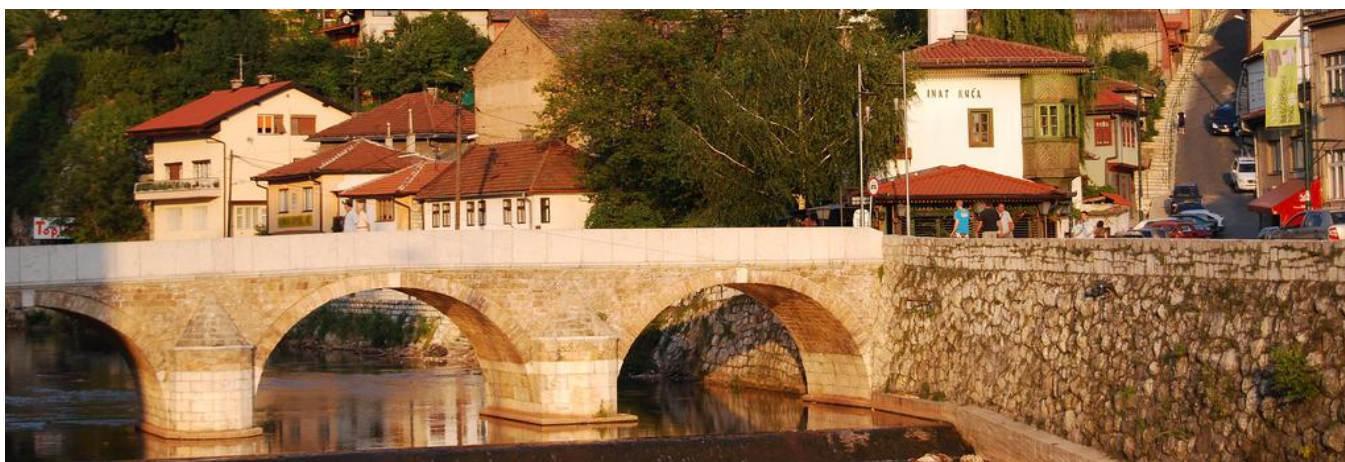


REGIONAL COMPETITIVENESS INITIATIVE VOL 4 ISSUE 1 MARCH 2010

HIGHLIGHTING SUCCESSES OF USAID COMPETITIVENESS PROJECTS THROUGHOUT THE E&E REGION



ABOVE Regional stakeholders from South East and Central Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Caucasus will convene in Sarajevo in May 2010 at USAID's RCI Annual Conference. *PHOTO:* Jon Worth

FIFTH ANNUAL RCI CONFERENCE IN SARAJEVO, BiH

The 2010 Regional Competitiveness Conference in Eastern Europe — Coming Out of the Global Economic/Financial Crisis — will take place from May 18 to 20 in Sarajevo. USAID Europe and Eurasia Bureau's Economic Growth Office (EE/EG) has invited regional stakeholders from South East and Central Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Caucasus to this annual event, which will feature local and international experts. Participants will share best practices, success stories, lessons learned, and future opportunities for cooperation, as well as USAID project experience in the region.

We invite you to visit the [RCI e-registration page](#) to register for this event. Participants may also contact the event coordinator, [BC Serdon](#), for further assistance and information.

Highlights for this three-day conference include:

- Coming Out of the Global Economic/Financial Crisis
- Access to Finance: FDI and EU Funding
- Leveraging Donor Resources
- USAID future strategic goals in the E&E region
- Workshops: IT, Tourism, Agribusiness, Finance, and Workforce Development
- New Partnership for Financial Stability activity and new Economic Growth programming.

UPCOMING RCI EVENTS

March 30–31

Moldova ICT Summit 2010: Empowering Development through Information Technology
Chisinau, Moldova

April 6–7

2nd Workforce Development Workshop
Skopje, Macedonia

April 7–8

IT B2B Matchmaking Event
Skopje, Macedonia

IT2BUSINESS WEB SITE INCREASES ICT COMPETITIVENESS FOR BUSINESSES

REGIONAL

Funded by RCI, the **IT2BusinessSolutions** Web platform is now an integral component of USAID's support for increased ICT competitiveness in Eastern European and Caucasus countries. The portal, designed and developed by ESI Center Bulgaria (<http://esicenter.bg>), facilitates contact between IT solution and service providers and businesses in other economic sectors, such as tourism, banking and finance, food industry, manufacturing, and agribusiness.

