

## Local Economic Development: Setting the Stage in Bulgaria

In the 1990s, as Bulgaria was navigating the challenges of change from a centrally planned economy to a market-based one, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) identified a need to strengthen the capacity of municipalities to attract and retain businesses and create jobs. The agency tapped ICMA to spearhead the effort through its Resource Cities Program, which later became known as CityLinks. In partnership with the Bulgarian Foundation for Local Government Reform (FLGR), ICMA identified cities in the United States that could share techniques and successes with their Bulgarian counterparts.

To set the stage for economic development, the CityLinks program sought to prepare Bulgarian cities to meet the needs of national and international businesses by applying a professional approach to business retention and recruitment. The program involved a number of steps:

- Each Bulgarian municipality completed a self-assessment of its readiness for economic development.
- Self-assessment results were used to create community profiles in a consistent format that were posted on a central Web site.
- Self-assessment results were also used to select projects (e.g., development of an industrial park, creation of a business incubator) that would enhance the LED readiness of municipalities.
- U.S. cities worked with their Bulgarian counterparts as they developed their profiles, designed marketing brochures, and/or created strategic plans to attract investment.
- Cities in both countries formed a consortium for local economic development and marketing.
- Each Bulgarian participant institutionalized an economic development position in the municipality and agreed to maintain the position in the long run.
- One of the U.S. partners developed and presented a practical economic development training course for Bulgarian professionals; training was taken over by FLGR as the program developed.
- U.S. and Bulgarian experts developed criteria that could be used as the basis for certification of LED professionals and certification of cities as “ready for business.”



Taken together, the steps set the stage for the creation of over 2,500 new jobs, investment of more than 140 million Euros in existing operations and expansions, and a certification program that became institutionalized in the country, ensuring the sustainability of the program long after CityLinks involvement ended.

### ABOUT ICMA

ICMA (International City/County Management Association) is the premier local government leadership and management organization worldwide. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advancing the professional management of local government. ICMA has been doing this since 1914 by providing technical and management assistance, training, and information resources to its members and the local government community. In 1989, with its first USAID grant, ICMA began working worldwide. Since then it has successfully designed, implemented, and evaluated hundreds of international projects, establishing a solid reputation for its practical, hands-on approach to meeting global challenges.