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ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY IN PRACTICE: MATRADE'S ROLE IN ENHANCING EXPORT READINESS AND EXPORT-LED GROWTH IN SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

Economic diplomacy has become an important instrument for enhancing export competitiveness and economic growth in developing economies. In Malaysia, MATRADE functions as the principal trade promotion institution, yet its role in supporting export readiness among mid-tier companies in peripheral regions such as Sarawak remains underexamined. This study investigates how MATRADE operates as an economic diplomacy instrument in enhancing export readiness and supporting export-led growth among Sarawak's mid-tier companies. A qualitative institutional case study was employed using an expert interview with the Director of MATRADE Sarawak, questionnaire responses from three selected mid-tier companies, and documentary analysis. The findings show that MATRADE facilitates export development through market intelligence, capability-building programmes, and strategic networking, while its effectiveness depends on firm-level operational readiness, institutional coordination, and the adaptation of national programmes to regional conditions. The study further finds that standardised export promotion initiatives require greater localisation to address Sarawak's distinctive geographical and infrastructural constraints. These findings contribute to the economic diplomacy literature by demonstrating how export promotion is operationalised at the subnational level and provide policy insights for strengthening institutional support for regional export development in developing economies.

Keywords: Economic diplomacy, export readiness, trade promotion institutions, mid-tier companies, Sarawak.

INTRODUCTION

Economic diplomacy has become an increasingly important policy instrument for promoting international trade, strengthening export competitiveness, and supporting national economic development. It operates through institutional legitimacy, resource provision, network integration, and transaction cost reduction, with its effectiveness depending on the quality of institutions and the alignment of diplomatic initiatives with domestic economic policies (Al-Saad, 2026). Among the principal instruments of economic diplomacy are export promotion agencies (EPAs), which facilitate firms' access to international markets through market intelligence, trade missions, business matching, export financing, and technical advisory services. Empirical evidence demonstrates that EPAs make a significant contribution to export growth, with every US$1 invested in export promotion generating approximately US$40 in additional exports, on average, although programme effectiveness varies considerably across regions, sectors, and institutional contexts (Lederman et al., 2006).

Despite this evidence, existing research has focused primarily on national-level export performance and macroeconomic trade outcomes. Much less attention has been given to how export promotion policies are implemented within subnational contexts, where institutional coordination, regional economic conditions, and firm characteristics ultimately determine whether nationally designed programmes translate into successful export outcomes. This represents an important gap because policy implementation is not uniform across regions. Differences in institutional capacity, infrastructure, industrial structure, and inter-agency coordination may significantly influence programme effectiveness, particularly in geographically diverse federal systems. Consequently, understanding export promotion at the regional level is essential for explaining why similar national policies produce different outcomes across regions.

The importance of regional implementation is increasingly recognised in the literature on subnational economic diplomacy. Regional governments have expanded their international economic engagement through trade missions, business matching, international exhibitions, and investment promotion activities to strengthen regional competitiveness and attract foreign investment (Putri et al., 2026). Nevertheless, successful subnational economic diplomacy depends on institutional capacity, policy coordination, and effective collaboration between national and regional governments. Existing studies suggest that although regional diplomacy contributes to trade and investment, empirical evidence explaining how national export promotion institutions adapt their programmes to regional conditions remains limited.

Economic diplomacy ultimately creates value through its influence on firms' export readiness. Export promotion agencies strengthen firms' capabilities by providing market information, business networking opportunities, export advisory services, and financial support that reduce information asymmetries and improve firms' ability to compete internationally. Export support programmes have been shown to improve export performance by strengthening firms' access to international business networks and market knowledge (Mansor & Cheah, 2024). Similarly, export promotion agencies function as key institutional actors within internationalisation ecosystems by facilitating knowledge transfer, stakeholder collaboration, and industry-government partnerships that support firms' international expansion (Costa Júnior et al., 2025). These findings suggest that institutional support enhances rather than substitutes for firms' internal capabilities, making export readiness a critical link between economic diplomacy and export performance.

Malaysia's export-led development strategy relies heavily on specialised institutions to promote international trade and reduce regional development disparities. Within this framework, the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) serves as the country's principal export promotion agency, providing structured programmes such as market development assistance, export capacity building, trade promotion missions, and business matching initiatives. These programmes support Malaysia's broader industrial and trade strategies by strengthening firms' international competitiveness while encouraging export diversification. However, the effectiveness of nationally standardised programmes depends on how they are implemented across regions with differing economic structures and development conditions.

This issue is particularly relevant in Sarawak. As Malaysia's largest state, Sarawak possesses abundant natural resources and growing manufacturing potential but also faces distinctive challenges arising from geographical dispersion, relatively high logistics costs, infrastructure constraints, and uneven industrial development. These characteristics differentiate Sarawak from Peninsular Malaysia and may influence firms' participation in, and benefits derived from, MATRADE programmes. Understanding whether national export promotion initiatives are sufficiently adapted to these regional conditions therefore represents an important policy question.

International experience further highlights the importance of regional adaptation. Many countries have strengthened subnational economic diplomacy by enabling regional and local governments to complement national trade promotion through closer engagement with businesses, targeted export initiatives, and stronger institutional coordination (Bouchet, 2022; Ciesielska-Klikowska & Kamiński, 2022). Rather than replacing national economic diplomacy, these approaches enhance policy implementation by responding to local economic conditions. Similar challenges exist in Malaysia, where regional diversity requires greater flexibility in implementing nationally designed export promotion programmes. Sarawak therefore provides an appropriate case for examining how economic diplomacy operates within a federal system characterised by significant regional variation.

