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Advantages and Disadvantages of the Participation of SMEs in Tourism Clusters

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Abstract:

The concept of clusters is based on creating entrepreneurship and competitiveness of interrelated organizations. The essence of the cluster initiative is to stimulate cooperation between individual enterprises and institutions, to accelerate innovation processes and thus to improve competitive position of enterprises operating within clusters. However, the participation in this initiative, based on the principle of cooperation, is also burdened with some negative effects resulting from the nature of cooperation and type of participants. The main aim of this paper is to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the participation in tourism clusters from the point of view of Slovak small and medium entrepreneurs. For evaluation, there were used the results of questionnaire surveys, which was interpreted by the Chi-Square test. The results showed that the most important advantages are from the areas of networking and common cooperation and propagation. The most important disadvantages were recognized mainly by micro and small entrepreneurs from the area of human resources.

Keywords: cluster; tourism cluster; advantages; benefits of participation in clusters; negative effects; SME sector

JEL Classification: L26 ; L83 ; Z32

Introduction

The definition of cluster is based on a group of interrelated enterprises, institutions and other types of organizations concentrated in the same area. It is an aggregation of interrelated organizations, including the scientific and research ones with a specific profile, operating in a certain area.

Clusters are mostly created in order to establish cooperation which, by using common resources, allows the participants of cooperation to gain competitive advantage in the market. The participation in cluster allows in particular small and medium enterprises to use opportunities resulting from sharing resources and exchanging experiences and knowledge. The benefits from the participation in the cluster initiative are also recorded by large enterprises. The formation of cluster brings about the benefits not only for the entrepreneurs participating in the cluster initiative themselves but also for the region and the whole country. Unfortunately, the participation in clusters is also burdened with negative effects resulting from the nature of cooperation and the specificity of the cluster operation.

The aim of the study is to present the essence of clusters, particularly taking into account the benefits and weaknesses resulting from the participation of enterprises of the SME sector. The accomplishment of the objective of the study is based on the review of literature and the evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the participation in tourism clusters from the point of view of Slovak small and medium entrepreneurs.

1. Literature Review

1.1. The essence of clusters

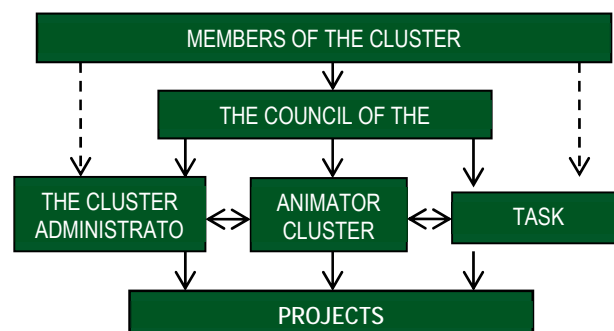
For the first-time cluster was defined by M. E. Porter (1990), who indicates the economic approach and draws attention to the fact that cluster is geographic concentration of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries and associated institutions in particular fields that compete but also cooperate. W. Elsner and J. Groenewegen (2000) acknowledge that clusters are group of enterprises linked vertically and horizontally and the relationships between firms and institutions supporting the creation of cluster are defined by the market. Literature review indicates that the definition of clusters and relationships between the cooperating participants is described in detail and results from various aspects, such as market and non-market linkages (Rabelotti 1995), sharing infrastructure and the provision of complementary services by entities (Rosenfeld 1997), specialization of participants (Guerrieri, Iammarino and Pietrobelli 2001), connection by vertical and horizontal relationships, which is associated with the local business support infrastructure (Mariussen 2001, Bohátová, Schwarcz, Schwarczová, Bandlerová, and Tlčík 2016), but also there occurs economic independence of the entities collaborating within clusters (Guerrieri, Iammarino and Pietrobelli 2001, Havierníková, Okřeglicka and Klučka 2016, Ližbetinová 2017).

The definition adopted by the European Union states that cluster is the way of organization of the production system caused by geographic concentration of economic entities and other organizations specialized in the same areas of activity, developing mutual market and non-market relationships, which together contribute to the development of innovation and competitiveness of the cluster participants and their area of operation (European Trend 2003, Dobai Korcsmáros and Seres Huszárík 2015). It can be acknowledged that clusters are formed on the basis of three main principles:

- concentration of organizations operating in the same or related sectors in the specific area;
- interaction and operation of these organizations;
- vertical and horizontal relationships linking the cooperating parties.

