

State and Civil Society Response to the 2024 Floods in Southern Poland: A Critical Review

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Abstract: This article presents a secondary analysis of research findings on the responses of state institutions and civil society to the September 2024 flood in southern Poland. The study selectively examines results from individual and group interviews regarding flood preparedness, the mobilization of social actors during the crisis, and organizational transformations necessary to enhance state resilience. The primary research objective is to analyze the interfaces between governmental, local, and civil society institutions, conceptualized herein as “crush zones.” The original contribution of this paper lies in operationalizing these zones to evaluate how inter-institutional friction impacts societal resilience. Furthermore, the conclusions of the source report are subjected to a critical evaluation within the context of the existing literature on resilience, with attention to its potential to mask institutional power asymmetries.

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In this article, society is conceptualized as the aggregate of individual and collective activities, in which agency is mutually conditioned. Drawing upon Margaret Archer's critical realist framework (2003), this study assumes that the characteristics and actions of social actors are structurally and culturally shaped by institutional interactions. Consequently, the triad of structure-agency-culture serves as the primary analytical framework for examining the resilience of state and local communities, as the quality of such resilience depends on the organization of flows among these constituent elements.

Integrating critical realism with resilience theory suggests that societal resilience cannot be established by investing in any single element in isolation. Moreover, the independent strengthening of individual components does not inherently foster systemic resilience. Instead, community resilience is fundamentally rooted in the communicative and organizational space between formally distinct entities. Depending on the quality of this "inter-institutional space," the capital of central government, local authorities, and social organizations can be either multiplied or squandered.

A review of the literature on resilience supports this premise: the endogenous characteristics and resources of individual entities contribute to the

collective's resilience only when communication between actors is structurally unobstructed and culturally practiced (Bhamra, Dani, and Burnard 2011; Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013; Saja et al. 2021). Community capital, which influences both environmental (infrastructural) and social factors, emerges from a fusion of agency rooted in public policy and the grassroots activities of social organizations (Tiernan et al. 2019). Thus, the generation of resilience—encompassing both infrastructural reinforcement and social strategies for threat mitigation—requires deep commitment and synergy across all institutional levels (Kapucu, Hawkins, and Rivera 2013).

To systematically analyze these inter-institutional spaces during crises, I propose the analytical concept of "crush zones." In automotive engineering, crush zones refer to structural areas designed to absorb kinetic energy during a collision. In the social sciences, this concept extends beyond traditional frameworks such as "boundary-spanning" and "institutional voids." While those theories often focus on the mere presence of networks, the "crush zone" framework specifically operationalizes the material friction, relational resource asymmetry, and temporal delays that occur during sudden crises.

In this study, social "crush zones" are operationalized as the specific institutional, legal, and relational interfaces where public and civic actors negotiate

responsibilities, exchange information, and manage resources. The conceptualization of resilience based on “crush zones” was developed through the following analytical progression:

- **Step 1:** Identification of the primary institutional pillars (central government, local authorities, and civil society).
- **Step 2:** Mapping the communicative and organizational interfaces (“crush zones”) between these actors during the specific crisis event.
- **Step 3:** Assessing the relational and material variables (trust, legal frameworks, resource flows) within these zones to determine whether they effectively absorb the crisis impact or exacerbate systemic failures due to friction.

The parallels between mechanical engineering and social dynamics are particularly striking in this context. To prevent casualties, it is essential to design spaces that minimize forces hazardous to individuals by establishing structures that buffer their impact. While in mechanics these structures are physical, in the social realm, they consist of the material resources available to various institutions. However, a fundamental distinction arises from a unique characteristic of the social world: the temporal dimension. Inefficient communication and poor organization among actors who possess these resources fail to provide the time needed for effective countermeasures against natural disasters and other crises. Consequently, I define the institutional and personal spaces of communication and organization between the individual and collective actors affected by a crisis as social “crush zones.” The efficacy of these zones depends on material resources, legal frameworks, interpersonal relations (linked to

accumulated social capital), and established practices of collective action.

Social “crush zones” are inherently processual. The dynamics of mutual relations between individuals and groups directly influence the strengthening or weakening of a community’s resilience. The concept of resilience itself must account for the capacity to anticipate threats, respond to crisis situations, and skillfully reconfigure resources, organizational structures, and communication during the post-disaster recovery phase. A detailed characterization of social “crush zones” can be illustrated by identifying the specific conditions necessary to bolster communal resilience. The extant literature allows for the identification of numerous constituent elements that contribute to such resilience (Aldrich 2012; Berkes and Ross 2013; Mayer 2019; Mesjasz 2024).

