

**THE USE OF CONSORTIA IN THE
INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CONSTRUCTION FIRMS
– MOTA-ENGIL STUDY CASE**

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of internationalization has been actively studied, throughout the years. In its wide approach, it has been predicted as irrevocable and of increasing impact in the firm-related strategy. The way by which the internationalization occurs is connected with the modes used to enter in foreign markets, which have been also industriously scrutinized. One of those modes, the consortium, has not received as much attention as others. Thus, it seems important to understand how consortia allow the settlement of firms in the international markets. This study intends to answer the question of “how” to internationalize, anticipating the consortium as the most feasible way for construction firms to enter in certain markets. The reasons which determine its choice are related with aspects concerning the specificness of the projects, markets and of the firm in question. In the first part of the study, is introduced the revision of literature already existing about consortia as a entry mode and a tool of internationalization used by construction firms, resulting a analysis matrix which reveals the motivations conducive to their choice. In the second part, it is presented the study-case of Mota-Engil, as a potential source of valuable information which may contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon under study. The case-study allows corroborating the motivations found to create the consortia. The study culminates with a combination of contributions, limitations and suggestions for future researches.

KEYWORDS: consortia, construction, alliance, cooperation, entry modes, internationalization, Mota-Engil.

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to expand its activity to other countries, the firm needs to settle in a clear and assertive way its strategy concerning the entry modes. Among the several entry modes available to the firms none can be considered as being the best and we should, instead, choose the one that better suits to a certain conjuncture (Chang, 1995; Folta, 1998; Hennart, 1991; Reddy *et al.*, 2002; Williamson, 1991).

In this article, we intend to study a specific entry mode: the consortium. This entry mode has been used by a certain area of activity: the construction area, namely in its international variation. Therefore, the question here examined is: “In what way the consortia allow the internationalization of the firms?” We will try to depict what are the determinants that lead to the choice of this entry mode by the firms, in order to delineate their international strategy.

In the Anglo-Saxon literature the consortia are considered non-equity joint ventures and differentiate themselves from the equity joint ventures, because they don't imply the creation of an entity aside, with legal form, through the equitable contribution of capital from the cooperation partners (Erramili *et al.*, 2002; Hagedoorn and Narula, 1996). The singularity of this entry mode allows the firms to join themselves, during a certain period, to share resources, split risks and dissolve easily the cooperation, after the end of the project. This issue seems to be poorly studied in the international businesses literature (Ireland *et al.*, 2002; Kumar and Nti, 1998; Narula and Dunning, 1998; Reuer and Arino, 2002), which rouses a larger interest in its study. The frequent resource to the consortium as well as the various situations in which it applies, justifies the need to investigate this subject. The purpose is to infer how this entry mode contributes to the firms' internationalization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The consortia as an entry mode

Although the literature already existing provides several classification typologies of the entry modes, they concur, in general, in the analysis criteria: risk and degree of control. Anderson and Gatignon (1986) uphold that the best entry mode proceed from a trade-off between the degree of control that the firm intends to carry out and the level of risk involved by that purpose.

In this essay it will be used a classification typology of entry modes, in three groups, according to the variables, control, risk and flexibility:

- Export modes: low control, low risk, high flexibility.
- Contractual modes: shared control and risk, shared property.
- Investment modes: high control, high risk, low flexibility.

According to this typology, the consortium is a contractual entry mode. This kind of contracts happens when the firms have some kind of competitive advantage and, separately, are not able to take advantage from it due to various constraints, starting, therefore, cooperation activities with other firms and organizations. The consortium or contractual joint venture is formed having as target the execution of a certain project with limited durability (Sillars and Kangari, 2004), which for its specificity, usually high risk and investment, requires team work of two or more firms in a separate organization. These are formal cooperation agreements between firms which do not imply capital sharing, neither the creation of a legal entity. Both parts have legal and strategic autonomy.

