

BRIEFING NOTE: UŽICE PARTICIPATION MODEL, MED III

The experiences and lessons learned from the “Užice Participation Model” (UPM) has been capitalized in this [case study](#) with the view to share good practices and inspire replication and upscaling. A total of fifteen municipalities will with support from MED (Municipal Economic Development Programme) adapt and implement similar citizens engagement interventions for small scale initiatives in 2023 onwards. Apart from briefly presenting the UPM, this note serves the purpose to outline:

- How the UPM contributes to the Swiss Cooperation Programme for Serbia 2022–2025
- Ideas on how to replicate and upscale the UPM in Serbia
- Ways of promoting and representing the model regionally and internationally

UŽICE PARTICIPATION MODEL – IN A NUTSHELL

The underlying rationale behind the UPM is the ambition of the municipality to **strengthen the social contract** with its citizens through **improved property tax management** by ploughing increased revenue income into **improvements of public services and -areas**. The UPM facilitates inclusive and participatory processes where citizens identify their priorities and needs. Rather than centring civic engagement around large scale service delivery projects such as improvement of road and water infrastructure, health and education facilities, the model is primarily focused on supporting small local initiatives proposed and owned by small self-organised, and primarily informal, civic groups. Typically, these civic initiatives are granted a budget around **CHF 4-6,000**. Small initiatives such as rehabilitating public parks and sports grounds and constructing playgrounds are important quick wins as such improvements are immediately visible and seen to benefit all local community members. The UPM was also initiated as a means to revitalize villages and reinvigorate rural community members to engage in local development through self-organised informal civic groups, often linked to the formal Mesne Zajednice structure. **Leaving No-One Behind**, the model also intends to reach typically excluded and marginalised groups such as elderly, people with disabilities, women and youth. Improved wheelchair access to public buildings, handrails for elderly people, sportsgrounds for youth, children’s playgrounds, and safe public spaces for women are only some of the gender responsive and socially inclusive achievements.

Graphic of Užice Participation Model



CONTRIBUTION TO SWISS COOPERATION PROGRAMME

The [Swiss Cooperation Programme for Serbia 2022–25](#) is based on trusted partnerships and mutual interests with the public and private sector as well as civil society. One of the three thematic areas for Swiss–Serbian cooperation is ‘**democratic governance and civil society**’. The governance interventions of previous cooperation programmes have yielded tangible results both at local and the national level in terms of improved transparency, accountability and management capacities. Related to MED, 27% of local governments have increased their property tax income and involved citizens more systematically in decision making. Effectiveness of property tax has enhanced for all local governments thanks to legislative changes and the introduction of the [Unified Information System](#). As the Užice participation model exemplifies, the scope and quality of services provided by less developed local authorities, including for socially excluded groups, has improved.

The MED programme contributes to the ‘Democratic Governance and Civil Society’ portfolio of the Swiss Cooperation Programme in Serbia 2022-2025 which aims to capitalise positive results at the local level e.g., quality of services, financial oversight, transparency and citizen participation while explicitly addressing LNOB and social inclusion:

Portfolio Outcome 1: Democratic governance and civil society. Citizens and civil society actively participate in inclusive democratic processes and institutions are more accountable and effective.

Outcome statement 1: Responsive and accountable institutions: Transparent and accountable local and national institutions meaningfully involve citizens in decision and policymaking and increase awareness and capacities regarding environmental protection and climate change. Local Governments (LG), the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) and the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government (MPALSG) will be supported to shape and implement local government reforms. Capacity building of local governments will foster their transparency, accountability and responsiveness to citizens’ needs. Selected relevant policy-making processes at central level will be supported in mainstreaming sustainable development goals in national policies addressing trade-offs and diverse interests in a participatory manner.

Outcome statement 2: Enhanced local services for all: Local authorities and CSOs provide effective and sustainable services, leaving no one behind. Capacities of LSGs and local civil society to assess the needs and provide services to citizens, particularly vulnerable groups, in collaboration and complementarity with local service providers will be enhanced with a view to building effective, inclusive and sustainable local services systems and to leave no one behind.

Outcome statement 3: Civil society and oversight actors perform their democratic role. Informed citizens and strengthened civil society participate in decision-making and oversee government’s work. The resilience and capacity of civil society will be strengthened to perform the democratic role of citizen mobilisation/ representation, advocacy and oversight. Promoting dialogue between the state and civil society and access of citizens to independent, credible information will contribute to a more enabling environment for civil society and an active citizenry in democratic processes.

