



PHOTO & CAPTION

Carpenter Eyes European Markets



Photo: Chemonics International/Burim Meqa

Until recently, Ukaj Company was one of many small carpentry shops in Kosovo with a small local clientele. But Sheqer Ukaj, the shop's owner, had bigger ambitions for his shop. When he learned that USAID provided training and counseling to small businesses like his, he knew it was exactly what he needed.

Through technical assistance and educational visits, Sheqer learned how to improve the quality of his products while controlling costs. USAID arranged a series of study tours abroad, where he learned about high quality carpentry. In Italy, he visited a top-quality chair design and manufacturing firm in Udine and a wood processing fair in Milan. These visits showed him the level of quality demanded by European companies. In the U.S., he learned better carpentry techniques. After learning how best practices were applied abroad, Sheqer was convinced that his company could match European quality standards. To test himself, he focused production on high quality wooden chairs.

On his return to Kosovo, Sheqer replicated the techniques and practices he had seen abroad. He stopped buying the cheapest lumber available, and quickly learned that buying better grade wood — at a slight additional cost — paid big dividends. With better wood, his shop produced less waste and could actually make more chairs from each batch of wood. Sheqer also applied techniques he had learned for controlling production costs, bringing down the production cost of one chair design from \$31.98 to \$26.05.

Sheqer also learned how to be more aggressive in expanding his market base and in adopting new product lines. As a result, Ukaj Company's sales increased 18 percent and Sheqer hired 10 more workers. His goal this year is to win 50 percent of the Kosovo market for chairs.

When Ukaj was among the few Kosovar companies invited to exhibit at a German furniture fair, he knew his investment had paid off. Proud of his new product line, Sheqer went to the fair to show that "made in Kosovo" means quality to European buyers — and that means good business for Kosovo.

Carpenter Sheqer Ukaj used USAID's advice to his advantage — by using higher grade lumber, he was able to make 35 chairs out of a piece of wood that, with lower grade lumber, yielded just 27 chairs.