The impact of community foundations on social changes in local communities

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Preface

The publication before you was developed under the Trag Foundation "Our Community Foundation – The Community Has a Say!" programme supporting the establishment of *community foundations* in the Western Balkans. Community foundations are foundations active in a specific geographic area such as a city, its part, a municipality, several municipalities, a district or a region. Their objective is to develop local philanthropy, and to raise financial and in-kind resources from individuals, the business sector and other stakeholders in the community, to support -*via* open calls – the citizens' initiatives to jointly shape their immediate environment. Even more importantly perhaps, these foundations are a place for gathering and connecting people from different avenues of life, and a point for building trust and empowering people to address important issues through joint action and thus contribute to the long-term and sustainable development of their communities.

Trag Foundation has been contributing to the development and empowerment of community foundations in Serbia since their early days back in 2011. As of 2019, under the programme "Our Community Foundation – The Community Has a Say!", Trag has been providing systemic support to the selected informal groups of minimum three persons pertaining to the same community to build community foundations in their environment. The selected groups of citizens are supported by mentoring and capacity building and tasked to raise the amount of 15,000 Euro from individual and corporate donors in their surroundings. This sum is then doubled by the Trag Foundation, to ensure the initial budget for the support to local initiatives. Trag first launched this programme in Serbia in early 2020 selecting four initiative groups from Niš, Pančevo, Stara Pazova and Šabac out of 28 applications from 17 communities. Of these four, the groups from Niš, Pančevo and Stara Pazova managed to reach their objective and become registered community foundations in mid-2022. Since 2021, the programme is also implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where five initiative groups are on the track to reach the same goal.

By the end of September 2022, the groups from Niš, Pančevo and Stara Pazova jointly raised more than 50,000 US dollars that Trag Foundation doubled. The funds were used to support 56 formal and informal initiatives in these cities. This study, implemented in cooperation with the Center for Study of Social Development from Novi Sad, focuses on exploring the effects of the work of the initiative groups from these three cities, by evaluating projects that they supported until June 2022. The conclusions and recommendations of the study will be used to shape our further work with the community foundations and initiative groups in Serbia and other countries in the region.

Finally, we owe big gratitude to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation who funded this programme, the Center for Study of Social Development and prof. Valentina Sokolovska PhD, who led this study, our expert associate Aleksandar Weisner and colleague Vjekoslav Vuković whose comments and guidelines contributed to the successful finalization of this publication. We would also like to thank the community foundations from the above cities, the representatives of the supported initiatives and members of the selection committees. This study would not have been possible without their engagement and contribution. We believe this study will help the experts, academics and broader public to appreciate that small changes may make a big difference and that all of us, both individually and collectively, can contribute to building a more equitable and accountable society for all - the reasons why the Trag Foundation has been investing into the development of local communities, and encouraging citizens to be active and engage around positive changes since 1999.

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The effect of community foundations on social changes in local communities

> *"A healthy society is that in which […] acting based on one's own conscience is understood as a necessary fundamental quality, and opportunism and lack of principles as anti-social; where an individual is interested in social issues thus turning them into personal issues […] A healthy society […] is the one allowing a person to work within operational and visible dimensions and be an active and accountable participant in the life of the society and the master of their own life. This is the society fostering human solidarity, not only allowing, but encouraging its members to mutually connect in love; a healthy society enhances the productive activity of each member in their work, stimulates the development of common sense and enables a person to express their inner needs." (From, 1989: 211)*

The idea of citizens organizing themselves to address specific issues faced by their local communities is not new. Moreover, it seems there is nothing "healthier" (From, 1989) for a society than its members trying to find a common solution when faced with a specific problem. Still, in the reality of everyday life in modern Serbian society, this is an exception rather than the rule.

Summary

The study before us explains the impact of the community foundations participating in the Trag Foundation programme "Our Community Foundation - The Community Has a Say!" on the creation of organized, logistic and philanthropic support to the development, unleashed the resources and empowered citizens to implement social initiatives in the local community.

This publication is intended for national and international researchers and practitioners engaged in local philanthropy, empowering citizens to join forces and launch initiatives for the common good, by building trust and contributing to the overall development of local communities. This publication is also intended for citizens who wish to strengthen their civic activism and improve life in local communities.

The study starts with an analysis of the social, economic and political contexts in which the above mentioned Trag Foundation programme was launched, proceeds with a focus on the analysis of the civil sector development in Serbia in the past 30 years and on the importance of the sustainable development concept to better understand the concept of the community foundations' work.

This is followed by a section dedicated to methodology, i.e., explaining the study sample and method, and the analysis of the findings. The section "A look inward: Activist citizenship in action" emerged based on the gathered testimonials of representatives of informal groups and associations, and grantees of community foundations in Niš, Stara Pazova and Pančevo. Besides their direct initiators, an important role in bringing the idea of community foundations to life was, and continues to be played by the members of the project selection committees selected by the community foundations themselves. The outcomes of discussions with them are published in the section "A look outward: Creating assumptions for change". This is followed by the part where our respondents proposed an entire set of recommendations to improve the future cycles of the call, as well as the overall community foundations' work.

Based on the experiences of the respondents arising from their cooperation with local communities and experiences acquired through self-organized civic activism and implementation of projects supported by community foundations presented during focus groups, we have learned that the process of social micro transformation was rather dynamic, bringing about changes fundamentally different from the changes that were typical for the transformation in Serbia for decades.

The study shows that community foundations are deeply rooted in the social ecosystems of local communities they are active in. The social reputation of their founders, members, coordinators and associates significantly affects the potential trust of their (fellow) citizens and the acceptance of foundations in local communities. Through the projects supported, the community foundations started nurturing new paradigms, given that active citizens' participation in building safe communities focused on improving sound interpersonal relationships and trust among people and addressing local issues is of the crucial importance for the implementation of the sustainable development goals.

The social, economic and political contexts in which the "Our Community Foundation - The Community Has a Say!" programme emerged

The Serbian society has undergone a very difficult and complex process of (social, economic and political) transformation over the past three decades. From the sociological aspect, at the systemic level this process produced a developmental discontinuity in terms of a changed direction and character of social processes materialized via changes in the domain of economic relations, political participation and civil society development in Serbia.

The formal termination of the continuity with self-governing socialism occurred at the beginning of the 1990s by abolishing the principle of economic reproduction of the socialist type (the 1989 Law on Privatisation). As of this decade, capitalist patterns of capital reproduction began taking hold gradually and with great difficulty. The introduction of a market-based economy in Serbia through a series of laws and institutional reforms is manifested in the establishment of all normative assumptions for the economic system to function based on the new foundations (Djorić, 2018).

However, compared to other Central and Eastern European countries, and due to the specificities of the political situation in Serbia, the character of the regime and international isolation[1], the transition of the society in Serbia took the shape of a "blocked transformation" (Lazić, 2011), which includes a systemic change reflected in the establishment of a specific hybrid regime enabling the reproduction of the major part of the ruling social class (originating from the previous socialist nomenclature). The gradual unblocking of transformational processes took place only in the second half of the 1990s. These processes intensified after the political change in 2000 which fostered a multidimensional - social, economic, political and cultural transformation, leading to the demolition of the old and the creation of new societal values and structures (Mladenović, 2014). All this implies the overall transformation of societal structure, economic reproduction, forming new political elites and reorganization of social relations shaping everyday life, the challenges faced by the citizens and redefinition of opportunities to address them.

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[1] The Security Council Resolution no. 757, on 30 May 1992 imposed sanctions on the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. The sanctions included an introduction of the full international embargo, bringing a disturbing period of international isolation of SR Yugoslavia. The sanctions had a devastating effect on the economy of the country, and the consequences of their effect were materialized in the decline of living standards and shortages of basic foodstuffs, medications and fuel. Following the signing of the Dayton Treaty in December 1995, the European Union and the UN suspended sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The introduction of a multi-party system and the formation of an autonomous civil sector opened new opportunities and channels for the citizens' social and political engagement. Unfortunately, these opportunities were not accompanied by substantial progress in the domain of political culture. Consequently, these new actors, who undoubtedly help articulate specific ideas and positions in the public domain, do not yet possess the necessary public influence to buffer the negative effects of transformation. The collapse of government institutions brought about intensive social instability and uncertainty that the citizens faced while coping with everyday problems and meeting different needs, whereby the transformation process produced a "society of risk" (Vujović, 2008).

The above described processes brought about dramatic changes, not only within the societal but also within the political and economic structures. Perhaps the best illustration of the nature of this changes was a pronounced polarization dividing voters into "winners" and "losers" of transition, that took place upon the diversification of the multi-party political arena after the year 2000. The winners who profited from the change in the social stratification mechanism, or production of capital based on private ownership now including the new social elite (comprising the representatives of the former socialist elite), kept the power in the new multi-partisan system, joined by the representatives of the new capitalist class - war profiteers from the 1990s and businessmen with a privileged status in public-private partnerships.

Along with the disappearing middle class, all the other parts of society practically became the "losers" of the transition in the first decade of the 21st century. In other words, the losers are those bypassed by the scarce positive effects of the changes, leading to their marginalization, pauperization and the disenfranchisement of workers and general radical social stratification. Such economic transformation only deepened material inequalities. A sudden differentiation of the disproportionally rich group of private owners was followed by a sharp increase in unemployment, an increase in poverty, a reduction in pensions, and the abolition of various forms of social protection.

