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Article

ASSESSING EXPORT READINESS OF THE SMES IN AGRICULTURE SECTOR IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of assessing the export readiness of agriculture-sector SMEs in Sri Lanka by constructing a systematic Export Readiness Index (ERI) to assist Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB) in taking fact-based decisions. The SMEs in the agriculture-sector of Sri Lanka provide the greatest contribution to the export revenues and development of the rural sector; but a large proportion of the export business of agriculture-sector SMEs is difficult to achieve and maintain internationally due to poor export readiness, lack of knowledge and non-existence of a well-established mechanism for testing of export readiness. The empirical evidence of the research was obtained through a structured questionnaire survey based on structured interviews which were taken from 90 purposively selected agriculture sector SME exporters and secondary data from EDB data base. The data was analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics, Wilcoxon signed-rank test and Spearman's correlation analysis with SPSS version 16 and Microsoft excel. The analysis shows that readiness significantly positively and among the factors organizational factors show strong positive impact on export readiness, while strategic plan and commitment of top management are major dimensions of organization factor and there was moderate positive relation with all factor group towards export readiness. Entropy weighted scores are used to develop ERI which classifies the SMEs into three export ready groups as; high, medium and low export readiness.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

Agri-SMEs play an integral role in Sri Lankan economic development by stimulating rural employment, income, and creating value-added exports. A wide array of exports such as spices, coconut-based products, tea, fruits, vegetables, are produced in the nation due to her agro-climatic features. In this aspect, over 3000 (3101) new exporters have been enrolled by the Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB) and the majority of the firms can be defined as SMEs, in particular, Agri-SMEs and thus have potential for inclusive growth and penetration of new markets. The problem lies with the low preparedness of the agro-SMEs in Sri Lanka, due to poor know-how and institutional framework, to effectively exploit export markets.

There is no systematic and scientific method to assess the export readiness of such firms in Sri Lanka currently. Sri Lanka export promotion agency (EDB), which functions as the central promotion agency does not use any formal tool or model to identify the capability, potential, and international competitiveness of a new exporter. Readiness is assessed through personal judgment by EDB officers based on the self-declarations of entrepreneur. This informal and unsystematic approach causes several inefficiencies such as the numerous newly registered exporters are either not engaged in exports or leave business soon due to the un-foreseen problems. Thus time, funds, and the effort (in training, communication, etc.) by EDB are channeled out to all exporters registered without difference between actual and not-actual exporters.

This lack of segmentation means that opportunities and incentives offered to SME exporters are not capitalized and, conversely, demotivate them. Such communications as targeted emails, letters, training sessions and workshops will be wasted on businesses that are unqualified or inactive. It is also difficult to ascertain relevant needs of its exporters with information on exporters' readiness, in a way EDB can shape its activities and communication effectively with relevant and proactive exporters, compared to Canadian, South Africa, USA, Malaysia, Australian practices where ERIs and standardized assessment tools are utilized to assess capability, to classify the database and direct services.

Table 1. Export Readiness Assessment Tools Used Internationally

Country	Export readiness assessment tool
Canada	Export Preparedness Assessment Tool - Trade Commissioner
South Africa	Export Readiness Questionnaire - TISA
United States	Export Readiness Assessment - Food Export USA
Malaysia	MATRADE Export Readiness Program
Australia	Export Savvy Program - Austrade

Source: As Identified in Literature

Table 2. International Export Readiness Assessment Tools, Key Assessment Factors, and Sample Weighted Formulas

Country	Export Readiness Assessment Tool	Main Assessment Factors	Sample Assessment / Weighted Formula
Canada	Export Preparedness Assessment Tool-Trade Commissioner Service	Management commitment, financial capability, market knowledge, product adaptability, export planning	$ER=0.30(MC)+0.25(FC)+0.20(MK)+0.15(PA)+0.10(EP)$
South Africa	Export Readiness Questionnaire - TISA	Production capacity, compliance standards, export knowledge, logistics capability, institutional readiness	$ER=0.25(PC)+0.20(CS)+0.20(EK)+0.20(LC)+0.15(IR)$
United States	Export Readiness Assessment - Food Export USA	Product compliance, certifications, operational capacity, export experience, supply capability	$ER=0.30(PC)+0.20(CF)+0.20(OC)+0.15(EE)+0.15(SC)$
Malayasia	MATRADE Export Readiness Program	Company capability, product competitiveness, financial readiness, institutional support, market orientation	$ER=0.25(CC)+0.25(PC)+0.20(FR)+0.15(IS)+0.15(MO)$
Australia	Export Program - Savvy Austrade	Strategic planning, international market	$ER=0.25(SP)+0.20(IMK)+0.20(BS)+0.20(RA)+0.15(DC)$

knowledge,
business systems,
resource
availability,
digital capability

Source: As Identified in Literature

- Conceptualized comparative formulas synthesized from literature,
- Illustrative assessment structures derived from key readiness dimensions identified in past studies.

Table 3. Summary of Empirical Literature on Export Readiness

Study Group	Context	Key Findings	Agreement with Present Study	Key Gap /Limitation	Contribution
International SME Export Readiness Studies (Gerschewski et al., Leonidou et al., Calheiros-Lobo et al.)	Developed & global SMEs	Export readiness and managerial capability strongly influence export performance; SMEs face financial and knowledge barriers	Strongly supports importance of organizational capability and multi-dimensional readiness	Less focus on developing country constraints and sector-specific issues	Establishes theoretical foundation for export readiness dimensions
Asian & Emerging Market SMEs (Rosnan et al., Pourmirza & Heidarzadeh)	Malaysia & Iran SMEs	Product capability, management support, and integrated operational capacity drive export readiness	Aligns with product and organizational factors in current study	Limited coverage of digital/technical readiness and agriculture focus	Supports adaptation of ERI dimensions for developing economies
Managerial Capability & Dynamic Strategy Studies (Levallet et al.)	Developed country SMEs	Dynamic managerial capability improves adaptability and export readiness	Supports importance of management commitment and strategy	Limited applicability to institutional constraints in countries	Strengthens theoretical basis of organizational readiness

Present (2026)	Study	Sri Lankan agriculture SMEs	Product, organizational, and technical/operational factors affect export readiness; organizational factors most influential	Integrates all prior findings into a structured model	Addresses gap in sector-specific, quantitative ERI measurement	Develops entropy-weighted, agriculture-specific Export Readiness Index (ERI)
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Source: As Identified in Literature

A similar framework currently does not exist in the Sri Lankan context and yet it is strongly needed. Agriculture sector comprises a variety of sub-sectors (spices and essential oils, food and beverage, tea, milk products, coconut-based products, handlooms and apparel) with unique features and export scope. One uniform strategy is ineffective across all such diverse segments. Besides, there is a software tool currently available to the researcher which is capable of linking EDB's exporter register with the real export data registered by the Sri Lanka Customs, thereby real-time identification of active vs inactive or dormant exporters. This technological possibility provides an opportunity for the creation of a dynamic, data driven Export Readiness Index classifying and prioritizing SMEs based on export readiness, sectoral context, and real-time export activity.

The construction of such index would not only make EDBs activities more strategically oriented but also enable SMEs to understand their current status of readiness and ways to improve. It would serve as a tool to measure, train, formulate policies and loans and access new markets. In the end, this study seeks to bridge the gap in Sri Lanka's export promotion system by introducing an internally defined, externally relevant, locally applicable, globally informed measure of export readiness specifically for agriculture-related SMEs.

