

SALAR International 

A part of the Swedish Association
of Local Authorities and Regions

25

Years of Impact

The journey of SALAR International
Stories, milestones, and reflections from over
two decades of operation



Salar International
Stockholm, November 2025

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In the face of global challenges, SALAR International has been at the forefront.

Forewords by **Anders Henriksson**,
Chairman of the Swedish Association of Local
Authorities and Regions

As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of SALAR International, I would like to shortly reiterate its importance in an increasingly challenging and complex global landscape. One of the key strengths of SALAR International is its ability to utilize the vast experience and capacities that Swedish municipalities possess to counter global challenges and foster international dialogue and cooperation. This unique advantage enables SALAR International to draw on proven practices and innovative solutions from Sweden to create impactful and sustainable outcomes worldwide, whilst also strengthening the position of SALAR and our members internationally and bringing valuable lessons back home.

One initiative which SALAR International has worked with through various methods is municipal partnership programmes. Through establishing municipal partnerships, the relation between SALAR International and SALAR's members has been utilized to facilitate bilateral exchanges of knowledge and best practices, as such allowing both Swedish and international municipalities to strengthen their local governance practices and the quality of life for their respective community.

These partnerships have not only fostered collaboration but also built bridges of understanding and cooperation that transcend borders.

In the face of global challenges, SALAR International has been at the forefront. By showcasing and leveraging Swedish initiatives and capabilities, SALAR International has championed and achieved sustainable solutions and fostered resilient communities. The Polaris programme has been instrumental in supporting multi-level governance reforms in Ukraine. Meanwhile, in Lebanon and Türkiye, the RESLOG initiative has focused on enhancing the resilience of local governments. In Armenia and Moldova, efforts have been directed towards equipping local governments with the capacities needed to meet European standards of local governance. Across greatly diverse contexts and settings, SALAR International is united by a shared commitment of advancing local governance.

Through SALAR International, Swedish municipalities have a platform to showcase their successes and good practices on a global stage but they also have an opportunity to gain valuable insights and experiences.

The engagement of Swedish municipalities not only benefits international partners but can also bring back innovative ideas and practices to be adapted to meet the needs of communities in Sweden.

At the same time, none of these achievements would have been possible without the long-term support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Their trust in SALAR International as an implementing partner has been essential in enabling the implementation of projects of high relevance and quality. Sida's commitment has not only provided the resources required but also affirmed the importance of strengthening local governance as a cornerstone of sustainable development. Together with Sida and local partners, SALAR International have been able to achieve results that have made a real difference in communities worldwide.

SALAR International remains steadfast in its mission to support local and regional authorities in navigating the complexities of modern governance. We, SALAR and its members, will continue to support this process. Through innovation, collaboration and advocacy, we can ensure that local authorities in Sweden continue to take the lead in enhancing the resilience and sustainability of local authorities across the world.

Where we have worked

A world map with a light teal background. The regions of South America, Europe, and Africa are highlighted in a darker teal color. The map shows the outlines of continents and countries.

Europe:

Albania
Belarus
Bosnia & Herzegovina
Bulgaria
Czech Republic
Estonia
Georgia
Hungary
Kosovo
Latvia
Lithuania
Moldova
Montenegro
North Macedonia
Poland
Romania
Russia
Serbia
Slovakia
Ukraine

South America:

Bolivia
Colombia
Cuba
Ecuador
Peru

Africa:

Algeria
Botswana
Democratic Republic of Congo
Ethiopia
Kenya
Liberia
Libya
Morocco
Namibia
Rwanda
South Africa
Tunisia
Uganda
Zambia
Zimbabwe



Asia:

Armenia
Bangladesh
Cambodia
China
India
Indonesia
Iraq
Jordan
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Lebanon
Mongolia
Myanmar
Philippines
Syria
Thailand
Türkiye
Vietnam

58
countries

The journey of SALAR International

Over the past 25 years, SALAR International has embarked on a noteworthy journey in international development cooperation together with partners and donors around the globe. Our story begins in the 1990s, when the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (SALA) established a unit for international cooperation. At the time, the strong international interest in understanding the Swedish model of local self-governance provided the foundation for exchanges and collaboration. Out of this momentum, and through discussions between SALA and Sida, SALA-IDA, now SALAR International, was created with the purpose of mobilising the unique competence and experience of the Swedish local government system.

Our journey from 2000 to today has been marked by global challenges, shifting political landscapes, and evolving development priorities. Along the way, we have strengthened partnerships, broadened our thematic areas, and contributed to building resilient and democratic institutions in diverse contexts. In this chapter, we share some of the moments and milestones that have been decisive in shaping where we stand today, 25 years later.

2000 A NEW BEGINNING

SALAR International is established as a separate entity within SALAR, marking the start of a new chapter: utilizing Swedish experience in local democracy and governance in a global context.

2001 TESTING THE WATERS

Our first international engagements, a project in Yugoslavia and fact-finding mission in Rwanda.

2003 BUILDING LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS IN TÜRKIYE



The collaboration with the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (UMT) was not solely our first engagement in Türkiye. It resulted in two highly successful projects, Turkish-Swedish Partnership Network (TUSENET) and Turkish-Swedish Partnership for Local Governance (TUSELOG), both of which included the mobilisation of SALAR members in partnership with Turkish Municipalities. It was the start of a relationship that would shape nearly two decades of continuous cooperation, which helped to redefine the role of UMT and supported capacity building and advocacy on a wide range of thematic.

2004 FIRST STEPS IN UKRAINE



The project “Support to administrative and legal experiment in the Irpin region” marked the start of our journey with Ukraine. Ukraine has later come to be a central partner highlighting the transformative potential of governance and decentralisation reforms in times of democratic transition.

2004 MUNICIPAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM



SALAR International designed and led the Swedish Municipal Partnership Programme, fostering peer-to-peer learning between Swedish municipalities and their international counterparts. This approach has later come to be a reoccurring component of our projects.



2005 A DEEPER ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Governance Accountability Project (GAP) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, implemented with financing from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Sida, marked the beginning of our work in post-conflict regions on a larger scale, whilst at the same time demonstrating how a focus on accountable and transparent local self-governance can lay the foundations for stability.



2009 SUPPORTING SOUTHERN AFRICA THROUGH P3 PROGRAMME

An important part of decentralisation reform is the strengthening of the capacities of local government associations (LGAs). In Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa, we supported the capacity of LGAs to provide technical support to member municipalities, under our first EU-funded, multi-country project. For us, it marked a shift in how we worked – placing an increased focus on tools that support transparency in local public service delivery, including the role that LGAs play in disseminating best practice.



2010 SYMBIOCIITY PROGRAMME



After being approached by Sida, we were entrusted with the responsibility of leading SymbioCity, a global programme on urban sustainability that draws extensively from models, tools, and approaches developed by Swedish municipalities.

The SymbioCity Approach has been systematically shared with international partners, enabling practical application and capacity building in cities across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This engagement changed our philosophy and way of working, moving from bilateral partnerships to a more active engagement in global knowledge development and policy advocacy on sustainable urban development.

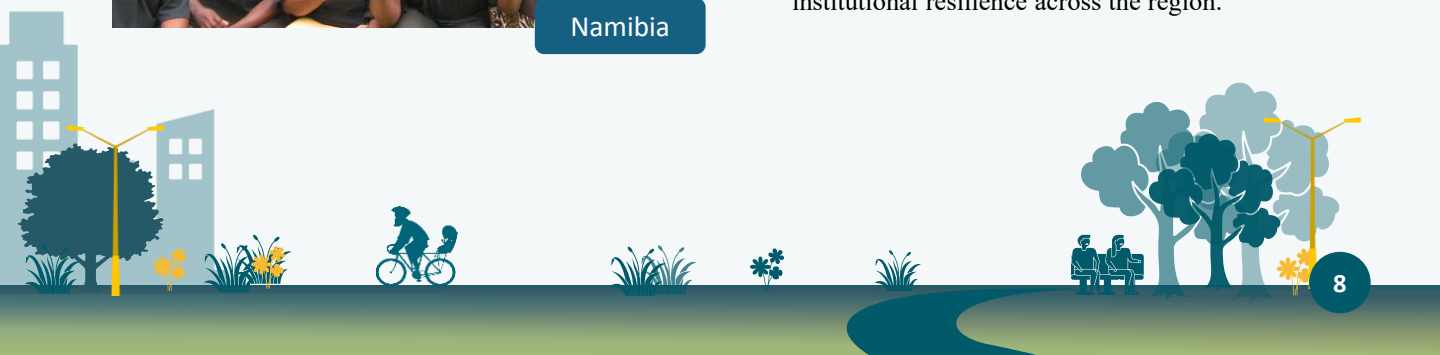
The SymbioCity programme also lays the foundation for our work on participatory and evidence-based planning for urban infrastructure improvements across a wide range of thematic.

2010 THE ARAB SPRING

Originating in Tunisia, the Arab spring sparked a wave of pro-democracy popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, driven by frustration with authoritarian regimes, widespread corruption, and poor economic conditions.



Building on our initial engagement in Iraq and Syria, we established a regional office in Jordan, and subsequently implemented a wide range of projects and assignments funded by different donors to support decentralisation reforms and institutional resilience across the region.



2011 BUILDING CONTINUITY IN SERBIA

Following a request for partnership from the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM), we started working in Serbia. This engagement has since continued across several project phases and thematic areas, and involved SALAR members directly. The partnership highlighted the wide range of thematic areas in which local governments can exchange experiences.

2012 ENGAGEMENT IN IRAQ: FROM POST-CONFLICT TO INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Local governments are often affected by political and societal transformations. Fragile contexts necessitate governance that is highly flexible and responsive to local needs.

Our engagement in Iraq started with governance reforms in the social care sector, improving services in a system under great strain.

