

Digital support services for exporting SMEs / Fintech in Gender Lens

Regional event - June 20 and 21, 2023 - Rome

Key Takeaways



DIGITAL SUPPORT FOR EXPORTING SMES (20 JUNE 2023)

EXPANDING SME EXPORT WORLDWIDE

On June 20, 2023, the MED MSMEs Programme organized in Rome, in collaboration with INSME (International Network of SME), a day of exchanges on strategies and instruments supporting SME export, with a particular focus on digital service platform.

The event was attended by the main institutional and private stakeholders in the Italian export ecosystem (SACE, ITA, SIMEST, CdP; Unioncamere), integrating the export.gov.it digital platform, 31 institutional and private foreign trade representatives from 7 Southern Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Palestine), and the responsible of two ITC (International Trade Centre) programmes (Euro Med Trade Helpdesk and e.commConnect).

Presentations by Italian officials showed the deployment of the national export strategy, the role played by each agency in terms of export financing and insurance, support for companies and promotion of their products on the international market, the governance of the digital platform and the supervision/coordination with Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Enterprise & Made in Italy.



THE ITALIAN EXPORT PLATFORM

The first part of the event, introduced by **Christophe MALHERBE**, **Team Leader** of the MED MSMEs Programme, gave the floor to representatives from Italian institutions who are the cornerstone of the **export.gov.it**, a digital platform that provides support services and financing to exporting SMEs. This platform constitutes a best practice of inter-ministerial collaboration, a model of financial and non-financial services integration, and a powerful tool for Italian SMEs targeting foreign markets. The session was opened by **INSME President, Mr Sergio Arzeni**, prior to the introduction of the distinguished experts by INSME **Secretary General, Giovanni Zazzerini**.



Simona Vultaggio, Manager of Education, Business Promotion & Supply Chain at SACE, highlighted the one-stop shop tool, export.gov.it, and its many functions to support SMEs in their internationalization. Ms. Vultaggio elaborated on these digitized services explaining the 4 main drivers to support SME expansion. She covered the digital solutions this tool offers, namely the tools to find digital products, business partners, insurance, and more through the open platform, myspace.it. One of the many initiatives was business matching, dedicated to Italian SMEs creating relationships with external buyers. This included business meetings hosted by these offices in Italy, abroad, and online in collaboration with partners, as well as a digital showcase where all collaborating international buyers are presented and available for Italian SMEs.



By empowering SMEs with tools for internationalization, risk management, and digital transformation, the platform serves as a catalyst for their success in global markets, fostering growth and sustainability in the ever-evolving business landscape.

Mariangela Siciliano, Head of Education of Business Promotion & Supply Chain at SACE, followed her colleagues' introduction of export.gov.it by further elaborating on the purpose and benefits of this powerful tool. Ms. Siciliano says the tool began with a need from SMEs, stating the difficulty is figuring out who to talk to, where to seek information, and how to get support from institutions. A discussion on how to centralize all the export services offered by the national and regional services of export and internationalization in a single public portal to support SMEs, led to an inter-ministerial collaboration led by the internationalization committee (*Cabina Di Regia per L'Internazionalizzazione*).



This portal aims to reach the SMEs that are new to exporting, but also those that already have an export strategy in place and want more information on liquidity, how to get financial support, digitization, business matching, etc. According to Ms. Siciliano, all information and services available on the portal undergo frequent updates. It is emphasized that a collaborative effort from all stakeholders is crucial to ensure the portal remains up-to-date and aligned with the company's needs.



Andrea degl'Innocenti, the Director of digital services of Italian Trade Agency, gave an overview on the 20 free services his company provide for SMEs that want to grow internationally. The three main pillars under which the services work are: promotion, support, training. On of this one is the platform [exort.gov.it](https://export.gov.it), which will offer companies the one-stop-shop for public support to exports and full export journey. He explained the origin of the platform, which is born out of “Patto per l’export”, the strategic agreement signed in 2020 by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, with the aim of providing Italian companies with a single point of reference for navigating the world of export. The project of the new public portal, he stated, it is online since September 2020, and it has been realized by MAECI, the Italian Trade Agency, SACE and SIMEST, in collaboration with CDP, the regions and the Chambers of commerce.



