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SUPPORTING SMES FOR INTERNATIONAL MARKETING AND EXPORTING THROUGH CLUSTERING: THE CASE OF ORNAMENTAL PLANTS AND NURSERY FIRMS IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

With the rising globalization in recent years, the participation of firms in the internationalization process has been increasing and companies are giving more emphasis on internationalization in their strategies in terms of entering new markets through various ways, especially through international trade. As a result, more and more firms have started to operate outside their domestic markets and export their goods to foreign customers. (Conconi et al., 2016: p.16). SMEs have the advantage of being more flexible and responsive to the needs of the customer compared to big firms. Clustering may offer new possibilities for the firms through collaboration. Significantly, these networking and support systems enable SMEs to compete better in the global marketplace. Building on local strengths, SME policies need to address the small-firm clusters to meet the challenges posed by globalizing economies (OECD, 2000: 1). Parallel to global developments and policies Turkey recently introduced UR-GE (Supporting the Development of International Competitiveness) program which offers support aiming to help the firms' internationalization through clustering.

Key words: Internationalization, exports, clustering, international marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the scope of internationalization, the opening of the firm to foreign markets, establishing business relations and performing economic activities in these markets are included. Firms make different choices when entering overseas markets. Various studies suggest several steps for internationalization of the firms. The Internationalization process is quite critical for the Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) which composes the majority of the firms globally and have vital place in the economies though supporting the big firms with production capacities, employment, entrepreneurship etc. Governments support the internationalization processes and export activities of the SMEs individually and/or as groups through collaboration. Depending on Michael Porter's systematically definition of clustering governments and institutions adopted policies and regulations to increase the competitiveness of their firms through clustering.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.The Internationalization Process

Even though many scholars defined the internationalization process differently (Johanson and Finn Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975; Bilkey and Tesar, 1977; Çavusgil, 1980; Reid, 1981: Pan and Tse, 2000) the steps for internationalization starts basically from the stage where stage firms do not have regular export activities The basic assumptions of Johanson and Finn Wiedersheim-Paul (1975) suggest that the firm first developed in domestic markets and that internationalization was the result of a series of increasing decisions. Furthermore, it is assumed that the most important obstacles to internationalization are the lack of information and resources, and because of the lack of knowledge about foreign countries and the tendency to avoid uncertainty.

2.2. SMEs and Export Supports

When examined it can be seen that there is no commonly accepted definition of "micro" enterprises, "small" enterprises and "medium" enterprises. Various definitions used by governments and organizations generally defines limits depending on the number of employees and/or annual turnover. However, majority of countries use the following definitions (WTO, 2016: 15): Micro enterprises are firms employing 1-10 employees, Small enterprises are firms with a number of employees between 10 and 50, Medium-sized enterprises are firms with a number of employees between 50 and 250.

As a result of difficulties experienced by different institutions for the SME definition in Turkey, different definitions have been harmonized with the EU definition. The Regulation on the definition, qualifications and classification of SMEs were adopted by the Council of Ministers Decision. According to this, SMEs are defined as economic units or enterprises that employ less than 250 employees annually and whose annual net sales revenue or financial balance does not exceed TL 125 million. Pursuant to this amendment a) Micro enterprise: enterprises employing less than 10 employees annually and whose annual net sales revenue or financial balance does not exceed 3 million Turkish Liras, b) Small enterprise: employing less than 50 employees annually and net annual sales c) Medium-sized entity: those employing less than 250 employees annually and whose annual net sales revenue or any one of their financial balance does not exceed 125 million Turkish Liras.

In 2014, Turkish Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) accounted for 99.8% of the total number of enterprises, 73.5% of employment, 54.1% of wages and salaries, 62% of turnover and gross investment in tangible goods. While the share of micro-scale enterprises with 1-9 employees was 17.7% in exports, the share of small-scale enterprises with 10-49 employees was 20.3% and the share of medium-sized enterprises with 50-249 employees was 17.1%. The share of large-scale enterprises with 250+ employees was 44.8%. According to the main activity of the initiative, 59.3% of SMEs' exports were made by enterprises operating in trade sector and 36% by industry enterprises (TURKSTAT, 2016: 1).

