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Not enough being done to fuel women entrepreneurship in Guyana

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Guyanese UNCTAD/ EMPRETEC Women in Business nominee Lucia Desir reflects on her experience at the 2010 Geneva Awards Ceremony

Lucia Desir may not have returned from Geneva with this year's United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Women in Business Award, an accolade for which she, and nine other international businesswomen qualified earlier this year; she has, however, gone back to her job as Managing Director of D&J Shipping, eager, energized and empowered. In April, shortly after Stabroek Business had announced that Lucia had been declared the Guyana nominee for the 2010 EMPRETEC/ UNCTAD international business award, she spent four days being feted in the Swiss city. It was, she says, "a lifetime experience."

If the most rewarding outcome of her stay in Geneva was the wholly new perspective which she acquired on women in business, her most memorable one was her engagements, along with her colleagues, with United Nations Secretary General Ban ki-Moon. "He spent a great deal of time with us and I was quite impressed with that," Lucia says.

Her current preoccupation in the light of the Geneva experience is two-fold. First, she wants to share her experience and knowledge in the area of empowering women in business. Her second focus is on applying her encounters in Geneva and her new knowledge base in the running of her own enterprise. "Frankly, I do not believe that we in this part of the world have really strong mechanisms that seek to respond to the business and other concerns of women. Elsewhere in the world a great deal of attention is paid to women in business and particularly to women running small enterprises. The focus is on bringing those enterprises up to the level of medium and large scale businesses."

Lucia pays tribute to UNCTAD's International Trade Centre, and particularly to its Women and Trade Programme, an initiative designed to help governments and trade support institutions take a gender inclusive approach to business and trade strategies with the aim of both enhancing human potential and increasing exports. ITC helps to connect institutions that support gender issues including their outreach to women entrepreneurs.

Lucia says that by taking advantage of the information provided by UNCTAD's International Trade Centre small female-run businesses can transform their perspective. "Apart from understanding how to run a business the ITC can actually help women running businesses understand how to package their products and target markets. Those are among the difficulties confronting many small businesses operated by women in Guyana. I think that the craft industry is a good example of that."

She points to the Women Access programme run by the ITC aimed at enhancing access to international markets for commodities produced by African women. ITC, Lucia explains, encourages the development of new opportunities for the systematic integration of women into international trade and export development. Initiated under the Canadian-funded Programme for Building African Capacity for Trade (PACT), Access addresses the particular constraints of businesswomen by enhancing their entry to a comprehensive package of trade support services including exporters' training, mentorship, business counselling, product and market development, business networking and trade intelligence.

What Access has done is to build strategic partnerships with national Focal Point institutions in Africa and with various other regional public and private partners including the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). Access has also been instrumental in assisting partner institutions in Africa in delivering customized business counselling to women entrepreneurs through a network of qualified experts.

Lucia says that the opportunity afforded by the Geneva experience now allows her to share with local small business institutions and non-governmental organizations the facilities available through ITC. "Local organizations have no real excuse. There is a lot of information available through the internet and we have the access." Lucia believes too, that programmes like Access are entirely workable in Guyana and the rest of the Caribbean where the approach of working together can strengthen team spirit and build business networks.

In Geneva, among the ten EMPRETEC Women in Business Award nominees, a new networking initiative was born, designed to explore opportunities for business linkages among women from Botswana, Brazil, Jordan, Uganda, Chile, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Argentina, Guyana and Ethiopia. Lucia says that she has already initiated dialogue with two of her fellow nominees out of which she hopes collaborative business opportunities will arise. With Vanessa de Figueiredo Vilela Araujo, a Brazilian manufacturer of a line of cosmetics made from a coffee extract she hopes to initiate an agreement that will eventually see her own operations diversify into marketing the Brazilian products here. With Joy Simakane, of Botswana, the second runner up in the EPTRETEC Women in Business Award, Lucia hopes to initiate a programme aimed at promoting visits by African cultural troupes to Guyana.

In circumstances where 70% of the world's poor are women, Lucia believes that if

business development is to contribute to poverty reduction, strategies for the growth and development of business must, of necessity, take account of women. She believes that ICT's Women and Trade Programme enhances policymakers' capacity to design, implement and evaluate business strategies and national development plans that build on the role of women in business development.

Crucially, she believes that if locally produced commodities particularly handicraft and other items produced by women are to benefit from export markets, national export strategies must be shaped to include the gender dimension and that plans for the enhancement of the local business culture must seek to create sector development strategies that benefit women.

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