

From Exclusion to Inclusion: International Approaches to Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems for People with Disabilities

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Abstract

Entrepreneurial ecosystems within international business are progressively recognised for their potential to promote inclusivity for individuals with disabilities; however, substantial disparities remain in both theoretical frameworks and practical implementations. Despite global commitments, people with disabilities are still underrepresented among co-founders and leaders in international business. This chapter critically reviews the literature at the intersection of entrepreneurial ecosystems, networks, inclusion, and international business network theory, providing a new perspective on addressing inclusion in International Business. It emphasises how fragmented institutional support, ableist norms, and digital exclusion limit opportunities for these individuals. Drawing on disability studies and international business network theory, we argue that network density — the interconnectedness among business, social, and institutional actors — functions as both a principal structural enabler of and a measurable indicator of inclusion within entrepreneurial ecosystems. We move beyond the traditional view of inclusion as a static policy target, instead reconceptualising it as a dynamic, emergent property of evolving network structures. This shift enables more actionable, measurable, and sustainable approaches to inclusion in international business. By advancing this network-centric perspective, the chapter addresses a critical gap in international business scholarship, which has historically prioritised firm-specific advantages over relational approaches. We propose a future research agenda that emphasises intersectional methodologies, foregrounding the lived experiences of people with disabilities across diverse contexts. This is essential for developing context-sensitive interventions and research that reflect real-world complexities.

Keywords: Inclusion, Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, International Business theory, People with Disabilities, Entrepreneurs with Disabilities

1. Introduction

The inclusion of people with disabilities¹ (PwD) in entrepreneurial ecosystems is a timely and pressing issue for international business (IB) scholarship (Jones et al., 2025; Rolle et al., 2020; Sinkovics et al., 2019; van Tulder, 2024). Global demographic changes, population ageing in the EU, the rising prevalence of disability due to geopolitical conflicts and international policy commitments such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals have underscored the imperative for inclusive economic participation (Eurostat, 2025; Klangboonkrong & Baines, 2022; Muñoz et al., 2022; OECD, 2023; United Nations General Assembly, 2015; World Health Organization, 2023). Recent military conflicts have heightened the need for inclusivity. In Ukraine alone, government and humanitarian agencies have documented at least 20,000 war-related amputations, while some unofficial estimates suggest the number could reach 100,000. These new injuries compound the situation of roughly 2.6 million displaced people who were already living with disabilities (Alen, 2024; World Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Such statistics bring into sharp relief how war and instability are dramatically increasing the global population of PwD and deepening their exclusion from equal economic participation.

Despite growing recognition of the need for inclusion, however, PwD remain significantly underrepresented in entrepreneurship — a phenomenon described as the “missing entrepreneurs” problem (OECD, 2023). The term of “missing entrepreneurs” refers to underrepresented groups of entrepreneurs, including PwD, youth, women, seniors, and migrants, who face greater barriers to entrepreneurship compared to the average due to challenges in developing skills, accessing finance and business networks, cultural biases, and overcoming discrimination (OECD, 2023, p.23). For example, the OECD estimates that if under-represented groups, such as women, youth, and people with disabilities, were as active in business creation as 30 – 49 year-old men, there would be 34.1 million more entrepreneurs across the OECD - a staggering 34 % increase in entrepreneurial activity (OECD, 2023). Data from 26 OECD countries indicate that self-employed workers without disabilities are 11% more likely to hire employees than their counterparts with disabilities, who face higher barriers to entrepreneurship, and the overall participation rate for people with disabilities (PwD) in entrepreneurship remains substantially lower (OECD, 2023). Together, these statistics underscore how PwD are not only underrepresented in starting new businesses but, when they do start, tend to operate smaller ventures with limited potential for employment creation. This gap is aggravated by crisis and conflict, which not only increase

disability rates but also disrupt support systems and amplify exclusion (Layton & Steel, 2015; Rolle et al., 2020).

The key contribution of this chapter is to advance a network-centric theoretical framework that positions network density both as a principal enabler and a measurable indicator of inclusion in internationalisation for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. We address existing gaps by integrating insights from disability studies and international business network theory, reconceptualising inclusion as a dynamic property of network density within entrepreneurial ecosystems. We position network density — the extent and quality of interconnectedness among business, social, and institutional actors — as a principal enabler of opportunity, legitimacy, and cross-border access for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (Prokop & Thompson, 2022; Wurth et al., 2021). Drawing on recent scholarship, we show that robust and diverse networks can mitigate exclusion and support meaningful participation, thereby exposing the limits of traditional, firm-centric models in IB and answering calls for more systemic, measurable, and intersectional approaches, that consider how such overlapping identities compound barriers and shape individuals' experiences within entrepreneurial ecosystems. (Lawton Smith, 2023; Dakung et al., 2023; Hameed et al., 2023). We provide IB scholars with a platform for developing more nuanced, participatory, and context-sensitive research agendas, and highlight the need for future research to adopt dynamic network analysis and intersectional methodologies — approaches, that explicitly consider how overlapping social identities (such as disability, gender, age, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status) intersect to influence entrepreneurial experiences and outcomes, to better capture the evolving realities of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities across diverse global settings (Dakung et al., 2023; Shakiba et al., 2022; Šilenskytė et al., 2024; Lawton Smith, 2023).

