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Rural entrepreneurship theory in the developing and developed world

Robert Newbery, Juliana Siwale, Andrew Henley

Editorial

Rural areas in the developed world are often regarded as in need of development, a pre-industrial leftover in a linear process of progress (Rostow, 1990). They hold many similarities with rural areas in the developing world. Both contexts have been defined through a peripherality from the centre, leading to uneven levels of development in terms of poverty, inequality and access to resources. Both contexts are often examined through the lenses of community and cultural distinctiveness. Both are the subject of ongoing argument as to whether the rural environment represents a constraint to be removed or offers an opportunity to be celebrated. These contexts appear conceptually close and, as a consequence, one might expect significant theoretical crossover between research into rural entrepreneurship and into international development through entrepreneurship.

Despite these clear commonalities, theoretical crossover between the 'developed' rural and the rural 'developing' context is limited. Conversely, entrepreneurship research shares an implicit and common location in both the urban and the developed context. The rural and developing world contexts are poor cousins to the developed urban (Bosma and Sternberg, 2014; Nijkamp, 2003). They are used as passive recipients on which to test colonial theory established in mature, urbanized economies (Brunton et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, rural entrepreneurship plays a key role in harnessing innovation, maintaining and developing communities, providing job opportunities and moderating the relationship between farming, land-use, community and economic development (Atterton et al., 2011; Newbery and Bosworth, 2014; Phillipson et al., 2011). Despite this importance, as an academic field, rural entrepreneurship is predominately focused on the developed world (Pato and Teixeira, 2014). In turn, the developing world is the territory of international development. The growth of the two fields has been historically separated in their own academic silos. To illustrate how peculiar this is, just 20% of the population in OECD countries live in rural areas, whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa, this figure is 63% (OECD, 2015).

From the point of view that this separation is an academic structural hole (being two networks with very little exchange between them), the Special Issue called for papers to span the gap and facilitate beneficial flows of knowledge between the silos (Burt, 2004). Authors were invited to submit papers and cases where theory could be applied to both the developing and developed rural context. We received submissions that attempted to do this from across the globe and chose seven that highlighted strong similarities and key differences between the contexts.

Papers from Wales and Ghana highlight the importance of networks, communities and the supply chain. Here, networks are regarded as critical to rural entrepreneurial business, providing access to resources and markets. However, while trust was important to both (Davies and Mason-Jones, 2017), the developing context in Ghana results in differential outcomes, suggesting nuances of theory to be further explored (Acheampong et al., 2017). Papers from Scotland and Israel

demonstrate the impact of peripherality and uneven development on often forgotten rural areas. Here, the developed may encompass the developing context, effectively obscuring them from political consideration and resultant support (Burnett and Danson, 2017; Farja et al., 2017). Conversely, papers from India and diverse countries illustrate the magnitude of extremes in developing contexts, where desperate absolute poverty levels cannot easily be equated with relative poverty in developed rural (Ladd, 2017; McKague et al., 2017).

The Special Issue also found a room for one case study and respective teaching note. For this, we selected a case that focuses on the issues relating to growing a rural business for a female entrepreneur (Pathak and Varshney, 2017). The particular context is Bangladesh; however, many of the issues will be familiar in rural Britain, such as the inseparability of business and social issues, and village politics. There are many commonalities to explore. With the addition of one academic's autobiographical review of key rural research influences, we hope that the resulting Special Issue helps to establish clear connections between the two contexts and the fields of rural entrepreneurship and international development. There are areas clearly warranting further research in either context, such as innovative business models for growth in the developed rural or communities of interest in the developing rural. The Special Issue also highlights the importance of comparative contexts in generating, testing and replicating theory that is relevant beyond the de facto urban/developed mould. This is important to develop the field of rural entrepreneurship. As such, we issue a clear call to scholars to conduct dual developed and developing context research that facilitates such comparison and supports new growth in relevant rural entrepreneurship theory.

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