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Export Barriers of Processed Food MSMEs: A Case Study of Rumah Tempe Indonesia

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A B S T R A C T

This study analyzes export barriers faced by processed food micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) through a case study of Rumah Tempe Indonesia (RTI). Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through field observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation during a four-month research period. The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, supported by triangulation. The findings show that RTI's export activity is constrained by production capacity, supply consistency, non-tariff requirements, certification, administrative complexity, logistics, and limited export readiness. RTI responds through quality-based differentiation, frozen tempe development, selective market targeting, and domestic-market strengthening as a foundation for gradual internationalization.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) remain central to Indonesia's economic structure because they absorb a large share of employment and sustain productive activity across communities. In the processed food sector, MSMEs are strategically positioned to transform local agricultural inputs into value-added products, while also contributing to inclusive economic development and community welfare (Amali et al., 2025); (Christian et al., 2025); (Salman Al Farisi et al., 2022).

Despite this potential, the export participation of processed food MSMEs remains limited. The challenge is not merely a matter of market opportunity, because the global food market offers demand for healthy, fermented, and plant-based products. The more critical issue is export readiness, including the ability to comply with destination-country standards, non-tariff requirements, documentation procedures, and logistics arrangements (Deardorff & Stern, 1997); (Hasni, 2018); (Haykel & Lie, 2025); (Lukman et al., 2023); (Prihandini et al., 2023).

Tempe illustrates this tension between strong product potential and complex export readiness. As a traditional fermented soybean product, tempe has nutritional, cultural, and branding advantages, and previous studies have emphasized its potential as a local commodity for the global market and as an export-oriented processed food product (I Wayan Agus Rangga Saputra et al., 2024); (Kurnia et al., 2023); (W. Y. Utami et al., 2023); (Wikansari et al., 2023). However, its export potential is strongly influenced by shelf life, cold-chain handling, food safety assurance, certification, packaging, and raw-material dependency, particularly because Indonesia's soybean supply remains closely linked to import dynamics (Auliyah et al., 2025); (Buana & Rusdarti, 2018); (Sekretariat Jenderal Kementerian Pertanian, 2022).

The contribution of this paper lies in its qualitative focus on a traditional processed food MSME that is not only a producer but also a learning center for hygienic tempe production. Existing studies have discussed MSME export barriers in general, yet fewer studies have examined the specific interaction between export barriers, fermented-food characteristics, value-added differentiation, and firm-level export readiness in the case of tempe-based MSMEs (Diyanto, 2017); (Lukman & Minghat, 2024); (Prihandini et al., 2023).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the internal and external barriers faced by RTI in developing export-oriented processed tempe products and to explain the adaptive strategies used to maintain competitiveness. The research focuses on tariff and non-tariff barriers, procedural and administrative obstacles, infrastructure and foreign market conditions, production capacity, financing, human resources, and export knowledge.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

MSMEs and export internationalization

MSME internationalization is shaped by the interaction between firm-level capabilities and external market requirements. In developing economies, MSMEs often possess flexibility, local knowledge, and product authenticity, but these advantages do not automatically translate into export competitiveness when

firms face constraints in capital, human resources, innovation systems, and access to institutional support (Anggraeni et al., 2013); (Braito et al., 2021); (Salman Al Farisi et al., 2022).

In the processed food sector, internationalization is even more demanding because food products are evaluated not only by price and taste but also by safety, traceability, nutritional information, shelf life, and conformity with destination-country standards. This makes export capability inseparable from certification readiness, hygiene systems, packaging innovation, and the ability to communicate product value to foreign buyers (Hasni, 2018); (Haykel & Lie, 2025); (Wikansari et al., 2023).

Trade barriers and export readiness

Trade barrier theory explains that export performance is influenced by both tariff and non-tariff measures. Tariffs increase landed costs and reduce price competitiveness, while non-tariff barriers include food safety standards, sanitary and phytosanitary requirements, labeling rules, technical specifications, inspection procedures, and administrative obligations (Deardorff & Stern, 1997); (Haykel & Lie, 2025); (Vladi & Vladi, 2017).

Export readiness connects these external requirements with internal capabilities. A firm may have a product with international demand, but export failure can occur when production capacity, managerial knowledge, financing, and quality systems are not yet adequate to meet foreign-market expectations. Studies on food-product SMEs show that licensing, documentation, marketing management, financing, and government-support limitations often operate simultaneously rather than separately (Braito et al., 2021); (Lukman & Minghat, 2023); (Lukman & Minghat, 2024).

Value-added differentiation in traditional food products

Traditional food products often compete in markets where consumers may perceive the product as homogeneous. In this situation, differentiation becomes essential. Value-added differentiation can be built through hygiene, product safety, consistent taste, functional nutrition, brand storytelling, attractive packaging, and innovation in derivative products. Product innovation has also been shown to support food-SME performance, especially when strengthened by collaboration among business, government, academic, and community actors (Christian et al., 2025); (Kurnia et al., 2023); (H. N. Utami et al., 2025).

