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Research Article

USAID Assistance to Economic Development of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Overview of Major Initiatives in Selected Sectors

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Abstract: Bosnia and Herzegovina, a Southeast European country and a European Union (EU) candidate state, is characterized by complex social, political and economic structures that influence its development trajectory. As a post-transition economy, it faces persistent structural challenges, including low economic growth and institutional fragmentation. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been an important factor in supporting development through long-term programs, yet recent changes in the status of its operations have raised questions about the sustainability of its interventions and future economic dynamics. This paper examines the spatial distribution of selected USAID-funded economic projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on diaspora investments, agriculture, tourism and energy policy. By analyzing program documentation and examining the spatial distribution of municipal-level participation, the study provides insights into the economic and geographic impact of USAID selected initiatives. The findings indicate an uneven territorial impact, with more frequent participation in municipalities with stronger institutional and economic capacity and more limited coverage in peripheral and structurally weaker areas. While the analyzed initiatives contributed to sectoral development and capacity-building, their uneven spatial concentration suggests potential territorial vulnerabilities over time. In this context, USAID's engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been economically, institutionally and geopolitically significant.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina; USAID; spatial disparities; diaspora investments; agriculture; tourism; energy policy

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Highlights:

- Recent USAID activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina had economic impact with spatial disparities.
- Since 2020, key programs focus on agriculture, energy, tourism and diaspora investment.
- Termination of USAID programs threatens many projects vital to local communities.

1. Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country with a post-transition economy and post-war socio-political issues, with the challenges of modern economic integration in the European and global systems further compounded by the country's institutional specificities and constraints within its political, economic and administrative framework (Banović et al., 2021). Researchers pay particular attention to transition economies due to their unique development dynamics (Teixeira & Queirós, 2016), which are largely defined by the interaction between economic indicators and human capital. Bosnia and Herzegovina falls within this category, facing multiple challenges as its economy holds a distinct status as a candidate for European Union (EU) membership (European External Action Service, 2024), while simultaneously

grappling with the consequences of political fragmentation (Moll, 2013), a complex institutional structure and limited capacity for structural reforms. The economic development of Bosnia and Herzegovina is highly dependent on foreign capital inflows, which have long been regarded as an important instrument for revitalizing the country's economy and market. In this context, economic policies have largely been oriented toward the liberalization of trade, financial flows and capital investment, while privatization has played a significant role in efforts to attract foreign investors. However, post-war economic recovery has been slow due to weak central institutions, with most development decisions made at the entity and cantonal levels (European Commission, 2017). Although foreign direct investment (FDI) and privatization are often presented as significant drivers of growth, research indicates that their contribution to economic expansion has been limited and Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to face challenges due to constrained investment capacity (Šušić et al., 2017). This necessitates an environment that can stimulate capital inflows into sectors with the highest potential for socio-economic development. According to data from the Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2011), FDI inflows in 2010 amounted to KM 339.7 million, equivalent to 1.4% of gross domestic product (GDP). In 2023, FDI inflows increased to KM 1.89 billion, corresponding to approximately 2.5% of GDP (Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024). This indicates growth both in absolute and in relative terms over the past 15 years. For additional context, inflows in 2023 were KM 378 million higher than in 2022 (KM 1.52 billion), pointing to a recent acceleration in investment dynamics (Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina's long-term structural challenges are particularly evident in the context of the devastation caused by the 1992-1995 war, which resulted in significant losses of human capital, infrastructure and industrial capacity, making the transition process considerably more difficult compared to other Western Balkan countries (Peštek et al., 2021). In this regard, international assistance has played a crucial role in the country's economic recovery, with total investments being directly linked to economic growth. Bjelić (2020) confirms that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between gross investment and GDP growth, supporting the view that sustained and substantial investment is an important precondition for stronger economic progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Foreign and domestic sectoral analyses indicate that the industrial sector plays a significant role in the economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, contributing to nearly a quarter of the GDP and employing almost one-third of the workforce. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009), the structural advantages of this sector include long-term specialization in industrial production, a competitive labor force and geographic proximity to the European market. When it comes to foreign investments, according to OECD (2021) most FDI goes into manufacturing (32%), followed by banking (26%), telecommunications (13%), trade (12%) and services (4%). The country's complex political and institutional organization also limits its economic potential, particularly due to a complicated bureaucratic system, lengthy procedures for starting a business and other administrative barriers. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023), Bosnia and Herzegovina's multi-layered administrative structure complicates economic decision-making, while political instability and ethnic tensions delay the reforms necessary for European integration and economic and political efficiency (OECD, 2025). The political landscape directly influences the business environment and the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) further limits its economic potential and integration into global economic flows (Sarajevo Times, 2021).

While the country maintains apparent macroeconomic stability, with fiscal surpluses and a decreasing public debt, a three percent annual GDP growth rate according to the World Bank (2024) is too slow to close the gap with developed European economies. At such a pace, convergence toward average EU living standards would likely take several decades, if not longer. One of the most pronounced socio-economic challenges is ongoing depopulation, particularly evident in the last inter-census period (1991-2013) and continuing further, with a significant share of population emigrating in search of better economic opportunities (Avdić et al., 2024). Economic disparities and inequality also represent a significant challenge. Although the Human Development Index (HDI) value suggests a higher level of development (0,78 in 2022), Bosnia and Herzegovina still ranks 80th globally (UNDP, 2023), while the Gini index (0.33 in 2023) indicates moderate economic inequality (Statista, 2024). National-level indicators may not immediately suggest such a trend, the ongoing demographic decline in municipalities distant from major development centers contributes to economic deprivation. Regional disparities highlight the socio-economic gap between urban and rural areas, with peripheral regions and small communities falling behind larger economic centers (Avdić & Avdić, 2023). The country is a highly decentralized state established under the Dayton Peace Agreement and consists of two entities, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS) and the self-governing Brčko District, which is administered separately. The

Dayton framework also introduced the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL), an additional administrative layer that structures territorial governance and post-war spatial organization. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is further organized into ten cantons with a substantial degree of self-government and its own institutional competences. By contrast, Republika Srpska does not have an intermediate canton level, instead, its spatial-planning framework proposes a nodal-functional regionalization (for planning purposes rather than formal administrative governance), as outlined in the amendments to the Spatial Plan of Republika Srpska up to 2025 (Narodna skupština Republike Srpske, 2015). At the local level, municipalities and cities represent the basic units of local self-government and serve as the primary territorial unit for mapping program coverage in this study. There are 79 municipalities in the Federation, while Republika Srpska comprises 64 local self-government units in total. The post-Dayton decentralization process led to the creation of many small administrative units (Raos, 2010), which often struggle with limited development capacity and a lack of financial resources.

Considering all these economic and demographic trends, development programs and international initiatives become a necessary tool for improving the economic environment and supporting social reforms. Recent studies suggest that sub-national aid allocation in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects practical constraints and donor priorities. For example, Dušková et al. (2025) highlight the importance of local implementation capacity, while Opršal et al. (2025a, 2025b), using municipality-level data, identify spatially uneven aid patterns and show that donor allocation does not always correspond closely to local need, with some evidence of politically or ethnically selective distribution in specific donor cases. While these findings do not directly address USAID, they provide a relevant context for geographically examining the territorial reach of major development initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the distribution of economic interventions across municipalities.

One of the most significant contributors to such initiatives and development programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This agency has implemented a series of programs since 1996, aimed at strengthening economic competitiveness, institutional reform and the development of certain economic sectors such as agriculture, energy sector and tourism. Its role has been particularly significant in strengthening the private sector, providing technical assistance and improving the business environment in line with the European and global standards (Yagci & Lopez, 2024). However, the recent decision by the new United States (U.S.) administration to freeze and potentially withdraw USAID initiatives globally raises significant questions about the implications for the country's economic development and the long-term stability of its business environment.

1.1. Background: USAID's engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina

USAID is an organization that, since its founding in 1961, has played a significant role in development initiatives and humanitarian missions in more than 130 countries (United States Agency for International Development, 2017; Caravani, 2025). As the leading institution of the U.S. government for development assistance, USAID has facilitated poverty reduction, mitigated development inequalities and managed crises in post-conflict and transitional societies through grants and projects (Congressional Research Service, 2025). USAID has not only been a tool for economic and political stabilization but also a geopolitical instrument (Politico, 2025). International relations scholars often argue that development assistance is a driver of socio-economic support but also a tool of foreign policy, closely linked to soft power and development diplomacy (Baydag, 2025). This dual role is also reflected in official strategic documents that treat development cooperation alongside diplomacy and other tools of national power, including the U.S. government's recent strategic planning for the United States Department of State and USAID, as well as U.S. national security strategies that explicitly frame soft power as part of international influence (U.S. Department of State & U.S. Agency for International Development, 2022). At the same time, public debates emphasize that aid can become increasingly politicized under geopolitical competition and domestic constraints (Bouissou, 2025), which affects both the objectives and public perceptions of donor engagement (Dreher et al., 2024, Pham, 2025).

Even in recent global crises, such as the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza, USAID has played a significant role in providing economic and humanitarian aid to the affected areas. In 2023, its annual spending was commonly estimated at around USD 40 billion, representing well under 1% of total U.S. federal outlays, yet still constituting a crucial source of support for some of the world's most vulnerable economies (NBC News, 2025). Recent analyses have also highlighted that the withdrawal or shutdown of USAID may generate broader public-health consequences, particularly by weakening disease surveillance and reversing progress in major global health programs (Auwal et al., 2025).

