

## INSIGHTS FROM GERMAN COMPANIES: DETERMINANTS FOR TRADE WITH SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

The following paper evaluates which external and internal variables explain what German Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) identified to be significant for successful exports to Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Explanatory factors specific to the region were derived from experts and compared with results from existing research. SSA has particular requirements for successful exports which differ from other regions. Regarding micro and macro environmental factors several indicators were named by the individuals participating in the underlying study. Concerning the macro factors all participants agree on the positive influence of the product origin 'Made in Germany'. Contributions to decision makers, which are illegal in Germany but offered by firms based in other countries, are the one determinant mentioned most often to influence export performance negatively. Also competition from other countries with cheaper products is identified to have a negative impact. Knowledge about the particular characteristics of the market enables managers as well as policy makers to improve trade relations. By focusing on German export performance in SSA this study fills a research gap since no scholar previously concentrated on this special aspect.

**KEY-WORDS:**Comparative advantages, export performance, Germany, internal factors, macro environmental factors, micro environmental factors, small and medium sized enterprises, Sub-Saharan Africa.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Export represents the most popular foreign market entry method (Lado et al., 2004), (Sousa et al., 2014; Zhao & Zou, 2002) since it offers companies a comparatively high level of flexibility with relatively small necessary investments, thus permitting a fast entry into new markets (Katsikeas et al., 2007; Leonidou, 1995; Sousa et al., 2014). Research into export modalities is commonly of high interest to three major groups: public policy makers, managers and researchers (Katsikeas et al., 2000; Sousa, 2004). Scholars explain the increasing interest in exports with its positive effect on a country's growth alongside the business opportunities it offers individual firms (Dean et al., 2000). Public policy makers welcome export activities since they foster the accumulation of foreign exchange reserves, support the development of national industries and the creation of new jobs and improve productivity (Czinkota, 1994). Cross-border economic relationships are seen by developed countries as a necessary instrument to maintain their standard of living (Baldauf et al., 2000). Export is promoted by the reduction of trade barriers and the formulation of multilateral trade agreements and customs unions such as GATT and NAFTA, by financial market deregulation and the convergence of consumer preferences (Baldauf et al., 2000; Chang and Xiao, 2015; Dean et al., 2000; Naisbit, 1984).

A detailed review of 33 articles, published between 2000 and May 2015 and dealing with export performance (EP), identified 65 internal and 35 external determinants. None of them focused on factors relevant for the successful export to markets in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This is surprising since the current and future potential of SSA offers great business opportunities. According to data from the World Bank (Catalog Sources World Development Indicators, 2015) the region's total GDP grew from 2000 to 2013 by 5.72 % per year on average. Furthermore, imports of goods and services rose from 2010 to 2012 by an average of 12.05 % per year, (Catalog Sources World Development Indicators, 2015), (United Nations Statistics Division, 2011), (United Nations Statistics Division, 2014). In 2012 countries in SSA imported a total of 496.50 billion US\$ of goods and services (United Nations

Statistics Division, 2014). The increasing demand for foreign products together with a relatively high level of uncertainty in the region makes SSA predestined for exports rather than alternative market entry methods such as foreign direct investment (Boly, 2014; Riddle, 2008; Sousa and Novello, 2012).

Regarding the exporter's home-country only three papers could be found focusing on Germany. This is astonishing since the country is one of the top three merchandise exporters with a share of 7.7 % in world trade in 2013 and a trade surplus of 264 billion US\$ (World Trade Union, 2014). Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are mainly responsible for Germany's success in exports (MoAE, 2015), a situation which is similar to that in most European countries (Bijmolt and Zwart, 1994). According to the EU definition SMEs include all firms with a maximum of 250 employees (Sousa et al., 2014; Katsikeas et al. 2007) argue that SMEs are not just smaller versions of large firms but that they operate differently because of their size. Therefore an insight into the success factors of German SMEs may be relevant for German policy makers and executives to identify the drivers of EP (Baldauf et al., 2000).

