

Microenterprises – underrepresented in research? A call for a more connected research field

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Abstract

Purpose – Given the significant economic and social role of microenterprises, there is a need for more nuanced research on this prevalent size of businesses. This study aims to provide a comprehensive literature overview of microenterprises, elucidate the diverse definitions and terminologies associated with them, and identify key academic fields that are essential to public policy, yet insufficiently explored in the context of microenterprises.

Design/methodology/approach – This scoping study provides a literature overview of the concept of microenterprises, and sheds light on evolving research and existing research gaps.

Findings – The study clarified the concept of microenterprise, emphasizing the variations in terms and definitions used across studies. It identified three academic fields – international entrepreneurship, innovation management and high-growth enterprises – that are pertinent to microenterprises but remain inadequately addressed in the existing literature.

Research limitations/implications – The study proposes that researchers should be aware of the variations in terms and definitions used and that the unique features of microenterprises should be highlighted more systematically to achieve a more coherent and cumulative knowledge of them.

Practical implications – Both practical and academic discussions would benefit from a cumulative contribution of the different thematic areas of entrepreneurship research to the specific field of microentrepreneurship research.

Social implications – Political decision-makers would benefit from a more coherent knowledge of microenterprises based on the cumulative contribution from different thematic areas within entrepreneurship research. This would strengthen microentrepreneurship as a distinct field of research.

Originality/value – This novel study contributes to the entrepreneurship literature by being the first attempt to clarify the concept of microenterprise and to provide an overview of the specific field of microentrepreneurship research beyond individual entrepreneurship research themes.

Keywords Microenterprise, Microfirm, Microbusiness, Microentrepreneurship, Growth, High-growth enterprise, International entrepreneurship, Innovation management

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

Microenterprises, commonly defined as firms with fewer than ten employees, comprise most businesses in the economies worldwide (Munoz, 2010; Rastrollo-Horrillo, 2021). This implies that the survival and development of these businesses are crucial questions for both developed and emerging economies (Henley and Song, 2020; Pronti *et al.*, 2023). In the European Union (EU), these smallest business entities account for approximately 23 million companies, constituting 93% of all companies in the EU (European Commission, 2021; Muller *et al.*, 2021). Microenterprises, which are a subset of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), provide a significant contribution in terms of value added (18.7%), accounting for almost a fifth of total value added and employment (29.2%), representing nearly a third of total

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employment in all the EU's enterprises (Muller *et al.*, 2021). In the EU, the significance of microenterprises has increased in recent decades due to the steady growth in the numbers of both such entities and the persons employed in them (European Commission, 2021). In recent years, they have outperformed their larger SME counterparts in terms of value added and employment, suggesting that microenterprises have demonstrated their resilience in the face of the current challenges (Di Bella *et al.*, 2023).

The goal of entrepreneurship and SME policies is to foster an environment that supports business creation and the development of SMEs, including micro-sized enterprises (European Commission, 2008; EUR-Lex, 2025; OECD, 2023a; Raes, 2021). As public policy should be grounded in high-quality, research-based information on microentrepreneurship (Tsotsolas and Alexopoulos, 2019), dedicated and focused research is essential to inform political decision-making. However, if research is fragmented and the terminology and definitions are used inconsistently, it becomes challenging to establish a coherent, research-based understanding of the field – preventing effective decision-making and policy interventions.

The purpose of this study is to offer an overview of research on micro-sized enterprises. The aims of any research are largely determined by the existing knowledge on the chosen topic (Shaw, 1999). Due to the inconsistency in terminology and definitions used, research concerning microenterprises is scarcely comparable, making it challenging to form a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing academic discussion. We aim to ferret out what previous research on the microenterprises has established and how to navigate this complex research field, which intersects various disciplines. While we agree with Rastrollo-Horrillo (2021) that there is a lack of research focused particularly on mature microenterprises, we also want to add that microenterprises in general remain significantly underexplored in other areas of entrepreneurship research despite their significance. Against this background, we will discuss and provide some proposals on how research related to microenterprises could become more connected and accessible to public policymakers.

This scoping review (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005) is inspired by the increasing, yet still scarce, research literature focusing on microenterprises. Several studies (e.g. Annosi *et al.*, 2024; Betton *et al.*, 2020; Björk *et al.*, 2025; De Moraes, Ekanem and Osabutey, 2017; Gherhes *et al.*, 2016; Gherhes *et al.*, 2021; Greenbank, 2000; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Kevill *et al.*, 2021; Klöppel and Stummer, 2015; Lussier and Sonfield, 2015; Mattare *et al.*, 2010; Rastrollo-Horrillo, 2021; Ricciardi *et al.*, 2025) have argued that, given their economic and social importance, microenterprises are still under-researched in many themes of entrepreneurship research. This is surprising, considering the high proportion of microenterprises among all enterprises and their economic importance as engines of growth (Gherhes *et al.*, 2016), important constituents (Betton *et al.*, 2020), the main driver of economic growth (Almeida, 2024) and societies' important contributors as silent transformers (Munoz, 2010).

