

# Characteristics of Exporting Micro-enterprises in Northern Sparsely Populated Areas – Statistics Overview

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**Abstract:** In European countries, the majority of the total value of exports comes from small, medium-sized and large enterprises, because they tend to be the principal target groups of public-support actions related to exports. However, micro-sized enterprises are the most numerous in every European economy. In recent years, global digitalization has lowered the barriers to exporting for micro-enterprises, and as a result, their share of total exports have increased rapidly in many countries. In addition, their share of the total number of exporting enterprises has increased. For example, in Northern Finland, more than 50 percent of exporting enterprises are micro-enterprises.

The aim of this study was to investigate the characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises in one northern sparsely populated area (NSPA). The micro-enterprises located in NSPAs tend to face context-specific challenges as they develop their businesses. Therefore, this study sought to provide context-specific knowledge, which is needed to strengthen business ecosystems and develop business-support services. To this end, the study focused on the 2015 statistical data from public archives and analysed all 49,411 active business identity codes registered in Northern Finland.

The present study described how exporting micro-enterprises in Northern Finland differ a) from larger exporting enterprises and b) from non-exporting micro-enterprises. Differences in turnover, age, form of company, standard industrial classification (SIC 2008) and import status were analysed. The results showed that it is necessary to make micro-enterprises a specific target group of export-support actions, and as such its results can motivate policy-makers and providers of business services to specifically target micro-enterprises for export-support actions. This study was limited to official enterprise statistics from year 2015.

**Keywords:** micro-enterprises, export, sparsely populated area, statistics

## 1. Introduction

Exporting is an important factor in economic growth, and promoting exports is one of the most important parts of the commercial policy of many countries. However, in recent years, many European countries have experienced trade deficits that have caused growing concern about the effectiveness of national programs that promote exports (Coudounaris, 2012). The smaller an enterprise is, the more it needs government export-promotion programs, mainly because it has fewer resources and capabilities than larger enterprises have (Leonidou, 2011). According to Falk et al. (2014, p. 185), smaller enterprises also benefit more from public support concerning internationalisation.

It is widely accepted that enterprise size is positively related to export intensity, but it is also argued that small enterprises may succeed in international markets despite having a shortage of internal specialized resources. Smaller enterprises have more flexibility to enter and exit foreign markets several times. In addition, smaller enterprises are able to adapt to environmental changes more quickly and flexibly than larger enterprises can (Keng and Juan, 1989). Bonaccorsi (1992) noted that small enterprises are often part of a system of firms and, therefore, can access external resources. It has also been argued that a company's size does not influence exporting attitudes (Ali and Swiercz, 1991).

Micro-enterprises export less than larger enterprises do because they have fewer resources in terms of finance, knowledge and managerial experience (Falk et al., 2014, p. 100). According to Köksal (2009), larger companies have more positive attitudes toward exporting because they have more resources and capabilities and the ability to manage the risks involved in internationalization. Micro-enterprises are also less aware of export-promotion programs (Kumcu, Harcar and Kumcu, 1995; Köksal, 2009; Coudounaris, 2012).

In Europe, the majority of the total value of exports comes from small, medium-sized and large companies, because they tend to be the principal groups targeted by public-support activities related to exports. However, the export participation of micro-enterprises is underestimated, because indirect export activities are usually not counted. Wagner (2001) noted that many small firms export indirectly by supplying parts or finished goods to a larger or multinational firm that sells the product on the foreign market.

Micro-enterprises are the numerically dominant group in every European economy. According to a report by The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016, p. 34), in all countries analysed, between 70% and 95% of all enterprises were micro-sized, and a very large share of micro-enterprises were non-employer enterprises. However, in Finland, between 2001 and 2014, almost 49% of new jobs in all enterprises were in micro-enterprises (Statistics Finland, 2017a). Currently, it is widely understood that micro-enterprises have significant potential to drive job creation, growth and innovation.

In recent years, global digitalization has lowered the barriers to exporting for micro-enterprises. Currently, European exporters are more likely to sell online than through any other channel, and exporters' use of online sales channels is constantly increasing. As a result, the share of total exports by micro-enterprises has increased rapidly in many countries.

In Europe, several databases address exports, but they differ widely as to which countries and industries they include, whether they include micro-enterprises and one-person businesses and even how they define 'exports' (Falk et al., 2014, pp. 39, 44). Nonetheless, analysing export data from various countries by enterprise size can help to identify export barriers, especially for smaller enterprises (OECD, 2016, p. 114).