It is an important issue that exports have a great importance for the country's economy and firms and play an important role in the development and development of the country's economy. Export is seen as an activity that is given importance in the light of the developments in world trade and supported by different trade development programs in the world, big and small economies and even SMEs. Exports help sales and profits increase, through competitive and unique products, decrease the dependence on the domestic market and taking shares from the world markets, benefit from tax and other incentive advantages in foreign markets, keep market fluctuations in balance, compete with the products of strong competitors in foreign markets, become stronger in domestic markets (Isik and Delice, 2007: 77, Ahmed et al., 2006: 664, Pope, 2002: 21, Wolff and Pett, 2000: 43-44, Bijmolt and Zwart, 1994: 80, Cavusgil, 1981: 119).

In terms of export, SMEs may have more appetite due to several factors however they may not be able to meet the export marketing activities due to limited resources; financial activities being very burdensome, low quality, inaccuracy in external pricing, not knowing the competitors adequately, wrong marketing strategies, lack of information and personnel about export, capacity shortage for export-oriented production, psychological barriers to foreign markets that are considered difficult and risky, and products not being suitable for export (Akgemici, 2001: 30-31, Gripsrud, 1990: 480).

Supporting exports in developing and developing countries is of particular importance. It is seen that the countries that want to get a share from the world trade continue to intensively implement their incentives for their economies to gain global competitiveness or to maintain their current power (Atayeter and Erol, 2011: 2).

Due to the implementation of the liberalization process since the 1980s, the Turkish economy has experienced a period of substantial growth. As one of the most crucial milestones in this process, Turkey became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. Following this move, it finalized an agreement with the European Union, enabling it to join the Customs Union on January 1, 1996. As the consequence of these developments, foreign trade in respect to both exports and imports has grown rapidly (http://www.invest.gov.tr/en-US/investmentguide/investorsguide/Pages/InternationalTrade.aspx).

Table 1: Yearly Exports and Imports of Turkey (Thousand USD)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Exports	151 802 637	157 610 158	143 838 871	142 529 584	156 992 940	167 920 613
Imports	251 661 250	242 177 117	207 234 359	198 618 235	233 799 651	223 047 094

Source: http://www.turkstat.gov.tr (03.09.2019)

After 1980 the adoption of outward-oriented growth model in Turkey in the period, in order to encourage exports, the export of cash payments made or exporters foreseeing covered by the state spending on public institutions applied different systems, but after the Uruguay Round Export performance subsidies in the form of payments were abolished at the end of 1994 (Atayeter and Erol, 2011: 22). In Turkey as export support system there are three maturity levels, i.e. preparation for export, marketing and branding (Ministry of Economy, 2018: 9-10).

A - Export Preparation Phase: At this stage, there are mechanisms to enable SMEs who are new to export or who do not have regular exports to become familiar with exports in order to make export a part of their commercial operations. The state aid practices provided during the preparation phase are UR-GE (Supporting the Development of International Competitiveness) Support and Supporting Market Entry

B - Marketing Phase: In this phase, the firms who have learned to export and made their first steps in foreign markets will be provided with support to find new markets or to become permanent in existing markets in order to make export a part of their ongoing commercial operations. Supports provided during the marketing phase are Market Research, Report and Overseas Firm Acquisition, Sectoral Trade and Sectoral Procurement Delegations, Membership Support to E-Commerce Sites, International Unit, Trademark Registration and Promotion Support, Turkey Foreign Trade Centers Support, Overseas Fair Support.

C - Branding Stage: At this stage, there are support mechanisms for firms that reach the competence of providing branded products in accordance with the dynamics of the market with their original designs that constitute distribution channels in foreign markets and consists of Trademark-Turquality Support, Design Support.

In addition to the aforementioned supports, Turkish Eximbank Supports (Export Credits, Credit Insurance, International Loans), State Supports for Investment and Activities in Free Zones, State Supports for Investments and Other Support Applications (Internal Processing Regime (IR), External Processing Regime (HIR) (Tax, Duty and Fee Exemption) (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Economy, 2018: 81-115).