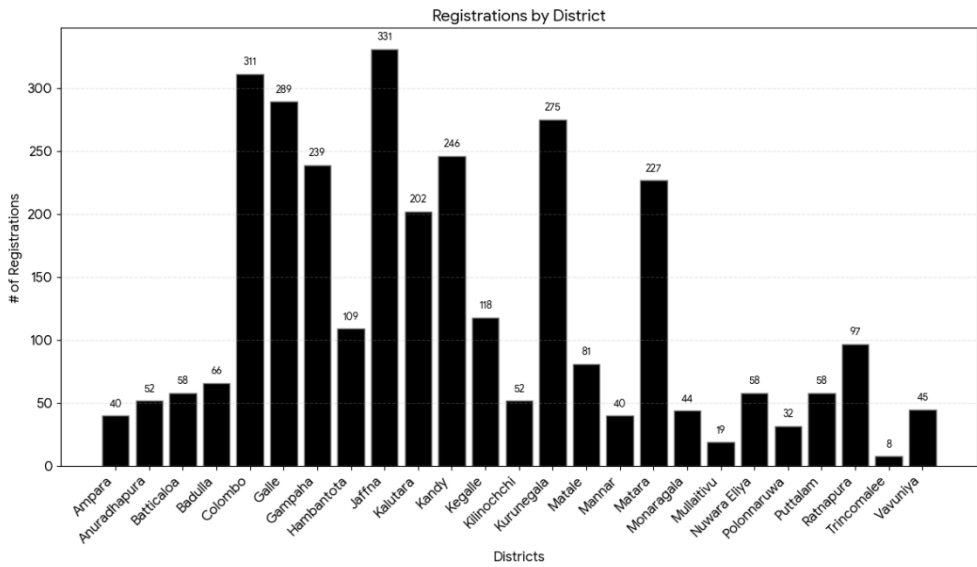


Figure 1. Exporters Distribution - District-wise

Source: New Exporter database, Export Development Board, Sri Lanka

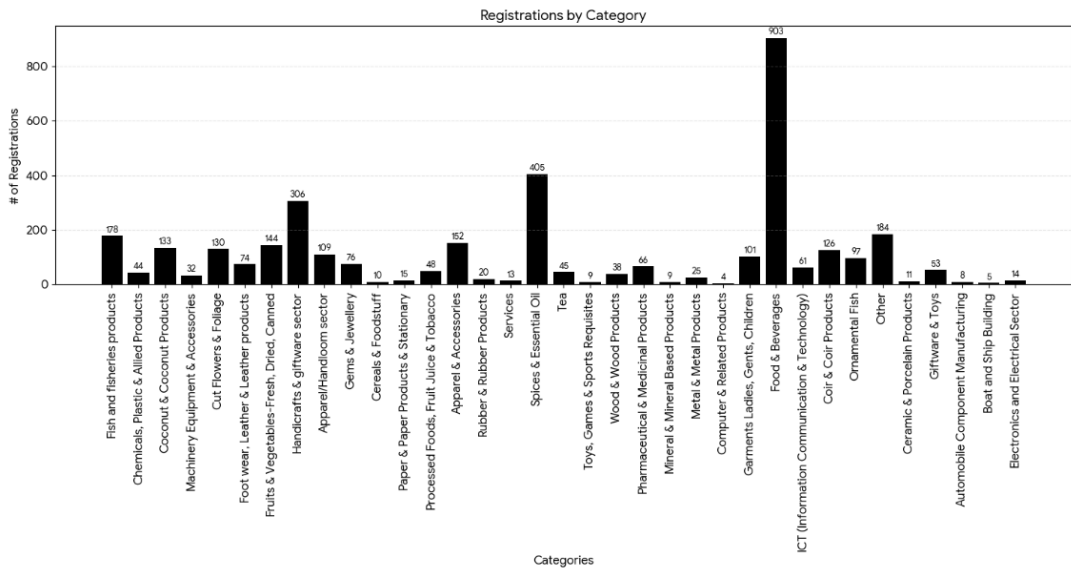


Figure 2. Exporters Distribution - Product-wise

Source: New Exporter database, Export Development Board, Sri Lanka

Research Problem and Justification

The agriculture sector SMEs has witnessed registration of numerous such entities with Export Development Board (EDB) in recent years for the purpose of export growth and diversification. Though this is evidence of SMEs' growing enthusiasm to enter export markets, the EDB does not possess a clear, consistent, and scientific means of measuring export readiness. The assessment of exporter capabilities currently depends on subjective judgement, self-declarations and subjective evaluation by officers, not a systematic and data-driven approach.

A non-availability of a proven tool to assess export readiness, brings forth an inability to distinguish between a firm that truly has the capacity to export and one that doesn't. Thus, all types of exporters-those that are export-ready and those that lack experience, resources, etc.-are being treated as equals. The export promotion system becomes inefficient, when available institutional resources-time, funds, training courses, human beings-are distributed among all the registered exporters in a uniform way and not on the basis of a readiness criterion for each of them.

This has led to high wasted resources and demotivation in the SMEs. Those SMEs not export ready face un-foreseen circumstances and failed. In the end they give up any efforts for export. Meanwhile, the potential exporters will not gain the required more sophisticated and tailored support for their exporting scaling up. Also, communication activities such as mails, letters, seminars and promotional activities are broadcasted to all of the export database as long as the target group of export.

As there are no readiness-based classifications included in the EDB exporter database, the export development processes is less effective. Bridging this gap through the construction of a formal Export Readiness Index (ERI) will facilitate realistic estimation of exporter capability, increase effectiveness of support activities and SME motivation, as well as more effective use of public resources. Therefore, this study will focus on bridging this gap through the creation of a data-driven and context-specific framework for assessment of the export readiness of SMEs in the agricultural sector in Sri Lanka.

Research Objectives

Research objectives were guide to the research findings. Hence, research objectives as follows: The main Objective of this research is to develop an Export Readiness Index (ERI) to assess and categorize the readiness of agriculture-sector SMEs for international trade. More specifically, study aims to assess the influence of product factors, organizational factors, and technical and operational factors on the export readiness of SMEs, To develop practical guidelines for SMEs to enhance their export capacity based on the assessment findings as well give recommendations to the EDB and, To re-segment the Export Development Board (EDB)'s existing exporter database by readiness level to enhance targeting in policy-making, training, and promotional activities.

METHODOLOGY

Research hypothesis

SMEs' readiness to export is affected by several internal factors. These include characteristics of products, organizational factors, and technical and operational capabilities. Several previous researches show that these factors are vital determinants of a firm's capacity to successfully enter and penetrate foreign markets (UNIDO, ITC, 2020; Rambe & Khaola, 2022). The characteristics of products involve those which ensures acceptability by customers in the foreign markets which include quality, adherence

to standards and nature of product. Organizational factors include managerial know-how, marketing capability and strategic planning that make firm to be more responsive to export opportunities. The technical and operational factors such as production capacity, technological adoption and operations and logistical management affect the firm's ability to consistently meet international requirements. Drawing on these established theories, the following hypothesis is posited:

H0: There is no significant impact of product factors, organizational factors, and technical/operational factors on the export readiness of agricultural SMEs in Sri Lanka.

