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**Support services dedicated to international cooperative strategies:
an exploratory qualitative study.**

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Green SMEs are SMEs *"that produce goods and services used to measure, prevent, limit, minimize or correct environmental damage such as water, air and soil pollution, as well as problems related to waste, noise and ecosystems. This industry includes cleaner technologies, products and services that reduce risks to the environment, minimize pollution and save resources"* (OECD 2011). They need to group together to go international, on the one hand to compensate for the scarcity of their resources (Schweizer 2012), and on the other hand because environmental markets often take the form of public tenders requiring the application of a consortium (Saarenketo et al. 2018). The purpose of international support is to help SMEs to better internationalize (Leonidou, Palihawadana, and Theodosiou 2011), but the dedicated literature has not yet focused, to our knowledge, on the support of cooperative strategies.

This study aims to answer the following question: How can international cooperative strategies of green SMEs be supported? Indeed, since cooperative strategies are not a uniform concept, the first step will be to identify the types of cooperative strategies implemented by SMEs as part of their internationalization, then to understand what services have been developed to support them, and finally to understand how this support is evolving and how to improve its effectiveness.

As entrepreneurship research benefits from contextualization (Welter and Gartner 2016), we chose the context of green SMEs because they need to cooperate to reach the opportunities (Pinkse and Groot 2015), and because the implementation of the sustainability transition requires the success of these cooperative strategies.

Literature

Companies frequently cooperate for their internationalization (N. E. Coviello and Munro 1995; 1997; McDougall, Shane, and Oviatt 1994). We define cooperation as "firms jointly pursuing mutual interests and common benefits" (Das and Teng 2000; Hannah and Eisenhardt 2018). It covers a large range of different strategies, from the most informal to the most integrated (Spence, Manning, and Crick 2008; Haahti et al. 2005). Those different cooperative strategies could be supported differently.

International support literature traditionally sees international support services (ISSs) as resource providers for SMEs (Leonidou, Samiee, and Geldres 2016), in terms of funding (Czinkota 2002; Köksal 2009), information (Child and Hsieh 2014), consulting, training, and legal and technical support (Durmuşoğlu et al. 2012), and marketing (Tesfom and Lutz 2008; Freixanet 2012). SMEs could therefore take advantage of these resources individually, but also collectively.

Recent studies highlight the influence of support services on the network (Catanzaro, Messeghem, and Sammut 2015) and the relational capital of SMEs (Catanzaro, Messeghem, and Sammut 2018; Haddoud, Jones, and Newbery 2017). The literature therefore examines the antecedents of cooperative strategies, but not these strategies themselves.

Methods

A qualitative methodology (Patton, 2005) was chosen here because it allows a deeper understanding of the processes at work. We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with 21 structures providing ISSs headquartered in France (2 ministries, 3 governmental agencies, 7 competitiveness poles, 1 institute, 6 private clusters, 1 union, 1 inter-branch organization) and with 9 internationalized French green SMEs engaged in international cooperations. The transcripts were processed through a thematic analysis and a manual coding. Adopting a multi-level approach, by questioning both the structures providing the ISSs and the beneficiaries of their support, makes it possible to confirm, invalidate or nuance the vision of each level, and to have a deeper insight into it.

Findings

First, this study characterizes the different types of cooperative strategies set up by green SMEs, with an increasing degree of commitment. We found a first step, informal, where green SMEs do not respond together to the same contract but travel together on missions and trade fairs, mutualize actions, join to solve common problems. The next step is when they group together to respond to a single opportunity, and coordinate to fulfill the contract. The last step is when they build long-term cooperations, either dyadic with suppliers, customers, or distributors, or multi-partners aiming to build an integrated offer to prospect together. Secondly, this study shows how each type of cooperation is supported by ISSs, by organizing informal cooperations, by providing all the ingredients necessary for one-shot formal cooperations, and by initiating long lasting cooperative strategies, or by providing resources for the cooperations initiated by SMEs. Thirdly, we found that this type of support is increasingly implemented by the structures providing the ISSs, and the avenues for improvement are identified.

Contributions

This study provides a typology of green SMEs international cooperative strategies. It contributes to the field of international support by highlighting new services that did not appear in the literature, and by extending the scope of action of structures from isolated companies to collectives. It confirms the work on the influence of ISSs on the network and on the relational capital of SMEs but extends it to cooperative strategies.

This study enriches the literature on environmental entrepreneurship by providing elements of understanding on their cooperative strategies and on their international support, which responds in particular to the call of Saarenketo et al. (2018).

On the managerial side, this study allows green SMEs to see what type of support they can find from ISSs for their international cooperations. It gives ISSs an overview of how their support should evolve to meet the expectations of green SMEs. Finally, this study shows the interest for policy makers to get in touch with the ISSs, which are a major gateway to green SMEs that implement their decisions in the field.

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