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**South American Export Promotion Agencies'  
lived challenges and experience  
in COVID-19 times**

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## **Abstract**

COVID-19 swept across the world swiftly, disrupting society and businesses globally. Most particularly, relational, mobility and operational containment restrictions also crucially effected international trade and export activity, especially that of SMEs. Worldwide, countries scrambled to urgently draw up policies, together with relief measures and emergency support – in an attempt to help businesses survive. This qualitative paper comparatively explores EPAs' lived experience, sense-making and response strategies in turbulent COVID-19 times. Focussed on the South American region, we extensively interview three different countries' EPA managers (Chile, Ecuador and Peru). Studying the realities and perspectives of different EPAs across diverse countries and contexts, while nonetheless still facing similar disruptive pandemic challenges, we seek to better understand the realities faced and shed light on any commonalities and ensuing best practice in pragmatically overcoming challenges, aligned with addressing enterprises' suddenly troubling and highly volatile critical realities. Besides anticipated scenarios and challenges, our findings observed various context-specific complexities compounding the pandemic's impact. One key aspect among many that emerge from our research is the resolute enterprising nature of the EPAs, and how in the face of adversity and much reduced resources, they steadfastly and creatively found resource-light approaches and pragmatic solutions to surmount challenges and effectively serve their mission.

**Keywords:** Export Promotion Agencies (EPAs); COVID-19 pandemic; exports; South-America; narrative approach, SMEs

# **South American Export Promotion Agencies’ lived challenges and experience in COVID-19 times**

## **1 Introduction**

Conceived at the dawn of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe swiftly, rapidly stalling economies – global trade registering a sudden 32% drop (WTO, 2020). This hard step on the brakes of global trade presents the context of our article, focussing on the EPAs’ realities in supporting exporting SMEs. In South America’s case, economic structural features render the region more “*vulnerable to this unprecedented shock*” than others (IMF 2020b). To help firms persevere and survive through this unimaginable crisis, governments worldwide scrambled to put together trade policy initiatives and assistance, often channelled through Export Promotion Agencies (EPAs) – established tools for effectively motivating firms’ export activity (Monreal-Pérez and Geldres-Weiss, 2019). Although evidence suggests COVID-19 is gradually emerging as a topic of interest in international business research (Verma and Gustafsson, 2020; Eggers, 2020), not much research has been conducted specifically on EPAs, and export promotion and support initiatives in COVID-19 times.

Furthermore, research addressing the South American region in relation to EPAs more generally is especially scarce. This area is especially relevant given its active involvement in international business, particularly through participation in global value chains, especially through agri-food exports, mining and raw materials (OECD, 2016; Vendrell-Herrero, 2017). Indeed, only around 15% of the last decade’s total were high technology exports (Castro-Gonzales et al. 2016). In this regard, one importantly notes South American countries are very sensitive to global trade, especially with China, where almost one third of exports are destined (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean – ECLAC, 2020a).

This research explores the lived challenges and realities of EPAs in COVID-19 times – their perspective, as they faced up to the crisis. Our research seeks direct insights and understanding on: 1) EPAs’ perspective on the pandemic’s impact

on exporting SMEs; 2) the pandemic impact on EPAs, their operations and response strategies; and 3) EPAs' perception and expectations post-COVID. The research focuses on three neighbouring South American countries: Chile, Peru and Ecuador.

This study is also particularly relevant for the following reasons: on a theoretical basis, suggested response measures might be taken for granted as being clear (e.g. cooperation, e-commerce, transparency, information, market diversification; Petrunenko and Podtserkovnyi, 2020; Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020, OECD, 2020b, ECLAC, 2020), but, what are the experienced realities at the EPAs' end, and are these measures effectively implemented in practice in the case of South America?

Our paper proceeds as follows: Our introduction established the value and rationale for our study, and articulated our research objectives. We continue with a concise overview of contributing literature and theory informing our study. Our methodology and approach is explained next. Then follows our detailed findings in the form of consolidated narratives drawn from extensive in-depth interviews. Our results are consolidated and discussed next. Finally, we present our conclusions highlighting novel insights and contributions, while also noting any potential limitations and areas for further research.

## **2 Supporting literature**

COVID-19 has driven companies around the world to be resilient and to adapt their ways of operating (Ivanov, 2020), leading to dramatic changes in how businesses act and consumers behave (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Kang et al 2020). Thus, to mitigate the effects of this crisis, new strategies are required (Verma and Gustafsson, 2020; Wang et al 2020; Petrunenko and Podtserkovnyi, 2020).

While Verma and Gustafsson (2020) and Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) observe COVID-19 gradually emerging as a frequent topic in business discourse, and despite acknowledging that the COVID-19 crisis requires urgent policy responses from governments to support individuals and businesses alike, no studies in the

business domain have addressed COVID-19 impact of on export promotion, and specifically on EPAs. More generally, this also seems to have been the case in previous crises: Eggers (2020) found only 8.7% of previous crises studies covered this institutional context.

SMEs universally acknowledged as the motor of their country's economy, and entrepreneurship recognised as a catalyst for growth and national development (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017) – sustaining such business activity becomes acutely more critical in crises of this magnitude (OECD). In this sense, it is established that government export assistance can help firms overcome international entrepreneurship hurdles towards achieving superior internationalisation (Geldres et al. 2016). Thus, export promotion programs (EPPs) can facilitate the firm's entrepreneurial initiatives in exporting, by providing 'external resources' (and capabilities) essential in overcoming various obstacles found at different stages of the export development process (Leonidou et al. 2015; Geldres-Weiss and Monreal-Pérez, 2017). For example tacit knowledge and advisory services providing SMEs insights, are likely more valuable in times of crisis and uncertainty. Furthermore, given the pandemic's disruption of supply chains, small businesses must be agile and open to market diversification (ITC, 2020). Indeed, overnight, COVID-19 highlighted just how vulnerable international production networks are to unforeseen catastrophic phenomena (ECLAC, 2020). This implies diversifying networks of suppliers across countries and companies, and relocating critical processes. Finally, researchers observe government assistance institutions should promote adoption of digital platforms to facilitate firms' operations and enhance competitiveness in such times (ITC, 2020; De, 2020; Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020).

In international contexts with amplified business risks, SMEs generally suffer more than their larger counterparts due to lacking capabilities (Fernández and Nieto, 2005). For this reason both local and national governments are increasingly concerned with lacking risk management capability among SMEs – and consequently often are attempting provision for risk management training and capability building (Gao et al. 2011). EPPs are a source of intellectual or experiential resources and specialized knowledge about export markets and associated risks (Geldres-Weiss et al 2016). In this sense, EPPs raise firms' risk

exposure and management awareness, providing advice and information on risk potential in targeted markets. Catanzaro and Teyssier (2020) observe a correlation between EPP participation and SME performance in risky international contexts.

To our knowledge, during the COVID-19 pandemic only the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) explored the South American scenario in 2020, proposing specific measures directed to improve trade in the South-American region.

