG	Inclusive Local Governance Programme
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IRFAD	Iraqi Research Foundation for Analysis and Development
IMWMB	Inter-Municipal Waste Management Board
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
LED	Local Economic Development
LDC	Local Development Centre
LGAs	Local Government Associations
LOGDEVI	Local Governance Development in Iraq
LSG	Local Self Government
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSME	Micros, Small and Medium Enterprises
NGO	Non- Governmental Organisation
PACE	Public Administration, Citizen Engagement
RESLOG	The Resilience in Local Governance Project
SALAR	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions
SCTM	Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities
UMT	Union of Municipalities of Türkiye
SUMPs	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans
WM4U	Waste Management for Ukraine

Reflections from 2025

I am pleased to present SALAR International's Annual Report for 2025. This year was special as we celebrate 25 years of strengthening local governance and democracy worldwide. Over the past quarter century, we have partnered with municipalities, associations, and institutions to drive lasting change, build resilient communities, and promote inclusive, locally led governance. This milestone reflects our long-standing commitment to developing local solutions to global challenges.



Ewa-May Karlsson,
SALAR International Board Chair

The year 2025 has also been one of growth, reflection, tangible impact – and challenges. In a rapidly changing global – and aid – landscape, we continuously explore our role and purpose, always returning to our belief in the vital role of local governments in building democratic and sustainable societies. The outcomes of this year clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach, showing that our work continues to support the development of democratic, locally driven societies. At the same time, it strengthens Sweden's international reputation and creates opportunities to mobilise the broader Swedish resource base through a strong Team Sweden approach where we work closely with Swedish municipalities, agencies and partners to bring relevant, high-quality expertise to our international collaborations. Importantly, this allows us to bring valuable lessons, methods, and experience back to our municipalities and regions at home.

We have continued our engagement in Ukraine, focusing on strengthening local self-governance, enhancing municipal capacities, supporting recovery and reconstruction in war-affected regions, and transforming municipal waste management in line with EU standards. In Moldova, we began supporting public administration reform and EU alignment. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we continued to strengthen the two associations to implement their core mandates and strategic plans – something I witnessed firsthand during the Board's visit in September. Seeing progress on the ground and the positive changes in communities reinforced the importance of partnership, trust, and long-term engagement.

At the same time, shifting aid priorities led us to close several long-term projects in the Middle East and North Africa. We are proud of the impact achieved, from strengthened local leadership to improved public services and more sustainable governance practices, clear evidence of the value of local capacity-building in crisis-affected contexts. We also see signs of a clear demand from different international development donors to support the continuation of our work in this region.

Internally, 2025 brought several developments that strengthened our capacity to support partners globally. A new organisational structure resulted in improved processes and greater efficiency. We welcomed new and returning colleagues and bid farewell to others – each having contributed in meaningful ways to the evolution of our work and programmes.

The results we present in this report are a testament to the passion and dedication of our team, partners, and donors. I invite you to explore it and learn more about how SALAR International continues to advance decentralisation processes and generate meaningful, lasting change across a wide range of contexts.

Sincerely,
Ewa-May Karlsson, Board Chair, SALAR International
Regional Councillor in the region of Västerbotten, Centre Party.

Introduction

As the international arm of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) in development cooperation, SALAR International works with local and regional governments, their associations, and national counterparts to strengthen multi-level governance systems and ensure that people can shape their own lives in inclusive local democracies and resilient communities. This Annual Report for 2025 highlights how locally grounded partnerships supported local democracy, resilience, and inclusion in a period of overlapping crises.

The report presents SALAR International’s results across four Domains of Change – broad areas in which significant changes are needed to reach its longer-term vision: democracy and accountability in multi-level governance, sustainability and resilience of cities and communities, rights and participation for equitable local democracies, and global responses to local challenges.



This report is a testimony to the capacity, creativity, and resilience of partners – local governments, their associations and other local government actors – in contexts as diverse as Algeria, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, North Macedonia, Serbia, Syria, Türkiye, and Ukraine.

Where We Work



Key Takeaways

- ✓ SALAR International's work strengthened the core functions of local democracy by advancing fiscal decentralisation, local revenue mobilisation, and evidence-based planning, helping municipalities base decisions on resources and design services closer to citizens' real needs.
- ✓ Local governments and their associations have become more influential policy actors, with concrete gains in legislative reforms and structured participation of LGAs in national policy dialogue and EU accession processes in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries.
- ✓ Local government resilience and sustainability have been improved through local economic development, systemic approaches to waste management and circular economy, linking local service delivery to climate and environmental objectives.
- ✓ Rights, participation and equality were embedded more firmly in local governance, with municipalities taking on stronger roles in preventing and responding to gender-based violence, seeking ways to be gender-responsive in tax and education services, and building gender equality and women-in-governance networks.
- ✓ International peer-to-peer collaboration proved to be a distinctive asset, with Swedish and partner municipalities co-developing tools, exchange platforms and joint initiatives.

2025 at a Glance

- 13** Countries
- 16** Partnerships with Local Government Associations
- 327** Local and Regional Authorities supported

OUR VISION
For all people to have the power to shape their own lives in inclusive local democracies and resilient communities.

Themes of support

Number of Local and Regional Governments supported in:

79 Recovery, Resilience, Crisis Management	69 Waste management	35 Administrative services	33 Education services	40 Functionality and delivery of core functions	27 Gender equality
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Methods of support

- ✓ Training/skill building
- ✓ Advisory services
- ✓ Method and tool development
- ✓ Peer exchange and learning
- ✓ Multi-level dialogue
- ✓ Process facilitation
- ✓ Material support
- ✓ Analysis and evidence

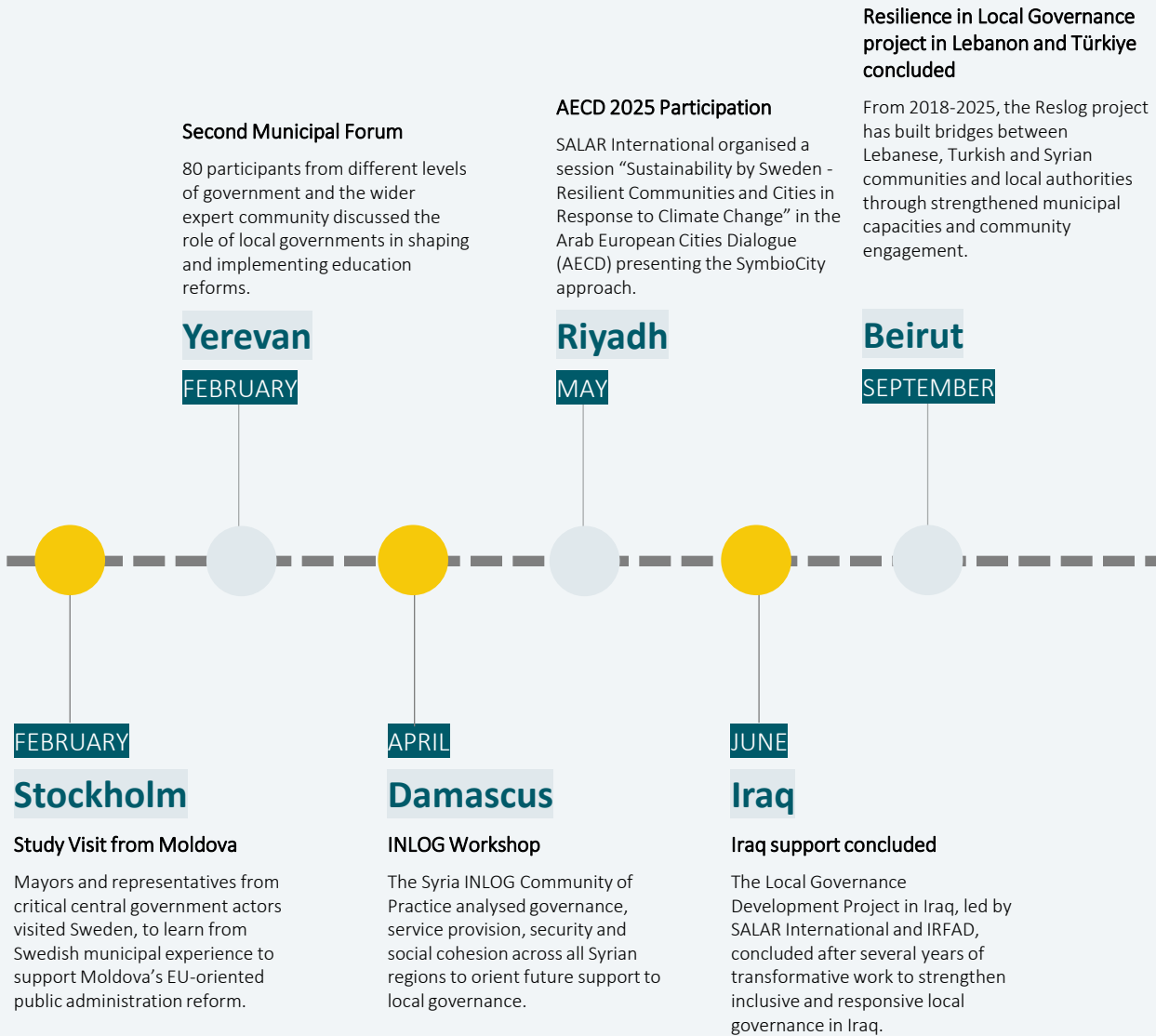
Innovative tools and practices leveraging Swedish experiences

- ✓ Locally-led recovery methodology, Ukraine
- ✓ Circular Economy Municipal Support Package, Serbia
- ✓ Green Transition Centre, Mersin, Türkiye
- ✓ Integrated and Inclusive Resilience Framework, Türkiye
- ✓ Climate Change Adaptation Planning Tool Iraq
- ✓ School-Municipality Nexus

Contributions to national policies & frameworks

- ✓ Local governance and fiscal decentralisation
- ✓ Public financial management and budgeting
- ✓ Sectoral service reforms
- ✓ Cross-cutting agendas

Overview of Key Events



Conference on EU Accession

130 participants from 65 municipalities gathered alongside entity authorities, international organisations, and representatives of the Directorate for European Integration to highlight critical role of local governments in EU accession processes.

Swedish Embassy visits partner municipalities

The Swedish Ambassador to the DRC His Excellency Joakim Vaverka, visited Kasumbalesa and Balamba (Haut-Katanga), partners of SALAR International.

Forum Cities and Regions for International Partnerships - Localising Global Gateway

SALAR International participated to this unique dialogue forum which reinforced the political backing for a stronger role of local and regional authorities in EU global partnerships.

