

MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Self-employment as strategy of economic incorporation

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Introduction

The economic incorporation of migrants comes with opportunities and poses challenges all over the world. Both temporal and structural migration help shape a diverse population (regardless of its measurement). Migrants constitute a pool of cheap workers at the lower end of the market, willing to do dirty, dangerous, and dull work, as well as a growing pool of workers at the higher end. While the vast majority of international migrants are economically active as wage earners, a relatively small number choose self-employment and become entrepreneurs.

This chapter seeks to highlight this particular form of economic integration for three reasons. First, the economic impact of migrant entrepreneurs is significant, not only in terms of ‘traditional’ micro-economic indicators – such as personal income, number of employees, added value, and so forth – but also in terms of innovation, market change, and larger economic outreach (Basu and Pruthi 2021). They discover, develop, seize, and exploit new or underserved markets, with or without ethnically specific products, processes, and ways of doing business. Migrant entrepreneurs also help foster third-party entrepreneurial activities – minority and mainstream alike. Second, migrant entrepreneurs are often involved in transnational business activities that affect both receiving and sending countries and sometimes even other countries (Solano 2020). As such, their socio-economic influence is literally far-reaching. And, third, while entrepreneurship is on the rise in general, the rate of migrant entrepreneurship has grown at a quicker pace. The decision to become self-employed can be the result of pull or push factors due to the emergence or disappearance of economic opportunities, some of which can be different from the ones potential mainstream entrepreneurs are facing. The search for these specific drivers and barriers helps to understand the entrepreneurial process of migrants.

As entrepreneurs and markets are strongly interdependent, this chapter touches upon the ‘structure versus agency’ debates in social sciences in general, and the tension between causes and consequences of individual behaviour and structural changes in particular. While the actor – the migrant entrepreneur – actively and often purposefully decides upon, undertakes, and adapts business practices and strategies in the realm of economic market realities (structure), the reverse is also true. Entrepreneurs’ collective behaviour, business activities,

demands for specialised inputs, and incited consumer demands are among the main drivers of change among existing markets or for the creation of new markets. Market structures are also shaped by technological innovations, (de)regulation, international developments, and so on.

In this chapter, we will first highlight the significance of societal and economic relevance of migrant entrepreneurs by discussing both the consequences of structural drivers for self-employment and the entrepreneurs' recursive influences on these drivers. This is followed by an overview of the academic state of the art on both agency and structure discussions regarding migrant entrepreneurship, where we also touch upon the differential views on determinants of migrant entrepreneurship. We conclude with societal and scientific challenges related to successful migrant entrepreneurship in particular.

Before doing so, we would like to dedicate a few words to definitional matters. A popular term in this field is that of the 'ethnic entrepreneur'. In essence, 'ethnic' refers to feelings of belonging to a particular group and is typically associated with features that distinguish them from other groups, including shared history, language, traditions, religion, and country of origin. However, it should be noted that this does not automatically mean that they operate in a separate 'ethnic' market; in fact, many migrant entrepreneurs are active in mainstream markets, with mainstream products and mainstream customers (Basu and Pruthi 2021). To be able to set this group apart from mainstream entrepreneurs, the alternative terms such as 'immigrant entrepreneurship' or 'migrant entrepreneurship' have been put forward. The flipside is that such a term disregards second- or third-generation migrants. In this chapter, we will use the term 'migrant entrepreneurship' even though we are sensitive to the fact that this term can be problematic (for a discussion about this as well, see Dheer 2018, pp. 557–559; Rath 2002b, pp. 23–24).

Relevance for society and the economy

Migrant enterprises pertain to the economic initiatives of all extra-regional or national foreigners (and their offspring) to any settlement, village, city, or region. As such, it can be argued that, for instance, current US wealth is historically, deeply, and firmly rooted in the economic activities of pioneering and entrepreneurial migrants in core and peripheral regions (Boyd 2013). Economic growth in many regions and, perhaps more visibly, in many cities, has been fuelled by migrant entrepreneurs who have created markets, offered products and services, and stimulated trade flows within and among cities, regions, and states.