Against this background, this study addresses an important gap in the economic diplomacy and export promotion literature. While previous studies demonstrate the overall effectiveness of export promotion agencies, limited empirical attention has been devoted to understanding how these institutions operate within subnational contexts, where programme implementation, institutional coordination, and firm-level export readiness shape policy outcomes. By examining MATRADE's role in supporting mid-tier companies in Sarawak, this research extends existing knowledge beyond national-level evaluations to the regional implementation of economic diplomacy. The study therefore contributes to a better understanding of how institutional arrangements influence export readiness and export-led growth within geographically diverse and decentralised economic systems.

The central research question is: How does MATRADE function as an economic diplomacy instrument to enhance export readiness and facilitate export-led growth among mid-tier companies in Sarawak? This question is addressed through four subsidiary questions:

i. What specific mechanisms and programmes does MATRADE deploy to promote export readiness among Sarawak-based firms, and how are these programmes adapted to the regional context?

ii. How effectively does MATRADE coordinate with local institutions in Sarawak, and what inter-agency coordination challenges exist?

iii. What institutional and contextual factors shape MATRADE's effectiveness in Sarawak, including institutional capacity, political commitment, and alignment with regional economic strategies?

iv. What barriers and enablers of export readiness exist among Sarawak's mid-tier companies, and how does MATRADE address these challenges through its regional implementation mechanisms?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to both theory and practice by demonstrating why regional implementation is fundamental to understanding how national economic diplomacy translates into firm-level export competitiveness. The findings also provide practical insights for strengthening institutional coordination and improving export promotion policies in peripheral regions within federal economies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic Diplomacy and Trade Promotion Institutions

Economic diplomacy promotes international trade through institutional mechanisms that strengthen market access, facilitate business networks, and coordinate trade-related policies. Export promotion agencies (EPAs) constitute one of the principal instruments of economic diplomacy, supporting firms through export promotion services, market intelligence, trade missions, and business advisory programmes. A meta-analysis by Moons and van Bergeijk (2017) finds that economic diplomacy has a positive and significant effect on international economic flows, while recent studies highlight the increasing adoption of integrated, whole-of-government approaches involving coordination among public institutions and private-sector stakeholders (Kukharyk & Romaniuk, 2024; Parajuli, 2025). Nevertheless, institutional coordination remains a persistent challenge, particularly where weak inter-agency cooperation and limited policy coherence constrain the effectiveness of export support systems (Naryshkin, 2021). Export promotion agencies also contribute to identifying competitive sectors and coordinating public resources to support export-oriented industries (Reed, 2024).

Although the effectiveness of EPAs has been widely demonstrated, existing research evaluates their impact primarily through national export performance. Limited attention has been given to how nationally designed export promotion programmes are implemented at the regional level, where institutional coordination, programme accessibility, and local capacity ultimately influence firm participation and policy effectiveness. This limitation is particularly important in federal or geographically diverse countries, where regional differences may substantially affect programme delivery and outcomes.

Export-Led Growth and Regional Institutional Capacity

Export-led growth remains an important development strategy, with recent evidence indicating a generally positive relationship between exports and GDP growth, although the strength and direction of this relationship vary across levels of development and economic sectors (Mkabane & Kongo, 2025). The effectiveness of export-oriented development is also shaped by broader contextual conditions. Macroeconomic stability, particularly inflation, GDP growth, and trade openness, significantly influences export performance (Addis et al., 2025), while institutional development, regulatory harmonisation, and sector-specific implementation affect the effectiveness of regional trade and economic integration initiatives (Rakhimzhanova, 2025).

Malaysia has pursued export-led industrialisation since the 1970s through specialised institutions and sector-specific policies. However, differences in regional economic structures mean that identical national policies may not produce similar outcomes across all states. Although Malaysia has introduced regionally differentiated development initiatives, little empirical evidence explains how national export promotion institutions adapt their programmes to East Malaysian contexts, particularly Sarawak. Consequently, the regional implementation of export-led development remains insufficiently understood.

Export Readiness and Firm Capability Development

Export readiness is shaped by a combination of organisational capabilities and external support mechanisms that influence firms' ability to compete in international markets. Recent evidence demonstrates that digital, human, innovation, networking, and technical capabilities contribute positively to export performance (Dung et al., 2026). Marketing and innovation capabilities also have significant positive effects on SME export performance (Sugiharta et al., 2026), while digital transformation, logistics infrastructure, human capital, and marketing capability have been identified as important firm-level determinants of export performance (Bui et al., 2025). Open innovation further contributes to export performance through market agility and business model innovation (Kim & Meng, 2026), whereas institutional support can strengthen export readiness, innovation, and export strategy development (Singh et al., 2024).

Institutional support contributes to export readiness by providing firms with market information, technical assistance, networking opportunities, and capability development programmes. Geographic conditions also influence firms' ability to develop and access export-related resources and capabilities. Imiru (2021) finds that firm location significantly influences the development of export-related capabilities, with rural exporters facing greater obstacles than firms located in metropolitan areas. This issue is particularly relevant to Sarawak, where dispersed settlements and logistical constraints may limit firms' access to export promotion programmes. Despite these findings, few studies examine whether export promotion agencies adapt their services to address regional constraints affecting export readiness.

