



VIBRANT ICT-BPO SECTORS FOR INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

1. BACKGROUND

The information and communications technology (ICT) and business process outsourcing (hiring external associates in business processes - BPO) sectors play a key role in the rapid transformation of markets in the Western Balkan countries. The COVID-19 crisis further accelerated the already rapid digital transformation. This, coupled with social distancing, made offsite delivery of services and outsourcing more important than ever before. To leverage this digital momentum, RECONOMY designed and started the implementation of an intervention in the Western Balkans to promote and strengthen the “regional value addition” of the ICT-BPO sectors.



RECONOMY is a program of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation in partnership with local and regional organizations in the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkan countries. RECONOMY stands for “starting afresh,” which refers to its role in revitalizing the developing economies in the regions.

The goal of RECONOMY is to enable women and youth, in particular excluded and disadvantaged groups, to benefit from economic opportunities by supporting them to increase their income and take up decent/green jobs inclusively and sustainably. To accomplish this goal, RECONOMY works along three pillars:

- **Skill Gap and Employment Opportunities:** Enhancing the (self) employability and income generation of target groups by improving the availability and quality of formal and non-formal training programs.
- **Financial and Business Services:** Contribute to the improvement and creation of new business value propositions.
- **Policies and Regulations:** Strengthen the role of the private sector and other target groups to effectively advocate for better economic opportunities and participate in the development of policies and regulations.



2. APPROACH OF RECONOMY

RECONOMY has used the inclusive systems approach – also known as the Market Systems Development (MSD) approach – to build initiatives that fit a specific country while examining how these can be adapted to other countries in the region, as opposed to choosing a one-size-fits-all strategy. To effectively implement its activities, RECONOMY relies on creating partnerships to generate significant and sustainable results.

RECONOMY's contribution to the regional value addition focuses on three areas:

- ▶ **Thematic focus.** In response to the dynamic nature of the new reality, especially upon the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, RECONOMY evaluates concepts and initiatives that foster collaboration and quick learning.
- ▶ **Institutional focus.** RECONOMY aims to serve as a multi-stakeholder initiative by bringing together and creating synergies among private-sector enterprises, public-sector institutions, academia, and civil society organizations. To support improvements in all systems and for all target groups, RECONOMY focuses on cross-cutting sectors.
- ▶ **Territorial focus.** RECONOMY cooperates with local partners to develop innovative ideas and harness diversity to put forward initiatives with high potential for regional replication.



3. ICT-BPO IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Western Balkans region has emerged as one of the most attractive regions for outsourcing.¹ The region is increasingly becoming very competitive in ICT and BPO. For example, in [North Macedonia](#), 1,957 economically active ICT enterprises bring in 879,65 million euros in annual revenue and employ 15,093 people, with a tremendous potential to increase these numbers. The [outsourcing sector](#) in North Macedonia generated 2.1% of the nation's real GDP in 2018 and employed 5,713 full-time workers, 1,174 more compared to the previous year. This number is predicted to surpass 15,000 by the end of 2022.

Also, the ICT industry in Kosovo has a very high potential for job creation. The [Future Workplace Platform's](#) recently released data indicated that there are 7,7623 ICT-registered firms. In [Montenegro](#), there are now about 800 ICT businesses, and that number has been fast increasing as IT businesses displaced by the conflict in Ukraine relocate throughout the region.

In general, some qualities make the entire region so appealing and competitive for both ICT and BPO. First, the labor force is technically capable of competing with other countries. A distinguishing feature of the Western Balkans is its young population compared to other European countries. Youth [constitutes](#) 21.27% of the overall population in the Western Balkans with a median age of 38.1 years and they speak multiple languages.² Second, the location of the Western Balkan countries is close to major clients in European countries. Third, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, home-based working models have been developed that made physical presence unnecessary in ICT-BPO-related services. In addition, the internet connection has facilitated the working-from-home model.

Not everything is rosy; the ICT-BPO sectors in the Western Balkan countries also present several challenges that need to be addressed.