Between 2000 and 2013 exports from Germany to all of SSA grew on average by 8.8 % to 13.51 billion US\$ in 2013 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015). 89 % of German exporters with experience in Africa plan to expand their commitment, especially in West- and Central Africa (Foly, 2013). Also politicians like the German Chancellor Angela Merkel show an increasing interest in Africa, e.g. during conferences such as the EU-Africa summit, and expect a steady cross-sectoral rise in demand thanks to a growing middle class (Merkel, 2014). This attitude by public policy makers and managers alike indicates that further research into the factors which influence German EP in SSA is necessary. Scholars argue that further research is needed to investigate possible predictors of EP (Baldauf et al., 2000; Fevolden et al., 2015; Navarro-García et al., 2015). Especially a focus on the EP of SMEs is of importance since export offers such firms a great degree of flexibility with limited resource commitment (Sousa et al., 2014). The significant contribution of SMEs to national economic development underlines their relevance for policy makers (Sousa and Novello, 2012). There is also the need to investigate the specifics of EP in further regions or countries (Navarro-García et al., 2015; Rambocasa et al., 2015). Concerning Germany, Wagner (United Nations Statistics Division, 2014) requests that detailed company characteristics should be worked out. (Sousa et al., 2008) and Sung (2015) identified a strong demand for more research on developing countries (DC), such as the ones in SSA, since their share in world trade is increasing and since they offer significant opportunities in the present and future global economic order. In summary, the quoted results indicate the need for additional research in the field of EP with a view to individual regions and explanatory variables. To provide evidence if SSA requires different or additional internal, micro- and macro environmental variables, this study concentrates on the relevant factors of German SMEs targeting this region. For this aim this study is organized as follows: First a literature review is carried out, followed by the methodology. The paper continues with the findings and analysis of the semi-structured interview. Finally conclusions are drawn and directions for further research proposed.

## **2. LITERATURE BACKGROUND**

Research about EP goes back to the year 1964, to Tookey's (1964) work about factors associated with success in exporting. In a wider context it addresses the outcome of export activities, mostly at the firm or export venture level (Kahiya and Dean, 2014). Nowadays EP is the most studied field in export marketing (Leonidou et al., 2010). Multiple aspects arise from the fact that the EP dialogue is spread over a huge pan-discipline research landscape which includes International Businesses, International Entrepreneurship, International Marketing, Small Business Management and International Trade (Kahiya and Dean, 2014).

### **2.1 Measurement of EP**

Regarding the measurement of EP there is no single universal view (Sousa et al., 2014). In fact, respective approaches are fragmented and uncoordinated (Kahiya, and Dean 2014; Katsikeas et al., 2000). An almost philosophical approach points out that for most export start-ups the pure survival is already some measurement of success (Kahiya and Dean, 2014). Indicators can reflect objective and subjective facts. Objective measures deal with the absolute performance whereas subjective ones are concerned with a firm's expectations or its perceived performance compared to competitors (Akyol and Akehurst, 2003). Scholars identified 42 (Rambocasa et al., 2015) or even 50 (Singh and Mahmood, 2014) indicators for EP. Since no individual indicator alone adequately captures

the phenomenon of EP (Kahiya and Dean, 2014; Lages and Lages, 2004; Zou and Stan, 1998) there is a general agreement in favour of a multi-dimensional approach. Many researchers such as (Baldauf et al., 2000; Papadopoulos and Martín-Martín, 2010) give preference to a multiple approach.

## 2.2 Countries of EP studies

The following graph illustrates the countries researched in 58 studies with the firm or export venture as unit of analysis, covering a period from 1998 to May 2015:

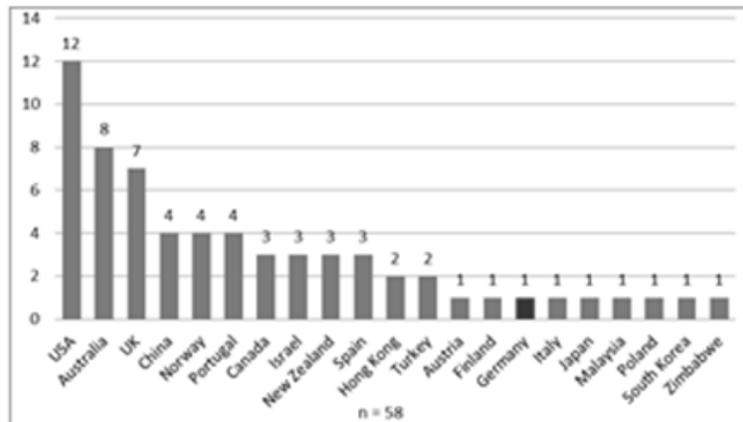


Figure 1. Countries of studies targeted in this and Sousa et al.'s (Sousa et al., 2008) review

Obviously most studies concentrate on the US as home country, followed by Australia and the UK. Only one paper dealt with Germany.

## 2.3 Determinants of EP

Two major theoretical approaches to classify determinants of EP stand out. The resource based view, emphasising the firms' individual competences as their unique bundle of assets, is used in various investigations (Conner and Prahalad, 1996; Nalcaci and Yagci, 2014; Stoian et al., 2011). Accordingly, the individual success of a company is the result of its acquiring and exploiting its own unique resources. Research aims at identifying how higher performance can be achieved in comparison to other firms (Barney, 2002; Dhanaraj and Beamish, 2003; Singh and Mahmood, 2014). Thus the individual EP of a business is determined by characteristics such as competence, experience and size (Zou and Stan, 1998). On the other hand the contingency paradigm proposes that environmental factors affect the company's strategies and EP. Thereby EP is the result of the specific company context (Sousa et al., 2008). Two premises are relevant: first, organisations rely on their environmental resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978); secondly, they can shape this reliance by evolving and sustaining appropriate strategies (Hofer and Schendel, 1978). Consequently, export is considered an organisation's strategic response to the interaction of external with internal factors (Boly, 2014; Baldauf et al., 2000; Sousa et al., 2008; Yeoh and Jeong 1995). Recently most publications show a general agreement that a multi-dimensional approach including a range of determinants like managerial, organisational and environmental aspects is most appropriate (Baldauf et al., 2000; Katsikeas et al., 2000; Rambocasa et al., 2015). This is confirmed by (Morgan et al., 2004) who synthesised the different approaches into a robust theoretical model. Accordingly, variables are categorised as internal and micro environmental on the one hand and macro environmental on the other. This classification has been applied by various scholars such as Sousa et al. (Sousa et al., 2008).

## 2.4 Internal and micro environmental factors

33 papers published between 2000 and May 2015 were analysed regarding internal and micro environmental determinants used in EP research. 65 variables were identified. The evaluation indicates that international experience measured in years (21.21 % of reviewed papers), firm size measured by number of employees (18.18 %), the adaption of the price strategy to market conditions (15.15 %) and the number of foreign markets served by a firm (12.12 %) are mostly applied to explain a business's EP.

### **2.5 Macro environmental factors**

Most scholars extend their research scope by using qualitative and quantitative determinants. 33 papers published between 2000 and May 2015 were analysed regarding macro environmental determinants. 21 studies covered external variables, identifying 35 external factors. Although an increasing level of competition in the foreign market is seen by various researchers to influence EP there is no consensus if it is positive (9.09 % of reviewed papers) or negative (6.06 %). Scholars are equally inconsistent regarding the influence of distance. Two papers (6.06 %) show that an increasing distance has a positive impact, whereas one paper presents a negative result. Although one paper states that the foreign exchange rate has a positive influence, three papers (9.09 %) found no significant effect. Customs and tariffs (9.09 %) and regulations (15.15 %) were frequently named to impact EP negatively while one study claims that they are irrelevant.