In this article, I examine specific elements that proved deficient during the September 2024 floods in southern Poland. The reconstruction of this crisis is based on qualitative data from in-depth individual and focus group interviews with key personnel responsible for managing the flood response. Specifically, I describe those components of social “crush zones” that compromised the resilience of local communities in the short term and, prospectively, threaten to undermine long-term systemic stability. These factors encompass social and institutional trust, established norms of collaboration and cooperation, and access to information and communication flows (Welsh 2014; Onyx and Bullen 2000). Furthermore, the analysis accounts for network diversity—specifically concerning the connections between disparate social groups and their relations with public institutions—and the overall level of political and institutional connectivity (Thomalla et al. 2018; Kyne and Aldrich 2020) while well suited for

capturing demographic characteristics such as age, race, and wealth, do not include sufficient proxies for social capital. This article proposes a concrete way to measure bonding, bridging, and linking social capital using widely available information. Our social capital index (SoCI).

Methodology

The report selected for this critical analysis was developed by a research team affiliated with the Batory Foundation (Kotras, Kubala, and Sześciło 2025).¹ Typically, the production of such reports culminates in recommendations aimed at rectifying systemic deficiencies and enhancing operational outcomes. Furthermore, these recommendations must be articulated in a language accessible to a broad spectrum of collective and individual actors. Consequently, both the report as a formal document and the underlying empirical data provide a robust foundation for further critical inquiry—specifically through the application of analytical categories not explicitly utilized in the original publication.

To satisfy the broader research objectives (which, though omitted here, were integral to the original project), it was necessary to reconstruct the communicative environment surrounding the flood, encompassing mainstream, local, and social media. Additionally, the report delineated the legal frameworks governing institutional responses and the statutory possibilities for flood prevention.

¹ The author of this article was an integral member of the research team, contributing to the conceptualization of the study, the design of research instruments, and the derivation of practical recommendations. As a co-author of the original report, the author is prompted to engage in a reflective re-evaluation of the empirical findings, situating them within established theoretical categories in the resilience literature.

The empirical component of this study is based on nine in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) and two focus group interviews (FGIs) conducted with key actors involved in the 2024 flood relief efforts. The IDI participants included a diverse range of social actors: two mayors, a deputy mayor, a village head, a voivodeship government official, a representative from the District Crisis Management Center, a social organization leader, a fire service brigadier delegated to crisis management, and a member of the scientific community. The focus groups were conducted with representatives of social organizations and local authorities.

The study was conducted in May and June 2025. Preparations for the research involved attempts to contact individuals both affected by the flooding and those responsible for coordinating relief efforts. Various localities were taken into consideration. An important methodological concern quickly emerged regarding the hierarchy implicitly assigned to hamlets, settlements, villages, and cities through the selection process. On the one hand, we sought to avoid reproducing the common media tendency to focus primarily on urban centers; on the other hand, it is precisely within such centers that the functioning of basic crisis-management institutions can most readily be observed. The final selection of research sites was therefore shaped by the need to reconcile these considerations with practical constraints. Participants from both rural and urban areas were ultimately included in the study. Alongside the positions they held, a key criterion for participant selection was their willingness to take part in the research. Individuals invited to participate most frequently expressed skepticism regarding the study's potential interventionist impact—in other words, they doubted that it could bring about any meaningful change.

The research team raised ethical concerns regarding the very nature of engaging with individuals who had experienced such an extraordinary event. Given that potential participants may have lost both their homes and their life's work, there was a significant risk that the research process itself could exacerbate the trauma caused by the natural disaster. Even the team's preliminary assessment of the affected communities led to a revision of the original research design. In particular, plans to conduct interviews with local residents had to be abandoned due to the highly emotional responses associated with the recent events.

Additional difficulties emerged when attempts were made to contact officials responsible for coordinating emergency assistance. Local government representatives frequently declined to participate in the study. However, the interviews that were ultimately conducted helped clarify the possible reasons for this reluctance. According to participants who agreed to participate, local government representatives are often not perceived as integral to the community resilience system.

It should also be emphasized that the final selection of participants was made possible through the author's extensive network of institutional and personal contacts. This method of access may raise legitimate concerns regarding the selective nature of the information sources. At the same time, however, it is reasonable to ask whether researchers operating without institutional support would, in comparable circumstances, be able to reach the participants identified in the research project.

In analyzing the organization of flood relief efforts, particular attention was devoted to the elements of bridging social capital, understood as mechanisms

capable of generating synergistic effects when crisis-response measures are effectively planned and coordinated. Accordingly, the scope of the study focused on cooperation among civil society organizations, local government, central government institutions, and the business sector.

With regard to cooperation with local government, particular emphasis was placed on the nature and scope of collaboration across the different stages of crisis management: preparedness, ongoing response activities, and post-flood recovery. The study examined potential forms of cooperation, their substantive focus, the degree of formalization of agreements, as well as examples of rapid information exchange, joint planning, and financial support provided during the flood. Attention was also paid to conflicts of competence and to the absence of clear communication channels or procedures that may have hindered or delayed relief efforts.

Participants were also asked to identify the factors they considered most effective during the crisis, including procedures, organizational tools, partnerships with public institutions and other aid-providing organizations, as well as forms of solidarity among residents. The overall aim of the inquiry was to collect as much information as possible concerning the functioning of networks composed of individual and collective actors responsible for initiating and sustaining community resilience processes.