1 <https://absl.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ABSL-Report-final.pdf>; https://masit.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/masit_report_final_outsourcing_compressed-1.pdf; https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/finance-and-investment/sector-specific-sources-of-competitiveness-in-the-western-balkans/business-process-and-information-technology-outsourcing_9789264055698-7-en#page2.

2 <https://connecting-youth.org/publications/publikim17.pdf>



- 1** First, there is limited access to foreign markets or difficulty in acquiring new clients on the international market. This constraint arises from the limited information available to find the right client/partner due to the underperformance of business services (e.g., information/research and knowledge generation function).
- 2** Second, there is a critical problem in recruiting staff with the right skills profile. Many of the job vacancies remain unfilled and firms struggle to recruit people with the right skills. The primary reason for this is a mismatch between the skills developed by the region's education systems and training providers (as well as relevant intermediation services) and those demanded by employers.
- 3** Third, only a limited number of enterprises are successful at entering new markets, and most of them believe that they are not able to make full use of the opportunities of entering these markets. The main problem lies in the little collaboration and cooperation between industry actors.

4. FROM ANALYSIS TO ACTION: THE ROLE OF RECONOMY

Leveraging the potential and addressing the challenges of the ICT-BPO sector of the Western Balkans required quick action. For this, RECONOMY partnered with Help – *Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe*. Help is a German non-governmental organization founded in 1981 which has a worldwide presence through the implementation of development projects. Help implements the promotion and strengthening of the ICT-BPO sectors through its regional offices in the Western Balkan countries.

The goal of the intervention is to improve employment opportunities for women and youth, and other vulnerable groups through skills development in the ICT-BPO sectors, improve the business services and advocacy of the ICT-BPO enterprises and business organizations, as well as the development of market systems. To achieve this goal, RECONOMY has cooperated with a wide range of private sector enterprises and business organizations throughout the region and channeled all activities into the following directions.

- I** Support private enterprises and business organizations to improve and innovate their business models, so they could improve their value proposition locally and regionally.
- II** Facilitate the regionalization of the ICT-BPO enterprises, to build a stronger regional ecosystem.
- III** Ensure training providers develop commercially sustainable models for delivering demand-driven training packages for women and young people, as well as other disadvantaged and excluded groups to create more inclusive and sustainable benefits (income and jobs). RECONOMY supported training service providers (Semos Education Career Center) in gaining accreditation to offer trainees, internationally recognized certifications that would allow employers to recognize their skills both locally and globally.

Each of the actors involved in the RECONOMY intervention played a fundamental role in making this initiative impactful. Below are four interventions that with the support of RECONOMY, are increasingly contributing to the improvement of the ICT ecosystem in the Western Balkans.





CASE ONE: TOWARDS A STRONG ICT ECOSYSTEM



ICT Cortex is a business association established in March 2021 by 11 founding members. The aim was to structure, develop, and strengthen the ICT ecosystem.³ The Montenegrin economy is small and heavily dependent on tourism.⁴ The ICT sector was generally underdeveloped, and it needed key market players to push for policy changes and promote ICT as a career option for youth. RECONOMY supported the ICT Cortex in becoming a strong player in the ICT ecosystem in Montenegro, thereby addressing the sector's problems. The mission of ICT Cortex is to improve the competitiveness of the Montenegrin ICT sector through the education of new staff and upgrading existing IT staff skills, cooperation with different stakeholders, and public-private partnerships.

The Montenegrin ICT sector is underdeveloped and it is mostly dominated by micro and small ICT companies. The ICT ecosystem provides limited support to new ICT start-ups. In addition, the current ICT companies suffer from an IT skill gap. The effective tackling of these challenges would not have been possible

without RECONOMY's support. RECONOMY supported ICT Cortex and strengthened its capacity to become a key player that represents the ICT industry in Montenegro and the region effectively.

RECONOMY was the first that supported ICT Cortex in several ways.