In the short period between 2000 and 2002, the Gini coefficient of income inequality increased from 0.28 to 0.33 - an indicator of the speed of the transformational processes leading to rising social inequalities. The high inequality in income distribution was not mitigated in the coming years, so in 2016, Gini equaled 38.6. After 2016, the Gini coefficient remained at a lower albeit stable level identical to the one at the beginning of accelerated transformation processes, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Indicators of material position and population inequality in Serbia*

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
At-poverty risk rate	25,9	25,7	24,3	23,2	21,7
At-poverty risk threshold (RSD)	14680	15600	16615	19381	22000
Material deprivation rate	37,4	30,7	30,4	25,6	25,6
Gini coefficient	39,8	37,8	35,6	33,3	33,3

Source: SORS (2021a): "Survey on Income and Living Conditions"

During the 1990s, the economic differences were somewhat less noticeable as a consequence of the almost overall pauperization of the society, whereby the changes in the international position of Serbia after 2000 enabled access to the international capital market and opportunities for the completion of the initial accumulation of social elites' capital, resulting in the intensification of economic differences in a short period and resuming inequality to the level recorded in the final years of socialism (Lazić, 2011).

On the other hand, the poverty index dropped from 28.9 in 1995 to 14.5 in 2002, indicating absolute improvement in the living standards in this period. It may be said that economic rise after the 2000 collapse of the Milošević regime and the normalization of Serbia's international position (until the 2008 international economic crisis) resulted in an improvement in the living conditions of all social groups with the aforementioned growth of inequality, which is expected in the conditions of the consolidation of the capitalist order. Most of the social groups experience intensive oscillations in their possibility to meet the basic living needs, which is a consequence of cyclical trends in capital production (Lazić & Cvejić, 2019).

The 2020 data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia show that 10% of households could not afford to buy medicines for their family members. Table 1 presents an overview of indicators of financial status and inequality in the period between 2016 and 2020. Stabilization of economic activity risk and an almost linear reduction in the at-poverty risk rate, material deprivation and pay gap were evident in that period. The absence of growing inequality and major changes in the above indicators, speak about the consolidation of the capitalist reproduction system and the establishment of permanent class differences and social inequalities within the existing societal structure.

Such an economic structure in Serbia explains, to a large extent, the conditions emerging from the political context, and the challenges faced by the citizens of Serbia in the domain of the collapse and capture of political institutions. Pauperization of the society and proliferation of precarious working conditions (Marković, 2021) considerably limits the existing resources of the citizens needed for political participation, formation of active citizenship and participation in the civil sector.

What developed through the transformation process in the past 30 years are the rudimentary forms of political institutions of extractive[2] rather than development character. Such institutions, mostly under authoritarian control, serve the privileged members of the elite in generating financial benefits to the detriment of the rest of the society, at the same time not providing support to social and economic development in the long run. If sustained by non-participatory forms of political culture, these can be maintained without coercion or open conflict. The majority of independent international reports indicate that democratic institutions in Serbia are formally present but practically inefficient, at the same time outlining the weaknesses in the domain of the rule of law and the lack of capacity of the legislative and judicial power in controlling the executive.

However, for the political elite to sustain such an institutional order, they will need

continuously produce social instability both internally and externally, making one of the most important preconditions for the survival of the ruling elite structured in this way (Golubović & Džunić, 2021). Due to various international pressures and commitments assumed by signing international treaties and the European integration process, the new political elites were forced to undertake a series of reforms denying them direct and firm support of voters. Therefore, the ongoing production of political crises has a fundamental role to play in the targeted exaggeration of social risks and over emphasizing different types of security, economic, social and other threats. The lack of political dialogue and constructive communication between political actors deepens political crisis and leads to further collapse of the already fragile democratic procedures.

In the absence of stable and independent institutions and constructed institutional democratic order, in the conditions of permanent crisis citizens are turning to clientelistic[3] networks of political parties. Such a clientelistic network, i.e. the network created by the political and economic elites, operates outside the existing institutional framework.

In the case of Serbia, this situation produces a kind of paradox reflected in the low levels of trust in the State and its institutions, coupled with political preferences seeking a higher level of State intervention and governmental protection against different sources of social insecurity. The main outcome of this phenomenon is reflected in the citizens turning to informal institutions (extended family, clan, corruption, etc.) perceived as faster and more efficient. Besides the mentioned clientelistic networks of political parties, these important informal mechanisms include relying on individuals with power and social connections for employment in private and public sectors (Golubović & Džunić, 2021; Lažetić, Živadinović, Jarić & Radonjić, 2014), issuance of various permits or ensuring specific services in the domain of health and/or social protection.

With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the citizens perceive institutions as corrupt and unreliable as they favor privileged groups and exclude the relevant segments of society. As the citizens start perceiving their immediate environment, their local community or elements of their State as a threat to their well-being, they turn to "ready-made" solutions and populist programmes of authoritarian political figures. Maintaining a non-democratic system with obviously collapsed or captured institutions is perceived as a "lesser evil" compared to insecurity and high (expected personal and utility) costs of further social change based on the transitional experience so far. In that context, authoritarianism is (self)promoted as an adaptive defense mechanism protecting individuals in a threatening social environment (Golubović & Džunić, 2021).

A clear signal of citizens' alienation from institutions is their lack of readiness to rely on them in a myriad of situations falling under the mandate of such institutions. Therefore, instead of seeking assistance from competent institutions to protect their interests, the citizens turn to informal sources of power estimated as more functional and efficient in materializing their short-term interests. These informal sources of power draw influence from the position and/or connection with the ruling political elite, even overstressing the idea of the impotence of institutions in the public discourse, thus shifting the burden of solving social problems to the level of individual actors, who, in turn, can solve everyday problems only through the clientelistic network of the ruling

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[2] They enable the spill-over of public resources from institutions and their transfer into the hands of individuals without transparent procedures.

[3] Clientelism in this context implies the political distribution of positions and resources governed by party interests rather than by objective criteria.

political party (Velinov et al., 2019). This is confirmed by an extremely large number of family members being members of political parties, especially of the ruling coalition. Such a high percentage which is primarily instrumentally motivated is recorded in various social studies (Petrović & Stanojević, 2019; Cvejić, 2016) and connected to the relevance of parties in the distribution of public resources, whereby the first position belongs to the employment in the public sector (*ibid*.). Despite the large number of political party members, the citizens demonstrate little interest in active participation in political life, real political participation and civic activism. In addition to clientelism, there are several factors affecting the weak motivation of citizens to participate in political life: the underdeveloped participatory political culture, broad acceptance of authoritarian values and centralization of the political system and underdevelopment of civil society. Among the reasons for the absence of motivation for political engagement, the citizens often note the lack of interest in politics, insufficient information about politics, and the lack of trust in the fact that civic organisation could yield the desired outcome (Petrović & Stanojević, 2019).

Still, recent studies point to certain progress in understanding political activism and motivation for engagement. The spontaneous initiatives, the sparks of new forms of activism and social projects, start appearing within the social reality, primarily in large cities (Petrović & Stanojević, 2019; Fiket & Pudar-Draško, 2021). The examples of such initiatives in the past eight years include the protests *"Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own"* in 2016, the protest *"Against Dictatorship"* in 2017, *"1 of 5 million"* in 2018, protests against MHP (mini hydro-power plants), protests *"Rio Tinto: Get off the Drina!"* in 2021, but also protests against the Europride in 2022 in Belgrade, extreme right group of citizens gathered in People's patrols and their gatherings to support Russian aggression on Ukraine in the same year. These protests testify about the gradual awakening of *activist citizenship*[4] which is not necessarily democratically oriented, does not always promote the values of human rights and freedoms or does not advocate for progressive and development-oriented social change.

Locally articulated political initiatives represent a part of a broader process of re-localization of politics (Kukec, 2022; Tomašević & Sokolovska, 2019). In the post-socialist societies affected by various crises and transformational processes already discussed, an accelerated nationalization of politics occurred (Bochsler, 2010) coupled with squeezing out local topics in favor of major national political narratives. The nationalization of politics represents a process of creating nationally uniform space for political competition or establishing institutions of political representation at the national level. On the other hand, localization is a process of re-approximation of politics to citizens and offers alternative mechanisms for participation in the political life of the local community, addressing key social problems at the local level, but also promoting democratic, participatory political culture in its broadest context.

Such initiatives are usually primarily articulated at the local level through cooperation between the civil sector and other stakeholders relevant to the life of specific communities, aiming to meet the needs and address problems local communities and their members are faced with. On the account of the awakening

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[4] Unlike the concept of active citizenship, implying that individuals regularly perform their civic duties (voting in elections, paying taxes, adhering to law and order), the concept of activist citizenship refers to discontinuation of regular social practices to open the space for action of new political actors and promote new political ideas.

of such activism, in 2019 Trag Foundation launched a programme developing philanthropy in local communities, to ensure necessary resources for this kind of *ad hoc* and longer-term movements.

Almost simultaneously with the emergence of the first Trag initiative groups under the programme "Our Community Foundation- The Community Has a Say!" in Niš, Pančevo, Stara Pazova and Šabac, in the second quarter of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic a sharp decline of all economic indicators was registered, as well as a sudden decline of the economy, namely the collapse of economic activity (Institute for Development and Innovation, 2020). Certain studies report an increase in long-term poverty (Jovanović, 2021), while the 2020 report of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia outlines that every fifth Serbian citizen is at-risk of poverty and that the perceived poverty rate amounts even to 88% (SORS, 2021a).

Such an analysis of the economic situation in Serbia especially during the pandemic, is of great importance for understanding the context in which community foundations started working, *inter alia,* because the fundraising within the local community, i.e. mobilizing financial resources from the citizens and businesses in the local community, makes a fundamental precondition for the development of the concept of community foundations. At the same time, this was a challenge for the initiative groups who were to develop community foundations regarding calls for solidarity and establishing cooperation particularly with those economic and political elites who created nationally uniform space within and outside institutions for decades, polarizing political public into "us" and "them", and initiating social tension and agony, building clientelistic networks and system in which the values advocated by the programme "Our Community Foundation - The Community Has a Say!" are not desirable.

