

Serbia

INCLUSIVE LABOUR MARKETS: ENSURING NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND



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About this report

Caritas Organisations are essential actors in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, and the striving for social justice. They do this by assisting and providing services to people in need, as well as by presenting alternatives to address unfair structures, policies and measures.

The Caritas CARES poverty reports are an important instrument in this endeavour. Caritas informs local, regional, national, and European authorities and formulates recommendations based on its daily work with people experiencing poverty. Caritas CARES poverty reports support the advocacy efforts of Caritas at national and at European levels, and endeavour to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable members of society are heard.

The focus of this edition of Caritas CARES poverty reports is on inclusive labour markets and social economy as part of national social models. The poverty report focuses particularly on the challenges that should be urgently tackled to make labour markets more inclusive and to promote the social economy, based on Caritas Europa's vision for sustainable social models, as well as existing EU and Council of Europe processes, programmes and legal instruments.

This country report has been realised on the basis of a questionnaire, designed in consultation with the participating member organisation.

About Caritas Serbia

In Serbia, Caritas organisations at national, diocesan and parish level are implementing numerous and diverse projects in order to improve the position of poor, vulnerable and marginalised people, but also the entire society. Home care and home assistance for elderly and sick people, day care for people with mental and intellectual disabilities, laundry services and psychosocial assistance to migrants and refugees in camps, a kitchen for the poor, bathroom services and the

provision of humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable are just some of the activities that Caritas implements in the field. Furthermore, the development of social entrepreneurship, the economic empowerment of people in disadvantaged positions, and disaster risk reduction activities are also part of Caritas' agenda.

More than 5,000 people benefit directly from Caritas' services in Serbia.



Photo: Caritas in action – donation to hospitals (medical and protective equipment and disinfectants).
Source: Caritas Serbia, 2020

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Caritas services

Since the start of the pandemic, Caritas Serbia has observed an evolution among target groups accessing its services, with increasing numbers of families with children, young people and elderly, people with health problems, and ethnic minorities, like Roma. The increase is directly linked to the pandemic and the fact that the organisation and procedures related to

public services changed. Most general hospitals became COVID-19 hospitals and stopped providing other treatments and post-operative care. When psychiatric wards were closed patients were discharged and psychiatrists were assigned to the COVID-19 hospitals. Furthermore, the centres for social work could not provide support to new beneficiaries. Under these new circumstances, people in need turned more to Caritas and its services.

Not only has the pandemic created an **increase in requests for the social services provided by Caritas**, but also an **increased demand for healthcare and homecare services**. Due to the difficulty in accessing public services when the lockdown was introduced in March 2020, the pressure on the social services run by Caritas (home care¹ especially) was particularly high and new needs also emerged. The increase in requests for support was evident for general care and for home assistance, and during the lockdown for food, medicines, and hygiene products.

As well as dealing with increased demand, Caritas' services also needed to adapt to the pandemic restrictions. Some services had to be closed, especially daily centres for the elderly, and for people with mental disorders and intellectual difficulties. Consequently, Caritas' organisations needed to intensify homecare visits. A large number of volunteers have been involved, so it has been possible to carry out various services: care, procurement, etc. The biggest adjustment related to the protective measures that were/are required. The cost of gloves and masks increased ten-fold for home care services. Working with people with mental and intellectual difficulties was also challenging for Caritas' teams during the state of emergency (declared on 15 March 2020 and lifted on 7 May 2020). It was not as easy to adapt activities and switch to online

counselling support for people with mental and intellectual difficulties, as it was in other projects like youth counselling, because of the former group's specific conditions. The social enterprise run by Caritas Šabac, which normally provides restaurant services and event organisation, adapted its services to food delivery and catering. The larger number of requests also required greater capacity and it was not easy to employ new staff during the worst of the pandemic.

The pandemic has shown that services must be provided continuously. **The biggest challenge for Caritas has been to ensure continuity** so that the beneficiaries could maintain the quality of life they had before the pandemic. Many other service agencies withdrew entirely, and Caritas became even more committed to respond to both the existing and new needs of its beneficiaries for home care, food procurement, etc.

1 The home care programme was one of the first services established by Caritas in Serbia. It is intended for elderly and other people in need for home assistance. Caritas home care teams are composed of nurses and caregivers that provide help with everyday activities together with basic health care and psychosocial support.
www.caritas.rs/briga-o-starima/?lang=en

'I suffer from paranoia and depression, and I have been receiving treatment for 15 years. I have been a user of the Caritas Daily Care Centre for People with Mental Disorders in Sremska Mitrovica since September 2019. Last year was very difficult for me. I lost both parents due to COVID-19. I was left alone, and it meant a lot to me to have homecare visits from Caritas. Now I live alone, I maintain my own hygiene, Verica from Caritas helps me a little, she cooks for me, and they also bring me meals. They have to cook meals especially for me because I have celiac disease. They also give me therapy and supply me with medicines; they take me for check-ups. I am very grateful to them all, because I don't know what I would do without them.'

– Milan L., 44 years old

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Frameworks for an inclusive labour market

Within Catholic Social Teaching, there is a recognition that economic activities must operate within a broader moral framework of honesty and accountability, respect for human dignity, fairness, and a vision of integral and authentic development that goes beyond mere material profits. For Caritas Europa, the economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of participation in society. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organisation and membership of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. In the final statement of Pope Francis' *Economy of Francesco* it is stated that 'the right to decent work for all, family rights and all human rights [must] be respected in the life of each company, for every worker, and guaranteed by the social policies of each country.'²

These rights are also enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8), the International Labour Organisation Conventions, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Social Charter (r), and more recently, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) (2017). The 20 principles of the EPSR are what guides the Member States towards a strong social Europe that is fair and inclusive.

