

Food businesses and export requirements: a first glance at current perception and future expectations

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Abstract

The export of agri-food products represents a pillar of the Italian economy. However, food businesses (FBs) must comply with a series of requirements, including those imposed by importing countries. This study conducted in-depth interviews with three Italian FBs producing food of animal origin to explore their perception about procedures, documentation, and the role of the central competent authority (CA) related to export. Interviews with food quality managers (FQMs) (February-April 2024) revealed similar challenges across different sectors, particularly regarding the availability and clarity of information. FQMs suggested the implementation of a centralized online platform to enhance access to necessary information. Additionally, the study revealed a lack of full awareness among FQMs about the central CA's role in the export process. A coordinated approach involving central, regional, and local CAs, trade associations, and the productive sector could be crucial to ensure the success of FBs in the international market.

Introduction

The export of agri-food products is an essential pillar of the Italian economy, representing a relevant source of income (Carbone and Henke, 2023). Over the years, Italy consistently expanded its global agri-food market, recording relevant increases in exports (Remondino and Zanin, 2022). In 2022, the main export markets were: North America (13.3%), Asia (7.6%), Africa (2.3%), Central and South America (1.6%), and Oceania (1.4%) (Crea, 2022). Agri-food exports continued to grow in the fourth quarter of 2023, reaching 16.6 billion euros (+6% compared to the fourth quarter of 2022), particularly towards the USA (Crea, 2024).

As a Member State of the European Union (EU), Italy requires food businesses (FBs) operating within its territory to comply with the requirements set forth in the EU General Food Law and Regulations (EC) 852/2004 and 853/2004 (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2002, 2004a, 2004b). These requirements are not only essential for operating within the EU but also constitute the fundamental basis for food exports to third countries (Ministry of Health, 2016). These may be supplemented by other specific requirements imposed by importing countries, contained in international agreements between them and the European Commission or individual exporting Member States (Ministry of Health, 2016; Antoci *et al.*, 2021).

These agreements are based on the international standards for food safety defined in the Codex Alimentarius, as well as those related to animal health outlined in the Terrestrial Animal Health Code by the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH), and the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures established by the World

Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement. They require countries to recognize that different inspection and certification systems can be equally effective in achieving the same safety objectives (Codex Alimentarius, 1995; WTO, 1995; WOH, 2024). Compliance with hygiene and health assurances takes the form of a health certificate issued by the competent authority (CA) of the exporting country. In addition, the CA of the importing country may require the inclusion of the FBs in an official list, comprising all the companies authorized to export a specific type of product (Ministry of Health, 2016). In Italy, the central (Ministry of Health), regional, and local CA (Local Health Authorities - LHAs) are defined by the Legislative Decree no.27 of February 2, 2021 (Italian Republic, 2021). They all perform an essential role in the export process, ensuring effective coordination and the correct application of the established requirements (Amorena, 2011; Ministry of Health, 2021) (Figure 1).

However, the responsibility for food safety management of exported products pertains to the FBs (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2002; Codex Alimentarius, 2013) that must be aware of the specific procedures related to the export process. Moreover, differences in the requirements for different destination countries, even in the presence of international agreements, make the export process complex (Neri *et al.*, 2019; Antoci *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, assessing the current perception of FBs about export procedures is crucial for identifying gaps in the existing processes and addressing specific needs. In this context, a qualitative analysis can be used to explore in detail the opinions, perceptions, and challenges faced by interviewees (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Therefore, the study aimed to conduct an in-depth interview with three approved Italian FBs producing food of animal origin to explore their perception regarding the procedures and related doc-

umentation for export and their awareness of the role and functions of the central CA.

Materials and Methods

Interviewees recruitment

Three FBs located in the Tuscany region were selected according to their experience with export activities. The FBs belonged to three different productive sectors (meat, dairy, and fishery products). Each FB was informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Verbal consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants. All FBs were then contacted again to schedule an in-person interview with the food quality manager (FQM), and detailed information about the interview process (specific objectives, interview duration, and anonymity of responses) was provided simultaneously.

In-depth interviews

A specifically designed interview guide was used as a basis to develop the in-depth interviews (Figure 2). The interview guide was structured into five sections: i) general FB profiling; ii) general overview of export activities; iii) impact of export activities on the FB's performance; iv) perception of FQMs as regards export requirements; v) awareness of the role and functions performed by the central CA. The meetings, held between February and April 2024, took place directly at the selected FBs. The answers provided by the FQMs were analyzed to identify common issues and any other concerns for the study context.

