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Maximilian Scheu
University of Hohenheim

Andreas Kuckertz
University of Hohenheim

Institute of Marketing & Management

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Fair and Successful Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: Introducing Contributism to Balance Inclusiveness and Selectiveness

Maximilian Scheu[a], Andreas Kuckertz[b*]

[a] University of Hohenheim, Entrepreneurship Research Group, Wollgrasweg 49, 70599 Stuttgart, Germany. ORCID: 0000-0003-3015-1435. Email: maximilian.scheu@uni-hohenheim.de

[b] University of Hohenheim, Entrepreneurship Research Group, Wollgrasweg 49, 70599 Stuttgart, Germany. ORCID: 0000-0002-1733-0706. Email: andreas.kuckertz@uni-hohenheim.de

[*]Corresponding author

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Abstract

In this theoretical paper, we challenge the notion that aiming for inclusiveness per se improves the effectiveness of entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs). We argue that thriving EEs tend to require a delicate balance between inclusiveness and selectiveness. In many contexts, contributions should primarily determine access to the EE. Moreover, we suggest that transparent inclusion processes can integrate both fairness and efficiency; we term that theoretical perspective contributism. Accordingly, we caution against well-intentioned inclusivity efforts that may inadvertently reinforce new forms of exclusion. Instead, we advocate for contribution-based thresholds that uphold excellence and call for a more nuanced dialogue that recognizes contribution-based selectiveness as an often necessary component of productive EEs.

Keywords: entrepreneurial ecosystems, inclusiveness, contributism, selectiveness

Highlights

• Defines contributism: entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) access follows contribution

• Rejects structural exclusion and calls to remove barriers to EE access

• Balances inclusiveness and selectiveness to strengthen EEs

• Warns that indiscriminate support may weaken outcomes when resources are scarce

• Proposes transparent selection: equal access, scarce support to high-impact actors

Introduction

Entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) comprise interdependent actors and factors and seek to support regional entrepreneurial activity (Stam, 2015). Their influence might span finance, culture, support services, human capital, knowledge, networks, and markets (Spigel, 2017). Thriving EEs drive new venture creation, create jobs, contribute to economic growth, and ultimately enhance social welfare while strengthening innovativeness and competitiveness in the region (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021; Schrijvers et al., 2024).

Practitioners, academics, and policymakers agree that a systemic perspective is vital for promoting entrepreneurship. Since practitioners introduced the notion of a startup ecosystem (Feld, 2012), the academic consideration of EEs has increased significantly (Wurth et al., 2022). Academic discourse informs and influences how policymakers and EE orchestrators intervene to support the development of EEs (Candeias & Sarkar, 2022; Leendertse et al., 2022; Kuckertz et al., 2023). Necessary decisions likely include funding and resource allocation (Colombo et al., 2019) and thus affect the medium- and long-term outcomes of a region's economic and societal success.

Nonetheless, researchers warn that policymakers relying on simplistic, one-size-fits-all strategies that ignore EEs' complexity, interdependencies, and local context tend to misapply the EE concept (Brown & Mawson, 2019). Recently, such simplified perspectives have affected efforts to build inclusive EEs. The thought experiment by Kuckertz (2019) illustrates how interventions intended to increase inclusiveness can overlook consequences, such as resource misallocation or weakened EE competitiveness. The study applied learnings from decades of research on managing natural

ecosystems, such as natural reserves, to EEs (for a similar perspective, see Hor, 2025). The managers of natural ecosystems are aware of their vulnerability and potential instability and go to great lengths to protect them, for example, from capacity overload. While EEs differ from natural ecosystems, the comparison prompts us to ask: Where are the limits of inclusivity? Do EEs miss opportunities because they are too exclusive? Are those systems sometimes harmed because they become too inclusive?

Research on inclusive EEs should depart from predominantly investigating social and structural barriers (e.g., Birdthistle et al., 2022; Motoyama et al., 2023; Chaudhry et al., 2025). A holistic perspective on exclusive structures—and why they exist—would better fit the field, as selectiveness is not necessarily negative but a defining criterion of any system. Therefore, throughout the paper, we use the term selectiveness to refer to the inevitable selection under resource constraints (sometimes labelled exclusiveness). Regardless of industry or discipline, many highly competitive systems are selective (e.g., top athletes in any sport). It is therefore crucial to make this distinction, particularly at the beginning of the discussion on inclusive EEs.

