

# Internal Final Evaluation of Rebuilding Better: Fostering Business Resilience Post Covid-19

## **DRAFT EVALUATION REPORT**

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Project Title	Rebuilding Better: Fostering Business Resilience Post-COVID-19
ILO Project Codes	RAS/20/06/JPM
Geographic Scope	Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand
DWCP Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Malaysia: Priority 2: Future of work – Strengthening national capacities to meet the needs of current and future of work</li> <li>- Philippines: Priority 1: Productive, remunerative, freely chosen and sustainable work opportunities are available for all Filipinos willing to work</li> <li>- Thailand: Priority 1: Promote an enabling environment for the growth of decent and productive employment</li> </ul>
P&B Outcome	Outcome 4: Sustainable enterprises as generators of employment and promoters of innovation and decent work
Technical Field	Enterprise Development
Administrative Unit in charge	ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
Technical Backstopping Unit	ENTERPRISE
Time frame	March 2021 – October 2022
Budget	USD 900,000
Funding Agencies	JP Morgan Chase
Type of Evaluation	Internal
Timing of Evaluation	Final
Evaluation Manager	Sara Andersson

## Acronyms

ACT/EMP	Bureau for Employers' Activities
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AWEN	Asian Women Entrepreneur Network
BCP	Business Continuity Planning
ECOP	Employers' Confederation of the Philippines
ECOT	Employers' Confederation of Thailand
ILO	International Labour Organization
ICT	Information, Communication Technology
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MSME	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise
P&B	Programme and Budget
USD	United States Dollar
WE Check	Women's Entrepreneurship Self-Check
WED	Women's Entrepreneurship Development

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## Executive Summary

“Rebuilding Better: Fostering Business Resilience Post-COVID-19” is an USD 900,000 project implemented by the International Labour Organization (ILO) between January 2021 and October 2022 with funding from the JP Morgan Chase Foundation. The project set out to support at least 900 small enterprises in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand to recover from COVID-19 pandemic disruptions and adopt more sustainable and resilient business models. To achieve these desired outcomes, the project aimed to facilitate participating entrepreneurs’ access to gender-inclusive training, entrepreneur networks, finance and government support programs, as well as information about market opportunities.

Rebuilding Better targeted primarily women-owned, urban-based small businesses in the manufacturing, service, and retail trade sectors. To provide needed support to the participating enterprises, the project engaged a variety of partners, including government agencies, employers’ organisations, women entrepreneur associations, and financial institutions. Due to restrictions on face-to-face meetings during most of the project’s implementation period, Rebuilding Better relied extensively on information, communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver project services.

In August/September 2022, the ILO conducted an internal evaluation of the project which examined the extent to which it achieved planned outputs and desired outcomes and identified good practices and key lessons learnt. This evaluation report provides the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the evaluation.

## FINDINGS

**Relevance and design validity.** Rebuilding Better was successful addressing the needs of the entrepreneurs who took part in its programs. This was demonstrated both by the high ratings the project received in participant satisfaction surveys and end-of-project tracer survey respondent comments. Participating enterprises reported greatly appreciating the opportunities to exchange experiences among fellow entrepreneurs as well as to gain new knowledge and skills, especially on digitizing their business and sales and marketing techniques.

A strength in the context of COVID-19, Rebuilding Better’s frequently used rapid assessment-driven approaches to design its interventions. This approach left room for the project team to adapt project services and delivery modalities to the evolving needs of participants at different stages of the pandemic. Having the flexibility to adapt was critical because although it was designed to be a post-COVID-19 recovery project (Rebuilding Better), the project implementation period was in fact still largely a time of recurring crisis for small businesses in the targeted countries. Moreover, the pandemic, with its unprecedented-in-recent-history global impact and difficult-to-anticipate trajectory, made knowing what would happen next as well as what exactly should be the response to support ailing small businesses almost impossible to know at the early design stage. Rather than detailing everything that would be done in the project document and/or pulling standard ILO business development curriculum off the shelf, Rebuilding Better made effective use of timely situational analysis and enterprise needs assessments to adapt its interventions to the changing needs of small enterprises. It also capitalized on the advice of national partners and allowed them to adapt and sequence project programs to the context in each country. These good practices notwithstanding, there was perhaps too much emphasis on assessing what the enterprises needed and not enough on existing support systems and gaps in the inception assessment. Rebuilding Better likely would have benefited from having additional practical and contextualized information about the women’s entrepreneurship and business support service eco-system in each country in the early stages of the project.

Having too many pre-established enterprise selection criteria in the project document likely contributed to challenges recruiting participants without offering sufficient upside benefits in terms of effectiveness or impact. The project document defined criteria based on geography, enterprise size, gender, and sector. Of these, the rationales for the enterprise size and gender criteria were the strongest. Although not an easy target group, keeping formal, small businesses afloat during the pandemic was critical to avoid losing “decent” jobs and growing the unregulated informal sector. Likewise, affirmative action in favor of women-owned businesses was well-justified since women were disproportionately hit by the pandemic and in addition, the choice created opportunities for the project to strengthen service providers’ capacity to be more gender inclusive.

The project’s initial articulation of its theory of change was missing social and behavioral factors that the project found to be critical for enabling small business resilience during the pandemic. The theory of change hypothesized that what businesses needed was access to training, finance, and business networks for sharing business intelligence and sales opportunities. The project showed that in addition to these, small business owners needed “intangibles” like hope and confidence, outcomes that seemed best facilitated by strengthening social bonds between fellow entrepreneurs.

**Coherence.** Rebuilding Better was highly relevant to the objectives and priorities of the ILO during the pandemic and more broadly. The project design aligned with the ILO’s high level strategic plans and corporate Programme and Budget (P&B) outcomes, which underline the importance of developing sustainable enterprises, and addressed the cross-cutting policy driver on gender equality. In the Philippines and Thailand, the project supported an important ILO constituent, the Employers’ Organizations, to become more gender inclusive and representative of the private sector, contributing toward longstanding ILO priorities. Finally, Rebuilding Better capitalized on ILO pedagogical resources, knowledge, and expertise in many meaningful ways.

**Effectiveness.** Rebuilding Better made numerous contributions toward the achievement of its three main objectives which were to increase access by predominately women-owned small business to training, finance and government grants, and business networks. By August 2022, the project had met or was on track to meet or exceed all of its targets for the number of activities, partners, and activity participants, among other objectives. Based on survey results, the project was highly successful producing sought after results.

- Under training, the majority participants who responded to project surveys affirmed they had gained new knowledge, skills, ideas, and confidence and had used the former to improve their businesses. Notably, project team reports and survey results show participants began or increased their use of technology for business thanks in part to support from the project.
- Under access to finance and government grants, the project recorded relatively modest achievements in terms of helping its participants access new loans or grants. Nevertheless, the majority of participants who responded to project surveys reported having greater awareness of the financing options available to them as were more confident about seeking new sources of funding.
- Under access to business networks, the majority participants who responded to project surveys affirmed that they had expanded their business networks and that the connections they had made with other entrepreneurs during project sessions were useful for expanding business opportunities.

The project and project implementing partners faced challenges achieving project objectives. Notably, they frequently struggled to demonstrate project activities’ value proposition to women-owned small enterprises and as a result consistently found it challenging to recruit participants. The project’s effectiveness forming relevant partnerships with credible and connected women

entrepreneur networks was a helpful strategy to overcome this challenge, at least partially. Meeting the relatively advanced needs and expectations for tailored support of some of its participating enterprises was likewise a critical challenge. The latter was at least partially addressed by the project's and its implementing partner's effectiveness mobilizing experienced business people as resource persons and mentors. The successful collaboration with JP Morgan Philippines linking peer and technical training program participants with skilled volunteers was an excellent example of this approach.

**Efficiency.** In a relatively short time, the Rebuilding Better team learned a lot about how to support enterprises during a pandemic and organized an impressive number of activities, making largely efficient use of its resources. The project team showed versatility in face of the public health imperative to go virtual by trying a variety of technology applications to meet different entrepreneur needs and abilities. The team also established and implemented comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems and engaged in regular stock-taking exercises leading to course corrections when needed. Although the wide breath of the project's experimentation was an efficient way to meet its key performance indicators and to identify what worked and what did not, the relatively short project duration did not leave sufficient time and space to significantly deepen and replicate successful approaches.

**Impact and sustainability.** By building their confidence and helping participants to adapt their business practices, Rebuilding Better helped many participating women-owned small enterprises to be more resilient during the pandemic. The small core of active participants who participated relatively more intensely in project programs likely benefited to a greater extent than the many that only attended one or two sessions. At the level of the enabling environment for women's entrepreneurship, the project likely had limited but positive influence. Rebuilding Better included strategies to influence and build the capacity of entrepreneur networks and business support service providers in the three countries to better serve women entrepreneurs. While Rebuilding Better did not have a strong policy agenda, it collaborated with influential women entrepreneurs with a voice in business affairs who are likely to continue their efforts to promote a more level playing field for women's entrepreneurship.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation one.** Future programs should replicate the use of rapid assessment methods to identify enterprise needs and customize support programs. Ways to capitalize on or improve on Rebuilding Better's approach include:

- Engage consultants with country level experience in national entrepreneurship ecosystem
- Keep beneficiary focus groups and in addition conduct service provider focus groups
- Collect more information on "who is doing what" to avoid duplicating what others are doing

**Recommendation two.** The ILO should build on Rebuilding Better experiences and continue efforts to support formal, small businesses and to strengthen women entrepreneur networks in the sub-region and elsewhere.

**Recommendation three.** The ILO should continue to advocate for and help the Employers' Confederations in the three countries to strengthen their SME membership and programs and make them more accessible to women entrepreneurs.

- Facilitate introductions between the Employers' Confederations and Rebuilding Better's women entrepreneur network partners

- When relevant, include women entrepreneur network partners in future employer consultations in the context of ongoing ILO Decent Work Country Programs

**Recommendation four.** Future projects should identify ways to strengthen its reach and value proposition to women-owned and led small enterprises.

- Distinguish project offerings more clearly from what other projects or support initiatives are doing or have done in the same space
- Target geographic areas which are less well-served by other projects or support initiatives
- Continue to capitalize on partnerships with strong women entrepreneur networks
- Continue to use of the peer and technical support methodology
- Replicate collaboration with JP Morgan volunteers and look for similar opportunities to promote mentorship programs
- Develop entrepreneur focused communication strategies in collaboration with implementing partners
- Develop strategies to encourage participant “loyalty” such as newsletters, offering membership with membership benefits, etc.

**Recommendation five.** In the future, innovative projects like Rebuilding Better should be longer in duration or multi-phased to allow sufficient time for experimentation as well as for the project team to identify, deepen and replicate successful approaches

## 1. Introduction

**Rebuilding Better: Fostering Business Resilience Post-COVID-19** is an 900,000 United States Dollar (USD) project implemented by the International Labour Organization (ILO) between January 2021 and October 2022 with funding from JP Morgan Chase Foundation. The project set out to support at least 900 small enterprises in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand to recover from COVID-19 pandemic disruptions and adopt more sustainable and resilient business models. Rebuilding Better targeted primarily women-owned and/or led, urban-based small businesses in the manufacturing, service, and retail trade sectors. In August and September 2022, the ILO conducted an internal evaluation<sup>1</sup> of the project which examined the extent to which it achieved planned outputs and desired outcomes and identified good practices and key lessons learnt. This evaluation report provides the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the evaluation.

### 1.1 Project context

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) account for more than 96% of all businesses in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (98.5 percent in Malaysia, 99.6 percent in the Philippines, and 99.7 percent in Thailand). They are also the largest employers and contribute significantly to the countries' Gross Domestic Product.