For Caritas, respecting the rights and dignity of every worker necessitates a human-centred economy, founded on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, which puts people and the climate at the centre of the economic system and is based on an understanding of how the economy, climate and social rights are interlinked and interdependent. It is a sustainable and inclusive social model, which does not consider economic growth as an end in itself, but rather as a means for social and environmental

² Pope Francis (2020), *The Economy of Francesco*, 21 November 2020, available at: www.francescoeconomy.org/final-statement-and-common-commitment (Accessed on 16/06/2021)

progress in combination with climate protection. Human-centred economic policies are therefore based on an assessment of social and environmental needs and boundaries, and are developed with the common good in mind to deliver benefits for people and for the planet.

An essential element of a human-centred economy is an inclusive labour market, one of the three pillars of Caritas' social model.³ Active inclusion, adequate income, sustainable employment, and quality services remain mandatory objectives for every economic system oriented towards justice and the common good. Inclusive labour markets, therefore, recognise the value of work and people's contributions to society.

Caritas' organisations in Serbia share Caritas Europa's vision of an inclusive labour market and a human-centred economy. Working with people belonging to vulnerable and marginalised groups for over 20 years has motivated Caritas Serbia to start promoting and managing social enterprises. Caritas in Serbia creates job opportunities for people with disabilities, people with mental disorders, single mothers, and young people. As organisations that pursue social justice and the common good, for Caritas in Serbia it is essential to enable marginalised people to lead a dignified life. In this sense, Caritas Serbia considers its enterprises as a means for social inclusion and progress.

3 Caritas' social model is made up of three pillars: 1) Family, 2) Inclusive Labour Markets, 3) Social protection Systems - Social justice and equality in Europe is possible - www.caritas.eu.

SECTION 1:

Current challenges in the Serbian labour market

1.1. The labour market: pre- and post-pandemic

1.1.1. The evolution of the socio-economic context

According to Eurostat statistics,⁴ between 2014 and 2020 the **employment rate**⁵ in Serbia rose from 54.8% to 65.9% (compared to the EU-27 average of 72.4% for 2020). Over the same period, the female employment rate⁶ increased from 47.2% to 58.9% (compared to the EU-27 average of 66.8%). However, in contrast to the other EU countries, the figures relating to the third quarter of 2020, which reflect the initial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic,

show an increase in the employment rate of 1.3 percentage points (pp) when compared to the third quarter of 2019. For women, the increase was even higher (1.7 pp).

Between 2014 and 2020, the **unemployment rate**⁷ fell from 19.4% to 9.2% (compared to 6.9%, the 2020 EU-27 average). The figures relating to the third quarter of 2020 again show an opposite trend in comparison to the EU average,

4 www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database (Accessed on 10/05/2021)

5 % of population aged 20-64

6 % of females aged 20-64

7 % of active population aged 20-64

with a decrease in the unemployment rate from 10.1% to 9.1% in the third quarter of 2020 (-1pp). For women, the decrease was higher (-1.7pp).

Concerning **youth unemployment**⁸ over the last six years (2014-2020), it was and has remained much higher than the EU average, but with a much greater reduction. While in 2014, youth unemployment was at 47.3% (compared to 23.4%, the EU average), it decreased to 26.6% in 2020 (compared to 16.8%, the EU average). The same can be said concerning female youth unemployment,

which was much higher than the EU average in 2014 (49.9%, compared to 23.0% at EU level), and it dropped to 29.5% in 2020, but is still considerably above the 2020 EU average (16.7%). Over the same period 2014-2020, the **employment rate of the population aged 15-24**⁹ did not increase in the same way as that of the overall working population. Eurostat data indicate that the increase in employment for young people between 2014 and 2020 was 5.7 pp, from 15.1% to 20.8%, remaining lower than the EU average (from 29.9% to 31.5%).

1.1.2. Challenges in the labour market for vulnerable target groups

Since 2014, there has been an improvement of three basic labour market indicators: the employment rate; the unemployment rate; and the inactivity rate. For the population aged 15 to 64, the employment rate increased from 50.8% in 2014 to 61.3% in 2020, the unemployment rate decreased from 19.6% to 9.1%, and the inactivity rate decreased from 36.6% to 32.3%. However, there was also a decline in the quality of people's employment. The share of workers with temporary contracts increased from 18.8% to 20.7%. Long-term unemployment (12 months or more) was extremely high in 2020 – 75.4%, as a percentage of total unemployment. In 2020 the rate of precarious employment (Eurostat definition) increased from 4.6% in 2014 to 7.3% in 2020. The number of

temporary employees increased by 44%, and 55% of young people had a limited duration contract. As a result, the improvement of these indicators only demonstrates an increase in **precarious work**. The gender employment gap also persisted in the observed period. In 2019, even though the informal employment rate was in decline, more than half a million people were still informally employed.¹⁰

The position of **young people** in the Serbian labour market is significantly unfavourable compared to that of young people in the EU, even though, according to general indicators of the labour market, it has improved. In 2020 only half of young people aged 20-29 were employed, and every fifth active young

8 % of active population aged 15-24

9 % of population aged 15-24

10 Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia Labour Force Survey, 2019
www.data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/240002090207?languageCode=sr-Cyrl&displayMode=table (Accessed on 07/04/2021)



