

Entrepreneurial Skills: Empowering Women
A UNDP-DPMM-MECD Project



ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS: EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN

EVALUATION REPORT

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ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS: EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN

EVALUATION REPORT

1 INTRODUCTION

The project, *Entrepreneurial Skills: Empowering Women*, culminated with the Graduation Ceremony which was held in Kuala Lumpur on 23 January 2008 for 54 women who completed the six-month course to equip them with entrepreneurial skills and empower them to take their businesses to greater heights. This grand finale was only a moment, albeit a very meaningful moment, in the long process the women had undergone. A lot of planning, organising, awareness raising and knowledge sharing had taken place before the women could take their final step onto the stage to receive their certificates. The purpose of this evaluation report is to assess this multi-faceted process with the aim of drawing lessons from the experience, proposing further action that could help to consolidate the gains made through the project, and recommending ways in which the project could be sustained and replicated.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF PROJECT

This project was initiated in 2006 through the collaboration of three key partners: the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development (MECD), the Malay Chamber of Commerce Malaysia (MCCM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with the objectives of:

- Educating and enhancing the awareness of the public, especially rural women, on the availability and advantages of micro-credit and micro-finance schemes in the country;
- Developing and enhancing the capacity to support the empowerment of rural women entrepreneurs and at the same time promote the food sector within the Malaysian cottage industry;
- Empowering a group of rural women to become successful entrepreneurs by enabling them to acquire entrepreneurial skills through activities such as business coaching, hands-on training and ICT training;
- Upscaling the production of local food products by micro-enterprises through increasing their awareness of and capability in branding, labelling, packaging, marketing and promotion; and
- Matching the enterprise owners with companies that can market their products through the development of business networks.

These objectives were to be achieved through the implementation of the two components of the project, viz:

- **Communications Campaign:** to increase the awareness, understanding and take-up of micro-credit and micro-finance among rural and urban low income communities, especially women.
- **Capacity Building:** for a group of rural women to equip them with various entrepreneurial skills such as branding, packaging and marketing to enhance the products of the women so as to empower them to become successful entrepreneurs.

The model for nurturing successful rural women entrepreneurs, which was developed through this project, will be documented in a knowledge product that is being prepared.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF EVALUATION REPORT

This evaluation will undertake a critical assessment of the soundness of the project design, the efficacy of the project partnership and the effectiveness of project implementation. The approach is constructive criticism and the aim is providing practical propositions on how the project model can be improved upon and replicated. The objectives of this evaluation exercise are therefore to:

- Assess the design of the project as a whole and in its parts in terms of its scope, feasibility and cohesiveness;
- Review the roles and responsibilities of the project partners, the articulation of the partnership and how it impacted on the project;
- Review the implementation of the project activities in terms of efficiency and effectiveness as well as attainment of the targeted outputs, outcomes and desired impacts; and
- Recommend suitable strategies to ensure project sustainability and mechanisms to facilitate the dissemination and replication of the project model.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

Two main sources of information have been tapped to conduct the evaluation: interviews with key stakeholders and perusal of a diversity of project documents. In addition, the

evaluator had the opportunity to observe two of the training workshops and the Graduation Ceremony.

The interviewees included:

1. 16 Trainees¹
2. 6 Trainers²
3. 3 Bestari Helpdesk Officers (from Kelantan, Melaka and Penang)
4. Mr Norman Rajen bin Abdullah, Manager, Mydin Holdings
5. Puan Zuriah Abu Bakar, MCCM Focal Point (since resigned from MCCM)
6. Cik Yuslinoff Ahmad, Head of Dewanita, Malay Chamber of Commerce, Penang
7. Encik Yaacob bin Omar, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia Focal Point
8. Dr Soraya Azmi, Consultant for the Feasibility Study on the Capacity Building component of the project

The documents studied included:

1. Project Document
2. Project Progress Reports
3. Project Minutes
4. Report on Capacity Building Feasibility Study
5. Paper on Communications Strategy
6. Report on Policy Dialogue
7. Assessment Forms used during the interviews of the candidates
8. Mission Reports on Training Workshops
9. Evaluation Forms on Training Workshops Completed by Trainees

The interviews and documents made it possible to reconstruct quite fully the entire process of the project, the issues and challenges faced along the way, the progress achieved and the impact on the stakeholders, especially the women trainees.

¹ Focus Group Discussions, with 4 participants each, were held separately for trainees from Kota Baru, Machang and Kuala Terengganu. Four other participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis.

² The trainers interviewed were: Puan Siti Rabaah, En Mohd Husny Basir, En Mohd Ali Bahari, Dr Mohd Sallehudin, En Zulhan Othman and Prof Azahari Ismail.

2 EVALUATION OF PROJECT DESIGN

As the blueprint of a project, a well-conceived project design is a pre-requisite for successful implementation. Conversely, a flawed project design will necessarily lead to less than optimum results, though not definite failure. For this project, the major design faults lie in:

- Lack of cohesion and linkage between the two components of the project; and
- Over ambitious outcome targets for the Communications Campaign, especially within the given time frame.

In contrast the Capacity Building Component is very well designed, with the cogent ideas in the original project document ably built upon and elaborated in the Feasibility Study. These provided the template for the delivery of an effective and fruitful training course.

The key issues pertaining to the project design are discussed below.

