

# 從被服務者到服務提供者：台灣身心障礙社會創業家之經驗探討與政策意涵

徐志杰

南臺科技大學流行音樂產業系助理教授

cchsu@stust.edu.tw

## 摘要

傳統上，身心障礙政策與社會福利措施多將身心障礙者定位為服務受惠者，但已有越來越多的身心障礙者透過個人洞察力與韌性，積極參與解決社會問題，逐漸轉型為具主動性的社會貢獻者。本文旨在探討身心障礙者如何從社會企業中的「被服務者」角色轉型為「服務提供者」。研究以障礙社會模式與人權取向作為理論基礎，透過深度訪談15位台灣身心障礙社會創業家，以及7位相關利害關係人，分析其主體生命經驗。透過質性訪談與主題分析，本研究指出政策框架、態度障礙與個人能動性之間的複雜互動，影響了身心障礙創業家的創業歷程。研究結果強調包容性政策的重要性、破除刻板印象的必要性，以及社會企業作為賦權轉型平台的關鍵角色。本研究建議政策制定者、教育工作者與社會創新培力單位，應重新定位身心障礙者為社會變革的重要推動者，而非僅是支持對象。

**關鍵詞：**身心障礙、社會企業、社會創新、個人機構、賦權、人權理論、社會模式

# From Recipients to Providers: The Agency and Innovation of Social Entrepreneurs with Disabilities in Taiwan

Chih-Chieh Hsu

Department of Popular Music Industry, Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology

cchsu@stust.edu.tw

## Abstract

Historically, disability-related policies have framed people with disabilities primarily as beneficiaries of social welfare. However, a growing number are transforming into active service providers, leveraging personal insight and resilience to address social problems. This article examines the transition from service recipients to social entrepreneurs among individuals with disabilities in Taiwan. Guided by a framework integrating the social model of disability with social entrepreneurship theory, the study explores how personal agency serves as a bridge between lived experience and social innovation. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 15 social entrepreneurs with disabilities and 7 key stakeholders, the research identifies the complex interplay between restrictive policy frameworks, attitudinal barriers, and the personal agency that shapes these entrepreneurial journeys. Findings highlight the necessity of dismantling stereotypes and positioning social entrepreneurship as a site of empowerment. The study concludes with recommendations for policymakers and educators to recognize people with disabilities not merely as recipients of support, but as crucial architects of social change.

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Corresponding author: C.-C. Hsu, Department of Popular Music Industry, Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Tainan 710301, Taiwan.

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## I. Introduction

People with disabilities have long been positioned as beneficiaries of charitable services, objects of rehabilitation, or recipients of social welfare. This perspective, influenced historically by the medical model of disability, frequently reduces individuals to their impairments, and it overlooks the structural, attitudinal, and environmental barriers that hinder their full participation in the community (Oliver, 1990). However, the human rights-based approach—as crystallized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)—has reframed disability as a matter of human rights and equality, highlighting the agency, dignity, and potential contributions of people with disabilities to society (United Nations, 2006). More recent research builds upon this rights-based foundation by positioning disability not as a limitation to be accommodated, but as an asset for innovation and value creation within social enterprises (Mauksch & Dey, 2024).

This shift opens up a new conceptual space—one where disability is reimagined not as a constraint to manage, but as a driving force for social transformation. It is within this emerging paradigm that social entrepreneurship becomes a critical site of analysis. Over the past decade, the rise of social entrepreneurship has presented a novel context in which people with disabilities can reposition themselves as active contributors rather than passive service recipients. Social entrepreneurship broadly refers to the use of entrepreneurial principles to organize, create, and manage ventures that aim to deliver social change (Dees, 2001). According to Bornstein and Davis (2010), social entrepreneurs aspire to resolve societal problems and innovate solutions that help marginalized communities.

People with disabilities, by virtue of their lived experiences, appear uniquely equipped to identify unmet social needs and conceptualize creative innovations (Renko et al., 2016). Their personal experiences with oppression and discrimination can serve as catalysts for designing solutions that challenge existing norms and reduce community barriers (Caldwell et al., 2016). This aligns with findings from Nguyen et al. (2024), who show that disabled entrepreneurs in Vietnam leverage their lived experiences to transform perceived limitations into human capital and employment opportunities.

Despite growing interest in disability and entrepreneurship, few studies have examined how disabled individuals themselves conceive of, enact, and sustain social enterprises—particularly within East Asian contexts such as Taiwan. This marginalization is reflected in national statistics; a 2024 survey found the labor force participation rate for persons with disabilities remains at 21.9% (Ministry of Labor, 2025), underscoring the structural barriers within the traditional labor market. Traditional disability policies in Taiwan have long focused on “occupational reconstruction” or vocational training, emphasizing individual impairments rather than dismantling broader social or institutional barriers (Chang & Yen, 2011). These programs tend to position people with disabilities as passive recipients of charity or support, rather than as innovators or decision-makers. As a result, although social entrepreneurship is gaining traction as a vehicle for both economic and social change, the leadership and perspectives of disabled individuals appear to remain underrepresented (Wu, 2021). Recent work by Mendoza (2023) highlights the importance of inclusive entrepreneurship models that integrate individual agency with institutional and community support through multi-level collaboration.