USAID has also played a significant role in the Balkan countries, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it has been active not only through economic projects but also through initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, civil society and the rule of law (Buchkovska, 2022). Following the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, this region became a significant concern of U.S. foreign policy, making USAID one of the actors in post-conflict reconstruction and economic recovery (USAID Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity, 2023). Development initiatives have covered a broad range of sectors, including agriculture, tourism, strengthening local institutions, supporting the diaspora and improving the rights and economic independence of marginalized groups, with a particular focus on women's empowerment (Klix.ba, 2025). According to available data, from 2020 to 2024, USAID implemented projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina worth over 400 million dollars (Klix.ba, 2025), making it the second-highest recipient in the region, right after Kosovo, in terms of USAID grants and investments.

USAID's primary mandate in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the beginning of its operations in 1996 was post-war reconstruction. The Agency worked on important projects to rebuild infrastructure like fixing the thermal power plant in Kakanj, building cross-border bridges in Posavina and renovating school buildings (World Bank & European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1996; United States Agency for International Development, 2017). According to official data, USAID participated in the implementation of over 1,500 infrastructure and development projects during post-war reconstruction (United States Agency for International Development, 2020). However, the spatial distribution and territorial reach of these investments remain insufficiently visible in the public domain, raising the question of how evenly support has been distributed across the country and which areas may be more exposed under a reduction or withdrawal of assistance. This issue is further complicated by data constraints. At the time of writing, major USAID web domains were inaccessible, while the local-language portal provided records only up to 2021.

1.2. Aim, data context and scope of analysis

The aim of this paper is to provide a structured overview of USAID's economic engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to clarify the territorial reach of selected interventions at the local level. Geographically explicit evidence on USAID's municipal-level economic footprint in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains limited, particularly under the current uncertainty surrounding its operations. By systematizing USAID support across agriculture, energy policy, tourism and diaspora investment the study outlines USAID's economic impact in the context of persistent socio-economic constraints and pronounced regional disparities. Specifically, it assesses how widely the selected programs extend across municipalities and whether their coverage suggests spatial concentration in certain parts of the country, with other areas remaining less represented. The paper provides a geographically explicit overview of USAID economic interventions and offers a basis for discussing where development support has been most present and where vulnerabilities could be stronger if such support is reduced.

The scope of the analysis is defined by the availability and accessibility of public records. A consistently updated, municipality-level database of USAID activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not uniformly available and documentation varies by program and reporting period. Online sources were partially inaccessible at the time of writing. For these reasons, the analysis focuses on four major initiatives that represent distinct sectoral policy domains and provide sufficiently documented evidence to enable a structured overview of their territorial reach: FARMA II (agriculture), the Energy Policy Activity (energy), TURIZAM (tourism) and Diaspora Invest (diaspora investment). These programs are used as sectoral exemplars through which the paper synthesizes USAID's economic engagement and its spatial distribution across local government units. By making program reach visible at the municipal scale, the study provides a baseline for future work that links aid exposure to socio-economic outcomes and compares USAID's footprint with other donors. This study contributes to the literature on development assistance by demonstrating how donor engagement can be spatially reconstructed under conditions of limited data availability and by showing that sectoral aid interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibit uneven territorial patterns linked to local absorptive capacity. The findings highlight the importance of spatially sensitive donor strategies, particularly in peripheral regions that are less likely to benefit from grant-based programs. As such, the paper offers a methodological contribution and a policy-relevant perspective at a time of potential shifts in U.S. development engagement.

2. Methodology

This study assesses USAID's socio-economic engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina through an approach that combines document-based analysis of sectoral priorities and institutional alignment with exploratory municipality-level mapping of project footprints (Figure 1). The analysis focuses on four development initiatives: Diaspora Invest (DI), FARMA II, Energy Policy Activity (EPA) and Tourism, selected because they represent distinct development domains and because publicly available documentation is sufficient to reconstruct at least partial place-based presence or governance-level outputs. Given the absence of a consistent, publicly accessible USAID database that disaggregates spending by municipality for the analyzed period, the study does not attempt causal attribution or municipal-level impact evaluation. Instead, it provides a traceable overview of territorial presence and relative engagement patterns across cases.

The empirical basis consists primarily of publicly available USAID project documentation, complemented by relevant national and sectoral strategy documents (Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2023-2027, Framework Energy Strategy until 2035 and other documents regulating international investments in the country). A main input comprises evaluation products produced under USAID/Bosnia and Herzegovina's Monitoring and Evaluation Support Activity (MEASURE/MEASURE II), which provides monitoring, evaluation, assessment and research support, including independent performance evaluations of major activities. MEASURE/MEASURE II evaluation reports are used in two ways. First, they serve as standardized evidence sources for reconstructing where activities were implemented or which beneficiaries were supported when such information is reported in annexes, lists and narrative sections. Second, they provide results-based performance information (indicator matrices, targets vs. actuals and reported outputs/outcomes) that is extracted and summarized to characterize program-level achievements. In line with results-based monitoring logic, the study distinguishes outputs (deliverables such as training numbers, adopted regulations, or grants awarded) from outcomes (e.g., reported changes among supported firms), while treating these as program performance evidence rather than municipality-level effects.

Because disaggregated municipal financial allocation data are not consistently available, project presence was reconstructed through manual extraction of place-based information from the document corpus. The unit of spatial reporting is the municipality (local government unit), except for EPA, where the most traceable footprint is multi-level governance outputs (state/entity/district/canton/system-operator level) rather than municipal beneficiaries. For grant and beneficiary-oriented initiatives (FARMA II, TURIZAM components, Diaspora Invest), municipalities were identified through explicitly reported references such as lists of supported municipalities/communities or partner local governments, locations of beneficiary entities (registered seats) when tied to activity delivery and named sites of intervention (e.g., protected areas, hub destinations) where the evaluation documents place-based implementation.

To ensure transparency under data constraints, the municipality-level footprint was operationalized in a simple and replicable way. Municipalities were coded as present (1) when documentation explicitly confirms implementation, support, beneficiaries or partner status linked to that municipality; otherwise, they were coded as absent (0). Where documentation contains more than a single reference to the same municipality (e.g., repeated mentions, multiple beneficiaries or several intervention points), this is interpreted as stronger documented engagement. Concentration is used in a descriptive (non-statistical) sense to denote visible spatial accumulation of documented presence in particular parts of the country or within certain municipalities, as suggested by the maps (no formal clustering statistics were applied). These operational definitions are intended to make narrative interpretation consistent and auditable, without implying funding intensity.

In this study, spatial analysis is therefore used in a pragmatic, cartographic sense. It refers to preparing municipality-level data and producing thematic maps that visualize where USAID-supported activities and beneficiaries are documented. All mapping and spatial processing were carried out in ArcGIS (Esri). For FARMA II, municipalities with registered grant beneficiaries were mapped as a footprint overlay and, where relevant, presented against a contextual population choropleth based on the 2013 Population Census (the last official population census in Bosnia and Herzegovina). For TURIZAM, polygon footprints were used for the Most Beautiful Villages component, complemented by point-based nodes for explicitly documented intervention hubs/sites. For Diaspora Invest, partner municipalities were mapped as an institutional layer, while beneficiary firms were mapped by municipality of registered seat where names were available in annexes. For EPA, public sources do not allow a reliable municipality-level mapping, therefore, EPA is represented through tables of reported legal and regulatory outputs organized by governance level (state/entity/district/canton/system-operator), which best capture the program's governance-oriented contribution. Across maps, simple and comparable symbology was applied (e.g., presence overlays/hatched municipalities).

Based on the reconstructed municipality-level footprints, the study presents maps and brief summaries showing where USAID-supported activities and beneficiaries are documented and it summarizes what each program delivered using evaluation evidence and a small set of significant indicators. This approach does more than show where support was present, it also highlights what that support meant in each sector, market-oriented improvements among supported agricultural and diaspora-linked firms, skills and destination development in tourism, regulatory and governance progress in the energy sector and more. In this way, the paper compares different modes of engagement (local beneficiary support versus higher-level institutional reform) and discusses their relevance for development in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s fragmented governance setting. At the same time, the maps simply show where engagement is documented in the available sources. This pattern reflects program design, who applied or partnered and what was publicly reported. Any statements about results therefore rely on program-level evaluation evidence, not on municipality-level causal claims or estimates of funding intensity.