In a situation when on the one side, various local government institutions are alienated from the citizens and are only formally present but practically inefficient, and serving the centralized government system, and on the other, atomized society of underdeveloped participatory political culture with low levels of trust in the State and its institutions, burdened by the rising insecurity the citizens face when addressing everyday challenges, the initiative groups dedicated to the development of the local community by strengthening philanthropy emerge as a call to citizens to articulate joint ideas and needs, initiate change in the public space and positively respond to the problem of the collective feeling of lost hope that civic (self)organising can bring about the positive outcome for the community.

Opening such local political space in Serbia and empowering their visibility will be interpreted in this report as a step towards developing activist citizenship and participatory political culture on the one hand and towards the strengthening of social solidarity and productivity of all members of the society (in line with individual, local and broader social needs) to enable overcoming hindering social circumstances and support the development contributing to a healthy society on the other.

The analysis of the civil society function in empowering citizens and their local initiatives may commence with an analysis of the absence of functionality of local government institutions in Serbia which, in parallel, demonstrates their lack of capacity to help citizens in addressing the existing issues and their role in creating new social problems.

This study explains how civil society organizations, and more specifically - initiative groups for the development of community foundations - affected the creation of organizational, logistic and philanthropic support for releasing and developing resources and empowering citizens to implement social initiatives in the local community.

Civil sector and local communities

Citizen participation in the civil sector cannot be considered separately from the development problems this sector is facing in the context of economic and political changes in Serbia over the past thirty years. During the 1990s, the civil society in Serbia was developing in a contradictory environment. While formal political pluralisation compared to the single-party system was conducive to the development of civil society, the political regime was extremely hostile towards this sector (Spasić, 2003). Following the change of the first single-party system, and then the non-democratic regime in 2000 and the enhanced international position of the country, more intensive development of the civil society took place albeit with the persisting problems regarding the practices of citizen participation. The studies have shown that Serbian citizens do not believe they can affect the change in their own country and their immediate environment through their engagement (Radovanović & Vasiljević, 2022). Most of the citizens demonstrate a low level of belief in their ability and competence to understand social and political issues. Coupled with the insufficient information about the nature, character and specific activities of civil society organizations, we arrive to the data that 95% of citizens do not participate in the work and activities of civil society organizations (Radovanović & Vasiljević, 2022).

The low levels of citizen participation and inadequate political culture are especially visible in the case of civil society organizations whose activities are predominantly linked to specific local communities. In the climate of transitional society risk, local communities and local governments have the capacity to buffer many crises, instability and uncertainty generated by the national politics and economy, and thus affect the quality of citizens' lives. In addition, the activities of the local community (investments into infrastructure, fast permit issuing, local taxes, etc.) significantly affect the development and maintenance of economic activity[5].

The cooperation between the local business and non-business entities in the economic sphere may be a very efficient way of harvesting various comparative advantages of specific local communities (location, natural resources, physical infrastructure, education of labor force). However, territorial disparities in Serbia are substantial. For a very long time, they were among the largest in Europe (Aničić & Veličković, 2019). Regions in Serbia[6] significantly differ based on the GDP level, level of employment, education, implemented investments, and average salaries (ibid.). A very sharp layering and deepening of development differences between the developed cities and their immediate environment is also very typical of Serbia.

This produces economic and social hierarchy among the four regions (Petrović et al., 2019). The financial status of the members of different social layers is the best in Belgrade, and the worst in the Southern and Eastern Serbia (see Table 2[7]). The disparities stem from the improved access to different resources in economically more developed areas (jobs, availability of educational institutions, communication, cultural content, access to consumables) and from the specificities of the demographic structure of the population). In line with this, the class and layer differences are less visible in underdeveloped regions than in the developed ones.

Table 2. *Economic indicators of Serbian regions, 2020*

Indicator	Belgrade	Vojvodina	Šumadija and Western Serbia	Southern and Eastern Serbia
Share in GDP	42,1%	25,6%	18,3%	14,0%
No. of the employed per 1000 inhabitants	321	317	293	282
Share of the employed 15-29 in total employment	14,1%	15,9%	16,1%	16,1%
Average earnings (in thous. RSD)	74,3	57,2	51,1	52,8
Investments in new fixed assets (in milion RSD)	374,2	290,5	107,9	118,5

Source: SORS (2021b): *Municipalities and regions in the Republic of Serbia* 2021, Belgrade.

The trend of reduced regional disparities can mask the fact that the political affiliation of the local government leadership in Serbia is an important factor for the allocation of funds from national budget and those of other authorities supporting local economic development. The membership in the ruling party considerably facilitates the delivery of tasks at the local level, and thus represents an important limiting factor of local development and a potential obstacle to the development of local initiatives and operation of civil society organizations. Each attempt of addressing local issues may be conditioned by the membership in the clientelistic network of ruling parties and local political elites, thus significantly aggravating functioning of local communities and their development.

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[5] This is why businesses should hold a considerable interest in cooperation with local communities.

[6] Here we refer to the four regions most often used to present statistical data for the Republic of Serbia: (1) Vojvodina, (2) Belgrade, (3) Šumadija and Western Serbia, and (4) Southern and Eastern Serbia.

[7] As presented in Table 2, the differences between the regions decreased in 2020, primarily in regard the number of employed per 1,000 inhabitants, as did the share of youth in total employment. The average wage also increased in the poorest region of Southern and Eastern Serbia. The largest structural source of regional disparities is the GDP structure - more than 40% of total GDP comes from the Belgrade region, which is three times higher relative to the poorest region of Southern and Eastern Serbia.

A healthy society and sustainable development

Social development can best be described as a "process of guided social change improving the society" (Midgley, 2014: 2). Still, the experience teaches us that all "guided" changes, even those motivated by the most benevolent tendencies, do not necessarily entail a happy ending for the society and its members. In the previous chapter, we outlined some of the details of a "guided" social change, the transformation from socialism to capitalism leading the Serbian society into a series of social, political, economic and environmental problems, forcing the Serbian society to develop unwanted alienation of citizens from social institutions and related practices of clientelism and corruption eating up the "healthy" social tissue. If a healthy society encourages citizens to "work within operational and visible dimensions and be active and accountable participants in the life of the society and masters of their own lives" (From, 1989: 211), then the activities fostering sustainable social development ought to be rooted in these principles.

An imperative of sustainability in the discussion on social development became dominant in the late 1980s, in the reports of international institutions and national governments[8]. Unfortunately, in the reality of everyday life, the projected sustainable development goals have not been implemented yet. There are numerous reasons for the ineffectiveness of implementation of international sustainable development policies, mostly revolving around the necessity to embrace a different approach in addressing these issues at the level of wealthy and poorer countries and insufficient reliance on local organizations, as well as the lack of implementation of lessons learnt at international and national levels. In the 1960s, the world started to face unsustainable environmental degradation. In the 1980s, it faced the notable increase of inequalities and slowing down in combatting poverty. All these challenges led to the review of the concept and shifting the focus from meeting of ever-growing needs and economic growth to improved well-being, which resulted in the design of the sustainable development concept. The issue of environmental degradation and potentially unsustainable development of mankind became the focus of the international public in 1972 for the first time, when the United Nations (UN) organized a conference on the environment in Stockholm (United Nations, 1972). In 1992 the UN organized "The World Summit" in Rio de Janeiro, integrating the concepts of economic development, environmental protection and social justice and inclusion into the concept of sustainable development which became the priority of the international community. In line with this, the recommendation was to design national strategies applicable in addressing economic, social and environmental issues. The outcome of

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[8] Prior to this, as of the end of the World War II, a dominant economic narrative on social development was the one insisting on economic growth aimed at developing the economy and international trade, without diving into issues of potential social consequences. With this idea in mind, in 1944 in Bretton Woods the nternational Monetary Fund and the World Bank were established to stabilise the global financial system and promote economic development.

the work of the participants was reflected in the document *Agenda 21* - a voluntary plan of action in the area of sustainable development to be implemented by all national, regional and local authorities. The document is particularly focused on the need to include local communities, civil society organizations and social groups identified by the UN as social groups with lesser participation in decision-making (women, children, indigenous communities) in the implementation of the recommended sustainable development policies (United Nations, 1992b).

Along the same lines, the UN organized the "Millennium Summit" in 2000. The *Millennium Development Goals* adopted were planned to be implemented by 2015: (a) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, (b) achieve universal primary education, (c) promote gender equality and empower women, (d) reduce child mortality, (e) improve maternal health, (f) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, (g) ensure environmental sustainability, (h) global partnership for development (United Nations, 2000). In 2012, Twenty years after the summit in Rio, the UN organized the "Rio+20" summit. The commitment to the concept of sustainable development was reconfirmed by the adoption of the document the *Future We Want*. At this summit, the development of the *Sustainable Development Goals* was agreed upon, relying on *Agenda 21* and *Millennium Development Goals* (United Nations, 2012).

In 2015 it was concluded that the *Millennium Development Goals* were partially implemented with unequal success worldwide. That same year, the UN substituted and extended the *Millennium Development Goals* by 17 Sustainable Development Goals focused on the fundamental human needs and the need to protect the environment: (1) End poverty in all of its forms everywhere, (2) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture, (3) Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, (4) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, (5) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, (6) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, (7) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, (8) Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, (9) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation, (10) Reduce inequality within and among countries, (11) Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, (12) Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, (13) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, (14) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, (15) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss, (16) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, and (17) Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015).

Taking into consideration the piled-up problems in the domain of economy, society and environment and the invested international efforts to mitigate or eradicate them, it becomes clear that the implementation of sustainable development policies is vital, not only for the survival of the mankind, but also for achieving social health, both globally and locally.