2.1 PROJECT COHESION

Although the project comprises two related components, little linkage was made between them in terms of the conceptualisation in the project design, and this lack of cohesion became even starker in the implementation of the project. The Communications Campaign was geared towards increasing the awareness and take-up of micro-credit and micro-finance, especially among low-income women. However, due to the channels used for organising the activities and mobilising the participants of the campaign, the information was not effectively disseminated to the target audience.

The Capacity Building component, by and large, catered to the targeted low income women entrepreneurs but scant attention was paid to micro-financing in the training. Hence, one of the major issues the trainees face after completing the capacity building course was that they now possess the skills to upscale their enterprises but still do not have the financial means to do so.

This disjuncture between the two components means that participants in each of them have gained possession of either the x or y factor but do not have the solution to the equation for successful entrepreneurship. Greater cohesion in the project design would have significantly reduced the negative consequences of the missing link. In addition, the two components should have been implemented simultaneously to allow for better integration between them.

2.2 DESIGN OF COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN COMPONENT

The design of the Communications Campaign can only be described as overly ambitious, especially given the time frame of six months in which it was to be completed. Objectives such as:

- “To evolve and rebrand micro-credit into sustainable micro-finance as a choice of financing mechanism”
- “To encourage and establish innovation and smart partnership among the many institutions participating in micro-finance activities, directly or indirectly”
- “To promote positive policy shift”

are all long-term goals that are beyond the scope of a short-term project like this. Also, the target audience is too wide and amorphous. It would have been better for a project of this nature to focus on a more defined target group – the low-income women. This would also have allowed better linkage between the two components of the project.

The measurements proposed for assessing the success of this component such as:

- “Increased uptake of micro-credit/micro-finance”
- “Increased media coverage”

are not appropriate. First, six months is too short a period for any substantial increase to be recorded even if the best of projects are implemented. Second, even if increase is discernible, it cannot be determined conclusively that the Communication Campaign can be credited for it – any number of other factors may have come into play.

It did not help, of course, that the International Consultant appointed to draw up the communication strategy did not deliver. The backstopping that had to kick in was undoubtedly constrained by time and other resources. This major hiccup at the project design stage had definite repercussions on the implementation of the project, which will be discussed in Section 4.

2.3 DESIGN OF CAPACITY BUILDING COMPONENT

The capacity building component was equally ambitious but it benefited from an insightful feasibility study which detailed all the essential elements to be taken account of in organising and conducting the training course, including:

- Criteria for selection of trainees
- Content of training
- Platforms of support for the entrepreneurs
- Marketing and distribution facility for cottage industry products

- Access to information relevant to the development of micro-enterprises

The feasibility study provided working guidelines from which a successful training model was moulded. Where gaps in the module became evident, they were quickly pinpointed and supplementary sessions organised. This ability to add on and modify the training module as the need arose, made it dynamic and all the more relevant and effective.

3 EVALUATION OF PROJECT PARTNERSHIP

The idea for mounting this project was mooted by MCCM, which has been conducting micro-enterprise training for its members. Discussions between MCCM, MECD and UNDP resulted in agreement to collaborate in undertaking the project. The project document, however, did not spell out with enough detail the respective roles and responsibilities of the partners. It is understood that during the early stage of the project, some miscommunication occurred concerning these roles and the manner of disbursements of project funds. This resulted in less than optimal support by certain partners in the implementation of the project. Essentially, project management and implementation became heavily dependent on UNDP and the project team. This had a definite impact on the scope and effectiveness of the project, as will be discussed in Sections 4 and 5. A clearer understanding at the outset, indeed the setting down of the roles and responsibilities of each partner in the project document might have helped to prevent this problem.

4 EVALUATION OF PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION: COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN

Comments have already been made about the ambitious scale of the Communications Campaign. Nonetheless, most of the planned activities were carried out although not at

the frequency originally anticipated. Table 1 indicates which of the planned activities were successfully conducted.

Table 1: Completion Status of Communications Campaign Activities

Activities	Status
Bestari Helpdesk	
Tools for help desk (printed materials)	√
Sustainable Micro-finance Booklet	√
Training of Help Desk Officer	√
Rebranding Exercise	
Creation of logo and theme	√
Media Relations	
Round table discussions with editors	
Media Interviews with stake holders	√
Conduct "on-site" visits with media	√
Promotion - Local Radio (DPMM State)	
Promotion - Womens Magazines	√
Promotion - Newspaper	√
Promotion - TV Slots	√
Awareness Campaign	
Sus. Microfinance Fair & Project Launch	√
"Book Launch" & "Open House"	√
Printed Media Materials (Buntings, Leaflets)	√
Networking Exercise	
Round Table Discussions (Policy Dialogue)	√

As the table indicates, 13 of the 15 (87%) planned activities were completed, with the two uncompleted activities falling within the realm of media relations. However it is not just what proportion of project activities are carried out that is of importance. Perhaps more pivotal is whether the activities achieved their desired outcomes and contributed to fulfilling the objectives of the project.