Sarajevo

SEPTEMBER

Balamba

Kasumbalesa

NOVEMBER

Brussels

DECEMBER

SEPTEMBER

Chişinău

New Project in Moldova

The Public Administration, Citizen Engagement (PACE Local) is funded by Sida and will support implementing the Public Administration Reform Strategy 2023-30 and assist the country's strategic orientation towards EU accession

OCTOBER

Brussels

European Week of Regions and Cities

Participation of All-Ukrainian Local Government Associations in the European Week of Regions and Cities, supported by the Polaris Programme together with the Cities4Cities initiative.

DECEMBER

Skopje

Inter-Municipal Waste Management Board

The municipalities of the Pelagonija and Southwest regions of North Macedonia, with the support of SALAR International, established this fully functional regional governance structure for waste management.

Our Results

This chapter presents the key results achieved through SALAR International's projects worldwide in 2025. It offers an overview of progress in each Domain of Change, highlighting major achievements and outcomes, and showcasing selected tools, approaches, and key learnings



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 1

To support democratic, accountable, and socially responsible multilevel governance systems



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 2

To build sustainable, inclusive, and more resilient cities and communities



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 3

To support peaceful, inclusive, participatory, and more equitable local democracies



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 4

To influence global responses to increasingly support Local Government's ability to implement their mandate and serve citizens



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 1

Democracy and Accountability to Support Multi-level Governance Systems



Democracy and Accountability to Support Multi-level Governance Systems

Achievements in this Domain of Change are foundational, addressing the essence of what inclusive, accountable local democracy is about: understanding what communities need and putting in place transparent systems to resource, implement and evaluate public services at the local level. In 2025, SALAR International's efforts focused on supporting fiscal decentralisation efforts, improving service delivery across governance levels and building institutional capacity for local development planning and financing. Local governments and their associations (LGAs) also strengthened their participation in national policy dialogues, working to ensure that local realities and needs are reflected in national-level decisions and frameworks.

Fiscal decentralisation – central to local democracy

Fiscal decentralisation is not simply a matter of reallocating revenues and expenditures; it is about aligning public resources with the level of government best placed to meet citizens' needs. It is also essential for local democracy. When local governments control spending, and at least part of their own revenues, elections and participation mechanisms influence real decisions rather than symbolic ones. Without fiscal powers, municipal councils risk not being able to respond to communities' actual needs in services, and residents may lose trust in local democracy. SALAR International continues to insert Swedish and other international experiences when supporting reforms and capacities for context-adapted fiscal decentralisation.

→ Understanding and support for fiscal decentralisation:

In **Armenia**, through the *Support to Decentralisation and Local Government in Armenia (DeaLoG)*, the Ministry of Finance has gradually adjusted its position towards fiscal decentralisation. To advance evidence-based dialogue, DeaLog developed a Fiscal Decentralisation GAP analysis providing a strong foundation for necessary reform discussions.

It built an understanding of the critical role tax sharing and financial aspects of the decentralisation reform play in ensuring greater democratic accountability and placing service provision closer to communities. The analysis included a desk study using secondary data from the state treasury system, legal frameworks, and recent development partner studies.

A nationwide survey of Armenian municipalities covered own revenues, intergovernmental transfers, service delivery, and the level of local autonomy in decision-making. With a 70% response rate from municipalities, the findings provided a solid foundation for recommendations to inform the decentralisation strategy. Key stakeholder reactions demonstrate the utility of the findings for the ongoing reform discussions to match municipalities' willingness to take on more responsibilities with needed resources. SALAR International's contribution lies in working with and connecting actors at the central and local levels, leveraging expertise and generating evidence-based recommendations that make municipalities' situations more visible.

→ Local governments' role in tax administration:

In **Ukraine**, SALAR International, through its *Supporting Multilevel Governance in Ukraine* programme *Polaris*, has supported decentralisation reforms through analysis and data, combined with a wide reach to municipalities and close relationships with Local Government Associations.



Administrative Service Centre, Ukraine



Although the ongoing war has put a pause on several structural reforms in the decentralisation field, the policy framework setting conditions of local governments in Ukraine is evolving. One example: Between late 2024 and early 2025, 150 State Tax Service front offices were closed across Ukraine, reducing access to essential tax administration for residents and businesses locally. Responding to this change and building on long-term collaboration with Administrative Service Centres (ASCs) since 2016, Polaris conducted impact analysis, supported consultations, and developed good practice documentation with key partners, including the Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities (AATC), Local Governments, the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers, Administrative Service Centre managers, and policy experts and the State Tax Service. The most tangible outcome is the integration of 12 tax services into ASCs, ensuring residents can obtain vital tax-related documents needed for social services and business. It reduces travel burden, increases transparency and local accountability, and enables municipalities to reconcile outstanding tax liabilities, likely contributing to improved tax compliance and higher local revenues.

→ Strengthening own source revenue mobilisation

In **DRC**, the *Appui à la gouvernance inclusive et redevable (AGIR)* project supports six partner municipalities in strengthening their capacity for own-source revenue mobilisation. Common challenges include a lack of understanding of who should pay a local tax or fee, conflicting claims to revenue between municipalities and a lack of transparency in tax collection and administration.

In Likasi and Kikula, AGIR facilitated negotiation of inter-municipal revenue-sharing for daily market taxes, resolving longstanding disputes and setting clear criteria for collection and sharing of the revenues.

In Likasi, the first city-wide taxpayer mapping was done and included training of city agents to act ethically and transparently, as well as using digital tools. In Balamba, where own-source revenue collection previously was neglected and poorly organised, each service has now started to map taxpayers. Revenue collection is managed according to legal procedures in the municipality, and roles between departments have been clarified. Balamba officials report that the municipality now covers human resource costs from own-source revenue without resorting to mining royalties.



Balamba, the Democratic Republic of Congo



The inauguration of the Local Development Centre in Diwaniyah

Local development planning – It all starts with a plan

Local development planning is essential for local and regional authorities' enhanced capacity to deliver core functions. It enables planning investments and allocating resources to ensure that vital local services respond to needs and that available resources are used in the best way.

→ Strengthening fact-based planning processes:

The Local Governance Development in Iraq (LOGDEVI) project in Iraq, implemented with long-term partner Iraqi Research Foundation for Analysis and Development (IRFAD), helped move local planning from ad-hoc, centrally instructed practices to more structured, data-informed local planning and policy development.

To address confusion and duplication in local planning mandates, a manual was developed to provide standard guidelines for planning processes. The work was a joint effort with the Ministry of Planning's Regional Development department and the local governments of Muthanna and Diwaniyah, focusing on hands-on capacity building, a collection of planning regulations, and gap analysis to identify ambiguities and needed improvements. An official review process ensured that the manual adhered to all aspects of the legal and policy frameworks.

In Diwaniyah, *LOGDEVI* facilitated the establishment of Iraq's first Local Development Centre (LDC). The Centre has the mandate to enhance the transparency and effectiveness of local decision-making by institutionalising fact-based planning and improving the use of gender-sensitive data.

SALAR International and IRFAD supported recruitment, equipment, staff training, and coordination with sectoral departments to collect and integrate planning data. The gender balance in the LDC is unprecedented, with more than 60 per cent of staff being women.

LDC has already contributed to improved inter-departmental collaboration and built capacity for data-driven decision-making within the governorate. A specialised three-week training on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) was conducted in April-May 2025 for 21 sectoral staff (half of them being women) from Diwaniyah and Muthanna governorates.

They learned to extract and analyse spatial data aligned for local planning. The workshop concluded with strong recommendations to expand such training across other relevant institutions to enhance planning quality and performance. With the LDC being equipped with an advanced GIS system (software, server, screens, plotter, maps, and computers), critical preconditions for leveraging GIS are in place.

Finally, in collaboration with the Swedish Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the project promoted central-local climate change alliances among government agencies and introduced a local government climate change adaptation planning tailored to Iraq's circumstances. The tool, originally developed by the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI) in collaboration with SALAR, was translated into Arabic. Additionally, 15 resource persons from the provinces of Muthanna, Diwaniyah, and central government agencies were trained as trainers on the climate adaptation tool.



"The development of this tool represents an important strategic step in supporting climate change adaptation efforts in Iraq, as it constitutes a national investment in a more stable and secure future. It contributes to the protection of natural resources, enhances community resilience, and ensures the well-being of present and future generations."

Dr. Jassim Abdulaziz Hammadi, Deputy Minister for Technical Affairs, Head of the National Initiative for Supporting Energy and Reducing Emissions



→ **Institutionalising inclusive, green, and crisis-responsive planning:**

The *Resilience in Local Government (RESLOG)* project in **Türkiye** made significant strides in institutionalising inclusive, green, and crisis-responsive planning and service provision at the municipal level. This change encompassed municipal leadership, planning units, climate change teams, social services, migrant units, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) relations offices, and service delivery teams in five pilot municipalities (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, Mersin Metropolitan Municipality, Gaziantep Şahinbey Municipality, and Bursa Yıldırım Municipality). Partner municipalities have integrated inclusive, green, and crisis-responsive approaches into their planning processes and service provision, making these approaches a permanent part of municipal operations.

Relevant municipal units have been strengthened and new units established to address climate change, social services, migrant affairs, and NGO relations. There has also been a shift towards increased openness to involve civil society. As a result, these municipalities are in a better position to deliver services that address the needs of both host and refugee communities. This strengthens sustainability, social cohesion, and resilience in response to future crises.



What we are learning

- ✓ Time is a luxury, but also essential. In the examples of Iraq and Türkiye, more than seven years enabled building strong and trust-based relationships.
- ✓ Tools and process must be versatile and flexible to adapt to new contexts, including crises and shocks (natural and man-made).
- ✓ Working within existing legal and planning frameworks and actively linking national and local levels is crucial.
- ✓ In fluid and unstable governance contexts like Iraq, institutionalising reforms and embedding new knowledge into permanent structures requires patient, detailed work to strengthen administrative procedures and systems.
- ✓ Gathering accurate information and citizen consultations are cross-cutting contributions to sound planning processes.