Starting in 2020 and carrying on into early 2022, many Southeast Asian countries, including the three Rebuilding Better targeted countries, implemented public health policies to contain COVID-19 impacts which featured stay-at-home orders, curfews, quarantines, closing borders to international travel, as well as other restrictions to limit social contact. These COVID-19 "lock downs" were, to varying degrees, useful in limiting the virus' spread, but their effects devastated many MSMEs. In particular, the manufacturing, service (including hospitality), and retail trade sectors experienced severe declines in economic output due to widespread closures of stores, cancelled orders, and restrictions on tourism. Drop in demand, limited market access, and supply chain disruption were among the critical challenges threatening the viability of MSMEs in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

In response, governments came to businesses' aid by introducing new loan programs, temporary tax breaks and utility subsidies, debt repayment holidays, and incentives for keeping employees on the payroll. Nevertheless, many businesses did not survive pandemic restrictions; others were able to stay afloat largely thanks to managers' ability to adapt their businesses to evolving market conditions – implement new safety measures, reduce costs, shift to online operations, alter supply chains, access different markets, and innovate products and services.

Women-owned and managed MSMEs were disproportionately hit by the negative consequences of the pandemic. Lockdowns and related school closures added to women's already disproportionate unpaid care burdens. Moreover, women employers and workers were found in greater numbers in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, such as domestic work, manufacturing, textiles, and hospitality. Women-owned MSMEs, many of which tended to be younger, smaller, and more often informal than male-owned businesses, were also less likely to be granted loans from banks, starving them of funds necessary for the survival.

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<sup>1</sup> Although an independent consultant conducted the evaluation, the evaluation was managed by the project team leader rather than the ILO's independent evaluation department, making it an "internal" evaluation.

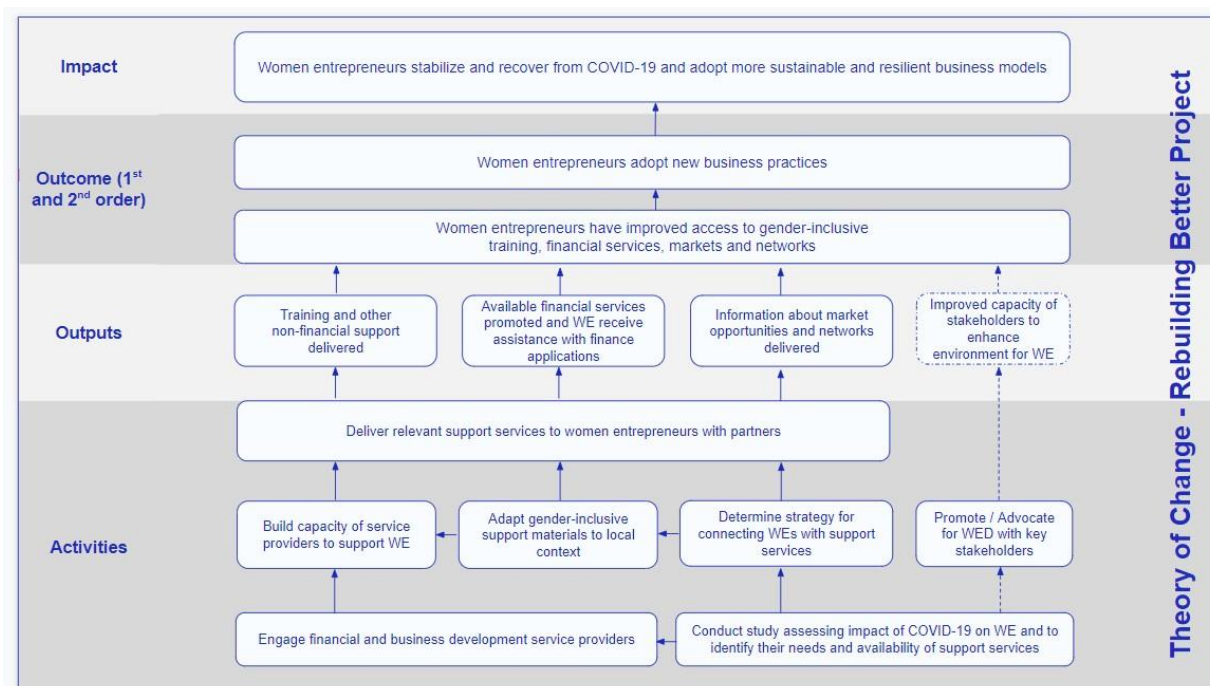
## 1.2 Project overview and intervention logic

Launched in January 2021, Rebuilding Better aimed to support at least 900 small businesses in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. To provide needed support to the participating enterprises, the project engaged a variety of partners, including government agencies, employers' organisations, women entrepreneur associations, and financial institutions. Due to restrictions on face-to-face meetings during most of the project's implementation period, Rebuilding Better relied extensively on information, communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver project services.

**Project theory of change:** The ILO designed the Rebuilding Better Project to help women-owned businesses in the three target countries to recover from the negative consequences of COVID-19 and adopt sustainable and resilient business practices. To achieve these desired outcomes, the project aimed to facilitate participating entrepreneurs' access to gender-inclusive training, entrepreneur networks, finance and government support programs, as well as information about market opportunities.

With improved access to training, business support services and finance, as well as market information, and strengthened involvement in entrepreneurship networks, Rebuilding Better reasoned women entrepreneurs in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand would adopt new business practices. These new business practices would in turn reinforce the resilience of participants' businesses and facilitate their sustainable recovery from COVID-19 harms. The project's visual depiction of its theory of change is included in exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1 Rebuilding Better Project Theory of Change



## 2. Evaluation Overview

### 2.1 Evaluation scope and purpose

The internal evaluation considered the Rebuilding Better project performance from its inception in January 2021 to the time of the evaluation (August/September 2022). It examined project results, stakeholder satisfaction, and emerging impact in all of the three project countries: Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

The overall purpose of internal evaluation was to provide the project management and other ILO personnel, the donor, and other stakeholders with an impartial assessment of the project's performance and to identify project learnings that could be useful to other ongoing or upcoming projects. To this end, the evaluation examined the extent to which the project achieved planned outputs and desired outcomes, documented good practices and key lessons learnt, and developed a set of recommendations to inform future projects.

## 2.2 Evaluation questions

The evaluation set out to answer the evaluation questions included in exhibit 2. The project management team developed the questions, some of which were reworded and consolidated by the evaluator with project approval. Annex 1 includes a matrix with data sources and indicative sub-questions by evaluation question.

Exhibit 2 Evaluation questions

<b>Relevance and validity of design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent did the project's design and approach respond to participating entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship support service providers' needs in the context of evolving COVID-19-related challenges?</li> <li>· What were the strengths and weaknesses of the project design?</li> <li>· Was the project theory of change sound?</li> <li>· In what ways, if at all, did the project design integrate ILO cross cutting policy drivers: gender equality and non-discrimination, environmental sustainability, promotion of international labour standards, social dialogue, and tripartism?</li> </ul>
<b>Coherence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent and in what ways has the project effectively leveraged resources and knowledge from other interventions and through partnerships to achieve anticipated outputs and outcomes?</li> </ul>
<b>Project effectiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent did the project achieve anticipated outputs and outcome targets?</li> <li>· To what extent and in what ways was the project effective in improving participating entrepreneurs' access to a) training programs and entrepreneur networks b) financing and government support programmes, and c) information about market opportunities?</li> <li>· To what extent and in what ways did the project leverage information communication technologies effectively to meet its objectives?</li> <li>· In what ways did internal and external factors affect the ILO's ability to meet project targets and objectives?</li> <li>· To what extent were project management and coordination mechanisms effective overall and, more specifically, adequate to handle COVID-19-related implementation challenges?</li> </ul>
<b>Efficiency of resource use</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent and in what ways were available technical and financial resources (staff, time, expertise, budget, etc) effectively allocated to fulfil the project work plan and to achieve project objectives and results?</li> <li>· How effectively did the project leverage partner resources to achieve project results?</li> <li>· How effectively did the project management monitor project performance and results? In what ways, if any, did the project use assessment and monitoring data to aid decision making?</li> </ul>
<b>Impact and sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent did the project contribute towards improving its public and private sector partners' capacity and commitment to support small businesses, especially women-owned and managed enterprises, during different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>· In what ways is the project likely to contribute toward reducing structural inequities and challenges faced by women-owned businesses in the target sectors? What, if any, gaps remain in gender inclusive business services that might be addressed by future projects?</li> <li>· How likely is it that the project results and activities will be sustained beyond the project?</li> </ul>

## 2.3 Evaluation Methodology

An international evaluation specialist conducted the evaluation in August and September 2022 using primarily qualitative methods to collect data on project performance and outcomes and

answer the evaluation questions. Evaluation data sources included document review, key informant interviews, and a project administered beneficiary surveys.

**Document Review.** Data from various project-produced and other documents informed the evaluation findings and conclusions. Consulted documents included the project document and results framework, project progress and financial reports, performance indicator monitoring data, other project materials such as training packages and research products, as well as other organizations' research reports on MSME COVID-19 related challenges in Southeast Asia. Annex 2 includes a full list of documents consulted by the evaluator.

**Key informant interviews.** The evaluator interviewed 33 individuals, 28 females and 5 males from various stakeholder groups. The evaluator and the project team consulted during the development of the key informant lists and used "having direct knowledge and experience with Rebuilding Better" as the main selection criteria. The evaluator interviewed informants individually or in small groups, primarily in English<sup>2</sup> using protocols adapted to each stakeholder group and featuring open ended questions. Exhibit 3 below shows the distribution of key informant interviews by stakeholder group and sex. Annex 3 includes a list of persons consulted.

**Exhibit 3 Distribution of key informant interview by group and sex**

Stakeholder Group	Total	Male	Female
ILO project management team, specialists, and managers	14	3	11
Government partners	5	0	5
Employers' organizations	3	2	1
Women entrepreneur network and other business support providers	9	0	9
Donor	2	0	2
Total	33	5	28

**Project beneficiary survey.** The primary source of information about enterprise experiences with the project came from participant satisfaction and tracer surveys. Because of response rates and sampling issues, the evaluation does not treat survey data as being "representative" of all participants but rather the experiences of those who chose to participate in the survey.

Satisfaction surveys. Rebuilding Better systemically collected participant feedback using satisfaction surveys post session, or if it was a multiple session program, after the final session. Available data is divided between those that attended public sessions and those enrolled in the multi-session peer and technical training events. 57 participants responded to the peer and technical training survey while there were 383 respondents to the public session survey.

Tracer survey. In September 2022, Rebuilding Better carried out a phone survey of 144 project beneficiaries/participants to collect feedback on their level of satisfaction with project supported services as well as how they these services affected their business practices and firms' performance. ILO contracted a company in each of the three target countries to carry out the survey, which targeted participants in project activities. Exhibit 4 shows the number and distribution of survey respondents by country and sex as well as sampling size.

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<sup>2</sup> One interview was conducted in Thai with the support of an interpreter.

#### Exhibit 4 Tracer Survey Sampling Information

	No. of participants in programs	No of respondents	Percentage of female respondents	Sample size	Average No of sessions attended
Malaysia	296	43	100%	14.50%	2.81
Philippines	439	42	98%	9.60%	2
Thailand	424	59	86%	14%	2.14
Aggregated	1159	144	94%	12%	2.3

#### Potential bias:

The evaluator was aware of potential bias risks in data collection and analysis. Understanding of bias risks is important because most of the project's information on how it affected participating enterprises' knowledge, business practices and other key indicators of business performance are based on survey respondents' reports and therefore may be subject to bias. The most important risks were response bias and attribution bias.

**Response bias.** Response bias is the risk that key informants or survey respondents may have been motivated to provide responses they considered socially desirable or influential in obtaining continued donor assistance. To mitigate this potential bias, the evaluator introduced each key informant interview with a clear informed consent protocol that, among other things, highlighted the objectives of the evaluation – to learn from what worked well and what did not, and promised strict confidentiality. The company administering the tracer survey used a similar protocol. The satisfaction surveys were anonymous, which mitigated response bias.