For the purposes of this report, SWOT analyses were prepared for the social actors involved in the relief effort.² Although this analytical framework

² SWOT is an acronym derived from the English terms *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats*. It refers to an analytical framework used to assess four key dimensions of an organization, project, policy, or social situation: strengths,

differs considerably from the tools more commonly employed in sociological research, it responds to the need for practical and actionable insights. Given that the study was intended to culminate in a set of recommendations, the SWOT analyses provided a useful point of departure for further analytical work.

At the same time, this approach is not without limitations. SWOT analyses are closely tied to the specific environmental and institutional conditions within which proposed solutions are to be implemented. In some cases, they reveal functional deficiencies of such magnitude that any effective response would require changes of a systemic or even revolutionary character. This, however, stands in tension with the practical purpose of formulating realistic recommendations.

The underlying reason lies in the complexity of social life and institutional agency. Individuals cannot be replaced in the same manner as mechanical components within a machine, just as institutions—often characterized by a significant degree of autonomy—cannot simply be “repaired” through technical adjustments alone. Consequently, if the report is to provide a meaningful foundation for systemic reform, particular caution must be exercised, especially when assigning responsibility for specific actions or omissions.

The inquiry into the designated “crush zones” focused on issues of social and institutional trust, both of which are critical determinants of resilience. The research addressed specific post-flood actions with

weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The method is widely applied in strategic planning, management, and marketing, as it supports informed decision-making and facilitates the identification of both internal capacities and external conditions affecting future actions.

in local communities—ranging from immediate relief to long-term recovery efforts, including infrastructure reconstruction, social assistance, and land-use planning. Furthermore, participants were asked to identify necessary organizational and procedural reforms to mitigate the impact of future disasters and to reflect on the lessons learned from the 2024 flood. We also explored urgent systemic changes at the state and legislative levels required to enhance crisis management in Poland.

Regarding the second pillar—the standards of cooperation and collaboration essential to the functioning of these “crush zones”—the interviews examined several key areas. These included cooperation with local authorities (commune heads, mayors, and municipal offices) across all stages of the disaster cycle: preparedness, response, and recovery. Specific attention was paid to the formalization of relationships through agreements and contracts between the public sector and social organizations, as well as the role of informal networks. We analyzed instances of rapid information exchange, collaborative planning, and financial support, while also identifying procedural bottlenecks (e.g., delays in grant competitions) that hindered assistance. Additionally, the study investigated jurisdictional conflicts, the lack of clear decision-making channels, and the quality of inter-institutional cooperation with government administration, including the Voivode, the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Ministry of Climate and Environment, and the Government Center for Security (RCB). A pivotal question was whether the state acted as an effective coordinator of activities among non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In examining access to information and communication flows, the study sought to clarify the inter-

actions among the central administration (e.g., the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Prime Minister's Office), command centers, emergency services, and local leadership. The analysis covered internal communication channels within intervention teams, as well as external channels utilized to reach residents and the media. Attention was paid to the challenges of misinformation and communication channel overload, alongside an evaluation of the efficacy of early warning systems and public information protocols.

Furthermore, the focus group scenarios and in-depth interview guidelines included questions on network diversity, specifically the linkages between disparate social groups and their relations with public institutions. This included the dynamics of cooperation with local government officials and their administrative teams, strategies for engaging non-governmental organizations, and local grassroots initiatives that augmented formal emergency services. Finally, the research explored the relationships between residents and local community leaders, such as village heads, local councilors, and the clergy.

Finally, “crush zones” in crisis situations encompass the level of political and institutional connectivity. This is manifested in consultations on local problems, the inclusion of NGO representatives and community leaders in decision-making processes, and direct access to key decision-makers. Consequently, the research explored the necessity for permanent coordination mechanisms (e.g., dedicated crisis teams, integrated online platforms), the demand for joint training exercises between NGOs, local governments, and emergency services, and the optimal organization of preventive education within flood protection programs. These inquiries addressed both the *status quo*—investigating wheth-

er such mechanisms existed prior to the flood—and the potential for future procedural reforms and public consultations.

The primary objective of this article is to present facets of the analysis omitted from the report, using qualitative data and quotations that were not included in the original document. This selective exclusion does not imply that these findings are of secondary importance. Rather, while the report aimed to formulate recommendations by harmonizing the potential of various actors—avoiding an overemphasis on factors that might undermine the legitimacy of the overall flood response—this article serves a different purpose. While the report functions as a pragmatic foundation for future cooperation, a scientific article provides the necessary space for a more rigorous and critical assessment of existing realities. Below, I present research findings pertaining to the four identified “crush zones.” I argue that the weaknesses within these zones could lead to higher casualty rates in future crises if left unaddressed. Thus, shifting the analytical focus toward a more critical perspective in this context is not only scientifically appropriate but also ethically justified.³

Results

Any analysis of the elements identified as pivotal to building national resilience must account for the divergent perspectives and institutional positions