This paper clarifies which forms of inclusion are potentially beneficial, which must be promoted for reasons of fairness regardless of their impact, and where a naïve interpretation of inclusivity could prove harmful. Inclusivity is a term that often has positive connotations but can become problematic when inefficient measures that undermine the long-term effectiveness of EEs become ingrained. Consequently, we aim to balance inclusiveness with a selective, contribution-oriented perspective that we term *contributism*.

The Case for EE Inclusiveness

In theory, EEs endorse a shared ideal of inclusivity, assuming equal participation by all stakeholders who benefit equally from the EE's resources (Feld, 2012). The extant literature has examined the availability and configuration of EE elements and their effects on EE productivity (Leendertse et al., 2022; Schrijvers et al., 2024). However, the mere availability of actors and

resources in EEs does not ensure equal access for all actors. Resource availability varies across EEs, as does accessibility within EEs and among different actors (e.g., Brush et al., 2019; Neumeyer et al., 2019; Scheidgen, 2021).

Social boundaries constrain actors from fully participating in and benefiting from EE elements to support their ventures. For example, structural characteristics like social origin and class (Brändle & Kuckertz, 2023), gender (Abraham, 2020; Breivik-Meyer et al., 2025; Koch et al., 2025), and sexual orientation (Chaudhry et al., 2025), or demographics such as ethnicity (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Singh & Nurse, 2024) and age (Kibler et al., 2015) affect entrepreneurs' access to resources and networks and, thus, determine participation in an EE. Such insights have led scholars to raise concerns over "who entrepreneurial ecosystems are for and if they can play a role in reducing inequality or if they instead contribute to its reproduction" (Wurth et al. 2022, p. 754). The discourse highlights the need to investigate the inclusiveness of EEs (Hess et al., 2025) to understand "whether and how ecosystems can become more open and inclusive" (Bakker & McMullen, 2023, p. 6).

Indeed, there are strong arguments for inclusive EEs being more productive and resource-rich than exclusive systems (Stangeler & Bell-Masterson, 2015). For example, diversity within EEs increases collaboration and exchange as actors serve as brokers spanning the boundaries and facilitating interaction (Duan et al., 2021). Studies also show that actors entering an EE can expand its resources and contribute to its evolution and development (Harima et al., 2021; 2024). If entrepreneurs solve problems they identify (Gielnik et al., 2012), entrepreneurs with diverse backgrounds would be more likely to recognize a broad range of challenges and create solutions to resolve them.

Inclusiveness in Leading EEs

Many leading EEs, such as Silicon Valley, Berlin, or London, appear reasonably inclusive at first sight. They attract actors to the EE who can access resources and EE elements to build thriving

ventures (Cohen & Fields, 1999; Nathan & Lee, 2013; Baron & Harima, 2019), a process that accounts for a significant number of new ventures (e.g., Kerr & Kerr, 2020) and, thus, contributes to a productive EE.

However, and this is essential in the inclusiveness-exclusiveness discourse, the issue is not restricted to structural inclusiveness. While these EEs and their actors appear inclusive, they are driven by clear performance-based motives and strive for excellence; as a result, individual actors are highly selective. Leading EEs and their actors seem to have an influx rather than an outflow of resources and actors, and often do not have to compete to access a critical mass of entrepreneurial talent (Stangeler & Bell-Masterson, 2015). They can either rely on self-selected inclusiveness thresholds and criteria or leave it to the market to clean up the EE. Hence, they are clearly performance-oriented.

For instance, Y-Combinator is a renowned EE actor in Silicon Valley, attracting a level of global talent and investor interest that makes it one of the most successful accelerator programs in the world (Dalle et al., 2023). It meticulously selects which ventures and entrepreneurs it partners with, and which teams it invests in. Although the quality standards are high, there is still a call for greater inclusiveness (e.g., MacNeil & McAdam, 2025). However, there are concerns that if Y-Combinator were to lower its standards to become more inclusive and increase the number of ventures it endorses, its quality standards might suffer (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2023).