**Attribution bias.** Attribution bias was also a risk. It is possible that key informants or survey respondents attributed outcomes to project activities when other factors also contributed to the outcome. Respondent may have participated in other programs and services or more generally been affected by broader, especially pandemic-related contextual factors. To mitigate this risk, interview questions and survey questions asked respondents to relate their answers to project activities and when possible, provide examples of how outcomes were linked to an activity. Where attribution risk seems particularly significant, it is highlighted in the evaluation report.

### 3. Evaluation Findings

#### 3.1 Relevance and design validity

This sub-section analyses available data showing the extent and ways the project met the perceived needs and expectations of the enterprises it sought to support. It also assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Rebuilding Better's design, examining design approaches, enterprise selection criteria and the completeness and coherence of its theory of change.

**The majority of entrepreneurs who responded to Rebuilding Better satisfaction surveys felt the project had been effective addressing their needs.** Based on satisfaction survey results as of August 2022, 74 percent of peer session respondents (n=57) rated the session's relevance to their needs excellent or very good. The rating for technical sessions was slightly higher at 82 percent excellent or very good. There was no similar rating on relevance for the public sessions; however, analysis of user comments on public sessions shows the words "helpful", "instructive" and "hope" were frequently used and the average star rating out of five was 4.34. In addition, 75 percent of respondent to public session satisfaction surveys (n=383) rated the speaker/instructor four or above on a scale of five. Both

the public and peer and technical training groups also scored very highly on the indicator of whether the participant would recommend the session to a friend or colleague. Exhibit 5 provides some examples of what participants appreciated about the programs based on respondent comments during the September 2022 tracer survey.

**Exhibit 5 Feedback from tracer survey respondents on how Rebuilding Better met their needs**

Country	What they liked about the programs	Topics that were relevant to their needs
<b>Malaysia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Helped me to focus on the tasks that generate money</li> <li>· Networking with other women entrepreneurs</li> </ul>	Management, leadership, social media for business, business networking, finance, human resource management, digital marketing, branding
<b>Philippines</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Sessions uplifted my spirit</li> <li>· Opportunity to learn from other entrepreneurs' experiences</li> <li>· Helpful with tips for expansion</li> <li>· Bazaar at mega mall was really helpful</li> </ul>	Business cycle, selling online, marketing, sales, customer relations, social media platforms, digitalization, business networking
<b>Thailand</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Sharing knowledge and information with other entrepreneurs</li> <li>· Learning new strategies for content creation for online marketing</li> <li>· Learning new ways to sell products</li> </ul>	Sales strategies, business networking, marketing, selling online, social media for business

## Soundness of project design approaches

**Rebuilding Better's approach to project design left room for the project team to adapt services and delivery modalities to the evolving needs of participants at different stages of the pandemic.** Noteworthy strategies that allowed the project to be responsive to the changing implementing environment were a) undertaking a situational analysis and needs assessment at the project's inception; b) the practice of actively consulting participants in the design of interventions; c) listening to national partners' ideas and adapting interventions to each country; and d) sequencing interventions based the evolving context.

**Inception Needs Assessment.** The assessment executed in the first months of project implementation was an opportunity for Rebuilding Better to deepen its knowledge of the project implementing environment in each country. The ILO team reported that the most valuable part of the exercise was the small business owner focus groups which revealed participants' priorities and concerns and helped to shape project services. For example, the inception stage needs assessment focus groups confirmed strong demand for business digitization support but showed enterprise reticence in the access to finance area. The assessment report also identified needs for support to build women entrepreneur confidence, address mental health issues, and for more support services designed specifically for women entrepreneurs. Rebuilding Better's service offerings took many focus group participants' priorities on board. Nevertheless, ILO project managers and other officials also noted the assessment could have been better.

**Participant needs assessments.** One of Rebuilding Better's main intervention strategies was the peer and technical support program. According to the guidebook developed by the project, the approach was designed to "to provide just-in-time support, according to the priorities of the participants." According to ILO officials, the Rebuilding Better project diverged from many past ILO enterprise development projects by implementing a greater volume of customized technical training

and informational events based on demand from participants. For example, according to the organizers of the peer and technical training programs, they selected technical sessions topics after identifying participants needs and priorities. In the words of one partner in the Philippines, because of the severe consequences of the pandemic even on her own business, *"I didn't know what the syllabus should be and so we decided let's create it as we go along. And I think this is where the success was."* By taking this route, rather than trying to adapt and implement existing ILO business development curriculum<sup>3</sup>, Rebuilding Better was able to mount a more fluid response in a changing environment.

**Listening and learning from national partners.** Another way the project adapted to the needs of entrepreneurs was by taking the advice of women entrepreneur network leaders. Rebuilding Better partners reflected that they felt listened to by the project and were able to adapt programs based on their organizational learnings. For example, one partner in the Philippines said of the collaboration that took place around program design, *"I love that idea that they were willing to listen and not demand for us to just follow."* Another partner in Malaysia proudly highlighted the ways they adapted the peer and technical training methodology to better fit with their participants' needs and expectations.

**Sequencing activities to align with shifting needs.** Various ILO and ILO partner personnel highlighted that based on their assessments, the project participants' demand for services evolved over Rebuilding Better's implementation period. For example, the ILO and ILO implementing partners as well as the inception assessment showed most small business wanted help to improve their online presence, but few had an appetite for help getting access to finance if it meant taking on additional debt at a time when their business' immediate viability was very much in question. An examination of the timeline of project services shows many early programs were focused on business continuity planning and digitization, as well as less technical subject matter like mental health and resilience. The project implementation team likewise reported that in the last months of the project, when the days of prolonged lockdowns appeared to be over, participants regained interest in investing in the future and so it took opportunity to organize a number of sessions on finance. Responding to reported fatigue with online meetings and fewer public health restrictions, the project also began organizing face to face events.

**The project team felt they needed more contextualized and practical information about the ecosystem for entrepreneurship in each country.** Some members of the project team indicated that they struggled to identify partners and resource people in their countries and that Rebuilding Better sometimes duplicated the efforts of other organizations that were trying to help businesses during the pandemic. They found that the inception report lacked in-depth information about the characteristics of entrepreneurship and existing business support services in their country and that the ILO country and regional teams were of limited help filling in information gaps. Although the inception needs assessment provided information about entrepreneur needs as well as higher-level analysis of economic challenges by sector, it offered limited insight on ongoing support programs, key organizations and people that would have facilitated project implementation. A couple ILO officials conjectured that the inception assessment would have benefited from having a consultant in each country instead of one international consultant handling all three countries but cited time as a key constraint.

### Soundness of enterprise selection criteria

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of ILO training packages commonly promoted by the Organization are Start and Improve Your Own Business or Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises

Although mutually agreed upon by ILO and the donor, the enterprise selection criteria in the project document were often perceived by the project team and ILO implementing partners as a **constraint**. Nearly all ILO and ILO implementing partner personnel highlighted difficulties mobilizing enterprises to participate in Rebuilding Better programs, which they attributed in part to the eligibility criteria which was embedded in the project design. The ILO and the J.P. Morgan Foundation agreed that the project would target formal sector small businesses<sup>4</sup> located in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Manila and Cebu (The Philippines) and Bangkok (Thailand) belonging to the hard-hit manufacturing, services, and retail sectors. The sector criteria were further refined following the needs assessment.<sup>5</sup> As discussed below, the team perceived tradeoffs between having clear cut selection criteria based on overarching rationales and shared definitions and a more flexible approach based on demand, who was in the partners' network, and other contextual factors.

**Geographic criteria.** The geographic criteria met J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation guidelines, which required that foundation funded activities take place in markets where it had business activities. However, ILO personnel highlighted that entrepreneurship/small business support programs were relatively more abundant in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Cebu in comparison to the countries' secondary cities and farther-outside-the-center regions. Even though they admitted the pool of potential beneficiaries was large in the targeted cities, both ILO and ILO partner personnel noted that the ILO was not a major player in existing entrepreneurship ecosystems and that quickly breaking in and differentiated itself in an already crowded space was challenging, especially since some other organizations had a head start responding to the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Several ILO personnel postulated that if it had been able to work in less well-served geographic areas, demand for project services would have been greater.

**Size criteria.** ILO and ILO implementing partners generally understood the rationale for targeting formal sector small businesses versus micro enterprises from an employment perspective (see box 1). Nevertheless, several ILO staff and partners wished there had been greater flexibility to work with enterprises that did not fit the size and formality criterion. A frequently cited reason was the perception that relatively larger businesses were better off and needed project assistance less. In addition, nearly all involved in implementation highlighted the practical challenges they experienced recruiting small business owners that fit the project's criteria. Specific challenges included:

- in all three countries but in particular in Thailand, many small businesses are not formally registered given entrepreneur preferences and regulatory challenges
- many "smaller" small businesses had become micro by the time Rebuilding Better initiated its services because of early pandemic layoffs
- entrepreneurs running small business are very often stretched and have very little time for capacity building or networking activities

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<sup>4</sup> The initial definition of "small" was enterprises with 5-49 employees and 10 to 49 full time employees and a turnover of up to USD 1.5M or total assets worth up to USD 1.2M.

<sup>5</sup> The Rebuilding Better needs assessment recommended to draw enterprises from the food and beverages and retail trade sectors in Malaysia, from food and beverages, food manufacturing and wellness sectors in Thailand, and from the food and beverage, food manufacturing, fashion design and handicrafts, and wellness sub-sectors in the Philippines.

<sup>6</sup> Rebuilding Better official started in January 2021, several months after the first lockdowns and did not gather steam until late 2021 given the time needed to recruit staff, complete the needs assessment and contract partners.

**Box 1 Good practice: targeting small, formal sector enterprises as a means to promote a human-centered recovery from COVID-19<sup>7</sup>.**

Rebuilding Better's aim to aid formal sector, small enterprises during the pandemic fit with and contributed to ILO decent work agenda. The project's focus on small, formal sector enterprises responded to ILO strategic priorities to grow the numbers of "decent" jobs. The size criteria for Rebuilding Better enterprises fell squarely within what is sometimes called the "missing middle" of developing countries' economies. The missing middle describes a phenomenon whereby developing countries' economies consist of a large number of microenterprises (mostly informal) and some large firms, but very few formal, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The latter tend to be the greatest generators of employment in developed economies. According to ILO officials, preserving existing small, formal sector enterprises and growing their numbers is important to create jobs with better regulated working conditions, that pay legal wages and benefits (including by contributing to social security) and which generate tax revenue to cover other critical public services. Nevertheless, ILO officials in the region highlighted that the organization as often approached the issue through programs to encourage informal sector enterprises to formalize rather than by helping existing SMEs to grow.

**Gender criteria.** Nearly all of those consulted during the evaluation agreed with the rationale for primarily targeting women-owned or led, because they had been among the hardest hit by the pandemic. In addition, many saw great value in having women only groups because these were more conducive to women sharing their concerns, experiences, and knowledge. A sign of the project's enthusiastic acceptance of gender-based select criteria, Rebuilding Better had exceeded the project target of serving at least 60 percent women owned or led businesses by over 20 percent as of August 2022.

**Sector criteria.** The inception assessment included analysis on which sectors were hardest hit in an effort to further refine the sectors from which Rebuilding Better should draw its participants. In the end, many of those involved in implementation found even the initial, broad targeting criteria based on sector to be largely irrelevant. One project team member said, *"we decided that we couldn't focus on just these two sectors, because for one thing, we weren't able to identify a lot of the women entrepreneurs under those sectors. And whenever we actually rolled out the support, the ones that did sign up were outside of the sector, but still needed the support."* Other reasons include:

- While the inception assessment report highlighted potential value in grouping businesses from a similar sector together to benefit from specialized training activities, according to the ILO team, the nature of the issues addressed by Rebuilding Better were not strongly differentiated based on sector of activity.
- A few evaluation participants perceived some value from having businesses from similar sectors in peer groups where they shared experiences but several also found that having businesses with differing experiences enriched participant discussions.

