

Empowering Local Human Resources in the Internationalization Process: A Qualitative Study of Coffee-Based MSMEs

Indira Oktavianti^{1*}, Sudarmiatin², Heri Pratikto³

¹ Departemen of Management Science, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Negeri Malang, Street, Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

²⁻³ Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, East Java, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author: e-mail: indira.oktavianti.2404139@students.um.ac.id

Abstract: This study aims to examine the empowerment of local human resources as a strategic asset in the internationalization process of MSMEs in Sumber Wandhe Wonosalam, Jombang, East Java. This study employs a qualitative case study approach to facilitate the investigation of complex research phenomena, evaluate various perspectives, identify contributing factors, and generate a broad overview. The study indicates that success in internationalization requires a combination of capabilities that can meet market needs, rather than a single capability. Business actors who are able to recognize opportunities for local human resource empowerment can optimize the export process. This enables the region and its residents to maintain generational training in innovative management to address the turnover of the younger generation. Ultimately, this study provides a foundation for further research on the dynamic capabilities required for MSMEs to thrive in international markets.

Keywords: Coffee Commodity; Export – Oriented Small Enterprise; Internationalization; MSMEs; Resource-Based View (RBV).

1. Introduction

Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are the primary drivers of economic growth in every country. Their growth is crucial for socioeconomic development and poverty alleviation (Rahman et al., 2017). MSMEs have thrived thanks to global economic progress and advancements in information technology, and internationalization has emerged as the key to their long-term success. Internationalization refers to the process of building an organization's capacity to seize international business opportunities, whether by entering new markets or strengthening its commitment to existing international markets. This process typically begins gradually, starting with irregular exports before reaching full-scale exports through agents and direct investment in international markets (Haddoud, et al., 2017).

SMEs in developing countries face greater challenges than those in developed countries when competing in domestic and international markets. During the internationalization process, these challenges may include constraints related to internal and external resources, such as a lack of management, knowledge, and financial support (Bowen, 2020). Limitations in business models also often pose complex challenges for SME operators in meeting higher market demands for quality and competitiveness (Vu, et al., 2026).

In developing countries, MSMEs are predominantly found in the agricultural sector, particularly as smallholder farmers (Jayne et al., 2022). Sixty percent of farmers in the coffee industry are smallholders (ICO, 2023). As one of the world's most popular beverages, coffee production and consumption continue to rise. SMEs in the coffee industry play a vital role in the national economy by creating jobs, employing local labor, and contributing to the value of agricultural commodity exports. Indonesia, as a developing country, has also seen a 5.3% increase in coffee bean consumption (Ministry of Trade, 2025). However, most SMEs remain focused on the domestic market and face challenges related to scale, quality, and human resource capacity in meeting export standards. Consumers choose coffee based on demands

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for quality and sustainability, and coffee products are gradually undergoing “de-commoditization” (Borella et al., 2015). A study Vu et al. (2022) highlights this shift in Vietnam. Using their sample, which consists largely of micro and small coffee shops, they demonstrate the companies’ involvement across various stages of the coffee supply chain, including the export of specialty coffee.

In the Wonosalam region of Jombang, East Java, Excelsa coffee possesses unique characteristics including distinct aroma, acidity, and flavor that could give it a competitive edge in the international market. However, the export process requires international standards, certification, packaging, and logistics systems, which are often beyond the capabilities of local SMEs. Several studies indicate that small and medium-sized coffee companies in Indonesia still face challenges such as limited access to information, overseas market networks, and sufficient human resources to manage exports.

A report from Indonesia’s Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs indicates that MSMEs account for only about 15.7 percent of the country’s total exports, far below neighboring countries such as Singapore (41 percent) and Thailand (29 percent) (Kompas, 2023). According to another report from the Indonesian Ministry of Trade (2024), factors such as low competitiveness and capabilities in marketing, labor, and financial resources contribute to this poor performance. Given that the number of SMEs in Indonesia is among the highest in Southeast Asia, they have the potential to boost Indonesia’s exports and demonstrate their vital role in the national economy. How small and medium-sized businesses identify and capitalize on opportunities in international markets has been discussed in numerous studies (Zahoor et al. 2020), highlighting the importance of strategically positioned resources.