2.3. Export Support Through Clustering

Michael Porter is the first one who systematically presented the concept of clustering, which has an important place in gaining competitive advantage. In his book “The Competitive Advantages of Nations” published in 1990, Porter used the concept of cluster to indicate interrelated industries in various ways, stating that a new paradigm was required for countries to achieve competitive advantage (Porter, 1990: 176). According to Porter (1990), the successful industries of a country are often linked by vertical (buyer / supplier) or horizontal (partner customers, technology, channels, etc.) relationships. Groups that can be called clusters are also often gathered in a specific geographical region. According to the definition of Porter (1998), the cluster is a group of firms and related organizations that are geographically close to each other, which are connected to each other in a particular area / sector and which are complementary to their common characteristics. Clusters also often include firms in the sub-sector and many clusters include trade associations and other private sector organizations that support cluster members.

Clusters emerge and grow mainly in six steps (European Commission, 2002: 14-16): First, the birth of a cluster, the availability of raw materials, specific information generated in R & D organizations or traditional know-how, a specific (geographically concentrated). Secondly, after the establishment of a group of firms, more and more external economies are being created, which creates a cumulative process. The third step includes information organizations, private educational institutions and business associations / chambers, etc., which serve several firms in the growing cluster. Fourth, the development of external economies and the emergence of new local organizations increase the visibility, prestige and attractiveness of a cluster. This can lead to more firms and qualified employees. The fifth step is concerned, for example, with the creation of non-market relational assets that support the circulation of information, i.e. to help coordinate informal cooperation and economic activities. Finally, if a cluster can renew its success for years, it may become part of a new cluster or enter a downturn.

Clusters are an important factor affecting SMEs' innovation, productivity, growth and development, internationalization and increasing their exports. Firms that are successful in the domestic market and in a cluster gain the skills they need for international markets. While clusters act as guiding forces for internationalization, firms increase their competitiveness and know-how. In addition, firms within strong clusters are easier to internationalize (Brown and Bell, 2001: 10–26, Aničić et al., 2016: 520)

The European Union has increasingly emphasized the importance of the cluster in economic development, especially after the Lisbon Strategy established in 2000 and has concentrated its work. Through the development of clusters, many European regions have developed their comparative advantage in specialized products and services. The Lisbon strategy emphasized the task of promoting and supporting cluster formation, particularly in regional, industrial and innovation policies (Obadiç, 2013: 24-25).

EU is one of the most important steps in the accession process related to cluster in Turkey issued by the Undersecretariat of Foreign Trade in 2008 "White Paper" is. The White Paper, Turkey offers a logical framework document for the cluster policy. The White Paper is a technical document that will form the basis for the decision-making process for the national cluster policy to be undertaken by the institutions of the Turkish Government. It emphasizes the main issues and the benefits that the Turkish economy can provide from the cluster (DTM, 2008: 14-15).

In the form of direct monetary payments in 1994. In this context, "based on the export performance subsidies" structure supports applied after the lifting force supports for the development of exports in Turkey in 2010. "2010/8 numbered Communiqué on Supporting the Development of International Competitiveness", i.e. the more widely known form of "UR-GE Support" and has been created in accordance with the "White Book. While the previous supports are given directly to the firms, it is aimed to make a pre-cluster preparation with UR-GE support. UR-GE support of the important feature of the support that the Trade Ministry urges the firms for the collaboration with associations, institutions and chambers should be made from traffic. In order to reach a well-functioning clustering, firms, under the leadership of cooperation organizations will perform common needs analysis, joint learning (training and counselling), joint marketing (promotion, brand, trade delegation, matching) and supporting export-oriented actions and activities.

The project is carried out by the UR-GE Project Cooperation Organizations for the member firms; The purpose, scope, duration and budget of the needs analysis, employment, training, consultancy, overseas marketing and procurement mission activities, refers to the project. The duration of UR-GE Projects is 3 years. The duration of the project may be extended by the Project Evaluation Commission up to 2 years depending on the performance of the project. 10 firms (5 for developing regions) are needed to participate.