Mid-Tier Companies in National Export Strategies

Although much of the empirical literature focuses on small and medium-sized enterprises rather than mid-tier companies, it provides relevant insights into the institutional support and firm-level capabilities associated with export performance. Malaysian evidence indicates that government marketing assistance strengthens firms' competitive capabilities and export performance, whereas financial support does not have a significant direct effect on either outcome (Mata et al., 2021). Evidence from the Indian pharmaceutical industry further demonstrates that supply-chain performance indicators, including working-capital efficiency, asset-management efficiency, raw-material import efficiency, R&D capability, and cost-to-serve, significantly influence firms' export capability (Talukder & Tripathi, 2025). More broadly, firm resources and capabilities, export marketing strategies, and management characteristics have been identified as important firm-level determinants of SME export performance (Faruk & Subudhi, 2019).

However, existing studies rarely examine whether capability-building programmes operate similarly across different Malaysian regions. Little is known about whether mid-tier firms in Sarawak experience different institutional constraints or derive comparable benefits from national export promotion initiatives. This represents an important gap because regional differences in infrastructure, labour availability, business networks, and institutional accessibility may significantly influence programme effectiveness.

Regional Implementation and the Sarawak Context

Growing evidence demonstrates that regional conditions shape the implementation and outcomes of economic and trade-related policies. In Sarawak, infrastructure development has revealed challenges associated with local enterprise participation, institutional enforcement, and adaptation to local economic and geographical conditions (Wu & Ling, 2025), while research on rural communities highlights persistent socioeconomic disparities and uneven economic readiness across the state (Stengle et al., 2025). Evidence from other developing regions similarly demonstrates that regulatory barriers, institutional cooperation, infrastructure constraints, and trade-facilitation policies significantly influence cross-border trade and regional economic outcomes (Momand & Ahmadzai, 2025; Sekati et al., 2025).

These studies collectively suggest that regional implementation matters, yet they stop short of examining how national export promotion institutions operate within regional settings. Existing literature generally investigates export promotion at the national level, firm capabilities at the organisational level, or regional development independently, without explaining how these dimensions interact during policy implementation. Consequently, the regional mechanisms linking national export promotion policies to firm-level export readiness remain poorly understood.

Sarawak provides a distinctive context for addressing this gap. Its geographical location, resource-based economy, dispersed industrial landscape, and position within Malaysia's federal system create institutional conditions that differ substantially from those of Peninsular Malaysia. Although national policies recognise East Malaysia's distinctive development needs, limited empirical evidence explains whether MATRADE's nationally designed programmes are sufficiently adapted to Sarawak's regional circumstances or how regional institutional coordination influences firms' export readiness.

Literature Synthesis

The literature demonstrates that export promotion agencies contribute positively to export performance, that firm capabilities are central to export readiness, and that regional conditions influence policy implementation. However, these research streams have largely developed independently. Existing studies rarely examine how national export promotion institutions coordinate with regional actors to deliver export support or how regional institutional capacity affects firms' access to these programmes. This regional perspective is particularly important for Malaysia because substantial economic and geographical differences exist between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysian states.

Accordingly, this study addresses an important gap by examining MATRADE's implementation in Sarawak. It integrates economic diplomacy, export readiness, and regional policy implementation to explain how nationally designed export promotion programmes are translated into firm-level export competitiveness within a distinctive subnational context.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative institutional case study approach to examine how economic diplomacy is operationalised by MATRADE Sarawak in supporting the export development of mid-tier companies (MTCs). A case study design was selected because it enables an in-depth investigation of contemporary institutional processes and stakeholder experiences within their real-world context (Yin, 2018). Data were collected through a semi-structured expert interview, questionnaires administered to selected MTCs, and documentary analysis of MATRADE reports, programme records, and publicly available export information. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Sampling Design

Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich respondents capable of providing insights into MATRADE's export promotion activities. The primary respondent was the Director of the MATRADE Sarawak Branch, who possesses 18 years of experience in trade policy, export facilitation, and international trade development. The respondent was selected based on formal responsibility for export promotion at the state level, direct involvement in programme implementation and stakeholder engagement, extensive knowledge of MATRADE's initiatives and operational challenges, and access to institutional information unavailable through public sources.

To complement the institutional perspective, questionnaires were distributed to 13 mid-tier manufacturing companies in Sarawak, of which three firms responded to a 23% response rate. Although limited in number, the respondents varied in size, revenue scale, export involvement, and years of establishment, enabling comparative analysis of firm perceptions regarding MATRADE's initiatives. As the study focuses on institutional mechanisms rather than population-level outcomes, the findings are intended to provide analytical insights rather than statistical generalisations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from three sources: a semi-structured expert interview, firm-level questionnaires, and documentary analysis. The interview explored MATRADE's export promotion strategies, programme implementation, export readiness initiatives, and challenges in localising economic diplomacy. The questionnaire examined firms' export activities, perceptions of MATRADE's programmes and services, export-related challenges, and awareness of government support initiatives. Documentary analysis of MATRADE reports, official publications, programme documents, and export-related records provided contextual and supporting evidence.

The data were analysed using thematic and comparative analysis. Interview responses were coded to identify recurring themes relating to institutional mechanisms, export promotion strategies, programme effectiveness, and implementation challenges, following the principles of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Questionnaire responses were analysed descriptively and compared with interview findings to identify areas of convergence and divergence between institutional and firm-level perspectives. Documentary evidence was subsequently used to verify and contextualise the findings.