However, there is no doubt about the fact that the concept of clusters is a way of thinking about the creation of the competitiveness of enterprises. Its essence is the stimulation of cooperation between individual entities of the economic life, acceleration of innovation processes and, by means of the above, improvement in the competitive position of enterprises operating in cluster. This situation particularly applies to the SME sector since the enterprises of this size (Rajić and Milošević 2016), when linked with each other, have better opportunities than when operating individually, the ones concerning development, identification of production niches, access to export markets (Dzemydaite 2017) and conduct of employment policy (Lachiewicz and Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2012). Moreover, clusters are most frequently established between small and medium companies (Štarchoň, Ližbetinová and Weberová 2017) concentrated in the same region (Matkovskaya 2017), belonging to the subsequent parts of value chain and also being the producers of complementary goods, business associations or units of the specialized structure (Tomski 2016). In Figure 1, there is presented the classic cluster organization chart, which enables formal contacts between cluster members but also indicates the ways of informal contacts.

Figure 1. The classic cluster organization chart



Source: (Klaster to zaufanie 2011).

Clusters may become a good solution for enterprises during an economic crisis as well as economic downturn but not only. However, it is important that entrepreneurs who decide on such a form of cooperation trust each other. Building trust is based on two-level relationships which are formal and informal. The first level is formal contacts, including the cluster regulation, partnership agreements between its individual members, creating joint product/service offer, concluding licensing agreements and other contracts, and thus all the forms of communication which are based on codified standards. The other level is informal contacts allowing for building a specific social network between entities creating cluster. Only the use of both types of communication channels brings desired results and allows for building really close and lasting bonds between cluster members. Organizations, which communicate not only on the basis of codified standards but also on the basis of the rules sanctioned not by the law but by mutual respect and the custom adopted in the group, much more easily recognize the expectations towards each other, establish mutual rights, privileges and responsibilities (Klaster to Zaufanie 2011).

In the subject literature, there are made attempts to classify clusters using different criteria, which may include (Enright 2001):

- the development criterion, where there are identified: embryonic, established, mature, declining clusters;
- the criterion of creating jobs, where there are identified: clusters of increasing, stable or decreasing employment;
- the territorial scope criterion, according to which there are identified: local, regional, national and transnational clusters;
- the criterion of the number of horizontally related sectors, where there are identified: narrow and broad clusters;
- the criterion of the number of stages of the production chain, among which there are: deep clusters – including all the stages of the production chain and shallow clusters – including one or a few production stages;
- the criterion of competitive position, according to which there are identified: clusters being world, national leaders or clusters with poor or average competitive position;
- the criterion of innovativeness and technological advancement, which may include: clusters of low, medium and high technologies.

Clusters are to integrate the entities operating in a specific area in related sectors. The benefits resulting from cooperation within cluster can also be used in the tourism activity. Tourism clusters (Borkowska-Niszczota 2015) can play a significant role in the activation of the local community and transformation of a place into tourist areas and an increase in their competitiveness in the tourism market. Initiatives associated with creating tourism clusters may serve the accomplishment of specific objectives. In this respect, the help of local authorities, both in financial and substantial terms become necessary to overcome various barriers (including the environmental one) of the local community (Roman 2013, Sobeková Májková 2015, Andrejovská and Hudáková 2016). The specific feature of the tourism sector is its interdisciplinary nature and the complexity of the offered product. This is due to the fact that tourism combines the elements of other economic sectors. Also, the specificity of the tourism product, which consists of different elements, is favorable for cooperation and synergy of effects within the framework of the operation of tourism clusters. This facilitates the activity of entrepreneurs in the group (Skowronek 2015).