4.1 OBJECTIVES

The stated objectives of the Communications Campaign were to:

- Alleviate the fear of potential micro-credit applicants of multiple and complex application documents;
- Educate and inform potential applicants of the current micro-credit and micro-finance opportunities available;
- Promote all Developmental Financial Institutes (DFIs) and their current micro-credit products
- Create a mindset shift from pro-poor micro-credit to sustainable micro-finance
- Promote positive policy shift

As mentioned earlier, these lofty objectives are highly ambitious within the context of a project with an implementation time frame of six months. The following sub-sections will evaluate the extent to which the various project activities were able to play their part in accomplishing the above objectives.

4.2 AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

The awareness campaign essentially comprised the launching ceremony of the project in the four selected states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Penang and Melaka; followed the day after with a workshop to introduce targeted women to the various micro-credit and services available. The awareness campaign was not carried out in Kedah because the state Malay Chamber of Commerce (MCC) lacked the human resources to support the programme.

The launching ceremonies, held in February 2007, were attended by more than 100 participants in each of the states. They comprised representatives from various DFIs, Micro-credit Institutes (MIs), relevant government agencies, women NGOs, banking

institutions and businesswomen from the respective states. Rural low-income women, the primary target group, were a minority in the audience, in part due to logistical constraints. Invitations were sent out based on the membership and contact lists of the MCCM and, in the case of NGOs, did not filter down to the grassroots membership. The central feature of the launch was the introduction of the Bestari Helpdesk and explanation of its roles and functions.

At the workshops, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), Yayasan Tekun Nasional, MARA and Bank Pertanian introduced the audience to the micro-credit products and services offered by each respective institution. The Agensi Kaunselling dan Pengurusan Kredit (AKPK), an agency under Bank Negara, also delivered a presentation on its services. The workshops attracted about 50 participants in each of the four states. As a result of the overwhelming response and request for more workshops at decentralised locations closer to the homes of the participants, additional workshops were organised. For instance, in Penang, workshops were organised in Seberang Perai Utara on the mainland and Balik Pulau and George Town on the island. These workshops were to have been the curtain raisers, with the Bestari Helpdesk running the rest of the show in terms of extending assistance to the women who wished to avail themselves of micro-credit facilities. In that regard, they fulfilled their functions – the fault lies in the Bestari Helpdesk which failed to take off.

4.3 BESTARI HELPDESK

The Bestari Helpdesk was to have been the centrepiece of the Communications Campaign. They were to have been set up at the state MCCs and the DFIs to increase awareness, understanding and uptake of sustainable micro-finance among low-income women in the five selected states. The Bestari Helpdesks at the MCCs were conceived as a one-stop centre for providing unbiased information and advice on sustainable micro-finance. Those at the DFIs were to provide business and financial advice such as guidance on applications for credit facilities, available repayment schemes and financial

restructuring. The plan to establish Bestari Helpdesks at the DFIs was not implemented. There was no ownership of the Bestari Helpdesks at the state MCCs. Some state MCCs also stopped providing support to the project.

To facilitate the setting up of the Bestari Helpdesk in the MCCs, two training sessions were held for 10 officers from the MCCs and MCCM headquarters to brief them on the functions of the helpdesk, acquaint them with the various DFIs and their products, and inform them of the services provided by AKPK, among others. The MCCs would have been a natural site for the helpdesks as their officers were already engaged in providing information and assistance of this nature. The Bestari Helpdesk would have represented an enhancement of the existing service. Unfortunately, as a result of the misunderstanding/miscommunication referred to in Section 3 and differences in opinion within the MCCM leadership, the state MCCs and MCCM did not lend the necessary support to the operationalisation of the helpdesks. The plan to set up the helpdesks basically had to be aborted. One of the helpdesk officers regretted this turn of events. Although the state MCC she was attached to was no longer officially involved in the project, she continued to help behind the scene: in organising the logistics for the capacity building course and even attended a number of the training sessions. She reckoned that it was a very meaningful course and she was eager to help because it was an activity for the benefit of women, so she rendered her assistance on her own time.

The failure to get the Bestari Helpdesk up and running was a major factor that led to the decoupling between the Communications Campaign and the Capacity Building components of the project. The helpdesks would have complemented the training admirably by facilitating access to micro-financing for the women who had been empowered with entrepreneurial skills and mindset.

4.4 REBRANDING EXERCISE

This exercise was aimed at rebranding micro-credit into sustainable micro-finance as the financing mechanism of choice through the launching of a common logo, theme and key

message for the DFIs. DFIs were to carry a common logo and theme alongside their existing logo to create awareness and acceptance of sustainable micro-finance as a safe and secure mechanism to develop micro-enterprises. The key message that was to be conveyed by all the DFIs was “There is a need to evolve pro-poor micro-credit to sustainable micro-finance which promotes smart financing for better living”.

After a logo was chosen and a Brand Consultant appointed to undertake this exercise, the project was informed by Bank Negara that the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Council had decided to create their own sustainable micro-finance logo. Bank Negara, which is an advisor to the SME Council, requested that the logo designed for the project not be launched. As a result, the project decided not to proceed with active promotion of its chosen logo but instead use it internally. Once again poor communications had wielded its ironic repercussions, rendering the rebranding exercise an exercise in futility.

