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# Rationality Patterns in Export Promotion Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

Export promotion organizations (EPOs) play an essential role in supporting global trade. Amid escalating global trade tensions, rising tariffs, and increased multipolarity, specialized teams within EPOs assume decision-making functions guided by distinct rationalities. The aim of this research was to identify the different rationalities within EPOs and determine the factors contributing to their variations. Using a mixed method approach, we assessed the rationalities of these teams and show demonstrable differences. Key influencing factors are primarily rooted in the organizational context: institutional guidelines, perceived trends and challenges, and organizational goals. Our analysis reveals three different clusters reflecting differences between corporate-oriented, government-oriented, and independent rationality. Understanding these distinct rationalities provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to enhance organizational effectiveness in navigating contemporary global trade challenges.

## 1 | Contextual Impact on EPO Teams' Rationalities

Export promotion organizations (EPOs) play a central role in the protection and development of international trade (Okenna and Adesanya 2020). They fulfill a specific political mandate, even if they have different objectives and organizational forms (Cruz et al. 2018). In recent years, however, global trade has experienced significant disruptions driven by increasing geopolitical tensions, rising tariffs, and the emergence of multipolar economic dynamics (Eldes et al. 2025; Vortherms and Zhang 2024). Such developments have considerably complicated the traditional functions of EPOs, making it vital to understand how these organizations respond to a rapidly changing environment. Within the EPOs, it is usually specialized teams that bear operational responsibility for decisions. The way in which these teams function and carry out their work is thus of great importance for export promotion, and a look at the micro level of EPOs is instructive for both science and practice.

In this study, we draw on the concept of organizational rationalities, which explains how professional teams develop shared interpretive schemes to make sense of their roles and tasks (Schedler et al. 2024; Berger and Luckmann 1966). These rationalities are not uniform; rather, they emerge from institutional expectations, professional norms, and the specific challenges teams encounter in their daily work (Cloutier and Langley 2007; Zucker and Schilke 2020). Recognizing the diversity of rationalities within EPO teams provides deeper insights into how these organizations function in practice and how they respond to external influences (Cabantous et al. 2009; Noordegraaf 2015).

To date, most studies shed light on the impact of export promotion on the economy (Gianturco 2001; Kim 2020), often with a view to different promotion approaches (Beckwith 2016), promotion objectives (Klasen et al. 2022), or the interaction between EPOs and promoted companies (Wilkinson and Brouthers 2006). In this paper,

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### Policy implications

- Tailor organizational forms: Policymakers and governments should choose or redesign the institutional setup of EPOs—for example, as state agencies, state-owned enterprises, public–private entities, or independent institutions—to fit the dominant rationalities of their teams. This helps ensure that export promotion mandates can be implemented coherently in light of current trade and geopolitical challenges.
- Balance regulation and flexibility: Guardian authorities, regulators, and boards should review oversight, compliance, and mandate frameworks so that they set clear boundaries but still leave room for professional discretion. Rules should protect against political capture and undue risk-taking, while allowing teams to adapt instruments and processes to changing trade environments.
- Context-sensitive policy: When assigning tasks, targets, and resources, policymakers and EPO leadership should acknowledge that corporate-oriented, government-oriented, and more independent EPOs perceive trends and constraints differently. Steering tools such as key performance indicators, mandates, and incentive systems should thus be differentiated rather than uniform across all EPO types.
- Encourage creative problem-solving: EPO executives and middle managers should invest in team composition, training, and leadership practices that foster innovation, social cohesion, and technical competence. Performance management should not rely solely on economic or political metrics but also recognize pragmatic solutions developed under hybrid and sometimes conflicting expectations.
- Institutionalize Regular Strategic Reviews: Governments, boards, and senior management should conduct periodic reviews of EPO mandates, organizational forms, and internal rationalities. These reviews ought to connect field-level megatrends with observed decision-making patterns inside of EPOs and lead to explicit adjustments in strategy, governance, and resourcing.

we thus move to the micro level of EPOs and analyze the influence that the organizational field and the organization as a context have on the rationality that prevails in teams working in EPOs.

However, we still know very little about the different rationalities that exist within teams in EPOs and the role that the organizational context and broader institutional environment play in influencing them. In particular, it remains unclear which contextual factors are perceived as critical by these teams. Understanding the rationality of each team that makes operational decisions about export promotion projects is relevant for both EPO executives and the politicians who define export promotion policy. Given the increased complexity and unpredictability caused by contemporary issues such as trade wars and rising tariffs driven by geopolitical fragmentation and multipolarity, understanding how these external pressures shape internal organizational rationalities is crucial.

To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to analyze interpretative schemes and prevailing self-evidence of teams, that is,

their rationalities, within EPOs. This is particularly important because decision-making rationalities influence how teams interpret information, set priorities, and implement export promotion strategies. Insights derived from this study will assist policymakers and practitioners in aligning their strategies and organizational frameworks more effectively to address current global trade challenges, including protectionist trade policies and rising tariff barriers. We assume that the context in which these organizations are acting has an impact on the rationality of the responsible teams within the organizations (Cabantous et al. 2009). However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding how institutional (broader context) and organizational (e.g., internal structures, leadership, and norms) factors influence these rationalities.

With this in mind, we pose the following research questions:

**RQ1.** *Which rationalities exist in teams within export promotion organizations (EPOs), and how can they be categorized?*

**RQ2.** *How do field-level and organizational contexts shape the rationalities of teams within export promotion organizations (EPOs)?*

To answer the first research question, we conceptually base our analysis on Schedler and Rüegg-Stürm (2014), who, drawing on previous literature (e.g., Diesing 1962; Thurmaier and Willoughby 2001; Townley 2008), define and operationalize six dimensions of organizational rationality. For the second research question, we rely on the self-descriptions provided by our interview partners. Specifically, we analyze which contextual factors they perceive as critical in shaping their goals and operations.