Innovative business model through ICT Cortex Academy

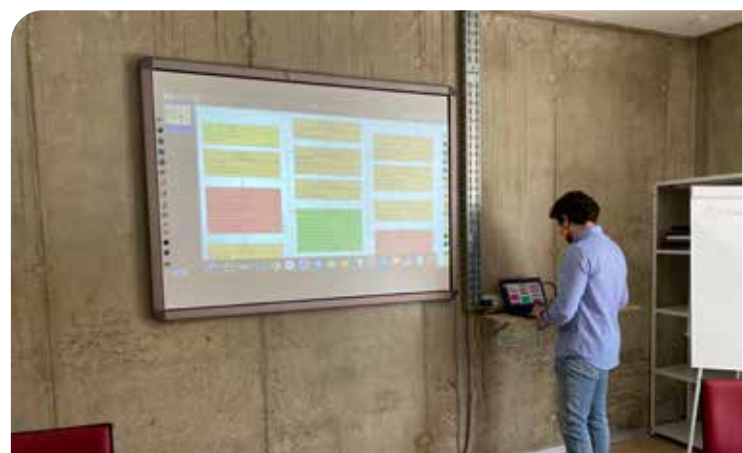
First, RECONOMY supported making the association's business model an innovative one, especially considering that everything was happening several months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most critical component of this innovative business model is the establishment of the ICT Cortex Academy, the first initiative of its kind in Montenegro. With the Cortex Academy, ICT Cortex is able to provide its members' employees with formal and non-formal education training courses, depending on their needs. This new service has contributed to the increase of potential members' interest to join the business association.

In addition to offering Cortex Academy services to the ICT Cortex members, the Academy offers training to other people as well. Its courses are designed for high school and university students and adults, (employed or unemployed) who are interested to gain knowledge and skills and specialize in certain fields of information technology. The Academy provides courses in a variety of subjects, including programming, software testing design, marketing, and project management.

An important component of the Academy activity is to train and support the employment of people from vulnerable groups. To reach these people, starting in January 2022, the Cortex Academy established cooperation with the Montenegrin Ministry of Education, local governments, and various schools directly.

³ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/787451545030793133/pdf/Montenegro-Growth-and-Jobs.pdf>

⁴ <https://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/100501492011108906/mpo-mne.pdf>





Additionally, the Cortex Academy has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Education so the schools continuously share data with the Cortex Academy related to pupils/ students from vulnerable groups. The Academy has also established a partnership with the Employment Agency of Montenegro which shares information about the Academy's training courses with all the registered jobseekers that could be interested to attend. The Cortex Academy was established in March 2021 and since then, it has significantly enhanced the IT skills of jobseekers and people from vulnerable groups. So far, the Academy has trained 678 people (524 men, 154 women, and 24 people representing minority groups). The training program consisted of two phases. The first phase included online training and the 382 graduates who passed the examination at the end of the training received internships. 13 of them got jobs with ICT Cortex members.

A better understanding of the ICT market

RECONOMY is supporting ICT Cortex to conduct thorough ICT market research to obtain a clear picture of the ICT industry's gaps and potential niches to invest in. Another upcoming association activity that is planned to start in December 2022, will be conducted with RECONOMY support and is entitled "Your skills for the Future of Work). ICT Cortex Academy will provide international certifications to IT professionals. This activity aims to help small and medium IT enterprises to get a skilled workforce and prevent brain drain from Montenegro.



"RECONOMY was the first to recognize our potential. RECONOMY helped kick off both ICT Cortex and the Cortex Academy. Thanks to the RECONOMY support, the association grew into one of the most important, innovative organizations in Montenegro and tripled its membership in just a year," stated Ferida Mandic, Chief Project Officer, ICT Cortex.

As a result of all these initiatives, ICT Cortex is now a prominent actor in advocating for creating a supportive institutional and regulatory environment for the Montenegrin ICT sector. More specifically, ICT Cortex took part in a number of working groups organized by the Montenegrin government to prepare the Strategy for Digital Transformation and the Strategy for Digital Nomad.

Besides contributing to the development of business- and ICT-friendly public policies, ICT Cortex is pushing the government to effectively implement innovation and R&D legislation in Montenegro. The ICT Cortex became a prominent player in the ICT sector with the support of RECONOMY, and with this new strong position, the association was able to acquire funding from the Montenegrin government.