3 The authors of the report emphasize that the resilience system worked despite the specific weaknesses described. Journalistic studies of the generally positive tone of the report can be found, among others, here: <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,32425091,-co-pokazala-nam-zeszluszczona-powodz-panstwo-nie-moze-traktowac.html> [Retrieved May 04, 2026] and <https://www.rp.pl/opinie-polityczno-spoleczne/art43278521-kiedy-pekaja-tamy-jak-budowac-odpornosc-spoleczna-na-kryzysy> [Retrieved May 04, 2026].

of the social actors surveyed. The discrepancies between these positions regarding the same phenomena serve as indicators of the degree of cooperation and functional complementarity between subjects. In the following section, I focus primarily on the perspective of non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives. There is a consensus among all interviewees regarding the scope and effectiveness of the third sector's role. Their contributions are described as invaluable, particularly within the "soft" dimensions of security that encompass various aspects of social life. NGOs provided clothing, food, and shelter; facilitated communication; organized waste collection; offered psychological support; and reached individuals unable to solicit aid independently. Consequently, the description of the individual components of "crush zones" is structured around the NGO perspective.

Social and Institutional Trust

The lack of material support for NGOs directly erodes institutional trust. In terms of resilience-building, it is critical to recognize that this deficit may adversely affect NGO leaders' decision-making in future crises. There is a notable absence of systemic solutions to strengthen horizontal trust structures. Without institutional guarantees for the reimbursement of incurred costs, a further erosion of trust between NGO leadership and both local and central authorities appears inevitable.

It is very inconceivable. Nine months have passed since the flood, and these people have not been compensated, despite their presence and immense personal sacrifice. I personally donated several vehicles—trucks and so on—for their use, yet the authorities failed to acknowledge this and did not provide a single zloty in return. [NGO IDI]

The financial asymmetry between institutions pivotal to disaster response may result in NGOs' material inability to fully participate in state resilience systems. Equally significant is the psychosocial dimension: a profound sense of disillusionment stemming from a lack of perceived fairness—an element that should ideally underpin any strategic reinforcement of state resilience (Ensor, Forrester, and Matin 2018; Matin, Forrester, and Ensor 2018; Ensor et al. 2021). The third sector can be conceptualized as an actor capable of flawlessly executing its mandates, provided that formal, regulated agreements govern the relationship between the state and NGOs.

I must reiterate that there were already high expectations after the war [the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine—KK], and I felt like a loser. We will not allow ourselves to undertake such an immense task again without receiving any government compensation. Notably, while the government received hundreds of millions of zlotys for the Belarusian border—where I also worked extensively—not a single zloty reached the NGOs. We didn't even get cars or thermoses; it all went to the security services. [NGO IDI]

This issue is further reflected in staffing deficiencies within local government crisis management bodies. Severe underinvestment in dedicated crisis management activities suggests that emerging procedural solutions—such as warning systems and risk prediction—may be merely superficial measures.

It is unbelievable, given the current era and the proliferation of threats. We have individuals employed on a one-seventh basis who are overwhelmed by so many responsibilities that crisis management becomes a marginal task, dealt with only at the end of the week. Unfortunately, this is counterproductive; with all due respect to these individuals, they lack

the specific competencies required to effectively assist a mayor or local council, simply because they are not dedicated exclusively to this role. [PCZK IDI]

Standards of Cooperation and Collaboration with Local Authorities

According to representatives of social organizations, the primary obstacles to establishing robust cooperation standards are the politicization and hermeticism of local authorities. Local governments often prioritize mechanisms for the reproduction of power, which significantly delays the resolution of fundamental systemic problems. Public sector concerns appear to stem from both a perceived encroachment on local government competencies and the emergence of “image competition.”

We are not a political force that they should refuse to work with; we are apolitical. Yet, I have a distinct feeling that whatever we do, it doesn't suit them. And that truly surprises me. [NGO FGI]

I believe this lack of will on their part is driven by fear for their own positions. They are afraid the public will see us as the people they can truly count on and perhaps vote for us in the future. [NGO FGI]

Well, I don't think it's just political maneuvering or fear. To me, it is also a matter of disregard. They stay in their offices, maintaining contact with the Territorial Defense Forces (WOT), the ministries, and the central government, while remaining blind to our achievements and our labor. [NGO FGI]

This dynamic results in low inclusiveness within local policies, a failure to recognize the strategic role of NGOs, and a persistent reluctance to co-finance third-sector activities. Furthermore, the friction be-

tween NGOs and municipal authorities often stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the economic and social value provided by the former, as illustrated by the following observation:

For years, we have faced the problem of being treated as if we are always asking for something. But it is quite the opposite. We bring capital into the municipality. We transfer funds to residents and organize virtually all the cultural events in the city through the efforts of our NGOs—precisely because the municipality lacks the funds to do so themselves. [NGO FGI]

The antagonisms and tensions between NGOs and local governments constitute the antithesis of a functional cooperative system. The development of standards designed to bolster community resilience is fundamentally obstructed when mutual animosity prevails between representatives of differing institutional orders. Furthermore, the threat posed by issues of “dignity” and symbolic recognition should not be underestimated. Within this framework, agency must be treated as a variable attribute of individual and collective actors—one that is activated not only by conducive institutional and organizational conditions but also by psychosocial factors such as trust and solidarity. It is this specific communicative space that triggers the volitional attitudes necessary to prioritize communal interests over individual ones during natural disasters. The fusion of these two orders—the institutional and the psychosocial—offers the most viable path toward systemic resilience. However, the qualitative data gathered do not confirm the existence of such conditions.

