



## PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Learning from an ECFI study visit to Serbia 10-14 October 2023



One of many 'Light bulb moments' - hosts and participants in Stara Pazova, Serbia.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The focus of this study visit was civic participation and engagement. It involved community foundation practitioners from 15 countries across Europe - to learn from peers in Serbia and their support infrastructure, to build connections, and to share their knowledge amongst each other and with those they visited. Co-designed with ECFI and organised locally by the Trag Foundation, the itinerary included visits to community foundations in Niš, Pančevo and Stara Pazova along with time for de-briefing and facilitated discussions. This report highlights learning drawn from the study visit.

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### 1. Background and context

The participation and engagement of citizens in a locality give community foundations legitimacy and credibility. This is fundamental to ensuring that they can act appropriately and effectively and can build relationships with local communities, donors and other stakeholders. It is critical to demonstrating their value added as philanthropic institutions that have profound knowledge of the locality - the inter-sectionality of social, economic, environmental, cultural and political issues, along with its assets and opportunities. It provides the basis for trust. While often used as synonyms, community engagement and participation differ concretely. Engagement can be seen as entailing a top-down approach, where an organisation or public institution initiates dialogue with and invites input from a specific community. Participation is considered to be more bottom-up, kicked off by organised citizens. Community foundations can play a role in both - by promoting engagement with donors, stakeholders, and beneficiaries and through empowerment and creating the conditions for active participation.

The context in Serbia is one of an ‘emerging field’ with a second wave of community foundation development through a programme started in 2019, led by the Trag Foundation, **“Our Local Foundation - Community Has a Say!”**. This has already resulted in the establishment of three new community foundations with more in the pipeline as ‘initiative groups’ in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Progress in the development of a culture of giving; the desire within local communities for some degree of self-determination and collective action; and the technical and financial support from the Trag Foundation created the conditions for this initiative.

More on the context, the work of the Trag Foundation, and the three community foundations visited, can be found here in this [Guide to Community Foundation in Serbia](#), produced ahead of the study visit.



## 2. Highlights from the visits

All the community foundations visited demonstrated high levels of involvement and collaboration with citizens, informal and formal civil society groups, individual and corporate donors, and in some cases public bodies. They all showed that have been (and continue to be) effective community organisers themselves but recognised their catalytic role as enablers and quickly built trust and credibility through grant-making at an early stage.

A youthful energy was evident that harnessed pillars for participation and engagement and the early stage of development as shown by Community Foundation Niš



The rapid development from initiation to collaboration across a diverse range of issues and with different groups was impressive as shown here in Pančevo.

The beginning - 2020.	Our neighborhood, our idea - 2023.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ecological workshops for children in Kačarevo</li><li>• Aviation in Pancevo</li><li>• Sexual education for young people</li><li>• Board game workshops</li><li>• Day in the Village workshops for children</li><li>• Multiculturalism and minority languages in Pancevo</li><li>• A youth podcast about mental health</li></ul> 

Core values articulated by Pančevo Community Foundation, were common in all three community foundations visited - these were: participation; responsibility; transparency; openness; community gathering; respect for diversity and inclusion.

Similarly lessons that emerged and which they shared were around the need to:

- respect process and allow time for relationship building
- react to external influences
- the importance of our team
- get back to basics
- build a network, reputation and credibility (and the value of early stage grant-making)

Importantly also, each community foundation utilised a variety of different spaces for engagement to reach different people around activities supported.



And here in Stara Pazova (below) and Niš (right) with fundraising events engaging with individual and corporate donors.

### Donation events

- ▶ organized 7 of them so far
- ▶ Donation tombolas (raffles)
- ▶ Donation fee Competition (Eeaster eggs colouring )
- ▶ Donation markets (school equipmmt and Christmas)



The importance of building donor relations and paying attention to the engagement and participation of the donor community has been realised from the outset. All had achieved a diverse portfolio of donors as shown here in the example from Stara Pazova.

### Donation structure

- ▶ Companies 50%
- ▶ Individuals 15%
- ▶ Small firms and entrepreneurs 35%
- ▶ So far collected, goal of 15.000e + Trag foundation match = 30.000euros
- ▶ About 3.000 euros more (mostly Donation events)



### 3. Insights and Lessons (Drivers, Enabling Factors, Internal Constraints, External Disincentives) and challenges for community foundations

When asked about the most important insights from the study visit, participants emphasised the importance of transparent and reliable relationships community foundations have established with their communities, mostly reflected in the honest and open communication with grantees and donors. Fundraising campaigns and innovative approaches undertaken by the community foundations on their path of becoming registered and independent actors in the community attracted the attention of the participants, along with the successful engagement of the donors in all three communities.

