



The importance of saying ‘yes’.



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Below, Jana Šarić, highlights findings from an analysis of the political, economic and social context in which the community foundations emerged in Serbia. She offers an answer to the question - ‘how exactly (despite many roadblocks) did community foundations manage to become agents of change and make such a big impact on their communities for a relatively short period of time?’

The importance of saying yes: the main results of the research on the impact of community foundations on social changes in local communities in Serbia

After an in-depth [research](#) depicting different models, structures and roles of the community foundations in Serbia published in 2021, Trag foundation decided to explore them from another perspective and analyze their impact, not only on the particular ecosystem, but on the social change as such. Trag foundation collaborated with the Center for Study of Social Development and its team of prominent sociologists and economists. These experts conducted a [study](#) with the goal to analyze the political, economic and social context in which the community foundations emerged, while putting special emphasis on the civil society and the role of the local philanthropy in its further enlargement, engagement and development. In its concluding parts, the study also reflected on the agency component of the community foundations’ work and its effects on the wider social ecosystem.

A view from inside out - a brief reflection on the methodology used

In order to understand the size and significance of the obvious imprints community foundations left on their communities, researchers conducted numerous interviews with grantees supported throughout several cycles of open calls for projects - members of civil society organizations and informal groups from Pančevo, Stara Pazova and Niš. Along with the perspective of the grantees, researchers collected testimonials of the project selection committee members of all three community foundations in order to present two different points of view - one internal, coming from the selection committee that shares values of both community foundations and their grantees but does not participate in the everyday work of the foundation, and another, external, coming from supported initiatives that are one of the focal points of the community

foundations' work. The research team chose a qualitative approach and conducted multiple interviews with a variety of respondents. These insights provided a wider explanation of the significance of the community foundations and the ways they inspire a revival of their surroundings and put local philanthropy to good use. With the analysis of gathered findings, researchers encompassed the role of community foundations in the thoroughly described context and investigated their potential to instigate positive changes. But, where exactly did the community foundations blossom?

On the road full of roadblocks - wider social contexts in which community foundations operate

A theoretical preview of the social, economic and political context provided by the researchers, confirmed the reflections community foundation members expressed since they embarked on the journey of establishing community foundations and participating in the *“Our local foundation - Community has a say!”* program, implemented by Trag with the support of the C.S. Mott Foundation. In the state of fragile democracy, rising inequalities, high rates of unemployment and constant risk of poverty which affects 21.2% of the general population in Serbia, combined with the general apathy and lack of enthusiasm for civic engagement, community foundations managed to motivate and engage members of their communities by offering a different path, the one that actually meets the expectations. Visible results of actual change in the community, credibility of the community foundations team members and reignited belief in the power of community-based activism, represented the main reasons why grantees - members of the informal groups and civil society organizations - even decided to apply for the open calls. The political situation has left the citizens mainly discouraged, believing that their efforts won't be acknowledged and supported.

“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”, one of the grantees stated.

In this rather hopeless political situation, where the mechanisms of social change are blocked on both national and local levels, community foundations planted a seed of change in their communities and nurtured citizens' activism. Trust and respect for the members of community foundations, visible results and achievable goals of the projects supported through open calls have actually opened a space for a social change. Maybe they cannot change the world or move mountains, but community foundations absolutely gather communities, channel the potentials and guide them towards (a positive) social change.

Constant support leads to perceptible change: how did they make it happen?

Community foundations ignited the spark of change and hope long before they even supported the first initiatives. Outside the capital city, every activity and novelty are welcomed and appreciated. But how exactly did they manage to become agents of change and make such a big impact on their communities for a relatively short period of time? The answer is simple and complex at the same time - by supporting a wide range of issues and, most importantly, by supporting informal groups alongside formally

registered civil society organizations. By reaching out to those who are traditionally invisible to the majority of donors, community foundations sent a clear message - we are here, we are listening and we are in this together.

In order to ensure the quality of the applications and overcome the gap between experienced civil society organizations and newly established informal groups, community foundations carefully chose the selection committees, consisting of people from different backgrounds - the business sector, civil society, education and local media. Selection committees recognized the potential, and helped community foundations' ideas come to life. Beside the community foundation teams, selection committees contributed to the revitalisation of the citizens' activism by selecting relevant, important and achievable initiatives.

“[In the selection process] Definitely important was that the project engaged the community ... The projects with the broader social impact, those mobilizing more members of the community, were considered more relevant”, said a respondent from the Pančevo selection committee.

The fact that community foundations supported a wide range of projects and issues has encouraged the grantees to submit their applications, without fear of rejection. Stara Pazova committee has emphasized the importance of the diversity among the supported initiatives.

“We wanted to support the projects as equally as possible in all municipal units, so no one would get offended, and we also wanted the entire municipality to see that we are supporting projects in the entire municipality. We wanted to have everything covered - education, sports, the environment...”

And that is how the main conditions for social change were fulfilled! The openness demonstrated by the community foundations and selection committees was welcomed by the activists who got used to constant rejections and obstacles in their way.

“We all come from alternative backgrounds. Because just like some others here from Niš, we did not receive any kind of support for specific galleries and exhibitions. And then we decided to engage in alternative things exclusively” stated the artist from Niš, whose initiative was supported by the community foundation.

Finally, the citizens have met someone who supports their ideas and understands their needs. No corruption, no favoritism, only meritocracy, creativity and relevance for the wider community. Social change couldn't be possible without a number of internal and external conditions and potentials. These mechanisms of change initiated by the community foundations have a noticeable impact on the civil society in their communities - even though community foundations are not operational organizations, but flexible and more sensitive donors, their work is based on activism and this enables them to understand the bigger picture, gain trust and be responsive to the communities' needs. Nothing would be achievable without community foundations as the instigator of the change, a bridge between the idea, local resources and its fruition in reality. In the general apathy and darkness, it is crucial to have someone who says “yes” to your

concepts, enthusiasm and a will for change. These affirmative answers will only increase as the community foundation movement in Serbia develops and citizens gain more confidence in their own power to build better communities through a multitude of interventions and joint actions.

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June 2023