

Building a new Kosovo, one village at a time

Podujevë, Kosovo - Not far from the border with Serbia, the people of Podujevë are busy pulling their lives together from the ravages of conflict and the complications of Kosovo's uncertain reality.



Podujeve's repaved main street

Although Kosovo is still formally part of Serbia and Montenegro, the territory is administered by the United Nations with talks on its final status still underway.

In Podujevë, a town of some 6,500 people (Kosovar Albanians mixed with members of Kosovo's Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian minorities), people have decided to stop talking politics, which was getting them nowhere, and start focusing on ways to improve their lives.

The most immediate problem was the stench from the open-sewers and the diseases the 'black waters' brought with them. So the townspeople got together and drew up plans to lay a sewage line

along the main street. All villagers with cash to spare contributed to the project.

Rexhep Beqiri, who owns a body-shop on the main street, remembers well the terrible smell and his anger towards his neighbor whose effluent flowed in an open ditch past his family's modest house.

"It wasn't my neighbor's fault, but we all felt helpless and ended up venting our frustrations on one another," said Beqiri who returned to Podujevë from Germany in 1998 because, as things got worse in Kosovo, he wanted to be there with his friends and relatives.

With tensions among villagers now fading – or at least not exacerbated by things beyond their control – Podujevë's self-help committee meets regularly. In addition to the sewage line, they have also asphalted the main street and reconstructed the village school.



"We felt helpless," says Rexhep Beqiri

320 projects so far, all over Kosovo

For each small project, their partner is the [Community Development Fund](#) (CDF). The fund was set up in 1999 with an \$8 million grant from the World Bank. So far it has provided some \$15 million in grants to 320 projects all over Kosovo.

The CDF's guiding light is Linda Bunjaku. An architect by training, she worked with the International Committee of the Red Cross during the conflict in 1999. Her determination to work with communities came out of her experience crisscrossing the territory with the ICRC, helping and treating the terrorized population. "It's about bringing people together, helping them focus on the challenges they face, and having them find their own solutions," says Bunjaku.

The fund's first cycle ran from 1999 to 2003 and it is now well into its second phase which goes through 2007. Its success has attracted additional support from several governments. The Austrians, Canadians, Dutch, and Swiss are all contributors.

A major strength of the fund -- which focuses on local infrastructure, schools, and social services -- is the special relationship it has fostered between citizens and municipal authorities.



"It's about bringing people together," says Linda Bunjaku.

Making the most out of limited municipal resources

Village committees pass project ideas to the municipal councils which must agree to provide their share before a proposal is submitted to the CDF. It's a virtuous triangle, explains Linda Bunjaku, with municipal authorities more likely to support projects if there is the promise of matching funds from the CDF and the communities themselves. At a minimum, the latter must contribute 15% of total costs.

"It's a no-brainer for us," says Hazir Raci, vice-president of the local administrative council in Podujevë. "We can make our limited municipal resources go a lot further if we leverage them with money from the communities and the CDF." They are also more likely to see results because CDF staff manage the finances of each project and train local civil servants to improve their performance. Contractors like it too because they are more likely to get paid in full and on time.

Selim Bajrami is a Roma who lives down the street from Rexhep Beqiri. Like some 40% of Kosovo's working-age population, he is out of work. Indeed, he can't remember when he last had a job. But he's proud of the things he and his neighbors in Podujeve have



Selim Bajrami's daughters are illiterate

achieved. His 12 year old son attends the local school he helped build. However neither of his daughters, aged 14 and 17, go to school. Like their father, they are illiterate.

So life in Podujevë is not perfect. Unemployment is high. Many of the town's former inhabitants have not returned since the war. The future is far from clear but there's a sense of shared endeavor - and none of the prejudice towards minorities so common elsewhere in the Balkans. Is it thanks to the sense of community created by working together? Yes and no, says Agim Hyseni, a member of the Ashkali minority who is active in the local self-help program. "We've come much closer together by working side by side. But perhaps we always got on. It just wasn't obvious in the past."

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Read [project documents](#) related to the Community Development Fund.