According to Barney’s Resource-Based View framework (1991), in the context of internationalization, internal resources include assets, capabilities, and strengths that enable a business to compete and succeed in foreign markets; these resources are developed, controlled, and utilized internally to support its international expansion. On the other hand, external resources refer to assets and capabilities that a business obtains from external networks, collaborations, and the market environment to improve business performance in foreign markets. The adoption of food processing innovations can be measured from a resource-based perspective (Naila et al., 2025). Specifically, the value and the inability to replicate new food processing methods and equipment are recognized as valid measures. Local human resources who possess an understanding of the characteristics of Excelsa coffee, processing practices, and the socio-cultural context of Wonosalam, East Java, can serve as a resource that is difficult for competitors from other countries to replicate. For SMEs exporting coffee, local human resources function not only as labor; they are also strategic assets that help develop local coffee brands by integrating culture, community ties, and technological knowledge.

Although important, human resource development in coffee export MSMEs still faces several challenges, such as training programs, a lack of incentives for career development, and a management style dominated by trial-and-error rather than a professional management system. Previous studies in the F&B sector and among SMEs indicate that SMEs often avoid investing in human resources due to financial constraints and the perception that training lacks direct financial impact (Romario et al., 2021). This exacerbates the knowledge gap between the existing capabilities of the local workforce and the requirements of export standards.

In the context of coffee SME exports, previous research has primarily focused on marketing elements, raw material quality, and export policies. Conversely, the role of local human resources as a strategic asset and the human resources-raw material combination within the RBV framework has not been extensively studied (Romario et al., 2021). To understand how the empowerment of local human resources can strengthen the strategic position of Excelsa coffee SMEs in exports, several qualitative studies on HRM have focused on specific cases such as coffee with milk or urban coffee shops, but have not explicitly linked human resources with RBV and raw materials as strategic entities.

Although Excelsa coffee in the Wonosalam region of Jombang has a unique identity, there has been little empirical research examining the role of human resources in the export process (Rifai et al., 2026). This study will reveal practices of local human resource empowerment, their relationship with Excelsa coffee raw materials, and the role of both as strategic assets in exports. Through a qualitative case study of Wonosalam coffee MSMEs, this study will demonstrate how human resource strengthening is necessary in the upstream-downstream coffee industry, although its implementation remains limited and has not yet been conceptualized within the RBV theoretical framework.

Based on the background outlined above, this study aims to uncover the role of local human resources as a strategic asset in Excelsa coffee exports, viewing it through the RBV perspective and linking it to raw materials as core resources. The study employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on SMEs in Wonosalam Subdistrict, Jombang, East Java. The results of this study are expected to provide a theoretical contribution to enriching the application of RBV in the context of coffee-exporting SMEs, while also offering practical implications for human resource empowerment, dynamic capacity building, and strengthening the competitiveness of the local coffee SME community.

2. Literature Review

Theory of Resource-Based View (RBV)

Resource-Based View refers to organizations that possess and utilize resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). The objective of the Resource-Based View (RBV) is to understand how various resources interact with one another and how resources can be combined to maintain a competitive advantage. Companies that possess unique, valuable, and irreplaceable resources have the ability to win in competition and survive in the global market. Barney and Arian (2005) categorize resources into tangible and intangible.

Physical assets such as buildings, machinery, and financial capital are examples of tangible resources. Intangible resources, such as capabilities, are a collection of unique and complex skills and knowledge possessed by an organization. To achieve optimal long-term performance, business actors must effectively utilize their intangible resources to exploit tangible resources in a manner aligned with market conditions (Racela & Thourmrungrejo, 2020). Sustainable competitive advantage is considered the result of creativity (Gupta & Chauhan, 2021), as it possesses unique factors such as value, scarcity, non-replicability, and the ability to be exploited by the organization.

Internationalization of SMEs

The significant impact of small and medium-sized enterprises on the global economy has led to increased research interest in their international expansion (Hamid, 2004). Various theories and approaches have been used to study the internationalization process of SMEs. This is due to the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises and their unique characteristics. Context is crucial for internationalization, and the context for international business encompasses the individual, organizational, and home country environments (Teagarde, 2018). Conversely, in strategic management, there is typically a more detailed categorization that focuses on decision-makers and the specific context of the business decisions they make. Additionally, SMEs must possess significant production capabilities to scale up operations while maintaining product quality (Ding, et al., 2021). This includes the ability to produce finished goods that ensure the business can meet international customer demand while adhering to global quality standards to successfully compete in international markets (Kazemi, et al., 2024). Furthermore, Aldibiki and El Ebrashi (2023) highlight the importance of value-added capabilities as a mediator between network performance and international performance, which helps improve products and processes.