Taken together, these insights underscore the need for research that centers the lived experiences of disabled founders—especially in societal contexts where welfare models have historically been dominant and policy evolution has been gradual. This study addresses this gap by investigating the experiences of 15 social entrepreneurs with disabilities and 7 key stakeholders in Taiwan, shedding light on how these entrepreneurs negotiate systemic barriers, utilize existing resources, and reshape the discourse surrounding disability. In particular, the study showcases the conceptual shift from viewing disabled people as "service recipients" to acknowledging them as "service providers" or "providers of social innovation." Applying the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and the human rights-based approach (Lord & Stein, 2008), the researcher examines how individuals navigate these constructs in the face of institutional constraints. The findings may offer novel insights for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates, emphasizing the need to dismantle stereotypes, expand inclusive programs, and empower social entrepreneurs with disabilities to become legitimate drivers of social change.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section II provides a literature review that contextualizes the medical and social models of disability, the CRPD's human rights perspective, and existing research on disability-led social enterprises. This is followed by an explanation of the study's methodology in Section III, including data collection and thematic analysis procedures. The findings are then presented in Section IV and organized around three key themes. Section V discusses the academic and practical implications of the findings, and Section VI outlines specific policy recommendations. The article concludes in Section VII by summarizing the core arguments and contributions of the research.

To analyze this transition, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework that combines the structural critique of the social model of disability with insights from social entrepreneurship theory. This study applies the concept of personal agency as a crucial bridge to understand how individuals navigate, resist, and re-shape the disabling structures they encounter. This framework allows this study to move beyond a simple description of barriers and instead analyze the agentic processes through which the lived experience of disability is transformed into a source of social innovation and entrepreneurial opportunity.

## II. Literature review

In recent years, the discourse on disability has undergone a profound transformation—from emphasizing individual impairments to examining systemic exclusion and human rights. This shift is particularly relevant in the context of social entrepreneurship, where traditional perceptions of people with disabilities as passive recipients are being challenged (Chang & Yen, 2011). This section synthesizes scholarship across four key domains: evolving disability frameworks, the influence of the CRPD, the intersection of disability and social enterprise, and the conceptual shift from service recipient to provider. Together, these strands illuminate the theoretical foundation for reimagining disabled individuals as agents of innovation and change.

### 1. Disability frameworks: From medical to social model

Scholars often distinguish between the medical and social models of disability (Oliver, 1990). The medical model focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of an individual's impairment. Historically, this perspective influenced public policies that emphasize care, rehabilitation, and charitable support. Although medical intervention can address certain needs, critics argue that this model neglects the broader social context and structurally embedded forms of exclusion—such as inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and inadequate policy frameworks (Oliver & Barnes,

2012). These limitations have prompted a search for alternative frameworks that shift attention from individual deficits to collective responsibility.

By contrast, the social model locates the root cause of disability in societal structures. Rather than perceiving disabled people as passive "patients," it highlights how social barriers—lack of accommodations, prejudice in employment, or poorly designed public spaces—disable individuals who have impairments (Oliver, 1990). Thus, the social model underscores the possibility of social change and political advocacy as pathways to enhance inclusion. Yet even the social model is not without critique. Some scholars note the need for an "interactionist" or "hybrid" approach that acknowledges both individual impairments and structural barriers (Shakespeare, 2013). These perspectives continue to evolve, reflecting the complexity of disability as both a lived experience and a socio-political condition.

## 2. Human rights-based approach and CRPD

Adopted in 2006, the CRPD mainstreamed the idea that people with disabilities have the right to full participation and equality in social life (United Nations, 2006). Ratifying states must ensure accessibility, nondiscrimination, and progressive reform of existing laws to comply with CRPD standards. The convention has been hailed as a shift from a charity perspective to a rights-based perspective, compelling governments and societies to remove systemic barriers and facilitate opportunities for economic self-reliance (Lord & Stein, 2008). This paradigm shift emphasizes dignity, autonomy, and social inclusion as the foundation of disability policy, rather than dependency or sympathy.

In practice, however, many countries have appeared to struggle to reconcile CRPD principles with deeply entrenched welfare or rehabilitation models. Taiwan, although not a UN member, voluntarily incorporated the Convention through the People with Disabilities Rights Protection Act. Yet international reviewers note that real transformation has been slow: the 2022 Concluding Observations of Taiwan's CRPD reviews criticizes the persistence of paternalistic policies and the use of strict eligibility tests that frame disability benefits as relief rather than investment (International Review Committee, 2022; Ministry of Health and Welfare, Social and Family Administration, 2022). This policy lag is particularly evident in employment and entrepreneurship, where charitable logic continues to conflict with the Convention's call for rights-based economic participation. Sustained progress, therefore, appears to hinge on reorienting policy away from welfare dependency toward genuine capacity-building and inclusive growth.