4.5 MEDIA RELATIONS

A communications campaign would invariably involve engaging the media and in this instance the strategy was to sensitize the general public to the relevance and currency of sustainable microfinance through the media. The project team appeared on three television programmes (TV on 2, Selamat Pagi Malaysia and Wanita Hari Ini) to explain the nature of the project and to promote its objectives. Some project activities, in particular the Graduation Ceremony received extensive press coverage. A number of the women trainees also shared in the media blitz when they were interviewed on their experiences and views of the project. However, as noted in Table 1, a couple of critical activities involving the media were not carried out and the rest of the activities were perhaps not mounted at the requisite intensity to make a significant impact. Undoubtedly time pressure was a major reason for the limited interaction with the press, to the detriment of the Communications Campaign.

4.6 NETWORKING EXERCISE

One of the strategies of the Communication Campaign was to promote networking by encouraging and establishing innovative and smart partnership among the institutions participating in micro-finance activities. However, the only activity that was carried out in this connection was a policy dialogue in which EPU, Bank Negara, AIM, KANITA and a former executive of the MCCM presented various perspectives on the poverty eradication strategies, sustainable micro-finance and micro-credit provision in Malaysia. The dialogue was attended by 35 representatives from government agencies, DFIs, and state MCCs. Although the dialogue provided the big picture and some interesting perspectives on the current status of micro-credit facilities in Malaysia, it certainly fell far short of incubating any smart partnerships between the DFIs and MIs.

4.6 OVERALL ASSESSMENT

From the outset, the Communications Campaign suffered from the twin effects of unrealistic project design and unresponsive project partners. It certainly did not help matters when the International Consultant failed to deliver a usable strategy for implementing the campaign. No surprise then that this component of the project failed on every count of the measurements constructed to assess its effective implementation. A recounting of these measurements and the extent to which the Communications Campaign measure up to them serves to provide an overall assessment of this campaign:

- ***Increased uptake of micro-credit/micro-finance*** – a compilation of data from all DFIs “pre” and “post” campaign will be carried out to measure uptake

No such data compilation was carried out “pre” or “post” the campaign, and even if the data had been gathered it would not have been possible to determine how much of the increase, if any, is attributable to the campaign.

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- ***Greater awareness, understanding and literacy of sustainable micro-finance*** – this will be measured by simplified “feed-back” questionnaires conducted via interviews or forms

A vague measurement, without clear definition as to who the respondents to the questionnaires would be, and in any case no such survey was conducted.

- ***Effectiveness of helpdesk – increased enquiries and successful applications*** – measured by the number of enquiries received in a day. The key performance index (KPI) of the helpdesk assistant will include: number of daily enquiries, handled, number of DFI referrals, number of loans applied, number of loans approved, number of training programmes undertaken and the number of clients satisfied with assistance provided

Very specific measurement in contrast to the immediately preceding one, but it is academic since the helpdesk died an early death.

- ***Increased media coverage*** – measured by the number of times “micro-credit” and the “pilot project” are mentioned in the media

Mention of “micro-credit” in the media cannot be correlated directly to awareness of the project and since the campaign did not engage sufficiently with the media, the impact could not be expected to be significant.

- ***Increased support of logo and key message*** – measured by the number of DFIs and Banking Institutions applying the new logo and communicating the key message

The logo and key message were discarded due to a similar initiative by the SME Council.

- **Positive policy shift** – measured by the positive changes in the policy. The two “Policy Dialogues” carried out “pre” and “post” campaign will document the policy changes made

A very ill defined and unrealistic measurement and only the “pre” dialogue was conducted.

In sum, the Communications Campaign failed to perform well on any of its self-prescribed measurements, not withstanding the fact that a number of the measurements were themselves poorly conceived.

5. EVALUATION OF PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION: CAPACITY BUILDING

Happily, in as much as the Communications Campaign performed below expectations, the Capacity Building component far exceeded the expectations of all stakeholders. The testimonies of a few of them are illustrative:

Rahayu Nizam, Trainee from Machang:

“This course is different from previous ones I have attended because it is comprehensive whereas the previous ones dealt with only a single topic. If the course is extended, I want to continue, I don’t want to give my place to other people. I feel that the Machang group is now like one family.”

Mardhiyyah Mohd, Trainee from Kuala Terengganu:

“The training method was fun and effective and we can apply the knowledge gained to our specific businesses. Attending this training was like waking up from a dream. Before this we were walking in the dark, we felt alone in our own businesses because we had no business networks and no peer support.”

Prof Azahari Ismail, Motivation Trainer:

“The participants are very motivated and eager to learn. They are happy with the way their businesses have benefited from the course because they can apply the hands-on knowledge to their enterprises. Their confidence level has increased substantially. There is a great contrast between the first time I met them and now³. At the first workshop it took a lot of probing before they would respond, now they can verbalise very serious points of view spontaneously.”

En Zulhan Othman, Food Structure and Taste Trainer:

“There has been marked improvement in the quality of the products. When I tested their products at the training session, I was wary of holding or eating some of the products because they were too greasy or too sweet. The women have really applied the tips we gave them, the products look much better and the packaging has improved.”⁴

A combination of factors contributed to the successful implementation of this capacity building programme and they will be discussed in turn below.

5.1 OBJECTIVE

The objective of the Capacity Building component of the project is stated as:

- Developing a group of rural women equipped with various entrepreneurial skills such as branding, packaging and marketing to enhance the products of the women so as to empower them to become successful entrepreneurs.

This was to be achieved by conducting a series of workshops and hands-on training, which include elements of ICT and business coaching, to enable the identified groups of rural women to acquire skills and develop expertise in various micro-enterprise aspects

³ Prof Azahari has conducted 3 sets of motivation workshops in the course of the project, the first set in August 2007 and the final one in January 2008.