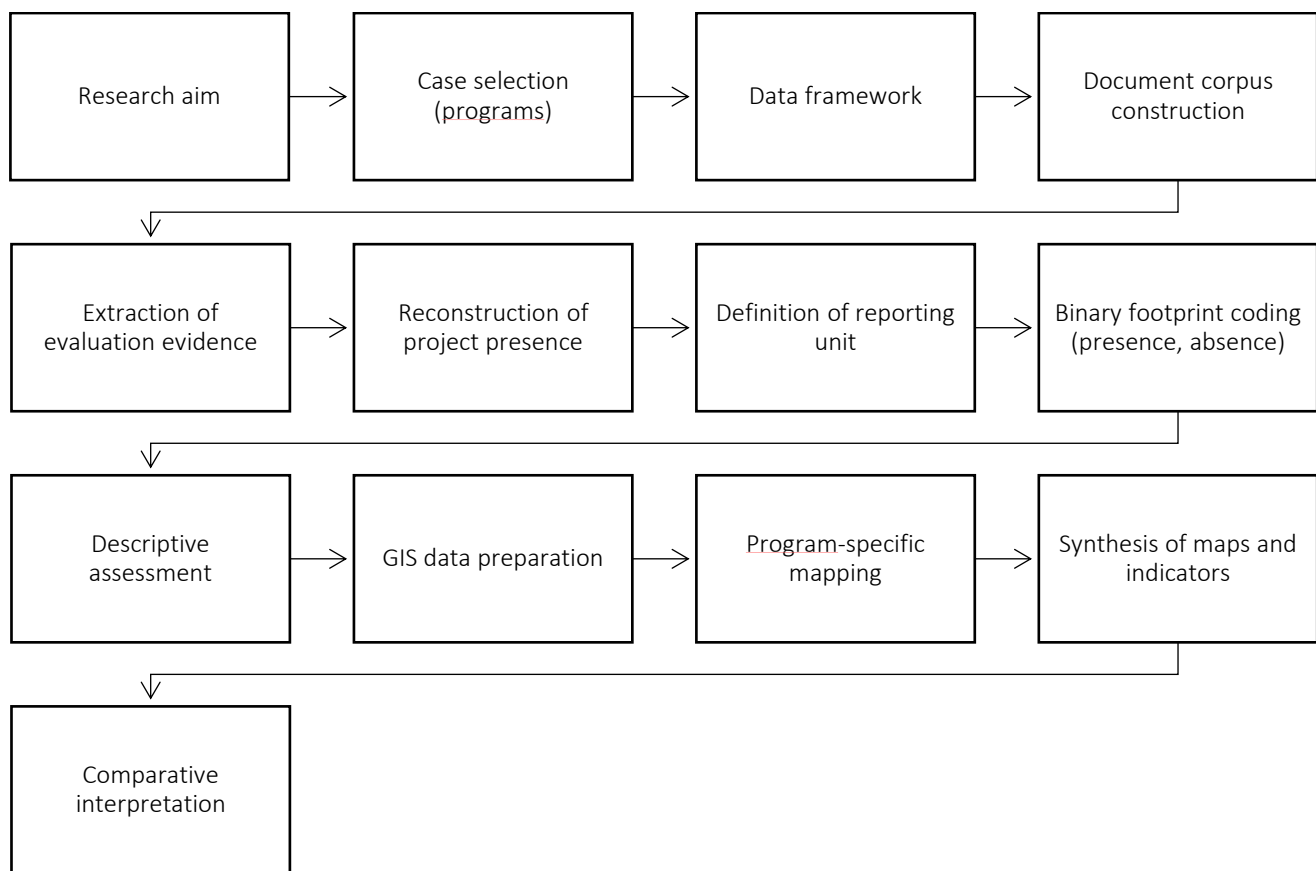


Figure 1. Methodological framework of the study.

3. Results

USAID’s development activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina included institutional strengthening, economic growth, democratization and social cohesion through judicial reforms, anti-corruption efforts, media freedom, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, investment attraction, digitalization of governance, education enhancement and the empowerment of marginalized social groups, which can be concluded based on the implemented initiatives and programs. While USAID initiatives covered various sectors, economic projects represented one of the most critical areas of intervention, as they aimed at long-term economic stabilization and strengthening market capacities. Therefore, economic initiatives remain the primary focus of this analysis. Among the most significant economic programs were initiatives targeting the diaspora, agriculture, tourism and energy policy. To ensure the effectiveness of its development initiatives, USAID applied precisely defined criteria in awarding grants to various entities, including businesses, municipalities and local partners. USAID's grant selection criteria (Figure 2) prioritize legally registered micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with additional requirements including business longevity,

co-financing, inclusivity favoring women, youth and marginalized groups, as well as alignment with priority sectors such as agriculture, tourism, energy and digital technologies, in line with economic policy priorities and market demands.

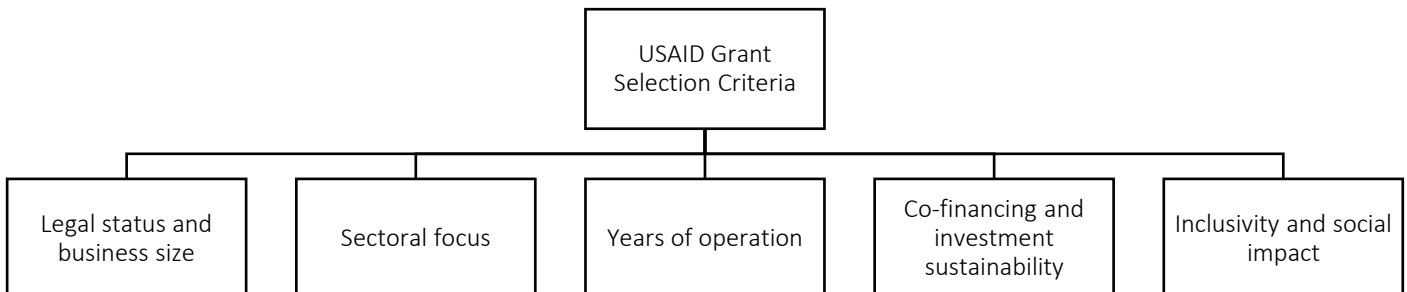


Figure 2. A schematic representation of some of the criteria USAID uses in selecting partners and grant recipients in selected programs.

The criteria used by USAID (Figure 2) are derived from an analysis of partner selection in the examined projects, to establish the principles of selection and gain a clearer understanding of fund allocation. Another important aspect of USAID’s operations is the evaluation process for projects, initiatives and programs. This is an important step in assessing effectiveness and ensuring proper monitoring of project activities and measures, for which USAID has established a unique methodology. By applying the MEASURE methodology, evaluations incorporate a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and are based on performance analysis in relation to initially set objectives. The evaluation process includes defining success indicators, reviewing implementation plans and documentation, employing various research methods (interviews, surveys, field visits), conducting comparative data analysis and identifying challenges and recommendations for improvement. USAID conducts both midterm and final evaluations, where midterm evaluations allow for project adjustments, while final evaluations assess the long-term economic and social impacts (USAID MEASURE BIH, 2024). With these selection and evaluation principles in consideration, the analysis focuses on the major economic initiatives where both contributions and geographic reach are most clearly documented. Taken together, their footprints and reported outputs provide a practical, readable overview of how USAID support has been distributed across Bosnia and Herzegovina and what kinds of development effects it sought to generate.

3.1. Agriculture and agribusiness

Agriculture has traditionally been a vital economic activity for a significant portion of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s population. However, the war (1992–1995) and the prolonged economic transition have significantly weakened this sector. Despite the country’s considerable agricultural potential, including arable land and favorable climatic conditions, these resources remain largely underutilized. Like in many parts of the world, rural areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina face depopulation and socio-economic marginalization (Gekić et al., 2022; Avdić & Avdić, 2023). In response, USAID has implemented various programs aimed at fostering rural development, increasing agricultural productivity and strengthening market value chains. USAID’s strategic framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina has been largely based on its Development Strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2012–2016, later extended to 2018 (United States Agency for International Development, 2012). The primary objectives of this document included enhancing market competitiveness, expanding economic opportunities and improving conditions for rural development.

One of the most notable initiatives was the Agribusiness Development project. This program, implemented between 2017 and 2020, aimed to increase farmers’ incomes and support job creation in rural areas by strengthening high-value agricultural production and market access (e.g., berries, vegetables and gherkins). The program combined technical support with input provision (seedlings, irrigation) and facilitated market linkages. Additionally, USAID launched the Agribusiness Development Partnership. This initiative was implemented in cooperation with the private sector, involving companies from Sarajevo, Bijeljina and Tuzla. A primary goal was to connect small-scale farmers with larger markets and improve access to financial resources through microcredit institutions.

Building on the experience of the previous FARMA project, USAID launched FARMA II in 2016 (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2018). FARMA II had a broader scope than Agribusiness Development, combining producer-oriented support with institutional and regulatory assistance, particularly in relation to EU compliance and competitiveness, including support to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s institutions in developing the Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2018–2021. A significant operational component was a competitive grant facility, under which the evaluation reports 457 submitted applications and 106 approved grants (implementation Year 2), totalling over 5.4 million BAM, with a large share of funds committed and partially disbursed during implementation (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2018).

From a geographical perspective, this paper maps the municipal beneficiary footprint of FARMA II by plotting the locations of grant recipients’ registered offices (rather than municipal budget transfers or infrastructure investments). Figure 3 presents a map showing the municipalities in which grant beneficiaries were located. Based on the FARMA II grantee list, grant beneficiaries were registered in 58 municipalities, including 34 in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 23 in Republika Srpska and 1 in Brčko District.