The chapter is structured as follows. We begin by critically reviewing disability inclusion in IB, then provide an overview of the conceptual foundations of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems and network theory. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for future research directions in international business.

2. Rethinking Disability Inclusion in International Business Research

International business (IB) scholarship exhibits a persistent tension between profit-centric paradigms and the inclusive rhetoric espoused in policy and corporate discourse. Dominant

frameworks, rooted in transaction cost economics and competitive advantage, reductively frame disability inclusion as a peripheral “social responsibility” rather than a core driver of innovation (Bähr & Fliaster, 2022; Beamish & Chakravarty, 2021; Kruger & David, 2020; Kolk, 2016; Kourula et al., 2017; Meyer & Wang, 2015). This market-centrism obscures the reality that many Entrepreneurs with Disabilities engage in *necessity-driven entrepreneurship* — a survival strategy in economies that deny them wage employment — rather than *opportunity-driven ventures* (López-Felipe & Manzanera-Román, 2019; Jena, 2022). By overlooking these forms of necessity-driven entrepreneurship, IB scholarship fails to address the structural exclusion targeted by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, September 25), revealing a misalignment between theoretical ambitions and the inclusive realities these global goals demand.

Moreover, market-centric approaches to international business fail to address the structural and institutional barriers that marginalise Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. Institutional barriers, such as inaccessible financing and ableist assumptions equating productivity with physical mobility, remain unaddressed, perpetuating exclusion (Friedman et al., 2024; Labie et al., 2015; Yousafzai et al., 2022). Entrepreneurs with Disabilities face fragmented institutional support, societal stigma, and digital exclusion, particularly in conflict-affected or post-Soviet regions where the collapse of infrastructure worsens disparities (Mladenov, 2017; Rushing et al., 2023). For example, in post-socialist states, cultural attitudes favour keeping people with disabilities in separate settings instead of fully including them. This widens the resource gaps and deepens their economic marginalisation (Mladenov, 2017; Csillag et al., 2019). Even digital transformation, often hailed as a democratising force, can instead amplify exclusion through the digital divide, inaccessible technological interfaces and skills gaps (Acs et al., 2017; Darcy et al., 2019). In international business, where companies deploy digital platforms and services across diverse markets, these unsuitable technologies not only exclude potential Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, but also typically fail to integrate essential assistive tools, undermining truly inclusive cross-border operations (Bähr & Fliaster, 2022; Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). Such conditions underscore the inadequacy of IB’s profit-driven models in addressing the socio-economic urgency of necessity-driven entrepreneurship.

Cultural and institutional contexts significantly shape PwD’s access to international opportunities, yet systemic ableism remains a critical but underexplored barrier to inclusive

international entrepreneurship for people with disabilities (PwD). Ableism — as a bias that lacks empathy for PwD — is not only perpetuated by non-disabled individuals, but is often internalized by disabled people themselves, leading to diminished self-perceptions and entrepreneurial aspirations (Friedman et al., 2024). It is often manifested through paternalistic and ambivalent attitudes and policies that presume dependency and equate productivity solely with physical mobility (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). In international business, these ableist assumptions cast disabled entrepreneurs as individuals possessing “anomalous bodily capital”, leading to the underrating of their innovation potential, the overlooking of inclusive market strategies, and ultimately limiting their global participation (Jammaers & Williams, 202). Exclusionary practices manifest in narratives that frame disabled individuals as “less capable” entrepreneurs (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). This research reveals how societal perceptions of disability significantly impact access to funding and resources necessary for entrepreneurial success (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). These cultural barriers intersect with institutional voids, such as misaligned policy frameworks and the absence of disability-inclusive metrics, hindering cross-border participation (Prokop & Thompson, 2022). Without dismantling these structural and attitudinal barriers, IB’s inclusive rhetoric risks remaining performative.

