

INTERNATIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN AGRIBUSINESS

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Abstract

This paper proposes an analytical framework for international entrepreneurship in fruit production companies. A multiple case study is developed with qualitative approach. Thirty managers and consultants participated in the research that used semi-structured interviews for data collection. Content analysis was adopted with the support of ATLAS.ti software. The presence of eight international entrepreneurship dimensions in this process is noted, most of these are present in the literature (attitude towards risk, ability to innovate, competitive resources development, opportunity, propensity to adapt, and relationship networks), while two emerged from the data (bold commercialisation and international entrepreneur). International entrepreneurship develops from a range of dimensions that have a continuous and intermittent nature.

Keywords: Internationalisation process, Born Global, International entrepreneurship

1. INTRODUCTION

International entrepreneurship (IE) is a contemporary theme. McDougall and Oviatt's studies since the late eighties are references on the subject (McDougall, 1989; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). In Brazil, research on this theme is scarce, however, with the first article apparently published in 2004 (Sohn *et al.*, 2004). Butler *et al.* (2010) argued that studies of IE focus on the US and called for more research on the topic in other countries.

The present study is based on the relevant theoretical discussions identified from the analyses of authors of IE, such as Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki (2003), Oviatt and McDougall (1994, 2005a), Schweizer *et al.* (2010), Welch and Welch (2004), and Zahra and George (2002), in addition to other published papers in Brazilian academic journals and meetings. Therefore, the present study proposes an analytical IE framework based on the fruit companies that operate in the Brazilian agribusiness sector. The export of food is approximately 15% of the total exportação Brazil. Figure 1 shows the time series of food exports since 2010 (MDIC, 2016).

In order to do so, a preliminary proposal based on the theoretical background was submitted to the data in the empirical research stage, as recommended by Keupp and Gassmann (2009), who indicate the need to formulate and test theoretical proposals to advance the present state of IE. The development of the framework is indicated by contemplating aspects detailed in the national and international literature and also empirical data.

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
21.62%	19.78%	19.29%	17.84%	17.07%	15.70%

Figure 1 – Brazilian food exports: Percentage of Exports

Source: MDIC (2016).

2. REVIEW OF IE

The literature on IE highlights that Morrow (1988) was the first author to write on the subject. However, McDougall (1989) is considered to be the pioneer for performing the first theoretical-empirical research (Acs *et al.*, 2003). Two decades of studies of IE have motivated the preparation of reviews of the literature that have summarised and evaluated the state-of-the-art information on this theoretical line of study (Coombs *et al.*, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2011; Keupp and Gassmann, 2009; Kiss *et al.*, 2012).

2.1 Initial IE framework proposition

There are several challenges to overcome in order for companies to commercialise their products and services in foreign markets. From the perspective of IE, some dimensions or essential characteristics promote this process.

There are different sources of risk in the process of internationalisation. The exploration of opportunities by itself is risky (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009) in that managers can make negative decisions about their companies. When the company decides to make direct investments, the acquisition of businesses in international markets is an option to reduce risks (Schweizer *et al.*, 2010). This line of thought corroborates with that of Mtigwe (2006) and Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki (2003), which presented attitude towards international risk as one of the elements of IE.

In IE, the ability to innovate depends on the creativity of the entrepreneur. Zahra and George (2002) clarified that creativity can come from any person that is a part of the team of managers. Butler *et al.* (2010, pp. 129) claimed that “creativity is a characteristic of the entrepreneur which integrates and optimizes his cognitive processes in order to produce success, that is why he plays an important role supporting IE”. Ripollés-Meliá *et al.* (2007) stated that innovation is one of the elements that constitute entrepreneurial orientation.

The allocation of human resources in different countries and relationships with suppliers (Dunning, 1988). There is resemblance between the IE models presented by Oviatt and McDougall (1994) and by Zahra and George (2002). Both sets of authors emphasise the power of resources in conquering competitive advantage. Such an understanding is also shared by Mtigwe (2006), who presented resource advantage as a reference in the constitution of IE.