Scholars have emphasized that a small firm is not simply a scaled-down version of a large firm (Storey, 1986), or as Welsh and White (1981, p. 18) put it, "the small business is not a little big business". Rather, the small size of a microenterprise does not have to be permanent, and many future large businesses start as microenterprises. Although the scholars have recognized for decades the need to distinguish SMEs from larger enterprises (Torres and Julien, 2005), there is also a need to identify the specificities of microenterprises in relation to other SMEs (Achtenhagen *et al.*, 2017; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Klöppel and Stummer, 2015; Rastrollo-Horrillo, 2021). Researchers have broadly described typical characteristics of microenterprises that set them apart from large businesses (see, e.g. Gherhes *et al.*, 2016; Liberman-Yaconi *et al.*, 2010; Rastrollo-Horrillo, 2021). They are described as businesses that are owner-managed, have few or no employees and with limited capital and role in the market (Tezler, 1992). Particularly, the owner-manager centric nature distinguishes microenterprises from larger SMEs (Betton *et al.*, 2020; Gherhes *et al.*, 2021; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Tezler, 1992). Microenterprises tend to have insufficient resources in terms of time, staff, capital (Bornhäll *et al.*, 2016) managerial skills, internal capabilities, informal systems and routines (Annosi *et al.*, 2024; Gherhes *et al.*, 2016; Kevill *et al.*, 2021). They also rely on nonformalized

methods for business development and employ direct supervision (Achtenhagen *et al.*, 2017; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Pronti *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, this liability of smallness in microenterprises (Djupdal and Westhead, 2015; Johnston and Prokop, 2025) raises concerns that existing theories on entrepreneurship may not be suitable for these informal, small-scale organisations (Chatzinikolaou and Vlados, 2024; Dandridge, 1979; Jayachandran, 2021; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Kevill *et al.*, 2021).

While there are distinctive characteristics that differentiate microenterprises from larger businesses, it is also true that there are differences among individual microenterprises (Harvie, 2003; Sandberg, 2003). In fact, microenterprises comprise an extremely heterogeneous group of businesses influenced by a range of factors (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015; Kevill *et al.*, 2021), and it is considered a myth that all microenterprises have certain deterministic characteristics that would prevent their development or advanced managerial activity (Rastrollo-Horrillo, 2021). The literature has distinguished microenterprises, for instance, by whether they are existing or start-up businesses; by their level of business development (unstable, stable or growing); or by their area of business activity (production, commercial, or service) (Ledgerwood, 2000; Harvie, 2003). Moreover, there is significant complexity and internal variation, such as differences in reasons of starting business, motivations, business forms, business models, industries and growth aspirations and abilities among these smallest-sized entities (Dana, 1995; Jaouen and Lasch, 2015). For example, start-ups usually fit into the definition of microenterprises (Tarabar, 2018), but due to their certain characteristics, they can be seen as forming their own subgroup within the category of microenterprises (Klute-Wenig and Refflinghaus, 2020; Liedholm and Mead, 1995).

In the entrepreneurship literature, the diversity of microenterprises has been addressed holistically in some studies (Munoz, 2010; Dana, 1995), such as the typology of microfirm owner-managers (Jaouen and Lasch, 2015) and the taxonomy of rural microenterprises (Wilson *et al.*, 2022), helping to clarify the field of microentrepreneurship. However, despite the growing recognition of their economic significance (Betton *et al.*, 2020; Kevill *et al.*, 2021; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022), research on microenterprises remains fragmented and inconsistent, particularly regarding terminology, definitions and conceptual clarity. Existing studies have largely overlooked the need for an overarching overview of the specific field of microentrepreneurship research beyond individual entrepreneurship themes. This highlights a clear gap in the literature, emphasizing the urgent need for a more coherent and policy-relevant understanding of microenterprises.

This paper is structured as follows. First, applied methodology is presented. Secondly, we introduce and discuss the various definitions and terminology used to refer to very small enterprises (i.e. microenterprises) in the research literature. We provide illustrative examples of diverse contextual and national definitions from around the world, as well as the terminology employed by researchers. Next, we argue that there has been limited research on types of microenterprises, other than the mature microenterprises, as presented by Rastrollo-Horrillo (2021). We pinpoint a need for further research on microenterprises in three public policy-essential areas – innovation management, international entrepreneurship and high-growth enterprises (HGEs) – to build on the existing microenterprise-focused literature. Finally, we propose three action points to enhance the connectivity of the microenterprise-focused research field. A more coherent body of knowledge on microenterprises would provide value for the academic community, as well as for business communities and policymakers.

2. Methodology: scoping review

We have applied a scoping review approach (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005) because we aim to scope a body of literature, clarify concepts, identify public-policy-related knowledge gaps and investigate research conduct (Munn *et al.*, 2018; Peters *et al.*, 2020) in the field of microentrepreneurship. A scoping review is an exploratory review that is predominantly explicit yet is not fully systematic in its methods (Langer *et al.*, 2016). It is a valuable research

methodology used to systematically map existing literature on a broad topic, particularly when the research field is complex or emerging (Peters *et al.*, 2020). Scoping reviews are beneficial for clarifying key concepts, identifying gaps, and guiding future research directions (Litherland *et al.*, 2025; Munn *et al.*, 2018).