Methodologically, we have chosen a mixed method approach that combines a questionnaire with qualitative interviews. Thirty-one high-ranking executives from EPOs (including multilateral organizations and multilateral banks) were available as interview partners.

Our data indicate that there are three different clusters of teams sharing a rationality pattern. In the qualitative analysis, we find differences in how the teams perceive their organizational field. Additionally, the characteristics of the organization in which the teams work have a decisive influence on the rationality pattern.

These results are interesting for the scientific debate on micro-level effects of organizational framework conditions, which has so far focused strongly on the influence of institutional expectations from the organizational field (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Reay and Jones 2016). In practical terms, our findings suggest that policymakers must carefully consider the organizational type of EPOs when assigning responsibilities, as this choice significantly impacts how teams respond to contemporary global trade disruptions such as tariffs, trade conflicts, and regulatory shifts.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows: In the next section, we provide the theoretical and conceptual background. In Section 3, we outline the methodology of our study. In Section 4, we present the results of our analysis. Finally,

the study concludes with a discussion of its contributions and implications.

## 2 | Theoretical Background

### 2.1 | Rationalities

Institutional scholars have argued that organizations respond to institutional pressure (Besharov and Smith 2014; Friedland and Alford 1991) with a variety of actions. The logics assigned to the institutionalized expectations from the organizational field serve as a frame to legitimize these actions (McPherson and Sauder 2013). Within organizations, actors respond to these expectations and develop strategies that include and deal with a multitude of rationalities (Cloutier and Langley 2007). That is, understanding the rationalities of teams at the micro level helps to better understand the organization's decision as a whole (Zucker and Schilke 2020).

Our work is based on the concept of multiple rationalities in organizations (Schedler and Rüegg-Stürm 2014). According to this concept, social interaction transforms teams into the so-called communities of meaning, which define a rationality as a common interpretative framework (Berger and Luckmann 1995; Cabantous et al. 2009). We define community of meaning according to Hopf (1998) as a social group, which creates meaning on the basis of a shared interpretive scheme and which “acknowledges the legitimacy of that action, by that actor, in that social context” (178f.). Typically, it is assumed that the major influence on the construction of a rationality is the task the community of meaning has to fulfill within an organization, but the education, socialization, and wealth of experience of the members of the community of meaning may also have an influence on the ongoing discourse in which rationality is consolidated (Eicher and Schedler 2012). For clarity, we use the term “team” instead of “community of meaning” in the remainder of this paper.

The concept of rationality is multilayered and ambiguous, depending on the context in which it is used (Gigerenzer 1996). In an economic environment, it is traditionally dominated by the rational choice approach, which has shaped decision theory over generations (Simon 1959). More recent, social science-oriented approaches understand rationality as a social construct within groups that enables their communication and simultaneously guides their decision-making (Cabantous et al. 2009; Townley 2002). The decision-making process is understood as a process of exchange between the team members, whereby the quality of the exchange also influences the quality of the decision (Selart and Patokorpi 2008). Having a shared rationality enables an effective exchange within the team as members are guided by the same mental model when acting, reasoning, and interpreting new information (Schedler et al. 2024).

Social groups with shared models to make meaning of a given information are called communities of meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1966). They are embedded in a complex environment as they interact with different stakeholders, who in turn have a wide range of expectations (Brunsson 1989). The respective tasks of the group under consideration shape the way

they think and argue (Tannò 2019). In addition, the groups are also subject to ideological or regulatory requirements that impose certain rational aspects on them (Yu 2015). The rationality of a social group reflects this complexity; that is, in practice, it is never purely ideal-typically economic, legal, or social, just to name a few. As the organizational context is hybrid, the rationality of the teams within the organization is hybrid, too (Noordegraaf 2015). Schedler et al. (2024) reflect this hybridity on the basis of considerations on Diesing (1962) and Townley (2008) discussing ideal-typical rationalities and, together with authors such as Wildavsky (1974) and Thurmaier and Willoughby (2001), come to the conclusion that in practice, there are probably only teams with hybrid rationalities. In order to grasp this hybridity empirically, they define six dimensions with which it should be possible to survey a concrete rationality (see Figure 1).

Within EPOs, funding decisions are not made by decision-making machines, but by teams made up of different humans from different professional and organizational backgrounds. They are expected to base their decisions on decision-making models that take various economic, regulatory, and political factors into account, such as markets, risks, or organizational characteristics (Cuyvers and Viviers 2012). However, the literature is largely silent on who makes the decisions in EPOs and according to which criteria in daily practice. This is despite the fact that these decisions are associated with large monetary payments and social effects. To shed some light on this black box therefore seems a long overdue and relevant task.

### 2.2 | Export Promotion Organizations

Government export promotion plays a crucial role in enhancing the export performance of firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This support can take various forms, including informational and experiential programs (Haddoud et al. 2017), marketing support (Francis and Collins-Dodd 2004), facilitating market entry (Broocks and Van Biesebroeck 2017), and financial aid programs, all aimed at overcoming obstacles to exporting and improving international competitiveness. Government-owned or government-supported export promotion organizations (EPOs) such as Export-Import Banks (EXIMs) and Export Credit Agencies (ECAs) have existed for decades (Griffin 1948), providing financial support to domestic exporters with credit programs, trade finance, and guarantees for risks (Klasen 2022). A World Bank study by Cruz et al. (2018) showed that in 2010 the vast majority of export agencies were structured as public-private organizations, followed by private companies acting as government contractors, and a minority that was structured as a government agency.

Although export promotion programs have always had to be tailored to situational factors (Welch and Wiedersheim-Paul 1979), literature suggests that the context of export promotion is increasingly complex. Facing current global challenges, export promotion organizations are aligning their activities with non-financial objectives, reflecting a broader commitment to sustainable and strategic export promotion (Klasen and Janus 2023). Beyond their traditional role in facilitating economic growth and job creation through access to international markets, they now actively

***Political dimension: Power and influence***

The political dimension is essentially about power, and power is used to find and enforce decisions in social systems. Structures for maintaining authority are among the essential elements of the political dimension. In teams with a strong political dimension, the use of power and influence is seen as rational.