The identification of opportunities depends on the relation between the entrepreneur and the scenario. Shane and Venkataraman (2000) explained that this process depends on the nature of the opportunities (expectations of high returns) and individual differences. Another relevant aspect was presented by Autio *et al.* (2000), who suggested that the early search for international opportunities induces higher entrepreneurial behaviour and thus grants a growth advantage. However, Butler *et al.* (2010) stated that uncertainty precedes opportunity; therefore, a nation with less tolerance for uncertainty and less propensity towards creativity will have more difficulty possessing IE.

The entrepreneur is an agent of change, responsible for the elimination of commercial and cultural barriers by developing new relationships, breaking paradigms, and generating wealth to society (Silveira and Alperstedt, 2007). In the implementation of strategies, managers consider the type of structure and change it in order to obtain a perfect fit for the context (Chandler, 1998). One example of this happens in international demand, a situation in which entrepreneurs modify structure and control systems (Coombs *et al.*, 2009), creating new departments such as marketing and making changes in the production sector (Silveira and Alperstedt, 2007).

According to this discussion, it is possible to note the existence of several influences in the processes of the adaptation of internationalised companies. This interpretation corroborates with those proposed by Etemad (2004).

Networks, relationship networks, and social networks are the words used as synonyms in the present study. According to Ferreira *et al.* (2010, pp. 140): "Social networks are an important vehicle to firm with IE in the identification of opportunities, access to knowledge, innovation and physical resources". By contrast, Wright and Dana (2003) presented a typology of networks, namely horizontal networks, vertical networks, and trans-industrial networks.

Intolerance to uncertainty tends to create difficulties when making risky decisions. In order to minimise these difficulties, entrepreneurs can develop networks to avoid bad faith and acquire confidence (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). This is one of the premises of Granovetter (1985). In addition, opportunism can be weakened by the internationalisation of certain transactions (Williamson, 1995) and vertical integration. Different to Williamson (1995), who comprehended transactions solely from the economic perspective, Granovetter (1985) added the social relations dimension, namely the relationship networks built by relationships because of the overlap between social and economic factors.

Figure 2 presents IE frameworks according to the predominant theory, expressed by the group of key events and stages that occur throughout the internationalisation trajectory.

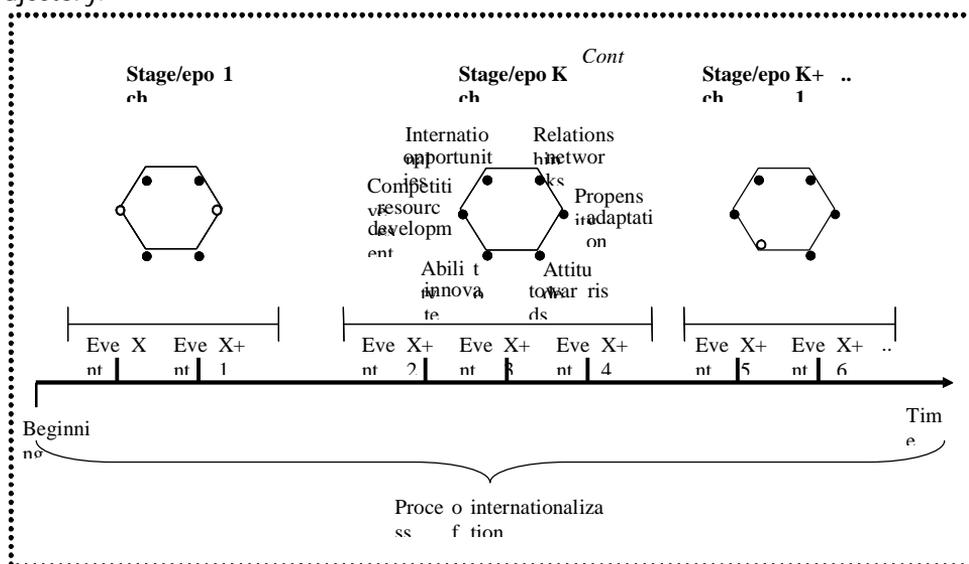


Figure 2 – IE initial framework proposition .Source: Elaborated by authors (2015).

