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ITC LENDS 'MOBILE' HAND TO LIBERIAN WOMEN

Women traders in the bustling markets of Monrovia may soon have distant customers brought literally within their grasp thanks to an innovative new technology that uses mobile phones to link buyers and sellers.

Developed by the Geneva-based International Trade Centre (ITC), the 'trade at hand' project for women traders and farmers will be launched at an international forum on empowering women being held in the Liberian capital on 7-8 March.

The new technology will cut the time it takes to negotiate and finalize wholesale vegetable and food purchases, so improving the flow of food to Liberia's towns, and facilitating exports.

But it is not just Liberia that can benefit. The system could be replicated in other parts of the developing world where women often play a major role in producing and trading food.

"Mobile phones are an important option to get women connected to networks and the information that you need for business," said Patricia R. Francis, ITC Executive Director.

Financed by a €100,000 (\$130,000) grant from the Finnish Government, the mobile phone project uses special software to create an easy-to-work system of business matching and trade linkages along the supply chain.

Liberia's illiteracy rate runs at around 80% so the system has been adapted to work with easily recognizable symbols. It will carry information not only on buyers and sellers, but also on products, quantity, prices, location and transport.

ITC, the export development arm of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, has been working closely with Liberia as it strives to recover from a 14-year civil war, which ended in 2003.

Its work is particularly focused on strengthening the economic role of women, which is a key policy goal of Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.



“We will try to provide economic programmes that enable Liberian women, particularly our market women, to assume their proper place in our economic process,” President Johnson-Sirleaf said recently.

Women make up 60% of Liberia’s farmers and 80% of its market traders, and played a vital role in feeding the country during the years of civil strife.

At the outset, the project will cover some 100 women traders and farmers. The initial response from market women has been enthusiastic.

“We use too much money with telephone calls. Sometimes you call and you don’t get anything but disappointment. This is much more economical. We should certainly benefit from it,” said Elizabeth Samdullah, a 46-year-old mother of five, who trades mainly rice and palm oil.

Strengthening the economic hand of women is a central theme of the 7-8 March ‘International Colloquium on Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security’ held in Monrovia, Liberia’s capital. Women’s economic empowerment is seen as key for development, international peace and poverty reduction.

President Johnson-Sirleaf and Finnish President Tarja Halonen are joint hosts of the meeting, which will be attended by 800 women leaders from Liberia and around the world.

For more information:

Contact: Natalie Domeisen
Chief, Communications and Events
P: +41 22 730 0370
E: domeisen@intracen.org
www.intracen.org

Contact: Sabine Meitzel
Senior Officer, MDGs Mainstreaming
P: +41 22 730 0296
E: Meitzel@intracen.org
www.intracen.org