According to this report, the drop in global economic activity, particularly in the United States, China and Europe, is hurting trade in South America, especially for commodities since key production sectors in the region's countries form part of global value chains linked to the United States and China (ECLAC, 2020a). Such impact is evident in ECLAC's (2020a) predictions forecasting trade in the South American region dropping 17.6% for 2020. This big negative impact partly derives from these countries' specialization in commodity exports, rendering them more vulnerable to market price declines. On the current pandemic situation, the report indicates South America's most exposed countries as Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru – the region's largest exporters of such products to China. Overall, deterioration in global financial conditions is as bad as in the 2008–2009 global financial crisis – some indicators worse still.

Further complicating the contextual scenario ensuing from the abovementioned disruption of supply chains and falls in global growth, are lower profitability and greater difficulty servicing debt (ECLAC, 2020a). Falling commodity prices in this sub-region exacerbated matters. Aligned with the ECLAC report, Petrunenko and Podtserkovnyi (2020) note the high dependency on natural resources and raw material exports of South American countries – sees them forced to sell at unfavourable prices in times of crisis – incurring huge losses. Characterised by high levels of informal labour, combined with low ability to work from home, SMEs suffered disproportionate disruption in this context (IMF, 2020c). In consolidation, regional characteristics *“turned the health crisis into the worst economic, social and production crisis the region has experienced in 120 years”* (ECLAC, 2020b: 5).

### **3 Methodology**

This study investigates the impact ensuing from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak on South American EPAs – adopting the perspective of the EPA.

Participant EPAs were purposively selected aligned with the funded Chilean project this research forms part of. Given regional focus, perspectives from the EPAs of Chile and its' neighbouring countries along the continent's west coast, Peru and Ecuador were sought: ProChile, PromPeru and Pro Ecuador – all three, public government-funded national EPAs.

Aligned with our objectives, we specifically seek first-hand insights into the EPAs' lived experience – their operational challenges endured and sense-making, and their strategic responses to the pandemic crisis in their context. Within their realities, we furthermore seek insights into their perceptions looking ahead, and post-pandemic expectations. We investigate the EPAs in these circumstances 'on their own terms' (Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991; Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004). Addressing our research questions, we employ an exploratory qualitative methodology in investigating this major phenomenon, seeking deep understanding of direct experiences in context of the EPAs' complex realities (Wright, 1996). Such approaches seek to understand phenomena 'from the inside' by analysing experiences of individuals or groups (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). A flexible exploratory stance is appropriate in seeking understanding on the dynamics surrounding this novel event (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010).

Our ontological stance draws from subtle realism – influenced by idealism and open to interpretivist perspectives. We acknowledge an external reality may exist independently of individuals' subjective understanding, however, given the nature of our study, this is only accessible through the respondents' own lived experience. Aligned with our research objectives, this approach emphasises critical importance in our participants' own interpretations of the issues we explore, and accepts their varied vantage points yield different valuable insights. Thus any external observable reality of the pandemic's impact is itself diverse and multifaceted, as EPAs, economies, and indeed humanity the world over,

idiosyncratically experienced and continue to endure the effects of this crisis in varying ways – depending on their unique circumstance and context.

Direct from the horses’ mouth, perspective diversity and intimacy adds richness to our understanding of various ways in which aspects of this calamitous reality have been experienced. Aiming to convey as full a picture as possible of the nature and extent their multifaceted lived reality (Ritchie, 2003). Useful insights from ‘ground zero’ augur further value in informing regional policy, as well as best practice addressing operational and strategic needs.

As our investigation explores this outbreak impact and crisis phenomenon as lived by the EPAs, we engage a narrative approach. This directs inquiry at narratives of human experience – enabling rich insights and understanding primarily from interview data. Analysis entails thick descriptive narratives and vignettes, explaining situations in their context (Moen, 2006; Cresswell, 1998).

Five elite participants, professionals and directors within their respective EPAs, were engaged in extensive in-depth interviews (Table 1). Elite informants are key decision makers having extensive and exclusive information, and the ability to influence important firm outcomes, either alone or jointly with others (e.g., on a board of directors) (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). This is appropriate for our study, given their managerial insights and responsibilities, decision-making capacity and organisational involvement at both strategic and operational levels (Harvey, 2011). Furthermore, given their status and representation, vivid personal accounts and experience tend to transcend that of their organisations.

Table 1 – List of elite participants and respective roles

EPA	Participant	Role
ProChile	CL1	Director / Head
	CL2	Trade Advisor*
PromPeru	PE1	Director / Head
	PE2	Director / Head
Pro Ecuador	EC1	Director / Head

\* One of the Authors, is also engaged at the Chilean EPA, and offered insights on aspects researched.



All in-depth interviews were undertaken between November 2020 and January 2021, each with an average duration of 90 minutes. Given pandemic physical distancing requirements, interviews were conducted visually yet remotely via the Zoom platform (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Conducted in English, interview audio and video were recorded, capturing the richness of participants' accounts. Verbatim transcripts were drawn up.

Interviews started with general inquiring open questions associated with broad themes of the study, setting the scene – inviting participants to share detailed accounts of their experienced realities. Following that, we directed the conversation asking further probing questions gaining deeper contextual understanding of 'whys' and 'hows' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Buckley and Chapman, 1996), also enabling an extent of cross comparisons across the EPAs.

In the latter 'guided' component, we asked key questions on the basis of a loose structure consisting of a few open-ended questions defining the area under study and from which the participant may agree or diverge in order to pursue an idea or emerging theme in more detail (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003). Guided, it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). In this way, we sought to understand themes of the lived world from the subjects' own perspectives. Moreover, with this approach, the researcher registers and interprets the meanings of what is said, as well as how it is said; and through observation, also be able to interpret vocalization and facial expressions (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018) – adding further meaning and emphases to particularly critical episodes.

Data from transcripts, video and any documentation provided by the interviewees were initially reviewed, analysed and imported into NVivo (qualitative data analysis software). Aligned with the aforementioned method of inquiry, the transcripts were coded using directed content analysis. Directed content analysis is appropriate when "existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1281). This technique – using open, followed by directed questions probing participants' experiences – is particularly useful in "qualitative interviewing methods based on story telling [which are] are powerful in eliciting narrations that

are structured according to interviewees' relevance systems" (Scheibelofer, 2008: 403).

A strategy used in directed content analysis is to begin coding the predetermined broad codes – in our case associated with our core research questions. "Data that cannot be coded [initially] are identified and analyzed later to determine if they represent a new category or a subcategory of an existing code" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1282; see also Scheibelhofer, 2008).