*‘There is merit in sowing seeds / starting small to engage people in the community, and then let it grow’.*

Valentina Ferrara, Spanish Association of Foundations (AEF) / Fundación Comunitaria de Carabanchel

Engagement of the youth has attracted a special interest of the participants - community foundations are perceived as an important factor of cohesion, connecting initiative of the donors and needs of often neglected groups in the community. General principles of community foundation establishment and functioning in Serbia, the examples of community engagement, reflected in the diversity of grantees from almost every part of the community, also left a big impression on participants. The idea of “small steps” leading to big changes in communities was also marked as one of the highlights, mentioned both during debrief sessions and in the evaluation.

*‘The mutual support offered in their peer network was impressive and is something for us to emulate in Croatia’.*

Helga Može, Foundation for partnership and civil society development (Istria Community Foundation)

#### Challenges for community foundations

- Making different stakeholders, especially donors, aware of the work of the community foundation and in particular its knowledge-based added value;
- Staying relevant at the local level and ensuring that the community foundation is seen to be bringing additional resources to the locality (and not competing for them with established civil society organisations);
- Overcoming project-related action and making the case for investing in sustained community engagement / participation process;
- Finding the appropriate geographic scale for participation and engagement;
- Ensuring financial sustainability of the organisation in order to realise a long-term vision and ensure succession and the transfer of knowledge and relationships (of staff and volunteers);
- Maintaining voluntary commitment while professionalising the organisation;
- Building and maintaining competencies in tools and techniques relating to community engagement and participation;
- Remaining connected to the national and international issues and trends, embedding foresight and avoiding chasing crises.

A framework for drawing learning from the Study Visit based on the work of the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) <https://eprints.icstudies.org.uk/id/eprint/291/1/LT-17-09-Empowered-communities-in-the-2020s.pdf>.

<p><b><u>DRIVERS</u></b></p> <p>Love for the place</p> <p>Creativity</p> <p>Realistic common vision / ambition</p> <p>Empowerment / sense of ownership</p> <p>Response to Covid</p> <p>Desire to re-connect</p> <p>‘Feel good’ factor</p> <p>Need to act</p> <p>Personal commitment and expertise (youthful energy)</p> <p>External support from like-minded people</p> <p>Selflessness</p> <p>Openness</p> <p>Empathy</p> <p>Showing by example</p>	<p><b><u>ENABLING FACTORS</u></b></p> <p>Synergy between Trag and the CF initiative groups</p> <p>Investment in building trust and drawing on knowledge and skills in the community</p> <p>Physical space</p> <p>Closeness of people already known and connected with the community in a variety ways</p> <p>Knowledge of active and dynamic approaches to participation and engagement</p> <p>Understanding of the local community (needs and assets) and quality of engagement</p> <p>The ‘common language’ bubble</p> <p>Ability to be outwards looking</p> <p>Constant connection with the community based on friendships and listening</p> <p>Transparency</p> <p>Good relationship with the municipality</p> <p>Media connections</p>
<p><b><u>INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS</u></b></p> <p>Relationships with municipalities</p> <p>Getting stuck in volunteerism</p> <p>Ambition limited by lack of resources (human, financial, physical)</p> <p>Organisational sustainability</p> <p>Founder syndrome / need for evolution and succession planning</p>	<p><b><u>EXTERNAL DISINCENTIVES</u></b></p> <p>Political interference / politicisation of issues</p> <p>Apathy in the community</p> <p>Lack of motivation from other stakeholders</p> <p>Lack of trust and awareness</p> <p>Unrealistic expectations</p>

#### 4. Applying learning

When it comes to examples of good practices other European community foundations could implement in their own work, early grantmaking inspired them the most. Related to this were the fundraising and grantmaking processes and milestones, inclusive and transparent grantmaking practices, and the way Serbian community foundations nurture their grantees. Several participants mentioned the importance of building the network of community foundations, strengthening the relations and communications between them, but also between them and donors. Innovative fundraising approaches and youth engagement was also noted, along with developing an enabling environment for active citizen participation in a creative manner. These observed practices of Serbian community foundations will inform actions to be implemented by participants in the near future.

