

For many years the Socio-Economic Institute (SEIN) of Limburg University in Belgium has organized different mentor programmes. The programmes are highly valued by the different stakeholders: the mentees (participants), the mentors, the companies and the promoters (Ministries, European Social Fund). The project has been selected as "best practice" in Flanders in a research study by the European Commission. Nowadays international cooperation is more focused on technical assistance and capacity building. As mentoring is an important tool for empowerment and as women in developing countries are looking for capacity building systems, it was interesting to explore and exchange our programmes with a university in the South. SEIN therefore developed a mentor programme to promote the empowerment of women in the labour market in Cuba. The University of Pinar del Río is the partner in this project. The project consists of developing the programme, foreseeing logistical support and working out a manual, so that afterwards the local university can continue the project by itself. The cooperation will be part of sustainable development within the empowerment of women. In the following sections, the background of this project, the methods and the objectives are given. This information can be used by other organizations to exploit their activities around mentor programmes for women, as a way of empowerment. Janneke Jellema is Project Manager at the Socio Economic Institute (SEIN) in the Limburg University, Belgium. Magdalena Mazon Hernandez is Project Manager at the Universidad de Pinar del Río in Cuba.

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Empowerment of Women in Cuba: Experiences of the SOFIA Mentor Programme

1. Problem Analysis

Every phase and position of people in society, from primary to adult education, is based on learning. The three E's, education, employ-

ment and empowerment, are dependent on lifelong learning. 'Learning' as such is a broad concept and can therefore be divided into informal and formal learning. Informal learning is most common: learning by experience, learning at the coffee table, learning from discussions and learning by 'role models'. Informal learning is structured and designed into formal learning.

Personal contacts and networking are an important base for learning, especially in professional life. Traditionally, there are different ways within our cultures for men to meet on a formal or informal base: at the pub or at the football match. Within these groups or networks you can see the effect of discussions and the exchange of experiences, which results in a coaching or mentoring process by the senior participants.

These processes are more difficult for women. Until now, female entrepreneurship and management has not been a common thing. An older generation of 'role models' and a long tradition of networks hardly exist.

Research has shown that the promotion of women in management and entrepreneurship, in the profit as well as in the non-profit sector, still stays behind male colleagues. Also, the percentage of women in a political and decision-making function lags behind. In financial respects, jobs for women are underestimated in comparison with equal functions occupied by a man.

The Socio-Economic Institute (SEIN) has been organizing different mentor and management programmes to stimulate the empowerment of women. In our training programmes we present informal and formal ways of learning. The objectives are to promote entrepreneurship and management positions for women in the profit, the non-profit sector and in politics. The projects have been subsidized by the European Social Fund and the Flemish Government.

2. Methodology

The mentor programmes of SEIN have the aim of optimizing and broadening the professional development of women by theoretical input, by training in personal and professional qualities, by personal coaching via mentoring and by offering a broad network. It can be seen as a concept of 'lifelong learning' for adult education because it is focused on different target groups. The projects can also be seen as an important instrument of the empowerment of women. SOFIA: the goddess of wisdom, is the name of the concept. The method is based on four 'tools': mentoring, training, networking and train-the-trainer.

2.1 Mentoring

Mentoring is a natural education method that in an informal way is integrated in our daily life. In professional life, mentoring is used more and more as a specific training method.

Mentoring can be 'one to one' coaching, the guiding by a mentor of a small group of participants, or the combination of these two aspects. An experienced female manager or entrepreneur shares experiences with 'mentees'. The mentor and mentee meet on a regular basis (monthly or even more often) organized and prepared by a co-ordinator. Even outside the meetings the participants can contact the mentors or co-ordinator for advice and support.

After basic education there does not exist a lot a space for adult education during the employment phase. Most of what we learn is in practice and by learning 'on the job'. The exchange of information and the experiences of a female 'role model', the mentor, are therefore of ultimate importance.

In the individual mentor programme the mentor and mentee meet on a regular basis. They have to construct their meetings based on checklists and monitoring by a co-ordinator. With a structured process, the co-ordinator can follow the development and can make sure

that meetings do take place, with a useful purpose. Disintegration of the meetings can thus be prevented.

Within the group programmes, the mentors and mentees meet every month. They are prepared with a strategy and thesis discussed with the mentees. The discussions and exchange of experiences (the mentoring) take place within a framework of training sessions.

2.2 Education and Training

The education within the mentor project is based on informal and formal learning. The training functions as a framework for the mentoring process. The programmes contain interactive training sessions based on the demand of the participants. Topics related to management and entrepreneurship are presented.