⁴ The Food Structure and Tasting Workshops were conducted in August 2007 and these remarks were made when En Zulhan examined the products displayed at the Graduation Ceremony on 23 January 2008.

of branding, labelling, packaging, marketing and promotion. Through this effort, it was hoped that the production potential of the target groups could be enhanced via the development of marketing channels and the strengthening of marketing networks for the entrepreneurs. To further widen market access, the usage of ICT by means of setting up a website would be explored in addition to other feasible digital marketing tools.

5.2 FEASIBILITY STUDY

A feasibility study for the Capacity Building component of the project was conducted with the following objectives:

- To describe the target population and gain an understanding of their socio-economic conditions in order to better understand their capacity building needs;
- To identify the specific areas of training for the targeted women;
- To provide recommendations for expanding the women's market access and strengthening business networking for the targeted women;
- To provide a basis for selection of the participants for the capacity building programme;
- To provide a basis for choosing 2 out of 3 states (Penang, Kelantan, Terengganu) for the purpose of conducting the capacity building programme; and
- To recommend a method of impact evaluation and data collection in order to assess the effectiveness of the project.

The feasibility study was very ably conducted by the consultant, Dr Soraya Azmi, and the insightful report produced became the blueprint for the implementation of the capacity building programme. Kelantan and Terengganu were chosen as the two states in which to conduct the programme, with the locations of the training being Kota Baru and Machang for Kelantan, and Kuala Terengganu for Terengganu.

5.3 SELECTION OF TRAINEES

Most of trainees learnt about the Capacity Building programme through government agencies such as the Agriculture Department or TEKUN, with which they are registered. Some heard about it through friends or the media. They confessed to not knowing what the course would entail, even after the interview, but were keen to attend all the same because they anticipated that the knowledge gained would help to advance their enterprises.

The Selection Panel accepted in total the selection criteria recommended in the Feasibility Study, viz:

Required components:

1. Already running her own small business.
2. Age-under 50 years old.
3. Involved in the food industry.
4. Literate, minimum of a primary school education.

Point-based components:

1. Can read and write competently. (20 points)
2. Household income of RM1,500 or less per month. (20 points)
3. Has not received government grants. (20 points)
4. Has not received other training. (20 points)
5. Demonstrates potential business aptitude. (20 points)

The assessment forms for the interview adhered to the above criteria. However, in the actual selection process, one or more of the above criteria were overlooked for certain candidates. For instance quite a number of the trainees had household income exceeding RM1,500; had previously received or were receiving government grants; or had already benefited from a number of training courses. It was explained that compromises had to be struck in certain cases in order to fulfil other requirements, such as a spread of representation in the different food sectors.

The original target to recruit 150 trainees was scaled down to 100 because it was decided that the resources available could not support such a large number of candidates. As the selection proceeded, the panel finally settled on taking in only 75 candidates because there were insufficient suitable applicants from Terengganu. Among the reasons for this low recruitment rate were the lack of response from the various bodies which were approached to assist in recruitment and insufficient diversity of products in Terengganu.

Another point to note is that the majority of the trainees in the Kota Baru and Kuala Terengganu groups were residents of these cities, and could hardly be considered the rural women who were initially meant to be targeted. Even Machang could not be considered rural either.

One of the Bestari Helpdesk officers opined that a number of the trainees from the higher income bracket, who were already fairly well-established entrepreneurs, were not as committed to the course and saw it as a stepping stone to their own ends – in particular establishing a marketing network. A number of the trainers, however, took a different view. They reckoned that a mix of participants was beneficial for the group, the more established entrepreneurs sharing their experiences with the less established ones, indeed acting as role models for them. It was also discovered that some of the better-established trainees helped their peers by supplying their products on credit for the latter to market.

Another effective selection criterion which, in the opinion of some trainers, contributed to the success of the training programme was the requirement that the women must have had experience in operating small enterprises. With this experience, they were better able to see the relevance of issues raised by the trainers, grasp the possible solutions offered and apply them immediately to their businesses in a hands-on manner. This made them appreciate the training programme even more. The decision to limit the trainees to those in the food industry also turned out to be a wise one. As one of the trainers noted, it allowed the training programme to be more focused as opposed to

certain other government training programmes where there is a mix of participants engaged in different natures of business.

5.4 TRAINING

A total of 14 training workshops were conducted, with the topics as listed in Table 2. Although 75 candidates were selected, only 68 actually commence their training. By the end of the project, a total of 62 (91%) trainees remained on the registered. However, only 54 received certificates for the course as this was conditional upon the trainees missing no more than three of the workshops. This graduation rate of 80% is certainly very respectable. Among the reasons cited for trainees dropping out of the programme were: personal problems encountered as they could not juggle between the training and their domestic responsibilities, some trainees had started work, while others found the distance they had to travel too daunting.