Triangulation

Methodological triangulation was employed through an expert interview, firm-level questionnaires, and documentary analysis to enhance the credibility of the findings. Institutional claims provided by the MATRADE Director were cross-checked against documentary sources, while interview findings were compared with firm-level responses to identify convergence and divergence regarding export readiness, programme effectiveness, and implementation challenges. This process enabled cross-checking across multiple sources and provided a more comprehensive understanding of MATRADE's role in supporting export development among Sarawak's mid-tier companies.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on a small purposive sample consisting of one institutional respondent and three firm-level respondents; consequently, the findings are intended for analytical interpretation rather than statistical generalisation. Second, all participating firms reported non-participation in MATRADE's flagship programmes, meaning the firm-level findings primarily reflect perceptions of programme awareness, accessibility, and relevance rather than direct participant experiences. Third, the responding firms were concentrated in Kuching, limiting the study's ability to capture perspectives from other parts of Sarawak. The low response rate may also introduce non-response bias, as participating firms may differ from non-participating firms in export orientation, institutional engagement, and organisational characteristics.

FINDINGS

MATRADE as an Economic Diplomacy Institution: Institutional Mechanisms and Export Outcomes

The findings indicate that MATRADE functions as Malaysia's principal institutional mechanism for implementing economic diplomacy by enhancing firms' export readiness through market access, capability development, business networking, and export facilitation. According to the MATRADE Sarawak Director, who has 18 years of experience in the field, the Mid-Tier Companies Development Programme (MTCDP) generated RM39.5 billion in sales during 2024, of which approximately 60% were export sales, with participating firms exporting to 115 international markets. Documentary evidence further supports these institutional outcomes, highlighting recognised exporters such as Tuong Aik Shipyard Sdn. Bhd., Iana Corporation Sdn. Bhd., and ABM (Amalgamated Batteries Manufacturing), all of which demonstrated sustained expansion into international markets.

However, firm-level evidence from the three participating mid-tier companies reveals a different pattern. None of the firms had participated in MATRADE's flagship programmes (MTCDP, Export Acceleration Mission or Market Development Grant), while two firms rated MATRADE's market access support as only neutral (3/5). These findings suggest that although MATRADE has demonstrated measurable success among participating firms, programme benefits have not yet extended uniformly across all mid-tier companies in Sarawak. This supports the view that the effectiveness of economic diplomacy depends not only on institutional programme availability but also on firms' awareness, accessibility, and participation.

Institutional Effectiveness across Export Promotion Functions

Triangulation of the expert interview, firm-level questionnaires, and documentary evidence reveals differing assessments of MATRADE's effectiveness across its major export promotion functions. The Director described Export Acceleration Missions (EAM) as an effective mechanism for developing international buyer networks and facilitating market access, while benchmarking and capability-building activities under the Mid-Tier Companies Development Programme (MTCDP) were reported to strengthen firms' export knowledge and capabilities. The Market Development Grant (MDG) was also presented as a mechanism for reducing the financial risks associated with overseas market expansion, while more recent initiatives have placed greater emphasis on branding and digital export readiness.

Documentary evidence supports several of these institutional claims. MTCDP recorded RM39.5 billion in sales in 2024, with approximately 60% derived from exports to 115 international markets. The international expansion of recognised Sarawak-based exporters, including Tuong Aik Shipyard, Iana Corporation, and ABM, further demonstrates the potential outcomes associated with institutional export support.

However, firm-level evidence presents a more moderate assessment of MATRADE's effectiveness. None of the three participating firms participated in MATRADE's flagship programmes. Among the firms that provided ratings, market access and market intelligence were generally rated as neutral (3/5), while financing support and branding assistance received ratings ranging from 2/5 to 3/5. Company B did not provide ratings for these export promotion functions and was therefore recorded as "Not rated" in Table 1. This contrast suggests that although MATRADE's export promotion mechanisms are operational and have generated measurable outcomes among programme participants, their perceived benefits are less evident among firms that have not directly participated in these initiatives.

The triangulation presented in Table 1 therefore highlights an implementation and perception gap between documented institutional achievements and firm-level experiences. Programme effectiveness appears to be more visible among active participants, while non-participating firms continue to report relatively modest perceptions of MATRADE's export promotion functions.

Table 1

Triangulation of Evidence on MATRADE's Export Promotion Functions

MATRADE function	Director's institutional claim	Company A rating	Company B rating	Company C rating	Convergence/ Divergence
Market access	Strong: EAMs generate direct contracts and trade links	3/5 (Neutral)	Not rated	3/5 (Neutral)	Divergence: Director emphasises effectiveness; firms perceive the function as neutral
Market intelligence	Strong: Benchmarking and knowledge transfer are documented	3/5 (Neutral)	Not rated	3/5 (Neutral)	Divergence: Director emphasises delivery; firms perceive the function as neutral

(continued)

MATRADE function	Director's institutional claim	Company A rating	Company B rating	Company C rating	Convergence/ Divergence
Financing support	Moderate: MDG "reduces financial risk"	3/5 (Neutral)	Not rated	2/5 (Ineffective)	Partial convergence: Financing is perceived as a weaker area
Capability building	Strong: MTCDP RM39.5 billion outcomes documented	3/5 (Neutral)	Not rated	3/5 (Neutral)	Divergence: Quantified institutional outcomes are not reflected in firm perceptions
Branding support	Moderate-Strong: Recent emphasis on branding strategies	3/5 (Neutral)	Not rated	2/5 (Ineffective)	Divergence: Lowest firm-level perception; more aspirational than operational

Notes. “Not rated” indicates that Company B did not provide a rating for the respective export promotion functions in the questionnaire. No value was assigned or imputed for these items.