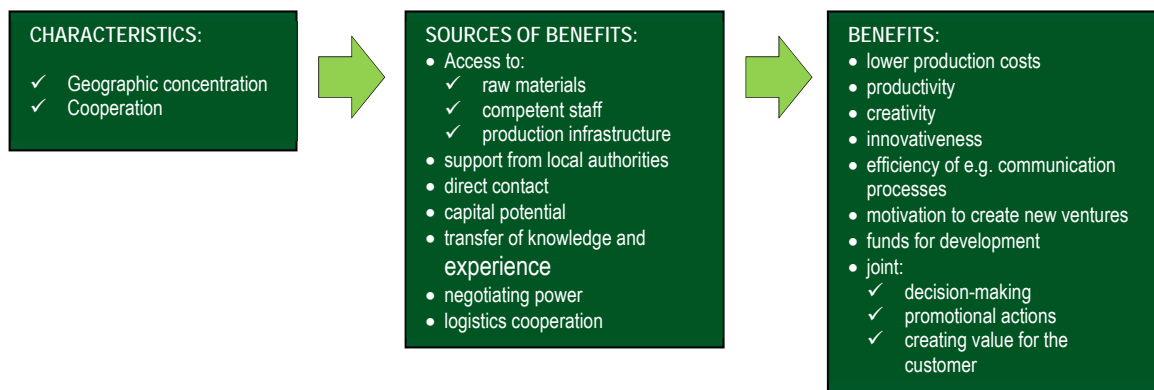
1.2. Benefits of participation in clusters

The carrier of modern development is the cooperation of the science sector and the economic sector. It is a source of innovation (Lorincová and Potkány 2016) and thus also competitive advantages of both enterprises and whole economies. Innovation is a result of a creative process, of a new idea, brain wave, and new knowledge – of invention. Innovations are considered to be the driving force of economic and social development of enterprises (Ivanová and Masarová 2016). It is of particular importance in the case of the units of the SME sector which usually do not have their own research and development units due to the limited capital potential (Kot and Kraska 2014).

The fundamental thesis concerning clusters consists in the belief that clusters positively affect an increase in innovativeness of the economy but also the enterprises themselves. The problem of clusters is associated with the occurrence of numerous benefits in this context for both the participants of cluster and the whole economy resulting from the role which the cluster performs. At the same time, these benefits can be defined as (Wicher-Baluta 2012) micro-level benefits and thus the benefits of the cluster participants and benefits at a macro-economic level where they operate as a type of the common good. In addition, as described by Bojar (2007), clusters may be the key destination for foreign capital allocation and foreign investments, which may play a leading role in cluster and strengthen synergy in all aspects of its operation.

When conducting the analysis of the benefits from the participation in clusters it can be assumed that the main criterion distinguishing the ideas of clusters is cooperation (collaboration) and geographic concentration. At this point, it is worth paying attention to the benefits for the companies conducting their business activities within clusters. In Figure 2, there are presented the benefits resulting from the characteristics of the most typical clusters, *i.e.* geographic concentration and cooperation. As it can be seen, formal and informal collaboration brings benefits to entrepreneurs (Sobeková Majková 2016), both by reducing costs of conducting a business at different organizational levels as well as it affects an increase in creativity, innovativeness and performance of enterprises. Moreover, the participation of enterprises, in particular from the SME sector, in clusters positively affects raising funds for business development and results in an increase in motivation to create new ventures by entrepreneurs (Kordos *et al.* 2016). This is due to the opportunities to make joint decisions, undertake joint promotional actions, which consequently creates the value for the customer and influences an increase in competitiveness of enterprises, particularly the micro- and small ones.

Figure 2. The classic cluster organization



Source: Own study based on (Wiśniewska and Liczmańska 2014).

In addition, in the subject literature, it is described that, from the point of view of an individual entity, the main benefits resulting from the operation within clusters, among others, may also include (Diatczyk 2012):

- reduction in the level of risk of conducting business;
- an increase in the degree of specialization;
- reduction in transport costs;
- an opportunity to benefit from business support offered by cluster coordinators.

The benefits at a macro-level can be divided into two groups, the ones resulting for the region in which the cluster operates and the ones resulting for the whole national economy. Among the positive consequences of the cluster operation for the region, there must be indicated (Benchmarking klastrów 2010):

- an increase in the level of attractiveness of the region, including an improvement in its competitiveness and innovativeness;
- development of small and medium enterprises by creating the culture of entrepreneurship and innovation (Lorincová, Hitka and Balážová 2016);
- development of scientific and research infrastructure, attracting highly qualified staff, an increase in the role of modern technologies, exchange of knowledge, creating pioneering companies;
- emergence of new economic entities in the region and thus creation of new jobs;
- positive impact on sustainable development of the region.