In the ambit of the JV typology, the international construction consortia might be defined taking in consideration:

- Nationality: they might be formed by national firms as well as by international firms. Ahead, in the case-study, we will see that this aspect depends a lot on the markets characteristics where the firm intends to carry out its incursion.
- Financial sharing: non-equity JV, since the associated firms do not contribute with capital in the moment they join their interests (Chan *et al.*, 1997; Sengupta and Perry, 1997).
- Parties concerned: In the case-study, the consortia are in its majority private, formed only by private firms. However, there are some exceptions for the mixed consortia, whenever the firms belonging to the state which control the market, in a certain specialized activity, participate in consortia with private firms.
- Legal form: Non-corporate JV, since the consortia are a way of cooperation between companies not gifted with legal form, «with a simplified and flexible nature, without endangering their legal autonomy and the economical independence of each of the associated» (Vasconcelos, 1999, p.19).

- **Durability:** Transitory JV, since this type of «cooperation between firms has a temporary and limited nature and concrete and determined purposes» (Vasconcelos, 1999, p.20).

From this analysis is important to emphasize that the consortium, as a legal entity, and having as basis the theoretic analysis which is given in terms of international businesses literature, constitutes a **non-equity** and **non-corporate joint venture**.

The consortia in the construction business

There is not much literature about marketing in the international construction activity (El-Higzi, 2001). The construction is a service rendered, and therefore, it is an activity of great complexity because of all the individual characteristics, inherent to the non-conventional nature of its services.

The construction industry is made of intensive capital, being the financial availability a decisive factor. The governmental assistance, with economic treaties which decrease the trade barriers, the assistance programmes to exportations and aid packages are factors that impel the international growth of the firms belonging to this industry (El-Higzi, 2001, Gunhan and Arditi, 2005). Besides this, an important part of the construction business is promoted by the public investment (Tiong, 1990, Ye and Tiong, 2000), so it is fundamental to the firm to find political support for the construction project they intend to develop (Ling *et al.*, 2005).

The international construction differs from domestic construction in several points. The international construction activities are distinguished by the combination of the business and project management capacities with the mobility of the production factors and with the location and connection between the support industries (Ling *et al.*, 2005). Besides the typical risks inherent to a domestic construction project, in the international level, the firms are exposed to a complex and subtle network of political, economic and cultural risks (Ashley and Bonner, 1987, Han and Diekmann, 2001).

