

UNLEASHING LOCAL ASSETS



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Local Resource Mobilization in USAID/Serbia's Local Works Program

INTRODUCTION: UNLEASHING LOCAL ASSETS

Local Works (LW) supports programs in which USAID and local partners work together to mobilize existing local resources for development, based on the belief that this enhances local leadership of development processes and leads to more sustainable outcomes. This case study investigates how partners in USAID/Serbia's LW Program engaged local actors, mobilizing local resources in support of development outcomes.

In this study, we discuss lessons learned for mobilizing community and government resources in the Serbian context. Local initiatives' community engagement efforts demonstrate the importance of building relationships and networks, sharing knowledge, and clearly communicating the path to change. Partners' work to engage government actors similarly suggests that strategically building relationships and presenting realistic solutions are foundational elements for success. Their experiences also hold lessons for thoughtfully leveraging public pressure for policy change.

This study begins with a brief description of the Serbian context and the LW activities that work within that context, and then identifies the data sources and methods used. It then discusses lessons learned, focusing first on the themes surrounding mobilization of community resources, then turning to findings on government engagement. These high-level findings are accompanied by three "Deep Dive" resources: lessons for USAID staff and partners on how to use media and community events for engagement, a tip sheet on measuring local resources mobilized, and considerations for USAID staff and partners on designing locally led development programming.

While this study unpacks lessons learned in the Serbian context, it offers considerations for teams across the Agency that are designing or managing programming centered on civil society strengthening, domestic resource mobilization, or government engagement, among other areas. More broadly, this study highlights the value of local resource mobilization - not only for the output of resources themselves, but for empowering a community to recognize its own assets and use those to advance its own priorities.



A LW partner worked with organizers of the Belgrade Marathon, dubbing it the "Race of Goodness" and raising over €72,000 for philanthropy through an online platform. Photo Credit: USAID/Serbia



A NOTE ON RESOURCES

The term "resources" often refers specifically to money, but the LW program views resources much more broadly. As the program description for USAID/Serbia's Local Engagement and Asset Development activity states:

"We see local communities all over Serbia as communities rich in resources which are not well or at all used. People, their skills and knowledge, forests, rivers, parks, hills, mountains, history, values... it is essential to understand that our approach sees financial means as only one chain link in this approach. One of the biggest weaknesses of communities is [their] limited perception [of] resources they already have."

ABOUT THE LOCAL WORKS ACTIVITIES

This case study focuses on five activities in Serbia funded under [Local Works](#), a Congressionally directed program that advances locally led development. The program provides selected Missions with five-year discretionary funds, to be used primarily for awards to local organizations. The longer time horizon of these funds enables Missions to take the time to listen to local priorities and develop the capacity of local actors to implement locally-designed, mutually valued solutions.

Communities throughout Serbia suffer from a sense of powerlessness and apathy - partly rooted in the nation's communist and socialist political history - which challenges locally-led action to solve problems. Democratic backsliding in recent years has fomented distrust in government and resistance to cross-sectoral collaboration in policy formation. At the same time, uneven economic growth has limited economic opportunity, causing many Serbians - especially young people - to leave the country. The LW program in Serbia supports locally-led initiatives addressing these issues through several activities, including the five examined in this study:



[Local Engagement and Asset Development](#) strengthens CSOs and informal initiatives for civic engagement and mobilization of local resources through capacity development and financial support.



[Strategic Advocacy Approaches](#) equips CSOs for advocacy work through small grants and mentoring.



[Civic Action for Accountability](#) works to increase government accountability and decrease corruption through supporting a network of grassroots organizations and activists.



[Framework for Giving](#) works to strengthen philanthropy through building a culture of giving and improving enabling legal structures.



[Public Private Dialogue](#) creates opportunities for collaboration between the national government, private sector, and civil society to co-create solutions to improve the business enabling environment.



KEY TERMS

LOCAL WORKS

Since 2015, USAID's Local Works program has enhanced the Agency's ability to empower local actors to lead their own development. Local Works provides USAID Missions with resources, tools, and opportunities to try new development approaches that are more flexible, locally responsive, and sustainable.

LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

When local actors are empowered in decision-making throughout priority-setting, design, management, measurement, and other processes through which development assistance contributes toward improving systems and outcomes for development.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Data for this case study were collected in two phases. First, DDI/LFT staff conducted a desk review of activity documents provided by USAID/Serbia, including annual reports, midpoint syntheses, summary one-pagers, and award documents. This review helped generate key case study questions, iterated through discussions with the Mission.

Second, the DDI/LFT team conducted 23 semi-structured, in-depth individual and group interviews with a total of 36 respondents, including 10 interviews with implementing partners and their activity consortium members, 12 interviews with civil society organizations (CSOs) and informal initiatives supported through the activities, and 1 interview with a representative of a federal government ministry. Given travel restrictions introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic, these interviews occurred virtually via video conferencing. Eighteen of the interviews were conducted in English, while five occurred via consecutive translation.

The team used qualitative coding software to conduct thematic analysis of interview notes, using a mix of deductive and inductive approaches and taking steps to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Photo: A LW implementing partner goes "fishing" in a pothole to draw attention to government delays in fixing the road.

Photo Credit: USAID/Serbia



LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT WORKS BEST TO MOBILIZE COMMUNITY RESOURCES?

Show that change is possible: The majority of respondents recommended sparking community engagement by showing citizens that they have the power to make change. Serbia's communist political legacy has contributed to apathy in many communities, characterized by a sense that only government action drives change. By sharing examples of past citizen-led activities with positive results, local initiatives battled the predominant narrative in Serbia that "nothing changes." Additionally, respondents argued that organizations often use overly-technical communication styles in sharing results, and should instead find ways to connect with people through human stories and accessible methods.

Activists also argued for clearly communicating small results to show forward progress: for example, one initiative issued an open letter to the mayor on Facebook, which led to the mayor offering to meet with them. Though this was only an initial step toward goals of improving environmental policy, they reported that these small victories are a path to the big ones because they demonstrate to communities that things can be changed.

Respondents shared ideas about how to show that change is possible:

Multimedia:

One organization produced a movie featuring applications of project-based learning around the world. This inspired teachers and decision-makers to rethink the role of education, and contributed to 700 teachers applying for grants to implement project-based learning approaches. Another initiative launched a podcast (on Youtube) to feature success stories.

Media coverage:

Many respondents spoke of utilizing media to highlight positive changes. For example, an organization that raised funds for COVID-19 response ensured media presence whenever they delivered supplies to hospitals. They reported that media coverage demonstrated the ways they fulfilled needs, and gave citizens cause for hope. See Deep Dive I for more detail on using media for community engagement.

Storytelling:

An initiative working to preserve indigenous fruit and vegetable varieties held an exhibition in Belgrade to boost farmer and consumer interest. Collecting foods produced through community seed banks, they told stories about how these items were traditionally cooked, and how they connected to regional customs. Enabling people to connect with their country's heritage helped them see the value and progress of this initiative.

Word of mouth:

Some initiatives relied heavily on word of mouth to combat the narrative that "nothing changes." News of an initiative's achievements that flows through networks of individuals in a community builds confidence in the initiative's power to create change.

Social media:

Initiatives also shared accomplishments on their own websites and Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. A group of bicycle enthusiasts marked 300 kilometers of rural bike routes, and shared the achievement online. After this, they reported, it wasn't hard to attract people to participate in their biking-promotion events.

Case studies:

One group produced case studies with detail on how they had successfully engaged local governments and achieved policy objectives. These studies aimed to motivate and guide other initiatives to work toward similar results in their own towns.

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If a young person believes in something and they go to their neighbor, they will be better able to convince them than us coming from Belgrade.

”

- Local Implementing Partner

BiciKLO, a cycling promotion initiative in the town of Loznica, holds events to raise support for improved cycling infrastructure. Photo Credit: BiciKLO

Leverage personal relationships of trust: Respondents reported that initiatives are more successful when leaders are integrated in their communities and can build relationships on trust. Initiative leaders cited that trust forged through frequent, personalized interactions with community members -interactions built on respect for local individuals’ existing knowledge - helped overcome skepticism of activists’ motives, which is pervasive in Serbia. While these relationships are strongest when initiative leaders live in the communities they seek to engage, activists coming from outside a community can boost community engagement by partnering with well-respected local individuals. These individuals can help activists understand the needs and priorities in their community, and can help build credibility for the initiative. Respondents also recommended leveraging youth as advocates, as they are often enthusiastic supporters and have influence in their communities.

