

Sara Ballero (PhD, MA, MA, BA)

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow – RuBusT

Università degli Studi di Cagliari, Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

ORCID: 0009-0008-1508-5058

sara.ballero@unica.it

Research Statement: A Narrated Research Agenda

Imagine this: One by one, your high school friends start to leave. You leave too, because you are still young, you want more, and you are tired of working the same underpaid job. And you did well to do so, they say, because ‘there is nothing here’. You are a dreamer who can turn into a wanderer and a stranger; you enter and exit relationships, one after the other; you work, you study, know people, read, remember, participate. You return home, sometimes, and your generation is gone. Your parents are getting older. It stings. You love your family. But the clock moves only in one direction, and have you heard that there are no doctors around? Not even for newborns — those little, precious rarities. But the sky is blue, the water is clean, and the trees are blossoming! Sweet, broken roads take you to memories of happiness. Sunday lunches. Harvest time. Boredom too takes another taste. You can actually *kill* time, rather than *be killed* by it. Why not try cooking or maybe painting, or maybe planting, like you used to do. You used to be a creative person, or is this nostalgia speaking?

Now, I’d like you to guess: *what do you think I research?*

I actually research rural socio-economies, or, to be specific, I research socio-economies in high-income countries dealing with ageing and declining populations and which often suffer from disinvestment, loss of identity, and lack of competitiveness. I am talking about those places made of citizens with the same rights and obligations as everyone else, but with little public transport, minimal access to care, closing schools, seasonal jobs. Places that are often defined by the collective resources they hold but not necessarily control, be it the relief provided during the pandemic, the food they put on our tables, the nature which is our strongest bastion against climate change. Spatial socio-economies which are frequently grouped together under the label ‘rural’ and which appear to be failing their future generations and exposing the previous ones at the very minimum to loneliness. I devote myself to studying rural resilience.

Rural resilience: entrepreneurship and policies at the crossroads

While I want to know if rural socio-economies have exhausted their functions as systems supporting social life, the thing I care the most is what can be done to change their decline. Despite harsh numbers, I do not accept that rural decline is an unavoidable, natural phenomenon. Rather, there is an insistent habit to treat geography as a predictor of individual and social behaviour. To me, space is a pivotal but neglected factor influencing the distribution of resources in contemporary political economies: not a container, but a live, complex social product continuously shaping and being shaped by individuals and institutions, made of physicality and materiality as much as of ideas, imaginary, and representations. Space is relational. In the myriad of processes describing rural change, such as commodification or gentrification, there is always someone who enacts change — thus I have hope that humanity can reinvent spatial socio-economies.

This is the juncture where my interest in entrepreneurship and state policies comes from: we contribute to the making of space. In my research agenda, the actions and beliefs of people and

institutional agents are core to understanding territorial resilience-building. Accordingly, I prioritise the human side of socio-economic processes, whereby awareness, willingness, capacity, and responsibility to act each play a role in forging the future reproduction of local socio-economies. For a long time, entrepreneurship has been portrayed as the panacea for rural problems, and I myself became captured by the potential of the entrepreneur as a market-society converter. More often than not, the entrepreneurs I refer to are not high-growth entrepreneurs; rather, they run one of the omnipresent SMEs, the bones of the economy, slowly adapting and gradually innovating (more Kirzner than Schumpeter, so to speak). Can entrepreneurs shoulder the problems of the rural collectivity, maybe having to radically reconceive their managerial practices, and why should they do that? Were entrepreneurs to fail to deliver, would policymakers come in support of rural socio-economies, and how so, considering their great diversity in needs?

Beginning to unravel some questions...

