

Reconceptualizing social inclusion in social enterprises: The case of work integration social enterprises in Vietnam

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Abstract: Social enterprises are increasingly recognized as key actors in fostering social inclusion, particularly through work-integration initiatives that support marginalized populations. However, the mechanisms through which social inclusion is created remain contextually underexplored. This study draws on qualitative data from Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) in Vietnam to investigate the processes through which social inclusion is created and to refine its conceptualization. Primary data were obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with the business owners of 15 WISEs. Findings show that while access to employment is crucial, deeper inclusion occurs through participation in social and organizational life, and through the personal empowerment of disadvantaged individuals. The Vietnamese context reveals distinctive pathways to inclusion, influenced by strong cultural values such as family ties and empathy-driven leadership, often shaped by founders' own experiences of marginalization. Based on these insights, the paper proposes a three-tier framework of social inclusion impact, grounded in theory and enriched by empirical evidence. This framework not only enhances understanding of inclusion in developing contexts but also offers a foundation for further comparative research. The study contributes to the evolving theory of social entrepreneurship by clarifying the mechanisms through which inclusion is achieved and provides practical implications for designing inclusive enterprises and policies in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: *Social entrepreneurship, Social impact business, Social impacts, Social inclusion, Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISEs).*

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship (SE) has evolved as a research domain among researchers over the past few decades [1]. SE creates both social value and economic value; however, these values are not easily separated but intertwined [2]. SE must pursue both the market-aligned tools of a traditional commercial business and the mission of a not-for-profit organization; thus, it became a bridge between these two kinds of organizations [3, 4]. One major sphere in which SEs are active is work integration for marginalized people, so-called work-integration social enterprises (WISE). Members of disadvantaged social groups are affected by many forms of social exclusion in the workplace, such as unequal treatment in the labor market, lack of access to the labor market and job training, disability or sexual inequality, etc [5]. In this regard, SE is a contextualized phenomenon due to the differences in institutional environment, norms, and cognitive beliefs in which they operate [6, 7]. Therefore, there remains a critical need to examine how SE generates social impacts for marginalized people in underexplored contexts. This study addresses that need by investigating how social inclusion is fostered through the operations of WISEs in Vietnam, a developing economy with a welfare system in transition. By analyzing diverse patterns of inclusion, the study contributes a contextualized understanding and proposes a multi-level framework that may inform inclusive practices more broadly.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Entrepreneurship and Social Impacts

Social entrepreneurship uses social innovation to target specifically excluded communities through employment and engagement in the labor market, which will eventually help to achieve social inclusion [8, 9]. Social enterprises provide job opportunities and even security for vulnerable groups, which is well known as work integration social enterprises (WISE) [10, 11]. By addressing a social issue, social enterprises also create added social value by promoting sustainable solutions [12]. Social entrepreneurship creates social impacts that can promote social change and also enable incremental efficiency of third-sector organizations [13, 14].

The social impact of these initiatives is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of social entrepreneurship, with a growing emphasis on the need for robust impact measurement and evaluation frameworks [15]. Social impact refers to the process of identifying, monitoring, and demonstrating the benefits created for target beneficiaries and communities, often through evidence-based outcomes and impact assessment metrics [16, 17]. While all organizations can generate social impact, the contributions of social enterprises and NGOs are particularly highlighted due to their explicit social missions and innovative approaches to addressing societal challenges [8]. The concept of “social impact” can be understood in different ways. While all organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, can create social impact, greater attention is often given to the impact generated by NGOs, social enterprises, social impact businesses, and social programs. The term “social impact” was first used in a 1969 Yale University Conference on the ethical responsibilities of institutional investors. Since then, most concepts have defined social impact as either creating “positive” social change [18–20] or minimizing negative impacts [21]. Recent literature underscores that social impact encompasses both positive and negative changes, including intended and unintended consequences, and should be understood as the long-term outcomes resulting from the activities and outputs of social enterprises [16]. As can be seen, social impact needs to be considered in both aspects as an aggregate function of positive and negative impacts. It is argued that social impact is the result of initiatives that are “doing good” (i.e., increasing positive impacts) and “doing no harm” (i.e., minimizing negative impacts) [22]. In addition, social impact has been conceptualized in the literature using terms such as social value [20, 23], social performance [12, 24, 25], social return [26], social return on investment, and social accounting [27].

In general, although there are differences in the definition of social impact, scholars agree that social impact is the long-term change produced by outcomes, outputs, and activities geared toward creating that social impact. Vanclay [28] proposed a definition of social impact that highlights the importance of analyzing, monitoring, and managing expected and unintended social consequences, enabling the development of service efficiency and identifying ineffective services. This definition identifies the following areas in shaping social impacts: life, culture, community, political system, environment, health and well-being, individual rights, and property [28]. However, this approach may overlook changes achieved by other actors or interventions. Although Vanclay's [28] definition provides a scope for measuring impact, applying this approach reduces the chances of capturing changes achieved by others or any intervention that occurs. The definition established by Clifford et al. [29] in the framework of GECES allows us to consider factors that are omitted in the definition given by Vanclay [28]. Clifford et al. [29] allow consideration of changes arising from other activities (alternative attributions), changes that would occur even without deadweight activities, and changes that decrease over time (drop-off). By integrating Vanclay's and Clifford et al.'s perspectives, social impact can be understood as encompassing both positive and negative, intended and unintended effects, while accounting for external influences and temporal changes. By combining the definitions provided by Vanclay [28] and Clifford et al. [29], positive and negative impacts (intended and unintended) will be determined by subtracting changes arising from other activities. Changes will occur even without the interventions, and changes/impacts will diminish over time.

