

Empowerment Through Community Mobilization

Challenge

During the last ten years, Serbs suffered cycles of economic and social instability that resulted in decreased production, low wages, high unemployment and underemployment - especially in the rural, agricultural areas. The opposition politicians that governed after the fall of Milosevic in 2000 had little if any experience in municipal government. In addition, the quality and capacity of social and public services had been undermined by economic decline, a lack of investment, and the increased demands of a large refugee population.



Photo: ADF Serbia

Drugi Oktobar citizens voted to renovate this building for use as a community center

Initiative

Given Serbia's rich natural and human resources, USAID is encouraging community mobilization through income-generating, community infrastructure, and environmental projects. USAID helped citizens improve their standards of living, promote economic development, and build mutual trust between citizens and local government.

Together these programs offer a promising opportunity to build on the democratic revolution in Serbia and to create momentum for social and economic development at the local level. Community

Development Groups (CDGs), established by community members with assistance from USAID, serve as the focal point of community activity and decision-making by identifying community priorities, liaising with local government, and implementing projects that address community priorities. To ensure community ownership, CDGs are responsible for contributing 25% of the project costs.

Results

Since the program's inception in July 2001, USAID has worked with thousands of citizens and has carried out 2500 projects in 363 communities throughout Serbia. In Drugi Oktobar, a local community of Vrsac Municipality (Vojvodina), citizens and local government are witnessing not only increased access to commercial financing for business and employment, but also a change in citizens' attitudes toward improving their lives. At a town hall meeting, Drugi Oktobar citizens voted as a top priority to renovate a building into a community center. The community center now serves as a hub for citizen advocacy and action and a key source for information, educational, social and economic development services.

In addition to securing support from local government, the community mobilized support from a private firm to fund a computer center which will provide computer literacy programs and internet access. Success from this community project has motivated other donors to invest resources in the community center and help provide for staffing.