The training programme is designed in narrow co-operation with the participants by analyzing their learning goals. That means that the education programme is not strictly defined before starting the project. Hence the co-ordinator organizes a personal interview with the candidates. The aim of this meeting is to make a needs analysis of the target group, to measure the background, the expectations and the learning goals of the participants. The personal meetings also give a stimulating effect to the participants before starting the programme. During the programme continuous monitoring and evaluation of the learning goals and coaching of the trainers and mentors take place. Hence the training sessions can really be organized 'tailor made' with a strong participatory method.

The training consists of interactive sessions based on a topic and introduced by a qualified trainer. The framework provides for the mentoring process and the exchange of experiences. Each session contains a theoretical and a practical part to make a link with the experiences of the participants.

During the practical training the group is split in discussion groups to "receive the mentoring". The mentors have an active role, because

they manage the group and assist them in solving their problems. The group work is very important for the exchange of experiences and the mentoring.

Besides training sessions, excursions are organized to the companies of the women entrepreneurs. Furthermore the participants are informed about interesting topics via a newsletter. The project management permanently offers documentation material and personal feedback and support.

2.3 Networking

Together with training and mentoring, functional networks are created. On the one hand the mentors and trainers open their networks. On the other hand strong networks are created within the group of participants. The network and group process is of great importance for the discussion and exchange of experiences during the training sessions.

The network provides a platform of colleagues who are active women in the labour market. It is a stimulating forum for the empowerment of women. Together with the mentors, the women support each other, they challenge and they provide vision. SOFIA acts as a 'sounding board' where women recognize their problems and experiences. Within the platform they can look for 'best practices' and solutions. The participatory and personal development within the network is very important. Hence the programme has an interactive, experimental and reflexive learning method.

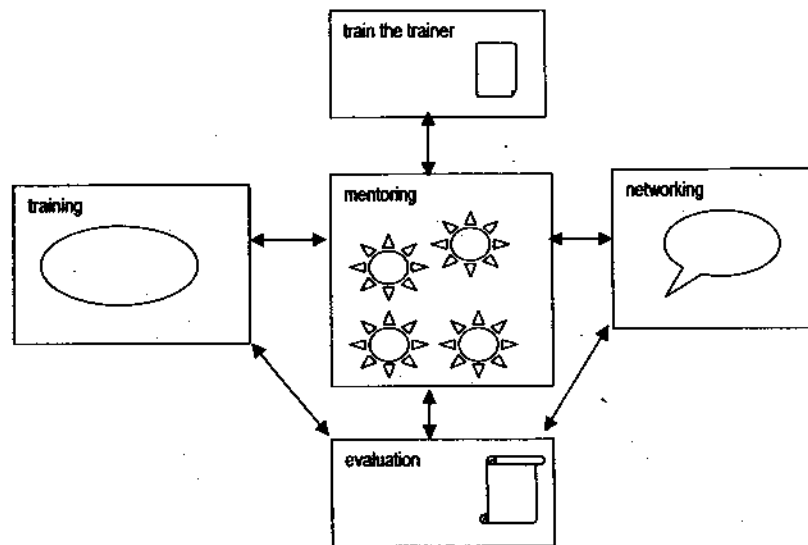
2.4 Train the Trainer

An experienced manager is not automatically a good mentor. In addition, a manager will not spend time and energy as a mentor if there is no win-win situation for her. The mentoring is an important pillar for the project. The mentor functions as a 'role model' for women in the labour market. For the participants it is important that they can identify with this mentor and that she really is a 'living example'. The

qualifications and the enthusiasm of the mentors determine the success of the coaching. Therefore an interesting train-the-trainer programme is presented to the mentors.

Mentors are shown that they are also learners. Mentoring gives a win-win situation, because they receive interesting reflections on their own careers and work fields. Furthermore the mentor creates a relation based on trust with the mentees because professional and personal items are discussed. The programme gives her also publicity, broadening of her network and contacts with a new generation of women. The 'Train the trainer' shows the win-win situation, informs about aspects of women in the labour market and diversity management and shows 'best practices' of mentoring.

The following flow chart gives an overview of the methodology:



3. The Economy in Cuba

Cuba is a middle income country and since 1956 a socialist republic. Because of international isolation and because of the economic crisis,

the constitution was reformed in 1992. In 1996 the BNP in Cuba grew by 8%. The economy is slowly moving towards a more liberal economy. The American dollar has become a legal currency. 75% of the state farms have been transformed into co-operatives with strong independence. Hence the economy is changing from a planned economy to dynamic management. Within this process new skills and knowledge are necessary to participate in the labour market and to fulfil a management position. The mentor project contributes to this change and focuses on these skills by training and an exchange of experiences.

According to UNDP, education and health care are the most important indicators for the quality of life. Referring to these indicators, Cuba obtains a rather positive score on the Human Development Index (middle income country 0.7 – 0.8 HDI). As education is an important tool for development and the education sector in Cuba is well developed, it is useful to organize a project in this sector.