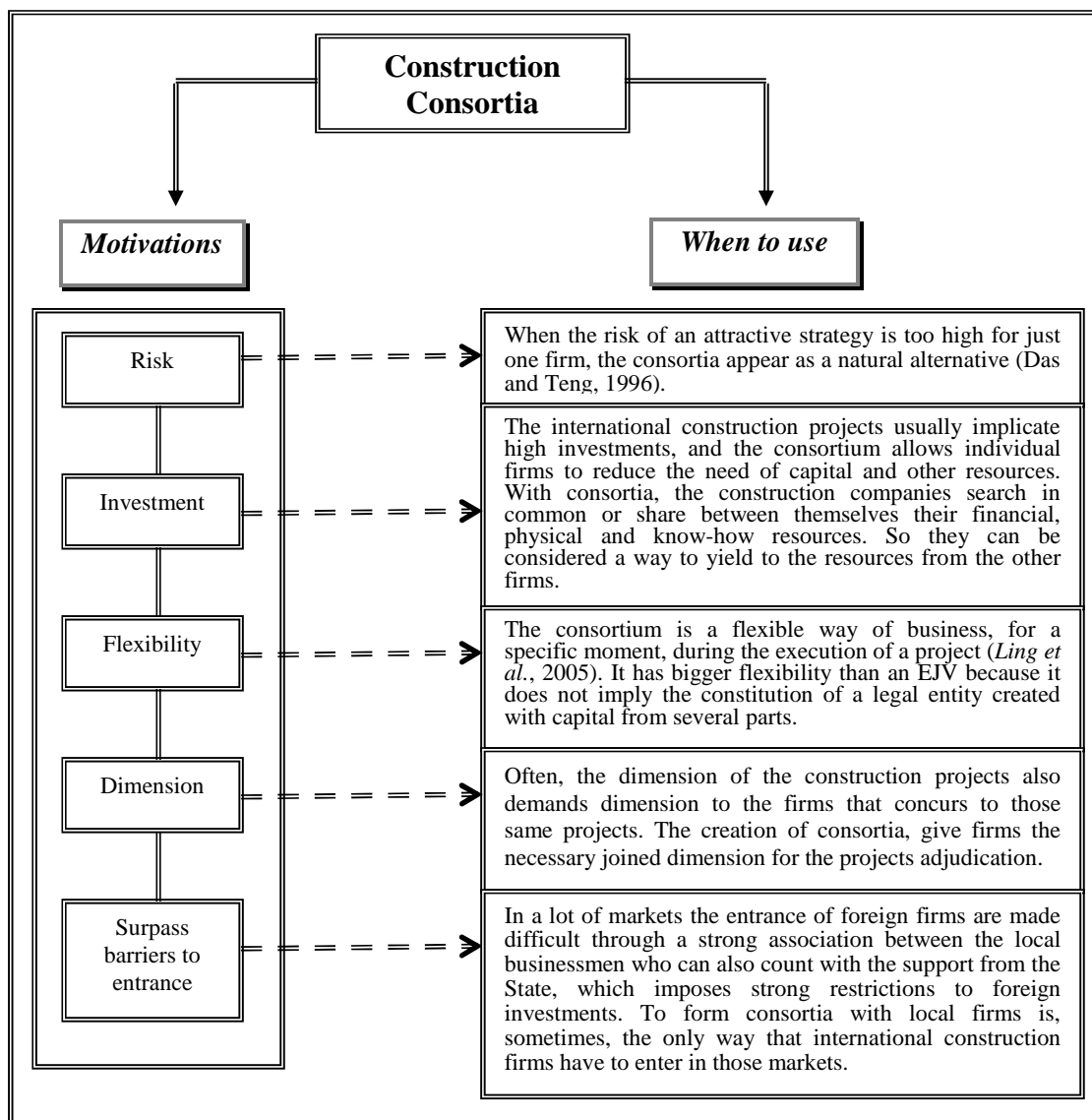
In the current literature is given little importance to the study of consortia, as a entry mode. The focus is saved to the EJV, and the consortia treated in a very superficial way (Beamish and Banks, 1987, Luo and Park, 2004, Wang and Nicholas, 2007). About

consortia, in the construction sector, the studies that already exist are still very scarce, and the entry modes treated in a very non-specialized manner.

This study intends to focus in the consortium whilst choice resulting from a possible trade-off between control and compromise of the resources. Before a large dimension project, in which the amount of resources required for investment is high, the firms, individually, are able to reduce the amount of resources invested by them by creating consortia with other firms.

The consortium is chosen, often, by the construction companies, because it allows carrying out several purposes and because it fits in the restrictions that are put to them, given their inherent characteristics, as it is intended to demonstrate in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Motivations for the choice of consortia in the construction sector



Due to the complex nature of the activities, process, environment and organization of the construction businesses, firms are extremely exposed to a high level of **risk** (Bing *et al.*, 1999). Thus, several researchers identified the risk sharing as an important motivation in order to form business-related alliances (Kogut, 1991; Oliver, 1990, Powell, 1987) that, like consortia, transfer risk and control to other firms (Brouthers, 1995).

The **investment** is also a particularly conditioning factor to the performance of the construction firms. This is a sector of intensive capital in which, in order to carry out the projects, is necessary a great level of commitment of resources and, consequently, a large investment. In this manner, the construction firms unite themselves, often, in consortia to contribute with physical, capacity, experience or financing resources (Badger *et al.*, 1995; Chan *et al.*, 1997) in the required proportion in order to carry out the project.

By creating consortia, it can also be achieved the necessary **dimension** to the adjudication of the huge projects. The smaller firms, for instance, find in consortia a growth opportunity as well as of achievement of revenues by becoming partners of larger firms and with more resources (Sillars and Kangari, 2004).