However, it is also widely acknowledged that social impacts are socially constructed and context-dependent, leading to differing perceptions among stakeholders. It must be acknowledged that social impacts are socially constructed [30–32]. This underscores the importance of considering diverse viewpoints and local contexts in both defining and measuring social impact. Hurst et al. [30] propose a relational approach, defining social impact as the real or perceived, intended or unintended, relational and agentic consequences of organizational decisions or actions for individuals, communities, and societies. This perspective highlights the co-determination of impact by organizations and stakeholders, emphasizing the importance of context and stakeholder perceptions. Additionally, recent systematic reviews underscore the growing complexity and multidimensionality of social impact, noting the integration of social, economic, and environmental dimensions and the need for context-specific measurement tools [33–35]. Therefore, the perceived social impacts of stakeholders are different and depend on the context.

Although social impact organizations often create social values and community benefits, not all of those values can be considered social impact but merely transferred from one resource to another (e.g., charitable contributions) [36, 37]. In contrast, social enterprises that provide vocational training and employment for marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, foster bigger social change by equipping individuals with skills, confidence, and social connections, ultimately supporting their integration into society. Social value and community benefits are only transformed into social impact when they result in observable social change manifested as shifts in societal structures, behaviors, or beliefs. A social enterprise employs workers with disabilities, organizes vocational training, trains them, helps them acquire career skills and life skills, and equips them with confidence and relationships. Society, ultimately, helps them integrate into the community. Thus, the created social values and community benefits can only be transformed into social impacts when there is social change [18, 37–39]. Social change manifests itself in changes in the structure, behavior, and beliefs of society. For example, social enterprises strive to create changes in society's perception of the poor and disadvantaged groups by giving them equal qualifications and employment opportunities. Recent studies also highlight the importance of rigorous social impact assessment, noting that organizations must distinguish between outputs (immediate results) and true impact (sustained change), and should consider both positive and negative, intended and unintended effects [40]. Thus, the social impact of an organization can be understood as long-term outcomes that can bring about economic, environmental, and social changes [41, 42]. This definition is broad enough to cover most current approaches to social impact research [19, 20] while acknowledging that social impact encompasses many different phenomena and goals [20, 23, 43].

2.2. Social Inclusion in Work Integration Social Enterprises

Regarding work-integration social enterprises, social inclusion has been identified as a key impact in creating social sustainability [44]. Social inclusion is a central impact of work integration social enterprises (WISEs), directly contributing to social sustainability by providing employment opportunities and fostering community participation for socially excluded groups such as people with disabilities, women, and older adults. WISEs address social exclusion, which involves a lack of resources, rights, and participation, by offering meaningful work, skill development, and social connections, thereby improving both individual well-being and social cohesion. WISEs provide supported work environments that enhance self-worth, purpose, and social skills among disadvantaged individuals. Paid work through WISEs is strongly linked to increased life satisfaction and improved mental health, especially for people with disabilities and those with mental health or substance use challenges [45–47]. WISEs focus on helping socially excluded people, such as people with disabilities (PWD), women, elders, etc., to offer them the opportunity to work. Those people suffer social exclusion, which is defined as the lack of resources, rights, goods, and services, and the inability to participate in normal relationships and activities. This is harmful to both the quality of life of individuals and social cohesion as a whole. Employment is a key mechanism for inclusion, as there is a positive correlation

between paid work and life satisfaction among people with disabilities [48]. Participation in WISEs leads to improved employability, job protection behaviors, and reduced barriers to job search. These enterprises also foster personal agency, empowerment, and relationship-building, which are crucial for social inclusion [49]. WISEs help individuals build connections to the community, supporting integration and reducing social isolation [45].

However, social enterprises also face many challenges in terms of the institutional context in which they operate, which may affect both these enterprises and their vulnerable workers [50]. While WISEs provide valuable job opportunities, their ability to help individuals transition into mainstream employment is often limited by external factors such as policy environments and societal norms [51]. Additionally, WISEs face challenges related to financial sustainability, policy support, and balancing social and commercial goals, which can affect their long-term impact on social inclusion [5, 52].

The World Bank's definition of social inclusion highlights improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of disadvantaged people to participate fully in society [53]. In the context of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs), social inclusion is not just about providing jobs; it's about enabling long-term social change and transforming the lives of vulnerable groups. The World Bank defines social inclusion as "the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people disadvantaged based on their identity to take part in society." As discussed above, social impact is created only when long-term social changes are achieved. WISEs do not simply create social impacts by providing jobs, but also create social inclusion impacts that transform the lives of vulnerable people. WISEs offer more than employment; they create environments where individuals gain self-esteem, social skills, and a sense of belonging. These are key indicators of social inclusion, as they help people move from the margins to active participation in society. Besides the economic values that the targeted groups receive through WISEs, the opportunity to engage in social activities and gain self-esteem is considered an indicator of social inclusion [54, 55]. Employees in WISEs report increased self-worth, improved quality of life, and greater social connections. These outcomes are especially significant for people with disabilities, those with mental health challenges, and other marginalized groups [45]. Therefore, WISEs need to acknowledge levels of social inclusion and how to achieve them through their operations [56].