Following analysis, our findings are presented in consolidated narratives. Bringing together several individual interviews, telling a single holistic story (Willis, 2019) – the story of COVID-19's impact experienced by these three South American national EPAs. It allows us to consolidate findings and "present complex, situated accounts from individuals, rather than breaking data down". Given the exploratory nature of our study, it also contributes "to 'future-forming' research, by presenting findings in ways that are useful and accessible to those outside academia." (Willis, 2019: 471). We safeguard against any potential limitation from this approach by building the narrative directly from original data, conveying findings accurately through verbatim quotes and vignettes, while also maintaining provenance through direct reference to respective participants (Willis, 2019). This way, "narratives allow research to be presented in a way which acknowledges the complexities of individual motivations and outlooks, whilst drawing out more generalized learning and understanding" (Willis, 2019: 476). This enables us to effectively present areas of convergence as well as differences and unique responses in the EPAs' experiences, in a meaningful way. Furthermore, to ensure accurate portrayal of events and participant voices towards maintaining validity and trustworthiness, member checking was used – both informally throughout participants exchanges, as well as formally in later stages (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Stake, 1995).

In consolidation, the detailed information gathered and rich descriptive findings also gain useful insights on various important operational aspects through the crisis. Among these, for example, understanding what approaches were more effective, and which weren't, in their respective contexts – as the EPAs sought to face up to the crisis, while assisting SMEs in promoting their exports. This aligns

with our intent in carrying out research providing useful insights helping inform policy or best practice for enterprises and practitioners, from detailed experiences endured and challenges surmounted (Ritchie, 2003).

## **4 Findings**

Following, we present our findings. Direct EPA perspectives and lived experiences on the effect the global COVID-19 pandemic outbreak had on their respective realities.

We structure and present our findings in line with our stated research objectives – seeking understanding on: EPA perspectives of the pandemic’s general impact on indigenous exporting SMEs; The pandemic’s impact on the EPAs, their operations, and response strategies; and looking ahead, EPA perceptions and expectations post-COVID-19 and beyond.

### **4.1 EPA perspectives on pandemic impact on exporting SMEs**

Noting the pandemic’s impact on global market dynamics and production operations, the additional complexity and severity it presented their SMEs was extensively emphasised across all EPA perspectives as being a critically disruptive (CL1, CL2, PE1, PE2, EC1):

*“[very] negative, and especially for SMEs here in Chile. Because they ... well, generally speaking, but especially in Chile, they face a lot of asymmetries [resource limitations] – so that’s why our focus has been, during the last years, on supporting SME exporters” (CL1)*

*“A very complicated situation – especially for exporters”.* Many stopping export activity to normally lucrative foreign markets such as China. Citing industry union figures, around 150,000 companies stopped working in some way or another due to complications arising from the pandemic (CL1).

Similarly, in Peru, SMEs struggled more, for example:

*“... the large companies were the first to implement all the protocols ... for the workers, in terms of our labour legislation ... the very first to get the COVID test, allowing people to go back to work. And the small and medium*

*companies – were not that fast in the adoption of all these risk assessments. And this was also a very hard situation for them – to start again. To start [operating] again with new restrictions ... our lockdowns [recently] relaxed, but we also still have some ... hours that people are allowed to go to work. Transport [restrictions] etcetera ...”* (PE2; also CL1)

The Ecuadorian perspective likewise highlighted liabilities of smallness compounding devastating pandemic impact: for SMEs it *“was very complex. Because at that moment, definitely the small and medium enterprises – definitely didn’t have much opportunities.”* (EC1).

*“First shock was terrible”* (EC1), besides impacting markets and operations, it also presented SMEs shifting trade regulations and documentation. For example Ecuador exports stalled as international agencies sought to adjust to countries’ diverse new hygiene and sanitary certifications. Not yet universally established, this *“first big obstacle”* saw exports refused foreign market entry for days. Only persistent diplomacy and sustained effort surmounted this early impasse – migrating new documentation to digital formats, signatures and platforms (EC1).

An evident contextual perspective shared upfront across EPAs, was nuanced political and socio-economic dynamics: *“for us the pandemic was actually the ‘second’ big wave of pressure on our exporters”* (EC1). Associated implications on market perception directly inferred:

*“Things were not very positive towards trade from our countries because of the political circumstances we faced in our countries [...] Latin America. [...] We had very difficult political struggles in Peru, in Chile, in Columbia, and of course Ecuador [...] big, big strikes effected definitely.”* (EC1)

Compounding restricted mobility, unrest further effected export operations:

*“Can you hear some sounds from the streets? [Car horns and live protest sounds audible over Zoom]. At this moment we are facing a [protest sounds interrupt conversation] ... I mention this because at this moment we are facing some strikes in some ports. In this region there are 6 ports, and 3 of them are at this moment with strikes. [...] So this is a specific situation that is related with the [COVID] context ... [the industry association says] at least*

*150,000 firms have closed ... unemployment is rising. For specifically SMEs, it's a very complicated situation - especially for exporters. ... companies get in this situation [...] some of them have stopped to export - to send their containers". (CL1)*

Such disruption, beyond periodic lockdowns, is particularly noteworthy from a regional context perspective. Especially since international demand for food products generally increased during the pandemic – and typically labour-intensive agri-business is a key export sector for the three countries (EC1). Where market demand exists, restricted mobility combined with port disruptions present exporting SMEs additional operational and logistical challenges (CL1).

Querying whether SMEs' ceased operations resulted from receding markets and drying up demand – the reply offered broader reasons:

*"That is one of the reasons. But there are other factors too", in some sectors and regions "productivity dropped ... also because there are some problems for people to work in some places. Some social problems ... there have been some violent situations." (CL1)*

Public domain media reports attest to unrest in the region coinciding before and after the pandemic outbreak. Objective scientific insight further concurs participants' observations: though reaching the region later than other continents, *"COVID-19 in Latin America ... began as a health crises but is now a humanitarian crisis"* (The Lancet Journal, 2020: 1463). Acute health concerns inextricably linked to ensuing economic hardship and uncertain employment, combined with national elections imminently due in all three countries – further amplifies uncertainty for businesses (or indeed EPAs) striving to look ahead beyond immediate survival.

Reinforcing uncertainty's impact as the crisis unfolded, participants highlighted SMEs' need for information being particularly important: *"first it's the information asymmetry"* – related to markets, lockdowns, regulations and all matters related to conducting business in a world gripped by pandemic chaos. (C1)

Notwithstanding SMEs' questioned survival and precarious realities (CL1, PE1, PE2, EC1) – larger exporting companies generally also suffered devastating

impact (CL1, EC1). An example cited was Chile's badly hit forestry sector, representing 70% of total exports in their Southern Macro Region – China being their *“most important market”* (CL1).