Since they don't involve common property neither the constitution of a legal entity aside, consortia offer a bigger **strategic flexibility**. Whilst non-equity alliances, the consortia give a larger margin of maneuver when a decision is taken (Das and Teng, 1996). This entry mode still works as a way to surpass the **entrance barriers** established in many markets, by local firms which unite themselves in order to obstruct the entrance of external competition. By creating consortia with local partners, the foreign firms achieve a larger opening to their activities, by the entities from the destination country (Shen and Wu, 2001).

3. METHODOLOGY

We intend to understand the process by which the happenings and actions occur. According to Yin (1994), as a rule, the case study represents the most suitable strategy to follow when the issues posed are “how” or “why”, when the degree of control that

the researcher has over the events is restricted or void and when the study is focused in an actual phenomenon in its natural context. It was adopted the study-case approach, since the need to gather detailed information from the managers shows that the qualitative research methodology is more suitable (Whitla *et al.*, 2006).

The choice of the Mota-Engil case-study, at present the biggest construction group in Portugal, is justified by the vast use of consortia whilst internationalization tool by this firm. The consortia are traditionally used by this Group which sees them as being, often, the only option of entrance in some markets. This case-study helps to understand and to explain the motivations which lead the firms to adopt this entry mode, and might also contribute to instruct possible management activities in similar areas.

4. THE MOTA-ENGIL CASE

The construction is the sector that more jobs generates, at the European level, considering that 26 million workers depend of it, indirect and directly¹. The enlargement of the European Union to many Eastern countries that belonged to the former Eastern Block allows the creation of new business opportunities and consequent international operations of expansion for new markets. And Eastern Europe is the area where more projects are being developed. The big European construction firms cross each other in public competitions in countries such as Poland, Check Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine and Russia, associated, usually, to local firms with a certain dimension, due to the knowledge they have about the market, legislation, environmental aspects and safety. On the other hand, in Africa, the big construction boom happens in Angola with 26% growth year, which allows the entrance of many Portuguese construction firms in that market. It is important to refer, yet, the competition from Chinese firms, despite the quality of their work being inferior to the standard of any European firm in the same area. The lower quality rate from this firms results, essentially, from the use of cheap labor, offer of services in exchange of commercial compensations with the support of the Chinese State and the practice of dumping in the market prices.

¹ in Mota-Engil, 2007a.