Social inclusion can be observed at the individual (self-esteem, skills), relational/organizational (social networks, sense of belonging), and societal (reduced stigma, increased participation) levels. WISEs need to assess and address these different levels through tailored support and ongoing evaluation [46]. At the individual level, WISEs support personal growth by providing meaningful work, skill development, and a sense of purpose. Employees often report increased self-worth, improved mental health, and enhanced employability as a result of their participation. For example, WISEs serving people with mental illness or disabilities have been shown to improve self-esteem, job skills, and overall life satisfaction, helping individuals overcome long histories of labor market detachment [57]. At the relational/organizational level, WISEs foster social connections and a sense of belonging by creating supportive work environments and opportunities for relationship-building. These enterprises help individuals develop social skills, build friendships, and feel part of a community, which are essential for social inclusion and combating isolation [58]. The development of social networks within WISEs can also provide emotional support and practical assistance, further enhancing inclusion. At the societal level, WISEs contribute to reducing stigma and promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups in broader society. By providing visible examples of successful integration and challenging stereotypes, WISEs help shift societal attitudes and increase acceptance of disadvantaged populations. They also promote greater participation in civic and economic life, which strengthens social cohesion and community resilience [52, 59]. Research emphasizes that WISEs should tailor their support and regularly evaluate outcomes at all three levels to maximize social inclusion. This includes ongoing training, community-building activities, and advocacy to address societal barriers.

Inclusion at the societal level means ensuring that people at risk of poverty and social exclusion have real opportunities and resources to fully participate in economic, social, and cultural life. This includes access to services (such as education and health), employment, income, and engagement in civic

and political life [5, 60]. Social enterprises play a key role in advancing this form of inclusion, but the process is complex and context-dependent. Inclusion at a societal level is defined as a process that ensures those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources to fully participate in economic, social, and cultural life. Social inclusion also means they have greater engagement and decision-making, and enables their fundamental rights [61]. Participation in society is context-dependent and multi-dimensional, but can be connected to some indicators such as access to services, including education, health, etc., such as employment and income, and engagement in political and civic life [5, 60]. At the organizational level, inclusion addresses aspects of integration such as the frequency of social relationships, the feeling of belonging, and the quality of daily support and relationships [62, 63]. The presence of targeted groups in social enterprises is seen as a potential for new organizational practices, not an obstacle, which implies the embeddedness of target groups in the organizational structures and operations [64]. The inclusion impact of social enterprises is demonstrated as increasing personal autonomy and self-esteem, enhancing social participation through raising awareness of personal rights, and improving mental health [50].

Social inclusion, as conceptualized by Gidley et al. [65], exists along a spectrum of ideological positions, each with varying depths of interpretation and practical implications. This spectrum highlights the contested nature of social inclusion in both academic and policy discussions, moving from a narrow, economically driven focus to a broad, human-centred approach. Furthermore, the effectiveness of social inclusion efforts is profoundly influenced by contextual sensitivity, requiring consideration of the diverse and interconnected nature of inequalities and the specific challenges faced by different groups and geographical locations. From the organizational and societal level of inclusion, it could be said that social inclusion is layered based on the degree of engagement and inclusion. Gidley et al. [65] propose a nested threefold schema for understanding the degrees of inclusion, describing three spectrums of inclusion: social inclusion as access, social inclusion as participation, and social inclusion as success (Figure 1).

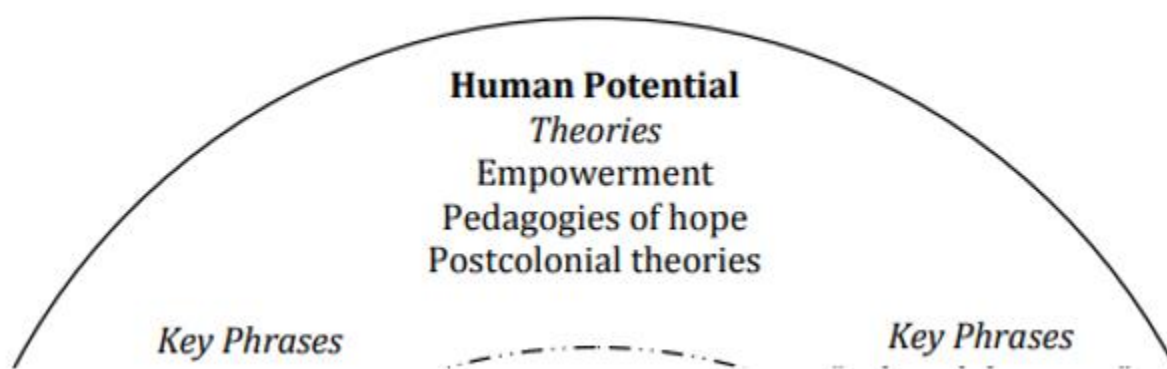


Figure 1.
Spectrum of ideologies underlying social inclusion theory and policy.
Source: (Printed from Gidley et al. [65]).

The first spectrum of social inclusion is linked to the ideology of neoliberalism, which describes inclusion as providing *access* to disadvantaged groups through investing in human capital and the skills of workers for primary economic growth. This is the narrowest interpretation of social inclusion, which primarily focuses on providing access to opportunities, such as higher education and employment, with the overarching goal of economic growth and human capital investment. The emphasis is on improving skills shortages to enhance a nation's economic performance in a competitive global market. In terms of WISEs, the disadvantaged groups are employed and offered skills training, which will eventually help

