

# Unlocking the Multilateral Procurement Market for SMEs: An In-Depth Case Study

**Prof. Dr. Cristina Lopez-Duarte, Marta M. Vidal-Suarez**

*University Of Oviedo, Spain*

## Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face significant barriers when attempting to access international markets. Beyond traditional export and foreign direct investment pathways, multilateral funded procurement projects represent an underexplored opportunity for international business growth. This study explores the role of official development aid channeled through multilateral financial institutions as a strategic pathway for SME internationalization.

Using an in-depth qualitative case study, the research combines secondary data with semi-structured interviews conducted with the main agents involved in a multilateral procurement project (companies participating in the consortium/business group awarded the project, the multilateral financial institution, business consultants specialized in international development aid funds, industry clusters, national and regional foreign trade agencies that foster the international growth of SMEs through programs specialized in the multilateral procurement market).

The findings identify key strategic mechanisms that enable SMEs to overcome access barriers, including institutional support, strategic market surveillance, accumulated experience and track record, networking and business cooperation, and direct contact with final clients. The study contributes to the international business and SME management literature by providing empirical evidence on alternative internationalization pathways and offers practical insights for managers and policy makers seeking to enhance SME participation in multilateral procurement markets.

**Keywords:** Business groups; international growth; multilateral financial institutions; official development aid; qualitative study