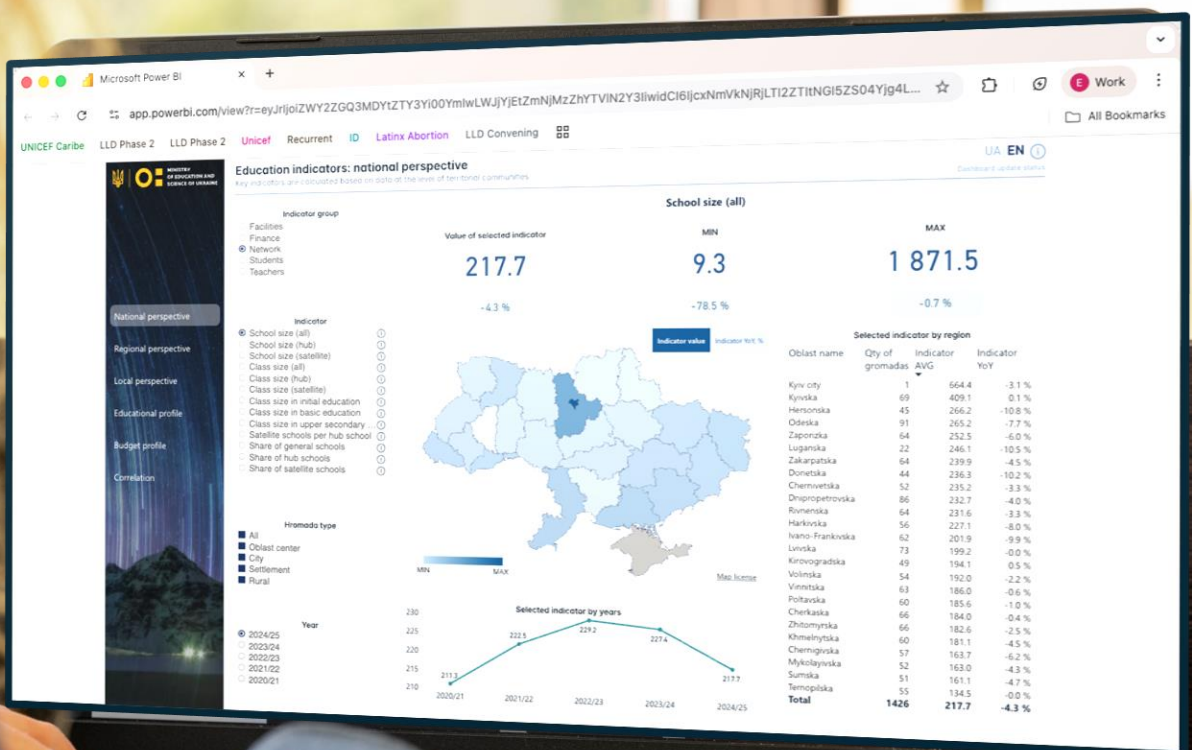
Building functional decentralised education systems

Decentralisation in the education sector enables local authorities to tailor educational policies, resources, and school management approaches to local needs. At the same time, education also requires harmonised service standards and resource allocation so that students meet similar and equal conditions across a country, calling for strong multi-level coordination.

→ Strengthening data-driven education delivery:

In **Ukraine**, SALAR International, through its *Polaris* programme, has supported national policy actions and coordination and accompanied municipalities in delivering education services with increased efficiency.

Structured consultations between municipalities, LGAs, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, and parliamentarians informed regulatory changes, the framework for reorganising secondary education networks being one example. Other critical achievements included the continued support for the development of education subvention statements for municipalities and updating the **Education Indicator Dashboard**. This tool enables analysing the status and development trends of general secondary education and strengthens data-driven decision-making capacity for education managers across levels of government.



Education Indicator Dashboard, Ukraine



At the local level, SALAR International provided systematic support to municipalities and regions in developing effective education governance and the efficient use of resources at the local and regional levels. Themes of cooperation included reorganising school networks, implementing upper secondary school reform, building communication among education stakeholders to reduce resistance to change, strengthening the resilience of education systems during wartime, and ensuring equitable access to quality educational services for all learners. Partner municipalities improved education services by taking on necessary yet sometimes unpopular changes, such as pooling small schools to increase class sizes, to raise the efficiency and quality of education. SALAR International accompaniment emphasises in-depth stakeholder consultation before recommending any actions, ensuring solutions are responsive to local needs and realities.

A high-level delegation visited Sweden to compare and reflect on education reforms. Practical experiences in Swedish municipalities provided inspiration for what is possible at the local level.

“Despite the war, Ukraine continues to develop its education system – and our partners recognise this. During the visit, we discussed how to make education governance even more transparent and how to strengthen support for hromadas, municipalities. It is very important for us not only to study international experience, but to understand how to adapt best practices to Ukrainian realities. We are returning to Ukraine not only with impressions, but with concrete tools.”

Nadiia Kuzmichova, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine.



On a study visit to Sweden, Deputy Ministers of Education and Science of Ukraine, Nadiia Kuzmichova and Anastasiia Konovalova met with Joakim Malmström, Director-General of the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket). Photo by Skolverket.



Local Government Associations – Driving policy change

→ **Local Government Associations remain vital channels to represent members at the central level:**

National Local Government Associations in **Ukraine** are more proactive in policy engagement, and regional political leaders are increasingly involved in parliamentary and ministry events when relevant reform initiatives are being discussed. LGA representatives contribute more substantively to such dialogue, feeding community perspectives into national discussions. LGAs also initiated key policy discussions through thematic forums and direct consultations with ministries and the Parliament. Their proposals – on budget declarations, tax codes, local tax administration, veteran and gender policies, secondary school reform, and recovery planning – were developed through regional engagement and supported by SALAR International expert input. Each forum resulted in resolutions to inform policy engagement. This underscores the pivotal role of Associations in connecting local realities with national decision-making.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, as part of a long-standing collaboration with SALAR International, the two Associations of Municipalities and Cities (AMCs) have further strengthened evidence-based advocacy capacity. They had substantial involvement in legislative consultations and amendments and advocated for enabling policies impacting municipalities. In Republika Srpska, one of the two entities, the AMC engaged in ongoing consultations with the Ministry of Administration and Local Self-Government regarding the Law on Salaries of Employees in Local Government and advocated for uniform yet flexible salary regulation across municipalities, representing member interests. Another example is how the AMC in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina influenced the Law on Budgets. The amendments have enabled mayors to declare temporary financing, which is critical for cash-flow management.



Representatives of Local Government Associations discuss the delineation of powers between different levels of local self-government and executive authorities. Kyiv, 5 September 2025.



On an annual basis, ahead of September 1 (beginning of new school year) Khoy Municipality donates school bags with necessary stationery to first-grade students at the schools.

Armenia- Making education sector reforms work through data and local testing

Armenia is in the process of undertaking a comprehensive decentralisation reform. For education, reform discussions currently focus on how to shift parts of school management, especially the use and maintenance of school buildings, from the centre to communities, but the precise division of powers, financing responsibilities, and decision-making authority remain to be clearly defined. The draft [‘2027–2031 Decentralisation of Powers Strategy and Action Plan’](#), prepared by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure includes proposals to further decentralise certain education-related functions. SALAR International’s *DeaLog* project combines partnerships with municipalities and evidence-based policy dialogue to support the ongoing reform process.

As part of the sustained engagement with the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (MoESCS), SALAR International conducted a functional review of Armenia’s school management system. It assessed the level of administrative decentralisation and its impact on educational outcomes, focusing on governance functions, stakeholder roles, and the distribution of competences. The review concludes that school autonomy and local government involvement remain limited, and suggests that more decentralisation, better funding, stronger teacher support, and greater digitalisation could improve both quality and equity of education.

Closer ties between municipalities and schools

Since 2023, DeaLoG has supported cooperation between schools and municipalities, applying the Maturity Model and integrating it with SALAR’s STYRSAM model, used in Swedish municipalities. The partnerships, involving 10 municipalities and 34 schools, produced action plans for improved cooperation. Cooperation is geared towards improving the quality of education and enhancing the practical use of school buildings for local development, addressing various educational and social needs of the community, for instance, adult learning and civic education opportunities or activities for vulnerable groups (poor, disabled, etc.).



“The school-municipality nexus is an important factor assuring the effectiveness of educational processes. The municipality should be actively involved in school-related matters.”

Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (MoESCS)

This aligns with the strategic goal of the MoESCS of transforming the schools of Armenia into local development centres (in its school hub model), especially in small and rural areas. The experiences showcased solution-oriented thinking and practical examples of municipalities willing and able to manage relevant education services.



Maturity Model:

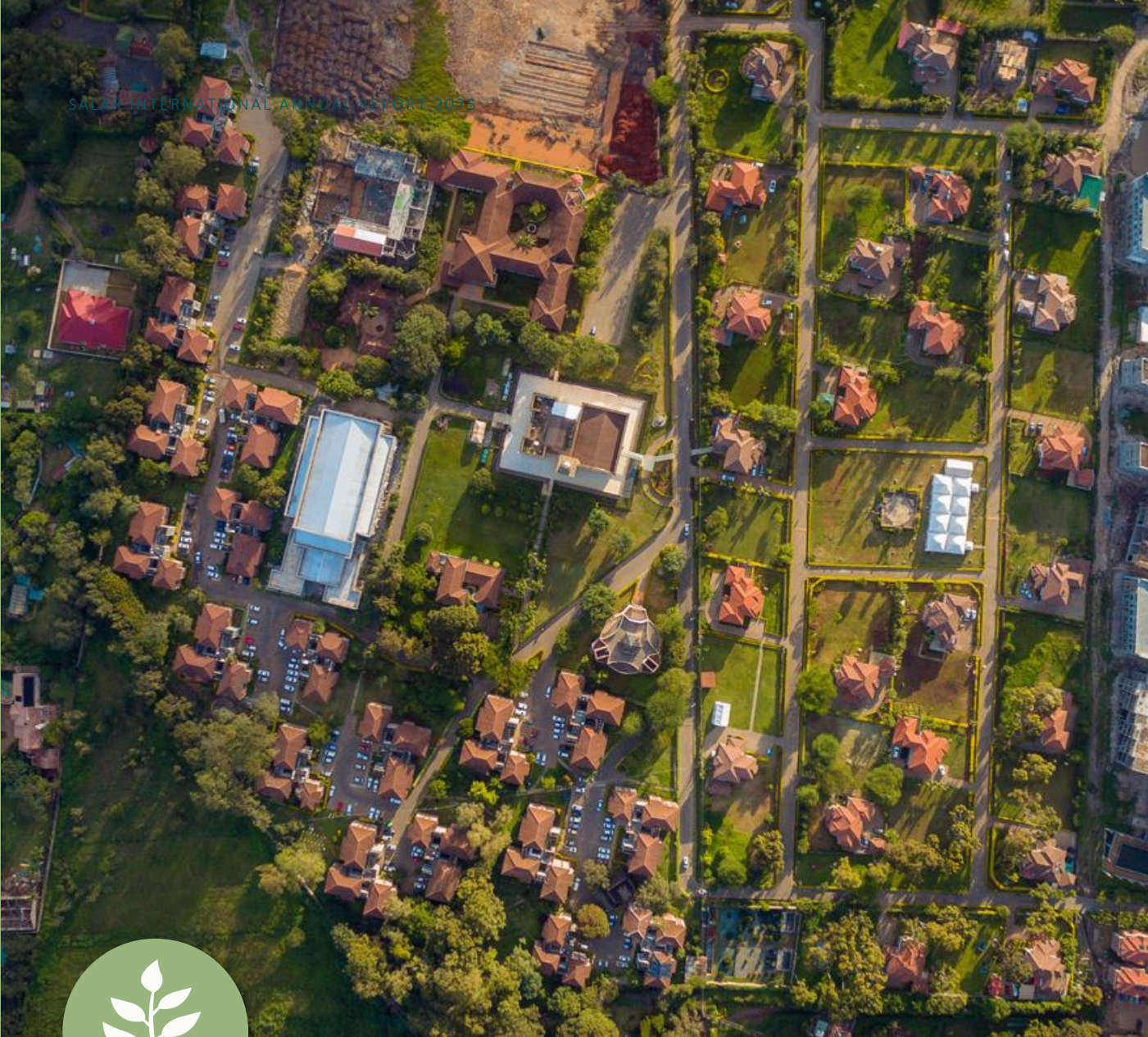
A self-assessment methodology where partner municipalities and schools evaluate the current state of their interaction and develop cooperation plans.