The concept of sustainable development is rooted in the economic activity not threatening the sustainability of the natural environment, but also in the social dimension, i.e. in policies encouraging citizens to be active participants and creators of social lives in line with their own needs and expected needs of future generations (Council of the European Union, 2006: 2).

Back at the 1992 World Summit, the UN recognized the crucial role of local communities in implementing sustainable development policies: "As many problems and solutions identified in the *Agenda 21* are rooted in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a decisive factor in meeting these goals. Local authorities build economic, social and environmental infrastructure, manage and maintain it, oversee the planning processes, design local environmental protection policies and regulations and help implement national and subnational policies in the environmental domain. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating and mobilizing the public and hold the utmost accountability towards the public in promoting sustainable development" (United Nations, 1992a).

The UN recommended the linking of supranational organizations with private businesses and banks in financing and coordinating activities with local communities whose main task is to collect all the necessary information in discussions and consultation with citizens, local organizations and businesses. The objective was to design the best possible sustainable development strategies, which in return, raises the level of awareness of the local population about the importance of these policies and enhances the process of formulation of local policies, laws and regulations to implement the *Agenda 21* goals.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding many examples of successful local projects dedicated to poverty reduction, the inclusion of marginalised social groups, environmental protection, etc. worldwide, the practice shows that funding for the local organizations is insufficient and non-flexible. The funds are often lacking. Even when available, the application procedure, implementation and requirements for the award of these funds are complicated and hard to meet. The major problem lies in the fact that these funds are often short-term, non-flexible and need to be spent in a predetermined timeframe, in line with the donors' interests. Contrary to that, local organizations require long-term allocations rather than large budgets, since more time is needed to implement local projects. Equally important is the flexible access to financial resources as local circumstances change fast and these changes need to be addressed in a reasonable time. The knowledge, fieldwork and capacities of local organizations often remain invisible to international agencies and national authorities, which is why the implementation of healthy sustainable development policies deriving from the experience and knowledge gained by working at the local level at is lacking national and supranational level (Satterthwaite & Sauter, 2008).

The key issue for the implementation of sustainable development goals is the active citizens' participation in building safe communities focused on enhancing interpersonal relationships and trust among people and addressing local problems and conflicts. The concept of the community foundations' work is based on principles which can fully support various forms of civic activism at the local level and efficiently contribute to the implementation of sustainable development goals. This activism can be delivered through direct participation in the work of local institutions like schools, kindergartens, sports and cultural content and environmental associations. In addition, citizens can be involved in addressing local issues such as protecting green areas from construction, poverty and unemployment or can get activated in the area of culture promotion (new cultural content), art (e.g. street art), and a more attractive, healthier and safer neighbourhood (e.g. street lighting, etc.). The role of local communities is crucial in mitigating social exclusion - for a healthy local community, it is important that nobody feels unwanted or undervalued. Moreover, the role of local communities in the area of environmental protection is indispensable. In addition to the protection of green areas, local communities can be particularly effective in the area of environmental protection through the promotion of work from home, more efficient public transport, better thermal insulation of residential and office buildings, reduced waste generation and its proper disposal, waste recycling and development of new green spaces and afforestation.

The advantage of local organizations and community foundations in implementing local sustainable development policies lies in their knowledge of the local context and local problems. Moreover, people know each other at the local level, which is a good starting point for successful cooperation, as its foundation is accountability towards the local community. It is also true that development policies and funds for their financing are often decided upon at higher instances - international and national. However, it is also a fact that these policies are implemented on the ground, which is why the success in the implementation of these policies depends on the local action - specific results of a specific project, mobilizing local assets and gaining knowledge.

The establishment of community foundations opens an opportunity to counter and overcome all barriers, gaps and problems stemming from such constellation, and build mechanisms and processes making fellow citizens in the same local community key stakeholders in all the stages of planning, decision-making, implementation and evaluation of the changes and developments at the local level, and contributing fully to the designed goals for building a better global world.

The programmes, strategies and recommendations of the UN and other international organizations (e.g., the Council of Europe) for the implementation of an idea of sustainable development can be understood as the most relevant, and most generic but also as the most specific reference framework for the community foundations to develop ideas and plan expected changes in their surroundings. They may also be perceived as a basis for considering and understanding the contribution of the community foundations' work.

Study: The effect of community foundations on social changes in local communities

Starting from the identified relevance of local communities and local initiatives in the implementation of sustainable development goals, this study was focused on social intervention launched by the Trag Foundation - initiating the establishment of community foundations within three local communities looking up to similar interventions in Romania, Hungary and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The purpose of the study was to analyze the effects of the work of community foundations initiated in three local communities- Niš, Stara Pazova and Pančevo on the development of local communities and philanthropy within them. The analysis was undertaken based on the evaluation of outcomes of supported projects of informal groups and citizen associations. More specifically, the study analyzed:

(a)   social, political and economic effects in local communities, initiated by the supported projects;

(b)   produced social relations and processes; as well as

(c)   sustainable progressive changes in local communities.

The study methodology and sample

The project was implemented applying a combined method - desk analysis and data collection in the field. The desk analysis included exploring: (a) relevant literature on community foundations; (b) Trag Foundation documents on the work of community foundations in these three cities; (c) relevant project documentation of associations (and organizations, informal groups, etc.) whose initiatives were supported; (d) various social media of community foundations and adequate media content. This analysis showed: (1) the contribution of the supported projects to the development of local communities, (2) the link between the donor and economic effects of the supported projects on the development of the local community, (3) the social profile of applicants, on one side, and final beneficiaries of supported initiatives, on the other, (4) the values promoted by the supported projects and community foundations through these projects, and (5) the impact of the project selection committees on the local community development policies.

On the other hand, data collection in the field was undertaken by applying the method of a focus group interviews, with the option of including individual semi-structured interviews where needed. As a qualitative method of collecting data, the focus group interview was used to better understand and interpret the data gathered through the desk analysis. Compared to other research techniques, focus group interviews (1) ensure much faster data collection, (2) "open questions" ensure discussion and a deeper insight into the opinions of respondents, (3) stimulate interaction among respondents, (4) enable moderator to seek additional explanations and encourage respondents to explain their views and finally, (5) applies to studies of various issues and examining different populations (Đurić, 2007: 55–56).

The very nature of our study implied forming two types of groups for the focus group interview: one with the members of the committees evaluating the submitted project proposals, and the other with the grantees. This division also conditioned the planning of samples. From the committee members, we wanted to learn about the course of the evaluation process of the received project proposals and their critical reflection on the work of the committee. The purpose of the discussion was to better understand their experiences, challenges that they faced and ideas for the improvement of the selection process of the projects community foundations would like to financially support in the future.

In the second case, the members of associations and informal groups that received funding for the implementation of their project proposals were invited to a focus group interview. One or more persons (members) coming from each supported initiative/group or association who are well familiarized with all project stages - starting from an idea, completing the application form, up to the delivery - were invited to attend the focus group. We invited the people actively involved in the work of the group: not necessarily (in)formal group coordinator, but any group member involved in different phases of the supported project delivery and different aspects of the group's work. The purpose of the discussion was to understand their different experiences and initiatives regarding the project implementation, relationship with the community foundation on one side, and the local community on the other.

The literature indicates that the optimum number of participants in the focus group interview is between 6 and 12. However, the size of the group needs to be adapted to the "type of research, nature of the issue to be discussed and characteristics of respondents" (Đurić, 2007: 108). In our study, the size of the sample was directly determined by the number of funded initiatives in each community foundation, as well as the number of committee members. Therefore, the number of respondents in focus group interviews differed. Finally, the implemented sample included a total of 30 respondents - 11 from Niš and Stara Pazova each, and 8 respondents from Pančevo (Table 3).

Table 3. *Sample distribution according to the place of study and group type*

		Group		Total
		Committee member	Grantee	
City	Niš	3	8	11
	Pančevo	2	6	8
	Stara Pazova	5	6	11
Total		10	20	30

The gender-based sample distribution shows a slightly higher participation of female (18) than male respondents (12). Only the sample in Stara Pazova included more men than women (Table 4).

Table 4. *Sample distribution according to the place of study and gender*

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
City	Niš	7	4	11
	Pančevo	6	2	8
	Stara Pazova	5	6	11
Total		18	12	30

The most striking distribution is found in the respondents' education level. There were four times as many respondents with university and college degrees than those with secondary education (Table 5). There were no interviewees who completed primary school or illiterate population members.

Table 5 *Sample distribution according to the place of study and respondents' education level*

|		Education level		Total
		Secondary school	College and university	
City	Niš	1	10	11
	Pančevo	3	5	8
	Stara Pazova	2	9	11
Total		6	24	30

Community Foundation Niš

In 2021, Community Foundation Niš supported 15 initiatives in total within two public calls. Although each initiative supported includes several dimensions subject to potential impact, it is always possible to identify the dominant area. In line with their guiding idea at the establishment, denoting they will advocate for "the development of sports in Niš, investing in education, support to culture and artists and development of public space" (Radovanović & Vasiljević, 2022: 37), the community foundation from Niš supported initiatives in the area of culture and arts, those focused on education and development of sports and recreation, and fostering the environment, or more specifically, developing public spaces (Chart 1).