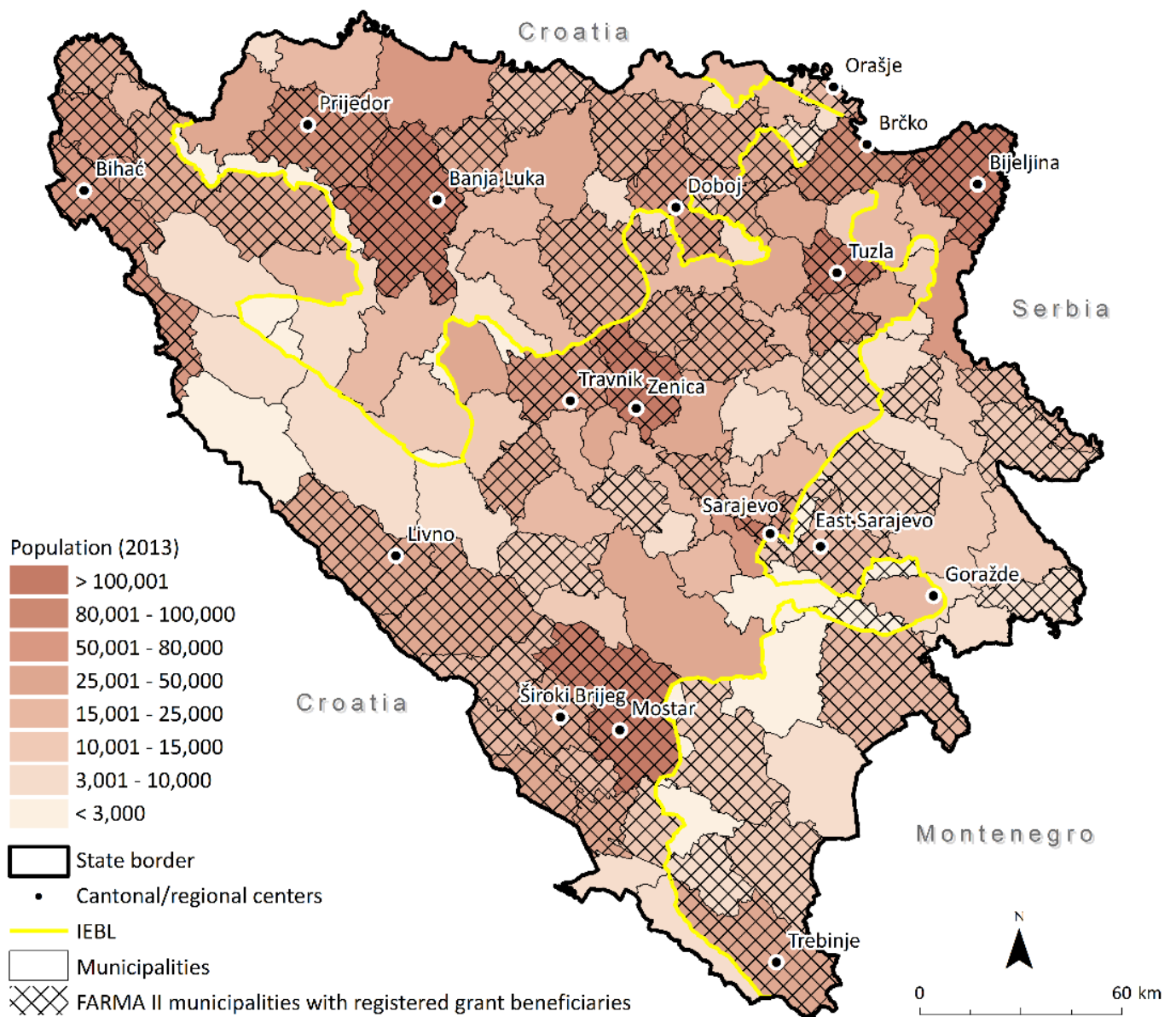


Figure 3. FARMA II municipal beneficiary footprint: registered-seat locations of grant recipients (Program period: 2016–2020).

Figure 3 should be interpreted as a map of beneficiaries' registered seats, the observed pattern therefore partly reflects where producer organizations and firms are administratively registered (often in larger urban/regional centers), rather than the full geography of where supported agricultural activities were implemented on the ground. This spatial distribution indicates a multi-nodal pattern with strong representation in major urban and regional centers (e.g., Sarajevo, Mostar, Banja Luka, Tuzla) and selected agrarian zones, while also highlighting that publicly available documentation does not enable a precise assessment of how far the most marginalized rural peripheries benefited, nor the detailed criteria behind municipal-level allocation decisions. In terms of reported beneficiary locations, Figure 3 suggests stronger clustering in the north and central parts of the country (including Tuzla and Zenica-Doboj cantons) and parts of Herzegovina regions. Based on the publicly available beneficiary-location information, eastern and western peripheral rural areas appear to be less represented in the documented footprint of these projects.

At the project level, FARMA II reported performance metrics for assisted beneficiary entities (producer organizations/firms), indicating market-oriented changes within the supported group. According to the indicator framework (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2018), exports increased above 98% and sales by more than 20% in Year 1 (relative to the 2015 baseline) among assisted beneficiaries, alongside reported new investments of over 2.2 million BAM (around 1.33 million USD) and an expansion of technical assistance coverage to 226 beneficiary organizations by Year 2. These figures describe performance within the assisted beneficiary group rather than municipality-level impacts and the evaluation cautions that the observed outcomes cannot be attributed solely to FARMA II.

Finally, an analysis of current national and entity-level strategic documents in agriculture, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina's Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2023–2027, the Agricultural Development Strategy of the Republika Srpska and the Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021–2027 reveals no direct mention of USAID's investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina's agricultural sector. These documents primarily outline domestic policies, priorities and measures for agricultural and rural development without explicitly detailing international donors' contributions or providing insights into the geographical distribution of USAID's impact in recent years.

3.2. Energy sector

The production of electricity is one of the most important economic activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, significantly contributing to exports. The country's energy sector holds the potential to support its integration into regional and European markets, particularly in the context of global efforts to ensure energy security (Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022). However, this sector faces numerous challenges, primarily due to the continued reliance on coal-based thermal power plants. Additional concerns include dependency on a single supplier for natural gas and the need for modernization of the legislative framework to align with European Union regulations. To enhance energy security and market competitiveness, USAID has implemented various projects aimed at supporting reforms and developing Bosnia and Herzegovina's energy capacities.

One of the most significant USAID programs in this area was the Energy Policy Activity (EPA), a five-year project launched in September 2019 (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2023). This initiative focused on improving the regulatory framework of the energy sector and ensuring a transparent gas and electricity market. Through this program, USAID provided technical assistance to government institutions in drafting legislation in compliance with European directives and in developing the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP). Particular emphasis was placed on reforming the natural gas sector, including diversifying supply sources and opening the market to new investors, thereby reducing dependence on the sole existing supplier, the Russian Federation. In this regard, the construction of the Southern Interconnection pipeline, a potential project that would enable Bosnia and Herzegovina to access alternative gas supply routes via neighboring Croatia and the Mediterranean, is considered critical (Fokus.ba, 2024).

In the electricity sector, USAID worked on establishing a competitive market, streamlining investment-related permits and developing financing mechanisms for energy efficiency measures. The project also included initiatives aimed at educating the public on the benefits of energy sector reforms and strengthening regulatory institutions to ensure greater transparency and competitiveness in the market. Given that EPA is primarily a policy and technical-assistance program, its most traceable footprint is not a municipality-level beneficiary distribution (as in grant-based programs), but the multi-level regulatory and legislative outputs produced across Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented energy governance system (state, entity, district, cantonal and system-operator levels). Table 1 summarizes the adopted and implemented legal and regulatory outputs reported under EPA's legislative and regulatory indicators across the first

three program years (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2023). Importantly, these outputs are presented as EPA-reported accomplishments. The evaluation treats them as outcomes to which EPA contributed through technical assistance and support to domestic institutions. However, this should not be read as strict causal attribution, since the evaluation itself cautions that overlapping donor interventions (data contamination) and recurring political blockages also shaped reform trajectories.

Table 1. EPA-reported adopted and implemented legal/regulatory outputs across program years (Annex VI), Program period: 2019–2024 (Source: Annex VI, USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2023).

Indicator	Status	Output (act/regulation)	Governance level	Reform domain (harmonized)
Energy sector governance	ADOPTED	New Republika Srpska Law on Electricity	Republika Srpska	Electricity market governance
Energy sector governance	IMPLEMENTED	Amendments to the Grid Code	State-level operator	Electricity market governance (system rules)
Energy sector governance	IMPLEMENTED	Categorization of Generators	State-level operator	Electricity market governance (system rules)
Energy sector governance	IMPLEMENTED	Amendments to the Market Rules	State-level operator	Electricity market governance (system rules)
Clean energy	ADOPTED	USAID EPA comments on FERC Licensing Rulebook	Federation of BiH	Investment & market regulation (regulatory practice)
Clean energy	ADOPTED	Draft Law on South Interconnection (adopted by both houses of FBiH Parliament)	Federation of BiH	Gas security
Clean energy	ADOPTED	Draft Law on Renewable Energy Sources in RS (formally adopted by RS National Assembly, Sept 2021)	Republika Srpska	Renewables / clean energy
Clean energy	ADOPTED	FBiH Law on Electricity	Federation of BiH	Electricity market governance
Clean energy	ADOPTED	FBiH Law on Energy	Federation of BiH	Electricity market governance
Clean energy	ADOPTED	Law on South-interconnection	Federation of BiH	Gas security
Clean energy	ADOPTED	Brčko District Electricity Law	Brčko District	Electricity market governance
Clean energy	ADOPTED	Renewable Energy Sources Law of Brčko District	Brčko District	Renewables / clean energy
Clean energy	ADOPTED	Una–Sana Canton Law on Construction	Canton (FBiH)	Investment & permitting
Clean energy	ADOPTED	Procedural Rules to Enable Wholesale Market Access for Power Producers Connected to the Distribution Network	State-level operator (ISO BiH)	Investment & market access (wholesale)

Table 1 therefore indicates that EPA's clearest trace in the available evidence lies in the program's reported multi-level regulatory and legislative outputs, adopted and implemented acts that strengthen electricity and gas-market governance and the investment/permitting framework and that may have helped create a more supportive institutional basis for subsequent reform-oriented assistance, including EPA II. Building upon previously successful initiatives, in September 2024, USAID launched a new Energy Sector Assistance Project (USAID/EPA II), with an investment of nearly 10 million USD (approximately BAM 18-19 million), aimed at further strengthening Bosnia and Herzegovina's energy security and supporting the transition toward renewable energy sources (Capital.ba, 2024). This program involves cooperation with policymakers, the private sector and non-governmental organizations to accelerate reform measures and attract foreign investment.