It also shows the IE framework expressed by the key events that occurred in stages/epochs throughout the internationalisation trajectory. The six dimensions constitute the dynamics of the stages/epochs influenced by the outside environment. The presupposition is that not all these dimensions are in every stage, but that they can be identified throughout the process of internationalisation. Hypothetically, the six dimensions of IE are present in the second stage (presented as the filled points at the extremities of the hexagon), while in the first stage the propensity to adapt and competitive resources development are absent and in the third the ability to innovate does not exist. There is no pattern in the appearance of the group of dimensions in the stages that appear intermittently.

Regarding the role of context, as the present study is about IE as a process, the environment is a determinant (Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki, 2003). Authors on the subject, such as Mtigwe (2006), also support this concept, especially when recognising the influences of the external context in the attitudes of international entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial abilities can be strengthened according to the social conditions in which the company is embedded (Acs *et al.*, 2003) and entrepreneurial decisions are committed to what happens in the external environment.

Therefore, the present study has the following central proposition: being determined by the context, IE occurs through the intermittent incidence of a group of dimensions in the process of internationalisation.

3. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Regarding the method, a qualitative perspective that focuses on essence, understanding, and description was adopted. In order to do so, a multiple case study strategy was used with the aim of building a theory (Eisenhardt, 1989); therefore, a historic qualitative study case became suitable (Merriam, 1998). Moreover, because of the complexity of the phenomenon, the software ATLAS.ti version 7 was used to support data analysis.

In the present study, four companies, representatives of the States of Bahia, Ceará, Pernambuco and Rio Grande do Norte, were selected. These states account for approximately 100% of the total fruit exported in semi-arid region. Regarding respondents, the number of interviewees was defined when the categories reached an adequate saturation point to answer the objectives of the research, totalling 30 social individuals. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, totalling 1,242 minutes, with a mean of 40 minutes per interview, which happened in two distinct moments. Since the present study is qualitative, and owing to the nature of the phenomenon, different data collection techniques were used: a semi-structured interview (in two phases) and the analysis of documents and bibliographies.

Data were examined analytically favouring the inferences on the information supported by the literature, and lastly the data received meaning according to the interpretation of researchers (Bardin, 2011). For codification and categorisation, the conceptual ordination proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Layder (1993, 1998) was considered, with the constant comparative method, in which theory–incident and incident–incident confront each other in order to generate codes and categories based on Layder's (1998) adaptive theory. In this scenario, the initial model based on theoretical arguments was confronted with the empirical data.

4. RESULTS

The analysed companies, year of opening, location, number of employees during the harvesting period, value exported in 2011. Special Fruit is the company that has more time in the market, while Ara Agrícola has only eight years of activity. Agrícola Famosa

employs 5,000 people and Agro Melão (pseudonym) has 500 employees; both have melons as their main exportation product. All companies are situated in the Brazilian semiarid region, which is the same location as the main fruit exporters in Brazil.

In light of the theoretical concepts and analysed empirical data, eight dimensions of IE were identified (two more than those identified in the literature review). The two extra dimensions are bold commercialisation and international entrepreneur. The discussion in this section is based on the cross-analysis of these cases to identify the properties of the dimensions of IE and follows the binary logic of existence (1) and inexistence (0). Data analysis considered the properties and characteristics that are present in three or four companies.

4.1. Attitude towards risk

Figure 3 shows two findings, namely the confirmation of the presence of attitude towards risk and its properties. The cross-analysis between companies allows us to affirm that commercialisation/negotiation and agricultural production are the two factors that challenge entrepreneurs, making them confront the inherent risks.