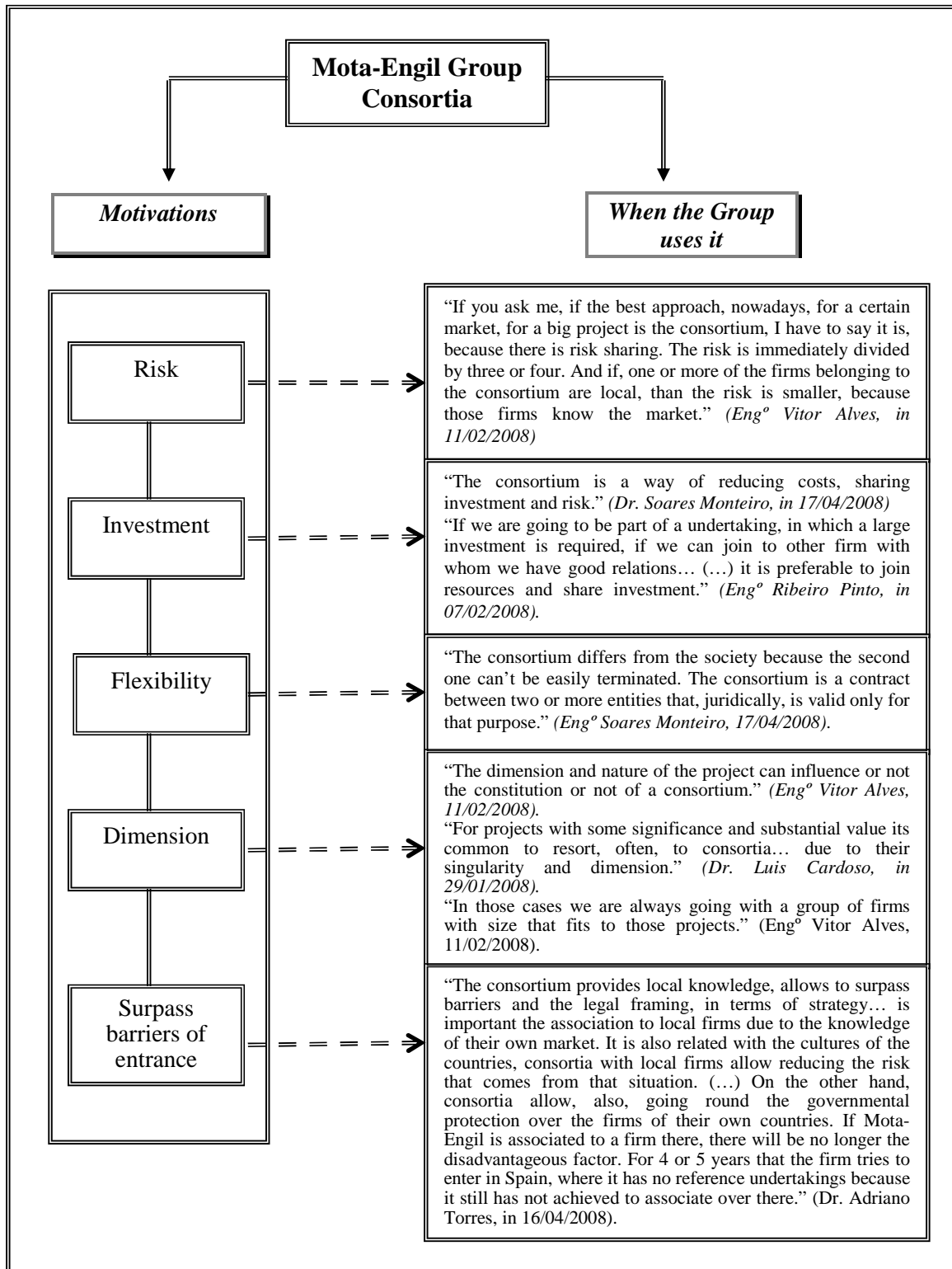
Mota-Engil, one of the main private economic groups in Portugal, explores and develops an integrated businesses portfolio focused in the construction chain of value with performance levels aligned with the best international practices. Leader in the national market, at the European level holds the 67th rank between the biggest firms of the construction area². The international market represents, in 2007, 43% of the Group construction activity³, nowadays present in 20 countries.

In the Mota-Engil strategy, the consortia are precious means of market approach under certain circumstances which create a combination of motivations, like it was described before in Figure 1. The Figure 2, bellow, assembles the consortia of the Mota-Engil Group at the ambit of the same motivations, showing that these are present at the time when the decision process occurs relating to the entry mode to adopt.

² in Deloitte, 2008.

³ in Mota-Engil, 2007b.

Figure 2 - Mota-Engil Group motivations to choose consortia



- **The risk**

The construction area is, as we said before, of high associated risk (Zhi, 1999), due to the kind of services it renders, because it involves always big investments and huge demands in terms of availability of human and technical resources. When the Group tries to execute a certain project, the consortium appears as the most suitable method for the dispersion of the risk. Because, in consortium, the inherent risk to the project no longer falls upon just one firm and it is shared by the associates (Ling *et al.*, 2005). The risk is, thus, smaller for each firm individually.

The so called “construction works”⁴, always gifted with high technical complexity and high safety rates, are largely executed in consortium, in order to minimize the associated risk. In several countries in the African continent, in which entering implies a considerable risk, specially in the cases of high political risk, the consortium is the choice for Mota-Engil, in order to guaranty some support between the cooperation partners.

- **The investment**

The projects of large dimension demand a substantial level of investment in terms of resources, which not always only one firm is capable to fill in. The solution found by the Group is, together with other specialized firms, create a strong consortium to combine financial, physical and know-how resources and share risks.