Clusters positively influence the level of innovation, condition the development of regions, particularly by promoting cooperation and spreading knowledge among research organizations and local entrepreneurs (Hiroyuki and Nishimura 2015). The impact of clusters on the national economy refers to:

- an improvement in the economic situation;
- an increase in the level of innovativeness of the economy;
- attracting direct foreign investments;
- affecting an increase in the level of export;
- activating a business activity resulting in beneficial impact on the basic macro-economic measures such as GDP value, production level, export value or level of employment and unemployment.

As described by M. E. Porter (1998), the main advantage and simultaneously the characteristic feature of the participation in cluster initiative is the ability to access a particular resource, including raw materials, equipment and specialists by individual participants of cooperation, *i.e.* the enterprise. The emergence and occurrence of clusters along with the regional industrial specialization affect high productivity of the region and innovativeness of the economy. As underlined by Y. V. Matveev and others (2016), it is important to understand that clusters do not determine only the competitive advantage of the region or the country. The occurrence of clusters of enterprises conducting their activity within clusters in the economy of the region is one of the factors influencing a general improvement in the quality of the business environment in which all the enterprises operate, not only the ones associated in clusters (Habánik, Kordoš and Hošťák 2016).

1.3. The negative effects of doing business in clusters

The operation of cluster as of any form of cooperation, in addition to undeniable benefits, also brings threats. The most frequently listed include (Staszewski 2004):

- environmental pollution being the consequence of industrialization of the region;
- the weakening of competition, which may be the result of creating cartels undesirable for the economy;
- an increase in prices due to enrichment and an increase in investment value of the region;
- “group thinking” – it may occur that the cluster, instead of stimulating creativity, has led to the stagnation of creativity or failure in the implementation of new technologies;
- cluster failure which may result from location (unfavorable and inflexible legal regulations or excessive consolidation) or events resulting from discontinuity of environment (*e.g.* discontinuity of technique and technology).

The functioning within the framework of cluster cooperation is also associated with some drawbacks indicated by the entrepreneurs being the participants of network cooperation themselves. Strategy, economic stability, performance, and access to external financing for microenterprises are determined by personality characteristics of owners. (Vojtovic, *et al.* 2016, Jarábková, Majstříková, and Kozolka 2016). According to the research by Lachiewicz and Zakrzewska-Bielawska (2012), the weaknesses of the operation in network structures most frequently are:

- unwillingness to cooperate between collaborating partners;
- autonomous thinking, *i.e.* excessive desire for independence, setting only to the activity of own company;
- conflicts between the network headquarters and partner companies;
- unwillingness to transmit innovation, ideas and competences to cooperating companies, participating in cluster;
- coordination difficulties against excessive growth of cluster network.

Moreover, L. Achtenhagen and R. Picard (2014) describe that the participation in clusters creates negative effects for their members, *i.e.* the companies collaborating due to the fact that the standard creation of behavior models or doing business, which is typical of the organizations functioning under “normal” environmental conditions, is blocked. Also, entrepreneurs do not have to strive for new contacts essential for conducting a business since the participation in cluster allows for gaining contacts necessary to run a company. Such practices bring about that cooperating enterprises often do not have to behave like other economic entities not functioning within the framework of cluster cooperation.

However, it should be stated that the operation of enterprises within networks is also associated with certain barriers which can be particularly experienced in the conditions of the economic crisis. They sometimes cause the concern about the fact of the emergence of the crisis with one partner, and especially their fall, may result in crisis phenomena and fall of other companies functioning within the network (knock on effect). In the conditions of the economic crisis the most often there can be seen the drawbacks associated with the activity within the network which can be incompatibility of network partners, particularly in the case of incompatibility of organizational cultures of collaborating companies, an increase in transactional costs of cooperation along with an increase in the number of partner, restrictions in the access to information, resulting from *e.g.* distrust of partners and the risk of the “leak” of significant information due to the cooperation of partners in different organizational sets, unfavorable changes in external operating conditions associated with the economic crisis, *e.g.* a decrease in demand for network products (Lachiewicz and Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2012). The research on a group of enterprises from the SME sector also indicates that enterprises, when cooperating in cluster, most frequently must face three types of risk, *i.e.* production, economic and political one (Havierníková, Okřelglicka and Lemaňska-Majdzik 2016).