### Soundness of project theory of change

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to ILO's call to action which outlines concerns and proposed strategies to achieve an inclusive job-rich recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that substantially strengthens worker and social protections and supports sustainable enterprises.

The project theory of change, as depicted in exhibit 1 on page 3 makes logical and clear linkages between what the project set out to do, what it expected to achieve, and how it hoped its achievements would contribute to higher level outcomes. Nevertheless, many of those involved in the program emphasized behavioral and social factors rather than purely “access to” technical and material inputs as being critical to creating resilience and driving business practice improvements, the former not being fully captured in the project theory of change. For example, project and implementing partners leaders highlighted the importance of peer support for imparting hope, confidence, self-awareness, and social values as well as the role of mentorship from experienced businesspeople in enabling meaningful learning and change. One implementor emphasized, “*the participating entrepreneurs did not need a lot of theoretical information but something deeper to help them carry on.*” Another partner in Thailand echoed the previous sentiment, saying the peer sessions in the dark days of the pandemic were largely aimed at giving participants “*the energy to keep going.*” One project team member highlighted the peer and technical support program was most successful in changing practices because it combined the tangible “access to technical inputs” with the less tangible creating social bonds than enabled deeper learning.

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*I think the peer program created the most impact out of the other kinds of support ...they [participants] were able to really gain the trust of not just their peers, but also from the speakers and the facilitators. And that itself is what really creates that close knit community of women entrepreneurs. And that is what I believe, is successful about the project.*

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### 3.2 Coherence

This section examines the extent and ways Rebuilding Better aligned with the ILO’s mandate, strategic plans and policy directives, capitalized on organizational assets and served the interests of its national tripartite constituents.

#### Coherence with ILO global strategies and policy drivers

**Rebuilding Better’s design reflected key elements of the ILO’s strategic plans, corporate Programme and Budget (P&B) outcomes and addressed the cross-cutting policy driver on gender equality.** According to the ILO, promoting jobs and enterprise, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection and promoting social dialogue are the four pillars of its Decent Work Agenda, with gender as a cross-cutting theme.<sup>8</sup> In its latest strategic plan, the ILO highlighted “*fostering an enabling environment for sustainable enterprises and entrepreneurship*” as a work area of particular importance to promote the global recovery from COVID-19. The 2022-2025 ILO strategy indicates “*targeted support to enterprises will need to focus on productivity, business continuity, formalization, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, and domestic and global supply chains.*”<sup>9</sup> The 2020-21 P&B planning document established the objective of promoting “*Sustainable enterprises as generators of employment and promoters of innovation and decent work*” under outcome four.<sup>10</sup> At the country level, two out of three of the target countries (the Philippines, Thailand) included an outcome

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<sup>8</sup> Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-lisbon/documents/event/wcms\\_667247.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-lisbon/documents/event/wcms_667247.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> ILO Governing Body, The ILO’s Strategic Plan for 2022–25, 340th Session, Geneva, October–November 2020 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_757564.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_757564.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Program and Budget for the Biennium 20-21 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_mas/---program/documents/genericdocument/wcms\\_736562.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_mas/---program/documents/genericdocument/wcms_736562.pdf)

on sustainable enterprises in their respective Decent Work Country Programs, to which Rebuilding Better broadly aligned.

With its focus on women owned or led businesses, Rebuilding Better clearly integrated the ILO's cross-cutting policy driver<sup>11</sup> on gender equality and nondiscrimination. In addition to having eligibility criteria that used affirmative action to favor women, Rebuilding Better developed resources and offered its partners training and awareness raising designed to help them be more effective serving women.<sup>12</sup> For example, the Employers Confederation in the Philippines is undergoing the WE-check assessment process which it reported was prompting it to come up with clear written policies affirming its commitment to gender inclusion.

### Capitalization of ILO organizational resources and knowledge

**Rebuilding Better capitalized on ILO resources and received guidance from experienced senior ILO specialists and programme managers but also needed to develop new approaches and seek collaboration with organizations outside its usual network to meet its objectives.** Based on document review and ILO accounts, ILO specialists provided expert inputs for project developed assessments and guides, recommended approaches, helped with partner introductions, and led or participated in project activities. The project also used pre-existing guidelines and training curriculum developed by the ILO in some of its activities. Nevertheless, the project team highlighted that overall, available ILO human and technical resources and oft used approaches were not well-aligned with what entrepreneurs said they wanted. For example, one ILO team member said, *"Women were clear that they did not want to allocate time to participate in traditional trainings but wanted smaller question and answer sessions, opportunities to share with peers and receive coaching."* The project filled this gap by developing new materials (for example, the peer and technical training guidelines) and partnering with other organizations working in the target countries with the sought-after expertise. Another ILO team member explained, *"What we have been trying to do is be the connector between entrepreneurs with specific needs and people and organizations that can help them."* The project was aided in its efforts to be a "connector" by its choice of national programme officers, all three of whom had backgrounds in entrepreneurship in their respective countries and to varying degrees were able to draw on their personal networks to identify partners and resource people.

#### **Box 2\_Good practice:\_Capitalizing on "peer to peer" approaches and other technical content developed within the ILO.**

The Bangkok based ILO Senior Enterprise and Gender Specialists championed the project's use of the peer-to-peer learning and provided technical support for its implementation. Based on institutional learning, the ILO Enterprise department has been moving away from "learning from the external expert" to an activity-based model. In the words of one Specialist, the emerging model *"is all about peer-to-peer learning... the materials have some knowledge embedded in them. But they really guide the discussion so that entrepreneurs and business managers get a chance to talk with others in similar circumstances and learn from them."* Rebuilding Better adopted the approach, helped by the ILO Specialist on Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination, who was a

<sup>11</sup> ILO cross cutting policy drivers are gender equality and non-discrimination, environmental sustainability, promotion of international labour standards, social dialogue, and tripartism.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Rebuilding Better organized two training workshops for the Philippines Department of Trade and Industry on "Gender Inclusive Service Provision" and enrolled the Employers' Confederation of the Philippines in the WE Check program, an institutional self-assessment tool developed by the ILO to assist organizations providing financial and non-financial business support to MSMEs to become more gender inclusive. In addition, the three main support materials developed by the project had a gender focus: the inception assessment, the manual on facilitating peer and technical support programs and the on guide gender-inclusive financial and business support service provision.

member of the three person team which authored a new, project produced resource [Facilitating Peer and Technical Support Programs to Women Entrepreneurs, a Manual](#).

Rebuilding Better also capitalized on ILO's knowledge and materials on Business Continuity Planning (BCP) which aimed to help participating small businesses increase their resilience and mitigate pandemic-related risks. The ILO first developed [guidelines](#) on the topic during the Avian Flu epidemic in 2009. The Rebuilding Better also capitalized more recent checklists and guidance developed by ILO Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP), such as the [six-step COVID-19 business continuity plan for SMEs](#) to reach nearly 200 entrepreneurs in collaboration with national partners.<sup>13</sup> The project likewise capitalized ILO materials on [Safe Return to Work](#), developed by ACT/EMP to help enterprises manage the pandemic-related health risks in the workplace. One project partner in the Philippines noted that although the ILO was not alone in offering BCP and Occupation Safety and Health guidelines as a response to COVID-19, she found ILO materials particularly clear and easy to understand.

### Capitalization of ILO's tripartite structure and membership

**Although not without challenges, Rebuilding Better identified common interests and succeeded to partner with the Employers' Confederations in Thailand and the Philippines.**<sup>14</sup> The ILO partnered with both the Employers' Confederations of the Philippines (ECOP) and the Employers' Confederation of Thailand (ECOT) for BCP training. For enterprises in Thailand, ECOT also hosted public webinars and meetings on business digitization, occupational health and safety, business planning, and marketing. Working with the big Employers' Confederations was consistent with ILO's tripartite governance structure and membership; however, both ILO and Confederation representatives agreed that based on their current membership structure, the Confederations were not well-positioned to reach Rebuilding Better's target business segment. In the three target countries, reaching small enterprises during the pandemic was a stretch of their capacity and required strong support from ILO national coordinators. Although Rebuilding Better reported it had long discussions around potential collaboration with the Confederation in Malaysia, in the end the latter decided to forego collaboration, indicating proposed activities did not fit with their main agenda and expertise.

Confederation representatives from the Philippines and Thailand reported there was clear value for them in the partnership with Rebuilding Better. One Confederation representative received collaboration would help it represent a broader set of business interests, *"It will help us firm up our programs as we try to reach out to small enterprises, especially the women owned enterprises, and beef up our training programs as well."* Because of its participation in Rebuilding Better, ECOT decided to offer free two-year membership to all small enterprises which participated in project events, a strategy to expand its membership and increase its representativeness.

### 3.3 Effectiveness

This sub-section on effectiveness analyses project progress toward its objectives and identifies what were the key implementation challenges it faced. The analysis draws on available data from project

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<sup>13</sup> The six-step COVID-19 business continuity plan for SMEs As of August 2022, the project in collaboration with national partners organized 18 BCP sessions and one Safe Return to Work session which were attended by 195 participants (23 Malaysia, 122 the Philippines and 50 Thailand). In Thailand and the Philippines, the ILO partnered with the national employers' confederation, ECOT and ECOP as well as the Philippines Exporters' Confederation and Philippine Women's Economic Network.

<sup>14</sup> According to the ILO, its tripartite structure, made up of member state governments, Employers and Workers Organizations, makes it unique among UN agencies. In most ILO international cooperation projects, the tripartite constituents are its preferred partners.

M&E systems, feedback from the ILO team, project implementing partners and participating enterprises.

### Progress toward project objectives

The project organized activities contributing toward all three planned objectives. Expected results of the Rebuilding Better project included participating entrepreneurs' enhanced access to (i) training, (ii) financial services and support packages and (iii) market information and business networks.

**Training.** Rebuilding Better set out to enable access to training by women-owned businesses. To deliver this output, Rebuilding Better leveraged two main intervention models:

- public webinars and trainings in collaboration with national partners. These were often short in duration, one to three hours, in order to fit within potential participants busy schedules.
- peer and technical support programme, which was an extended programme where participant met 2-4 times a month and that offered technical trainings, peer coaching and mentoring opportunities for small groups of women entrepreneurs.

To complement the former approaches, Rebuilding Better developed and/or promoted a few self-paced online learning tools with other ILO projects in Southeast Asia. These included Google Primer and small business "resilience" videos, and guides.