Intervention-based Case Study



The choices that RECONOMY makes are geared towards facilitating a “human-centered development”. This is at the core of the ‘leave no one behind’ (LNOB) agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Jovan was one of those that benefited from the ICT Cortex activities.

Jovan was just 17 years old when his professor urged him to participate in a three-month training course that ICT Cortex was organizing. The course was developed with the support of RECONOMY. After passing an entry test, only 28 out of 60 students from the Vaso Aligrudic secondary vocational electrotechnical school were selected. Jovan was one of the students selected to attend the training course. He and his team went through a simulated work process and developed a web application information system for their school library. The entire training was conducted in seven ICT Cortex member companies, which are leaders in the ICT sector in Montenegro.

“With the use of cutting-edge technologies, the team and I were introduced to some sophisticated technical skills linked to programming.”



In addition to learning new technical skills, Jovan acknowledged that this was a truly unique hands-on experience. *“We were introduced to IT businesses, we saw what it was like to work in IT companies, with large projects and very experienced mentors. We also received soft skills training in communication and project presentation.”*

After this training ended in 2021, one of the ICT Cortex members noticed Jovan’s talent and offered him a job as a Junior Developer, a position that typically pays 600 dollars per month. Jovan’s passion for ICT led him to pursue his university studies in information systems and technologies in Montenegro. He received a scholarship as a result of his high-Grade Point Average. Jovan is doing a fantastic job of striking a balancing his job as a Junior Developer and his studies.





CASE TWO:

BETTER LEARNING MOBILITY OPPORTUNITIES IN THE REGION

Linking supply and demand has always been a challenge in the ICT-BPO. An even greater challenge is finding the right solution to establish trust and links between the training providers and the private sector.

With the support of RECONOMY, Semos Education has made significant progress in developing a career center to provide their students added value through career guidance for retraining or employment but also to serve as a platform through which the private sector can achieve dynamic growth with quality jobs. Furthermore, Semos Education provides internationally certified training, which makes it more appealing for replication in the Western Balkans.

Semos Education is a private enterprise located in North Macedonia, whose main business line is to develop courses for diverse end users with varying levels of computer technology proficiency. Semos Education places special emphasis on establishing strong relationships with the private sector to understand their skill requirements and based on that, develop tailored training.

To effectively bridge the labor market supply with demand, Semos Education established a career center whose goal is to act as a conduit between job seekers and organizations looking for highly qualified staff. The Career Center worked to develop a highly skilled workforce with a focus on software and IT. In addition, the Center aimed at bridging trainees with potential employers in the market. The Center has been offering its services to a wide range of individuals and businesses. The increasing demand for its services required adaptations in its business model to preserve its leading role in this sector and start providing its services regionally. At this point, RECONOMY steps in.

With RECONOMY's support, Semos Education's business model has changed in several ways.

Enhancing internal operational processes

RECONOMY supported the improvement of the internal operational processes of Semos Education's Career Center. The Center used to own a lot of raw data about the potential trainees, companies, and other sector-related data. However, it was unable to make use of all of them to plan its future operations. With the RECONOMY support, the Career Center created its own application which gathers data about the companies, the trainees, and the interaction between them.

Afterward, Semos Education implemented a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system that helped the Career Center manage all relationships and interactions with current and potential customers (both individuals and companies). Additionally, it made it possible to track all trainees' placement (in other words, measure its impact) and plan future resources of the center. This way, the CRM system is assisting Semos Education's Career Center to maintain contact with its stakeholders (companies, individuals, institutions), streamline procedures, and improve its profitability.

Adapting and innovating the business model

RECONOMY also played an important role in supporting Semos Education to adapt and innovate its business model in line with the dynamics of new market developments in the region, especially upon the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the support of the RECONOMY, the Career Center has managed to reach many more companies (partners) than it was planned.

Specifically, through the conversation and the exchange of information with the partners, the Career Center supported by RECONOMY, had an impact on the development of new courses and academies that will follow the needs of the companies. One of them was the Academy for Human Resources in the IT sector. This Academy is serving the needs of the ICT companies, by training potential candidates for HR managers and HR specialists that could serve these roles in the IT companies. This way, Semos began offering its students more value by providing career counsel-

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ing for requalification or employment as well as job-matching services acting as a platform for connecting the private sector with their students and graduates.

