

## CASE STUDY: Prokuplje, Knjazevac, Ivanjica, Serbia Driving Change Together: Youth, Local Organizations and Governments Co-Create Employment Solutions

From the [Global Programme on Making Migration Work for Sustainable Development \(M4SD\)](#)

**KEY WORDS:** whole-of-society partnerships, community-driven development, diverse ethnicities, youth, employment, education, returning migrants, potential migrants, local governance

### MEET LYDIA<sup>1</sup>

Lydia is one of six women in their late teens and early 20s taking a beginning sewing course in the [Technical School "15 May"](#) in Prokuplje, Serbia. Two years ago, she migrated to another European country for more opportunities<sup>2</sup> because she found it hard to get a job as a young person in her small town. But she soon came back to Prokuplje, since it was hard to live abroad and it was difficult to find a job there too. Like Lydia, many returnees to Prokuplje are young people who are members of the Roma community. Lydia and her classmates know that their best chance of success is to get more education and a good set of skills so that they can qualify for open jobs or start their own small businesses. To help these young people and open up more opportunities, local communities must strengthen and better coordinate between a host of local services, organizations and governance sectors (education, employment, technology and more).



### THE SOLUTION?

Using a whole-of-society approach, various stakeholders representing the voices of youth, migrants, Roma, educators and the private sector work together with local governments in Prokuplje, Knjazevac and Ivanjica to jointly identify community solutions to strengthen their local development. The municipalities have long-standing, mutually respectful relationships with community organizations. The local government works to understand the labour needs of local employers, the Roma and returning migrant community and youth and then actively engage community members from different backgrounds to design projects and initiatives as well as policies and decisions. Through training programmes developed hand-in-hand with local academic institution, and work practice and job insertion initiatives with businesses, young people have the skills they need to build careers and employers have a well-trained new workforce.

Community organizations act as facilitators between the local government and the populations they serve through peer-to-peer support and dialogue. By working together and co-creating initiatives from start to finish, young people have better educational outcomes, fulfilling employment and greater representation in local and national policy- and decision-making processes.



*“Only together can we achieve something good.”*

**Milan Djokic, Mayor, Knjazevac Municipality**

<sup>1</sup> Name and identifying factors have been anonymized to protect the identity of the individuals mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> The National Ministry of Youth conducts a survey of young people every year. About 17 per cent of the Serbian population are young people. In the latest survey in 2022, 3.2 per cent say they want to leave permanently, while 10 per cent want to leave temporarily. The main reason for emigrating is for work, followed by education. Together, this is a significant proportion, 20 per cent or about 1 in every 4 young people. Data according to the Ministry for Tourism and Youth (as of October 2022)

## HOW IS IT DONE?<sup>3</sup>

### 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

TARGET 16-7



ENSURE RESPONSIVE, INCLUSIVE AND REPRESENTATIVE DECISION-MAKING

The national government considers inclusive policymaking a priority. There is a **Roma Employment and Inclusion team** in the national government and a **UN Youth Advisory Group** established by the UN Country Team. The National Ministry for Tourism and Youth regularly **consults young people and youth organizations** when defining laws and strategies; indeed, the national definition of “youth” (16-30 years old) is more inclusive than the international definition because it is based on youth feedback. Similar efforts exist in municipalities as they design Local Employment Action Plans or Municipal Development Strategies, for example, which **consider and integrate the voices of youth, returnees, migrants and other groups**.

### 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

TARGET 10-3



ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND END DISCRIMINATION

All different kinds of people are **brought together through educational and skills training** in local schools, which act as community spaces.

Young people learn together. For example, roughly one in every four (27 per cent) of those involved in M4SD in Prokuplje were **returning migrants**, many of whom are Roma.

### 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

TARGET 8-5



FULL EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK WITH EQUAL PAY

Thanks to these partnerships, **104 people are now employed<sup>4</sup>** after participating in new training and apprenticeship opportunities.<sup>5</sup> This includes 86 youth, 38 women and 59 returning migrants (mostly Roma) across three municipalities. Over 100 Roma returnees from the EU (under a readmission process in

Prokuplje) were also supported by the Roma Association to register with the National Employment Service, who share open vacancies with jobseekers.