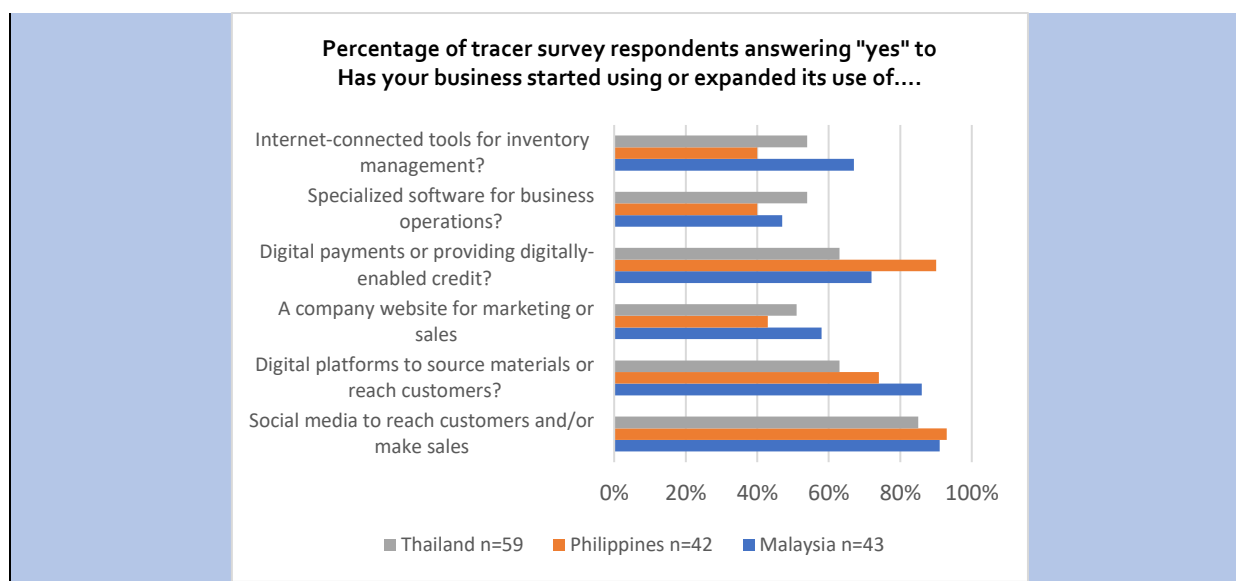
Rebuilding Better satisfaction surveys showed that nearly two thirds of respondents from the peer and technical training support program (n=57) strongly affirmed that they had gained knowledge, skills, ideas, and confidence through their participation in program sessions. In regard to the public sessions, three quarters of satisfaction survey respondents (n=333) strongly affirmed that they acquired new knowledge of skills from the session.

#### **Box 3 Good practice – helping to digitize small businesses during the pandemic.**

The project made business digitization a significant focus of training activities and helped many participating small businesses improve their use of technology. Many of the best attended project activities were on business applications of ICTs. Project public and peer program sessions covered digitization topics including online marketing and sales, social media, branding and design, fintech, and cybersecurity. One of the approaches that garnered strong interest and positive feedback, Rebuilding Better partnered with graphic design platform Canva to provide training to participating small enterprises on ways to improve their online marketing and social media presence using better graphics.<sup>15</sup> Several ILO and ILO implementing partners observed that numerous participants capitalized on the session to improve the quality of their social media posts. In Malaysia, several technical sessions in the second cohort of the peer and technical support program were on topics related to digitization. As a result of her participation, one participant in the program reported she had totally upgraded her website. In addition to anecdotal evidence, the tracer survey conducted in September 2022 showed that 78 percent of respondents (n=144 aggregated across the three countries) strongly affirmed that project activities had enabled them use technology more effectively. Even though these changes cannot all be attributed solely to project activities, additional data from the tracer survey (depicted below) provides insights into the new or expanded ways respondents said they were using technology in their business during the pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The project organized four sessions (three public events and one peer training sessions) which as of August had attracted nearly 350 participants in total (142 Malaysia, 127 the Philippines and 78 Thailand), ranking the sessions among the most popular.

<sup>16</sup> The survey did not ask participants to attribute the changes to the project, only how their use of technology changed during the pandemic.



**Financial services and support packages.** The project aimed to address key constraints that hindered women entrepreneurs' access to finance and business support programs. Initially, it planned interventions to assist eligible women entrepreneurs to apply for and access special COVID-19 assistance programs. However, based on project accounts, it was not possible to connect women entrepreneurs to immediate sources of funding because by the time the project got underway, most businesses had already accessed available government financial assistance programs, did not meet eligibility requirements, or were reluctant to take on additional debt through more conventional financing sources.

The project pivoted from trying to help businesses get immediate assistance to focus on providing information on types of financial and business support services available to small businesses in "normal" times, hoping that once the pandemic restrictions subsided and business confidence improved, participants would have greater knowledge of the financing options and support services available to them. For example, the project organized a series called "Financing Business Growth for Women Entrepreneurs" with Malaysia's Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives. It also organized webinars in collaboration with public SME support agencies in the Philippines and Thailand which featured technical sessions with insurance companies, banks, and impact investors. In all three countries, the project branded the collaboration the "Women Entrepreneurs' Hour" or WE hour, a short format webinar. To date, the WE hour reached nearly 300 participants, responding well to the project objective to facilitate access by women entrepreneurs to information about financial and government services.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the September 2022 project tracer survey, 82 percent of respondents (n=144) affirmed they were better informed about available support programs and resources because they participated in project sessions. While 73 percent of respondents reported that information or skills from the Rebuilding Better sessions had helped their business seek funds, only 13 percent of respondents had received a loan and 8 percent had received a grant since the start of the program. Nevertheless, 72 percent affirmed having increased confidence about seeking financing for their businesses.

<sup>17</sup> As of August 2022, WE Hour the sessions numbered 11 and attracted a total of 281 participants (4 sessions, 55 participants in Malaysia, 4 sessions, 168 participants in the Philippines, and 3 sessions, 58 participants in Thailand).

**Market information and networks.** Rebuilding Better aimed to assist women entrepreneurs to take advantage of new and existing market opportunities by facilitating their participation in business networking activities and access to new markets. To support this output, it organized sessions to help women entrepreneurs leverage online market platforms to sell their products and services and organized several networking events, both national and regional (see good practice). In the Philippines, Rebuilding Better in collaboration with the Women's Business Council of the Philippines organized a market for women-own MSMEs in September 2022 which allowed approximately 120 MSMEs sell their products to the public, in two in-person events and online.<sup>18</sup> The technical and peer training program also enabled networking among peer groups. According to ILO and ILO implementing partners, many participants capitalized on the latter to learn about each other's products and services and some developed new business partnerships and generated sales as a result.

Based on satisfaction surveys (n=57), 77 percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the peer and technical support program had helped them to expand their business networks. Similarly, the majority of respondents to the September 2022 tracer survey across the three countries (n=144) likewise indicated that the connections they made with other entrepreneurs during project sessions had been useful for their businesses (86 percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement). In addition, 89 percent of tracer survey respondents affirmed the sessions had helped them find new business opportunities.

#### **Box 4 Good practice – facilitating business networking by women entrepreneurs within the sub-region**

Rebuilding Better featured regional activities with women entrepreneurs and partners, including meetings to exchange good practices and lessons learnt among peer program implementing partners, virtual networking events and capacity-building workshops. For example, the project, in collaboration with the Asian Women Entrepreneur Network (AWEN) gathered hundreds of women entrepreneurs from across the region to share experiences and forge new business connections in an online networking event “Power of WE: Connecting Across ASEAN.” Another event, “Voices of MSMEs” brought together micro, small and medium-sized enterprise owners from the sub-region in an interactive, online forum to share pandemic challenges and ways they were adapting their businesses and staying resilient (attended by 128 participants from the three target countries). According one ILO team member, *“There is a real value in having a regional programme as there is a lot of interest among partners and beneficiaries to learn how things are done in other countries.”*

#### **Effectiveness of intervention strategies**

**Rebuilding Better is on track to meet or exceed end-of-project quantitative targets on numbers of activities, participants and partners as established in its original workplan.** Project reporting and M&E data shows that as of August 2022, Rebuilding Better organized a higher than planned volume of activities and events (92 individual sessions as of August 2022, 28 percent more than the end-of-project target) and exceeded its target for the number of small businesses served (954, six percent more than the end-of-project target). It likewise exceeded its gender inclusion target for the percentage of women-owned businesses attending at least one project activity (81 percent versus 60 percent). As of mid-August, Rebuilding Better had not yet reached its target for the number of participants in its peer and technical training program (109 businesses enrolled versus 150 or a 73 percent of its target). However, with additional cohorts in progress, the project team anticipates it will also exceed this target before project end.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The markets were organized in shopping malls, one in each of Manila and Cebu, and online. A short video explaining the event can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEPgW5niQII>

<sup>19</sup> Based on current projections, Rebuilding Better's peer and technical training program will reach 187 enterprises, 24 percent more than the number planned.

**Rebuilding Better leveraged a variety of complementary partnerships with diverse organizations to reach women entrepreneurs and connect them to peer and business networks as well as technical expertise.** Rebuilding Better partnered with a greater than anticipated number of public, private and not-for-profit national partners, exceeding its initial target by 25 percent (30 partners instead of 24). The project partnered with a variety of organizations from different corners of the entrepreneurship and business support service eco-system including public SME support agencies, large business associations, women entrepreneur networks, financial service providers, innovative start-up networks, tech companies, and other for and non-for-profit service providers.

**Exhibit 6 Rebuilding Better Partners and their roles**

Type of organization	Example of partner organizations	Role in project
<b>Employers' organizations</b>	Employers Confederation of the Philippines, Employers Confederation of Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-hosted public sessions</li> <li>• Co-hosted networking events</li> </ul>
<b>Foreign Chambers of Commerce</b>	Thai-New Zealand Chamber of Commerce, Thai- Norwegian chamber of Commerce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participated in online networking events</li> </ul>
<b>Financial institutions</b>	Bank of Thailand, Banco de Oro Philippines, Development Bank of the Philippines, SB Corp (PH), Government Savings Bank (TH), Krungsri Bank (TH), SME Bank (MY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Featured as resource organizations in public sessions on access to finance</li> </ul>
<b>Government partners</b>	Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperative and SME Corp (MY), Office of SME Promotion (TH), Department of Trade and Industry (PH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-hosted webinar series "Women Entrepreneur Hour" mainly focused on access to finance</li> </ul>
<b>Women's entrepreneurship associations and networks</b>	ASEAN Women Entrepreneur Network, Philippine Women Economic Network, GREAT Women (PH), Women Business Council Philippines (PH), Women Entrepreneurship Network Association in Malaysia, National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia, Federation of Business and Professional Women of Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-hosted online public sessions and a few in-person events</li> <li>• Implemented peer and technical support program</li> </ul>
<b>Private sector and not-for-profit organizations</b>	Connecting Founders, Google, Canva, Endeavor Malaysia, Space Bangkok, JP Morgan Chase Good Works (PH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-hosted online public sessions and a few in-person events</li> </ul>

### Critical challenges and project strategies to surmount them

**Rebuilding Better struggled to attract participants to its activities.** The most frequently highlighted challenge faced by the project implementation team was attracting participants. ILO and ILO implementing partners believed many different factors contributed the challenge, including:

- characteristics of the target group, in particular that they tended to be very busy and therefore selective
- challenges differentiating the project's offering from that of other service providers during the pandemic
- the effect of prolonged lock downs, which reinforced many small entrepreneurs' isolation
- project or project partners' inability to offer immediate, tangible benefits, especially since many participants had already accessed government benefits for which they were eligible
- project eligibility criteria, which narrowed the field of potential participants
- entrepreneurs' lack of appetite or technical difficulty accessing online sessions

- project and project partners' limited SME databases and underdeveloped communication and outreach strategies

Based on team member accounts and public session satisfaction surveys responses, successful project strategies for reaching entrepreneurs, overcoming their distrust, and mobilizing participation in activities included:

- working with partners who were known and trusted in women entrepreneur circles
- word-of-mouth referrals from past participants, project team or implementing partners' networks (35 percent public session participant satisfaction survey respondents were referred to the event by a friend or colleague)
- sharing information about project events in specialized websites, online groups and forums used by entrepreneurs (according to the survey, 36 percent of attendees found out about the event through a Facebook group or other entrepreneur group or network)
- engaging social media and search engine optimization professionals to promote project online content (applied mainly to the MSME resilience videos and Google primer)

**Box 5 Lesson learned - By building strong partnerships with known women entrepreneur network organizations, the project was able to be more effective attracting women-owned small businesses.**

Rebuilding Better found that small enterprise owners tended to be very demanding clients and skeptical of support programs of unproven value. To overcome potential participant doubts, Rebuilding Better needed to position itself as a trusted partner in the enterprise development eco-system, and in particular with entrepreneur networks. Even though, as highlighted in section 3.2, the ILO has a strong mandate to promote sustainable enterprises, its work in this area was reportedly not well known in the three target countries. One ILO team member recounted frequently being asked, "what's the ILO doing with entrepreneurship?" Rather than trying to make a name for itself in a short period of time, Rebuilding Better chose to partner with known entities and capitalize on their reputation and existing networks, which enabled it to mobilize participants more effectively. Based on project accounts, some partners had stronger networks and shared project objectives to a greater extent than others, which influenced their effectiveness. One managers' advice to future projects similar to Rebuilding Better was, *"Spend sufficient time on developing strong partnerships with capable organizations ....Do not spend time forcing collaboration or activities."*

**In addition to gaining entrepreneurs' interest and trust, the project was also challenged to meet the needs of business owners who wanted highly personalized and advanced support.** Several within the project implementation team indicated that some potential participants declined to attend or continue attending project activities because the support offered was viewed as being too "basic." Project staff and implementing partners highlighted that the needs of small business owners tended to be quite sophisticated relative to the more frequently targeted micro-enterprises. Based on various project staff and implementing partners, the peer and technical support program responded the most effectively to participant demand for in-depth and relatively personalized technical support. For example, one project team member recounted, *"In the peer program, they [leaders and participants] were actually able to dive deeper into the topic and show the women entrepreneurs, what you need to do for your company."* The collaboration with JP Morgan and Great Women in the Philippines exemplified the benefits of this more personalized approach (see box 6).