***Legal dimension: Formal and informal rules***

Rules are formulated for specific situations and define what is prohibited or permitted. When actors stress out the regulative prescriptions in organizations, they often develop standardized or formalized procedures of deciding and acting. In teams that exhibit a high level of the legal dimension, compliance with rules and governance via rules are seen as rational.

***Economic dimension: Monetary transactions***

The economic dimension is about transactional processes that seek to eliminate the inequality of distribution inherent in the system. In teams with a strong economic dimension, an orientation towards monetary transactions is seen as rational.

***Social dimension: Human centrality, Interaction and Integration***

People and their relationships form the core of the social dimension. The aim of the social dimension is to integrate the individual participants into a coherent and consistent social system. In teams that exhibit a high level of social dimension, maintaining peaceful coexistence and inclusion is considered rational.

***Technical dimension: Functionality and purpose***

The technical dimension is geared towards the respective matter or effective problem solving (functionality / fulfilment of function). The effectiveness of the action, i.e. its lasting effect in relation to the objective, is decisive. In teams with a high level of technical dimension, prioritizing the functionality of a solution is seen as rational.

***Creative dimension: The value in itself***

The creative dimension is about actions for their own sake based on inner convictions. In teams that exhibit a high level of creative dimension, the development of innovative ideas is seen as rational, even if they do not directly serve an entrepreneurial purpose.

**FIGURE 1** | Six dimensions of rationality (Schedler et al. 2024).

support goals such as environmental sustainability, social development, and geopolitical stability (Akita 2022). They are pivotal in advancing energy and infrastructure projects that promote clean technologies and resilient systems (Wright 2011), particularly in politically or economically vulnerable regions. Moreover, by stabilizing trade flows during economic crises, export promotion organizations contribute to long-term global economic resilience.

Klasen et al. (2024) emphasize that a number of geopolitical and megatrends influence the activities of EPOs: Geopolitical power

struggles and nationalist movements (Power); new industrial policies and a curtailment of the free market (Economy); a new dominance of the climate narrative leading to a greater politicization of export promotion (Climate); a dynamic interplay of population growth and migration (People); digitalization and innovation (Technology); and new rules and regulations in various sectors (Regulation). These six trends shape the organizational environment of the EPOs. The purely economic perspective has been supplemented by other political objectives, such as the question of ecologically sustainable development (Klasen

et al. 2022) or global energy issues (Wright 2011). Changes in the institutional environment such as an increasing politicization of export promotion can lead to changes in the internal functioning of export promotion organizations (Wilkinson and Brouthers 2006).

Organizational theory assumes that changes in the environment of organizations lead to different expectations in the organizational field, to which organizations respond (Besharov and Smith 2014). Following this logic, we assume that EPOs have adapted their internal structure to changing needs of their relevant stakeholders (Townley 2002). The internal structure of EPOs is central to their ability to enhance firms' competitiveness and export performance (Ferreira and Teixeira 2012). Effective EPOs deliver a range of services, including the provision of market intelligence and support for navigating foreign market complexities (Jordana et al. 2010). By implementing national export promotion programs, EPOs bolster the resources and capabilities of firms, particularly benefiting smaller and less experienced exporters. Thus, the mechanisms through which these organizations design and adjust their service portfolios are highly relevant.

### 3 | Method

The purpose of this study was to understand the organizational context and the rationality of decision makers within export promotion organizations. For this, the study employed a mixed method approach (Creswell 1999) to explore the rationality of working teams within organizational contexts. We selected 31 decision makers within EPOs (see Appendix 1) from private, government, and supranational organizations. Primary data collection was conducted on a voluntary basis with confidentiality and anonymity guaranteed. Only one participant per organization took part in our study. We are aware that these participants' perceptions of how the teamwork may differ from a complete survey of the teams. Initially, every participant completed a standardized survey designed to assess perceptions of rationality within their respective teams. This survey served as a foundational measure to capture baseline perspectives across participants. Subsequently, we conducted semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into the contextual dynamics surrounding team operations (Hammer and Wildavsky 1993). This design of mixing qualitative and quantitative methods allowed us to first measure rationalities and second to interpret the results on the basis of qualitative data related to the context of the interviewees.

These interviews probed into a range of relevant themes, including the formal organizational structure and goals, and interviewees' observations of broader sectoral trends and developments. By combining structured survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews, this approach provided a comprehensive understanding of both the individual and contextual factors influencing the team's rationality.

For the *structured component* of our study, we employed the rationality questionnaire developed by Schedler et al. (2024), utilizing an abbreviated version consisting of 24 items, as outlined on the 'rationalities.ch' platform (see Appendix 2). This instrument

assesses six dimensions of rationality—economic, legal, social, political, creative, and technical—each represented by four distinct items. The order of items was randomized for each participant to mitigate response bias. Respondents provided their assessments on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

In the *open component*, the interviewees were asked to describe their professional background and their current work context before answering the questions of the survey. Data were analyzed immediately, with findings visualized through a six-dimensional radar chart (Wen-Yuan et al. 2008). This visual representation was subsequently presented to participants, who were invited to interpret and discuss the results in a postinterview reflection (Rawlings et al. 2021). Emphasis was placed on two key areas: the perceived plausibility of the chart's outcomes ("Does this evaluation resonate with you?") and participants' reasoning behind the specific chart shape observed. This approach aimed to prompt immediate reflection and encourage participants to offer deeper insights into the rationality of their team through narrative explanations. These data were incorporated into the interpretation of the clusters.