The data collection and analysis in the present study proceeded in the following phases. First, we identified the main research question for the scoping review, i.e. what knowledge exists related to microenterprises? Using a variety of keywords based on the authors' familiarity with the phenomenon, we searched for any English-language literature related to microenterprises in electronic databases (Scopus, Web of Science). Moreover, so-called grey literature – such as national and international policy and government reports, materials of statistical offices and grey literature databases (e.g. Google Scholar) – was considered eligible for inclusion to reduce the influence of publication bias (Litherland *et al.*, 2025; Siddaway *et al.*, 2019). As comprehensiveness and breadth are important in scoping reviews, our search strategy also included hand-searching of journals and reports of international organisations (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Levac *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the snowball method was employed as a supplementary search strategy, involving the checking of references in relevant articles and the identification of subsequent works that cited these articles (Levac *et al.*, 2010). The process was an iterative to identify and analyse knowledge gaps (Munn *et al.*, 2018). We identified three gaps in microentrepreneurship research that are essential to public policy: innovation management, international entrepreneurship and HGEs. All these areas are relevant from a public policy perspective, as they are considered important and receive significant public investments to support their advancement (OECD, 2023a; Raes, 2021).

Alongside the above-mentioned, we conducted a descriptive bibliometric analysis (e.g. Donthu *et al.*, 2021) in the Scopus research database to demonstrate terminological variety, annual trends and country-specific preferences in microentrepreneurship research.

3. Varied contextual and national definitions

For decades, scholars have used the term “microenterprise” when classifying businesses by their size. For instance, Arnold *et al.* (1994) and McPherson (1996) defined microenterprises as those with ten or fewer workers. Reid (1995) employed the same size limit when referring to “microfirms”, whereas Henrekson and Johansson (1999) relied on the definition used by the European Union that firms with 0–9 employees are micro-sized firms. In the 1980s, the term “microenterprise” was used in research concerning aid and development projects of microenterprises, often focusing on those in third-world countries (Levitsky, 1989; Robinson, 1995). One of the most well-known projects was the Growth and Equity through Microenterprise Investments and Institutions (GEMINI) project, supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Arnold *et al.*, 1994; Nichter and Goldmark, 2005). In relation to the above-mentioned, the concept of microenterprise has been frequently employed in research related to the popular topic of microfinance (Ledgerwood, 2000; Munoz, 2010; Robinson, 1995; Rohmana and Wulandari, 2025).

However, there is no universally applied definition for a microenterprise (Munoz, 2010; Rastrollo-Horrillo, 2021). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the number of people employed is the most common criterion. In the OECD's definition, microenterprises employ fewer than 10 employees (OECD, 2023b). Devins *et al.* (2005) pointed out that scholars from different geographical and research areas use various criteria based on company size, number of employees and annual financial turnover. In addition to the academics, national governments also employ size-based categorisation of microenterprises for regulatory or statistical purposes, as well as for establishing eligibility for official assistance (Farbman and Lessik, 1989; Lapar, 1991; Ledgerwood, 2000).

In the European context, the official definition is based on the recommendations from the European Commission (2003). In 2000, the European Charter for Small Enterprises by the European Council of Santa Maria da Feira endorsed a more refined definition of

microenterprises – a category of small enterprises particularly important for entrepreneurship development and job creation. In 2003, the European Commission recommended a definition of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises. This definition was motivated through the extensive interaction between national and European Community measures assisting micro-sized enterprises and SMEs in connection with the EU structural funds and research funds, among other initiatives. The definition was heavily based on policy intentions in supporting EU business competitiveness.

According to the EU Commission's definition, microenterprises form a sub-category of SMEs and refer to any enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 2 million. The enterprise must also be autonomous, i.e. independent. Table 1 presents the size classes of enterprises defined by the EU.

In 2021, the European Commission conducted an evaluation of these size categories. In conclusion, the current size categories were still considered relevant and appropriate, although some demands were raised to place emphasis on sole entrepreneurs and companies with a maximum of one to three employees (European Commission, 2021). In the United Kingdom, the same size category is applied (one to nine employees), but they are referred to as microbusinesses (UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2020).

In the United States, the term “microenterprise” is associated with microenterprise programmes that support very small businesses as a strategy for boosting poor communities (Clark and Huston, 1993). Since the 1980s, these programmes have provided support to existing businesses and loans to disadvantaged individuals, primarily among low-income people and minorities who aspire to be self-employed but lack access to the commercial banking sector (Howells, 2000; Servon and Bates, 1998; Sanders, 2002). The businesses targeted by such programmes are often referred to as microenterprises (Howells, 2000). They are defined as businesses with five or fewer employees, including the owner (Else, 2001; Mattare *et al.*, 2010; Sanders, 2002), or as businesses with ten or fewer workers (Nichter and Goldmark, 2005). Today, the term “microenterprise” officially refers to a sole proprietorship, partnership, or corporation that a) has fewer than five employees, and b) generally lacks access to conventional loans, equity, or other banking services (United States Small Business Administration, 2020). However, the definition of a “microbusiness” with fewer than ten employees is used by the SBA Office of Advocacy (United States Small Business Administration, 2017), though it acknowledges the absence of a definitive definition. In line with the above, Anastasia (2015) pointed out that the definitions of microenterprises in the United States are scattered, leading to confusion about what distinguishes a small business from a microenterprise.