For instance, regarding local government—which is your primary interest—I actually avoid them as much as possible...They are quite content with that,

because when I do go there, I present my ideas as specific tasks to be addressed, and they don't like me very much for it, and the feeling is mutual. [NGO FGI]

However, throughout my heavy involvement in providing aid, I felt that we, as a foundation, were being marginalized—pushed aside the entire time. Despite the help we were providing to people, there was not a single instance of support or acknowledgment on social media from, say, government officials, was there? [NGO FGI]

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that in small communities, it is common for NGOs to be systematically ignored when attempting to establish cooperation with local authorities.

I was simply told, "I'll call you." There was no further communication, but I knew we couldn't just wait there; we had to act. [NGO FGI]

Representatives of social organizations highlight a critical lack of procedures governing activities at the most granular level of local government during natural disasters. This procedural vacuum obstructs cooperation between diverse social actors and shifts the burden of decision-making onto personal, volitional agency. The absence of institutionalized decision-making pathways can lead to "decisional paralysis," driven by a reluctance to assume personal liability for outcomes affecting the lives, health, and property of citizens. Such institutional ambiguity profoundly weakens community resilience.

Indeed, there are no procedures for actors like village leaders. I haven't received any guidelines whatsoever on how to act in this situation. At the end of the day, every village leader and every mayor is forced to navigate the crisis individually. [NGO FGI]

However, grievances regarding the lack of responsiveness and organizational gaps are not limited to the third sector. A representative from the District Crisis Management Center (PCZK) expressed ambivalent views on cooperation with NGOs, citing their perceived reluctance to adhere to top-down command structures. From an administrative perspective, the core issue is the lack of legal regulations to formalize and organize NGO involvement during catastrophes.

Generally, these organizations arrive to assist with cleanup, logistics, or food distribution. That is commendable, but these activities take place within high-risk areas. We cannot simply allow unregulated access. Everything must be controlled—even mundane matters like insurance. Do these volunteers have accident insurance? Are they vaccinated, which is essential in hazardous zones? Everything must be verified. We cannot allow spontaneous, uncoordinated action, as that could—to put it bluntly—lead to a secondary disaster. [PCZK IDI]

This observation corresponds with the need for volunteer training expressed by NGO representatives. Without such systemic preparation, it is not only impossible to harness the full potential of those willing to assist, but both volunteers and victims are exposed to significant risks. The circumstances described above reflect a lack of a political culture of participation. This culture, indispensable for bolstering community resilience, is predicated on trust and on established norms of collaboration with local government. Deficits in this form of networking—that should ideally integrate knowledge, experience, and capital—result in paralysis in decision-making. This phenomenon was underscored by a representative of the provincial voivodeship government:

...[the central government intervention—KK] unfortunately made me realize—or was the direct result of—a dramatic reactive disaster on the part of local government; as a local official, I can state this with a clear conscience. The local government simply capitulated. In many instances, it was entirely absent—we had to track down one mayor who had gone on vacation, while others, overwhelmed by the crisis, sank into depression and barricaded themselves in their offices. [PSPW IDI]

...they were incapacitated by the inherent weakness of their own structures and overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the catastrophe. Ultimately, it appears the human factor remains the most vulnerable link in the system. [PSPW IDI]

Communication Failures Across NGO and Governmental Levels

One of the most profound weaknesses within the identified “crush zones” is the communicative inefficiency among NGOs, the national government, and local authorities. A critical systemic error in the resilience framework is the lack of coordinated dissemination of information and warnings by local governments. NGO representatives often receive alerts regarding impending floods from fragmented sources—such as neighbors, national media, or local social media groups—while citing local authorities only incidentally as a reliable source. This fragmented landscape is further complicated by residents’ disregard for Government Center for Security (RCB) alerts, the rapid proliferation of disinformation on social media, and a significant lack of real-time data regarding flooded areas and road accessibility for external relief organizations.

It was extremely difficult for us to obtain precise information about where, what, and how. Knowing the

exact locations and the progression of the flooding was a major challenge. [NGO FGI]

I don’t even know who it was—the mayor or someone else—who simply failed to answer a basic question, such as how many dehumidifiers were needed. [NGO FGI]

[What is needed—KK] is a higher degree of automation in the warning processes. We heard accounts of why, for half an hour, no one in Kłodzko knew that the dam in Stronie Śląskie had breached. Regarding Łądek, the consensus was that either mobile networks had failed or that no one was aware of the situation at all. [PSPW IDI]

The intersection of deficiencies in public trust, organization, coordination, and communication results in a complete systemic disconnect—a finding consistently confirmed in both individual and group interviews. Analytically speaking, any positive assessment of the 2024 flood response can be reduced to a “stroke of luck” rather than the result of a robust system. According to active NGO members, cooperation remains merely incidental, while the permanent situation is rooted in mutual animosity.