For RTI, value-added differentiation is relevant because the quality of tempe is not always visible to consumers. Nutritional value, cleanliness of production, soybean selection, fermentation control, and shelf-life stability must be communicated through packaging, labeling, certification, and consumer education. This logic is consistent with studies on premium and healthy-food consumers, which show that product labeling and perceived health value influence consumer behavior (H. N. Utami et al., 2025); (Wikansari et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative case study design. RTI was selected as the research site because it represents a processed food MSME that

produces tempe and tempe-based derivative products while developing an export orientation. The case study approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to understand export barriers contextually through the meanings, experiences, and practices of the actors involved (Lima & Newell-McLymont, 2021).

Data were collected through field observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and triangulation. Observation was conducted to understand production activities, hygiene practices, packaging, product handling, and export-related operational readiness. Interviews were conducted purposively with informants who possessed relevant knowledge, including the owner or manager, production personnel, quality or certification-related actors, administrative staff, and other parties involved in export preparation. Documentation included company profile information, product records, certification-related materials, packaging data, and supporting visual evidence.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Field data were coded based on major barrier categories: tariff barriers, non-tariff barriers, procedural and administrative barriers, infrastructure and foreign-market conditions, production capacity, financing, and human resources or export knowledge. Data credibility was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, observation, and documentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1988); (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

The findings show that RTI's export challenges are multidimensional. Export activity is not blocked by a single obstacle, but by the accumulation of internal and external barriers. The following results summarize the empirical patterns identified from observation, interviews, and documentation.

RTI as a hygienic tempe production and learning center

RTI is located in Bogor, West Java, and was established on June 6, 2012 as a production unit that promotes hygienic and environmentally friendly tempe production. Its development involved collaboration among local cooperative actors and supporting institutions, including KOPTI Kabupaten Bogor, Mercy Corps Indonesia, and Forum Tempe Indonesia. This collaborative origin positioned RTI not only as a production site but also as a role model and educational space for tempe producers.

RTI produces fresh tempe and several processed tempe products, including branded fresh tempe, tempe bacem, yellow-spiced tempe, tempe nuggets, and tempe chips. Fresh tempe remains the core product, while processed variants expand the product portfolio and create additional value. The company's production orientation emphasizes hygiene, process consistency, and quality assurance, which are essential prerequisites for entering modern domestic markets and potential export channels.

The empirical data also show that RTI functions as a social and educational enterprise. It receives visits from students, universities, communities, entrepreneurs, and international guests. This role strengthens its legitimacy as a

living laboratory for tempe production and contributes to changing the perception that tempe is merely a low-value traditional product. In this sense, RTI's competitiveness is built not only through production but also through knowledge dissemination and value creation.

Export orientation and market segmentation

RTI's export activity is centered on processed tempe products, particularly frozen tempe, because freezing helps maintain nutritional stability, texture, and product safety during long-distance distribution. Export markets are not homogeneous. The findings identify two broad types of foreign markets: high-standard markets and flexible diaspora-oriented markets.

High-standard markets require strict conformity to product specifications, raw material quality, standardized processing, legal documents, certification, hygiene protocols, and labeling rules. These markets usually come from countries with stronger regulatory systems and higher consumer expectations for food safety. By contrast, diaspora-oriented markets are relatively more flexible because demand is driven by availability, affordability, and cultural attachment to Indonesian food. However, even these markets still require consistency of supply and acceptable product quality.

This segmentation shapes RTI's export strategy. Rather than treating export as a uniform opportunity, RTI must adapt quality levels, packaging, communication, and distribution arrangements according to market characteristics. This approach confirms the importance of market-oriented production, where product specifications are negotiated based on consumer needs, buyer expectations, and regulatory conditions.

Internal barriers: production capacity, finance, and export knowledge

The first major internal barrier concerns production capacity. Export orders generally require consistent volume, predictable delivery schedules, and stable product quality. As an MSME, RTI faces constraints in scaling production without compromising process control. Because tempe is a fermented product, quality depends on raw material selection, processing discipline, temperature, timing, packaging, and storage. Scaling up production is therefore not a simple matter of increasing output; it also requires system maturity.

The second barrier concerns financing. Export activity requires additional costs for certification, packaging adaptation, cold-chain logistics, documentation, market access, and working capital. These costs are incurred before revenue is fully realized. For MSMEs, limited access to affordable financing can make export expansion risky, especially when the firm must absorb buyer requirements, shipping uncertainties, and potential product rejection.