Table 1 presents the number of exporting enterprises by size category. In Northern Finland, almost 96% (45,532) of enterprises are micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees. In total, 585 exporting enterprises are located in Northern Finland, and nearly 52% of exporters (302) are micro-enterprises. This means that there are more exporters that are micro-enterprises than there are small, medium-sized and large enterprise exporters combined.

**Table 1:** Size categories and number of exporting enterprises in Northern Finland in 2015 (Jokela et al., 2016)

	All enterprises	Exporting enterprises	Exporting enterprises in size class
Micro-enterprises	45,532	302	0.7%
Small	1,731	194	11.2%
Medium-sized	228	79	34.6%
Large	28	10	35.7%
Total	47,519	585	

As table 1 shows, in Northern Finland, only 0.7% of micro-enterprises (302 of 45,532) are exporters, whereas more than one-third of both medium-sized enterprises (79 of 228) and large enterprises (10 of 28) are exporters, and a bit more than one-tenth (11.2%) of small enterprises (194 of 1,731) are exporters.

Northern sparsely populated areas (NSPAs) face the effects of major global trends, including climate change and its effects on people, demographic changes and rapid economic and environmental changes due to large-scale industrial projects. In addition, entrepreneurship in these areas faces operational challenges, including obtaining financing for start-up companies and long distances from support facilities. These problems are similar to those experienced by companies on the periphery: small customer bases, long distances to markets and a generally poor business environment. Furthermore, micro-sized companies commonly lack experience or the tradition of cooperating with enterprises outside the local area (Clement, 2014).

Moreover, in NSPAs, the availability of financing is a greater challenge. Remoteness increases costs and challenges in communication, logistics and transportation in addition to increasing manufacturing costs and commute times. Low population density may limit the availability of skilled labour and employment options in general.

The present study's research question was as follows: 'In Northern Finland, how do exporting micro-enterprises differ from a) exporting larger enterprises and b) non-exporting micro-enterprises?'. The study's aim was to investigate the characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises in one NSPA. Because micro-enterprises located in NSPAs tend to face context-specific challenges as they develop their businesses, this study sought to provide context-specific knowledge to strengthen business ecosystems and develop business-support services. The study focused on public archives and analysed the 2015 statistical data from all 49,411 active business-identity codes registered in Northern Finland.

This paper contains four sections. The introduction contains the background, motivation, research problem and research question. The second section describes the method undertaken. The third section describes the analysis of the data gathered and their examination in light of the research question. The fourth section discusses the main results and opportunities for further research.

## 2. Methodology

The aim of this cross-sectional, single-case study (e.g., see Yin, 1989; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012) was to investigate the characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises in one NSPA.

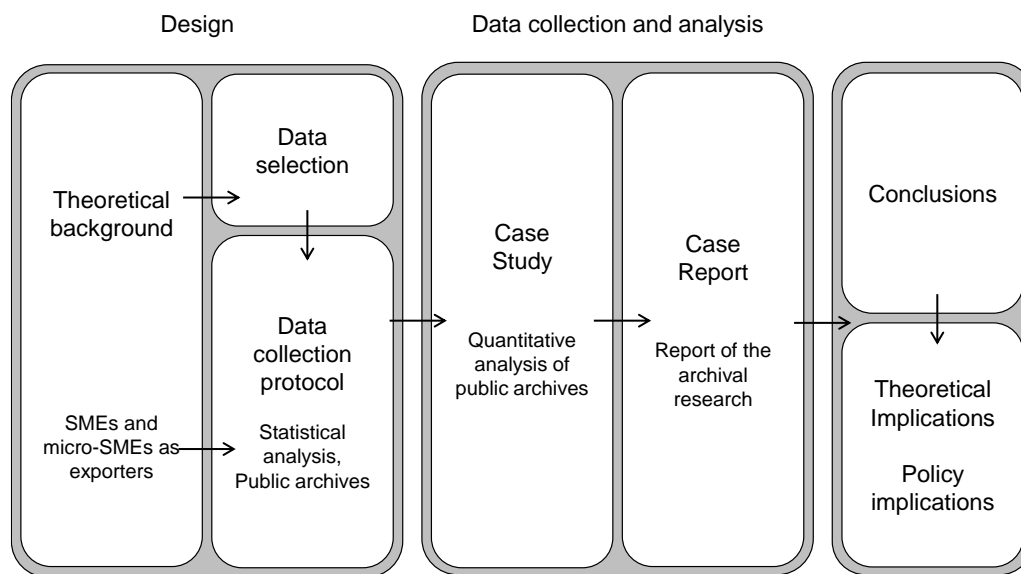
According to the European Union (EU) recommendation 2003/361 (European Commission, 2003), the study defines a micro-enterprise as an enterprise with fewer than 10 employees that has an annual turnover or balance-sheet total not exceeding EUR 2 million and that meets the criterion of independence, which is that not more than 25% of the capital or voting rights are owned by one enterprise or jointly by several enterprises or that the enterprise falls outside the definition of a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) or a small enterprise, whichever may apply. This new definition took effect in the EU on 1 January 2005 (OECD, 2005).