## 3. Social entrepreneurship and disability

Social entrepreneurship refers to the creation of enterprises that address social issues while maintaining operational sustainability through earned income (Dees, 2001). Many scholars conceptualize social entrepreneurs as visionaries who integrate market approaches with social missions (Bornstein & Davis, 2010). For disability communities, social enterprises serve dual roles: they offer inclusive employment and empower disabled founders to develop services or products based on lived experiences (Renko et al., 2016). Disability-led ventures often generate unique innovations—ranging from assistive technologies to inclusive vocational training and community-based programs (Caldwell et al., 2016). Case studies from Indonesia and Malaysia further demonstrate how digital platforms amplify these innovations, allowing founders to scale their impact and redefine their social identities (Widagdo et al., 2024). This body of work highlights the transformative potential of combining lived experience with entrepreneurial strategy in disability-inclusive ventures.

Nevertheless, disability-led social enterprises continue to face structural barriers. People with disabilities encounter discrimination, lack of tailored financing, and insufficient access to business training (Hwang & Roulstone,

2015). Additionally, negative societal attitudes can diminish investor and consumer confidence. Empirical research shows that impairment (in)visibility and stigma hinder the ability of disabled entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy in both mainstream and disability markets (Kašperová & Kitching, 2021). Even within mainstream social enterprise accelerators, disability-inclusive design is often overlooked (Renko, 2013). To address these systemic shortcomings, Mendoza (2023) proposes a multi-level inclusive entrepreneurship framework that links individual capabilities with institutional and community resources, revealing a path toward more equitable support structures. Yet, despite these theoretical advances, many disability founders remain constrained by models that position them as service recipients rather than service providers—indicating a persistent tension between innovation potential and the limitations of existing frameworks.

#### **4. Service recipients to service providers: A paradigm shift**

Examining the roles of disabled people in social enterprises reveals the potential for a paradigm shift. Typically, philanthropic or social sector organizations conceptualize people with disabilities as “beneficiaries” or “service recipients,” receiving job placements, assistive devices, or supportive counseling. However, as new evidence emerges, a contrasting pattern becomes visible: individuals with disabilities are increasingly acting as co-creators, entrepreneurs, and service providers (Caldwell et al., 2012). Their ventures often center on training programs, inclusive job-matching platforms, or universal design services that reflect their lived experiences. Rather than being passive participants, disabled individuals are actively reshaping the contours of social innovation. This transition reflects the CRPD’s ethos and affirms that disability can serve not as a limitation, but as a strategic asset in the pursuit of systemic change.

In Taiwan, however, critical questions remain. How are these transitions occurring, and what conditions enable them to take root and grow? To what extent do current public policies support—or inhibit—such developments? How do cultural stereotypes and social expectations impact the entrepreneurial capacity of people with disabilities? Addressing these questions is essential not only for understanding the broader policy context, but also for identifying the specific challenges and resources that shape disability-led innovation. The answers to these queries can illuminate both the constraints embedded in existing systems and the emerging pathways toward more inclusive economic participation.

#### **5. From Lived Experience to Social Innovation: An Agency-Based Perspective on Disability-Led Social Entrepreneurship**

While the social model of disability effectively uncovers structural and attitudinal barriers (Oliver, 1990), it offers limited insight into how individuals actively respond and reframe these challenges. Social entrepreneurship theory, by contrast, emphasizes how marginalized individuals harness entrepreneurial initiatives to enact social change (Dees, 2001). In this context, personal agency—the capacity to act independently and make strategic choices under structural constraints (Bandura, 2001)—becomes a critical analytical lens.

Emerging disability entrepreneurship studies suggest that people with disabilities often leverage their lived experiences and unique standpoint to identify community needs and drive innovation (Csillag et al., 2025). This aligns with standpoint theory, which posits that marginalized groups possess epistemic privilege stemming from firsthand experiences of exclusion (Harding, 1986). For example, Csillag et al. (2025) show how entrepreneurs with disabilities navigate ableism and transform constraints into entrepreneurial strength. Through this lens, disability shifts from a deficit to a form of human capital that enables social innovation.

Therefore, this subsection argues that an agency-based perspective—grounded in personal agency and standpoint theory—provides a robust framework for understanding how disability-led social entrepreneurship unfolds. This theoretical integration grounds the subsequent research design, offers interpretive depth during analysis, and enriches discussion by highlighting how lived experience becomes a catalyst for both social transformation and entrepreneurial self-determination.

### III. Methods

This research employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and this analysis was guided by the theoretical framework, paying specific attention to how participants described their agentic actions in response to the structural and attitudinal barriers identified in the literature. To investigate the lived experiences of disability-led social entrepreneurs in Taiwan, this study employed a qualitative methodology grounded in interpretivist traditions. Such an approach is well-suited for capturing the complex, subjective realities of marginalized groups and interrogating how individuals construct meaning within specific socio-political contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to generate in-depth insights that illuminate the interplay between disability, entrepreneurship, and systemic opportunity structures. The following subsections outline the research design, participant recruitment, data collection procedures, and analytical strategies in detail.

#### 1. Research design

To deeply understand and interpret the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of disability-led social entrepreneurs within the specific sociocultural context of Taiwan, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This approach acknowledges that social reality is pluralistic and socially constructed. The researcher's role is to immerse themselves in the phenomenon under investigation and interpret the world from the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Such interpretive positioning is particularly well-suited for exploring marginalized voices, especially within disability research, where dominant narratives often obscure lived realities (Goodley, 2024).