In China, classification standards group small SMEs into medium, small and mini enterprises. The classification is complex and depends on the industry category. In the mini category, the upper limit of the employee number varies, with the most common limits being 10 or 20 (China Briefing, 2022). Generally, in Asia, the definitions vary according to the country's context, but microenterprises typically refer to businesses with few, if any, employees beyond the owner-operator of the enterprise (Schaper, 2020). They are perceived as small-scale enterprises in the informal sector, either rural or urban areas, producing and

Table 1. Small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) size categories (European Commission, 2003)

Company category	Staff headcount	Turnover	or	Balance sheet total
Medium sized	<250	≤ € 50 M		≤ € 43 M
Small	<50	≤ € 10 M		≤ € 10 M
Micro	<10	≤ € 2 M		≤ € 2 M

distributing goods and services in unregulated but competitive markets (Harvie, 2003). In Australia, microbusinesses are small businesses that employ between one and four people, including non-employing businesses (Gilfillan, 2015). Similarly, according to the Canadian company size categorisation, microbusinesses have one to four employees (Government of Canada, 2022).

African countries have their own size-based enterprise classifications (Akamobi, 2020; Olugbenga and Mashigo, 2017). Typically, a microenterprise is understood as a type of small business, often unregistered or informal, typically having of a maximum of five to ten employees. In this context, a microenterprise is often a necessity-based form of self-employment (Khosa and Kalitanyi, 2014; Olugbenga and Mashigo, 2017; Roy and Wheeler, 2006). Particularly in the rural areas of the developing African countries, microenterprises are predominantly seen as survivalist enterprises through which women seek opportunities to sustain themselves rather than manage opportunity-based businesses (Khosa and Kalitanyi, 2014; Rhodes, 2009). However, microenterprises also make significant contributions to the socio-economic landscape of African societies and play an important role in poverty reduction and job creation (Akamobi, 2020; Okello Candiya Bongomin *et al.*, 2024; Olugbenga and Mashigo, 2017; Roy and Wheeler, 2006).

We would like to add that above we have presented various contextual, national and official definitions for the smallest companies, i.e. microenterprises. Microenterprises are framed within the context of a body, an institution or geography (De Moraes, Ekanem and Osabutey, 2017, p. 116). We are also aware that individual researchers may apply and create additional definitions in their own papers or reports. There are almost an uncountable number of different versions in research databases and listing them all here individually is not feasible.

4. Unsystematic use of terms

Another obstacle to a coherent overview of the existing research and development mechanisms of microenterprises is the multiplicity of terms used as synonyms. This reflects the fragmentation of the research field. The OECD report 2021 (OECD, 2021) is a descriptive example of the inconsistency of terms used. In this publication, a variety of terms, such as “micro-enterprises”, “micro-firms”, “micro firms”, “micro business”, have all been used. To showcase the diversity in the research literature, we compiled a list of microenterprise-related terms used in published research articles (see the full list in Table 2). Terms referring to these smallest businesses include, but are not limited to, “micro, small, and medium-scale enterprises,” “small, medium, and micro enterprises,” “micro and small enterprises,” “microenterprises,” “micro-firms,” “micro-companies,” “microbusiness,” “micro SMEs,” “micro-sized enterprises,” “micro-sized ventures” and “micro-sized companies”. Many of these have various typographic variations, with or without hyphens, and are spelled either with a “z” or an “s.” It is possible that even this extensive list is not exhaustive. In addition, business cases discussed in other related fields, such as family business or start-up research, sometimes simultaneously fall under the category of microenterprises.

When investigating the overall body of literature and the relative proportion of microenterprise-focused research, we conducted a scoping search using the Scopus database. We utilised all the terms presented in Table 2, adding “microentrepreneur” and “microentrepreneurship”. The total number of publications since 2000 amounted to 4,788 hits. The annual frequency has increased nearly six-fold in a roughly of a decade, rising from 97 hits in 2013 to 633 hits in 2024. We believe that the exact numbers are less compelling than the relative proportions and temporal changes in the appearance of various terms. The umbrella term “entrepreneurship” yields as many as 43,527 hits, limited to business, management, and accounting (4,521 in the year 2024 alone). The common abbreviation “SMEs” generates 23,366 hits (2,349 in 2024).