them to become more economically autonomous, and thus contribute to global wealth [66]. By offering jobs that would not typically be provided by conventional enterprises for marginalized individuals, WISEs give them access to the labor market and help address skills shortages. WISEs are often recognized for providing marginalized groups with employment opportunities and skills training, thereby overcoming immediate barriers to labor market entry. However, research warns that this access can be superficial or "cocooned," offering sheltered employment without facilitating a genuine transition to open labor markets. For example, Chui et al. [51] found that WISEs for people with disabilities often reinforce normative boundaries, providing jobs but rarely enabling movement into mainstream employment. This can serve as a convenient deflection from more robust, systemic policy reforms needed for true inclusion, risking the over-romanticization of WISEs as a panacea for labor market exclusion. *Participation/Engagement* represents a broader view of social inclusion, prioritizing human rights, egalitarianism of opportunity, human dignity, and fairness for all. Its primary objective is to enable all individuals to participate fully in society with respect for their human dignity, which includes strong emphasis on community engagement and participation [65]. A more inclusive interpretation of social inclusion is identified through social justice ideology as *Participation/Engagement*. Just like the social impact created by social enterprises is said to be the long-term changes produced by outcomes, outputs, and activities geared toward creating that social impact [29], social inclusion is not only providing jobs but also giving employees human rights, human dignity, and fairness. The workers are encouraged to participate in organization activities, from which they gain the opportunity to engage in social life with respect for their human dignity. While WISEs may foster participation and social relationships, their ability to deliver meaningful engagement is shaped by broader policy and economic contexts. McKinnon et al. [47] argue that WISEs are increasingly taking on social responsibilities once held by the state, but must also maintain commercial viability. This dual pressure can lead to a productivist bias, where the value of inclusion is measured primarily by economic participation, potentially sidelining deeper forms of social and civic engagement. Furthermore, Kiss et al. [5] highlight that external barriers, such as limited resources and unsupportive policy environments, often constrain the sustainability and depth of inclusion efforts. Unlike the reductive forms promoted by neoliberalism, social justice interpretations involve "complex integrations" stemming from a "full ecology of interests" that acknowledges diverse stakeholders regardless of power imbalances. Social enterprises, for example, contribute to social justice by addressing deep-rooted issues like long-term unemployment and community empowerment. They provide opportunities for participation and development, reduce isolation, and confront prejudice. The importance of ensuring equitable distribution of benefits and risks in interventions, strategies, and research aligns with social justice principles and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) frameworks, highlighting the objective of minimizing potential harms [67]. This degree of inclusion implies an important distinction between "access" and "participation". The most inclusive degree of social inclusion is identified as *success or empowerment*. This is the widest interpretation, striving to maximize the potential of each human being. It moves beyond merely justice and human rights, employing "models of possibility" rather than "models of deficiency". Interventions include enabling individuals' "voice being heard", fostering interreligious and intercultural dialogue, long-term futures planning, and interventions that facilitate hope and empowerment. Yet, the literature points to the fragility of these gains. Blonk et al. [58] show that while WISEs can foster recognition and self-esteem among workers with intellectual disabilities, these achievements are precarious and do not fully counteract the misrecognition and exclusion embedded in capitalist labor markets. Moreover, Adamson et al. [68] urge a more nuanced understanding of inclusion, warning that organizational practices may reproduce exclusionary dynamics even as they promote diversity and inclusion rhetorically. Critically, while this approach valorizes difference, there is a risk that market-based social enterprises, aiming to treat disability as an "asset" (e.g., in employment), can paradoxically produce new forms of exclusion by commodifying disability and reinforcing performance ideals [69]. This can lead to distinctions between "more able" and "less able" disabled individuals, creating a "supercrip" ideal that marginalizes those who cannot meet market

expectations. This highlights the need for careful consideration to prevent “benevolent discrimination” where well-intentioned actions might inadvertently reinforce the low status of target groups. At this level, social inclusion goes beyond economic access or social justice but implies a transformation in human potential, such as empowerment, aspiration raising, and self-esteem enhancement. In WISEs, social inclusion

From what has been discussed in the literature, it can be said that the social inclusive impact of WISEs is layered by three main levels:

1. *Access*: Access to not only economic benefits through income and improved well-being, but also access to education through training of skills and knowledge, and other social services that the disadvantaged receive.
2. *Participation*: Once workers are employed, they gain the opportunity to participate in the labor market and other social activities. They develop social relationships not only with the owners but also with other workers, policymakers, and various social groups. They are integrated into society, where they can actively engage in social and economic activities.
3. *Personal Empowerment*: Increasing the personal autonomy and self-esteem of vulnerable groups is seen as the transformative impact that WISEs could bring to the workers.

Both societal and organizational inclusion are important for understanding how WISEs can create a socially inclusive impact. However, little discussion has reflected on how WISEs can achieve a socially inclusive impact themselves [5], especially in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, the present research focuses on exploring what social inclusion impact WISEs in Vietnam create and how they create that by examining the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do WISEs provide access to disadvantaged groups?

RQ2: How do disadvantaged groups participate in the labor market and other social activities?

RQ3: What personal empowerment do disadvantaged groups gain through working for the WISEs?

3. Methodology

In response to the exploratory nature of these questions, the current research applied basic qualitative research integrated into a case study approach to explore what social inclusion impact was delivered in small WISEs in Vietnam. A qualitative method was chosen because it suits the research questions, which attempt to give an in-depth understanding. In addition, one strength of the case study method is its contextuality [70]. The case study approach was highly suitable because it helps to gain in-depth investigations of the phenomenon (social inclusion impact) and to understand meanings in a real-life context (Hanoi, Vietnam). The findings propose a framework for identifying what social inclusion impact was achieved in WISEs in Vietnam.

A purposive sampling method was adopted. Purposive sampling requires the researcher to think critically about the studied population and choose cases based on specific criteria. The research questions demanded that data be gathered from a range of WISEs. After all, WISEs include different types of industries where disadvantaged people often work in Vietnam. Each case was a small enterprise that created impacts in the work-integration field, particularly for the disadvantaged. There were 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with WISEs' owners. Owners in this study are also the CEOs due to the small business size. Data was collected in Hanoi, Vietnam, from August 2022 to April 2023. The research focused on WISEs located in Hanoi because many operate there. Interviews were conducted via video call or in person and lasted from 40 to 60 minutes. The information provided in the interviews was cross-checked after each session. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed to better capture each participant's responses. The coding process was guided by three themes that emerged from the literature review, corresponding to the three research questions: the ways WISEs provide access to disadvantaged groups, the participation of disadvantaged groups in the labor market and social activities, and the personal empowerment gained by disadvantaged groups through working for the WISEs.