STYRSAM support for collaboration and decision-making in the school sector:

Consists of various materials and documentation to support dialogue and develop a common understanding of responsibilities and roles in schools. The aim is to strengthen governance and management in the school sector and thereby contribute to better school results.

What is next?

To develop options for practically transferring school management responsibilities, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports now endorsed pilots in three Armenian communities. This will happen in newly created school hubs, bringing preschool, primary, secondary and extracurricular education under one roof. Testing how decentralising relevant education functions works out in practice will be a great source of learning to inform next steps – from the bottom up. Together with ministry officials, municipalities and school leaders, SALAR International will bring in legal and educational expertise and leverage the STYRSAM method to clarify functions, identify capacity gaps and strengthen collaborative decision-making.



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 2

Sustainability and Resilience to Build Inclusive Cities and Communities



Sustainability and Resilience to Build Inclusive Cities and Communities

SALAR International partners with local governments to drive sustainable development, especially in the face of multiple crises and governance challenges. Local governments play a central role in providing essential services such as urban planning, mobility, environmental management, and local economic development, all of which are key to resilience. In 2025, SALAR International supported local governments in inclusive local economic development approaches, developed contextually relevant waste management support drawing on Swedish experience, and contributed to local recovery capacity in Ukraine, Türkiye, and Lebanon.

Advancing Local Economic Development strategies towards thriving and more sustainable local communities and economies

Local Economic Development (LED) can serve as a tool for local governments to address challenging contextual trends, including increased costs, reduced revenues, and socio-economic instability. LED helps municipalities to increase local revenues and reduce dependence on external funding, respond to real needs like youth employment and women's economic empowerment, attract investment and strengthen the local business environment, and boost visibility and legitimacy through concrete results. SALAR International projects in Serbia, Türkiye, Lebanon, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Iraq have strengthened local authorities' role as enablers of LED, with promising results.

→ **Comprehensive LED support in Türkiye:**

SALAR International, working with the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (UMT), Marmara Municipalities Union (MMU), and Çukurova Municipalities Union (CMU), tested LED approaches between 2022 and 2025 as part of broader efforts to strengthen municipal resilience when managing migration.

Support enabled municipalities to identify their local economic potential, develop inclusive and forward-looking strategies, and collaborate across sectors with civil society, cooperatives, business actors, and international stakeholders. Pilots particularly sought to address structural exclusion in economic life, focusing on women, youth, and refugees. Experiences from Sweden provided significant added value, as pilot municipalities adapted methods based on Swedish experiences on topics such as green economy and job creation. That learning was relevant and relatable, and motivated engagement on an issue that is relatively new to Turkish municipalities.



Local Economic Development:

A participatory process where municipalities, private sector and communities collaborate to drive local economic growth – creating jobs, activating local assets, promoting inclusive growth alleviating poverty, and integrating new opportunities with the green and digital transitions.



→ **Hands-on support led to notable results in three municipalities:**

Mersin Metropolitan Municipality established the Green Transition Centre, Yıldırım provided capacity development and organisational support for a women-led agricultural cooperative; and Şahinbey upgraded an existing community centre to serve as a hub for entrepreneurship and vocational training, including a digital lab aimed at improving the livelihoods of young women in high-value sectors.

In addition, LED strategies, institutional assessments, stakeholder maps, a LED Handbook, and reference materials for municipalities and practitioners engaging in similar work were produced. Importantly, work on LED contributed to shifting the local narrative concerning migration, demonstrating that, with proactive approaches, migration can support rather than undermine economic development. Since then, the initial project results have been broadened. Mersin's Green Transition Centre expanded partnerships with external stakeholders, launched awareness campaigns on green jobs and skills, and developed programs to promote green entrepreneurship among local youth. In Yıldırım, the experience inspired the municipality to pursue additional funding opportunities to strengthen its internal infrastructure to support the social and solidarity economy and expand its work with local cooperatives. The digital lab improved in Şahinbey inspired other community centers and was also replicated.



Ingredients of LED support in Türkiye

- ✓ Local Economic Development (LED) analyses gave municipalities a clear, evidence-based view of their economy and institutional strengths, gathering data for development indicators at both provincial and district levels.
- ✓ Participatory stakeholder meetings in each pilot area encouraged municipalities to see LED as a shared effort, sparked collaboration among municipal units, and brought in key local economic actors for the first time and reinforced municipalities' role as leading local economic actors.
- ✓ Municipalities identified local priorities and created tailored, needs-based interventions through joint consultations, leading to unique projects.



Mersin Municipality Green Transition Centre Information Meetings



What we are learning

- ✓ LED is closely intertwined with fiscal decentralisation and financial capacity. When municipalities can levy local taxes, their motivation to enable businesses and employment increases. Through clear and simple local regulations and proactive measures, they can help the local economy to grow, which increases the municipal revenue base.
- ✓ LED is a key tool to address inequality, thereby linked with poverty alleviation and gender equality. The potential of LED and the unique entry point to work on it from a governance perspective calls for an expanded focus on this issue over the remainder of this Strategic Period.

→ Advancing women's economic empowerment:

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, ongoing work with LGAs to support gender equality, especially through a gender network, has prompted several municipalities to develop Local Gender Action Plans.

Istočna Ilidža and the City of Istočno Sarajevo, both active in the Gender Equality Network, shared their good practices in providing small and medium-sized enterprise development programmes and measures to support women to start businesses serving their communities. This peer-to-peer exchange was enabled by the gender equality networks of the two Associations of Cities and Municipalities (AMC) in the framework of the cooperation project with SALAR International.



Slobodanka Veselinović is one of many women whose businesses were supported by the Municipality of Istočna Ilidža.



Strengthening environmental protection and climate resilience

Environmental management initiatives, with a focus on waste, in Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Serbia, enhance local capacities, strengthen coordination and develop national policy frameworks. SALAR International facilitated capacity exchange with a broad range of Swedish actors geared at identifying practical lessons which make sense in the local context – rather than a copy and paste approach.

→ More than a technical fix – systemic support in Ukraine:

The *Waste Management for Ukraine* – or WM4U – project was launched in 2024. This comprehensive Swedish-Ukrainian partnership contributes to reforming the municipal waste management system and improving environmental practices. It also supports Ukraine in progressively aligning with the EU Waste Framework Directive as part of the accession process. The project is co-led by the Swedish Association of Waste Management and Recycling (Avfall Sverige) and SALAR, effectively implementing a Team Sweden approach. The initiative provides expertise, conducts studies, delivers material support through donations from Swedish municipalities, and organises peer learning visits as well as mentoring.

WM4U emphasises that waste management reform requires coordinated legislative, institutional, and practical action – from planning and infrastructure to day-to-day operations – to build sustainable, EU-aligned systems for the long term. A major 2025 contribution was strengthened awareness for both Ukrainian and Swedish stakeholders of each other's systems and contexts, laying the foundation for co-creating concrete interventions together. A key takeaway has been the idea that there is a need for systemic change rather than technical quick fixes.



Team Sweden approach in practice

WM4U leverages a collaborative network of Swedish actors – public sector organisations, agencies, and companies. They are pooling their expertise to support Ukrainian counterparts in finding systemic solutions to the challenges faced by the waste sector.

- ✓ Funded by Sida.
- ✓ Jointly managed by Avfall Sverige and SALAR/SALAR International.
- ✓ Coordinated with the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, which runs a parallel programme supporting Ukraine's EU accession process in the waste sector.
- ✓ Done in partnerships between Swedish and Ukrainian municipalities.
- ✓ Involves the Swedish resource base, including engineering consultancy companies for specific assignments, and when relevant.
- ✓ Following the Trust Fund agreement signed between Sida and Nefco in November 2025, WM4U and Nefco have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate joint preparation, financing and implementation of light waste management infrastructure projects in Ukrainian municipalities.

Forty-seven municipalities have been selected for local support, and networks of collaboration between Ukrainian and Swedish municipalities were set up in four regions: Vinnytsia, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kremenchuk and Lozova Clusters.



Losova receives a donation from Uppsala, consisting of 191 waste bins.



Material support included seven large-scale donations of used but high-quality Swedish containers and vehicles to Ukrainian municipalities. In total, 1617 waste containers were delivered to four Ukrainian communities in 2025. This increased bin availability, improved sanitary and aesthetic conditions at waste collection sites and aided the introduction of new practices such as separate waste collection.

The programme also delivered several strategic outputs, forming the basis of reform work and piloting over the next years:

- Analysis of the current waste management tariff system in Ukraine,
- Comparative study on European tariff systems and practices,
- Guidelines for conducting waste composition analyses in Ukraine,
- Four Baseline Reports for the clusters, which will inform the development of Local Waste Management Plans (LWMPs).

An emerging policy result is the initiative of the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine to introduce the Nordic unified waste labelling system, to harmonise household, business, and public sorting practices. The Ministry prepared and shared a draft proposal with other ministries for approval. This system provides clear and consistent visual guidance for separating waste by material type – using recognisable pictograms, colours and terminology that make recycling easier for households, businesses and local authorities alike. The idea to introduce it in Ukraine was informed by a study visit to Sweden, seeing the benefits of a unified pictogram system for waste sorting across the country in action.

→ **From local action plans to regional waste cooperation:**

In **North Macedonia**, 15 out of 18 municipalities in the target region have developed Local Action Plans for waste management and implementation is ongoing.

To lay foundations for good citizen participation in the waste management process, a school education program reached 42 educators in 14 schools across seven municipalities.

