

## Evaluation of the *Export Helpdesk for Developing Countries* Summary Report

The *Export Helpdesk for Developing Countries* is an online service provided by the European Commission to facilitate market access for exporters from developing countries to the European Union. It offers information on EU import requirements as well as market information, including import tariffs and import conditions, legal product requirements, member states' taxes, and trade statistics. The *Export Helpdesk for Developing Countries* has been launched in 2004, thus the external evaluation has been carried out in the third year of its operation.

The **objectives of the evaluation**, as set out in the Terms of Reference, are:

1. To evaluate the results and overall impact of the service;
2. To assess the extent to which the information provided by the Export Helpdesk is reliable; complete, and useful, the service is user-friendly, and its availability is well-known amongst its target users;
3. To consider whether changes are desirable or necessary, and if so, to make practical suggestions about how such changes might be implemented.

To this end, the investigation draws on a number of **internal and external sources** of information, including:

- A user survey carried out both online and offline, based on a succinct and a more detailed questionnaire, in which close to 1,000 users participated;
- Over 40 interviews both with experts in trade promotion or related fields and with staff of the EU Commission in charge of maintaining the *Export Helpdesk*, or otherwise involved with the service;
- An analysis of simulated model queries concerning a representative range of import transactions;
- An analysis of website traffic on the *Export Helpdesk* server;
- A comparative analysis of similar online services (Benchmark study);
- An analysis of documents pertaining to the website and its underlying organisation.

The **study design**, then, explicitly embraced the experiences and opinions of stakeholders worldwide, and aimed to strike a regional balance to the greatest extent possible. Limitations arose from a low level of use (or even awareness) of the tool especially in Africa, which had an impact on participation in the user survey and the interviews, and from bad lines, particularly in some parts of Asia and Africa, which put an obstacle to the expert interviews. Nevertheless, the answers collected represent all major regions and a wide range of stakeholders, including DC exporters, different export promotion bodies, EU-based importers, and others.

According to our **findings**, the Export Helpdesk is on the whole a very **comprehensive** source of information, and its approach of providing this range of information systematically by product code is unique among comparable web-based tools.

Its **assets**, as perceived by the stakeholders consulted, are that it is **comprehensive, free of charge**, and **systematic** in information structure. This makes it a highly useful service, especially for users who carry out export-related research frequently. For users who have little experience in export business, retrieving and interpreting the information supplied by the Helpdesk is, however, more difficult. The systematic approach currently **requires considerable prior knowledge**, e.g. on import procedures and the EU Single Market, in order to be able to piece together a picture from the information obtained. **User-friendliness** needs to be enhanced therefore, so as to ensure that the service is of use to a wider circle of users in developing countries. This should be seen as a **priority** in the further development of the service.

Information on the Helpdesk is predominantly **up-to-date**, however the state of affairs which it seeks to present is by definition the current one. In order to take into account the time spans and financial risks involved with planning for export, the Helpdesk should adopt a **more future-oriented approach** by announcing forthcoming changes in regulations, taxes and tariffs prior to entry into force. Moreover, because of the sheer amount of data which has to be processed, information on taxes and requirements are updated just two to three times a year, and may therefore be outdated by up to six months. The **date** when the information was last updated should therefore **be indicated** for information where up-to-dateness is of crucial importance.

As regards **usage and awareness**, a certain number of users consult the *Helpdesk* intensively. As indicated above, however, the tool is still unknown to large parts of its potential user group. Usage is strong in South America, South Asia and within the European Union, but less so in other parts of Asia and still less in Africa. This appears to be linked to internet connectivity and economic factors such as export capacity to a certain extent. Nevertheless, **awareness-raising is crucial** to increase impact of the service, and should involve a feedback mechanism for impact assessment and user engagement.

As one-off presentations in the EU and developing countries do not have as sustainable an impact as continued promotion through local multipliers, **networking and cooperation** with relevant institutions in developing countries should be **pursued systematically** in order to increase awareness and use of the Helpdesk. As a promising and inexpensive means of promotion, networking in the short run could begin with extensive linking with relevant webportals.

To guide medium- to long-term development of the service and set it in the wider context of EU trade policy and development cooperation, the *Export Helpdesk* **should be given an official mission** or strategy. In the manner of a mandate, this should set down its overall objectives, clarify its main target groups, and define and prioritise its scope of content and services. Only then, global objectives can be translated into operational goals, appropriate resources needed in the long run can be allocated, and the *Helpdesk's* impact will become measurable and communicable.