
Overcoming Barriers to Sustainability: Architectural and Social Challenges for Polish Micro-Enterprises

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study examines the potential of micro-enterprises in the Wielkopolska Voivodeship as inclusive and sustainable workplaces for individuals with disabilities. It assesses employment strategies, workplace adaptations, and awareness of statutory regulations and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (decent work) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

Design/Methodology/Approach: A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative and qualitative data from 60 micro-enterprises, including those in the open labor market (OLM) and Sheltered Employment Workshops (SEWs). Data were collected through direct observation, document analysis, and Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), with descriptive statistics to assess compliance and awareness.

Findings: SEWs showed higher compliance with disability employment requirements, with 96.67% meeting the 6% employment rate, compared to 46.67% of OLM enterprises. SEWs also demonstrated greater awareness of SDGs (63.33% vs. 50% in OLM). Significant architectural and social barriers, limiting inclusion, were reported by 24.80% and 36.00% of enterprises, respectively, highlighting the need for workplace adaptations and attitude shifts.

Practical Implications: The study emphasizes the need for policy initiatives to support OLM micro-enterprises in enhancing accessibility. Increased training on SDGs and incentives for compliance are recommended to foster inclusive practices. Addressing physical and social barriers is essential to create supportive environments for individuals with disabilities.

Originality/Value: This study offers insights into the capacity of micro-enterprises to advance SDGs through inclusive employment, particularly highlighting SEWs' compliance strengths. Findings support further research on inclusivity in small-scale enterprises, aligning local practices with global sustainability goals.

Keywords: Disability, SMEs, micro-enterprises, professional activation, recommendations.

JEL Codes: J14, J71, L26, Q01, M14.

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1. Introduction

Disability is a global issue that affects individuals across all social and economic backgrounds, emphasizing the need for inclusive and sustainable development. Efforts to address disability are critical for fostering both inclusivity and advancing sustainable goals, paving the way toward a more equitable global community.

Throughout history, societies have exhibited varied attitudes toward disability. In ancient Sparta, infants with disabilities were often eliminated to preserve societal harmony. During the Middle Ages, disability was viewed as divine punishment, leading to social exclusion or confinement. The marginalization of individuals with disabilities persisted through World War II and, in some regions, continues today. However, early legal codes, such as those from Mesopotamia in 1700 BC, included compensatory provisions for individuals with disabilities.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the dignity and equality of all individuals, and the Rome Treaties further supported the rights of people with disabilities. Poland's entry into the EU brought significant improvements for people with disabilities through access to EU funding. Globally, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to prevent the exclusion of vulnerable groups, including those facing employment challenges due to disability.

This study examines the potential of micro-enterprises in Wielkopolska Voivodeship as inclusive and sustainable workplace for individuals with disabilities, focusing on employment strategies, workplace accommodations, and policies that promote inclusivity. Through an analysis of case studies in this region, the research gathered data via direct observation, document analysis, and interviews conducted with company representatives from both open and protected labor sectors between 2000 and 2024.

The study is organized into five sections. Section 1 reviews literature on micro-enterprises as inclusive workplaces. Section 2 outlines the research methods used. Section 3 presents results and analysis, while Section 4 concludes with recommendations for practical application. Lastly, Section 5 discusses limitations and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

An Sustainable development is considered one of the most important trends in contemporary economics and administration, leading to the elimination of social dissonance in the global dimension, the concept of which appeared in the 1960s. At that time, real problems were noticed (1) of an ecological nature, including: environmental pollution, treated by entrepreneurs as the price of profits, or (2) social problems related to the increasing number of people and meeting their needs.

Due to the degradation of the surrounding ecosystem resulting from industrial human activity, the actions taken to protect valuable species turned out to be insufficient (Jabareen, 2008; Parris and Kates, 2003; Mitlin, 1992; Bebbington and Unerman, 2018; Raworth, 2017).

The turning point of the 20th century was the report presented at the General Assembly session on May 26, 1969 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), S. U'Thant - *"Problems of the Human Environment"*. It emphasized that for the first time in human history there was a global crisis caused by the destruction of the natural environment through human interference. U'Thant documented this thesis with alarming statistical data and appealed for a planned international action to save the environment.

The report of the then UN Secretary General shocked world public opinion and, according to observers, resulted in the transformation of weak nature conservation organizations into dynamic ecological movements (Pawłowski and Pawłowski, 2016; Meadows *et al.*, 2013; Young, 1994; Habuda and Radecki, 2009; Hopwood *et al.*, 2005).