I started to address these questions with my PhD dissertation. Published in the White Rose E-Thesis repository, the study focused on the loss of rural diversity in Japan, and tackled the extent to which state and private economic agents can influence resilience in the advent of the post-demographic transition. Using a qualitative case study, the investigation identified the various relationships making the rural and showed their ramified political implications for rural resilience building, revealing the increasing vacuum of responsibilities on whom should revitalise the Japanese countryside. Hence, policy makers continue to define and mediate the exchange between state and rural socio-economies through agriculture, despite known low employment levels and precarious work conditions, while rural entrepreneurs have grown accustomed to the shrinking of their societies and, for all the numerous adaptational efforts at the management level, showed a lack of capacity or willingness to take full responsibility for the collective well-being of rural citizens. The study concluded that tackling the heavy effects of demographic changes on small socio-economies demands the creation of a rural agenda able to sustain a degree of organisation and mobilisation that rural socio-economies have not reached outside agriculture. The biggest lesson? Individual efforts cannot be a substitute for collective efforts.

...and getting ready for new, emerging ones.

But the PhD also left me with a sense of unfulfillment. Truly, rural socio-economies might need an agenda to pursue their collective interests, but what should this agenda look like? There are a number of important matters to face, which I suspect relate to the moral foundations of regulating diversity and the relationship between the general and the particular (or space and place). To date, the justifications in favour of further allocation of resources to rural socio-economies are, at best, unclear. It seems easier to argue on behalf of rural well-being through the conservation-of-resources argument, as tangible, collective benefits are at stake, than using arguments based on society and quality of life, primarily enjoyed by the targeted recipients. Why should we prioritise spatial socio-economies rather than, for instance, widespread problems such as inequality? How can we promote spatial socio-economies in an inclusive, positive manner? Identifying and organising the various arguments in support or against a specific rural agenda and engaging with the deeper why questions is among my long-term goals. I simply do not feel that sufficient guidance exists on how to approach spatial matters, not without being or feeling on the defensive side, as if scholars are only protecting their own 'clan'. Further exploration is needed.

That said, any agenda must be filled with concrete measures. How to foster entrepreneurship remains as important a question as how to strengthen its connection with societal problems. We may want more and 'better' entrepreneurs, productive and socially keen, but years of exposure and engagement with the practice of entrepreneurship, either reviewing and analysing SMEs policies at the OECD or assisting students in setting up their business, led me to appreciate the magnitude of

efforts needed in starting and running a business, even under conducive business conditions. Coordinating entrepreneurial efforts towards specific aims is even harder. Entrepreneurship might provide just jobs, good jobs, money flows and/or new services, but rarely provides benefits on all fronts, and therefore might produce very different societal effects. Most entrepreneurs I interviewed in Japan considered employment as their biggest contribution to rural revitalisation but recognised that citizens were not interested in the type of jobs provided. Existing entrepreneurial efforts were thus disconnected from mid-to-long-term, emerging societal needs in a context of depopulation and ageing — which require retaining and attracting people — while still continuing to function as key sources of income in the short-term. Complex relationships such as the above example are ripe when analysing entrepreneurship's role in coping with modern societal challenges. Situating and contextualising them is however fundamental to create policies with impact, and it thus constitutes a major pillar of my agenda.

What I work and stand for

Recent debates in academia have supported the value of cross-fertilisation of knowledge production. My attitude to research embraces this philosophical/methodological turn. I am a strong supporter of international and cooperative research, having developed multiple channels for doing so during my academic years. Overall, I position myself as a rural researcher focused on entrepreneurship and territorial policies, with sympathies for critical studies, open to theoretical pluralism and interdisciplinarity, and generally attracted to approaches which aim to grasp the interplay between agency, structure, geography, and political economy. With my research agenda, I aim to explore the thin line between diversity and discrimination embedded in the complexity of geographical realities; to critically examine the conflicts between the general and the particular which so strongly emerge from spatially sensitive investigations; and to demystify entrepreneurship as a necessarily good or evil endeavour, seeking to qualify instead the circumstances in which it exerts certain societal functions. Through these goals, I hope to support the development of societies with equal dignity and equal life chances and to promote the value of the variety of societal and economic formations that exist within the dominant, capitalist system.

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