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SMES EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INTERNATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Abstract: Challenges for SMEs development are multi-dimensional. As trade barriers, transport and communication costs fall, SMEs are required to add more value to their products to stay ahead and compete with lower cost rivals. Consumer demand is changing rapidly as incomes rise and choices increase when imported products become easily available in domestic markets. Competition within the developing world for export markets, foreign investment and resources is also intensifying.

This was motivation to focus in this paper on SMEs, its export competitiveness, business strategies, access for financing and so on. Enhancing SME competitiveness requires creation of enabling legal, regulatory and administrative environments and capable institutional structures, and most importantly human capital and a sustainable environment. Removing supply-side constraint to trade and investment, require firms to build up their competitive advantages. Public and private sectors in transition and developing countries must work together to improve the functioning of markets at home, while intensifying efforts to integrate into the world economy.

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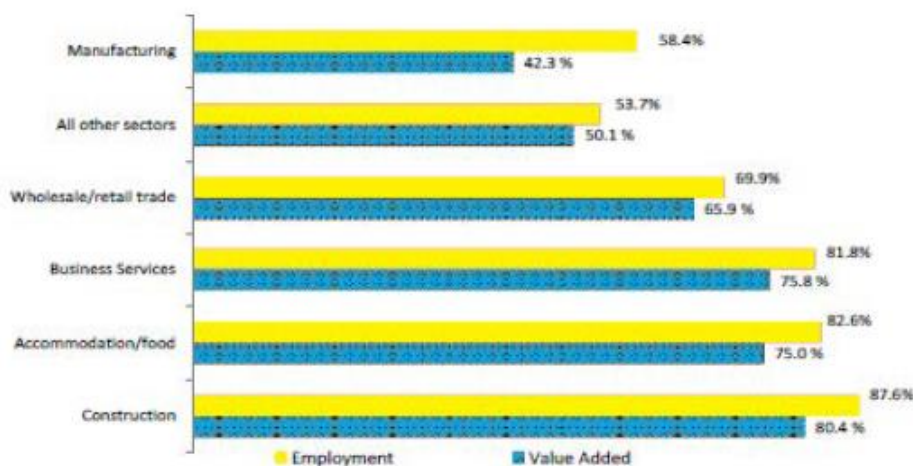
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1 Introduction

SMEs play an important role in economic growth and development. In this way, globalization and trade liberalization have ushered in new opportunities as well as challenges for SMEs. Only a small part of the SME sector is able to identify and exploit these opportunities and deal with the challenges. The majority of SMEs in developing and transition countries, has been less able or unable to exploit the benefits of globalization and, to add to the situation, are frequently under pressure on the local or domestic markets from cheaper imports and foreign competition. Many transition and developing countries, in particular face a need to promote and strengthen the long term development of the SME sector, which requires access to market opportunities, as well as to new technology and management know-how, often in a situation of considerable resource scarcity.

However, there is growing evidence of changes in patterns of foreign direct investment, involving a wider range of source and destination countries and the increasing involvement of SMEs as foreign investors. There is evidence that a growing number of medium sized firms, in particular, are internationalising their operations as a strategic response to increasing competitive pressure. In this context, internationalisation represents a means of reducing costs, as well as of opening up new market opportunities, thereby enabling them to combine greater flexibility with cost reduction (ACCA, 2012a).



Source: Eurostat, 2017

Even when SMEs account for a large share of employment and/or value added in a particular sector, this does not necessarily imply a correspondingly large share of SME employment/value added in the overall non-financial business sector. This is because the sector concerned may be relatively small. The evidence suggests that SMEs are vitally important in both high-income and low-income economies, worldwide. SMEs were adversely affected by the global financial crisis of 2008. Some have continued to struggle, with revenues and employment levels remaining subdued in the following years. Others have recovered relatively fast, indicating the resilience of the SME sector. Many have suffered from reduced access to finance and increased costs of credit. Governments around the world have responded in a variety of ways. To assist SMEs in particular, policymakers' attention has focused on supporting working capital, easing access to finance, implementing a better regulation agenda, and encouraging SME investment in new technologies or markets.

6. Conclusion

Evidences show that when SMEs become internationalised, particularly when they start exporting to foreign markets, their contribution to their home economy increases. For this to happen, substantial barriers need to be overcome. SMEs can face difficulties in financing international activity, identifying opportunities and making appropriate contacts in their target markets.

SME development cuts across sectors, involves multiple stakeholders and necessitates concerted actions by the public and private sectors. Therefore, SME development should be mainstreamed into the national development framework. Building up market institutions should be accompanied by capacity building of appropriate institutional structures.

Although competitiveness is a firm level phenomenon, macroeconomic and microeconomic environments influence market signals. To enhance SME competitiveness, therefore, requires the creation of enabling legal, regulatory and administrative environments, access to finance and capable institutional structures, and most importantly human capital and a sustainable environment. Removing supply-side constraint to trade and investment, require firms to build up their competitive advantages. However, competitive advantage is measured in relation to rivals in the markets firms compete in. Integration into regional and global trade and investment networks will require much effort, although it is not an impossible proposition. Public and private sectors in transition and developing countries must work together to improve the functioning of markets at home, while intensifying efforts to integrate into the world economy. Improving the investment climate for SMEs, and strengthening their capacities to respond to trade and investment opportunities, does strengthen the economic performance of SMEs and this in turn has a positive impact on growth and poverty reduction.

Each country has to find its own way to strengthen the legal, policy and institutional frameworks in which SMEs operate and which set the quality of the enabling environment. Strategic support should be provided for project risk analysis, business plan development support and the organisation of

brokerage events for SMEs to meet with investors and other potential collaborators for fund-raising and commercialisation of output.

While policies to support the internationalisation of SMEs and their growth in hightech manufacturing or knowledge-intensive services are essential for the future economic well-being of Europe, the many SMEs operating outside these sectors should not be forgotten. The crucial role of SMEs export performances for economic development should be taken into greater consideration through regular and effective consultations with SMEs and SME representatives. Moreover, SME tests and regulatory impact assessments should also be applied not on ad hoc basis but rather systematically as an integral part of policy making.

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