Access to cases was guaranteed on the condition of anonymity. Pseudonyms such as A, B, C, and so on were used to name each company. The structural profile of the interviewees is summarized below:

Table 1.
Profile of Interview Participants and Their Organizations.

Participant	Coding of the Company's name	Established year	Industry	Number of employees	Number of disadvantaged people
1	A	2008	Handicrafts	13	11
2	B	2015	Biochar	38	34
3	C	2017	Personal protective equipment	8	5
4	D	2018	Vocational training for people with disabilities Textile painting	30	24
5	E	2013	Vegetable farming	35	20
6	F	2010	Teaching autistic children	15	10
7	G	2015	Food processing (Mostly banana)	40	28
8	H	2015	Handmade toys	20	18
9	I	2016	Growing mushrooms	7	4
10	J	2015	Garment	15	9
11	K	2008	Graphic design	50	50
12	L	2017	House furniture	6	6
13	M	2016	Massage therapy	10	10
14	N	2015	Information technology	7	6
15	O	2017	Vocational training (for deaf people) Making wigs	15	12

Our coding process was guided by three themes that emerged in our literature review: access, participation, and empowerment. We started to openly code keywords and phrases in the responses of interviewees and grouped them into relevant categories, which eventually were put into three themes. To ensure data reliability, the two authors of this article undertook the coding independently. The constant comparison method (CCM) was then applied to compare and contrast the emergent themes. The authors then revisited the data and the literature review to resolve disputes.

4. Findings

Our findings describe disadvantaged groups working for Vietnamese WISEs and outline how the three main themes emerged across three research questions.

4.1. Disadvantaged Groups

Disadvantaged groups in this study include people with disabilities, women in difficult circumstances, and the elderly. Women in difficult circumstances include individuals who do not have vocational training and/or who have to take care of sick family members. The elderly include individuals who have no savings and/or are single, with limited job opportunities. Women and the elderly are not picky about jobs. They tend to do everything that suits their circumstances. The manager of company E explained:

My company produces vegetables. Women and the elderly over 50 years old have very few job opportunities. Many industries need healthy workers. They can work in this company because the job is simple, not requiring much muscle strength, for example, packing vegetables.

People with disabilities choose jobs that suit their health conditions. The business owner of company A describes their employees:

Company A has thirteen employees, of whom six have kidney failure and require dialysis. These employees work three days a week and undergo dialysis on the other three days. Another employee has one leg; another has a spinal injury; another has a chronic illness; one has congenital anaemia; and one has heart disease.

4.1.1. Owner of company J Added

"My garment factory has fifteen workers. Most of them are older women who find it very difficult to get a job elsewhere."

Disadvantaged people often live in areas near the company. They learn about the company through introductions from acquaintances working there or through recruitment information sent by local authorities. When applying for a job, most people with disabilities lack adequate skills and abilities to work. The owner of company M explained the reasons for the lack of skills and abilities to work:

"Ethnic minorities and people with disabilities rarely receive vocational training."

Owner of company P elaborated:

With limited education, people with disabilities become self-conscious when they grow up [...]. The more self-conscious they are, the more afraid they are to communicate and interact with strangers, so their learning opportunities are even fewer.

4.1.2. Another interviewee said

"Some people with disabilities can easily give up during vocational training". (Owner of company M)
Because:

"I have experienced it. When learners did not have to pay for studying, they did not appreciate the course, they easily gave up, or did not put in the effort to study." (Owner of company P)

or:

"Personal health conditions make them discouraged." (Owner of Company H)

In addition, families with people with disabilities in Vietnam are often not open-minded and keep their children at home, leading to children being afraid of social interactions and having fewer learning opportunities than other children.

However, once determined to work at a company, the disadvantaged often persevere in their employment. They do not change jobs as frequently as others. They appreciate their current jobs. Owners of companies A, B, C, E, G, and J shared this view. For example:

People with disabilities are very persistent in their work. Wherever they work, they focus on that. They are conscientious and less likely to change jobs. (Owner of company B)

4.1.3. Access

In line with the literature that defines access as the first layer of social inclusion [65], our findings reveal how Vietnamese WISEs create such access for disadvantaged groups.

Business owners who belong to disadvantaged groups tend to establish businesses for disadvantaged people. Fourteen out of sixteen people interviewed were people with disabilities or had relatives with disabilities. Disadvantaged people operate businesses for disadvantaged groups because they want to contribute to the community of disadvantaged people, both by creating jobs for disadvantaged individuals and by helping themselves.

4.1.4. One Interviewee Illustrated

Most of the company's members, including myself, are people with mobility disabilities [...]. The company focuses on creating jobs and ensuring a livelihood for people with disabilities [...]. I am happy with what I am doing. (Owner of company O)

Another interviewee pointed out:

"I created this company for family reasons. My mother-in-law is disabled. She cannot walk and has to use a wheelchair. My sister cannot go either. I am under financial pressure. I need a flexible business model; anyone can do it, whenever they're free. It creates a source of income [...] After that, I felt attached to this job, I saw the meaning of creating jobs for disadvantaged people." (Owner of company J)

4.1.5. Training, Recruitment, and Motivation at Work to Provide Access for Disadvantaged Groups

Consistent with previous research results [29, 71], this study found vocational training and recruitment to be means of providing access to disadvantaged groups. However, the Vietnamese context and culture have created differences in training and recruitment activities. Additionally, job motivation to maintain human resources in the studied WISEs tends to be family-oriented.