Data analysis included two steps: First, all conversations were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by two researchers using an inductive coding procedure to ensure a data-driven approach (Saldaña 2013). Inductive coding formed the main part of the analysis. It allowed themes to emerge directly from the interview data without relying on prior assumptions. This approach helped identify how organizational rationalities in EPOs develop. To establish consistency and reliability in coding, the first three transcripts were double-coded by both researchers (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). This process involved iterative discussions to identify emerging themes and agree on initial codes, which were then consolidated into a comprehensive codebook. The codebook served as a standardized reference for the subsequent analysis of the remaining interviews. Through this approach, a total of 433 codes were generated, reflecting the breadth and depth of the data. These codes were then organized into categories and themes to capture the underlying patterns and insights within the interviews. In a second round, all interviews were analyzed again in order to discuss unclear assignments in the team. This was followed by deductive coding using the megatrends from Klasen et al. (2024) as a predefined code structure. The deductive coding component is smaller and targeted. Because external context can shape organizational rationalities, we used it to verify our assumptions about the environment in which EPOs operate. This part of the analysis relied on the mega-trends in export finance outlined by Klasen et al. (2024): Climate, Economy, People, Power, Regulation, and Technology. Our findings confirmed these wider developments and supported our assumptions about the organizational context within which our inductive findings are embedded. The multiple analysis led to increased certainty that the statements of the interview partners had been reliably understood and recorded.

Second, in the analysis of the survey results, we employed a k-means clustering algorithm (Ikotun et al. 2023) to systematically categorize respondents into distinct groups on the basis of their ratings across the six dimensions: legal, economic, political, technical, social, and creative. Prior to clustering, the data

were normalized using  $z$  scores to ensure that all dimensions were treated on a comparable scale, mitigating the influence of differences in magnitude across variables. The  $k$ -means method partitions data points into  $k$  clusters by minimizing the within-cluster variance, with initial clusters determined randomly and iteratively refined. The optimal number of clusters ( $k=3$ ) was selected on the basis of interpretability and the underlying patterns of the dataset.

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess the differences between the three identified clusters (Cluster 0, Cluster 1, and Cluster 2) across the six dimensions. The ANOVA results indicate that there are statistically significant differences between the clusters across all six dimensions. The  $p$ -values for each dimension are well below the 0.05 threshold, suggesting that at least one cluster differs significantly from the others in each category. The  $F$ -statistics further support this by showing relatively high values, meaning the variance between groups is larger than the variance within groups (Table 1).

To further explore these differences, we conducted post hoc pairwise comparisons using Tukey's honest significant difference (HSD) test (Abdi and Williams 2010). Tukey's HSD provided pairwise mean differences, adjusted  $p$ -values, and confidence intervals for each dimension (Table 2). The results demonstrate significant pairwise differences between specific clusters for multiple dimensions, highlighting how these groups differ in their profiles across key variables.

We follow Schedler et al. (2019) in using simple matching to capture similarities among the variables. In the absence of a universally accepted decision rule for determining the ideal number of clusters, methodological literature recommends evaluating multiple solutions and selecting the one that offers the greatest interpretability (Backhaus et al. 2011; Mooi and Sarstedt 2011).

## 4 | Findings

The findings suggest that the clusters represent distinct groups with meaningful differences across the six dimensions. For instance, Cluster 0 consistently shows higher mean scores on most dimensions than Clusters 1 and 2, suggesting that members of Cluster 0 may demonstrate stronger attributes in areas such as technical expertise and creativity. Conversely, Cluster 1 exhibits lower scores on dimensions like social and creative, indicating potential limitations in these areas. Cluster 2, although

generally intermediate, displays unique patterns in legal and economic dimensions.

### 4.1 | Rationality Patterns

The evaluation of the survey data gives an indication of how the rationalities of the teams in the EPOs are composed. The cluster analysis reveals three distinct groups of respondents based on their ratings across the six dimensions used. The respective levels of the six dimensions of rationality are visualized in radar charts, which allow for quick visual differentiation.

#### 4.1.1 | Balanced High Performers

Cluster 0 embraces 16 out of 31 interviews and demonstrates the highest scores across most dimensions, particularly in the economic, technical, and creative dimensions, suggesting a well-rounded and high-performing profile. This group likely represents respondents who are optimistic or broad in their assessments, valuing creativity, economic factors, and technical capacity, which may align with individuals favoring comprehensive and balanced development approaches. It is noticeable in the composition of this group that practically all interviewees (with one exception) work for private organizations, state-owned enterprises, or multilateral development banks. This leads to a more corporate-oriented organizational spirit (Figure 2).

Particularly in large financial organizations, the interviewees perceive corporate guidelines that were not explicitly developed for the (focused) task fulfillment of the team responsible for export promotion, such as high social standards or high compliance requirements, which are reflected in the corresponding dimensions. This is in addition to the specific requirements for the team's problem-solving ability (found in the technical and creative dimensions), which ultimately explains the balanced shape of the radar chart.

At [our company], 'take care for the others' is very strongly cultivated ... The fact that creative is high doesn't really surprise me, because I have a business creation role. The high political dimension doesn't surprise me either. If you want to propose something new, it's very important that you can convince the right person in the company.