To date, 35 small business IT solution and service providers from 12 countries in the region have registered 86 successfully implemented products and services. The promotion of high-quality IT solutions at the local level has given regional businesses more access to suitable products. In addition, regional small businesses can receive better software management support and a broader choice of applicable IT solutions, consultations, and staff training.



For stakeholders in the region, IT2Business will be instrumental in promoting regional competitiveness.

You can find the Web site at: <http://it2business.org>

CONFERENCE CELEBRATES ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF CISCO ACADEMIES

MOLDOVA



ABOVE A Cisco Academy student

Since 2008, the USAID Competitiveness Enhancement and Enterprise Development (CEED) project has been actively engaged in introducing Cisco Networking Academy courses to leading Moldovan educational institutions. The courses are an effective tool to bridge the existing ICT networking skills gap in the country and bring

networking skills up to the requirements of the modern labor market.

Launched with USAID support, four local Cisco Networking Academies are now successfully operating on a sustainable basis within the Finance and Banking College, Free International University, Technical University of Moldova, and the Moldova State University. The courses, which are offered as optional paid training after working hours, enable students to qualify as Cisco Certified Networking Associates (CCNA) during their student years. Highly prized by many prospective employers, this credential gives graduates an advantage in the labor market.

The CEED project was instrumental in introducing IT Essentials PC hardware and software courses in three high

schools, and the curriculum is under way in another 10 high schools. Courses cover the fundamentals of PC hardware and software as well as some advanced concepts, and prepare students for a career in ICT and other sectors.

More than 170 Moldovan students currently enrolled in the Cisco courses are gaining cutting-edge and marketable IT networking skills. Acquiring business knowledge and skills during their university years affords Moldovan IT graduates a significant advantage when they enter the job market, thereby helping to mitigate the IT labor shortage in the country.

To celebrate the accomplishments of the Cisco Networking Academy Program in Moldova, a national conference *Cisco*



ABOVE Ambassador Chaudhry

Networking Academy Program – a Successful Model for Educating ICT Skills was held on February 11, 2010 in Chisinau. It brought together 150 distinguished guests, including U.S. Ambassador Asif J. Chaudhry, representatives from Cisco Networking Academy Program in

Romania, government, USAID, and the business community, as well as teachers and students from leading Moldovan educational institutions in the ICT field.

USAID OPENS NEW AGRICULTURE INFORMATION OFFICE

ALBANIA

On January 22, 2010, USAID launched a new initiative to support the development of Albania's agricultural markets. In a ribbon cutting ceremony at Tirana's Wholesale Market, USAID official, Sean Huff, and Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection, Tokli Thomai, inaugurated the new Market Information and Trade Facilitation Office. At the ceremony, Mr. Huff described how the office would address several issues constraining the development of Albania's agriculture sector.

"Timely and accurate market information is key to reducing uncertainty about market trends," Huff said. "It enhances competition among farmers, traders and consumers, and enables farmers to respond effectively to market demands. Through programs like the opening of this new information office, USAID hopes to enhance the competitiveness of Albanian products in domestic and international markets."

In partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection and the Agrifood Traders Union, the office will collect market data for select agriculture commodities; disseminate information regarding prices, availability, and market trends to wholesale traders; and facilitate sales transactions between farmers and wholesale traders. USAID's Albanian Agriculture Competitiveness program supports suppliers, farmers, processors, and traders to increase productivity, improve quality, respond effectively to business opportunities, and establish long-term business relationships.

Although the concept of a market information and trade facilitation office is relatively new to the region, its



ABOVE USAID Program Officer, Mr. Sean Huff cuts the ribbon with President of the Agrifood Traders Union, Mr. Roland Hysa (left) and Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Tokli Thomai (right), at the entrance of the new Market Information and Trade Facilitation Office in Tirana.

application is expected to result in a significant increase in sales transactions and reduce the reliance on imported fruits and vegetables.

Initial steps have already begun to produce results. Since USAID and the Ministry of Agriculture launched Albania's first multi-media information system in January 2009—the Agribusiness Market Information System or SITA, its acronym in Albanian—has been providing thousands of farmers and traders with daily wholesale and retail prices for 22 commodities from four major markets around the country. The information is sent through newspapers and Internet notifications, in addition to broadcasts throughout the day on two national television channels. SITA also produces weekly and monthly market analysis reports.