Network: While fostering personal relationships was important for establishing trust, respondents reported that building and leveraging broader networks was an effective strategy for formulating solutions, for getting information out to target audiences, and for motivating government action. Under one initiative, high school student parliaments in different towns worked together to come up with concrete proposals for improving online education, and together lobbied the Ministry of Education to issue an opinion on online education quality during COVID. Informal networks were also valuable: one IP recognized the lack of government initiative for addressing the needs of people with disabilities, and brought together individuals and organizations interested in the problem for a series of debates. These debates led to a set of conclusions to be used for policy advocacy, and served as an opportunity to collect funds for translation services for the hard of hearing.



Start by building knowledge: In nearly all interviews, respondents cited the importance of building awareness of existing problems and their impact on citizens' lives. One initiative leader related her initial assumption that citizens would be aware of air pollution and simply in need of someone to lead their fight, but she found that, in reality, community members had little knowledge of the problem (and thus little interest in solving it). An initiative working to protect bees from the harmful effects of chemicals found that, to make the issue salient for citizens, they needed to explicitly communicate how a threat to bees presented a threat to agriculture. Similarly, respondents noted citizens possessed limited knowledge of their legal rights. Informing citizens about their legal rights to demand information and accountability from the government, and providing guidance on how to exercise those rights, helped boost engagement in activism. For example, one local organization guided citizens in following the legal process to comment on a local government's proposed deforestation plan.

Leverage existing business objectives: As most local businesses are owned and operated by local individuals, many of the lessons shared for engaging businesses matched those for engaging citizens. Still, respondents stressed building on businesses' existing objectives. For example, one activity sought to boost support for a proposed tax reform, so they marketed an online tax calculator that businesses could use to predict how much they would pay under the new system. This incentivized firms to advocate for the proposed reform, as they understood clearly how they would benefit.

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When citizens get
information about what
their rights are, the
dynamic changes and
institutions become
more transparent.”

- Local Initiative Leader

LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT WORKS BEST TO MOBILIZE GOVERNMENT RESOURCES?

Serbia's political environment suffers from distrust between the public and civil society. Government actors are often inclined to assume all activists - even those working on issues that are not politically sensitive - represent opposition. While respondents spoke about improvements in this area in recent years, many had persisted through trial-and-error in finding the best strategies to engage government in this challenging environment. Several themes emerged:

Find the right person: Many respondents spoke of the challenge of connecting with an individual in government with the will and the power to take action. Most initiatives who met success in engaging with the government had found the “right person” - someone who was committed to an issue for personal or political reasons, and had enough leverage with decision-makers to make things happen. One partner emphasized the importance of persisting in finding a good government insider: the first officials willing to engage may be largely disinterested or unable to mobilize resources, but eventually the right partner will emerge. Additionally, respondents found opportunities to network and build relationships with government actors to be extremely valuable. For example, one activity organized study tours in which government and civil society leaders traveled outside Serbia to learn about salient topics, including tax administration, entrepreneurship, and agricultural practices. These trips allowed individuals to connect on a human level, building confidence and trust that facilitated public-private dialogue toward reform in these areas.

CATALYZING COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY

Mobilizing citizen philanthropy (both cash and in-kind) is most successful when part of a broader engagement strategy. In the context of that engagement, respondents offered the following tips for catalyzing giving.

