Article by Larry Butler, Principal Deputy High Representative: “What Have You Done for Me Lately?”

There was in my country a few years ago a popular catchphrase that originated in relationship therapy. Couples were encouraged to ask one another “What have you done for me lately?”

The idea was to highlight the fact that relationships aren’t static; they are continuously developing – and they’re all about give and take.

I think this question might usefully be inserted into popular political debate inBosnia and Herzegovina.

Citizens should ask their elected leaders and those civil servants whose actions have a direct bearing on everyday life, “What have you done for me lately?”

And elected leaders and civil servants should welcome the question – it gives them an invaluable opening to explain their actions – and where necessary their reasons for *lack* of action – and their plans for future action.

The question opens up a whole area of accountability and dialogue – and accountability and dialogue are core elements in any functioning democracy.

A good place to begin asking the question is at the municipal level. Municipalities are the point at which, nine times out of ten, the government meets the people. The municipality is where we have to queue up for forms, stamps, licenses, permissions and assorted documents (in my country as in

yours). And it's the municipality that is responsible for delivering key services – such as refuse collection, street lighting, local clinics and children's playgrounds. The municipalities also have a direct and crucial role in attracting the sort of investment that can fund new businesses and create new jobs in the neighbourhood.

So the question "What have you done for me lately?" can elicit a very concrete response. We've improved this, we've started that, we're about to begin the other.

If it's met with a *less* constructive response – then you know that your mayor or the members of your municipal assembly are not doing their jobs.

Comparisons are odious, but they are very often enlightening too.

Let's take a look at two municipalities.

The municipality of Ljubinje in East Herzegovina faces practical challenges related to its relative remoteness and the small number of economic assets that have been developed there. The Municipal Assembly has introduced modest financial incentives, including a "baby bonus" to persuade residents not to move away, and it has taken steps to make it easier and cheaper to build in the municipality. The Mayor has also introduced performance-linked salaries in the local administration.

The contrast with Bijeljina, for example, is striking. In Bijeljina the bureaucracy is expanding – the budget for cabinet salaries has tripled since the new Mayor was elected in October last year. Bijeljina residents have little to show for the vastly inflated salaries they are now paying the Mayor and his cabinet. The municipal assembly also recently increased their monthly allowance to an amount higher than the average salary in the RS. Despite the fact that the municipality has a comprehensive range of economic assets and

was once a thriving centre of agriculture and commerce, the public infrastructure is crumbling and municipal services are inadequate.

The issue here isn't a *party*-political one. Ljubinje and Bijeljina are governed by the same party.

But it *is* political.

It resolves around the question: "What have you done for me lately?" This question should be put by residents to the municipal officials in Ljubinje and Bijeljina. Their answers will be different and they will be illuminating.

I have cited these two municipalities as respectively a good example and a bad example. Perhaps residents will correct me. And perhaps the municipal leadership in Bijeljina will be able to explain why they have been unable to provide citizens with adequate services despite enormous salary increases for the Mayor's associates.

In each municipality in the country there are distinct political forces at work. In some cases the mayor is prevented by the municipal assembly from working effectively; in others it's the opposite way around. Some municipalities have natural economic and demographic advantages; others labour under immense practical handicaps.

But these are the very issues that have to be explored and explained.

Municipal residents have to explore. And municipal officials have to explain.

The officials don't *own* the municipality; the residents do. Let municipal officials explain what they've done, what they're doing, what they plan to do.

Start the ball rolling. Ask your mayor or your nearest municipal official: "What have you done for me lately?"