2. Methodology

For the processing of questionnaires in practice the commonly used test for testing relationships between categorical variables is the Chi-Square test (χ^2). Chi-Square test is using for verifying of null hypothesis (H_0) about no association between two nominal variables. Observed counts (f_{b_n}) are compared to expected counts (f_{e_n}).

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^m \sum_{j=1}^n \frac{(f_{b_n} - f_{e_n})^2}{f_{e_n}} \quad (1)$$

In this paper, the χ^2 statistic was used for ascertaining whether an association exists between size of tourism company and advantage or disadvantage of connection into cluster cooperation. Two hypotheses were stated:

- H_0 : between type of contributing factors of cluster cooperation and size of tourism company is no association;
- H_1 : between type of contributing factors of cluster cooperation and size of tourism company an association is present.

The low level of p value < 0.05 means that the H_0 is rejected and we accept the alternative hypothesis H_1 . Large level of p-value > 0.05 means that the H_0 is not rejected. It means that between type of contributing factors of cluster cooperation and size of tourism company is no association.

3. Results and Discussion

Questionnaire surveys were conducted during the year 2017 in Slovakia. The representative sample of the populations was entrepreneurs representing by owners or managers of tourism SMEs (200 Slovak respondents) with experience with cluster cooperation. The categorization of respondents due to the number of employees are presenting in Table 1. The highest percentage of respondents was from category of micro enterprises. This category of enterprises is in general in the Slovak Republic also the biggest from all categories of enterprises.

Table 1. Categorization of respondents based on number of employees

Category	Number of employees	%
less than 10	102	51.00
from 10 to 49	85	42.50
from 50 to 249	13	6.50
Total	200	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

The questionnaire survey is the part of project VEGA 1/0953/16. The evaluation of clusters' impact measurement on regional development of the Slovak Republic. In the frame of this project we recognize two types of the clusters: tourism and technological. This typology is also used by Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency (SIEA). In the Slovak Republic, we can observe around 50 subjects named as a cluster, but only 25 cluster organizations were active in 2016. In this paper we have focused on tourism clusters. From 25 cluster organizations, only 6 operates as a tourism cluster (Cluster LIPTOV - association of tourism, Cluster Orava, Cluster TURIEC - association of tourism, Cluster Topoľčany - association of tourism and Košice- Tourism). Slovakia is divided into 8 self-governing regions. These clusters operate mainly in Žilina, Trenčín and Košice region. This corresponds with geographic distribution of the Slovak Republic and the opportunities for tourism development in these regions

From the questionnaire survey, we have selected questions related to the evaluation of advantages and disadvantages of the cluster cooperation. These evaluated issues in the case of connection into tourism clusters were evaluated through the three categories of common activities of cluster:

- the area of networking;
- the area of human resources;
- the area of common cooperation and propagation.

Each category consists of several contributing factors (Table 2).

Respondents evaluate the advantages and disadvantages according scale 0 – the most disadvantage factor, 5 – the more advantage factor. Following tables (Table 3 and Table 4) represent the percentage of respondents' answers to each evaluated factor due to the size category of SMEs.

Table 2. The contributing factors of observed areas of network cooperation

1. The area of networking	
1.1	Information support (common portal, newspapers, magazines)
1.2	Common meetings
1.3	Mediation of contacts among cluster members
1.4	Mediation of contacts with suppliers or customers
2. The rea of human resources	
2.1	Organizing of common seminars and conferences
2.2	Common training and education of employees
2.3	Cooperation with training agencies
3. The area of common cooperation and propagation	
3.1	Common purchase
3.2	Marketing surveys of trends and markets
3.3	Common participation in fairs
3.4	Common catalogue of provided services
3.5	Common name, brand name
3.6	Common advertising
3.7	Electronic marketplace

Source: Own elaboration.

