

Strengthening Women's Business Associations

by Corina Schwartz

The political changes of 1989 triggered the development of the private sector in Romania and the creation of support organizations to represent the interests of the business community. Romanian women proved ambitious and willing to take risks, making their way into an arena previously reserved for men by founding successful businesses and ascending to top management positions. New women business leaders, whether entrepreneurs or managers, came to feel that women's entrepreneurship had specific characteristics and needs that could not be fully represented by existing professional associations or chambers of commerce. These women accordingly created local women's business associations for professional affiliation and support. These associations were at first "elite clubs" more than traditional associations, bringing together successful business leaders to share their experiences and interests. In time, many of these associations expanded their activities to address social and community issues or gender issues. The majority of these organizations had no employed staff, functioning basically through the dedication of volunteers.

In 2000, the Romanian Business Associations Development Project – an initiative by the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) in Romania – recognized that women's business associations could take on an enhanced role, one more actively business-oriented. The women of these organizations began to understand that in order to get a seat at the table in the public-private dialogue, they would have to refine their business image and speak with a singular, articulate voice. Witnessing the success of business associations in the tourism, information technology, and manufacturing sectors, women's business associations formed their own coalition that would include them in Romania's decision-making process and address policy and business issues relevant to women entrepreneurs and business owners.

CIPE provided these women's business associations with technical assistance and sustained their organizational development through relevant events – such as the Women in International Trade Forum in 2001 and the Women in Business conferences in 2002 and 2003 – and other programs and seminars designed to specifically address their needs. CIPE encouraged public recognition for successful members of the women's business associations by developing the “Women of Success” CD, an annual multimedia collection of success stories that caught the attention of the business community, public authorities, and the mass media.

Creating a Coalition for Women's Business Interests

In January 2004, a group of nine women's business associations came together to begin the process of creating a larger and more unified coalition. With the financial support of CIPE Romania and the National Endowment for Democracy, the Coalition of Women's Business Associations (CAFA) was officially launched. “CAFA represents an opportunity for women's business associations to work together and become a stronger voice in the dialogue with public authorities,” said founding member Elena Cismaru, President of the Association of Women Managers, Ramnicu Valcea.

“CAFA represents an opportunity for women's business associations to work together and become a stronger voice in the dialogue with public authorities.” CAFA provided valuable input from the private sector on fiscal policy.

CAFA was established as an informal coalition with no president or officers and with a three-tiered membership system: founding members (nine task force representatives), full members (any women's business association that would like to join), and supporters (women's associations that have a related business program or agenda). The management of the coalition, including communication and coordination of activities, was assigned to a secretariat. For the first two years CIPE Romania held the secretariat position.

Capacity Building and Visibility in Public Policy

Both CIPE Romania and the women's business associations involved in this project agreed on the need to strengthen the member associations individually and the coalition as a whole. CIPE Romania and CAFA organized workshops on strategic planning, advocacy, public perception, and members' involvement, and trained more than 150 entrepreneurs, managers, and association volunteers. The tradition of an annual Women in Business Conference has continued; attendance increases each year and participation has grown to include participants from local and national public authorities. CAFA members enjoy amplified networking opportunities and greater visibility.

As CAFA engaged in activities targeting public policies, it developed a reputation as a successful, trustworthy coalition. In 2004 CAFA was asked by the National Authority of Control to assist in amending the code of conduct for control officers. The code was designed to limit abuses by public officials during inspections of private companies. CAFA provided valuable input from the private sector during this process. This high-level participation in policymaking led to similar invitations from other Romanian ministries and agencies; for example, the Ministry of Finance requested CAFA's input on drafting income tax deductions legislation. CAFA's studies, public debates, and press conferences have promoted reduced taxation as the means to a more sound economy. The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection invited CAFA to cooperate permanently with the Division of Equal Chances, while the National Agency for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises and Co-operatives has included CAFA in a partnership program for women's entrepreneurship and future legislative initiatives for SMEs. CAFA meets regularly with members of the Romanian Parliament and also had the opportunity to present its vision and plans for the future to the President of Romania.

CAFA decided to organize a public debate to voice the concerns of businesspeople regarding the effects of the 2005 amendments to the Fiscal Code the new Labor Code. The debate was attended by CAFA members, representatives of other business associations, media representatives, Romanian

government officials (from the ministries of finance and labor, and the National Agency for SMEs and Co-operatives), parliamentary representatives, and representatives of the Institute for Finance and Monetary Research. Supported by the findings of a comprehensive study commissioned by CIPE on salary taxes and the Romanian Social Insurance System, CAFA members raised the public profile of a number of policy issues. The study recommended reducing the number and level of contributions to social security and simplifying the monthly procedures and documents concerning tax payments and proofs of payment. The participants' opinions were included in a final document and submitted for analysis to the relevant ministries at the request of the representatives attending the event.

Sustaining Women's Business Associations in Romania

Since January 2006 CAFA no longer receives outside support and is instead fully sponsored by its members. The function of the secretariat has been taken over by one of the coalition's members, and CAFA now focuses on strengthening its public image as an articulate and active partner in the public-private dialogue. CAFA cooperates with the Economic Commission from the Senate by providing feedback on the Fiscal Code and other laws of relevance to the business community. CAFA members promote the coalition by participating in national and international conferences. Many CAFA members have already expressed their interest in joining a future Balkan Coalition and getting involved in advocacy activities and a network on a larger scale. Such inclinations demonstrate the dedication of CAFA's members and the importance of such an organization to developing business cooperation in Romania.

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