### 17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

TARGET 17-16



ENHANCE THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

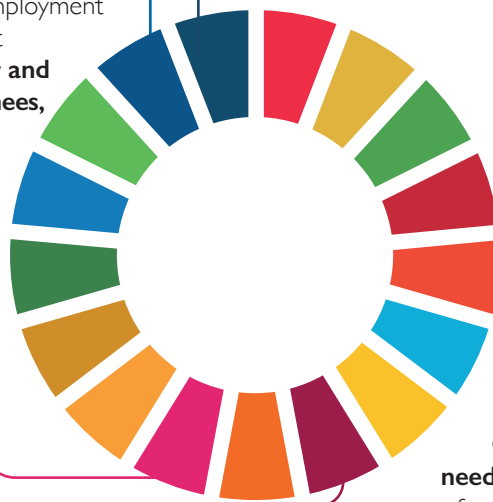
**Local businesses also work hand-in-hand** with municipal and national governments. In Knjazevac, they donated 10 old sewing machines and other machines used in production lines so that technical schools have more tools to train more students.

TARGET 17-17



ENCOURAGE EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Local governments in the M4SD **programme partner with institutions, local companies and organizations representing the voices of diverse community members**, such as the Roma Association in Prokuplje, a local non-governmental organization called the Timocki Klub in Knjazevac and local business Matis in Ivanjica. Activities are co-created with representatives of the communities that the activities seek to support. The UN Migration Agency (IOM) and UN Development Agency (UNDP) provide technical advice. Activities are coordinated with the National Employment Service, Centre for Social Work and others.



#### Consultations, surveys and needs assessments

with different groups of people ensure that the activities responded to real community barriers and interests. In Prokuplje, the Roma Association led an **informal assessment of the Roma community** which analysed: socio-economic wellbeing (housing conditions, number of household members, income), education (level and type of education, life skills), needs for additional training, employment and more.<sup>6</sup> In Ivanjica, a detailed **analysis of youth** was also conducted before designing the project proposal, with similar questions. Over 70% of youth expressed the need for additional training and development to start their own business.

TARGET 17-18



ENHANCE AVAILABILITY OF RELIABLE DATA

A **mapping of the potential of the private sector for migration management** which used a survey of 646 companies across four cities (Ivanjica, Knjazevac, Prokuplje and Belgrade) deepened the understanding of existing and potential private sector engagement with regards to cooperation between the Serbian diaspora abroad and businesses and Serbia as well as the employment of migrants. Nearly half of all businesses surveyed also expressed their **interest to support governance processes** such as the development and implementation of Local Action Plans (e.g. digitalization, infrastructure, investments for the general good).

<sup>3</sup> Data as of June 2023. Because activities between projects have sought good synergies to maximize the use of funding and to create whole-of-society engagement, not all the activities here were exclusively funded by the M4SD Programme

<sup>4</sup> Of the 104 people, 59 were in Prokuplje (38 were engaged in public works, 17 with local companies, 2 at a local health centre and 2 in the metal industry), 40 in Ivanjica (20 machine operators employed by a local business named Matis and 20 others employed with local companies after Work Practice), and 5 in Knjazevac (2 machine operators and 3 tailors)

<sup>5</sup> Of nearly 550 people who took part in training and job search support

<sup>6</sup> A large number of returnees were interested in motivational workshops (68 per cent), retraining/additional training (85 per cent) and mini grants (76 per cent). 92 per cent were interested in “medicine”, or something related to health institutions. Out of all the suggested forms of assistance, 96 per cent of respondents reported that the most important for them is employment, i.e. a permanent job, as the vast majority of respondents (92 per cent) currently receive income only from social assistance and child allowance instead of through employment.

## SUCCESS FACTORS

**TIP 1: Empowering local changemakers creates more effective and sustainable community-led solutions.** People often know best about what they need and how to address their own challenges. They may already know the solutions to these issues but lack the support and means. It is important that local governments and other local actors empower individuals to put these solutions into practice, including by providing support to implement their ideas. For example, young people in Ivanjica told their local Youth Office that they needed more tools, training and support to learn the tech skills that they needed for their future – including future employment – as the world becomes more digitalized. Responding to this, the local community centre was refurbished in 2021 to build in new internet and technology including computers, 3D printers, new courses and more. As another example, thanks to the Roma Association's close partnership with the local government in Prokuplje, they were jointly able to identify the challenges that returnees and youth experience including unemployment, a lack of housing, uncertain land and property rights and high rates of truancy and school drop-outs. Solutions to some of these challenges were already identified and put into practice, including new and more practical educational courses, job placement initiatives and legal and housing support. Empowering people with resources to make their own change can be more sustainable and effective in the long term.