The small and medium sized entrepreneurs considered as most important advantages the factors: 1.4 Mediation of contacts with suppliers or customers, 1.1 Information supports which could be represented by common portal, newspapers, magazines, etc. and 3.6 Common advertising. These factors were evaluated also as a most important by entrepreneurs from categories of micro and small enterprises. The other important factors are: 1.3 Mediation of contacts among cluster members, 2.3 Cooperation with training agencies, 3.2 Marketing surveys of trends and markets, 3.4 Common catalogue of provided services. As the smallest advantages were recognize by the respondents the factors 3.1 Common purchase, 1.2 Common meetings, 2.1 Organizing of common seminars and conferences 3.2 Marketing surveys of trends and markets and 3.7 Electronic marketplace.

Table 3. The evaluation of advantages of cluster cooperation

Factor	less than 10 employees	from 10 to 49 employees	from 50 to 249 employees	Total
1.1	11,00%	10,50%	1,00%	22,50%
1.2	2,50%	4,00%	0,00%	6,50%
1.3	6,00%	8,00%	1,00%	15,00%
1.4	10,50%	10,50%	2,00%	23,00%
2.1	2,00%	4,50%	0,50%	7,00%
2.2	4,50%	5,00%	0,50%	10,00%
2.3	6,00%	5,00%	1,00%	12,00%
3.1	2,00%	3,50%	0,00%	5,50%
3.2	7,00%	4,00%	1,50%	12,50%
3.3	4,00%	3,50%	0,00%	7,50%
3.4	5,00%	6,00%	1,00%	12,00%
3.5	4,00%	4,00%	1,00%	9,00%
3.6	9,50%	7,50%	1,00%	18,00%
3.7	4,00%	2,00%	1,00%	7,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4 presents the percentage of respondents' answers related to the evaluation of disadvantages of cluster cooperation. The medium sized entrepreneurs don't perceive observed factors as the disadvantages. The reason could be also affected by fact, that this category of respondents was very small. The most important disadvantages are from area of human resources: 2.1 Organizing of common seminars and conferences, 2.2 Common training and education of employees, 2.3 Cooperation with training agencies. The respondents also mark as disadvantage the factor 3.5 Common name, brand name.

The results of questionnaire surveys were evaluated by statistical method – Chi square test. We tested H0: that between variables is no association against alternative hypothesis H1: between variables is association. Table 5 presents the results of Chi-Square test (p-value) and the main statistical characteristics.

Table 4. The evaluation of disadvantages of cluster cooperation

Factor	less than 10 employees	from 10 to 49 employees	from 50 to 249 employees	Total
1.1	2,00%	3,50%	0,00%	5,50%
1.2	2,00%	5,00%	0,50%	7,50%
1.3	1,50%	5,00%	0,50%	7,00%
1.4	2,00%	3,50%	0,00%	5,50%
2.1	10,50%	8,00%	0,00%	18,50%
2.2	8,50%	6,00%	0,00%	14,50%
2.3	9,00%	8,00%	0,00%	17,00%
3.1	9,50%	4,00%	0,00%	13,50%
3.2	5,00%	0,50%	0,00%	5,50%
3.3	9,50%	4,50%	0,00%	14,00%
3.4	8,00%	3,50%	0,00%	11,50%
3.5	11,50%	6,00%	0,50%	18,00%
3.6	7,50%	3,00%	0,00%	10,50%
3.7	9,50%	5,00%	0,00%	14,50%

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5. Chi-Square test (p-value) and the main statistical characteristics of cluster cooperation

Factor	Chi-Square	Average	St. deviation
1.1	Pearson chi-sq.:10,0316, df=10, p=,437734	3,210000	1,465139
1.2	Pearson chi-sq.:12,9343, df=10, p=,227388	2,585000	1,327246
1.3	Pearson chi-sq.: 13,0313, df=10, p=,221944	3,110000	1,388358
1.4	Pearson chi-sq.:12,3918, df=10, p=,259709	3,345000	1,405651
2.1	Pearson chi-sq.:10,4579, df=10, p=,401289	0,450000	1,016200
2.2	Pearson chi-sq.:11,6959, df=10, p=,305938	2,130000	1,508135
2.3	Pearson chi-sq.:12,4350, df=10, p=,257017	2,605000	1,555982
3.1	Pearson chi-sq.:7,49466, df=10, p=,678064	2,345000	1,587000
3.2	Pearson chi-sq.:5,86105, df=10, p=,826794	0,380000	0,985115
3.3	Pearson chi-sq.:10,1285, df=10, p=,429300	2,350000	1,384589
3.4	Pearson chi-sq.:15,1657, df=10, p=,126156	3,045000	1,315915
3.5	Pearson chi-sq.:19,2635, df=10, p=,037054	2,475000	1,479975
3.6	Pearson chi-sq.:17,8589, df=10, p=,057407	2,645000	1,533209
3.7	Pearson chi-sq.:12,9561, df=10, p=,226154	2,180000	1,549064

Source: Own elaboration.

