

# MSMEs for the Empowerment of Women

**G**OAL Three of the Millennium Development Goals calls on nations to “promote gender equality and empower women” but despite all the efforts made, progress has been slow and uneven. Women in developing countries are in general still disadvantaged by wage differentials, occupational segregation, higher unemployment rates and by their disproportionate representation even in the informal and subsistence sectors, hence limiting their economic advancement. Add to this the constraints imposed by socio-cultural attitudes, employment policies and the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities.

In ASEAN, globalization has also complicated the matter as it has led to unemployment and underemployment, dislocation from traditional livelihood, urbanization and migration. According to Apichai Sunchindah, Executive Director of the ASEAN Foundation, “the financial crisis in 1997/98 resulted in a significant increase in the number of poor in urban and rural communities in ASEAN countries. The women are among those who suffered considerably from this crisis.” Thus empowering women is essential to enhance their potential in economic and social development.

To address this issue, the ASEAN Foundation has undertaken various programs to support and promote women’s economic empowerment through programs involving technical vocational education and training and through capacity building programs for promoting micro-enterprise development for cooperatives. This is in line with the ASEAN High Level Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming which was held in Jakarta on November 2006 that addressed the challenge for ASEAN to develop a clear and agreed-upon conceptual framework on gender equality, women’s empowerment and gender mainstreaming. Moreover, ASEAN and the United Nations Development Fund for Women’s East and



**Women cooperatives’ leaders visit the Lemon Farm Pattana Cooperative Ltd. in Thailand.**

Southeast Asia Regional Office also supported initiatives that focus on women empowerment and elimination of violence and discrimination against women in the region. Both parties signed a Framework for Cooperation Agreement to this effect in June 2006.

In cooperation with the Philippines-based Asian Women in Co-operative Development Forum (AWCF), a resource center and advocacy body on gender cooperatives, the ASEAN Foundation is currently implementing a capacity building program for women entrepreneurs to encourage them to explore opportunities in micro-enterprises for cooperatives. Women cooperatives’ leaders and entrepreneurs in micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are exposed to new management and marketing skills, are introduced to the application of ICT to their businesses and are given the opportunity to network with their counterparts in other ASEAN member countries.

Driven by the belief that co-ops, by virtue of being people-based and democratically run and managed socio-economic institutions, have the inherent capacity to bring about gender equality, gender equity, and improved gender relations, AWCF has successfully completed two other programs with the ASEAN Foundation. One project was to conduct

a situational analysis of women, gender issues and co-ops in Asia, focusing on Southeast Asia. Another project resulted in a publication which contains the documentation of successful stories, describing the enabling factors and strategies adopted by co-ops in overcoming obstacles and challenges.

At the initial stage, twenty women from twenty cooperatives from the ten ASEAN countries participated in an exchange program, visiting enterprises owned and managed by individuals, groups or associations and by cooperatives to learn how to operate, manage and ensure the sustainability of their enterprises. A regional forum has also been created by women decision makers and entrepreneurs from twenty cooperatives and associations around ASEAN.

The Credit Union League of Thailand (CULT), which participated in the projects initiated by AWCF and the ASEAN Foundation, has created the Women Co-operative Product Development Center (WCPC). WCPC supports Thai women’s groups, especially those which are credit union-based, in developing MSMEs. To date, WCPC supports 20 MSMEs involving 129 groups of primarily women, producing close to 700 products.

Yu Pin, a member of the Kyeupraw Ready-Made Cloth Group, says “I earn, and I also develop myself. I attend training and seminars, and gain more skills in my work.” During farming season, Yu Pin works part-time in the Keyupraw Group but during off-seasons, she works full-time earning additional income to supplement her husband’s income as a vendor and to give her family of 2 children a better life.

The story of Yu Pin is not the only success story in the region. There are countless others.

Through creative initiatives, such as MSMEs in co-operatives, women in ASEAN countries can be more economically empowered and this will ultimately bring benefits to society.