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured in-depth interviews. This technique ensured that the inquiry remained focused on the core research questions while allowing flexibility for real-time follow-up based on the interactional flow of the conversation. Such flexibility enabled the capture of richer, more nuanced, and sometimes unexpected narratives—particularly valuable in exploratory research areas where existing literature remains limited.

#### 2. Participants

The primary dataset comprises in-depth interviews with 15 social entrepreneurs with disabilities and 7 key stakeholders. These entrepreneurs self-identified as having a range of impairments—including visual, physical, and neurological disabilities—and were recruited through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling, primarily via local disability advocacy networks in Taipei.

Participants were categorized based on the stage of their entrepreneurial development:

- (1) **Preliminary Stage (8 individuals):** Participants with clear business or social innovation ideas, but without formal incorporation or consistent revenue streams.
- (2) **Startup Stage (7 individuals):** Founders who had already launched a registered social enterprise with operational continuity and at least minimal staffing.



Table 1 below provides an overview of the demographic profiles and entrepreneurial stages of the 15 disability-led founders.

Additionally, 7 stakeholders were interviewed, including government officials from labor and welfare departments, staff at social enterprise incubators, and a program manager at a disability-led nonprofit organization. These stakeholders provided critical contextual insights into how institutional structures, policy mechanisms, and social enterprise ecosystems interact with the lived experiences of disabled entrepreneurs. Their perspectives helped situate individual narratives within broader systemic constraints and opportunities.

**Table 1**

*The background of participants with disabilities in the study*

Group	Pseudonym	Age Range	Education Level	Entrepreneurial Stage	Social Enterprise/Venture Idea
Group A	Henry	55-65	Junior College	Preparatory	Long-term care institution
	Chapman	35-45	Doctorate	Preparatory	Association for the care of persons with disabilities
	Lance	25-35	Bachelor's	Preparatory	Job matching company for persons with disabilities
	Wendy	25-35	Bachelor's	Preparatory	Job matching company for persons with disabilities
	Ada	55-65	Junior College	Preparatory	Association for persons with disabilities
	Kevin	35-45	Bachelor's	Preparatory	Marketing company
	John	25-35	Bachelor's	Preparatory	Adult toy store
	Jeff	25-35	Bachelor's	Preparatory	English cram school
Group B	Richard	35-45	Master's	Start-up	Assistive device rental service
	Louis	45-55	Junior College	Start-up	Assistive device rental service
	Walker	55-65	High School	Start-up	Massage parlor
	Will	35-45	Doctorate	Start-up	Tech company (Mobile App)
	Jane	25-35	Junior College	Start-up	Independent coffee shop
	Nick	35-45	Doctorate	Start-up	Care village for the visually impaired
	Ted	45-55	High School	Start-up	Universal design company

### 3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes each, were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The semi-structured interview guide was organized to elicit themes aligned with the integrated framework (structural barriers, personal agency, and the transition from recipient to provider). Interview questions explored:

- (1) **Motivations and Background:** Participants' personal history, reasons for exploring social enterprise, nature of disability.
- (2) **Entrepreneurial Journey:** How participants conceived their business idea, overcame challenges, or leveraged disability-specific knowledge.
- (3) **Interaction with Public or Private Support:** Experiences with government subsidies, social innovation labs, or mainstream startup accelerators.

- (4) Impact and Vision: Perceptions of their social enterprise's contributions, reflections on identity shift from "service recipient" to "service provider."

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms. Ethical approval was granted by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

#### 4. Data Analysis

This research employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), coding transcripts in multiple stages:

- (1) **Initial Familiarization:** Read all transcripts to note recurring concepts (e.g., "empowerment," "stereotypes," "policy loopholes").
- (2) **Generating Codes:** Created 28 detailed codes around participants' experiences with policy, training, or social barriers.
- (3) **Searching for Themes:** Clustered related codes into broader themes, such as "Reframing Disability Identity," "Policy-Induced Constraints," and "Pathways to Empowerment."
- (4) **Reviewing Themes:** Refined themes to capture the most significant patterns relevant to the shift from recipients to providers.
- (5) **Defining and Naming Themes:** Generated final thematic categories for presentation in the results.

Trustworthiness was reinforced through triangulation (cross-verification among entrepreneurs, stakeholders, and official documents) and peer debriefing. The researcher also performed member checks with selected participants to confirm the authenticity of interpretations.

#### 5. Researcher Positionality

As the researcher, my perspective has been shaped by both lived experience and long-term engagement in disability rights advocacy. These positional experiences provided me with an insider's sensitivity to the social, cultural, and policy contexts that influence entrepreneurship among persons with disabilities. Rather than approaching the field as a neutral observer, I was attentive to the structural barriers and agency strategies that participants described, recognizing how their narratives resonated with broader struggles for equality and recognition. At the same time, my background informed not only the framing of research questions but also the interpretive lens through which I understood the participants' entrepreneurial journeys. This positional standpoint underpins the study's emphasis on agency, structural reform, and the transition from service recipient to service provider.

### IV. Findings and analysis

This chapter aims to present the core findings of the research, reorganizing the interview data from the 15 social entrepreneurs with disabilities and the perspectives of the 7 key stakeholders into three interrelated themes for in-depth analysis. These three themes are: (1) The dual drivers of entrepreneurship; (2) Systemic barriers faced from the entry to the growth stage; and (3) The paradoxical effects of current support policies.

