

South East European Business Start Up Network *From Idea to Business*

Summary

The Academic Training Association (ATA) will establish a network of Business Support Centres (BSCs) in South East Europe, financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2007-2010). In addition to an existing centre already established in Kosovo, BSCs in respectively Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia will be established. Aim of the network is to foster sustainable economic development by supporting local economic and (higher) education institutions to promote entrepreneurship.

Introduction

ATA is a NGO based in the Netherlands, active in private sector development and higher education development in South East Europe. A precondition for a population to improve its well-being, especially in the Western Balkans is to gain access to economic and educational opportunities. ATA concentrates activities on small and medium enterprise (SME) development, the creation of an enabling environment for private sector development and providing higher education institutions the tools necessary to support the development of an entrepreneurial spirit in society. ATA sees these as cornerstones for sustainable economic development. Currently, ATA has two private sector development projects, financed by the Netherlands; a Regional Private Sector Development in the Western Balkans (PSD) and a Business Start-up Centre in Kosovo (www.bsckosovo.org). The new project will build on the experiences gained from these running projects.

The South East European Business Start Up Network

The new project offers training, consultancy, working space and access to micro-credit to young entrepreneurs. This leads to the establishment of new & innovative SMEs. The target group consists of youth, with a focus on university students and recent graduates (up to 3 years after graduation). The BSCs will cooperate with each other to exploit possibilities between SMEs to do business regionally. This will also facilitate the mapping out of regional obstacles to trade and make a lobby towards relevant EU institutions and regional governments stronger. Research will be conducted on regional obstacles for economic (SME) development. Annual and bi-annual reports will be published on the results. Furthermore, the project provides internship programmes involving (international) companies. Also, new curricula that better meet the demands of the (local) labour market will be introduced at the participating universities. Besides practically oriented training and assisting young people in establishing their own businesses, ATA aims to facilitate economic improvement by enhancing the capacity of its local partners in the project. Trainings will be offered to the relevant financial and management staff of the partner institutions. Examples of trainings that will be offered are Applied Project Cycle Management, Applied Financial Management and Applied IT Management Systems Development.

Partners

Various types of partners will be included in the project: national and municipal government (policy making), Chambers of Commerce and business alliances (policy influencing) and Higher Education Institutions (knowledge accumulation and reproduction). Local partners in other ATA projects voiced several interests and needs. The *Chambers of Commerce* showed interest in easing bureaucratic and political barriers to the functioning of SMEs, as well as in enhancing possibilities for regional and international trade. With assistance offered in the project *universities* are able to adjust their curricula and meet European standards, particularly those related to increasing the employability of their students. The interests of the *(local) governments* are to decrease youth unemployment as well as in easing bureaucratic and political obstacles to starting a business and cross-border trade.

Objectives, results and activities (2007-2010)

The main objectives of the project are related job creation, capacity building and policy making. ATA aims for the achievement of the following results by 2010:

- The local economic and educational partners will have reduced poverty levels under youth, women and vulnerable groups. They have done so by the creation of jobs at existing companies and through establishing new SMEs.
- The partner institutions will be operating more efficiently due to the implementation of new ICT Systems and (re)trained staff.
- Obstacles on national and international level in doing business that have been identified during the first two years of the programme will have been removed. The remaining is reduced, or on the political agenda.

These results are to be accomplished by undertaking the following activities:

- Establishing four Business Support Centres in respectively Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia providing training and career counselling services.
- Establishing a regional BSC Network.
- Training trainers and organising trainings for other beneficiaries.
- Organising workshops to improve curricula at faculties, adapted to the needs of the labour market.
- Developing a credit facility to be used as part of the Business Plan Competition.
- Starting SMEs, through organising business plan competitions, providing trainings, counselling, grants and further assistance.
- Setting up four functioning business incubators, accommodating starting SMEs.
- Upgrading ICT management systems operating at partner institutions.
- Training staff of partner institutions.
- Publishing 4 annual reports on the local SME sector in the respective areas and in the region as a whole.
- Organising conferences on SME Development in SEE, including regional SME fairs.
- Organising study visits to Western Europe.