

DISADVANTAGED
ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND
THE ENTREPRENEURIAL
ECOSYSTEM

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP RESEARCH

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DISADVANTAGED ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

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FOREWORD

There is no doubt that the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem concept is rapidly gaining popularity both in academic and policy circles: a quick search in a major management, entrepreneurship, or regional development journal tells us this much. Likewise, organizations such as the OECD and national and regional policymakers continue to deploy the concept as a blueprint for helping to stimulate and support high growth entrepreneurship for wider economic development aims. Therein, however, lies the sticking point with these debates to date: they have been focused overwhelmingly on so-called high-growth entrepreneurship, and have been woefully lacking in their consideration of other types of entrepreneurs.

This has left a significant blind spot in our understanding of already existing entrepreneurial ecosystems, inhabited by real-life entrepreneurs, which in turn undermines the concept's efficacy and tenancy in a policy toolkit. As this collection recognises, this is a concerning gap which needs to be addressed if we are to truly understand how to support entrepreneurial activity on a society-wide plane. This becomes even more urgent as the ongoing Covid-19 crisis has the potential to further entrench inequalities between rich and poor and has thrown up considerable challenges for entrepreneurs.

This large conceptual gap which exists in contemporary entrepreneurial ecosystem thinking is not going to be filled by one collection alone, but this book makes great progress in beginning to open our eyes and stretch our thinking around entrepreneurial ecosystems to consider groups, places, and perspectives that have so far largely been missing from the conversation. It also adds into the mix vital intersectional perspectives, which are no doubt crucial to the ecosystems discussion. Specifically, by elucidating the experiences of poor, woman, migrant, refugee, and social entrepreneurs, and by shining a light onto geographical contexts largely overlooked in the literature to date, such as deprived areas and regions in the Global South, the chapters in this book force us to think more broadly about who an entrepreneur is, what they do, and how an entrepreneurial ecosystem looks and functions. Specifically, contributions which unpack the motivations of in-poverty entrepreneurs, interrogate the issue of human capital in deprived areas, take an intersectional lens to studying women-migrant entrepreneurs, center social entrepreneurship in the debate and focus our attention on refugee entrepreneurs, are ideal examples of work that pushes us out of our comfort zone of studying the usual suspects, into new and exciting waters.

In addition to filling gaps in our theoretical conceptualization of entrepreneurial ecosystems, the collection of works in this book provide some tangible suggestions and lessons for better policy regarding entrepreneurial ecosystems, potentially useful for the public sector, NGOs and civil society actors who invest in projects and programs to support entrepreneurship. For example, by asking

questions about what really drive in-poverty entrepreneurs, exploring the human capital dimensions of entrepreneurship in deprived regions, and exploring the experience of women migrants entrepreneurs, our knowledge about the realities for groups that have been largely overlooked by policy responses to entrepreneurship in the past is increased. Therefore, our ability to design good entrepreneurial support, and avoid the inappropriate application or wastage of precious public funds, is increased. By filling institutional voids impacting the most vulnerable members of society, such as through targeted support schemes and establishing specialized incubators, there is a great potential to create supportive environments for all kinds of entrepreneurs.

In this collection we see a broadening with regards scholarship on entrepreneurial ecosystems taking place. By collecting diverse contributions under the general theme of disadvantaged entrepreneurship, the kinds of entrepreneurs, and contexts of ecosystems, considered under the entrepreneurial ecosystem rubric is substantially advanced. As this collection points out initially, thus far the majority of work on under-represented groups in ecosystem works have focused on women entrepreneurs whereas the other groups dealt with in this collection, plus the intersectional view of them, are massively under explored. Thinking along the lines of layered “triple disadvantages” impacting women migrant entrepreneurs from poor countries, helps us to think about those most in need to support, and where the allocation of resources is likely to have high impact. With chapters ranging from empirical to theoretical, and displaying a range of methods of enquiry and analysis, we see that the possibilities for exploring disadvantaged entrepreneurship within ecosystems are huge.