Chart 1 *Areas covered by the supported projects at the Community Foundation Niš*

|		
	3	sports and recreation
	3	education, training, workshops
	6	culture and art
	3	environment
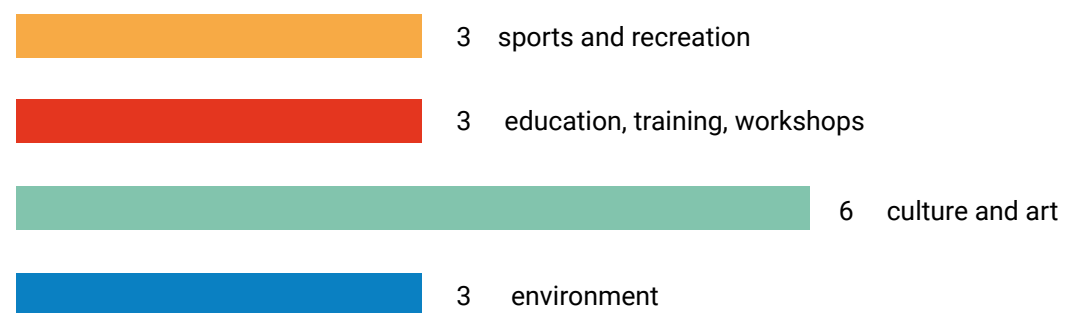
As of May 2022, the Community Foundation Niš has supported the largest number of initiatives of informal groups of citizens (12 in total) and three initiatives of formal civil society organizations (Chart 2).

Chart 2 *Direct beneficiaries of the grants of the Community Foundation Niš*

Informal groups	Citizen associations
12	3
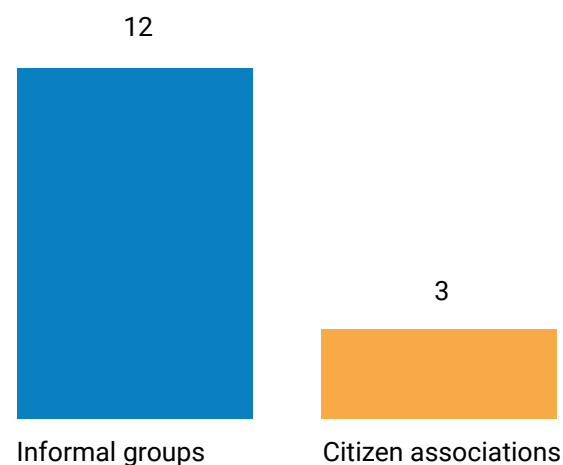
The highest number of approved initiatives list all citizens as final beneficiaries, two initiatives are focused on children, and one wishes to improve the social life of youth and persons with disabilities (Chart 3).

Chart 3 *Final beneficiaries of the approved initiatives by the Community Foundation Niš*

|		
	11	all citizens
	1	persons with disabilities
	1	youth
	2	children
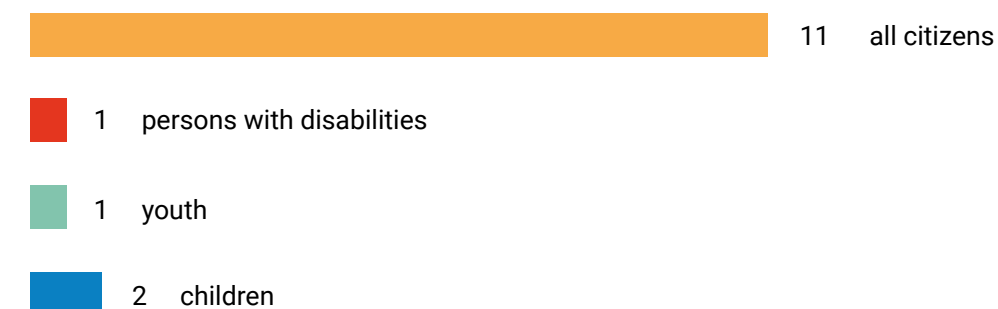
The study was undertaken in Niš in late May 2022. The focus groups dedicated to the committee members evaluating received project proposals included three committee members, whereas the focus group dedicated to discussion with grantees was attended by eight counterparts from five informal groups and two citizen associations.
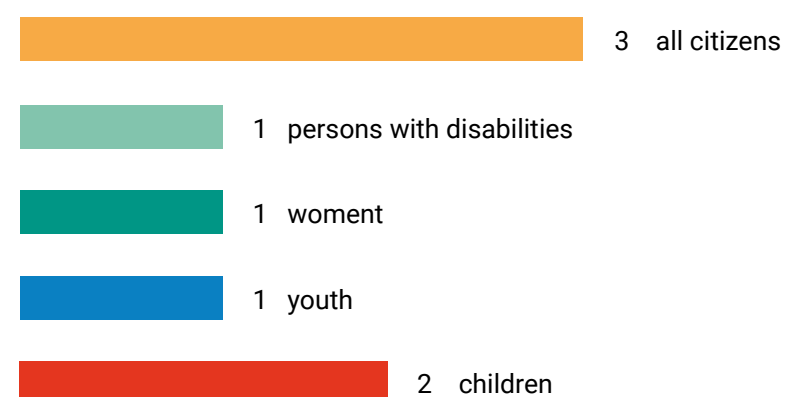
Community Foundation Pančevo

In line with the objective of this community foundation: a more homogeneous, better connected, more capable and responsive community able to independently face challenges and problems (Radovanović & Vasiljević, 2022: 37), in 2021 the initiative group, under a call titled "Our community, our idea", supported eight initiatives in total. These initiatives mainly focused on education, training, workshops (three initiatives: introduction to history and tradition of the Serbian army and military aviation, mastering the technique of decoupage, education in the field of urban planning and architecture) and the environment (three initiatives: more adequate lighting in parts of the settlement, environmental protection by recycling cans, equipping yards between residential buildings), sports and recreation (one supported initiative for the equipment of a children's playground) and culture and art (one initiative for the promotion of artistic handicrafts - exhibition of handicrafts) (Chart 4).

Chart 4 *Areas covered by the supported projects at the Community Foundation Pančevo*

▬	3	environment
▬	1	culture and arts
▬	3	education, training, workshops
▬	1	sports and recreation
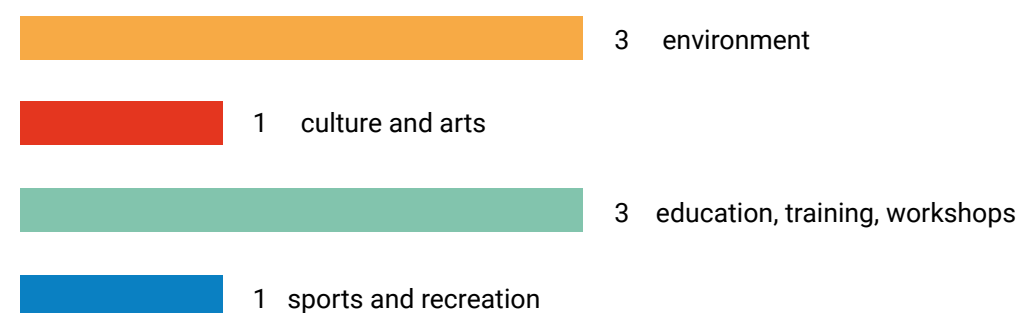
The direct beneficiaries of the supported projects are six informal groups and two citizens' associations. However, when it comes to the end beneficiaries, we would like to single out the initiatives targeting improved lives of citizens, and those targeting children. Also supported were the actions whose final beneficiaries were persons with disabilities, women and youth (Chart 5).

Chart 5 *Final beneficiaries of initiatives supported by the community foundation in Pančevo*

▬	3	all citizens
▬	1	persons with disabilities
▬	1	woment
▬	1	youth
▬	2	children

The data collection in Pančevo took place in June 2022.

The focus group with grantees of the Community Foundation Pančevo included six representatives of three informal groups and one citizens' association. One informal group and citizens' association were represented by two respondents each in this discussion.

The members of the selection committee evaluating the submitted initiatives participated in two online individual interviews. Namely, as the data collection was organized in summer when the people were already taking their annual leaves or were busy otherwise, it was difficult to organize a focus group. This challenge was resolved by conducting individual online interviews.

Community Foundation Stara Pazova

As described by Radovanović and Vasiljević, Community Foundation Stara Pazova "advocates for additional education of youth, development and improvement of public spaces, support to artists and culture, healthy and environmentally-friendly environment and development of sports" (Radovanović & Vasiljević, 2022: 36). In 2021, this community foundation financially supported twelve projects under two calls. The projects were mainly implemented in the area of sports and recreation, followed by various training and development of public spaces, and one initiative categorized as belonging to charity work (Chart 6).

Chart 6 *Areas covered by the projects supported by the Community Foundation Stara Pazova*

1 charity
5 sports and recreaton
3 education, training, workshops
3 environment
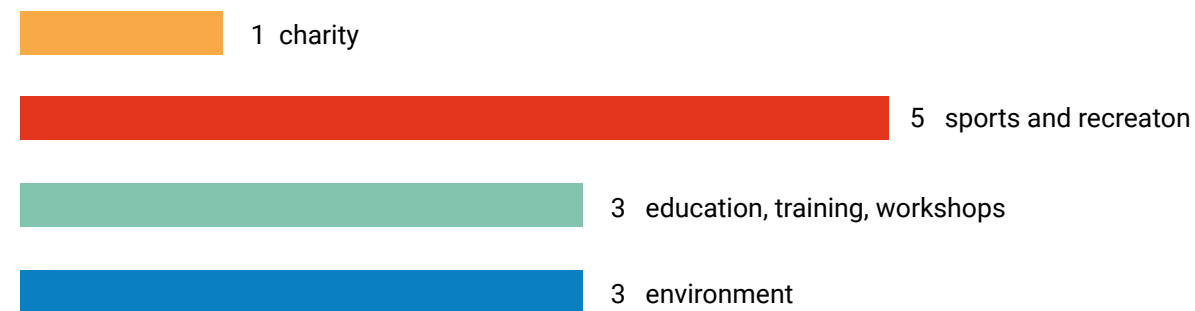
Based on the brief descriptions of the supported projects furnished by the community foundation from Stara Pazova, it is evident that the majority of project proposals were submitted by citizens' associations, with only three initiatives of informal groups being supported (Chart 7).