**Box 6 Good Practice - Harnessing executive volunteers to support women entrepreneurs**

The ILO, Great Women and JP Morgan's Good Works volunteer programme partnered to implement Rebuilding Better's technical and peer support program in the Philippines, entitled "Flip Your Business". Through the partnership, J.P. Morgan volunteers shared their expert knowledge and offered individually tailored advice on topics including analyzing financial statements and improving sales and marketing strategies. After assessing

the needs of participating entrepreneurs, Good Works mobilized six experts as presenters and 30 volunteer counselors/mentors who co-organized two “Flip Your Business” programs in 2022, one three-month program serving approximately 30 women entrepreneurs and one two-day Flip Your Business “boot camp”, the latter hosted in-person at JP Morgan’s Manila offices and attracting 18 participants. Based on participant testimonials and feedback from ILO and its partners in the Philippines, participating women entrepreneurs loved having the opportunity to get personalized support and reported gaining new skills as well as confidence in their ability to recover from the pandemic. Although “Flip Your Business” organizers believe it possible to replicate and even scale the partnership in the Philippines, JP Morgan volunteer programs were less well developed in Malaysia and Thailand which prevented the team from following the same approach in these countries.

**Some participants also experienced technical challenges accessing online activities.** Internet access varied by country with the most challenges being reported in the Philippines, especially in Cebu in the aftermath of Typhoon Odette in December 2021. Online meeting fatigue was cited by many evaluation participants as a factor that was likely constraining participation in some project activities. To try to address the latter, Rebuilding Better trained its main partners on online facilitation skills, including ways to enable more interactive experiences.<sup>20</sup> It also moved to hybrid or in-person training when restrictions allowed.

### 3.4 Efficiency

This subsection on efficiency examines the extent and ways Rebuilding Better used financial resources (staff, time, expertise, budget) effectively. It also assesses the effectiveness of project monitoring and evaluation systems and ways the project used assessment and monitoring data to aid decision making.

**Since there was no “playbook” for supporting small businesses during a pandemic, Rebuilding Better’s experimentation with a variety of approaches and mediums was an efficient way to identify what worked and what didn’t.** Considering it was a short project managed by a small team, Rebuilding Better implemented a relatively large number and wide variety of activities with diverse partners and mediums to meet project objectives. After a somewhat slow start while national staff came on board, Rebuilding Better gathered momentum quickly. Not only was the project able to reach or surpass nearly all its output targets, but it also tested a variety of approaches and frequently adjusted its strategies to address challenges along the way. Below are examples of adaptive management cited by the project implementation team:

- Even though the collaboration with Great Women and JP Morgan volunteers on the peer and technical support was positively received by participants, it was challenging to get a new cohort of women entrepreneurs to commit to a three-to-four-month program. For the second cohort, the project tried out an intensive “boot camp” approach, which was still well-received by participants and in addition, was more accessible to busy entrepreneurs.
- After initial difficulties, there were many lessons learned about how to capitalize on the strengths of various institutional partnerships, several of which required time to build trust and mature.

**Rebuilding Better successfully adapted to the necessity of “going virtual” for project implementation.** Like so many others during the pandemic, the project embraced online meetings as its primary means of communication, both among the project implementation team and to reach

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<sup>20</sup> The ILO organized two online workshops on “Online Facilitation and Activity-Based Learning” for capacity building for development organizations and business development service providers in Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_832457/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_832457/lang-en/index.htm)

out to its target audience. According to one project manager, having a young and technology savvy team facilitated the project team efforts to coordinate among themselves but program coordinators nevertheless faced challenges collaborating with external partners and some enterprises due in part to their varying degrees of e-readiness.

Rebuilding Better also experimented with reaching women entrepreneurs using self-paced learning tools and other online content formats, with varying degrees of success measured in reach. The main examples were:

- Rebuilding Better, in collaboration with other ILO projects in the sub-region, produced the “MSME Resilience Regional Video Campaign”. The campaign promoted 11 short videos featuring small business owners recounting their experiences confronting pandemic challenges to their business and included “tips” for adapting and staying resilient. The videos were hosted on a ILO’s [Peer Learning Hub for Enterprises in Asia-Pacific](#) and a related [Facebook page](#). Each video attracted tens of thousands of views and were played through several thousand of times by viewers in each of the three target countries.
- The project collaborated with Google to promote [self-guided modules](#) for small business owners on digitization and other business-related topics.<sup>21</sup> Rebuilding Better promoted the tools during one regional public event (attended by 76 participants) and through two social media campaigns. According to the project, these efforts yielded limited results as to date only around 100 individuals completed a full lesson.

**Several team members felt that the number and breadth of activities resulted in project resources being spread too thinly.** The project planned that its deepest interaction with enterprises would be through the peer and technical support program, which got off to a slower than planned start and faced challenges mobilizing the anticipated number of participants. To compensate, Rebuilding Better organized a larger-than-planned number of one time or limited series type public sessions which had the effect of broadening its reach but not necessarily deepening its engagement with enterprises. One ILO team member said, *“I think we were trying to do too many things...where it was just this number of trainings provided or this number of events, how many partners we can reach out to, and things like that.”* Indeed, analysis of project M&E data up to August 2022 shows that, except for a relatively small core of participants, most entrepreneurs attended only one event/session. According to project records, the average number of sessions attended per participant was 1.4 and only 64 participants attended 4 or more sessions. While Rebuilding Better designed its programs to accommodate women entrepreneurs who had varying needs, availability, and levels of interest in its support and recognized it would have different levels of participation, the project expected there would be a greater number of regular participants in its activities. The project team indicated that if the project had been longer, they would have continued to taper off the number of “one off” events and focus more on its peer and technical support program, regional networking as well as activities to boost business support service providers’ capacity to deliver gender inclusive services.

**The project was strategic in complementing its relatively limited human resources using in-kind, paid and unpaid ILO and partner human resources.** The project leveraged its partners’ networks and resource people in the delivery of training and as mentors. While some partners received grants to

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<sup>21</sup> In May 2020, the International Training Centre of the ILO (ITC/ILO) entered into a partnership with Google Primer, a free learning application developed by the tech firm. Google developed a curated set of self-guided learning modules of potential relevance to the project which covered topics such as financial literacy, how to establish and/or strengthen your online presence, facilitate better information exchange, offer digital customer services, and use analytics and real user data.

implement project activities, many others mobilized resource people free of charge. Notably, representatives of financial institutions, marketing firms, human resource management experts and entrepreneurship experts took part in project activities as volunteers. Even those organizations which received grants reported mobilizing experienced members and other personnel to mentor participants in the various peer and technical support programs, in some ways above and beyond what was expected. As a result, as of August 2022, the project estimated it had received in-kind contributions valued at 152,000, slightly exceeding the ILO's contractual end of project commitment.

**The Rebuilding Better team set up necessary monitoring and evaluation systems, regularly monitored project performance, and organized stocktaking exercises, on which it capitalized to make course corrections.** Based on the data and other materials provided to the evaluator, the project made the development of comprehensive project monitoring and evaluation systems a priority. This started at the onset of the project, with the baseline situational analysis (inception needs assessment) and the refinement of the project theory of change and performance indicators. It carried on through out the implementation of project activities, with the collection of participant data, basic event statistics and information, as well as the use of surveys to collect information about participant satisfaction and short-term outcomes. At the project's end, the project commissioned the participant tracer survey and this final internal evaluation and will be producing a final report. Importantly, the project reported analyzing their performance data in regular stock-taking exercises both internally as well as with partners to exchange insights from each country and orient future activities.

### 3.5 Impact and sustainability

This sub-section examines the extent ways enterprises reported their participation in Rebuilding Better affected their businesses. It also assesses ways the project tried to influence the broader business support eco-system to provide relevant and gender inclusive services beyond the Rebuilding Better's end.

#### Influence of project on enterprise resilience during the pandemic

**Many entrepreneurs who took part in Rebuilding Better programs perceived their participation had contributed positively to increasing their resilience during the pandemic.** Based on the September 2022 project tracer survey results, in addition to the outcomes described in sub-section 3.3, nearly 90 percent of respondents (n=144 across the three countries) strongly agree or agreed with the statement *"the sessions increased my confidence to make decisions and manage my business."* Additionally, 85 percent of respondent affirmed the sessions contributed to changes in how they ran their businesses.

**Exhibit 7 Tracer survey respondent feedback on changes in business practices and business outcomes after project support**

Country	Perceived changes in business practices	Perceived changes in business
<b>Malaysia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Created proper business plan</li> <li>· More efficient in handling customers</li> <li>· Decided to create a new business activity</li> <li>· Started using TikTok and registered as vendor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Gained more customers</li> <li>· Better understand the local market</li> <li>· Have many more options to market products</li> <li>·</li> </ul>
<b>Philippines</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Put in place system to support operations</li> <li>· Improved decision making</li> <li>· Better use of social media platforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Gained new customers and networks</li> <li>· Improved products</li> <li>· Strengthened social media presence</li> </ul>
<b>Thailand</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Expanded online marketing</li> <li>· More daring to promote myself and my business in the business community</li> <li>· Invested more in my business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Increased sales strategies</li> <li>· Modernized business</li> </ul>

	· Began planning more and developed systems make work easier	
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End of project research showed other, higher level indicators of resilience among the enterprises that participated in Rebuilding Better programs. According to end-of-project tracer survey, 60 percent of respondents (n=144) indicated that since the conclusion of the immediate COVID-19 crisis, the number of full-time employees employed by their businesses had stayed the same and for 17 percent of respondents, full-time employee numbers increased. Similarly, 64 percent of respondents indicated that their sales had stayed the same or had increased. Reported outcomes are difficult to attribute solely to the project since there are many other potential contributing factors and considering enterprises' different levels of engagement in project activities.

### Influence of project on enabling environment for women's entrepreneurship

**Rebuilding Better included strategies to influence and build the capacity of entrepreneur networks and business support service providers in the three countries to better serve women entrepreneurs beyond the project's end.** According to one project team member, *"For us, this was a key opportunity to also influence and contribute to a more enabling environment for women entrepreneurs in the long-term."* Although many partners were already engaged in member capacity building activities, collaboration with the project offered Employers' Confederation and women's entrepreneur network partners the occasion strengthen their member services and try out new methods. Although they cited funding as a constraint, these partners indicated they hoped to capitalize on the content and methodology of Rebuilding Better programs in their future training programs. The project also capitalized on the [WE Check program](#), a self-assessment tool as well as guidebooks developed by the project on [Gender-inclusive service provision](#) and [facilitating peer and technical training support programs](#). Through Rebuilding Better, seven individuals from the project target countries became certified WE Check facilitators, and the project drew content from the Rebuilding Better guidebook in a reportedly very successful regional workshop on gender inclusive service provision.<sup>22</sup> According to project M&E data, Rebuilding Better trained 93 partner staff or coaches, more than double its target.