Table 2: Attendance at the Respective Training Workshops

No	Topic	Kota Baru		Machang		Kuala Trengganu		Total	Total
		Date	Attendance	Date	Attendance	Date	Attendance	Attendance	Trainees
1	Packaging and Labelling	July 18-21	29	July 18-21	17	July 18-21	16	62	68
2	Food Structure and Tasting	Aug 11-12	29/27*	July 28-29	18/18*	Aug 9-10	17/18*	64/63	68
3	Costing	Aug 9	31	Aug 10	13	Aug 11	18	62	68
4	Motivation 1: The Self	Aug 17-18	25/23	Aug 11- 12	14/16	Aug 23-24	16/16	55/55	64
5	Good Handling Practice	Aug 23	24	Aug 24	14	Aug 22	15	53	64
6	Marketing	Sept 7	21	Sept 6	13	Sept 5	16	50	63
7	Motivation 2: The Family**	Oct 26	23	Oct 27	12	Oct 28	12	47	63
8	Financial Records	Nov 1	21	Nov 2	12	Oct 31	14	47	63
9	Business Simulation	Nov 15	22	Nov 16	14	Nov 17	12	48	62
10	Computer Literacy	Nov 22	15	Nov 23	16	Nov 24	16	47	62
11	Halal Certification	Dec 6	24	Dec 6	8	Dec 5	15	47	62
12	Grooming	Jan 23	22	Jan 24	16	Jan 24	14	52	62
13	Motivation 3: The Team	Jan 24	22	Jan 24	16	Jan 24	14	52	62

Note:

* indicates that 17 persons attended on the first day and 18 on the second

** some participants brought along their husbands and children as they were encouraged to do so in keeping with the topic of the workshop

However, the trend of declining attendance as the programme proceeded was very noticeable. This is perhaps understandable considering that it was an intensive course spread over an extended period of six months. The women had to juggle their domestic responsibilities in order to attend the workshops. A number of them brought their young children along with them to every training session because they had no alternative childcare arrangement to rely on. This was a definite indication of their commitment. A few had to travel substantial distances from their hometowns to participate in the workshops. Some of the women persisted with the training despite a lack of support from their spouses and the consequent domestic tension engendered.

5.4.1 Choice of Topics

The training programme, as illustrated in Table 2, was a comprehensive one, albeit at an introductory level for each of the topics concerned. Starting with the areas recommended in the feasibility study as base, further topics were added on upon discussion with some of the trainers. In the course of the programme, certain gaps were identified and supplementary training sessions were organised. This dynamic and flexible manner of operation resulted in a training package which provided the trainees with all the essential entrepreneurial skills.

The trainees found all the topics to be highly relevant and eye-opening. The Food Structure and Tasting Workshop was mentioned by many as being particularly interesting because they obtained many useful tips on how to improve their products in terms of taste, form, texture, durability and presentation. The trainees reported that they contacted the trainers on the phone when they needed further advice. The Costing Workshop was also highlighted because, although the trainees found it one of the more difficult of the topics, they valued the insights gained on how a lot of the expenses they previously had not included into their costing (such as electricity, cooking gas, etc.) did add up. Some realised to their horror that they had actually been operating at a loss or made very meagre profits. The trainers provided them with some solutions on how to cut unit cost.

The Motivation Workshops were appreciated for helping the women to boost their confidence and learn to conduct themselves more professionally; to garner support from their family members for their enterprises; and teach them teamwork. Although the Computer Literacy Workshop exposed them only to the most basic of IT functions, the women were excited about finally having “touched” the computer and overcoming their fear of it.

Although these were the workshops that left a deeper impression on the trainees, it was obvious that they valued the entire package of training. As many of them remarked, they had previously received ad-hoc training in single aspects of entrepreneurship. The comprehensive nature of this programme provided them with the whole picture, made them realise the multi-faceted nature of enterprise management – and also how much more they needed to learn.

5.4.2 Choice of Trainers

A lot of care was given to the choice of trainers. The Project Team interviewed a pool of potential trainers to select the few who had a proven track record of having conducted similar courses for a similar audience. Thus the main trainer on Food Structure and Tasting, Dr Mohd Sallehudin, has had a long and rich experience as a chef and is teaching culinary art in Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM). He was able to provide the trainees with very practical advice on solving specific problems they faced in enhancing the quality of their products. En Mohd Husny Basir, one of the trainers on Costing, teaches the subject in the Malaysian Entrepreneurship Development Centre (MEDEC) in UiTM. More importantly, he has conducted many similar courses for the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development and other government agencies.

The trainer on Packaging and Labelling, Puan Siti Rabaah from the Faculty of Arts and Design, UiTM, decided to assign her students to design packaging for the trainees as part of their course project for that semester. Although the students had some problems communicating with their respective “clients” due to the distance between them, the

students were able to come up with many attractive and imaginative packaging which they exhibited at the Graduation Ceremony. Even if not all the designs by the students are adopted, due to reasons of cost or practicality, they would certainly have given the trainees a lot of good ideas on how to improve their packaging. This was an instance of individual enthusiasm and innovativeness which was a hallmark of the Capacity Building programme, and which contributed to its success.

As a result of their experience, the trainers were able to deliver the contents of their workshop in a manner that could be clearly understood by the trainees and with an interactive approach that engaged them. All the trainees testified that they could understand the course content, although certain subjects – especially the more mathematical ones like costing and accounting – were found to be more challenging. On their part, the trainers were very impressed by the trainees' enthusiasm and high level of participation.

Great pains were also taken to ensure that the course content fitted the needs of the programme and the trainees. The Project Team engaged in long discussions with each of the trainers to customise the course content in accordance with the objectives of the project.

