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Competitive Economy Project

AgroNet – Building Stronger Links between Academia and the Food Industry

Serbian agribusiness has been experiencing constant progress over the past ten years, but there is still much to be done to catch up with developed economies of the EU. If this is to be done, cooperation and inter-connectedness among key stakeholders operating in the industry has to be improved to stimulate impactful knowledge exchange. This is particularly visible when examining lack of formal connections between higher learning institutions and the industry in Serbia. Much of the technical knowledge and innovation for private sector in the past decade originated abroad. This is primarily because universities in Serbia provide high quality theoretical knowledge, while lacking flexibility in responding to core industry needs. To take country's food industry to the next level this gap has to be addressed.

To develop a long-term sustainable solution for responding to constant changes in the market, USAID Competitive Economy Project (Project) supported Belgrade University, Faculty of Agriculture (FoA) to set up a flexible technical service centre to the business community i.e., innovative, short-term certification courses for staff development and life-long learning opportunities.



UCD and AgroNet team visiting industry lead companies across Serbia, April 2019

The Project supported FoA to establish AgroNet - Centre for Education and Research, founded by a team of distinguished FoA professors, to provide short certification courses based on US best practices. This delivery mechanism is supported by the new partnership with the University of California, UC Davis Post-harvest Centre (UCD), ensuring transfer of knowledge and research between two universities and most up-to-date solutions for the private sector.

The collaboration process involved a visit by the UCD team to Serbia to gain a better understand of local production, post-harvest, logistics, and marketing practices and challenges. Shortly after, the AgroNet team visited UC Davis on a study tour organized by the Project to attend

their 41st Annual Postharvest Technology of Horticultural Crops short course. The goal was to gain practical exposure to short courses system and establish better connections between two academic institutions. These visits resulted in AgroNet representatives working on a pilot short-term certification course for Serbian food processing companies, based on best-practice models implemented in the US.

This joint effort resulted in the first certification course titled "Post-harvest Biology and Technology." To better understand the needs of the industry and tailor the course curriculum to address these challenges, AgroNet had surveyed over 100 companies. Based on that feedback, the course was designed, to assist food SMEs to adopt new practices and technologies and add new value to production. As a part of outreach efforts, AgroNet partnered with the biggest business association in



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Serbia, Chamber of Commerce, to present the course to the companies throughout the country, and through this partnership they institutionalized it and ensured its sustainability. This partnership had enticed interest in the course and secured impressive turnout of participants in the first year – 36 local industry professionals, and foreign guests from Montenegro attended and participated in three days of technical training and two days practical on-field training in December 2019.

The response from the trainees was overwhelmingly positive:

"I was genuinely surprised by the sheer amount of quality information gained from the course. It allowed me to learn more technical knowledge related to apple storage management systems and provided new insights and ideas for future practices. Specifically, we were introduced to particular species of solitary bees used for large-scale crop pollination. This year, we leveraged this information to deploy solitary bees to pollinate our apple orchard. The pollination results were truly excellent! We also met two of our new partners - Frutorga and Dilmano Dilbero – that took part in the training. And I even realized there was still time to apply for EU-funded IPARD grants and USAID's DCA guarantee to further grow our business," stated Nikola Marašević, Development and Investment Manager, Dolina Morave



The first certification course for professionals from the food processing industry in Serbia, December 2019

Building on the achievements and positive feedback from the previous course, AgroNET continued to expand portfolio of courses. The next one organized shortly after was a three-day course titled "Intensive production of vegetables & fruits in protected areas". Based on participant feedback the course was moved away from Belgrade into one of the local municipalities in Serbia – Knic. Also, it was shorter, a three-day course. It was attended by 30 participants, including F&V producers, agro-food company representatives, and local municipal representatives, and covered a range

of topics related to shift from traditional to modern/protected environment protection, responding to rapidly visible climate change and changing export market demands.

The third course was focused on developing wine industry, titled "Modern approaches to wine production with a terroir stamp". Participants came from both leading and emerging wineries in Serbia and discussed and brainstormed about currently hot various topics such as: advantages of biodynamic approaches in wine production, digitalization of marketing and sales. Additionally, special focus was placed on Prokupac, a high potential autochthonous red wine variety, an emerging asset for Serbian wine sector that is currently seeking its identity.



Wine industry certification course, October 2020



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“This is the first time a three-day training covering the Prokupac variety was organized for winegrowers. The variety has much winemaking potential, so this is a very important step for our wine industry,” stated Slavica Todić, Head of the Viticulture Department at the University of Belgrade and Owner of Doja Winery.

The training received a very positive feedback from the attendees, as well as the industry as a whole. Due to COVID-19, it was limited to only 30 participants, despite extensive interest to take part in the training.

“After successfully piloting our ‘Postharvest Technology and Biology’ course and newly designed short-term certification courses, we are now ready to deliver new courses going forward. We are adopting to online system, but also looking forward to on-site field visits as our trainings involve hands-on practical exercises in various types of production environments,” stated Bogdan Mladenovic, Secretary of AgroNet.

Going forward, the new tailored courses related to current issues and industry-specific topics will be developed. With more structured coursework available to address the specific needs of the business community, both large SMEs and small-scale F&V producers and growers will benefit in the future as employees have more and more opportunities to learn new skills and continue their professional development.

“The huge interest in our courses shows we’ve done a good job. In the meantime, we continue to improve cooperation between the public, private and academic sectors. Together, we represent a strong alliance to push forward innovation and advance economic growth. This is just the beginning,” added AgroNet Director, Dr. Vlade Zarić with a big smile.