The results in Table 5 show that in Slovakia the hypothesis H₀ is rejected and accepted the alternative hypothesis H₁ only for factor 3.3. For the rest of factors, we have to reject the hypothesis about no association between evaluated variables. It means that only in the case of factor 3.5 Common name, brand name the answer depends on the size of tourism company.

In the last decade, the effective components of regional development in the Slovak Republic have also become the clusters. Recently the number of cluster initiatives has significantly increased in different regions. First cluster was established in 2004 in Košice region (BITERAP cluster), the last one in 2015 in Nitra region (Bioeconomy cluster). First tourism cluster was established in Žilina region in 2008 (Cluster LIPTOV - association of tourism) and the last one in 2010 in Košice region (Košice- Tourism). However, the real performance of tourism cluster is limited. The reason is the lack of a holistic cluster policy or conception, both at national and regional level. Their activities are also affected by Slovak legislative, which was in the last years changed and supported are mainly regional organization of tourism (named in Slovakia OOCR), not directly clusters of tourism or cluster organizations. Highest support is for cluster industry organizations provided by the Slovak Ministry of Economy. In Slovakia, the cluster are based on the principle the "bottom-up", the lack of adequate legislative adaptation, which ultimately causes problems in the functioning and development of clusters also affects the decision of small and medium entrepreneurs about their connection in this form of cooperation. Vision and understanding of advantage and subsequent mechanisms of cluster cooperation are not a simple issue. It requires expertise in various processes of involved stakeholders. Mechanisms and processes of clusters institutionalization are not possible being carried out without adequate regulation and management of these activities. Under these circumstances, finding advantage for small and medium entrepreneurs could be improved by support and regulation by external body represented by national and regional authorities that would follow the advantages not only for stakeholders,

but also for society and regions. The better explanation could contribute to the connection of small and medium enterprises into cluster cooperation.

Conclusions

Summing up, clusters are a concentrated group of enterprises cooperating with each other at different levels but also an association of firms competing with each other. The form of cluster is an exceptionally flexible form of cooperation of organizations. Therefore, it can be indicated that the activity of clusters brings benefits both in macroeconomic terms, *i.e.* for the country or the region in which the cluster operates and also for the enterprises conducting their activities within the framework of cluster cooperation themselves. The development of the region by an increase in innovativeness, an increase in employment, higher qualifications of workers are only the examples which show how the cluster initiative may contribute to the economic development and GDP growth. The benefits resulting from the cluster operation in the region occur also in the case of institutions participating in the life of cluster and the whole business environment of organizations operating on the market. On the basis of literature review, it can be concluded that these benefits occur at a time and are not immediate but undoubtedly appreciable for the region and entrepreneurs themselves. Looking through the lens of the members collaborating in cluster cooperation themselves, thus in microeconomic terms, among the benefits, there must be listed most of all more favorable operating conditions for cooperating enterprises compared to the competitors not undertaking activities within clusters, including lower production costs, access to resources, knowledge, technologies which, already in the opinion of A. M. Porter, characterized the cluster initiative and proved benefits resulting from the participation in clusters. It is of particular importance for entrepreneurs of the SME sector which are often characterized by low resource potential and limited conditions for development. Therefore, the participation in cooperation with other entities may become the factor affecting the success of the organization.

