

Expert Insights

Strategic but Stalled: When MSMEs Miss the Global Fit

Is your international strategy visionary on paper but broken in practice?

Many MSMEs dream of exporting but rely solely on funding or intent to scale. Despite policies and trade access, execution gaps stall global growth. Even the best ideas falter when founders overlook on-ground realities and institutional support. This session reveals what separates successful exporters from those who simply have potential.

Scroll down to discover the missed steps and mindset shifts MSMEs need to unlock real global opportunity.

Knowledge Source

Wadhwani Foundation Expert Session | Feb 8, 2025

This expert session was designed to guide Indian MSMEs, policymakers, and ecosystem enablers on aligning strategic ambition with operational and institutional execution for export growth. The focus was on demystifying policy access, founder readiness, and global positioning.

About the Expert: Abhilash Puljal

Abhilash Puljal is a global development and trade strategist with 23+ years of experience. As Partner and Country Director at Expectation State (UK), and Co-Director of the LSE Foundation India, he has shaped macroeconomic policies and market entry strategies across Asia, Africa, and Europe. His advisory roles span sectors like agriculture, renewable energy, deep tech, and education. He also serves on boards for policy think tanks and global expansion foundations, including The Kalp Foundation (US) and The Bridge Tank (France).

> "Abhilash shared real-world insights on why Indian MSMEs struggle with global expansion despite having funding or government support. He emphasized that poor documentation, lack of intermediary institutions, and misaligned packaging or compliance strategies are bigger bottlenecks than product quality. Through systemic and strategic lenses, he demonstrated how MSMEs can build globally aligned operations, not just aspirations."

Case Scenario & Where It Fell Short

The Case Scenario

Ravindra, founder of a solar microgrid startup in Maharashtra, envisioned exporting affordable green energy kits to rural Africa. With strong endorsements from local governments and a few NGO pilots, he approached institutional buyers in Kenya and Ghana. He even met success with B2G discussions but couldn't close a deal.

His packaging didn't meet cross-border transport norms, warranties weren't documented per destination country standards, and his grant proposal lacked clarity on long-term scalability. While the idea was globally relevant, execution weaknesses led to delays, confusion, and ultimately, lost trust.

Where It Fell Short

1. **Policy Access, No Local Execution:** Relied on top-down MoUs without local operational clarity in the export country.
2. **Missing Packaging & Warranty Standards:** Ignored market-specific compliance requirements on electrical goods and transit safety.
3. **Institutional Gaps:** No partnership with a country-specific trade or facilitation agency.
4. **Non-convertible Grant Deck:** Used vision-heavy, jargon-filled pitch decks that failed to show implementation feasibility.
5. **Documentation Discrepancy:** Didn't align technical documents with country-specific customs and utility norms.

ⓘ Founder and brand details anonymized to protect privacy.

Root Cause Breakdown

Common Mistakes	Consequences
Using policy wins as market proof	Gave false confidence without buyer validation or ecosystem readiness
Packaging not adapted to local transport standards	Delays, breakages, and rejections by African partners
No trade partner or embassy liaison	Missed cultural cues and go-to-market networks
Grant proposal lacked scalability clarity	Lost trust of international funding bodies
Poor documentation alignment	Customs clearance issues, warranty doubts, and loss of institutional trust

Recommended Solution

To move MSMEs from potential to performance in global markets, Abhilash recommends the following five-step solution path, each aligned with a core root cause:

Step 1: Validate Policy Wins with Execution Roadmaps

Why It Matters: MoUs and endorsements often give a false sense of readiness. Only a detailed country-specific execution plan can translate intent into reality.

How to Execute:

- Create a 60–90 day operational plan post-policy approval.
- Validate feasibility with local trade bodies, distributors, or consultants.
- Highlight execution tasks and counterpart responsibilities in every MoU or agreement.

Sample Prompt to Try: "Help me build an execution roadmap for an MoU with a government agency in Kenya for solar product deployment."

Modify the above prompt: Add sector, buyer type, and timeframe for execution planning.

Try the above prompt in the free version of the below AI platforms:

ChatGPT | Gemini | Perplexity

You Will Get: A step-by-step rollout framework that turns policy alignment into real traction.

Step 2: Redesign Product Packaging for Transport & Compliance

Why It Matters: Even great products get rejected or damaged due to non-compliant packaging.

How to Execute:

- Study customs and transit norms for your product category in target regions.
- Use durable, weather-appropriate, and labeled packaging per country guidelines.
- Include QR codes or warranty terms as per buyer expectations.

