

# UNLEASHING LOCAL ASSETS



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

## Deep Dive I: Media and Community Events as Engagement Tools

This "Deep Dive" resource accompanies the Local Works (LW) case study "Unleashing Local Assets," which examines resource mobilization in USAID/Serbia LW programming. In many of the case study interviews, media and community events emerged as promising ways for organizations to raise community awareness and interest and mobilize citizen resources. These tools helped local initiatives achieve specific fundraising and policy change goals, while strengthening ties between initiative leaders and the communities in which they work.

This document draws on case study interviews to unpack lessons around leveraging media and community events as engagement tools, as expressed by the local partners and initiatives involved in the LW program.

“  
*Media is a very important partner to help spread your message. To have a good relationship with media, you must build a network with transparency.*

”

- Local Implementing Partner

### MEDIA

Respondents broadly perceived media as a powerful tool for promoting one's organization or cause. Visibility in the media helped local organizations control their own narratives, which is especially important in the Serbian context given the government's often-negative portrayal of civil society activists. Media also helped raise citizen awareness around issues of importance, which was a critical facet of engagement given the low level of pre-existing knowledge of social and environmental problems or government accountability breaches.

In terms of media strategy, local initiatives found that establishing personal and professional relationships with media outlets, notably at the local level, facilitated media coverage for an initiative's activities. Framing messaging around concrete goals and achievements helped initiatives create a newsworthy story - content media outlets were enthusiastic about publishing that also improved initiatives' local visibility and reputation.

#### *Social media: Not a silver bullet*

In Serbia, citizens are widely connected to social media platforms; as one organization said, "If it's not on Facebook, it didn't happen." Local initiatives found social media to be a useful tool for advertising events (e.g. public debates) or mobilizing volunteers. Notably, however, initiative leaders saw social media as a useful tool for expanding their reach and communicating their message, but not as a replacement for attracting citizens to their cause by way of concrete accomplishments. A strong social media presence allowed more people to see an organization's accomplishments, which in turn spoke for themselves. In some cases - such as for an initiative working with rural farmers without internet access - in-person communication was far more effective. However, even in towns where citizens were well-connected to social media, initiative leaders generally did not see these platforms as substitutes for forming personal, face-to-face connections.

“  
*Whenever we delivered assistance, we made sure that there was media presence, so citizens saw that their needs were being addressed and felt hope during the difficult time.*

”

- Local Initiative, on delivering assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic

## COMMUNITY EVENTS

Events offer a unique opportunity for community organizations to mobilize resources and advance advocacy goals. Local initiatives in Serbia organized many types of events, including protests, celebratory festivals and conventions, and community volunteer days. Such events served to boost visibility for a cause, connect individuals to collective priorities and identity, and provide a positive experience that made community members eager to engage in the future.

Local organizers proactively spread the word about upcoming events through social media promotion, partnership with other community organizations with strong local networks, and targeting of key groups (such as youth or families). Leveraging these existing local networks and influencers was effective because people who heard about events from friends and family were more likely to attend. For example, the leader of an initiative to fight air pollution worked with teachers' networks to establish partnerships with schools, which enabled them to teach kids about air pollution and volunteering to improve the environment. They found this to be effective, as the kids then pulled on parents' emotions to incite broader engagement. Local initiatives also recruited event attendees based on shared interests: one organization held cycling events, attracting people based on their common enjoyment of the sport. After that, they reported, it wasn't hard to get people to show up for community volunteer days to mark bike trails.

The content and framing of the events themselves was just as important as the promotion strategy. Organizers used events to convey the urgency of a cause and generate excitement about solutions in a fun and engaging way. Finally, local initiatives emphasized that the high energy of events could be draining for event organizers and community members over time. They recommended limiting events to a realistic time period that would generate excitement without leading to burnout.

“

*Events are not just about education, it needs to be a two-way interaction with the local community.* ”

- Local Implementing Partner



Photo: An initiative working to preserve indigenous fruit and vegetable varieties held an exhibition in Belgrade to boost farmer and consumer interest..

Photo Credit: USAID/Serbia

## INITIATIVE SPOTLIGHT: MOBILIZING RESOURCES THROUGH "THE FORCE"



Jedi Con event; Photo Credit: National Coalition for Decentralization

Jedi Con is an annual meeting of 5,000 participants in the town of Nis, and the most popular convention in the South of Serbia. Focused on “the Jedi within each of us” and “the power of the force” for creating positive change in one’s community - as well as a general celebration of all things Star Wars! - it demonstrates the power of fun, local events to generate community engagement and mobilize resources.

The event is both fueled by and brings recognition to local assets. Individuals who have distinguished themselves in the community are publicly awarded “Jedi Knighthood,” and a “Jedi Talks” session features community leaders sharing their own experiences and offering advice for how other members of the community can make an impact. The convention provides a forum for approximately 15 local initiatives or organizations to raise visibility for their causes, and invites local arts groups or universities to lead sessions. In terms of financial resources, 50% of the admissions proceeds each year are donated to a local charitable cause.

Jedi Con’s success in securing local government resources reflects the lessons highlighted in this case study. The organizers met with a local government official to try to secure municipal cultural funds for the event, and expected skepticism. In contrast, the official was the mother of two kids who she had brought to Jedi events in the past, and was ready to lobby decision-makers for support of the convention. The experience reflects the importance of finding an ally within government with both the interest and power to take action. The organizers also experienced the effectiveness of popular support in mobilizing government resources. After the sponsor for the event’s mainstage equipment backed out ten days before the event, the founder sent a request for support to the mayor’s office. The mayor asked his team for their thoughts, and they related how much families in Nis loved the event. As a result, the mayor directed the municipal Ministry of Culture to provide space and equipment for the convention.

The rising popularity of Jedi Con illustrates the importance of word-of-mouth and personal connections in boosting engagement. The founder shared that in the first year, the event was not very popular in this conservative community, where “imported” culture (such as Star Wars) is often frowned upon. Nonetheless, he found that people who attended and enjoyed the event brought their family members and friends the following year, increasing the visibility of the convention over time and improving its reputation as an initiative beneficial to the community. Now, the event boasts coverage in dozens of media outlets. Jedi Con also partners with other local organizations each year to expand networks of potential attendees and strengthen cooperation between organizations in the community.

By designing an event that resonates with community priorities, the Jedi Con organizers are able to direct local resources to local causes in a way that is engaging, illuminates local assets, and empowers community members as leaders.