

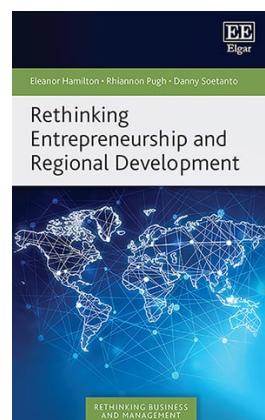
Rethinking Entrepreneurship and Regional Development

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This new volume sets out to "rethink" the relationship between entrepreneurship and regional development. Entrepreneurship is the start-up and growth of firms, usually involving innovation and the creation or development of new ideas, services and products. It usually creates jobs and requires investment too, so *prima facie* its connection to regional development is not in question. The authors do not directly challenge this, but they analyse more nuanced inter-relationships and more complex dynamics of change. The distinctive contributions of the book are to explore how entrepreneurship is about more than profit-seeking activity, and how it relates to regional inequalities, not just regional growth. For AGER readers interested in the fortunes of rural areas, this presents an interesting angle for the interpretation of rural entrepreneurship and rural innovation ecosystems.

A critical tension exists between perceptions of entrepreneurial ecosystems that retain major power imbalances and perceptions of entrepreneurship as a form of emancipation. I am not sure that the book really comes to a conclusion on this issue, but it very powerfully highlights the fact that entrepreneurship is more likely to flourish in areas with good connectivity, resources and skills. Essentially regions with the power to

attract investment and skilled workers, and the power to influence policy, are best place to continue to thrive. At a rural scale, the most effective clusters or ecosystems may look different (Merrell & Charles, 2025). Rural researchers also understand the influence of metrics where sparse regions tend to be disadvantaged by hegemonic approaches to measuring productivity and innovation (Tiwasing et al., 2023).

In light of these concerns, it may be difficult to understand how entrepreneurship can also be emancipatory. Evidence from a vignette on women entrepreneurs' groups in Africa indicates that entrepreneurial activity can provide a route out of poverty. Similarly, chapter 4 provides evidence about how the local and regional engagement of universities and policymakers in the UK can enable entrepreneurship to make a difference; But, can it close the gap or simply ameliorate the impact of inequalities? If we see entrepreneurship as a driver of inequality, where successful firms and skilled labour in peripheral areas are sucked into more dynamic areas, the prospects for regional development are suddenly more questionable. In essence, more "place sensitive" approaches are required (Iammarino et al., 2019).

A whole chapter on the book is devoted to entrepreneurial learning, with the suggestion that this should be a goal in itself to promote regional development. However, a lot of the literature on entrepreneurial learning is drawn from urban clusters where proximity is assumed to be a key factor in the accumulation and deployment of learning. Universities are also seen to play an important role. Following this logic, one wonders what this means for the prospects of more peripheral and sparse rural areas? Not only do they lack the density on knowledge, but the types of knowledge is likely to be qualitatively different. Therefore, too much emphasis on particular types of knowledge are likely to contribute further to urban-rural power imbalances.

These questions lead to a more nuanced interpretation of entrepreneurial ecosystems. In the book, entrepreneurial learning ecosystems are mooted, but I am concerned that we do not need more categories of ecosystem. Instead, we should focus on inequalities and learning processes within broader ecosystem models and use the aggregated model of entrepreneurship, innovation and regional development as the basis to detect strengths and limitations. This approach would also allow a more sensitive inclusion of scale, not just as part of the context that is now well incorporated into entrepreneurship scholarship (Welter et al., 2019), but as a variable of its own. Devolution in the UK presents a good example of how the relationship between entrepreneurship and regional

development operates at multiple scales. If the North West region benefits from the growth of a new entrepreneurial cluster, it might see the narrowing of inter-regional inequalities but, assuming the cluster does not cover the whole territory, it will simultaneously widen internal inequalities. The challenge for regional development policy is therefore two-fold, addressing inequalities at multiple scales as well as promoting traditional forms of growth that continue to influence disposable incomes, demand and broader wellbeing.

The authors address this point in their third question, recognising that entrepreneurs act autonomously to drive growth and, particularly in rural areas, seek to provide better quality of life, essential services in their localities. In parallel, policymakers have responsibilities provide the right balance of infrastructure and support to enable entrepreneurship to thrive in different contexts, and among different types of people. Together, these twin approaches can begin to address the regional inequality conundrum. Entrepreneurship can be emancipatory for rural and "left behind" places if regional policy makers provide the right framework for place-based business growth. If policy is instead dominated by inter-regional competition to hit growth targets or to attract inward investment, however, the prospects for the less well-endowed regions remain bleak. To close the gap, their entrepreneurial endeavours have to outperform those of the successful regions... and even if we change the measurement metrics, that remains an unlikely outcome.

In conclusion, I found the book achieved its goal of stimulating important questions about the roles of entrepreneurship in regional development. Inequalities within and between entrepreneurial ecosystems cannot be addressed solely by importing knowledge from elsewhere nor by relying on endogenous entrepreneurial potential. I agree with their conclusion that entrepreneurial learning is a key factor to connect context with the multiple stakeholders and a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate, especially when we consider rural areas. Reflecting on the role of universities as researchers and as agents of change, providing direct business support programmes training (entrepreneurial) graduates, the legacy of the book will hopefully be to stimulate more civic activities from universities but also a greater willingness for them to listen and learn from heterogeneous contexts. Only then can we hope to encourage something similar from national and regional policymakers too.

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