Ivana, the Career Center Manager, reached out to over 1,160 trained students (47% women) and over 50 companies in the past two years and connected trainees who want to make a change in their careers and companies that are looking for highly qualified personnel. Additionally, with RECONOMY support, the Career Center developed a database of students and their courses, skills, and qualifications so the Center staff can recommend them to the private sector and also follow their career progress. The Career Centre receives a portion of the course fee to ensure its sustainability and growth.



This way, Iva, Ilija, and 256 other students (39% women) who completed specialized training at Semos Education were not just provided career guidance through the Career Center but were also recommended for internships or employment in relevant private sector companies. So far, 305 students (108 women) found a job, made a career change, or made career progress in the field.

Diversifying business services

RECONOMY supported Semos Education diversify its value proposition by delivering new services. Talent partners is the concept developed by Semos Education that is intended to fill the gap between the education process and practical knowledge. Talent partners (companies) have the possibility to get recommendations for the best students from the training courses, offer scholarships for the best attendees, and offer projects/tasks to target talents for future internships or employment. So far, 11 companies have joined the initiative.



Sashka is one of the beneficiaries who has been reskilled and matched with an international ICT company in North Macedonia with the Career Center's full support.

Sashka is a 30-year old civil engineer by profession. She has over seven years of experience as a geotechnical engineer and civil engineer. She has, however, always been passionate about ICT, particularly programming. Sashka never stopped thinking about and projecting herself into her dream job as a programmer despite having a well-paid position that provided her with a decent life. Last year, Sashka made the decision to completely shift her career path and chase her dream. She enrolled in a programming course at the Semos Education Career Center. The Career Center, with the support of RECONOMY, had recently launched a special mentorship program in which businesses were invited to participate. Businesses used to develop special projects for the pro-

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programming course's trainees, and the best trainees could have a high possibility of starting working in one of such businesses.

Sashka notes that the training course lasted around six months. *"The whole process was difficult. I had to put forth a lot of effort to learn Python"*. After the course, the Career Center, through its connections with businesses, offered Sashka some recruiting interviews with potential ICT employers. Two months after finishing the course, Sashka began working her dream job, thanks to the intermediation of the Career Center. She is currently employed as a Junior Software Engineer in an international ICT firm with headquarters in the United States. Sashka has already been working there for almost a year and is thrilled to have chosen this new path in her career. Sashka is working in a fulfilling job. Aside from that, Sashka now makes significantly more than she did in her previous job.



"With the RECONOMY support, we began to think deeper and more quickly, and we also put our concept ideas into action faster. SEMOS Education came up with the concept ideas, but RECONOMY pushed us to think beyond borders and start making the private sector our key partner in the business model network," Ivana Chiplakovska, Manager of the SEMOS Education's Career Center in North Macedonia.

With all these developments, the business model of North Macedonia's Semos Education's Career Center is being replicated in Serbia. Initially, it started with *Business-to-Customer* offers, to eventually become a full-fledged Career Center. In addition, RECONOMY supported Semos Education to introduce six new internationally certified training courses for the Serbian market allowing them not only to be competitive in the market but also to ensure a qualified labor force is supplied based on the latest IT-demanded skills by the labor market.

In response to the new ways of working that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic one observes:

- ▶ a short-term positive market response from this intervention that constitutes a breakpoint in the increased demand for online (internationally) certified courses and career counseling from the course participants and
- ▶ employers' confidence in enlarging their team of qualified staff shortening the time they spend on recruitment and requalification by half.



CASE THREE:

TOWARDS AN EMERGING GAME DEVELOPMENT HUB

One way to boost employability is by increasing the number of start-ups. Start-ups create direct employment by starting new businesses that need operating employees. Creating a start-up and managing a business, require some sets of skills that have been offered by the Serbian Games Association (SGA).