Later, between 2018 and 2025, work expanded within the LOGDEVI project, supporting broader local governance development at provincial levels in the south and the Kurdistan region of Iraq, with national and regional government take-up of results.

The experience in Iraq led to valuable lessons in terms of the need for flexible and conflict-sensitive approaches, which we have subsequently made use of in other countries in conflict or post-conflict.



Support to Child Protection Services

FRAMEWORK AGREEMENTS ON DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS (SIDA), GENDER EQUITY (SIDA), GOVERNANCE (EU)

SALAR International was awarded Framework Agreements with Sida and EU. These key agreements resulted in numerous strategic assignments in a wide range of countries. The geographic and thematic insights gained from these assignments were invaluable to SALAR International's development.

2013 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ACROSS CONTINENTS



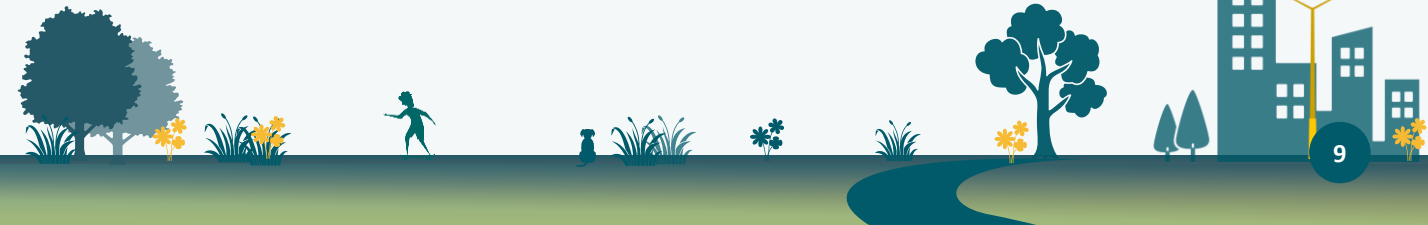
In 2013, the global SymbioCity programme took us to Indonesia and China, facilitating municipal cooperation between Swedish cities and pilot cities.

This cooperation highlighted that despite cultural, political, and economic differences, cities share many of the same challenges, further reinforcing our belief in peer-to-peer exchange as a powerful tool for learning and problem-solving.

2014 SOLIDARITY WITH UKRAINE



Following the Maidan revolution, Ukraine embarked on an ambitious decentralisation reform. Through the Sida-financed Decentralisation Support Project and EU-supported Ukraine – Local Empowerment, Accountability and Development (U-LEAD) programme, we became deeply involved in one of Europe's most important reform processes. Beyond this, these efforts also laid the groundwork for subsequent projects that continue to build institutional capacity, promote local governance, and foster resilience in Ukrainian municipalities.



2015 INTERNATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Numerous Sida-financed International Training Programmes were implemented during 2015 - 2025, some in cooperation with the International Centre for Local Democracy. These inspired future trainings such as the Executive Programme in Innovation and Urban Management, implemented with the Arab Urban Development Institute and Berkeley University California in 2024.

EXPANDING SYMBIOCITY

In Kenya, following the establishment of forty-seven county governments under the 2010 Constitution, SALAR International collaborated with the Council of Governors to introduce and integrate the SymbioCity approach to support the sustainable development of the newly formed local governments.

In the same year, the second phase of the global SymbioCity programme was launched. Building on the success of the first phase and strengthened by lessons learned, this phase placed greater emphasis on gender mainstreaming, participatory planning, and climate resilience, and was implemented in collaboration with cities in Colombia, Tunisia, Ethiopia, and Myanmar.



2016 SUPPORTING THE PEACE AGREEMENT IN COLOMBIA

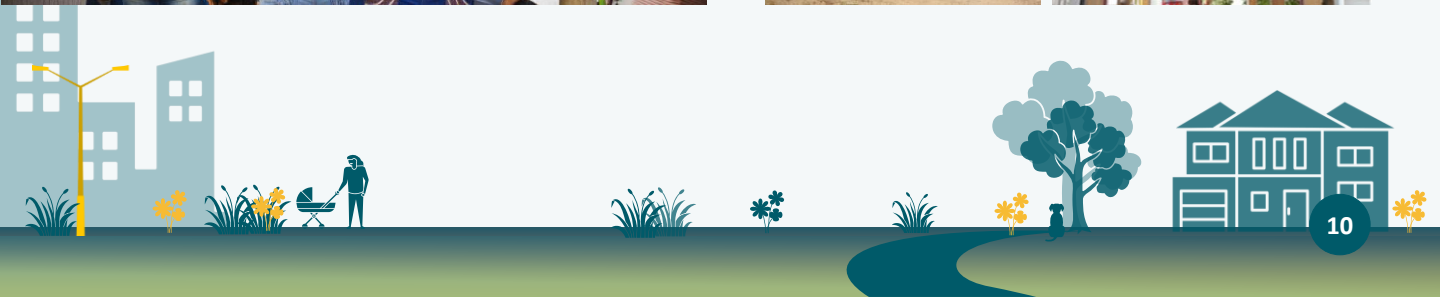
The peace agreement in Colombia placed strong emphasis on local governance as a key component of sustainable peace, as evidenced through the introduction of territorial development programmes.

SALAR International supported these efforts through the FOINCIDE project, working to enhance inclusion, accountability, and equity in local governance across post-conflict regions.



2017 RESPONDING TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS THROUGH RESLOG

The Syrian crisis triggered mass displacement, with millions seeking refuge in neighbouring countries like Türkiye and Lebanon. This sudden influx placed immense pressure on local governments, exposing them to complex, multi-layered challenges. By focusing on strengthening the transformative capacities of affected municipalities, we have worked to enhance the resilience and effectiveness of local governance in both countries. RESLOG generated wide-ranging lessons on durable solutions and local migration governance, a space where few international actors have significant programmatic experience.



2018 DESCENTRALISATION REFORM IN TUNISIA

Following initial engagement during 2013 – 2017, we supported Tunisia’s ambitious decentralisation reform.

By supporting national policy dialogue (including fiscal decentralisation reforms), as well as municipal capacity building, we aimed to foster conditions for democratic accountability and balanced regional development in the country.



2021 RELOCATION TO SALAR OFFICE



SALAR International relocates to the main SALAR headquarters, ensuring a deeper level of engagement with political representatives and experts working across all SALAR divisions.

2022 ARMENIA’S DESCENTRALISATION JOURNEY

Having signed the European Charter of Local Self-Government, Armenia has dedicated itself to reforming its inherited centralised political system.

As part of Sweden’s support to Armenia, through the Resilient Syunik initiative, SALAR International works to support Armenia’s reforms in fiscal and education decentralisation.



2023 BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN THE MENA REGION



Following years of work across the region, we observed a strong demand for a continuation of support to reform champions across the region. Hence we developed an executive training programme aimed at building local capacity, reform advocacy and creating a “community of practice” across the region. By connecting municipal leaders, associations, and civil society actors, we have created a platform for like-minded actors aiming at governance innovation.

2024 A NEW GLOBAL STRATEGY, FOCUSED ON AID AND POLICY ADVOCACY

SALAR International’s new Global Strategy was adopted. This Strategy included a first concrete focus on aid policy advocacy. It has become the basis for a global learning framework, resulting in Annual Results Reports across all SALAR International programmes.



2024

INAUGURAL AFRICAN URBAN FORUM

Following extensive engagement at successive World Urban Forums, SALAR International participated in the first African Urban Forum. This included a keynote during a panel session on “Sustainable and Resilient Development in Africa”.

2025

MOST RECENT PROJECT MOLDOVA- PACE LOCAL

PACE Local, our most recent project, aims to support the Moldovan government to implement their Public Administration Reform Strategy, as well as assist the country on its path to EU-accession.



2025

SUPPORT TO SWEDISH REPRESENTATIVES IN THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Enhanced engagement in policy advocacy targeting EU institutions. While SALAR International previously supported Swedish representatives in the Committee of the Regions concerning the development of opinions on relevant legislation (eg. Ukraine Facility, 2023), during 2025 our 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 Global Europe, including joint advocacy under the Council of European Municipalities.



25 Years of impact



From local to European:

The synergy between Albania's decentralisation and EU-integration

Without robust local governance, the risk of recentralisation and diminished local democratic oversight in the face of EU accession looms large.

From local to European: The synergy between Albania's decentralisation and EU-integration

In the intricate process of European Union integration, local governance often plays a pivotal yet understated role. Local and regional governments are responsible for implementing 70% of the EU acquis, covering critical policy areas such as governance, environment, infrastructure, and regional development. This responsibility underscores the necessity of equipping local governments with the capacities to manage EU accession and meet its stringent standards.

Without robust local governance, the risk of recentralisation and diminished local democratic oversight in the face of EU accession looms large. This is where the synergy between decentralisation and EU integration becomes not just important, but essential. Local governments, when empowered, can tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of their communities, leading to more effective and efficient outcomes.

SALAR International's role in Albania

Between 2005 - 2012, with Sida support, SALAR International implemented the "Development of Albanian Association of Communes" (DAAC) project. The focus was on ensuring that local

governments were not just participants but key actors in Albania's decentralisation reform, and that their knowledge of the requirements of the EU accession process was enhanced. DAAC was a comprehensive effort aimed at developing the Albanian Association of Communes (AAC).

Focusing not only on institutional development, the project also strived to embed European values such as transparency, accountability, and public participation within local governance structures. Through targeted training programmes on financial management, strategic planning, and service delivery, the project equipped local governments with the necessary skills to understand and implement EU policies. Mirroring EU financing mechanisms, a Small Grant Scheme was created that allowed Communes such as Bushat to improve local waste management and Paper to provide drinking water to twenty families living in a particularly remote location.

The AAC also published an "ABC of European Union for Local Government Units," demystifying EU structures and expectations for local officials. Introduced well before other external support placed a focus on EU accession requirements, the project enhanced capacity and understanding of EU-integration on the local level. Today, Albanian local governments are far better placed to drive Albania's EU integration forward, rather than simply being spectators to it.