For more information about USAID activities to support the Albanian agriculture sector, please visit <http://albania.usaid.gov>.

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT SUPPORTS BOSNIAN PRODUCERS

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

The Fostering Agricultural Markets Activity (FARMA) is a four-year, \$14-million agricultural development project jointly funded by USAID and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

The objective of FARMA is rapid, sustainable, and broad-based economic growth through demand-driven assistance aimed at improving competitiveness of BiH agricultural and food producers, as well as through expanding sustainable production, processing, and sales of agricultural products. FARMA is expected to provide targeted demand-driven assistance to agricultural associations, cooperatives, market integrators, and SMEs in targeted subsectors to take advantage of domestic, regional, and international market opportunities.

FARMA works in the subsectors of dairy, fruit, and vegetables, in addition to medicinal, aromatic plants, and honey. These products were selected on the basis of their high potential for rapid, sustainable, and broad-based growth measurable through increased sales, exports, and employment. Program activities are decentralized with staff in Sarajevo, Tuzla, Banja Luka, and Mostar.

FARMA works with the regional development agencies, relevant associations, and other stakeholders to build its capacity to formulate policy issues, develop strategies for priority reforms, and effectively lobby for policy changes at all levels of BiH government.

In addition to working to achieve increased income, FARMA directs its efforts to help BiH agriculture meet international standards and move closer to European Union accession.

INTERNSHIP PROGRAM GENERATES JOBS AND SKILLS FOR MACEDONIA YOUTH

MACEDONIA



ABOVE Interns at Next Sense, a software company that has hired three interns through *My Career*.

Unemployment regularly exceeds 36 percent in Macedonia where more than half of those aged between 18 and 24 do not have a job. The Macedonia Competitiveness Project's National Internship and Job Program, known as *My Career*, targets this problem head on. It matches job seekers—particularly recent

graduates and other youth—with internships and positions to bridge the gap between skilled worker supply and demand.

The success of this program is transforming the labor market in Macedonia, increasing acceptance of internships among companies and making it easier for them to recruit and hire the best available talent. Internships are also gaining popularity among youths as a way to break into the job market.

The main tool is the Internship and Job Portal. A free, Web-based application, www.mycareer.com.mk has registered 4,795 students and 246 companies in its first year. By early January 2010, 520 students had completed internships found through the portal, and 100 were offered full-time jobs.

MACEDONIAN PRODUCERS EMBRACE FOOD SAFETY STANDARDS

MACEDONIA

Over the past few years, Macedonian companies in the Wild Gathered Products (WGP) Value Chain have become aware of the many benefits of implementing quality standards and food safety systems. Macedonian processors and exporters have benefitted from the experience gained through participating in trade fairs and study tours organized by AgBiz. They have gained a better understanding of the importance of food safety assurance.

Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) is one of the most widely accepted food safety systems designed to enhance trade between countries. For HACCP to work, it must be implemented and maintained at all levels and by all parties involved in the value chain: producers, processors, wholesalers, and/or the retailers with whom they trade.

Implementation of food safety systems based on HACCP principles has been a legal requirement for all Macedonian food operators since 2009. There was concern that food-related firms would not be able to adapt to the standard in the required time frame. This was recognized as an obstacle to WGP value chain competitiveness enhancement at both the primary consolidator level, where most participants are micro-enterprises or individuals, and at the level of larger exporting companies that source their raw materials from consolidators.

AgBiz recognized the need for HACCP implementation support. In partnership with the WGP companies, AgBiz engaged four local consulting companies and two local consultants to implement HACCP-based food safety systems in 30 consolidator companies and in the three largest WGP



ABOVE Implementing food safety principles at a wild gathered products company.

exporters. Additionally, support for four WGP exporters helped them achieve organic certification. This set of activities had a positive impact not only on the businesses themselves, but also on the entire supply chain by establishing long-term cooperation arrangements between consolidators and exporters and assuring a continued market for the wild products gathered by an estimated 60,000 low-income WGP gatherers.

“This is an enormous move in the right direction for the future of the Wild Gathered Products Value Chain. We are dedicated to the continued implementation of joint activities such as HACCP implementation through the newly established ‘Sumski Plod’ association,” said Mr. Dragan Markovski, a WGP consolidator. ❖