PLAN A CAMPAIGN

- **Target those who already agree with your cause**, rather than trying to convince skeptics.
- **Set attainable goals** for resource mobilization. If goals are too ambitious, local citizens and businesses lose motivation because they feel that their contribution won't make a difference.
- **Make it as easy as possible** for citizens and businesses to donate. One local leader says, "If participation is easy, people will participate!" For example:
 - Initiatives attracted individual donors by linking fundraising campaigns to events. One organization partnered with coordinators of the annual Belgrade Marathon, dubbing it the "Race of Goodness" and raising over €72,000 for philanthropy via an online platform advertised at the event.
 - The "Very Important Card" initiative allows citizens to buy from community businesses and direct a portion of proceeds toward local priorities.
 - For the fundraising campaign "Humanitarian Coffee," cafes donated a percentage of proceeds to a philanthropic cause. Its coordinator said, "Many people want to do humanitarian work, but don't know how. [This] gave citizens a good approach."
- **Publicly recognize contributions** through social media, marketing, and events. This makes donors more likely to give in the future.
- **Dedicate staff** to work on resource mobilization, if possible.
- **Use crowdfunding as a tool, not a silver bullet solution:** Crowdfunding platforms, like GoFundMe, make the donation process easy for both donors and fundraisers. They are especially useful for smaller organizations who do not have the resources to create and maintain their own fundraising platforms. However, organizations must use them as part of a broader promotional effort. One youth campaign aimed to get \$2 donations from individuals. Though it was easy to donate (people could use their phones), they saw an unexpectedly low response rate because the campaign was not well-marketed.

The 'Really Important Card' is a community rewards card which collects 1% of purchases at participating businesses and directs them to local projects selected by citizens.
Photo Credit: USAID/Serbia



CATALYZING COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY

CONNECT WITH THE COMMUNITY

- **Leverage personal connections and institutional networks.** People are motivated to give because of relationships with the individual or organization requesting support.
- **Develop long-term relationships** with communities and businesses before asking them to donate. Then, you can approach them with confidence, rather than hesitancy or embarrassment, when asking for resources. After an individual or business donates, keep them engaged by offering opportunities for deeper involvement: this might include opportunities to participate in decision-making, or to connect with other donors, becoming part of a philanthropic community of companies.
- **Embrace in-kind donations of time and expertise,** as well as financial contributions. For example, in the case of a community seed bank initiative, low-income farmers volunteered to plant heritage crops, a contribution of time and agricultural expertise.

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

- **Be fully transparent** in all aspects of resource mobilization. Be clear about the problem, propose a specific solution, and communicate the purpose of the funds.
- **Convey the value and urgency of the cause.** For example, a project to mobilize volunteer efforts to make homemade masks at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was successful because the initiative communicated the urgency of the pandemic and offered a straightforward solution to which citizens could contribute.
- **Focus on issues that are important to the community, but are not politically controversial.** Environmental action, cultural heritage, and grassroots COVID-19 responses were causes that, in the Serbian context, motivated people. Attempting to rally resources around “hot button” issues - while sometimes necessary and worthwhile - was far more challenging.



Community philanthropy is one facet of local ownership, and measuring cash and in-kind contributions can be a great way to assess and demonstrate progress toward local leadership and sustainability. Check out this case study's accompanying “Deep Dive” resource on quantifying local resources.

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Bringing [government and civil society leaders] together in formal and informal settings was more useful in this project than I expected.

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- Local Implementing Partner

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić watches a student robotics demonstration. Cooperation between a LW partner and the Government of Serbia enabled schools to receive innovative learning tools, like Bee Bots. Photo Credit: USAID/Serbia

Propose a solution: Some activists found that government actors perceive certain issues to be unsolvable given resource or political constraints, leading them to avoid engaging on these issues. By proposing a well-researched, data-backed solution that was mutually beneficial to government and civil society (or private sector) interests, initiatives were able to engage in collaborative problem-solving with government actors. Other initiatives spoke of involving experts in business, law, and environmental and cultural protection to prepare policy briefs or engage in conversations with the government. Respondents reported that this “expert” perspective was valued by government actors, and helped initiatives appear well-informed, granting them credibility as partners in forming policy solutions. This lesson was supported by the federal government official interviewed, who shared that he is unable to support initiatives raised “without any arguments or proposals.” This respondent recognized the value that civil society and private sector entities brought to the table, citing their important role in helping government identify and address needs.



SOLUTION SPOTLIGHT

One initiative sought to change tax laws that made it expensive to donate food and encouraged food waste. It prepared a reform proposal, accompanied by a cost-benefit analysis. The Prime Minister - initially worried that the plan would reduce tax revenue - was impressed with this demonstration of how the proposal would benefit nonprofits, businesses, and society at large, and formed a cross-Ministry working group to explore policy reform options.



Apply public pressure (but do it strategically): Almost universally, respondents cited the effectiveness of public pressure as a tool for engaging government actors. Politicians pay attention - and are more likely to take action - when there are more people behind a cause. Respondents showed less agreement over how to do this.

