

By Jonathan Plashkes

One of the LEADER Project's most important objectives is to ensure that our resources are directed towards areas which will receive the most benefit. The benefit we hope to achieve is to improve entrepreneurial skills and increase exposure to North American business school learning methods in Eastern Europe. This year, Skopje replaced another site in an effort to achieve this objective.

Skopje represents what may become the model for future site development: a diverse group of entrepreneurial minds that are currently operating businesses or wish to do so in the near future. Participants this year ranged in age from 24 to over 40 years old, with a wide range of educational backgrounds including business, engineering and computer science. Some had been operating their businesses for years; others were still working out where to begin. It was this wide diversity of perspectives that made the LEADER classroom experience a success this year in Skopje.

The LEADER curriculum is made up of three components: lectures centered on business skills, cases that illustrate these business skills, and business plan lectures. We use this curriculum at each of our seven sites, so it requires some tailoring to ensure it remains relevant at each site. In Skopje, this meant removing some of the less complex concepts and focusing on more advanced business theories, because the participants were more sophisticated and experienced here than elsewhere. What resulted was a collection of information that was both relevant and timely; participants could apply concepts directly to their businesses and better assess opportunities for the future.

Business planning was one area of focus that participants were skeptical of. We found that in many cases, there is very little formal documentation analyzing business opportunities before executing an idea. We hope that through the lectures and documents we provided to LEADER participants, more advanced planning and analysis will be undertaken to avoid failure in the future.

During our time in Macedonia, we had the opportunity to visit not only participants' businesses, but also several large and successful operations in Skopje. MZT Pumpi, Tinex and Johnson Control represent different industries, markets and strategies, providing us with a much better understanding of how businesses operate in Macedonia. The challenges that these businesses face are also being faced by this year's LEADER participants: attracting skilled or quality labour, difficulty transporting goods and dealing with competition. By visiting these businesses, we were more effective in our business coaching sessions with participants.

Even with a very busy schedule during our two weeks in Macedonia, we still had plenty of opportunities to enjoy ourselves. In Skopje, we couldn't help but enjoy the excellent food around town and the vibrant night life. On the weekend we spent a night in Ohrid, enjoyed a swim in the lake and visited the Monastery of Saint Naum. The amazing countryside surprised us all and likely sealed each of our plans to return at some point soon. Finally, it was the people that really made our two weeks a success. Everyone at the Chamber of Commerce and the businesses we visited took care to ensure that we were having a great time and that made all the difference.

*In 2007 Jonathan Plashkes was a LEADER instructor in Moldova and in 2008 he was the team captain in Skopje, Macedonia. He is an HBA graduate from the Richard Ivey School of Business and recently joined Deloitte as a Business Analyst in their Private Company Services division.*