#### 1. The dual drivers of entrepreneurship: Survival needs and value realization

This study finds that the motivation driving persons with disabilities to engage in social entrepreneurship is not a single factor, but rather a dual force woven together by push factors and pull factors. Push factors mainly originate from the pressure to strive for economic autonomy and survival dignity in a labor market with structural discrimination. Pull factors, on the other hand, appear to come from a higher-level desire for self-realization and a



sense of mission to improve the predicaments of themselves and their peer community. These two forces are not mutually exclusive but coexist and reinforce each other in the life courses of most entrepreneurs.

To provide a systematic overview before turning to narrative details, Table 2 summarizes the primary entrepreneurial motivations of all 15 participants, categorized into push and pull factors. This table demonstrates the universality as well as the diversity of entrepreneurial motivations, and serves as an empirical foundation for the subsequent qualitative analysis.

**Table 2**

*Analysis of Entrepreneurial Motivations among Social Entrepreneurs with Disabilities*

Group	Participant ID	Stage of Entrepreneurship	Main Push Factors	Main Pull Factors
Group A	Ada	Preliminary	Pressure for economic self-sufficiency; failure of traditional employment channels	Advocacy for labor rights and dignity; voicing the concerns of street vendors
	Henry	Preliminary	(Few)	Responding to long-term care policy trends; pursuing a personal goal of serving society
	John	Preliminary	(Few)	Pursuing personal interest in business; transforming personal challenges in dating into a mission to enhance bodily autonomy within the community
	Kevin	Preliminary	Instability of the traditional labor market; mismatch between job content and professional expertise	Creating an inclusive work environment; realizing the value of personal design expertise
	Jeff	Preliminary	Lack of suitable English-learning channels affecting employment	Addressing the learning barriers of visually impaired adults in English; enhancing community competitiveness
	Chapman	Preliminary	(Few)	Overcoming the limitations of existing NPO service boundaries; realizing broader social concerns
Group B	Wendy & Lance	Preliminary	Failure and exploitation in existing job-matching systems	Establishing a fairer and more effective employment platform; safeguarding peer rights
	Richard	Start-up	(Few)	Observing unmet demand in assistive device rental; transforming professional expertise into social services
	Jane	Start-up	Limited choices in the traditional labor market	Pursuing a passion for the coffee industry; creating diverse employment opportunities for the visually impaired community
	Will	Start-up	Traditional employment services do not match his professional background	Leveraging IT expertise to bridge the information gap for the visually impaired community; advocating for information equity
	Walker	Start-up	(Few)	Responding to policy deregulation in the massage industry that affected visually impaired peers; providing stable employment opportunities

Group	Participant ID	Stage of Entrepreneurship	Main Push Factors	Main Pull Factors
	Nick	Start-up	(Few)	Developing a mission after observing the struggles of isolated visually impaired individuals; building a supportive community ("RP Village")
	Louis	Start-up	Original printing business disrupted by digitalization	Identifying market needs through personal wheelchair use experience
	Ted	Start-up	(Few)	Promoting universal design concepts; advocating for disability rights in a more proactive manner

As shown in Table 2, the motivations of disabled social entrepreneurs are shaped by a complex interplay of push and pull factors. While some respondents emphasized the structural pressures of the labor market, others were primarily driven by a sense of mission, personal passion, or community responsibility. This overview not only demonstrates the heterogeneity of motivations but also sets the stage for the in-depth narratives presented in the following sections.

### (1) The Push of Survival: Seeking a Way Out of Employment Exclusion

The interview data suggest that for many participants, the decision to start a business was a direct response to the limitations of traditional employment pathways. In their job-seeking process, they repeatedly encountered discrimination due to their disability status, unfriendly work environments, or could only obtain low-paying, unstable short-term jobs. These experiences led them to seek alternative paths to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Ada's case is a representation of this push factor. As a street vendor, she not only faced income uncertainty daily but also had to constantly evade law enforcement. For her, the initial motivation for entrepreneurship was to fight for a legal and dignified right to work. Ada's statement reflects this pressure:

*"If I don't produce today, I'm very poor; the government has to subsidize me because I'm a low-income household. But I don't want to be like this, I can still work. Since I can still work, why won't the government help me?" (Ada, street vendor, junior college)*

Ada's narrative reveals the nature of entrepreneurship as a survival strategy: it is not just about economic need, but also a declaration of self-worth and the right to labor. Similarly, Jane, who is visually impaired, realized before entering the coffee industry that the options in the traditional job market were extremely limited. She recalled:

*"My sister left because she got married and had children, and my brother also found a better job and left. So I became independent [started my own business], because for us [visually impaired people], finding a job is not that easy." (Jane, visually impaired barista, junior college)*

so-called "push" is not merely personal economic pressure but a structural response to an exclusionary labor market; entrepreneurship becomes their action to create opportunities and fight for basic survival rights in the face of adversity.

### (2) The Pull of Value: From Personal Experience to Community Mission

Simultaneously, a powerful "pull factor" also appears to draw these entrepreneurs. This force originates from their profound life experiences, transforming personal inconvenience and suffering into a motivation to change society and serve the community. Their entrepreneurial ideas often directly respond to the unmet collective needs faced by themselves and other persons with disabilities in their daily lives.