### **2.6 Measurement**

According to (Katsikeas et al., 2000) the application of subjective measurements is justified by a high correlation with objective measurements. For determinants where qualitative data collection is easy, scholars seem to agree on objective measurements. For example the internal variable firm size is commonly measured by the number of employees [e.g. 38, 39, 59, 75] and the factor international experience by the number of years a firm has been exporting [e.g. 14, 30, 62]. Regarding the macro environment, quantitative data from existing databases is frequently used for variables such as GDP [e.g. 24, 54, 63] and foreign exchange rate [e.g. 24, 71]. However, primary data derived from surveys is commonly employed for the measurement of internal, micro- and macro environmental factors (Katsikeas, Leonidas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000). For many determinants firms either do not want to give quantitative data or a quantitative measurement is not possible (Leonidou et al., 2002). Therefore quantitative measurements based on subjective assessment are the solution. By means of a Likert scale respondent's can determine the influence which each variable has on their firm's EP (Wilson, 2013). There is a tendency away from the simple three-point scale to five-points or more recently seven-points.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Philosophy**

This paper applies interpretivism. This paradigm was developed to meet scholars' social interests (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). It represents the epistemological position that advocates the need to understand differences between humans in their role as social actor (Saunders, 2012). Accordingly, researchers argue that reality is too complex to be reduced to law-like generalisations (Saunders, 2012). Data is primarily collected with qualitative approaches and small sample sizes. Semi-structured interviews and a limited sample size, both characteristic of interpretivism, are applied in this study to support the underlying pragmatism (Collis and Hussey, 2014) following the assumption that social reality is subjective, based on people's minds and therefore multiple. A similar approach in the field of EP studies has been followed by Freeman and Styles (2014) in their mixed approach and by (Nalcaci and Yagci, 2014) as well as Lacka and Stefko (2014), who both conducted interviews only.

### **3.2 Research Approach**

Collis and Hussey (2014) describe the inductive approach as the reverse of the deductive one, i.e. building up theory from observations of empirical reality. This study follows this approach, collecting data by means of a semi-structured interview to explore a phenomenon and to gain new insights, as previously done by (Freeman and Styles 2014; Lacka and Stefko 2014; and Nalcaci and Yagci 2014)., in their research about EP.

### 3.3 Research Purpose

To answer the research question a semi-structured interview was carried out resulting in mainly qualitative data following an exploratory approach. The aim of exploratory research is to seek new insights into phenomena and to assess the phenomena in a new light (Saunders, 2012). Ways to conduct research are the search and evaluation of literature, in-depth individual interviews of experts and focus group interviews, usually unstructured (Saunders, 2012). In this study a semi-structured interview was carried out with experts. This was done since only few studies about the EP of German SMEs and none specifically about firms targeting SSA exist. Another reason to include exploratory research was the positive experience of (Freeman and Styles 2014; Nalcaci and Yagci 2014; and Lacka and Stefko 2014) who gained new insights about EP for other regions by conducting interviews.

### 3.4 Research Strategy

Selecting the research strategy is a plan how to achieve a goal (Saunders, 2012). It is the methodological link between the chosen philosophy and applied methods to collect and analyse data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The applied semi-structured interview falls in the survey strategy which is mostly applied to gain quantitative data, but also qualitative information can be collected this way. Thus the exploratory approach used in this paper can be followed (Collis and Hussey, 2014; Saunders, 2012).

### 3.5 Data Collection

First literature was studied in detail to gain secondary data and information about the current status of research activities. A semi-structured interview was chosen to gain new insights from experts concerning the factors which influence a firms' EP, thus extracting answers to specific key questions while providing the flexibility to react to the flow of conversation (Saunders, 2012; Freeman and Styles 2014) previously used a similar approach.

### 3.6 Semi-structured interview

By means of a semi-structured interview qualitative data was gained from experts.

