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*FLEXIBILITY, ADAPTATION AND
INNOVATION BY ENTERPRISES IN THE
NPA IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19*

NPA COVID-19 RESPONSE PROJECT ON
ECONOMIC IMPACTS
MAIN REPORT: PART 3

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drawing on 10 partner reports
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3.1 Micro and small enterprises, community and social enterprises in peripheral economies

Many businesses have undoubtedly suffered during Covid-19, as we illustrate in Section 1 of this report. For example, the BSCDC survey of 62 entrepreneurs revealed that for 68% of respondents Covid-19 has had a negative or very negative impact on their businesses, while 17% responded that it had a positive impact mainly driven by an increased focus on local markets or on opportunities to develop new business models. In this section we focus on the flexibility, adaptation and innovation that enterprises have adopted to survive and even thrive during the pandemic.

Micro and small enterprises form the bedrock of local economies in many peripheral regions. Even nationally, in Canada for example, 97.9 percent of business employment in the country in 2018 came from small businesses, 1.9 percent from medium-sized businesses and 0.2 percent from large. And the importance of micro and small enterprises is even greater in many peripheral areas.

The Region of Jämtland in Sweden, with 130 810 inhabitants is one of the most sparsely populated counties in Sweden, with 2.7 people per square kilometer. After the island province of Gotland, Jämtland is the least industrialised region in Sweden with only 15 percent of the population involved. At the same time, together with Gotland, Jämtland has the highest rate of businesses in Sweden, 16 companies per 100 inhabitants. Industrialisation is dominated by small businesses; only 50-60 of the province's industrial companies have more than 50 employees.

In island communities of just 5000 people in Uist in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, where the largest employer is the public sector, a survey in 2013 identified over 450 micro-enterprises providing jobs for 850 people. At the Rural Economy session at the Scottish Rural Parliament (11Mar21) participants pointed to evidence that micro-businesses stay in business and employ people, even if only one or two people. But the contribution of micro-enterprises, and indeed many community and social enterprises, is undervalued, because unless a business is registered for VAT or incorporated, it doesn't 'show up' in official data sources.

Community and social enterprises are also critical to the local island economy in Uist. In 2012, local research estimated that there was almost one social enterprise for every 100 people in Uist, and more than one community organisation (including social enterprises) for every 45 people on the islands. They deliver a wide range of critical services, from community land ownership to health and social care, from recycling to music and culture, from manufacturing to retail. They generate 12 % (2012) of all employment outside of the public sector, and 10 % (2018) of all jobs for young people (up to 40) returning, settling or staying, who are critical for island population turnaround.

Micro- and small enterprise, both private and social, also play a significant role in the emergence of new sectors. Nordregio's BeUBio project highlighted examples of young entrepreneurs in the Nordic and Baltic region who are engaged in innovation within the bioeconomy. The BiUBeo website collects "stories of young people whose business ideas, jobs and other activities lead the way towards a different and more sustainable economic path. With a variety of different examples, young people from across the Baltic Sea Region, inspire new ways of making business while having a positive impact to the environment and society".

One example is from Trondelag in Norway where architects from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, in close collaboration with the construction sector and property owners, set up the company GreenStock in 2018, offering construction companies and organisations a simpler way to track and reuse their materials: 'reuse made simple'. It is a case of circular economy in practice. Likewise, the NPA funded [Blue Circular Economy Project](#) reports that most of the companies exploring waste fishing nets, ropes and components to develop new resources are micro-enterprises.

3.2 The performance of micro and small enterprise during Covid-19

The BSCDC research, which included a survey of 62 entrepreneurs especially within the tourism sector in Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, shows that while the barriers and difficulties faced by tourism-driven entrepreneurs as a result of Covid-19 are evident, there are also positive trends emerging as a result of the pandemic. Firstly, there has been a significant localising of markets targeted at domestic rather than international customers. Secondly, there has been an upsurge of innovation across rural communities accelerating the shift towards more sustainable, long-standing business models.

Indeed, 52% of survey participants consider Covid-19 to have brought about new business opportunities that they are either already pursuing or intend to pursue in the future. Other entrepreneurs have seen Covid-19 as an opportunity to change their business model not necessarily for local tourism, but for remote or distant tourism. And yet other entrepreneurs have sought to become less dependent on tourism altogether.