Albania's EU accession FOUR KEY FACTS

- 1 Albania applied for membership in the European Union in 2009 and was granted official candidate status in 2014
- 2 Accession negotiations formally opened in 2020
- 3 Albania has completed the EU screening process and opened 24 chapters in its EU accession negotiations – second only to Montenegro among Western Balkan countries.
- 4 The country aims to conclude negotiations by 2027, with full membership readiness by 2030.



“Sweden’s decentralised model of governance, characterized by strong, autonomous municipalities, served as a benchmark throughout the DAAC project. Through SALAR International, Swedish expertise was directly transferred via peer exchanges, workshops, and technical support missions. Albanian local governments learned how Swedish municipalities engage citizens, plan territories sustainably, manage public finances effectively, and advocate through strong associations. These experiences helped Albanian stakeholders visualize what a functioning, EU-aligned local governance system could look like and inspired the localization of such models in the Albanian context.”



AGRON HAXHIMALI,
Executive director of the Institute for
Albanian Municipalities

The DAAC project can highlight several messages for actors working with EU-integration through, and on the local level:

- **Inclusion must be intentional:** Local levels of government are not able to meaningfully engage in EU integration processes unless explicitly included in national strategies and supported with adequate resources.
- **Capacity and ownership go hand in hand:** All training and technical support must be paired with the building of local ownership to ensure that local governments see themselves as co-creators of their EU-future.
- **Associations matter:** It is vital to recognize the role of LGA’s as critical intermediaries. Strengthening their policy and service delivery capacity can allow them to multiply their impact on the local level as well as ensuring that national policies are aligned with local realities.

“Looking ahead, the future of EU integration for Albania will be increasingly defined by how well it reforms and empowers its local governance. Strong municipalities will be the frontline implementers of EU policies, especially in areas like environmental protection, infrastructure, social services, and regional development. Sweden, through its longstanding support and proven expertise, can continue to play a key role in this journey.”

By supporting capacity development, facilitating regional exchanges, and promoting participatory governance models, Sweden can help ensure that Albania's path to EU membership is both inclusive and sustainable.”- Agron Haxhimali, Executive Director Of The Institute For Albanian Municipalities

Perhaps the most tangible outcome of the DAAC project was the support it provided to AAC and national authorities on key reform initiatives that would ensure Albanian local governments possessed better structural conditions to provide public services and to take account of the challenges and opportunities presented by the EU accession process. Building on the experiences of an earlier Swedish municipal amalgamation process, SALAR International experts presented options and a process for territorial reform that ultimately resulted in a reduction from 350+ to 65 local governments units in Albania. This was a game changer for the country and its EU accession process; Albania appears to now be a frontrunner to join the EU.

The story of Albania's EU integration is not just one of national ambition but also of local empowerment. With support from SALAR International, Albania's local governments have been equipped to play a crucial role in this transformative process. By aligning local governance practices with EU standards, building capacity, advocating for policy alignment and improving service delivery, Albania is laying a strong foundation for its future within the EU. The path to Europe is not only paved in national capitals, but in the towns and municipalities throughout each candidate country.



Reflections from past and present coworkers

At the heart of every project are the individuals who turn the project visions into reality. They are not superheroes in capes, but committed professionals, local leaders and community builders who dedicate their time and energy to driving change where it matters most.

These sections give space to some of those voices. Through their memories, reflections and achievements, we see how reform and cooperation take shape in practice. Their stories remind us that progress and sustainable change is carried forward by people.

VARSENIK MNATSAKANYAN

Building bridges between schools and municipalities in Armenia



Role: Local Project Manager

Project: Support to Decentralisation and Local Self-Government Reforms in Armenia (DeaLog)

As Local Project Manager for the project Support to Decentralisation and Local Self-Government Reforms in Armenia (DeaLog), Varsenik Mnatsakanyan has played a central role in bringing people together around dialogue and reform. One of her fondest memories is from the very beginning of the project, during a study visit to Stockholm with high-level decision makers from Armenia.

“The trip sparked joint, open, and non-formal discussions, fostering horizontal and vertical dialogues around reforms,” she recalls.

For Varsenik, the most meaningful achievement within the DeaLog project has been the creation of the “School–Municipality Nexus.” This initiative established cooperation between municipalities and schools, aiming to replace old practices with a culture of partnership.

“The nexus has led to a more coherent local and human development in Armenian communities,” she explains with pride.

Looking back, Varsenik highlights what makes working with SALAR International unique: the organisation’s ability to bring the Swedish experience of local self-government into international development work.

“Through SALAR, SALAR International can actively bear and promote the values of local democracy, channelled and fed by the experiences of all member municipalities and regions. Its extensive knowledge in local governance makes it a valuable partner,” she says.

An aerial photograph of a densely populated urban neighborhood. The buildings are packed closely together, with a variety of roof colors including blue, brown, and grey. A central area features a large, colorful mural on a wall, possibly a school or community center. The streets are paved and have some vehicles parked or driving. The overall scene depicts a vibrant, lived-in community.

SymbioCity:

Towards sustainable and inclusive cities

The new approach was used as a global tool to influence networks of cities, planners, and local leaders to do things differently.

Symbiocity:

Towards sustainable and inclusive cities

In 2009, as Sida phased out its urban development department, they were keen to find a new home for the SymbioCity Approach, a concept for support to sustainable urban development essentially rooted in Swedish municipal experiences.

SALAR International was tasked to coordinate the SymbioCity Approach in a Swedish national effort, taking into consideration the entry points and expertise of different actors such as government ministries, academia, the private sector, civil society, and local governments. The new approach was used as a global tool to influence networks of cities, planners, and local leaders to do things differently. SymbioCity evolved into a practical, adaptable methodology that has since been applied in cities across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Each city brought its own challenges and opportunities. Each found its own answers.

At the heart of this journey, there has been a shared commitment to inclusive, integrated, and locally driven urban development, including the prioritisation of infrastructure investments involving the private sector. SALAR International, building on our close ties with municipalities and regions in Sweden, and engaging closely with Business Sweden, has played a key role in this evolution—supporting cities, facilitating partnerships, and helping to translate ideas into action

From concept to practice – experiences from cities on four continents

SymbioCity began as a conceptual framework, but its strength lies in its adaptability and practical applicability. In the town of Probolinggo, Indonesia, a partnership with the municipality of Helsingborg, Sweden, led to a pilot eco-village project and a new way of thinking about waste, water, and climate resilience. The initiative not only addressed environmental challenges like waste and flooding but also helped shape national policies. The Indonesian Ministry of Public Works later integrated the SymbioCity methodology into its Green Cities Programme, rolling it out to over one hundred cities.





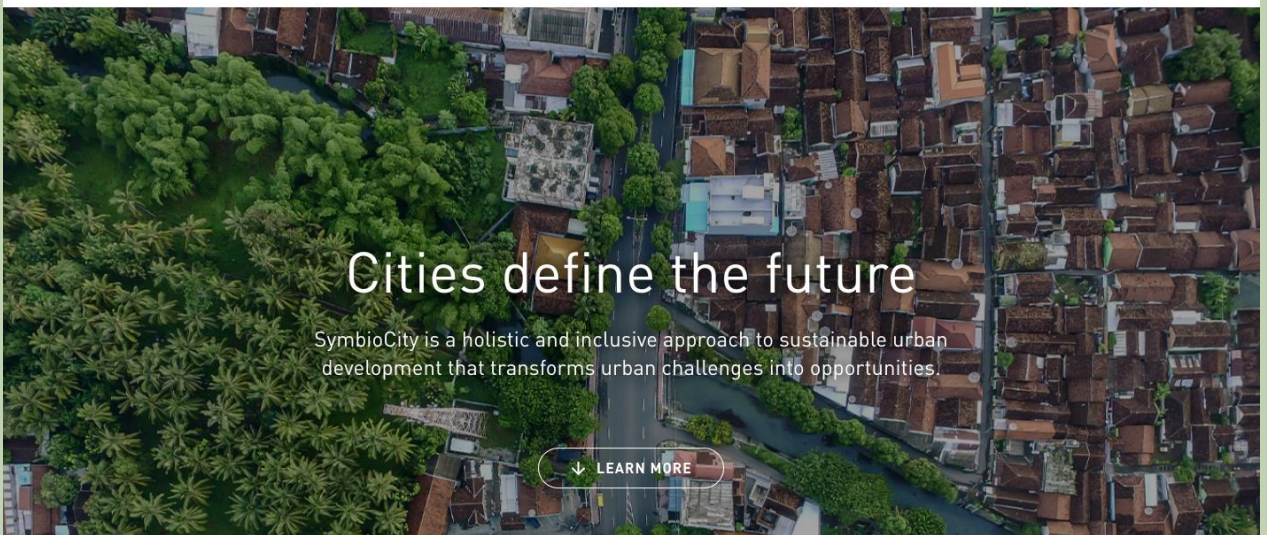
In Colombia, the cities of Pitalito and Apartadó used the approach to tackle issues related to mobility and urban safety. Their work led to new strategies, new bicycle infrastructure, and a shift in how public spaces are used and valued. **In Ethiopia**, cities like Shashemene and Debre Berhan developed their solid waste management system, including inclusive strategies that involved informal waste workers—many of them women—and embedding new solutions and projects into municipal and city budgets.

In Myanmar, the SymbioCity approach was institutionalized through a national training programme. The participants included representatives from the local, regional, and national levels as well as academic institutions. It equipped more than two hundred officials with greater knowledge on an inclusive and democratic approach to sustainable urban development as well as practical capacities to plan and manage urban spaces in perspectives of i.e. Improved livelihoods, sustainable mobility solutions, heritage conservation, urban resilience building, disaster risk reduction, green infrastructure, city profiles and data analyses.