This also highlighted longstanding regional dependence on narrowly defined large-scale *“traditional exports”* in normally price-sensitive commodity and natural raw material sectors, including industrialised agri-business (CL1, PE1, PE2, EC1). Affecting balance of trade, concertation in such export activity was cited as restricting, *“in the global context, there are very few countries. Those with open borders, for our products”*. (EC1)

Similarly, the regional economies' structure and nature of key industries were also underlined as further accentuating enterprises' pandemic impact. Logistics and infrastructure strained by the crisis and health concerns also played a part. PE2 conveys:

*“... forced to lockdown from one day to another. So that impacts a lot, especially in the agri-business and seafood sectors - [especially smaller] companies. [...] as a developing country, our industries are very labour intensive. So, workers cannot go to the farms, to the factories to work. [...] And logistics were highly impacted also. [...] large distances to cover, difficult geography ... and it's kind of difficult to reach the production areas. So facing the lockdown ... with more strict measures of transit [restrictions], of services, of transport, that impacted ... our industries.”* (PE2)

While all EPA perspectives ascertained the devastating impact of COVID-19 on businesses – doom was not meted out equally across industries.

The Chilean perspective noted SMEs already using e-commerce or familiar with online channels were *“less negatively impacted”* (CL1). Meantime, most other SMEs scrambled to migrate to digital platforms seeking to restore functionality.

*“[first] forced to implement some digital transformation. ... So the companies have been forced to adapt ... And now they are facing new challenges such as approaching [foreign clients] through new channels, with new buyers, such as e-commerce for instance. But not only, also doing business through different media, leaving behind the traditional ones, like*

*the trade shows or the in-person meetings. Turning to these kinds of [remote, digital] negotiations or meetings, a new method of meeting ...”* (PE1).

Others, initially still under shock, at first simply ‘hibernated’, holding their breath hoping and praying it would all just go away quickly.

Regarding export market demand, CL1 and EC1 observed, unlike hard-hit commodities, sometimes *“in the case of higher value products, when you move up the value-added chain [...] the impact has been less negatively strong”* (CL1).

Notwithstanding dire predicaments, some sectors saw *“winners”* (EC1), notably in agri-business or fisheries – dominant sectors in the three countries – aligned with a crisis growth trend in food consumption, especially demand for health-oriented ‘superfoods’ (PE1, CL1, EC1). Several SMEs exporting these products experienced growth – *“getting benefits from the pandemic!”* (EC1). This complemented the EPAs’ ongoing strategy branding and promoting their countries’ ‘superfoods’.

The Chilean perspective cited 47% *blueberry* export growth among others, due to pandemic-enhanced demand (CL1). PE1 noted their *agricultural* sector was the only one registering export growth in Peru: 7.2%, surprisingly higher than the previous year’s (PE data). The Ecuadorian EPA observed growth for SMEs exporting *banana, shrimp, coco, coffee* and *frozen broccoli* (EC1). Stressing export growth notwithstanding comparatively higher imposed import tariffs at circa 30%, and only sparse free trade agreements, unlike its established trading neighbours – EC1 illustrated the case of an SME making bread from cassava:

*“[T]hey used to export very little, probably once every 3 months 100 kilos [...] Now they are exporting three containers, every month.”*

EC1 mentioned another perceived crisis trend: consumers shunning premium *“famous”* global brands, for functional, quality, healthy food alternatives – noting *“this is the opportunity our smaller exporters were handed – and they took it”*. SMEs innovated developing new products: higher added-value *“healthy snacks”*, *“quinoa spaghetti”* and *“powdered broccoli”* exported to European and niche markets as far as Japan, Korea and Indonesia (EC1).

EPAs also noted countries running campaigns urging consumers to support domestic businesses and ‘buy local’ – detrimental to their exports (CL2, PE2).

In consolidation, market and operational problems, uncertainty and inability to plan ahead – in order to mitigate the pandemic’s impact, especially with respect to time-frames in relation to resource availability – were perceived key SMEs debilitating factors across all EPA perspectives.

#### **4.2 Pandemic impact on EPAs: Operational changes and response strategies**

The outbreak impact on the EPAs was profound, intense and “*a shock*” (EC1). Initially confusion and “*panic*” reigned as they sought to respond and overcome extreme dramatic realities materialising ‘overnight’ (CL2, and PE1, EC1). Global uncertainty like fog restricted visibility: policies and lockdowns shifting continuously in tandem with surging contagion, death tolls and evolving scientific opinion. (CL1, PE1, PE2, EC1)

Like everyone around the world – “*We were in total uncertainty ... nobody knew what was going to happen*” (PE1; and PE2, CL1, CL2, EC). Seeking focus and purpose the EPAs were compelled to ask the most fundamental of questions – reflecting the crisis’ suddenness and magnitude:

*“the challenges that we lived, and I saw in the first few months: ‘it’s what are we going to do now?’ What are we going to do with this big structure? We are 57 offices around the globe, and in Chile we have 16 ... so what are we going to do?”* (CL2)

Searching for answers, they started collaborating intensely, using all means and channels, formally and informally – seeking to understand, learn, and make sense of the chaos – to gradually re-establish purpose, a sense of direction and start evolving plans to deliver on their mission:

*“And in asking this question, we started working with everyone - you know - we are going to do this workshop, we are going to do this panel, we are going to do forums ... and in this panic situation, we started to do everything ... and we can [start to] see the focus good*



*... you can see what is going to be our goal. So I think in the first place was, [the challenge to] organise this, because we have to focus ... and then, [figure out] what we are going to do with the other priorities.”*  
(CL2)

Amid lockdowns and enforced physical distancing, the EPAs' first priority was to urgently restore an extent of (remote) work capability; scrambling to re-organise operations to resume functionality, *“and in parallel, ... what can we do to help the companies?”* (PE1; and CL1, CL2, PE2, EC1).

Although to different extents, digitalisation had been a future contemplation, and pre-pandemic they enjoyed typically good office ICT infrastructure<sup>1</sup> – like many across the world, the EPAs were unprepared for what hit them (CL1, CL2, PE1, PE2, EC1). Urgent investments and migration to digital platforms and VPN<sup>2</sup> secure servers for work, communication and service provision were top priority – draining, *“it has been very time consuming doing this remote thing”* (PE1), *“it wasn't easy, but it was the only way to continue supporting firms”* (CL1). Respective governments and ministries supported as best they could facilitating this rushed transition (CL1, PE1, EC1).

EPA staff needed to go back to basics, learning new technologies required to do everything: *“how to approach the clients, how to conduct the meetings itself”* (PE1). An immediate important challenge was plugging crucial skills gaps including soft-skills for delivering professional services in new ways – *“capacity building”* (CL1). Besides steep learning curves and demanding new processes, employees faced personal stress, working very long hours from home amid family distractions. PE1 vividly illustrates the EPAs' lived experience:

*“At home [...] having the families, and the children having to have their own computer, and having to make your own office at home. Having the little kids doing their work at home, and everybody at home [...] a big challenge. [...] Some days, we started with meetings in Korea at 7 am, and ended with a conversation with China at 8 pm. ... So it was a 12 hour day of work. And*

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<sup>1</sup> Especially in ProChile's case, it was noted that considerable investments in digital technology and infrastructure already existed pre-pandemic – yet as was universally the case, it was insufficient for the ensuing crisis.

