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Brno, Czech Republic, 21 January 2004
Message by Mrs. Brigita Schmögnerová,
Executive Secretary

I would like to warmly welcome all participants to the Conference. Allow me to congratulate the MAPM *(Moravian Association of Women Entrepreneurs)*, and particularly Ms. Olga Girstlova, its President, for organising this important event, supported by the General Consul of the Slovak Republic in Brno, Ms Katarina Smékalová, and Brno municipality, represented by Major Petr Duchon and under the patronage of Mr. Tomás Bata.

Creativity is a key component of entrepreneurship. True, to some extent it is defined by personal characteristics and experiences. However, creativity and entrepreneurial skills are also acquired through learning. The latter goes beyond formal education at Universities and Business Schools and includes all forms of life-long learning, such as participation in training programmes to improve marketing techniques, preparation of business plans or knowledge of foreign languages, mentoring or exchange of experiences with business associations, such as MAPM. Life-long learning is not expanding enough in the EU Member States; in 2002 the percentage of the population aged 25-64 participating in education and training over the four weeks prior to the survey was only 9.2% for females and 7.9% for males.

Commitment to the continuous improvement of professional knowledge and skills is especially important in the context of EU accession. EU membership will open up new markets and the European business network but at the same time it will increase competition and the need to adjust to new standards and regulations.

Effective strategies to meet these challenges have to be based on a commitment to education and learning. This commitment will largely determine the development of the SME sector, which is the driving force behind job creation and economic growth in all mature market economies.

The World Economic Forum in its annual report "The Global Competitiveness Report" provides an assessment of the comparative strengths and weaknesses of 102 industrialized and emerging economies. It provides a ranking in Growth Competitiveness and Business Competitiveness. Under the Business Competitiveness Index it assesses, among other indicators, capacity for innovation, production process sophistication and business environment. It is not within the capacity of the individual entrepreneur to change the business environment, but it is in his or her capacity to improve innovativeness by increasing the professionalism of employees and management and promoting a spirit of collaboration in the company.

In the overall BCI, Finland takes again the leading position and is one of the world's most remarkable success stories over the last decade, followed by the USA, Sweden, Denmark and Germany, while the Czech Republic ranking is 35 and the Slovak Republic ranking 43. This shows that both government and business in this region must improve and meet the new challenges of the growing competitive environment. With EU accession in view, we should develop strategies on how to take part in the EU efforts to achieve the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy 2000 to become by 2010 "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion". Achieving this goal requires the transformation into a knowledge-based economy, information society for all and also the creation of a friendly environment for starting up and developing innovative businesses, particularly SMEs. Education and training are key factors to achieving this.

And again: women-owned businesses in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and other countries in the region have demonstrated their potential to provide jobs and contribute to economic growth in the region. Although a number of women run large companies, most businesses run by women are small ventures, which are often the only source of income for a family.

However, women's entrepreneurial potential still remains untapped. A recent UNECE publication on women's entrepreneurship points out that in the east European and CIS countries for which we have data, men start their own business usually twice as often as women. For example, in the Czech Republic, self-employed women comprise only 9% of total female employment as compared to 18% for men. During the 1990s the gap between men and women's entrepreneurial activities widened in many CEE countries. This trend contrasts with trends in other countries, especially the United States but also the United Kingdom, France and others where women-run companies are the driving force of the SME sector.

Women entrepreneurs are thus less numerous than men and they face additional, gender-based barriers largely associated with their family responsibilities and time constraints that affect their ability to upgrade skills and learn as well as obtain finance, find business partners, and access

information and new markets. This explains the increasing interest in developing specific programmes supporting women entrepreneurs initiated by Governments, women's business associations and NGOs as well as international organizations, such as UNECE.

UNECE concern for promoting women's self-employment and entrepreneurship reflects core UN values. Its activities aim at assisting member countries in reaching goals related to gender equality, poverty alleviation, social cohesion as well as sustainability of economic development. These goals are reflected in many UN documents adopted by member countries at the global level, such as the Millennium Declaration, the Beijing Platform for Action and Financing for Development Resolution (the Monterrey consensus) but also region specific documents, such as the agreed conclusions from the Regional Beijing+5 meeting (2000) where support for women's self-employment was adopted as one of the important priorities for all countries in the UNECE region.

UNECE pays special attention to the problems of women entrepreneurs in transition countries through:

Promotion of a regional dialogue and exchange of good practices in supporting women entrepreneurs undertaken by various stakeholders (Governments, women's business associations, NGOs, private sector). The biennial UNECE Forum of Women Entrepreneurs in Geneva discusses lessons in introducing innovative financial schemes, developing training, providing advice on access to markets and business networks at national but also local/municipality levels. The second UNECE Forum (17-18 March 2003) focused on access to financing and ICT.

Promotion of role models for women entrepreneurs through a **virtual Gallery of Excellent Women Entrepreneurs** (over 200 women from 30 member countries).

Facilitation of the process of building networks among women entrepreneurs **(virtual network of women's business associations)**

The UNECE develops these activities in partnership with Governments at the central and local level.

I am very happy that women entrepreneurs from Slovakia, the Czech Republic and other countries represented at this conference take an active part in UNECE work. I hope that this cooperation will be strengthened in the future.

We remain committed to working with the MAPM on those and other matters related to Women's Entrepreneurship.

I wish you a very successful event.