Furthermore, Andrea degl'Innocenti highlighted the essential objective of the initiative: to give to Italian SMEs an easier access to all services made available by the various public actors (both national and regional) for the internationalization of enterprises. The main targets of the platform, he explained, are not only the most developed companies but also the less mature, such as companies that are not exporting yet even though, they are ready, companies with low exporting, companies already exporting but with a conservative approach, and companies already exporting but not fully aware of all available exporting services by PI.

Francesca Alicata, chief of external relations of SIMEST (part of Cassa Depositi e Prestiti groups) underlined that company's mission is to support the Italian firms, especially internationalization of SMEs to develop their firms worldwide. They offer three lines of activities, namely equity loans, export credit support and soft loans. Throughout the presentation, Francesca Alicata firstly explained that equity loans aim to support the Italian firms to buy a productive site in a foreign country through SIMEST own funds and with a time horizon up to 6.8 years with a buy back agreement with the Italian partner. On the wave, the export credit support is managed by SIMEST through a joint venture to promote economic conditions respecting the structure of the company investment. Regarding the soft loans, Francesca Alicata indicated the support that they give to the Italian firms entering the foreign markets in their growth and internationalization processes. As an example, SIMEST could offer loans for trade fairs and exhibition to promote business on new markets, as well as loans for programs for entering foreign markets by opening of commercial structures and the strengthening of existing structures. Moreover, they offer loans for e-commerce through the use of a marketplace or the creation of a well-developed IT platforms, and so many other loans to which SIMES apply a very low interest rate, that is 10% of EU benchmark rate. Finally, Francesca Alicata clarified that the guarantee the company ask for depends on their size. If a company is huge, it is low rated, based on the score of Medio Credito Centrale, in which a database record information about each company and therefore evaluate its score.

Still sharing each company contribution to the platform, **Pietro Infante, expert in Unioncamere**, presented his company and its hard work in the creation of the export.gov.it platform. The major contribution Unioncamere provided to the project is the SEI project (supporting Italian export). Its aim is to prepare SMEs to face international markets and strengthen the presence abroad for companies already working in global markets or for the occasional potential exporters. Results of an interest prediction of the study "Guglielmo Tagliacarne" estimated that a stronger role for chambers of commerce could bring about 44.000 potential exporting companies to international markets, meaning an estimated growth around 40 billion in exports, compared to 620 billion of the total Italian export in 2022. Unioncamere intervention aimed to support SMEs through the application of different practices and activities, like training and support exports, vouchers, as well as reaching and contacting counterpart by using platforms and digital tools.

Dr Valeria Centinaro intervened as head of projects at PROMOS Italia. She introduced Project SEI (Supporting Italian Exports), which is mentioned in the first step of the export.gov.it platform, with the aim of increasing the number of exporting companies, strengthening the international positioning of occasional exporters and standardize the support services for SMEs. The project provides entry level assistance for SMEs (digital tools to identify the correct internationalisation strategy), digital export opportunities hub, financial advisory services. More than 7000 companies are active and subscribed on the platform, with 3000+ trained. SEI follows the SME's journey starting from a training phase that will then evolve into an export check-up and export readiness assessment. Dr Centinaro then introduced three useful tools that can be used through PROMOS: GO2MARKET, DIGITEXPORT and INBUYER. GO2MARKET is a tool that exists specifically for chambers of commerce actors, not for the common public, DIGITEXPORT is a webinar based



platform and assessment tool for companies, taking into account e-shops and social media platforms and INBUYER is a matchmaking platforms for SMEs.

The final speaker from the Italian delegation was **Riccardo Honorati Bianchi** from Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, where he works as Head of Country System Initiatives.

Honorati Bianchi presented a platform inside the export.gov.it platform. [Business Matching CDP](#). Cassa depositi e prestiti is the national promotion institution and works in financial international cooperation, helping and promoting innovation and sustainable initiatives in Italy and abroad. With this goal in mind, CDP has developed a business matching platform with MAECI and SIMEST, aimed to support SMEs in internationalization. This gave the opportunity for SMEs to explore new commercial partnerships, opening new international markets touching China, USA, Japan and South Africa among other countries. This platform is algorithmically based, meaning that the system will automatically propose partnerships, which are supported also through translation services and B2B meeting organizations.