This equipped them to foster sustainability habits and awareness among youth through extracurricular activities. During a workshop in Ohrid, Macedonian municipalities worked with Swedish experts to strengthen planning and service delivery for waste collection centres. These centres were highlighted not only as key infrastructure but as a crucial service improvement that reduces illegal dumping, boosts recycling, and enhances legal compliance. Meanwhile, Ohrid, as one of the pilot municipalities, completed the full rollout of its waste separation initiative, including the distribution of new 120-liter bins for plastic and paper, implemented jointly by the municipal administration, utility company, waste specialists, and the civic group “Zbogum Bukovo.”

Beyond these local achievements, decisive steps to regional coordination and integrated planning were taken this year, learning from the Local Action Plan process. In late 2025, the 18 municipalities of the Pelagonija and Southwest regions, with the support of SALAR International, officially established the Inter-Municipal Waste Management Board (IMWMB), now a fully functional regional governance structure for waste management. The drive for increased regional coordination was initiated by the Municipality of Novaci, where a regional sanitary landfill will be constructed, and shared with 17 others. It reflects the need to cooperate to manage the regional sanitary landfill and the upcoming establishment of the regional utility company. The establishment of the IMWMB marks a clear transition away from years of fragmented, ad-hoc solutions. Municipalities are now moving toward a unified regional model with predictable processes, clear mandates, and strengthened inter-institutional coordination. The Board now has the task to guide the development of the new Regional Waste Management Plan 2026–2032, finalising the regional utility company, strengthening institutional coordination, and advancing infrastructure for sorting, recycling, and compliant disposal.



Infographic showing how waste management will be coordinated in the region.



Greater resilience and sustainable development of local communities through crisis preparedness, management, and response

When crises hit, local governments need to keep up essential services running, protect vulnerable groups, and lay the groundwork for long-term recovery. They are well placed to find practical solutions that fit local realities if they collaborate closely with communities and civil society. Central authorities and international partners can leverage this strength, but need to create conducive and responsive policy frameworks and investment plans. This chapter presents how SALAR International has supported municipalities in this role across Türkiye, Lebanon, and Ukraine, strengthening their capacities for inclusive migration management, crisis leadership, and locally led recovery.

→ Strengthening migration management capacities and policy dialogue:

In **Türkiye**, looking back at the multi-year *Reslog* project, we can see that the support strengthened the practical migration management capacities of partner municipalities. Hands-on tools such as migration master plans (MMPs), resilience assessments, and the integration of migration perspectives into strategic, equality, and participation plans were taken up. In some municipalities – like Bursa, Istanbul, and Mersin, the project strengthened the capacity of civil society coordination units and facilitated their engagement with Syrian-led NGOs, while others incorporated migrant and women’s groups directly into planning processes. These inclusive methods led to more citizen-centred urban projects, stronger cooperation with Syrian civil society organisations, and improved gender-sensitive service design. Study visits to Sweden broadened municipalities’ international perspectives and directly inspired new engagement strategies with migrant communities. Over time, municipalities continued using the MMP methodology independently, reporting that it enabled them to include migration goals in strategic plans for the first time. The process also opened local decision-making to Syrian CSOs and strengthened internal coordination across municipal departments, helping social cohesion units mature into confident migration management actors.

The *Reslog* project strengthened cooperation and peer-learning among three municipal unions and created a regular, effective dialogue between municipalities and the national migration authority, Presidency for Migration Management. This led to greater trust, better coordination, and a shared platform for discussing migration challenges. The *Reslog* supported Migration Policy Paper became an influential advocacy tool, helping unions and municipalities gain access to national decision-making processes more effectively, some for the first time.

In policy development process, the Presidency Migration Management shifted from being a lobbying target to an active partner, recognizing municipalities as essential actors in migration management and integrating some of their recommendations into national plans. As a result, municipal advocacy capacity improved, their voice became more unified. UMT demonstrated increased leadership by convening a new Social Cohesion and Migration Commission. These results show that *Reslog* contributed to sustainable, inclusive municipal migration management systems that municipalities have begun to internalise and continue using beyond SALAR International support.

→ Replicating a model for crisis management leadership:

In **Lebanon**, SALAR International supported local authorities’ abilities to effectively respond to crises. Through collaboration since 2020, *Reslog* created a sustainable, decentralised crisis management system grounded in accurate data, coordinated action, and strengthened local-national collaboration. The Crisis Management Unit (CMU) in the Union of Municipalities of Jurd el Qayteh became a model of effective local crisis leadership. Exchange between Swedish and Lebanese actors significantly facilitated meaningful results. Hallsberg Municipality provided a contingency planning model that was translated into Arabic, adapted to the Lebanese context, and rolled out first in the Jurd el Qayteh Union and then across partner municipalities. Due to the success of the *Reslog* crisis management model, enhancing coordination and reaching the most vulnerable through needs-based data analysis, the Governor of Akkar requested its replication in other unions. In 2025, *Reslog* helped expand the model of crisis management units to two additional Unions of Municipalities and two municipalities. The Hallsberg-based contingency training reached Unions of Municipalities covering 42 member municipalities, significantly enhancing preparedness before, during, and after crises.

Furthermore, *Reslog* supported partner Unions of Municipalities and their member municipalities in Akkar in establishing and strengthening Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and data collection. In times of crisis, GIS plays a critical role by enabling timely, location-based decision-making. The availability of accurate data has also enabled development projects to be better aligned with actual local needs, while also strengthening residents’ trust in municipal institutions. Partner UoMs were equipped with digital tools, including updated GIS maps, satellite imagery, and street addressing systems. As a result, 69 municipalities, representing 55 per cent of all municipalities in Akkar, gained access to a comprehensive digital data package. Of these, 55 municipalities completed fully validated socio-economic data collection, enabling them to generate up-to-date information to support planning, beneficiary targeting, emergency response, and service provision.



Serbia – Championing the circular economy

Local governments are pivotal for translating the circular economy concept into practical solutions. They play a key role in managing how resources flow in the daily life of communities – for instance, through local waste management systems, land use and infrastructure permits, or public procurements. They are also close to households and local businesses, which means they know what works in their context.

In Serbia, Kruševac, has emerged as a circular economy leader, with its Circular Economy Working Group using collaborative planning and a baseline assessment to prepare one of the country's first local Circular Economy Roadmaps. Before formal adoption by the City Assembly, the municipality plans a public debate to present the roadmap and gather feedback from stakeholders. As part of a long-standing partnership with SALAR and SALAR International, the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) accompanied the whole process through its Municipal Support Package (MSP) on Circular Economy in Kruševac.

The support from SCTM and SALAR International assists local governments in aligning their circular economy roadmaps with national methodologies and guidelines by providing technical assistance, capacity building, and facilitation of stakeholder engagement. Support to Kruševac was tailored to the city's context and priorities, helping to bridge internal resource constraints. The collaboration also benefited from Swedish experience.

Through several visits and exchanges involving the City of Gothenburg and The Research Institute of Sweden, Kruševac's team drew inspiration, e.g. on how to apply the waste-prevention ladder in practice – from avoiding waste in the first place, to reusing and recycling it, then using residual waste for energy production – all to minimise the final step of disposing waste in landfills. The process in Kruševac has been a great source of learning. It highlighted the importance of strengthening internal capacities within local government departments to ensure the successful implementation of the circular economy. Moreover, fostering strong partnerships with local businesses, public institutions, and civil society is critical for achieving long-term success in transitioning to a circular economy.

SCTM will use this experience to support more local governments among its membership.



A delegation from Serbia visited Sweden to learn from Swedish experience in Circular Economy.



“SCTM plans to build on the experience gained in Kruševac and share these lessons with municipalities and cities through future MSP on local environmental programs, which will include a section on circular economy. This approach will help replicate good practices and support broader implementation at the local level.”

Jana Pavlovic, Project Manager at SCTM



Ukraine – Partnerships for locally-led recovery

Building on experiences with crisis management and resilience in Lebanon and Türkiye, and leveraging tools for urban planning (SymbioCity), SALAR International has launched comprehensive support to locally-led recovery in Ukraine.

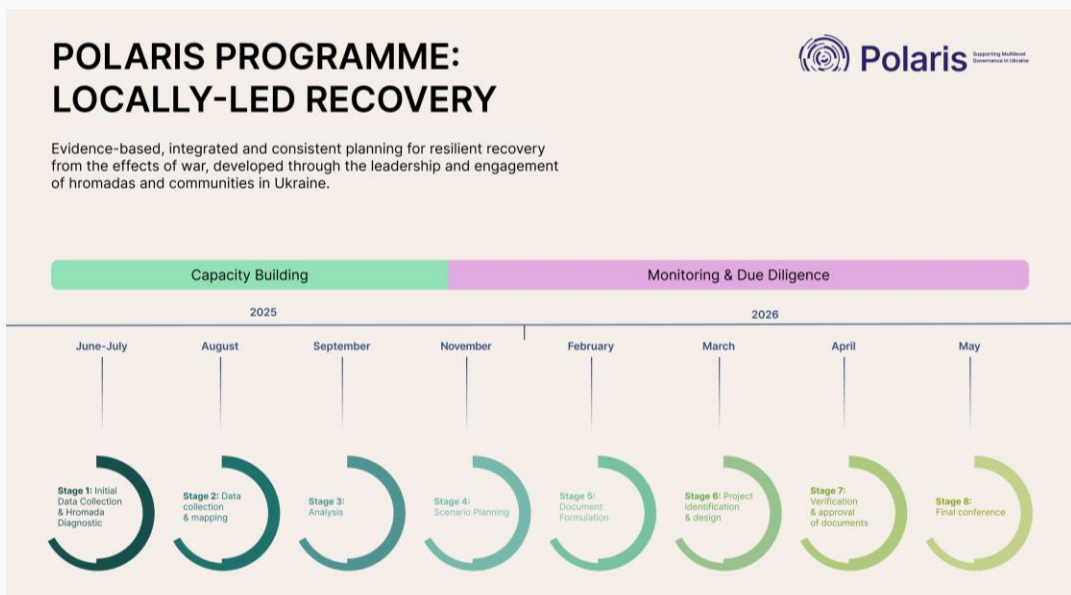
The ongoing full-scale Russian invasion has heavily impacted vital infrastructure, everyday life and public services. Local governments find themselves at the forefront of the immediate humanitarian response and play vital roles in the country's recovery efforts. Mandated to lead local planning processes, they are well-positioned to adapt recovery programmes and efforts to circumstances in their area while ensuring citizens are part and parcel of the process. To strengthen such locally-led recovery, SALAR International is partnering with 13 war-impacted local governments (including those in the Zaporizhzhia, Sumy, and Dnipro regions) and two highly affected regions, Kharkiv and Kherson Oblasts. Closely collaborating with the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine and the State Agency for Restoration, the SALAR International approach leverages existing planning frameworks and adapts them to the specific needs of recovery design.