For example, this kind of cooperation is the tool used by Mota-Engil to carry out the project which is considered the biggest construction work in the city of Luanda, in Angola: the Atlantic Towers, with an investment of 110 million euros. The same thing happens in Mozambique, where the consortium Mota-Engil/Soares da Costa is executing the bridge over river Zambeze, the biggest infra-structure carried out in the country since its independence, estimated in 66 million euros. The fact that this undertaking implies the mobilization of large and very specific material and human

⁴ The term “construction works”, in construction activity, refers to bridges, viaducts and tunnels.

resources, imposes the need to create a consortium in order to be achieved the necessary amounts of investment.

- **The flexibility**

When the purpose of cooperation is perfectly defined within a short and previously established term, the Group tries to materialize it through a flexible contract which allows to dissolve it, with no restrictions, by the time the project ends (Wang and Nicholas, 2007). The consortium is the option chosen because it does not imply the formation of a legal entity resulting from the investment of capital between both parts (Wang, 2007). Each part cooperates with a legal entity and bears their responsibilities. The consortium is subordinated to the minimum of administrative barriers, consuming less time and being more economic, in bureaucratic terms, than the equity joint ventures.

Often, the consortium works for Mota-Engil as the entrance door in certain countries. The purpose is to engage local knowledge and try to establish a network of contacts in the receiving country (Starssmann, 1898), so that, afterwards, they might move to an autonomous activity which will allow to consolidate a position in the market and improve the level of flexibility of the chosen options. The same is applied to works with a previously established and short term, like the bridge over the river Catumbela, in the Angolan province of Benguela. The conditionalism of time points out to actions that may easily be dissolved in the moment that the work terminates, without inferring, for the partners, high irreparable costs. For the Group, flexibility means adaptability of the consortia to the places where it is working and to the means it has at their disposal.

- **The dimension**

When the project in competition has a big dimension, which happens namely in international markets and demands a big investment effort, the most common is for the Group to try to compete in consortium to the work contract. It tries to join to other firms that have experience and the necessary technical capacities for the accomplishment of the project. The complementarity of the firms in terms of equipment, human resources

and know-how allows the consortium to be capable to achieve the dimension and organization indispensable to the formulation of the work in competition.

On the other hand, in markets with a strong growth, the Group feels the need to comply to the competitions in consortium with international players. Because, despite being a leader in the home market, the Group not always has the necessary strength and dimension to rival with the biggest firms in the area, at the international level. The significance of an approach with consortia, in certain markets, is also related with the intensity of the competition. The Central and Eastern Europe Markets, for example, highly competitive and attractive, allow foreseeing a fierce struggle between the giants of the sector with a superior dimension than the one of the Group, acting separately. That is why those are the markets where it is crucial the entrance through consortia, since they provide the concentration of associated firms by a common purpose (Terpstra and Simonin, 1993), restraining, thus, the competition, since the competitors become, often, partners in consortia.

- **The barriers to the entrance**

In markets with a small degree of receptivity to foreign investment and with a high degree of protectionism, the consortia with local firms are a way for the Group to enter and conquer awareness so that they might, afterwards, develop their activities (Kogut, 1988, Ling *et al.*, 2005). The partners, foreign and local, can complement themselves mutually: the domestic firms have a better knowledge of the local work conditions, of the localization of the sources of human and material resources, whilst the foreign firms bring to the consortium a high level of expertise in financial, technological and managing terms (Raftery *et al.*, 1998).

The Spanish market is pointed out as a good example of this situation. Due to a strong protectionism and association which characterizes the Spanish construction sector, it becomes difficult to a foreign firm to operate in that market. That is why, until today, the Group considers that still has not made works of reference, in the construction sector in Spain. And, points out, as a possible cause, the fact of not being able to create any consortium with Spanish firms for the adjudication of the projects. On the other hand, Martifer (a firm belonging to the Group) is, already, the strongest firm of metallic

constructions in Spain. According to the Group, the explanation may lay in the fact that this firm has, previously, formed a consortium with Somague, which is Spanish. So, maybe, this is the reason why Martifer was invited to work in Spain.