This concept was developed in the 1980s and assumes the thoughtful use of the planet's resources in such a way that they are sufficient to build the prosperity of the current generation and can also meet their needs in the future. Reducing the use of non-renewable raw materials and eliminating hazardous, toxic, or non-recyclable materials from processing are examples of this initiative (Jodkowska, 2011; Larson, 2007; Brundtland, 1987; Escobar, 1996).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as The Global Goals, are an action plan for the changes and transformations of the world in which the needs of the current generation can be met in a sustainable way, with respect for the environment and taking into account the needs of future generations. They were adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 as a universal call to action to eradicate poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030. Seventeen mutually integrated sustainable development goals have been defined, recognizing that action in one area, among others, social, economic, or environmental, will have an impact on the results in other sectors (Hák *et al.*, 2016; Sen, 2001).

Setting sustainable development goals is not only the UN's response to growing environmental and social problems but is also the subject of the European Union's activities. The Community promotes the need to harmonize economic, ecological, and social tasks. The document Europe 2020 – A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, adopted in 2010, prioritizes support for an economy that uses resources efficiently, is environmentally friendly and competitive, and ensures social and territorial cohesion (Woźniak, 2016; Steurer and Hametner, 2013).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) align closely with the overarching objective of the global work program outlined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), which aims to comprehensively understand the role of economic entities – ranging from microenterprises to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – in fostering employment. In this regard, the ILO echoes the principles embedded within the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular emphasis on two key objectives:

- SDG 8: promoting economic growth and decent work, encapsulated by the imperative to cultivate sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, ensuring full and productive employment opportunities alongside decent work for all; this entails combating the exclusion of individuals vulnerable to unemployment, with a focus on factors such as gender, social status, and disability;
- SDG 10: advancing efforts to reduce inequalities, both within nations and across borders; this objective correlates with the ILO's vision of decent work, underscoring the importance of fostering an environment wherein every member of society can actively contribute to economic value creation and reap the benefits of its expansion (EU, 2023; Marmot, 2015).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of December 13, 2006, requires the Republic of Poland to fully include people with disabilities in social life on equal terms. This includes provisions such as accessibility (Art. 9), education (Art. 24), health (Art. 25), rehabilitation (Art. 26), work (Art. 27), social security (Art. 28), participation in public life (Art. 29), and access to culture and sport (Art. 30), enabling individuals with disabilities to enforce their rights from the State (Konwencja o prawach osób niepełnosprawnych, 2013; WHO, 2011; Barton and Armstrong, 2007).

Decent work, as outlined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), encapsulates key goals for employment by promoting fair wages, workplace security, social protection, opportunities for personal growth, and equal treatment. It emphasizes workers' rights to voice concerns, organize, and influence decisions impacting their lives. Ensuring decent work is thus pivotal to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as it not only fosters resilience but also diminishes inequality (ILO, 2015; Patel, 2019).

Despite these aspirations, discrimination in the workplace remains prevalent worldwide, including for individuals with disabilities. The EU is transitioning to employment models aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), affecting the support services sector. While more sheltered workshops across the EU have adopted UNCRPD principles, disparities in legal frameworks and varying national policies have resulted in uneven progress across member states (Nations, 2007).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are central to modern economies,

especially micro-enterprises, which, though small in scale, significantly influence both global and local economic dynamics (Liñán et al., 2020; Małecka, 2018; Wright et al., 2007). In Poland, SMEs make up over 99.8% of businesses, with micro-enterprises comprising 96.5% of all firms. Small companies account for 2.6%, medium for 0.7%, and large firms represent only 0.2% (EEIP, 2023).

SMEs are typically defined by limited capital but are operationally flexible, allowing quick adaptation to market changes. They are crucial for fostering innovation, creating jobs, and supporting community development. Research on SMEs reveals their essential role in economic growth, job creation, and technological advancement. Additionally, SMEs contribute to local identity and culture through community engagement and collaboration with local suppliers.

Polish micro-enterprises notably impact the economy, contributing significantly to GDP and employment. However, these companies encounter challenges, such as limited funding, difficulty in recruiting skilled labor, and intense market competition.

3. Research Methodology

The study was based on data collected between 2000 and 2024 through direct observation, data analysis, and Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) from 60 micro-enterprises in the Wielkopolska Voivodeship. Micro-enterprises were selected according to European Commission guidelines, with 30 entities previously holding Sheltered Employment Workshop (SEW) status and 30 without such a designation.

