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Cooperation as A Key Factor to Increase Local Companies' Competitiveness: A Descriptive Analysis

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Abstract

This study intends to present a characterization of the entrepreneurial group of a rural area of Portugal and focuses on the difficulties they face and expectations they have in current economy. We focus on one district that reunites nine municipalities. We aimed at understanding how in this small, isolated and deprived region a company can succeed competing in global markets. Such possibility as our object of analysis concerns companies of rural housing and production of endogenous products that have gourmet potential. Thus a study was conducted in the local enterprises. A qualitative approach followed and by means of in-depth interviews it was possible to understand the companies, their main difficulties, their current commercialization paths and the possibility of having both an online presence and a reality where they work together. It was possible to understand that the majority of the enterprises feel that it is very hard to work in the regions, that they face difficulties to increase their commercialization geographic and they all feel that a partnership, a cooperation between companies could help them reach further the public. The possibility was to create a common platform to commercialize both areas.

Keywords: Regional development; competitiveness; cooperation.

Introduction

All over Europe, several countries are facing the reality of having depopulated regions that tend to be in rural areas, with older population, and low economic activity that in consequence implicates lower job prospects and lower wages (Valdivia, 2018).

This phenomenon of depopulation in European rural regions is not new, however it is becoming more and more relevant when it comes to the economic survival of the regions. Currently 25% of the European rural areas are facing a severe population decline and 22% of the individuals that remain in the rural areas are elderly. Portugal is one of these countries (Johansson, Nilsson and Westlund, 2018; Ubels, Bock and Haartsen, 2019).

As such, in these regions, the existing enterprises face serious problems, not only when it comes to keeping the business alive but also attracting customers and improving their sales outside of the region, since there are fewer local costumers.

This research intends to analyse the enterprises that are located in a Portuguese region, Terras de Trás-os-Montes, focusing on a major trend that thrive in the region: endogenous products with gourmet

potential. The intention was to understand the main difficulties these companies face, their business expectations, and how they perceive their needed actions in order to commercialize outside of the region. To do so, 30 local companies were studied.

The study is structured in four sections. After the introduction, a theoretical framework of the determinants of current economic reality and success factors is presented, focusing on rural regions. The third section presents the empirical study. This presents the region in analysis, defines the objective, the data treatment method and the descriptive analysis. Finally, the main conclusions are presented.

Current Context of SME on Rural Regions

As stated previously, rural regions all over Europe face serious challenges due to increasing depopulation. Some of which have to do with the very declining of services, both public or private, disappearing enterprises, diminishing markets and declining local finances. This brings several consequences to the region, namely the disappearance of basic social services, decrease of opportunities, and weak economic performance (Ubels, Bock and Haartsen, 2019; Valdivia, 2018).

Along with the disappearance of services or even the merge of different public services, the residents are less supported and tend to leave the region to look for more prosperous regions and with better public and private structures and job opportunities. These rural regions seem less appealing to live or to develop a business, since it is difficult to attract investment to a region that hardly has internal demand (Radović, Košić and Demirović, 2018; Ritcher, 2017; Ricci, Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2019).

Also, the majority of enterprises that labour in rural regions tend to be of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and micro SMEs. When there is a limited number of potential customers, the companies face a limited potential to growth. As such, they must increase the attraction of outside costumers, either physically attract them to the region or through online demand (EPSON, 2018; Phillipson et al., 2018).

The development of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises' competitiveness is related to the ability to innovate, however, the reduced size of the businesses; the lack of adjustment to better and newer forms of commercialization, the lack of entrepreneurial spirit, among other aspects, inhibits that (SARURE, n.d.). To occur innovation and industrial development, there must be investments in information and communication technology (ICT), development of knowledge networks that are not restricted to the geographic region (Polyakova, 2018; Farja, Gimmon and Greenberg, 2018).

Nevertheless, even when technology is crucial for companies to progress, rural and more isolated regions tend to have worse internet telecommunications and, as such, are restricted to use all the potential the technology allows (Roberts, Beel, Philip and Townsend, 2017).

The Case of the Northeast of Portugal

The region known as Terras de Trás-os-Montes (TTM) collects nine municipalities, namely Alfândega da Fé, Bragança, Macedo de Cavaleiros, Miranda do Douro, Mirandela, Mogadouro, Vila Flor, Vimioso and Vinhais. This region has an extension of 4,370 square kilometres, and in 2018 registered 107,860 inhabitants, and almost 30% are over 65 years of age (INE, n.d.).