**Although not a main focus of their collaboration with Rebuilding Better, many project partners reported they were engaged policy advocacy on improving the business enabling environment for women-owned small businesses.** In all three countries, Rebuilding Better partnered with women entrepreneur networks led by influential women leaders, some of whom have a strong voice in policy forums on the economic empowerment of women. For example, one implementing partner recounted *"our activities have been very much focused in providing training and basically being a voice for the women in many of the engagements with the government."* Another spoke specifically about efforts to increase business opportunities for women-owned businesses: *"I talk a lot about gender-based procurement, a topic that I am often consulted on, because I really think that if we're serious about helping women entrepreneurs, this is this is a faster route."* Based on evaluation interviews, many of the women's network leaders with whom the project collaborated are interested in both economic and broader gender equity issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace, the right to maternity leave, eliminating sexual discrimination in hiring, and closing the gender pay gap.

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22 Eleven organizations participated: the SME Corp. Malaysia (gov), Malaysian Employers Federation (EO), KUSKOP (gov), NAWEM (WEA) from Malaysia; DOLE (gov), SPARK! Philippines (WEA), NEW (WEA), Women's Business Council Philippines (WEA), Philippine Mediation Center from the Philippines; and Employers Confederation of Thailand (EO) and Sasin Sustainability & Entrepreneurship Center (university).

## 4. Evaluation Conclusions and Recommendations

### 4.1 Conclusions

The following are the evaluation's main conclusions organized by evaluation criteria.

#### Relevance and design validity

**Rebuilding Better was successful addressing the needs of the entrepreneurs who took part in its programs.** This was demonstrated both by the high ratings the project received in participant satisfaction surveys and end-of-project tracer survey respondent comments. Participating enterprises reported greatly appreciating the opportunities to exchange experiences among fellow entrepreneurs as well as to gain new knowledge and skills, especially on digitizing their business and sales and marketing techniques.

**A strength in the context of COVID-19, Rebuilding Better's frequently used rapid assessment-driven approaches to design its interventions.** This approach left room for the project team to adapt project services and delivery modalities to the evolving needs of participants at different stages of the pandemic. Having the flexibility to adapt was critical because although it was designed to be a post-COVID-19 recovery project (Rebuilding Better), the project implementation period was in fact still largely a time of recurring crisis for small businesses in the targeted countries. Moreover, the pandemic, with its unprecedented-in-recent-history global impact and difficult-to-anticipate trajectory, made knowing what would happen next as well as what exactly should be the response to support ailing small businesses almost impossible to know at the early design stage. Rather than detailing everything that would be done in the project document and/or pulling standard ILO business development curriculum off the shelf, Rebuilding Better made effective use of timely situational analysis and enterprise needs assessments to adapt its interventions to the changing needs of small enterprises. It also capitalized on the advice of national partners and allowed them to adapt and sequence project programs to the context in each country. These good practices notwithstanding, there was perhaps too much emphasis on assessing what the enterprises needed and not enough on existing support systems and gaps in the inception assessment. Rebuilding Better likely would have benefited from having additional practical and contextualized information about the women's entrepreneurship and business support service eco-system in each country in the early stages of the project.

**Having too many pre-established enterprise selection criteria in the project document likely contributed to challenges recruiting participants without offering sufficient upside benefits in terms of effectiveness or impact.** The project document defined criteria based on geography, enterprise size, gender, and sector. Of these, the rationales for the enterprise size and gender criteria were the strongest. Although not an easy target group, keeping formal, small businesses afloat during the pandemic was critical to avoid losing "decent" jobs and growing the unregulated informal sector. Likewise, affirmative action in favor of women-owned businesses was well-justified since women were disproportionately hit by the pandemic and in addition, the choice created opportunities for the project to strengthen service providers' capacity to be more gender inclusive.

**The project's initial articulation of its theory of change was missing social and behavioral factors that the project found to be critical for enabling small business resilience during the pandemic.** The theory of change hypothesized that what businesses needed was access to training, finance, and business networks for sharing business intelligence and sales opportunities. The project showed that

in addition to these, small business owners needed “intangibles” like hope and confidence, outcomes that seemed best facilitated by strengthening social bonds between fellow entrepreneurs.

### Coherence

**Rebuilding Better was highly relevant to the objectives and priorities of the ILO during the pandemic and more broadly.** The project design aligned with the ILO’s high level strategic plans and corporate Programme and Budget (P&B) outcomes, which underline the importance of developing sustainable enterprises, and addressed the cross-cutting policy driver on gender equality. In the Philippines and Thailand, the project supported an important ILO constituent, the Employers’ Organizations, to become more gender inclusive and representative of the private sector, contributing toward longstanding ILO priorities. Finally, Rebuilding Better capitalized on ILO pedagogical resources, knowledge, and expertise in many meaningful ways.

### Effectiveness

**Rebuilding Better made numerous contributions toward the achievement of its three main objectives which were to increase access by predominately women-owned small business to training, finance and government grants, and business networks.** By August 2022, the project had met or was on track to meet or exceed all of its targets for the number of activities, partners, and activity participants, among other objectives. Based on survey results, the project was highly successful producing sought after results.

- Under training, the majority participants who responded to project surveys affirmed they had gained new knowledge, skills, ideas, and confidence and had used the former to improve their businesses. Notably, project team reports and survey results show participants began or increased their use of technology for business thanks in part to support from the project.
- Under access to finance and government grants, the project recorded relatively modest achievements in terms of helping its participants access new loans or grants. Nevertheless, the majority of participants who responded to project surveys reported having greater awareness of the financing options available to them as were more confident about seeking new sources of funding.
- Under access to business networks, the majority participants who responded to project surveys affirmed that they had expanded their business networks and that the connections they had made with other entrepreneurs during project sessions were useful for expanding business opportunities.

The project and project implementing partners faced challenges achieving project objectives. Notably, they frequently struggled to demonstrate project activities’ value proposition to women-owned small enterprises and as a result consistently found it challenging to recruit participants. The project’s effectiveness forming relevant partnerships with credible and connected women entrepreneur networks was a helpful strategy to overcome this challenge, at least partially. Meeting the relatively advanced needs and expectations for tailored support of some of its participating enterprises was likewise a critical challenge. The latter was at least partially addressed by the project’s and its implementing partner’s effectiveness mobilizing experienced business people as resource persons and mentors. The successful collaboration with JP Morgan Philippines linking peer and technical training program participants with skilled volunteers was an excellent example of this approach.

### Efficiency

**In a relatively short time, the Rebuilding Better team learned a lot about how to support enterprises during a pandemic and organized an impressive number of activities, making largely efficient use of its resources.** The project team showed versatility in face of the public health imperative to go virtual by trying a variety of technology applications to meet different entrepreneur needs and abilities. The team also established and implemented comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems and engaged in regular stock-taking exercises leading to course corrections when needed. Although the wide breath of the project's experimentation was an efficient way to meet its key performance indicators and to identify what worked and what did not, the relatively short project duration did not leave sufficient time and space to significantly deepen and replicate successful approaches.

### Impact and sustainability

**By building their confidence and helping participants to adapt their business practices, Rebuilding Better helped many participating women-owned small enterprises to be more resilient during the pandemic.** The small core of active participants who participated relatively more intensely in project programs likely benefited to a greater extent than the many that only attended one or two sessions. At the level of the enabling environment for women's entrepreneurship, the project likely had limited but positive influence. Rebuilding Better included strategies to influence and build the capacity of entrepreneur networks and business support service providers in the three countries to better serve women entrepreneurs. While Rebuilding Better did not have a strong policy agenda, it collaborated with influential women entrepreneurs with a voice in business affairs who are likely to continue their efforts to promote a more level playing field for women's entrepreneurship.

### 4.2 Recommendations

**Recommendation one.** Future programs should replicate the use of rapid assessment methods to identify enterprise needs and customize support programs. Ways to capitalize on or improve on Rebuilding Better's approach include:

- Engage consultants with country level experience in national entrepreneurship ecosystem
- Keep beneficiary focus groups and in addition conduct service provider focus groups
- Collect more information on "who is doing what" to avoid duplicating what others are doing

**Recommendation two.** The ILO should build on Rebuilding Better experiences and continue efforts to support formal, small businesses and to strengthen women entrepreneur networks in the sub-region and elsewhere.

**Recommendation three.** The ILO should continue to advocate for and help the Employers' Confederations in the three countries to strengthen their SME membership and programs and make them more accessible to women entrepreneurs.

- Facilitate introductions between the Employers' Confederations and Rebuilding Better's women entrepreneur network partners
- When relevant, include women entrepreneur network partners in future employer consultations in the context of ongoing ILO Decent Work Country Programs

**Recommendation four.** Future projects should identify ways to strengthen its reach and value proposition to women-owned and led small enterprises.

- Distinguish project offerings more clearly from what other projects or support initiatives are doing or have done in the same space
- Target geographic areas which are less well-served by other projects or support initiatives

- Continue to capitalize on partnerships with strong women entrepreneur networks
- Continue to use of the peer and technical support methodology
- Replicate collaboration with JP Morgan volunteers and look for similar opportunities to promote mentorship programs
- Develop entrepreneur focused communication strategies in collaboration with implementing partners
- Develop strategies to encourage participant “loyalty” such as newsletters, offering membership with membership benefits, etc.

**Recommendation five.** In the future, innovative projects like Rebuilding Better should be longer in duration or multi-phased to allow sufficient time for experimentation as well as for the project team to identify, deepen and replicate successful approaches

## Annex 1 Evaluation Matrix

Evaluation Question	Data Sources	Indicative sub-questions
<b>Relevance and validity of design</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent did the project's design and approach respond to participating entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship support service providers' needs in the context of evolving COVID-19-related challenges?</li> <li>What were the strengths and weaknesses of the project design?</li> <li>Was the project theory of change sound?</li> <li>In what ways, if at all, did the project design integrate ILO cross cutting policy drivers: gender equality and non-discrimination, environmental sustainability, promotion of international labour standards, social dialogue, and tripartism?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Document review</li> <li>Tracer survey</li> <li>Key informant interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How did the pandemic affect MSMEs? How did it affect MSME business support service providers? In addition to pre-existing needs, what new, critical needs emerged?</li> <li>In what ways did Rebuilding Better interventions help MSMEs and business support service providers to face business challenges/critical needs emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>In what ways did Rebuilding Better fill gaps in or complement existing services for MSMEs during the pandemic?</li> <li>What, if anything, more might the project have done or offered in the way of support to be more effective addressing critical needs?</li> <li>Was the project targeting strategy useful (selection of countries, partners, sectors, types of entrepreneurs)?</li> <li>Were the causal relationships described in the theory of change plausible? Did the project's implementation strategy align with its theory of change? Did changes occur in the ways the project predicted they would?</li> </ul>
<b>Coherence</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent and in what ways has the program leveraged resources and knowledge from other interventions and through partnerships to achieve anticipated outputs and outcomes?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Document review</li> <li>Key informant interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What examples, if any, are there of Rebuilding Better capitalizing on good practices, lessons learned or existing ILO or other organizations resources/methodologies to expand access by MSMEs to needed support during the pandemic?</li> <li>In what ways did Rebuilding Better's partnership strategy either enhance or constrain its ability to meet its objectives?</li> <li>What, if any were project lessons learned or good practices related to its partnership strategy?</li> </ul>
<b>Project effectiveness</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent did the project achieve anticipated outputs and outcome targets?</li> <li>To what extent and in what ways was the project effective improving participating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Document review</li> <li>Tracer survey</li> <li>Key informant interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In which areas did the project meet, exceed, or fall short of its performance indicators?</li> <li>What were the main internal or external factors that either helped or hindered project performance?</li> </ul>

