

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

**Second Regional Forum of Women Entrepreneurs
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I think it would be useful to start this Round Table session on Improving Access to Financing with a review of the challenges and opportunities facing women entrepreneurs in the region.

The whole concept of enterprise development and entrepreneurship is of increasing importance to governments in virtually every country in the world. There is a greater awareness of the need to create new businesses rather than rely on expanding the traditional large companies. In fact, in many markets, the large companies are the ones that are reducing their staff levels while new businesses continue to provide employment.

These changes are now recognised as major development challenges within the UN system. The UNECE, ILO, UNDP and many other agencies are all looking at ways in which to stimulate entrepreneurship and encourage the development of new enterprises. These will not only create employment, but also will also ease social pressures and frustrations that are often caused by the lack of access to jobs. Enterprise development also improves the national economy and greatly improves the prospects for regional and international trade.

This means that there is a tremendous need for entrepreneurs. They are the engines of economic growth and the SMEs they create are the fastest growing segment of business worldwide. Entrepreneurs and their enterprises create most jobs, they are the innovators and inventors who drive technological change and often drive social change.

So what are the characteristics of good entrepreneurs? The International Business Leaders Forum regularly asks major companies to help define the global manager of the future and the answers always include; the need to be flexible and have open minds and they must be team builders and culturally aware, especially in the global market place. They must be patient and, most importantly, they must be able to communicate.

Entrepreneurs should be determined, able to motivate people and have a capacity for hard work. They should demonstrate flair and lateral thinking so they can make the most of the opportunities created by their imagination and turn ideas into action. They require different attitudes as well as skills and to succeed they must demonstrate belief and passion, intelligence and clarity of thinking and have great communications skills so they can share their ideas and enthusiasm with others.

One of the prime purposes of this Regional Forum of Women Entrepreneurs is to discuss ways in which we can strengthen entrepreneurs and enterprise development in the UNECE region. If we are to succeed in that I believe we have to take action in a variety

of ways. We must build and strengthen our local and regional networks; we must share information and ideas and promote entrepreneurialism by demonstrating your success. We also need to consider other support structures for enterprise development such as business incubators.

Networks are absolutely essential if enterprise is to develop. They not only encourage links between businesses but provide the opportunity to learn from each other. It is important that they are used to share information and not just receive it. Good communication is always two-way. Networks may provide the opportunity for entry to new markets and access to new customers. In our region such networks can also strengthen the role of entrepreneurs and small business as advocates for change in education, legislation, governance etc. and can increase the influence of business in general.

There are already several good examples of effective networks of women entrepreneurs within the UNECE region. I hope many more will become established in individual countries and sub-regions and that they are used to greater and greater effect.

Networks are the most important support structure but another, more local one can come in the form of business incubators. Typically these are clusters of new start-up companies, perhaps in a single location, that provide a secure base for a new company for its first few years of operation. A good incubator programme provides quick and easy access to support, flexible leases and, possibly, room for expansion in the right location. They usually have like-minded people each starting their own business but can take advantage of good access to different networks. Such incubator programmes often provide advice and training opportunities and can become a valuable source of emotional support as new businesses develop. Incubator facilities can provide common marketing material and are often most effective in attracting customers and international buyers to a single location that acts as a central market.

Good incubators help start-up companies to achieve a higher survival rate, they can encourage faster growth by helping to identify investment opportunities and facilitate the commercialisation of new ideas. They are also often an effective way in which to tackle economic development issues.

I am pleased to say that my own organisation, the International Business Leaders Forum, plays an active role in developing young entrepreneurs and enterprise in general. Our Business Links programme encourages large companies to engage with local small, medium and micro enterprises in business relationships that promote the transfer of business knowledge, skills and technology to local enterprises. We encourage activities that build the capacity of such enterprises enabling them to take advantage of more business opportunities, thereby boosting local economic activity.

Our Youth Business International programme, YBI, is aimed at unemployed and under-employed young people, who have a good business idea but have no access to funds or advice. Working with a network of local partner organisations we provide such young people, many of which are young women, with access to seed funding, without any need for collateral or security, and with business advice. At the heart

of the YBI programme is the business mentor, an experienced local business person who works with the young person as a guide, teacher and friend for the critical first two or three years. They provide business advice and act as a sounding board for new ideas and, in turn, the local YBI initiative supports the mentors with a network of specialist advice and help as well as assessing and approving the applications for finance.

The results have been startling. To date over 60,000 young people had been set up in business. Most impressive of all have been the business survival rates. Around 60% of those started up are still trading in their third year and a significant proportion of those who ceased trading did so because they had been offered a job. Through the experience of working for themselves, they had become much more employable.

The YBI programme is now active in over 20 countries and many more, including several from the UNECE region, are evaluating the possibility of introducing such programmes. I am pleased that the IBLF continues to help business in this region and around the world by encouraging responsible business practices that benefit business and society.

Many of you are already successful entrepreneurs. I hope that you, your governments, business associations and the UNECE will continue to encourage new women entrepreneurs to enter the market place so that they too can experience the delights of running their own business.

Finally, let me list what I believe are the golden rules for your continuing success.

- Think like an entrepreneur
- Research your sector
- Be innovative about financing
- Be prepared to take risks
- Be flexible and capitalise on opportunities
- Never be off duty
- Use all types of networks
- Ask for all the help you can get
- Take a long-term view
- Remember why you started your own business
- Have fun

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