The third barrier concerns human resources and export knowledge. Export activity requires familiarity with documents, HS codes, incoterms, customs procedures, quality certification, buyer communication, and destination-country requirements. The findings indicate that export readiness depends on the ability of the organization to distribute tasks and build specialized knowledge. Without adequate human resources, export procedures become slow, costly, and vulnerable to error.

External barriers: non-tariff requirements, administration, logistics, and market conditions

External barriers are dominated by non-tariff requirements. For processed food, standards related to hygiene, food safety, labeling, packaging, and certification are decisive. RTI must manage requirements such as HACCP-based process control, good manufacturing practice, halal assurance, nutrition information, and destination-country rules. These requirements are important for consumer protection, but they raise compliance costs for MSMEs.

Procedural and administrative complexity is another barrier. Export requires coordination with several documents and institutions, including business legality, product certification, customs documents, invoice and packing list preparation, certificates of origin, and other destination-specific requirements. For MSMEs with limited administrative staff, the documentation burden can delay export decisions and increase transaction costs.

Infrastructure and market conditions also affect export feasibility. Frozen tempe requires temperature-controlled handling to maintain quality during transportation. Logistics cost, access to reliable shipping schedules, cold-chain availability, and product risk during transit influence RTI's ability to serve foreign buyers. At the same time, foreign consumers may demand non-GMO, organic, vegan, vegetarian, or health-oriented product attributes that require additional product positioning and communication.

Raw material dependency and quality grading

A significant finding concerns soybean supply. RTI's production still relies heavily on imported soybeans, particularly from the United States, Canada, and Brazil. The dependence on imported soybeans is not simply caused by the technical inferiority of local soybeans. It is also related to the economic structure of domestic soybean farming, including limited farmer incentives, low margins, short shelf life, production risk, and market uncertainty.

RTI responds to raw material dependency through quality grading. The company uses different soybean categories, including GMO, non-GMO, and organic soybeans, depending on product positioning and market requirements. This quality-grading strategy allows RTI to match raw material choices with buyer expectations. It also supports premium positioning, especially when the target market values safety, health, and product traceability.

Rather than directly importing raw materials, RTI cooperates with local vendors that already possess supply networks. This strategy enables the firm to concentrate on production control, product quality, and innovation while reducing administrative and operational risks related to import activities. The approach reflects a rational supply-chain strategy based on specialization and risk management.

Adaptive strategies and export readiness

The findings show that RTI does not position export as the only or primary growth strategy. Export is treated as a selective opportunity that must be pursued carefully, while the domestic market remains the foundation for business sustainability. This strategic posture is rational because export expansion

without adequate capacity, financing, certification, and logistics support could expose the firm to excessive risk.

RTI's adaptive strategies include value-added differentiation, frozen product development, quality-based pricing, consumer education, flexible production based on market segments, and the strengthening of domestic market legitimacy. The company deliberately targets consumers who understand and appreciate hygiene, quality, and product credibility. This strategy allows RTI to avoid direct competition with mass-market tempe that is evaluated mainly by price.

Another important adaptive mechanism is value-based leadership. The informant emphasized integrity, honesty, discipline, quality commitment, and social contribution as foundations of business sustainability. These values shape the organizational culture and strengthen trust with consumers, partners, and visitors. In RTI's case, export readiness is therefore not only technical but also organizational and ethical.

Table 1. Export Barriers and Adaptive Responses of Rumah Tempe Indonesia

Barrier dimension	Empirical manifestation	Main impact	Adaptive response
Production capacity	Limited ability to scale frozen tempe output while maintaining fermentation quality and delivery consistency.	Export continuity is difficult when demand requires stable volume and timing.	Strengthen production planning, quality control, and gradual capacity expansion.
Financing	Certification, packaging, logistics, and working capital create additional costs before revenue is realized.	Export expansion becomes financially risky for an MSME.	Prioritize selective export opportunities and use domestic market stability as a financial base.
Human resources and export knowledge	Export documents, HS codes, incoterms, buyer communication, and compliance procedures require specialized skills.	Administrative error and processing delays may increase transaction costs.	Develop task specialization, export mentoring, and practical documentation routines.
Non-tariff requirements	Food safety, hygiene, labeling, certification, and buyer standards differ across countries.	Compliance becomes a prerequisite for high-standard markets.	Apply HACCP-oriented production, quality grading, and certification-based positioning.
Procedural administration	Multiple documents and institutions are involved in export preparation.	Bureaucracy increases time and complexity.	Prepare standardized document checklists and coordinate with supporting agencies.
Logistics and market conditions	Frozen tempe requires reliable cold-chain handling; destination markets vary in quality expectations.	Product quality may be exposed to transit risk and market mismatch.	Use frozen product development, market segmentation, and buyer-specific specifications.