<sup>2</sup> Virtual Private Network

*if you sum up this with the proper stress of being at home all day, and the pandemic itself. It was a big challenge.”*

Noting they were comparatively technologically better equipped than many other organisations and businesses (EC1, CL1, PE1, PE2), and notwithstanding significant additional advances made, digitalisation remains an important operational concern ten months in: *“it is still a challenge, an important challenge”* (PE1; and CL1). In this remote-first ‘new normal’, *“gaps”* persist and *“digitalisation of all the processes [services]”* is yet to be realised for all EPAs (CL1, EC1). Now fully dependent, sometimes technology fails too (PE1).

Immediately some operational functionality was restored, upon catching their breath, EPAs’ attention instantly refocussed on *“how to keep trade running”* (CL1). ProChile started providing SMEs regular updated information on what was evolving in the international sphere. All EPAs’ first responses entailed rudimentary fact-finding by directly calling exporters as well as foreign importers to make sense of *“what was going on out there”* (CL1; and PE1, CE1). Directly asking, *“hey, what do you need? What market do you have? What info do you need? What’s your needs regarding joint ventures, infrastructure?”* (PE2). Pro Ecuador started using social media platforms extensively, Instagram, Facebook to *“reach new customers”* (EC1).

The Ecuadorian EPA experienced an additional prolonged trauma when the pandemic exploded. SMEs’ products stopped at market borders – newly digitalised alternative hygiene and sanitation certificates were not recognised by foreign countries’ validation agencies. Pro Ecuador took on the gruelling complex *“commercial diplomacy”* role, working 24/7 for days, liaising with international embassies, ministries and health authorities globally, sometimes outside formal channels, to surmount this impasse – for exports to flow again. Tact, persistence, trust-based relationships and goodwill were providential. Such ‘diplomacy’ still constitutes circa 80% of the EPA’s tasks as the crisis wears on (EC1).

Also heavily impacted were EPAs’ resources. Mirroring stalled economies, they suffered significant financial budget cuts at short notice; and in Ecuador’s case, substantial employee layoffs (EC1, CL1, PE1). Resource reductions when most

needed necessitated further adjustments in critical times. CL1 consolidates the circumstances:

*“... but we have to deal also with the impact about the budget. [...] the budget destined for the promotion agency, was a big cut for us. So we have to adapt our strategy. What are we going to do with this less budget?”*

Pro Ecuador had to restructure, emerging a leaner more effective EPA with recalibrated strategies. Fragmented duplication at all foreign offices was replaced with regional centres of specialisation serving all their Latin American offices. Additionally a ‘business intelligence’ unit was established, with statisticians collecting and preparing *“Wow ... amazing data”* to inform strategies helping exporters – already generating results (CE1).

Amid all this, something strongly evident from all participants, was the immense sense of commitment and professionalism, honour as well as pride, in tirelessly striving to help their country and assist their businesses through the crisis (CL1, CL2, PE1, PE2, CE1). Even grateful to have a job, and the opportunity to work hard for this purpose.

Facing a global crisis inflicting universal problems, all EPAs stressed huge value realised in extensively leveraging their networks, collaborating with (normally *“competitor”*) EPAs. *“Immediately we started cooperating”* (EC1; and CL2, PE1), seeking to share and help each other through the crisis. A pervasive genuine will to help – in times of crisis, far more effective than any *“fancy and politically correct”* formal speeches and agreements (EC1). This informal *“win-win”* collaboration, trusting goodwill, was deemed to be very strategically important (CL1; CL2, PE2, EC1) – *“outstanding”* for dealing with the crisis. *“A [simple] phone call and a relationship was more important than signing a memorandum of understanding!”* (EC1).

Meantime, SME demand for EPA services varied. CL1 noted take up for certain instruments *“dropped significantly”*; funding public contest applications for agri-business and other sectors dropped 50%:

*“I would say one of the reasons is that most SMEs targeted [...] are worried at this moment about keeping alive – [to] keep selling the products internally [in the absence of exports].” (CL1)*

On the other hand, PE2 observed an *“increase in exporters ... joining virtual meetings ... they just contact us ... everybody wants to participate with us right now – but they are already exporters [as opposed to first-time exporters]”*.

EPAs also observed some SMEs initially reluctant to learn and participate in virtual activities. Culturally also preferring personal interaction, they supposed they'd try to wait for the pandemic *“to pass”*, in order to travel and join the usual physical trade missions later – however by September 2020 they realised the crisis had no end in sight, and started exploring alternative possibilities (CL1).

Using digital platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, the EPAs also sought to pass on important 'new normal' insights and skills to SMEs. EC1 sums it up:

*“aggressively initiated training programmes in every single field - from packaging, labelling ... even psychological aspects of negotiations ... export processes.”*

The EPAs stated no specific new pandemic-response instruments were created: *“same services in a different way”*, existing offerings were, *“aggressively improved”* (CE1, CL1) in format, delivery, access and communication channels – *“focussed on how to cope with the pandemic - having to try to find new opportunities between these, this whole chaos”* (PE1).

However, one observes the EPAs indirectly did offer several new complementary facilitating services that were essential for SMEs in learning and making sense of the crisis – for mitigating challenges, adjusting, surviving, and in some cases exploiting unexpected export opportunities.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and evidently the EPAs were enterprising in different ways – innovating and improvising, creating value through effective frugal solutions.

For example, ProChile, innovatively leveraged its extensive foreign networks to start bringing together businesses from both sides – seeking complementarity,

prospecting SME strategic alliances for mutual gain, facing up to the pandemic (CL1).

PromPeru, assisted small exporting SMEs by collecting their product samples and dispatching them to prospective foreign importers – that they may see, touch and taste before bringing both together for virtual meetings – promoting new market development (PE2).

Attending very large virtual trade fairs and congresses, Pro Ecuador investigated further. It transpired they were not so effective, besides being “*very expensive*”. EC1 explained the experience of physical interaction attending trade expos simply cannot be transposed to digital platforms. Prospects for serendipitous encounters or trust building are compromised. Instead they more successfully organise targeted virtual meetings between parties sharing mutual interests – “*basically what the buyers need is a Zoom conference, they don’t visit the virtual set, the virtual platform, virtual congress! [...] A 45 minute meeting. And that’s it.*” (EC1)

Beyond obligatory operational adjustments, the EPAs’ pandemic response strategies emerged in vivo as the crisis evolved – in line with their learning and sense-making. Although the pandemic presented universal problems, and commonalities were apparent – each EPA’s disruptions and idiosyncratic realities were closely linked to national circumstances. The following consolidates the EPAs’ own account of their *key emergent response strategies deployed*, from among various ongoing initiatives.

For example, CL1 noted additional urgency:

*“there are different impacts COVID has had. We are adjusting our strategy. We need to move forward, but fast at this moment. You know, the government term in Chile is only four years, it is quite short - at this moment 471 days left - So that’s one fact that’s important to mention”.*

Crisis and political expectations come together heightening the need to deliver – now with less financial, and at times human, resources.