The BSCDC report also refers to a survey done by Visit Greenland with 100 respondents within the tourist sector that demonstrates that 40% have adapted their product in response to the pandemic. Some entrepreneurs have started using their existing business infrastructure for film-making whilst others have focused more on providing education services.

Similarly, a survey for a forthcoming report on *Covid-19 Impacts on Rural Economic Development in Atlantic Canada* (see Box 3.3 at the end of this section) reports that "when asked to indicate the positive impacts on businesses, the top responses were: new business opportunities (22%); increased sales (20%); new partnerships (14%); and new markets (12%). Other positive outcomes included new products (8%) and new hiring opportunities (10%)."

These findings are in line with a study on business strategy from the start of the financial crisis in 2007 to the summer of 2009 that showed small companies are more likely to increase their growth during crises, unlike large companies which are instead more defensive during turbulent times. Small companies were more flexible and were able to change faster than larger companies. Another possibility is that small businesses gain very little from cutting their costs and benefit all the more from looking at other opportunities during the crisis ([Wilson & Eilertsen, 2010](#)).

The [NPA Covid-19 Response thematic project](#) on technology provides a striking example of this. It surveyed 35 technology companies across the NPA that engaged in significant innovation, adaptation or market expansion in response to health needs during Covid-19. Almost all of them responded to the opportunities that Covid-19 presented to develop, adapt and expand their businesses. Of these 35 companies, three quarters (26) are small and micro-enterprises, and

almost half (16) have ten or fewer employees (6, or 17%, with five or less), demonstrating remarkable innovation and adaptation within the micro and small enterprise sector.

“Many of these technological solutions have had considerable success, demonstrated by the fact that many of these companies have experienced continued growth and expanded to include new markets resulting in increased revenue.” “Many of the companies interviewed found that they had an accelerated uptake of their products during the pandemic.” (TechSolns report)

The Jämtland report looks at the performance of 5 small businesses, all with 5 or more employees, in Jämtland during 2020. The companies come from diverse industries: clothing and footwear in wholesale, construction and civil engineering, electrical plumbing and construction installations, agriculture and forestry, and leisure and entertainment activities.

The research confirms that these small businesses have adapted well during the pandemic (see Box 3.2 at the end of this section). Strategic flexibility is an approach that many of the small businesses used to respond to the crisis. The research demonstrates that while the small businesses had planned strategies in advance, the majority in fact use strategy as “a pattern of action”, based on the company's previous experience and critically also on external factors. Planned strategies are not always adapted to unexpected scenarios because they presuppose that the company will operate in an environment and future that remains stable.

Small businesses were good at strategic flexibility even before Covid-19, and this has proved a critical resilience factor during the pandemic. Covid-19 was a major unexpected shock, to which the businesses have responded in flexible and effective ways. They demonstrate that in rapidly changing times businesses need to act quickly, and constantly allow themselves to develop, change and reformulate their strategies in flexible ways, and the five business casestudies illustrate that small businesses in Jämtland have been able to do this.

Interestingly, the Finnish research suggests that smaller health units in Finland were also better able to act effectively and creatively in adapting hospitals and personnel during the first wave of the Covid-19 epidemic. The research focuses in particular on the smallest hospital district in Finland, which invested in significant retraining and collaborated effectively with private and NGO service deliverers.

Anna, CEO of Moxter AB in Jämtland, a family business distributing a high-quality German boot brand in Sweden, has noticed a rapid development in e-commerce during the year and sees e-commerce as a major change in the trading industry, a trend that has been accelerated by Covid-19. Web-based activity has become critical in so many sectors, and underpins the success of the technology innovation companies that the TechSolns project analysed, demonstrating “a wide range of technology innovations throughout several regions. Many of these innovations include software platforms that conduct a variety of functions ranging from predicting changes in patients’ health and monitoring vital signs to contact tracing and products that provide reduced workload and improved workflow for healthcare workers”.