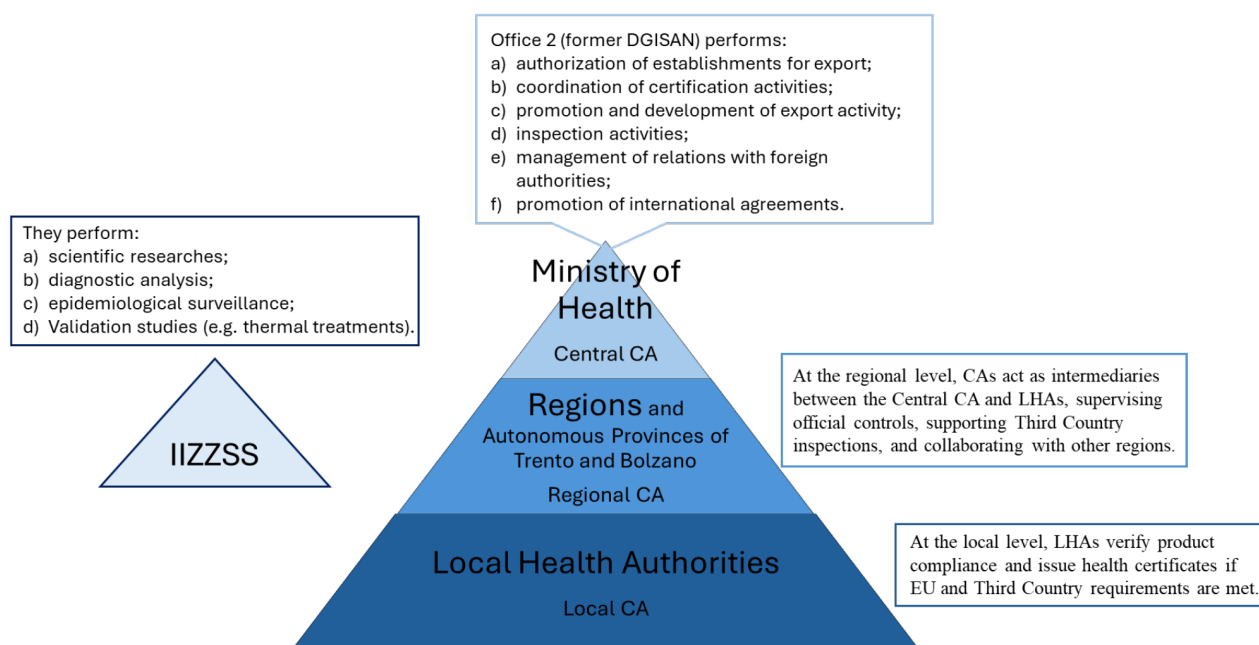


Figure 1. Competent authorities (CAs) designated in Italy in accordance with the Legislative Decree no.27 of February 2, 2021. DGISAN, Direzione Generale per l'Igiene e la Sicurezza degli Alimenti e la Nutrizione; IIZZSS, Zooprofilattici Istituti (Istituti Zooprofilattici Sperimentali); LHAs, Local Health Authorities; EU, European Union.

Results and Discussion

Outcomes of the in-depth interviews

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research method that aims to explore the perspectives of individuals regarding a specific issue/topic (Boyce and Neale, 2006). This technique involves conducting detailed one-on-one interviews by engaging participants in open-ended conversations (Minhat, 2015). As suggested by Gill *et al.* (2008), the in-depth interviews conducted in this study included questions that were open-ended, neutral, and comprehensible, allowing the interviewees to respond expansively.

With respect to the general information, all three FBs had a long-lasting period of activity ranging from more than 60 to over 100 years. In terms of business size, one FB was classified as large, while the remaining two were classified as medium-sized according to size categories defined by the Italian Ministry of Productive Activities (2005).

Concerning the second section, all three FBs were actively

exporting abroad and had at least 10 years of experience. The countries to which they were or had been exported are listed in Table 1. Even considering the limitations of the study, our results seemed to be in line with export data, which confirms the greater presence of Italian exports in North America, particularly in the USA, and in Asia (Crea, 2022, 2024).

Regarding the third section, all three FQMs claimed to have achieved positive results from their export activities. This was evidenced by an increase in income, the creation of new job positions, and a higher volume of goods produced. Two of the three expressed the intention of expanding the typology of products exported, while one aimed only to increase the volume and frequency of shipments of products already marketed abroad. These results, together with the future strategies declared by the FQMs, indicate the commitment of the FBs in optimizing their export activities to maximize their economic performance. The advantages of exporting are, in fact, numerous, such as access to new markets, expansion of the customer base, diversification of rev-