UPSCALING UŽICE PARTICIPATION MODEL IN SERBIA

As acknowledged by SDC in Serbia, supported local governance reforms with responsible ministries have potential for systemic change. Partnerships with SCTM and MPALSG are paramount in terms of promoting local governance reforms, representing and defending municipal interests at the central level, while better equipping local governments to implement adopted laws. SCTM and MPALSG are important vectors for replicating and scaling up good municipal practices that are piloted by a sound representative number of Local Governments (LAs). Since the UPM is being implemented in 15 municipalities >10% of LGs in the Republic Serbia, there is a solid basis for replicating and further scaling up the model. Befittingly, outcome 3 of MED intends to showcase good practices in national policy dialogue fora and discuss their potential for replication and upscaling, specifically output 3.1.: “*Civic monitoring methodology to measure quality of participatory and inclusive LG practices improved and informs national level policy dialogue*”. For such dialogues it would, apart from presenting the case study and (15) municipal experiences implementing it, be of particular interests to reflect on the following questions:

- How the UPM can be replicated beyond the current fifteen municipalities; and/or
- How specific parts of the model can be integrated into existing municipal budgeting and planning for capital investment projects; e.g.:
 - LGs and Civil Society co-creating/refining inclusive and participatory processes that are built on common ownership and mutual commitment to strengthen the social contract
 - Ensuring greater municipal responsiveness to gendered and socially inclusive needs
 - Bolstering MZ structures to mobilise and consult communities in municipal participatory processes
 - Bridging the gap between local and peri urban/urban development

SHARING AND PROMOTION OF UŽICE PARTICIPATION MODEL

Beyond contributing to the advancement of local governance and strengthening of civic engagement in Serbia, the results and lessons learned from the UPM merits promotion and sharing both regionally and internationally. For this, the following institutions, networks and channels may be considered:

Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation

As the funding agency of MED, SDC would have multiple internal channels through which the cooperation programme in Serbia could share the UPM. MED could profile itself and the model through platforms where HELVETAS, namely the Voice Inclusion and Cohesion Team (VIC), plays an initiative-taking role. The member space of the [Governance Network](#) and its occasional global webinars would be well known avenues for knowledge sharing. HELVETAS, incl. programmes in Western Balkans have previously contributed through these knowledge platforms. The newly established [Peace Governance Equality Network](#), to which HELVETAS' VIC team provides backstopping services, would be another effective channel of communication

HELVETAS

Within HELVETAS, there are multiple channels that we can use to promote the Užice participation model and MED at large:

- **Moving Governance Programme (MG) 2022-2025.** The VIC team, in collaboration with the Partnership & Philanthropy team is receiving funding from the Swiss based Somaha and Leopold Bachman Foundations to support nine core funded projects worldwide and to foster wider knowledge sharing across the organisation, incl. bi- and multilaterally donor funded governance & civic space mandates. A series of global webinars and topic specific Communities of Practice are currently being set up. In 2023 "Inclusive Governance" is a key learning stream which MED could contribute to. Other learning streams in the MG programme include "enabling policies;" digitalized governance;" "urban governance" and "shrinking civic space."
- **Communication Outlets.** The VIC team collaborates closely with the international communications teams which offer multiple ways that experiences from MED can be shared including the **AS Highlights Newsletter**, the **Red Chair** (short interview format for LinkedIn) and **blogs** that can be shared via **social media platforms** and internally through Pamoja. The [governance and civic space landing page](#) would be another communication possible outlet. The **Mittagsklub** (previously feat. MED) would be a more informal and less professionally oriented outlet.
- **HELVETAS Symposium.** In 2023, the flagship event for external audiences in Switzerland, incl. virtual global audience, will be dedicated to the topics "democratic backslides". While this may not be an event to specifically share the UPM, it may be an opportunity to network with relevant actors and stakeholders.

Decentralization and Local Governance Network. The VIC team has, as only INGO representative in Switzerland, recently been approved as a member of the important [DeLoG](#) network. It was initially set up for multilateral and bilateral development partners, but DeLoG now also includes municipal association members such as [UCLG \(United Cities and Local Governments\)](#), **NALAS** (Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe), think tanks and academia. The network offers learning opportunities and access to knowledge and could therefore be another space to showcase the work of MED.