4600+ companies have registered from all over the world, with 3000 actively participating in the matchmaking process.

DELEGATIONS FROM THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN PARTNER COUNTRIES

In the afternoon, **Mr. Paolo Castrataro (SME Internationalisation Expert at MED MSMEs)** animated the panel devoted to the exchange of experience among the Southern Mediterranean Countries during which representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco took the floor to present their country's export ecosystem, lessons learned from recent initiatives and needs for the future to enhance digitalisation.

Egypt

Mr Mohamed Abdelkader, IMC Representative, presented the export challenges of Egyptian SMEs nowadays. The main challenges Egyptians are facing are represented by the increasing costs of trade logistics and certificates, the low knowledge of international market and the lack of export guarantee, as well as the lack of knowledge, resources, new technologies and digital channels. Mr Abdelkader has shared with the audience the IMC policies implemented to overcome MSMEs export challenges in Egypt. These policies are increasing the awareness of technology transfer as a key priority, besides supporting and subsidizing B2B activities for MSMEs, capacity building programs and embracing digital solutions, utilizing effective digital tools. Moreover, they are considered important policies such as compiling Egyptian products to the latest standards and fostering public-private co-operation and cluster information.



Mr Iman Omar, the Expolink Representative, emphasized the support and opportunities for MSMEs through Expolink to overcome challenges in Egypt. They work on 6 topics: market intelligence, export readiness, certification verifications & logistics, product & process upgrade, promotion & marketing, and matchmaking supplier & buyer. In other words, Expolink focused on these program themes to get the best



opportunity for export and avoid failed processes. Mr Omar also underlined the Export Incubator Program (EIP), which addresses the rising demand for export in Egypt and the need to enable new exporters and build the export capacity in the country for MSMEs and SMEs. Starting in October 2020, it makes an impact on more job creation, adding to inclusive social and economic development. They provide more than 30.000 export opportunities and 5000 international buyers. They participated in 541 international trade fairs. Also, they organized 67 trade missions and success with 1604 corporate image-building profiles. He also emphasized the desire to collaborate.

Lebanon

Khaled BOHSALI, Executive Director- Head of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Banque du Liban, stressed that international strategy should overcome the main barriers that afflict Lebanese technical infrastructure, lack of legal frameworks and consumer protection framework. Mr Bohsali shares BDL's efforts in overcoming barriers through the enhancement of the industrial collaboration with banks and Fintech companies and other potential stakeholders, enacting the appropriate regulatory and supervisory framework, raising awareness of digital literacy also with training and working groups.



Jordan

Mira Hussein, of Jordan Enterprise Development Corporation (JEDCO), presented the National Export Strategy, which aims to expand and diversify Jordanian exports by leveraging trade agreements. Key objectives include identifying new markets, promoting product quality and competitiveness, and enhancing export capacity for local businesses. The strategy prioritizes North America, the EU, Africa, North Asian countries, and neighbouring regions as target markets. Executive programs within the strategy focus on market information, marketing, quality, finance, legislation, and e-commerce. The strategy was developed through partnerships with various public and private sector institutions.



Lana Al-Zubi, of Jordan Enterprise Development Corporation (JEDCO), highlighted recent initiatives supporting SMEs in Jordan. One significant effort is the Industrial Development Fund, funded by the World Bank, which promotes private sector-led investment through industry upgrading, outcome-based incentives, and export guarantees. JEDCO, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, and the Jordanian Loan Guarantee Corporation manage different aspects of these programs. JEDCO serves as the national umbrella organization, collaborating with private sector entities such as Chambers of Industry and Trade, business associations, and Jordan Exports Company to facilitate SME growth and international expansion. Over the

past decade, JEDCO has supported around 1,000 SMEs, reached 120 countries, and financed 11,000 SMEs with 186 million Jordanian dinars. The Industrial Development Fund, with an 85 million USD budget, implements the Industrial Modernization and Export Promotion Programs.