DISCUSSION

Export barriers as an interaction between regulation and firm readiness

The findings confirm that export barriers for processed food MSMEs cannot be reduced to external regulation alone. Tariffs, standards, documentation, and logistics are important, but their impact becomes more severe when the firm lacks internal readiness. This interaction is consistent with export-barrier literature, which emphasizes that regulatory barriers and firm-level capability gaps often reinforce each other in SME internationalization (Braito et al., 2021); (Deardorff & Stern, 1997); (Lukman et al., 2023).

This supports the argument that export policy should not only open access to foreign markets but also strengthen the capabilities of MSMEs before market entry. Training, certification assistance, export financing, and logistics support will be more effective when they are linked to the actual readiness level and product characteristics of each MSME (Haykel & Lie, 2025); (Prihandini et al., 2023).

Non-tariff barriers and food safety as central challenges

In processed food exports, non-tariff barriers are more decisive than tariff barriers because food products must comply with safety, hygiene, labeling, and certification requirements. For tempe, the challenge is amplified by the product's fermented nature, limited shelf life, and sensitivity to temperature and handling. Previous studies on Indonesian processed food exports also identify technical standards, food-safety requirements, administrative procedures, and logistics costs as major constraints for MSMEs (Hasni, 2018); (Haykel & Lie, 2025); (Lukman & Minghat, 2024).

RTI's emphasis on HACCP-oriented production and hygienic processing indicates that food safety is not merely a formal compliance requirement; it is part of product credibility. For high-standard markets, certification and documentation become signals of reliability, while for diaspora and niche markets, product authenticity and consistent quality remain central to buyer trust (H. N. Utami et al., 2025); (Wikansari et al., 2023).

Quality differentiation and consumer education

The study shows that high-quality tempe requires consumer education because the most important quality attributes are often invisible. Hygiene, nutritional value, fermentation control, soybean grading, and shelf-life stability cannot always be judged visually by consumers. Therefore, the firm must translate these attributes into credible messages through labeling, packaging, storytelling, and consistent brand communication (Christian et al., 2025); (H. N. Utami et al., 2025)

RTI's strategy of value-added differentiation addresses this issue by linking higher prices to credible product attributes. This approach is consistent with a niche-market strategy, where the firm serves consumers who value quality, health, safety, and authenticity rather than competing primarily through low prices. Studies on tempe-based products similarly emphasize the importance of innovation, packaging, and market positioning in strengthening export potential (I Wayan Agus Rangga Saputra et al., 2024); (Kurnia et al., 2023).

Policy implications for processed food MSME export development

The case of RTI suggests that export development programs should be designed according to the life cycle and readiness level of MSMEs. Government intervention should prioritize internal strengthening before encouraging export expansion. This includes managerial training, standard operating procedures, certification pathways, digital marketing capacity, export documentation literacy, and access to market information (Braito et al., 2021); (Lukman & Minghat, 2024); (Prihandini et al., 2023).

At the sector level, soybean dependency should be addressed through a broader policy approach. Strengthening local soybean supply requires economic incentives for farmers, improved trading systems, risk reduction, and coordination between agricultural, industrial, and trade policies. Without these efforts, tempe producers will remain exposed to raw-material price fluctuations and supply uncertainty ((Auliyah et al., 2025); (Buana & Rusdarti, 2018); (Sari et al., 2025); (Sekretariat Jenderal Kementerian Pertanian, 2022).

Finally, export assistance should differentiate between market types. High-standard markets require intensive support for certification, traceability, and product compliance, while diaspora-oriented markets may require distribution partnerships, packaging adaptation, and promotional support. This segmented approach is more realistic than assuming that all MSMEs can follow the same export pathway (Hasni, 2018); (Haykel & Lie, 2025); (Lukman et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that RTI's export barriers are structural and operational. The main constraints include limited production capacity, supply consistency, non-tariff requirements, certification, administrative complexity, logistics, financing, and human resources. These barriers show that export readiness is the key condition for sustainable internationalization.

RTI responds to these barriers through quality-based differentiation, frozen tempe development, selective market targeting, quality grading of raw materials, domestic-market strengthening, and value-based organizational practices. Export is therefore understood not as an immediate mass expansion strategy, but as a gradual opportunity that should be pursued only when internal capabilities and external support are aligned.

The study recommends that processed food MSMEs strengthen quality systems, production planning, financial capacity, and export knowledge before expanding internationally. Government and supporting institutions should design export assistance based on MSME readiness levels, with stronger emphasis on certification support, logistics facilitation, financing, and market-specific mentoring.

FURTHER STUDY

This study is limited by its single-case qualitative design. Future research may use comparative case studies involving several tempe producers or processed food MSMEs in different regions. Quantitative or mixed-method designs may also be used to test the relationship between export readiness, quality differentiation, leadership values, and business performance. Further

studies should also examine the role of consumers, distributors, farmers, and policymakers to obtain a more balanced understanding of processed food export ecosystems.

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