Table 1 demonstrates that MATRADE’s institutional achievements are supported by documentary evidence but appear to be concentrated among programme participants. In contrast, none of the three participating firms had participated in MATRADE’s flagship programmes, and among the firms that provided ratings, most export promotion functions were perceived as neutral to moderately effective. The convergence and divergence across the three evidence sources indicate that programme availability and documented institutional outcomes do not necessarily translate into equally strong firm-level perceptions. This implementation gap highlights the importance of expanding programme participation, strengthening awareness, and improving the regional relevance of MATRADE’s export promotion initiatives in Sarawak.

Export Readiness Assessment Tool: Standardised Yet Sarawak-Insensitive

The Export Readiness Assessment Tool (ERAT) serves as MATRADE's standardised diagnostic instrument for evaluating firms' export readiness across four dimensions: export resources, marketing capability, management commitment, and product or service potential. According to the Director, ERAT provides firms with an initial assessment of their export capabilities and identifies areas requiring improvement.

Nevertheless, ERAT was also identified as having important limitations in the context of Sarawak. As a nationally standardised assessment, it does not explicitly consider regional conditions such as longer logistics chains, higher transportation costs, sector-specific requirements, or limited international connectivity. Consequently, firms may appear export-ready according to ERAT while continuing to face operational constraints that are not captured by the assessment. The Director therefore recommended complementing ERAT with state-level export clinics, customised diagnostics, and mentoring programmes to improve its relevance for Sarawak-based firms.

Regional Outreach Mechanisms: Geographically Extended but with Limited Participation

MATRADE has expanded its regional presence through initiatives such as Sarawak Export Day, export clinics, business matching sessions, and technical advisory programmes delivered in collaboration with the Ministry of International Trade, Industry and Investment Sarawak (MINTRED). These initiatives demonstrate efforts to decentralise export promotion beyond the national level and strengthen institutional accessibility within Sarawak.

Despite these initiatives, the participating firms reported no involvement in MATRADE programmes and continued to perceive limited programme relevance. Interestingly, all three firms were in Kuching, where MATRADE maintains its strongest state-level presence. This suggests that geographical accessibility alone is insufficient to explain programme participation. Instead, the findings point to additional barriers, including programme awareness, perceived relevance, organisational readiness, and firms' capacity to engage with export promotion initiatives.

Critical Success Factor: Operational Readiness vs. Institutional Access

Across all evidence sources, operational readiness emerged as an important determinant of export success. According to the Director, firms achieve sustainable export growth only when institutional support is complemented by strong internal capabilities, particularly production capacity, quality assurance, logistics management, market knowledge, and managerial commitment.

Documentary evidence supports this observation. Award-winning exporters such as Tuong Aik Shipyard, Iana Corporation, and ABM possess strong operational capabilities that have enabled them to translate MATRADE support into sustained export performance. In contrast, firms with weaker operational capacity or limited export experience may struggle to benefit fully from available institutional support. These findings reinforce the role of economic diplomacy as an enabling mechanism rather than a substitute for firm capability development.

Federal-State Coordination: Stated Collaboration with Implementation Gaps

The interview findings indicate that MATRADE delivers nationally standardised export promotion programmes while collaborating with Sarawak agencies, particularly MINTRED and Invest Sarawak, to support regional implementation. MATRADE contributes international market access, buyer networks, and export promotion expertise, whereas state agencies provide local industry knowledge, firm identification, and regional development priorities.

Nevertheless, several coordination challenges were identified, including differences in federal and state priorities, limited sharing of firm-level export readiness information, and difficulties in aligning national programmes with Sarawak's economic conditions. These findings suggest that strengthening institutional coordination is essential for improving the regional implementation of Malaysia's economic diplomacy strategy.

Table 2

Summary of Triangulated Findings

Finding	Expert interview evidence	Firm-Level evidence (n=3)	Documentary evidence	Convergence assessment
MATRADE programmes generate export outcomes	MTCDP: RM39.5 billion, 60% exports, 115 markets	Non-participation (0/3)	Award-winning exporters: Tuong Aik, Iana, ABM	Outcomes confirmed but appear concentrated among participants
Institutional mechanisms are available	EAM, MDG, ERAT, export clinics documented	Neutral perception (3/5 ratings)	Export days reach 300 firms	Availability confirmed; perception gaps evident
Geographic barriers are real	Detailed diagnosis: logistics, infrastructure, ports	Company B: "freight charges much higher"	Documented constraints	Convergence: Firms and expert align on barriers
Programme tailoring is inadequate	Acknowledged localisation gaps	1/5 tailoring ratings	Standard ERAT lacks sector/regional differentiation	Convergence: Both identify insufficient customisation
Operational readiness is critical	Identified as the single most important factor	Non-participation suggests awareness/relevance gaps	Success cases (Tuong Aik, Iana) demonstrate strong operational capabilities	Convergence: Operational capacity is associated with stronger outcomes

DISCUSSION

Reconciling Institutional Effectiveness with Limited Firm-Level Engagement

This study reveals an important implementation gap between MATRADE's institutional achievements and firm-level engagement. Documentary evidence demonstrates that MATRADE has successfully operationalised Malaysia's economic diplomacy through programmes such as the Mid-Tier Companies Development Programme (MTCDP), which generated RM39.5 billion in sales, reached 115 international markets, and supported award-winning exporters. However, these outcomes appear to be concentrated among programme participants, while the three surveyed mid-tier firms reported no participation in MATRADE's flagship programmes, and the firms that provided ratings perceived its support as only moderately effective.