Exports of goods and services consists of transactions (sales, barter, gifts or grants) in goods and services from residents to non-residents. An export enterprise is defined as one that has an export threshold value of EUR 12,000 and trading transactions in at least two months per year or for which the value of trading exceeds EUR

120,000, in which case, one trading transaction per year is sufficient. The data were obtained from the National Board of Customs (Statistics Finland, 2017b).

According to Yin (1989), ‘A case study is an empirical inquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’ (p. 23). Figure 1 presents this case study’s research process, which was as follows.

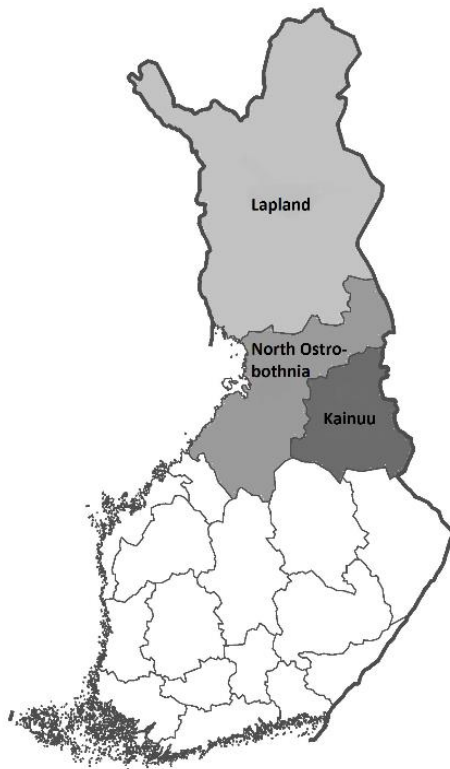
The data collected consisted of the 2015 public-archive statistical data for all 49,411 active business-identity codes registered in Northern Finland. These statistical data were purchased from Bisnode Finland, Ltd. The data had been collected on 27 October 2015. A closer analysis was made of the business-identity codes of those companies for which there also existed key information (industrial classification, number of personnel and sales). The final data contained 47,519 business-identity codes.



**Figure 1:** The study’s research process

### 3. Results

Northern Finland (Fig. 2) consists of three provinces, Kainuu, Lapland and North Ostrobothnia, which among them have 15 subregions. These subregions contain 59 municipalities. The total population of the area is approximately 666,000 (12.1% of Finland’s population), and the region covers 150,000 km<sup>2</sup> (49.3% of Finland’s area). The largest city is Oulu, with approximately 200,000 inhabitants. Human-health and social-work activities comprise 19.1% of the jobs in the area; industry, 11.9%; and wholesale and retail trade, 10.2%. In this region, 49,411 enterprises are in operation; the majority (95.8%) are micro-enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, and the majority of these micro-enterprises (95.5%) employ fewer than five individuals. The share of SMEs in Northern Finland is 99.94%. Only a few large companies (having 250 or more employees) exist, which are in North Ostrobothnia (0.06%). The most common (25.5%) category of activity (SIC, 2008) is forestry and logging (SIC 02). Approximately 82% of the companies have less than EUR 200,000 in sales per year. Approximately 2.9% of the companies have a turnover of more than EUR 2 million. The region has 1,724 import companies and 585 export companies. The average age of the companies in Northern Finland is approximately 11.5 years, and the most common forms of business are private traders (60.1%) and limited companies (30.7%).