Properties (Attitude towards risk)	Characteristics	Agrícola Famosa	Agro Melão	Special Fruit	Ara Agrícola
Commercial and trading	Exchange	1	1	1	1
	New markets	1	0	0	0
Agricultural production	Weather conditions	1	1	1	1
	Production and partnership abroad	1	0	0	0
	Variety	1	0	1	0
Distribution	-----	1	1	0	0
Big size company	-----	1	0	1	0

Figure 3 – Definition of the property Attitude towards risk. Source: Elaborated by authors

The expressivity of the dimension can be observed in detail in Figure 4. The international commercialisation and negotiation of fresh fruit, in its essence, is risky since the product is highly perishable. As if this was not enough, buyers across the world force factored transactions that only benefit one side. In addition, the absence of contracts or fulfilment requires an acceptance attitude from the manager in the face of these risks, as stated by Williamson (1995).

This agrees with Carvalho and Miranda’s (2009) proposal, which treats exchange as an aspect of the economy that must be managed by agribusiness companies. Investment, daily labour, soil conditions, and water availability are some of the primordial factors in agricultural production. The tropical fruits of drought locations, such as those in the Brazilian semiarid region, do not support the presence of rains, which causes plague manifestations and prevent obtaining good quality fruit (Carvalho and Miranda, 2009).

In the data analysis, several entrepreneurial actions were identified to confront risky situations with the purpose of internationalisation (McCarthy and Leavy, 1999). These findings strengthen the theoretical proposal of Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki (2003), which presented risk as an IE category. Therefore, with the arguments exposed, it is clear that **attitude towards risk is a dimension of IE.**

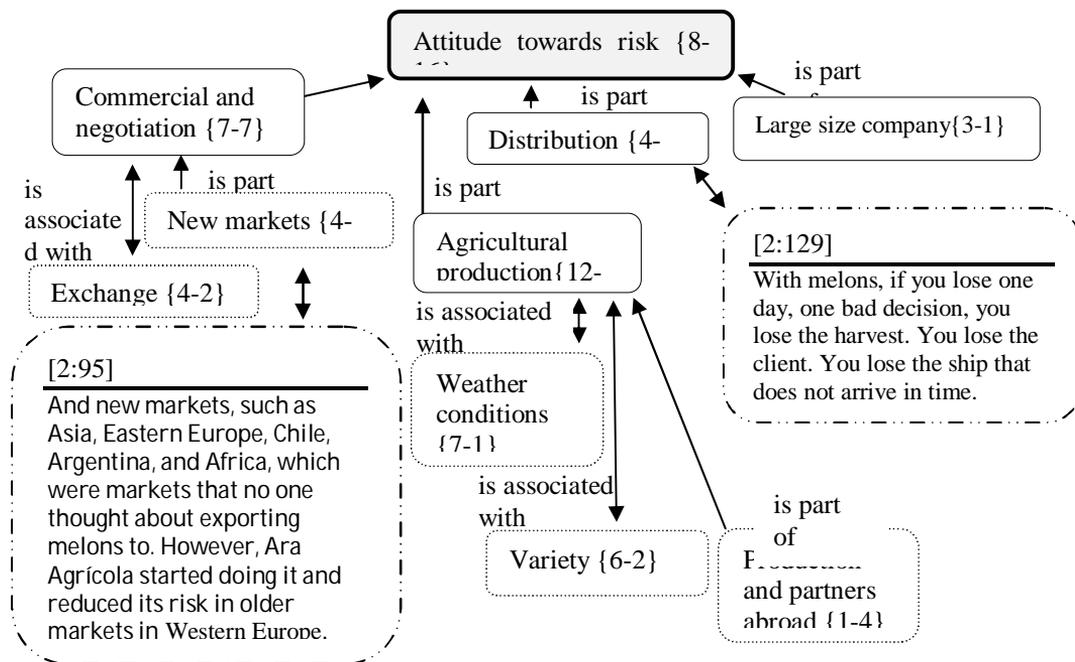


Figure 4 – Properties of attitude towards risk (Agrícola Famosa)
 Source: Elaborated by authors using ATLAS.ti (2015).