Photo: Caritas in action - distribution of food packages to poor and elderly. Source: Caritas Serbia, 2020

person was unemployed.¹¹ The key obstacle to the employment of young people was the lack of secure jobs - 54.5% of young people (age 15-24) had temporary jobs, and 81% of them worked in these kinds of jobs because

they were unable to find a permanent job.¹² Every fourth young person in Serbia was in the NEET (not in employment, education or training) group (with a 25.9% NEET rate among ages 20-25, and 23.4% among ages

11 Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia Labour Force Survey, 2020, own calculation, www.publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/Pdf/G20215671.pdf (Accessed on 07/04/2021)

12 Eurostat Labour Force Survey Database, own calculation, www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/lfs/Data/database (Accessed on 07/04/2021)

25-29)¹³. Young workers earned less than older workers and were more exposed to low paid work¹⁴. The 2020 survey on graduates revealed a high degree of overqualification – 54% of graduates reported that their level of qualification was not well matched to the skill requirements of the job they held.¹⁵

Roma are another group at a significant disadvantage in the Serbian labour market. Numerous studies show that the Roma minority are in a far more unfavourable position, due to systemic discrimination, compared to the majority population in almost all areas of social life, and especially when it comes to their access to the formal labour market. The 2019 unemployment rate of Roma working-age men (36%) and women (45%) is extremely high compared to the rate in the general population (16%).¹⁶ The vast majority of Roma generate their income as unregistered construction auxiliary workers, secondary materials' collectors and/or

seasonal workers in agriculture. As such, they have limited access to the social system, in terms of health and retirement insurance.

Often, **migrants and refugees** tend to work in seasonal jobs or try their luck in advancing their journey towards and into EU countries, in the hope of finding work there. In the year 2019,¹⁷ a total of 24,421 temporary residence permits were issued, which was 15.7% more than in the year before. The number of permanent residents was much lower, at 8,721. It is believed that the number of foreign nationals working in Serbia is far higher than the number of issued work permits, since work permits are issued only to foreigners who have an employment contract.

13 Eurostat Population and social conditions database, own calculation, www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Youth (Accessed on 07/04/2021)

14 Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, Structure of Earnings Survey, 2018, www.data.stat.gov.rs/Metadodata/24_Zarade/Html/S019031_ESMS_G4_2018_3.html (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

15 Uvalić, M. & Bartlett, W. (2020) *Transition from university to employment of young graduates in Serbia*. In: W. Bartlett, V. Monastiriotis & P. Koutroumpis (Eds.), *Social Exclusion and Labour Market Challenges in the Western Balkans*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, pp. 191-217

16 Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of Serbia, www.socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/socijalno-ukljucivanje-roma-i-romkinja-u-republici-srbiji-prioriteti-i-izazovi (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

17 Commissariat for Refugees and Migration – Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2019, www.kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Migration%20Profile%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Serbia%202019.pdf, p. 11, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

1.1.3. The impact of the pandemic on the Serbian economy and the labour market

The **pandemic has worsened the position of those groups who were in an unfavourable position in the labour market** even before the start of 2020. This includes young people, migrants and refugees, Roma, people with disabilities (PWD), in particular if they were young women, and the informally employed.

Many **workers who are informally employed** usually engage in labour intensive jobs with low wages and conditions that do not guarantee occupational safety and health, or provide the right to social security, paid sick leave, and annual leave. In 2019, the informal employment rate was 18.2% with 529,200 people informally employed.¹⁸ In all four quarters of 2020, there was a drop in the number of informally employed, and the largest drop was noted in Q2/2020 (132,000 people or 23.5%)¹⁹, at the time of the state of emergency, when a curfew was introduced. The consequence for many people in this situation was poverty, since they were left without any income, and were not eligible for unemployment benefits.

Young people, who compose the majority in non-standard forms of work²⁰, were the first ones to lose their jobs during the pandemic. The youth unemployment rate (aged 15-24)

increased from 28.1% in Q4/2019 to 30.7% in Q4/2020 (from 25.0% to 27.1% among men, and from 32.9% to 36.9% among women²¹), which indicates that the pandemic, in terms of access to the labour market, affected more young women than young men. Over the same period young men's participation in education and training decreased in comparison to the same quarter of the previous year, from 62.4% (Q4/2019) to 58.4% (Q4/2020), whereas for women it increased from 70.1% (Q4/2019) to 72.3% (Q4/2020).

Between March and May 2020, **migrants and refugees faced additional challenges due to the pandemic**. They had restricted opportunities to leave their reception and asylum centres. Since they were unable to leave, they were also unable to work or look for a job, usually an informal job, thus preventing them from earning enough income to continue their journey to southern, central or western Europe. In addition, the procedure for obtaining a work permit is long and complicated, both because of the long time periods that have to pass until they are eligible to apply for the permits (nine months from the day they file for asylum) and because many of them have no proof of their professional qualifications

18 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, www.data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/240002090207?languageCode=sr-Latn (Accessed on 07/04/2021)

19 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Labour Force Survey database – 2020 quarterly data, www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/oblasti/trziste-rada/anketa-o-radnoj-snazi (Accessed on 07/04/2021)

20 **Non-standard forms of employment (Non-standard forms of employment) (ilo.org)**

21 Eurostat, Unemployment by sex and age – 2019 and 2020 quarterly data, www.appso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

(diplomas, certificates, etc.) The asylum process may last up to several months and substantially prolong the period that has to pass before they are eligible to exercise their work-related rights. Furthermore, many of the reception and asylum centres are located in economically run-down municipalities or remote areas, where there are few employment opportunities. Most of the respondents to the 2019 Belgrade Centre for Human Rights survey, who said they had worked in Serbia, specified that they had not been registered, that they had performed low-skilled jobs and that they had been hired by private employers. Their remuneration had been below the minimum prescribed by law, which additionally discouraged them from looking for new work. Furthermore, they had been totally excluded from the protections afforded to workers under the law, including occupational safety procedures.²²

Roma people also faced additional challenges. Since only a small proportion of Roma have registered employment in Serbia, the pandemic has severely affected

their generally unstable work situation, as unregistered workers were the first to lose their jobs. Having significantly lower employment rates than the majority of the population, the Roma are mostly engaged in the informal sector, which has been most affected by the pandemic. Collectors of secondary raw materials (of which 80% are Roma) were not able to exercise their right to work because of the curfew, which made it impossible for them and their families to respond to their existential needs. Another difficulty relates to the fact that many Roma in Serbia live in settlements, condemned as 'illegal' by the authorities since they are illegally built, and are therefore considered to be unhygienic due to limited access to power and water supplies.