Bridging the gap between inclusive intent and practical outcomes in international business requires rethinking ecosystem design through a disability-informed lens. Systemic change requires integrating social entrepreneurship’s equity-focused principles with IB’s global market logic. Scholars advocate for reframing inclusion as a network feature, leveraging collaborations between educational institutions, NGOs, and policymakers to dismantle barriers (Barba-Sánchez et al., 2023; Csillag et al., 2019; Prokop & Thompson, 2022). However, significant gaps persist: disability remains underrepresented in empirical studies, and frameworks lack actionable metrics for assessing ecosystem inclusivity (Shakiba et al., 2022; Fernandes & Ferreira, 2022). Post-socialist transitions exemplify this neglect, where neoliberal reforms prioritised market efficiency over social equity, sidelining PwD’s entrepreneurial potential (Mladenov, 2017). Centring network density and disability-informed institutional design could bridge these gaps, aligning IB’s theoretical ambitions with lived realities.

Ultimately, International business (IB) scholarship must confront its epistemological foundations, which are shaped by ableist assumptions that marginalise disability as a source

of entrepreneurial value. The field must confront how its narratives marginalise PwD's diverse capabilities and reframe disability as a facet of innovation-driven diversity (Jammaers & Williams, 2023; Mauksch & Dey, 2023). By prioritising relational embeddedness over profit-centric metrics, IB can reimagine global value chains as engines of equitable participation, ensuring necessity-driven entrepreneurship is recognised as both a survival strategy and a catalyst for systemic change. These insights highlight the need for a systemic, network-based approach to inclusion, which the following section develops in detail.

3. Advancing a Network-Centric Framework for Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Our core contribution is to advance the notion of inclusion in entrepreneurial ecosystems from a static attribute to a **dynamic network property**, building on Prokop and Thompson's (2022) insights into ecosystem openness and Zhao et al.'s (2021) framing of purposeful, bottom-of-the-pyramid networks. Whereas Prokop and Thompson demonstrate that the degree of connectivity and permeability among ecosystem actors determines who can participate, and Zhao et al. show that evolving interdependencies in networks underpin real inclusion, we synthesise these perspectives by defining inclusion as an emergent feature of network structure itself, one that can be measured in terms of density, multiplexity and bridging ties. This reconceptualization not only explains why certain groups remain marginalised despite formal support, but also suggests that network density metrics should be designed, monitored and intervened in to ensure that inclusion becomes an integral, measurable outcome of network dynamics, rather than an isolated policy add-on.

This perspective positions network density, rather than isolated individual attributes, as the principal driver of opportunity formation and systemic change (Isenberg, 2010; Stam, 2015; Wurth et al., 2021). By foregrounding the structural properties of networks, the research challenges the adequacy of traditional, firm-centric models of internationalisation, advocating instead for a relational approach that recognises the importance of trust-based, multi-layered networks in fostering inclusion (Stam, 2015; Stam et al., 2025; Lawton Smith, 2023). Empirical evidence highlights the mediating role of networks in shaping opportunities, participation, and inclusiveness for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (Dakung et al., 2023; Lawton Smith, 2023). Informal support systems, particularly family and close social ties, are

crucial for enhancing inclusive participation, particularly given the often limited presence of formal institutional mechanisms (McAdam et al., 2018).

The dynamic relationship between network centrality and brokerage capacity substantiates the network theory of internationalisation for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. Those embedded within dense and diverse networks are more effectively positioned to serve as brokers, connecting disparate actors and capitalising on international opportunities that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Johanson & Vahlne, 2003; Prokop & Thompson, 2022). In contrast, sparse networks tend to reinforce homophily and gatekeeping, spreading exclusion and constraining the ambitions of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (Shakiba et al., 2022; Mladenov, 2017). Targeted interventions, such as hybrid incubators and accessible digital platforms, can disrupt exclusionary dynamics by fostering cross-sectoral collaboration and enabling Entrepreneurs with Disabilities to participate meaningfully in global value chains (Mauksch & Dey, 2023; Chowdhury et al., 2023). This supports the assumption that tightly interconnected network structures, rather than individual capability alone, are the principal determinants of entrepreneurial success for marginalised groups (Prokop & Thompson, 2022). Taken together, our conceptual synthesis reinforces the need for intentional ecosystem design that prioritises network density and diversity.

Policy and community interventions still play an important role in shaping the inclusivity of entrepreneurial ecosystems when they address both structural and attitudinal barriers. The research identifies accessible governmental support pathways, flexible taxation policies, and the integration of disability entrepreneurship modules into educational and training programmes as effective mechanisms for enhancing inclusivity (OECD, 2021; Dakung et al., 2023). Community-based business associations and peer networking events further strengthen these efforts by facilitating practical support, knowledge exchange, and collective advocacy (McAdam et al., 2018; Mion et al., 2022). However, the persistence of societal stigma and fragmented institutional arrangements indicates that policy interventions must move beyond superficial reforms to address the root causes of exclusion (Mladenov, 2017; Rushing et al., 2023). Institutionalising network density metrics within policy frameworks is recommended to ensure that support mechanisms are robust, responsive, and attuned to the needs of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (Prokop & Thompson, 2022). This approach aligns with calls for more systemic, accountable, and scalable interventions.