2.4. Nursery and Ornamental Plants

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the ornamental plants sector began to emerge as an economic sub-sector within the crop production sector. 90% of the international floriculture trade currently takes place worldwide with developing countries in Africa and South America under duty-free, free trade agreements or preferential trade programs. Ornamental plants sector has shifted to countries such as Colombia and Kenya with the low production costs, availability of ecological conditions, having large land and investments of international firms, and these countries have become important exporting countries. There are also important producer countries in Europe and Asia. However, especially the high production costs in Europe (especially workers and energy) and the competitive structure of the sector provide a competitive advantage for African and Asian continents in the production of ornamental plants (Gülcür, 2015).

As of 2017, total global exports amounted to approximately $ 21 billion. As can be seen in the table, the Netherlands is the most important country in the sector with an export share of 48.5%. In addition to the Netherlands, Italy, the USA, Spain and Japan are important players in the sector. Turkey's total world exports by just 85 million 512 thousand dollars has a share of 0.4%. On the import side, Germany ranks first with 28% of the total imports. The Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom follow. Germany, Italy and France are less export oriented than the Netherlands. Belgium and Denmark, despite their small production capacity, are above their imports in nursery and ornamental plants (www.trademap.org).

Ornamental plant production in Turkey is especially concentrated in 6 provinces: İzmir, Antalya, Yalova, Istanbul, Manisa and Sakarya. Especially İzmir and Sakarya have grown their ornamental plant production areas more than twice. Production is carried out on a total area of 48.5 thousand decares. Table 30 shows ornamental plant production areas by province.

The ornamental plants sector has been specialized in exports for the last 20 years. In exportation, Turkish Republics, Middle East countries, Balkan countries and countries such as Holland, England, Germany are important export markets. On the other hand, the increasing demand of municipalities for outdoor decorations has expanded the domestic market of the sector (TUSSIDE, 2017: 95-97).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1.Aim of the Research

The aim of the research is to determine the readiness for exports and increasing the foreign trade capacity of the firms within the scope of UR-GE Support. The research includes 22 firms which are members of Ödemiş Chamber of Commerce (Ödemiş is one of the leading counties of İzmir, TURKEY for agriculture) and applied for the UR-GE Support and none of them are dealing regularly with exports operating in ornamental plants and nursery sector. indicated in introduction, we have two major research questions.

3.2.The steps and the Method of Research

The research was carried out in 4 basic stages. In the diagnosis stage; Perceptions of the firms and supporting stakeholders were investigated. Within the scope of the second stage i.e. diagnosis stage, the researches and interviews were carried out for data collection and analysed and the diagnoses were determined. In the third stage i.e. proposal development stage; solution suggestions, strategy design and road map are made. In the last stage of verification; the recommendations were shared and discussed with the participating firms.

In the diagnosis stage questionnaire consisting open and closed-ended questions was used and one-to-one interviews were conducted. In the third stage target market import data, trend analysis, tariff barriers analysis and supporting fairs and tags were evaluated within the scope of target market trend analysis and target market suggestions were prepared. As a result of the analysis of the primary and secondary data and the evaluations made at the diagnosis stage, the competencies of each firm were determined separately. As a result of determining the development areas of each firm within the scope of the project, training and consultancy programs that can be implemented within the scope of the project have been determined in detail. In line with the clustering approach, a common vision, strategy and road map have been created. In the fourth stage analyses and the findings and was shared with firms and stakeholders and a verification workshop was conducted.

3.3.Findings

3.3.1. Demographics

It is found that the turnover of 22% of the firms is less than 1 million TL and this ratio is followed by 67% with 1 million TL - 8 million TL. The turnover of 6% of the firms is between 8 million TL and 40 million TL and the turnover of 6% is determined as more than 40 million TL.

3.3.2. Sales

35% of the firms make regional sales and 55% make national sales. Only 10% of the sales are realized as exports.