In addition, according to the National Employment Service (NES) data, the number of **persons with a disability** involved in Active Labour Market Policies decreased by 25% in 2020.

22 Milojević, S. (2019), Access to the right to work of migrants in the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Pristup-migranata-pravu-na-rad-u-RS.pdf (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

SECTION 2:

Assessing national and EU level policy responses

2.1. Serbian labour market policies and responses and opportunities offered by EU policy making

In Serbia, the inclusiveness of the labour market is regulated by law, which makes it legally fairly inclusive, but this is not always the case in practice. To illustrate, this is the difficulty, for example, for **persons with a disability (PWD)**. The law requires that for every 20 employees, one person with a disability is employed. If the employers do not employ PWD, they are obliged to pay fines into the Budget Fund for Professional Rehabilitation and Promotion of Employment of Persons with Disabilities. However, a large number of employers decide to pay these fines rather than hire PWDs. The civil sector, including Caritas, is

very active in promoting the employment of those belonging to vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, through social enterprises and other initiatives.

One policy recently implemented in Serbia, which is having a positive impact on labour market inclusion is the **Action Plan for Chapter 19 – Social Policy and Employment**,²³ promoted by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs. It was approved in May 2020 in order to transpose the EU acquis into Serbia's national legislation, and to build capacity for its implementation in each of the areas

23 www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2020-06/API19%20ENG%20FINAL%20-%202020.docx

that are covered by Chapter 19. Measures that are planned in areas of labour relations, employment policy, social inclusion and non-discrimination, will be – without doubt – of crucial importance and will have a positive effect on the inclusiveness of the labour market, if they are implemented as anticipated and according to given deadlines. In fact, these measures create the preconditions for access to the *European Social Fund (ESF)*²⁴ as the main instrument of support for creating jobs, finding better jobs, and ensuring more fair employment opportunities for everyone.

Austerity measures introduced by the Ministry of Finance in 2013 are, on the contrary, having a negative impact on the inclusiveness of the labour market. The amendments to the Law on Budget System prohibited employment in the public sector in regard to vacant job positions, and that prohibition was extended to 2020. The Law on the Temporary Regulation of the Basis for Calculation and Payment of Salaries, Wages and other Permanent Income for Public Funds' Users (2014)²⁵ reduced salaries by 10% for all of those who were earning more than 25,000 Serbian dinar (RSD) per month. Austerity measures followed up with the passing of the Public Administration Reform Strategy²⁶ and

the Law on Employees in Public Services²⁷. In just two years, Austerity measures led to the number of employees being reduced by over 11,400 in three main sectors – health (7,000), education (2,150), and internal affairs (2,300). According to the information in the Statistical Annual Bulletin of Serbia on teachers in primary and secondary schools, the number of full-time employees decreased, while there was an increase in part-time and fixed-term employment. In addition, those measures are in their nature discriminatory as they had the greatest impact on women who represent the majority of those employed in the public sector (72%). Due to the 2014 ban on public sector employment, which has been in effect for seven years, it has been difficult for young people, especially women, to enter the labour market.

Whilst the Serbian government has put in place some policies addressing the access of young people and other vulnerable target groups to the labour market and to counter the informal economy, there are still problems, as described in the following paragraphs. In addition, policies/initiatives which would greatly improve the inclusiveness of Serbia's labour market are not being sufficiently implemented.

24 Regulation (EU) No 1304/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Social Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 [EUR-Lex - 32013R1304 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#) (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

25 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 116 of 27 October 2014, 95 of 8 December 2018, [www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2014/116/2/reg](#), (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

26 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 9 of 3 January 2014, 42 of 23 April 2014 – correction, 54 of 13 July 2018, [www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2014/9/1/reg](#), (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

27 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 113 of 17 December 2017, 95 of 8 December 2018, 86 of 6 December 2019, 157 of 28 December 2020, [www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2017/113/19/reg/20201229](#), (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

In Serbia, **the size of the informal economy** is quite significant. In 2019²⁸, one-fifth of the total number of employed were working in the informal economy (236,900 in the service sector, 213,300 in agriculture, 44,500 in construction, and 28,500 in industry). Of the total number of employed in the agricultural sector, almost half of them (48.4%) were informally employed, while in the construction sector, one out of three was informally employed. When distinguishing by age, 60% of the people employed in the informal economy were those in the age group of 65 and over (representing 49% of all informally employed men, and 78% of all informally employed women), and 24.4% of the people employed in the informal economy were young people (representing 26.6% and 20.7% of all informally employed young men and women respectively). Out of a total of 567,900 self-employed, 46.6% were employed in the informal sector (43.4% of all men, and 54% of all women).

The first National Programme for Countering the Informal Economy in Serbia²⁹ was approved in 2015. However, after the programme was approved and implemented, informal employment increased in the following years. Reasons for this are found in the fact that no measures were planned for reducing informal employment in agriculture, in which most of the informally employed work. Furthermore, insufficient job offers in

the formal sector were not recognised as a problem, and the gender dimension of informal employment also was not identified.