John's entrepreneurial story illustrates this pull factor. The inspiration for his social enterprise in adult products stemmed from his observations of the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities in terms of intimate relationships and bodily autonomy. And the starting point for all this was a very personal need—dating. He stated:

*"The main purpose of my participation in social movements was to date! I wanted to have more places to eat and date. We [he and his wife] can't just flip open a magazine or a blog and pick a restaurant like others can. About 80 or 90 percent of restaurants I can't get into. This is my motivation!" (John, freelancer, bachelor's degree)*

This self-disclosing dialogue reflects not just an individual need, but also the suppression of bodily autonomy and spatial rights of the disability community. Starting from the initial intention of finding accessible spaces, it further expanded to a concern for the issues of sexual rights and bodily exploration for persons with disabilities, ultimately transforming into the core mission of his social enterprise.

Similarly, Richard, a wheelchair user, founded a social enterprise for assistive device rentals. His initial motivation also stemmed from his long-term observation of the social participation difficulties of persons with disabilities. He mentioned in the interview:

*"Our association holds many travel activities, and I often meet many friends with disabilities who need to use assistive devices. Some use crutches, so they walk slowly or not far. Others rely on family members to push manual wheelchairs, which is very hard for the caregivers. At that time, I was thinking, is there a way to help them solve this problem?" (Richard, Assistive device rental service, Master degree)*

These examples reveal that the "pull factor" is not just market-oriented insight, but a drive rooted in deep community identity and empathy. The social entrepreneurs are not simply filling a market gap, but are developing business models with a social justice consciousness based on their life experiences. This transition from internal to external, from individual to collective, also illustrates a unique characteristic of social entrepreneurship by persons with disabilities: the push and pull factors are often intertwined, making it difficult to distinguish their boundaries. This practice, which merges personal circumstances with collective well-being, challenges the traditional binary perception of "profit" and "public good" in business and presents a form of practice with the dual significance of economic self-sufficiency and social reform.

## **2. Invisible Walls: Systemic Barriers from "Entry" to "Growth"**

This study finds that on the entrepreneurial path of social entrepreneurs with disabilities, there appear to be two "invisible walls" that are difficult to surmount. The first is "entry barriers," mainly reflected in a support system with significant functional misalignments, which makes it difficult for potential entrepreneurs to effectively accumulate the necessary human capital and social capital at the initial stage of entrepreneurship. The second is "growth barriers." Even if entrepreneurs successfully cross the first wall through personal effort and establish their own businesses, the deep-rooted "attitudinal barriers" in society may still follow them, causing them to encounter challenges and have their professional abilities questioned when seeking external resources for growth and development.

### **(1) Entry Barriers: A Support System with Functional Misalignments**

For entrepreneurs in the preparatory stage, a significant challenge is how to acquire the knowledge, skills, and network connections needed for entrepreneurship. However, Taiwan's current employment support system for persons with disabilities appears to present challenges and may even be counterproductive in helping them accumulate this crucial capital.

First, in the accumulation of human capital, the vocational training system appears rigid and may be ineffective. The content of existing vocational training courses specifically for persons with disabilities is often out of touch with market demand or fails to meet their diverse and advanced professional development needs (Feng et al., 2018; Ministry of Labor, 2020; Workforce Development Agency, 2014). On the other hand, when they try to enter mainstream training channels, they may face insufficient accessible facilities and discriminatory treatment. The experience of Jeff, who is visually impaired, is an example. To improve his English skills for his venture, he contacted a mainstream chain English cram school and received the following response:

*“They also told me frankly that if I wanted to take their classes, I could only listen in class. They couldn't give me an electronic file of the textbook or let me convert the textbook into a version I could use, nor would they allow me to bring a recorder to class... I also couldn't bring a laptop into the classroom to use; they said it was difficult to find a seat near an outlet.” (Jeff, freelancer, bachelor's degree)*

This case shows how structural exclusion can hinder motivated potential entrepreneurs from acquiring human capital. This is not a passive failure but an active denial of reasonable accommodation, which directly undermines the individual's effort to build skills.

Second, in the accumulation of social capital, the function of the employment transition service system is also a concern. The system not only may fail to provide stable, developmental job opportunities, but its internal performance evaluation mechanism may be a key contributing factor preventing persons with disabilities from obtaining long-term stable employment. The testimony of Lance and Wendy reveals a notable example of this systemic issue. The system, driven by misaligned performance metrics, can worsen the precarity of the workers it is supposed to help, trapping them in a cycle of short-term, insecure work. They explained:

*“Now they [the job placement officers] have to meet the performance targets set by the government. For the job placement officers, they just need to close the case before October each year. Some employers are actually very good to the massage therapists [with visual impairments] and want to promote the disabled massage therapists to full-time employees, but the case manager [job placement officer] prevents this from happening. The job placement officer wants to meet the performance target every year, so they reject this kind of long-term contract that is beneficial to the [disabled] massage therapist but unfavorable to their own KPI.” (Lance & Wendy, visually impaired massage therapists, bachelor's degrees, joint interview)*

This interview reveals a significant systemic contradiction: a system that should support the stable employment of persons with disabilities instead appears to trap them in fragmented, insecure labor situations due to misaligned performance indicators, potentially depriving them of the opportunity to accumulate social capital and entrepreneurial funds through stable work.