USAID's role in energy sector reform, particularly in promoting Bosnia and Herzegovina's commitment to sustainable development goals, has been widely recognized through various sources and project activities outlined in the Framework Energy Strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina until 2035. Additionally, USAID has been an important player in advancing Bosnia and Herzegovina's transition toward a sustainable energy system, especially through the organization of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Energy Summit in 2022. This event addressed topics such as decarbonization, climate policies and the implementation of the National Energy and Climate Plan. Special attention was given to challenges related to energy security, the creation of a competitive and transparent market and the role of women in the energy sector (Energetski samit u Bosni i Hercegovini, 2024).

3.3. Tourism

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina is among the least-visited countries in Europe, tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of its economy. This growth is largely attributed to the country's geographical position, as well as its diverse natural and cultural-historical attractions. This trend represents a significant factor in economic diversification and regional development. Notably, tourism development is not limited to major urban centers such as Sarajevo and Mostar, but also extends to local communities in less developed areas, particularly in mountainous regions (Banda et al., 2022). Within this context, international donors, such as USAID, play a crucial role in enhancing the sector's competitiveness through strategic interventions aimed at improving infrastructure, destination branding and human resource development. One of the most significant projects supporting these objectives is the Sustainable Tourism Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina (TURIZAM) initiative, which runs from 2020 to 2025 with a total budget of nearly 20 million USD (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2024).

The TURIZAM program is designed as a multi-component, hybrid intervention. It combines place-based actions that are geographically traceable (e.g., rural destination pilots, protected-area visitor management, hub destinations...) with sector-wide measures (e.g., standards, certification, branding and training) whose effects are not consistently attributable to individual municipalities in publicly available documentation. Consequently, the program's contribution is most appropriately assessed through a combination of spatial evidence for geographically anchored components and program performance indicators reported through the monitoring and evaluation framework. A mid-term evaluation conducted between July and October 2023 provides the main evidence base for assessing implementation progress, perceived effectiveness and emerging constraints (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2024).

The core objectives of the TURIZAM project include strengthening human capacities in tourism, improving access to financial resources for small and medium-sized enterprises in the sector, developing innovative tourism products, harmonizing regulations and enhancing destination branding and promotion (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2024). The evaluation indicates that the Activity is widely perceived as effective due to its comprehensive design and adaptability to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability. The main contributions of the project include improving the strategic framework for tourism development, standardization and certification of tourism services, enhancing the quality of tourism products and promoting Bosnia and Herzegovina as an international travel destination. However, certain challenges were identified, particularly in facilitating access to financing for SMEs and strengthening public-private partnerships.

Within the rural-development dimension, USAID launched the *Most Beautiful Villages of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MVB)* initiative, recognizing and supporting 14 rural communities to preserve heritage, increase visibility and improve the economic sustainability of local populations. This initiative is based on the model of *Les Plus Beaux Villages de France* and is implemented in cooperation with the Association for the Development of Rural Tourism - Alterural (BosniaTurizam.com, 2022). The first 14 villages (with municipality/city in brackets) included in the initiative are: Ostrožac (Cazin),

Martin Brod (Bihać), Krupa na Vrbasu (Banja Luka), Pecka (Mrkonjić Grad), Guča Gora (Travnik), Prokoško Lake (Fojnica), Mijakovići-Dragovići-Bobovac (Vareš), Kraljeva Sutjeska (Kakanj), Vranc (Kreševo), Umoljani (Trnovo FBiH), Blagaj (Mostar), Stupe (Livno), Bratač (Nevesinje) and Ravno (Ravno) (Figure 3).

USAID provided technical support, training to enhance tourism services and consulting on sustainable business models through this project. Beyond rural tourism, the TURIZAM initiative also includes visitor management strategies in Una and Kozara National Parks and the development of tourism capacities across both entities – Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2024). To visualize the place-based dimension of TURIZAM, Figure 4 distinguishes between two tiers of spatial evidence. First, it maps a municipality-level footprint for the MVB component, shown as polygons. The MBV component is primarily anchored in rural and often peripheral municipalities, consistent with a product-development approach that uses heritage and landscape assets to raise visibility and diversify local incomes beyond established tourism cores.

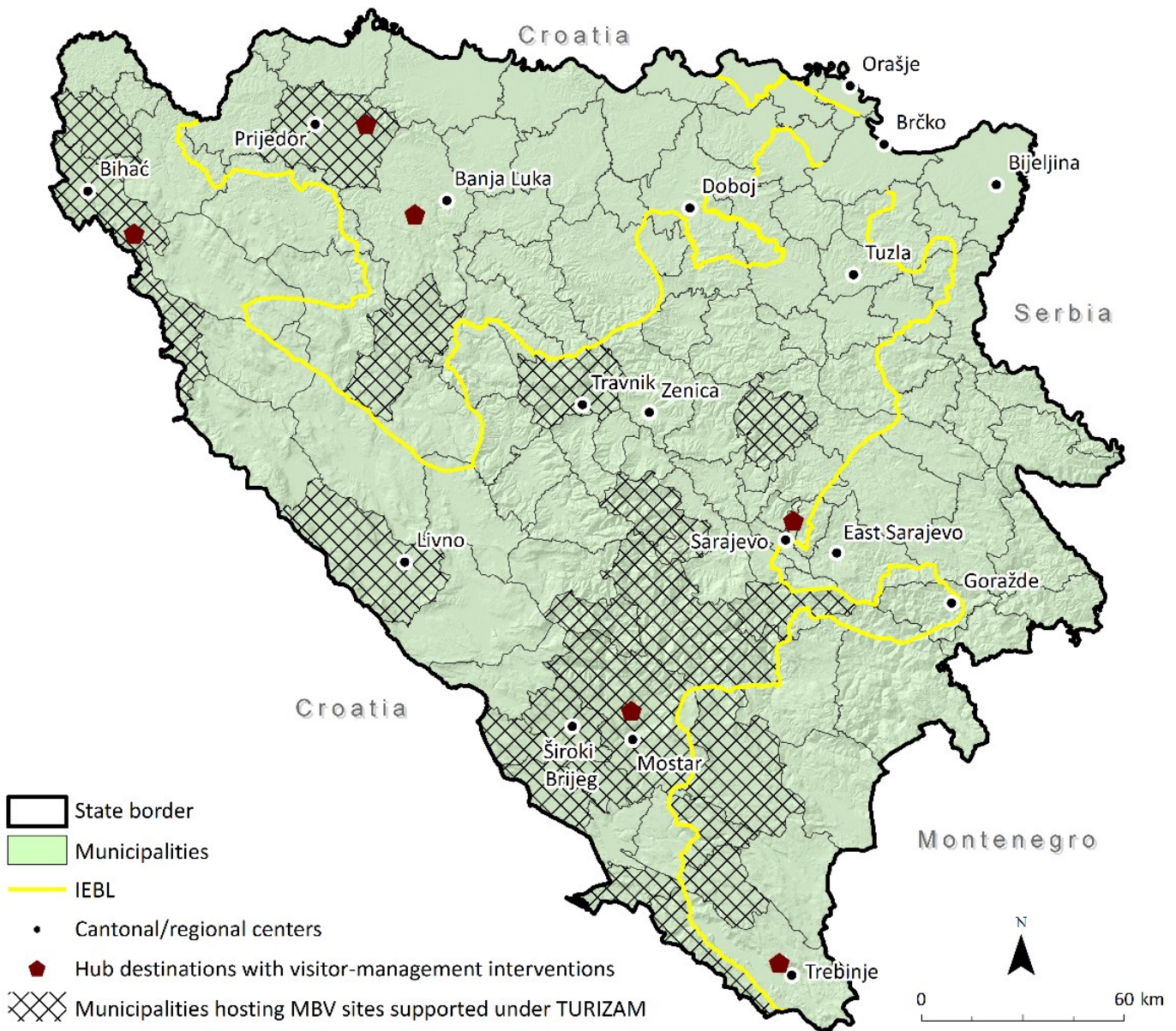


Figure 4. TURIZAM place-based footprint – municipalities hosting MBV villages and selected destination/protected-area nodes (Program period: 2020-2025).