For **young people**, Serbia has specific policies in place to help them enter the labour market, and in response to the pandemic, the number of these policies has increased. The annual National Employment Action Plan (NEAP) represents an overview of employment policy goals and priorities that are to be achieved through the implementation of active labour market programmes and measures (ALMPM). One of the employment policy goals of 2021 is to 'improve the status of young people in the labour market'. Young people, up to 30 years of age, have the status of 'hard-to-employ', which is why they are a priority group for inclusion in the ALMPM. The service package for young people contains a set of active employment measures intended for those young people who are registered in the National Employment Service's records. The aim of the service package is to prevent the obsolescence of young people's competency in order to help them be competitive in the labour market, and to reduce the risk of them drifting into long-term unemployment.

One of these measures is the *Decree on the Youth Employment Incentive Programme – 'My First Salary'*. The programme envisions internships for 10,000 young people that are

28 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia Labour Force Survey, 2019; own calculation, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/Pdf/G20205658.pdf> (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

29 http://uzmiracun.rs/images/preuzmite/Nacionalni_program_za_suzbijanje_sive_ekonomije.pdf, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

registered with the National Employment Service and are first-time job-seekers with secondary or tertiary education. However, the programme suffers from specific shortcomings concerning the legal grounds of the Decree since the type of contract it covers is not provided for in the existing legal system.

At EU level, the *Reinforced Youth Guarantee (rYG)*³⁰ aims to better support youth employment across the EU, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is bringing back high youth unemployment rates and increasing the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs). This Guarantee could serve as a framework for how to support this vulnerable target group and generally help create a more inclusive labour market in Serbia. Young people who are inactive and are not in education nor training do not currently have access to active labour market policy services and measures. In 2019, there were many young people in this group, almost as many as those unemployed (about 114,000)³¹. Early interventions through the rYG could help lead to a decrease in the number of long-term unemployed young people, who account for 46.6% of the total number of registered unemployed. In addition, young people without qualifications, who now account for 22% of the total number of unemployed, would be able

to acquire qualifications. Young people would also have access to quality apprenticeships and internships, which has not been the case so far since this area is currently unregulated.³²

For **migrants**, Serbia does not have specific policies in place to foster their access to the labour market nor new policies related to the pandemic that could help them. Existing anti-discrimination policies and strategies with regard to the labour market are not improving the situation. Currently, there is no comprehensive strategic framework. The Prevention and Protection against Discrimination Strategy³³ expired in 2018, and a new one has not yet been approved. The anti-discrimination legislation is not fully in line with the EU acquis in regard to the scope of exceptions to the principle of equal treatment, the definition of indirect discrimination, and the obligation to ensure reasonable accommodation for employees with a disability. Despite the comprehensive anti-discriminatory legislative framework (Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, labour, and employment-related laws, including provisions prohibiting discrimination), there are still many difficulties when it comes to applying normative provisions in praxis. According to Reports of the Commissioner for Protection of Equality, the most common areas in which

30 European Council (2020), *Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee* and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee 2020/C 372/01

31 Eurostat Labour Force Survey database, 2019, own calculation, <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

32 National Employment Action Plan for 2020, http://sociojalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Nacionalni_akcioni_plan_zaposljavanja_2020.pdf, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

33 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 60 of 10 July 2013, www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2013/60/1/reg, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

discrimination persists are: employment, and the enjoyment of rights related to social protection.³⁴ Despite the distinctly unfavourable structure of unemployment among migrants, in fact no intervention in the employment action plans is planned for this vulnerable group.³⁵ The new *EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (APII)*³⁶ could present a useful framework for Serbia to revise both its labour market policy for migrants and the Action Plan for Chapters 19 and 24.

Reskilling and upskilling policies are crucial in the current Serbian context. If implemented, these policies could contribute to solving many of the key problems that Serbia is facing in this area, such as low participation rate of adults (ages 25-64) in education and training (4.3%), and especially for education levels 0-2 (0.3%)³⁷. The main reasons for this low participation range from insufficient resources dedicated to training activities (vocational training costs represent only 0.3% of the total labour costs paid by the employer³⁸), to the

lack of information on skills needed, insufficient capacity in the National Employment Service for conducting analysis on labour market supply and demand, and to the low quality of educational achievements. According to PISA 2018³⁹ results, after completing compulsory primary education, 40% of students in Serbia were functionally illiterate, whereas in three-year vocational secondary schools, the majority of students failed to achieve basic literacy both in mathematics (up to 86%) and in reading (up to 89%). During the pandemic, Caritas has continued providing and organising different reskilling and upskilling activities for its beneficiaries: soft skills training sessions, VET courses, internships, and self-employment. Some activities and training courses were organised online, while practical components of VET courses were done in small groups, in accordance with the anti-COVID-19 measures. The *European Skills Agenda*⁴⁰ and its 12 actions could present a useful framework here, and push national and local authorities to develop and fund reskilling and upskilling policies.