4. The Target Group

Over the past two decades women's place in the labour market has been a constant concern for policy design in many countries around the world. We can identify three main reasons why women deserve a place in male-oriented economies:

- self-recognition of their professional capacities
- necessity of income sources for daily life
- organizations with a more equal personnel policy are more innovative

These criteria confirm that regardless of geographical area, women are part of society not only in their role as wives or mothers, but as active members of the labour market.

The participation of women in the labour market in Cuba has been increased. Depending of the sector and the country, the participation of women in the labour market in general is about 40%. This percent-

age is valid for developed countries as well as for a middle income country like Cuba.

If we have a look at the percentage of women in management this is much lower. Depending of the sector and country, the participation is more or less 10%.

Although the education of women is strongly increasing and the amount of girls within higher education is almost 50%, the move up the career ladder lags behind.

The topic of women in management was also part of a Latin American conference, in co-operation with UNICEF, the *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer* (CEM) and the *Federación de las Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC). Here again it is shown that women don't participate sufficiently in decision making processes. The consequence is that women take less part in the decisions, the implementation and the planning of the development of a country.

5. Women and Adult Education

During research we have seen that the participation of women in the labour market in Cuba does not differ that much from in Belgium. The representation of women in the labour market is about 40%. The representation of women in management is about 10%. Both countries are concerned about equal opportunities in the labour market. Policy measures have had several effects. But via policy measures only, the effect won't be completed because a lack of networking for women is still a problem.

The empowerment of women is an important tool within development cooperation. Capacity building and training for women are an important necessity. Women need space and opportunities to develop their leadership skills and assertiveness, to establish an action agenda that focuses on their needs. It also shows that women can only be self-confident and autonomous in their economic activities if no cultural

restraints hold them back. Training is here an important tool to promote women's equality in the economy.

After traditional secondary or higher education, women need opportunities to re-train and upgrade their skills, and to continue their access to vocational and career guidance. A way to organize this is via mentoring, networking and training. Until now a combination of these factors doesn't exist within the empowerment of women. Within the changing process of the Cuban economy, it is time to take the opportunity to acquire new skills to improve the position of women in the labour market.

6. Women and Mentoring = Netlearning

The integration of women in management has less to do with basic education. A middle income country such as Cuba, scores well on the Human Development Index. This means that basic education is available. Besides, primary, secondary and higher education in Cuba are free for everybody.

Research has shown that there are other reasons for less representation of women in management. In one way this has to do with empowerment and human resources. It has been shown that there is a lack of female role models (mentoring) and networking.

Social contacts are of great importance for the personal and professional development of men and women. Traditionally men have different ways to meet and to participate in mentorship or 'godparentship' for younger men. For women this is more difficult as there doesn't exist a tradition of women in management. There is a lack of women 'role models' who function as a mirror, reflexion and sounding board.

Furthermore networking with colleagues or with superiors is an important way of developing a career. It is necessary to exchange ex-

periences and to stay involved in different (mostly informal) communication lines outside the formal circuit.

In some ways lack of women in management exists because of the absence of management experience and training. Management qualities are learned by practical training and learning "on the job". Therefore management training based on a needs analyses with a participatory approach is necessary. The combination of learning and networking with mentors can be described as netlearning. This is learning within and from an interactive network of participants.

7. Policy Environment

The representation of women in the labour market in Cuba does not differ much from that of women in the European Union, in spite of the differences between the economies.

Equal opportunities for men and women began in Cuba already in 1959 and it still is a policy priority. The elimination of all forms of discrimination against women constitutes a major goal of the Cuban Government. Its legal and practical implementation remains under constant review by the Government and is followed by the *Federación de las Mujeres Cubanas*.

Relevant ministries and institutions have developed programmes to change socio-cultural patterns of conduct among women and men. There are also programmes to educate women about exercising their rights. Efforts are made to provide more training for women and opportunities for redeployment.

It is important to recognize the role that non-governmental organizations have played for decades. The most important one is the *Federación de las Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC). The FMC is recognized by the constitution as the responsible body for promoting policies for the advancement of women. The FMC represents a large proportion of women in Cuba. 85% of Cuban women are members of the FMC.

With this position they enable and influence government policies and decisions. The FMC is represented in all the regions of the country, even at local level. It organizes seminars and lectures about topics related to equal opportunities. Hence the FMC plays an important role in the empowerment of women.

8. The Project Partners

The project partners within the SOFIA mentor programme consist of two universities. The Universidad de Pinar del Río in Cuba and Limburg University in Belgium are relatively small universities. Both universities have a strong regional accent in the agricultural provinces of the country. Besides, both institutes have a lot of experience in adult education and research. They organize different training courses about gender, personal effectiveness and human resources management. The main research topic is women in the labour market. Equal opportunities and empowerment of different target groups is their mission. Thanks to the similar characteristics of the organizations, the partnership is a fruitful project in exchanging knowledge and experiences.