<p>1. General information</p> <p>a) Year business started.</p> <p>b) Business size.</p>
<p>2. Export activity</p> <p>a) Active exportation abroad (outside European borders).</p> <p>b) Start date of export activity.</p> <p>c) Countries to which export activity is active and countries to which export activity has been discontinued.</p>
<p>3. Impact of export activities on the Food business's performance</p> <p>a) General outcomes from export activities.</p> <p>b) List of positive/negative outcomes (if found).</p> <p>c) Willingness to expand, maintain or reduce export activities.</p>
<p>4. Documentation availability and clearness of export requirements</p> <p>a) Sources of information.</p> <p>b) Difficulties in retrieval and comprehension of requirements (if found).</p> <p>c) Assistance for gathering information (if requested).</p> <p>d) Suggestions for improving availability and clearness of information (if necessary).</p>
<p>5. Role of the Central Competent Authority (Ministry of Health)</p> <p>a) Awareness of a dedicated office (Office 2, DGISAN) for the coordination and verification activities associated with export.</p> <p>b) Perceived activities carried out by Office 2 (DGISAN).</p>

Figure 2. Interview guide.

enue streams, and enhancement of global competitiveness (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2024).

With respect to the sources for retrieving the export documents (fourth section), all the FQMs declared having relied on the Ministry of Health's official website (Ministry of Health, 2024). Two out of three FQMs reported using the trade association's official website as well. With respect to the documents' availability, the interviewees highlighted the presence, on the Ministry of Health's website, of: i) a non-harmonic organization, characterized by dispersive information and the excessive use of external links; ii) documents/information not equally available for all countries; iii) missing documents for some countries. The consultation of the Ministry of Health's official website allowed us to notice that sometimes information was included without following a uniform criterion for all third countries, confirming the FQMs' concerns. However, we must consider that the Ministry of Health also provides instructions/clarifications on export requirements through circulars. Although these circulars are addressed to CAs, they are transmitted, for knowledge, to trade associations, which collect and make them available to FBs through their databases. Consequently, FQMs could potentially consult these circulars for guidance, even though they are not specifically designed for their use (Capizzi, 2010). However, retrieving all this information, including ministerial circulars, from both the Ministry of Health's website and the trade associations' databases could lead to several complications for FBs. These include the increased time and resources required for research, the risk of overlooking some documents, potentially leading to product non-compliance, and the consequent need to look for assistance from third parties. Furthermore, the FQMs pointed out limitations in implementing the instructions given in the ministerial circulars into procedures for adapting their facilities and production processes to the requirements for export. This is due to the fact that the instructions are sometimes contained in separate ministerial circulars, which the FQMs have to merge, and also because they are not specifically designed for them. In this regard, all three FQMs stated a lack of expertise to independently perform this task and the need to look for assistance from external entities. Indeed, all three FQMs affirmed that they received assistance, particularly from: the LHAs (two out of three), consulting agencies (two out of three), import-

ing FBs that were their customers (two out of three), and trade associations (one out of three). When FQMs were asked to provide suggestions for solving the aforesaid issues, they all suggested the implementation of a centralized online platform, managed by the CAs, providing detailed and up-to-date information on the export process for each country, including requirements and exportable and non-exportable products. They also suggested that this portal should include a country-by-country table with specific requirements. This approach could create a single source for collecting export information, simplifying the process. Moreover, a country-by-country table with specific requirements would allow FBs to plan their export activities more effectively and adjust their production processes accordingly. Regarding the last section, the FQMs affirmed to be aware of the existence of a dedicated office within the Ministry of Health (Office 2, DGISAN) and recognized its crucial role in the authorization of establishments for export, coordination of certification processes, and inspection activities. On the other hand, the FQMs were not aware of their functions in managing relations with foreign authorities and promoting international agreements. Even though these activities are not strictly linked to the practical activity that must be implemented by FBs, knowing that the Ministry of Health manages relations with foreign authorities and promotes international agreements should be considered relevant by the FBs. In fact, these agreements can directly impact their ability to sell their products internationally. In this regard, to increase FBs' awareness, it could be useful to carry out targeted communications or to explore these topics during participation in export-related events and courses.

Table 1. List of countries to which the food businesses recruited were or had been exporting.

N. food business/total food business	Country
3/3	United States of America
2/3	Brazil Canada Hong Kong United Kingdom
1/3	Australia Chile China Colombia Costa Rica Japan Malaysia Mexico New Zealand Russian Federation Singapore United Arab Emirates

Conclusions

Our study highlighted that despite coming from different productive sectors, FBs face similar challenges in complying with export requirements. Overall, the interviews confirmed the crucial role of the CAs in the export process and highlighted some areas for potential improvement, at least according to the three FQMs interviewed. These concerned the availability and clarity of information regarding export requirements. All three FBs suggested the implementation of a centralized online platform to enhance access to necessary information. Despite the limited number of participants, who may not fully represent all FBs exporting to third countries, this study should be viewed as a first glance at the topic. Indeed, the identified areas of potential improvement could be useful to define the main contents for a future computerized questionnaire to be administered to a larger number of Italian FBs trading with third countries.

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