Morocco

The delegation from Morocco saw two presentations by Miss **Kawtar Mgouni** from the **Ministry of Industry and Trade** and **Mounir Ferram** of **ASMEX**. Miss Mgouni stressed the importance of supporting small and medium-sized enterprises for exports in Morocco, while Mounir Ferram focused on Moroccan Exporters Associations. In response to untapped export potential, the Ministry of Industry and Trade established a



Task Force Export system. The ministry aims to diversify action into new markets, including the UK, USA, and China. They analysed 200 exportable products across various sectors such as automotive, aeronautics, food, industry, fishing, clothing, electrical, technology, pharmacy, building materials, and plastics. Each product undergoes a thorough analysis of quality, export opportunities, Morocco's international position, characteristics of target markets, access conditions, and risks.



To leverage the identified potential, the ministry offers various export support programs in partnership with entities like the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Moroccan Agency of Development of Investments and Exports, and the Moroccan Association of Exporters. These programs include individualized export support, certification, and compliance programs to meet international standards, specific financing programs in collaboration with national banks, export insurance strengthening, and support for SMEs participating in fairs, shows, and missions.

On top of the above...

Said Charna, Advisor to the Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), expressed the severity of the need for SMEs in the Mediterranean region to digitalize. SMEs are crucial to the economy of many countries but at the international level they are under resourced and financed. Only a small percentage of Mediterranean SMEs have access to international markets, but this percentage can be increased through digitalization, seeing it as a crucial tool for internationalization and regional economic development. Because of this, UfM has made it their priority to assist SMEs in their digitalization process. UfM has done this through the organization of workshops in collaboration with Estonians, specifically the important Estonia ICT cluster. Besides this, UfM is also launching a grant scheme soon on inclusive digital trade that mainly targets NPOs in the Southern Mediterranean countries that work on enhancing e-commerce for mainly women-led SMEs.

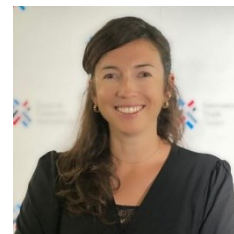
Giovanni Zazzerini closed this rich and collaborative event, concluding with the belief that SMEs everywhere in the world face the same problems and that efforts ubiquitously must be combined to fix these prevalent issues. SMEs face the liability of smallness and must overcome this through digitalization as this opens international markets to SMEs. Digitalization allows SMEs to access foreign market information and unlocks access to millions of customers through which they can establish relationships. Internationalization offers many opportunities but also risks as there is more competition. Local competitive advantages may not exist internationally therefore SMEs must ensure high product quality and strengthen their competencies. Export.gov.it is available to emerging ecosystems in Italy which can increase their innovation and internationalization. Due to this, the platform can be a tool for economic development as there is a strong link between innovation, product introduction, and economic development.

Access the event's presentations [HERE](#).

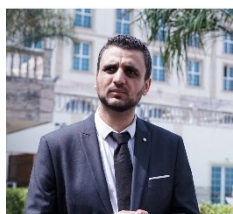


EUROMED TRADE HELPDESK AND ECOMM.CONNECT (21 JUNE 2023)

Ms Elodie Robin, Project Director of the **Euromed Trade Helpdesk** (<https://euromed.tradehelpdesk.org/>) at the ITC - International Trade Centre, provided a quick overview of the potential and obstacles to trade development among South and East Mediterranean countries, and how digital tools can address the needs for information on export markets, assist in spotting opportunities, and offer a single window for answering enquiries, the sum of all answers forming a pool of knowledge made available to all users. Her presentation was followed by that of Mr Jawad Almuty from the Ministry of National Economy in Palestine, who gave a real-life online demonstration of the platform's operation and functions. This presentations showcased how the level of detail provided by the Euromed Trade Helpdesk was instrumental in informing and elaborating relevant export strategies.