According to the most recent industry [report published by the Serbian Games Association \(SGA\)](#), not only did the gaming industry in Serbia achieve record revenues of 120 million euros in 2021, but other important factors like the number of development teams, their funding, and the participation of women are all increased. Video games made in Serbia have now been downloaded and purchased more than 350 million times. This industry now employs more than 2,100 people, about a third of whom are women.

SGA is a non-profit membership organization serving all businesses and individuals who create games in Serbia. The SGA's goal is to improve the talent and creativity of those working in the gaming industry and make SGA members competitive in the regional market. In addition, the SGA works to improve the gaming ecosystem for developing and releasing video games in Serbia and the region. The SGA was established in 2018 and has more than 100 members. SGA's members' voices are so important in shaping its activities.

“The latest annual survey with our members confirmed that they were lacking the necessary array of specific business skills relevant to the gaming sector, and more specific insights and skills related to accessing funding opportunities,” Relja Bobić, Program Director, SGA.



In light of these needs, RECONOMY supported the SGA in developing tailor-made business skills development workshops called “Game Funding Bootcamp”. The Bootcamp took place between February and April 2022, with a total of 11 sessions/workshops. 68 participants coming from Serbia, North Macedonia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, joined the Bootcamp sessions. The Bootcamp had several modules, focusing on different ways of acquiring funding and managing a business toward raising investments. These include covering insights into public funding, crowdfunding, publishing deals, mergers and acquisitions, venture capital, or angel funds, as well as practical related topics such as administration, negotiation skills, pitching and presentation skills, business plan writing, and other pertinent hard and soft skills.



The Bootcamp has produced benefits that can be viewed from two different angles. First, everyone who participated in the Bootcamp, acquired new critical knowledge and skills that they are now using in their business activities. For example, some participants have already started to explore funding opportunities for their gaming enterprises. In addition, the Bootcamp participants will utilize their new knowledge and skills to train new potential employees for the gaming industry.

Second, the SGA improved its business model by granting its members exclusive access to the Bootcamp materials and by sharing with them valuable information about potential cooperation and programs beyond Serbia. Through the support of RECONOMY, the SGA started connecting with some like-minded organizations in other Western Balkan countries (for example, the Magda Association in North Macedonia), and they are collectively currently working to improve the gaming ecosystem in the region but also joining forces in potential projects acquisitions, creating critical mass and ensuring greater competitiveness.

“RECONOMY provided us the opportunity to test novel programs’ formats by making the SGA offering added value to its membership. In addition, it helped us to connect with the right players of the gaming industry in the region, with whom we started working collaboratively and collectively to improve the gaming industry in the region,” Relja Bobić, Program Director, SGA.

“Development” is the right word for describing the stage of gaming industry in Serbia and other regional countries such as North Macedonia. Although still young compared to the other well-developed gaming industry countries in Europe, the Western Balkan countries are on the offset of the constant growth and development in the last ten years or so. Foreign investors are drawn to the Western Balkans by the ecosystem’s expansion and the rapidly improving environment for game developers. These investors provide resources and chances for local growth in the development of high-quality and profitable games.

The expanding game industry in Serbia requires new and fresh talent to join their teams and there is a big demand for educated professionals in this area. To bridge the gap between

the students and the ecosystem that exists in the professional world, the Universities in Serbia have begun developing new curricula that will produce future generations of video game industry professionals. RECONOMY is here to work further with the SGA in providing opportunities to spur the development of critical knowledge and skills required in this industry.





CASE FOUR: FOSTERING FREELANCE DIGITAL ACCOUNTING SKILLS THROUGH CERTIFIED TRAINING

Digital transformation has created new opportunities for both workers and their employers. While the rest of the world was advancing toward digitization, COVID-19 happened at this lightning speed. Suddenly, firms were not striving toward digital transformation as a future objective. It was urgently required. In addition to increasing demand for technology-based goods and services, this area of digitalization is driving the creation of new jobs. Melita & Partners is one of the private sector companies that, with the support of RECONOMY, is investing in enhancing youth and other vulnerable categories' digital skills to meet the new pace of technological developments.

