

Improving Human Security for Vulnerable Communities in South-West Serbia



UN Trust Fund for Human Security



Fast Facts

Country: Serbia

Duration: October 2012 to April 2015

Implementing UN Agencies: UNDP; UNFPA; UNOPS; WHO

Other Implementing Partners: National ministries; Commissioner for Protection of Equality; Serbian Office for EU integration; Municipality of Novi Pazar

Budget: \$2,859,659

Key Words: Minority groups; youth; inter-ethnic co-existence; inclusive community development

BACKGROUND

For over 20 years, the Sandžak region of south-west Serbia had received an influx of displaced groups from across the Balkans. During the 1990s, the arrival of refugees fleeing violence in Croatia was followed by internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Kosovo. Groups of repatriated migrants had also returned to Sandžak from the European Union, while the region remained home to a large number of displaced Roma families. Refugees, IDPs and Roma communities were living in temporary housing or illegal settlements, with little more than rudimentary shelter and inadequate access to water, electricity and land to grow food. They often lacked the necessary documentation to

access essential social services, including healthcare and education. At the same time, underinvestment in physical infrastructure and social services had stifled the local economy, with youth unemployment rates at almost 60 percent. Subsequently, south-west Serbia remained vulnerable to outbreaks of violence as tensions were rising between communities divided along ethnic lines. A concerted effort was needed to promote inter-ethnic cohesion and address the multiple insecurities facing vulnerable communities in Sandžak to ensure a future free from fear, want and indignity.

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The programme's objective is to promote economic security and social cohesion towards improving the overall human security of vulnerable communities in Sandžak. To this end, the programme proposes to: (i) improve income generation and open employment opportunities for vulnerable populations; (ii) enhance

inter-ethnic understanding and community cohesion; (iii) increase access to social and public services and provide official documentation to displaced groups; and (iv) promote the human security concept within central and local governments and civil society organizations.

BENEFICIARIES

With particular emphasis on women, youth and Roma communities, the programme will target IDPs, refugees, returnees and other vulnerable individuals

and households. An estimated 60,000 people in Novi Pazar and other municipalities in southwest Serbia will directly benefit from the programme.



APPLYING THE HUMAN SECURITY APPROACH

This programme highlighted the importance of people-centred approaches, where the voices of local communities guided policies and actions. By engaging community-based organisations and government institutions in a human security analysis of Sandžak, the programme identified the various factors that hindered minority ethnic groups and economically marginalised populations from accessing essential public services and participating in civic life. The analysis revealed that pervasive unemployment, inter-ethnic divisions, lack of formal documentation, and the precarious situation of youth were the most pressing insecurities for the local population.

In response, the programme developed a comprehensive strategy that addressed these threats, recognizing the need to integrate protection mechanisms with solutions that empower vulnerable groups. For example, obtaining legal certificates of birth registration and citizenship enabled refugees, IDPs, and Roma communities to access a full range of social services, including education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and adult education, as well as essential social and legal rights.

At the same time, the programme empowered individuals and communities to engage in a multi-ethnic society. Through arts, sports, culture, and education, the programme created spaces that reduced

violence by promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and coexistence. With nearly half of the population under the age of 30, particular emphasis was placed on empowering the region's youth through vocational training, community work, and youth leadership capacity-building to forge inclusive and resilient communities able to face future challenges.

Economic insecurity, a key threat to human security in Sandžak and a significant driver of ethnic tension, was also addressed. The establishment of a cooperative waste management centre created legal and formal employment opportunities for vulnerable people, providing sustainable income for the community. A portion of the centre's profits was allocated to a community support fund, which financed local development programmes, directly benefiting displaced individuals and their families. In addition to providing economic support, the waste management centre delivered environmental benefits for the entire community.

By involving stakeholders from all ethnic groups in every aspect of the programme, the human security approach multiplied the impact of these activities. It promoted social cohesion while strengthening the capacities of vulnerable groups to engage in civic life and develop their full human potential.

NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS

(i) The programme made significant strides in employment generation by establishing a modular recycling center designed to serve a city of 100,000 inhabitants. This initiative created sustainable job

opportunities for local communities, contributing to medium-term economic security.

(ii) Intercultural initiatives played a pivotal role in reducing ethnic tensions and fostering social harmony. Events such as a youth theatre festival, which drew

6,000 participants, and a music festival that attracted over 35,000 attendees, provided platforms for inter-ethnic dialogue and understanding. The “City of Good Hosts” programme further united 600 children from diverse ethnic backgrounds, cultivating mutual appreciation and social cohesion.

(iii) Access to personal documentation was dramatically improved, resolving nearly all cases of undocumented individuals in the participating communities. A total of 255 families obtained 420 identity and health insurance documents. Additionally, workshops for 170 participants and the development of a tailored manual for Roma communities empowered individuals to navigate documentation processes independently.

(iv) Healthcare services were strengthened through impactful initiatives. More than 700 youth participated in awareness campaigns addressing sensitive topics such as reproductive health and gender-based violence. Furthermore, 402 medical professionals received specialized training to improve service delivery. These

efforts enhanced trust in healthcare systems and reduced disparities in access for marginalized communities.

(v) There was substantial improvement in access to education. Ninety adults from underserved settlements acquired basic literacy skills, enabling them to complete essential tasks like filling out forms and managing personal documents. Training sessions for 326 teachers improved their capacity to support vulnerable children, resulting in better academic outcomes and addressing systemic barriers to education.

(vi) Social protection systems were bolstered by training 49 social workers to address pressing challenges, including child labor and family planning. Community workshops strengthened trust between marginalized groups and service providers, leading to increased school attendance and higher adult enrollment in education. These efforts collectively reinforced the foundation for more inclusive and equitable communities.