Technological advancement and digital inclusion are increasingly central to the internationalisation of entrepreneurship among PwD, serving as levellers that can transcend physical and social barriers. Earlier studies illustrate that digital platforms and mobile technologies enable disabled entrepreneurs to access new markets, forge international partnerships, and engage in digital marketplaces (Darcy et al., 2019; Mauksch & Dey, 2023). Initiatives led by governments and NGOs in the digital economy further expand these opportunities, breaking down traditional barriers to entry and fostering innovation (Kašperová & Genus, 2023, Lazić et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the persistence of the digital divide, particularly in regions with limited infrastructure or digital literacy, remains a significant challenge (Acs et al., 2017). Addressing this requires targeted investment in digital skills training, infrastructure development, and the creation of accessible digital tools that accommodate the diverse needs of disabled entrepreneurs (Darcy et al., 2019). Digital inclusion thus complements network density as a driver of systemic change.

Taken together, these insights reinforce the centrality of network density as both an enabler and a measure of systemic inclusivity within entrepreneurial ecosystems. The recognition and realisation of international opportunities for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities are not contingent upon firm-specific advantages, but rather upon the structural inclusivity and interconnectedness of the ecosystems in which they operate (Wurth et al., 2021). Policy recommendations, such as the institutionalisation of disability-inclusive supply chain practices through UNCRPD-aligned trade agreements and the promotion of cross-sectoral collaborations (OECD, 2023), are supported in this study. By situating network density at the heart of ecosystem analysis, this discussion provides a robust platform for advancing both scholarly understanding and practical strategies for creating more equitable global entrepreneurial landscapes (Prokop & Thompson, 2022). This sets the stage for the following section, which propose future research directions.

In summary, this section has repositioned network density as a catalyst for inclusive internationalisation, challenging the traditional focus on firm-specific advantages and highlighting the importance of structural inclusivity within entrepreneurial ecosystems. By demonstrating how tightly interconnected networks enable PwD to access business opportunities and global value chains, we argue that international opportunity recognition hinges not on firm-specific advantages but on structural inclusivity within ecosystems (Johanson & Vahlne, 2003; Shakiba et al., 2022). This integration of disability perspectives reveals critical gaps in international business scholarship, which has traditionally prioritised

resource accumulation and risk management over trust-based intermediation and multi-layered networks (Kolk, 2016; Sinkovics & Archie-Acheampong, 2020). As we move forward, the next sections unpack the conceptual foundations of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems and examines in detail how different network types and their density shape access, participation, and success for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities.

4. Network Structures and Disability Inclusion in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

This section examines the conceptual underpinnings of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems, highlighting how network structure, density, and diversity influence access and participation for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. Drawing on leading international business and diversity scholarship, it considers how these ecosystem dynamics can foster more equitable and globally connected entrepreneurial outcomes.

4.1. Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems—Conceptual Foundations and Their Promise for Disability Inclusion

To overcome the limitations of traditional, market-centric models that have long dominated international business (IB) scholarship, which often overlook structural barriers faced by marginalized entrepreneurs, it is essential to focus on inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems (IEEs) that emphasize intentional, systemic interventions (Wadichar et al., 2022; Kolk, 2016). The scholarly field of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems (IEEs) is still emerging and remains conceptually fragmented, with definitions, frameworks, and disciplinary perspectives often lacking coherence (Hameed et al., 2023; Miah et al., 2024; Wadichar et al., 2022). Building on previous conceptualisations (Kruger & David, 2020; Hameed et al., 2022; Miah et al., 2024), we define an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem (IEE) as a geographically or spatially rooted group of mutually dependent actors (entrepreneurs, investors, support organisations and individuals, public agencies), institutions (formal rules and informal norms), and resource flows that deliberately lowers structural barriers and ensures equitable access to finance, information, networks and markets for entrepreneurs from historically marginalised groups, whether defined by gender, ethnicity, disability or socio-economic status.

Despite increasing attention to inclusion, the literature reveals that disability is often overlooked compared to gender and ethnicity, even though people with disabilities (PwD) face compounded exclusion due to inaccessible infrastructures, attitudinal biases, and policy gaps (Csillag et al., 2019; Fernandes & Ferreira, 2022). The field is further complicated by disciplinary divides, with IB scholars focusing on global integration and social entrepreneurship research emphasising local empowerment (Zhao et al., 2021; Barba-Sánchez et al., 2023). This fragmentation limits the development of holistic frameworks that can address the needs of marginalised entrepreneurs.