A unique, evidence-based, digital, and scenario-driven approach to locally-led recovery was crafted. Built as a flexible toolbox, local actors are in the driving seat so that they can tailor solutions to their specific situation. Reflecting the link between good planning and accurate, up-to-date data, GIS is a key feature of the methodology.

It enables local planners and decision-makers to take data-driven decisions, creating a comprehensive visual analysis of the physical environment, service reach and gaps, and the needs of diverse population groups.

The transparent, open-call application process created strong foundations for partnership. Now, a team of senior experts in spatial planning, strategic development, and local self-government provides tailored support. Following the successful completion of initial data collection, needs assessment, and agreement on further areas of cooperation, citizen engagement has been in focus. In November and December 2025, partner municipalities hosted public discussions with residents to craft a shared vision for recovery and development. The outcomes of these discussions form the basis for work on key planning documents (a Comprehensive Spatial Development Plan, an Integrated Development Concept, or a Hromada Development Strategy). In every municipality, the process has its own emphasis – reflecting local challenges, priorities, and capacities.

For example, in the Khmeliv municipality in Sumy Region, several simple channels were used to engage residents – social media posts, announcements, and personal invitations through starostas. Most importantly, choosing a convenient time and location allowed those who work or have children to take part – and it worked. Petro Panchenko, Head of the municipality, emphasised: "We wanted to hear honest and diverse views, because a hromada's 'municipality's' strategy should not be drafted in offices but developed together with the people who live here. I expected an active discussion – and that is exactly what happened". Participants highlighted that the format allowed them to openly voice problems and expectations – and to articulate how they want their municipality to look in a few years.



The 8 steps of the LLR process: Initial Data Collection & Hromada Diagnostic, Data collection & mapping, Analysis, Scenario planning, Document formulation, Project identification & design, Verification & approval of documents; Final conference.



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 3

Rights, Participation, and Equality to Support Equitable Local Democracies



Rights, Participation, and Equality to Support Equitable Local Democracies

Local governments can be key levers for promoting equity, social cohesion, and human rights through making public services accessible to all. Against the backdrop of global democratic decline, SALAR International prioritises rights, participation, and equality as fundamental principles across all its projects, and invests specifically in strengthening gender equality and improving the participation of marginalised groups.

Promoting Gender Equality at the local level

Gender equality promotes local democracy by ensuring that decision-making reflects the needs and perspectives of the entire population – women and men, girls and boys. In 2025, SALAR International projects helped spark peer learning among local politicians and municipal staff, improve local responses to gender-based violence, and integrate gender perspectives in services.

→ The power of networking:

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, following several years of work, over 80 municipalities (half of all municipalities) are now actively engaged in the Gender Equality Network of the Associations of Municipalities and Cities of Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The core group of 15 municipalities has developed into a cohesive operational hub, co-leading the network's agenda and sharing knowledge through peer-to-peer exchange, enabled by a multi-stage training process and other initiatives. Municipal staff are now leading gender equality trainings, such as the sessions for newly elected councillors, demonstrating increased ownership, capacity, and confidence in promoting gender equality within their institutions. This result shows that gender equality work is no longer driven solely by external actors or short-term projects but is becoming embedded in the structures and practices of local government.

The institutionalisation of the network and its peer-led approach foster sustainability and resilience beyond political cycles. This not only strengthens local responses to gender-based issues, such as violence against women, but also empowers municipalities to be active agents of change, contributing to broader systemic transformation across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Inspired by Sweden's long-standing work with women's leadership networks, the "Women in Governance Network" was created in **Ukraine** within the framework of the Polaris Programme, together with LGAs.

Political empowerment for women in Ukraine remains a challenge, with significant gender gaps in representation and leadership. Despite some progress, women still occupy only a small share of positions as heads of local councils following the 2020 local elections, and they face additional pressures from persistent gender stereotypes.

Recognising these challenges, this network offers practical leadership support through both online and in-person meetings, where participants themselves identify the most relevant themes and priorities. Its mission is to enable women political leaders to consolidate their positions, foster a culture of equality, and build alliances that strengthen their leadership – locally, regionally, and nationally.



What we are learning

- ✓ Basic knowledge about gender and gender capacity is often lacking or insufficient, calling for systematic training of officials and decision makers supported by gender experts, starting from fundamentals. This lays the groundwork for effective gender mainstreaming and implementation of gender action plans.
- ✓ Local networks and peer exchanges are powerful drivers of change, but they require management support and strong follow-up to move from plans to real implementation.
- ✓ International experience, such as Swedish municipal practice, is a valuable catalyst, demonstrating how gender equality is relevant across the main services at the local level.



Representatives from the Gender Equality Network in BiH participate in the annual Gender Conference in Bosnia and Herzegovina



→ Local Governments addressing gender-based violence:

The prevalence of gender-based violence globally calls on local authorities to lead response and prevention efforts. In **Ukraine**, SALAR International supported eight local governments (hromadas) in developing roadmaps to strengthen systems for the prevention of and response to domestic violence. Achievements include improvements in coordination among actors working on the prevention of and response to gender-based violence, using new approaches to preventive work on domestic violence, and the development of internal procedures for responding to cases of domestic violence.



Today we see that hromadas are capable of creating their own models of prevention and response – thoughtful and sustainable. The most valuable aspect is the ability to act in a coordinated way and to keep the person at the centre of the system. This is the foundation on which effective prevention of domestic violence is built.

Yuliia Savelieva, Lead of the Gender Equality Area of the Polaris Programme

The municipality of Tešanj, an active participant in the Gender Equality Network of Associations of Municipalities and Cities in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, has become a model of local government leadership in combating violence against women and girls. Alarming statistics show that every second woman in the country has experienced some form of violence, and the growing number of femicides highlights the urgent need for action.

Through its Local Gender Action Plan and related activities, the municipality has taken critical steps to establish a sustainable response to violence against women and domestic violence. The adoption and effective monitoring of a Protocol on Procedures in Cases of Domestic Violence led to the introduction of more comprehensive measures for perpetrators.

The SALAR International project worked with Tešanj and other municipalities to share their practices and experiences through the gender equality network of the two Associations of Municipalities and Cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus raising awareness about victims' rights, particularly through the introduction of reporting procedures.



Hasan Plančić, Member of the implementation team for Tešanj's Gender Action Plan.



→ **Examples for integrating gender perspectives into local government action:**

In **DRC**, the heads of gender departments used a peer networking meeting to jointly identify how they could provide value to ongoing collaborations in the broader SALAR project in six municipalities. A taxpayer mapping in Likasi, implemented those ideas directly, through the design of the mapping tool, the selection of data collectors (gender-mixed teams) and the results (understanding gendered impact of taxes on MSMEs, for instance). In **Ukraine**, a pilot training on conducting Gender Audits in schools with 20 educators (19 women, 1 man) from partner municipalities allowed education institutions to receive practical tools to conduct audits in their schools, and several schools have implemented audits since. This is the first structured effort to use Gender Audits at the school level, marking an important step toward embedding Gender Equality in educational practice and motivating schools to actively promote non-discrimination and inclusive culture.

→ **Keeping the crucial role of Local Governments for Gender Equality on the agenda:**

In September 2025, SALAR International co-hosted the international conference “Reshaping Power for Equality: Women’s Political Participation and the Future of Democracy” in Stockholm, together with SALAR and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). The event gathered around 100 leaders, policymakers, and experts from 48 countries. Over two days, participants engaged in high-level dialogues, panel discussions, and exchanges on feminist local governance, women’s political participation, and the role of local authorities in renewing democracy. SALAR International also provided strategic inputs to Carina Ohlsson, member of the European Parliament, for developing her expert opinion on Women’s Rights for the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). The input highlighted the crucial role of local and regional authorities in advancing women’s rights and accelerating the implementation of equality commitments.



SALAR International co-hosted the international conference *Reshaping Power for Equality: Women’s Political Participation and the Future of Democracy*.



Iraq: Improving coordination to serve the most marginalised groups

Various factors shape how people living in local communities can benefit from local services and how they might be exposed to stressors. Groups marginalised due to gender, disability, displacement, and other vulnerabilities face particularly significant barriers to accessing the services they need. Social norms often exacerbate such experiences of exclusion in society. Local governments, as critical service providers, can help overcome exclusion and integrate marginalised groups in local communities. However, they often lack the necessary human capital, knowledge, material resources or coordination mechanisms to seize that role.

Against this backdrop, the experience from Duhok in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq illustrates how targeted support can help local authorities start changing these patterns. In Duhok, SALAR International and its partner IRFAD supported local and regional authorities in enhancing systems of working with vulnerable groups. The long-term collaboration between the governorate’s office, Directorate of Labour and Social Affairs (DoLSA), the Directorate of Education (DOE), the Child Protection Committee (CPC), all in Duhok, as well as relevant regional ministries,

has led to significant institutional development of the social care sector in Duhok. Duhok Governorate has emerged as a leader in the Kurdish region in areas of social services, child protection, and education for children with special needs. Importantly, perceptions of the role of local authorities in tackling complex issues like child protection and inclusive education have shifted towards more multi-sectoral, participatory ways of working.