Second, it marks selected intervention nodes explicitly documented in the evaluation, hub destinations (Sarajevo, Mostar and Banja Luka), protected areas (Una and Kozara National Parks) and Trebinje, as points. The documented hub

destinations reflect locations where visitor-management and system-level interventions are most relevant due to their gateway function and higher visitor pressure. The mapped pattern suggests an effort to combine rural product development and place branding with targeted management measures in high-traffic nodes. This representation is not intended to imply comprehensive municipal coverage of the entire Activity, but rather to show the geographically identifiable components within a broader program that also operates through nationwide sectoral measures (standards, training and branding).

Evidently, this is a significant and financially extensive USAID program that has had considerable implications for local development in the municipalities where it has been implemented. Evaluation materials indicate that TURIZAM supported local tourism strategies and management plans, which likely improved planning and coordination in participating municipalities (USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2024). The program also facilitated the development of new tourism products, especially rural and adventure offers and delivered extensive training for guides, hospitality workers and other stakeholders, aiming to raise service quality. In addition, documented support to tourism-related amenities and small-scale infrastructure was intended to improve visitor readiness at selected sites.

Table 2. TURIZAM – Selected quantitative outputs (Source: USAID MEASURE-BiH, 2024).

Output indicator (what was delivered?)	Baseline (pre-project)	Target (end of activity)	Achieved to date	What does it capture?
Tourism/hospitality entrepreneurs, operators & employees trained (technical/quality/safety/management)	0 (2020)	13,900	5,241	Human-capital upgrading / service quality capacity
Training activities held (for service employees/entrepreneurs/operators)	0 (2020)	305	198	Training intensity / outreach
International travel agents selling BiH itineraries	0 (2020)	230	136	International market linkage / sales channels
Number of investments in tourism sector facilitated (in 000 USD)	0 (2020)	25,000	136.94	Mobilised investment (facilitated, not necessarily disbursed grants)
New local traditional products/processes/businesses with protected status / brand certifications	0 (2020)	110	17	Branding/heritage product valorisation
Private sector enterprises with increased access to finance due to USG assistance	0 (2020)	30	1	Finance constraint proxy (also signals challenge area)
BiH Country Brand ranking	116 (2019)	96	109	Branding proxy at country scale (ranking-based)

Table 2 shows pronounced output growth from baseline across capacity-building, market linkage and branding-related measures, alongside uneven progress in finance-related indicators, which is consistent with the evaluation's conclusion that access to finance remains a persistent structural constraint for SMEs even as skills development and promotion advance. By supporting these initiatives, USAID has played a very significant role in fostering sustainable tourism development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, aligning with broader strategic objectives, including economic diversification, environmental conservation and community empowerment. Moving forward, ensuring the sustainability of these interventions will require continued collaboration between government institutions, private sector stakeholders and international partners to maintain and expand the progress achieved through projects like TURIZAM (USAID MEASURE-BIH, 2024).

3.4. Diaspora investment

The diaspora can serve as a crucial factor in the economic and social development of countries of origin, particularly in an era of globalization and increased labor mobility. Through remittance inflows, direct investments and knowledge transfer, the diaspora can significantly contribute to improving living standards, strengthening the business environment and enhancing the competitiveness of national economies (Fang & Wells, 2022). Consequently, many countries have developed strategies to systematically integrate their diaspora into economic processes. Relative to its population size, Bosnia and Herzegovina has one of the largest diasporas (Halilović et al., 2018), which reflects both its historical emigration patterns, intensified by the effects of the 1992-95 war and a substantial economic opportunity for synergistic development. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2021), remittances accounted for 10.5% of country's GDP in 2018, placing Bosnia and Herzegovina among the most remittance-dependent nations in Europe. While this share slightly declined to 10.3% of GDP by 2023 (Trading Economics, 2023), remittances remain a critical stabilizing factor for the national economy. However, an overreliance on financial transfers from the diaspora also presents vulnerabilities, particularly in times of economic crises or shifts in migration policies in host countries.

To support the integration of the diaspora into Bosnia and Herzegovina's development processes, USAID launched the Diaspora Invest project in 2017. This five-year initiative, as stated in the final report of the Program, was implemented in partnership with Financial Markets International and focused on three main components: the development of a strategic framework for diaspora investments, the facilitation of direct diaspora investments through grants and technical assistance with the establishment of a sustainable platform for diaspora business services (USAID MEASURE-BIH, 2019). One of the most significant achievements of Diaspora Invest was the establishment of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Diaspora Marketplace, a platform that identified and supported innovative business models with high growth potential. The project also provided advisory and technical support for small and medium-sized enterprises owned by diaspora members. Additionally, successful entrepreneurs gained access to Development Credit Authority loans, improving financing opportunities for diaspora-owned businesses (USAID MEASURE-BIH, 2019). Importantly for spatial analysis, Diaspora Invest is not a primarily municipality-targeted program in the way grant-intensive initiatives are. Its core mechanism operates through firms and diaspora investors, with place-based effects emerging indirectly through the location of beneficiary enterprises and partner local governments. The evaluation reports that during the period assessed, the activity served 118 potential investors and beneficiary companies and that 75 unique firms received grants and/or technical assistance valued at more than BAM 1.1 million, or around USD 710,000 (USAID MEASURE-BIH, 2019).

Project evaluations highlighted the reduction of institutional and regulatory barriers for diaspora investors as one of the most significant achievements (USAID MEASURE-BIH, 2019). Entrepreneurs who participated in the initiative expressed high levels of satisfaction with the grants and technical assistance provided, emphasizing the program's role in enhancing the overall business environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The evaluation also highlights the importance of institutional support and investment facilitation mechanisms for sustaining diaspora engagement.

The map (Figure 5) distinguishes between the program's institutional footprint, partner municipalities listed as partner communities and its beneficiary footprint, shown as firm locations extracted from the evaluation annexes (Annex VI-VII in USAID MEASURE-BIH, 2019) and assigned to municipalities based on registered seats. Hatching marks partner municipalities and the blue intensity indicates the number of named beneficiary firms per municipality (1-5), which serves as a proxy for documented engagement rather than municipal-level investment intensity or impact.

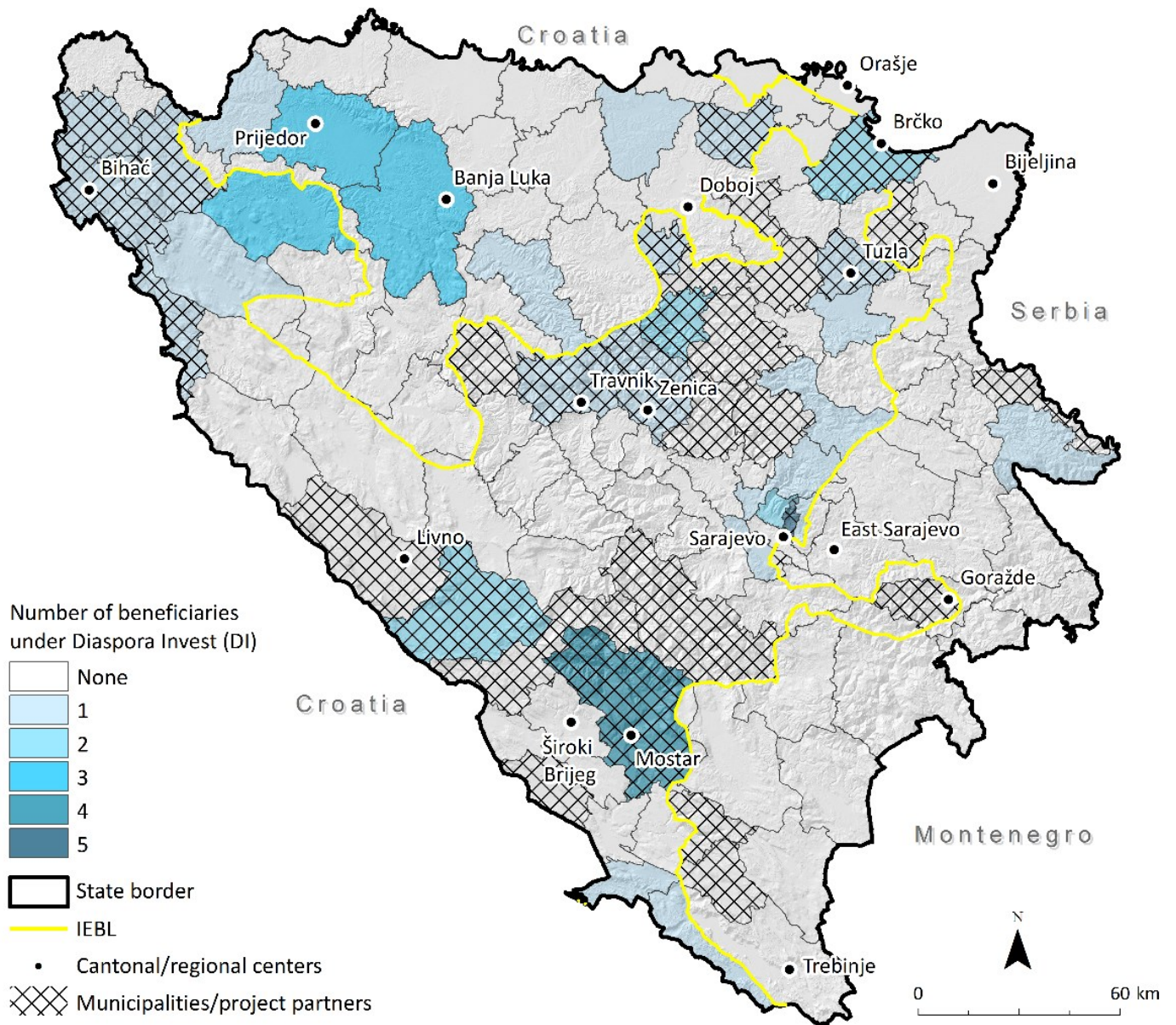


Figure 5. Diaspora Invest spatial footprint: partner municipalities and beneficiary firms by municipality (Program period: 2017-2022).