Inclusive entrepreneurship is characterised by the facilitation of opportunities and resources that empower all individuals, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, to engage in entrepreneurial activities. At its core, inclusive entrepreneurship is characterised by three interrelated dimensions: opportunity inclusiveness, participation inclusiveness, and sharing inclusiveness (Pilková et al, 2016; Wierenga, 2025; Dakung et al., 2023). Opportunity inclusiveness refers to the accessibility of entrepreneurial pathways for diverse groups, ensuring that barriers for marginalised individuals are minimised. Participation inclusiveness highlights the importance of active involvement and representation of these groups in entrepreneurial processes and ecosystem governance (Ali et al., 2021). Sharing inclusiveness ensures that the benefits of entrepreneurship are distributed equitably, fostering collaboration and mutual support among all participants. However, as systematic reviews show, these dimensions are often treated in isolation, with little integration of disability-specific challenges or intersectional barriers (Fernandes & Ferreira, 2022). This lack of synthesis weakens both empirical understanding and practical interventions for truly inclusive ecosystems.

The literature also suffers from conceptual overstretch, with inclusion often framed as a moral imperative rather than a measurable ecosystem property (Hameed et al., 2023; Rolle et al., 2020). Recent studies identify network density, the extent to which ecosystem actors are closely and multiply interconnected, as a potential driver of opportunity inclusiveness; yet, they rarely address how ableism within networks can negate participation for people with disabilities (PwD) (Shakiba et al., 2022; Lawton Smith, 2023). For example, while universities and incubators are recognised as fostering inclusion, disability-specific findings and empirical studies remain scarce (Butkeviciene & Lawton Smith, 2024; Muñoz et al, 2019; Capitán & García, 2019, Ngah et al., 2023). Additionally, IB frameworks are less

effective at addressing the challenges encountered by Entrepreneurs with Disabilities because they typically view inclusion as a secondary social obligation rather than a primary operational concern (Kruger & David, 2020; Sinkovics & Archie-Acheampong, 2020). This gap between normative aspirations and operational realities underscores the need for more nuanced and actionable frameworks.

4.2 The Interplay of Business, Social, and Institutional Networks in Shaping International Inclusion

Effectively fostering inclusion for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities in international contexts requires integrating business, social, and institutional networks, as each provides distinct resources, legitimacy, and pathways for overcoming barriers that no single network can offer alone. In international business research, these network types are well established: business networks are central to studies of internationalization and inter-firm relationships (Johanson & Mattsson, 2013); social networks build on foundational work in sociology, particularly Granovetter's (1985) analysis of embeddedness; and institutional networks draw on institutional theory, as articulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), to explain the role of formal organizations and legitimacy. Considering these perspectives together allows for a more comprehensive and effective approach to building inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. The interplay of business, social, and institutional networks is central to understanding how Entrepreneurs with Disabilities access and succeed in international markets. Business networks, encompassing relationships with suppliers, clients, and investors, provide critical resources such as operational knowledge, market intelligence, and funding, which are essential for cross-border expansion (Hilmersson et al., 2015; Johanson & Vahlne, 2003). Social networks, rooted in trust and often extending through diaspora and academic ties, help Entrepreneurs with Disabilities overcome cultural and psychic distance, confer legitimacy, and offer emotional support (McAdam et al., 2018; Lawton Smith, 2023). Institutional networks, including universities, government agencies, and industry associations, supply regulatory scaffolding, advocacy, and legitimacy, reducing bureaucratic risks and enabling scalability (Hadley & Wilson, 2003; Prokop & Thompson, 2022). The integration of these three network types moves beyond hierarchical and transactional models, positioning relational governance and network diversity as central to internationalisation for PwD. For Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, the density and diversity of these networks are especially crucial in overcoming compounded exclusion and fragmented support.

Network theory reframes internationalisation as a co-evolutionary and relational process, in contrast to the incremental, learning-based approach of the Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2015), which emphasises gradual commitment as firms gain experiential knowledge and reduce uncertainty. While traditional international business frameworks such as the Uppsala model focus on stepwise expansion and the accumulation of market knowledge, network theory highlights how relational embeddedness allows entrepreneurs, especially those facing marginalisation, to leverage connections and trust to access opportunities and bypass institutional voids, thereby accelerate market entry (Johanson & Vahlne, 2003). Trust-based social ties can facilitate rapid expansion, substituting for formal market research and mitigating cultural barriers. Resource dependency theory (Barney, 1991, 2001) further explains how entrepreneurs mobilise resources through client-driven entry or venture capital, with network structure and the ability to leverage indirect relationships determining strategic flexibility and success. For PwD, evolving from informal social ties to formal alliances is crucial for transforming domestic legitimacy into global credibility and opportunity.