Through the inclusion of high-level representatives as well as national town planning teams, the training was linked with the development of legal frameworks, new planning documents, and budgeted town improvement projects.

Subsequent to the training, town planning teams in the Ministry institutionalised the SymbioCity methodology and tools, including perspectives of participatory processes, gender equality, cross departmental collaboration, and evidence-based development, in new cities and towns in Myanmar, showcasing institutionalization and local ownership of results. The Urban Research and Development Institute (URDI) was developed as a hub for sustainable urban knowledge, equipped with new priorities, a public lecture series, and a city profiling tool for national dissemination.

These results did not come from external consultants or top-down mandates. They came from local governments, civil servants, and communities. The SymbioCity approach offered a structure. The cities did the work which has ensured local ownership and commitment to sustainable results.



Cities define the future

SymbioCity is a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable urban development that transforms urban challenges into opportunities.

↓ LEARN MORE

A platform for learning and exchange

One of SymbioCity’s defining features is its emphasis on peer learning. Swedish municipalities such as Helsingborg, Borås, and Umeå have all shared their experiences with counterparts in Indonesia, Colombia, and beyond. They do not primarily participate as experts – but as peers. Through study visits to Sweden and numerous international trainings programmes (ITPs), city leaders have developed visions for what is possible when planning is integrated, socially inclusive, and long-term.

The approach also evolved. Toolkits were developed on gender mainstreaming, participatory planning, and practical guidelines such as for solid waste systems. A new [website](#) made a range of different expert resources accessible. The focus gradually sharpened: more on social inclusion and gender equality, more on poverty, more on urban resilience and climate change adaptation.

A shared effort

While SALAR International has helped coordinate and support the global SymbioCity effort, the real drivers of change have been the cities themselves. Local governments, civil society organisations, and community members have embraced the approach, adapted it to their contexts, and made it their own. The success of SymbioCity demonstrates how local insight, international partnership, and a united vision for sustainability can create transformative change.

It has shown that sustainable urban development is not just about infrastructure—it is about people, participation, and long-term thinking.

As urbanisation accelerates and the climate crisis deepens, the need for integrated, inclusive, and locally led solutions is greater than ever. The SymbioCity Approach has not just offered a methodology, but a mindset—one that continues to evolve through the experiences of the cities and communities that use it. With the right tools, partnerships, and commitment, cities everywhere can become more sustainable, more inclusive, and more resilient.

Looking ahead, the lessons of SymbioCity are highly relevant for the EU’s Global Gateway initiative, where infrastructure investments must be matched with democratic governance, social inclusion, and sustainability, if they are to last. They are also central to the Team Sweden Smart Cities strategy, which can showcase Swedish solutions that are green, digital, and socially inclusive. In both arenas, SymbioCity demonstrates how Swedish experiences and the Swedish resource base can contribute beyond simply providing technical solutions: they can bring a way of working that is participatory, evidence-based, innovative and grounded in local ownership. This is precisely what is needed to ensure that global strategies translate into real change for people and communities on the ground.



BELAY FILE GAROMA

How SymbioCity contributed to Sustainable Urban Development in Ethiopia



Role: Currently working as Programme Management Officer for UN-Habitat Ethiopia.
SALAR International Project: SymbioCity in Shashemene and Debre Berhan, Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, Belay has been particularly proud of the capacity-building initiatives that helped local authorities identify problems and apply planning approaches rooted in the SymbioCity methodology. These trainings strengthened local planning skills and introduced new ways of thinking about urban development that are both practical and sustainable.

“The most memorable outcomes were seeing local teams apply these approaches in their own contexts.”

What sets SALAR International apart for Belay is the organisation’s multi-disciplinary perspective and its global reach.

“I have not seen an association as committed to the development of local governments in the Global South. SALAR International brings knowledge, experience, and a level of dedication that is rare, and I deeply appreciate that,” he explains.

For Belay, the SymbioCity project is not just about technical solutions — it’s about empowering local governments, building capacity, and fostering sustainable development that can grow and adapt over time.

Mongolia's local self-governance model, designed through Swedish experience

In the early days of its journey of democratization, Mongolia turned to Sweden as a source of inspiration.



Mongolia's local self-governance model, designed through Swedish experience

Twenty years ago, Mongolia was one of SALAR International's most important cooperation countries, seeing several consecutive projects being implemented under Sida's bilateral development cooperation strategies that were in place between 1997 and 2010.

The new democratic Constitution adopted by Mongolia in 1992 established the legal foundation for local governance. This was later followed by a Law on Administrative and Territorial Units and their Governance (LATUG) that created a local self-governance system with elected Citizen's representative khurals (local councils) at local and provincial levels. Subsequent revision of the legal framework increased the authority and autonomy of local governments, introduced key elements of decentralisation, and clarified division of responsibilities between the central government and sub-national governments.

At this moment, Mongolia is guided by a long-term development policy, popularly called "Vision 2050". In the field of local governance, the development policy serves to:

- Establish a citizen-centred government structure.
- Ensure efficient and accessible delivery of public services

- Establish an enabling environment for the independent and sustainable development of municipalities, provinces, and regions.

The Swedish model as a source of inspiration

In the early days of its journey of democratization, Mongolia turned to Sweden as a source of inspiration and concrete experience of functional local self-governance. Between 1997 and 2005, the two phases of the "Strengthening the Capacity of Local Self-Government Bodies" project were implemented by SIPI International and SALA, later through SALA IDA - the predecessor of SALAR International.

The partnership with the Mongolian Cabinet Secretariat and the Mongolian Association of Local Authorities (MALA) worked in many different areas related to decentralisation. Some of the main areas were:

- Improvement of the local governance legal framework
- Introduction of new methodologies for local development planning and budget preparation
- Capacity building programmes for members of local councils and local government leadership
- Institutional development of the Mongolian Association of Local Authorities
- Action research on citizen participation

"The support of Sweden—particularly through the dedicated partnership with SALAR International and Sida—was nothing short of foundational in the introduction and institutionalization of local self-governance in Mongolia, following the country's transition to democracy and the adoption of its new Constitution in 1992. At a time when Mongolia was navigating the complexities of decentralisation and democratic reform, Sweden's timely and visionary support helped breathe life into the principle of local self-government."

Byambasuren Urgamal, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary of the Government of Mongolia



During the course of the projects over two hundred Mongolian civil servants (primarily representatives of local councils) participated in experience-sharing visits to Sweden, 42 Mongolian local governance Master trainers were developed, and over three thousand local representatives were trained on various themes following two local elections.

Beyond this, dozens of handbooks were developed and widely disseminated amongst local authorities in Mongolia. A similar Swedish project later rolled out an official leadership programme, where Mongolian Master trainers were given the capacity to train 3900 Mongolian civil servants all across the country. Many Mongolian municipalities also engaged in municipal twinning projects focusing on energy efficiency with municipalities in northern Sweden.

Re-establishing relationships between two countries

When Sweden decided to phase out development cooperation with Mongolia from 2010, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and German GIZ continued with substantial programming on local governance and public administration reform support.

Nonetheless, the conviction that the Swedish system of local self-governance can serve as a role model for Mongolia has not faltered. In 2025, through an initiative from MALA, SALAR International received a delegation from Mongolia, consisting of representatives of the Mongolian Government, MALA, and senior local government politicians and officials. The visit gave the delegation plenty of insights in Sweden's experiences of local governance, service delivery, urban planning, waste management, and climate change adaptation, amongst other topics. To conclude the visit, an MoU was signed between MALA and SALAR International to emphasize the intent to find prospects of future cooperation between Sweden and Mongolia.



Global problems, local solutions

Friendship and solidarity between municipalities have historically played an important role, not least between neighbouring countries in the aftermath of the Second World War. This legacy also influenced the design of early municipal ‘twinning’ projects, which focused on relationships and exchange more than the project content. In an increasingly interconnected world, it became clear that municipalities also viewed international partnerships in a new and more pragmatic way. In dialogue with Sida, SALAR International therefore took the initiative to design the Municipal Partnership Programme in 2004. The new programme gave Swedish local and regional governments the opportunity to seek strategic partnerships and design projects that address common concerns or build on joint strengths.



Paul Dixelius,
original designer of the
Municipal Partnership
Programme at SALAR
International.

“The municipal partnerships gave the local and regional governments an opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to address global challenges with local solutions, sustainable development, and mutual growth”.

A central pillar of the municipal partnerships has been the principle of democratisation. Municipalities, by their very nature, are the level of government closest to the people. They operate at the level where citizens feel the most direct impact of governance and where citizens are in the best position to hold leaders and governments accountable. This proximity allows for democracy to be truly participatory, where citizens and civil society are not only heard but are actively involved.

Municipal Partnership Program FOUR KEY FACTS

- 1 SALAR International managed the municipal partnership programme between 2005-2009, after which it was handed over to ICLD.
- 2 The partnerships covered 8 themes, including local governance, economic development, social issues, environment, education, and urban planning
- 3 During the course of the programme, a total of 113 partnerships between Swedish and other country local and regional authorities were established.
- 4 The programme facilitated partnerships with 20 countries, 11 through the North-South programme and 9 through the East programme.

The Municipal Partnership Programme sought to capitalize on this strength through the creation of platforms for local voices to influence and shape development agendas, ensuring that initiatives were grounded in real community strengths and needs.

A core ambition of the programme was to localise Sweden’s development assistance, with municipalities being empowered to take the lead in development cooperation. Swedish municipalities, with their deep expertise in social welfare, infrastructure, and public services, became valuable partners to cities in emerging democracies. However, the partnerships were intentionally designed to create mutual benefits.

Through the partnerships, the goal was for Swedish municipalities to primarily broaden their perspectives, enhance institutional capacities, and strengthen their role in global development efforts. Peer learning was encouraged, allowing both sides to exchange experiences, address shared challenges, and co-create innovative solutions.

