Empowering ‘The Hand that Rocks the Cradle’
Women’s Vantage Role in Supporting MSME Growth

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UNITED NATIONS (UN) ADVISOR SASA JAGWANTH BASED AT THE UNITED NATION HEADQUARTERS IN NEW YORK IS A BUSY LADY, HELPING COUNTRIES BRIDGE GAPS IN THEIR MSME SECTOR FOR ECONOMIC PROGRESS. WHEN SASA VISITED SRI LANKA LAST FEBRUARY, HER MISSION WAS TO CONSULT AND LEARN FROM THE SRI LANKAN GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES ABOUT HOW THEY COULD SUPPORT EFFORTS TO ENHANCE MSME GROWTH IN SRI LANKA. DESPITE HER BUSY SCHEDULE THE LANKA WOMAN MAGAZINE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET HER.

We wanted to understand more about how she is empowering MSMEs across the world, in her role as the United Nations Inter-Regional Advisor for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

MSMEs are the backbone of a country’s economy, and universally understood as a major catalyst in socio-economic progress. That is why world organizations such as the UN are looking at ways to help developing countries to boost their MSME sectors.

Since its commencement, the DSDG/DESA project on ‘the role of micro-small and medium enterprises in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals’ has helped beneficiary countries to bridge their specific gaps in MSME growth. A part of the project is to research the needs of MSMEs in that particular country. For example, Kenya focused on youth entrepreneurship and Philippines on startups. Some countries focus specially on youth, young women, start-ups, or youth and start-ups etc. The project will also provide knowledge input through workshops, consultants, and research on areas relevant to a country.

For instance, in Cambodia, it was very difficult to get a new business registered, often taking up to several months, with different ministries, depending on the business sector. The project helped Cambodia research on how they could institute a one-stop registration shop, where all regulatory authorities were based in one location. They also researched best practices from other countries, taking into consideration the specific needs of Cambodia. Similarly, issues range from country to country. But the role of women is an issue that keeps coming up, again and again. In general, women are not encouraged to start small businesses, and is often unable to get the collateral and support they need to run a business.

The DSG/DESA project is supported by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and funded by the Government of China. Although the project looks at all aspects of MSME development identified by each country as contextually important to them, they also focus on specific issues relating to women. DESA/DSDG hopes that women may become more empowered, as countries now realise that an increase in women’s entrepreneurship is good for business and economic growth. Increasing the capacity of women entrepreneurs has a significant potential to reduce poverty and inequality globally and that is why DESA/ DSGD is prioritizing it.

In Sri Lanka, Saras observes, women’s issues are at the forefront. Despite Sri Lanka being a beautiful country with friendly people and culture, in the case of the women entrepreneurs, we are still lagging behind in terms of the substantive support women require to engage in business. At the top of the list are the difficulties they face in obtaining collateral to finance their businesses, and also vocational training and education systems that need to incorporate women, those marginalized in particular. Saras said that DESA/DSG is looking forward to helping the Government in implementation in these areas.
Saras wants to share experiences good practices and lessons learned from other countries with Sri Lanka in relation to MSME development, and vice versa. She was glad to note the significant interest on the part of the Government to increase growth of the MSME sector, and ensure the development of synergies between MSME development and the achievement of the SDGs. She pointed out some recent initiatives taken by the Government to enhance MSME growth, such as the new National Information and Entrepreneurship Strategy, and the proposed update to the Micro-Finance Act.

At the moment, time frame for this particular project is the end of 2020. However, Saras is hopeful that further funding will be available for the project, after 2020. Lanka Woman Magazine had a few more questions for Saras, which she gladly obliged.

**Q: Can you tell us about the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and when it was initiated?**

The Sustainable Development Goals were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2012. They replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). But they are different in the sense that they recognize many issues countries are facing: they provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. There are 17 goals and 169 targets, which are a call for action by all countries. The 17 SDGs cover a range of subjects including no poverty, zero hunger, good health and wellbeing, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities, climate action, life on land and water and peace, justice and strong institutions. Women’s equality and empowerment is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, but also integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development.

**Q: How do you plan to implement these goals and who are your target recipients?**

All countries undertook to implement all these goals by 2030. Countries report on implementation of the goals through their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) which are presented to the High-Level Political Forum in July in New York. Sri Lanka presented its VNR in 2018.

**Q: In short, what are the SDGs and what do they do?**

In short, the SDGs depend on the achievement of Goal 5 - which is the goal on gender equality. The SDGs are part of a larger document, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

**Q: How do you identify according to UN measurements who or which countries need to set these goals?**

All countries of the world have agreed to work towards achieving these goals. Effective monitoring and review processes are key to the 2030 Agenda, and includes the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of reliable, timely, accessible and disaggregated data. This includes the global SDG indicator framework for the follow-up and review of the progress adopted in 2017 that contains the indicators towards achieving the SDGs.

**Q: Which one or ones of these does Sri Lanka need?**

Like all other countries, all the goals are relevant to Sri Lanka. Each country identifies the issues that are of priority to them according to their national circumstances. Some countries may have identified all the goals as priorities. The Sri Lankan Government in their VNR has identified its main challenges and areas of progress in poverty, health, education, gender equality, water and sanitation, energy, transport, tourism, natural resources and peace.

**Q: How are these goals designed to empower women around the world and women in Sri Lanka?**

There is a separate goal on gender equality, goal 5. Its targets require ending gender discrimination; eliminating all forms of violence against women; eliminating all harmful practices; recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work; ensuring women’s full participation in political, economic and public life; ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health; granting women economic resources; enhancing the use of enabling technology and adopting strong policies and laws for the promotion of gender equality.
Sri Lanka talks in their VNR of regulations being introduced to facilitate women to balance work with their responsibilities within the family, which will help women to be able to engage in work outside the home. This means that women’s participation in micro, small and medium enterprises will be enhanced.

So far, how much have you achieved through this programme and in which countries? By when do you plan to achieve all your targets with the sustainable goals?

The period of the SDGs run from 2015 to 2030.

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs through its Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DESA/DSDG) at the United Nations headquarters in New York runs a project on the role of micro-small and medium enterprises in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The project is run through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Sub-Fund of the UN peace and Development Fund of which the People’s Republic of China is a major contributor. It supports micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in achieving the sustainable development goals in 9 countries: Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Fiji, Laos, The Philippines, Kenya, Tanzania, Gambia and Brazil.

We hope to have many achievements in various countries and are working on areas that Governments themselves identify, for example: a simplified registration policy in Cambodia; start-ups in the Philippines; youth entrepreneurship in Kenya; and decentralization of MSME policy in the Gambia.

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Job creation through MSMEs will often directly benefit the poor and vulnerable, particularly women and youth, thereby directly reducing poverty, increasing income and positively impacting household investments in education and health over time. MSME development has the potential for wide reaching impacts on the SDGs globally, including SDG 1 (end poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work), and SDG 9 (improve sustainable industrialization and fostering innovation).

Many countries, including Sri Lanka, have identified women’s entrepreneurship as an issue they would like us to work on. Through this project, women may become more empowered, as countries increasingly identify women’s lack of participation in MSMEs as a problem.

Countries are now realising that an increase in women’s entrepreneurship is good for business and economic growth. Fostering the capacity of women entrepreneurs and business owners has a significant potential to reduce poverty and inequality globally.