I also do my part, as if I know what needs to be done, but for now, I don’t have a partner to talk to...Someone interested in creating this would have to appear, and also not make promises or bullshit...I like to get involved, but I like it to make sense. And I know it makes sense because when I get involved, it brings huge results. So I analyze the situation, whether it’s worth it or not. And there have been too many empty talks. I stopped going to them because nothing comes of them. [NGO IDI]

Furthermore, representatives of social organizations bolster their critical assessment by citing the

authority of an external figure—a key leader in the rescue operation who managed the crisis effectively and was perceived as an impartial guarantor of order.

General Z left [the city—KK] with a message to all of us: that our case as NGOs—specifically, regulating the aid situation for the city—is the only issue he was unable to bring to a conclusion, and that he considers this his failure. [NGO FGI]

Operational communication, upon which the efficacy of disaster relief depends, is a critical factor that cannot be overlooked. While the challenges posed by a massive influx of nationwide aid are predictable—given the typical readiness of Polish society to engage in charitable action—the lack of preparation remains a glaring systemic failure. The absence of coordinated aid influxes, designated storage facilities for material donations, and task-level coordination (resulting in groups being redundantly assigned to the same tasks) underscores a systemic weakness. Such deficiencies profoundly undermine the resilience potential of local communities permanently exposed to flood risks.

...there were actually a lot of groups coming to help. But unfortunately, no one coordinated it. They all sat around and didn't know what to do...No help from the authorities. So we could only do what we could ourselves. [NGO FGI]

No, we don't need anything. And it's not even at the level of small NGOs. WOŚP [Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity] came. Everyone in Poland knows WOŚP; it's impossible not to know them. And the first thing the mayor said—the first decision he made—was that “No, we don't need any help.” [NGO FGI]

Foundations called us, asking: “Why, if you need help, are we being told otherwise [by the authorities—KK]? We can see that things are bad, can't we? We're calling you, not the authorities.” [NGO FGI]

The negative assessment of crisis communication is a recurring theme across all interviewed social actors. Regardless of participants' institutional affiliations, there was a consistent belief that communication channels were insufficiently open, lacked decisiveness in immediate messaging, and lacked the organizational links necessary for the effective deployment of communication tools. The representative of the District Crisis Management Center (PCZK) identified significant discrepancies in the responses of local government officials at the municipal level. Communication was frequently characterized by sluggishness; furthermore, warnings failed to automatically trigger established procedures, as recommendations were often treated as optional rather than mandatory.

...there was no consistent communication between the central government and local authorities. Discrepancies were frequent. It was clear that the system was simply falling apart. At times, messages appeared to contradict each other, exacerbated by a fundamental lack of understanding regarding the practicalities of the work. [PCZK IDI]

There was a palpable lack of coordination in the management of communication resources across the local, district, and voivodeship levels.

Leaders of individual local government units, such as village heads, occasionally bypass their immediate administrative level. When a disturbing event occurs, they turn directly to the voivode's resources instead. [PCZK IDI]

We were able to provide approximately twelve Starlink sets to assist with connectivity. However, the local governments utilized only one. [PCZK IDI]

Systemic communication errors are further compounded by flawed crisis management plans. Overly complex and voluminous documentation obstructs the effective dissemination of these plans, necessitates an impractical degree of narrow specialization among personnel, and alienates potential actors. Such documents discourage engagement and fail to distinguish between critical priorities and secondary concerns. Consequently, they lose their operational utility and become entirely impractical in high-pressure environments.

...these documents are simply immense...Even in the Opole Voivodeship, which is the smallest in the country, the plan totals about a thousand pages...If we do not treat this as a practical document—a concise collection of procedures and a “phone book” that tells us exactly whom to call and what to ask for—it simply will not work. [PCZK IDI]

The reconstructed landscape of crisis communication must also account for the absence of a coherent information policy for flood-affected residents. A significant disconnect exists between high-level political messaging and the functional capacity of field administration. Given the severe staffing and material shortages identified, local officials should not be burdened with the impossible task of reconciling mainstream media narratives with the actual operational constraints of flood relief. As one mayor noted, this lack of alignment forces front-line employees to manage the fallout of public disillusionment.

