

Catalysing Women's Entrepreneurship



Creating a gender-responsive entrepreneurial ecosystem

CHALLENGE

Women's role as job creators, employees and contributors to economic expansion is clear. It is estimated that advancing women's equality in the Asia-Pacific region could add as much as US\$ 4.5 trillion – a 12 percent increase to the region's GDP annually by 2025. There is widespread recognition that women's entrepreneurship is a key pathway for advancing women's economic empowerment and can, in turn, have a multiplier effect on family well-being, poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth. Yet, women's potential as business owners is greatly undermined by numerous challenges such as discriminatory legislative frameworks, lack of or limited access to finance, information and communication technologies, lack of access to markets and business networks, discriminatory socio-cultural norms as well as limited opportunities for capacity development. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs have disproportionately borne the brunt of the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, putting them and their businesses in an even more vulnerable position.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is implementing a five-year regional programme on "Catalysing Women's Entrepreneurship (CWE) - Creating a Gender-Responsive Entrepreneurial Ecosystem" in six countries, to support member States in their efforts to enhance women's entrepreneurship as a strategy for poverty reduction, social well-being and sustainable economic growth. The programme is supporting the fulfilment of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and many related goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is contributing to priority area 5 of the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA) (Human and social development). It undertakes on-the-ground implementation activities in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and Viet Nam.



NOMINATED BY

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

COUNTRIES/REGIONS/TERRITORIES

Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa, Viet Nam

CONTRIBUTING PRIORITY AREAS OF THE ISTANBUL PROGRAMME OF ACTION (IPoA)

1, 5, 6, 7

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS TARGET(S)

5.C, 5.B, 5.A, 5.1, 8.1, 8.4, 8.6

SUPPORTED BY

Global Affairs Canada

IMPLEMENTING ENTITIES

ESCAP (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Viet Nam, Ministry of Industry Science Technology and Innovation, Cambodia, Ministry of Women Affairs, Cambodia, Ministry of Women Children and Poverty Alleviation, Fiji, Small and Medium Enterprise Foundation, Bangladesh, Ministry of Commerce Industry and Labour, Samoa.

PROJECT STATUS

Ongoing

PROJECT PERIOD

March 2018 – December 2023

URL OF THE PRACTICE

<https://www.unescap.org/projects/cwe>

The programme has been structured around three interconnected pillars of work:

Policy and Advocacy: strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks that provide an overarching enabling environment to support women entrepreneurs. Through in-depth national and sub-regional research, systematic technical advisory and capacity development efforts, the programme assists policymakers in developing gender-responsive policies and programmes.

Innovative Financing: leveraging public and private capital to pilot, test and scale financing models that support women entrepreneurs. Utilizing multiple affordable, regulated and tailored financial services enables the programme to address the financial access and usage challenges of women entrepreneurs from start-up to growth-stage businesses.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT): strengthening the capacity of policymakers to create an enabling environment for ICT-empowered women entrepreneurs and enhancing the capacity of women entrepreneurs to adopt and utilize ICT tools in support of their businesses.

The programme has locked in commitments from seven Ministries comprising leading SME agencies, women's machineries, and Central Banks to design and implement targeted interventions for women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, Fiji, Samoa, Viet Nam and Cambodia. Notably, non-gender Ministries have committed to play a significant role in promoting women entrepreneur centric reforms. The participatory and human-centred approach of the programme has informed the solution design at many different levels (community, institutional and sub-regional). Examples of key achievements include:

Research has been undertaken to enable a better understanding of national policy environment for women led MSMEs and assist policymakers in identifying current gaps. These include studies on the impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Samoa and Viet Nam that have generated actionable recommendations to address challenges in the short and long term.

Evidence showed that women entrepreneurs are facing numerous barriers in accessing information and services. The programme developed a discussion paper on 'Innovations and Good Practices on One-Stop Shops to support Women Entrepreneurs' to showcase various one-stop shops and portals in the Asia Pacific region and how they address the contextual needs of women entrepreneurs. A regional exchange has been organized to facilitate good innovations and lessons learned from operationalizing these one-stop hubs in different countries. Based on the learnings from the paper, work is underway to improve and/or launch one-stop hubs for women entrepreneurs in partnership with SME Ministries, including in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Viet Nam.

The programme has leveraged sub-regional partnerships to scale women entrepreneur-centric policies beyond CWE programme countries. For example, ESCAP has partnered with ASEAN coordinating committee on MSMEs (ACCMSME) to develop a toolkit for ASEAN policymakers to integrate targeted provisions for women entrepreneurs in national SME policies and action plans. This will include a self-assessment tool to help policymakers understand the entrepreneurship ecosystem for women entrepreneurs in their country, identify gaps and facilitate action planning for fostering an enabling ecosystem in the long term.

As a regional commission, ESCAP has facilitated cross-country exchange of knowledge and data sharing under the programme. Examples include a sub-regional expert group consultation in partnership with the ASEAN Committee on Women on enhancing women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in ASEAN. Promising practices and progressive initiatives on women's entrepreneurship, including addressing legal barriers for women entrepreneurs, were deliberated on by ASEAN policymakers.

SME policies and laws in Cambodia, Fiji, and Viet Nam have been reviewed to include women specific provisions and improve overall implementation effectiveness at the national and provincial levels. The process of review and revisions has also contributed to developing the capacities of national stakeholders.

Focusing on context specific and human-centred solutions and building a range of partnerships are notably the most innovative aspects of this programme. Programme advisory committees have been established at the country level that serve as institutional mechanisms for direct exchange and collaboration among various stakeholders affecting women entrepreneurs. The sustainability of the initiative is demonstrated in the institutionalization of these advisory groups, for example in Fiji, Samoa, and Viet Nam that will ensure stakeholders' capacities to respond to future changes and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs.

The regional integration efforts under the programme promote South-South cooperation by sharing dynamic practices, lessons learned as well as presenting an opportunity to member States to work together towards realizing the collective vision of advancing women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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