Table 3 shows the overall frequency of each search term in publications in the 2000s, as well as the leading countries based on the author affiliations. “Microenterprise” is the most

Table 2. Examples of microenterprise-related terms used in research publications

Search term	Examples of research publications
Micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs)	Beebeejaun (2022), Ghimire (2011), Okello Candiya Bongomin <i>et al.</i> (2024), Satta (2003), Simba and Thai (2019)
Small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs)	Dele-Ijagbulu and Eresia-Eke (2020), Lekhanya (2015)
Micro and small enterprises (MSEs)	Donner and Escobari (2010), Liedholm and Mead (1995), Marx and Klotz (2023)
Microenterprise**	Berrone <i>et al.</i> (2014), Dana <i>et al.</i> (2008), Else (2001), European Commission (2003), Falk <i>et al.</i> (2014), Howells (2000), Kuusisto <i>et al.</i> (2021), McPherson (1996), Nichter and Goldmark (2005), Nikunen <i>et al.</i> (2017), Saarela <i>et al.</i> (2018), Sanders (2002), Servon and Bates (1998)
Micro-firm**	Achtenhagen <i>et al.</i> (2017), Henrekson and Johansson (1999), Jaouen and Gundolf (2009), Kelliher and Reindl (2009), Rastrollo-Horrillo (2021), Reid (1995), Tiwari and Korneliussen (2018)
Micro-company**	Almeida (2024), Kitching (2019), Ojala <i>et al.</i> (2016), Sandbacka <i>et al.</i> (2013)
Micro business/microbusiness**	Allinson <i>et al.</i> (2013), Devins <i>et al.</i> (2005), Gherhes <i>et al.</i> (2016), Greenbank (2000), Mattare <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Micro SME**	Muller <i>et al.</i> (2021), Short and Gray (2017)
Micro-sized + enterprise/firm/business/enterprise/company/venture	Hallenga-Brink and Brezet (2005), Lopez-Garcia and Aybar-Arias (2000), McCormick and Fernhaber (2018)
Note(s): *With a z or an s; ** with or without a hyphen	
Source(s): Authors' own work	

Table 3. Search hits 2000–2025*in the fields of business, management and accounting. Search engine: Scopus

Term	Number of hits	TOP 5 countries by the author affiliation
Microenterprise	1,785	USA (432), UK (148), India (137), China (85), Malaysia (77)
MSMEs	1,402	Indonesia (451), India (445), Colombia (55), Malaysia (55), UK (48)
MSEs	1,265	India (265), China (164), USA (130), Indonesia (90), UK (63)
Micro entrepreneur/micro-entrepreneur	449	India (68), USA (58), UK (53), Malaysia (50), Indonesia (21), South Africa (21)
Micro business	359	UK (78), Indonesia (36), Australia (30), USA (24), Malaysia (20)
Micro-firm	302	UK (59), USA (36), Italy (35), France (23), China (22)
SMMEs	242	South Africa (187), China (15), UK (9), India (8), USA (8)
Microentrepreneurship/micro entrepreneurship/micro-entrepreneurship	170	USA (44), UK (23), India (20), Malaysia (12), South Africa (12)
Micro-company/micro company	85	UK (12), Finland (8), Czech Republic (8), Mexico (6), Spain (5)
Micro-sized + venture/enterprise/firm/business/enterprise/company	60	South Africa (8), Finland (7), UK (7), Malaysia (6), Italy (5), USA (5)
Note(s): *Searched in 02/2025		

frequently used term (1,785 hits) during the whole period, followed by MSMEs (1,402) and MSEs (1,265). The temporal changes in the use of terms are shown in Figure 1. Notably, there was an increase in the appearance of the term “microenterprises” since 2013, as well as “MSEs” since 2018. These terms are used when the authors want to highlight the particular focus on the smallest companies compared to the general SMEs.

5. Microenterprises – underrepresented in research essential to public policy

Different classifications of microenterprises can be found in the literature (Wilson et al., 2022), such as the dichotomy between livelihood activities and growth-oriented enterprises (Harvie, 2003). Liedholm and Mead (1995) provided a four-part microenterprise classification: new starts – enterprises just getting underway; non-growing enterprises – enterprises that have survived from the start-up phase but are not growing; small growers - enterprises that have added employment in small amounts since starting; and graduates - enterprises that are growing out of the microenterprise category. Recently, Rastrollo-Horrillo (2021) proposed the following classification for microenterprises: 1) start-ups focused on technology and innovation with the intention of growth; 2) young enterprises in traditional sectors or business models but with an inclination towards growth; and 3) microenterprises with no growth prospects and that remain micro-sized over time, referred to as “mature microenterprises”. Rastrollo-Horrillo (2021) argued that there is particularly little research on mature microenterprises that remain at this size over time without growth prospects. We would like to add that the need for microenterprise-related research is not limited to these aspects and addresses research gaps identified in the academic literature: innovation management, international entrepreneurship, and HGEs.

As entrepreneurship is a key driver of social and economic growth, public policies serve as crucial tools for governments to foster entrepreneurship, particularly policy areas such as innovations, internationalisation and HGEs (Campos et al., 2021; Castaño et al., 2016). From a public policy perspective, all these areas are considered essential, and significant public investment is made to promote them on the grounds of public benefits such as job and income creation (OECD, 2023b; Raes, 2021).