An Unbalanced Understanding of Inclusive EEs

One fundamental challenge in the discourse on inclusive EEs is the conceptual ambiguity surrounding inclusion, inclusiveness, and inclusivity. The terms are frequently used interchangeably, even though they refer to different dimensions of inclusion (Shore et al., 2011). Early conceptions of inclusion, rooted in the idea of equal opportunity and equitable treatment presented by Rawls (1971), hold that individual differences have no negative impact (that *differences make no difference*) on access to resources, opportunities, or participation (see Hellerstedt et al., 2024).

Accordingly, inclusion means valuing and treating people equally regardless of demographic characteristics such as gender, origin, or age. Consequently, meritocratic standards can foster inclusion (Hellerstedt et al., 2024); in other words, they support individuals based on their contributions to an EE through abilities, skills, talents, achievements, and qualifications.

However, that view contrasts with an understanding of inclusion as inclusivity firmly focused on demographic diversity (Shore et al., 2011; Hellerstedt et al., 2024). That understanding considers that a high level of diversity indicates an inclusive EE. Inclusion is thus understood not merely as a static condition but as a dynamic objective to be pursued through targeted measures, such as quotas, support programs, and diversity policies.

That perspective creates a potential conflict of objectives, as the mechanisms for achieving inclusivity diverge: a merit-based model emphasizes formal equal treatment, whereas a diversity-oriented model often relies on compensatory measures to address structural inequalities. Recent debates on inclusive EEs increasingly adopt the diversity-oriented view, treating demographic attributes as key indicators of inclusion (e.g., Chaudhry et al., 2025; de Bruin & Swail, 2024; MacNeil & McAdam, 2025) while potentially sidelining an emphasis on fair procedures, merit, and contribution.

The Risks of an Unexamined Push for Inclusive EEs

Differentiating meritocratic exclusiveness from structural exclusiveness based on characteristics is important and safeguards the efficiency of limited resource allocation. The push for greater inclusivity often overlooks the potential risks to EEs. First, overly unconditional inclusiveness can lead to inefficient resource allocation, potentially weakening EE performance. The actors and factors within an EE determine its resource endowment (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). Therefore, continually adding resources—for example, by removing entry barriers for new actors—could benefit the overall development and performance of EEs. However, resource endowment to an EE is delimited by its carrying capacity. Again, drawing on a natural ecosystems perspective

(Kuckertz, 2019), the carrying capacity is "the limit of growth or development of each and all hierarchical levels…beginning with the population, and shaped by processes and interdependent relationships between finite resources and the consumers of those resources" (del Monte-Luna et al., 2004, p. 485). Logically, each EE has a specific carrying capacity that limits the total accumulated resources (Abootorabi et al., 2021). An all-inclusive EE that supports all actors equally (Feld, 2012) would distribute the resources equally among them. As more actors join the EE, the EE can allocate fewer resources to each entrepreneur. Although equal and seen as fair and just by some, such a resource allocation is inefficient and harms the EE rather than strengthens it (Shane, 2009).

Second, some inclusiveness initiatives deviate from the competitive logic of markets. Many such efforts enforce inclusivity through, for instance, diversity mandates or imposed quotas based on gender or ethnicity (Motoyama et al., 2021; de Bruin & Swail, 2024). These inclusivity interventions aim to create a critical mass of diverse actors within the EE. However, such interventions should be approached with caution. They may create misaligned expectations that mischaracterize entrepreneurship by lowering entry barriers to the EE without applying competitive market rules. However, market rules will inevitably catch up with the actors eventually. Therefore, it is questionable whether enforcing inclusion through externally imposed diversity, rather than fostering organic diversity to enhance inclusiveness, is effective in the long run. Such initiatives could potentially harm the very actors they intend to support.

Third, granting resource access based on diversity mandates to project an inclusive EE may undermine EE output and could also harm the nascent talent it aims to support. Instead of fostering true competitiveness and providing meaningful access to EE resources in a merit-based environment, such interventions promise talent opportunities that they may not be equipped to fulfill. When the inclusiveness ideal leads to prioritizing quotas over qualifications, long-term innovation risks being reduced as selection shifts from competency and contribution to

characteristics. Ironically, under some designs, this approach risks excluding promising talent precisely because of candidate traits, thereby undermining the very goal of genuine inclusiveness.

When viewed through the lens of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (Luhmann, 1995), EEs can change only if their internal structures provide pathways for inclusion. Luhmann's model also draws a comparison with biological ecosystems and suggests that systems trigger their own internal rules in response to external irritations. In other words, change can only happen from within the system, for example, as a reaction to external influences, but cannot be forced upon the elements in the system from outside.