For example, the early collaboration between the municipality of Gothenburg and their South African counterpart; Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan municipality, which jointly guided the design of the programme, led to mutual insights and learnings in areas such as education, social issues, environment and city planning.

“It has been really encouraging to see how the peers from different municipalities have inspired each other over the years. I remember representatives from the mountainous town of Duyun in China who said that cycling was not an option in their city. After their visit to Eskilstuna they said - we are going to build bicycle-lanes!”, Paul Dixelius.

Another key domain of the programme was its emphasis on strengthening local governance. By supporting democratic institutions at the local level, it helped lay the foundations for long-term political stability and inclusive development in various countries. In fragile democracies, these partnerships served as a lifeline by allowing reform-minded local leaders to connect and gather inspiration from experienced Swedish counterparts.



Björn Kullander,
former programme
manager of the
Municipal Partnership
Programme

“In an international perspective, Sweden’s local governance system stands out as exceptionally strong. With municipalities responsible for approximately 75% of welfare production, they manage the issues closest to citizens—creating deep expertise among municipal politicians and civil servants. Recognizing their potential as actors in Sweden’s development assistance is essential, especially when aiming to strengthen local democracies. The inclusion of the local level is vital, as municipalities possess the contextual knowledge needed to drive meaningful and sustainable local change.”

The selection of partners was strategic, based on shared goals and complementary strengths. While the approach varied depending on the country—partnerships within Türkiye, for instance, differed significantly from those with South Africa—the underlying principle remained the same; collaboration rooted in mutual respect and shared learning. This adaptability was crucial in navigating complex political landscapes of different countries.

Even in the face of administrative hurdles and political tensions, long-term, sustainable results were achieved. Such results should be measured not only by the amount of completed projects, but by the lasting relationships and strengthened institutional capacities. In fact, municipalities were not the only beneficiaries of the project. Civil society organizations gained access to international networks and contributed with vital community insights, whilst businesses shared technical expertise and gained exposure to new markets. In short, a whole of society approach. Together, these actors helped create inclusive, locally grounded partnerships that supported democratic development and innovation.

The programme recognized that municipalities are not solely service providers, they are also agents of change. The programme also helped concretize international collaboration and development assistance on a local level, making global engagement tangible and impactful for everyday citizens and local stakeholders.

We believe that the power of local governance lies in the ability to bridge the global and local, driving change that is sustainable and locally owned. The partnership programme stands as testament to this potential – that when local governments cooperate, they create enduring solutions.

The legacy of the Municipal Partnership Programme

Following a handover to our sister organisation, the International Center for Local Democracy (ICLD), the philosophy of partnerships between local governments has been continuously present, both through SALAR International’s role in the ‘Partnership Council’ of the Municipal Partnership Programme, and in SALAR International’s wider work.

- The **Turkish-Swedish Partnership Network** (TUSENET) and Turkish-Swedish Partnership for Local Governance (TUSELOG) projects mobilised Swedish Municipalities in partnership in a wide range of thematic local partnerships with Turkish Municipality clusters.
- **SymbioCity** facilitated municipal partnerships to support bilateral knowledge exchange and capacity development in the field of sustainable, urban development.
- The **Cities4Cities** | United4Ukraine initiative connects Ukrainian and international municipalities to support Ukraine’s aspirations of EU membership and post-war recovery



MATS JARNHAMMAR

Reflecting on SymbioCity Programmes



Role: Was working as Senior Expert.

Project: SymbioCity projects in Indonesia, Kenya, Myanmar, Turkey, as well as regional programmes in Southeast Asia, East Africa, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe.

Mats Jarnhammar reflects on his work with SALAR International with gratitude for the people he has met along the way.

“All of the amazing people I have had the privilege of meeting from all over the globe – many of whom are now my friends”.

One of his proudest achievements comes from the SymbioCity programme in Kenya, where seven county governments were supported in strategic urban planning. Working closely with local communities and stakeholders, the strategies developed during the project were transformed into development plans connected to funds for implementing innovative solutions.

“This approach combined institutional strengthening and capacity development with tangible results on the ground. Today, you can see home-grown solutions in public spaces, waste management, flooding, and local economic development in these counties.”

For Mats, what sets SALAR International apart is its unique position as part of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities.

“No consultancy can match the depth of knowledge and experience from Swedish local governments. It allows us to collaborate as peers, acting as trusted partners rather than mere service providers. There is also a strong culture of professionalism and a focus on achieving real outcomes.”

Through his work, Mats has seen how careful planning, collaboration, and local ownership can turn ideas into lasting improvements in communities, demonstrating the real impact of supporting local governments in a meaningful way.

Building resilience from the ground up: *The role of local governance*

Resilience, fragility, and crisis response are no longer side issues – they are central to how governments at all levels must act. As part of our work to advance local governance and decentralisation across the world, these issues, including the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of local governments, are at the core of our work. The Resilience in Local Governance (RESLOG) project, implemented in Türkiye and Lebanon, offers context sensitive, structured, holistic and inclusive solutions for how institutional and community resilience can be strengthened to respond to complex crises. By providing local actors with the capacity to enhance service delivery, foster local economic development and engage in environmental and physical planning, sustainable development and resilience can be promoted through structures that are sustainable beyond initial responses to crises.

When States suffer from fragility, this is all the more important. Local governments are at the forefront of responses to external shocks, regardless of whether they originate from natural disasters, economic instability or social unrest. They furthermore possess greater knowledge about local, contextual issues, allowing for risk assessments that are thoroughly grounded in local perspectives. Furthermore, they contribute to social cohesion, laying foundations for peacebuilding, inclusive recovery and sustainable local development.

During the course of almost a decade, the Union of Municipalities and pilot municipalities of the RESLOG project in Türkiye and Lebanon encountered several large, as well as smaller, natural or man-made crises. In Lebanon’s Akkar region, an Area-Based approach was applied to strengthen intermunicipal structures for crisis management, based on strong local leadership and governance which contributed to improved local, regional and national crisis response. Innovation, ownership and data-driven solutions such as geospatial analysis, together with well-anchored platforms for community engagement, strengthened local governments, not only to withstand shocks but equally enforced their systems for sustainable recovery.



In Türkiye, RESLOG formulated a response to the massive earthquakes in 2023 based on the Resilience Assessment Methodology, initially developed for municipalities to respond to the migration crisis from Syria which since then continued to develop to a unique tool (Integrated and Inclusive Resilience Framework 2IRF) for local governance resilience to multifaceted shocks. The methodology enabled local governments, together with their inhabitants, to analyse the effects of a crisis, or multiple crises, on different municipal competences, including their own institutions, and to develop a systematic and inclusive response. Through these efforts, 11 earthquake- and displacement-affected municipalities developed recovery plans which also helped attract international funding.

As actors, local governments are well-positioned to advance work across, and in adherence to, the triple (humanitarian-development-peace) nexus. When responsibilities and fiscal capacities are devolved to them, local engagement strengthens national responses, helping to ensure that they are effective, context-specific, and truly sustainable. Within the RESLOG project, the experiences gained by the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye, regional Unions of Marmara and Çukurova and their members, helped to shape locally-led advocacy concerning national migration policies.

A common repercussion of centralized, top-down responses is their ineffectiveness at times when the need for swift, localized action is paramount. As such, pre-established centralised coordination mechanisms often fall short of effectively addressing and managing the complexities of large, multi-faceted crises. While centralised systems can be beneficial for maintaining uniformity and control, they can be slow to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, and protracted humanitarian response architecture does not produce dividends in terms of sustainable recovery. Moreover, a lack of local context and understanding can result in solutions that are not tailored to the specific needs and conditions of affected communities.



In contrast, local governance structures are inherently more agile and responsive. They possess a deeper understanding of local context, resources and vulnerabilities, enabling them to implement more effective and immediate solutions. Local governments can mobilize resources quickly, engage with community members directly, and adapt strategies in real-time to meet the evolving demands of a crisis. They are also better-placed to consider longer-term recovery scenarios that are relevant to context.

It is concerning that the role of local governments are often not recognized by national and international responses, commonly manifested through a centralized responsibility for allocation of resources and a preference for international actors, instead of locally-mandated ones, within the humanitarian response architecture.

At SALAR International, we believe that local governments and their respective communities are best placed to prepare for, and respond to, crises. Local governments, with their specific mandates, play a crucial role in spearheading mobility policies, overseeing environmental services, and taking account of the physical environment during planning processes. Additionally, they support local economic development—factors that are essential preconditions for building resilient societies. These capabilities are vital in addressing the increasingly complex development challenges we face today.

In our engagement in Lebanon, through the RESLOG project, this philosophy has been a driving force. Lebanon has faced a multitude of crises that have significantly impacted the national landscape. RESLOG worked to increase the resilience of local governments in Lebanon by strengthening their capacities through an area based approach combining technical support, and localised participatory and inclusive mechanisms and governance innovations.



The project’s distinctive proposition includes:

<p>1</p> <p>Local leadership:</p> <p>Placing municipalities and inter-municipal structures at the heart of strategy design and implementation ensured context relevance and community legitimacy, and accountability.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>Data-driven governance:</p> <p>Building local capacity to collect and analyze data-informed decision-making, improved transparency, and fostered accountability.</p>	<p>3</p> <p>Inclusivity and participation:</p> <p>Mechanisms involving youth, women, refugees, and marginalized groups increased public trust and strengthened social cohesion.</p>	<p>4</p> <p>Embedded crisis management:</p> <p>Integrating emergency preparedness into routine governance enhanced responsiveness to shocks and long-term risk mitigation.</p>	<p>5</p> <p>Sustainability and localization:</p> <p>Focusing on permanent, locally anchored systems reduced reliance on external aid and improved continuity of services.</p>
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Incorporating fragility as a policy subject in development initiatives is an integral part of creating outcomes that are truly sustainable and stress-resistant. However, this dimension is often overlooked in larger policy frameworks. The EU’s Global Gateway Strategy, anticipated for a deeper roll out under the forthcoming Multi-Annual Finance Framework, aims to synchronize member states’ investments in smart, clean, and secure links across digital, energy, and transport sectors; much homework is still needed when it comes to fragile contexts.