- Some favored media coverage to both raise public awareness and emphasize public opinion, believing that it was essential to generate noise to bring about government response. As one initiative leader stated, “I don’t believe in dialogue [with the government] at all. This is not the way.”
- Others preferred a less confrontational approach: for example, one initiative approached the mayor with the information that the town’s social development strategy had not been updated for 11 years, and implementation of the strategy had withered, creating problems for unemployed citizens. The mayor was unaware of this and invited the initiative to engage in drafting a new strategy.
- Another initiative shared its preference for working through back channels first, having found that presenting the issue to the government and giving it space to maneuver (without generating public attention) is sometimes effective in arriving at a solution. This same initiative, however, moved to raise public pressure when the government failed to act in response to initial requests.

Organizations talked about this as a “dance” between civil society and government bodies, or as “using a bit of the ‘carrot’ and a bit of the ‘stick.’” As one initiative leader related, “We have a Plan B to expose how the government has broken regulations if Plan A doesn’t work. But we really want to cooperate.” Because of the distrust between sectors in Serbia, it is challenging to have meaningful dialogue, but several partners and supported initiatives urged intentionality in creating opportunities conducive to collaboration with the government. This adaptable approach speaks to many local organizations’ understanding of how to navigate relationships with government in their particular context, as well as their desire for long term, productive relationships (rather than a short term transactional approach).

Be flexible: While the government representative emphasized the importance of approaching the government with a well-researched solution, he also urged initiative leaders to recognize government resource and political constraints and practice flexibility in negotiating around their proposed policy solutions. For example, the government may not be able or willing to provide direct funding, but they may allocate budgetary resources to scale up a solution. One CSO invited teachers to request in-kind grants for project-based learning approaches. The Ministry of Education contributed labor to application review and published the call on their website, which gave credibility to the initiative among teachers.

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If there are no voices raised, [government] will continue with breaches and wrong decisions.

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- Local Activist

“

We are all on the same side, but maybe we don’t have the same point of view.

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- Government Official,
urging initiatives to be open
to compromise in policy
negotiations



TIP: Demonstrate how government will benefit:

An association of entrepreneurs showed how proposed tax reforms would save the public tax administration thousands of dollars in employee time. In response, the Ministry of Finance pledged \$150,000 for software to update the tax calculation process, contributing to a more favorable business environment.

Seize the day: Respondents reported that timing mattered in seeking government engagement. Seizing opportunities that commanded public attention - such as the COVID-19 pandemic, national tragedies, or other news events - created helpful leverage. For example, one initiative works to improve cycling safety and convenience by upgrading cycling infrastructure in its town, but had struggled to get a foot in the door with the local government. When the pandemic arose, citizens sought to avoid public transport, cycling became more popular, and the local government was motivated to take action. The initiative seized this opportunity to put its proposals forward through a government-sponsored working group for improving cycling infrastructure. Respondents also urged attention to election cycles and political considerations, arguing that activists will have more success when they plan engagement around politicians' bandwidth to engage and interest in sponsoring a politically-popular initiative.

LOOKING TO DIVE DEEPER?

Based on the experiences shared by LW partners and supported initiatives in Serbia, this case study has drawn out themes surrounding what worked best for engaging communities and government actors in that context. Strategies that proved effective in Serbia may not be the best choice in countries with different political, cultural, or economic contexts. Nonetheless, this case study raises considerations about citizen knowledge and motivation for change, government political will and capacity to engage, and factors that build or challenge trust between citizens and between sectors. We hope these considerations spark useful conversations around these questions during activity design and adaptation, even in contexts where the answers may be different.

If you'd like to learn more about the topics explored in this case study, check out the accompanying "Deep Dive" resources on ProgramNet and Learning Lab. Informed by the USAID/Serbia LW experience, these products offer more detail on the following topics:

Deep Dive 1: Media and Community Events as Engagement Tools

Deep Dive 2: Tips for Measuring Mobilized Local Resources

Deep Dive 3: Considerations for Locally Led Activity Design

This case study was produced by the Local, Faith and Transformative Partnerships Hub in USAID's Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation (USAID/DDI/LFT). Please direct any questions or comments to Amanda Satterwhite (amsatterwhite@usaid.gov).