With the rapid expansion of web-based business, location is no longer as significant, and much can be delivered from peripheral regions across the NPA as much as in urban centres, enabling businesses operating in the digital economy to emerge across the area, and also in Atlantic Canada: “Innovative sectors including the digital economy, clean technology ... and biosciences are ... doing well. The bioscience sector of Prince Edward Island added 200 jobs since the

pandemic began and seven of its companies are planning expansions, and the technology sector is growing in Newfoundland and Labrador also.”

On-line activity is equally important within very different sectors such as traditional music, an economic activity in Scotland that has grown exponentially over the last 30 years, with many individual performers and many festivals. Activities range from small gatherings deeply rooted in individual communities, especially in rural and island Scotland, to major national and international performances and festivals.

The economic impact of Covid-19 on this sector has been crushing, with cancellation of almost every performance, ‘gig’, concert, wedding and festival. In response, many musicians went on-line, and over time, so did major events, festivals and teaching, giving access to performers dispersed across a vast area, including in many of the remotest regions and islands in Scotland. Musicians were paid for delivering their music in a virtual context, while national TV and radio continued to broadcast performances by traditional musicians.

For example, the community music, Gaelic and cultural teaching festival Fèis Rois went on-line and paid £100,000 to musicians to enable them to deliver work. Normally Fèis Rois would host a three-day event each year in Ullapool on the west coast of Scotland with about 250 attendees. In 2020 the same on-line programme attracted 2,600 attendees with more than 50,000 watching on-line, including internationally. Celtic Connections, Scotland’s largest international cultural festival normally held in Glasgow, was delivered on-line in 2021 and sold 10,000 tickets before it started in January. By the end of the festival over 27,000 tickets were sold, with audiences from 65 countries, 10.9 million minutes of musical entertainment spread over 19 days. All musicians were paid and showcased their performances.

Taking business on-line is one example of innovation among small and micro-businesses in peripheral areas in response to Covid-19. Another striking example from Scotland is isle20.com, set up by an entrepreneur on the Isle of Tiree to provide an on-line market place for island businesses from 93 inhabited Scottish islands that stretch for hundreds of miles off the west and north coasts of Scotland. Many of these businesses would have closed because no tourists could visit the islands. Over 500 island businesses are now listed on the site, with close to 150 trading through the site. At isle20’s first birthday in March 2021, gross turnover over the first year had exceeded £100,000 and it has just taken on its first employee.

But there are other examples of innovation and creativity beyond going on-line. The Canadian report for this project points to a long-standing culture of ingenuity out of necessity across the Atlantic provinces that has allowed many businesses to turn their vulnerability into opportunity, mitigating their losses by getting creative with their businesses, offering on-line ordering, curbside pick-up and delivery, and working together to jointly market their products. And this character of entrepreneurship combined with caring for others is regarded as part of Atlantic Canada culture.

A number of manufacturers were able to pivot production to personal protective equipment (PPE). Early in the pandemic the federal Canadian government partnered with eight organisations to supply medical-related goods, including two in Atlantic Canada. Stanfield’s Ltd. initially laid off 200 employees and was able to hire most back after agreeing to supply medical gowns and masks using locally sourced material. Irving Oil began producing hand sanitiser for a federal contract valued at \$5 million Canadian. The National Research Council also provided some funding that

enabled a metal fabrication company to produce face shields and Top Dog Manufacturing in Prince Edward Island to produce medical gowns. In Top Dog's case, they had to add more work shifts to meet demand for this new product.

There are many other examples of entrepreneurship and innovation from Atlantic Canada, and they paint the picture of a sector that not only showcases ingenuity, but one that is motivated by a sense of community and generosity – wanting to help relieve the impact of the crisis and to give back. The Tourism Nova Scotia government web page titled “Industry Innovation and Inspiration” created a listing with summaries of 55 inspiring innovations across their province alone. These examples of pivoting businesses range from making masks and hand sanitiser to on-line and delivery options, including the inventive on-line wine tasting and trivia combination. Getting food and meals into the hands of those who have been impacted through income loss or being a front-line worker is a very common theme from pubs and restaurants to growers and retailers, many of which include a component of monetary or food donations to local food banks.