Our understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems, in both their structures and practices, shifts from a type of best practice model, towards one which is more appreciative of sub optimal operating environments and outcomes, moving us away from the high-growth discourse which has dominated discussions to date. By pushing the entrepreneurial ecosystems concept out of its comfort zone we are forced to ask the big questions of *why* do we need well functioning entrepreneurial ecosystems in all places, and *who* benefits. We may not find all of the answers in these pages but we certainly find some clues and hints that set us off on the right path, and it is exciting to see how the field of entrepreneurial ecosystem research is constantly broadening and challenging our norms and assumptions about entrepreneurship in place. My own hope is that this collection is read, cited, and reflected upon by those within the “core” of entrepreneurial ecosystem research, so that it can herald a real shift in the predominant thinking away from only high-growth entrepreneurship in a small handful of places and sectors, and that the field will advance in a more critical and inclusive manner which will help to establish support for entrepreneurial ecosystems that are aimed towards helping the many and not only increasing the wealth and privilege of the few. Also, galvanizing those hidden or under-supported communities of entrepreneurs could have a great potential for regional development, as more of the entrepreneurial and growth potential within society is actualised.

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CHAPTER 1

DISADVANTAGED ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW AND INTRODUCTION

Shuangfa Huang, David Pickernell, Martina Battisti,
Zoe Dann and Carol Ekinsmyth

ABSTRACT

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are tasked with driving economic recovery globally, particularly through knowledge diffusion and consequently, government policy-makers strive to encourage innovation activity to benefit their economies. Entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) are increasingly used as a framework through which such policies are funnelled, but an increased focus on high-growth, scale-up entrepreneurship risks overlooking the effects of entrepreneurship on social groups affected by multiple sets of disadvantage. This chapter identifies and analyses the existing research on disadvantaged entrepreneurship and the EE via a systematic review of the literature and then briefly outlines how the chapters contained within this book seek to address the gaps found.

Keywords: Disadvantaged entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial ecosystem; critical literature review; introduction; existing research; gaps

1 INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship and innovation are important in policy terms. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly tasked with driving economic recovery globally (Arshed, Mason, & Carter, 2016; Beynon, Jones, & Pickernell, 2016), particularly through knowledge diffusion (Braunerhjelm, Acs, Audretsch, & Carlsson, 2010). Consequently, government policy-makers strive to encourage innovation activity to benefit their economies (Hausman, 2005).

An entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) approach is now commonly used as a framework through which such policies are funnelled (Pugh, Soetanto, Jack, & Hamilton, 2019). The EE approach emphasises the role of both entrepreneurs and the broader social contexts enabling entrepreneurial actions (Stam, 2015) and is focussed on factors necessary to create and sustain high-growth entrepreneurship within regions (e.g. Audretsch & Belitski, 2017; Pitelis, 2012; Spigel, 2016; Stam, 2015). The EE, as identified by Pugh et al. (2019), includes actors such as universities, science parks and incubators, together with attributes of accessible markets, human capital, funding and finance, support systems, government and regulatory frameworks, education and training and cultural support. It represents a dynamic process-based approach which brings together people, networks and institutions, as well as the entrepreneur and the small business, in multiple flows of knowledge and resources.

The increased focus on high-growth, scale-up entrepreneurship, often facilitated through the EE, however, risks overlooking the effects of entrepreneurship on social groups often affected by multiple sets of disadvantage. The business and entrepreneurship literature is dominated by agency-based, economically driven high-growth entrepreneurship in new start-up enterprises, with a focus on how to encourage and support more of this scale-up activity and an assumption that this is the dominant model of business and venturing.

Increasing research suggests, however, that some groups of entrepreneurs have lesser access to opportunities, resources and networks within EEs (Carter, Mwaura, Ram, Trehan, & Jones, 2015; McAdam, Harrison, & Leitch, 2019). As Blackburn and Smallbone (2014, p. 3) point out, ‘women, youths, seniors, unemployed, disabled, ethnic minorities and immigrants who run a business’ are “disadvantaged” entrepreneurs because they face additional barriers when undertaking entrepreneurship’. As a result, they are often underrepresented within ecosystems.