The RESLOG project demonstrates that it is possible to make investments even in fragile contexts. Where national governments are obvious partners, this needs to come hand in hand with an equally important local partnership and ownership. Local governments need to be invited early into dialogue that can influence the design of investments based on local needs and realities. They also need to be equipped with context-sensitive capacities, to own planning, implementation and monitoring in participatory and inclusive manners. Only in this way can development efforts become more effective, transparent, and sustainable. Furthermore, this approach not only improves the distribution of resources but can help promote stability and enhance adaptability to evolving challenges.

RESLOG’s work in Türkiye and Lebanon shows how local governments, when empowered, can lead inclusive planning, foster community participation and inclusion, and deliver services that reflect the realities on the ground. These lessons are highly relevant as the global aid landscape undergoes a major shift, there is a need to move beyond top-down investment strategies and embrace local governance as a cornerstone of resilience.





SOURAYA HAMMOUD

A voice for local resilience in Lebanon



Role: Local Project Manager.

Project: Resilience in Local Governance (RESLOG) Lebanon

As Local Project Manager for Resilience in Local Governance (RESLOG) Lebanon, Souraya Hammoud has seen firsthand how local actors can transform crisis response when given the tools and trust to lead. Her favourite memory goes back to the projects first national conference on community first responders, where RESLOG’s work in Akkar was presented as a success story.

“Seeing our work recognised as something that could inspire and be replicated elsewhere in Lebanon was deeply emotional. It reflected everything we had been working toward: a truly localized, area-based approach that fills the gap left by years of underinvestment. When coordination is done right and local actors are trusted, the impact does not stay local. It grows.”

Among the many achievements, Souraya highlights the establishment of local crisis management structures in underserved areas such as “Jurd El Qayteh”. These structures allowed municipalities to respond to crisis more quickly and confidently, coordinating efforts between first responders, volunteers, and local actors.

“Local actors began acting proactively, thinking ahead, and mobilising resources from both local and international partners,” she explains.

When Lebanon faced the internal displacement crisis in 2023, these efforts proved their worth. The knowledge and tools developed in Jurd El Qayteh were replicated in other municipal unions, showing that even in fragile contexts, locally led crisis responses can serve as a model for others.

For Souraya, SALAR International’s way of working has been key to these successes.

“What makes SALAR International unique is its genuine commitment to partnership, learning, and local ownership. It listens, co-creates, and grows with its partners. There is a humility in the way the team works that allows for trust to build, even in the most fragile settings.”

Through her and RESLOGs work, Souraya has helped demonstrate that local actors can transform crisis response when given the tools and trust to lead, resulting in impact that does not stay local: it grows.



The Arab Spring: Decentralisation and SALAR International

*Where local governments are trusted,
they can also play a stabilizing role in
times of crisis.*



The MENA region is marked by contrasts: booming capitals alongside neglected rural towns, wealthy oil-producing states beside fragile economies, and entrenched political elites governing over increasingly youthful populations. Centralised systems have often failed to respond effectively to these realities. The result has been not only inequality, but also authoritarianism and mistrust in public institutions.

The Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 – 2012 sent shockwaves across the region, forcing states, societies, and international partners to re-examine governance systems that had long been characterised by authoritarian control. While the early uprisings promised democratic openings, the trajectory has since been uneven: some countries slid back into authoritarianism or conflict, while others experimented with local governance reforms. A second wave of uprisings in 2018–19 reinforced demands for dignity, participation, and accountable governance in different countries in the region, most prominently in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria.

SALAR International has been engaged in MENA for two decades. Our work has underscored a consistent lesson: decentralisation is not just a technical reform; it is a political project. It is not a panacea, but it offers pathways to more inclusive governance, balanced development, and a deeper social contract between citizens and the state. Municipalities and regions closer to citizens are better placed to prioritize urgent needs, adapt policies to local realities, and involve communities, including women and youth, in shaping their own future. Where local governments are trusted, they can also play a stabilizing role in times of crisis—something made starkly clear during the conflicts that followed the Arab Spring.

Yet decentralisation cannot be seen as a one-size-fits-all reform. Each country has its own political economy, its own historic state-society relations, and its own risks. Reforms that ignore context are unlikely to work. What is needed are gradual, tailored processes, rooted in the realities of local actors and institutions. This requires a concerted effort and the right kind of international support. Since 2024, we have seen renewed calls for reforms across the MENA region. Regrettably we have also observed a decline in donor interest. But recent shifts in regional and global politics – not least under Global Europe – may create new opportunities to revitalise local governance support.

Tunisia: Promise and setbacks

Tunisia was the first country to embark on a serious decentralisation journey after 2011. A new Constitution in 2014 enshrined devolution of powers and introduced local democracy as a cornerstone of governance. For a time, Tunisia stood out as a regional beacon.

SALAR International supported this process through successive phases. First, by providing credible technical arguments that helped Tunisian stakeholders embrace decentralisation. Later, by contributing to law-making, strengthening the National Federation of Tunisian Municipalities, and supporting reforms in local financial management. These efforts laid down foundations for local governance that could deliver.

However, the broader democratic transition in Tunisia has faltered. Democratic backsliding in recent years shows that decentralisation cannot survive in isolation. It requires political will, institutional checks and balances, and sustained citizen demand. Still, the Tunisian case shows both what is possible and what is fragile.

Iraq: Building from below

Iraq also experimented with decentralisation. Laws were passed to strengthen local governance, but reforms soon stalled. Political patronage and the capture of oil revenues by elites limited the space for genuine local empowerment. The risk was clear: decentralisation on paper can turn into frustration in practice.

For over a decade, SALAR International’s work in Iraq has therefore focused on the local level, “building from below”. In Diwaniyah governorate, for example, the digitalization of financial reporting for local service sectors created transparency and enhanced process effectiveness. Several successful local initiatives were then shared upwards from provincial level to influence national policy. This bottom-up model has been key to keeping the decentralisation agenda alive in a challenging environment, and today most political actors in Iraq agree that decentralisation is a necessary way forward.

From implementers to change agents:

An Iraqi NGO taking the lead in transformative governance

Since 2010, IRFAD, an Iraqi NGO, has worked with SALAR International in a series of Swedish-funded projects aimed at improving local service delivery and strengthening governance at the provincial level in the north and south of Iraq. At the start, work was mainly focused on improving social services, but as the Iraqi government seriously, although a bit ad-hoc, started decentralisation reform initiatives from 2014 onwards, SALAR International and IRFAD became the main actors in providing proof of concepts for the national and regional government agencies of how decentralisation could be manifested and realized at the local level. Over the years, IRFAD has served as a crucial institutional partner of SALAR International that has helped to manoeuvre the intricate socio-political environment of Iraq and drive effective change at the local level. Jointly, we have realised local governance results that few believed possible.

“At the start, IRFAD was a service provider implementing the plans of various organisations and donors that most often were defined elsewhere. But through the unique partnership with SALAR International, we have gradually been trusted with significant influence over what is needed and how change in the Iraqi context can best be stimulated. As a result of this experience, IRFAD is today a ‘go-to’ organisation in Baghdad and south of Iraq when it comes to institutional development in the local governance sector.”

Sarmed al-Kazraji, Chairperson IRFAD.

Lebanon: Between fragility and local innovation

Lebanon’s trajectory after the Arab Spring has been shaped less by mass uprisings and more by chronic governance failures, compounded by financial collapse and the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Despite political deadlock at the national level, municipalities and unions of municipalities have shouldered a disproportionate burden of crisis response – from hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees to coping with collapsing public services.

SALAR International, through the Resilience in Local Governance (RESLOG) project, has highlighted how participatory local planning and municipal–civil society collaboration can mitigate tensions and channel limited resources effectively. Lebanon’s case shows both the limits of decentralisation without a functioning state, and the enduring importance of empowering local actors as anchors of stability and service delivery in fragile contexts.



Syria: Decentralisation amid fragmentation

Syria remains one of the region’s most complex cases. The 2011 uprising was met with extreme repression and violent conflict, producing state fragmentation, displacement, and humanitarian catastrophe. Local administration structures evolved in highly uneven ways: in regime-held areas, reforms such as Law 107 promised devolution but were implemented selectively, often reinforcing central control through appointed governors. In opposition and self-administered areas, ad hoc local councils emerged as lifelines for communities but lacked resources and legal clarity.

Following an initial engagement in 2010 under the EU’s Decentralisation and Local Development (DLDP) project, SALAR International has monitored these dynamics closely and, through the INLOG project, explored programmatic options after the fall of Assad in 2024. Our engagement with Syrian civil society partners points to the importance of supporting locally-led recovery, building transparent planning and citizen engagement mechanisms, and strengthening municipal services as a bridge from humanitarian relief to reconstruction. A renewed focus on municipal functionality—whether through service delivery, participatory planning, or local development—could lay the foundation for national reconciliation.

Jordan: Reform in search of momentum

Jordan offers another important case of the post–Arab Spring era. Reforms to the Local Administration Law in 2015 and 2021 introduced new layers of governance but also created fragmentation, unclear mandates, and weak accountability. Public confidence in structures like governorate councils has been low, while fiscal transfers to municipalities have declined.

These developments have triggered a review of de jure and de facto local governance arrangements. The Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System has recommended reforms that resonate strongly with international principles: strengthening elected local institutions, clarifying responsibilities, embedding participation, and ensuring “financing follows function.” Through the Inclusive Local Governance (INLOG) project and a parallel support to national policy dialogue during 2025, SALAR International has explored how these principles could translate into practice.