The proof of the pudding is the near unanimous high ranking accorded to each of the trainers in the trainees' evaluation forms as reflected in Table 3. Practically all the trainers were adjudged good to excellent. The trainees were also very impressed by the sincerity and approachable nature of the trainers. They felt particularly blessed (*syukor*) for having been given the opportunity to learn from university professors and lecturers.

Table 3: Ranking of Trainers for the Respective Workshops

No	Topic	Ranking
1	Packaging and Labelling	3-4
2	Food Structure and Tasting	4
3	Costing	2-4*
4	Motivation 1: The Self	3-4
5	Good Handling Practice	3
6	Marketing	3-4
7	Motivation 2: The Family**	3-4
8	Financial Records	3-4
9	Business Simulation	3-4
10	Computer Literacy	4
11	Halal Certification	3-4
12	Grooming	nil
13	Motivation 3: The Team	nil

Note:

Rankings were from 1-4, with 1 representing the bottom and 4 the top of the scale

* One of the trainers was ranked 3-4, while the other received a number of 2s

5.4.3 Effectiveness of Workshops

When asked the question “What was the impact of the training on you?”, many trainees answered without hesitation: “I am so fired up”, “I have become so motivated”, “I have become so much more confident”, “I know so much more about running a business”. There could be no better testimony of the effectiveness of the workshops.

Besides the entrepreneurial skills attained and the mindset changed achieved, the trainees in the various locations had also built up a peer support system amongst themselves. Apart from sharing information and knowledge, this newly established peer network is also being used to help each other market their products and buy supplies in bulk to reduce production cost. The group in Machang is discussing the possibility of setting up a shop to market their products together. This peer network is extremely important to ensure that the trainees do not become invisible and atomised again, each acting in isolation.

5.5 MARKETING NETWORK

The lack of marketing channels is definitely a major challenge facing micro-entrepreneurs, the trainees of this project not excepted. This spurred the Project Team to explore the establishment of a marketing arrangement between the trainees and Mydin Holdings. Mydin has an expressed policy of promoting local SMEs by retailing their products. A briefing session was conducted for the trainees by Mydin's manager, En Norman Rajen bin Abdullah who acquainted the trainees with the pre-requisites for acceptance of their products for retail in Mydin stores. Beyond quality of the product in terms of taste, the entrepreneurs have to fulfil the requirements of halal certification, barcode, publication of nutritional facts, and acceptable packaging. En Norman even tasted the products and gave suggestions for their improvement.

During the trainees' field visit to Mydin Wholesale Hypermarket on 22 January 2008, En Norman tasted their products again and surmised that the majority of them met the quality standards. The publication of nutritional standards was not an issue for most of the trainees and Mydin agreed to help them with the barcodes until they are able to obtain them on their own. The remaining issues were halal certification and packaging. Realising the need for the halal certification, a special session on this subject had been added to the training programme. However, even though the trainees now know how to go about getting the halal certification, many lack the means to do so as it is quite a costly process. Some of the trainees had improved their packaging to a level that was acceptable to Mydin but others still have to work on theirs. A number of the packaging designs submitted by the UiTM students were considered unsuitable by Mydin either because of they would be costly to produce or were not practical for display purposes.

Although there are still kinks to be smoothed out, much progress has been made in opening up this very important marketing channel for the trainees. It is of special importance because Mydin is planning to set up its largest hypermarket in Kelantan within the next two years. The eagerness evident among the trainees when they surrounded En Norman, during the field visit, to hear his evaluation of their products and packaging is clear indication of how much it would mean to them to get their products

retailed in this major chain of outlets. That the Chairman of Mydin, Datuk Ameer Ali bin Mydin actually took time off to address them during the field visit and to attend the Graduation Ceremony was a tremendous encouragement for the trainees. Getting their products into Mydin Stores would indeed be a major achievement for the trainees as well as the project.

5.6 GRADUATION CEREMONY

The glittering Graduation Ceremony was a proud moment for the trainees, but it was in a sense as much the end of a journey as the beginning of another. They had completed their training and been equipped with a range of entrepreneurial skills, but only at the most basic level. A lot more learning has to happen if they are to take their enterprises to a higher level. The handholding had ended, they had to make or break on the own from hereon, although the peer network and the marketing platform established may be able to lend them some support. The “What next?” question was probably on many minds but no answers were forthcoming – this is probably one of the biggest failings of this component of the project and will be discussed in Section 6.

The Graduation Ceremony showcased the products of the trainees and generated a lot of interest among the guests. A number of them expressed interest in helping to launch similar projects. If this indeed eventuates, the Graduation Ceremony would have more than served its purpose. However, such sentiments have a way of evaporating after the event and it is necessary for the project team and partners to follow up to ensure that the replication process does actually take place.

5.7 PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The project team was awarded very high scores by the trainers and trainees alike for its commitment and competence in managing the Capacity Building component of the project. Despite having to operate without the expected logistical support from the local

partners in Kelantan and Terengganu, the team managed to mount all the planned activities – indeed added to them as new needs were identified. The trainees described the team members as being very approachable and accommodating, ready to go the extra mile to ensure that all the workshops were run smoothly and delivered contents of high standards. The only complaints were those pertaining to the physical condition of the workshop venue for some of the earlier sessions.