**Figure 2:** Location of provinces in Northern Finland

Because the research question was ‘How do exporting micro-enterprises in Northern Finland differ from a) exporting larger enterprises and b) non-exporting micro-enterprises?’, the study defined enterprise groups as shown in Table 2. Micro-enterprises employ fewer than 10 persons, and larger enterprises employ 10 or more.

**Table 2:** Enterprise groups and number of enterprises per group

	Number of employees	Enterprises	Abbreviation
Exporting micro-enterprises	fewer than 10	302	Exporting micros
Exporting larger enterprises	10 or more	283	Exporting larger
Non-exporting micro-enterprises	fewer than 10	45,230	Non-exp. micros
Non-exporting larger enterprises	10 or more	1,704	Non-exp. larger
Total		47,519	

Table 3 presents the categories of turnover for both exporting and non-exporting enterprises. Turnover was below EUR 200,000 for 23.5% of the exporting micro-enterprises and for only 0.4% of the exporting larger enterprises. Of non-exporting micro-enterprises, 86% had turnovers of less than EUR 200,000. Approximately 15.6 % of exporting micro-enterprises and 82.3% of exporting larger enterprises had a turnover of more than EUR 2 million. Only 0.6% of non-exporting micro-enterprises had a turnover of more than EUR 2 million.

**Table 3:** Turnover categories for exporting and non-exporting enterprises in Northern Finland in 2015

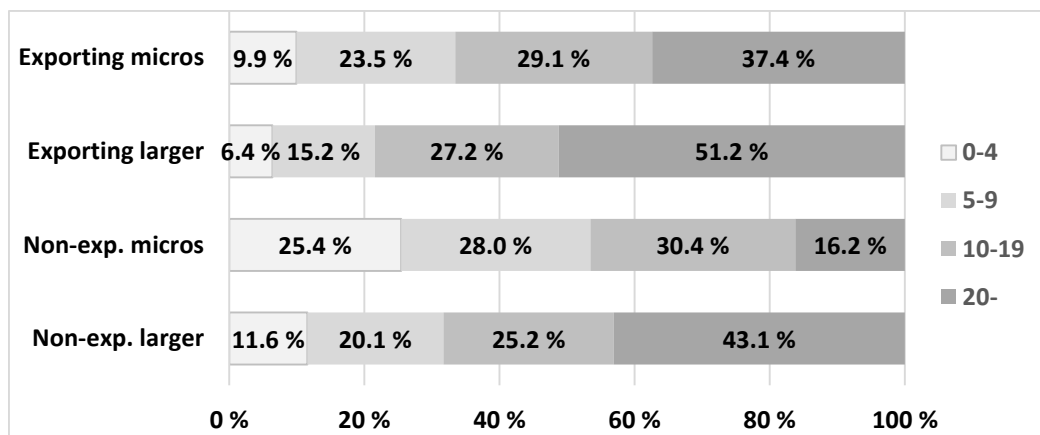
Turnover	1–199 k€	200–300 k€	400–999 k€	1–2 M€	2–10 M€	10–20 M€	20–M€	Total %
Exporting micros	23.5%	12.3%	29.1%	19.5%	13.6%	0.7%	1.3%	100%
Exporting larger	0.4%	0.0 %	3.5%	13.8%	44.5 %	20.5%	17.3%	100%
Non-exp. micros	86.0%	6.7%	5.3%	1.4%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
Non-exp. larger	4.6%	1.3%	17.7%	28.4%	40.3%	4.1%	3.6%	100%

Table 4 shows the legal forms of the exporting and non-exporting enterprises. The majority of both exporting micro-enterprises (81.1%) and exporting larger enterprises (99.3%) were limited companies, while just less than 28% of non-exporting micro-enterprises were limited companies. Nearly 10% of exporting micro-enterprises were private traders, while among exporting larger enterprises, there was not a single private trader. Of non-exporting micro-enterprises, nearly 63% were private traders. Slightly more than 7% of exporting micro-enterprises and less than 1% of exporting larger enterprises were limited partnerships.