Mr. Abdelbasset Boulelouah, marketing and e-commerce advisor at ITC, presented **ecomConnect** ([ITC's e-commerce programme](#)) which supports SMEs in developing countries to market and sell their products online by connecting them to local, regional, and international online markets, in an inclusive and sustainable manner. Mr. Boulelouah presented the results of e-commerce projects recently implemented in the South-med region (Tunisia, Lebanon, and MENA) and other regions (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), and highlighted ecomConnect's modus operandi for achieving positive outcomes and systemic change. Combined efforts at the enterprise, ecosystem and institutional levels are critical for the success of e-commerce development and the digitalization of SMEs. Collaboration between private and public players is essential to unlock the full potential of e-commerce.



FINTECH IN GENDER LENS: AN ACTION PLAN (AFTERNOON SESSION)

The afternoon session gave the opportunity to listen to policy makers, regulators and stakeholders who shared the latest developments of the fintech sectors in the South Med partner countries. It also allowed discussing the FinTech in Gender Lens Action Plan, an action plan aimed at mainstreaming gender into the South Med fintech industry, prior to focusing on four priorities that could bear immediate impact.

During the session, **Mr. Christophe Malherbe** (Team Leader MED MSMEs) initiated discussions by highlighting the potential risks associated with overlooking gender considerations in the FinTech industry and the use of outdated processes reliant on technologies, data, and algorithms that no longer align with current contexts and inclusion goals. This underscores the importance of carefully refining estimations to prevent the replication of past models that have contributed to gender disparities in access to finance. Consequently, Mr. Malherbe outlined the session's objective, which is to foster regional dialogue among women in business associations and participants from central banks. The focus is on effectively implementing the Financial and Gender Literacy Action Plan (FGL-AP), establishing the Euro-Med Network of Women in FinTech, determining the necessary measures for maximizing impact and sustainability, understanding the expectations and challenges faced by women in business associations, and assessing the progress made by policymakers in establishing an inclusive industry foundation.

The FGL-AP session was moderated by Dr. Amira Kaddour (FinTech in gender lens expert MED MSMEs) and by Mrs Douja Gharbi (Tabadool expert MED MSMEs).



During the session, **Mrs. Huda Rawabdee**, a civil society activist and representative of the FinTech startup beezwrowd in Jordan, highlighted the progress achieved within the Jordanian ecosystem. Specifically, she discussed the Central Bank of Jordan's ongoing initiatives aimed at fostering innovation and encouraging the introduction of inclusive financial solutions and digital experiences to the market. Notably, the Central Bank established the JO REG BOX in 2018 to support FinTech innovation and facilitate safe experimentation. This regulatory sandbox



provides innovators with a controlled environment to test their FinTech applications. Mrs. Huda also emphasized the importance of creating incentives for women in the field, as funding and administrative barriers often discourage women from investing in FinTech ventures.

Mrs. Ibtissam EL ANZAOU from Bank Al-Maghrib in Morocco shared the outcomes of the first phase of the Moroccan National Financial Strategy, set to conclude by December 2023. Notable achievements include the implementation of significant legal and regulatory reforms to promote financial inclusion. These reforms encompass the establishment of frameworks for microfinance, micro-insurance, crowdfunding, credit bureaus, and movable collateral. The country has also placed a strong emphasis on digitalization, making progress in mobile payment systems, the digitization of government-to-person (G2P) payments, and the ongoing adoption of electronic know-your-customer (e-KYC) processes. Moreover, efforts have been made to enhance communication and financial education across all relevant aspects. Recognizing the importance of women as a key target population, specific measures have been introduced to support women-led businesses through the development of gender-centric financial products. Additionally, a dedicated national initiative has been launched to empower rural women economically, with a pilot experience tailored specifically for young entrepreneurs in these regions.