...the government’s *ad hoc* communication policy was counterproductive; the media narrative starkly con-

tradicted what Social Welfare Center [GOPS] employees were experiencing on the ground. There were no updated templates for aid applications. We worked with the old forms, only to discover they had been changed, forcing us to revisit the affected residents... The Prime Minister announced on television that “Everyone would receive 10,000 PLN,” but our internal instructions were different: we had to estimate and determine the percentage of damage. Only those with 100% damage qualified for the full 10,000 PLN; for others, the funding decreased proportionally. However, the media message was unequivocal: everyone gets 10,000. Consequently, our employees were left to manage the intense frustration and emotions of the residents. [Mayor IDI]

Political and Institutional Connectivity: The Crisis of Recognition

The resilience of any community is fundamentally dependent on networking—specifically, the integration of diverse social actors’ potentials. In the context of sudden crisis events, this requires direct, functional access to public sector decision-makers. Furthermore, systemic issues must be subject to broad, meaningful consultation rather than superficial, “tick-the-box” exercises. Equally vital is the active inclusion of social organizations and grassroots initiatives in the design and implementation of crisis mitigation programs. However, the evidence and testimonies presented in this study offer little ground for optimism.

It is a profound misunderstanding and a total lack of respect. It’s disheartening. We experienced some very ugly situations here in [X]. We have yet to receive an apology from the authorities, nor any genuine gratitude. Now, we see our mayor receiving a medal from the President—and we know exactly how things

looked from the inside. It's almost farcical, isn't it? The fact that such things happen, while we remain completely cut off from any further contact. [NGO FGI]

From the perspective of state and local community resilience, it is imperative to recognize that NGOs cannot indefinitely assume the burden of coordinating, managing, and financing emergency aid in every disaster scenario. The potential of the third sector can only be fully realized through sustained external financial support and effective collaboration with other social actors. It is fallacious to assume that the expectation of effective NGO intervention will consistently be met by the organizations' own capacity for resource acquisition. Moreover, the financial risks inherent in such large-scale operations are significant enough to trigger decision-making paralysis among NGO leadership. Currently, there is little evidence to suggest that institutional networking will evolve sufficiently to strengthen these resilience processes.

Above all, we need greater trust in local leaders. When a problem arises, for example, in [X], I believe the funding was blocked due to personality clashes—something quite common in small towns. There are “local hells” where deep-seated conflicts suppress those who rise to the occasion. In times of crisis, natural leaders emerge and theoretically could build social capital, but they are immediately struck down. It's brutal. I don't know if anything can be done; we would essentially have to transform the nature of leadership in this country into one that is not driven by fear. [NGO IDI]

A distinct challenge within the resilience framework is the actual nature of cooperation between local and central government representatives. This tension arises from both the formal statutory framework

and the prevailing administrative culture within the public sector. One could argue that this is one of the most sensitive components of the resilience-building system, given the competing interests of institutional sovereignty and the psychosocial impact on social actors. Effective coordination depends as much on legal and organizational structures as it does on social trust and a political culture of participation.

...the Voivode lacks the legal instruments to issue binding orders to the Starost or village heads regarding their internal operations. This is the essence of local government; they are autonomous in these matters. We have granted local authorities very broad powers. To be frank, while some local governments manage these responsibilities exceptionally well—and I am not necessarily referring to the “wealthy” ones—others struggle significantly. [PSPW IDI]

Discussion: The Litmus Test of Local Governance

Local and mainstream media predominantly portrayed local authorities in a negative light, characterizing them as passive and ineffectual (Kotras et al. 2025). Such communicative stigmatization of local governments severely undermines trust in the very institutions that, by definition, should operate closest to the public and in tandem with a robust civil sector. However, the interviews conducted suggest that the core issue is not necessarily the “ill will” of officials, but rather profound systemic neglect across the four identified “crush zones.” Addressing these failures requires more than mere legislative adjustments; it demands an interrogation of deep-seated institutional taboos.

These are the objective consequences of a social system built upon the current Polish model of local gov-

ernment. A hidden feature of Polish democracy at the local level is the chronic lack of substantive and practical management preparation. While disasters and natural catastrophes act as a litmus test for local authorities, the stakes are far too high to allow for this type of *post-hoc* evaluation of local leadership. [PCZK IDI]

There are weak districts that essentially have no reason to exist, yet there is a lack of political courage to admit that we are over-administered. While the local government reform of thirty-five years ago is generally held in high regard, it is overdue for a revision. There is no political will for this, but the current flood has exposed a rapid escalation of these structural pathologies—phenomena we are afraid to acknowledge, leaving no one capable of an effective response. [PSPW IDI]

To objectify this assessment, we must question whether the knowledge, competence, and resources available to local government representatives at the most granular level are sufficient to manage extraordinary crises. This inquiry necessitates a differentiation of roles: to what extent can a municipal government manage the administrative dimensions of a crisis, and in what specific areas can it supplement the interventionist management provided by central government delegates? A potential solution may lie in preventively prepared, standardized, and rehearsed operational protocols (instructions). These would functionally complement the actions of specialized actors deployed to disaster-prone areas before a crisis escalates.