Key factors influencing the transition away from SEW status were identified. Financial unprofitability was cited by 29 respondents, generational factors (notably reduced interest among younger workers) by 22, and social stigma associated with the SEW label by another 22. Administrative limitations were noted by 30 respondents. Research tools were chosen to align with sample sensitivity, employing quantitative analyses such as mean, median, and a 7-point Likert scale for a rigorous assessment.

4. Research Results

The research indicates that 66.67% OLM and 80.00 % SEWs of the 60 micro-enterprises were aware of the obligation to make payments to the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons to the failure to meet the statutory requirement of a 6% employment rate for people with disabilities – determinant no. 1. Of these micro-enterprises, 46.67% OLM and 96.67% SEWs were found to maintain an employment rate for people with disabilities at $\geq 6\%$ of full-time positions – determinant no. 2. Additionally, 50% OLM and 63.33% SEWs reported awareness of Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 10 – determinant no. 3 (Table 1).

Table 1. *The research sample*

No.	Determinant	OLM			SEWs		
		yes	no	Σ	yes	no	Σ
1	obligation to make payments	20	10	30	24	6	30
2	employment rate $\geq 6\%$	14	16	30	29	1	30
3	knowledge about SDGs 8 and 10	15	15	30	19	11	30
Percentage [%]							
1	obligation to make payments	66.67	33.33	100	80.00	20.00	100
2	employment rate $\geq 6\%$	46.67	53.33	100	96.67	3.33	100
3	knowledge about SDGs 8 and 10	50.00	50.00	100	63.33	36.67	100

Source: Own research.

The data indicates that architectural barriers were identified by 31 respondents as a significant obstacle to employing people with disabilities. Among these respondents, 15 were from OLM and 16 from SEWs. Overall, 24.80% of respondents considered infrastructural barriers to be a major challenge, emphasizing the need to adapt physical spaces within micro-enterprises to support the employment of individuals with disabilities (Table 2).

Table 2. *The barrier to employment of people with disabilities in micro-enterprises – multiple chose*

No.	Answer	OLM	SEWs	Total
1	architectural barrier	15	16	31
2	social barrier	19	26	45
3	knowledge barrier	21	28	49
Σ		55	70	125
Percentage [%]				
1	architectural barrier	27.27	22.86	24.80
2	social barrier	34.55	37.14	36.00
3	knowledge barrier	38.18	40.00	39.20
Σ		100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Own research.

An even greater number, 45 respondents, pointed to social barriers as a key obstacle, with 19 from OLM and 26 from SEWs. Approximately 36.00% of respondents regard social barriers as the most serious challenge, highlighting the urgent need to counteract prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities to foster a more inclusive work environment.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal clear differences in awareness and compliance with disability employment requirements between micro-enterprises in the open labor market (OLM) and Sheltered Employment Workshops (SEWs). Awareness of the obligation to make contributions to the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PFRON) due to failure to meet the statutory employment rate of 6% was observed

in 66.67% of OLM and 80.00% of SEWs. This suggests that sheltered enterprises demonstrate higher awareness and commitment to meeting legal employment requirements, potentially due to their specific operational profile and institutional support (Table 1).

Furthermore, this heightened awareness among SEWs may reflect the specialized nature of these enterprises, where employers are more likely to receive guidance on compliance and access to resources that support disability employment, positioning them as more inclusive workplaces.

A notably higher rate of maintaining disability employment at $\geq 6\%$ was found among SEWs (96.67%) compared to OLM (46.67%), indicating potential challenges faced by micro-enterprises in the open labor market in achieving the required employment rate. These challenges may be attributed to infrastructural and social barriers, highlighting the need for targeted workplace adaptations to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities across various types of micro-enterprises.

This difference also points to the need for a more robust support system for OLM micro-enterprises, which could benefit from greater access to resources for workplace modifications and incentives to promote inclusive hiring practices. Enhanced collaboration between regulatory bodies and OLM micro-enterprises may bridge this gap, creating a more balanced approach across both types of enterprises.

Although 50% of OLM and 63.33% of SEWs reported awareness of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 and 10, these results suggest a significant knowledge gap regarding the impact of SDGs on disability employment. The low awareness of SDGs, particularly in OLM, underscores the necessity for enhanced education and promotion of sustainability and inclusivity principles in workplaces to fully implement the goals of equality and anti-exclusion.

Lack of awareness of SDGs among OLM micro-enterprises may limit their motivation to adopt practices that align with global sustainability and inclusivity standards. Programs that emphasize the value of SDGs, particularly in promoting equitable employment, could improve commitment to SDGs and help employers better understand their role in contributing to broader social objectives.