EEs foster productive entrepreneurship. They were neither designed nor intended to address overarching societal issues. They do not have to because they pursue a clear purpose and operate toward their goal. Applying Luhmann's logic to EEs, external irritations (i.e., calls for inclusive EEs) can affect the system, but only to the extent they are interpreted through the logic of the EE. As a result, inclusion depends on whether the actors and factors in the EE develop internal structures that integrate new actors into the EE's own mode of operation.

Therefore, to foster a truly inclusive EE, access to resources and opportunities should ideally be based on the logic of the EE, not on quotas or characteristics. By prioritizing talent development within a competitive environment based on merit and contribution, stakeholders in EEs can help ensure that long-term growth and innovation are driven by the most capable individuals—rather than hindered by inclusiveness policies that inadvertently exclude potential talent.

Contributism: A Contribution Perspective on EE Inclusiveness

We define contributism as a contribution-oriented approach to EE inclusiveness.

> **Definition 1:** Contributism is a theoretical perspective that prioritizes individuals' actual contributions to collective goals over their credentials, status, or identity.

In a contribution-oriented EE, resources such as funding, mentorship, and network access would be granted to actors who demonstrate the greatest potential for impact. Contributism incorporates reducing structural inequality, fostering dynamic inclusion based on the value creation of individual actors within the system toward its overarching output goal. Adopting a contribution-oriented perspective on EE inclusion would create a dynamic environment where the most capable minds contribute to venture success and, thus, to productive entrepreneurship and economic growth.

An EE that evaluates and rewards talent based on their contribution to the EE is likely to attract and retain highly skilled individuals willing to add value to the EE and its development, regardless of their characteristics. Studies found that the absence of new venture entries or even the exit of some ventures does not necessarily weaken a functioning EE (Hoetker & Agarwal, 2007). Crucial knowledge, resources, and experience remain within the EE and may favor a more promising venture or transition to another EE element (Acs et al., 2018). Such observations underscore the argument that EEs need not be all-inclusive to function. They must meet a sufficiency threshold of actors and factors contributing to productive entrepreneurship by effectively distributing limited resources. Prior research argues for selective entrepreneurship support by showing that a few ventures outperform the many (Shane, 2009) and account for most productive entrepreneurship. Fostering a contribution-oriented EE, where limited resources are allocated to those who leverage them most productively to add value, is more efficient than distributing resources indiscriminately to a growing pool of entrepreneurs, regardless of their abilities and qualifications. Based on these arguments, we propose:

> **Proposition 1:** EEs thrive when inclusiveness is based on contributism, where contribution rather than arbitrary criteria determines access to the EE.

The Challenge of Designing Contributism in EEs

A contribution-oriented EE is characterized by equal access to opportunities, resources, and networks, as well as a transparent design of its institutions and the equitable enforcement of its

regulations. One fundamental issue affecting a contribution-based EE is measuring the impact on productive entrepreneurship at the early stage of entrepreneurial endeavors and on entrepreneurial talent. When the productive outcome remains unclear, how can a contribution to the EE be attributed to an individual? For instance, serendipitous discoveries have often led to unexpected developments and entrepreneurial opportunities (Dew, 2009). Similarly, individuals with entrepreneurial talent, even if they do not recognize it in themselves, have become successful actors in EEs when their attributes are appropriately nurtured. Human capital theory suggests that individuals with varying levels of human capital can achieve entrepreneurial success (Unger et al., 2011). The principle points toward a need for a critical mass within EEs before exclusion principles based on contribution can take effect.

However, when designing an EE to ensure each actor contributes, it is possible to achieve critical mass before applying exclusivity measures to that EE. As we have outlined, an EE based on the flawed logic of producing output from increased input is likely to be inefficient and risks adverse consequences for the system and its actors. This is where the debate frequently becomes cyclical. In theory, EEs are meant to provide equal opportunities for all entrepreneurs (Feld, 2012). However, in reality, these EEs emerge, evolve, and drive productive entrepreneurship under inherently unequal conditions (Cai et al., 2024). This observation raises the question of how to balance inclusiveness and selectiveness based on contribution. The answer lies in maintaining efforts to eliminate structural inequality without fostering inefficient EEs that prioritize inclusiveness at the expense of efficiency.