Innovation policy aims to promote the commercial exploitation of new ideas as products, services, and processes (Foreman-Peck, 2013). To improve policymaking, it is essential to identify the barriers that inhibit SMEs from innovating, and that should be addressed by

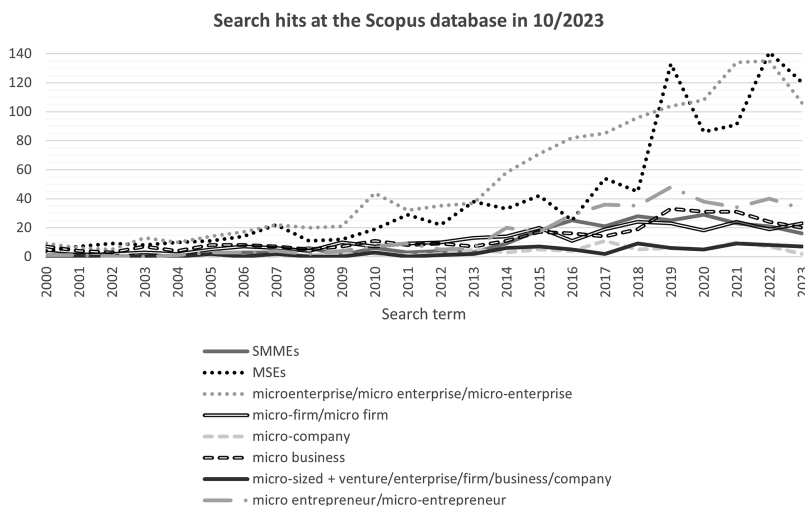


Figure 1. Search hits with various search terms. Search engine: Scopus. Source: Authors’ own work

innovation policies (Veugelers, 2008). SMEs often lack qualified personnel and sufficient resources, which hinders their ability to expand internationally. Therefore, enterprise policies step in to provide financial support, market access initiatives and managerial capacity building, ensuring SMEs may overcome these challenges, helping firms to increase their level of internationalisation (Campos *et al.*, 2021; OECD, 2009). As there is considerable empirical evidence that only a small proportion of firms generate most new net jobs, policymakers are considering how to foster the creation of more HGEs (Mason and Brown, 2013; OECD, 2010).

Although innovation, internationalisation, or high growth can be seen as distinct objectives for a policy, there are obvious linkages between them as firms will grow fast based on innovation or international expansion (Raes, 2021). Campos *et al.* (2021) pointed out that internationalisation of businesses is often a result of product innovation, meaning that the more innovative firms are, the more likely they are to succeed in international markets. Moreover, innovations are widely recognised as key drivers for gaining HGEs (OECD, 2010; Rajapathirana and Hui, 2018).

5.1 Innovation management

Innovation plays a crucial role in business development, with significant literature focusing on SMEs and larger enterprises (Faherty and Stephens, 2016). Interestingly, innovation is not exclusive to larger firms; companies within the microenterprise size-class also engage in innovative practices (Baumann and Kritikikos, 2016; Battisti *et al.*, 2010; Farè, 2022). However, data on innovation activities in microenterprises is scarce, as they are frequently overlooked in datasets and innovation surveys, such as the EU Community Innovation Survey (Baumann and Kritikikos, 2016; Roper and Hewitt-Dundas, 2017; Tu *et al.*, 2014). As innovation studies often are based on such datasets, robust evidence on innovation practices in microenterprises remains scarce (Battisti *et al.*, 2010; Chatzinikolaou and Vlados, 2024; Faherty and Stephens, 2016; Ricciardi *et al.*, 2025; Roper and Hewitt-Dundas, 2017; Tu *et al.*, 2014). According to Farè (2022), the past decade has brought an increase in the availability of data on microenterprises, leading to a better understanding and more research on their innovative behaviour.

The approach to innovation in microenterprises differs significantly from that of larger companies (Ricciardi *et al.*, 2025; Roper and Hewitt-Dundas, 2017). Often, their innovation processes are very informal, meaning that traditional measures of research and development (R&D) investment do not fully capture their diverse innovation efforts (Henley and Song, 2020). Due to resource constraints, innovation activities in microenterprises may not always be systematically managed (Faherty and Stephens, 2016), though these businesses could greatly benefit from more structured innovation processes (Baumann and Kritikikos, 2016). Faherty and Stephens (2016) observed that innovation in microenterprises could involve products, processes, people or marketing. Audretsch *et al.* (2020) found that, particularly in the case of start-ups and young businesses in knowledge-intensive services, microenterprises are less hampered by size-related disadvantages and are capable of efficiently converting innovative inputs into outputs. Innovation ecosystems, by facilitating the absorption of knowledge and resources and mitigating risks, may serve as an enabler of innovation for microenterprises (Oliveira and Rua, 2025).