Jordan stands at a crossroads: incremental but strategic reforms could make municipalities more functional, accountable, and development-oriented, but a deficit in concerted international assistance for reforms and the recent revisiting of key legislation highlight the risk of moving forward in the absence of participatory and evidence-based policy dialogue.

Morocco: Regionalisation at a crossroads

Morocco stands out in the MENA region for having introduced an ambitious decentralisation framework through its 2011 Constitution and the 2015 Organic Laws on “advanced regionalisation.” In principle, these reforms give regions, provinces, and municipalities more autonomy in planning, budgeting, and development. In practice, however, progress has been uneven, with major gaps between responsibilities on paper and the financial and institutional resources available to exercise them.

Through the INLOG project, SALAR International has worked closely with representatives from Moroccan regional councils, municipal associations, and civil society organisations to bridge these gaps. This has included the development of a tool for participatory regional development planning and exploring fiscal decentralisation reforms.

The EU’s Global Gateway strategy adds a new dimension. Morocco has both the institutional framework and the investment needs to become a testing ground for Global Gateway projects in areas like green infrastructure, mobility, and digital transformation. Embedding these investments within strengthened regional governance structures would not only make them more sustainable and locally responsive but also help demonstrate how decentralisation can create a solid platform for international investment.

Conclusion

A renewed window for decentralisation

Looking back, it is clear that the region has witnessed successive public demands for reform, followed by the adoption of selective reform measures and/or backsliding. The first Arab Spring uprisings (2011–12) and the second wave (2018–19) both triggered openings for decentralisation, but in many places these were rolled back amid political turbulence and conflict. Today, new windows of opportunity are emerging following political change in Lebanon and Syria, the revisiting of legislation in Algeria, Jordan and Iraq, and considerations for New Pact for the Mediterranean and investments in infrastructure, climate resilience, and digital transformation anticipated by the EU’s Global Gateway.

The story of the Arab Spring is still being written. The pursuit of decentralisation remains both urgent and fragile. Municipalities are the frontline of service delivery, crisis response, democratic participation and peacebuilding. Without stronger, more accountable local governance, demands for dignity and participation will remain unmet.

External donor support is now more critical than ever – decentralisation should not be seen as a technical afterthought, but as a fundamental investment in stability and sustainable development. Stronger local governments are not only about democracy—they are about managing crises, supporting livelihoods, and building resilience.

Few organisations are in a better position than SALAR International to assist in carefully designed and fit-to-purpose decentralisation reforms and local governance and local development initiatives in the MENA region.





MOHAMED RACHID ESSEGHIR

A key figure in SALAR International's efforts across MENA region



Role: Regional Coordinator.

Project: Tunisia Local Governance Project (2016-2023) and INLOG programme.

With more than a decade of experience in strengthening democratic institutions and building trust between communities and authorities, Rashid Esseghir has become a key figure in SALAR International's efforts across North Africa and the Middle East.

Since 2016, he has been deeply involved in the Tunisia Local Governance Project and, later, the Inclusive Local Governance Programme (INLOG). Looking back, one of his proudest memories is the creation of a regional community of practice through INLOG.

“Bringing together practitioners from Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria and Syria was a turning point,” he reflects. “It showed that even across borders, there is a strong appetite for peer learning, solidarity, and finding shared solutions to the challenges of local governance.”

The platform quickly gained momentum. National coordinators were appointed, community charters drafted, and an annual action plan established. For Rashid, these steps were more than bureaucratic milestones – they were signs of genuine ownership from those involved.

Equally memorable for him is the technical support given to five Tunisian municipalities on the brink of financial collapse. Using a context-sensitive methodology developed within the Tunisia Local Governance Project, his team carried out comprehensive diagnostics and co-designed tailored action plans with local stakeholders.

“It was remarkable to see how these municipalities, once in deep financial distress, could gradually regain balance,” Rashid says. “It was a tangible demonstration of the power of localized, participatory problem-solving.”

When asked what makes SALAR International unique, Rashid doesn't hesitate:

“Flexibility. The ability to adapt to local sensitivities and evolving needs is what makes our interventions effective. It reduces resistance, increases legitimacy, and makes the outcomes sustainable. That's why SALAR International is trusted, even on sensitive themes.”

Through his work, Rashid exemplifies the qualities that are essential for fostering change in complex contexts: technical expertise, cultural sensitivity, and a deep commitment to collaboration. His journey is proof that governance is not just about systems and structures, but about people coming together to solve problems – and building trust along the way.



A decade of decentralisation: SALAR International's cooperation with Ukraine

*Ukraine stands out not only as one of our
most challenging engagements – but as
one of our proudest.*

As we celebrate 25 years of SALAR International, Ukraine stands out not only as one of our most challenging engagements – but as one of our proudest.

Our journey in Ukraine began in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity (2014), at a time when the country was embracing one of Europe’s most ambitious public sector reform efforts— decentralisation. What initially started as technical assistance soon evolved into a deep, strategic partnership that has spanned more than a decade.



Oleksandr Korinniy,

Mayor of Novoukrainka City, Chair of the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities, and Ukraine’s delegate to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

“The reform of local self-government and the territorial organization of power gave impetus to the creation of a capable institution of governance in a democratic society – one that is closest to the citizens: local self-government”

Since 2014, through several Sida-funded initiatives, including our role in the EU-funded programme U-LEAD with Europe, SALAR International has become a trusted ally to Ukraine’s national ministries, parliament, municipal associations, and hundreds of local governments (Hromada’s). In close partnership we have worked to reshape systems of governance, enhance the quality of public services, and empower municipalities to respond more effectively to situations of both crisis and recovery. This work has not only strengthened democratic institutions but also anchored resilience in some of the country’s most challenging moments.

“Despite military aggression, ongoing shelling, and active hostilities, local self-government bodies have demonstrated resilience and the ability to respond rapidly in crisis situations. They have continued to ensure the functioning of communities and to provide services to residents — once again confirming the success of the reform of local self-government and the territorial organisation of power in Ukraine.”, Oleksandr Korinniy

A decade of achievements and impact

Through the Support to Decentralisation in Ukraine (DSP) project (2014–2024), we have supported critical reform components, including that of education finance, fiscal decentralisation, and strengthened policy making. We have helped shape the formula for allocating national education funds, improve the Ministry of Education’s capacity for data-driven governance, and introduced transparency instruments and subvention statements for local governments.



Liliya Hrynevych,

Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine (2016–2019), originator of the “New Ukrainian School” reform.

In the wake of the decentralisation reform launched after the Revolution of Dignity, one of the key steps toward ensuring fair access to education and better use of budget funds was the introduction of the education subvention for municipalities and its allocation formula, carried out with expert support from the DSP Project.

Another important part of strengthening education management, both at the central and local levels, was DSP-supported initiatives that promoted data-driven education policy making, as well as greater transparency and accountability in how communities manage their budgets.

This was a productive partnership, tailored to Ukraine’s needs and drawing on top-level professional expertise.”

Through the second component of U-LEAD with Europe (Phase I 2016–2021), we helped lay the foundation for Ukraine’s nationwide network of Administrative Service Centres (ASCs) through driving the transformation of the country’s administrative service provision. Over five years, this engagement has seen Hromada’s establishing 484 ASCs together with 816 territorial units, remote workplaces for ASC administrators, and mobile offices. Three energy-efficient ASCs has been constructed from scratch. A mobile ASC model has been piloted, later successfully scaled up across Ukraine.

Through comprehensive assistance – including targeted policy and advocacy efforts, support to Hromada’s in promoting gender equality and fostering civic engagement, deployment of Vulyk information system as well as institutional capacity building – the programme contributed to building a citizen-oriented administrative service system, available across all of Ukraine.

“SALAR International has been a valued partner in supporting Ukraine’s decentralisation reform. Through programmes like U-LEAD and DSP, we have empowered hromadas, fostered democratic self-government, and increased trust in local institutions. Looking ahead, this cooperation will remain vital as communities move from crisis response to long-term recovery and EU Accession.”

Bastian Veigel,

Programme Director of U-LEAD with Europe

Even amid the full-scale Russian invasion, we have stood steadfast in our support and engagement in Ukraine. Our local Ukrainian team has been forced to adapt rapidly to shifting realities, helping both national ministries and local governments keep functioning under fire. Above all, the war has shown that local governments are at the frontline when it comes to democratic resilience. They coordinate humanitarian aid, they support internally displaced persons, and they restore and maintain municipal services, often at a faster rate than expected. Through continuous coaching, peer support, and expertise tailored to local needs, we have worked alongside Ukrainian Hromada’s and national authorities to sustain essential governance functions, strengthen leadership, and nurture partnerships that help communities be resilient, and responsive, even under the extraordinary challenges of wartime.

“Decentralisation has become Ukraine’s municipal shield in times of crisis. When hromadas are empowered with real autonomy and financial independence, they are able to lead recovery on the ground — protecting residents and ensuring essential services. Along this path, SALAR International has been a key partner, helping to establish not only the cultural foundations but also the practical tools of modern governance — fostering new mechanisms of trust and shared responsibility.”

Viacheslav Nehoda,

Head of Ternopil Oblast Military Administration, First Deputy Minister for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine (2014–2023)

Under the PROSTO project (2021–2024), we have supported the establishment or upgrade of 48 Administrative Service Centres (ASCs) across Ukraine. This vital support has ensured that more than half a million residents have had access to essential services even during wartime. The engagement has taken many forms. 5,000 ASC staff has been trained, mobile ASCs have been deployed in war-affected regions, and policy tools which are both inclusive and citizen focused have been developed to ensure that public services are accessible and responsive to local needs.

“Building on Swedish knowledge, Ukrainian authorities were able to make informed decisions that resulted in the establishment of modern Administrative Service Centres — now recognised as one of the flagship achievements of the decentralisation reform”- Oleksandr Korinniy.