CL1 explained emergent strategies incorporated a redefined mission to extend work with existing exporters to enter different markets, leveraging their network of 56 foreign offices. International collaboration intensified, new “*different types of meetings*” seek to bring together “*different initiatives*” between trans-national SMEs exploring potential for mutually advantageous strategic alliances in facing up to the pandemic (CL1). Organisation-wide training initiatives enhancing human capital and collaboration with universities and centres of excellence were also stepped-up. Besides proactively augmenting relevant services for their SME clients.

PE1 and PE2 explained their strategy is underpinned by seeking direct links with as many of its SME clients as possible – to have a pulse on their realities. They further increased training and skilling for SMEs, started extensive promotion of e-commerce offerings, and initiated small focussed trade promotion meetings. Assisting small rural SMEs, they collect and dispatch physical samples to importers, improving success rates and prepping for Zoom meetings. They too are exploring and encouraging strategic alliances between SMEs to better face the pandemic. A new strategic direction is targeting and promoting B2C business models, given consumer awareness and pervasive online shopping. They have furthermore engaged outside consultants to start making sense of a strategy overhaul for 2021.

EC1 noted their strategy ensued in parallel with a forced need to restructure due to severely reduced budgets and employee redundancies – now leaner and more capable, however still ruing lesser finances. Strategic decisions, now based on data via their Business Intelligence unit, maximise effectiveness and projections. Their new strategy involves international collaboration as well as tight coordination with national ministries and agencies to ensure one direction and concerted effort. They maintain “*commercial diplomacy*” – and their top objective is to promote and protect the national brand: Ecuador. All crucial in addressing potentially more severe consequences and reputational issues at different points during the crisis. They aggressively initiated training programmes for SMEs including soft skills and embarked on extensive social media use. Realising greater efficacy – they focus more on their smaller targeted virtual trade missions between hand-selected interested parties.

### 4.3 Quo Vadis? EPAs' expectations looking ahead post-COVID

Although promised COVID-19 vaccines are due for rollout, global pandemic cases and death rates surge again to new record levels – reinstating stricter lockdowns the world over, boarder closures and restrictions once more. The pandemic persists.

The allure of 'normality' now seems likely at some point, yet the EPAs remain cautious amid major pandemic disruption, knowing much uncertainty remains, and furthermore new behaviours and trends likely persist in tomorrow's 'new normal'.

That, said, although the EPAs; now with ten months' pandemic experience behind them, and habituated to putting out fires in disruptive realities; were mostly already engaged on evolving their pandemic response strategies. Naturally, aspects from these crisis measures transcend, also shedding light on their perceptions on the future – since by its nature, strategy requires looking ahead.

The respective EPA participants' perceptions and expectations post-COVID, follow:

Looking ahead, CL1 noted Chile's economic projections:

*"[we] will be near to the situation prior to the pandemic as soon as 2024 – not before". It was stressed "the recovery will take a long time. A long time before exports are back to normal ... And for bigger companies, its maybe not a big deal, if you can say that, but for SMEs it's quite critical."* (CL1)

CL1 intimated the EPA now sees increased value in identifying and establishing clearer insights on 'potential exporters' – close-to-export-ready SMEs in specific sectors, who with additional assistance have potential to internationalise successfully. This forms the basis of future-looking outreach support strategies. It aligns with their awareness of needing to enhance service "coverage", since "not all exporters come to us", and "gaps" where certain sectors may be underserved exist (CL1). In this regard, a drive already initiated and expected to be intensified post-COVID-19 is greater emphases in promoting exports in

service and creative industries – citing their impact increasing qualified professional employment and socio-economic value.

In combination, CL1 observed indigenous SMEs often need to improve efficiency and productivity to enhance exportability in competitive international markets. Acute for post-pandemic recovery, CL1 anticipates an important role helping SMEs innovate up the value-added ladder in line with changed consumption patterns. Indeed, *“incorporating a lot of innovation”* was awarded the wish-list top-spot.

Sustainability was also mentioned as both a challenge, and important future vision component – in relation to a more connected and aware, ‘smaller’ world. Increasingly informing policy and shaping global markets – changes in consumer behaviour intensified environmental concerns – particularly important for Chilean agri-business exports. CL1 cited damaging negative publicity Chile and one of its main superfood exports endured on international media – indicating that national reputation and green credentials should also be promoted in foreign markets.

Looking ahead, PE1 notes a key need the Peruvian EPA requires for 2021 and beyond, is:

*“to try to have forecasts and any kind of information that can give us some light about what can happen. It will be hard, but this is what everyone is expecting. So we have to do our best to try to get this information for us, and for the companies [we serve] obviously”.*

Clarity helps adapt operations to unfolding realities, facilitating establishment of ensuing strategies (PE1). While reprieve from uncertainty is on everyone’s wish-list, this is understandable since one year’s worth of pandemic experience has been gained, and vaccinations are being rolled out.

Operationally, PE1 anticipates adopting a hybrid workspace – mixing physical and virtual contexts for both employees and export promotion activities. This deemed to:

*“Have benefits not only for work, but also for the environment and for the quality of life for the citizens.”* (PE1)



An extent of remote working from the pandemic era would remain, leveraging investments made, newfound technology familiarity, and changed behavioural patterns.

From a post-pandemic consumer perspective, PE1 also perceives:

*“There will probably be more demand for more sustainable products. People are more aware of the causes of this pandemic, and probably, the most sophisticated markets, like Europe, and maybe the US or Japan – they will probably be more demanding for the organic and sustainable products. But I will say that also here, at a regional level, there will be some kind of changes in the pattern of the consumer. I would think that after all this crisis, some things will have to change!”*

Noting pandemic accelerated trends, PE1 declared they will “*continue with betting for digitalisation*”. A key strategy already mooted includes a marketplace concept entailing “*a mixture of in-person and virtual activities*” promoting Peruvian offerings internationally 24/7. PE2 observed:

*“Everything is virtual now. Everybody is researching and curious, using software networks and the internet in general. So our exposure in the virtual [world] will bring us closer to / approach the consumers – not only with the importers. I believe that is going to change ... our strategy”.*

As part of their future plans, besides intensifying marketing efforts promoting national brands, such as ‘Coffees from Peru’ and other superfoods – they will now look to new investments embarking on strategically targeting connected consumers, using B2C models (PE1, PE2).