Entrepreneurs from disadvantaged groups can also face distinct challenges in pursuing entrepreneurship, often perceived by funders as more risky because they lack a track record in running a business (Blackburn & Smallbone, 2014). This implies that disadvantaged entrepreneurs can experience greater difficulties in obtaining finance to start or grow their businesses. The businesses owned by disadvantaged entrepreneurs are also more vulnerable to changes in the environment due to relative small scale.

Recent research has explored the myriad ways in which female entrepreneurs may be disadvantaged in entrepreneurship. Findings have included masculinist cultural norms in the ecosystem which are often cited as potential barriers for women’s participation in entrepreneurship (Ahl & Marlow, 2021). Young entrepreneurs often

experience substantial challenges in pursuing entrepreneurial activities due to lack of business experiences and social capital (Chigunta, 2002; Curtain, 2000), as do entrepreneurs from minority backgrounds, who need to deal with extra challenges caused by different societal and cultural norms in the host country (Blackburn & Smallbone, 2014). Additionally, entrepreneurs may also be disadvantaged due to the geographical regions they are located within, for example, entrepreneurs in rural regions can be disadvantaged in potential to grow their businesses due to limited customer base in such regions (Cowell, Lyon-Hill, & Tate, 2018).

2 THE EXISTING LITERATURE

To identify and analyse the existing literature, a systematic review of the literature was conducted in 2019. This followed a structured and transparent process that includes four steps (Xheneti, Madden, & Thapa Karki, 2019). First, we developed a list of relevant terms for the literature search. Specifically, we used the search terms [ecosystem AND entrepreneur*] to capture the literature concerning the EE.

Literature suggests entrepreneurs may be disadvantaged not only socially but also economically (Lewis, 2017). Entrepreneurs can be socially disadvantaged on the basis of their gender, age, ethnicity, disability, family responsibilities and skills (Carter et al., 2015; McAdam et al., 2019; Shukla & Chauhan, 2018). They can also be economically disadvantaged because of their income, employment status and the geographic regions (e.g. rural areas) they live in (Cowell et al., 2018; Khan, 2017; Lewis, 2017). To capture different groups of disadvantaged entrepreneurs, we developed the following sets of terms including [gender OR women OR woman OR female], [age OR young OR old], [minority OR ethnic* OR immigrant], [disability OR health OR illness OR mobility], [childcare OR mother OR mumpreneur], [skill OR education OR qualification], [employ*] and [regional OR rural OR urban OR core OR peripheral* OR deprived]. The two sets of search terms concerning EEs and the different groups of disadvantaged entrepreneurs were then used in combination to identify relevant literature on EEs in relation to disadvantaged entrepreneurs.

Second, we conducted the literature search using the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, following Johnson and Thakur (2015) and Xheneti et al. (2019). To ensure the results capture evidence across different disciplines, we selected subject areas including 'Social Sciences', 'Economics, Econometrics and Finance' and 'Business, Management and Accounting' from the Scopus database and used the Core Collection in WoS. Consistent with other systematic reviews (Dean, Larsen, Ford, & Akram, 2019; Fitz-Koch, Nordqvist, Carter, & Hunter, 2018), we conducted the search in the title, abstract and keywords using the search terms developed in the first step. We retained only peer-reviewed journal articles as the review process can help to ensure articles are validated by experts in the field. Contributions such as books, book chapters, and conference papers were thus excluded. This literature search procedure resulted in 414 hits from Scopus and 492 hits from WoS. Since a large number of articles were duplicated in the two databases, the sample was reduced to 531 articles after the cleaning process.