3.3.3. Human Resources

44% of the firms employ less than 10 employees and 39% of them have 10-50 employees. There are 50-250 employees in 17% of the firms, but there are no firms with more than 250 employees among the firms. 72% of the firms do not have any foreign trade staff. While 94% of the personnel working in the firms do not speak any foreign languages, the remaining 6% have foreign language knowledge of the firms make regional sales and 55% make national sales. Only 10% of the sales are realized as exports.

3.3.4. Marketing Function Competencies

Only 16% of the firms find themselves successful in this field. More than half of the firms declare themselves to be insufficient and very insufficient in this field. When the success levels of the firms involved in the project in terms of pricing their products and services are evaluated, only 21% of the firms see themselves as successful and competitive in this field, but 31% of them see them as less or less successful.

When the ways of reaching the customers are analysed, 27% of the firms reach the customers themselves and 36% of the firms reach their customers through individual relations and one-on-one customer visits.

When the ability of the firms to reach the customer is analysed in general, firms declare that 63% of the customers either come on their own or reach the firms through individual relations. This situation is due to the fact that most of the customers are located in and around İzmir. However, it should be noticed that 50% of the firms declare that they would be willing to explore any target market.

None of the firms sees their market research as sufficient and all firms underline the importance of market research. When the knowledge levels of the firms about their potential customers in the target markets are analysed, none of the firms has very good level of knowledge in this field, 26% of the firms have medium, 21% have little and 32% have very little information about marketing research.

When the information levels of the firms about their current and potential competitors in the target markets are examined in detail, it is understood that 42% of the firms have very insufficient, 47% have insufficient knowledge and only 11% have good knowledge in this field.

When the information levels of the firms about their current and potential competitors in the target markets are examined, it is understood that 89% of the firms have intermediate and low knowledge.

When the communication skills of the firms with their existing customers are analysed in detail, it is found that the ability of communication with the existing customers can be seen only in 5% of the firms is very good. However, 79% of these capabilities are good level. While 11% of the firms are moderately successful in this area, 5% of them are observed to be very successful.

When the communication skills of the firms with the existing customers are examined in a summary, it is understood that 84% of the firms can set up moderate or low level communication 16% of them are good or higher in this field.

When the capabilities of the firms involved in the project were examined in terms of the adequacy of the promotional materials, it was found that 32% of the firms were successful at this point. On the other hand, 26% of the firms were observed to be successful at medium level, 16% at low level and 26% at very low level.

When the capabilities of the firms in terms of the adequacy of promotional materials were examined, it was found that 68% of the firms were successful at the middle and below levels and 32% were successful at the higher and better levels. When evaluated within this scope, it is understood that there are intervention areas in the field of developing promotional materials in the studies of the target markets of the firms.

89% of the firms have web sites and 11% of them do not have web sites, however only 16% of the firms see their websites as satisfactorily sufficient, 26% as medium level and 37% as less satisfactory. 63% of the websites of the firms are only in Turkish and 37% of them serve in different foreign languages.

78% of the firms involved in the project had worked for corporate identity. The remaining 22% do not have any corporate identity studies. However, 89% of the firms with corporate identity studies are not satisfied with the corporate identity studies.

Only 42% of the firms keep record of the transactions with their customers, while the remaining 58% do not keep regularly. Also only 5% of the firms always make contract with their customers where 11% of firms often sign contracts and 32% sometimes sign contracts. 42% of firms never sign contract with their customersof the firms employ less than 10 employees and 39% of them have 10-50 employees. There are 50-250 employees in 17% of the firms, but there are no firms with more than 250 employees among the firms. 72% of the firms do not have any foreign trade staff. While 94% of the personnel working in the firms do not speak any foreign languages, the remaining 6% have foreign language knowledge of the firms make regional sales and 55% make national sales. Only 10% of the sales are realized as exports.

