

VISIT TO FINLAND OF THE POLISH MINISTER OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT, MS.
GRAZYNA GESICKAN 22 JUNE 2006-06-26

Presentation of the FEM-project to the minister

My name is Laura Perheentupa and I work in the Ministry of the Interior, in the Structural Policy Unit. I have earlier here been involved in building International co-operation between EU-countries, when Finland was a new member of the European Union. Nowadays I work with International aspect but from the women's perspective.

Women's perspective's approach to development work is interesting in the way that we are actually in contact with Grass root level, women in the grass root level. This way of working is not typical for a ministry work. The FEM project I am going to speak to you about is a very concrete project that operates on local, regional, national and international levels.

We perform actions that involve individual women. At the same time the meaning is that through this project the actions will gradually spread to touch a wider range of persons.

The large purpose of the FEM project is to develop and influence structures of society in such direction that the society better enhances women's entrepreneurship and livelihood, and to create more gender sensitive societies in general.

Experiences and studies from Nordic and Baltic countries show that particular structures are needed in order to enhance women's entrepreneurship in the best possible way. Structures supporting women's employment and entrepreneurship are insufficient. Advisory services need to be developed further with special emphasis on supportive and personal approach. The demand for these structures is great in regard to loans for women entrepreneurs, guidance, support for network building and mentoring.

FEM is an Interreg III B Baltic Sea Area project for the years 2004-2007. Ministry of the Interior, Structural Policy Unit co-ordinates the international project. For the Ministry this project is important, and the ministry's role to do with developing of the regions and in enhancing of international co-operation. The project enhances co-operation around the Baltic Sea area in Europe as well as regional development through enhancing of women's entrepreneurship. Women's entrepreneurship is one challenging and important area of regional development work, and it needs to be given resources.

The countries involved in the FEM are Finland, Sweden, Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Background of the FEM lies in Nordic co-operation. Nordic Council of Ministers financed a five year project earlier between Nordic and Baltic Countries that concentrated on bringing micro credit system to women entrepreneurs in the countryside in the Baltic Countries based on good experiences from Norwegian remoter areas.

In the co-operation Poland is thus the newest member. Contact taking with Poland was initiated by our Swedish counter parts. Swedes have a tradition in searching of international co-operation contacts. The negotiations with Poland started with consultants first. At the moment Sweden is already looking for new contacts namely in Kaliningrad and in Belarus.

Compared with the former Nordic Council project the Interreg project is a step forward: all countries are working equally, and actions are taken in each country.

Each country in the FEM is responsible for their own actions and does them in their own special way.

Total budget of the FEM is 2,2 million euros. Each country's budget is about 350 000 euros + we have a common co-ordination budget of about 350 000.

1,2 million is EU-money (from ERDF), the rest is national co-financing. In Finland there are 4 ministries providing national co-financing for the projects. The share of the ministry in the national co-financing is up to 70 %, which is quite high.

For the new EU-member countries especially Lithuania, Latvia and Poland I think the shock after the Phare phase has been that the partners actually have to have almost 100% of the financing themselves at first, and the EU share comes only afterwards and much afterwards as well. The lack of liquidity is one of their main challenges, and partly even obstacles.

Feed back from our Polish partners has also been concerning the financing of this project, when we are building something totally new, rises the level of costs a bit. And one needs really not only to build the new structures, but also really work on convincing decision makers of the importance of this area of work all the time. They have also stated that the authorities are oriented much more towards concrete physical investment projects, they are much more attractive. And our kind of project is more challenging to convince the decision makers.

There are 35 partners in the FEM. From Finland we have 4 regional councils as partners, and it is in those regions that the operations mainly take place. Regional Councils use organisations specialised in women's entrepreneurship to make the operations. This ministry is a partner as well of course.