H1: There is a significant impact of product factors, organizational factors, and technical/operational factors on the export readiness of agricultural SMEs in Sri Lanka

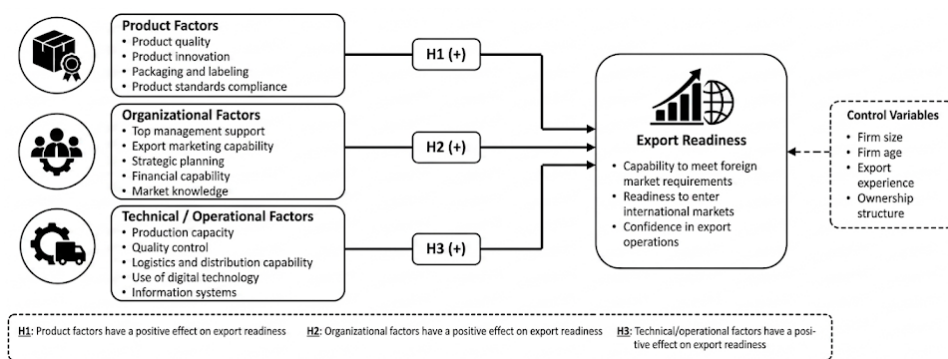


Figure 3. Literature Review and Hypothesized Relationships of Export Readiness Factors

Source: As identified in literature

Population and Sample Selection

The present study is exclusively aimed at the Sri Lankan agricultural SMEs. This sector has been chosen because it is an export-oriented industry with great significance for the national economy. Exports of agricultural produce contribute substantially to earning foreign exchange, creating employment in rural areas, increasing value addition, and improving living conditions in the country. Accordingly, agriculture is one of the priority areas for the country's export development promotion. In spite of other export industries existing in the country such as textile, manufacturing, handicrafts, and technology industries, agriculture has emerged as one of the main categories of exports with a great number of SME exporters. Moreover, agricultural SMEs encounter numerous export-related obstacles such as fulfilling standards and certifications requirements of importing countries, supply chain and operational constraints. These export obstacles that are specific to agricultural SMEs led us to study and develop an export readiness assessment for the agriculture sector only. In order to get practical results it has been restricted to a sample of agricultural SMEs. Therefore the Export Readiness Index (ERI) developed through this study may not be generalize to other export-oriented industries that exist in Sri Lanka due to sectoral and institutional variations. In such situation, it is suggested for further researchers to develop and validate the ERI by taking into account of other export oriented industries in the country.

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling strategy was used in this research so that it would include the right type of respondents who would possess characteristics essential for fulfilling research objectives and to measure export readiness. Sample size of 90 agriculture-sector SME exporters were taken from all nine provinces of Sri Lanka. While exporters are registered in all provinces a high percentage of actively exporting SMEs are seen to be concentrated in the Western Province due to the presence of better infrastructure, market, logistics facilities and business networks that cater to the export demand.

The use of unrestricted or proportionate sampling could have resulted in a regional bias of the Export Readiness Index (ERI) with the data from the Western Province being highly responsible for the results. Purposive sampling was used to take samples of exporters operating under different regional, operational and market environment to avoid the regional bias and increase the representativeness of exporter samples from national perspective. Apart from avoiding the geographical and structural bias the usage of purposive sampling method was justified on practical reasons too such as lack of time to carry out data collection, scarcity of resources and to target the right category of respondents i.e., active exporting SMEs fitting the selection criteria for the study.

Pre-defined criteria for the inclusion of the samples for the study were as; to be actively engaged in exports, to be an agriculture sector SME exporter and, to fall within the defined categories of SMEs as stipulated by the nation and the willingness of the respondent to participate in the survey. The study admits limitations of generalizability due to the use of purposive sampling and a relatively smaller sample size, but enables a better in depth contextual and meaningful investigation of the factors influencing export readiness among provinces. All attempts were made to increase the reliability and validity of data such as respondent confidentiality and anonymity to be maintained, a very clear and less ambiguous wording of items, telephone survey conducted to get clarification for answers of inconsistent responses and secondary data from Export Development Board (EDB) data base to assist the context of validity of profiles and export engagement. However, studies future are recommended to utilize large samples, stratified random sampling techniques and actual measures of performance like export sales figures, accounting records, customs data etc.,

Data Collection

Data from two different sources was obtained for this study. In order to collect primary data on product factors, organizational competencies, technical/operational abilities affecting export readiness, A well-structured questionnaire was given to the respondents. Secondary phone calls were made to have clear information on response, ensure completion and accuracy of the collected data. In order to have secondary Data, Export Development Board (EDB) database provided some additional data about exporters like exported goods, products and previous export activity.

Variables and Measurements

Dependent Variable; Export Readiness

Export readiness is understood as the extent to which an SME is ready and willing to undertake export business, and it will be operationalized by a compound index composed of measures drawn from three key areas-product, organization and technical/operational readiness. Assessment will be through a structured Likert-type questionnaire (from 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree) including the main indicators: past export experience, export volume and frequency, knowledge about export markets, document and logistic readiness and international standard readiness.

Independent Variables

The product factors are considered to be product quality and compliance with international standards, product originality and competitiveness, and product compatibility with foreign market demand, measured via respondent evaluation on a Likert-scale, triangulated with documentation and quality certifications, where applicable. Organizational factors involve commitment of the management toward exporting, the international market experience of the organization and planning and objective setting related to exports. It can be measured using questionnaire items related to leadership's support towards exporting, number of years that the organization has been developing export strategy, and resource allocation in exporting activities.

Technical and operational factors cover technological capability of organization (e.g. Supply chain systems, electronic tool and logistic systems in exporting), digital presence (e.g. Company website, e-commerce, social media) and utilization of data and information in exporting. These measures can be acquired by assessing the accessibility of technology systems, electronic tools, and other exporting-related data using Likert-scale survey items.

Control variables (firm-level characteristics)

Firm level variables will also be used to explain possible confounders, i.e., firm size (number of employees or revenue), business tenure (e.g., length of time the firm has been in operation) sub sector (e.g. Tea, spices, coconut) and geographic location (rural/urban). The firm-level variables will be gathered using fact-based question (e.g. Through the demographic section of the questionnaire).

Conceptual Framework

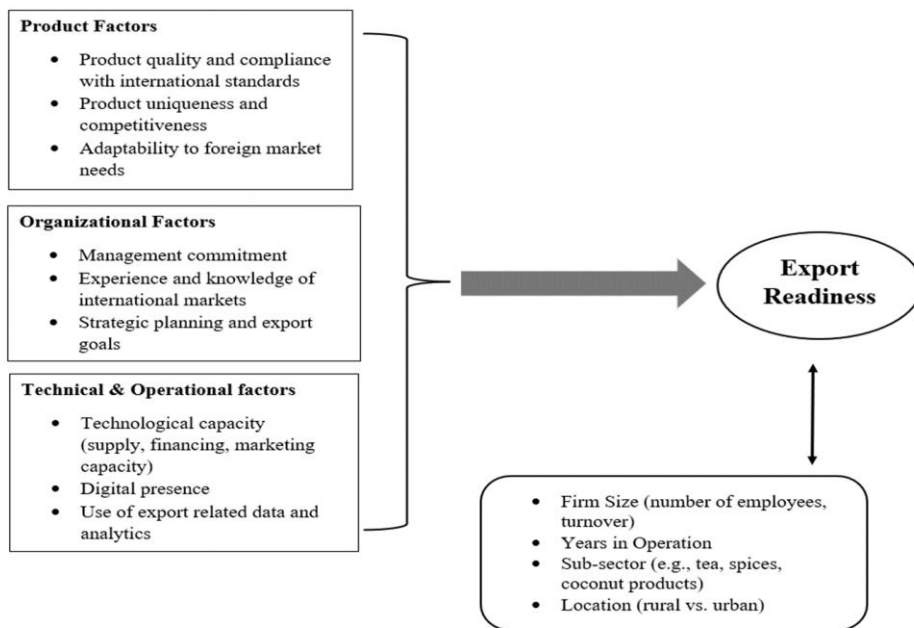


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework

Analysis of Data

Descriptive Analysis

Collected data were first organized and summarized using descriptive statistics in the forms of frequencies and percentages for categorical variables such as firm size, product nature and exporting experience and means and standard deviations for continuous variables such as organizational capability, product readiness, technical/operational capabilities, which clearly presents the distribution of the respondents. Graphics such as bar chart, pie chart and histogram were used to better and easier present the data. From this step, the characteristics and variations across agricultural SMEs was revealed which would be used as the base for inferential analysis.

Inferential Analysis

Inferential statistics were used in assessing the relations between product factors, organizational factors, technical and operational factors and export readiness of SMEs. Due to the data collected mainly through responses on the Likert scale questionnaire, measurements of the variables were ordinal. In addition, some requirements for the parametric technique of analysis were not fulfilled, the normal distribution. Hence, non-parametric techniques were suggested to be utilized. Spearman's Rank Correlation analysis was performed to test the degree and direction of monotonic association between the independent variables and export readiness, whereas the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was conducted in order to test for significant differences between actually observed and expected level of readiness in SMEs. Such methods of analysis can be implemented under the violation of normal distribution assumption.