Table 1 Participants of the semi-structured interview

Firm	A	B	C	D
Industry	Trading House, incl. Finance	Medical Projects Tumkey	Medical Projects Tumkey	Textiles and advertising industry
Interviewee	Senior Executive Project Manager for SSA	Director tum-key projects	Chief Executive Officer	Chief Executive Officer
Employed in company (years)	4	27	5	9
Target countries (years of export activities)	Ghana (4.5) Kenya (4.5) South Africa (4.5) Angola (4.5) Mozambique (1) Tanzania (1)	Congo (7) Senegal (6) South Africa (1) Zimbabwe (25) Nigeria (4) Ghana (7) Guinea (1)	Ghana (50) Nigeria (35) South Sudan (10)	Several countries in SSA such as South Africa, Congo, Namibia, Liberia and South Sudan (56)

The interview consisted of two major parts. At first general information about the participants and their firms was derived from the answers to closed questions, followed by an inquiry regarding target markets in SSA. Closed questions were used since participants were surveyed on a specific issue. In the second part participants elaborated freely about internal and external factors which are perceived to influence their firm's EP (Saunders, 2012).

As a sampling technique a non-probability sample was chosen because the probability of each case being selected from the population is unknown (Saunders, 2012). More specifically purposive sampling was applied, based on the scholar's judgement. Since all participants had been in charge of exports to SSA for several years the scholar

considered them to be a good fit. However, it needs to be mentioned that this approach is not statistically representative (Saunders, 2012).

As suggested by Collis and Hussey (2014) possible interviewees were contacted by phone. (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015) considers this approach as the chance to combine the low-cost advantage of postal / online surveys with the interactivity of face-to-face interviews. Appointments were arranged to ensure that the interviewee would make enough time to answer all the questions in one go. A response rate of 40 % was achieved which is comparatively high. Sousa's review found an average response rate of 30 % (Sousa et al., 2008) and 25 % (Sousa et al., 2008). Table one summarises general information about the participants (data estranged to insure confidentiality).

## 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

### 4.1 Method of Analysis

To quantify the orally given data a content analysis was done. Using this widely applied method, items of qualitative data are systematically converted to numerical data (Collis and Hussey, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

### 4.2 Evaluated macro environmental factors

Eight factors (table two) were mentioned in an open question to influence EP.

One participant stated that his firm concentrates on private customers since decision makers of public institutions sometimes expect special payments which his firm cannot fulfil. Two participants argued that contributions are illegal in all European countries but that France, besides others, does not apply the existing legislation. According to them, Germany is the only country where the law is enforced. They argue that expensive presents in certain cultures express esteem and that some decision makers depend on special payments to support their family and tribe. Therefore in some regions or industries German companies have no chance to get contracts. Consequently German politics and legal environment are considered to influence EP, amongst others with export promotion programmes and the prohibition of bribery. This supports O'Cass and Julian's study (2003), stating that legal and political decisions influence EP. Dean et al. (Dean et al., 2000) confirm that governmental agencies may support export.

A survey by Transparency International (Tookey, 1964) shows that bribe is a serious matter in Africa and that decision makers are willing to accept such payments. For example 54 % of the 2.207 questioned households from Ghana said that they had to pay bribes in 2013. Politicians were described as corrupt by 76 % (Hardoon, 2013). Country of origin referred to by all interviewees as having an influence on EP was previously mentioned to be relevant by Lacka and Stefko (2014). The difficulties to find partners that finance big projects were already addressed by Felbermayr and Yalcin (2013) to influence EP. The identified competition from other countries matches the factor 'market competitiveness' recorded to be significant e.g. by (Cadogan et al. 2012; Lages and Montgomery 2005; and Navarros-García et al., 2015).

Table 2 Macro factors which influence EP

Positive influence	Negative influence
Made in Germany (four)	Difficulties in finding partners to finance big projects (once)
Export promotion by the German government (once)	Contributions to decision makers are illegal in Germany, but especially offered by firms based in other countries (three times)
Local conditions: Some countries are not able to coordinate projects by themselves so that they need companies specialised in offering turn-key projects (once)	German politics does not consider the special characteristics of the region, information level does not correspond with the current situation (once)
	German politics should support German producers by financing exports to the region (once)
	Competition from China and other countries with cheaper products (twice)