A quantitative overview of migrant entrepreneurship is regrettably hard to present. The concept and definition of the 'migrant' is subject to numerous interpretations and registration issues; not every country is able to give accurate figures about migrants (or ethnic minorities, for that matter). In addition, the term 'entrepreneurship' is also used differently: some countries apply a fairly broad definition of entrepreneurs, while others do not, and this discrepancy undermines statistical comparisons. Should small business owners or self-employed-without-staff be included in the definition of entrepreneurship (Kloosterman and Rath 2003; OECD 2010a, 2013; OECD/EU 2019)? Other than that, there is no universal model of understanding migrants' opportunities and constraints and their positioning in the wider economic context. Migration histories and employment trajectories, labour market dynamics, general business developments, and regulatory matters set more than an ocean apart (Gonzalez-Gonzalez and Bretones 2013; Kloosterman and Rath 2003). Finally, within countries and even cities and economic sectors, the mechanisms behind self-employment may differ between migrant groups (Fairchild 2009).

How entrepreneurial are migrants? For the US, it has been found that self-employment is twice higher among migrants than among native-born Americans (Fairlie et al. 2017). The latest available gross figures on self-employment rates among migrants in the EU stem from the OECD/EU report on indicators of immigrant immigration (OECD/EU 2018) and Eurostat (2019). Overall, about 13 per cent of all foreign-born migrants in EU countries are self-employed; however, across countries the differences are substantial (OECD/EU 2019). In several north European countries, the self-employment rates among foreign-born migrants and natives are comparably similar (Eurostat 2019). However, in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and the UK, self-employment is more prevalent among migrants than among natives – but for Italy, Turkey, Greece, Ireland, Cyprus, and Switzerland, the opposite holds true.

The self-employment rates of migrants also vary according to educational attainment (e.g., for Luxembourg, see Peroni et al. 2016) and country of birth. In general and within the EU, a larger share of migrants from other EU states are self-employed than of migrants from outside Europe (OECD/EU 2019). In most countries, foreign-born migrant entrepreneurs from non-EU countries hire employees more often than migrant entrepreneurs from other EU countries. Also in Canada, migrant-owned businesses overall create more jobs than Canadian-owned firms (Picot and Rollin 2019). Kerr and Kerr (2020), in contrast, found that in the US, between 2007 and 2012, migrant business owners created fewer jobs than their native counterparts, however, the former group's survival rate and enrolment in international trade were more substantial.

Data on spatial disaggregation within countries to provide for insight in spatial variations in migrant entrepreneurship such as urban or intra-urban prevalence are thin on the ground. However, Light and Rosenstein (1995), McEvoy and Hafeez (2009), Fairchild (2010) and more recently Schmitz and Hernandez (2019) and R auchle and Schmitz (2019) examined the prevalence of migrant entrepreneurship in different regional and urban settings. Recently, Kerr and Kerr (2020) found that between 2007 and 2012 spatial variations in US migrant self-employment are enormous, with shares being ten times as high in some US states than in others.

The contribution of migrant entrepreneurs has many faces. In the economic arena, the effects of new and successful migrant entrepreneurs are visible and palpable. In quantifiable terms, they have increased the number of firms and jobs as well as the volume in trade, output, and sales, and this may benefit other economic sectors. However, while the rate of entrepreneurship among migrants is relatively high in general, the survival rate is somewhat lower (Beckers and Blumberg 2013; Garson and Mestres 2010; Riva and Lucchini 2015; Schutjens et al. 2017). Still, many migrant firms are active in retail, wholesale, and consumer services – typically locally oriented business – and, as a consequence, their local multiplier effects are relatively large.