Partner municipalities form a geographically broad institutional network, whereas the distribution of named beneficiary firms is more uneven and concentrated in a limited number of municipalities. Considering the program’s quantitative outputs, as shown in Table 3, Diaspora Invest generated measurable firm-level results within its assisted beneficiary cohort, combining direct support (75 diaspora-linked firms; BAM 1.17 million in grants and technical assistance) with outcome-oriented signals, most notably verified job creation and fixed-asset investment. These indicators suggest that the program’s most clearly documented effects are concentrated at the enterprise level through investment facilitation and business expansion, while the platform metrics (61 diaspora organizations mapped; 30 investors using One-Stop Shop services) reflect a parallel institutional/service layer intended to broaden diaspora engagement beyond grant recipients. In the context of this paper, such outputs provide evidence of program performance, but they do not permit direct inference about municipality-level impacts or the spatial distribution of financial flows.

Table 3. Selected program outputs and performance indicators for Diaspora Invest (evaluation evidence) (Source: MEASURE-BiH, 2019).

Indicator	Baseline (start of activity)	Achieved (reported/verified in evaluation)	Activity target
Beneficiary firms receiving grants and/or TA	0	75 ¹	—
Total value of grants + TA awarded (BAM)	0	1,173,054	—
New full-time registered jobs in DI-assisted firms	0	259	250
Direct investment into fixed assets by supported firms (USD)	0	2.9 million	2.1 million
Firms receiving DI-funded technical assistance	0	37	—
Diaspora organizations / business networks registered on diaspora map	0	61	100
Potential diaspora investors using One-Stop Shop services	0	30	100

Overall, Diaspora Invest demonstrates the program logic that diaspora engagement can support local development through investment and job creation, while also generating broader spillovers via knowledge exchange, business networks and stronger ties between local institutions and transnational communities.

3.5. Integrated Overview of Project Outputs and Municipal Reach

Across agriculture, tourism, diaspora and energy, the programs produced different types of results, such as training and mentoring, support to businesses and local organizations, selected policy and planning assistance and practical measures aimed at strengthening local economic activity. Although these outputs differ in scope and delivery, taken together they point to a common approach that relies on local partners, requires a certain level of municipal capacity and aims to generate visible economic effects.

Analyzing the municipalities involved as partners in the selected projects allows for the identification of certain spatial patterns in USAID’s initiatives (Figure 6). The cities of Sarajevo, Banja Luka and Mostar, three macro-regional centers emerge as the primary hubs of USAID activity, reflecting their institutional capacities to manage development projects and attract international funding. This conclusion may be connected to their strategic/geographic positioning, existing infrastructure, demographics and economic potential. Figure 6 summarizes overlap by showing municipalities included in none, one, two, or all three initiatives. Overall, a slight advantage is visible in the number of municipalities covered by at least one initiative in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within the Federation, participation is most concentrated in Zenica-Doboj Canton, Sarajevo Canton, Tuzla Canton and West Herzegovina Canton. In contrast, parts of the western rural periphery (e.g., Bosansko Grahovo, Glamoč, Drvar) and the eastern periphery (especially municipalities in Podrinje and Eastern Herzegovina) largely remain outside the selected initiatives. This may be attributed to several factors. First, peripheral municipalities often have lower economic attractiveness due to infrastruc-

¹ It should be noted that the evaluation reports 75 unique beneficiary firms in total; however, only around 55 firms are explicitly named in the publicly available annexes and could therefore be geocoded by municipality and plotted in Figure 4, meaning that the mapped point distribution represents the named subset rather than the full beneficiary cohort.

ture limitations and low demographic base, which reduce their potential for high-return investments. Second, the administrative capacities of local governments in these regions are often constrained, limiting their ability to apply for and effectively implement USAID-funded programs. This particularly applies to the newly established municipalities along IEBL.

A comparable concentration is also evident in Republika Srpska, where engagement clusters most strongly around Prijedor and Banja Luka. As two relatively strong centers, particularly in terms of the number of firms and to some extent more favorable demographic and broader socio-economic trends, these areas are better positioned to meet the practical requirements of USAID’s grant reach and selection logic. Lastly, the overall pattern is consistent with a concentration of engagement in municipalities where implementation partnerships and economic absorption capacity are stronger. This may reflect a practical preference for settings in which collaboration can be organized efficiently and results can be documented more clearly. While some rural and border municipalities are included, multi-project engagement remains more common in central and economically active areas.

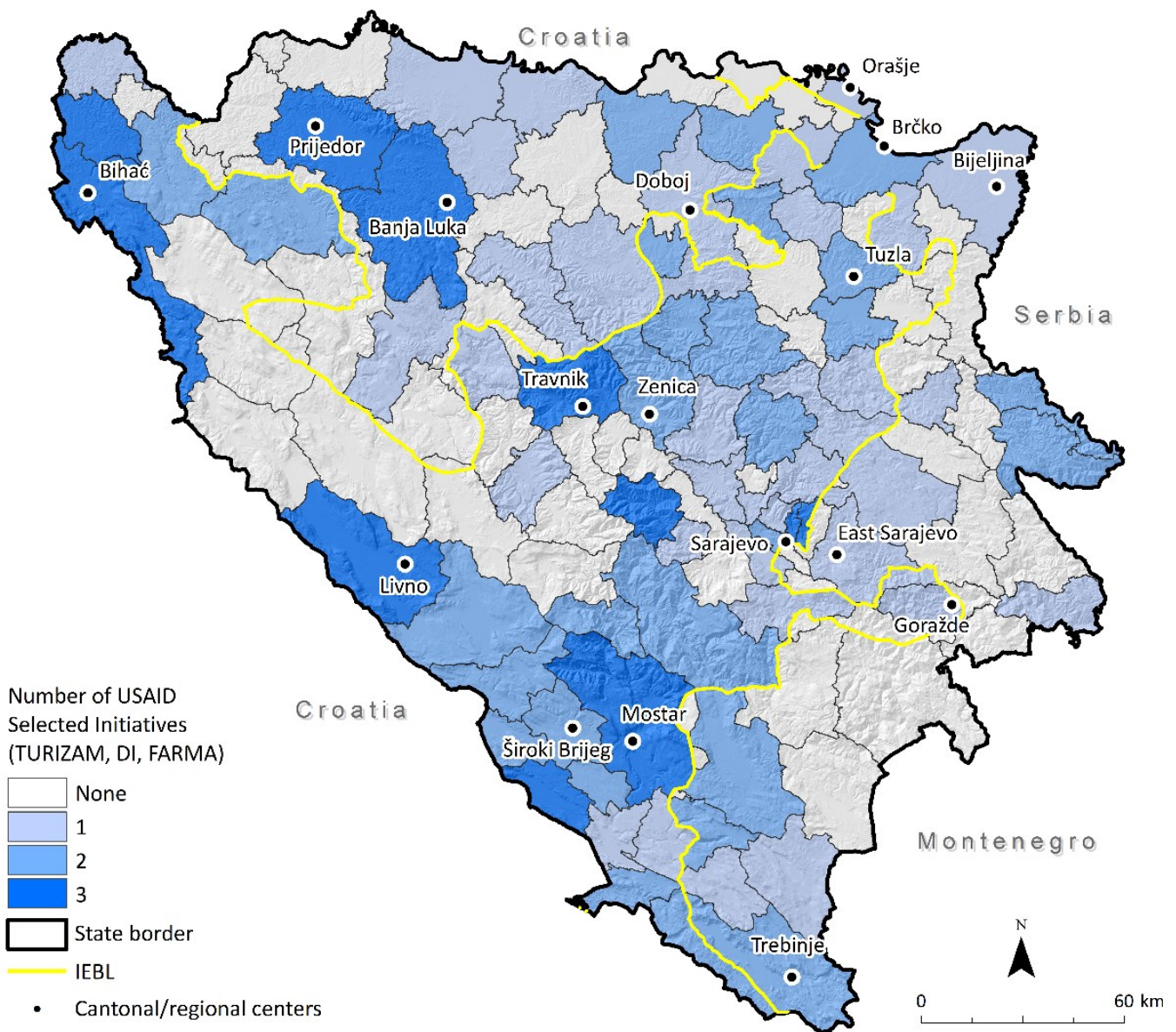


Figure 6. Municipalities where USAID operated through selected economic development projects.