**Table 4:** Legal forms of exporting and non-exporting enterprises in Northern Finland

Legal form	Private trader	Open company	Limited partnership	Limited company	Cooperative	Total %
Exporting micros	9.9%	1.0%	7.3%	81.1%	0.7%	100%
Exporting larger	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	99.3%	0.0%	100%
Non-exp. micros	62.9%	2.4%	6.1%	27.7%	0.8%	100%
Non-exp. larger	3.7%	2.1%	3.1%	88.1%	2.9%	100%

Figure 3 presents the age categories of the exporting and non-exporting enterprises. Nearly 10% of exporting micro-enterprises and 6.4% of exporting larger enterprises were less than five years old, while more than one-quarter (25.4%) of non-exporting micro-enterprises were less than four years old. In contrast, more than 37% of exporting micro-enterprises and more than half (51.2%) of exporting larger enterprises were more than 20 years old.



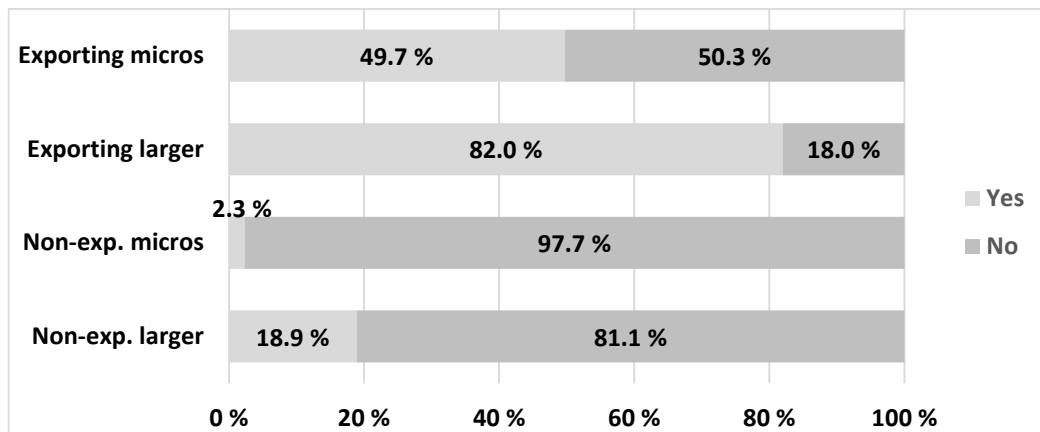
**Figure 3:** Age categories of exporting and non-exporting enterprises in Northern Finland

Table 5 presents the 12 most common SIC-codes of the exporting enterprises in Northern Finland. For exporting micro-enterprises, the most common (16.9%) SIC-code was SIC 46 (*Wholesale trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles*), while for exporting larger enterprises, the most common (11.3%) SIC-code was SIC 16 (*Manufacture of wood and of products of wood and cork, except furniture; manufacture of articles of straw and plaiting materials*). Smaller share of exporting micro-enterprises than larger exporting enterprises operate in manufacturing sectors. However, the situation was the opposite in the trading sectors, in which a larger share of exporting micro-enterprises than larger exporting enterprises operate. In addition, in both the manufacturing and trading sectors, smaller share of non-exporting micro-enterprises than exporting micro-enterprises operate. The two SIC-codes most equally represented across enterprise groups were SIC 43 and SIC 71.

**Table 5:** 12 most common SIC-codes of exporting enterprises in Northern Finland

Standard Industrial Classification (SIC-code)	Exporting micros.	Exporting larger	Non-exp. micros	Non-exp. larger
Wholesale trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles (SIC 46)	16.9%	6.7%	2.1%	1.6%
Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles (SIC 47)	11.6%	6.0%	5.7%	13.0%
Manufacture of wood and of products of wood and cork, except furniture; manufacture of articles of straw and plaiting materials (SIC 16)	6.3%	11.3%	0.6%	1.1%
Manufacture of fabricated metal products, except machinery and equipment (SIC 25)	3.6%	9.9%	0.8%	2.7%
Manufacture of computer, electronic and optical products (SIC 26)	5.0%	7.8%	0.1%	0.2%
Wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (SIC 45)	8.6%	3.9%	2.3%	2.2%
Specialised construction activities (SIC 43)	5.3%	5.7%	5.6%	9.6%
Manufacture of machinery and equipment n.e.c. (SIC 28)	1.7%	7.1%	0.2%	0.5%
Manufacture of food products (SIC 10)	3.3%	4.6%	0.4%	1.1%
Architectural and engineering activities; technical testing and analysis (SIC 71)	3.3%	4.2%	2.2%	3.9%
Land transport and transport via pipelines (SIC 49)	3.6%	1.8%	5.2%	8.6%
Crop and animal production, hunting and related service activities (SIC 01)	4.3%	0.0%	5.6%	0.6%

Figure 4 shows the import status of the exporting and non-exporting enterprises. Nearly 50% of the exporting micro-enterprises and 82% of the exporting larger enterprises were also importers, while only 2.3% of non-exporting micro-enterprises were also importers.