Migrant entrepreneurs also bring about qualitative economic and market changes when they seek *Neue Kombinationen*,¹ new combinations, at the crossroads of home and host markets. This may result in ideas on products, processes, and organisations that are perceived as exciting or at least new, which when picked up by pioneering consumers and producers are adopted by other entrepreneurs, businesses, and economic sectors. However, as has been said, migrant entrepreneurs are a highly diverse category. Their educational attainment, expertise, and skills differ widely, impacting on business choice and business success or failure (Jones et al. 2019). Sector choice, for instance, seems to differ between generations: older migrants, but also newcomers, are increasingly found in the higher market segments of advanced economies (OECD 2010b; Rusinovic 2006). Under particular conditions, migrant

entrepreneurs gravitate to particular neighbourhoods or shopping strips, thereby creating interesting places for leisure and consumption as the many Chinatowns, Balti Quarters, Little Italys, and Klein Turkeis demonstrate. As such, migrant entrepreneurship may also transform the design and implementation of zoning laws as well as the branding of a city. Aytar and Rath (2012) and Serra del Pozo (2012) provide examples of formerly derelict urban neighbourhoods or streets that have been transformed into vibrant ethnic business areas, showing a wide diversity of economic activities unprecedented in traditional shopping streets dominated by native entrepreneur businesses. Migrant entrepreneurs may also revitalise particular industrial sectors such as food or garment. Rath (2002a) explores how the garment sector in various cities and countries got a new lease on life by the entrepreneurial activities of migrants. Deng (2020) demonstrates how many neighbourhood coffee bars in northern and central Italy have been taken over by Chinese immigrants.

Academic debates

Since the early 1970s, a large body of literature on migrant entrepreneurship has emerged, especially in North America and Europe. Most scholars in migrant entrepreneurship aim at describing the ‘emergence’ and ‘success’ or – perhaps better – the degree of ‘success’ of migrant entrepreneurs and exploring its determinants and effects (Basu and Pruthi 2021; Rath 2002b, p. 8).

Different sets of explanations can be identified. Some focus on the individual entrepreneur and formulate agency-oriented explanations, others focus on the context and theorise about structural determinants, and again others try to integrate both. Both Dheer’s (2018) and Basu and Pruthi’s (2021) recent and extensive literature reviews on immigrant entrepreneurship show few new academic avenues in the past five years. On the one hand, this is remarkable, as accessible datasets are abundant and the number of both scholars and migrant entrepreneurs has risen; on the other, this confirms that the agency-structure duality is still key in understanding causes of (successful) migrant entrepreneurship. Let us therefore examine these different sets of explanations of migrant entrepreneurship in greater detail, starting with the agency-oriented approaches (see also Rath and Schutjens 2019).

Agency-oriented approaches

In line with the traditional neo-classical economic logic, scholars such as Bates (1997) situate business creations and transactions in an environment of demand and supply whereby the entrepreneur with the best education and experience has the highest chance of entrepreneurial success. For many of these authors, the entrepreneur’s ethnic background is not especially relevant. A college-educated entrepreneur will then most likely be more successful than any less-educated entrepreneur. To put it in stark and simple terms: success is irrespective of their embeddedness in a thick and supportive ethnic network as this approach prioritises human capital and a rational entrepreneurial strategy (for an overview, see Minniti and Lévesque 2008).

Most other scholars, however, avoid direct use of neo-classical economics with its one-dimensional focus on human capital and take the ‘Polanyian position’ that entrepreneurship can only be fully understood and explained with an approach that captures aspects outside the neo-classical domain of supply and demand (Polanyi 1957).

Ivan Light, the Nestor of ethnic entrepreneurship studies, is a case in point. In his book *Ethnic Enterprise in North America* (1972), he follows a Weberian logic and concludes that

immigrants' cultural-specific proclivity towards self-employment was the primary explanations. Here, Light points to the significance of 'cultural capital'. The entrepreneurial success of Korean immigrants, for example, could according to Light, among others, be explained by the existence of rotating savings and credit associations – a cultural-specific institution. Metcalf et al. (1996) and Werbner (2000) too emphasise immigrants' proclivity towards self-employment. More recently, Vinogradov and Kolvereid (2010) and Chand and Ghorbani (2011) explore the home country's culture influence.