Chart 7 *Direct beneficiaries of grants of the Community Foundation Stara Pazova*

9

3

Informal groups   Citizen associations
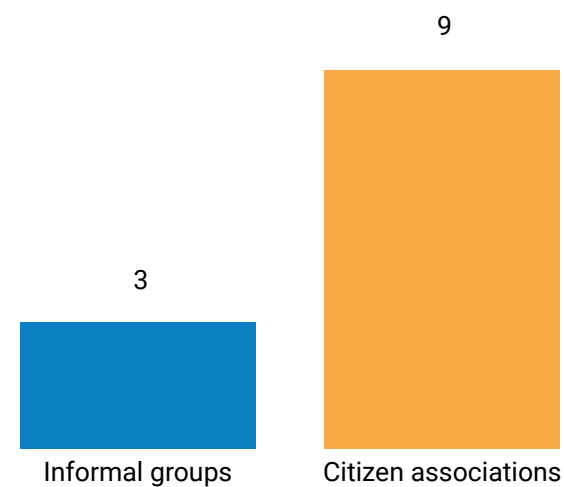
The approved projects address equally all citizens and children, and youth. Some of them are focused on improving the situation of persons with disabilities, or animal welfare (Chart 8).

Chart 8 *Final beneficiaries of the approved initiatives in Stara Pazova*

4 all citizens
1 animals
1 persons with disabilities
2 youth
4 children
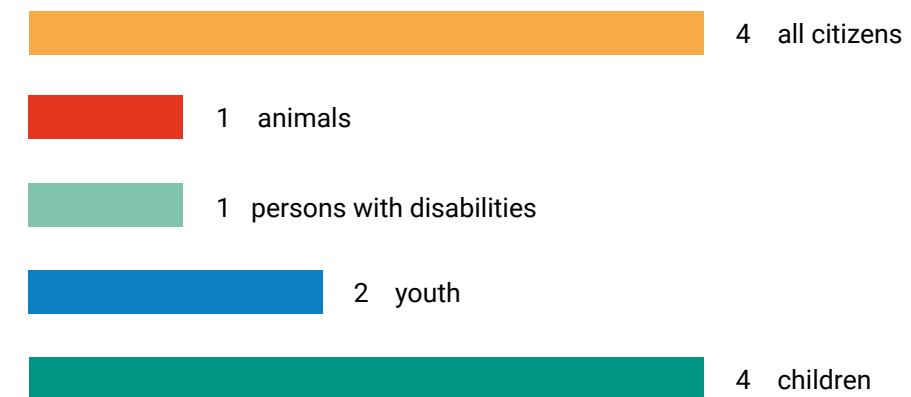
The analysis of the focus group interviews

As already mentioned, gathering empirical material focused on narrative interpretations of two groups of respondents: (a) representatives of informal groups and formal associations whose projects were financially supported by community foundations, and (b) project selection committee members delegated by the community foundations.

A look inward: Activist citizenship in action

Based on the gathered testimonials of representatives of informal groups and associations, the grantees of community foundations in Niš, Stara Pazova and Pančevo, it becomes clear that the motivation of the largest number of grantees to apply to the calls of community foundations was guided by the desire to address specific issues faced by their local communities or their certain parts. The issues described by the respondents are rather different, ranging from those concerning the immediate environment of the project proponent (e.g., the development of immediate surroundings of residential buildings where the initiators live, schoolyard attended by the children of the project initiators, etc.), to artistic interventions and culture events in public spaces attended by many citizens from the broader community. A common denominator is an intensive, almost intimate[9] experience of the relevance of the selected project implementation:

> "The initiative *Polito e bello* best testifies that we all love having a clean environment around us. When we see our surroundings undeveloped, we start behaving accordingly. On the other hand, when we come to the clean and developed area, we adjust our behavior [...] I live in a neighbourhood inhabited by people from different areas, those originating from ex-Yugoslav republics, who have brought along their customs and culture, which resulted in a "collision" when we found ourselves in a small space. This collision disturbs the way of life we are used to. The point is that a great deal of the problems we are facing lies in the culture of behavior."

> "This darkness really annoys me."

> "We have to exist, otherwise we will get concrete all over our settlement."

Besides this intensive and intimate experience of local circumstances affecting the respondents as a direct stimulus, the narrative also includes a motive of *rebellion* against the limitations they face, which is connected to the desire to conquer the

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[9] In terms of absence or systemic ignoring of the broader social articulation, or articulation of the need at the level of local community and local authorities.

territory with limited access, as perceived by the respondents. This refers both to physical/material space or territory of the local community and stimulating economic activity:

> "Our goal is to engage as many people as possible in this mountaineering story so they could experience new mountain trails and peaks and push their limits. The goal of our mountaineering association is even broader - both athletic and social. We want to include as many people as possible in different things - we organize educational debates hosted by different people who have, besides being mountaineers, been on an expedition to the South Pole and climbed Everest. Our guests included Nedeljko Todorović, a famous meteorologist and Ljubiša Marinović, who talked about equipment. We plan to bring people to talk about medicinal herbs, identifying mushrooms, etc. We are developing environmental awareness in our municipality and aim to bring together similar organizations to cooperate at the local level, and we are succeeding in doing so."

> "...Whenever we organize a workshop, we are happy when at least one woman starts practicing what she has learned there. This was a nice idea and my daughter embraced it and started making small Easter baskets. She also sold them quite successfully. It means a lot to us when someone embraces what we are doing and starts doing it on their own. Our idea is to offer the local florist "Nadja's Corner" from Glogonje that we produce baskets for her floral arrangements."

but also to non-material territories of interpersonal communication, symbolic communication and collective memory:

> "...Children are now spending more time on computers, alone, while their parents don't have enough time to spend with their children in a quality manner due to various existential problems. We have decided to design a project involving both the parents and their children."

> "We all come from alternative backgrounds. Because just as some others here from Niš, we did not receive any kind of a response when we applied for specific galleries, and exhibitions and then we decided to engage in alternative things exclusively."

> "...This is a rather sad and devastating story - what happened to the residents of the Tesla settlement, which somehow fell out of focus over time. For a very long time, it was all about whether will someone make some money out of it. Whatever it was [...], the settlement was slowly decaying together with the society. First, when the factory was closed, then the second wave of decay followed after the 1990s. And now the third one. Or, whatever. Still, we want to preserve the memory of the history of this settlement. Children, for instance, do not even know there was a lightbulb factory Tesla, after which the entire settlement was named."

All these elements affect the quality of citizens' lives and, the previously mentioned, three dimensions of social development that need to be developed in parallel, with the engagement of the activist citizens within the local community, for the development process to be sustainable in the long run.

The testimonies of the respondents also include answers referring to the problem of human insecurity. The need for risk reduction and raising the level of the feeling of safety can also be considered as the motives for citizens' self-organizing:

"The purpose of painting this mural is to raise the level of security in public space […] for the people, and especially girls, passing by here at night to feel safe."

"…This passage was dark and close to the bus stop. I think that lighting is an important thing, as there is a deserted house close by where someone tends to sleep occasionally. Safety is crucial."

"The playground is dangerous. […] and this is one hidden spot used by mothers in the 1990s to breastfeed their babies. Now it is used only for walking the dogs or people come to get some "booze" or I don't know what … It's literally neglected. We have cleaned it, painted a wall and now there is a mural here created by the members of our initiative who are painters, and we also installed three benches and planted some plants."

"Tesla, as really a large settlement, has deadly slides."

An important incentive in terms of sustainability for all these processes may be ensured by *local authorities*, which, at least in the words of our respondents, rarely opt to support local civic initiatives:

"…It's nice to set up an initiative for your neighbourhood, for your own local community. But, if someone has decided to do such a thing, they should be provided with more support […] At the end of the day, be provided with some "wind in their sails" both financially and materially."

"It is very important to have institutional support in place…"

"At one stage when we organized an event we were in contact with the mayor of that municipality. That person is into the subject matter, and we principally got support, but I cannot say any more than this. We will see; the time will show whether the city will help us. Our project is about the culture of oblivion. The city should have done this, culture institutions, city administration … but, since they have not, this made us initiate this story."

Many respondents feel that an important element for getting the support of local authorities is membership in the ruling party:

"…If you are not a member of the ruling party, they won't even show up. I know this from my own village. This is an issue raised, even when the decision is made about how many dumpsters will be installed and whether at all, and when will they be emptied."

However, the reasons for the absence of support are most frequently interpreted by the respondents as follows:

a) a symptom of *general social anomie* materialised in a broadly spread out the institutional discourse of competences enabling flourishing of clientelism, continuous collapse of institutions and the environment:

"…When we started implementing this project, we felt like Don Quixote. We plan something and when we come back a week after, we see four trucks unloading massive construction debris in the area where we planned to mark walking paths."

b) the *absence of competencies* and general poor information of staff in relevant institutions and citizens about their rights:

"We have cooperated with municipalities for years, with the chamber of commerce, with institutions, and local authorities. It's never been worse than now, in these past several years. Because the people working there are not educated for the job. First of all, they need to be educated about how to talk to citizens. They lack basic education. They do not know what an association means, how it operates […] that we are actually on the same job. We found ourselves in many different situations. I could write a book about it. They are very rigid. In these eleven years of our existence, we have found people in the system who are able to recognise certain stories, but this is very hard and painstaking work. We found ourselves being recognised in Belgrade rather than in Niš, although we are a Niš-based association. Cooperation is very difficult. […] Basically, it all comes down to personal initiative and personal contacts. I believe they need education, above all."

"I think the problem is not only in these institutions, and municipalities but also in the fact that citizens are unaware of their civil rights. This means empowerment, education and engagement of local authorities, but also educating citizens about their rights and possibilities."

