

Swiss Increasing Market Employability Programme

Newsletter

Issue N° 3

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The Swiss supported Increasing Market Employability Programme - IME works toward creating an enabling environment for three identified high-growth target sectors: Sustainable Agriculture, Adventure / Active Tourism and Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

IME's success through numbers: January 2021 - June 2021

By providing incentives for market actors in the sectors and instigating a higher-quality utilization of business support services, the following achievements have been accomplished to date:



The investment in a cooling capacity at 'Dobra Zemja' created conditions for waste reduction and an increased purchase of organic products, grown by local farmers

573 jobs created - out of which 267 women and 236 youth

45% average increase in sales by IME supported companies

145 companies supported to introduce new technologies, innovations, standards, and/or improve business practices

438 companies utilized business development services to improve competitiveness out of which 42 companies are women owned

CHF 10,9 MIL resources already mobilized or in a process of loan approval with the support of IME financial facilitators

33 adopted new standards and certifications

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICT)

Innovative services that drive growth of tech companies

Developing ICT solutions requires technical and specific industry driven knowledge. IME supported **6 ICT companies** (*Pixyle, Inteligenta, Magix, INS, Aspekt, Web Factory*) who received external expertise for improving their core business operations.

[Magix.ai](#), a start-up company focusing on applied artificial intelligence and



machine learning, introduced a new Chatbot tool for direct communication between banks and clients. The Chatbot is a

computer program capable of understanding user questions, providing intelligible and relevant answers. A specific know-how in artificial intelligence and machine learning has been used, which helped the company further develop new functionalities of their product, as requested by potential clients at pre-sales meetings. Magix.ai has been engaged in communication with banks and other financial institutions for expanding the sales of other products and services.

[Aspekt](#) is software development and IT consulting company delivering flexible, scalable, and integrated software



solutions, comprised under the Aspekt Product Suite. They received support to develop a new product page, utilizing the website for introducing Aspekt Product Suite in front of potential clients and engaged expertise in analysing potential clients in CIS and MENA markets, resulting in profiling future client base, and developing case studies of prospective clients. This helped the company improve its marketing and sales policies, as well as their overall market exposure.

Macedonian startups conquer foreign markets in Europe and Asia

IME supported the newly established Expansion Launchpad - Educational and Mentoring Program of Startup Macedonia, which represents a platform for networking and connection of domestic start-ups with the

German and Japanese market. The 7 selected start-ups (*Creative Hub, InRoomPreview/ ProDizajn, Vision Dynamix, Matryoshka, doxMenu, MonoZero, Howitzer*) work directly with German (*36Chamber*) and Japanese (*BasicMath*) partners,

who are helping them enter foreign markets through mentoring and coaching sessions.

The implementing partners are responsible for executing market entry activities like organising pitching events, B2B meetings, networking opportunities etc. Start-ups are also exposed to opportunities for different partnership and co-funding models driven by the product development needs. Specific expertise provided by SwissEP is helping the start-ups in further developing and aligning their products/services per the received feedback by the German or/and Japanese market players.



Students develop cutting-edge ICT products for clients

Matching students with companies for developing client-based products is the most sustainable way of learning and acquiring practical skills. Being well-positioned and recognized as a training provider within the ICT community, the Seavus Education & Development Centre has designed a Student Project Mentorship Program. The program uniquely incorporates real projects and tasks, as a critical part of the all-inclusive learning experience for students at SEDC Code Academy. This is a way to create a challenging, yet safe environment for students to practice what they learned and more importantly to fully experience the 'provider - client' relationship.

The start-ups/ partner companies (*EnRoute*, *InRoom Preview*, *Psyent Consultancy*, *SimAlnd*) participating in the program act both as contributors

and beneficiaries. They define the projects for students, categorized in two different types: **1) Client project**, where the implemented activities are: refining client needs, implementing front-end part

front-end part of a web-based product, and confirming completeness of the product features.

For example, the 'Paintings Voting Tool' is being developed for the company 'InRoom Preview',



of a website, and confirming client needs satisfaction; or **2) Minimum viable product**, where the implemented activities are: refining end-user needs based on a basic market / trends research, implementing

representing a virtual art web gallery platform designed as a web-based solution for online exhibitions with functionalities for buying the arts, as well as organizing exhibitions, and competitions.