## **(2) Growth Barriers: Pervasive Attitudinal Barriers**

After overcoming entry barriers and launching their businesses, entrepreneurs with disabilities often face a second, more subtle but equally damaging obstacle: attitudinal barriers. These stem from persistent stereotypes and limited understanding of disability-related contexts—even among those tasked with providing professional support. As a result, requests for concrete, growth-oriented assistance are often misinterpreted, ignored, or reduced to symbolic gestures. Will, the founder of a tech-based social enterprise and holder of a Ph.D. in information engineering, encountered this when seeking support from a startup accelerator to refine his funding model. Despite his technical expertise and clarity in business needs, the consultants failed to provide meaningful feedback.

*“They just didn’t understand the disability community at all. So the advice they gave us was so superficial—it completely missed the pain points.” (Will, founder of a digital assistive technology company, doctorate)*

This response reflects how inadequate comprehension of disability can translate into ineffective, generic suggestions that lack actionable value. Rather than engaging with the structural and social complexities of disabled entrepreneurship, consultants defaulted to vague advice, signaling a disconnect that may have stalled progress.

Jane’s experience exposes another layer of attitudinal bias—this time in the way others represent and interpret disabled entrepreneurs’ competence. A certified coffee master who is visually impaired, Jane approached a government-commissioned startup accelerator seeking technical improvement from a professional chef. Yet the consultants reframed her request in a way that emphasized her impairment rather than her expertise.

*“They [the business consultants] said it was because no one [no chef] could solve my problem. No one was willing to help me. Do you know how they [the business consultants] explained my situation to them [the chefs]? They said there was a visually impaired person who opened a coffee shop. Naturally, every professional chef would doubt, how could a visually impaired person cook?” (Jane, visually impaired barista, junior college)*

Although Jane had already demonstrated her capability through licensing and business operation, her request was seemingly dismissed through a framing that preemptively invited doubt. In place of technical mentorship, she was assigned a motivational speaker—a move that appeared to invalidate her professional status and reinforce a view of disability as something to be inspired by, rather than collaborated with.

These cases reveal how ableism can manifest over time—from external exclusion to internalized dismissal. Even after entrepreneurs prove their capabilities, they may remain subject to assumptions that prioritize their disability over their professional expertise, which can distort their needs, limit access, and sustain an invisible ceiling on growth.

### **3. The Policy Paradox: A Shackle Named "Support"**

While Taiwan has made significant strides in promoting employment for persons with disabilities and has domesticated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), challenges remain. Specifically, in the area of entrepreneurship, there appears to be a gap between existing policies and the rights-based commitments outlined in Article 27 of the Convention. In practice, support mechanisms such as the Self-Reliance Entrepreneurship Grant are designed under a residual welfare logic rather than a framework of equal economic opportunity. As explained by a key stakeholder (government official), the grant is intended as the final step in the vocational rehabilitation system—specifically targeting individuals with disabilities who are unable to access even sheltered workshops. This reveals a regulatory mindset of scarcity and control—framing applicants as potential liabilities instead of contributors.

A core contradiction in disability entrepreneurship policy lies in the exclusionary clauses embedded within the Self-Reliance Entrepreneurship Grant. Applicants must not have formal employment income or receive key welfare subsidies. This reflects a policy logic rooted in welfare thinking, where the grant is positioned not as an investment tool but as a form of charity reserved for those deemed “unemployable.” Such logic imposes an untenable dilemma on persons with disabilities who genuinely wish to start a business. In order to access public funding, they must first relinquish stable income or basic social protection. Lance and Wendy, both licensed massage therapists employed under the quota employment scheme, were disqualified from applying solely due to their registered employment status:

*“The most important point is that you cannot have other officially registered income... You also cannot participate in the quota employment for persons with disabilities... So we cannot apply for that self-reliance entrepreneurship grant. We do not meet the qualifications for that grant.” ((Lance & Wendy, visually impaired massage therapists, bachelor’s degrees, joint interview)*

This problematic link between welfare and entrepreneurship is explicitly codified in government regulations, which state that an applicant must not “be employed in another capacity” (New Taipei City Government, 2024). As a result, the grant functions less as a tool for fostering innovation or empowerment, and more as a narrowly defined gatekeeping mechanism that may discourage those who are already taking steps toward economic independence. For entrepreneurs with disabilities, the policy can create not a bridge to self-reliance, but a barrier that demands sacrifice before access—effectively creating a disincentive for initiative rather than supporting it.

#### 4. Integrative Observation: The Cross-cutting Role of Personal Agency

Across the three themes, a cross-cutting dynamic becomes evident: the crucial role of personal agency. Despite structural push-and-pull forces, systemic barriers, and policy contradictions, participants did not simply endure constraints. They mobilized limited resources, pursued alternative solutions, and asserted their professional identity even in the face of doubt. Such actions illustrate that the entrepreneurial journey of persons with disabilities is also a process of role redefinition—from service recipient to service provider. In this sense, personal agency functioned not merely as a reaction to barriers but as an engine of empowerment that enabled participants to move forward, even within an often-unaccommodating environment.