Social capital

Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993, pp. 1325–1327; see also Portes 1995) assume that sharing a particular migration history and particular religious and cultural beliefs and practices in an otherwise 'foreign' environment constitutes a perfect condition for the development of in-group solidarity, trust, and group-specific social relations. A 'heightened sense of community' then paves the way for the mobilisation of social networks in the acquisition of knowledge, distribution of information, and recruitment of capital and labour. Social capital allows these entrepreneurs to reduce their transaction costs by avoiding formal contracts and gaining privileged access to economic resources. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that social capital matters, but also that varies from country to country and from city to city, is gendered, is unequally distributed among ethnic groups, and may articulate with other forms of capital (Bird and Wennberg 2016; Flap et al. 2000; Granovetter 1992, 1995; Kanas et al. 2009; Kumcu 2001; Light and Gold 2000; Waldinger 1996). Explanations for new and successful migrant entrepreneurship have also been sought at the production side by highlighting structural determinants. At the lower end of the market, the demand for cheap products and services remains high, fuelling vacancy chain market processes,² in which new entrepreneurs try their luck in a highly competitive setting and therefore succeed each other in fast pace. At the higher end of the market, where characteristics such as individualisation and cosmopolitanism are de rigueur, we are witnessing a growing demand for particular ethnically specialised goods and services. For this group, the commodification of culture is materialised in consumption, tourism, and entertainment revolving around real or perceived notions of cultural diversity. In either case, market demand or market pull drives migrant self-employment.

Blocked mobility

Some scholars draw the attention to blocked mobility on the labour market. While Jones et al. (2014) and Ram (1994; see also Waldinger et al. 1990) point to long-term unemployment due to racist exclusion, Saxenian (1999) highlights the glass ceiling that high-skilled migrant workers reach. In both cases, labour market trajectories are being blocked, affecting the ability of the individuals involved to be high performers and preventing them from achieving higher returns on their human capital investments. These migrants are subsequently pushed rather than pulled into self-employment. While not denying that racism and discrimination may play a decisive role in the labour market, these theoretical claims are not always corroborated by empirical facts. For example, one would expect a growth of migrant self-employment in times of economic decline and a stabilisation or even shrinkage in times of economic boom, but empirical evidence for this is scarce. On top of that, it seems hardly convincing that migrants are only victims of racism when they are wage workers, and that racism ceases to exist in the realm of small businesses. Blanchflower (2009), for instance,

showed that the US credit market discriminates against migrants in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Institutional perspectives

Institutional perspectives on migrant entrepreneurship tend to highlight the effect of political and economic systems at national, regional, and local levels that bring along (un)written rules and regulations easing or blocking the entrepreneurial process. Regulation – both state and private – is omnipresent, even in the most liberal nation-states. Start-up incentives, zoning policy regulations, tax benefits, qualification requirements, and anti-competition guidelines are cases in point. Entry barriers by incumbent firms in the form of formal or informal price settings influence (the feasibility of) transactions and market opportunities. This, of course, holds for both mainstream and migrant entrepreneurs, although barriers for the latter group may turn out higher as migrants are often less familiar with formal and informal institutions and regulations. Integrative perspectives emphasise the complex interdependency between structure and actor and try to combine multiple factors of both supply and demand in explaining (successful) migrant entrepreneurship. Waldinger et al. (1990) were pioneers in including the opportunity structure in the analysis of migrant entrepreneurship while equally acknowledging human and social capital determinants. The mixed embeddedness approach by Kloosterman and Rath (2003) has added the regulatory (or political-institutional) dimension to the opportunity structure concept. This dimension's enduring importance is underlined by research recommendations to simultaneously include both individual sociological and contextual/regulatory determinants of migrants exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities in two recent encompassing literature overviews (Basu and Pruthi 2021; Dheer 2018).