The interference of the State in this sector is high, and was identified, in previous studies, various legal barriers imposed by some Governments to the entrance of international construction firms. Very often, the Governments support the local firms in prejudice of the international constructors, stipulating that the project must be finished by a national contractor. The incompatibility of the technical standards in the different countries is another difficulty faced by construction firms operating at an international level (Whitla *et al.*, 2006). Thus, even if the Group has the necessary investment to start a certain project and a small aversion to risk to a point that does not feel the need to start a cooperation process, the barriers to entrance raised by the Government and by local firms, often, make the consortium the only alternative to enter in those markets.

5. CONCLUSION

Main assessments

At a scientific level, apparently this study contributes to enlarge the knowledge of an entrance way which seems poorly explored in terms of international business literature. In terms of business-related strategy, the consortium appears to be a tool of recurrent use for the approach to the international markets by construction firms. This study helps also to understand the motives and benefits which induce firms to choose the consortium, contributing for a more complete characterization of this entry mode.

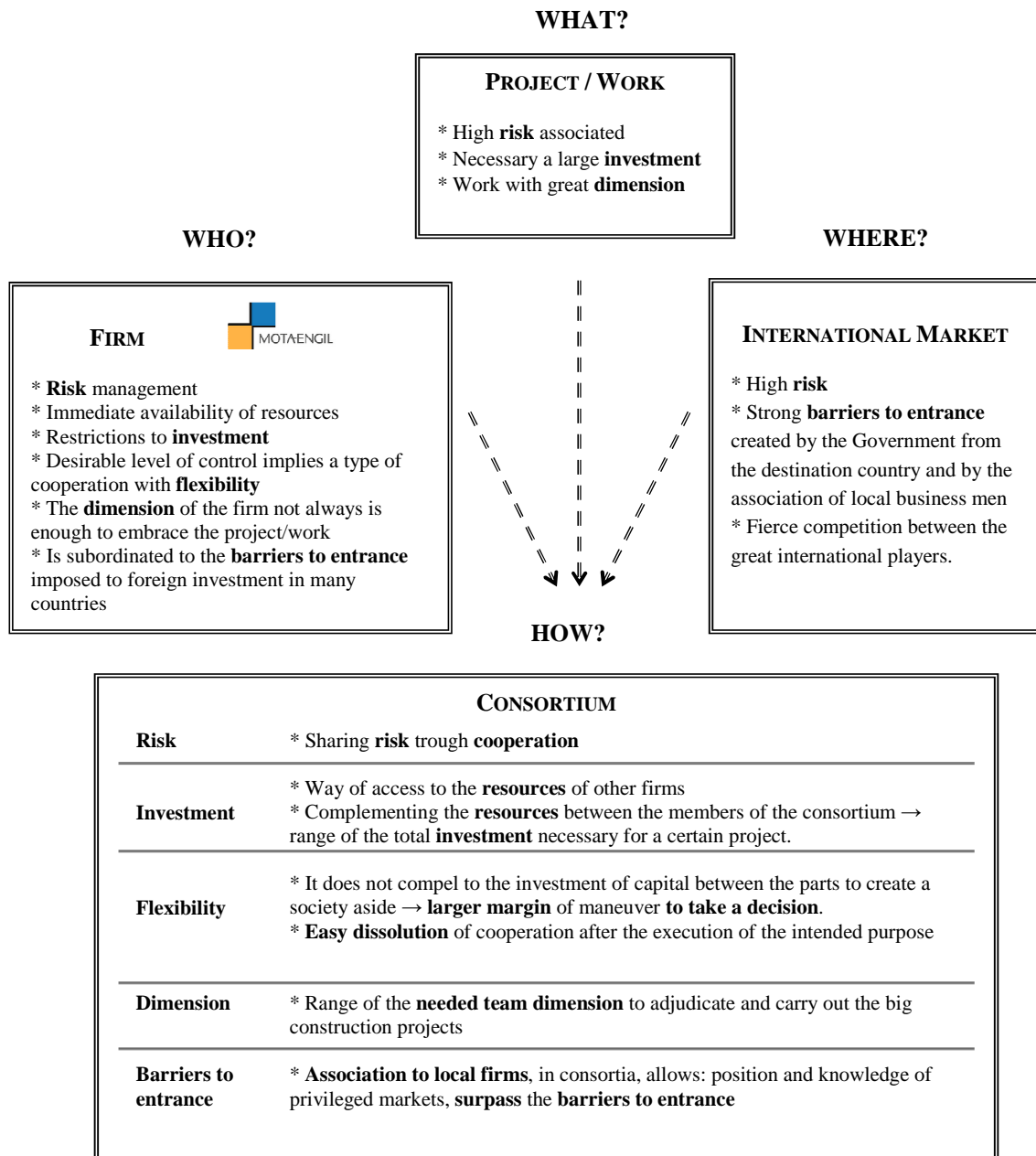
The analysis matrix of the consortium, suggested in this study, may contribute to assess the performance of this internationalization tool available to firms. Because of the confrontation between motivations, which lead to internationalization, with the gaps that the consortium intends compensate, it is possible to conclude about the usefulness and suitability of this entry mode within a certain predicament. Comparing the different alternatives, the consortium appears to be the perfect choice before a sequence of conditionalisms which make it the only way the firm has to carry out a certain internationalization strategy. Factors such as, investment, risk, flexibility, dimension and barriers to entrance work as a motivation to the creation of consortia and are related