### 4.3 Evaluated internal and micro environmental factors

The variables shown in table three were mentioned in an open question to influence EP. The relevance of product quality may confirm the importance of the product strategy. Previously (O'Cass and Julian 2003; and Shoham et al. 2002) indicated that it is significant for Australian firms. Similar results were found by Lee and Griffith (2004) for South Korea and Piercy et al. (Piercy et al., 1997) for Britain. The influence of the price was highlighted by various scholars such as Lado et al. (McNaughton, 2003; Morgan, et al., 2004; and Sousa et al., 2014). However, (Sousa and Novello's study 2012) found out that there is no influence of the price strategy. The factor market knowledge or rather know-how and social competences emerged as significant in studies of (Kahiya and Dean, 2014; and Ling-Yee 2004). One participant mentioned that his firm as a medium sized company concentrates on smaller projects. This comment underlines the importance of company size. Besides others Kahiya and Dean (2014) and Lado et al. (McNaughton, 2003) describe it as fundamental and Lee and Griffith (2004) mention that a certain size is necessary to export successfully. There is no consensus, however, about its relevance. For instance (Lee and Griffith 2004; and Stoian et al., 2011) could not prove any influence. General willingness of firms to deal with the aspect of risk in Africa has not been mentioned in previous studies. Two participants named that time spent abroad or rather the continuous physical presence in the target country is essential. However, (Stoian et al., 2011) could not prove any relevance for Spanish exporters. Employees' principle mistrust towards SSA was mentioned to influence EP negatively. The attitude of employees towards a target market was previously researched by Nalcaci and Yagci (2014).

Table 3 Internal and micro factors which influence EP

Positive influence	Negative influence
Concept of sustainability, e.g. not only building a hospital but also training employees and finding qualified staff (once) Continuous physical presence in the target market (twice) Network in the industrial sector in the firm's home country (once) As a medium sized company concentration on smaller projects (once) General willingness of the firm to deal with risks in Africa caused by insufficient experience in the region (once) Cooperation with local partners (once) High local market knowledge (once) Company image (once) Employees: know-how and social competence (twice) Competence not only to offer good quality, but also good prices (twice) Product quality (once)	Initially mistrust towards the region, it was necessary to build trust in different departments such as risk control and accounting (once)

## 5. CONCLUSION

Sousa et al. (2008) name EP as one of the most widely researched but least understood areas of international marketing. This paper contributes to research in this field, specifically analysing the EP of German SMEs targeting SSA, and therefore fills a research gap. A comprehensive literature review and a semi-structured interview were carried out and evaluated. This study indicates that SSA has specific requirements for successful exports which differ from other regions. Regarding micro and macro environmental factors several indicators were named by the participants. Concerning the macro factors there is a consensus about the positive influence of the product origin 'Made in Germany'. Contributions to decision makers, which are illegal in Germany but offered by firms based in other countries, is the one determinant mentioned most frequently to influence export performance negatively. Also competition from other countries with cheaper products is identified to have a negative impact. Knowledge about the particular characteristics of the market enables managers as well as policy makers to improve trade relations. By focusing on German EP in SSA this study fills a research gap since no scholar previously concentrated on this special aspect.

## 6. FURTHER RESEARCH

Similar to (Sousa et al., 2014; and Stoian et al., 2011) it is suggested to extend the scope of work to additional home as well as foreign markets and to generalise findings (Boly, 2014; Catalog Sources World Development Indicators, 2015; Sung, 2015). Since this paper evaluated the whole of SSA without considering country specifics, additional research focusing on individual markets within SSA is desirable. Longitudinal studies about German SMEs targeting SSA would be useful to gain further insight into their EP. It might be advisable to research individual industries instead of multi-industries to find out if specific criteria need to be considered (Stoian et al., 2011). There is no limit to the number of independent and dependent variables for further analysis. Concrete ideas can be derived from suggestions made by participants of the semi-structured interview. It needs to be mentioned that the semi-structured interview presented in this paper was followed by a questionnaire survey. Qualitative as well as quantitative data were gained from a larger sample size and analyzed by various mathematical analysis methods. The results will be presented in a future publication.

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