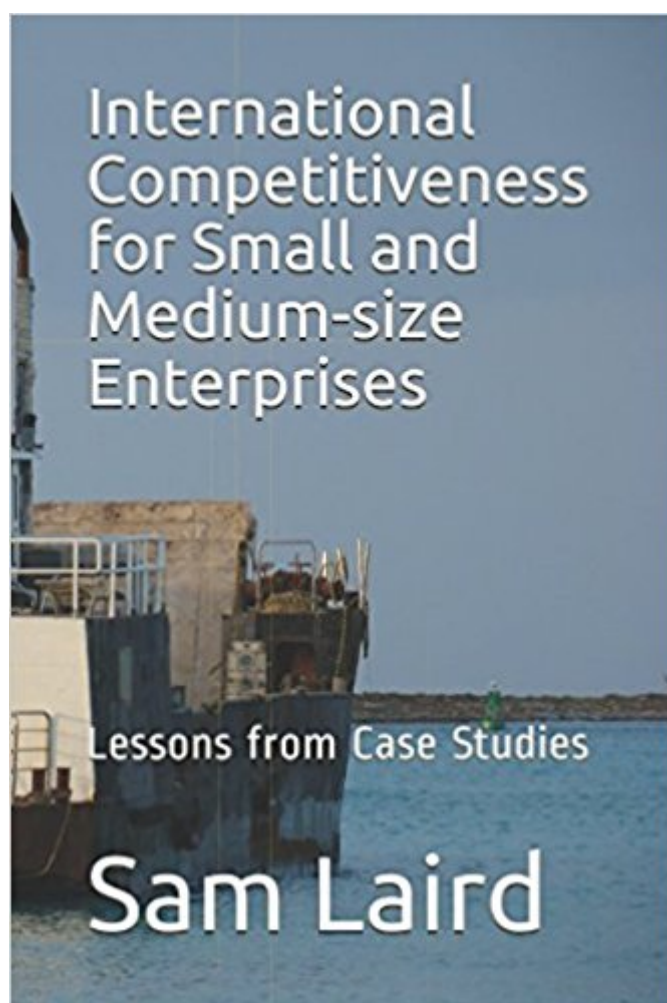


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International Competitiveness For Small And Medium-size Enterprises: Lessons From Case Studies



Synopsis

In the age of globalisation, small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) in the developing world face considerable challenges to survive and prosper in the face of competition at home and in international markets. This is a matter of national importance since SMEs contribute the larger share of national production and employment, and indirectly help to tackle poverty. Analysis of the case studies covered here make it possible to craft a relatively comprehensive, and, hopefully, coherent framework or road map for developing competitiveness. Some countries are already well ahead on that road, while others need to look at their economic maps and satellite navigations systems to see where they need to go. The analysis suggests that SMEs can do much for themselves, but they also need to be supported with a coherent overall supportive economic and political framework, elaborated by specific policy and programmes to improve international competitiveness. Such actions need to be based on priorities of each country. In the domestic market, actions to improve competitiveness are likely to be necessary in the following areas: the business environment; taxation, tariffs and other policies affecting the cost of imported inputs; the formation of cluster groups; the availability of development support, including finance (business capital); improving access to foreign direct investment; a proactive competition policy; addressing a range of labour market issues; innovation; lifting standards; and facilitating access to government procurement programmes. In international markets the issues that may need to be addressed are: obtaining access to information on international markets; assistance in marketing; participation in global value chains (GVCs); access to trade finance on reasonable terms; meeting standards and certification requirements in international markets; trade facilitation; trade infrastructure; and effective participation in international trade institutions and negotiations. In interviews with the author in more than 30 countries, the private sector lists their priorities as: addressing infrastructure weaknesses, improving access to finance on reasonable terms, cutting red tape (domestic regulation and trade facilitation), and supportive fiscal policies (taxation, tariffs). An enabling business environment can also facilitate participation in global value chains as a means of developing their businesses and expanding into international markets. Implementation of action programmes needs to be supported by aid for trade (AfT), targeted at the key cost centres. Support from the international and regional financial institutions or other development partners maybe needed, especially for the big budget items such as hard and soft infrastructure and trade facilitation. However, in some instances, SMEs can obtain aid for trade directly from some international institutions, such as the IFC and regional development banks. In addition, some commercial financial institutions are becoming active in this area of business. Success in building competitiveness also needs cooperative efforts by

governments, business and other players. Such a consultative process can help develop a shared sense of ownership.

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