34 Screening Report for Serbia, Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights 16, <http://europa.rs/upload/2014/Screening-report-chapter-23-serbia.pdf>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

35 Commissariat for Refugees and Migration – Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2019, <https://kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Migration%20Profile%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Serbia%202019.pdf>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

36 European Commission (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions, *Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027*, Brussels, 24.11.2020 COM (2020) 758, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-11/action_plan_on_integration_and_inclusion_2021-2027.pdf

37 Eurostat/Education and training statistics database; <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/data/database>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

38 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Labour Cost Survey, 2016, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2018/PdfE/G20181162.pdf>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

39 www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined_Executive_Summaries_PISA_2018.pdf

40 European Commission (2020), Communication – European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020), <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9723&tableName=news&moreDocuments=yes>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)



Photo: Caritas in action – donation to hospitals (medical and protective equipment and disinfectants)
Source: Caritas Serbia, 2020

As far as gender equality is concerned, the existing Strategy (*National Gender Equality Strategy 2016 – 2020 – NGES*)⁴¹ has expired and a new one has not yet been developed. Whilst gender equality in Serbia is acknowledged de jure through the ratification of international treaties such as the *Convention on the*

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, it is far from being well-implemented, as corroborated by the data from the assessment of the Action Plan for the implementation of NGES, the Gender Equality Index (GEI), reports by independent institutions, international organisations and

41 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 4 of 22 January 2016, www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2016/4/1/reg

NGOs. In 2016, the GEI for Serbia amounted to 55.8.⁴² In comparison to the EU-27, Serbia has a lower index value in all observed domains. There are several reasons for this: the four-year postponement of the gender equality law (GEL); the absence of operational coordination mechanisms for gender equality; and the limited effectiveness of, and insufficient human and financial resources in, the existing mechanisms for the implementation and monitoring of the NGES.

A new Gender Equality Strategy (GES) that is in line with the EU's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025⁴³ could contribute towards building a more inclusive labour market. The current EU strategy represents a good framework for planning for the coming period. Results achieved with the previous strategy were very

poor, primarily in reducing discrimination in the labour market, which is partially the result of setting target values below the standard that ensures full equality. Labour market indicators over a five-year period indicate a continuation of gender inequalities. In 2014, the gender employment gap was 15.2 pp, and in 2019 it was 13.9 pp. Compared to the EU-27 average, the employment rate of men in Serbia was lower by 7.6 pp (the EU-27 average for the five-year period 2014–2019 for men was 76.5%), and the employment rate of women was lower by 15.9 pp (the EU-27 average for the five-year period 2014–2019 for women was 65.01%).⁴⁴ Serbia also has a gender pay gap, no matter the level of education achieved.⁴⁵

42 Source: Babović, M. (2018) Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Serbia – Measuring Gender Equality in the Republic of Serbia 2016; Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit, Government of the Republic of Serbia: https://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/system/files/post-files/indeks_rodne_ravnopravnosti_srbija_eng.pdf, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)
The Gender Equality Index measures the progress of gender equality on a scale from 1 to 100, where a score of 100 stands for full equality. The scores are based on the gaps between women and men and levels of achievement in six core domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power and health, and their sub-domains.

43 European Commission (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions, A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, Brussels, 5.3.2020 COM(2020) 152 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152&from=EN>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

44 Eurostat Labour Force Survey database; own calculation, <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>, (Accessed on 08/10/2021)

45 The gender pay gap for those with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education is 21.4%, for upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education is 14%, and for tertiary education is 18.4%. Source of data: Structure of earnings survey 2018, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/earn_ses18_16/default/table?lang=en

2.2. The Social Economy

In Caritas Serbia's understanding, social economy aims at putting people before profits. Caritas organisations in Serbia have started promoting social entrepreneurship as a means for reaching social objectives and social values through creating job and training opportunities for people belonging to vulnerable groups. Indeed, over the past two decades, Caritas Serbia has created different social services in order to respond to the needs of marginalised people. Services like day care centres focus on empowering beneficiaries and enabling them to live independent lives. They aim at leading the beneficiaries out of social service dependence and enabling them to gain economic autonomy. Driven by a human-centred approach, Caritas Serbia in 2015 decided to step into the Serbian labour market and create inclusive job opportunities for its beneficiaries and to achieve, at the same time, the sustainability of its services by directing the profit back to the people and the services. For example, Caritas Bicycle Service Ltd has been operating since 2017 as a result of the ELBA project. It has one employee, but all the profit is being directed to the development of social services provided by Caritas Subotica. The bakery-confectionery *Pet hlebova (Five loaves)*, also recently established by Caritas Subotica, employs 14 workers, including 4 people with disabilities

and 4 people without any qualifications. These people are employed as assistant bakers, confectioners, waiters and bartenders. Caritas Šabac manages the company for professional rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities *Socijalna Sinergija Ltd (Social Synergy)* that was established with the aim of ensuring full social inclusion of women from socially vulnerable groups, and providing professional rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities. *Social Synergy* provides services of dry cleaning, washing, drying and ironing of clothes. Moreover, people belonging to vulnerable groups benefit from these services free of charge.

According to the Economic Impact of Social Enterprises in the Republic of Serbia,⁴⁶ in 2012 the gross fixed capital formation⁴⁷ in the social enterprises sector amounted to 0.2% of the total gross fixed capital formation in the Republic of Serbia. Three of the most frequent fields of social economy business activities in Serbia are: education and training (31.0%), tourism, accommodation, food-related services and catering (18.0%), and culture and arts (11.8%). Cooperatives most frequently earn their income from the purchase and sale of agricultural commodities (61.9%), production of agricultural commodities (36.8%), and wholesale and retail sales (23.8%). Enterprises

46 www.ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/15062/attachments/5/translations/en/renditions/native

47 The Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) is a macroeconomic concept used in official national accounts, such as the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA), National Income and Product Accounts (NIPA) and the European System of Accounts (ESA). http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/economic_impact_of_social_enterprises_in_the_republic_of_serbia_RZS.pdf



| Photo: Sustainable Development Farm, Bogatić – kitchen. Source: Caritas Serbia, 2020

for professional rehabilitation and the employment of people with disabilities operate most frequently in the areas of printing and copying (28.9%), manufacturing of clothing and footwear (20.0%), and manufacturing of furniture (17.8%). Other types of social enterprises (agencies, incubators, spin-offs) most frequently earn their income from education and training (58.3%), and from administrative services, bookkeeping and accounting (13.3%).