Highlighting the flexibility, creativity and innovation of small and micro-businesses is essential to pinpoint a key resilience factor for many local economies in peripheral regions. Such resilience is further strengthened by the fact that flexibility, adaption and innovation is not confined to one or two sectors. The many cases from across the NPA area that our research has brought together clearly demonstrate that these are characteristics of micro- and small enterprises engaged in a wide range of very different sectors in peripheral regions. They include the primary and manufacturing sectors, as well as diverse services, including tourism, hospitality and retail, traditional music and cultural activities. They range from traditional activities like forestry to emerging sectors like the bio-economy, technology innovation, the digital economy and bio-science. These characteristics are also common among community and social enterprises within peripheral communities, and also within collaborative local networks, including the public sector, as we will see in Section 4 of this report.

There is real optimism within the social enterprise community as we begin to emerge from the current pandemic. A [report](#) by Social Enterprise UK seems to reflect a level of confidence across the sector – both in terms of recovery and growth that runs counter to a number of trends being suggested amongst conventional businesses.

For many of the concrete examples we have illustrated above, government and public sector support has been critical during the pandemic. The casestudy businesses from Jämtland, Sweden drew on a range of different national government support measures. Some of the 35 technology companies across the NPA received public investment and most of them, of course, business from public health sectors.

In Atlantic Canada the actions taken by the federal and provincial governments to provide financial support for individuals, businesses and non-governmental organisations has allowed the vast majority of society to keep functioning. Small businesses have benefitted from a complex ecosystem of support, with loan payment and tax payment deferrals, wage subsidy, rent relief, and funding for safety measures, and involves all levels of government.

The BSCDC study points to cases in Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, where public and private actors alike have supported entrepreneurs in exploring new market opportunities. For example, Sermersooq Business (Greenland) are looking at the opportunity of redirecting tourism

from Akureyri to East Greenland, expanding the dry fish industry (this would not be as vulnerable to government regulations on cool keeping) as well as seaweed harvesting. And the Colourful Nuuk App creates a directory for all the experiences available in the area, and provides an easy link between customers and service providers.

Nevertheless it is important to recognise that many businesses did not receive additional support through such measures, but survived through their own flexibility, adaptation and innovation.

Box 3.1 Support for enterprises during Covid-19

The BSCDC survey asked 62 entrepreneurs or enterprises about measures (1) alleviating financial burden, (2) facilitating knowledge-sharing and (3) enhancing marketing strategies. Looking at what they had received themselves, 22% had received support from public actors and 3% from both public actors and community/civil society actors. 31% were not aware of any support available, one-fifth reported that their business was not eligible and 3% applied for funding but did not receive it.

The casestudy analysis of rural Atlantic Canada’s response to Covid-19 by Hall and Vinodrai (2021, see Box 3.3 below), also highlights the active role of various chambers of commerce and business associations in not only advocating for their membership around government policy and support, but also in creating campaigns to engage customers. Examples of buy local campaigns can be found in both Cape Breton Island (Nova Scotia), Saint Andrews (New Brunswick), and Charlottetown (Prince Edward Island). Cape Breton relaunched their shop local program #CapeBretonFirst in multiple languages, including merchandise and a partnership that gives back to a local organisation that supports individuals with complex challenges due to disabilities. To make customers feel safer while shopping, Saint Andrews downtown blocked parking through their main street to create wider sidewalks and allow businesses to expand out into the sidewalk. They marketed the area as safe and open for tourists and the pilot project was enthusiastically received. The Charlottetown Chamber is asking Islanders to make 10% of their annual spending local. According to their CEO, local businesses recirculate \$45 of \$100 back into the local economy and a ten percent shift would “support 460 new jobs and contribute approximately \$16 million in wages to Islanders.”

Entrepreneurs surveyed in the BSCDC research shared this attitude: “The public sector including municipalities should to the extent possible spend budget to support local business and encourage locals to spend money/support local businesses. For example, they can book treks/experiences for their staff. They could distribute spending to businesses that have suffered significant losses during the pandemic.”

The pivot to local markets is clearly one of the most prevalent adaptations that small and micro-businesses have made in response to Covid-19, including, for example, selling fresh fish locally rather than exporting them to other regions or other countries.