Moreover, as a form of exploratory predictive technique regression analysis was suggested to investigate the effect of the independent variables on export readiness. The use of regression analysis as one of the analytical technique should be performed with careful consideration in terms of the ordinal measurement scale of data collected through Likert scale, moderately adequate size of sample, and also since it was collected via a purposive (non-probability) sampling method and thus the results should only be used cautiously, based on the sample surveyed, and not be generalized to the whole population of SMEs.

The above study generally favors correlation-based analysis along with non-parametric approach to perform accurate analysis on the basis of appropriate statistical procedure. Future study with larger sample sizes and properly distributed data with random sample selection would enable the use of more complex statistical analyses, like multiple regression analysis or structural equation modeling (SEM) in testing causality and interactions, and providing better support for predictive ability of Export Readiness Index (ERI).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents Profile

The sample of 90 agricultural SME exporters included exporters from all the provinces of Sri Lanka. Thus, representing fairly, the distribution of agricultural export enterprises across the geographic scope of the country's agricultural export industry. It can be noted that while exporters from the Western Province had the highest proportion of 21 exporters (23.3% of the sample), possibly attributed to the good infrastructure and access to major ports as well as agro processing industry clusters, the Uva province accounted for 11 exporters (12.2%) demonstrating the expanding involvement of this province in the export agriculture. There were 10 (11.1%) and 9 (10%) exporters from Southern and North Western provinces (already known as agricultural clusters), respectively. Central and Northern provinces also consisted of 8 exporters each (8.9%), whereas Eastern and North Central had 7 exporters each (7.8%). Sabaragamuwa province accounted for 9 exporters (10%).

Table 01: Province wise exporter

Province	Number of Exporters
Western	21
Central	8
Southern	10
Northern	8
Eastern	7
North western	9
North central	7
Uva	11
Sabaragamuwa	9

Source: Survey data 2025

Figure 5 depicts the distribution of the agricultural SME exporters by product category. Processed foods account for the majority category, with 28 firms (31.1%) being in this sector due to increasing global demand for value-added agricultural products. Spices and essential oils category follows with 17 exporters (18.9%) which exhibits the competitiveness of Sri Lanka for traditional products of agriculture.

Fruits and vegetables category is represented by 15 exporters (16.7%) whereas Coconut product sector has 16 exporters (17.8%). Horticultural products and 'Others' product categories are lowest, 7 exporters (7.8%) each.

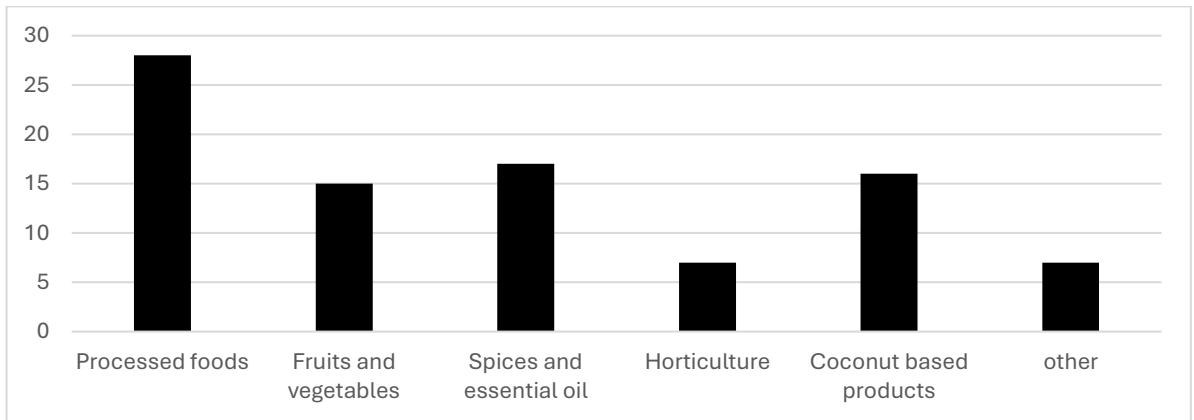


Figure 5: Type of Agricultural Product(s) Exported

Source: Survey data 2025

The annual turnover of the 90 agricultural SME exporters questioned is demonstrated in the bar chart in Figure 6. A total of 56 exporters (62.2%) had an annual turnover of less than 10 million LKR. This demonstrates that the majority of companies interviewed are relatively small businesses. A further 19 exporters (21.1%) fell between 10 and 40 million LKR with 10 exporters (11.1%) having an annual turnover in the range 40-80 million LKR. Only a few companies (2) had a turnover between 80 and 120 million LKR with 3 of the exporters (3.3%) having an annual turnover of greater than 120 million LKR.

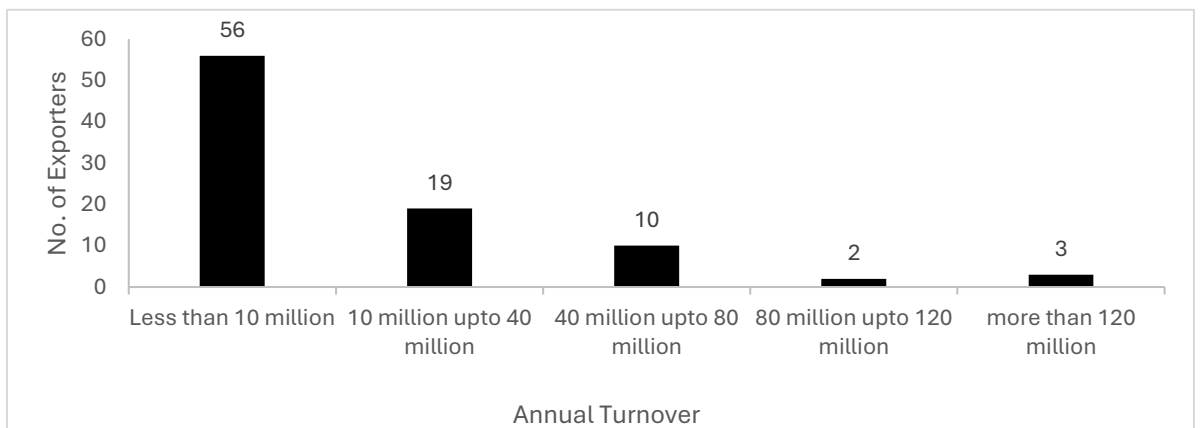


Figure 6: Annual Turnover

Source: Survey data 2025

Figure 7 displays a clear and interesting variation of agricultural SMEs according to the count of export-quality products within their product range. Most of the firms (36 exporters, 40%) supply between 1 and 4 products. This demonstrates a strategy focusing on a few types of products for export purposes. In general, 31 firms (34.4%) deal with 5-10 products in the same way. The number of exporting SMEs which keep more than 10 products in their market basket decreased significantly: 11 firms (12.2%) carry between 11 and 15 products. Only 6 exporters supply more than 16 items; within these two remaining groups, there are 6 firms each (representing 6.7%). Thus, it seems that most of the agricultural SMEs in Sri Lanka prefer to supply only a few products of export-quality. Likely, this fact helps to preserve product quality, maintain conformity to international regulations and manage capacities on operational level. The supply of a larger variety of products seems to be favorable due to more flexible market access, although it entails more complexity of quality assurance and export management procedures.