The third step entailed analysing the title and abstract of the articles identified from the literature search. We assessed whether the article is relevant based on the criteria that (a) it applied the theoretical lens of EE and (b) it dealt with at least one group of disadvantaged entrepreneurs. Articles that did not fulfil these two conditions were considered as non-relevant and removed from further review. As a result, a total of 77 articles were retained.

We then extracted the full texts of the articles for further assessment. After reading the full texts, we identified only 23 empirical papers relevant to the scope of our review. [Table 1.1](#) shows the characteristics of the papers included in the review. As indicated in this table, research on disadvantaged entrepreneurs using the theoretical lens of EE is relatively young, all contributions being published after 2016. The majority of studies focus on women entrepreneurs with less attention being devoted to entrepreneurs from other disadvantaged groups.

Based on our analysis of the articles, we identified two key themes in relation to EEs and disadvantaged entrepreneurs:

1. the processes associated with EEs; and
2. the relational dynamics of EEs.

The subthemes in relation to the processes associated with and relationship dynamics of EEs are summarised in [Table 1.2](#). As can be seen, women entrepreneurs are the main disadvantaged entrepreneur group analysed to date in the literature, with a much lower number of papers produced evaluating other forms of disadvantage. In addition, issues of intersectionality are very rarely explicitly analysed, though there are some implicit analyses identified.

There is, therefore, relatively little exploration of disadvantaged entrepreneurs from an EE perspective. Additionally, exploration of entrepreneurs in the global south from an ecosystem perspective is even less evident. Simultaneously, whilst self-employment is often hailed as highly suitable for women and migrants – because

Table 1.1. Characteristics of the Empirical Papers Included in the Review.

No. of Papers	Publication Year	Disadvantaged Groups ^a	Methods Used	Geography
23	2016 (3)	Women (15)	Qualitative (10)	Africa (2): Nigeria (1); 35 African countries (1)
	2017 (4)	Youth (4)	Quantitative (12)	Asia (6): Israel (1); Jordan (1); Malaysia and Laos (1); India (2); Saudi Arabia (1)
	2018 (15)	Migrant/ethnicity/minority (4)	Mixed (1)	America (6): USA (6)
	2019 (1)	Low socioeconomic regions (4) Nascent/novice (2)		Europe (1): Portugal (1) Others (8): Latin America (2); Mixed (4); NA (2)

^aTotal number of papers is more than 23 as some papers cover more than one disadvantaged group.

Table 1.2. The Processes Associated With and Relational Dynamics of EEs.

Key Themes	Subthemes
1. The processes associated with EEs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurial intention • Entrepreneurial participation • Re-entry after failure • Support for entrepreneurship
2. The relational dynamics of EEs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurs as connectors within ecosystems • Factors affecting the number and diversity of connections • Policy-making related to network and connection building • The impact of resourcing on networking • Ecosystem intermediaries • Ecosystem stakeholder roles • Entrepreneurs as cross locational network connectors

of its assumed work/life flexibility and ability to bypass discrimination, entrepreneurial ‘disadvantage’, for such groups, is little inspected in the context of the EEs. Where it has been examined, it has often been explored in terms of the absence of ecosystem, rather than in terms of alternative ecosystems/substitutes for ecosystems that may exist.

To summarise therefore, whilst a number of existing papers and narratives focus on the relationship between disadvantage and entrepreneurship, there is a lack of more substantive and current extended work that addresses the subject of disadvantage using an EE lens. Second, it is explicitly recognised that entrepreneurship ecosystems constructed by disadvantaged entrepreneurs will exist beside, within and perhaps in opposition to existing and ‘mainstream’ systems, with relevant dynamics being extremely important. Third, entrepreneurship policy has largely failed to focus on widening engagement in entrepreneurship in recent decades for disadvantaged people and places. By engaging with these issues, this book represents some first steps to addressing this knowledge deficit. A new publication on this topic is therefore needed at this time because of the dearth of previous literature discussing entrepreneurship for disadvantaged groups in the context of the EEs built to support entrepreneurial activity.

