

1495



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RESEARCH INSIGHTS

NETWORK COMPETENCE FOR THE BOTTOM OF PYRAMID MARKETS: EVIDENCE FROM CROSS-BORDER NETWORKING BETWEEN EXPORTERS AND INTERMEDIARIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social innovation poses significant challenges for firms operating in today's dynamic business environment. In bottom-of-the-pyramid (BoP) markets in particular, it requires collaborative networking among firms to facilitate access to underserved communities. Adopting a network perspective as a theoretical lens, this study examines how social innovation emerges through the interplay of actors, resources, and activities. The findings identify three network competencies shaping exporting firm's BoP orientation: (i) the marketing capabilities of intermediaries; (ii) the cross-border resources of exporting firms; and (iii) strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries. These competencies complement BOP orientation, which in turn influences social innovation outcomes. Moreover, exporters' BOP orientation positively interacts with their purposeful societal goals to further enhance social innovation. This study contributes to social innovation research by demonstrating the critical role of intermediaries in BoP markets and by elaborating on the managerial and policy implications of socially driven innovation strategies.



KEYWORDS

- Networking
- interaction
- actors
- activities
- resources
- partnerships
- bottom-of-pyramid markets
- social innovation
- purposeful societal goals

RESEARCH RELEVANCE

- Network competence drives social innovation in BoP markets: Social innovation is enabled by three interrelated network competencies—intermediaries' marketing capabilities, exporting firms' cross-border resources, and strategic partnerships. Together, these capabilities allow firms to overcome institutional voids and resource constraints, translating collaborative efforts into socially innovative outcomes.
- Intermediaries as capability amplifiers: Beyond facilitating market entry, intermediaries in BoP markets act as critical enablers, providing local knowledge, coordinating activities, and strengthening collaborative networks, which are essential for delivering socially relevant products and services.
- BoP orientation as a mediating capability: Firms develop a stronger orientation toward BoP markets through interactions with capable intermediaries and resource-supported networks, rather than through internal strategy alone.
- Importance of collaborative and relational capabilities: Social innovation emerges from networked interactions among multiple stakeholders, rather than isolated firm efforts, highlighting the need for integrated and adaptive collaboration.
- Purposeful societal goals enhance impact: Firms' intrinsic societal purpose strengthens the effect of BoP orientation on social innovation. Purpose-driven strategies ensure that collaborative networks and resources result in meaningful social outcomes, not just economic gains.
- Policy and managerial implications: Insights from this study guide firms and intermediaries in designing long-term, capability-driven approaches to BoP markets, while informing policymakers on supporting investments, public-private partnerships, and regulatory frameworks that foster inclusive social innovation.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Khan, H., Lee, R., Khan, Z., & Mouzas, S. (2026). Network Competence for the Bottom of Pyramid Markets: Evidence from Cross-border Networking between Exporters and Intermediaries. *International Business Review*, 35(4), Article 102591. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2026.102591>

“Social innovation in bottom-of-the-pyramid markets does not emerge from firms alone, but through networked collaboration, where intermediaries, resources, and partnerships collectively shape both market orientation and social impact.”

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