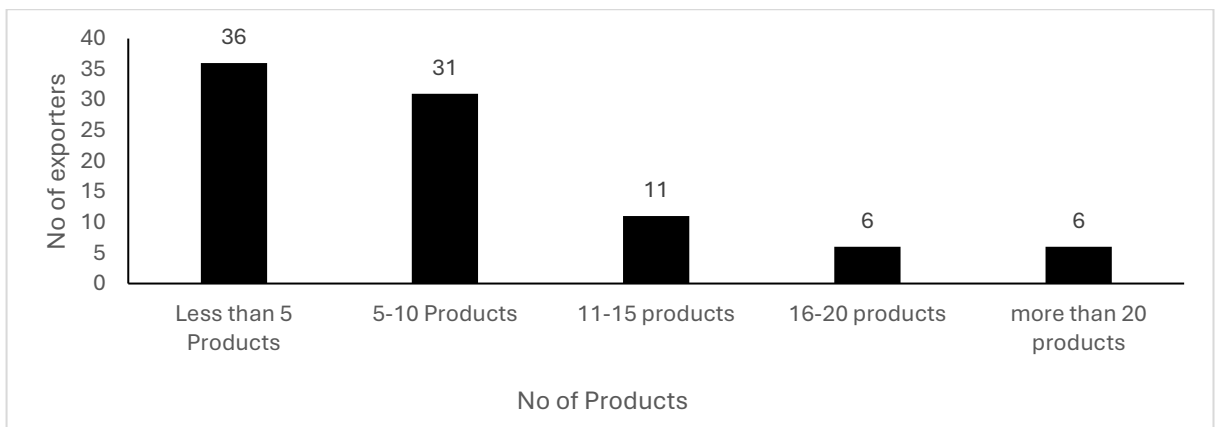


Figure 07: No of products Export

Source: Survey data 2025

Develop an Export Readiness Index (ERI) to assess and categorize the readiness of agriculture-sector SMEs for international trade

Not every dimension or indicator that is part of building the Export Readiness Index (ERI) would contribute equally to the export readiness of the SMEs. There will be indicators that would be more variable between the SMEs thus carrying more information; others would be very similar and do not contribute to differentiate between the level of readiness of firms. So in order to find an unbiased weight for each dimension, this research adopts the Entropy Weight Method (EWM), a common decision-making multi-criteria method which attaches greater weights to dimensions that vary across the respondents.

The development process of export readiness index involved the following methodical process: the description of data, normalization and construction of composite index and classification and interpretation of composite index. Initially it consisted of description of the data prior to index creation. Standardization of the indicators was done so that comparison between different indicators was made possible. For all the indicators, scores were converted on a scale ranging from 0 to 1. Normalization was done on Likert scale from 1 to 5. The original Likert scores were calculated by the following formula:

$$\text{Normalized score} = \frac{X_i - X_{\min}}{X_{\max} - X_{\min}}$$

Where,

X_i - Actual score

X_{\min} - Minimum possible score

X_{\max} - Maximum possible score

This procedure of normalization was applied for all 90 respondents and for each of the items that comprises each factor. The normalized scores are presented in the field called 'Nominalized Score' in the following table.

Table 4: Nominalized Score

Actual Likert Score (1–5)	Normalized Score (0–1)
1	$(1-1)/4 = 0$
2	$(2-1)/4 = 0.25$
3	$(3-1)/4 = 0.50$
4	$(4-1)/4 = 0.75$
5	$(5-1)/4 = 1$

Source: Survey data 2025

Dimension scores were then obtained. For each respondent, the normalized indicator scores were averaged within each dimension. For example, if Product Factors was comprised of five indicators, each of which were described in five questionnaire items, the normalized scores of those five items would be averaged to calculate the Product Score.

$$\text{Product Score} = \frac{\text{Normalized } Q_1 + Q_2 + Q_3 + Q_4 + Q_5}{5}$$

Similar methodology was used for Organization Factors and Technical and Operation Factors to have their dimension score respectively.

The dimensions are then weighted with their weights (The weighted aggregation meets the constraint that all 3 weights sum up to 1). Then Export Readiness Index (ERI) was computed using the following equation:

$$\text{ERI} = (w_1 \times \text{Product score}) + (w_2 \times \text{Organizational score}) + (w_3 \times \text{Technical score})$$

$$w_1 + w_2 + w_3 = 1$$

Where,

w_1 - Weight of Product score

w_2 - Weight of Organizational score

w_3 - Weight of Technical score

The Entropy Weighted Method was used to assign weights objectively using variability measures. The subsequent calculated scores were used for classifying SMEs into three groups of export readiness, which were Low, Moderate and High. SMEs with export readiness index score of between 0.00 and 0.49 was categorized as Low Readiness, SMEs with export readiness index score between 0.50 to 0.74 as Moderate Readiness, and SMEs with export readiness index score between 0.75 to 1.00 was categorized as High Readiness as shown in table Export readiness category.

Table 5: Export Readiness Category

ERI Score Range	Export Readiness Category
0.00 – 0.49	Low Readiness
0.50 – 0.74	Moderate Readiness
0.75 – 1.00	High Readiness

Source : Survey Data 2025

The allocated weights derived using the Entropy Weighted Method are presented in Table 5 Allocated Weights. The sum of log value and relevant score was negative 13.58 for Product Factors, negative 18.21 for Organizational Factors, and negative 22.05 for Technical and Operational Factors. The Entropy Value (EIJ) values reached 0.15 and 0.20 and 0.24 when we calculated them as column sum multiplied by Multiplication Factor (MF) which equals negative 1 divided by 90. The Normalized Value (DIJ)

values which measure diversification showed results of 0.85 and 0.80 and 0.76 when we calculated them as 1 minus EIJ. The final allocated weights established 0.35 for Product Factors 0.33 for Organizational Factors and 0.32 for Technical and Operational Factors based on these calculations.

Table 6: Allocated Weights

Steps	Product Factors	Organizational factors	Technical and operational factors
Sum of log value and relevant score	-13.58	-18.21	-22.05
EIJ (column sum × MF)			
(MF = -1/90)	0.15	0.20	0.24
DIJ = (1-EIJ)	0.85	0.80	0.76
Weight	0.35	0.33	0.32

Source: Survey data 2025

Therefore, the final formula with calculated weights is as follows,

$$ERI = (0.35 \times \text{Product Score}) + (0.33 \times \text{Organizational Score}) + (0.32 \times \text{Technical Score})$$

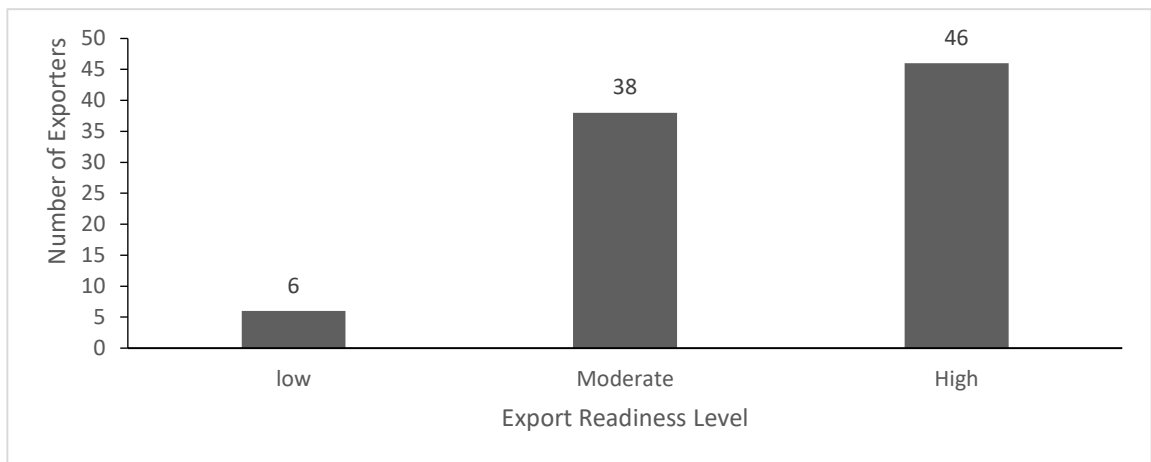


Figure 8: Export Readiness Category

Source: Survey data 2025

Influence of product factors, organizational factors, and technical and operational factors on the export readiness of SMEs

Reliability Analysis

A reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha was performed to check the internal consistency of the items of the questionnaire used, which included product factors, organizational factors and technical & operational factors of the SMEs export readiness.