Digital technologies are redefining the boundaries of international entrepreneurship, particularly for PwD. Digital technologies and digital transformation, which enabled the development of global digital platforms, cloud-based solutions, blockchain, and AI-driven tools are reshaping entrepreneurial ecosystems by creating new, low-cost network ties that span geographies and stakeholder groups (Darcy et al., 2019; Mauksch & Dey, 2023; Šilenskytė et al., 2024). It also has the potential to enable Entrepreneurs with Disabilities to participate in global value chains and access new markets without the constraints of physical mobility. This expansion of network density is critical for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, as it allows them to bridge structural voids, access mentors and investors remotely, open up new avenues for collaboration and market entry and tap into global knowledge flows without the physical or attitudinal barriers of traditional ecosystems. However, persistent digital divides, especially in low-income regions, highlight the need for targeted investment in accessible technologies and digital skills training to ensure equitable participation. Technological advances can thus complement network density by making relational embeddedness more accessible and impactful for marginalised entrepreneurs, positioning disability as a source of diversity and innovation rather than limitation.

Networks are not static; their evolution over time shapes internationalisation outcomes for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. Early-stage ventures often rely on informal social ties for initial market entry, but as they mature, these relationships evolve into formalised business

and institutional alliances (Hilmersson et al., 2015). Firms with balanced integration across business, social, and institutional networks are better positioned to coordinate cross-border activities and respond to international opportunities than those reliant on a single network type (Hadley & Wilson, 2003). Network centrality — being strategically positioned within these interconnected networks — enables Entrepreneurs with Disabilities to act as brokers, connecting disparate actors and accessing resources otherwise out of reach (Prokop & Thompson, 2022). Policy interventions such as UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) aligned trade agreements and hybrid incubators co-designed with PwD can institutionalise network density metrics and foster inclusive ecosystems (OECD, 2021).

The ability to develop, integrate, and strategically leverage diverse networks is a key determinant of inclusive internationalisation and systemic change for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. Overreliance on any single network type risks exclusionary gatekeeping, while insufficient density across all three perpetuates resource gaps and limits opportunity (Hilmersson et al., 2015). Digital platforms offer new possibilities for democratising access to global networks, but must be complemented by investments in accessibility and digital skills to ensure equitable participation (Mauksch & Dey, 2023). Embedding network density as a core metric of ecosystem health enables stakeholders to move beyond rhetorical commitments and deliver tangible, measurable outcomes for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, advancing the central thesis that network density is a catalyst for inclusive internationalisation and systemic transformation.

4.3 The Central Role of Network Density in Enabling Systemic Inclusion

Network density stands out as a foundational structural enabler for the inclusion of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities within entrepreneurial ecosystems. Dense business networks facilitate access to critical resources, such as funding, mentorship, and market opportunities, which are often otherwise inaccessible to PwD due to systemic barriers and exclusionary practices (Dakung et al., 2023; Bell, 2019). Strategic collaborations between businesses and disability-focused organisations, as well as hybrid incubators, exemplify how tailored support mechanisms and collaborative financing models can empower Entrepreneurs with Disabilities and foster innovation (Freire-Gibb & Carrillo, 2019). These business networks not only provide operational advantages but also help PwD navigate regulatory and infrastructural challenges, reinforcing the argument that network density is a key determinant of opportunity access and entrepreneurial success (Prokop & Thompson, 2022). The structure and quality of

these interconnections, rather than the mere presence of actors, transform barriers into pathways for participation and growth (Wurth et al., 2021).

Social networks, encompassing family, community, and peer relationships, are equally vital in supporting the inclusion and resilience of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. Trust-based social ties counteract societal stigma and provide essential emotional support, validation, and encouragement, which are particularly important for marginalised individuals facing attitudinal barriers (McAdam et al., 2018; Lawton Smith, 2023). Empathy and shared experiences within dense social networks often catalyse social innovation, as seen in disability entrepreneurship forums and peer-driven initiatives that amplify the visibility and legitimacy of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (Mion et al., 2022). However, sparse or fragmented social networks risk perpetuating isolation and exclusion, especially in regions with entrenched cultural biases (Mladenov, 2017). This underscores the need for intentional efforts to strengthen and diversify social ties in entrepreneurial ecosystems, ensuring that PwD are empowered as agents of change.