(Interview 25)

#### 4.1.2 | Low-Rating Conservatives

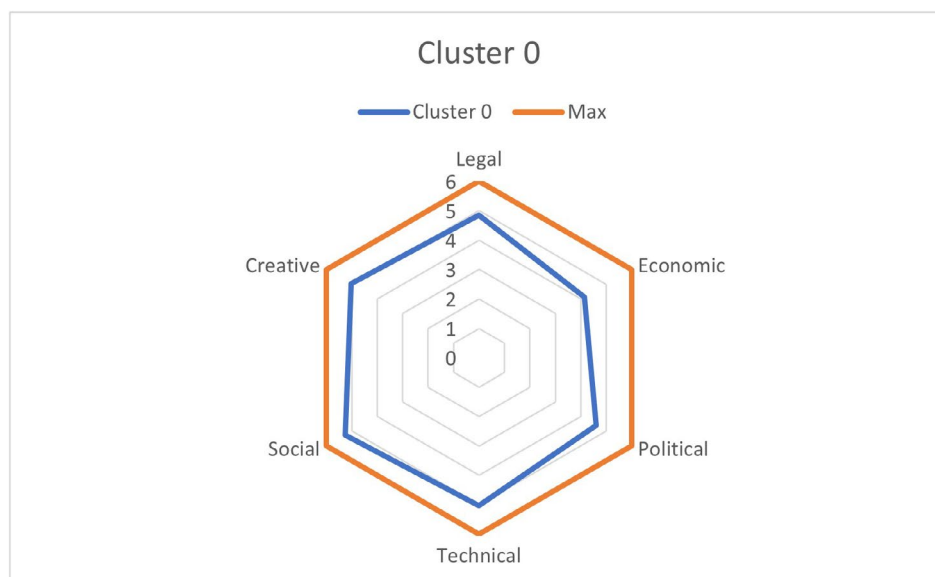
Cluster 1 embraces 10 out of 31 EPOs. It exhibits the lowest scores across all dimensions, with particularly low ratings in economic and social dimensions compared with those in the other clusters, indicating a more critical or conservative evaluation style. This cluster appears to reflect a group with stricter or more conservative judgment, potentially prioritizing realism over idealism in their evaluations. Interviewees in this cluster are—with one example, a highly regulated branch of a private bank—working in EPOs that are government agencies. This means that financial

TABLE 1 | Corrected ANOVA results.

	<i>F</i> -value	<i>p</i>
Legal dimension	10.1695	0.0005
Economic dimension	10.1973	0.0005
Political dimension	13.3249	0.0001
Technical dimension	13.4767	0.0001
Social dimension	8.4375	0.0014
Creative dimension	6.9598	0.0037

**TABLE 2** | Tukey's mean differences.

Dimension	Group 1	Group 2	Mean diff	p-adj	Lower	Upper
Legal dimension	0	1	-0.68	0.06	-1.39	0.03
Legal dimension	0	2	-1.58	0.00	-2.45	-0.70
Legal dimension	1	2	-0.89	0.07	-1.85	0.06
Economic dimension	0	1	-1.28	0.00	-2.00	-0.56
Economic dimension	0	2	-0.79	0.09	-1.68	0.09
Economic dimension	1	2	0.49	0.43	-0.47	1.45
Political dimension	0	1	-0.76	0.00	-1.20	-0.31
Political dimension	0	2	-0.86	0.00	-1.41	-0.32
Political dimension	1	2	-0.11	0.90	-0.70	0.49
Technical dimension	0	1	-0.93	0.00	-1.44	-0.41
Technical dimension	0	2	0.42	0.25	-0.22	1.05
Technical dimension	1	2	1.34	0.00	0.65	2.03
Social dimension	0	1	-0.82	0.00	-1.35	-0.28
Social dimension	0	2	0.02	1.00	-0.64	0.67
Social dimension	1	2	0.83	0.02	0.12	1.55
Creative dimension	0	1	-0.78	0.01	-1.35	-0.22
Creative dimension	0	2	0.22	0.72	-0.48	0.91
Creative dimension	1	2	1.00	0.01	0.24	1.76



**FIGURE 2** | Balanced high performers.

incentives for team members are less important than in private for-profit organizations (which are mainly found in Cluster 0; Figure 3).

Various statements from interviewees in this team of meaning make it clear that the organizational context close to the government has an important influence on how the teams function in the respective EPO. This explains, *inter alia*, the

low level of the economic dimension compared with that in the other two clusters:

... as a government department, ... we do have a mandate around creating value for the ... economy, but it is value understood in that broad sense rather than transactional.

(Interview 23)

### 4.1.3 | Focused Problem Solvers

Focused Problem Solvers, with five respondents, are the smallest cluster and the only one with a distinct shape. It shows an emphasis on creative, social, and technical dimensions. This cluster highlights a distinct team with a narrower focus on interpersonal and technical capabilities. The combination of high values for creative, social, technical, and low values for legal, economic, political suggests that teams are at work here that take a pragmatic approach to problems and do not prioritize formal rules and relationship patterns. In contrast to the other two clusters, this relatively small team does not exhibit any typical organizational characteristics. We find here two multilateral organizations, one commercial bank, and two SOEs. Typically, respondents justify their lower characterization of the legal dimension by distinguishing between formal rules and their deeper meaning (Figure 4).

The interviewees in this team show a relatively high degree of independence from organizational guidelines and regulations, which enables them to focus clearly on solution-oriented and creative teamwork.

All the rules and norms are important but many of them are not very logical, and if you continue to follow strictly in an environment like [ours], you would not be able to do anything basically. You have to be flexible.

(Interview 6)

### 4.2 | Field-Level Factors: Trends and Challenges

EPOs operate within a distinctive institutional framework and organizational field that shape their goals and challenges (Aalto and Gustafsson 2020), as revealed through