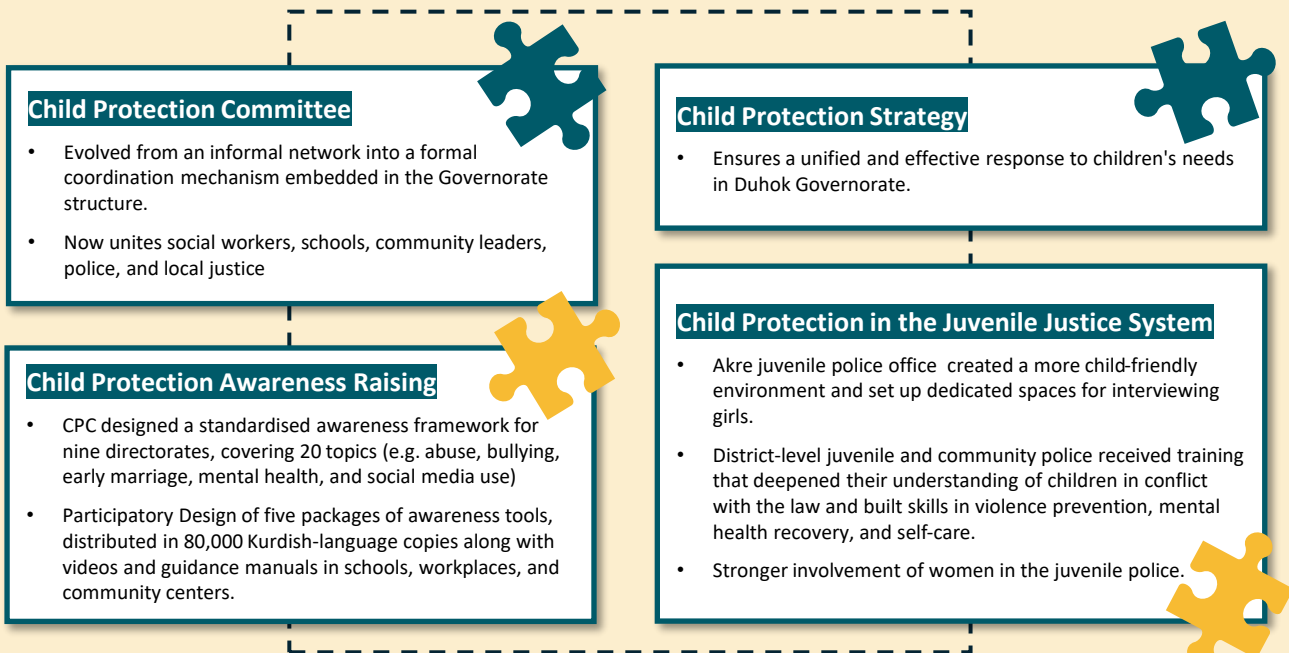
→ Embedding a child rights perspective into social services:

This is demonstrated by the comprehensive changes within the child protection sector. It had historically been fragmented between social affairs, education, justice, health, and NGOs, with weak coordination and unclear roles, which hampered case management and follow-up for at-risk children. Cooperation resulted in strengthened cross-sector coordination, with the Child Protection Committee evolving into an oversight body in Duhok Governorate, while creating a shared working space for the diverse actors needed for effective child protection across sectors.

Strengthening Child Protection Services in Duhok



Cross-sector coordination





Inclusive Education is now integrated into Duhok schools.

Practical shifts in the Juvenile Justice Sector and a large Child Protection Awareness Campaign are some of the ripples enabled through improved coordination and strategy. The cooperation also slowly built support for the need for gender-sensitivity in child protection work, considering the specific needs and challenges of girls and boys.

Over recent years, the project has closely coordinated with the Ministry of Education (KRI) to find ways of wider dissemination of the modules. The eight inclusive education training modules were handed over and have since been uploaded to the Ministry of Education's digital education platform, so that they are accessible for future use in teachers' training. For an upcoming initiative, the ministry has shared the Modules with partner Save the Children for piloting in two kindergartens in Erbil and in three primary schools in Baghdad for one year.



Awareness campaign materials gave particular attention to issues putting girls at risk, including depression and early marriage.

→ Strengthening capacities for inclusive education delivery:

A comprehensive Inclusive Education Curriculum was developed through participatory processes with teachers, parents, and social workers and involving peer exchange with Swedish municipalities. It features clear tools, training modules, and coordination mechanisms for delivering inclusive education.



What we are learning

- ✓ Building genuine ownership within local institutions was central. It strengthened their own capacities and institutional frameworks, enhancing sustainability. Partnering with the institutions to deliver better services with a long-term outlook, rather than reaching children directly, was the unique added value of the engagement.
- ✓ The initiative worked through a systems approach by ensuring vertical alignment and buy-in, building horizontal integration (such as in the CPC) and investing in administrative structures and processes which are indispensable for clarity of roles and sustainability.
- ✓ Pilot projects on specific issues were instrumental in showing tangible results. Testing approaches at a small scale before expansion created credibility and buy-in across institutions (“scaling from below”).
- ✓ Contextualising Swedish expertise and partnerships added value. Beyond technical inputs, this centred on how to translate key principles such as sector collaboration, inclusive education design, and community-based prevention work into concrete practices in Iraq.



DOMAIN OF CHANGE 4

Global Responses to Local Challenges



Global Response to Local Challenges

Swedish-Ukrainian municipal partnership forum in Stockholm, May 2025.

Global trends and actions impact local governments, which calls for their involvement in shaping global policies. In 2025, SALAR International contributed to peer-to-peer collaboration within and beyond borders, brought local governments and LGAs closer to EU accession processes, and participated in convenings to inform international development frameworks impacting local governments.

Solidarity and collaboration go a long way – the unique value of peer-to-peer exchanges

SALAR is driven by collaboration among municipalities of different sizes, socio-economic profiles, challenges and opportunities. SALAR International nurtures such peer-to-peer learning and support across all its projects. These not only enhance knowledge but also foster long-term relations of support.

→ Partnerships that drive change:

Against the backdrop of exceptional needs of Ukrainian municipalities under war conditions, SALAR International integrates international partnerships with Ukrainian counterparts in both its initiatives (*Polaris* and *WM4U* programmes). Through the [Cities4Cities platform](#), new partnerships have been established, taking the total number beyond 80. The Cities4Cities portal, which is now featuring over 400 Ukrainian profiles, is an important tool for establishing contacts. SALAR International accompanies partnerships with a needs-based approach.

In the area of waste management, WM4U uses a cluster approach (pairing a Ukrainian with a Swedish cluster of municipalities) to develop learning relations over a longer period.

“Being a mayor is not only about bridges, roads, or cultural centres — it’s above all about values. From that perspective, the best thing we have done is our sisterhood with Lviv. Our firefighters sent equipment to Lviv — and were inspired by the work of their Ukrainian colleagues. Our police handed over patrol cars — but gained new approaches to their own work. This partnership is not one-way. In truth, we receive more from Lviv than we can give.”

Bart Somers, Mayor of Mechelen

“We are deeply grateful for all the help and support, but we also always think — what can we give in return? The experience of living and working under immense pressure, in extremely difficult circumstances, is also knowledge that we can share. Because war, unfortunately, is not the only ‘black swan’ that can come into the life of our communities — there are natural disasters, industrial accidents, terrorist and hybrid threats, pandemics.”

Ostap Protsiuk, Advisor to the Mayor of Lviv

Inter-municipal partnerships have yielded tangible humanitarian, knowledge, and social outcomes while also strengthening networks between Ukrainian and European municipalities. Several partnerships provided direct humanitarian aid, including communal vehicles and maintenance equipment. The Poltava–Kalmar partnership demonstrates this. Kalmar donated a fire truck and facilitated a large delegation visit that included humanitarian organisations. Camps and exchanges with Swedish, French, and German municipalities supported war-affected Ukrainian youth with a focus on mental health and wellbeing. Strengthening citizen participation remains a central objective within the Cities4Cities training programs, echoed in partnerships which have encouraged inclusion of new groups in local governance and recovery processes. What is important is that these partnerships are two-way streets. Partnerships can also foster economic connections in the context of recovery efforts.



Advancing inclusive local governance through international collaboration

The *Inclusive Local Governance Programme (INLOG)* worked as a leadership development, knowledge exchange and practice innovation space, reaching over 50 participants from Algeria, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, and Syria. The programme brought together public servants at local, regional and/or national levels, members of academia and think tanks, and civil society organisations (CSOs). Throughout 2024-25, INLOG combined workshops with online exchanges in a hybrid approach. The training enabled participants to grow as leaders, build their skills, and apply what they learned in their day-to-day work. It has also brought practitioners closer together – they started active multidisciplinary national Communities of Practice and worked on joint initiatives together.

To create space for continued cross-context exchanges, a Regional Community of Practice was formed by country groups. It will be hosted at the [Local Public Sector Alliance](#), functioning as an institutional home for continuing exchanges and learning on decentralisation.



What we are learning

- ✓ The success of the programme depended on flexible, adaptive management – from logistics, language, meeting times to terminology used and mentoring support provided.
- ✓ When working with challenging and dynamic contexts in a region ripe with armed conflict, creating safe space and common ground was vital. Having a shared code of conduct, open lines of communication, and carefully managing politically-sensitive content were pivotal.
- ✓ For creating participant commitment and engagement, it was important to define and service what motivates each participant.
- ✓ The programme was implemented in Arabic, which broadened the diversity of practitioners reached. It also brought together stakeholders who usually do not work closely together (e.g. civil society and municipal staff), which provided for new perspectives and learning.

INLOG Feedback from participants



8 out of 10 participants

assessed INLOG as relevant to their professional roles



Ripple effects on organisations and sector

Over 90% of survey respondents reported tangible contributions to their organisation or sector because of participating in the INLOG programme:

1. Enhancing training and advisory services with the knowledge gained
2. Integrating participatory planning in processes
3. Adding a gender and inclusion lens
4. Connecting theory to practice, developing realistic proposals



I became more confident in initiating reform-oriented discussions and engaging colleagues and decision-makers with evidence-based arguments.

INLOG Participant in final feedback survey, Dec 2025

As a result of my participation in the Inclusive Governance Programme, I worked to strengthen the participatory planning approach within the municipality by involving sectors in setting priorities, linking them to local community needs, and publishing the results and data.

INLOG Participant in final feedback survey, Dec 2025





→ Collaborative solutions crafted:

At the country level, joint projects gave participants a concrete space to design and test their own responses to governance issues, creating an avenue for agency of local actors. Working in mixed teams and starting from specific challenges and opportunities (for example, unclear roles between levels of government or weak citizen participation), they developed practical proposals or tools. They used targeted input from INLOG experts when needed. During the final in-country workshops, they presented their outputs, received feedback from national ministries and international partners, and deepened relationships that can support implementation.



JORDAN

The team developed an evidence-based guide related to resilient, participatory, proactive urban planning at the local level. It provides a comprehensive framework to inform decision-making and support the formulation of a shared, participatory, and gender-sensitive vision among stakeholders to drive change at the local level, through the mainstreaming of SymbioCity¹ methods and tools. The INLOG programme provided expertise on integrating GIS data. The Guide is particularly timely as Jordan is currently shaping a new local administration law aimed at strengthening citizen participation in urban planning. The guide has already been piloted in several municipalities, with feedback from these experiences integrated into the final version.



MOROCCO

Participants crafted recommendations for the fiscal transfer system with a view to enhance equity and efficiency in the allocation of resources to local authorities. They also produced a practical guide to support local and regional collectivities in applying for international funding opportunities. Both outputs were presented to key stakeholders, including the Ministry of the Interior and Association Marocaine des Présidents des Conseils Communaux (AMPCC).



ALGERIA

The group addressed weaknesses in citizen engagement through an app prototype to crowdsource citizen feedback on municipal services. The app is designed to enable direct interaction between residents and local authorities around services. Local communities could give feedback and thereby participate in improving local service delivery. During the final workshop, participants also compared the app with a similar tool used by the Stockholm City Council, which the Swedish Ambassador presented.