Institutional networks, including universities, government agencies, regulatory bodies, and vocational institutions, provide the formal frameworks and legitimacy necessary for sustaining inclusive entrepreneurial practices (Prokop & Thompson, 2022; Audretsch et al., 2018). Policy interventions such as disability-inclusive procurement mandates and tax incentives have been shown to incentivise the integration of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities into supply chains and business development programmes (OECD, 2021). Academic institutions, through accessible curricula and industry partnerships, play a dual role in both raising awareness and providing practical support for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (Dakung et al., 2023; Butkevičienė & Lawton Smith, 2024). Yet, fragmented institutional support and misaligned policies often hinder progress, particularly in post-conflict or resource-constrained settings (Rushing et al., 2023). Institutionalising network density metrics within governance frameworks is therefore essential for ensuring that inclusive initiatives are both accountable and scalable.

5. Future Research Directions: Network-Centric and Intersectional Approaches in International Business

As the previous sections identified, substantial gaps remain in understanding how network dynamics, intersectionality, and digital transformation shape the international opportunities of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. The reconceptualization of inclusion as a dynamic property

of network density, rather than a static policy target, highlights the need for a more nuanced, context-sensitive research agenda (Table 1). This section outlines key future research directions, drawing on the preceding discussion.

Table 1. Priority Areas for Future IB Research on Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems for PwD

| Research Priority | Key Questions/Focus Areas | Rationale for IB scholarship |
|--|--|--|
| Dynamic Network Relationships | How do business, social, and institutional networks evolve across borders to shape Entrepreneurs with Disabilities' access to global value chains? | Explains how network adaptability enables sustained international participation (Prokop & Thompson, 2022; Johanson & Mattsson, 2013). |
| Network-driven Opportunity Recognition | Through what mechanisms do disability-inclusive networks expose Entrepreneurs with Disabilities to diverse commercial norms and cross-border partnerships? | Advances IB understanding of indirect market entry strategies and adaptive capacity (Ahmadian & Abdolmaleki, 2018; Wurth et al., 2021). |
| Digital Connectivity & Global Inclusion | How do digital platforms and accessible technologies reduce barriers and enable PwD to participate in international business? | Clarifies digital inclusion as a complement to network density in global ecosystems (Darcy et al., 2019; Mauksch & Dey, 2023). |
| Institutional Alignment for Global Markets | How can international policy frameworks (e.g., UNCRPD-aligned trade agreements) lower cross-border barriers and incentivize disability-inclusive procurement? | Guides systemic policy interventions for IB ecosystems (OECD, 2021; 2023; Prokop & Thompson, 2022). |
| Social Networks as Capacity-Building Engines | How do peer networks disseminate market intelligence and foster resilience among Entrepreneurs with Disabilities in global contexts? | Reveals social capital's role in sustaining international ventures (McAdam et al., 2018; Lawton Smith, 2023). |
| Methodological Innovation: Longitudinal and Context-Rich Studies | How do network dynamics, policy interventions, and digital innovations impact the internationalisation trajectories of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities over time and across diverse regions? | Provides empirical evidence for the evolution of inclusive IB ecosystems and captures regional and cultural variation (Hidegh et al., 2022; Rushing et al., 2023; Shakiba et al., 2022). |

Table 1 presents suggestions for an agenda for future research in international business (IB) as it relates to the inclusion of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. Each priority area is directly

linked to the structural and relational dynamics that are central to IB scholarship and draws on references already established within our chapter.

First, the priority of dynamic network relationships underscores the need to investigate how business, social, and institutional networks change over time and across borders, shaping the global opportunities available to Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. As Prokop and Thompson (2022) and Johanson and Mattsson (2013) argue, entrepreneurial ecosystems are not static; they are interconnected systems where global and local dynamics continually interact. Exploring these evolving relationships will provide valuable insights into fostering inclusivity as an ongoing, adaptive process rather than a one-off initiative. Such a perspective is crucial for identifying best practices and strategies that foster resilience and adaptability within these networks, particularly for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities.

Closely related is the need to understand network-driven opportunity recognition. Building on Ahmadian and Abdolmaleki's (2018) work, future research should examine how disability-inclusive networks serve as gateways to global opportunity, exposing Entrepreneurs with Disabilities to a diversity of commercial norms, consumer preferences, and partnership options. Often, these networks facilitate indirect market entry strategies, whereby entrepreneurs leverage relationships with intermediaries, partners, or digital platforms to access international markets without the need for direct investment or formal establishment abroad (Wurth et al., 2021). Participation in resilient, boundary-spanning networks can broaden the market reach of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities and shape the adaptation and competitiveness of their products and services across borders (Wurth et al., 2021). This approach challenges traditional, firm-centric models in IB by positioning relational embeddedness and indirect network effects as central to international opportunity recognition.