Table 7: Reliability Test Results

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items	Interpretation
Product Factors	0.893	6	Excellent Reliability
Organizational Factors	0.885	6	Good Reliability
Technical & Operational Factors	0.843	7	Good Reliability

Source: Survey data 2025

From the figures above, all variables recorded the values of Cronbach's Alpha over 0.80 that suggest strong internal consistency among items measuring the variables. The Cronbach's Alpha for the construct of Product Factors achieved the value of 0.893, this means excellent Cronbach's Alpha is obtained, hence all 6 items used to assess the product-related factors are highly reliable and consistent. The Cronbach's Alpha for the construct of Organizational Factors is 0.885 which is of a good Cronbach's Alpha, hence all 6 items used to assess organizational-related factors are highly reliable and consistent. The Cronbach's Alpha for the construct of Technical and Operational Factors is 0.843 which is good and acceptable Cronbach's Alpha for the 7 items used. The commonly accepted acceptable level of Cronbach's Alpha value is above 0.70 whereas, above 0.80, a value is good Cronbach's Alpha. Hence, the reliability of all constructs in this research is accepted and can proceed further statistical analysis.

The One-Sample Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was employed because the variables for product factors, organizational factors, and technical & operational factors collected data from Likert scales, where the level of measurement is ordinal and can't be assumed to be normally distributed as required by a parametric test. The sampling method was purposive, and since normality can't be assured by the structure of the data, a non-parametric test was conducted. A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test can be used to examine the median value in a single sample is significantly different from a specified test value and thus, can be employed for the tested significance level of export readiness factors as perceived by the SMEs.

Hence, this test was adopted to determine whether the obtained responses significantly differ from neutral value in order to draw more robust and reliable conclusions with respect to non-normal situation

The results of the One-Sample Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test reveals that all product-related factors have a significant impact on the export readiness of agricultural SMEs. The range of the means of these items is from 4.01 to 4.27 indicating high levels of respondent agreement. The key practices identified were: ensure quality standard of product suits foreign countries, redesigning product to adapt with the buyers' comment, uniqueness of product, use international standard for packaging and the product design have to be adapted to different countries' needs.

Table 8: The results of One sample Wilcoxon Signed Ranked Test for Product factors

Sub Variable	Mean	Sig. (P)	Standardized test value	Decision
Checking product quality to meet foreign market standards improves export readiness	4.27	0.000	7.194	Ensuring product quality significantly enhances export readiness among SMEs
Improving products based on foreign buyer feedback enhances export readiness	4.27	0.000	7.359	Adapting products to foreign buyer feedback significantly strengthens export readiness
Offering products with special, unique features supports better export readiness	4.22	0.000	7.369	Providing unique product features significantly boosts export readiness
Using international standard packaging and labelling strengthens export readiness	4.22	0.000	7.097	International standard packaging significantly enhances export readiness
Ability to adjust product design for different foreign markets increases export readiness	4.01	0.000	6.450	Flexible product design for foreign markets positively impacts export readiness

Source: Survey data 2025

The results of the One-Sample Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test on organizational factors suggest that all the sub-variables significantly influenced the export readiness of the agricultural SMEs, with means between 3.66 and 4.18. The top management's interest and promotion towards entering into the global market, (Mean=4.18) obtained the highest mean value, emphasizing the importance of the role played by leadership in exporting processes. The integration of export plans into overall business plans (Mean=4.02) and the continuous assessment and revision of export plans (Mean=3.91) are important for dynamic and well-planned strategic approaches. Although, allocation of resources for export ventures (Mean=3.78) and employees' competence for cross-cultural communication and in English language (Mean=3.66) resulted in comparatively lower means, they were significant too. The above outcomes indicate that top leadership, strategies and its integration with business strategy, resource involvement, human resource capacities is critical to promote organizational export readiness of Sri Lankan agricultural SMEs.

Table 9: The results of One sample Wilcoxon Signed Ranked Test for Organizational factors

Sub Variable	Mean	Sig.(P)	Standardized test value	Decision
Top management's interest and promotion of international market entry improves export readiness	4.18	0.000	6.911	Top management support strongly improves export readiness
Including export plans in business goals and strategies strengthens export readiness	4.02	0.000	6.673	Integrating export plans into business strategy significantly boosts export readiness
Allocating resources (staff and budget) for export work enhances export readiness	3.78	0.000	5.783	Resource allocation for exports positively contributes to export readiness
Staff capability to work with different cultures and communicate in English boosts export readiness	3.66	0.000	4.994	Cross-cultural and English communication skills enhance export readiness
Periodically reviewing and improving export plans supports continuous improvement in export readiness	3.91	0.000	6.672	Regular review of export plans strengthens continuous export readiness improvement

Source: Survey data 2025

In technical and operational factors, the one-sample Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test findings show that most factors have a significantly influence in the export readiness of agricultural SMEs with the means varying from 3.48 to 4.03. Capacity to produce a greater quantity due to increasing export demand obtains the highest mean score (Mean=4.03). It means that scalability of production capacity has to have a part in sustaining of the business export strategy. Besides, strong supply chain (Mean=3.89) and use of Internet and other digital technology for overseas promotional strategies (Mean=3.80) shows a significant influence in determining the export readiness of SMEs. Analyzing sales data and the use of information to make export decision (Mean=3.58) and staff training on export and international trade and practices such as custom declaration and documentation (Mean=3.48) are statistically significant and are essential for export readiness. However, sufficient financial capacity in supporting export expansion (Mean=3.16) has not statistically significant influence on the export readiness of agricultural SMEs ($p=0.181$), which shows although financial capability plays a critical role in the success of export business; a large number of SMEs have limitations which does not guarantee a significant contribution on the export readiness. In summary, scalability of production capacity, supply chain and the use of Internet and digital technologies for overseas promotion, and also technical training in export activities are important contributing factors for the export readiness of agricultural SMEs in Sri Lanka and access to financial resources may be a constraint in this regard.

Table 10: The results of One sample Wilcoxon Signed Ranked Test for Technical and Operational Factors

Sub Variable	Mean	Sig.(P)	Standardized test value	Decision
The ability to increase production capacity if export demand grows supports export readiness	4.03	0.000	6.688	Scalable production capacity enhances export readiness
A well-functioning supply chain supports export readiness	3.89	0.000	6.800	A strong supply chain is crucial for export readiness
Sufficient financial resources to support export expansion strengthen export readiness	3.16	0.181	1.339	Adequate financial resources are important but not significantly linked to export readiness
Utilizing the internet and digital tools to promote overseas enhances export readiness	3.8	0.000	5.692	Using digital tools to promote products overseas strengthens export readiness
Actively analyzing sales data to inform export decisions strengthens export readiness	3.58	0.000	4.599	Analyzing sales data to inform export decisions enhances export readiness
Staff training in managing export logistics and customs documentation improves export readiness	3.48	0.000	3.862	Staff training in export logistics and customs strengthens export readiness

Source: Survey data 2025

Correlation coefficient between Product factors and Export readiness factors

Table 11: The results of Spearman's correlation coefficient

Variable	Spearman's Correlation	Significance (2-tailed)	Decision	
We always check if our product quality meets foreign market standards	0.464	0.000**	Moderate correlation	Positive
We improve our products based on feedback from foreign buyers	0.387	0.000**	Moderate correlation	Positive
Our products have special unique features that help us differentiate in foreign market	0.498	0.000**	Moderate correlation	Positive
We use packaging and labeling that match international requirements	0.412	0.000**	Moderate correlation	Positive
We can easily adjust our products, design for different foreign country needs	0.436	0.000**	Moderate correlation	Positive

** Correlation is Significant at the **0.01** level (2 tailed)

* Correlation is Significant at the **0.05** level (2 tailed)

Source: Survey data 2025

In Table 11, a Spearman correlation analysis is applied to find the relationship between product factors and export readiness of agricultural SMEs. It revealed that there is a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between all the product-related variables and export readiness at 1% significance level ($p < 0.01$). Providing products with special and unique features show the highest correlation with export readiness ($r = 0.498$). This suggests that the product differentiation is the most important variable in terms of increasing competitiveness of SMEs in overseas markets. Both, products with high quality that comply with foreign markets ($r = 0.464$) and having adaptability to modify products in accordance with foreign market demand ($r = 0.436$) show the statistically significant positive correlations with export readiness. Using appropriate international standard products package and labels ($r = 0.412$) and improvement of products on the feedback of foreign buyers ($r = 0.387$) also show moderate positive relation with export readiness. It can be concluded that the more strength in the product capability, the higher the export readiness of agricultural SMEs in Sri Lanka is likely to be.