4.2. Ability to innovate

Visits to Brazilian and foreign farms are common in all analysed companies. Entrepreneurs learn about international competition, process the information, and adapt and perform innovations (Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki, 2003). There is alignment between the empirical evidence and the arguments given by Oviatt and McDougall (2005a), when they emphasised that technology speeds up organisational internationalisation. In the earliest studies of IE, innovation was indicated as a requisite to the existence of the phenomenon in the company (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994), and this is seen in the companies analysed in the present study. This discovery requires adequate interpretation in order to avoid the perpetuation of research that concentrates only on companies directly linked to technology. With the results achieved, it is possible to see that the presence of ability to innovate is not limited to technology firms; it can also happen in agribusiness, in drug industries, in clothing, and in several others. Therefore, **ability to innovate as a dimension of IE** is understood.

4.3. Competitive resources development

Knowledge, team, liquidity, brand, production, quality, and relationships are the resources developed by the entrepreneurs of Agrícola Famosa, Agro Melão, Ara Agrícola, and Special Fruit during the process of internationalisation. It is possible to observe the focus on intangible resources that are potential sources of differentiation (Barney, 2002), preponderant in the IE approach in which the objective is to aggregate value (Mtigwe, 2006) and to gain competitive advantage (Zahra and George, 2002). According to Oviatt and McDougall (2005a), together with technology, knowledge increases the entrance speed of internationalisation. Complementarily, Schweizer *et al.* (2010) highlighted that

experience is part of this knowledge and that collaborating firms should align with the demands of global buyers, promoting the entrance process abroad.

According to interviewees, liquidity is associated with organisational freedom (the absence of financing debt). The relative availability of financial resources is a tangible good necessary for production destined to other countries (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). The fruit segment functions in the same way, according to the analysis of the empirical data. Brand is an intangible resource (Barney, 2002) that is related to reputation (Ribeiro and Pimentel, 2009). Reputation is consolidated as a differential ability conquered after a determined period in the market and is thus a source of competitive advantage (Kay, 1996). This corroborates with the findings of the present study. Therefore, it is possible to identify that all leaders of the analysed companies concentrate on this development (Sharma and Erramilli, 2004). With the information collected in the field, it is therefore possible to affirm that there is a consolidation of what is already agreed in the IE literature (Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki, 2003; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Welch and Welch, 2004). Therefore, it is true to say that **competitive resources development is a dimension of IE.**

4.4. Opportunity

The main finding of this dimension is in the recognition of the relevancy of the exploration of national opportunities that collaborate in the process of internationalisation. Evidence corrects the naming, previously defined "international opportunity", which is now named "opportunity" and thus embraces both national and international origins. In Ara Agrícola, with these data, it was possible to prove what was predicted by Shane and Venkataraman (2000), who claimed that entrepreneurs put in more effort when there is high return expectancy. In addition, there is a transformation in what is available to everyone, but for the entrepreneur it becomes an opportunity, as proposed by Venkataraman *et al.* (2012). In all studied cases, it is possible to observe that the interpretation of the context by individuals distinguished the identification of the opportunities, an aspect suggested in the literature (Jones *et al.*, 2011). In 2011, Agro Melão's entrepreneur also managed to utilise his knowledge and expertise to risk planting melons in a period that was more likely to receive rain. The managerial choices of the entrepreneur determine the chances that he or she has to explore opportunities (Peterson, 1988). In this sense, it is considered to be true that **opportunity (national and international) is a dimension of IE.**