*'We saw small things supported by great enthusiasm and energy. We need to remind ourselves of our own origins and re-examine the fundamentals'.*

Ulrike Rühlmann, Halle Community Foundation

Takeaways from site visits noted by participants:

- Trusted personal relationships and connections are key, community foundations are a glue for the local social fabric, but building social capital requires continued effort (if not it naturally dissipates)
- We share similar challenges, and methods / approaches are the same but contexts differ - details are important
- Importance of a variety of physical spaces for convening and listening and to be able to take the right actions at the right time, flexibility is key
- There were impressive levels of enthusiasm and energy, these are vital assets and it is imperative to consider how to sustain this drive over time, and build a sustainable structure / institution
- The strategic ambition and wealth of project ideas demonstrated the breadth of participation and engagement
- Importance of a people-oriented approach to participation and engagement (no one-size fits all)
- Need to get out of NGO bubbles and be prepared to get out of a 'comfort zone'
- Importance of communicating success stories (to all stakeholders)
- Small things matter, including small fundraising and small grants - cherish simplicity
- Early grant-making built credibility and raised awareness and funds
- Money is important but dedication, passion and authenticity are critical success factors
- The diversity of fundraising and donor engagement actions was impressive (including the use of donor match funding)
- Connecting a reconnecting between community foundations at national level is important to exploit synergies and seek opportunities for collaboration
- There is a belief in young people and spaces created to hear their voice and to release creativity

*'The importance of identifying and utilising all local assets, including multi-sectoral and community connections, resonated with me and is something that we need to re-visit in Lille'.*

Malika Beyragued, Lille Community Foundation

## Takeaways for future study visits suggested by participants

- Be clear on intended learning outcomes and products from the study visit
- Be mindful of local sensitivities and vulnerabilities
- The importance of continued international exchange and learning in a dynamic environment among people with a wealth of knowledge and experience
- Need for more time to reflect and discuss and space for sharing a variety of approaches and practices in different socio-economic and political contexts and at different stages of development
- Build and maintain new international connections

## Actions

Below are some actions indicated by participants that are outcomes from the study visit:

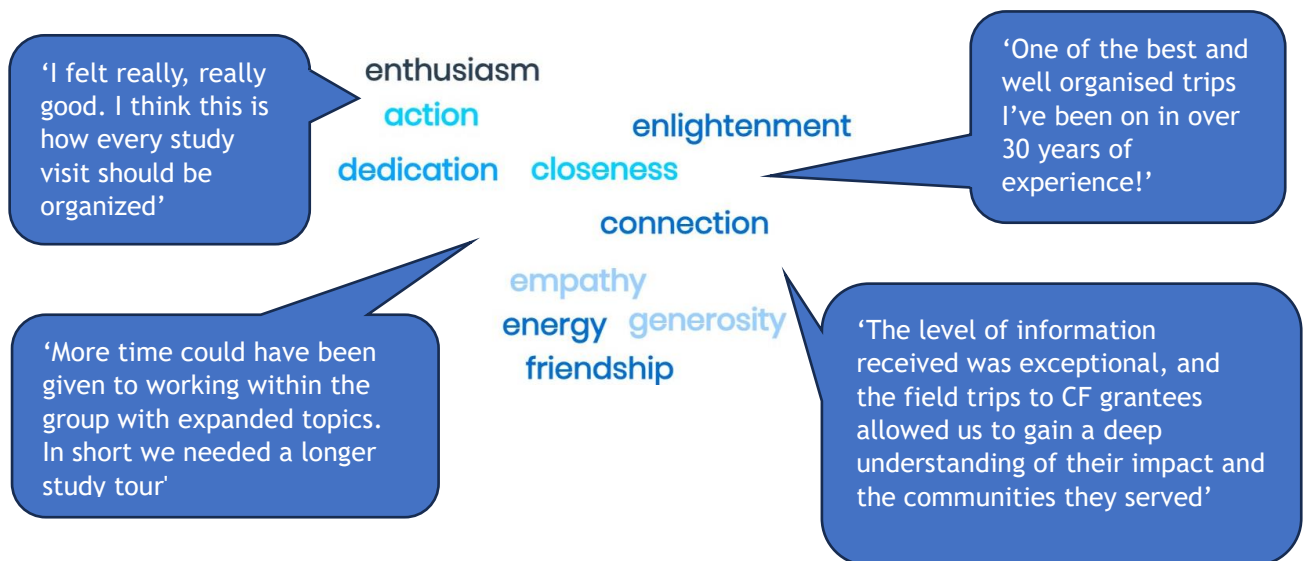
- Planning further collaboration and possible joint projects
- Provide training for staff and volunteers in community foundations - consider establishing a community foundation school / college
- Reactivate / refresh our local social network - listen, listen, listen.
- Organise awareness raising and fundraising activities for citizens and small businesses not just to raise funds but to build longer term relationships
- Apply more strategic thinking and review work programme (re-focus)
- Find a balance between zoom and room (ensure that online connections complement physical meetings)
- Look for a new space for the community foundation that is more accessible to the community
- Do more small things (including reconsidering support for informal groups) and consider different approaches to grant-making (from open calls to strategic and 'grant plus' approaches)
- Promote the concept and the potential of the community foundation movement more widely (nationally and internationally)
- Build connections with CFs and CFSOs at regional level
- Discover and encourage new initiative groups
- Organise a follow up call to maintain connections and to encourage action relating to learning
- Write the definitive community foundation 'cook-book'
- Consolidate learning and ensure it is shared widely
- Apply methods of collective learning to other exchanges