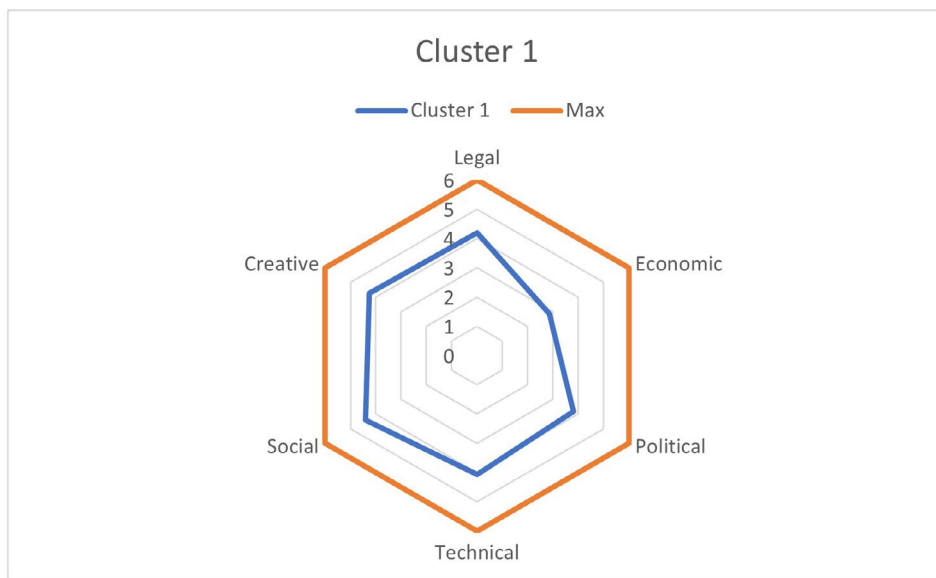


FIGURE 3 | Low-rating conservatives.

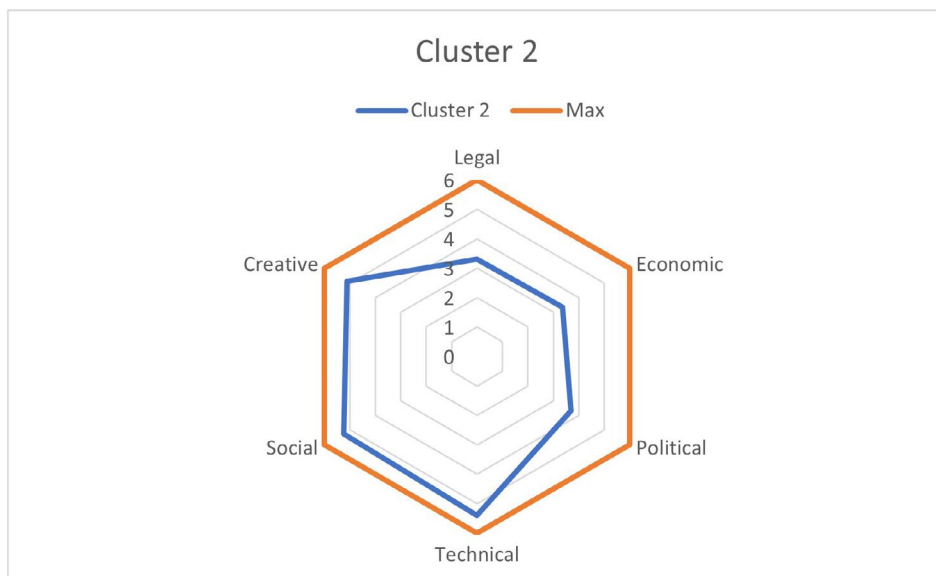


FIGURE 4 | Focused Problem Solvers.

the analysis of interview data. The study highlights both enduring objectives and evolving trends within these organizations. Consistent with the extant literature (Aalto and Gustafsson 2020), interviewees affirmed that export promotion aims to enhance national economic stability by bolstering the competitiveness of exporting firms. This economic function indirectly generates social benefits, such as job preservation, improved living standards for workers and farmers, and broader economic development. Notably, a growing emphasis on sustainability has emerged, with increasing prioritization of environmentally responsible projects over those with adverse ecological impacts. These insights underscore the dynamic interplay between traditional economic objectives and contemporary sustainability imperatives in the strategic orientation of EPOs.

As part of the evaluation of the interviews, we used the *trends* identified by Klasen et al. (2024) as important for global trade as a deductive element: Power, Economy, Climate, People, Technology, and Regulation. In order to provide an indication of whether certain topics are more or less present for a cluster, we undertake a frequency analysis (Mayring 2015). Here, it can be seen that all trends were mentioned by all three groups. The team of Focused Problem Solvers (Cluster 2) particularly emphasizes the new economic conditions such as industrial policy and national competitions. They also emphasize the trend toward increased regulation more than the other two teams, whereas

they place less emphasis on the geopolitical muscle-flexing of nations. The Balanced High Performers (Cluster 0), who tend to have a more corporate-oriented approach to export promotion, on the other hand, tend to rate economic shifts as less influential, as do changes to population and technology. The team of Low-rating Conservatives (Cluster 1) appears to be the most balanced. Finally, it is striking that power and climate are mentioned significantly more often than the other trends (see Table 3).

As part of an inductive coding of the interviews (Mayring 2015), we looked for statements that describe the key *challenges* for the EPOs. Data suggest that many challenges are related to the trends described by Klasen et al. (2024). The most frequently mentioned are growing political influence, strict regulations and geopolitical tensions, and the associated need to strike a balance between commercial success and (politically expected) social impact or between restrictive regulation and necessary creativity and innovation. Here, too, it is noticeable that the group of Focused Problem Solvers (Cluster 2) primarily address the regulation and economic shifts that restrict them in finding creative solutions. The more corporate-oriented Balanced High Performers (Cluster 0) feel challenged above all by conflicting stakeholder expectations, climate narratives, and geopolitical tensions, whereas they do not particularly emphasize inefficient markets or increasing regulation. Low-rating Conservatives (Cluster 1), on the other hand, who tend to be close to the government, feel no economic pressure and suffer little from regulations and conflicting stakeholder expectations (see Table 4).

