

## CASE STUDY: Ivanjica, Prokuplje & Knjaževac, Serbia

### Triple-win: Improving young people's quality of life, prosperous towns and growing businesses

From the Global Programme on Making Migration Work for Sustainable Development (M4SD)

**KEY WORDS:** youth, employment, education, skills training, potential migrants, internal migration, rural-urban migration, private sector partnerships, minority groups, community-driven development, local governance



#### MEET PETAR AND MILICA

Smaller towns in Southern Serbia like Ivanjica, Knjaževac and Prokuplje face a demographic challenge: young people are moving to bigger cities<sup>1</sup> or other countries in search of education and employment.<sup>2</sup> Job opportunities at home are limited and their schools do not provide youth with the skills that local employers need. A lot of young people go to universities in bigger cities in Serbia and settle there or want to explore other countries that they have heard about through the media. Some of the villages now only have a few families living there, posing a problem for local businesses looking for new employees and hindering the social and economic development of these areas.<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 made it worse – a lot of youth are unemployed, including many from Roma communities. Young people have many ideas, skills and passions that could help grow their communities, and they are looking for reasons to stay.

Petar is 20 and after finishing high school, he does not know what to do next. He does not want to move to another city to find work because he has a lot of friends and close family in Ivanjica. He needs to find a job so he can establish himself in his hometown. Milica, a young woman in town, is 27 and has two children. Her partner's income is not enough to support their young family, but there are not many jobs in Ivanjica that she is qualified for.



#### THE SOLUTION?

To address these demographic and employment challenges, the local self-governments (LSGs) and their partners in three municipalities are directly supporting unemployed 16-30 years olds to find jobs through vocational training and job placement support. Local technical schools develop and roll out new courses designed to help young people launch their careers with skills that local businesses really need, like leather tailoring or machine operations. Some municipalities partner with businesses to provide direct training-to-employment paths. By providing opportunities where young people live, communities can benefit from the new ideas, creativity, vitality and skills of the younger generation, ultimately fostering local prosperity and socio-economic development.



**“We must support the youth to believe in themselves, to have self-confidence and to have the skills to live well. We must put youth in focus. They are our present and our future”.**

**Snezana Klasnja, Minister Advisor, Ministry of Tourism and Youth**

<sup>1</sup> Commonly known as rural-urban or internal migration

<sup>2</sup> The National Ministry of Youth conducts a survey of young people every year. In the latest survey in 2022, 3.2 per cent say they want to leave permanently, while 10 per cent want to leave temporarily. Together, this is a significant proportion, 20 per cent or about 1 in every 4 young people. According to the last census, 35k young people were abroad. About 17 per cent of the Serbian population are young people. Data according to a member of the Ministry of Tourism and Youth

<sup>3</sup> This is a problem for many towns in Serbia. Ivanjica estimates that 5,000 people left in last 10 years; in Knjaževac, 15% of the local population has moved away. Data according to the Municipal Offices.

## HOW IS IT DONE?<sup>4</sup>

### 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

TARGET 16-7



ENSURE RESPONSIVE, INCLUSIVE AND REPRESENTATIVE DECISION-MAKING

The **local self-governments** designed and led the roll-out of these initiatives. The main partner in Ivanjica is the Municipal Youth Office which enables the local government to provide long-term, sustainable counselling, guidance and awareness-raising to unemployed youth. The local governments co-fund the projects with municipal budgets and monitor progress. Workshops for local authorities on migration and development help plan Youth Strategies and future projects.

### 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

TARGET 10-3



ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND END DISCRIMINATION

The approach focuses particularly on **enhancing the job prospects of people most prone to unemployment, such as youth, returning**

**migrants and minority groups such as Roma.** Roughly one in every four youth (27 per cent) supported are returning migrants who have arrived back to the municipality of Prokuplje under an EU readmission agreement, many of whom are Roma. In Prokuplje, the main objective is creating positive conditions for employment through training and job placement support which would enable the inclusion of Roma returnees into the local community. As some municipal authorities said, "Serbs and Roma are all our people. We make no distinction. Youth training is an opportunity to socialize and grow together."