*'Starting from the methods of fundraising presented by the Stava Pazova Foundation, we will include in the capacity building sessions of our grantees a training on how to relate to ensuring the sustainability of their organizations'.*

Teodora Albiter, Oradea  
Community Foundation



And finally, here are some words to describe participants' overall impressions of the community movement in Serbia, and some of their anonymous feedback.



## 5. Concluding comments

Our deep dive into engagement and participation revealed how it is fundamental to the success of a community foundation - in respect of how it connects with the local community and all stakeholders. It builds trust, enhances credibility and attracts resources. Although in their early stages of development it was evident that these community foundations see the potential of identifying a wide range of assets in their localities and utilising them strategically.

The opening of hearts and minds of all the people we met in Serbia was greatly appreciated. We are grateful to the Trag Foundation team, and to all those involved in Niš, Pančevo and Stara Pazova community foundations for the time and effort they put into hosting this study visit. We hope that the lessons are relevant to others and that the learning can be applied widely across Europe.

James Magowan

November 2023

## Annex 1

## Study Visit participants

Vera	Dakova	Mott Foundation	Bulgaria
Helga	Može	Foundation for partnership and civil society development (Istria Community Foundation)	Croatia
Maija	Lehtomäki	JEV (Jaan, Elimäen ja Valkealan) Development Foundation	Finland
Malika	Beyragued	Foundation de Lille	France
Nia	Chelidze	Center for Strategic Research and Development of Georgia (CSRDG)	Georgia
Ulrike	Rühlmann	Bürgerstiftung Halle	Germany
Kamil	Szlosek	ECFI	Germany
Marta	Rakusz	Community Foundation of Eger (Egri Közösségi Alapítvány)	Hungary
Alessandra	Di Renzo	Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo	Italy
Diana	Lozko	Aluksnes and Apes Community Foundation	Latvia
James	Magowan	ECFI	N. Ireland
Simon	Gill	Zywiec Development Foundation	Poland
Teodora	Albiter	Oradea Community Foundation	Romania
Marina	Mikhaylova	interregional charity NGO "Centre of social technologies "Garant"	Russia
Natalia	Zavialova	Charitable Foundation for the Support and Development of the Local Community of the Chelyabinsk Region	Russia
Marija	Mitrović	Trag Foundation	Serbia
Jana	Šarić	Trag Foundation	Serbia
Ivana	Marković	Trag Foundation	Serbia
Milana	Vojnović	Trag Foundation	Serbia
Stanislava	Linčevski	Trag Foundation	Serbia
Filip	Jovanović	Community Foundation Niš	Serbia
Jelena	Stanojević	Community Foudnation Niš	Serbia
Marina	Balaž	Community Foundation Pančevo	Serbia
Nikola	Rajković	Community Foundation Stara Pazova	Serbia
Željko	Ivoić	Community Foundation Stara Pazova	Serbia
Marina	Petrović	Community Foundation Stara Pazova	Serbia
Vjekoslav	Vukovic	Trag Foundation	Serbia
Valentina	Ferrara	Spanish Association of Foundations (AEF) / Fundación Comunitaria de Carabanchel	Spain