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Technological knowledge, learning and linkages in the wooden furniture industry in Malaysia: a spatial innovation perspective

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This paper examines technological knowledge, learning, and linkages in the wooden furniture industry in the Muar cluster of Malaysia in terms of a spatial innovation perspective. The furniture manufacturers form a close partnership with their immediate business environment (the suppliers, customers, retailers and support industries) to enhance the process of interactive learning. The mutual exchange and shared learning process in the cluster are best described as socially constructed and socially embedded processes that are highly associated with the element of trust within the cluster; in addition, tacit knowledge tends to become embedded in the local milieu. The relationship among the community and the furniture industry players is also close. There is a strong social capital and mutual understanding among competitors to see one another as partners, especially in advancing their knowledge in the international markets. The achievement of the Muar furniture cluster is built upon the collective efforts of the entire Muar furniture industry. Firms are always ready to share business opportunities and information. However, the cluster still lacks the design and technological capabilities to move to the original design manufacturing and original brand manufacturing stage.

Keywords: innovation systems; social capital; trust; low-tech industry; furniture cluster

1. Introduction

Technological innovation is a highly socio-economic-technical hybrid that evolves through time and space. As such, innovation success no longer depends on individual investors but on systematic laboratory research, availability of an educated workforce, and a knowledge management system that are together able to integrate technology and markets in a complex, dynamic and interactive combination (Kline and Rosenberg 1986; Mowery 1995). Knowledge in this context is the heart of innovation (Lundvall 1992; Nelson 1993; Asheim and Coenen 2005) that plays a crucial role to establish and sustain the long-term capabilities and performance of firms and organizations (Howells 2002). For Feldman (1994), innovation (perhaps even more than other economic activity) depends on knowledge. As a whole, research that emphasizes the spatial innovation perspective recognizes the importance of the interaction between actors that manifest from different configurations in space that play an important role in technological learning, such as proximity, regional differences, social capital and trust.

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