Regarding the enterprises, according to the latest records from 2016 there were 19,118 companies registered and operating in the region, and the majority (10,455) were agriculture related companies. Almost all, 98%, are micro companies registering on average two employees (CIM-TTM, 2014; INE, 2018).

The TTM has extended agricultural and forestry resources and has a considerable part (38%) dedicated to agriculture, and so, the agro industrial sector is dominant. The list of endogenous products is long

ranging from horticultural, fruit to mycological products. The products are produced by different companies and commercialized individually by each producer (CIM-TTM, 2014).

Even though the products are of national and international recognized quality, there still is no common brand or any common action to promote and commercialize them outside the regional border. Again, each producer develops its own strategies and the majority has no online presence (CIMAT, 2015).

According to regional experts, since the region has a small internal market, the potential growth must come from increasing the number of visitors to the region and developing online promotion and commercialization in a collaborative perspective. However, regional entrepreneurs seem to be ignorant regarding network programs and collaborative work that is already being developed by official entities (CIMAT, 2015; CIM-TTM, 2018).

Objective, Data Treatment and Analysis

This study intends to understand the enterprises’ knowledge and use of ICT and how they regard a collaborative network to commercialize their products.

To do so, a qualitative approach was followed and with the use of an in-depth interview 30 companies were interviewed. The data collected was analysed according to context analysis.

The interview was centred in three main areas: a characterization of the company; competition, internationalization, use of ICT and a collaborative commercialization network.

Descriptive Analysis

The 30 companies that were inquired focused on different products, namely olive oil, wine, fruit, cheese, smoked sausages, and honey. The first part of the interview presents the characterization of the company, main products, innovation level, markets and business volume, as described in table 1.

Table 1: Characterization of the business, by product

Main product	Market	Innovation level	Potential to expand
Olive oil	Portugal and other countries	Medium	Moderated
Peaches	Portugal	Medium	Moderated
Honey	Portugal	Medium	Moderated
Cheese	Portugal	High	Moderated
Smoked ham	Portugal and other countries	Medium	Moderated
Wine	Portugal, Spain and Brazil	Medium	Moderated

Table 1 illustrates that the majority of the companies has a medium level of innovation and the major part has a moderate potential to expand. Only in the cheese business the innovation level was high and the interviewed individuals recognized that this was a very competitive area that was greatly sustained in gourmet and innovative products. Almost all the companies refer that Portugal is the main market, but in some areas, such as wine and olive oil, Spain and Brazil show up as important secondary markets.

When questioned about their competitors, every company could identify their main local, regional and national competitors. The main competition occurred at local level, however, it was visible that they all knew each other and that they had friendly relationships between them, in most of the cases.

The companies were also able to identify what differentiated them from the competition and it was noticeable that the business volume was considerably different in some areas. Subsequently, business representatives attributed to the competitors' higher economic results the availability to make higher investments

Regarding internationalization, most companies already sell to other countries, although in a smaller scale than in Portugal. The international sales are made through physical intermediates. Some companies attend international fairs to present their products, but they consider it to be very expensive for a company to do so on their own, when they do not have a big dimension.

Only a small percentage has online presence and sells by such means. Even without the e-commerce function, very few companies have a website. According to the business representatives it is an expense that is still very high for the level of business and thought of as not able to increase the sales, since they sell out the entire production.

When presented with the perspective of a collaborative network, where they could jointly develop an online platform to promote and sell their products, to attend international fairs with divided costs and to promote other products to their own clients, they all agreed that it was a very good perspective. It was noticeable that the companies do feel unsupported by local entities and they think that there should be more share of information between the competitors, since they would all benefit from a better promotion. Also, in a region with a small market, where all competitors know each other, and present some developed friendship relations, they are aware of the difficulty to grow regionally and to obtain funds to invest, and so, to become more competitive in new or broader markets they realize the effort must be combined.

Conclusion

The study allowed us to better understand the difficulties and challenges SME and micro companies face in rural areas. The majority of the companies complained about the lack of support from local entities. They felt that they are working alone and that it is very hard to obtain the necessary funds to investment in industrial developments, innovations and promotion of their products.

The majority believe in the potential and the quality of their products and believe that they have a product that is unique.

The majority sell through big distributors and to most of them only a minor part of the sales goes international. Very few companies have a website or have an e-business, therefore revealing that their knowledge and use of ICT is very low.

All the companies interviewed think it would be excellent if they could collaborate with other local companies and jointly promote regional products, dividing the cost, and enhancing the visibility and increasing sales. As such, projects that intend to stimulate collaborative networks are highly appreciated and required in this region, since the entrepreneurs are fully aware of the benefits and have open mind to follow that path.

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