



Regional export centres

– one part of Sweden’s export strategy

Background

Regional export centres is one of the biggest measures in terms of involved actors and initiatives in the export strategy produced by the Government at the end of 2014. The regional export centres are intended to act as a “door” to various types of guidance and financial support to help small and medium-sized companies grow.

The Agency for Economic and Regional Growth was commissioned by the Government to coordinate work on establishing regional export centres. The project began with six counties getting a pilot centre each in 2016. In September of 2017 the Government decided that all counties should have their own export centres by 2018.

The purpose of the audit has been to examine if the establishment of regional export centres was done in a way that was suited to the purpose and goals of the initiative, and if there is room for improvements going forward.

The audit has been based on the following questions:

- Has the Government and the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth’s preparations and organisation of regional export centres improved the conditions for export-promoting initiatives in the affected regions?
- Has the Government and the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth followed up on and accounted for the establishment of and results of the regional export centres, with a focus on efficient use of resources?

The results of the audit are mainly based on information and documentation that the National Audit Office has obtained from representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Enterprise, the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, Growth Analysis, and

from representatives of business organisations and the 17 regional export centres founded so far.

Audit results

Regional export centres have been established throughout the country in a fairly short period of time. In the establishment of the centres, the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth has handled fundamental organisational needs. The regional development actors found in the counties and regions have had a positive impact by acting as unifying forces in the export centres.

In relation to the assessment criteria of the audit, the National Audit Office has noted the following problems:

The Government and the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth have not taken previous experiences into consideration.

There is nothing to indicate that the Government or Agency for Economic and Regional Growth have heeded the lessons of previous, similar initiatives when making preparations. Previous attempts at regional export centres were investigated at the time. One conclusion was that the participating actors were too keen to guard their own turf, which hampered coordination and cooperation.

Business organisations feel that they have not been given enough opportunity to comment on matters.

It can also be noted that business organisations representatives feel that they were not given enough opportunity to provide input ahead of the establishment of the regional export centres.

The Agency for Economic and Regional Growth has not created the conditions for evaluation

The regional export centres began as a pilot project in six regions. This meant that there theoretically was room for an impact evaluation of the pilot centres before expanding the project. However, the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth has not opted to take this opportunity. The Government's choice of pilot regions made it difficult and even impossible to conduct a formal evaluation. No impact evaluation has been ordered for the project as a whole.

The National Audit Office also notes that there are no reliable compiled data on the number of companies who have been helped by the regional export centres.

The accounting does not meet the Riksdag's expectations

The Agency for Economic and Regional Growth's account and the Government's account to the Riksdag of the regional export centres' development and results are both very basic. The National Audit Office finds that the accounts do not meet the expectations expressed by the Committee on Industry and Trade regarding the Government's account of results in the policy area.

The audit has also identified room for improvement in a number of areas:

- The regional export centres are currently only based on short-term projects. The Government must clarify if there is a long-term plan for the initiative and how it is linked to other parts of the export strategy.
- The Government may also need to clarify the link to other initiatives in the export strategy such as Team Sweden, especially as one underlying motive for the establishment of regional export centre was to help small and medium-sized companies to navigate the incentive system.
- The services that actors in regional export centres offer needs to be developed to stay relevant. In this respect, the Government may want to consider adjusting the group of actors that can be involved in regional export centres.
- The Agency for Economic and Regional Growth's organisation of regional export centres is perceived as meaningful and helpful by the export centres themselves. But there is room for improvement in a number of areas.
 - The management of the export centres needs to focus on company-oriented measures rather than internal activities and cooperation between business-promoting actors.
 - Regional export centres have used cooperation agreements with regional development coordinators and other regional actors in the export centre to a fairly small degree, considering the positive impact such agreements appear to have had.
 - The Agency for Economic and Regional Growth must clarify working methods and role descriptions; there is for example a need for dialogue between the national steering group and the strategy group.
 - It may be advisable for the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth to consider a greater joint focus among regional export centres, for example through joint qualitative indicators so that individual centres can get an overview of other centres' operations and influence the coordination between centres.
 - The indicators for follow-up and evaluation focus on less relevant parts of the initiative.

Recommendations

The National Audit Office gives the following recommendations.

The Government should:

- clarify the time perspective of the initiative
- emphasise that it shall be possible to evaluate the impact of these types of initiatives
- improve its account to the Riksdag regarding regional export centres with information about the status of the work and conducted follow-up
- investigate how the identified areas for improvement can be utilised. This includes:
 - how relevant the services provided by actors in regional export centres are
 - whether an increased group of actors to be involved in regional export centres can increase their relevance.

The Agency for Economic and Regional Growth should:

- focus its follow-up and evaluation of relevant export centre activities on the impact for the target group rather than the internal cooperation between business-promoting actors
- improve its account of regional export centres with information about the status of the work and conducted follow-up
- investigate how the identified areas for improvement can be utilised. This includes:
 - greater joint focus among regional export centres, for example through increased use of cooperation agreements between actors in the export centres, the export centres' overview of the initiative throughout the country, and the export centres' ability to influence the coordination efforts
 - development of verksamt.se.