From Poland we have with us Pomerania and West-Pomerania regions involved, as partners we have municipalities, small municipalities: Leborg, Leba, Marianowo, Debnio municipalities, and then Szczecin University's Institute of Economic Analyses, Diagnoses and Forecasts.

As Swedish partners there are regional and local women's Resource Centres (Region of Småland, Östergötland + Malmö) + Swedish national Federation of Resource Centres, the Region of Skåne (Regional public authority). + a co-operative Development Agency of Jönköping county.

Norway has a national public authority as our partner Innovation Norway.

Estonia's partner is an NGO ETNA.

From Latvia the main partners Latvian University of Agriculture and Association of Rural Women in Latvia.

From Lithuania we have Lithuanian Women Farmers Association and Women and Business in Lithuania Association.

Some countries have the whole country as project area others have smaller parts of the country.

The FEM concentrates on human size activities, on **micro entrepreneurship, and on developing entrepreneurship in the countryside in particular as a possibility for women to provide work for themselves in their own region in their own country. Generally speaking micro entrepreneurship does represent about 95 % of all business.** The trend is now to enhance that share, and not the big companies like has traditionally been the case.

The **operations of the FEM concentrate on five areas** based on good experiences and practices already existing in the Nordic countries, some we are really building together as we go along based on existing needs.

The first one is **Building Resource Centres for women.** This is the main function in Poland and in Baltic Countries during the FEM. In each of these countries about 5 centres are been built to work locally. They are places where women can go to seek advise and support when they are unemployed & wanting to become employed, or when they are planning to start entrepreneurship, or also when they are planning to take steps to internationalise their business.

Resource Centres are also local or regional actors involving women in development work. **Sweden** is the international leader of this work area in the FEM. There are about 150 Resource Centres in Sweden and Centres form there an acknowledged part of regional development actors. Just this week a European Association of Resource Centres has been established, and the FEM Centres belong to this new co-operation level as well.

The FEM is also building a network of entrepreneur advisers around the Baltic Sea. Advisers get also training in advising women entrepreneurs. Common strategies are created to support women's business to internationalise. **Estonia** is leading this work internationally.

Mentoring and especially group mentoring for entrepreneurs take place in each participating country. Women entrepreneurs often work alone, and the FEM encourages them to co-operate and learn from one another. **Finland** is the international leader of this work area.

In each country discussions take place with decision makers and banks on possibilities of having special women's loans. Microcredit groups (based on the Gramen Bank, Bangladesh version originally meant for developing countries) take place in Norway, Sweden, Estonia and Latvia. Norway has today about 250 microcredit groups working (loan to the group granted by the state + processing one's entrepreneurship in a group of entrepreneurs under certain rules), and this tool is actually profitable for the Norwegian state. **Norway** is the international leader of this work area in the FEM.

The entrepreneurs form a network around the Baltic Sea in the FEM. New models of internationalisation are created during the FEM, and entrepreneurs are supported and encouraged to take steps towards internationalisation. **Finland** is the international leader of this work area.

As the Lead partner in the project we are stressing the following things

- 1) Goal orientation in all actions. All that is done must aim at our common goal and purpose of influencing and developing structures of society.
- 2) Countries choose themselves how they organise their actions and what areas they emphasise and concentrate on.

3) At the International level countries bring to the common discussion forum their solutions and their ways of doing, and will hear all other's versions as well as their feed back. There are specialists in the co-operation, and all can learn from one another. The common International exchange of knowledge and learning from one another is very useful for the work at national level and regional level work in the countries.

4) The project has aimed at personal growth of the persons involved: changes in attitudes and in thinking. It is from the changes in the persons that the changes in organisations and structures begin.

5) Common information spreading. Trough similar actions at the same time in all the countries involved we have a better volume of experiences to bring up the important theme of enhancing women's entrepreneurship. We aim to spread our experiences and best practices to a wider use in the countries.

6) An evaluation of our work will be done.

7) A new project will be needed after this. Things take time, and go forward slowly in development processes.