The five developing countries in Southeast Asia are Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The ASEAN Investment Report (2022) states that the contribution of Indonesia's micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) is expected to be greater than that of other ASEAN countries because Indonesia has the largest number

of MSMEs in the ASEAN region. Each country has a different definition of MSMEs. These definitions are typically influenced by various factors, such as the amount of capital invested, the number of employees, and assets or sales (Khan et al., 2014).

The criteria used to define MSMEs depend on a country's stage of economic development and the specific policy objectives being pursued. SMEs tend to have more employees in countries with more prosperous economies (Gibson, 2008). Research by Ndiaye et al. (2018) found that financial and firm characteristics, informality, infrastructure, innovation and technology, regulation, taxation, trade, and employees influence the performance of small and medium-sized businesses and their ability to expand into new markets. Freixanet and Federo (2022) found that information technology enables businesses to gather information on trends and customers, helping small and medium-sized enterprises identify market gaps, create innovative and unique products, and ensure that their products remain relevant, valuable, and competitive, particularly in target markets.

Human Resources Management

Human resources are a critical internal resource for supporting a company's performance (Mendy & Rahman, 2019). Small businesses in developing countries face challenges such as finding high-quality employees who can help their businesses grow. Okpara & Kabongo (2010) noted in their research findings that limited skilled labor can hinder SMEs from growing and overcoming domestic and international challenges. Barriers to export knowledge stem from employees who lack experience and training. Companies with high-quality employees handling export operations are more likely to participate in export markets. Developing countries like Indonesia must prioritize the development and implementation of training programs for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprise (MSME) owners and their employees, given the complexity of the international business environment. These efforts play a crucial role in enhancing the internationalization of small and medium-sized enterprises, offering a promising future.

3. Method

The phenomenon of internationalization must be examined thoroughly because it is highly complex. Consequently, as stated by Creswell and Creswell (2017), this study employs a qualitative research methodology, which allows the researcher to evaluate various perspectives, identify contributing factors, and generate a broad overview. The researcher employs a case study methodology to facilitate the investigation of this complex research phenomenon. Yin (2018) notes that the case study is a widely used social science research approach for in-depth examination of contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts. This qualitative method allows academics to study complex and specific phenomena using structured case studies that focus on the "how" and "why" of these phenomena. Case studies enable researchers to compare and contrast cases to identify patterns, similarities, and differences. This helps researchers better understand the phenomena and make generalizations.

Data Source

The focus of this study is coffee and coffee-based product MSMEs, as defined by Government Regulation No. 07 of 2021. Companies with net assets of up to 1 billion rupiah and sales of up to 2 billion rupiah are classified as microenterprises under this regulation. The data for this study was collected from the Sumber Wandhe MSME, located in Jombang, East Java.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with the owners of the target companies to gather preliminary data. This type of interview is suitable for qualitative research because it can provide in-depth and useful information about the research topic. To learn about the history of internationalization, we conducted interviews using open-ended questions. According to Yin (2018), this protocol was designed to encourage discussion and give the interviewer the opportunity to learn more about the topic and the responses provided.

The main questions asked included: What process did you follow when starting to export? Second, what factors played a key role in the success of your exports? Third, how do you measure the success of your exports? Is there a dedicated team assisting with the export process? How do you manage human resources to optimize business operations? These main questions led to more in-depth inquiries, which supported the findings. The interviews were conducted in person and lasted approximately 3 hours. Interview transcripts were used for additional analysis during the interview sessions. Additionally, this study utilized supplementary data from articles, websites, social media, and other online sources to supplement the interview data. We occasionally followed up with participants via WhatsApp to provide updates and ensure their statements aligned with what they had said during the interviews.

