

■ APEC & ICT

Public-Private Partnerships in ICT

~ an effective way to improve women's social and economic status

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The “2013 APEC Conference: Innovation and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Women Business” took place June 28 -29, 2013 in Taipei City. The event was hosted by the Department of Gender Equality & Ministry of Foreign Affairs and co-hosted by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of Indonesia and the Foundation for Women's Rights Promotion and Development of Chinese Taipei.

Government delegates, private ICT firms and non-profit organizations' representatives from 13 APEC economies attended the conference. During the first day of meetings speakers from participating member economies shared the different ICT-related measures and strategies they have each been taking to improve women's economic and social status.

The second day of meetings was dedicated to the first Public-Private Partnership Network (PPPN) Meeting. This meeting is part of APEC Multi-Year Project proposed by Chinese Taipei on March 3, 2013. The establishment of a Public-Private Partnership Network is meant to facilitate sustainable new business models and policy environment for women based on ICT services. Three case studies will be selected to apply ICT proposals on women based on the ranking criteria provided by the PPPN during the meeting on June 29. The results of these pilot projects will show how cooperation between the public, private, IO and NGO sectors in ICT can be the most suitable approach to promote sustainable economic development for women in the APEC region.

There is no doubt that access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has gained particular significance in the enhancement of business opportunities and economic development. Pi Shia Huang, Director General in the Department of General Equality of Chinese Taipei referred to this phenomenon when she acknowledged the crucial role Innovation

and ICT have in the economy and especially in the promotion of women's entrepreneurship during her opening speech of the APEC Conference on June 28. Moreover, in the last decade a great number of projects have been launched aimed at empowering women through the use of ICT. However, many of these projects have shown to be unsustainable due to the lack of an effective and feasible mechanism to implement them. In this regard, Chinese Taipei's Multi-Year Project proposal seeks to surpass this obstacle by making public-private partnerships (PPPs) a key element in facilitating women's ICT access.

As stated in The Global Innovation Index 2012 published by WIPO's (World Intellectual Property Organization), PPPs are becoming increasingly important in the ICT sector. Also according to this publication, several global initiatives like the Global Knowledge Partnership and the World Summit on the Information Society have stressed the relevance of PPPs as a tool for economic growth and social development (Witters, Marom and Steinert 2012, 84). Following this line, since its inception in 2006, United Nations' Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development (APTCICT) has acknowledged the vital role that PPPs play in developing countries trying to keep up with ICT innovations by promoting cooperation between the private and the public sectors (Geldof, et al. 2011). Another example where we can see the two sectors working together in ICT-related industries is within the European Commission. In 2011 the European Commission launched a project named “Future Internet Public Private Partnership” whose objective was to improve the efficiency and sustainability of the use of future Internet technologies in different public and business sectors. Therefore, Chinese Taipei's choice of PPP as a model for ICT diffusion is not something new. All the initiatives

mentioned above were designed with the underlying concept that a partnership between the public and the private sector is the best way to ensure the success of an ICT-related project.

It is easy to see why PPPs have been chosen as the mechanism to carry out all the cited-above programs. A Public Private Partnership is defined as a contract between the public sector and the private sector that delivers a public service or facility and that is meant to achieve a mutually beneficial goal. The idea is to take advantage of both partners' strengths and to combine their competences and the services they can provide in order to increase the probability of their common project success. This phenomenon also applies to the ICT sector which, as mentioned above, has experienced an upsurge in PPPs in recent years. Likewise, this kind of model has been applied in many developing countries in order to address the needs of the most vulnerable, especially women and children with fewer resources.

It is not uncommon for governments in low income countries not to be able to finance some of the basic educational, social or healthcare demands of its citizens. By establishing a partnership with the private sector they try to overcome the funding constrain. However, despite being one of the main motivations for a PPP, funding is not the only benefit the public partner can get from the partnership. The private sector provides many elements that are crucial for assuring long- term sustainability of socio-economic development projects. Among them are indispensable expertise, technology experience and continuous exposure to know-how. Furthermore, a more productive way of handling business operations and of managing the project is also guaranteed when associating with a private corporation. Another appealing advantage of PPPs for the public partner is the possibility of risk-sharing when investing in new technologies (Witters, Marom and Steinert 2012, 86). Finally, a PPP increases the chances for a project to survive different challenges like changes in the government (Geldof, et al. 2011, 42).

Just as importantly, international non-profit organizations are the third major player in the establishment of a PPP. Their role is to help the two partners come together and to promote cooperation

and communication between them. International organizations can also contribute in the development of the project by providing information, experts or any other kind of assistance. What makes international organizations so relevant in a socio-economic development project is their independence and disinterested nature regarding the project's outcome - their main goal is to achieve long-term sustainability of the project.

All the arguments cited above show how a close collaboration between the public, private and IO or NGO sectors can contribute significantly to the enhancement of the effectiveness of a project, making PPPs the ideal instrument for designing, implementing and monitoring an ICT-based program.

When analyzing Chinese Taipei's APEC Multi-Year Project and its aim of applying technological innovations to women's economic empowerment we need to take into account that many governments in the APEC region do not have the means or the experience to carry out development programs on their own. Thus, we can conclude that the proposal of joining efforts and strengths amongst private, public and NGO sectors to enhance ICT capacity of women comes as the ideal vehicle to reach the desired outcome for the project. By all accounts, PPPs established as a result of the findings of the Public-Private Partnership Network's pilot projects constitute the best chance to succeed in facilitating women's livelihood capacity building via ICT. (*The author came from Spain, internship in Taiwan Institute of Economic Research*)

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