4. Discussion

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of selected economic programs and initiatives implemented by USAID in Bosnia and Herzegovina, aiming to assess their sectoral impact and spatial distribution. The selected initiatives (FARMA II, EPA, TURIZAM and DI) were chosen based on their potential to drive economic development in strategically important sectors, each of which plays a significant role in Bosnia and Herzegovina's economic framework. Agriculture remains an important sector given the country's significant rural population, while energy transition and diversification hold strategic significance in sustainable development and European integration. Additionally, the tourism sector, as one of the fastest-growing industries (Ateljević & Popović, 2020), has the potential to generate substantial financial returns, while the diaspora's economic engagement represents a significant driver of investment, with remittances accounting for a significant share of GDP (Williams, 2018). The findings indicate that USAID interventions have played a meaningful role in strengthening local sectoral policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, by investing in regional development and enhancing the capacities of local communities. These contributions align with the principles of subsidiarity and the bottom-up approach, which is increasingly advocated within EU development frameworks (Sarnyai et al., 2017). USAID's financial engagement has catalyzed further investments, attracting capital from institutions such as the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), reinforcing Bosnia and Herzegovina's investment landscape (Ačić & Grujić, 2022).

USAID's sectoral interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina have contributed to strengthening local economic resilience and enhancing sectoral competitiveness. Through FARMA II, agricultural market competitiveness was improved, aligning domestic production with EU standards. However, its spatial impact was primarily concentrated in economically developed regions, with more limited outreach to certain rural and marginalized communities. In the energy sector, USAID facilitated regulatory reforms and market liberalization, paving the way for greater energy security and alignment with EU directives. The TURIZAM initiatives exhibited a more spatially inclusive approach, integrating rural and peripheral areas into broader economic frameworks, providing a replicable model for sustainable local development. Investments in tourism infrastructure and branding have created long-term economic opportunities, yet challenges persist in ensuring financial sustainability and fostering stronger public-private partnerships. The Diaspora Invest project demonstrated the potential of diaspora engagement in local economic growth by strengthening business linkages and improving access to financing, although regional disparities in investment distribution highlight the need for more balanced support mechanisms.

One contribution of USAID's economic programs lies in its support for SMEs. This is particularly relevant given the observed presence of USAID partners in underdeveloped municipalities, not solely within major macro-regional centers. However, the spatial distribution of its activities has revealed certain regional disparities. Besides urban centers, the analysis also reveals engagement in smaller municipalities, those with emerging economic potential. However, a particularly striking observation is the relatively limited engagement of USAID in peripheral regions (Marić & Avdić Marić, 2025). The observed pattern may be partly explained by a combination of structural and capacity-related factors that shape which enterprises and implementing actors are able to access and carry out grant-based support. Entities operating in municipalities with smaller populations, a limited base of SMEs and weaker local economic capacity often face tighter constraints in meeting the formal and operational requirements of application and implementation (e.g., administrative readiness, co-financing ability, documentation and delivery capacity). As a result, participation may be lower among businesses and partner organizations originating from such areas, which in turn can translate into weaker territorial coverage of the analyzed initiatives.

In this context, a slight advantage is observed in the overall distribution of supported participants within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina compared to Republika Srpska. This difference appears to be associated primarily with variation in local economic structure and municipal-level absorptive capacity, factors that condition the density and readiness of eligible enterprises and partner institutions, rather than with political or institutional considerations. At the same time, the findings also reflect certain patterns identified in recent studies on the spatial distribution of aid (Opršal et al., 2025a; Duškova et al., 2025), which is often directed toward more developed areas rather than those experiencing the greatest levels of need.

A full withdrawal of USAID from Bosnia and Herzegovina could entail a range of economic and institutional implications. In the short term, the discontinuation of ongoing programs and grant-based support may reduce opportunities for business development and employment generation in localities and sectors that relied on such external assistance, especially where alternative funding sources are not readily available or where local actors have limited capacity to

compensate for the gap (Cheeseman et al., 2024). Over the longer term, the effects would likely depend on the extent to which domestic institutions, private-sector actors and other donors can adapt and sustain the functions previously supported through USAID-funded interventions. Although this study does not quantify program impacts, the documented outputs and implementation modalities allow for a cautious, scenario-based reflection on continuity risks across the four analyzed domains. In the EPA activity, the main vulnerability concerns the pace and coherence of regulatory reforms that depend on technical assistance and coordination, in the absence of sustained advisory and convening capacity, reform trajectories may face delays or uneven implementation. For FARMA II, the durability of competitiveness gains in agricultural value chains is likely to depend on whether upgrading efforts (standards, producer organization, extension and market linkages) have been sufficiently embedded in domestic institutions and stable buyer-supplier relationships, otherwise, smaller producers may find it difficult to maintain performance. In the TURIZAM program, destination branding and cluster-based initiatives typically require ongoing coordination among municipalities, private operators and public agencies; without a coordinating actor, collaboration may weaken unless local destination management structures assume a stronger role. For Diaspora Invest, firm-level sustainability may hinge on whether facilitation mechanisms (mentoring, matchmaking and access-to-finance instruments) can be maintained through domestic financial and business-support institutions or alternative donors.

Beyond economic considerations, development assistance also operates within broader geopolitical and foreign policy contexts. Reduced U.S. aid may alter the external development landscape and potentially increase the relative visibility and influence of other international actors in the Western Balkans, including Russia and China, whose engagement in the region has been widely discussed in the literature (Hake & Radzyner, 2019; Larsen, 2020; Stanicek & Russell, 2022; Foundation for European Progressive Studies et al., 2024; Shopov, 2025). Rather than implying a direct substitution effect, this perspective highlights a possible rebalancing of external involvement, with implications for the strategic orientation, conditionalities and governance models related to development cooperation. These dynamics raise the question of whether current shifts in donor engagement reflect wider realignments in the global development system, with longer-term political and economic consequences. Additionally, USAID has provided technical assistance in aligning Bosnia and Herzegovina's regulatory framework with EU standards, particularly in governance reforms, digitalization efforts and the introduction of e-governance practices (United States Agency for International Development, 2020). The cessation of USAID programs could slow down these reform processes, further complicating Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession trajectory. While EU institutions remain dominant in donor-funded projects, accessing EU funds is often constrained by complex bureaucratic procedures and lengthy approval processes (Šiljak & Nielsen, 2023), making them less flexible compared to US-led initiatives. The long-term economic and institutional impacts of USAID's withdrawal, therefore, depend not only on the adaptability of local actors but also on the extent to which alternative funding mechanisms can effectively replace its contributions.

4.1. *Limitations and future research*

Despite providing insights into USAID's economic interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this study faces several methodological limitations that must be acknowledged. One of the primary constraints is the lack of comprehensive data sources for a more detailed analysis of project activities and their precise spatial distribution. The absence of disaggregated, up-to-date quantitative data has limited the ability to draw more generalized conclusions regarding the long-term economic and geographical impact of USAID's initiatives. Furthermore, the inaccessibility of USAID's main database has posed a significant challenge, as the most recent publicly available data primarily cover the 2017–2020 period, preventing a more current assessment of the agency's contributions. Another limitation stems from the methodological constraints imposed by data availability, which restricted the study to a qualitative analysis of project reports and a cartographic visualization of municipal-level partnerships. While this approach offers valuable geographic insights, the inability to employ more diverse quantitative methods, such as econometric modeling or impact assessments based on primary data, has prevented a deeper evaluation of USAID's sectoral influence. Future research should develop a comprehensive database of USAID-funded projects, incorporating detailed quantitative analyses of their economic contributions to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such a dataset would enable comparative assessments with other international donors and facilitate cross-country evaluations of development assistance effectiveness. Additionally, a more structured methodology, integrating mixed-method approaches with spatial econometric analyses, could provide a clearer understanding of the long-term sustainability and spatial reach of USAID's interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of selected economic programs and initiatives implemented by USAID in Bosnia and Herzegovina, aiming to assess their sectoral impact and spatial distribution. The findings indicate that USAID interventions have played a meaningful role in strengthening local sectoral policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, by investing in regional development and enhancing the capacities of local communities. USAID's sectoral interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina have contributed to strengthening local economic resilience and enhancing sectoral competitiveness. However, the spatial distribution of its activities has revealed certain regional disparities. A particularly striking observation is the relatively limited engagement of USAID in peripheral regions. This difference appears to be associated primarily with variation in local economic structure and municipal-level absorptive capacity, factors that condition the density and readiness of eligible enterprises and partner institutions, rather than with political or institutional considerations. A full withdrawal of USAID from Bosnia and Herzegovina could entail a range of economic and institutional implications. In the short term, the discontinuation of ongoing programs and grant-based support may reduce opportunities for business development and employment generation in localities and sectors that relied on such external assistance, especially where alternative funding sources are not readily available or where local actors have limited capacity to compensate for the gap. Rather than measuring direct impact, this study seeks to make visible where development support has been present, providing a spatial reference for understanding where future economic and institutional vulnerabilities may arise.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments: The study is based on publicly available program documentation (USAID project pages, program reports, evaluations and related donor materials) and publicly available macro-level statistics cited in the paper (e.g., Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The municipality-level dataset used for mapping was compiled by the authors from these public records by extracting and harmonizing partner/municipality references across the four analyzed initiatives (FARMA II, EPA, TURIZAM and Diaspora Invest). The compiled municipal participation table and the resulting cartographic outputs are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. At the time of writing, some online sources were partially inaccessible and documentation availability varied across programs and reporting periods.

Ethics Statement: This study is based exclusively on publicly available documents and does not involve human participants. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

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