Training. For untrained workers, most WISEs in this study offer free vocational training. Some businesses offer free accommodations and meals for a certain period. After that period, if the disability continues to work for the company, he or she will have a paid job. Those who do not continue working for the company can leave. The owner of company B said:

"Cooperatives (companies) provide free vocational training. Those who do not stay overnight at the company are provided with lunch. Those who want to stay are provided with free accommodation and meals."

Most training courses for people with disabilities in these companies include two parts: the first part is soft skills training, and the second part is work skills training.

Recruitment. WISE's recruitment is based on the desire to work for disadvantaged people. WISEs create maximum employment opportunities for disadvantaged individuals. Disadvantaged people who are unable to work full-time are allowed to work on a schedule that suits their abilities and conditions.

The salary calculation method for each WISE is different. However, business owners indicate that they do not generate a high rate of profit after deducting costs because disadvantaged workers have low labor productivity, resulting in higher labor costs compared to normal workers. One interviewee stated:

Currently, 40% of the company's profits are invested in programs to support people with disabilities. For example, training for individuals with disabilities. (Owner of Company K)

During employment, disabled workers are often provided with basic medical support. Some businesses employ both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged workers to support each other. Vulnerable workers are assigned jobs suitable for their health status. Regular workers undertake other tasks.

4.1.6. Motivation

Most businesses in this study use a family-based motivational approach. Because in Vietnamese culture, family is a safe "where all storms stop behind the door," using family values to motivate workers is reported by business owners to be effective.

Family values that disadvantaged people receive in the workplace include using family member pronouns such as aunts, uncles, sisters, and brothers; being asked for opinions on related work; and being able to work with flexible hours according to their health condition. Workers are allowed to bring work tools home and work at home, participate in team-building activities such as eating, drinking, chatting, traveling, and going shopping together. Owner of company H explained:

"My company has 18 disabled employees. Keeping them working long-term is very difficult. After training them, it is common for them to quit their jobs. I have to use many strategies, motivate them to work, and keep them staying."

4.1.7. Owner of company L illustrated

People with disabilities do not have transportation, so I lend them sewing machines. I brought those sewing machines to their houses. They can work from home.

4.2. *Participation at Work*

Participation is essential in ensuring employees' fairness, human rights, and human dignity. WISEs translate these values into organizational policies and practices. Interviewees stated that fairness is fully practiced, and that human rights and human dignity are not fully practiced due to some legislation and normative factors.

4.2.1. *Fairness*

WISEs' owners offer policies to ensure fairness in wages, fair working conditions, and dispute resolution. Fairness is demonstrated by paying disadvantaged employees the same rate as regular employees. Disadvantaged workers are included in all business activities, including work and extracurricular activities. Most studied WISEs emphasize their commitment to equity and justice. For example, one interviewee stated:

"I work hard for fairness [...] The biggest picture I hope for is fairness for everyone" (both disadvantaged and normal employees). (Owner of Company K)

Besides removing unfair advantages, WISEs provide all employees with the information they need to perform their jobs. WISEs support disadvantaged employees both in the workplace and in their personal lives. When disadvantaged employees make contributions at work, WISEs' managers will recognize and acknowledge them. Interviewees said that disabled workers need to be recognized just like normal people. When they receive recognition, they feel happy and try to work more effectively.

4.2.2. *Human Rights and Human Dignity*

Human rights and human dignity often appear together in this study, even though these two concepts can be separated. Human dignity is reflected in being respected both in the workplace and in society. One interviewee said that when dignity is recognized, human rights are affirmed. She suggested that people must understand that every person plays an important role in the society in which he or she lives. She added:

Everyone should have a broader view. Society is the collision of many people. People with disabilities create products that serve society. Every disabled person who works also pays taxes. People with disabilities also have many initiatives to promote social development. (Owner of Company K)

As mentioned in the work motivation section, employees are treated as family members. Many people with disabilities have also engaged in social life with respect for their human dignity. The human rights of disabled workers are expressed through wages and safe working conditions. However, human dignity and human rights are not always fully and fairly practiced for people with disabilities. Some WISEs establish trade unions and pay social insurance for workers, such as companies G, K, and L, while others do not. Business owners explain that the reason for not paying social insurance is that employees are not sure about their long-term ability to work, so they do not want to pay insurance. Interviewees said they are striving to ensure human rights and human dignity for workers with disabilities because many people with disabilities are not confident in themselves or feel insecure. Therefore, WISEs often accompany people with disabilities until they understand that they are a valuable resource for the organization and society. One interviewee explained:

"We always accompany the disabled [...] this is a long journey [...] to make them feel secure. Not only training them to work but also training soft skills, explaining the company's cultural values to them [...] When they understand the company's cultural values, they become a source of sustainable labor and help the business to stabilize. (Owner of company M)

In addition to the above reasons, the curiosity of people around when people with disabilities pass by is described as a reason why people with disabilities do not want to participate in many social activities.

4.3. *Personal Empowerment*

This is the area where disabled workers' changes are most clearly seen. The obvious shift of personal empowerment takes place in four aspects: taking control of life, changing personal awareness and behaviors, and changing social awareness.