However, **the problem is that the state does not recognise social enterprises and the social economy, and for this reason, there are no appropriate incentive measures.**

The already-difficult situation for social enterprises has been further aggravated by the pandemic, impacting their activities, ways of working, and self-sustainability.

The adoption and implementation of national legislation on social entrepreneurship should therefore be a priority. Caritas Serbia would like to see a balanced solution that meets the interests of all parties: social enterprises, civil

society, the economy and the government, and thus for society as a whole. In that way, the state would show that it recognises the importance of social entrepreneurship and social economy as a means toward fostering the development of the entire society. Usually, legislation in and of itself does not envisage incentives, so it would be necessary to adopt a programme of support measures. The programme should consist of different elements, such as the promotion of social entrepreneurship among institutions, the economy, and public, financial instruments and the education of public servants. It is essential to work with representatives of local governments because municipalities are the first level of social enterprise support, places where social enterprises identify problems and try to solve them, so that the environment in which they operate is more prosperous. In addition, the development of financial instruments, from supporting start-ups to those in need of upscaling, is extremely important for the sector to expand and develop more stably and sustainably.

SECTION 3:

Caritas Serbia's promising practices

'Your Job - Youth Overcoming Unemployment Regionally through Job Opportunities in the Balkans'⁴⁸

This project addresses the root causes contributing to the high youth and NEETs' unemployment rate, namely the: 1. mismatch between education systems and labour market requirements; 2. lack of professional orientation and knowledge about personal competence; 3. lack of support during transition from school to labour market; 4. lack of networks and contacts to potential employers (a constraining factor for youth in finding a job); 5. lack of internship possibilities; and 6. lack of funding opportunities to support the entrepreneurial ideas of the youth.

This 'Your Job' project aims at empowering young people (15-30 years of age) and increasing their competitiveness in the labour market through counselling and training sessions as core activities. The entire empowerment process is carried out by guidance counsellors who work in Caritas youth incubators in Aleksinac, Zrenjanin and Ruma. One part of the activities is dedicated to the development of (social) entrepreneurship and the promotion of self-employment for those young people who want to become (social) entrepreneurs. The project pays particular attention to gender equality and the inclusion of people with disabilities, as well as other vulnerable categories.

48 www.facebook.com/YourJobSrbija and www.instagram.com/your_job_srbija



Photo: YourJob – 1st boot camp for young entrepreneurs, March 2020. Source: Caritas Serbia

'Your Job' offers a unique person-centred approach where the proposed individual plan is designed based on background, needs, and aspirations of the young people involved. The individual counselling sessions within the 'Your Job' project is not only about informing and advising young people; it is about guiding them, constantly supporting and following their process towards employment. Beneficiaries involved stress the importance of the individual counselling as their most favoured activity. They pointed out the friendliness, constant availability and dedication of the project guidance counsellors as the most important aspect of the project. It is this friendly, person-centred approach that makes the difference, especially when comparing it to other similar projects or public employment services.

‘Sustainable Development Farm’⁴⁹

The Sustainable Development Farm addresses the unemployment of people with disabilities. Caritas Šabac’s goal is to train as many people with disabilities as possible (through eight accredited vocational training programmes) and enable them to find jobs anywhere, not necessarily in a social enterprise. In addition, it pays a lot of attention to the visibility of the enterprise in order to raise awareness about this need in the community.

The Sustainable Development Farm, an enterprise for the professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities, employs ten people: five people with disabilities, and five people from what are considered ‘hard-to-employ’ categories. The enterprise is situated in the municipality of Bogatic, where the unemployment rate is typically high, especially for people with disabilities. Out of the five people with disabilities, three suffer from mental health problems, and are former beneficiaries of Caritas day care centre for adults with mental disorders and intellectual disabilities. The activities of the company concern primary and secondary agricultural production, catering and tourism, pottery workshops, and maintenance of green areas. People are employed under excellent working conditions, and their contribution to the workplace is extremely high, thanks to the professional workers for integration in the workplace and the training the beneficiaries undergo before engaging in employment. In addition, since this enterprise is an enterprise for professional rehabilitation, it also provides eight accredited training programmes for people with disabilities.

For now, the profitability of the social enterprise is a clear indicator of success that enables further work on the development of social entrepreneurship and labour inclusion. In addition, the satisfaction of the beneficiaries, i.e. employees, is even more important.

‘It was a big change in my life because after a long time I started hanging out with people again, getting out of the house, having obligations. But when I got the job, it really changed my life completely. I have my colleagues with whom I feel good, I feel good at work, I like when they praise me for doing something well, then I try even harder. My illness (schizophrenia) is under control, now I control my life and I feel good about it’.

— Testimony of an employee of the Sustainable Development Farm,
a former beneficiary of the Caritas day care centre

49 www.avlijabogatic.rs, Facebook: Avlija Bogatić, Instagram: avlija_bogatic

ELBA⁵⁰

The problems facing socially disadvantaged people are numerous. Unfortunately, the state does little to recognise their problems and even less to solve them. Many people have been brought to the brink of their existence. In a large number of cases, these are socially broken families, with low material income. Many of their human rights are or have been violated. Considering these factors, Caritas advocates that the best way out of such a cycle of problems is for the people impacted and suffering from social vulnerabilities to organise themselves, participate in empowerment activities and undertake specific actions to address the disempowering elements related to their status/situations. Caritas hopes that the state will recognise and accept this model for self-development in the future as a solution for overcoming accumulated problems.