Digital connectivity and global inclusion represent another critical research frontier. The integration of digital platforms and accessible technologies can facilitate and reshape interactions among ecosystem actors, creating robust support systems for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities and enhancing their access to resources and collaboration opportunities (Darcy et al., 2019; Mauksch & Dey, 2023). However, persistent digital divides, particularly in low-resource settings, may continue to limit participation. Future research should clarify how digital transformation can complement network density, rather than replace it, and identify the conditions under which digital tools most effectively enable global inclusion for PwD.

Institutional alignment for global markets is essential for scaling inclusion in IB ecosystems. Research should explore how international policy frameworks — such as UNCRPD-aligned trade agreements and disability-inclusive procurement policies — can institutionalise network density and lower cross-border barriers for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (OECD, 2021; Prokop & Thompson, 2022). Comparative studies of policy frameworks in different regions, including post-conflict and low-income contexts, would clarify the institutional conditions that sustain inclusive international business ecosystems. Future policy and ecosystem design should adopt intersectional approaches, recognising how disability intersects with gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status to shape entrepreneurial experiences and outcomes (Dakung et al., 2023).

Social networks as capacity-building engines highlight the importance of interpersonal and peer-based networks in cultivating supportive communities for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities. These networks can provide emotional resilience, peer learning, and informal channels for exchanging information on global funding, mentorship, and partnership opportunities (McAdam et al., 2018; Lawton Smith, 2023). Addressing how different network configurations — such as density, multiplexity, and diversity — diffuse resources and best practices across disability-inclusive entrepreneurial communities will clarify the mechanisms through which social capital drives inclusion and international opportunity recognition.

Finally, methodological innovation is crucial for advancing this research agenda.

Longitudinal and context-rich empirical studies are needed to uncover patterns of interaction and reveal how different layers of the network, including informal connections and institutional partnerships, contribute to fostering an inclusive entrepreneurial identity over time and across diverse contexts (Rushing et al., 2023; Shakiba et al., 2022). To access people with disabilities for research purposes, we recommend a combination of purposive and snowball sampling through disability advocacy organizations, entrepreneurial networks, and community groups. Qualitative research designs, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participatory or co-researcher approaches, are particularly well-suited for capturing the nuanced lived experiences of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, especially in settings where quantitative data may be scarce or unreliable. Such studies will enable researchers and practitioners to better understand the mechanisms that support or hinder inclusion, refine policies and practices, and ensure that research reflects the perspectives of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, particularly in non-Western and low- and middle-income countries, post-socialist contexts, and regions affected by conflict or displacement.

In sum, these priorities collectively reposition network density as the structural backbone of inclusive internationalisation, challenging IB's traditional firm-centric paradigms. By putting more emphasis on dynamic relationships, digital inclusion, institutional alignment, and methodological innovation, future research can transform inclusion from a peripheral concern into a measurable and actionable driver of global entrepreneurial ecosystems.

6. Conclusions: Towards Systemic Inclusion in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Our perspective paper concludes that network density emerges as the foundational driver of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems for people with disabilities, shaping access to opportunity, resources, and international reach. This research demonstrates that success for disabled entrepreneurs is not simply a function of individual attributes or firm-specific advantages but is fundamentally determined by the structure and quality of their business, social, and institutional networks (Johanson & Mattsson, 2013; Prokop & Thompson, 2022). Dense and diverse networks enable entrepreneurs to overcome exclusionary barriers, broker new relationships, and access global markets, offering a relational perspective that challenges traditional, firm-centric models of internationalisation (Wurth et al., 2021). The integration of trust-based, multi-layered networks is shown to be particularly effective in countering systemic ableism and fostering genuine inclusion (Lawton Smith, 2023). These insights reposition network density as both an enabler and a measure of systemic inclusivity, providing a new lens for scholars and practitioners seeking to advance equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Government and policy support are revealed as critical catalysts that amplify the benefits of network centrality, ensuring that inclusive ecosystems are both robust and sustainable. Policy interventions, such as disability-inclusive procurement, accessible training, and institutionalisation of network density metrics, are essential for dismantling structural and attitudinal barriers that persist within entrepreneurial environments (OECD, 2021; Shakiba et al., 2022). Our analytical synthesis suggests that effective policy does not operate in isolation but must be embedded within, and responsive to, the evolving dynamics of entrepreneurial networks. This interdependence between policy and network structure calls for systemic, cross-sectoral approaches that prioritise both density and diversity of connections (Prokop & Thompson, 2022). Ultimately, this research invites future studies to empirically test these relationships across diverse contexts and to develop actionable frameworks that institutionalise inclusion as a core property of entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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¹ We use the definition of people with disabilities according to the United Nations (UN), which define them as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations, 2006)

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