"Yes, […] ignorance. When somebody says 'association, nongovernmental sector', it is perceived as a foreign mercenary straight away. And immediately - who's paying you? When you have an idea, 'aha, who sent you' and stuff like that. A few years ago, we had a European project and three deans signed up, director of the heating plant and the director of the integrated collection were supposed to sign. I could barely reach her, she wasn't opening her emails. Finally, I had to find "a connection" to schedule a meeting with the lady. When I showed her all these signatures and explained the entire project, she said she is not allowed to sign it. In the end, we did not apply that project. Still, even on top of all this, there are people in the system who do recognise these things. They just need to be found and "nurtured".

c) or on the other side, the feeling of fear, linked to the current political elite and mechanism of power making this elite recognisable in the past decade:

"We have established contact because of this flagship event of ours - a celebration of child literature day. On that occasion, we wanted to establish cooperation with the children's library in Niš. Besides the lack of information

mentioned, we felt fear. We were supposed to describe every sentence from our project, just to avoid making a mistake by accident ... We found librarians who like the idea, but they were afraid of their superiors, they were afraid to even inform them why we were there and what we have asked them."

The topic of fear, in the narratives of the respondents, is present not only in recounting the encounters with employees in different institutions and local self-government authorities but also in engaging (fellow) citizens in the initiatives they have launched.

"People generally fear everything, any kind of a change. For better or for worse. [...] There are some things we can change by ourselves, as citizens, but for many others, we need everybody to stand together and ask for certain things to be changed."

"Everybody sees the dark side. Nobody sees pink, or multi-color, only black. These people need to be removed from that position somehow. Then everything will move forward more easily and for the better."

The need to involve other (fellow) citizens in actions initiated was recognized by other respondents as well:

"People need to get activated more and join forces."

"People are afraid, and they have built this comfort zone. They don't want to engage in anything, because in our society we always have some "leaders" changing things. And then these people who live in fear, when they see that someone is guiding them, gladly join. The people who live here couldn't do a thing. Then we showed up and a grandpa helped us paint the wall, and a woman working in the kiosk and living nearby gave us free juices. So, when they see that someone started doing something, they do join in because they want to help us. I think that we need to identify those leaders and provide them with more support to guide the process. Then people will start joining, once somebody else has started something."

Still, the most succinct description of this specific phenomenon almost all initiatives are faced with, which can be described as a refusal for assuming responsibility and taking action, is given by one of the activists/respondents:

"We recognized this when we organized one of the parties, I believe right after the action concerning "tree stumps". We had a small workshop - we bought felt-tip pens, and crayons and children came and drew. We also recognized it and hung laundry drying lines between the trees and attached the drawings, where a bunch of children wrote: "You defend Tesla" and not "We defend Tesla". It appeared to me as a cry for help, and as an expectation. So, it was not like let us all defend it together, but you ought to do it. This meant they had recognized us as the ones who have taken that task upon themselves."

And indeed, this narrative strategy of substitution by the first person plural ("we") with the second person plural ("you") sublimates the arduous path of constituting activist citizenship in a hostile and thwarting clientelistic/populist ecosystem. By overcoming numerous barriers and confronting the challenges in such an environment, implementing the project

goals implied investing effort and raising new capacities and competencies, not inherent to organizations or individuals planning to implement these projects. The topic of developing, individually or as a group, different competencies acquired by the respondents is frequently present in their accounts. These competencies refer to rather diverse developed or established new competencies and knowledge. They are predominantly connected to *entrepreneurship and financial management*; competencies in *planning, project management, public relations and IT literacy*. The development of experience and skills in *public advocacy* and *communication* were also clearly stressed.

"And finally, everything we made was sold on the 8th of March and generated some income. We bought material to have something new to do."

"We re-channeled the funds we received to other associations so they could buy workshop material and make various items. Then we sold them and used the funds earned to buy new raw material."

"...We realized this called for much more work when it came to the Tesla settlement if we intend to engage more people than those living in a single building. We need to act as a micro plan. Three buildings may be too much. The more people you wish to include the fewer will respond. This is how it goes - proportionally. But these insights have also helped us plan some further actions in the settlement."

"I believe we have all improved our communication skills."

"Public advocacy!"

"We have recently developed a QR code for our project."

The social, political and economic context in which local initiatives emerge in Pančevo, Niš and Stara Pazova imply certain common characteristics that could be described both as fundamental causes and as fundamental consequences of lost transformation and captured society, and concern the topic of social capital, and in particular, issues of trust, solidarity, accountability and cohesion as preconditions of any kind of constructive and progressive civic activism, without which the development of a local community cannot be imagined at all. The development of these traits of the society, and the power of motivation and attraction for an interactive relationship of various entities is undoubtedly described in all narratives of the respondents:

The tenants living in the building next to ours, after seeing what we have done, demonstrated great interest in how we have implemented our project."

"In any case, we have re-channeled the funds and designed a new project. We then organized the first inclusive fair in the city museum, and there we gathered four more organizations of persons with disabilities. These included the Association of blind and visually impaired persons, the Association of persons with multiple sclerosis, the Association of persons suffering from dystrophy and one more, I can't remember which one."

"The project was initially designed to engage women. However, over time women from a neighboring village joined us, as well as the women from Pančevo."

"As far as I am concerned, it's been a while since I felt this kind of hope and enthusiasm even more than when we first got together. And I got to love my settlement even more. I've known all of these people only from around, and then suddenly one discovers how many quality people are there. So often we are all depressed by the things that are happening around us, but it is that moment when you find people in your community and then from there you start going further, to "mesna zajednica" even..."

"Many people joined after we implemented the project."

The concept of the community foundations' work and principles applied in their work, especially concerning the purpose of the call, manner of setting up the project selection committee and applying the evaluation criteria, and support in the implementation of ideas of self-organized citizens or already registered organization, brought about specific processes in the local community and emergence of social micro changes of a new quality, including nurturing the relationship between the donor and applicant, but also understanding the role and image of the citizen's associations/non-governmental organizations:

"Our cooperation with representatives of community foundations has proved them to be real pals. Without any tension, they weren't pretending to be some kind of donors we needed to constantly justify ourselves to or flatter."

"Since we already have experience with some larger projects, this was relaxed cooperation based on trust. Quite often the donors seem to lack trust, especially when the money is being spent. You find yourself in a situation of having to justify some trivial things. They trusted us that this was the right thing to do, and the overall cooperation was rather smooth. Nobody felt burdened, neither parents nor us."

"However, if it weren't for the community foundation and this call, we would hardly have moved. I believe this is a good opportunity for the community foundation to promote this call targeting the local community and stimulating informal groups and citizens. I think that generally there is a lack of awareness that if there are six or seven of us, we do not have to get registered, draft our articles of association and all these other things. It is enough to just have an idea as we did, and there is a possibility for something to be done."

"I think community foundation is encouraging people who cannot come to terms with what is going on around them. Specifically, we cannot get this kind of funding from anyone. The community foundation supported us, and this gave us so much strength ... This means that there is somebody out there who is willing to support our work, our effort... We do not have to depend on politics, to be conditioned by somebody, and all that. And then somebody got us rolling. This is now our second project. And we're planning the third one!"

"I believe that community foundation happened to us at the right moment. Pančevo started dying out somehow. [...] And now something is happening. I have this feeling that everything has come to life. [...] These are some mini-actions, but this means a lot right now. I believe that critical mass is now formed. And I think the community foundation did that."

A look outward: Creating assumptions for change

In addition to the direct initiators, the members of project selection committees selected by the community foundations continue to play an important role in bringing the idea of community foundations to life. Initially designed as local support to citizen initiatives, associations and informal groups to "gather people around joint activities, values and actions" targeting initiating social change, vital projects and initiatives, rooted in articulated needs of local communities, community foundations had to find a way to operationalize this designed goal. A key task concerning the operationalization was delegated to the selection committee members who articulated the project selection criteria.

Judging by the statement of the committee members, all three community foundations have given liberty to the selected committees in formulating the criteria. This is the reason why each of the committees, within three different local communities, was following different paths in their formulation. The final outcome in all three communities shows more similarities than differences:

"...We had quantitative criteria. The form itself included a ranking list and a "yes", a "no" and a "maybe". We received 11 applications and I have to say they were all nicely entered into the registry. It was easy for me to navigate through them. We also received a tabular overview demonstrating that applications have met the application criteria. Qualitative criteria were as follows: relevance of the problem, is the problem important to the local community, can the proposed solution solve the problem, the level and method of active engagement of the community, a benefit for the community achieved by the project, level up to which the initiative has recognized the resources in the community, ... and how realistic the objectives are. [...] Definitely important was that the project engaged the community [...] the projects with a broader social impact, those mobilizing more members of the community were considered more relevant." (Pančevo)

"... We had several criteria. First - we wanted to support the projects as equally as possible in all "mesne zajednice", so no one would get offended, and we also wanted the entire municipality to see that we are supporting projects in the entire municipal territory. The second criterion is how much the money means for this particular project, and will the particular effect be achieved by that investment? For instance, we rejected two projects, including the one designed for the construction of a skate park, as it turned out that the applicants did not have any technical or other knowledge to successfully implement this project. The community foundation activities need to be visible. We also wanted to support a project primarily targeting the younger population. [...] we wanted to have all areas covered – education, sports, the environment." (Stara Pazova)

"Basically, I cannot say we had fully defined criteria. We had areas that were evaluated. I don't know, the creativity of the idea, sustainability of the idea, etc. This was agreed upon upfront, there were five such areas, criteria: sustainability of the idea, creativity, budget, engagement of the broader community... These tasks were set before us by the foundation. What was not defined, and that is pretty hard I have to admit, this is some space for improvement, each of us had to assess each of these categories on a scale of 0 to 10." (Niš)

The initially articulated criteria were upgraded in line with the specific problems during the project evaluation process:

> "We had a situation where I didn't know the people behind this group, and then in conversation, we realized that maybe there was some kind of background there which is not so positive in terms of promotion of the Foundation in the local community. We didn't want anyone to say: "Aha, this call is rigged." And then we all agreed to consider this an important factor in making the final decision. (Niš)

> "I expected to see one more item in the application form - collaborators or project implementers (individuals, institutions, private companies [...] who will support us in the project implementation)." (Stara Pazova)

> "In the first project cycle, an issue of project feasibility was raised for two projects. One involved constructing a dog park. The project implementer was a vet office. The project was well-designed. However, when we asked them if they had discussed this with anyone in the municipality and explored the possibility of getting the construction permit for building this park, and if they had checked that something else was not planned in that particular green area - a parking lot, a building, etc. it turned out that they hadn't checked any of it, and when we confronted them with these questions, they eventually gave up." (Stara Pazova)

All three committees, although independently from one another, adopted similar evaluation criteria, provisionally divided into the following categories for the purpose of this report:

1. external, referring to the applicants

2. internal, concerning the proposed project.

