

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the positive effects of cultural bridges on European firms' internationalization to SMCs and MECs. We analyse the meaning and the role of managers' cultural competence in order to understand if and how it contributes to the formation of effective cultural bridges.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Given the few contributions existing on the topic, and the lack of a general theory, a multiple case-study analysis seems appropriate to the topic. In particular, we present five case studies of European large firms, which have successfully internationalized in SMCs and MECs. In each firm, we interviewed local and foreign managers, in order to understand the importance of cultural issues and the ways companies overcame cultural distance.

**Findings** – Cultural distance is a big problem for European firms investing in SMCs and MECs. They impact both intra- and inter-organizational relationships and cultural bridges can be useful to overcome the effects of its perception. Cultural bridges are effective if based on managers' cultural competencies, and can be represented by a specific manager, or by an organizational unit. In any case, the involvement of local people and the adaptation to local customs are crucial.

**Research limitations/implications** – The analysis is still limited, and, in the future, we'll look for a methodology able to isolate cultural knowledge and cultural competence as key factors in order to evaluate the importance of each factor.

**Practical implications** – When entering Islamic countries, foreign investors should be aware of local values, particularly religious and family value, which deeply impact on business and social relationships. Based on a deep cultural knowledge, cultural bridges enable fruitful relationships both inside and outside the organization.

**Originality/value** – Whereas cultural competence is often mentioned in the literature, only a few contributions focus on cultural competence as a key aspect of internationalization. In addition we explore the concept and the relevance of cultural bridges, and the multiple case-study analysis show some best practices firms could follow to succeed in SMCs and MECs