Business growth, efficiency, credibility and new opportunities through certification

Enhancing competitiveness through certification remains to be top priority for ICT companies. In its journey towards continuous improvement and excellence, the Macedonian company Axapta Masters, in cooperation with the consulting company DEL Solutions and the certification body TUV NORD CERT Skopje successfully implemented and adopted ISO 27001.

"The cooperation with DEL Solutions and the implementation of the ISO Standards, was a completely positive experience! The approach from both parties was both friendly and professional. Through the cooperation, we managed to establish better integration and implementation of standards in the daily way of functioning of Axapta Masters, simplifying and facilitating many of our work processes. The acquired certification undeniably leads to attraction of new potential clients. Certainly, our cooperation doesn't end here. It will continue to evolve in terms of upgrading and consulting, leading to simplification of the overall work process in the company." - Natasha Apostolovikj Gjorgjievska, HR Manager at Axapta Masters.



Axapta Masters is the fastest growing and leading Microsoft Partner in North Macedonia, operating globally. The company is a Gold Microsoft Partner with the experience and knowledge to provide an upgrade in business processes and technology, by applying practical cloud solutions.



Accelerating the digital transformation of the agricultural sector



Signing of MoC between IME and the Fund for Innovations and Technology Development

Digital technologies increase the scope of innovative ideas for positive impact on agriculture and food production. Realizing the importance of technology in this sector, IME supported the 'Digitalization of Agriculture' initiative of the Fund for Innovations and Technology

Development. IME participated in the Open Call for selection of advanced startup solutions that have already developed a prototype of an innovative product/service.

Within the challenge, four startups have been selected - Dron OPS, 8TEK DOOEL, AG

Futura and Agrodidaem tehnologija.

Implementation of all four digital solutions will lead to economic growth by enabling farmers to extract maximum production from their land. What is more, IME provides support in the form of individual mentoring sessions with the Fund beneficiaries and support in the commercialization of innovations. The assistance also extends to connecting startups with companies or farmers who would be potential users of their digital solutions/ services. Wider adoption of these digital solutions will contribute to increase productivity and income of agricultural holdings. This activity is also done in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE).

Selected startup heroes are now beginning their business journey to success! Eight most innovative micro and small food manufacturing startups were chosen to be assisted through the "Startup Heroes" challenge, realized by the Fund for Innovation and Technological Development and IME in cooperation with the corporate partner 'Tinex' supermarket chain.

For the first time, selected innovative products of the companies: Eval, Matryoshka, Plant Engineering, Pro-Fit VIS, Qinado, Scoop, Pivara Bakreski and Fila Kozmetik will be displayed on specially branded 'Startup

'Startup Heroes' Challenge: Startup companies will place their products on the shelves in Tinex supermarkets

Heroes" shelves at predefined locations within selected Tinex retail outlets. Tinex will provide favorable terms and conditions for start-ups to sell their new



Left to right: Goran Damovski - Team Leader (IME), Cvetanka Hristovska - Chief Brand Officer (Tinex), Kosta Petrov - Managing Director (FITD)

products through Tinex for a period of 12 months and integrate them in the digital marketing communication and in-store promotion. IME will provide experts to mentor selected startups in brand development, finalizing and increasing the attractiveness of products using neuromarketing tools and better preparation to become successful suppliers of Tinex supermarket chain. Direct market entry and mentorship will assist these startup companies to grow more rapidly, expand their know-how and create new jobs.

Contract farming model becomes a reality

Aiming to support the process of contract farming and contribute towards establishing favourable conditions in the country, IME supported the Macedonian Association of Agricultural Cooperatives (MAAC) and Agrotim to facilitate piloting of two different contract farming models: (i) processing capacity and farmers and (ii) processing capacity and cooperative/s. This will be further presented to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE) and used for final adaptation of the recently introduced national



support measure: 'Cooperation for development of new products, processes and technologies in agriculture and food systems (integrated projects)'.

Agrotim was engaged to facili-

tate contract farming production of organic pepper with three processing capacities. Ten contracts were signed with farmers to produce organic pepper on more than 10ha. Group education sessions were organized with local experts and input suppliers, and Agrotim expert provided on-farm mentorship to each farmer. MAAC, in close partnership with the Macedonian Association of Processors (MAP), started implementation of a pilot project to strengthen linkages and facilitate contract farming between processors and three selected agricultural cooperatives.

Sparkling success for the first Macedonian sparkling wine: Lazar Winery



In 2019, Lazar winery successfully launched small test production of sparkling wines that were sold on the local market in bulk, served by the glass. There was a high demand for the wine, and they decided to increase production of white and rose sparkling wines to be bottled and sold to restaurants, bars, and retail shops in the country. With Swiss support, Lazar Winery invested in new modern production technology to bottle prosecco and frizzante sparkling wines for the local and international markets.