These findings suggest that institutional availability does not necessarily translate into institutional utilisation. Although MATRADE has expanded regional outreach through initiatives such as Sarawak Export Day and export clinics, firm-level engagement remains limited. This challenges the assumption that information asymmetry is the primary constraint to export promotion. Instead, the findings indicate that programme participation is influenced by firms' absorptive capacity, operational readiness, and perceived alignment between institutional support and business needs.

From an economic diplomacy perspective, institutional effectiveness depends not only on the quality of programme design but also on successful implementation at the firm level. The strong performance of MTCDP participants reflects an effective alignment between institutional support and firms with higher export readiness, whereas the limited engagement of non-participating firms suggests that current programmes may not fully address the operational realities of all Sarawak-based manufacturers. Consequently, economic diplomacy should be understood as a multi-level process in which national policy, regional implementation, and firm-level capabilities interact to shape export outcomes.

Export Readiness as the Critical Link: Evidence from Success and Limitation Cases

The findings further demonstrate that export readiness is the critical mechanism linking economic diplomacy to firm-level export performance. According to the expert respondent, successful exporters combine institutional support with strong operational and managerial capabilities, including production capacity, quality assurance, supply chain management, market knowledge, and human capital. Documentary evidence from successful exporters supports this view, indicating that institutional assistance facilitates international expansion but does not substitute for firm capability.

In contrast, the surveyed firms had not participated in MATRADE's programmes despite recognising their potential value. Company C acknowledged that MATRADE initiatives could support future export opportunities but noted that its operations remained primarily domestic, suggesting that firms may delay participation until they perceive themselves as sufficiently export-ready. Similarly, Company B identified higher freight costs compared with Peninsular Malaysia as a major competitiveness constraint, illustrating how Sarawak's geographical conditions influence firms' readiness to internationalise.

These findings suggest that export promotion programmes represent necessary but not sufficient conditions for export success. While MATRADE provides market access, trade missions, grants, and advisory services, firms must possess adequate operational capabilities to convert these opportunities into sustainable export performance. Therefore, export readiness should be viewed not simply as an outcome of economic diplomacy but as an essential mechanism through which economic diplomacy contributes to long-term export competitiveness.

ERAT as Diagnostic Tool: Standardised Yet Context-Blind

The findings suggest that while the ERAT provides a useful national framework for assessing firms' export capability, its standardised design limits its effectiveness in Sarawak's regional context. ERAT evaluates general dimensions of export readiness, including management commitment, product capability, resource availability, and marketing preparedness, but does not adequately capture region-specific constraints such as higher logistics costs, limited export gateways, certification accessibility, and sectoral differences. Consequently, firms may appear to be export-ready according to national assessment criteria while remaining operationally constrained by local conditions.

This finding extends existing export readiness literature by suggesting that standardised assessment tools may have limited explanatory value in geographically peripheral regions. In Sarawak, export readiness is influenced not only by internal firm capabilities but also by external structural factors that affect firms' ability to compete internationally. Therefore, a uniform national assessment may overlook important barriers to export performance.

The findings support the Director's recommendation that ERAT should be complemented by state-level export clinics, customised diagnostics, and mentoring programmes. Rather than replacing the existing framework, these contextual adaptations would improve the assessment of export readiness while enabling more targeted interventions for Sarawak-based firms.

Localisation Paradox: Geographically Decentralised Yet Substantively Standardised

A further contribution of this study is the identification of a localisation paradox within MATRADE's regional implementation strategy. Although export promotion activities have been geographically decentralised through initiatives such as Sarawak Export Day, export clinics, and collaboration with state agencies, programme content remains largely standardised across Malaysia. The participating firms, despite being in Kuching, where MATRADE has its strongest regional presence, reported low perceptions of programme relevance and limited participation, indicating that geographical accessibility alone is insufficient to improve programme utilisation.

These findings suggest that effective regional economic diplomacy requires more than decentralised programme delivery. National initiatives must also be adapted to regional industrial structures, logistical conditions, and sectoral priorities. For Sarawak, greater programme localisation through sector-specific export roadmaps, differentiated support based on firms' readiness levels, and stronger alignment with priority industries such as marine engineering, specialty food products, renewable energy components, and advanced manufacturing could improve programme relevance and participation. Such adaptations would strengthen the regional implementation of Malaysia's economic diplomacy while ensuring that national export promotion strategies better reflect Sarawak's unique economic context.

From Market Access to Strategic Positioning: Evolution of the Economic Diplomacy Role

The findings suggest that MATRADE's role should evolve beyond facilitating market access towards a more strategic model of economic diplomacy. While existing initiatives such as trade missions, business matching, and international exhibitions have supported export promotion, Sarawak's geographical isolation and industrial structure require broader diplomatic engagement. The expert respondent highlighted the potential for MATRADE to leverage Malaysia's embassies, trade commissioners, and diplomatic missions to promote Sarawak's niche industries in priority markets such as ASEAN, the Middle East, and East Asia.

