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HERITAGE-LED RURAL REVITALIZATION THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY AND VOLUNTEERISM: THE CASE OF MAGLIČGRAD, SERBIA

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Abstract: *The Magličgrad civil initiative restored access to the medieval fortress of Maglič (Serbia) after its footbridge was lost, using a volunteer-operated river ferry, a volunteer camp and a rural cultural centre. A qualitative single-case study of 27 public documents (2018–2026) identified seven analytical dimensions of the initiative. Evidence is strongest for volunteer mobilization and restored accessibility and weakest for community and economic effects. Civil society can act as a complementary actor in heritage-led rural revitalization, but its long-term contribution depends on resources and institutional cooperation that volunteers cannot secure alone.*

• Introduction

Maglič, a 13th-century fortress in the rural Ibar valley, lost its only footbridge (closed in 2018, later carried away by the river) and stayed without regular public access for about three years. In 2022 the Magličgrad initiative restored access with a volunteer-run ferry and developed a volunteer camp and cultural centre below the fortress. A state-funded bridge approved in 2023 was still unbuilt in 2026.

Aim: to examine how civil society and volunteer engagement contribute to heritage activation and rural revitalization.

• Material and method

Design: qualitative single-case study based only on publicly available secondary sources.

Corpus: 27 documents (2018–2026): organizational, media, institutional and user-generated.

Analysis: 67 evidence units manually coded in an evidence matrix (activity → documented outcome → interpretation), classified by source type and triangulated. Figures reported only by the association were treated as organization-reported, not official statistics.

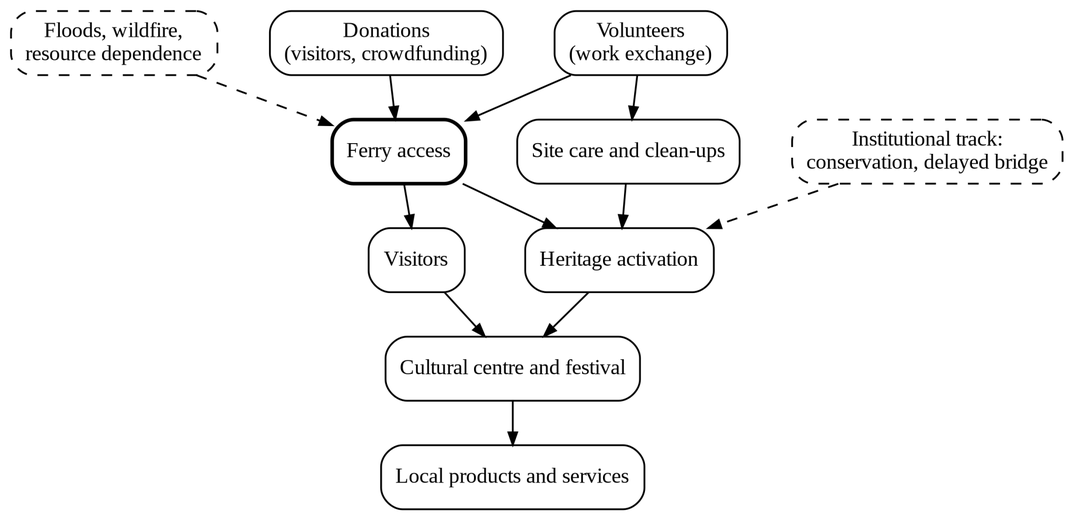


Figure 1. Model of the Magličgrad initiative derived from the results

• Results and discussions

Seven analytical dimensions were identified (Table 1). The most robust, triangulated finding is restored access: volunteers re-established the crossing, which the National Museum Kraljevo publicly credits to them. The association reports 78,000 visitors over four seasons. Recurring challenges include flood damage (2023), a wildfire near the fortress (2026), dependence on volunteers and donations, and no formal partnership with institutions.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions and strength of evidence

Dimension	Key finding	Evidence
Civil society	Informal group → association (2022); donations, crowdfunding	Mostly organizational
Volunteerism	International work-exchange volunteers; no paid staff	Strong
Heritage activation	Ferry restored access; site care, interpretation	Strong, institutionally confirmed
Community development	Moba, courses for residents, local products	Limited
Environment	Clean-ups of the Ibar and fortress area	Moderate
Tourism and place	Only access route; festival; 78,000 visitors*	Strong for access
Local economy	Channels exist; effects undocumented	Limited

**Organization-reported figure, not official statistics.*

• Conclusions

Civil society acted as a complementary actor in heritage-led rural revitalization: it reconnected a dormant monument with people where institutional action was delayed. Human and social capital were converted into built and cultural capital, but conversion into local income and political influence remains weak. Long-term impact depends on formal cooperation with institutions, diversified resources and deeper involvement of local residents.

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