The analysis of barriers identified both architectural and social obstacles as significant challenges in employing people with disabilities. Architectural barriers, reported by 31 respondents, were evenly distributed between OLM and SEWs (Table 2). This finding highlights the importance of adapting physical workspaces within micro-enterprises to support disability employment, aligning with SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequality.

Furthermore, accessible workspaces can enhance the retention and productivity of employees with disabilities, demonstrating a long-term benefit to micro-enterprises.

Investments in accessible infrastructure may yield positive outcomes not only for employees with disabilities but also for enterprises by fostering an inclusive and supportive environment conducive to employee well-being and engagement.

However, social barriers emerged as the most significant challenge, reported by 45 respondents, representing 36.00% of the total sample. These results indicate that prejudice and discrimination towards people with disabilities remain substantial issues, especially within SEWs, where awareness of such challenges is higher.

Addressing stigma and fostering positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities is essential for creating an inclusive work environment, in line with SDG 8, which promotes decent work and economic growth for all. Developing inclusive policies and encouraging ongoing training on disability awareness may gradually shift workplace culture, reducing discriminatory practices and encouraging acceptance.

In summary, the findings highlight the need to support micro-enterprises in addressing infrastructural and social barriers while enhancing institutional and social awareness. Mitigating architectural and social obstacles, coupled with increased education on SDGs, could significantly contribute to creating a more inclusive labor market in Poland and other countries with similar employment structures for people with disabilities. Collaboration among policymakers, regulatory bodies, and micro-enterprises may accelerate progress toward these goals, fostering an inclusive economy aligned with sustainable development principles.

6. Limitation of the Study

This study provides useful insights into disability employment practices in micro-enterprises but has limitations affecting its generalizability. Recognizing these limitations clarifies the study's scope and suggests areas for further research. The study focused on micro-enterprises in the Wielkopolska Voivodeship, meaning results may not represent practices in other Polish regions or internationally. Regional variations in policies, economic conditions, and cultural attitudes can influence awareness of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and compliance with disability employment regulations. Broader regional samples could capture more diverse practices.

The sample of 60 micro-enterprises, while informative, limits the identification of nuanced trends. Although dividing the sample between open labor market (OLM) enterprises and Sheltered Employment Workshops (SEWs) allowed for comparison, a larger sample would provide a stronger statistical basis. Expanding future research to include small and medium-sized enterprises would provide a more comprehensive view of disability employment.

Self-reported data introduces response bias, as respondents may have provided

socially desirable answers. Using direct observation or third-party verification could help validate self-reported information. The study focused on limited determinants—such as awareness of PFRON obligations, employment rate compliance, and SDG awareness—without considering other influential factors like financial incentives or organizational culture. Including these factors would offer a more comprehensive view.

Lastly, while architectural and social barriers were examined, other obstacles such as attitudinal biases and technological limitations were not explored. Broader research into these barriers would enhance understanding and support more targeted recommendations.

In summary, addressing these limitations in future research by broadening sample size, expanding data collection methods, and including additional determinants could provide more nuanced insights into inclusive employment in micro-enterprises.

7. Conclusions

This study provides insights into the employment practices and challenges faced by micro-enterprises in Wielkopolska Voivodeship concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities. By examining awareness, compliance, and barriers within both the open labor market (OLM) and Sheltered Employment Workshops (SEWs), the study highlights the distinct roles these enterprises play in fostering inclusive work environments. SEWs demonstrated higher compliance with statutory disability employment rates and greater awareness of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDGs 8 and 10, likely due to institutional support and a focus on sheltered employment.

However, significant obstacles persist, with both architectural and social barriers limiting the integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce. Architectural barriers emphasize the need for accessible workplace environments, aligning with SDG 10's objective of reducing inequality. Social barriers, identified by over a third of respondents, reveal ongoing prejudice, particularly within SEWs, where compliance does not always equate to inclusivity.

The study also reveals a substantial knowledge gap regarding SDGs, particularly among OLM enterprises, where only half of the respondents were aware of SDGs 8 and 10. Addressing this gap through educational initiatives could improve inclusivity by linking sustainability principles with business objectives.

In sum, achieving an inclusive labor market requires addressing physical and social barriers alongside fostering SDG awareness. Enhanced collaboration between policymakers, regulatory bodies, and micro-enterprises is essential to supporting accessible workspaces and inclusive employment practices, contributing to a more

equitable labor market aligned with global SDGs.

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