3.3.5. Strategy and Road Map for Firms

In order to achieve the goals of the cluster, 3 basic strategies have been determined. The first of these three basic strategies is to provide internationalization opportunities to support the competitiveness of firms. In this context, it is recommended that supportive activities such as providing opportunities for cooperation to facilitate firms' entry into new markets and national and international promotion of the cluster are recommended.

However, as the second main strategy, effective communication and coordination with national and international sector stakeholders has been determined and in this context, it is suggested that the cluster management should follow a path shaped on lobbying, promotion and communication strategies.

The third strategy, which provides the infrastructure to establish inter-firm cooperation, is recommended to carry out activities that will increase the low level of cooperation especially among the firms in the cluster.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most remarkable aspect of the results is the change of mentality of the firms. Due to their small size and weaknesses the firms realized the importance and the opportunities of collaboration and forming a cluster for international marketing and exports. In order to accomplish successful internationalization and cluster management all firms agreed that clustering should be adopted not as a goal, but as a model that will increase international competitiveness. The governance structure of the cluster should be established and relevant delegations should be realized. Working groups for training, consultancy and internationalization activities should be established within the scope of the project. The UR-GE Project should be designed as a driving force. . In this respect, complementary projects should be developed from national and international platforms to support the UR-GE Project. Supporting actors should be identified. The cooperation infrastructure with these actors should be realized quickly. The documentation system of the cluster should be established. Written documents should be prepared for the activities to be carried out for long term. The job descriptions of the experts involved in the technical and administrative management of the cluster should be determined. Continuous training of the cluster's technical and administrative experts on the cluster and other issues should be ensured. A common infrastructure for the cluster's marketing activities should be provided. The institutional identity of the cluster should be studied. Promotion and lobbying activities of the cluster should be carried out especially by using the power of Ödemiş Chamber of Commerce.

For the skill and competency development Strategy Design / Strategic Planning Training Program, Institutionalization Training Program, Clustering Networking, Trust and Collaboration Training Program, Marketing and Brand Communication Training Program, Marketing, Sales and Negotiation Techniques Training Program, Customer Relationship Management Training Program, National and International Marketing Experience Focus Group Workshops, Foreign Trade Training Program, Business Intelligence and Target Market Entry Strategies Training Program, Marketing and Sales Process Management Consultancy Program, Corporate Identity Revision Consultancy Programs are found as vital for the firms

For the Suggestions for Internationalization and Overseas Promotion Activities target market proposals and strategies are evaluated in 2 main groups i.e. 1-Take Action Target Markets, 2-Analyze Target Markets. The first group of markets are the countries that are relatively close, where trade relations have developed, where cultural ties have been established already, and most importantly, where trade relations have been established and / or developed in the sectoral sense, can be presented under this heading. Common characteristics of these markets have interactions with Turkey (cultural, commercial, etc.) consisting of adequate sectoral relations. The main characteristics of the for the second group of countries (2-Analyze Target Markets) under this market group are the markets that have the potential to purchase and also have the opportunity to cooperate, and that can be achieved in the short and medium term with the right product portfolio, brand positioning, price level and cooperation infrastructure. These markets are relatively different and have high level of technical requirements and regulations, have high purchasing potential and high product quality standards. For the markets in this group, the firms should organize Promotional Activities, Lobbying Activities, Track Project-Based Collaboration Opportunities. On the other hand, for these markets Strategic Target Market Training, Target Market Consultancy Program / Cluster Facilitation Activities should be carried out simultaneously.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The supports offered by the governments give the firms opportunities to start and/or develop their exports and international marketing activities. The fact that the UR-GE support starts with needs analysis helps companies understand their current situation and set new targets. Solving the common problems identified with the Needs Analysis with the joint learning and common marketing approach within the scope of the support enables the companies to benefit from the project at the highest level. The training and consultancy activities to be given within the scope of the support will help the institutionalization of companies, strengthening of the human resources management, innovative capabilities. With the realization of foreign marketing activities, it can be ensured that the producer gains vision and that production is made in accordance with the demands of the international market. Explaining the conditions and importance of international competition as well as the conditions that determine the competition among the companies within the scope of the support will help placing the culture of acting together for the companies.

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