Unfortunately, the collaboration within cluster is also associated with threats resulting from the fact that the participants of cooperation do not have the opportunity for individual behavior and their failure may be the result of poor relations within clusters themselves or problems resulting from the cluster structure or nature. Moreover, the participation in clusters is related to the risk which is perceived differently and it often can be stronger, which affects the whole cluster structure. Entrepreneurs conducting activities in clusters are not forced to entrepreneurial behavior typical of individual business activities, which may lead to behavior unusual for the competitive market. Literature review indicates that a significant role is played by the policy of the public authorities, which should counteract the negative effects associated with the participation in the cluster initiative and promote entrepreneurial activities of this type, particularly in the group of enterprises of the SME sector, which operate in a highly competitive market.

On the basis of questionnaire surveys, it can be concluded that most advantages are seen by small and medium sized enterprises in the area of networking. The most disadvantages are seen mainly in area of human resources.

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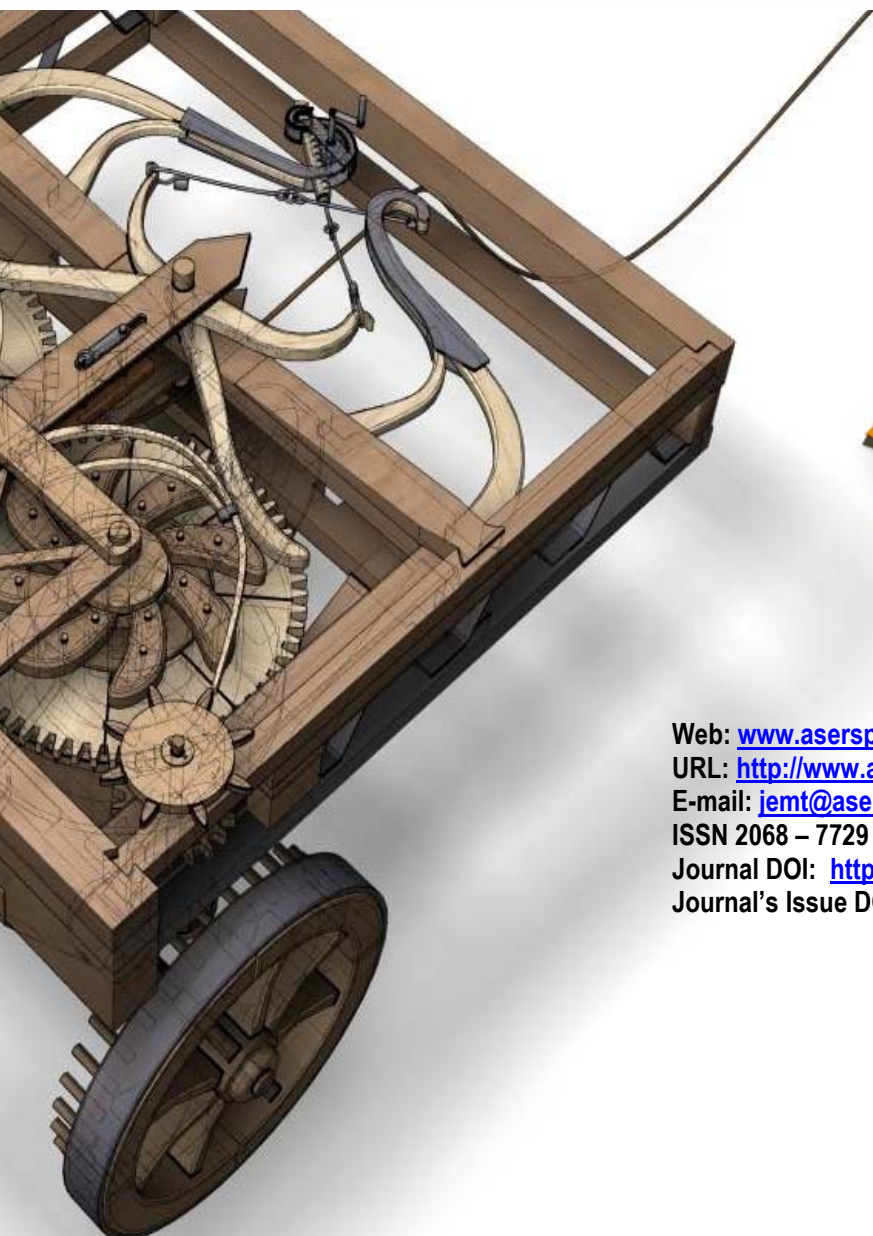
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