Correlation coefficient between Organizational factors and Export readiness factors

Table 12: The results of Spearman's correlation coefficient

Variable	Spearman's Correlation	Significance (2-tailed)	Decision
Our top managers are interested and promote entering international markets	0.499	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation
We include export plans in our business goals and strategies	0.555	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation
We allocate resources (staff/budget) for export work	0.478	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation
Our staff knows how to work with different cultures and communicate in English	0.449	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation
We review periodically our export plans and improve them when needed	0.320	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation

** Correlation is Significant at the **0.01** level (2 tailed)

* Correlation is Significant at the **0.05** level (2 tailed)

Source: Survey data 2025

The organizational dimensions have a moderate positive statistically significant relation with export readiness of agricultural SMEs. Inclusion of export plans as part of organizational goals and strategies have the highest degree of association with export readiness ($r = 0.555$, $p < 0.01$), so if the firm strategy include export strategy, the export readiness is strong and has a positive influence. Interest and advocacy for international market development by top management also has a significant moderate positive relationship with the dependent variable ($r = 0.499$) indicating that top management involvement is beneficial. Adequate staffing and resource allocation for export business ($r = 0.478$) and competence to conduct business in the international market (ability to work with different cultures and communication in English) are found to be positively correlated ($r=0.449$), highlighting the need for human capital and organizational resources. There is also a statistically significant, although the weakest, correlation of periodic update and improvement of export plans with export readiness ($r=0.320$). This indicates that continuous updates and improvement of export plans contributes to a positive association with export readiness. In general, organizations with the highest organizational capabilities tend to exhibit high export readiness.

Correlation coefficient between Technical and Operational Factors and export readiness factors

Table 13: The results of Spearman's correlation coefficient

Variable	Spearman's Correlation	Significance (2-tailed)	Decision
We can increase our production capacity if export demand grows	0.304	0.004**	Weak Positive correlation
Our supply chain works well and supports exports	0.421	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation
We have enough money to support export expansion	0.504	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation
We use internet/digital tools (e.g. website/social media) to promote products overseas	0.262	0.013**	Weak Positive correlation
We analyze sales data and performance analytics to support export decisions	0.424	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation
Our staff is trained to manage export logistics and customs documentation	0.392	0.000**	Moderate Positive correlation

** Correlation is Significant at the **0.01** level (2 tailed)

* Correlation is Significant at the **0.05** level (2 tailed)

Source: Survey data 2025

An observation made in technical and operational factors was the difference in relationship with export readiness with a weakness noted in some categories: production capacity (0.304) and use of digital technology (0.262). This implies that most agricultural SMEs in Sri Lanka are still resource deficient and thus, do not possess a significant ability to achieve the desired economy of scale and exploit a digital strategy. This implies that they are "weak" in the sense that although the technical features exist, they alone cannot determine export readiness and will only serve to strengthen organizational and product-based capabilities. The difference in the strength of the association must be due to varying levels of maturity and access to infrastructure; without support from management and finances technical infrastructure alone would not suffice and would serve as a latent factor driven by the secondary factor that must provide support from organizational ability.

Correlation coefficient between Product (Mean score PF), Organizational (Mean score OF), and Technical/Operational factors (Mean score T&O) and the overall Export Readiness factor (Mean score ERF)

Table 14: The results of Spearman’s correlation coefficient

Factor	Correlation with Mean ERF	Sig.	Strength of Relationship	Interpretation
Mean score PF (Product Factors)	0.547	0.000	Moderate Positive	Higher product quality, uniqueness, and adaptability increase export readiness
Mean score of (Organizational Factors)	0.573	0.000	Moderate Positive	Strong management support and planning improve export readiness
Mean score TF (Technical/Operational Factors)	0.498	0.000	Moderate Positive	Better resources, logistics and digital tools contribute to export readiness