4.5. Propensity to adapt

The analyse indicates that entrepreneurs are willing to adapt to commercial and actualise the management of costs. Adaptations in the management of costs derive from external forces and from the business vision of entrepreneurs (Ribeiro and Pimentel, 2009). In contemporary companies, organisational transformations are considered to be strategic, demanding more attention and flexibility from managers when acting and directing the firm. The results found in the present study corroborate with Silveira and Alperstedt's (2007) proposal, which recognised the entrepreneur as a change agent in the generation of wealth to society. The adjustments performed in Agrícola Famosa, Agro Melão, Ara Agrícola, and Special Fruit guaranteed the perpetuation of internationalisation with an above average performance level for these firms. This corroborates with Chandler's (1998) classical premise, in which the structure follows the strategy. These findings strengthen what was postulated by Coombs *et al.* (2009), namely modifications in the structure and control system due to international demand. Even though some of the modifications in the companies are associated with economic forces, leaders are concerned about the permanent treatment of international markets. Therefore, the ability

to adapt is comprehended as the entrepreneur's primordial competence in internationalisation (Autio *et al.*, 2000). Hence, it is true to say that **propensity to adapt is a dimension of IE.**

4.6. Relationship networks

The types and benefits of relationship networks were macro-themes observed in the data analysis. The main relationship networks are formed with buyers and competitors, bringing about benefits such as trust and information. The typology of Wright and Dana (2003) involves horizontal, vertical, and trans-industrial networks. Through the interaction of relationship networks, Ara Agrícola collaborated with competitors casting products with only one brand, SUNGROUP. The partnership with the participants of SUNGROUP is also a source of opportunity (Zahra and George, 2002), with one of the members of the group, Ara Agrícola, contacting a new buyer. Agreeing with the observations of Kiss *et al.* (2012), the information obtained from social networks favoured an advance in Ara Agrícola's stage of internationalisation as well as with the other three companies. The primary data collected indicate that the information obtained in these relationship networks benefited the exploration of opportunities, in line with Ferreira *et al.* (2010). Therefore, as predicted by Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust also reinforces relationships and induces long-term agreements. In addition, a cooperative characteristic is observed in international regimes conducted by informal rules, a phenomenon present in the process of the internationalisation of the analysed companies. Hence, it is true to affirm that **relationship networks are a dimension of IE.**

4.7. Bold commercialisation

Bold commercialisation can be observed in IE when fruit producers use advanced sales, select buyers (due to the absence of contracts), and centralise commercial negotiations. This category was not predicted in the theoretical model but rather emerged from the analysis of the results. The research performed by Welch and Welch (2004) in the agribusiness sector, even though not emphasising commercialisation, drew attention to the importance of the country's government in political cooperation and support to sugar exportation. In entrepreneurial firms, the tendency is to centralise decision-making power (Sohn *et al.*, 2004). It is thus worth highlighting that bold commercialisation can be a result of both proactive and reactive attitudes, a fact that differentiates it from the only proactive construct (Ripollés-Meliá *et al.*, 2007). Kiss *et al.* (2012) highlighted that the characteristics of the industry can impair or favour internationalisation and that the entrepreneur must evaluate and define the strategies that fit the context. Therefore, bold commercialisation is understood as a category of dynamic response to fruit exportation that has its own characteristics because of the lack of commercial protection for the exporter. Thus, it is indicated that **bold commercialisation is a dimension of IE.**

4.8. International entrepreneur

The conceptual construction of the present study, with the six predefined dimensions (attitude towards risk, ability to innovate, competitive resources development, international opportunity, propensity to adapt, and relationship networks), defines itself in the comprehension of the participation of entrepreneurial actions in the internationalisation of the company, which emerges as a category from the analysis of the empirical data. On the strategic side, international entrepreneurs have people skills and vision. Human resources, when adequately managed, bring about property advantages that are important to international business (Sharma and Erramilli, 2004). Regarding the vision of the entrepreneur, this boosts the company strategically in identifying opportunities. Therefore, it is understood that such characteristics lead to the comprehension that they do not have the same meaning of entrepreneurial guidance and

entrepreneurial proactivity (Ripollés-Meliá *et al.*, 2007). Active participation corresponds to the daily presence of the leader in the business. Therefore, the empirical data allow us to affirm that international entrepreneurs have three sides: autochthonous, strategic, and functional. Thus, it is true to say that **international entrepreneur is a dimension of IE**.