“Supporting locals is very important and if the locals ask, they will always get.” Lochmaddy Bay Prawns, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, Scotland

“I sell to the local community. I’ve been asked to ship things out before, but I say, I sell to the community of Uist exclusively, as well as to some tourists.” Scandi Bakery, South Uist, Outer Hebrides, Scotland

The shift has been most obvious in the tourist sector. The BSCDC research found an increased focus on local tourism in all regions, together with an increasing interest in own history, nature and traditions. “The pandemic has provided an excuse for locals to explore their own country and customs.”

Local tourism has provided an opportunity to retain some income, although has often not fully substituted for the reduction in international tourists. Nevertheless, some regions like North Iceland did well from domestic tourism in 2020, with some businesses reporting that they had their best season ever (BSCDC workshop). Domestic tourists stayed for longer (rather than just passing through or stopping over for a night like so many international tourists ‘doing’ Iceland) and engaged in lots of outdoor and sustainable activities like hiking.

We explore the impacts of Covid-19 on the tourism sector, and responses of businesses to the pandemic, in the next section, which also highlights many more examples of flexibility, creativity and innovation in adapting to the pandemic.

Box 3.2 Five casestudies from Jämtland

Östersund Multichallenge AB is a business in the adventure and experience industry, including education and conference activities. The company offers Boda Borg (delivering entertainment of "quests" through a series of rooms), mini golf, laser hall, go-cart track, and a playground for children, and also runs a hostel.

In response to Covid-19 the company is only open on weekends. Sales dropped drastically during 2020, including the loss of a large number of visitors from Norway when the border was closed. The number of employees has dropped from about 30 to 12, and the company has used the government's crisis package (including short-term layoffs and help with rent payments) to be able to survive.

Nevertheless, in looking to the future, the company remains confident and has continued to work on its expansion, building and establishing a restaurant and six bowling alleys, shuffleboards and billiards. They aim to collaborate actively with local schools and believe business will revive when Covid-19 decreases. The company has strong self-belief: their concept is unique and there is no such facility except in Östersund.

J Amréns Skogsmaskiner (Forestry machinery) AB has been an expanding business since it was started in 2008 and is still run by its founder Jonas Amrén. It has 25 employees in five machine teams, a workshop, consulting services and a shop for machine parts. The business has been affected greatly by Covid-19. Sales decreased by about 14% in 2020 and the market is more hesitant. Several large customers had encouraged J Amréns to expand in November 2019, with new machinery and employees, but by summer 2020 three of the largest contracts were terminated, changing conditions completely. And, on the supply side, it has been a problem to meet landowners who sell forest and who are usually older people.

The company's tactic has been to try to keep the machines running, but to produce as little as possible. J Amréns also succeeded in finding a new customer, the Swedish Transport Administration, to secure trees for power lines. The company used the government's crisis package, including short-term leave, reduced costs for sick leave and lower fuel prices during the spring of 2020.

Looking to the future, the company is seeking longer contracts than previously, and to distribute these so that all contracts cannot be terminated at the same time. They also see a positive impact of the pandemic which may contribute to more Swedes thinking differently about their housing and moving to the countryside. Such behavior could result in more labour being drawn to Ragunda Municipality, where there is a shortage of labour, including in the forestry sector.

Stigs Maskin AB is a company that sells and services construction machinery, and equipment, spare parts and consumables in the forest sector. Stigs Maskin has been relatively spared from the impacts of Covid-19: "Used machine sales have declined slightly, but that market has declined overall across Europe over the past year. But it has been offset by other parts of the business that have instead increased." And they have introduced a new product, a machine that makes markings on the wood from forest machines, and they have worked to get exclusive rights to this new product. Stigs Maskin sees a bright future in 2021, as several deals are underway and machines will be delivered which will then generate business in spare parts and servicing.

Marklunds Invest in Östersund AB, which began in 1945, delivers services electrical services (installations and servicing), household appliances, commercial kitchens, property washing and heat pumps, and now employs 45 people. On the whole there have been no major changes in strategy or action due to Covid-19. Customers continue to need the business services, and turnover is unchanged this period compared to the same period last year. The company has used government support for short-term layoffs in Åre, a tourist destination where there was already more competition, and in Bräcke, where a large number of older people live. The CEO feels the company has tackled the Covid-19 crisis well and is positive about the future of the business.