4.3.1. *People with Disabilities Take Control of Their Own Lives*

This change is the most recognizable among the changes in personal empowerment. Disadvantaged workers move from having no income or very unstable income to having a stable income. All interviewees agreed that having a stable income helps disadvantaged workers take control of their lives. Most interviewees shared the view that taking control of life means the ability of a person to influence his or her destiny. Additionally, other forms of taking control of lives are represented by disadvantaged workers making their own decisions, buying what they want, and living the life they hope for. The owner of company B explained:

Having a stable income helps people with disabilities pay for living independently and support their families. Having an income helps them assert their self-worth. They dare to think and do bigger things. They begin to have their own goals [...] Some people who come here do not know how to use a mobile phone. After getting a job, they set a goal to save money to buy a phone.

Through working and interacting with people, disabled employees understand themselves better. They recognize their strengths and weaknesses. They accept their weaknesses, and some people begin making an effort to improve what they perceive as their limitations.

4.3.2. *Change Personal Awareness and Personality*

Research data shows that disabled workers change their perception the most on the meaning of life, their values, and how to solve life situations. They used to think that the future of people with disabilities was bad, but now they see hope ahead. They used to think that they had no contribution to society, but now they recognize their economic and socio-cultural contribution. In the past, they used to passively wait for help whenever they encountered difficult situations; now, they proactively find ways to solve their difficulties. Owner of company H summarized:

There has been a significant change among disabled workers. Initially, they were very timid and self-conscious. After participating in the working environment, engaging with colleagues, and taking part in exchange activities both inside and outside the company, their perceptions changed. They exchanged thoughts with colleagues, and everyone seemed to find themselves in a common environment.

Their worldview shifts from needing to survive to needing to assert their value. Before participating in the labour market, many people with disabilities only wanted to have enough food to survive. After working for social enterprises, they realized their value and wanted to contribute more effort to society.

Research results also show some changes in the personalities of people with disabilities after participating in social enterprises. Some people become generous and willing to share information share resources with others; some people are no longer selfish, and some are no longer afraid of outside society. Some people go from being shy to being confident. For example, they confidently speak in public, confidently share personal opinions, confidently dress well, and wear makeup. Interviewees illustrated:

They change rapidly. They dress up, dye their hair, tattoo their eyebrows, and invite each other to go to the café. (Owner of company B)

And:

Many people discover that they have things they had never known before. Some people have never sung in front of a crowd before, but now really like to express themselves. Every day, they talk and laugh more happily. They also change their way of dressing and personal preferences.

Some people go from being selfish and stingy to being generous and generous:

Before, people were very selfish. If anyone touched their belongings, they would scream. They did not like anyone touching their possessions. Even during meals, they were afraid that others would eat more than them. When they had money, they changed. They were willing to give others some shampoo or other items. They were aware of helping others. They no longer thought about winning or losing. (Owner of company B)

4.3.3. *Change Social Awareness*

Interviewees said that in the areas where disabled workers work and live, there has been a change in social awareness. The biggest change is recognizing the existence of people with disabilities as a group member of society. They may have different physical characteristics from others, but they are a group of members of society with the same human rights and dignity as normal people. The interviewee explained that the regular participation of people with disabilities in social activities has changed social awareness. For example:

"If you have never seen people with disabilities or wheelchairs walking on the street for your whole life, your mind will never include ideas about building a road for wheelchairs. If you see people in wheelchairs every day, you have to build a ramp for wheelchair users, right? If you never see a disabled person entering a 5-star restaurant, or if only a disabled person enters a 5-star restaurant, the security guard will come out and give him 5,000 VND and then chase him away. If more people with disabilities come to use this service, society's habits and thinking about people with disabilities will change [...] I have encountered similar situations; every time people saw me, they gave me 2000. Now I don't encounter those situations anymore." (Owner of Company K)

5. Discussion

This section interprets our findings in light of existing theories of social inclusion and prior studies on WISEs, highlighting how the Vietnamese context adds new dimensions to this body of knowledge.

First, the findings reconceptualize social inclusion in WISEs as a multi-level and context-dependent process, while also highlighting distinctive pathways shaped by family-oriented cultural values and empathy-driven leadership. Social inclusion in Vietnam is represented through three degrees, as pointed out in the literature, which include access, participation, and empowerment [71]. However, the specific manifestation of social inclusion differs due to the Vietnamese research context. These three degrees do not have a sequential progression from access to participation to empowerment, but rather a shortcut development from access directly to empowerment.

At the first level, access, WISEs in Vietnam primarily create opportunities through vocational training, flexible recruitment, and family-oriented motivational strategies. Similar to earlier findings that highlight employment as a gateway to inclusion [5, 29], our study shows that Vietnamese WISEs embed access in culturally resonant practices. In particular, framing the workplace as an extension of family life reinforces loyalty and retention. This aligns with research on the embeddedness of social enterprises in local socio-cultural norms [4] and demonstrates that access cannot be understood solely in economic terms, but must be contextualized within broader value systems. The biggest difference lies in the significant role of non-material motivation tools. Vietnamese WISEs provide family values to motivate disabled workers. The reason for using family values to motivate work is that family has a particularly important meaning in Vietnamese culture in general and for people with disabilities in particular. People with disabilities are more attached to their families than non-disabled people. Therefore, family cultural values at work make them feel understood and shared, and from there, they have a comfortable spirit at work.