SYRIA

Participated with a larger country group, representing most of Syria's localities and modalities of local governance. The national Community of Practice has constituted a safe space for them to share experiences on promoting local democracy and learn about the situation in other areas. The Syrian group started the development of a Knowledge Platform for Local Administration in Syria (KPLAS) – a database gathering all available legislation, reports, and information related to local administration that will be a valuable resource for local governance actors, researchers and civil society.



LIBYA

During the final national workshop, in collaboration with the National Organisation for Governance and Local Development Support, the Libya team presented two key outputs:

- a comprehensive study proposal for reforming fiscal decentralisation in Libya, addressing key structural, legislative, and financial constraints to strengthen municipal finance, local revenue mobilisation, and intergovernmental fiscal relations.
- a strategic framework on enhancing community participation in activating the governorate system in Libya, focusing on participatory governance mechanisms, citizen engagement, and the role of local actors in supporting the effective functioning of the governorate level.

¹ SymbioCity is a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable urban development that transforms urban challenges into opportunities. Find out more here: <https://symbiocity.org/>



Improving the position of local governments in EU accession processes and enhancing their access to financial instruments

SALAR International expanded its work in supporting local governments to participate in EU accession processes, carrying one key message: the success of the accession process will depend on the daily work of municipalities. Local governments deliver services, uphold standards, and communicate reforms to citizens, and, eventually, this makes them the frontline actors of European integration.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine, capacity development activities and multi-stakeholder discussions served to prepare municipalities for accessing EU funding. SALAR International's new Moldova project *PACE Local: Local Public Administration, Citizen Engagement*, also supports EU accession, aligned with the Swedish cooperation agenda in the country. Local governments in the cooperation countries are increasingly involved in discussions, and platforms for dialogue are in place.

→ Positioning for increased influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

Local governments and their two Associations have significantly increased their preparedness and engagement with EU institutions over the last two years.

A key outcome is that, after sustained advocacy, the EU has started designing a dedicated municipal programme under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). This marks a major shift from the previous approach, where no local-government-specific IPA funding existed. In parallel, SALAR International and the Associations of Municipalities and Cities boosted municipal capacity to apply for EU funds through targeted, hands-on training, leading to several successful grant applications.

Municipal staff now navigate EU calls for proposals more effectively, improving local access to resources and encouraging sustained use of EU funding opportunities. SALAR International also led a series of meetings with the EU Delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and international donors to initiate dialogue on a new initiative aimed at supporting the role of LGs in the EU integration process. AMCs facilitated structured peer exchange, with the EU network of local representatives growing to around 40 association members, providing a platform for learning, coordination, and joint positioning in the EU accession process. A high-level conference in Sarajevo in September 2025 brought together over 130 participants from municipalities, state institutions, and international partners, producing joint conclusions that called for a permanent state–local coordination platform, continued training for the EU networks, formal local participation in negotiation working groups, and stronger regional cooperation and joint lobbying in Brussels.



EU conference in Sarajevo, September 2025.



→ Consolidated local influence on negotiation process in Serbia:

Following the structured work of SCTM, supported by SALAR International, EU accession processes now systematically integrate local governance perspectives in Serbia. Influence channels include participation in the Negotiation Group on Chapter 27 and the Inter-Sectoral Working Group for Green Agenda, feeding in municipal proposals. The EU accession process for Chapter 27 increasingly prioritises local-level implementation, as demonstrated by the government's full incorporation of SCTM's municipal-focused proposals into the 2023 Green Agenda Progress Report early in 2025. SCTM's active role in the Inter-sectoral Working Group further ensures local perspectives on urban mobility and circular economy are embedded in national Green Agenda measures.

→ Laying the foundations through interactions among LGAs on EU accession and EU advocacy in Ukraine:

Against the backdrop of the EU accession process preparations, four national Local Government Associations are strengthening their collaboration and expanding their contact with EU stakeholders. Alignment and collaboration are critical to contribute to the consolidation of Local Government perspectives to enhance influence in upcoming negotiation platforms and processes. A key achievement was the design and roll-out of a comprehensive and tailored course on EU accession, which had been requested by the Associations.

→ Preparing for opportunities in Moldova:

The opening of EU accession negotiations in **Moldova** presents local authorities with specific challenges and opportunities, including responsibility for implementing EU standards in areas ranging from environment to public procurement, but also a pending influx of investment funds that could help to deliver decentralised responsibilities. With the goal to prepare local authorities in the best way possible for the EU accession process, SALAR International is closely coordinating with national authorities (State Chancellery, the Bureau of European Integration), the Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova (CALM), the EU delegation and local governments. Information sessions on EU integration helped raise awareness. The envisaged launch of an EU Officer Network can provide a critical platform for building capacities to apply for EU funds, as Pre-Accession funds are projected to become available for the local level in 2028.



What are we learning

- ✓ EU Accession impact analysis has served as a useful tool demonstrating why and on what Local Government participation is needed.
- ✓ There is a critical role of LGAs in aggregating perspectives of local governments and feeding those into the negotiation of key chapters, yet, considering the lengthy and unpredictable nature of EU accession processes, cultivating a strong position of LSGs takes long-term support and political buy-in.

Advocating for Local Governments in Global Dialogues

2025 was an important year for global policy advocacy, particularly concerning support for local governance issues in future EU and Swedish aid. SALAR International was therefore active in strengthening the voice of local and regional governments in various European and global platforms.

→ Contributing to Team Sweden:

SALAR International has been active in different Team Sweden constellations. As a member of the core team for Team Sweden Smart Cities, SALAR International has been involved in drafting a strategy for the coming years. It is also active within Team Sweden Ukraine, where the focus is on contributing to discussions on Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction framework. In all cases, SALAR International has worked in close dialogue with various Swedish public and private actors to showcase how a focus on 'aid and trade' should be underpinned by a strong level of engagement of local and regional authorities.



→ Inputs to the EU Committee of the Regions opinions:

While SALAR International has previously supported Swedish representatives in the Committee of the Regions on the development of opinions on EU legislation, during 2025, the SALAR International team gave input on three opinions on EU enlargement, the Roadmap on Women's Rights and the Global Gateway. The latter follows extensive dialogue in Brussels on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (2028-34) and the Global Europe instrument. Furthermore, through joint advocacy under the Council of European Municipalities (**PLATFORMA**), SALAR International successfully advocated for a greater recognition of the role of local and regional authorities in future EU development cooperation, including a greater emphasis on multi-level governance and "Global Gateway" investments that are underpinned by a 360-degree approach targeting accountability and sustainability. At the 2025 Policy Forum on Development and EU-LAC Forum of Local and Regional Governments, Bogota, SALAR International argued that local authorities must be treated as strategic peace and development actors, drawing on lessons from Colombia to show how municipalities contributed to sustainable, inclusive recovery in fragile contexts.

→ Localising the Global Gateway:

2025 culminated in SALAR International's participation in the Forum Cities and Regions for International Partnerships – Localising Global Gateway, in Brussels in December, where a new initiative aimed at localising the Global Gateway, to be implemented by SALAR International and partners, was announced by Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA).

During 2025, SALAR International was also active in various other global policy fora, including:

- Arab European Cities Dialogue (AECD), May 2025: SALAR International joined mayors and partners to promote local climate resilience, decentralisation, and inclusive urban governance, positioning municipalities as central to implementing global climate and sustainability commitments.
- Asia Pacific Cities Summit and Mayors Forum, October 2025: SALAR International was invited to attend the largest global cities forum and showcase examples of the quality of life from Swedish Municipalities.
- Local Self-Governance in Central Asia Forum, December 2025: SALAR International presented its experiences of support to fiscal decentralisation and territorial reforms, considered relevant for Central Asian countries.



SALAR International gave input to an opinion on the Roadmap on Women's Rights.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

In 2025, SALAR International's efforts demonstrated that long-term, locally anchored partnerships can advance complex reforms and contribute to concrete improvements in people's lives. From fiscal decentralisation and education reforms to circular economy, gender equality, child protection and migration management, local governments and their associations utilised SALAR International's support to provide better services and influence national and international policy processes.

Sustainable success largely depends on patient, consistent investment in local ownership, as well as improved vertical relations and horizontal cooperation. Peer-to-peer exchange with Swedish municipalities and regions adds value, not by transferring ready-made models or knowledge, but by co-developing context-adapted solutions.

Looking ahead to 2026 and the remainder of the Strategic Period, SALAR International will continue many of the initiatives featured in this report, guided by the four main pillars of our Global Strategy (i.e. Democracy and Accountability, Resilience and Sustainability, Rights, Participation and Equality and Global Responses to Local Challenges).

Trusted, long-term partnerships with local and regional authorities and their associations, grounded in SALAR's institutional expertise, are the backbone of SALAR International's work. In an increasingly uncertain global context, it is more urgent than ever that these authorities are recognised as essential actors in addressing democratic backsliding, climate change, migration, economic stagnation, inequality and conflict. It is both humbling and encouraging that SALAR International's partners are already at the forefront – often far from the international spotlight – of tackling these complex challenges facing the public sector worldwide.

In response, three strategic focus areas will enhance SALAR International's ongoing work and impact:



1. Give local and regional authorities a stronger voice in development cooperation

SALAR International will build on the policy dialogue started in 2025 to advocate for clearer recognition of local and regional authorities in Swedish and EU external development assistance, including in the Global Europe instrument, EU “Global Gateway” investments, and related programming. This entails working with EU bodies, Team Sweden and partners in other countries so that major investments are planned and implemented with local actors at the table, supported by technical assistance, peer learning and practical tools such as SymbioCity.



2. Promote Local Economic Development through partnerships with Swedish regions

Together with Swedish regions, SALAR International will explore how their LED, green transition and regional innovation experiences can support local and regional authorities in partner countries. This will include assisting SALAR and its members to connect with local and regional authorities and initiating new partnership constellations to share high-value Swedish solutions (e.g. in waste management, climate resilience, and digitalisation) with other countries. Targeted training and advisory services will enhance the capacities of local and regional authorities to attract and manage investments, foster a supportive environment for LED, and link EU investments in growth corridors and zones with Team Sweden initiatives.



3. Support resilient local services in fragile and crisis-affected contexts

SALAR International will deepen its work in accompanying local and regional authorities in situations of conflict, disaster or large-scale displacement. The focus will be on enabling local government capacity, while also contributing to global discussions on how humanitarian, development and peace efforts can reinforce one another (the Triple Nexus). Reflecting the relevance of these experiences for Swedish municipalities, SALAR International will harvest lessons from international programming for the benefit of SALAR's members, for example, when it comes to civil contingencies.