Source: Survey data 2025

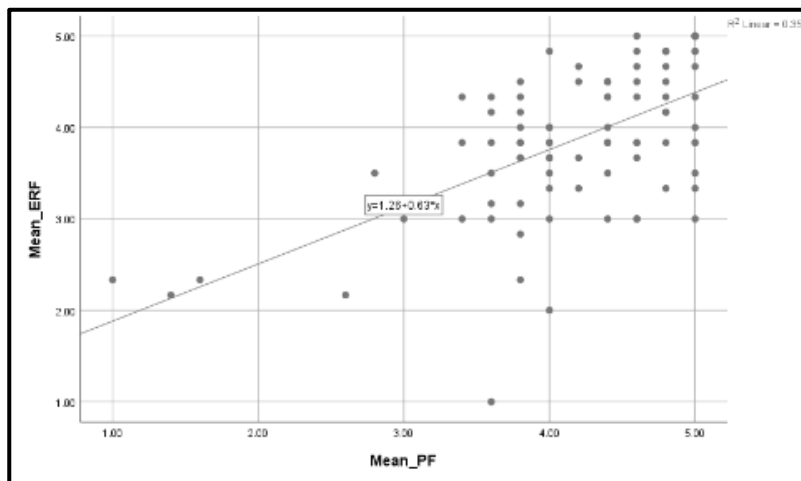


Figure 9: Correlation coefficient between Mean score PF and Mean ERF

Source: Survey data 2025

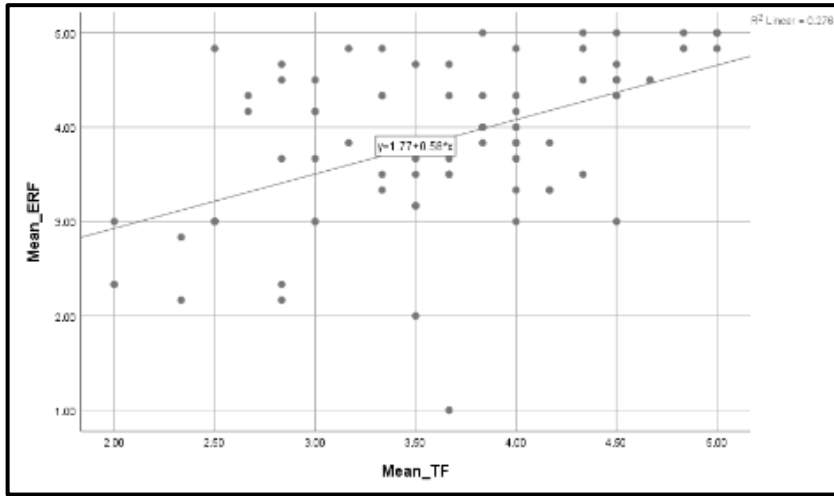


Figure 10 : Correlation coefficient between Mean score TF and Mean ERF

Source: Survey data 2025

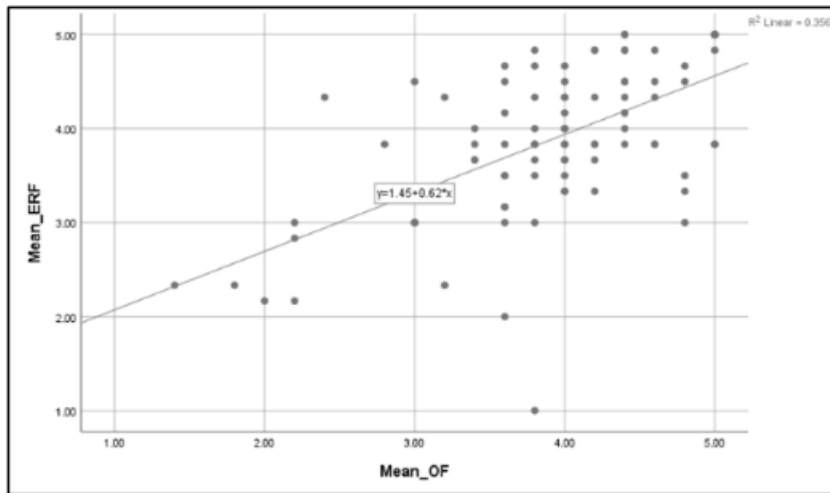


Figure 11: Correlation coefficient between Mean score OF and Mean ERF

Source: Survey data 2025

Practical guidelines for SMEs to enhance their export capacity based on the assessment findings as well give recommendations to the EDB

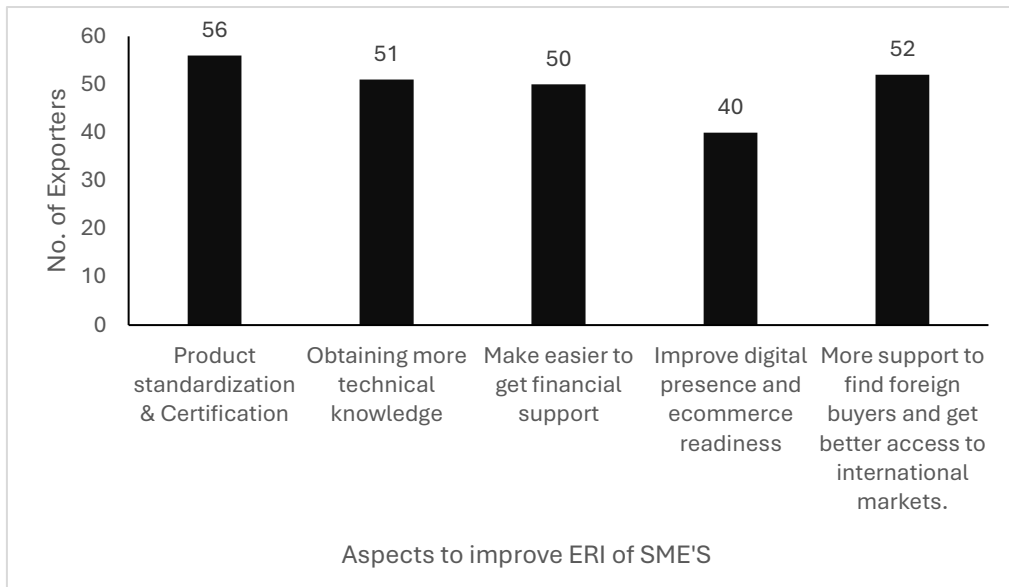


Figure 12: Key Practical Guidelines and recommendations Identified to Enhance Export Readiness of SMEs Based on Survey Insights

Source: Survey data 2025

Guidelines for SMEs

To achieve better score in Export Readiness Index (ERI), agricultural SMEs need an integrated approach along the dimensions of product, organizational and technical/operational level. At product level, agricultural SMEs should focus on complying with international quality standard via certifications such as ISO, HACCP, Global G.A.P.; keeping the stable quality and suitable export-oriented package; incorporating the demands from the buyer into the product-market adjustment. Value addition, tracing system, continual innovation according to world trends and SPS requirements should also be prioritized. At organizational level, agricultural SMEs need to set their strategies in accordance with export orientation; reinforcing the role of the leadership, strengthening the capacity building on exports, appointing designated resources, enhancing inter-functional co-ordination and knowledge management system. Building an export team, regular staff training on exports and monitoring the performance of export activities can increase the firm's ability of export development. At the technical/operational level, agricultural SMEs need to develop their scale of production, perfect the supply chain management system, manage finances wisely and embrace technological application such as e-commerce, data analyzing system, and automated production process. Moreover, plan for risk management, international operational standards.

Recommendations for the Export Development Board (EDB):

The EDB needs to perform the role of an enabler and a facilitator in boosting the export readiness of SMEs. To achieve this, specific support needs to be extended in three main areas, namely: the product, organizational, and technical/operational areas. Support at the product level could entail: providing subsidies on certification and testing of products; provision of support on packaging and labeling; facilitation in providing access to accredited laboratories; promotion of product innovation through services on advisory, exhibition and mentoring. Financial support to create value addition in product development and support in market information should also be implemented. The EDB needs to: extend the range and depth of export training programs; have structured mentoring systems for exporters; formulate standard format of documents relating to exports; establish export help desks and networks; provide incentive for employing export manager; promote cluster development and have a program for "excellence in export". The support at the technical/operational level includes: making sure access to export financing are made more favorable; adoption of new technologies; support in services for advising in logistics and supply chain; promote quality management systems. Furthermore, establishment of digital diagnostic tools, directory for skilled personnel in export; formulation of operation manuals for respective markets will add more support.

Although the authors are fully aware that a longitudinal study would make ERI more credible and predictable, it should be stated that this research was carried out at the undergraduate level, with extremely tight limitations on time, data, and resources, so it intended mainly to build a feasible, policy oriented ERI to be instantly available to EDB rather than to monitor an SME longitudinal data set over time. Nevertheless, the ERI framework proposed in this paper is aimed at being scalable and applicable on a wide basis. In fact, the EDB already confirmed the interest in implementing this index through a forthcoming digital portal aimed at analyzing both new and existing exporters. With such a application, data could be collected in real time, assessing export readiness instantly, building in this case an empirical base to enable and guide longitudinal validation studies in the future. The index is to be developed into a computer-based tool intended to make systematic classification of exporters, allowing targeted policy and capacity-building interventions to be introduced to a greater extent.

Consequently, although a longitudinal validation was beyond the scope of the present study, it has been outlined as an important area for future research work. Future studies may well be in the position of analyzing SMEs over time, and assess the validity of the predictive power of ERI in relation to their export performance and sustainability through use of the suggested digital tool, thus contributing to a progressively validated, practical and empirical driven evaluation tool.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All three areas-product, organizational, and technical/operational aspects are positively correlated with export readiness for the country's agri sector SMEs and are characterized by the positive performance of SMEs in terms of product quality, differentiation, and international standards adherence and above average performance in product, organization supported by management, and alignment of strategy toward export in case of organizational dimensions. Nevertheless, the country SMEs have to take immediate initiatives to cope up with their low performance regarding technical and operational dimensions such as logistics operations, digital marketing competency, supply chain management and employee training. According to the ERI, the majority of Sri Lankan agri sector SMEs have performed

well in terms of high or medium export readiness while only a small portion showed low level of export readiness indicating early stages of development. The ERI model provides a structured grading (low, moderate and high readiness) system which is useful for the relevant policy makers to take tailored interventions. The study recommends that the EDB should introduce a system that allows integration of ERI to a digital portal which is linked to a central exporter data bank for monitoring and training and policy-making purposes and should constantly update the ERI considering the global trends of trade.

For SMEs to improve the competitiveness of agri products export it is suggested that the focus on product adaptation, building organizational capacity and the effective utilization of digital tools and technology are of paramount importance. Generally it was observed that the performance in product quality and the management is above the expected level while the other aspects can be enhanced for the optimal utilization of opportunities in the international market and achieve growth in long term perspective.

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