Balancing Inclusiveness and Exclusiveness in EEs

Balancing inclusiveness and exclusiveness in EEs is challenging but achievable through strategic policies, initiatives, and practices that ensure equal access while rewarding contributions. We use the metaphor of an EE as a dinner table to illustrate the balance between inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Imagine a table with ten available seats. While some seats remain unoccupied (i.e.,

the EE's carrying capacity has not been reached), anyone may join the table, regardless of their background, on the proviso that they contribute something of value. Their contributions can vary and might, for instance, comprise dishes, tableware, or conversation.

However, the table cannot expand indefinitely. Once all ten seats are occupied, it becomes exclusive to have a seat. At that point, only those who bring something more valuable than what is already present can join (e.g., a more complicated dish). Consequently, another diner may need to surrender their seat. Over time, the table becomes fuller and better arranged, enriched by the growing quality and relevance of the guests' contributions. No one joins the table without contributing, and the value of the table is defined not by who is seated but by what they bring (whether tangible or intangible resources). Hence, inclusion is conditional on active contributions.

As a balance of inclusiveness and selectiveness, contributism in EEs depends on several conditions. First, ensuring equal opportunities for all while upholding high-performance standards is essential. Each initiative should delineate its selection mechanisms to support entrepreneurial talent by expressly defining merit-based metrics and ensuring they remain accessible and equitable. Second, contribution-oriented inclusiveness must not exclude some actors due to structural characteristics. Current inclusivity initiatives often emphasize structural characteristics while neglecting contribution. Enforcing structural inclusiveness through quotas or one-sided support programs, such as initiatives exclusively targeting women (McAdam et al., 2019), fails to nurture an EE that values contribution over characteristics and may, paradoxically, exclude certain actors based on their traits. Consequently, some initiatives intended to foster inclusivity may ultimately achieve the opposite, thus undermining the very notion of contribution. Third, a contribution-oriented EE is limited. The actors within an EE pursue different interests and performance indicators. It may be tempting to present an EE as broad as possible, in which the most diverse set of actors operates with very low barriers to entry and with which everyone can engage. However, as outlined above, unconditional inclusiveness risks diluting scarce resources and

discouraging productive entrepreneurship. Functioning EEs may even ignore the access barriers faced by minority groups, since sufficient competition for scarce resources already exists in the EE (Scheu et al., 2024). In nature, not every ecosystem is a beautiful meadow of flowers. There are monotonous natural ecosystems, some of which are hostile to life for many species. They can, however, form a perfect environment for some species that have evolved to cope with the harsh conditions. We should consider this analogy to natural ecosystems in EEs and accept that EEs cannot include every actor. Accordingly, we propose:

> **Proposition 2:** Inclusive EEs balance inclusiveness and selectiveness by granting equal access through transparent selection mechanisms while directing limited resources to the most capable actors contributing the most value to the EE.

A Future Perspective on Inclusiveness and Selectiveness in EEs

Do we need inclusive EEs? In this paper, we argued against structural exclusion (barriers based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, and the like). At the same time, we encourage selectivity focused on efficient venture creation and on contributing to the EE. Many leading EEs and their elements promote exclusiveness by drawing clear boundaries based on meritocratic standards. Therefore, EE orchestrators should not unthinkingly aim for inclusiveness but combine it with contribution-oriented selectiveness to ensure efficiency, innovation, and fairness.

We offer considerations and propositions to foster a more refined dialogue on inclusive EEs. To that end, two central ideas are key. First, we argue that selective systems have positive aspects and that selectiveness extends beyond structural features. Selectiveness is a multifaceted goal in a market economy and is guided by the principles of competition and value creation. Future research on the inclusiveness of EEs and their elements might well address inclusiveness and selectiveness based on the principle of contribution. Second, we caution against inclusiveness interventions that inadvertently create structural exclusivity in an attempt to reduce it. EE initiatives should avoid

that scenario by prioritizing contribution-oriented thresholds over solely structural characteristics, ensuring that inclusiveness does not come at the expense of excellence.

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University of Hohenheim
Dean’s Office of the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Sciences
Palace Hohenheim 1 B
70593 Stuttgart | Germany
Fon +49 (0)711 459 22488
Fax +49 (0)711 459 22785
wiso@uni-hohenheim.de
wiso.uni-hohenheim.de