This reflects a shift from traditional economic diplomacy, which primarily focuses on market access, towards a more strategic approach that integrates market development, regulatory cooperation, and sector positioning. For Sarawak-based firms, diplomatic networks can help strengthen international visibility, build buyer confidence, and reduce barriers associated with geographical distance and unfamiliarity with market origins. Such an approach would enable economic diplomacy to support not only export promotion but also the long-term international competitiveness of regional industries.

Federal-State Coordination: Stated Architecture vs. Implementation Reality

The findings also demonstrate that effective economic diplomacy depends on strong coordination between federal and state institutions. Although MATRADE collaborates with agencies such as MINTRED and Invest Sarawak, differences in institutional priorities, fragmented information sharing, and nationally standardised programme design continue to constrain regional implementation. These challenges suggest that programme accessibility alone is insufficient without stronger policy coordination and local adaptation.

For Sarawak, greater federal-state collaboration should extend beyond programme delivery to include joint planning, information sharing, and the co-design of regionally relevant export initiatives. Strengthening coordination would enable MATRADE to better align national export strategies with Sarawak's industrial priorities while supporting more targeted interventions for firms with different levels of export readiness. Importantly, these lessons may extend beyond Sarawak, as other regions with decentralised governance structures and geographical constraints may encounter similar implementation challenges. Consequently, improving multi-level institutional coordination represents an important policy implication for strengthening the effectiveness and sustainability of economic diplomacy at the regional level.

Comparative Context: Why Sarawak Represents a Distinctive but Not Unique Case

The expert respondent's documentation of Sarawak's challenges—including geographical distance, infrastructure gaps, industrial structure mismatch, talent constraints, and programme design misalignment—highlights distinctive regional conditions that are not wholly unique. Sarawak faces geographical remoteness across the South China Sea, export gateway constraints arising from fewer international shipping routes and limited direct connectivity to major global ports, last-mile challenges for manufacturers located outside major urban centres, port capacity limitations that are not optimised for containerised high-value exports, and disparities in digital infrastructure.

However, comparable regions globally face analogous challenges:

i. Sarawak and the Borneo Regional Context: East Malaysian geography reflects the broader Borneo island context. Brunei, Indonesian Kalimantan, and Malaysian Sabah face similar challenges related to remoteness and infrastructure constraints. MATRADE's experience in Sarawak may therefore inform bilateral trade dialogue with Brunei and potentially contribute to ASEAN-level trade facilitation strategies.

ii. Resource-Based Economy Transition: Sarawak's dominant resource sectors, including timber, palm oil, minerals, and LNG, alongside relatively limited downstream manufacturing, reflect broader development patterns in which resource-based economies face challenges in transitioning towards manufacturing exports. The expert noted that Sarawak's economy remains heavily concentrated in commodities, while many MATRADE programmes are designed around manufactured, branded and consumer-ready exports. This reflects limited downstream manufacturing capacity and a smaller pool of firms that are export-ready in terms of product differentiation, branding, and value-added processing. Similar challenges have been experienced in resource-rich regions across Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America.

iii. Secondary City Export Exclusion: The expert noted that MATRADE programmes are associated with higher participation among firms in Kuching and Miri than among those in smaller cities such as Sibu, Kapit, and Mukah or in rural districts. This reflects a globally common pattern in which trade promotion institutions tend to concentrate resources in major metropolitan areas, potentially limiting access for firms in smaller and more peripheral locations.

Generalisation for Other Malaysian Regions: Sabah, Malaysia's second East Malaysian state, faces similar challenges related to geographical remoteness, resource-based economic dominance, and limited manufacturing export infrastructure. The institutional and programmatic lessons learned from MATRADE's experience in Sarawak, particularly regarding localisation strategies, federal-state coordination mechanisms, and sector-specific economic diplomacy, may also be relevant to Sabah, with appropriate contextual modifications.

Lessons Beyond Malaysia: Developing regions facing geographical isolation, resource-based economic structures, and limited downstream manufacturing capacity may encounter comparable export development constraints. MATRADE's institutional approaches in Sarawak, including Export Days, export clinics, state agency partnerships, and sector targeting, may offer potentially transferable lessons for other regions facing similar challenges in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa. However, the applicability and effectiveness of these approaches in other contexts would require further empirical assessment.

Sustainability and Long-Term Institutional Development

The findings further suggest that the long-term effectiveness of MATRADE's economic diplomacy depends on continuous institutional adaptation rather than one-off export promotion activities. Sustainable export development requires export readiness programmes that evolve alongside firms' changing capabilities and regional needs. This includes strengthening localised export readiness assessment, expanding sector-specific support, enhancing collaboration between MATRADE and state agencies, and leveraging diplomatic networks to create long-term market opportunities.

Without these institutional improvements, MATRADE risks maintaining strong national export outcomes while leaving persistent regional disparities in programme participation and effectiveness. Embedding continuous monitoring, regional adaptation, and stronger institutional collaboration within export promotion strategies would therefore enhance the sustainability of Malaysia's economic diplomacy and help ensure that regional firms remain competitive in international markets over the long term.