Data Analysis

In-depth interviews were conducted with the owners of the target companies to gather initial data. This type of interview is suitable for qualitative research because it can provide in-depth and useful information about the research topic. To learn about the internationalization process, we employed an interview protocol with open-ended questions. The first step, to achieve the research objectives, was to conduct data analysis. Case analysis is based on interview transcripts, according to Weber (1990). Case study analysis begins with individual case analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to connect patterns or themes into a holistic configuration and describe the cases in chronological and thematic order. The purpose of individual case analysis is also to organize, define, reduce, and understand the information obtained from each observed case (Pagel & Wu, 2009). The case studies considered may be biased due to their unique context and cannot be generalized (especially in internationalization research) (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). Therefore, triangulation is necessary to make the research findings more credible and robust (Yin, 2018). This study interviewed micro-business owners in the processed food industry as part of the triangulation process. This triangulation utilizes documents, online sources, and interview data.

4. Results and Discussion

Results

Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises engage in activities aligned with the empowerment of local human resources as a strategic asset in internationalization. Sumber Wandhe Kopi Excelsa Wonosalam MSME is a roastery, coffee shop, and coffee lab located in Sumber Hamlet, Wonosalam Subdistrict, Jombang, East Java, focused on preserving and developing Dutch-heritage coffee varieties such as Excelsa and Liberica through modern fermentation. Founded in 2017 by Mochamad Shobari Karim, the business began exporting green coffee beans after foreign buyers were immediately drawn to the unique characteristics of the local coffee. Operations cover the entire supply chain, from cultivation to packaging, with market expansion into Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Australia, India, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. In addition to exports, domestic products such as ground coffee and ready-to-drink beverages are sold at the on-site café.

The export process began when foreign buyers visited Wonosalam in person in 2019 and were drawn to the unique characteristics of Excelsa and Liberica coffee. This process involves preparing the necessary legal documentation with the assistance of consulting services, complying with destination country regulations such as the EUDR for Europe, and coordinating with freight forwarders for shipments to countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Australia, India, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. There are no specific details regarding the initial administrative steps, but coffee bean export regulations are considered less complex than those for other processed products. The main products are specialty-grade 1–3 regular and premium coffee beans for export. Sustainability depends on monitoring from seedling to harvest and adapting to opportunities. Quality meets regulations such as the EUDR in Europe, and processing uses custom equipment meeting international standards. The domestic market focuses on ground coffee and ready-to-drink products, while exports are supported by freight forwarders and consultants to address challenges such as costs when regulatory changes occur.

Export success depends on the quality of Grade 1–3 specialty products, which are strictly monitored from seedling to harvest, as well as in-house production equipment that meets international standards. Adapting to buyer opportunities, international certifications held by the owners, and regulatory flexibility in countries such as Taiwan and Hong Kong are other key components. Owners leverage digital technology to expand their businesses and enhance operational efficiency. Business activities based on digital technology by owners include administration, sales transactions, and communicating with customers in export and domestic markets through social media and e-commerce platforms. Although there are issues such as funding, access to initial information, and additional costs due to a country's geopolitical conflicts, actively seeking information from freight forwarders and consultants is also important. Stable revenue in export markets since 2019 and expansion into various countries, supported by buyer demand for local coffee characteristics, indicate a high level of success. Although no quantitative metrics, such as volume or revenue, are mentioned, sustainability is marked by process innovation and human resource management on a larger scale. Exports continue despite external obstacles, such as changes in regional regulations in the receiving country.

The human resources structure relies on the empowerment of 30 local farmers at three processing sites, coordinated by one person responsible for supervising every 10 farmers, as well as 60–70 local women who sort the beans in bulk using traditional skills and the “watch-and-learn” method. Support for seed processing for up to 3 years, collaboration between government agencies and academics for farmers, and innovations in managing the turnover of the younger generation make human resources a strategic asset for internationalization. There is no dedicated team handling exports. Product exports are carried out directly by the owners, with forwarders and external consultants managing the process. The human resource structure consists of 30 farmers, with one supervisor for every ten farmers at three processing sites, and 60 to 70 local women who sort the harvest according to fruit quality using the observe-and-imitate system and traditional training methods. Through community empowerment, three years of seed processing guidance, and management innovations to foster a reliable and dedicated workforce, operational optimization has been achieved.

Discussion

The Resource-Based View has been widely validated in the literature for its ability to explain business performance in global markets (Racela & Thourmrungrejo, 2020; Gupta & Chauhan, 2021). According to the RBV, a company's long-term competitive advantage stems from the combination of its resources and unique capabilities. Based on this, this study argues that competitive advantage stems from the integration and synergy of various resources, rather than from individual resources or specific capabilities. These capabilities combine to form a unique advantage that is difficult for competitors to imitate. Companies rely on the coordination of various capabilities in the context of internationalization, which reflects the complexity and multifaceted nature of entering and competing in global markets.