4.9. Presentation of the analytical IE framework

Figure 5 displays the final framework based on the theoretical-empirical analysis designed throughout the present study. The dimensions of IE are represented in circles. Illustratively, the coloured circles infer the full existence of the eight categories in the first stage, which are not necessarily fully presented in this stage of internationalisation, as they can be present in any stage of the process. The dimensions with an intermittent nature – attitude towards risk, ability to innovate, opportunity, and propensity to adapt – are in circles without a colour in order to demonstrate their absence.

Therefore, through the results of the present study and in line with Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki (2003, pp. 205), who stated that “as a procedural phenomenon, IE can involve numerous stages [...] with linearity or discontinuity throughout time”, it is understandable that **in a certain context, IE occurs from a set of dimensions with a continuous and intermittent nature during the process of internationalisation**.

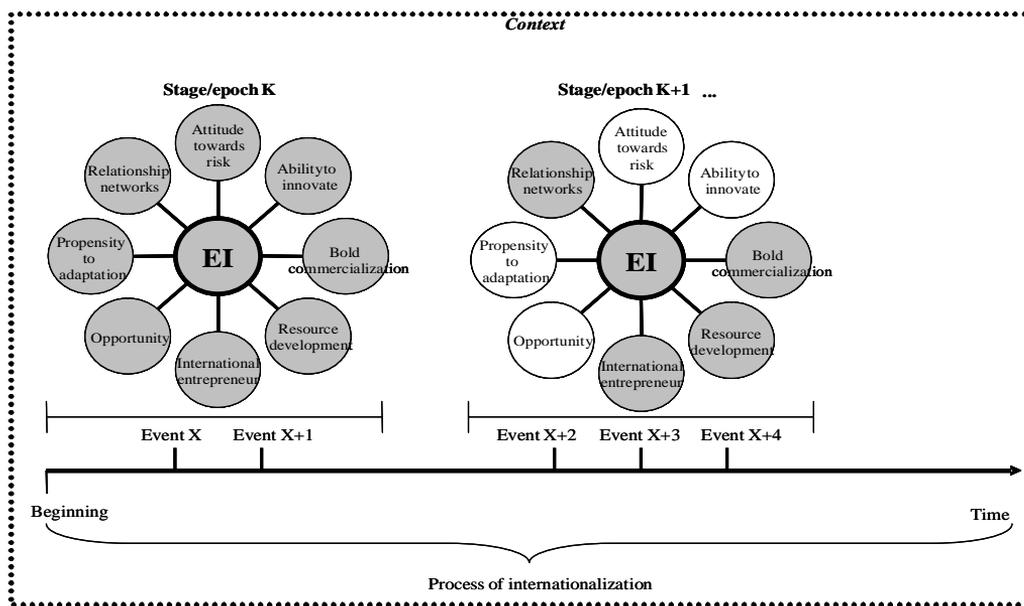


Figure 5 – Analytical IE framework.

Source: Elaborated by authors (2015).

The information obtained agrees with the understanding that IE cannot be considered to be a static phenomenon due to its procedural characteristics (Keupp and Gassmann, 2009). Therefore, it is possible to confirm the importance of adopting longitudinal research methods when investigating IE (Coombs *et al.*, 2009).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Nevertheless, even though it had a different plan from those of the other companies, the focus on adopting state-of-the-art technology is common to all analysed

firms, an aspect that helped in entering the international market. Time of activity is not a fundamental condition, reinforcing the argument that the primary goal in IE is internationalising in the first years of activity. By supporting the hypothesis of the study, it is possible to affirm that, given the context, IE occurs from a set of dimensions that have an intermittent and continuous nature during the process of internationalisation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the scientific literature. First, it is one of the few studies that examine IE in agribusiness firms by observing strategies, the internationalisation process, and context. The second theoretical contribution is the demonstration of eight typical dimensions of IE, under a longitudinal analysis, an aspect that has not yet been analysed in depth. The results found in the present study further add to the existing literature by showing that bold commercialisation and international entrepreneur influence the process of firm internationalisation.

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