"With the new semi-automatic machine, we speeded up the bottle filling process significantly – going from 500 bottles per work shift to 1500 bottles per hour. In this way we managed to respond to the increasing market demand for sparkling wine. We are proud to be creating a new consumer preference on the local market, as Lazar's frizzante and prosecco wine is the first domestic wine of this type". – the owner Lazar Ristov shared.

Leading experts develop a new version of the Law on Organic Agriculture

In order to provide harmonization with the latest EU regulation on organic production, a new version of the Law on Organic Agriculture is being drafted.



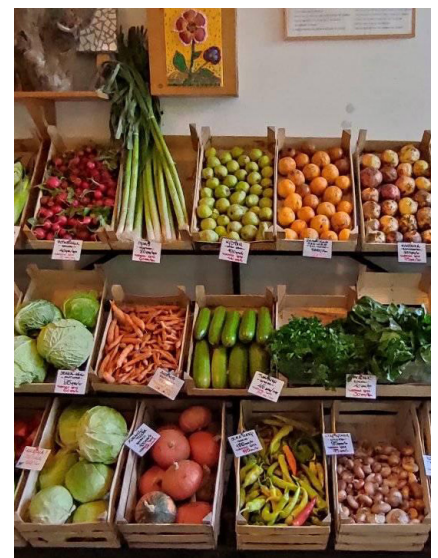
Production of organic hazelnut

Therefore, IME is assisting the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE) in engaging a working group of local experts, who are responsible for drafting the law chapters, providing recommendations and comments in the process of developing the new EU harmonized Law on Organic Agriculture.

Dobra Zemja: Supporting waste reduction and increased sales of organic products

IME supported Dobra Zemja cooperative to invest in cooling capacity thus considerably reducing waste and securing a continuous sale of organic products, through improved cooperation with the farmers in the value chain. Five long-term contracts were signed, and due to the capacity to store larger volumes of fresh products, less frequently deliveries are required.

The cooperative organized a training session with certification body ProCert to increase the capacity of 30 new potential suppliers in organic production.



Sales of organic products

ADVENTURE / ACTIVE TOURISM



World Champion Ralph Näf upgrades adventure tourism offer in Krushevo



Ralph Näf during a Press Conference in Krushevo

Diversifying the current adventure tourism offer in the country attracts both domestic and foreign tourists. A team of Swiss experts from the sport consulting company GFC Sports Management AG, led by world champion in mountain

biking Ralph Näf developed an analysis and a master plan for constructing four biking trails in Krushevo. The initiative for preparation of bicycle paths

and Hotel Panorama Spa Krushevo. This will supplement the existing tourist offer and further promote active tourism in Krushevo.



Group photo with conference attendees

according to international standards for mountain biking belongs to Ski Center Panorama

Watch the **TV Story** prepared by 360 Stepeni (Alsat M) on Ralph's visit [HERE](#).

Digitalizing the country's adventure tourism offer



Recent developments with COVID-19 have almost entirely globally suspended the travel industry. This has consequently influenced the adventure tourism market segment in the country. In the recuperation period, it is expected that more tourists will move away from mass tourism to more adventure/ active tourism. IME sees this as an opportunity for a more targeted and focused promotion of the values of adventure tourism (AT) and the

potential of North Macedonia to cater such services and products.

A partnership was formed with the leading online platform Grouper.mk to support the digital promotional campaign '[Destination Macedonia](#)'. The campaign supports various adventure tourism service providers to start online sales and engage in informal alliances for stronger promotion of destinations. Thus, they enhance visibility to end-customers and

encourage them to choose domestic travel particularly for short vacations or daily/weekend getaways.

Additionally, IME supported an alliance in the Mariovo region (led by Off Road Association for rural tourism) promoted six self-guided audio tours. Guided tours are directly targeting consumers and are promoted through various social media channels, including <https://ruraladventure.mk/>

Improving tourism products across destinations



Mountaineering hut Ljuboten

Supporting the renovation of the oldest mountain hut in the country - Ljuboten, built in 1931 will most certainly enrich tourism offer in the Shar Mountains. The hut is the only one in the country to have kept the original structure and

location since it was first built. Situated under the Ljuboten peak, the hut is managed by the Mountaineering Club Ljuboten, currently counting app. 100 active members. With IME's support, MC Ljuboten finalized the refurbishment of the lodge

of the mountaineering hut and increased accommodation capacity. Along with the remaining tourism offer in the Shar region, Ljuboten hut will be promoted to incoming tour operators to incorporate those products in their travel itineraries.