Maryna Bobranitska

Head of the Department for the Systemic Development of Administrative Services at the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine

“With the support of SALAR International, the U-LEAD with Europe and PROSTO programmes have helped hundreds of hromadas establish modern Administrative Service Centres, where residents can access public services quickly and easily. This has not only strengthened the institutional capacity of local governments but also made a tangible contribution to the daily lives of millions of Ukrainians, especially during a time of serious challenges for the country.”

A cornerstone of our engagement has been the mobilization of expertise found within Swedish municipalities. Study visits, peer learning, and bilateral cooperation have deepened mutual learning and ensured that Swedish expertise is utilized in Ukrainian contexts. Through the Cities 4 Cities initiative, around 25 Swedish municipalities have formed lasting ties and partnerships with Ukrainian counterparts, creating a powerful bridge for democratic governance, green transition, and post-war recovery grounded on the local level.

PARTNER HROMADAS

INTERNATIONAL MUNICIPAL PARTNERSHIPS

1. Boryslav hromada – Ljusdal kommun
2. Brusyliv hromada – Mönsterås kommun
3. Vasylykiv hromada – Sundbyberg kommun
4. Ivano-Frankivsk hromada – Luleå kommun
5. Kolomyia hromada – Falun kommun
6. Konotop hromada – Jönköping kommun
7. Krolevets hromada – Berg kommun
8. Poltava hromada – Kalmar kommun
9. Slobozhanske hromada – Vännäs kommun
10. Ternopil hromada – Ronneby kommun
11. Trostianets hromada – Mora kommun
12. Khotyn hromada – Eslöv kommun
13. Chuhuiv hromada – Danderyd kommun
14. Pivdennoukrainsk hromada – Östhammar kommun
15. Yampil hromada – Vänersborg kommun



Sweden Sverige Implementer SALAR International

During 2025 fifteen Ukrainian municipalities will receive resources for joint activities with their Swedish counterparts, within the framework of the Polaris Programme

“From the very beginning, the partnerships with Swedish municipalities played a transformative role. Their expertise — in delivering high-quality administrative services, building and sustaining school networks, and managing transparent, efficient budget processes — became a valuable source of guidance and inspiration.”-Oleksandr Korinniy.

Building on a broad track record of cooperation with Ukraine — from reform support and sector initiatives to municipal partnerships and policy dialogue — we are now advancing our work through the flagship Swedish-Ukrainian Programme Polaris (2024–2028), supporting the country’s recovery and European integration. As of September 2025, the programme has successfully brought together one hundred partner Hromada’s and maintained close cooperation with key ministries and parliament. Polaris works to advance priorities relevant to all levels of governance, from locally-led recovery, fiscal decentralisation, accessible public services to strengthening Starosta’s institutions, providing veteran support and advancing education reforms.

Polaris aims to ensure that Ukraine’s decentralisation processes not only withstand the challenges of today but grows stronger with it, enabling Hromada’s to make effective decisions and drive sustainable recovery with a commitment to advancing gender equality and foster multi-level inclusion.

Beyond Polaris, we are also present in Ukraine through the “Waste Management for Ukraine” (WM4U) programme. Launched in 2024 in partnership with Avfall Sverige, WM4U is a groundbreaking Team Sweden initiative supporting the transformation of municipal waste management across Ukraine. The programme helps both at the national and local level develop environmentally sustainable systems aligned with EU standards. This includes support from tariff reforms, landfill gas control, organic waste diversion, to introduction of landfill tax and extended producer responsibility. WM4U strengthens local planning and technical capacity, it supports light infrastructure upgrades, and channels donations of waste equipment from Swedish municipalities to Ukrainian territorial communities. By advancing circular economy practices, the programme also contributes to climate action, public health, and resilient local governance.



The foresight of Sida ensures that both Polaris and WM4U will be complemented by investments deriving from recovery and waste management plan priorities, to be implemented by the Nordic Green Bank (Nefco) in various locations.

The journey has been, and will continue to be, demanding. Nonetheless, Ukraine’s steadfast dedication to democratic reform and the enduring presence of SALAR International have shown what is possible when trust, local ownership, and long-term partnerships guide the work. As Ukraine prepares for recovery and EU membership, SALAR International is proud to remain a committed, hands-on partner for inclusive local governance and resilient public services. Our engagement in Ukraine exemplifies the essence of what SALAR International stands for: system-oriented, value-based, and adaptive support grounded in local realities.

“In Ukraine, successful decentralisation means strong, capable local self-government that creates and sustains vibrant, safe, and inclusive communities where people can thrive. It is about ensuring that every resident has access to high-quality, affordable public services close to home; empowering citizens through genuine mechanisms of direct democracy and fostering decision-making that reflects the needs of communities while aligning with the strategic priorities of the state.”- Oleksandr Korinniy.

Svitlana Spazheva

Head of Pokrovska Hromada,
Dnipropetrovsk Oblast



“The decentralisation reform has become a true test of maturity for Ukraine’s hromadas. It gave them the tools, resources, and responsibility to act swiftly and decisively in times of crisis – from the pandemic to the full-scale war. Thanks to decentralisation, local authorities were able to stay closest to the people, organise evacuations, provide humanitarian aid, and ensure critical infrastructure. At the same time, they took on a key role in recovery – from repairing schools and hospitals to building new economic resilience. Without strong hromadas, a strong state is impossible, and today we see this more clearly than ever.”



Gender equality as a prerequisite for local democracy

At SALAR International, gender equality is not treated as a separate issue but as a principle that permeates everything we do. Women's rights and gender equality are fundamental prerequisites for democracy, and without them, inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable societies cannot be achieved. Addressing inequalities between women and men is essential to strengthening democratic governance, improving service delivery, and building societies where everyone can participate on equal terms.

Local governments are uniquely positioned to advance gender equality. Because of their proximity to women and men, girls and boys, they have both the mandate and the tools to translate rights into everyday realities. By mainstreaming gender equality into decision-making, policies, and service provision, municipalities can address structural power imbalances and create environments where all residents have equal opportunities to thrive. For SALAR International, this conviction underpins all our projects, whether through systematic gender mainstreaming or through targeted measures that directly tackle inequalities.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Local change through collaboration and networking

An illustrative example of this approach can be found in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where since 2017 SALAR International has partnered with the Associations of Municipalities and Cities (AMC FBiH and AMC RS). Through the Sida-financed project Strengthening the Role of Municipal Associations in BiH, we have, among other things, worked to build institutional capacity and integrate gender perspectives into the associations core work, helping them, and their member municipalities, address deeply rooted gender equality challenges in BiH.

One of the most significant outcomes has been the establishment of two gender networks, inspired by a similar initiative in Sweden and coordinated by SALAR. These networks bring together municipalities from both the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska, enabling collaboration across entities that is rare in a divided political context. They have become vibrant platforms for dialogue, peer learning, and capacity building, where local governments share experiences, inspire one another, and jointly advance gender equality initiatives.



Creating global platforms for change

While progress begins locally, advancing gender equality also requires global solidarity and shared platforms for dialogue. SALAR International is committed to creating such spaces, where local leaders can exchange knowledge, develop joint visions, and push the global agenda forward.

Most recently, on 23–24 September 2025, we 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. From Africa to Europe, from Latin America to the Balkans, the message was clear: gender equality is essential for democracy, and local governments are indispensable in making it a reality.

The effects are tangible. In the municipality of Gradiška, the municipality has made support for women’s sports a gender equality priority, helping challenge traditional norms and broaden opportunities for women and girls. In Istočna Ilidža, inclusive employment policies are opening up more jobs for women, while in Žepče, local support has created fertile ground for women’s entrepreneurship to flourish. Tešanj, meanwhile, has become a model of municipal leadership in preventing and addressing violence against women and girls, showing how local governments can take responsibility for ensuring safety and protection for their residents.

These examples demonstrate how, when local governments are empowered and connected, they can make gender equality a driver of safer communities, stronger economies, and more resilient democracies.



Looking ahead: Local Governance as a foundation for peace, prosperity and resilience

Reflections from **Ryan Knox**,
Managing Director of SALAR International



Twenty-five years ago, SALAR International was created with a simple but powerful conviction: that local democracy matters. That when people are given the tools, trust, and space to shape their own communities, they create solutions that last. That strong institutions, built from the ground up, are the foundation of peace, prosperity, and resilience.

Today, that conviction is more relevant than ever. The global aid landscape is shifting. There are clear echoes of the Swedish aid reform agenda in proposals for a new Global Europe instrument, which emphasizes stronger linkages between aid, foreign policy, migration and trade. In this new order, there is a risk that local and regional governments are overlooked. But if these ambitions are to succeed, they must be anchored locally — where policies meet people’s lives and where an emphasis on digitalization, climate resilience, green transition, transport, health and education must be underpinned by a European “value-based offer” underpinned by transparency, sustainability and good governance.

Over the past decades, SALAR International has witnessed how local governments, when empowered, become engines of inclusion, resilience, and innovation. We have supported decentralisation reforms, strengthened municipalities, and helped communities navigate conflict, climate challenges, migration flows, and rapid urbanisation. Our experience shows that without local ownership, national and international strategies cannot succeed.

The lessons are clear: local and regional authorities are not just implementers — they are leaders. They provide democratic legitimacy, know their territories, and are the key to translating global strategies like the Global Gateway; creating real, lasting impact. SALAR International, along with Swedish municipalities and regions, bring credibility, know-how, and values that resonate far beyond Sweden’s borders.

As we look to the future, we must ensure that local voices remain at the heart of the international agenda. This means advocating for space for local governments in the design and implementation of EU and Swedish strategies. It means linking lessons from abroad to strengthen our own preparedness — whether for crises, climate adaptation, or sustainable growth. And it means recognising that international engagement is not an add-on, but a source of strength for Swedish local democracy and competitiveness.