Melita & Partners is a private company based in Kosovo, established formally in 2010. It provides financial management solutions to businesses and other types of organizations, through QuickBooks® software and other support solutions. Over the span of ten years (up to 2020), Melita & Partner has scaled up its business, serving more than 500 domestic and international clients. Melita & Partners works with high professional standards and is certified by Intuit Certified QuickBooks® ProAdvisors and QuickBooks® Solution Provider for the Balkan region and this ensures a credible relationship with its clients. In 2017, Melita & Partners got the right to deliver international certifications on QuickBooks as well.

Once the pandemic hit the globe, and particularly the Western Balkans, Melita & Partners started working remotely, and that was the ideal moment for the company to think about how to offer new digital accounting services. The company's managing partners started brainstorming how to use the technology to expand its range of digital services. The main idea was to offer training about QuickBooks to youth and other interested people so they could later become certified digital accountants. To complete it, a curriculum, a platform, and other details were needed. At this point, RECONOMY provided its support.

Designing a relevant and attractive training curriculum

RECONOMY supported Melita & Partners in designing a training curriculum that consists of two major modules: QuickBooks Online and Freelancing. The idea behind this was to create new jobs for youth and others in the Western Balkans. To do this, the youth needed not only technical knowledge of QuickBooks but also how freelancing works. The company started delivering its first online training on How to Become a Freelance Digital Accountant.



A total of 31 candidates (22 women) attended the first training, and there are currently 14 participants (10 women) enrolled in the second and third training 35 candidates. To promote this new training course as an opportunity, especially for youth, Melita & Partners had open info sessions in the Faculty of Economy, University of Prishtina, and Faculty of Economy, University of Gjilan, where it provided 5 scholarships for students. In addition, social media served as a channel of promotion. More than 76,000 people were engaged through social media. Now, Melita & Partners is offering the *How to Become a Freelance Digital Accountant* training even in North Macedonia and Albania.



Nurturing future trainers

RECONOMY proposed to increase the number of people who could become trainers for such a service. Consequently, the partnership also concentrated on the Training of the Trainers. 4 trainers (3 women) were enrolled and have completed the training for trainers. In the first group of

training, “Become Freelance Digital Accountant” one of the trainers was already engaged. All trainers assisted during further lectures.



Discovering new freelance opportunities

Trained youth required a platform to work and discover new freelance opportunities. Thus, RECONOMY worked with Melita & Partners to promote “KUDO” which means “ANYWHERE” a platform supporting freelancing. Students with an economic background now have the chance to work as freelancers and conduct market research to collaborate with clients both domestically and abroad.

5. KEY TAKEAWAYS AND CONCLUSIONS

The role of RECONOMY in the ICT-BPO sectors has produced a variety of benefits and laid the foundation for future positive outcomes. The speed of the digital revolution has been significantly impacted in recent years. While many “traditional jobs” continue to face significant challenges, RECONOMY has seen a rapid development of ICT/BPO-related jobs. Knowledge creation in the ICT-BPO sector, facilitation of industry upgrading through training, and facilitation of access to new markets are crucial to accommodate the increase of demand in the Western Balkan.

The key to overcoming obstacles - fragmented markets, “zero-sum” rivalry for a limited number of competent workers, a lack of government awareness (advocacy), and cultivating the image of the sector (among women and young people, especially the vulnerable, as well as regional and international clients)—is improving coordination between key players in the region. RECONOMY is supporting such coordination.

Leading ICT companies will enhance local businesses’ offers so they can expand into new regional and international markets and provide a regional package. They will act as role models for other businesses to follow as their capacities grow. Through this approach, the business model that RECONOMY supports creates the basis for a ‘regional brand’ that leading ICT enterprises will promote.

The focus of RECONOMY is identifying and acting upon constraining factors on the systemic level rather than exclusively on the level of individual enterprises to benefit more women and youth. With the facilitative support of RECONOMY, private enterprises and business organizations in the Western Balkans’ ICT-BPO sector, have grown to be more significant local and regional players. These experiences are depicted in this case study. The actors covered in this case study have significantly improved the inclusive and sustainable provision of economic opportunities to women and youth, especially the disadvantaged and excluded groups. RECONOMY supports all of these initiatives and promotes both the already successful results as well as those still to come.