5.8 OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Without a doubt this component of the project has succeeded admirably in fulfilling its objective of “developing a group of rural women equipped with various entrepreneurial skills such as branding, packaging and marketing to enhance the products of the women so as to empower them to become successful entrepreneurs”.

6 EXIT STRATEGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The only serious blemish on the Capacity Building component of the project is probably the lack of an exit strategy or any mechanism to ensure its sustainability. This section will explore briefly what could be done in these respects.

6.1 CURRENT STATUS OF TRAINEES

The current status of the trainees can be likened to dinner guests who have been served the appetizer but left salivating for the rests of the courses. A door had been opened and they had been given a glimpse of the array of skills they would need to succeed as entrepreneurs. The door is now closing on them, however, and it is not certain that they have sufficient resources and stamina to progress further. If indeed they are not able to sustain their current level of motivation, much less advance further, a lot of the energy expended on the project would have been in vain. Although the trainees have expressed

vague ideas of continued support and collaboration amongst themselves, they most probably still need some external professional support.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP ACTION TO SUPPORT TRAINEES

Although the pilot project has ended, it is necessary to continue to extend some form of support to the trainees to ensure that what had been gained would not be lost. Some key recommended actions in this respect are:

- To continue to provide some training sessions for the graduates although at a much less intensive pace. This will serve to both enhance their skills further and facilitate continued contact and networking between them. The networking is a critical support system to ensure that they advance further as entrepreneurs rather than stagnate, or worse, slide back;
- To ensure that the marketing platform initiated with Mydin becomes firmly established. With a ready and potentially expanding market for their products, the graduates will definitely be spurred to develop their enterprises further;
- To improve the administration of the www.kuihpantaitimur.com website, which is currently not user friendly and does not allow the customer to order online. Instead they have to call the respective administrators to place their order.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP ACTION BY PROJECT PARTNERS

The project partners and other stakeholders have the resources to help ensure the sustainability of the project. Among the follow-up action that can be carried out without expending too much additional resources are:

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- MCCM (or another suitable agency) to revive the Bestari Helpdesk and give it greater prominence. For many of the state MCCs, it is a function they are already performing. It is a matter of formalising and rebranding the service. As many of the graduates are still plagued by the issue of inadequate capital, the Bestari Helpdesk can give priority to assisting them apply for micro-finance;
 - AIM (and other providers) can also give priority to processing the applications from the graduates who fulfil the qualifying criteria. A special session could perhaps be conducted in each of the project sites to brief the graduates on the qualifying criteria and assist them with the application;
 - AIM and TEKUN (and others) can pay special attention to the graduates who are already their members and provide them with further assistance;
 - As the project has shown that micro-credit and micro-finance without accompanying entrepreneurial skills training or vice versa are inadequate, AIM and TEKUN should consider incorporating the project training module into their operations;
 - MECD can give priority to the project graduates for its “Groom Big” programme and other relevant schemes.

6.4 REPLICATION OF PROJECT MODEL

A highly successful model and module for entrepreneurial skills training for women in the food industry has been developed and should be disseminated and replicated as widely as possible. Some expressions of interest have emerged from various quarters to replicate the project. Among them are Dr Soraya Azmi, who is interested in launching a similar project in Perlis, and Cik Yuslinoff Ahmad, the head of the Penang Dewanita, who would like to see it being replicated in her home state.

- A mechanism should be put in place whereby the project team can serve as consultants for any party interested in replicating the project. MECD or UNDP could serve as the coordinating body for this purpose.
- Other stakeholders such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development and the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industries should be encouraged to adopt the model for replication.

7 CONCLUSION

The long and short of it is that the Communications Campaign failed to meet many of its objectives while the Capacity Building component succeeded remarkably. In conclusion, it is best to distil the key lessons learned from the implementation of the project ***Entrepreneurial Skills: Empowering Women:***

- Project designs have to be cohesive and realistic to ensure smooth implementation and the achievement of project objectives;
- Clear roles and responsibilities of the project partners should be spelt out in the project document to avoid misunderstandings that can jeopardise the successful implementation of the project;
- Effective communication should be maintained between project stakeholders to avoid duplication of efforts or wastage of resources;
- A clear and detailed blueprint which addresses all relevant issues realistically can greatly facilitate effective project implementation. The feasibility study of the capacity building component is a case in point;

- Close adherence to agreed criteria for selection of target groups should be practised as far as possible to ensure that the project benefits those most in need. Both the Communications Campaign and the Capacity Building programme did not focus sufficiently on rural low-income women;
- Training programmes for entrepreneurial skills should be customised and focused on a single industrial sector for maximum effectiveness;
- A comprehensive training package that delivers multiple entrepreneurial skills to the trainees is more effective than one-off training on single subjects;
- Training content should be practical and applicable, and address directly the issues faced by the entrepreneurs in operating their businesses;
- Choice of trainers should be based on expertise in terms of content and ability to deliver the content in a manner that is interactive and can be easily assimilated by the target audience;
- Establishment of a marketing platform for the products of the trainees is pivotal for sustaining their growth as entrepreneurs;
- Practical activities such as the hamper exercise is a good learning experience for participants, allowing them to combine and apply the various skills they have gained
- Pilot projects are of limited usefulness if there is no exit strategy which puts in place a realistic mechanism for project sustainability and replication without the same level of resources available during the pilot period.