The ELBA programme is a large regional programme involving eight Caritas organisations active in the Southeast Balkans (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Serbia). The project started in 2015 and so far, numerous training programmes on the topic of social entrepreneurship have been held, as well as numerous study visits both in the Balkans and other EU countries. Through tenders, social enterprises were established in the field of production and the provision of services. At the moment, these are pioneering ventures, some of which are already quite developed and are serving as an example of good practice for Western countries as well. The project includes socially vulnerable people, people with disabilities, women, and the long-term unemployed.

At this stage, the project's achieved results are not so noticeable in comparison with the overall problem it seeks to address, but it is certainly a way to start resolving some of the above-mentioned problems. Some innovative approaches and solutions (especially for people with disabilities) are, in a way, a light at the end of the tunnel and still need to be improved and developed. So far, eleven social enterprises have been supported (in Subotica, Valjevo, Sabac, Bogatic, Novi Sad, Zemun, Aleksinac), and about 20 people have been employed as a result of the project.

50 For information on this, and other Caritas programmes, see: www.sustainableeconomy.me

SECTION 4:

Conclusions and recommendations

According to Eurostat statistics, between 2014 and 2020, employment rates in Serbia rose considerably while unemployment rates fell, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the improvement of these indicators only highlights a growing precariousness with an increase in the number of temporary employees and a persisting gender employment gap. The informal employment rate is in decline, but it is estimated that more than half a million people are still employed informally.

The position of young people in the Serbian labour market is significantly unfavourable compared to the average in the EU even though, according to the general indicators of the labour market, it has improved. Roma people are also at a severe disadvantage, especially when it comes to their ability to access the formal labour market. The pandemic has worsened the position of those groups who were in an unfavourable position on the labour market even before the pandemic started, including young people, migrants, Roma, and people with disabilities.

These population groups face considerable difficulties in accessing the labour market in Serbia. Even though the inclusiveness of the labour market is regulated by law, it is not applied in practice. Whilst the Serbian government has put in place some policies addressing the access of young people and other vulnerable target groups to the labour market and to counter the informal economy, such as the *Action Plan for Chapter 19 – Social Policy and Employment*, these are not yet being sufficiently implemented.

Furthermore, though Serbia has many social enterprises, the state does not legally recognise them and therefore has no policies to support them. The difficult situation of social enterprises has only been aggravated by the pandemic, in terms of their activities, ways of working, and self-sustainability.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Caritas has experienced an increase in the number of requests for social services and an increased demand for healthcare and homecare services. Despite the big challenge for Caritas to

ensure continuity of accessible, quality service delivery, so that the beneficiaries can maintain the quality of life they enjoyed before the pandemic, Caritas remains as committed as ever to supporting and helping people in need.

Driven by a human-centred approach in its work, Caritas Serbia has decided to step into the Serbian labour market and create inclusive job opportunities for its beneficiaries and achieve, at the same time, sustainability for its services by redirecting the profit from its social enterprises back into its services.

The adoption and implementation of national legislation on the social economy, as well as the new EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (APII),⁵¹ the European Skills Agenda⁵² and its 12 actions, together with the full application of existing laws and strategies addressing disability, gender equality and discrimination, could all help Serbia to build a more inclusive labour market, a supported social economy sector, and advance the country in terms of the EU acquis.

4.1. National level recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: Adoption and implementation of a Law on Social Entrepreneurship

The concept of social entrepreneurship is not recognised in an adequate and comprehensive manner within the legal system in Serbia. The conditions for financing social enterprises and the financial operations of social enterprises are unfavourable, except for those enterprises focused on professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with a disability. The main problem is the lack of microfinancing, tax benefits and facilitated process of public procurement. The existence of these elements in the legal and business environment would enable easier founding, and business operations, of social enterprises.

51 European Commission (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions, Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, Brussels, 24.11.2020 COM(2020) 758, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-11/action_plan_on_integration_and_inclusion_2021-2027.pdf

52 European Commission (2020), Communication – European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020), <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9723&tableName=news&moreDocuments=yes>

RECOMMENDATION 2: Continuous promotion of people with disabilities' right to work

The state's obligations to support and empower people with disabilities into employment should not be limited to merely adopting amendments to existing legislation, or to adopting new legislation that prohibits discrimination in employment but rather, to further strengthening the principles of equal opportunities and equal treatment, by creating a range of active employment policy measures and incentives. These should be effectively and sustainably implemented, ensuring full inclusion of all people, in particular people with disabilities.

The government should create an awareness-raising campaign to promote opportunities for professional education among people with disabilities, and foster individualised support in selecting educational and job profiles. National and local authorities should promote this campaign through the media and in all other ways. Local and national budgets should also foresee instruments and measures to support people with mental and intellectual disabilities (e.g. through employment assistance). In raising awareness of the need for labour market inclusiveness, employers should be also strongly focused on.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Recognition of civil society organisations as providers of employment support services.

For some years, through different projects, civil society organisations have been providing support to young people experiencing ongoing unemployment. This support has consisted of individual counselling, accompaniment and guidance, as well as the provision of different training sessions (soft skills) and VET courses. The results show that a tailor-made approach is more successful in securing adequate placements in the labour market for those people belonging to 'hard-to-employ' categories. The civil society organisations involved still need to be recognised by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social affairs as official providers of these kinds of services, so that their work can be sustainable through the continued funding and support of local authorities.



Photo: Sustainable Development Farm, Bogatić. Source: Caritas Šabac, 2020



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