Some scholars, such as Zastempowski (2022), argue that microenterprises have been a forgotten group of innovators in academic literature. Although there is a growing body of research on innovation within microenterprises, our understanding of its nature remains limited (Henley and Song, 2020; Ricciardi *et al.*, 2025; Roper and Hewitt-Dundas, 2017). This is partly because the focus of research has been on individual countries and the limited coverage of microenterprises in research (Farè, 2022). Gaining a deeper understanding of innovation performance among microenterprises is essential. It would not only test the general applicability of existing innovation theories but also enhance support for the productivity of microenterprises, and ultimately, contribute to economic growth (Audretsch *et al.*, 2020; Farè, 2022).

5.2 International entrepreneurship

Across countries, international trade is a major driver of economic growth. Firms involved in export activities typically achieve greater profitability, provide higher wages, and experience faster growth than non-exporting firms (OECD, 2023c). Globalisation and technological development have reduced distances and enhanced accessibility to international markets for small businesses (De Moraes, Ekanem and Osabutey, 2017). However, microenterprises have remained relatively ignored in studies on international entrepreneurship (Duarte Alonso and Kok, 2021; Falk *et al.*, 2014; Lehtinen *et al.*, 2021; McCormick and Fernhaber, 2018; Tiwari and Korneliussen, 2018). The scholars have focused on large firms and SMEs and, despite the numerous calls for additional research, have paid little attention to the internationalisation of microenterprises (Dana *et al.*, 2008; De Moraes, Ekanem and Osabutey, 2017; McCormick and Fernhaber, 2018; Tiwari and Korneliussen, 2018). In empirical international entrepreneurship research, microenterprises are often excluded or they are included in the SME category (Donner, 2006) without distinguishing them from larger SMEs (Falk *et al.*, 2014; Lehtinen *et al.*, 2021). Thus, findings related to microenterprise cannot be separated from those of larger companies. There is a widely shared consensus on the need to study microenterprises distinguished from larger SMEs because of the uniqueness of their business characteristics, such as the role of the entrepreneur in the firm's internationalisation process (Gherhes *et al.*, 2016; Greenbank, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Lehtinen *et al.*, 2021). Research focusing on the internationalisation of microenterprises would employ a new lens to examine theories within the international entrepreneurship literature (Lehtinen *et al.*, 2021; McCormick and Fernhaber, 2018; Tiwari and Korneliussen, 2018).

5.3 High-growth enterprises

Business growth is a central theme in entrepreneurship research (Coad, 2009; McKelvie and Wiklund, 2010), and much empirical work has focused on HGEs (Colombelli *et al.*, 2014; Parker *et al.*, 2010). Microenterprises, particularly in their early growth stages, face unique challenges and exhibit irregular growth patterns (Coad and Hözl, 2009). A notable observation in existing literature is the underrepresentation of microenterprises in HGE studies and statistics (Björk *et al.*, 2025; Daunfeldt and Halvarsson, 2015; Rico-Belda and Cabrer-Borrás, 2024). For instance, the OECD's definition of HGEs, a standard in academic research (Daunfeldt *et al.*, 2015), excludes firms with fewer than ten employees (Eurostat–Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2007). The OECD defines an HGE as a firm with a minimum of ten employees at the beginning of a three-year period and that achieves an average annualised employment growth greater than 20% during that period. Similarly, the EU definition of HGEs sets a size threshold that omits microenterprises (Eurostat, 2020). Consequently, micro-sized HGEs (one to nine employees) are overlooked in the EU's regular data collection, resulting in their absence from official statistics (Eurostat, 2020). Several researchers have pronounced that this exclusion poses significant limitations to understanding fast-growing businesses, leading to sample selection issues and potentially flawed policy implications (Björk *et al.*, 2025; Coad and Hözl, 2009; Daunfeldt *et al.*, 2015; Eurostat, 2020). Fortunately, this research gap is gradually closing. Recent studies have shown that microenterprises can also register high growth, as highlighted by Rico-Belda and Cabrer-Borrás (2024) and Björk *et al.* (2025), who emphasised their role in high-growth dynamics, while Coad and Karlsson (2022) revealed that young microenterprises often evolve into HGEs, whereas mature microenterprises are less likely to do so.

6. Call for a more connected microentrepreneurship research field

The purpose of the scoping review is to offer an overview of research on micro-sized enterprises and raise points for action for researchers whose work supports policymakers. Microenterprises are a critical component of the business landscape worldwide. According to

Rastrollo-Horrillo (2021), most management theories are based on the reality of large or even multinational corporations. This leads to biases in business organisation and management theories that do not reflect all nuanced aspects of business contexts (Chatzinikolaou and Vladoš, 2024). There is a discrepancy in how well the established models for entrepreneurship reflect the realities of micro-sized enterprises, and further, how well the overall enterprise-related research reflects the fact that the entrepreneurial field is versatile and multifaceted. The study clarified the concept of microenterprise, emphasizing the variations in terms and definitions used across studies.