**TIP 2: Inclusive policymaking requires real engagement and coordination at every step, not just token participation.**

Sustainable change requires establishing long-term policies at the national and local level, rather than solely individual small-scale solutions. Yet policies must account for everyone. At the national level, the Ministry for Youth and Tourism carries out three-day consultations with youth organizations and ministry members to hear directly about what young people really want and need. They also conduct regular surveys to hear from as many young people as possible. Then, based on these consultations, they co-create the National Youth Strategy. Youth organizations reported feeling more satisfied with policies when they were included in the design and drafting process. This is also true at the local level. Municipalities can create dedicated representative spaces and bodies, like Local Migration Councils which then include representatives from different institutions: representatives of the local self-government, Centre for Social Work, police directorate, employment service and a trustee.<sup>7</sup> Policies determine what municipalities focus on, fund and put into action. Ensuring that everyone has decision-making power and is involved in long-term policy processes ensures transformative changes for fulfilling lives.

**TIP 4: Share good models for bigger impact.**

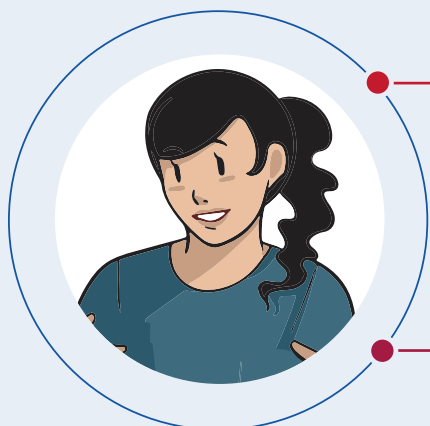
Ivanjica and Knjazevac are consolidating their youth employment and whole-of-society cooperation models into manuals and tools that other municipalities can replicate, including how to build cooperation agreements between key actors like civil society and technical schools, rules of procedures and application forms. The head of the Municipal Youth Office in Ivanjica is on the advisory board of the National Municipal Association and regularly shares good practices with other towns. Reflecting on, learning from and then feeding local good practices into national programmes and sharing with other communities ensures more people gain through upscaling.

**TIP 3: Co-develop solutions with different local actors, as they can address concerns, explain processes and provide peer-to-peer support to often marginalized communities and migrants.**

Some communities may feel less comfortable going directly to local or national authorities, so associations and local organizations can act as facilitators. For example, the National Employment Service can connect job-seekers with available employment in Serbia, but to do so, people must register. The Roma Association helped to address concerns, explain why procedures such as this are necessary, clarify how their personal information will be used and affirm that everything is optional and based on consent. Partnering with and playing to the strengths of each partner in a community improves services more broadly: more information on a national scale will help procure funding to expand and scale up services so that they are more available to returning migrants, youth, people of all ethnicities and other populations.

<sup>7</sup>The Law on Migration Management established the local-level structures responsible for the implementation of migration policies – Local Migration Councils, whose task is to monitor and report to the national Commissariat on local migration issues and trends. They consist of representatives from: the Local Self-Government Unit executive body (mayor or municipal/town council member), Centre for Social Work, police directorate, employment service and a Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) trustee.

## These activities have made life better for Lydia



The Technical School “15 May” runs a [fashion show](#) every few months, where students show off their creations and drum up customers or increase their chances of being hired by local factories. Under the leadership of the headmistress, “15 May” will continue to expand its course offerings in different trades, buy newer and more diverse machinery and adapt the professional training to new advances in technology and economy (SDG 4, quality education).

Lydia says, “The training was great and the mentors were very committed. The certificate means a lot to me because this job is in high demand. I have more to learn, but I am already completing work on my own for customers on my personal sewing machine. If I had a bit of money to invest, I would grow my business and sell online or at markets.” (SDG 8, decent work and economic growth).

By working together, the solutions developed by these communities work for everyone: young people, returning migrants (mainly Roma), other vulnerable members of the society, the local and national government, local businesses, educators and Lydia and her friends (SDG 17, partnerships for the goals).

The six women have completed their first sewing course, building friendships as they overcame the harder parts: threading the needle, learning how to set up and maintain their machines and understanding the right speed and rhythm. They each made a dress using different diverse and complex techniques, such as painting on silk to embroidery. Some signed up to learn new skills that are useful in the garments industry, like needlework (SDG 9, industry, innovation and infrastructure).



This is good news for Prokuplje, Knjazevac and Ivanjica. Local community organisations like the Roma Association and Timocki Klub have made progressing in overcoming young people’s concerns about employment and are able now to turn to other community needs (SDG 16, peace, justice and strong institutions).

As the local governments look to expand their tourism industry, attract new factories and industries and strengthen their community bonds and social wellbeing, enthusiastic and talented young people will be key to success in the future (SDG 11, sustainable cities and communities).

Watch [Nina’s story](#), another young woman in Prokuplje.

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