### 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

TARGET 8-B



DEVELOP A GLOBAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

TARGET 17-14



ENHANCE POLICY COHERENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In Serbia, there are national policies for youth-related issues such as the **Youth Strategy (2023-2030)**. The M4SD programme supported its development so that **youth mobility considerations are included**. Youth employment is prioritized both through this Youth Strategy as well as the National Employment Strategy. Funding is channelled to support initiatives and services for youth empowerment. A new **Law on Youth** is also being developed. At the local level, this has been translated into **Local Action Plans** for a) Migration, b) Employment and c) Youth, where mobility issues play an important role.

### 17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

TARGET 17-17



ENCOURAGE EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

This is a whole-of-community approach, with partnerships between the **local governments** (including a Municipal Youth Office), the **national government and institutions** (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, Ministries of Labour and Youth, National Employment Service, Center for Social Work), **national and local organizations** (Chambers of Commerce, Roma Association Prokuplje and CSOs like the Timočki Klub), **academic institutions** (local technical schools, faculties, academies), **local businesses** (over 40 throughout all municipalities) and the support of the **UN** (the UN Migration Agency, IOM, and the UN Development Agency, UNDP).

TARGET 17-18



ENHANCE AVAILABILITY OF RELIABLE DATA

To tailor employment and skills training to the local labour markets, **two analyses in Ivanjica were carried out**, one to understand the needs of both unemployed youth and local businesses and another to understand young people's interests in self-employment and business start-ups. Major findings show that wood, metal and agricultural employers need skilled machine operators and technicians.<sup>5</sup> Three in four young people were interested in starting their own business in a wide range of areas.<sup>6</sup> These analyses ensure that **training provides youth with skills directly applicable to available opportunities**.

### 5 GENDER EQUALITY

TARGET 5-A



EQUAL RIGHTS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES, PROPERTY OWNERSHIP AND FINANCIAL SERVICES

**Dedicated focus on women's inclusion and outreach to young women who are prospective students** ensures 47 per cent of the youth trained are women. In one municipality, two out of every three students taking IT courses are women, and most students in the tailoring courses are women. Women like Milica are even entering sectors that are traditionally occupied by men such as machine operating jobs (in Ivanjica, 43 per cent of people taking machine operating courses were women) and men are also entering sectors that are traditionally occupied by women (in Knjaževac, 20 per cent of people taking tailoring and sewing courses were men).

TARGET 8-5



FULL EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK WITH EQUAL PAY

539 people participated in **skills training and individualized job search support** which helps youth find jobs and contribute to the economic and social success of their local communities. Nearly 90 people are now employed. **Academic institutions and apprenticeships certify youth** in new skills which makes it easier to find jobs and helps employers find new staff matched to their needs.

<sup>4</sup> Because activities between projects have sought good synergies to maximize the use of funding and to create whole-of-community engagement, not all the activities here were exclusively funded by the M4SD Programme

<sup>5</sup> Machine (CNC) operators, locksmiths, mechanics, electricians, warehousemen, carpenters, welders, technicians, etc.

<sup>6</sup> IT sector, management, technologies design and machine operation, 3D modelling and printing, graphic design and web programming

## SUCCESS FACTORS

### **TIP 1: Establish Municipal Youth Offices with strong competencies.**

Serbia's model works well because there are 140 dedicated offices that focus on youth issues and provide support to young people in town. Municipal Youth Offices can work on planning, implementing and developing youth policy and action plans at the local level and establishing cooperation and networking with all relevant partners. Placing Youth Offices within municipality buildings and municipalities who dedicate funds to the Municipal Youth Offices make this approach more sustainable. To complement this, offices can seek funds through tenders offered by the Ministry of Tourism and Youth, apply for municipal grants and seek out alternative funding from NGOs and donors. Youth Offices can easily combine different municipal projects to maximize impact, meaning more people could be employed and cities learn from the past. Some Youth Offices even act as a kind of job board, where employers can submit job profiles and young professionals can apply.