...delegating the military to take action was a sound decision. However, the manner of its execution was problematic. The communication surrounding it suggested that local government was incompetent, bewildered, and overwhelmed—implying that the state and the military had to “take over” at that point. This

narrative was widely disseminated, leading some residents to remark that it was a relief that the military arrived since the mayor was failing. I disagree with this framing; I believe forces should be integrated and combined, rather than one institution merely replacing another. [MA IDI]

The insights presented above reinforce the article’s initial theses. The discourse on building social resilience at the local level must account for the necessity of well-prepared, external interventionism. Furthermore, there is a compelling case for the partial delegation of institutional responsibility for initiating interventions. Such a shift would act as a buffer against the personal financial liability that currently paralyzes local actors. This problem spans the entire administrative spectrum, from officials in small rural municipalities to those in large-scale institutions. When decision-making restraint ceases to be reasonable and instead becomes an ingrained, habitual attitude, it actively undermines the capacity for immediate response. To correct this, a “safe harbor” list of standardized activities is required—actions that do not place an undue personal or legal burden on the individual administrator (e.g., protocols for controlled reservoir drainage or simplified aid application processing).

However, procedural adjustments cannot substitute for the accumulation of both personalized and institutional trust. External agency will remain insufficient in the absence of robust networking between collective and individual actors. Communication blockages at the levels described in this study inevitably lead to decisional paralysis regarding warnings and evacuations—a critical failure in areas prone to flash floods. Ultimately, strengthening state resilience requires the mutual complementarity of these elements—structure, agency, and trust—

ensuring that no single component dominates at the expense of others. Unfortunately, we do not yet exert control over all these variables.

...did those who were elected mayors eighteen months ago truly know what they were getting themselves into? Forty percent of the new mayors in Poland had no idea. And these individuals in the flood zones certainly did not...In such small communities, factors like family ties or neighborhood feuds play such a peculiar role in elections that sometimes entirely random people become mayors or village heads. Unfortunately, that is the stark reality. [PSPW IDI]

The evidence gathered underscores the existence of fragmented, insular microcosms where social organizations, local authorities, and central agencies operate in parallel rather than within a synergistic network. Instead of collaboration, a culture of suspicion and mutual distrust is habitually recreated. This leads to a reflective withdrawal that ultimately exhausts the potential of all the social actors involved.

A panel discussion organized by the Batory Foundation on October 17, 2025, provided a poignant illustration of this dynamic. A village leader from a flood-affected area revealed that while the local mayor initially established a crisis management team designed to be inclusive—comprising over twenty members, including numerous NGO representatives—the group was later arbitrarily purged. By mid-October, all social organization representatives had been excluded, reducing the team to a handful of public officials. Similarly, during a community meeting in Łądek-Zdrój on December 09, 2025, residents noted, with irony, that the Foundation's initiative was the first public forum in which they could voice their perspectives on the flood response. They further ridiculed current prevention policies, ob-

serving that mayors and village leaders return from provincial training sessions with a superficial sense of security, convinced that a mere theoretical understanding of “what to do” equates to actual community safety.⁴ This institutional lack of trust toward citizens triggers a reciprocal deficit among residents. These paroxysms of mistrust frequently target the most active and visible members of the local community—as evidenced by the dismissal of the village leader in Stara Morawa for supporting strategic regional flood mitigation efforts.⁵ Collectively, this depicts a landscape fundamentally hostile to the integrated strengthening of social resilience.

It is an entirely separate matter to what extent academic studies, like this article, contribute to the framing of resilience in ways that raise a number of concerns. One might ask whether they function as a metanarrative that depoliticizes the well-known actor—the state—responsible for the safety of its citizens? Do they not constitute an element in the privatization of the problem of resilience? While a critique of resilience discourses lies beyond the scope of this text and requires separate analyses, one must remain mindful of the weaknesses inherent in the dominant operationalization of resilience. The task of building resilience is frequently ceded to the lowest levels of local government and non-governmental organizations.

The proposed analytical isolation of “crush zones” is intended to reveal the necessity of the state's presence as a collective entity in the process of organiz-

4 The mentioned content can be found in the recording from 1h04min to 1h15min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIPVyn2Dq48> [Retrieved May 04, 2026].

5 See: <https://walbrzych.wyborcza.pl/walbrzych/7,178336,32510689,soltyska-starej-morawy-odwolana-za-popieranie-budowy-zbiornika.html> [Retrieved May 04, 2026].

ing resilience. The conducted research underscores the irreplaceable role of the state in the process of reconstructing the resources of smaller collective entities, generating legal frameworks, coordinating

communication processes, and occasionally substituting for actors who, due to the sheer scale of natural and man-made disasters, would never be capable of confronting them independently.

Appendix: Abbreviations and Research Codes

IDI: Individual In-Depth Interview

FGI: Focus Group Interview

GOPS: Municipal Social Welfare Center [*Gminny Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej*]

MA: Mayor

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

OSP: Volunteer Fire Department [*Ochotnicza Straż Pożarna*]

PCZK: District Crisis Management Center [*Powiatowe Centrum Zarządzania Kryzysowego*]

PLN: Polish Zloty [the national currency]

PSPW: Provincial-level local government representative [*Przedstawiciel samorządu szczebla wojewódzkiego*]

RCB: Government Center for Security [*Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa*]

WOT: Territorial Defense Forces [*Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*]

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