<p>entrepreneurs' access to a) training programs and entrepreneur networks b) financing and government support programmes and c) information about market opportunities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent and in what ways did the project leverage information communication technologies effectively to meet its objectives?</li> <li>· In what ways did internal and external factors affect the ILO's ability to meet project targets?</li> <li>· To what extent were project management and coordination mechanisms effective overall and, more specifically, adequate to handle COVID-19-related challenges?</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· In what ways were project training programmes effective in helping participants in improving their businesses or business support services? How might the training programmes or the project's outreach to potential participants have been more effective?</li> <li>· In what ways was the project effective connecting participating entrepreneurs to available assistance programmes, sources of finance or government subsidies, sources of information on business opportunities? In what ways, if at all, did the project fall short of its objectives in these areas? How might it have been more effective?</li> <li>· Was the project more effective in some countries than others? In reaching some kinds of beneficiaries than others? How? Why?</li> <li>· In what ways did Rebuilding Better leverage ICTs to meet its objectives? What were the strengths and weaknesses of its approaches? How might it have been more effective?</li> </ul>
<b>Efficiency of resource use</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent and in what ways were available technical and financial resources (staff, time, expertise, budget, etc) effectively allocated to fulfil the project work plan and to achieve project objectives and results?</li> <li>· How effectively did the project leverage partner resources to achieve project results?</li> <li>· How effectively did the project management monitor project performance and results? In what ways, if any, did the project use assessment and monitoring data to aid decision making?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Document review</li> <li>· Key informant interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· What was the breakdown of project expenditures?</li> <li>· What role did project personnel play in project implementation? Were project personnel's qualifications appropriate for their job requirements?</li> <li>· What other paid and in-kind expertise did the project and project partners leverage to achieve project objectives? Was the expertise leveraged adequate to contribute effectively towards project objectives?</li> <li>· Was the project M&amp;E system sound? Was it well-implemented? How did the project use assessments and M&amp;E data during the life of the project?</li> </ul>
<b>Impact and sustainability</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· In what ways is the project likely to contribute toward reducing structural inequities and challenges faced by women-owned businesses in the target sectors? What, if any, gaps remain in gender inclusive business services that</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Document review</li> <li>· Key informant interviews</li> <li>·</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Based on research, in what critical ways are women owned businesses disadvantaged?</li> <li>· In what ways did the project contribute to a more level playing field for female entrepreneurs? What critical challenges facing female entrepreneurs remain?</li> </ul>

<p>might be addressed by future projects?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To what extent did the project contribute towards improving its public and private sector partners' capacity and commitment to support small businesses, especially women-owned and managed enterprises, during different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> <li>· How likely is it that the project results and activities will be sustained beyond the project?</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· In what ways, if any, did the project affect a) individual entrepreneurs b) women's entrepreneur networks and/or c) business support service providers' priorities, practices in the target countries? What factors affect the sustainability of these changes?</li> <li>· How likely is it that project-supported services will continue beyond the period of project support?</li> </ul>
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## Annex 2 List of documents consulted

### Documents provided by the project

- Project document
- Rebuilding Better Grant Agreement November 2021
- Rebuilding Better progress report 29 June 2021
- Grant extension agreement 27 April 2022
- Rebuilding Better Theory of Change
- Rebuilding Better Monitoring and Evaluation Framework and tools and implementation manual 20 September 2021
- Draft Rebuilding Better tracer survey

### Rebuilding Better Publications

- Assessment of women entrepreneurs' needs and available support services during COVID-19 in Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand, December 2021
- Gender-inclusive service provision: A quick guide for financial and business development services providers, February 2022
- Facilitating peer and technical support programmes to women entrepreneurs: A manual October 2021

### ILO website

- Women entrepreneurs reboot their businesses 15 July 2022  
[https://www.ilo.org/manila/public/fs/WCMS\\_851070/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/manila/public/fs/WCMS_851070/lang--en/index.htm)
- Educating others and ourselves: Peer support for COVID-19 recovery and resilience 28 June 2022 [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/articles/WCMS\\_849680/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/articles/WCMS_849680/lang--en/index.htm)
- "Financing Business Growth for Women Entrepreneurs" Workshop series  
[https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS\\_839361/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS_839361/lang--en/index.htm)
- Unlocking potential of women entrepreneurs: Provision of gender inclusive financial and business development services [https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS\\_838247/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS_838247/lang--en/index.htm)
- 'Going digital with women entrepreneurs in South-East Asia' with the ILO, ITCILO and Google Primer [https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS\\_826543/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS_826543/lang--en/index.htm)
- New ITCILO-Google Primer partnership to support women entrepreneurs in South-East Asia through digital training May 2021 [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_795225/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_795225/lang--en/index.htm)
- Rebuilding Better: Building your Business with Canva for Women Entrepreneurs  
[https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS\\_815946/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS_815946/lang--en/index.htm)
- Launch event: Rebuilding Better: Fostering Business Resilience Post-COVID-19  
[https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS\\_791252/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/events/WCMS_791252/lang--en/index.htm)

### Other Research

Geotina-Garcia, Ma. Aurora D. Leave No One Behind: Rebuilding the ASEAN Economy with a Gender Lens. 29 July 2020

Nixon, Nicola, Pillai, Sunil and Augustine, Marly. Barely Staying Afloat: The Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in Southeast Asia. Asia Foundation. August 2021.

Tuan Anh Vu and Shubert Ciencia. A Better Normal for Business, How ASEAN micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) can recover and thrive in and beyond COVID-19. Oxfam. July 2020.

## Annex 3 Persons Interviewed

### Rebuilding Better Team

1. Ms. Sara Anderson, Chief Technical Officer
2. Ms. Jittima Srisuknam, Programme Officer, CO-Bangkok Thailand
3. Ms. Linartes Vilorio, National Project Coordinator Philippines
4. Ms. Amira K Ikmal, National Project Coordinator Malaysia
5. Ms. Karnmanee Thanesvorakul, National Project Coordinator Thailand

### Other ILO Personnel

6. Mr. Dong Eung Lee, Senior Specialist on Employers' Activities
7. Ms. Joni Simpson, Senior Specialist on Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination
8. Mr. Graeme Buckley, Director of the ILO DWT for East and South-East Asia and the Pacific and Country Director for Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand
9. Mr. Charles Bodwell, Senior Specialist on Enterprises Development
10. Ms. Concepcion Sardaña, Senior Programme Officer, ILO Philippines
11. Ms. Rakawin Leechanavanichpan, former Senior Programme Officer for Malaysia
12. Ms. Napaporn Udomchaiporn, Senior Programme Officer for Malaysia
13. Ms. Khalid Hassan, Country Director, ILO Philippines
14. Ms. Virginia Rose Losada, Global WED Coordinator, ILO

### Donor

15. Ms. Cecilia Mok, Senior Associate, Global Philanthropy Asia Pacific, J.P. Morgan
16. Ms. Tel Lejano, Good Works, J.P. Morgan Philippines

### Partners

#### *Malaysia*

17. Ms. Nuraizah Shamsul, President, Women Entrepreneur Network Association (WENA), Malaysia
18. Ms. Anusuya Krishnan, National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia (NAWEM)
19. Ms. Aida Syukrena, Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives

#### *Thailand*

20. Ms. Jenn Weidman, Space Bangkok Thailand
21. Mr. Kornchai Kaewmahawong, Employers Confederation of Thailand (ECOT)
22. Mr. Ugrish Kanchanaketu, Employers Confederation of Thailand (ECOT)
23. Ms. Sunaree Kongsathit, Ministry of Labour
24. Ms. Chalao Sutthiruk, Ministry of Labour
25. Mr. Chayaporn Sittito, Ministry of Labour
26. Ms. Naphaphen Vejajiva (Deon), International Relations Chair, BPW Thailand

#### *The Philippines*

27. Ms. Ana Bobadilla, Partnerships Manager, Philippine Women's Economic Network (PhilWEN) and member Asian Women's Economic Network
28. Ms. Emma C. Asusano, Assistant Director, Department of Trade and Industry Philippines

29. Ms. Boots Geotina-Garcia, PhilWEN Chair and PBCWE Co-Chair
30. Ms. Imelda Canuel, GREAT Women Philippines
31. Ms. Jeannie Javelosa, GREAT Women Philippines
32. Ms Abigail Roxas-Gorospe, Deputy Director General, ECOP
33. Ms Mylene Abiva, WomenBizPH

## Annex 4 Performance indicator tracking matrix

Performance Indicator	Baseline	Target	Actual	Comments
<b>Output Indicators</b>				
<b>Number of sessions provided</b>				
Total number of sessions held	0	27		
# of in-person peer sessions held	0	0		
# of virtual peer sessions held	0	45		
# of in-person public sessions held	0	0		
<b>Total</b>	0	72		
<b>Number of small businesses assisted</b>				
# of small businesses assisted through peer sessions	0	150		
# of small businesses assisted through public sessions	0	750		
# of small businesses assisted in total	0	900		
% of participating small businesses which were women-owned	0	100%		
<b>Number of individuals assisted</b>				
# of women assisted in peer sessions	0	150		
# of women assisted in public sessions	0	390		
# of men assisted in public sessions	0	360		
Total # of individuals assisted	0	900		
<b>Number of views and downloads of Rebuilding Better self-guided resources</b>				
# of individuals viewing Rebuilding Better posted content	0	2000		
# of downloads of Rebuilding Better Content	0	1000		
<b>Institutional strengthening and local engagement</b>				
Total value of in-kind contributions made by partners in total		USD 150,000		
# of community-based organizations engaged in total		6		
# of private partners engaged in total		15		
# of public agencies or departments engaged in total		3		
# of new tools developed in total		3		
# of coaches or staff of partners trained in total		45		
# of online self-guided resources made available		12		
# of project publications disseminated		1		
# final project reports disseminated		1		
<b>Outcome indicators: Changes to business practice, access to finance, and firm outcomes</b>				
<b>Investment and financing</b>				
Average amount of additional outside investment or stimulus/development funds received in last 12 months	0	Not available		
percentage of businesses attracting \$300 additional investment or stimulus/development funds in last 12 months	0	70%		
<b>Changes in business practice</b>				

% of businesses increasing or making improvements in digitalization <sup>23</sup>		70%		
% of businesses that have an increase in business confidence and agency		70%		
% of businesses that have changed or improved business practice <sup>24</sup>		70%		
<b>Jobs</b>				
Average % jobs retained per business		70%		
# of businesses retaining 70% of quality jobs		Not available		
<b>Revenue</b>				
Average change in revenue per business		Not available		
% of businesses increasing revenue by more than 15%		70%		

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<sup>23</sup> According to the project indicator definition, examples of improvements include the addition of a website, new use of social media to connect with consumers, adoption of software to handle business operations, expansion of business selling through digital platforms, adoption of improved technology to manage business operations OR self-reported increase in use of digital tools

<sup>24</sup> According to the project indicator definition, improvements in business practice may include changes/improvements in marketing strategies, bookkeeping, logistics management, or in production processes or a new investment in the business.

**Facilitating peer and technical support programmes to women entrepreneurs: A manual:** The manual provides guidance on how to set up and deliver programmes for women entrepreneurs to facilitate peer learning, foster networking within the business community and enhance women entrepreneurs' access to support services. It introduces one model that is currently being tested in South-East Asia, and that can be further innovated and modified over time.

**Gender-inclusive service provision: A quick guide for financial and business development services providers:** The manual explains the benefits of targeting women entrepreneurs and women-led businesses and how to tailor products and service delivery to them