Concluding remarks: the future

For the near future, we expect migrant entrepreneurship to be continuously centre-stage – and the academic debate to be even more vivid – for three reasons.

First, the kaleidoscope is extending as migrant entrepreneurship displays more and more variations on different dimensions. Not only are more and more nationalities involved in migration all over the world, entrepreneurship is also manifesting itself in different forms, phases, and places. In today's globalised world, dynamic societies, and turbulent economic contexts entrepreneurship is increasingly a flexible career option and no longer seen as a fixed, lifelong occupational choice. As people identify, evaluate, and exploit new opportunities over time, entrepreneurship continuously competes and coincides with (temporary) wage-labour opportunities. Consequently, entrepreneurship is emerging as a temporary, parallel, and sequential career path. The entrepreneurial kaleidoscope also explodes in terms of business models and business concepts with, for instance, the rise of home-based businesses, larger differences in business (growth) ambitions, and the formation of temporary coalitions in production and business strategy. Also, among migrants, diversity is key. An increasing number of studies point to the differences between migrants in self-employment or the successive performance of their firms according to generation, gender, and education (Cueto and Rodríguez Álvarez 2015; Efendic et al. 2016; Peroni et al. 2016; Soydas and Aleti 2015).

Second, new social and spatial layers emerge. On the one hand, transnationalism and regionalism in doing business abroad point to new pathways for flows of goods, businesses, knowledge, financial and human capital – all potential drivers for socio-economic

development in home country, home region, host country, and even third countries (Portes et al. 2002; Smans et al. 2013). On the other hand, migrant entrepreneurs' impact of, and contributions to, local economic development, mostly in urban neighbourhoods, are influenced and sometimes accelerated by local social networks, existing and expanding ethnic communities, and relations outside the original market (Wang and Li 2007). Furthermore, in our globally connected economy, next to home and host regions, third or up countries are involved in transnational business relationships (Solano 2020).

Third, although firm start-up and firm success are intrinsically related, the dynamic phases after the start-up phase are crucial for the success of firms and entrepreneurs. This process-based perspective described in the literature highlights the power of individuals to actively and purposefully use resources and adapt business strategies over the firm's life course. This perspective has hardly been explored by migrant entrepreneurship scholars thus far, although lately studies on the specific performance of migrant business are increasing in numbers (Beckers and Blumberg 2013; Clydesdale 2008; Efendic et al. 2016; Jiang et al. 2016; Riva and Lucchini 2015).

In closing, we expect migrant entrepreneurs to continue to change the face of societies. Some, especially those with limited resources or in a shrinking sector of the economy, will remain economically marginal and slowly totter into oblivion. Others may be able to carve out a niche – not necessarily an 'ethnic niche' – and create substantial added value. In all cases, self-employment is a process. In Europe today, it seems likely that new migrants will try their luck and set up shop in lower-class migrant neighbourhoods, mainly targeting co-ethnics or co-nationals. However, it is also likely that some will gradually move to greener pastures and continue the business in a more profitable location – in the central business district, a suburb, or a business district. More and more migrants, notably the better-educated ones, will venture out to more profitable sectors such as business-to-business services. Networks – ethnic, mainstream, and mixed alike – will continue to be important, albeit their composition and role may change over time. Finally, changing regulations will both positively and negatively influence business opportunities. Our challenge is to grasp the complex, multiplex but no less fascinating reality of economic opportunities driving new and successful migrant entrepreneurship.

Notes

- 1 This is a term coined by Schumpeter (1942); he distinguished entrepreneurs who manage to carve out new markets from those who just manage a firm.
- 2 These are processes that happen when a new entrepreneur fills a vacant shop or plot left behind by previous entrepreneurs; they do not create new markets but keep the existing ones intact.

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