The second level, participation, proved more complex. Although WISEs strive to provide fair wages and equal opportunities, participation in organizational life is constrained by structural and normative barriers, including limited access to social insurance and a lack of rights awareness among workers with disabilities. These challenges echo concerns that participation gains in WISEs may be fragile or conditional [58, 68]. Moreover, the persistence of partial recognition resonates with critiques of

“benevolent discrimination,” where inclusion rhetoric masks the reproduction of inequalities [69]. Thus, while participation reflects important progress, it remains uneven and contingent on broader institutional arrangements. Specifically, human rights and human dignity are not fully practiced due to some legislation and normative factors. Laws on social insurance for people with disabilities in Vietnam are said to be relatively difficult to apply if people with disabilities have intermittent work time. Normative factors represent the fact that many disabled people themselves do not realize the role of social insurance. Therefore, they delay paying social insurance. Besides, although human rights and human dignity have different connotations, they are very difficult to separate in this study. Human rights and human dignity are often used interchangeably when referring to people with disabilities in this study. The interviewees explained that because most people with disabilities work as unskilled workers, their income is not high. They often care about fair pay practices, rather than paying attention to their human rights or dignity.

At the third level, empowerment, our study highlights transformative changes in self-perception, autonomy, and social recognition. Empowerment is not only experienced at the individual level through increased confidence and agency but also at the community level, where the visibility of workers with disabilities helps reshape social norms. These findings are consistent with evidence that WISEs can foster empowerment by enhancing capabilities and challenging stigma [50, 62]. Importantly, the Vietnamese case illustrates that empowerment is often accelerated by founder empathy, as many WISE leaders are themselves members of disadvantaged groups. This corroborates research on empathy-driven leadership as a critical enabler of social impact [72, 73] and suggests that founder positionality can serve as a catalyst for deeper inclusion. Regarding the third degree of empowerment, previous studies have shown changes in people with disabilities themselves [50, 55, 62, 63]. Few studies have mentioned the ability of people with disabilities to change social awareness around them. This study shows that the presence of people with disabilities has changed social perceptions of them.

Across all three levels, the agency of beneficiaries emerges as central. While WISEs provide resources and supportive environments, it is the aspirations and determination of disadvantaged individuals that sustain empowerment outcomes. By situating inclusion as a dynamic and non-linear process where access can sometimes lead directly to empowerment, our findings advance the theorization of social inclusion in ways that better capture the realities of developing and transitional economies [6, 7].

Theoretically, this study contributes a contextualized three-tier framework of social inclusion in WISEs, emphasizing the interplay between cultural values, empathetic leadership, and beneficiary agency. Practically, it suggests that designing inclusive enterprises in resource-constrained contexts requires moving beyond employment provision toward embedding empowerment pathways that leverage local cultural resources. Future comparative research could test the transferability of this model to other developing contexts, thereby strengthening institutional and cross-cultural perspectives on social inclusion.

Second, previous studies indicate that social enterprises are driven by a sense of ethical responsibility to help others [72-74]. This study shows that, in the Vietnamese context, many social enterprises for disadvantaged people are founded by business owners with disabilities. The founders' original purpose was to find a way to help themselves first. After that, the company expanded into the community. Thirteen of the fifteen interviewed business owners were disabled or had family members who were disabled. Most of them establish businesses to create jobs for themselves, combined with creating jobs for the community of people in similar situations.

Third, the research results show that, despite receiving support from social organizations, it is the efforts of people with disabilities to bring success to social inclusion. People with disabilities themselves must have a strong desire to change their lives. Interviewees shared a common path they often build for potential disabled workers: the first step is explaining the meaning of the job so that disabled people understand themselves and the working environment; the second step is to train soft skills; the third step is to train work skills; and the final step is to let disabled workers access the workplace.

6. Implications

The findings of this study yield important implications for theory, practice and policy, which are discussed below:

First, this study contributes to theory by reconceptualizing social inclusion in WISEs as a multi-level but non-linear process, where access does not always lead sequentially to participation and empowerment. Instead, in the Vietnamese context, cultural values such as family orientation, empathy-driven leadership, and the agency of disadvantaged workers themselves create distinctive and sometimes direct pathways from access to empowerment.

This finding nuances the linear model of social inclusion often emphasized in prior literature [29, 65] and resonates with recent critiques of conditional or fragile participation [58, 69]. Thus, the study demonstrates that a deep exploration of local specificities is necessary to further advance and adapt existing theories in new institutional environments.

Second, social enterprises should draw on the specific values prioritized in each society to motivate their workers. For instance, in the Vietnamese case examined here, WISEs effectively mobilized family values as a source of non-monetary motivation.

By leveraging such contextually salient values, enterprises not only foster inclusion but also strengthen workers' contributions to the organization. The findings from Vietnam suggest that social inclusion can be accelerated by leveraging local cultural values and empathy-driven leadership, implying that SE models need to be "localized" to fit specific contexts.

Third, policymakers should revise social insurance regulations to accommodate the intermittent work patterns of people with disabilities. They should also develop policies that help WISEs balance social and commercial goals, thereby ensuring sustainable participation. In addition, policymakers should promote programs that raise awareness of social rights and entitlements among people with disabilities, as our findings indicate that many workers are not fully aware of the significance of social insurance or their own rights.

7. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to understand how the social inclusion impact was created by WISEs in Vietnam. With the theoretical background of social inclusion theory, the findings demonstrate that social inclusion in WISEs is not a straightforward or uniform process but can be shaped by contextual and cultural factors, highlighting the dynamic and contingent nature of inclusion in practice. Beyond job creation, WISEs in Vietnam also function as vehicles for broader social change, enabling disadvantaged groups to participate in community life and pursue empowerment.

By situating the analysis in a developing-country context, the study extends existing debates on social inclusion, which have often been dominated by evidence from Western settings.

This research has some limitations. First, the study was based on a relatively small number of cases, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, data were collected only from the perspective of WISE owners, which may not fully capture the voices of workers and other stakeholders. These limitations suggest that future research should adopt larger samples across different regions and include multiple stakeholders' perspectives to provide a more comprehensive picture of how social inclusion is fostered through WISEs.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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