



SUCCESS STORY

Apple Grower Triples Yields with USAID Facilitation

An apple grower's journey toward sustainability.



Refik Shabani at his apple orchard in the municipality of Lipjan, which has tripled its yield this year after applying new technologies and facilitation of USAID's agriculture program.

Photo: Luljeta Kuraja,
USAID Agriculture Growth
and Rural Opportunities
[Tetra Tech]

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~ Refik Shabani, apple grower and owner of Agrounion.

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October 2018 – Refik Shabani (51) clearly knows a thing or two about growing great apples. He has been in the agriculture family business for almost three decades as an input supplier, and lately also a grower of apples, pears and other fruit. Today his company Agrounion located in central Kosovo counts 30 employees and 30 seasonal workers.

After struggling with low yield after facing weather challenges in the past couple of years, Shabani has finally tripled his yield this year and is growing healthy and nutritious apples, which are selling in the local market. A fair part of this success has come after applying new technologies and facilitation from USAID's agriculture programs.

"Apple farming is rewarding, but it is not for everyone. It takes a lot of knowledge and hard work to be successful, but mostly it takes patience," said Shabani.

This year, from his 6 hectares of apple orchard located in Lipjan municipality, this grower expects to harvest and sell around 350 tons of apples. This is more than triple the yield of last year, whereby he harvested only 100 tons due to the late spring frost.

The harvest results are encouraging for Shabani, and maximized yields present a real potential for profitable and sustainable apple production.

In 2012, USAID assisted Shabani with a grant to expand his plot for an additional one (1) hectare of apples, bringing it up to a six (6) hectare plantation. He planted six apple varieties, and attended three study tours to prominent orchards in Europe and the region.

"The apple study tours offered by USAID were a real eye-opener for me, because they were very informative. For the first time I had a chance to see high quality apple saplings and learned never to plant second rate saplings in my orchard."

Upon returning from the study tours, Shabani said he gained a lot of insight into operation systems of highly organized orchards and realized how applying these approaches to his own orchard would make him more competitive and have a better impact on his business.

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Another contributing factor to his success Shabani associates to the work of international experts brought on by USAID through its agriculture programs. “The advice I received from international experts was instrumental in how I do things in my orchard today, from planting apple varieties, pruning techniques, to overall managing the orchard,” said Shabani.

In 2016, with the help of USAID’s Agriculture Growth and Rural Opportunities program, a new apple grading line was installed at collection center AMA in Lipjan, to serve the companies and other apple commercial farmers in the region of Rrafshi i Kosoves. AMA is a joint entity established to strengthen their economic capabilities by the following three companies in 2015: Agrounioni, Agrovizioni, and Me-Agro. The new unit washes, brushes, dries and grades by size, weight, shape and color, and also sorts apples and other round fruit by color. The capacity of the unit is 5 metric tons per hour and is considered that only this type of technology will enable apple producers to compete with imports and potentially enter the export market.

Shabani is adamant that his openness to new ideas has enabled him to operate a successful apple orchard. More farmers than ever in Kosovo are realizing that a new era of farming requires additional investments and know-how in organization and quality, in order to bring about significant and positive changes to the business.

Currently there are at least 700 hectares of commercial apples in Kosovo that are nearing full commercial production. Therefore, since about 80 hectares of these apples are concentrated in Lipjan and surrounded municipalities - this new technology is absolutely essential if Kosovo is to compete in the regional and international apple trade.

USAID’s Agricultural Growth and Rural Opportunities, a five-year activity that started in 2015, focuses on increasing agricultural productivity, marketability and responsiveness to markets. The program is designed to enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of targeted Kosovo agribusinesses in domestic and export markets. To date, the program has established over 3,400 hectares of farmland with improved technologies and has facilitated over \$70 million in sales.