Product planning to meet international consumer demand and global production standards is the initial stage of internationalization (Kazemi et al., 2024). High-quality products require adequate resources. Production capabilities encompass many factors, including raw materials, employees, production facilities, production methods, and the values embedded in the products. Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) require these elements to enhance their ability to produce high-quality, flexible, cost-effective products with shorter lead times (Aldibiki and El Ebrashi, 2023). This supports our findings that the capacity of business operators to deliver high-quality products and meet required standards is key to the success of small and medium-sized businesses in international markets.

Production capabilities enable small and medium-sized businesses to participate in supply chains by offering reliable products and processes. Furthermore, this builds a foundation of trust and relationships with partners and customers, strengthening supply chain operations. The production of products that meet quality standards, in the right quantities, and on time is a key capability and pillar of every export-oriented company (Ding, et al., 2021).

Production capabilities increase opportunities for cooperation and business transactions for the small businesses participating in this study, as our findings indicate.

Information technology enables businesses to gather information about trends and customers, helping small and medium-sized enterprises identify market opportunities, create innovative and unique products, and ensure that their products remain relevant, valuable, and competitive, particularly in target markets (Freixanet and Federo, 2022). Additionally, skilled human resources can operate in foreign markets without geographical constraints thanks to information technology. This study supports previous research by showing that micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises use information technology for marketing purposes, such as managing their social media, studying market trends, and finding new ideas to differentiate their products. Business owners also use digital technology to help them carry out their daily activities, such as sales transactions, and manage their finances more easily.

Human resources are a crucial internal asset that supports a company's performance, as noted by Mendy & Rahman (2019), and SMEs in developing countries often struggle to recruit high-quality employees to fuel business growth. Our findings reflect common challenges faced by SMEs in developing countries, such as employee turnover that reduces the effectiveness of time, costs, and energy, as well as the characteristics of the younger generation, who exhibit a weaker sense of ownership compared to previous generations. This aligns with the literature highlighting the limitations of informal HR competencies, a lack of long-term training, and retention difficulties due to insufficient benefits and unclear career paths. To address these challenges, business owners leverage local human resources as a strategic asset: a piecework system with intergenerational training and "watch-and-learn" methods to optimize the quantity and quality of specialized sorting, as well as mentorship lasting up to three years for coffee bean processing. A simple structure, in which 30 farmers are coordinated by one supervisor for every 10 people across three locations, supports collaboration between government agencies and academia, as well as strong management innovation and recruitment.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the complex dynamics of internationalization among export-oriented micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in developing countries, with a particular focus on Indonesia. The research employs a case study approach to determine how production capabilities, networks, marketing, learning, and human resource management as forms of empowerment for local communities contribute to global competitiveness. These capabilities enable MSMEs to navigate challenging overseas markets and sustain their international operations when strategically aligned and continuously developed.

Findings indicate that the expansion of MSMEs in developing countries depends on inherent capabilities and the strategic utilization of internal and external resources. Critical capabilities for production, marketing, networking, learning, and compliance are supported by key resources, such as high-quality local raw materials, production facilities, information technology, and unique product value. MSMEs can create high-quality, unique, and globally standardized products by combining these resources and capabilities. Overcoming challenges in foreign markets, enhancing competitive advantage, and ensuring the sustainability of international operations require this synergistic approach.

Innovative human resource management enables MSMEs to grow adaptively by transforming obstacles into unique opportunities. As a result, small and medium-sized businesses succeed in the global market by effectively combining their various capabilities, turning challenges into strategic advantages. This supports the idea that competitive advantage stems from coordinated efforts to maximize resources and capabilities. As micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises continue to play a vital role in global economic growth, particularly in emerging markets, enhancing their capabilities is essential for achieving long-term business sustainability and continuity. As a comprehensive framework that illustrates the evolving relationship between resources and capabilities as SMEs enter global markets, this study makes a significant contribution to prior research by highlighting the importance of

creating synergies among key capabilities, enabling MSMEs to effectively navigate the complexities of the global market.

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