This literature overview confirms that microenterprises are under-researched and there are severe research gaps on themes essential to public policy. Microenterprises are often either excluded from empirical studies or merged into a less specific category of small business or SMEs. There are many understandable and recognizable reasons why microenterprises remain relatively underrepresented in research. One reason is less easy access to data. According to Reid (1995), the reason why the microfirm is neglected is that the data are not readily available. Often official business statistics databases, such as national business registers, do not fully capture the reality of microenterprises. This shortfall stems from various reasons: microenterprises are not required to report all the data that large companies do, their company-level reporting systems may be less sophisticated or they might lack the staff resources to provide data, participate in research interviews, or complete surveys. Given the significant economic and social role of microenterprises, we argue that there is a need for more nuanced research on this prevalent type of business across local, regional and national economies.

Microentrepreneurs struggle with time and human resources, making them less flexible to attend researchers' interviews or complete surveys. Curran and Blackburn (2001) stressed that building and obtaining a representative sample of small businesses for a research project, which would be considered routine in other research fields, may be surprisingly difficult. Moreover, researchers may prefer to focus on more homogenous groups or sectors rather than a diverse field of microenterprises. We acknowledge from our own experience that a researcher's perseverance and time are needed to contact several microentrepreneurs.

In developing countries, the paucity of empirical studies is mainly due to the difficulty of identifying and surveying such economic units, many of which tend to operate informally (Kok and Berrios, 2019). Although individually small in both size and turnover, these enterprises can collectively exert a significant impact on the economy (OECD, 2023c). Additionally, as Curran and Blackburn (2001) described, determining what previous small business research has found is not easy for researchers; it is at the intersection of so many disciplines and professional practices that previous research is easily overlooked. This is undoubtedly also true for microenterprise-focused research.

To address the above-mentioned issues, we propose the following actions for research initiatives focused on the nuances of microenterprises.

First, achieving **greater coherence in terminology and definition** is needed. We recommend expanding the scope of literature searches to encompass as many alternatives or potentially relevant terms as possible. In addition to the list of existing variations referring to micro-sized enterprises (shown in Table 2), we suggest searching for articles on small enterprises, firms, businesses, companies, start-up companies or SMEs in general, as some studies include microenterprises without explicitly naming them. Similarly, some family business studies also fall within this scope. With the continuous evolution of working life, it is advisable to stay abreast of trends and recognise emerging types of microentrepreneurship, such as light entrepreneurship (Elo and Emmanuel, 2022), part-time entrepreneurship (Viljamaa *et al.*, 2022), hybrid entrepreneurship (Folta *et al.*, 2010) and senior entrepreneurship (Perenyi *et al.*, 2018). This study proposes that researchers should be aware of the variations in terms and definitions used and that the unique features of microenterprises should be highlighted more systematically to achieve a more coherent and cumulative knowledge.

Secondly, we emphasise the necessity of **considering the heterogeneity of microenterprises** when conducting research. Focusing on a certain subgroup of microenterprises is highly recommended. Despite the variations in classification criteria for microenterprises, all definitions are based on company size, regardless of the specific indicators used. These kinds of limits are seen as arbitrary by [Lapar \(1991\)](#) and far from adequate to describe their exact nature ([Hadjimanolis and Boustras, 2017](#)). As [Curran and Burrows \(1993\)](#) have stated, there is always a problem with quantitative definitions based solely on size, as they often imply a false homogeneity among business units distinguished based on quantitative criteria. Although microenterprises generally share certain characteristics, there is significant internal variation among businesses operating in different business models and industries. Microenterprises also encompass a wide range of corporate forms and growth aspirations, making them more challenging to study comprehensively as a single target group. This necessitates careful consideration by researchers regarding study design and data collection methods suitable for this diverse context.

Thirdly, we call for **more microenterprise-focused research on the areas of innovation management, international entrepreneurship and HGEs**. SME and entrepreneurship policies should be based on exploiting high-quality information on the phenomenon ([Tsotsolas and Alexopoulos, 2019](#)). Only a very small proportion of microenterprises have export activities ([Forte and Sá, 2021](#); [Grazzi and Moschella, 2018](#)). [Henley and Song \(2020\)](#) argued that innovation policy design should focus on microenterprises with the highest capacity for innovations and exports. Microenterprise-focused research could help to identify export barriers and target the public sector advisory and financial services to them. This would help dispel doubts and myths related to the inability of microenterprises to grow ([Rastrollo-Horillo, 2021](#)). It could help policymakers design policy measures that strengthen collaboration between businesses and research organisations ([Laursen and Salter, 2004](#)), or direct research, development and innovation (RDI) support to microenterprises with high growth potential but limited resources. Moreover, prior research has made a convincing case that policymakers should re-focus entrepreneurship policy on initiatives that will generate more HGFs ([Mason and Brown, 2013](#)). More nuanced research on microenterprises and a better understanding by policymakers of the specific challenges microenterprises face in terms of innovation, internationalisation and rapid growth will allow for more targeted policy action.

We are aware that there may be other research gaps in microentrepreneurship research, but in this specific article, we focus on those with central relevance to public policies. This novel study contributes to entrepreneurship literature by being the first attempt to clarify the concept of microenterprise and to provide an overview of the specific field of microentrepreneurship research beyond individual entrepreneurship research themes.

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