The first group included those regarding: (a) regional distribution of projects ("mesne zajednice" within the municipality/local self-government), (b) inclusion of different areas addressed by the projects (culture, education, sports and the environment), (c) inclusion of different socio-economic, minority and vulnerable groups addressed by the projects (youth, senior citizens, LGBT, persons with special needs, etc.), (d) potential visibility of the implemented project, and (e) social reputation of applicants.

On the other hand, the second group of criteria included those concerning: (a) creativity of the idea and its importance for the local community, (b) efficiency/realistic implementation of objectives, (c) level and method of engaging the broader community in the project and the level of identification of existing resources in the community, (d) potential benefit for the community, and (e) realistic budget and estimated relevance of allocated funds for the project.

A look back

Having in mind the experience with the previous calls announced and the projects hitherto implemented by community foundations, our respondents presented a series of recommendations for the improvement of future call cycles and the work of community foundations. In that sense, one of the respondents - a member of the project selection committee - concluded "these two calls were[10] [...] a triage of potential needs identified in a local community. This is like mapping of space, needs, problems, generally readiness of citizens to change something."

Still, the respondents believe some things should be organized differently:

> 1. Most of the suggestions concerned the too broad thematic distribution of applications and the needs of the Committee members to somehow facilitate the selection process:

> "...Reduce the number of eligible areas."

> "Reduce the number of areas (culture, sports, education, the environment). These are all stories where one doesn't know how to balance. What is more needed, what is more sustainable? All these are needed. Is it about youth, or is it about vulnerable groups? They need all of it..."

> The reasons corroborating this position include:

(a) the need to define as clearly as possible the evaluation criteria to make the projects applying for funding comparable. This can be done only within the clearly determined thematic sections:

> „... The fewer application areas, the greater the challenge for us. This allows us to compete in a narrower framework. As it is a problem. What is better? Is it an apple, a pear, a tomato..."

(b) the need for the committee members to familiarize themselves in as much detail as possible with the project proposals:

> "The projects are extremely heterogeneous. There are lots of areas and lots of topics. And we are all aware of it. You know, one could scribble anything on a piece of paper. Here we can see some people are great at writing projects. And this is obvious. And now, by reading this and understanding the deeper sense of that story, you have nothing to subtract and nothing to add. An excellent story. None of us had neither the capacity nor the time to dive deeper than simply reading a paper. What I'm saying here is that this story can be somewhat superficial."

(c) the need to put the limited funding offered by community foundations to the best possible use:

> "We need everything [...] And how much money did we have? For six projects. I have my inclination. If needed, we can even argue about a project which will make a difference and focus all energy and resources on two projects."

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[10] This concerns the call cycles organized by the community foundation in Niš, note of the author.

"...It is better to implement one or two good projects, but really good ones, those that will leave a mark. In this way, we will get all other projects, once someone sees a tangible result of this previous project. It is better than to dissipate our energy to fifty places and have nothing as an outcome."

"...It would be good to divide the call into the following categories: the call for more serious grants, like RSD 300,000 and one which should target informal groups. The recommendation in this respect is for the call to offer a higher grant to target already established and registered organizations."

2. Contrary to the identified excessive thematic distribution, the respondents identified the pronounced *absence of topics concerning the specific vulnerable groups* among applications, which is something that should become an additional focus in the future:

"There were no projects addressing sexual rights, the rights of sexual minorities (if I'm not mistaken). But, the entire call is so broadly set that a good question is whether such a need realistically exists in town in terms of an organization. It is likely it exists, however, we did not receive these types of projects.

3. The work of *public enterprises* and their role in the life of local communities is an important topic in the respondents' narratives. Although the respondents talk about this topic mainly by criticizing the treatment of citizens and local communities by public enterprises, they do believe that additional effort needs to be invested in the future to e*stablish better communication between the initiatives supported by community foundations and public enterprises.*

"I better not speak about the communication between the public enterprises and citizens. You know this circle: local government, public enterprises, citizens - this is all disturbed because they are like two different worlds. I believe this not only the case in Pančevo but in other local self-governments as well."

"What is the cooperation with public enterprises like? It is non-existent. Because these public enterprises and these people leading them have no awareness of the importance of these initiatives and how they could be of help."

"And the thing that I like, no matter how crazy this country and its people are, is the fact that public sector participation needs to be a requirement. The remark of the foundation, and our colleagues, is absolutely legit, this is something we cannot expect from informal groups. But, I like this being a requirement. Even if they refuse, this should be included even in the footnote. This is my suggestion."

4. During the project evaluation process, committee members ought to consider the feasibility of the project applications with the proposed budget or if their full implementation calls for an additional intervention:

"Well, financial support is not always of crucial importance to us. However, any other kind of support requires funding. For instance, we have a loom. We have bought a loom, but we do not have money to organize a training. Having someone to come and train us, costs money."

5. The grantees need support through the *provision of expert support* in the form of info sessions to deliver training on project proposal writing and adequate budget planning. During the project implementation period, several grantees faced various challenges, and to overcome them they needed expert competencies the members of associations and/or informal groups did not possess.

"We failed to include banking fees in the project. It has never even occurred to us we would have such costs. And this was a problem later on. Expert support would mean a lot to us."

"The community foundation organized a one-day course, an info-session. But maybe it would be good for this to be a two-day course on how to run a project. The forms should be simpler for informal groups or newly established organizations, but some kind of training is needed."

Community foundations as a catalyst of social change and implementation of the idea of sustainable development

Based on the experience of the respondents of their cooperation with local communities and experiences acquired through self-organized civic activism and implementation of projects supported by community foundations presented during focus groups, we learned that the process of social micro-transformation was rather dynamic, bringing about changes fundamentally different from the changes typical for transformation in Serbia for decades back, described in the chapter on the social, economic and political contexts in which the community foundations emerged.

Community foundations are deeply rooted in the social ecosystems of local communities they are active in. The social reputation of their founders, members, coordinators and associates significantly affects the potential trust of their (fellow) citizens and acceptance of foundations within local communities. On the other hand, the dynamic of everyday life in each local community, apart from the specificities concerning specific local stakeholders and circumstances, follows the rhythm of the society and faces all problems and challenges burdening different social subsystems and the social system. Therefore, it could be said that the development trajectory of each local community is tightly intertwined with the development trajectory of the Serbian society. This has also been confirmed by the findings of our study. Dysfunctional institutions of local self-governments, utility services doing their job only partially, local officials being more loyal to their political party than to the citizens they ought to be "serving", and clientelistic networks guiding the activities of local authorities - are but a few of the symptoms of structural disruption in communication between the citizens and local government bodies and services.

Breaking this link, which is the main artery allowing the flow of information on the needs on the ground and articulation of responses to them, produces a kind of necrosis of the civic tissue and alienation of citizens from their local self-government. This alienation results in the atomization of citizens and the loss of faith that the collective social action can bring about intervention in everyday life reality. In such a disturbing anomic social landscape, community foundations become some kind of doctors for the dis-alienation of citizens and resuming circulation of ideas in the necrosis-affected local civil tissue, which is best corroborated by the words of one respondent:

> "I believe that this foundation managed to create the "WE". WE all together work and build something, and this WE is particularly important to me [...] this part where neighbors get organized to do something, is particularly important to me."

The projects fostering and ensuring access to education, empowerment of women, innovation and entrepreneurship, social dialogue and social capital development, environmental care, creative and safe public space, sustainable production and consumption (...) community foundations started nurturing new paradigms, contrary to the globally present

practice showing that the funding of the community foundations' work is not flexible and that, even when the funds are available, the application procedures and requirements are complicated and hard to meet (Satterthwaite & Sauter, 2008). As already mentioned in the chapter on sustainable development, for the implementation of the sustainable development goals, active participation of citizens is crucial in building safe communities focused on improving sound interpersonal relationships and trust among people, and addressing local issues.

The study has shown that the social tissue of local communities is once again becoming vital through the reconstruction and reanimation of street infrastructure resources for alternative and subversive spaces for the promotion of engaged art and multimedia painting and literary works of artists in the local community. By articulating and expressing the organizational, programmatic, spatial, structural and ideological alternative to the dominant, imposed, dictated and supervised cultural policy in the local community, the projects have contributed to the constructive channeling of social pressure and releasing the emancipation pulse and energy of the citizens. The concept of tapping into the resources of the local environment, development of competencies and new capacity building by linking human, material, financial, informational and infrastructural resources at the local level, has enabled a radical change in the situation in which Serbian citizens demonstrate a rather low opinion of their own potential to affect the change in their own environment and the ability to understand social and political issues and respond to them. Community foundations in Pančevo, Niš and Stara Pazova have had a positive experience and brought about a visible change in local communities thus changing the psychological mantra of learned pessimism.

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