Economically, the Ecuadorian perspective anticipates that while some countries might recover in 3 years,

*“in the case of Ecuador I believe at least 4 years is the time we expect to have fully recovered ... 5 years – not less”.*

EC1 mentioned looking ahead post-pandemic also depends on imminent election outcomes due May 2021:

*“that crystal ball would first have to tell us who will be the next president”.* However, it was pointed out that *“Ecuador, regardless of government, depends on exports. So any government will always protect the exporting sector - and we need also investments.”*

In this regard, the EPA’s recent restructuring into a leaner, responsive and data-driven organisation forms an important foundation for their post-pandemic strategy (EC1). Already generating valuable insights, they feel further investments in business and market intelligence will be a future requirement. Near term, from 2021, existing KPIs are to be extended to include client and stakeholder perspectives – enhancing strategic client/market alignment (EC1).

Intent on strengthening national and agency exposure, as well fostering relationships with importers, the EPA is contemplating new regional events, including promotion – such as overseas award ceremonies for *“Best Importer of Wellness Products”*. EC1 infers *“innovating in the way we approach buyers”* will be an important requirement for the future.

At industry level, EC1 perceives post-pandemic ‘future-of-work’ trends will see workplaces and office around the world transformed and redecorated, as *“people will prefer the hybrid modality of working, and people will prefer open spaces”*. Pro Ecuador is already gearing up to provide training and support for furniture and related SMEs that they may recognise and exploit any post-pandemic opportunities – should they materialise. Though seeking new opportunities is central, EC1 however stressed it would always be critical for their strategy to *“maintain the current exports – that’s very important”*.

Post-pandemic, the EPA intends to further experimentation with industry 4.0 and technology applications to facilitate exports. An existing blockchain pilot project logging major shrimp exports supply-chains will be extended. This is where they believe the future is headed. EC1 noted secure, internationally recognised technologies ensure efficiency, continuity and validity – safeguarding against bureaucracy or disruption. Facilitating and enabling Ecuadorian SMEs to catch-up in adopting e-commerce and digitalisation is seen as a required strategic thrust for the coming years.

In consolidation, protecting brand Ecuador, international collaboration for mutual gain and knowledge transfer, as well as training – at EPA and SME levels – will all play a central role for the EPA post-pandemic. They believe these will enable them to “*maximise the opportunities for the exporting sector*”.

## **5. Discussion**

A calamitous unknown-unknown, nothing compares to the absolute disruption COVID-19 suddenly wrought on the global economy (Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020). Its impact saw global GDP drop 4.9% in 2020 (IMF, 2021a). More acutely affected, South America’s regional economy plummeted 8.1% (IMF, 2021a). The hard-hit region’s health crisis transformed into its “*worst economic social and production calamity in 120 years*” (ECLAC, 2020b) – “*a humanitarian crisis*” (The Lancet 2020: 1463). These predicaments and international agency indicators were clearly evinced and manifested at ‘ground zero’ in these three EPAs’ vividly corroborated lived experiences – as they actively faced up to the pandemic in their own realities.

Following, we discuss the salient aspects ensuing from our findings and attendant implications, in line with our stated objectives:

The EPAs’ rich narratives evinced the pandemic’s effect on the stunned enterprises they serve. Highlighting lockdown devastation halting activity overnight, it was clear regional aspects compounded matters, presenting deeper uncertainty and intensifying impact. This, poignantly expressed by EC1, stating “*for us the pandemic was actually [only] the second big wave of pressure on the exporting sector*” – the EPAs citing social unrest and political dynamics adding complications. Strikes and discord complementing lockdowns and boarder closures in halting operations – regional rural geography, infrastructure and the nature of economic activity also played significant parts in impeding resumption of business activity – more so for exports (CL1, PE1, EC1).

OECD-diagnosed global supply chain problems (further challenged by regional circumstances in access and travel, restricted labour mobility, shipping port disruptions, and additional health and safety measures) were evident in the EPAs’ accounts – stressing the importance of innovation in relation to seeking different foreign market buyers (Geldres and Monreal-Pérez, 2017). Examples highlighted

included changing priorities, tastes and behaviours of consumers (CL1, CL2, PE2, EC1), necessitating new product development (EC1, CL1, PE1), as well as the use of new channels including digital platforms and media, and grappling with e-commerce (CL1, CL2, PE1, PE2, EC1).

Mostly positioned at the origin of global supply chains, severe impact suffered reflects now apparent critical vulnerabilities of production networks to such unforeseen crises (ECLAC, 2020a). Disruption and concerns from export overdependence on raw materials, commodities and agri-food products were highlighted (CL1, PE1, EC1). Typically price sensitive on global markets, the EPAs emphasised SMEs' urgent need to embrace innovation: to differentiate and moving up value chains (CL1, PE2, EC1), and improve lagging productivity and efficiency (CL1, PE1), to enhance international competitiveness.

Similarly, input-related employee mobility impediments impacted typically labour-intensive operations – regional exporters registering circa 30% declines (Cao et al., 2020). Also emphasized were human capital and skills gaps, and insufficient digital connectedness (CL1), aligned with ILO (2017) reports – limited flight and travel policies intensifying shortfalls (Hilmola et al., 2020). Cultural aspects also emerged, ranging from physical relational preferences initially shunning remote alternatives, to conservative attitudes heightening risk aversion (OECD, 2020b). EPAs here were extremely important in mitigating increased risk perception, providing information and motivating export resumption (Monreal-Pérez and Geldres-Weiss, 2019).

Many businesses on life-support or closed down – yet some reaped fortunes from the global trend in food consumption rising during crises. EPAs reported enterprising agri-businesses increasing exports (CL1, PE1, PE2, EC1) – notwithstanding regional complexity. This was also reflected in overall growth for the respective countries' agri-business sectors. Nonetheless, the EPAs' issued a clarion call that important lessons must be heeded. Manageable exposed shortcomings, known pre-pandemic, need to be shored and actively addressed, at firm, agency and national policy levels – if prospecting competitive participation in tomorrow's international markets.

As for other organisations universally, the outbreak for the EPAs was initially debilitating: chaos, paralysis and an inability to look ahead (Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020) – “*total uncertainty*” (PE1), “*even experts didn’t know what was happening*” (EC1).

The crisis’ magnitude forced fundamental self-questioning of their mission, seeking purpose in unfamiliar calamity (CL2). This was also evinced among 39% of European TPOs reporting new mandated remit objectives (ETPOA, 2020). Once the shock subsided, they left no stone unturned actively adjusting, seeking to assist SMEs operations – yet not without COVID-19 collateral. While elsewhere, some benefitted from increased emergency funding, these EPAs’ had financial budgets cut, and in Pro Ecuador’s case, employee layoffs.

That said, many of their evolved response strategies would have been similar to other EPAs’:

First step, restoring operational capability in a new virtual world of remote interaction. Digitalisation featured extensively in both the EPAs’ operational adjustments internally, enabling employees to work remotely, as well as migration of service offerings for SMEs to access online. Establishing regular direct lines of communication with the business community via online channels, including extensive social media presence, were also a top priority – dispensing information updates amid the evolving crisis’ persisting uncertainty, and gradually restoring service offerings (Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020). In-house, professional and university training was “*aggressively*” (CL1) pursued, plugging employees’ skills gaps, as well as service offerings for SMEs. The EPAs’ EPPs were restructured, enhanced and largely moved online – resulting in “*new old instruments*” (Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020). Acknowledging this global remote experiment accelerating digital migration will likely persist (Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020), the EPAs intend to maintain various hybrid digital operations post-pandemic (CL2, PE2, EC1).