3 THE CHAPTERS

Recent events also have the potential to impact in this area. For example, in the UK (and other parts of Europe), austerity and Covid may have had impacts on the ability of disadvantaged individuals and communities to engage in entrepreneurship (via its effects on welfare state provision and public sector structures and support), incentivising alternative ecosystems to emerge but also potentially restricting their ability to do so. This is the case both generally, and also in the context of intersectionality, given the multiple levels of disadvantage that may face potential and actual entrepreneurs. This book therefore addresses how different groups of people in different spatial contexts engage in entrepreneurship and build or access relationships and networks to support their activities. The spatial contexts explored within the chapters span the globe being drawn from

the global south (Latine America, Sierra Leone and Malaysia) and the global north (The UK, Germany and Finland). The collected chapters focus on several novel elements, specifically:

- the background contexts driving disadvantaged groups towards entrepreneurial activity and the existing theory surrounding this, particularly in terms of the role of human capital;
- The role of intersectional factors such as gender, migrant status and location; and
- The roles of activities and stakeholders that can substitute for elements of traditional EEs, assisting disadvantaged entrepreneurs to both develop the absorptive capacity to create and develop their own businesses and potentially begin to access parts of the formal EE.

Chapter 2 explores the (mixed) motivations of those engaged in enterprise and experiencing poverty. Adopting an in-depth, qualitative exploration of motives for enterprise amongst a sample of 42 people in the UK who are experiencing financial hardship, this chapter focuses on the motivations that inform engagement in enterprise creation and operation by individuals experiencing poverty.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework, focussing on the influence of human capital in driving entrepreneurial intentions in deprived areas. This chapter identifies key mechanisms linking formation of appropriate human capital to the prevailing environment, whilst crucially recognising that these influences flow in both directions.

Chapter 4 explores the intersectional roles of gender and location by applying a gendered perspective to Latin American EEs. This chapter uses experts' perceptions of the conditions of their EEs to analyse women's disadvantages, identifying, first, which conditions can be improved for women in comparison to men in Latin America and, second, if the level of development of the economy affects the support women entrepreneurs receive.

Chapter 5 takes into consideration the disadvantages inherent to female migrants and, based on the cases of migrant women entrepreneurs in Finland, evaluates migrant female entrepreneurship and the EE. This chapter argues that inherent biases and a lack of intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches have contributed to inadequate understanding of female entrepreneurial capacity, particularly with regard to the framing of highly skilled migrant women. This chapter addresses these knowledge gaps by focussing on the entrepreneurial experiences of highly skilled female migrants from both developed and developing countries.

Chapter 6 explores how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids. It draws on insights from the Malaysian context in order to close a gap in the literature concerning real-life accounts of how refugee entrepreneurs (as one specific group of disadvantaged entrepreneurs across multiple categories) cope with the constraints imposed on them, using agency, creativity and resourcefulness, to participate in markets.

Chapter 7 explores the relational dynamics within refugee business incubators, focussing on how these incubators help build bridges between refugee

entrepreneurs and the host-country EE. Adopting explorative qualitative research with a single case study of a German business incubator for refugees, this chapter illuminates the role of business incubators in integrating refugee entrepreneurs into the local EE, paying particular attention to relational dynamics within the incubator. Chapter 8 also examines an alternative to more traditional EE mechanisms, by focussing on the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Sierra Leone petty trading EE. It specifically highlights the important role of CSOs in the petty trading (disadvantaged) EE, based on qualitative analysis of interviews undertaken with two CSOs and three entrepreneurial firms from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Chapter 9 focuses on the ecosystem of UK Social Entrepreneurship through a meta-analysis of contemporary studies, to explore social enterprises as another alternative addition to traditional EEs. It reviews the substantial social enterprise literature in order to identify the myriad of competing tensions that constrain the development and success of social EEs in areas of significant poverty and economic deprivation.

Chapter 10, finally, draws conclusions from the contributions made in this book. It also identifies options for policy-makers and areas for future research.

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