Sample Prompt to Try: "What are packaging and labeling standards for renewable energy kits exported to Africa?"

Modify the above prompt: Specify product type (e.g., solar battery pack) and target market (e.g., Ghana, Kenya).

Try the above prompt in the free version of the below AI platforms:

ChatGPT | Gemini | Perplexity

You Will Get: Export-ready packaging standards and visual compliance checklists.

Step 3: Build Trade-Facilitator Partnerships for Local Access

Why It Matters: Trusted intermediaries accelerate validation, credibility, and local access.

How to Execute:

- Join export promotion councils like FIEO, EEPC, or APEDA based on your sector.
- Reach out to Indian embassies and trade missions in your export country.
- Partner with in-country logistics, warehousing, or compliance firms.

Sample Prompt to Try: "Which trade bodies or local partners can help MSMEs export clean tech products to Kenya and Ghana?"

Modify the above prompt: Refine based on your export country and sector.

Try the above prompt in the free version of the below AI platforms:

ChatGPT | Gemini | Perplexity

You Will Get: A curated list of institutional and operational partners.

Step 4: Rewrite Grant and Buyer Proposals for Operational Clarity

Why It Matters: Institutional buyers and donors don't fund ideas—they fund clear execution plans.

How to Execute:

- Replace visionary storytelling with clear operational slides: cost, manpower, timeline
- Include field validation or early pilot outcomes
- Use donor-aligned language and grant deck templates (e.g., USAID, GIZ)

Sample Prompt to Try: "How do I design a grant proposal to deploy solar kits at scale in Africa with local partners?"

Modify the above prompt: Specify type of funding (grant vs loan), partner role, and unit economics.

Try the above prompt in the free version of the below AI platforms:

ChatGPT | Gemini | Perplexity

You Will Get: A funder-friendly proposal format tailored to implementation goals.

Step 5: Standardize Documentation for Each Target Market

Why It Matters: Even minor documentation errors can delay customs clearance or trigger buyer distrust.

How to Execute:

- Maintain a documentation pack per export country (CoO, HS code, test certificates)
- Work with DGFT-certified consultants to verify local alignment
- Use online portals like ICEGATE or DGFT for pre-clearance and trade facilitation

Sample Prompt to Try: "What documents are mandatory for exporting solar energy kits to Ghana and what are the HS codes used?"

Modify the above prompt: Include product classification, buyer type (B2B/B2G), and destination country.

Try the above prompt in the free version of the below AI platforms:

ChatGPT | Gemini | Perplexity

You Will Get: A checklist of documentation aligned to the destination market's trade and customs norms.

Expected Result

By applying these strategic and practical steps, MSMEs can shift from stalled ambition to export execution—backed by institutional readiness, partner support, and global trust.

From MoUs to Movement

Execution roadmaps translate policy-level wins into actionable plans, reducing delays and improving buyer confidence.

Compliant Packaging, Fewer Disruptions

Product packaging aligned with transport and customs standards prevents rejections, damage, and compliance-related delays.

Faster Access Through Strategic Partnerships

Institutional tie-ups and facilitator partners unlock local networks, reduce friction, and improve deal conversion timelines.

Funder-Ready Proposals That Convert

Clear, structured decks with operational clarity lead to higher success rates in grants, donor partnerships, and institutional sales.

Documentation That Builds Trust

Country-specific documentation ensures smooth customs clearance, faster delivery, and enhanced buyer reliability in new markets.



Insight

> **"Every founder wants to go global—but global markets only open up when your execution is as sharp as your vision."**

Big ideas and policy support can get you attention, but they don't close deals. What truly unlocks international growth is your ability to meet on-ground realities—packaging, documentation, buyer trust, and local partnerships. Execution is no longer a backend task; it's your front-facing credibility.

Founders who localize their approach, build institutional bridges, and deliver clarity—win faster, scale better, and stay global longer.

Founders Please Check

Before you approach your next global buyer or finalize your export plan, pause and ask yourself:

1. Do I have a country-specific execution roadmap?

Policy intent is not a strategy—buyers want proof of how it'll work on the ground.

2. Is my product packaging compliant with target market regulations?

Damage, delays, or rejections often start with overlooked packaging details.

3. Have I partnered with any trade council, embassy, or local facilitator?

Institutions can help open doors you can't reach alone—don't go in blind.

4. Is my proposal or pitch deck operationally clear, not just visionary?

Donors and buyers want to see logistics, cost breakdowns, and risk mitigation—not just ambition.

5. Have I tailored my export documentation for the destination country?

Even a perfect product will get stuck in customs if your paperwork isn't aligned

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