### **TIP 2: Start small.**

Working with small- and medium-sized municipalities is a great place to start, since they can more easily coordinate and develop partnerships with local businesses and organizations since most people know each other. Smaller towns can easily combine employment with other local services like scouts and other priorities like rural tourism. As one municipal officer in Ivanjica said, "We must listen to small municipalities because big cities tend to run on their own well-established patterns." With less resources and people, towns are facing threats to survival and growth, and are hotbeds for innovation, adaptation and deep social bonds.

### **TIP 3: Turn policies from paper to reality: connect migration, youth and employment.**

In Serbia, the National Employment Strategy, Economic Migration Strategy, National Youth Strategy and National Youth Law all include mobility considerations and aim to provide opportunities for youth at home and abroad. It is important that employment initiatives are strongly aligned with specific goals in strategies and laws to enhance employability of all young people. To implement these locally, municipalities can then establish *Local Migration Action Plans*, *Local Youth Action Plans* and *Local Employment Action Plans* which recognize young people as a group of potential changemakers and plan active measures towards their employment. All three Serbian municipalities have these, and Ivanjica also has a dedicated *Strategy for Sustainable Development* which prioritizes employment, migration and development linkages. Local Migration Councils can also work closely with Municipal Youth Offices, proposing plans to create new opportunities for young people.

### **TIP 5: Ensure courses fit employers' and students' needs.**

Municipalities carried out detailed research on the labour market and young people's interests before designing the project. Some results were surprising, such as the huge need for machine (computer numerical control - CNC) operators. Based on this, the municipalities designed new courses for mechanical technicians and sourced used machines to train students. Similarly, training for web design and IT sectors responds to students' interests and the changing nature of work, including remote employment opportunities that open new economic development avenues. Several young professionals have returned from Belgrade and opened IT businesses in their hometowns where now they employ others. Education should also consider young people's costs of living to set them up for success. Consider: course length (six-month training is ideal, while two-month is too short); individualized career counseling for job searching and hiring after course completion; local businesses paying apprentices during training; covering commute and meal costs.

### **TIP 4: Partner with the private sector for direct training-to-employment pathways and capital for start-ups.**

Merge theoretical and practical training, with direct pathways to apprenticeships and long-term contractual employment. By linking up with local businesses and academia, students not only receive training but are on a path to a long-term career. The Municipal Youth Office in Ivanjica facilitates placement because of direct partnerships and relationships with local businesses. Young participants and businesses both said that a big success factor for this project is the mix of both practical and theoretical training, tailored to the skills that a job will require. Graduates have real-world experience fit for their future employment. For entrepreneurs, advocating with banks to help youth secure low-interest business loans would enable graduates to open their own businesses.

## These activities have made life better for Petar, Milica and their neighbours



Petar was scrolling through his Municipal Youth Office's Instagram one day and found an opportunity to join a training course for machine operators. Seeing that it included a job offer and a salary while he was completing his training, he applied and took 3D modelling and machine operations courses (SDG 4, quality education).



Petar now has a job in a local company called [Matis](#) in Ivanjica, which makes flat-packed furniture that is exported throughout Serbia and Europe (SDG 8, decent work and economic growth).

Milica also completed the course for machine operators and was offered a job with Matis, where she has worked for over a year. Most of her income supports her children (SDG 1, no poverty).



She is hoping to stay at the company because of the benefits like free transportation, unemployment and healthcare (SDG 3, good health and well-being).



Her job also has reasonable working hours and opportunities to grow into management and team leader roles (SDG 8, decent work and economic growth).



Private sector company Matis and other local companies benefit, too, with a skilled and dedicated workforce. They support youth with training, apprenticeships and stipends during their education (SDG 17, partnerships for the goals).



But the company will reap long-term profit (SDG 9, industry, innovation and infrastructure).



The hope is that more people will remain in smaller towns which will continue to see Serbia's rural economy and social bonds thrive. Providing employment and new careers for young people in their home municipalities are set to become best practices for other local self-governments in Serbia faced with development challenges associated with internal and external migration (SDG 11, sustainable cities and communities).

Watch the [full video](#) about Ivanjica, Matis, Petar and Milica.

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