to the characteristics of the project, market and firm, according to the diagram in Figure 3.

In consortium, the firms:

- are capable to decrease the **risk** inherent to projects and international markets;
- reach the necessary **investment** for internationalization;
- guarantee some **flexibility** of decision in a environment of great uncertainty and in constant change such as the international markets;
- together, they conquer the indispensable **dimension** to the adjudication and execution of great projects;
- they go round the **barriers to entrance** created by the Government of the destination country and by the association of local business men which obstruct the outside activity.

Figure 3 – Matrix of analysis of consortia



As an entry mode, the consortium allows the internationalization because it is a tool of adjustment of the firm to the internal and external conditionals of its expansion to new markets. This fact may present an important implication of this study at the management level. This perspective, according which this entry mode may work as a solution for the problems that, many times, the managers come across, can be included in the strategic consideration carried out when is depicted the international activity of the firm. Instead of putting aside certain projects and markets because they do not think

they have the strength needed to dissolve their weaknesses and to surpass the characteristic threats from an international approach, the firms must put in perspective the consortium as a way of access to new opportunities which they have to face on a daily basis.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

One of the limitations of this study is related with the methodological option of the study-case. Due to the choice of a single case design, this may jeopardize the potentialities of an analytical generalization, given the characteristics of the firm studied. However, we think its choice allowed to develop a suitable case because it gives answer to the question of the research and is attainable because it is susceptible of understanding. The sample selected for interviews could have a larger dimension, giving, therefore, a bigger robustness in terms of quantitative representativeness. The purpose of this project focused in the attainment of interviews to the point of saturation, from which the data to assemble no longer add any value to the investigation. So, we think that the qualitative representativeness is accomplished, and the interviews carried out gave rich information and allowed the perception of the agreement of the interviewed in relation to the issues disputed.

The expansion of this investigation to other representative cases of the set of problems in study constitutes a suggestion for future works, susceptible to fulfill the gaps at the representativeness level, expressed before. We can compare the results obtained in this study and get a possible corroboration of the same with the inclusion of different firm-related realities. The enrichment of the deductions taken from this study can also be obtained through its retort in firms that perform in similar contexts, in terms of international activity. Another issue that might work as a starting point for future studies is the confrontation of adopted strategies by the national construction firms, in terms of entry mode, with the options at that level by the foreign firms. It will be interesting to inquire how often the option for consortium is presented to the international construction firms. It is also suggested the analysis of the agreement of the motivations and conjunctures which lead these firms to the choice of the consortium, as an international performance, with the ones which resulted of the analysis carried out in this study. To infer about the weight that each motivation, individually, has at the moment of choosing the entry mode, can be another point open to a future investigation.

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