Synthesis and Policy Implications

This study demonstrates that MATRADE has successfully operationalised Malaysia's economic diplomacy by strengthening export capability among participating firms, as reflected in documented programme outcomes and exporter achievements. However, the findings also reveal that these benefits remain concentrated among firms actively engaged in MATRADE programmes, while many mid-tier manufacturers continue to perceive limited relevance and exhibit low participation.

The study identifies three priorities for strengthening regional economic diplomacy in Sarawak. First, export readiness assessment should be adapted to regional conditions through more localised diagnostics, sector-specific mentoring, and integration with state-level advisory services. Second, stronger federal-state coordination is needed to improve programme alignment, information sharing, and the design of interventions that reflect Sarawak's industrial priorities. Third, MATRADE should expand its economic diplomacy beyond traditional market access by leveraging diplomatic networks, sector-specific trade promotion, and long-term international partnerships to enhance the competitiveness of Sarawak-based firms.

Overall, the findings suggest that sustainable export-led growth depends not only on expanding programme availability but also on ensuring that national export promotion strategies are responsive to regional contexts and firm-level capabilities. By combining contextual adaptation, stronger institutional coordination, and strategic economic diplomacy, MATRADE can broaden programme participation while supporting Malaysia's long-term export competitiveness. These recommendations may also be relevant to other geographically peripheral and resource-based regions seeking to strengthen regional export development through economic diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study demonstrates that MATRADE functions as an important economic diplomacy institution supporting export-led growth among Sarawak's mid-tier companies through structured programmes such as the Mid-Tier Companies Development Programme (MTCDP), Export Acceleration Mission (EAM), and Market Development Grant (MDG). Documentary evidence confirms that MATRADE's programmes have generated meaningful export outcomes, although these benefits appear concentrated among firms that actively participate in MATRADE initiatives, while engagement among a broader segment of Sarawak's mid-tier companies remains limited.

The findings further demonstrate that export readiness is strongly shaped by firm-level operational capabilities, including production capacity, quality assurance, logistics, market knowledge, and managerial competence. MATRADE's institutional support enhances these capabilities but cannot compensate for weak internal organisational capacity. Consequently, firms with stronger operational readiness are better positioned to translate institutional support into sustained export performance.

The study also identifies important contextual limitations in MATRADE's current implementation model. Although the organisation has expanded outreach through Export Days, export clinics, and collaboration with state agencies, programme design remains largely standardised at the national level. Existing initiatives, including the Export Readiness Assessment Tool (ERAT), do not fully capture Sarawak's distinctive geographic, infrastructure, and industrial characteristics. As a result, programme accessibility has improved, but participation and perceived relevance remain uneven across firms.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the economic diplomacy literature by extending analysis beyond national-level trade promotion towards the regional implementation of export promotion institutions within a federal system. The findings demonstrate that institutional effectiveness is influenced not only by programme design but also by regional context, suggesting that nationally standardised policy instruments may produce uneven outcomes when implemented across geographically and economically diverse regions.

The research also advances understanding of export readiness by clarifying that institutional support functions primarily as a catalyst rather than a substitute for firm capability. Operational readiness, encompassing production capacity, managerial competence, logistics capability, quality compliance, and export strategy, emerges as a critical factor in export success, while institutional programmes amplify rather than create these capabilities.

Furthermore, the study reinforces institutional and developmental state perspectives by illustrating that effective economic diplomacy requires adaptive implementation, multi-level governance, and stronger coordination between federal and regional institutions. The findings therefore provide empirical evidence that institutional effectiveness depends on both organisational capability and contextual adaptation rather than standardised policy implementation alone.

Policy Contribution

The findings suggest several priorities for strengthening MATRADE's effectiveness in Sarawak. First, national export programmes should be complemented by Sarawak-specific export roadmaps that prioritise sectors with regional comparative advantages, such as marine engineering, downstream timber processing, specialty food and beverages, and advanced manufacturing. Second, ERAT should be enhanced with localised diagnostics that consider Sarawak's logistics, infrastructure, sectoral characteristics, and geographical constraints to improve export readiness assessment and programme targeting. Third, greater collaboration between MATRADE and state agencies, supported by regional outreach and digital service delivery, should be strengthened to improve programme accessibility, particularly for firms outside major urban centres. Finally, institutional support should place greater emphasis on developing firm capabilities in production scaling, certification, supply chain management, export management, and market intelligence to strengthen long-term export competitiveness.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study primarily reflects MATRADE's institutional perspective through a single expert interview, supported by questionnaire responses from a limited number of firms and documentary analysis. Consequently, the findings provide analytical rather than statistically generalisable conclusions.

Second, the qualitative research design does not permit quantitative assessment of programme effectiveness, export performance, or causal relationships between institutional support and export outcomes.

Third, the study represents a cross-sectional assessment and therefore does not capture changes in institutional performance or firms' export development over time.

Finally, the research focuses exclusively on the Sarawak context. Although the findings may offer insights for other peripheral regions, institutional and economic differences require caution when extending these conclusions to Sabah or other regional contexts.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should adopt mixed-method and longitudinal approaches to evaluate the long-term impact of export promotion programmes using indicators such as export growth, market diversification, productivity, and export survival. Broader stakeholder participation, including state agencies, participating and non-participating firms, international buyers, and other export support organisations, would provide a more comprehensive assessment of institutional effectiveness. Comparative studies across Sarawak, Sabah, Peninsular Malaysia, and other decentralised economies would further enhance understanding of how regional context, institutional adaptation, and federal-state coordination influence the effectiveness of economic diplomacy.

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