As one example, the tradeoff between a deep-rooted financial perspective (commercial success) and a more charitable development perspective (social impact) is repeatedly addressed in the interviews. A member of the groups of Balanced High Performers describes it:

... if we are in the classic funding relationship, we follow the logic that we generally assume that the funding will be repaid. The conflict arises when we

**TABLE 3** | Trends mentioned by interviewees.

Trends	Mentions	Cluster 0 (%)	Cluster 1 (%)	Cluster 2 (%)
Power	38	46.97	42.53	10.51
Economy	6	9.28	30.47	60.24
Climate	25	37.98	34.63	27.38
People	14	15.52	50.93	33.56
Technology	12	18.69	40.89	40.42
Regulation	12	21.19	19.88	58.93

**TABLE 4** | Challenges mentioned by interviewees.

Challenges	Mentions	Cluster 0 (%)	Cluster 1 (%)	Cluster 2 (%)
Navigating Growing Political Influence	25	42.53	57.47	
Strict Regulations	24	30.35	11.72	57.93
Tradeoff between Commercial Success and Social Impact	21	56.42	43.58	
Geopolitical Tension and Complexity	19	61.90	38.10	
Tradeoff between Regulation and Creativity/Innovation	17	15.88	32.59	51.53
Stakeholders' Expectations	16	82.05	17.95	
Climate/Sustainability	14	64.64	35.36	
Market Inefficiencies	12	12.25	24.13	63.61
Economic Pressure	7	48.04		51.96
Covid-19 Pandemic	5	54.93	45.07	

join forces with the development aid and financing side or development institution in order to make politically desired projects fundable.

(Interview 11)

Some Low-rating Conservatives specifically mention the regulated, rather bureaucratic culture that they experience in their organization or team. The associated reticence is probably one of the reasons why the average ratings in most dimensions are in the center of the scale.

... the rules and regulations are very high, create a bureaucratic culture [even if we] sometimes don't understand why this is necessary to be regulated.

(Interview 28)

### 4.3 | Organization-Level Factors: Organizational Goals

A key contextual factor for the work of teams in EPOs is the goals set for them by their organization. It is particularly striking that the interviewees in the Focused Problem Solvers team (Cluster 2) did not talk about goals set by their organization in any of the interviews. In contrast, the members of the more corporate-oriented Balanced High Performers (Cluster 0) frequently report goals that relate to creating social impact and relatively rarely report a mandate from the government. The more government-oriented Low-rating Conservatives (Cluster 1) mention the government mandate more frequently than average and the social impact less frequently (see Table 5).

As an example for organization-specific context factors, members of the Low-rating Conservatives describe their working environment as risk-averse. Some interviewees explain the relatively mediocre development of the creative and technical dimensions with the limited opportunities they are confronted with. Although creativity and functionality of the solutions are demanded, when it comes down to it, the limitations win out over the wishes. Additionally, some argue that the industry as such is very traditional, lacking competition and is risk-averse; therefore, it has not evolved into something new.

I think a lot of leaders say that, yes, we need creative solutions, but the reality is that in my context, in a risk context, ... you can't be surprising.

(Interview 14)

## 5 | Discussion

In this study, we explored two central research questions: First, which rationalities exist in teams within Export Promotion Organizations, and how they can be categorized; and second, how the field-level and organizational contexts shape these rationalities. Our data suggest that there are three distinct groups, each sharing its own specific rationality.

The different characteristics of the six dimensions of rationality, as depicted in the simplified questionnaire by Schedler et al. (2024), can be demonstrated both visually and statistically. We were able to show that the three groups have a different organizational context: The Balanced High Performers are embedded in a more corporate-oriented context, whereas the Low-Rating Conservatives are embedded in a government-oriented context. Although business-oriented teams are also subject to economic constraints and therefore display a very balanced radar chart, government-oriented teams can function without economic constraints, which is reflected in the lower degree of economic rationality. This contrasts with the Focused Problem Solvers, who define themselves or their organizational mission much more independently and accordingly place little value on regulations and economic constraints. With five representatives, this group was the smallest found here. These are probably specific teams that solve problems for the other teams in the organizations. The fact that the organizational context is also of great importance in the fulfillment of public tasks is consistent with current research findings (Demircioglu 2020). It is not surprising that the teams experience themselves in a hybrid context that challenges them on all dimensions of rationality and that they react to this with a multidimensional rationality and hybrid professionalism (Calderón et al. 2005; Noordegraaf 2015).

All three teams describe the same current trends in their organizational field, albeit with very different characteristics. On the one hand, this confirms the description of the megatrends by Klasen et al. (2024), but on the other hand, it shows that these trends do not have the same significance for all actors in EPOs. This impression is reinforced by the perceived challenges in which the three teams differ significantly. The choice of organizational form in which an EPO is institutionally embedded appears to have a central influence on the perception of the organizational field by the teams active in it. Thus, there is probably not always a direct relationship between institutionalized expectations in the field and the micro-level manifestations of rationality, but the institutional embedding of the organization is likely to be a key moderator (Steensma and Corley 2001). That is, actors also base their decisions on the expectations of their institutional environment (Delmas and Toffel 2011).

TABLE 5 | Organizational goals mentioned by interviewees.

Organizational goals	Mentions	Cluster 0 (%)	Cluster 1 (%)	Cluster 2
Creating Social Impact	22	75.29	24.71	
Stabilizing and supporting the economy	17	49.75	50.25	
Challenging Mandate	5	54.93	45.07	
Government Mandate	4	23.35	76.65	

The economic and political dimensions tend to be below average across all three teams. This may seem surprising at first, as export promotion is a business with a strong economic focus. However, the rationality of a team does not only reflect the logic of a field of activity but also describes the way in which a social group functions and interacts with each other (Cabantous et al. 2009). Our findings indicate that for successful task fulfillment within EPO teams, financial incentives and power dynamics play a comparatively minor role internally, whereas dimensions such as creativity, social cohesion, and technical problem-solving take precedence. In times marked by geopolitical tensions, economic protectionism, and regulatory uncertainties, these dimensions may facilitate more adaptive and resilient organizational behaviors.