**Figure 4:** Import status (yes/no) of the exporting and non-exporting enterprises in Northern Finland.

#### 4. Discussion

In Northern Finland, more than half of the exporters were micro-enterprises. It is likely that the actual share is even larger, because the majority of the enterprises for which the export value was below the threshold value were micro-enterprises. A good example of the potential that exists among micro-enterprises in Northern Finland is the fact that more than 96% of the enterprises that did not export were micro-sized. According to Mpinganjira (2011), there is wide interest in the export business among these non-exporters. Therefore, the large number of non-exporting micro-enterprises in Northern Finland warrants further efforts to increase their export participation.

Table 6 presents the main findings regarding the characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises compared to those of exporting larger enterprises in Northern Finland. Compared to exporting larger enterprises, the exporting micro-enterprises were younger and had smaller turnovers. The legal form of exporting micro-enterprises was more likely to be that of a private trader or a limited partnership and less likely to be that of a limited company. In the manufacturing sectors, the share of exporting micro-enterprises was smaller, but in the trading sectors, it was clearly larger. In addition, exporting micro-enterprises were clearly less likely to be importers than were exporting larger enterprises.

**Table 6:** Characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises compared to exporting larger enterprises

	Characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises compared to exporting larger enterprises
Turnover	Clearly smaller
Legal form	Fewer limited companies More private traders More limited partnerships
Age	Younger
SIC	Smaller share in manufacturing sector Clearly larger share in trading sector
Import status	Clearly smaller share of importers

Table 7 presents the main findings of the characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises compared to those of non-exporting micro-enterprises in Northern Finland. Compared to non-exporting micro-enterprises, exporting micro-enterprises were older and had clearly larger turnovers. The legal form of exporting micro-enterprises was more likely to be that of a limited company and less likely to be that of a private trader. In the manufacturing and trading sectors, the share of exporting micro-enterprises was clearly larger. In addition, exporting micro-enterprises were clearly more likely to be importers than were non-exporting micro-enterprises.

**Table 7:** Characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises compared to non-exporting micro-enterprises

	Characteristics of exporting micro-enterprises compared to non-exporting micro-enterprises
Turnover	Clearly larger
Legal form	More limited companies Clearly fewer private traders
Age	Older
SIC	Clearly larger share in manufacturing sector Clearly larger share in trading sector
Import status	Clearly larger share of importers

This study shows that in Northern Finland, exporting micro-enterprises differ from both exporting larger enterprises and non-exporting micro-enterprises in turnover, form of company, age, standard industrial classification and import status. The present study's findings support those of Voulgaris, Lemonakia and Zopounidis (2013) concerning the differences between exporting and non-exporting enterprises. According to Falk et al. (2014, p. 103), the enterprise-specific determinants of exporting differ between SMEs and micro-enterprises. Grigoryan (2011) noted that it could be erroneous to assume that all enterprises at the same stage of internationalization require the same assistance. Smaller enterprises are an important target group for export-promotion policies, because they might be able to respond to market forces more rapidly than larger enterprises can (Yaprak, 1985). Policy-makers should design export-promotion programs that cater to the specific needs of various exporter groups by taking into account their unique requirements (Leounidou, 2011). Keng and Jiuan (1989) stated that export-promotion assistance for small exporting enterprises should be sensitive to their needs at various stages of development. In northern Finland, it might be worthwhile to reconsider the priorities of export-promotion policies, especially because enterprises in NSPAs face context-specific challenges as they develop their businesses, including limited resources, remoteness and long distances. There is a clear need to develop export-promotion services targeted at micro-enterprises. The



results of this study show that it is necessary for policies that enhance export activities to specifically target micro-enterprises as a group.

In future, the context of NSPAs should be studied using the exact location data of the logistical nodes important to exports, including the enterprise's distance from ports, railways and airports. Because industry sectors vary widely in their share of exporting micro-enterprises and exporting larger enterprises, future studies should be focused on sectors. It would also be interesting to investigate the relationship between population density and business density in the enterprise's home town and the number and sizes of the exporting enterprises in the NSPA.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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