The *Federación de las Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC) is a third partner in the project. It is important to work with a local partner which is well integrated in the community and the target group. The co-partner may also be a representative of the SME's, for example a Chamber of Commerce.

9. Experience of the Participants

The experience of the participants, mentees as well as mentors, is positive. Mentors and mentees have recognized that this kind of programme is useful for women of all enterprises. They learn about different management styles and they can compare their situation with each other.

Many of the women recognized that they did not have a formal role model in their personal career. Some of them identified relatives, partners or colleagues who played an informal role. But most of them found role models, an exchange of experiences and a stimulating platform within the SOFIA programme.

The women also admitted that SOFIA differs from traditional training courses. There is a participatory approach, a personal contact and exchange among junior and senior women. This gives a very stimulating feeling of trust and familiarity and a sounding board for women in the labour market.

All of the participants recognized that the SOFIA programme has been an important forum of reference in their career. At the beginning of their professional lives, the women did not realize the importance of gender in management, as they had not faced the issue at lower level. Only when women are involved in management activities, do they realize that there are barriers in a male-oriented environment unaware of stereotyping, visibility, performance pressures and 'clone effects'.

The SOFIA women were also positive about the combination of mentoring, networking and training, because the training functions as a framework for the discussions. Furthermore the participants evaluated that SOFIA gave reasonable to high consideration to the following learning goals:

- to look for 'best practices' in a stimulating forum
- to improve professional functioning and broaden the network
- to recognize problems and experiences by other women
- to enlarge personal skills by training and mentoring

The mentors are important actors in the process. They realized that the programme was a win-win situation for them. The mentors participated because it gave them a reflection on their work field. They shared experiences with the other mentors and with a new generation of women managers. Mentors are experienced managers who func-

tion as a 'role model'. Literature gives different criteria for being a good mentor. The mentees agreed with these criteria and they considered the characteristics of mentor to be as follows:

- is a confidential listener and has an 'open mind'
- is willing to share experiences and gives advice
- creates a positive environment for development
- functions as a stimulating role model
- is aware of commitment and encouragement

10. Results

The project has specific objectives with this mentor programme. SOFIA aims to reach different objectives. The following results are strived for:

- improving the position of women in the labour market in Cuba
- enlarging the skills and qualities needed for a leading position
- enlarging self-awareness and confidence and improving personal effectiveness
- offering a sounding board and forum
- offering exchange of experiences and career guidance
- raising awareness about the situation of women in the labour market
- providing knowledge and logistical support
- providing a manual for further implementing of mentor programmes

11. Critical Success Factors

After finishing the project we will report the final evaluation. Within this report we will also handle the critical success factors. Until now the following factors have been identified.

In the first place the mentoring is a critical success factor. The leading women function as mentors and 'role models' for the mentees, by explaining their own experiences. The intense personal contact be-

tween the mentor and the mentees creates a trust relationship in which advice, experiences and tips can be exchanged.

The co-ordination as a framework will influence the matching and the contact between the mentor and the mentees. A good preparation for the mentors in the 'train the trainer' programme will make the mentors enthusiastic for their task. As a preparation for the mentor, it is also important to give a strategy and a thesis before the training session. Besides, mentors are only interested in participating if there is a win-win situation for them. So also for them training and learning aspects have to be presented.

Secondly the coaching and stimulating of the trainers or facilitators during the training is important. The training is the framework for the mentoring process. The training is based on the needs analyses of the participants. Therefore it is very important that the trainers know exactly the expectations of the participants. The programme is discussed with the individual teachers based on the learning goals of the participants. The participatory approach enlarges this effect.

Finally the logistical part can be a critical success factor. It is important to organize a location or classroom that all the women can reach easily and where they can meet each other. In addition didactic material such as paper, writing materials and blackboards are useful to facilitate the sessions and to promote the mentoring process. Finally, communication material to inform the participants about the programme, the agenda and the topics would be useful. To inform the participants in advance is a strong motivating factor for their participation.

12. Monitoring and Evaluation

Evaluation and monitoring are an important part of the project. Continuous evaluation at all levels and good co-ordination of all meetings will influence the critical success factors. Every session is evaluated. Evaluation meetings with the participants and the mentors monitor

the programme. And finally an overall evaluation is made. This material is used to prepare and coach the trainers and mentors, and to monitor or change the programme if necessary. The evaluation and experiences of all the stakeholders in the projects (mentees, mentors, trainers, and partners) are determined in order to improve the mentor and network programmes. An overall evaluation of different programmes is based on the following indicators:

1. number of participants and number of drop outs
2. evaluation per session based on content, presentation and exchange of experiences
3. final evaluation for the mentees and the mentors in terms of achieving the learning goals
4. evaluation by the mentors concerning the evolution of the mentees and their own learning
5. monitoring and evaluation through the experiences of the steering committee

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