## 6 | Conclusion

This research project contributes to the scientific discourse on two levels: On the theoretical level, we show that although there is a relationship between institutional expectations and developments in the organizational field and the rationalities of teams in organizations, this is moderated by the organizational embedding of the teams. This explicitly addresses our second research question by showing how field-level factors are filtered through organizational structures. The rationality of the team as a social group thus reacts to institutional expectations at the organizational level, provided that these are expressed. At the empirical level of export promotion, we show that decision-makers in EPOs perceive megatrends with different weighting and that the associated perceived challenges depend centrally on whether the actors are in a corporate-oriented, a government-oriented, or an independent environment. This directly answers our first research question by categorizing rationalities into clearly distinguishable clusters based on their organizational contexts.

We see the practical relevance of our findings primarily in the fact that they make the significance of the organizational form for EPOs transparent. For policymakers, this underscores the importance of carefully considering the institutional design of EPOs. Specifically, policymakers must be aware that assigning export promotion responsibilities to corporate-oriented, government-oriented, or independent organizations will fundamentally shape how these entities respond to current global trade disruptions. For the decision-makers in EPOs (and thus probably also for some of their decisions), it is also likely to be relevant whether they are active in a corporate-oriented, a government-oriented, or a more independent form of organization with the different institutional expectations in each case. The institutional developers of EPOs should be aware of these correlations. You made your bed, now lie in it.

## 7 | Limitations and Further Research

This study has limitations. First, our research focuses on a specific sample of Export Promotion Organizations (EPOs), including multilateral organizations, multilateral banks, and government agencies. Although our mixed method approach provides valuable insights into rationality patterns within these organizations, the findings may not be directly

generalizable to all EPOs worldwide. Future studies should expand the scope by examining a broader range of EPOs, including private sector organizations and smaller scale initiatives, to assess whether similar rationality clusters emerge in different institutional settings.

Second, our analysis primarily relies on self-reported perceptions from high-ranking executives. Although this approach provides deep insights into how teams within EPOs perceive their rationality and decision-making contexts, the results may also be influenced by response style. Our approach does not capture how these rationalities translate into actual decision-making behaviors. Future research should integrate observational studies or experimental designs to assess how rationality patterns manifest in real-world decision-making processes within EPOs.

Third, although our study highlights the role of institutional and organizational contexts in shaping rationalities, it does not explicitly analyze how these rationalities evolve over time in response to external pressures such as political shifts, regulatory changes, or economic crises. Given recent developments in global trade, including escalating trade conflicts and multipolar dynamics, future research should explicitly track how such events reshape internal rationalities of EPO teams over extended periods. Future research thus should adopt a longitudinal approach.

By addressing these limitations, future research can build on our findings to develop a more comprehensive understanding of rationality in EPOs and its implications for export promotion strategies and policymaking. Such research is particularly valuable as it can guide policymakers and organizational leaders in designing EPOs capable of effectively responding to evolving global trade challenges.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because of privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## Appendix 1

### List of Interviewees

No	Position	Type of organization	Cluster
1	Senior Director	Large export company	0
2	Executive Board Member	Private agent, acting as government export credit agency	0
3	Political Advisor	Ministerial department	1
4	Head of Sustainability and Communications	Commercial bank, financing exports	0
5	Ambassador	Ministerial department	0
6	Executive Director	Multilateral organization	2
7	Managing Director	Commercial bank, financing exports	0
8	COO	Multilateral development bank	0
9	Senior Director	Independent government export credit agency	1
10	Director	Multilateral development bank	0
11	Managing Director	Commercial bank, financing exports	0
12	Director	Independent government export credit agency	0
13	Director	Multilateral organization	2
14	CRO	Independent government export credit agency	1
15	ESG Analyst	Private agent, acting as government export credit agency	0
16	CEO	Commercial bank, financing exports	2
17	Head of Structured Export Finance	SOE, financing exports	0
18	CEO	SOE, bank financing exports	0
19	Head of Political Risk, Credit and Surety	Privat credit and political risk insurer	0
20	Director General	Multilateral development bank	0
21	President & CIO	SOE, government export credit agency	2
22	Head of Large Corporates	SOE, government export credit agency	2
23	Deputy Director	Government department and export credit agency	1
24	CEO	SOE, government export credit agency	1
25	Senior Client Manager	Reinsurance company	0
26	President & CEO	Independent government export credit agency	0
27	CEO	SOE, government export credit agency	0
28	General Manager	SOE, government export credit agency	1
29	Director General	Independent government export credit agency	1
30	Global Head	Commercial bank, financing exports	1
31	Secretary General	Industry association	1

## Appendix 2

### Rationality Survey Items by Schedler et al. (2024)

Dimension	In our community of meaning ...
Legal	... we strictly adhere to formal rules
Legal	... we expect each person to strictly comply with internal directives.
Legal	... we adhere to regulations that determine what behavior is permissible.
Legal	... to follow the rules is a good argument.
Economic	... it is important to generate financial gains with our actions
Economic	... everything has its (monetary) price.
Economic	... incentives are effective when they involve monetary payments.
Economic	... actions are considered right if they promise a profit.
Political	... we expect others to want to have more influence.
Political	... influence is considered an important characteristic.
Political	... we strive to attract influential people.
Political	... colleagues with great power are considered successful.
Technical	... we strive for a perfect solution.
Technical	... it is important that things fulfill their purpose.
Technical	... something that doesn't work needs to be fixed.
Technical	... we develop solutions so that they fulfill a given purpose.
Social	... the well-being of others is a good argument.
Social	... we expect supervisors to also take care of employees' personal concerns.
Social	... we take into account the individual life situations of our employees.
Social	... we pay attention to whether others are well.
Creative	... unusual ideas are encouraged.
Creative	... thinking «out of the box» is a good argument.
Creative	... it is desired to try new things.
Creative	... it is a compliment to be original.

Note: Source for the shortened version: [www.rationalities.ch](http://www.rationalities.ch).