

Bottom-up empowerment: community foundation development in Serbia



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The Trag Foundation has been actively supporting community foundation development in Serbia since the first foundation was established in 2011. In 2019, with the support of the CS Mott Foundation, it launched “Our local foundation - community has a say!” program, aiming to build the community foundation movement in the Western Balkans region. Currently, Trag is supporting the establishment of three community foundations in Serbia and five in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also in the process of identifying new initiative groups to work with in Serbia and the selection will be completed in July 2022. Here Marija Mitrović highlights findings from an academic study which considered the role, challenges and prospects for community foundation development.

“In 2019, Trag Foundation established a strategic partnership with the Laboratory for the Philanthropy, Solidarity and Care Studies (SolidCare Lab) that operates within the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade. The idea behind this partnership was to create a tighter bond between the academic community and the civil society, resulting in the further building and sharing relevant knowledge in Serbia, Western Balkans region and beyond.

With this in mind, it was only logical that the first step of Trag’s partnership with SolidCare Lab was to conduct a study on community foundations in Serbia titled **“Bottom-up Empowerment - The role, challenges and prospects for development”**. The study was rolled out in the second half of 2019 and encompassed the already existing and emerging community foundations active in Serbia. The study facilitates the understanding of community foundations, role in empowering citizens to actively engage in shaping their immediate surroundings, the challenges they face in their work, the problems beleaguering the communities in which they operate, as well as the prospects for further development of this form of social engagement.

Among other things, the study showcased that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed significant challenges to already struggling communities across Serbia. Emerging community foundations had to build themselves up in really complex circumstances, on top of figuring out how to establish themselves as a new resource in the community and address lack of trust and apathy that already posed significant barriers to association and action. Community foundation representatives nevertheless kept on feeling motivated to encourage and empower people to use their own resources, build



accountability towards their communities and support the struggling civil society sector to rise up and take ownership over solving the issues that the communities encounter. This is especially commendable and encouraging, given that the vast majority of community foundation representatives act as volunteers and work on community foundation development only in their spare time. The full findings of this study in the English language can be found [here](#).

This study represents only the first step in Trag's engagement with the academia. In 2022, Trag teamed up with Centre for the Study for Social Development from Novi Sad to carry out a research on the "*Impact of community foundations on the social changes in their local communities*", aiming to conduct a qualitative study on socio-economic-political changes in the local community that came as a result of projects implemented by the grass root initiatives funded by the three emerging CFs that were supported within the first cycle of this program (Niš, Pančevo and Stara Pazova). The researchers are now gathering relevant data and inputs from the field and the results of their analysis will be published in autumn of 2022."

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Additional information on the program in Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina can be found on www.tragfondacija.org | www.lokalnefondacije.rs | www.lokalnefondacije.ba

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