Moxter AB is a family business with 8 employees and has the exclusive agency for distributing Meindl, a high-quality German boot brand in Sweden, including supplying boots to the police and military. CEO Anna (daughter of the company founder) says that Moxter works a lot with goals and strategy, but there are always alternatives "because you never know what will happen. Especially after the corona year it feels even more relevant to always have a plan B and a plan C if unforeseen things happen. Then you will not be surprised if you have to use plan B".

For December 2020 business for Moxter had recovered, but it was a roller coaster year, including one customer who went through a reconstruction and did not pay. "March and April were not fun months at all". But things turned around when interest in outdoor life and nature grew greatly, and the calls to stay home and spend time outdoors gave Moxter a great year in terms of sales. There have been problems in supplies from factories in Germany, Italy and parts of Asia, but not huge difficulties.

Anna has noticed a rapid development in e-commerce during the year and sees e-commerce as a major change in the trading industry, a trend that has been accelerated by Covid-19. Anna sees a bright future, believing that the increased awareness of health and climate is only positive for their product range.

Box 3.3 Examples of small business innovation in response to Covid-19 in Atlantic Canada

A small town Nova Scotia business, Ignite Labs, supports start-ups and uses 3D printers for prototyping. They shifted gears for the pandemic making PPE with their printers and even went so far as to invent an ‘ear saver’ to alleviate irritation that front-line workers were experiencing from wearing masks for hours a day. More than 600 health care workers benefited from the ‘game-changing’ ear saver in one week. Beyond that, Ignite recognised the importance of worker safety in other local industries and quickly started producing for them. In the words of the owner of IMO Foods, “These shields were sold out locally and on-line, so having Ignite use their in-house technology to produce face shields locally on demand, virtually in minutes – not weeks on back-order – is sort of unbelievable.” Another player in this community-minded business ecosystem is the local Credit Union which provided funding to support the production of the ear savers. In the words of their CEO, “How well we cooperate with one another will impact the outcome of this pandemic significantly. It was great to see Ignite and others step up and repurpose themselves during this pandemic. It’s a great example of leadership and community spirit.”

Pre-pandemic, LuminUltra, a New Brunswick based company known for their water testing technology, had developed a niche in the global market with customers as far away as Australia. In March 2020 the company quickly realised that their technology could be transferred from water testing to virus testing. After receiving Health Canada’s approval for its rapid-test kits in December, the company, now at 115 employees, has been shipping 500,000 units a week.

In New Brunswick, Sunbury Shores Arts and Nature Centre, in St. Andrews, found a new way to keep art alive and stay connected to the community through their ‘Artist in the Window’ initiative. During the pandemic, local artists began taking turns spending a few days working on a piece of art from inside the window of the art gallery where passers-by could be reminded of and feel inspired by the creative industries.

And a number of First Nations communities across the region are taking on food insecurity by creating and operating their own geothermal greenhouses that can produce fresh food year-round. According to their spokesperson, on-reserve food options are limited and well-stocked grocery stores can be 50+ kilometres away, leaving some to rely on the local convenience stores for sustenance. The project will not only make fresh, local food accessible in these communities, it is providing jobs for those who have lost them in the pandemic.

A great example in Newfoundland and Labrador of crises being the birthplace of innovation is NL Eats which started as a Facebook page for showcasing local cuisine and became a food bank that delivers food. The idea started as a six-person operation (a group of 20 to 30-something siblings and a fiancé, a mix of university students and chefs with marketing and administration experience) out of their garage to one that now serves more than 1,300 people with 150 volunteers.

Yet more examples from Atlantic Canada can be found in the forthcoming report by Waterloo University for the Canada Rural Revitalization Foundation, based on 78 responses (18 from Atlantic Canada) to a survey conducted between August and November 2019: *Covid-19 Impacts on Rural Economic Development in Atlantic Canada* (Heather Hall and Tara Vinodrai, March 2021)