Although the FinTech ecosystem in Morocco is still in its early stages of development and faces challenges related to infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, customer behavior, and access to finance and investors, recent initiatives have been implemented to bolster the sector. One noteworthy initiative is the establishment of a "One stop shop" within Bank Al-Maghrib, offering support and guidance on the Moroccan legal and regulatory framework as well as the licensing process. This has facilitated the emergence of new business models within the payment value chain and beyond, including aggregation, buy now pay later services, and nano-credits. Furthermore, efforts are underway to explore additional avenues for growth through an experimental approach. In line with this, a new project called the Morocco Fintech Market Current State Assessment and Strategy Development has been launched to assess the current state of the Fintech landscape in the country and provide recommendations to expedite the growth of the ecosystem. Mrs. El Anzaoui proposed several suggestions to foster an inclusive FinTech ecosystem in the region, including raising awareness among policymakers about the importance of a gender-sensitive and transformative approach in the FinTech industry, forming partnerships with civil society and universities to stimulate women entrepreneurship in FinTech, and facilitating peer learning at regional and international levels to promote inclusivity in the FinTech industry.

Mrs. Maya Abdelfateh from the National Council for Women in Egypt shared the progress made in closing gaps in access to finance and utilizing FinTech as a driver for inclusion. Mrs. Abdelfateh presented the "Ta7weesha" application, which is a result of a groundbreaking initiative for women's financial inclusion through a memorandum of understanding signed between the Central Bank of Egypt and the National Council for Women. The Central Bank has outlined its Financial Inclusion strategy for the period of 2022-2025, with the introduction of the digitized mobile application "Ta7weesha" being a key component. This application aims to digitize the existing Village Savings and Loan Associations model, benefiting approximately 1.2 million women through prepaid cards and establishing 60,000 saving groups with group bank accounts. To support this transition to a digital platform, 3,000 facilitators will be trained and equipped with smartphones.



Mrs. Abdelfateh also highlighted several barriers and the need for regional collaboration. Firstly, based on the ecosystem assessment, FinTech can play a critical role in addressing challenges faced by the population as a whole and SMEs. Secondly, Egypt has one of the highest unbanked populations, standing at 67%, making it crucial for FinTech solutions to initially focus on areas such as payments and micro-lending. Thirdly, there is a lack of a clear FinTech licensing framework and overall guidelines on regulatory practices, hindering the development of uniform and applicable regulations and impeding knowledge transfer for successful models. Fourthly, there is a need to replicate successful models pioneered by FinTech startups. Lastly, continuous ecosystem and market assessments are essential for ongoing development and progress in the FinTech sector.



Mrs. Leila Belkhiria Jabeur from the National Chamber of Women Entrepreneurs (CNFCE) in Tunisia emphasized the importance of advocacy in driving positive change. She shared the Chamber's experience in promoting inclusive laws and amplifying the voice of businesswomen in Tunisia. Mrs. Jabeur highlighted that FinTech holds great potential in harnessing the entrepreneurial capabilities of women. It offers alternative funding methods and supports the mobility nature of women by providing access to services that can empower them in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Mrs. Nisreen Dib from the Lebanese League for Women in Business (LLWB) emphasized that closing gender gaps is a collective responsibility that both women and men share. Therefore, it is crucial to have the support of men, as well as capacity-building programs for policymakers to effectively integrate a gender lens into their work. Mrs. Dib stressed the importance of establishing a network of women in Fintech across multiple countries. This network would enable collaborative efforts in setting strategies, defining objectives, and establishing key performance indicators (KPIs) to improve the situation of women in the fintech industry. Such a network would bring together stakeholders from different countries to raise awareness and engage in dialogues on how best to support women in fintech. The findings and recommendations gathered from these discussions can then be used to develop country-specific plans with joint and common actions among participating countries. To achieve the desired outcomes, it is crucial to prioritize the skill development of women in finance and technology. Workshops should be implemented, targeting various areas, especially rural regions. Additionally, hackathons and competitions can be organized, with financial support provided to recognize and reward successful stories.



Mr. Said Charna from the Union for the Mediterranean (UFM), based on the outputs of the meeting of the 15th of June and the one-to-one meeting held in Rome in the 21st of June, he expressed the organization's commitment to supporting the implementation of the Financial Governance and Literacy Action Plan (FGL-AP). He also mentioned that discussions regarding the UFM label process can commence in July. This process aims to bring together relevant stakeholders from the region to facilitate the effective development of the action plan and advance its objectives.



Presentations can be accessed [HERE](#).