During COVID-19, horse-riding as an active tourism offer proved to be highly demanded by both domestic and foreign tourists. IME is co-investing with Sherpa Horse riding to expand its camping offering and improve the safety of tours and other tour operators to integrate new adventure tourism products and local suppliers into their supply chains.

Tourism in North Macedonia in the period January - July 2021 has marked a positive trend and an increase by 56.6 % compared to the same period last year. Apart from the vouchers for domestic tourism, the Government endorsed two IME supported projects: - [‘Safe Like Home’](#) campaign and the national digital platform [‘Safe Travels Stamp’](#), as main instruments for helping the sector to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic.

‘Safe Like Home’ has the purpose of promoting various destinations and activities in the country for boosting visits by domestic tourists in the summer / autumn 2021 seasons.

In parallel, IME supported national digital platform based on ‘WTTC Safe Travel Stamp’ protocols, assisted the Ministry of Economy and the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism to efficiently implement protocols for safe tourism. Through the platform, seven tourism chambers and national associations received public authorization to issue ‘Safe Travels Stamp’ and play an instrumental role in ensuring wider compliance with the safe standard among their members. So far, 188 firms acquired ‘Safe Travels Stamp’ through the platform.

‘Safe Like Home’ and ‘Safe Travels Stamp’ create positive changes in domestic tourism



‘Safe Like Home’ campaign

Gender and Youth Inclusion



Startup Macedonia Job Fair: New hires and promotion of the business sector

During the Startup Macedonia Job Fair, 10 start-up companies presented 74 job vacancies, employer branding prospects, and internship opportunities to around 200 students. The companies - CodeWell, Cognism, Data Masters, EmbedSocial, InPlayer, Microtica, Slice Macedonia, Startup Macedonia, TeliportMe and Upshift, had the possibility to present their products, corporate culture, as well as the current open positions for candidates in the

tech, marketing and sales industry. What is more, Thrivity, a local platform that matches job seekers and hiring companies also had an interesting presentation of their activities.

'I had dilemmas about my future employment, but thanks to this event, I feel more confident that my career development remains in the country.'
– said Ivan, a 4th year student at FINKI.

#ReFRESH Agribusiness & Tourism: Two student cross-sectorial hackathons

With the aim to bring digital solutions closer to the agriculture and tourism sectors, IME supported the Student Parliament FINKI (Faculty of Computer Sciences and Engineering) to organize two multidisciplinary hackathons. More than 30 students from FINKI, the Faculty of Agriculture Sciences and Food and the Faculty of Tourism (UTMS Skopje) worked in mixed groups for 48



You can visit 'Nasha Tezga' official page [HERE](#).

hours to come up with digital solutions applicable in the two sectors. The cross-sectorial #ReFreshAgriculture & Tourism Hackathon resulted in the development of an online platform for integrated incoming tourism offer and an online shop for rural agribusiness products. Both were presented to companies from the agribusiness and tourism sectors.

As a result of the hackathon, the NGO 'Rural Coalition' signed an agreement with the student developers to purchase the virtual shop for online sales of agricultural products named 'Nasha Tezga', available at the following [link](#). The platform offers sales of vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and other home-made products, which are locally produced by around 100 women from rural areas. The idea is that when potential consumers visit the online market, they first get acquainted with the way food is produced, and then make a purchase. The virtual market is a fusion of traditional domestic produce and the authentic life stories of female producers.

Employer Branding Academy becomes an official training program country-wide

Companies in our country are realizing the importance of employer branding and HR policies, working conditions, employee retention and organizational psychology. The Employer Branding Academy of Vita Institute

generation of students has already started their professional development.

The Employer Branding Academy participants are introduced to new, innovative, and inclusive HR policies and practices. Participating companies



Certificate Award Ceremony for the participants at the Employer Branding Academy

received accreditation by the Centre for Adult Education and the Ministry of Education and Science, enabling it to become a formally recognized educational program. Vita Institute hosted an event for the successful completion of two rounds of the program, while the third

integrate new recruiting practices and plans for employee's performance management. All academy participants develop their own employer branding strategy for retaining current employees and intensifying social media presence to increase company attractiveness.