Yet amid such ubiquitously endured crisis and universally deployed EPA counter-measures, what really stands out from our findings is these three EPAs’ resolute spirit and resourcefulness in creatively surmounting difficulties. Supporting exporting SMEs in the face of adversity – further acting as custodians to their

national brand. This amid severely restrained resources, besides pandemic concerns – long hours and disrupted personal lives.

Seeking answers to questions “*nobody knew*” (PE1) – the “*outstanding*” (EC1) importance of human rapport, contacts and trust-based relationships was highlighted as being of immense value in facing the pandemic. Decentralised and informal, solutions to challenges were pragmatically established across borders – whether on the fringes of international diplomacy, or among ‘previously-competitor’ EPAs, engaged in collaboration – where social capital renders a mere phone-call “*more important than [...] a memorandum of understanding*” (EC1). This aligns with ECLAC’s, albeit formal, initiative seeking to avoid conflict-ridden trade measures, promoting collaboration and multilateralism (ECLAC, 2020a). All three EPAs professed a newfound importance in the need for deeper cooperation.

Pushed hard, all three South American EPAs were creative in effectively serving their mission. Entrepreneurially leveraging their limited resources, they frugally and creatively generated value and brokered solutions. Various examples ensued from our findings: PromPeru assisting rural exporters, collecting samples for dispatch to prospective foreign importers, landing new contracts. Forced to restructure with fewer employees, leaner Pro Ecuador set up business intelligence and reorganised operations to better effect. Shunning expensive, not-so-effective large virtual trade expos, they successfully run tailored Zoom sessions between mutually motivated prospecting partners, while ProChile brings indigenous and foreign SMEs together fostering collaboration, prospecting alliances for facing COVID-19.

The EPAs coincided in highlighting difficulty in planning ahead amid undulating contagion waves, intermittent lockdowns, shifting policy and impending national elections. Plans morphing flexibly and strategies emergent. Anticipating their economies restored to pre-pandemic levels in circa 5 years, nevertheless, the EPAs were optimistic about the future – while also acknowledging defined challenges at firm and national levels – valuable opportunities if addressed strategically. Noting consumer behaviour patterns would likely endure post-pandemic (Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020), all three EPAs underlined the importance of environmental sustainability for both products and processes – and

recognition of national green credentials internationally (CL1, PE1, PE2, EC1). Also expecting pervasive online presence and purchasing to continue, the EPAs are intent to “*continue betting for digitalisation*” (PE1), e-commerce and B2C national initiatives – while also exploiting technology to maximum effect for hybrid trade promotion activity (CL2, PE2, EC1). This is in line with OECD’s (2020a) suggestion for supporting teleworking and digitalisation, especially in the case of SMEs. Technology is also notably seen by the EPAs as a useful tool mitigating disruption from potential regional instability, ensuring continuity, with blockchain cited as one example (EC1). In consolidation, it was also well-founded that the EPAs emphasised importance in strategically promoting innovation at all levels, targeting indigenous growth in diversified, value-added and service sectors for export – if international market competitiveness is to be maintained. The overall sentiment underpinning the EPAs’ weary yet resiliently positive gaze looking ahead is summed up by PE1, “*after all this, some things will have to change*”.

## **6. Conclusion**

Our research explores the lived challenges and realities of EPAs in COVID-19 times – their experience, as they faced the crisis. We analyse these South American EPAs’ experiences and perspective on the pandemic’s impact on exporting SMEs; their own operations and strategic response; and their post-COVID expectations. Our main contribution lies in direct vivid detail through the privileged first-hand viewpoint of elite informants – intimately engaged at operational and strategic levels. Embedded in specific realities, we shed light on best practice in such contexts, and offer insights for policy response – government support for exporting SMEs as well as the EPAs that support them. We contribute to literature in the international business domain, providing knowledge about COVID-19’s impact on export promotion, specifically in the case of South American EPAs (Eggers, 2020). We adopt a novel approach in employing detailed consolidated narratives for our exploratory qualitative methodology, seeking rich insights and deeper understanding ‘from the inside’ on this major phenomenon – complementing the mostly quantitative studies treating COVID-19 in field.

COVID-19 is evidently having particularly disruptive impact on SMEs in South American countries. Besides observing the implications of regional complexities,

our findings align with Catanzaro and Teyssier (2020), stating that in an international context in which business risks are amplified, SMEs could really suffer more than their larger counterparts as a result of restricted capabilities and resource limitations.

Hardly any research exists on the role of EPAs in COVID-times in South-America. In this regard, our study provides useful insights on how policy perspectives determined by other papers (e.g. Rokosz and Pietrasienski, 2020; OECD, 2020b) may be implemented in the South American region.

Our findings also evidently confirm Verma and Gustafsson, (2020), Wang et al (2020), and Petrunenko and Podtserkovnyi's (2020) observations, stating that to mitigate the effects of this crisis, new strategies are required. In our study the EPAs were compelled to devise novel response strategies to help exporting SMEs. They used different specific instruments, and digital platforms to facilitate SMEs' operations, migrating most activities online – complementing the research of De (2020), ITC (2020), and Rokosz and Pietrasienski (2020).

Our paper opens a new line of enquiry researching EPAs' perceptions and expectations post-COVID. Other potential future research streams emanating from our findings, specifically relating to the COVID-19 crisis, include exploring: cooperation strategies between EPAs; risk management in exporting SMEs; export managers' risk perception, opportunity recognition and resilience; and evaluating EPP conduciveness to digital or hybrid format migration. COVID-19 heralded the dawn of a new world reality for SMEs, and EPAs. It is clear that changes and awareness brought about by COVID-19 in relation to consumption patterns and production – such as sustainability matters – merit further research attention. Regarding the EPAs' efforts, we have to stress how they creatively, with very limited resources, have found resource-light approaches and pragmatic solutions or ideas to effectively serve their mission.

Despite its various contributions, our study needs to be interpreted with caution, mindful of potential contextual limitations – which in themselves, present opportunities for further research. Our research only included perspectives from three South American national EPAs, and while similarities likely exist, regional representation cannot be assumed. Similarly our research only engaged elite



EPA participants. Future research may also solicit the involvement of SME managers; or alternatively adopt an in-depth, single case approach involving several of the EPA's participants at different levels, leading to broader perspectives and varied insights. While the advantage of rich descriptive detail derives from our qualitative approach, quantitative research could also yield additional valuable insights on for example organisational performance, contributing towards a more holistic perspective. Finally, we believe that it would be interesting to undertake a post-hoc study of the effectiveness of any implemented EPAs strategies – once the currently still-raging pandemic subsides.

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