#### 5. The Stakeholders’ Perspective: A Complementary Diagnosis of Systemic Barriers

While the primary focus of this study is on the lived experiences of entrepreneurs with disabilities, the perspectives of seven key stakeholders are included here to provide contextual depth. These individuals—government officials, scholars, social enterprise practitioners, and program managers—offered an external diagnosis of systemic barriers. Their insights help to illuminate the broader institutional environment within which entrepreneurs operate, without shifting the spotlight away from the entrepreneurs themselves.

**Table 3**

##### *Stakeholders’ Perspectives on Systemic Barriers to Disability Entrepreneurship*

Theme	Representative Quotation	Stakeholder Role
Policy Paradox & Welfare Trap	“The design of our startup subsidy is contradictory... applicants can’t have any part-time job. This regulation requires them to give up their current income from employment or disability benefits in order to apply.”	Government Official (City Government Staff)
Vocational Training Mismatch	“The job training that the government agency provides for people with disability is about the ‘sunset industry’ which means most people don’t want to do. Or even after finishing the training, it is still hard for them to be employed.”	Scholar in Social Welfare Research
Resource Misallocation	“Actually, for wheelchair users, the environment is accessible. But for people with visual or hearing impairments, there is no support at all.”	Social Innovation Lab Supervisor
Attitudinal Barriers & Structural Dependence	“Basically the system is a medical model, a model we should have abandoned long ago, and yet we continue to embrace it.”	Taipei City Government Supervisor



Four recurrent themes emerged from their accounts: policy paradoxes, the functional mismatch of vocational training, the misallocation of support resources, and persistent attitudinal barriers. These themes corroborate the entrepreneurs' narratives and further clarify how systemic contradictions reinforce the challenges of disability-led entrepreneurship.

Stakeholders consistently pointed out a paradox at the policy level: while the stated goal is to empower people with disabilities, subsidy schemes and administrative rules often create welfare traps that discourage entrepreneurship. Similarly, the vocational training system remains rooted in a medical model, offering courses disconnected from real labor market demands. Mainstream entrepreneurial resources also tend to lack accessibility and disability awareness, leaving disabled entrepreneurs excluded from vital networks. Finally, stakeholders confirmed that attitudinal barriers continue to operate as an "invisible ceiling," shaping both institutional practices and societal expectations.

These perspectives, while important, are not the central object of this study. Rather, they serve as a complementary backdrop that reinforces the entrepreneurs' own accounts of exclusion and resilience. In doing so, they highlight that the challenges faced by disability-led social entrepreneurs are deeply embedded in systemic contradictions, and that institutional reform remains essential to unlocking the full potential of their agency.

## V. Discussion

The findings provide robust empirical support for an agency-based perspective on disability-led social entrepreneurship. The "dual drivers" of survival and mission are not merely motivational factors but rather manifestations of what can be conceptualized as resistant and creative agency. For example, Ada demonstrated resistant agency by rejecting a passive welfare identity, while John and Richard illustrated creative agency by transforming personal struggles into innovative community services. These patterns suggest that while the social model of disability is indispensable for diagnosing structural barriers, it is insufficient on its own. A comprehensive understanding must also incorporate the agentic strategies that disabled entrepreneurs deploy to contest, negotiate, and transcend those barriers.

This underscores the pivotal role of personal agency in their journeys: the entrepreneurs in this study did not wait for change to happen—they made it happen—demonstrating autonomy and self-determination in pursuing their ventures. This observation aligns with the empowerment ethos of the human rights-based approach, showing that when given even limited support, individuals with disabilities can assert themselves as equal participants and innovators in society. Importantly, this highlights that personal agency and structural reform are mutually reinforcing: while systemic barriers must be addressed, agency enables entrepreneurs to transform lived experience into entrepreneurial value, embodying the transition from service recipient to service provider.

Through in-depth interviews with 15 social entrepreneurs with disabilities in Taiwan, this study has systematically revealed their dual driving forces, multiple barriers, and the policy paradoxes they face in their entrepreneurial journey. These grassroots empirical evidences not only provide new perspectives for academic dialogue but also present challenges for current policies. Complementing these narratives, the perspectives of seven stakeholders—summarized in the Findings section—provided an external diagnosis of the broader institutional environment. Their insights consistently revealed the contradiction between policy intentions of empowerment and the everyday implementation that often reproduces welfare dependency and bureaucratic control. Taken together, these perspectives reinforce this study's core argument that personal agency and structural reform are mutually

reinforcing: while entrepreneurs cannot succeed without institutional change, their ventures simultaneously embody alternative futures beyond the welfare paradigm.

The findings of this study first engage in a critical dialogue with the existing fields of disability studies and social welfare in Taiwan. In the past, research in related fields has often tended to "objectify" and "problematize" persons with disabilities, with its discursive focus mostly on individual impairments, family burdens, or the efficiency of welfare service delivery (Wang, 2011). This study, by presenting the agency and social contribution of entrepreneurs as "service providers," offers a critical counter-narrative to this mainstream perspective. The results show that persons with disabilities are not only passive recipients of social welfare but also active agents with insight, capable of identifying social needs and proposing innovative solutions.

Furthermore, this study confirms the explanatory power of the social model of disability and the human rights approach in analyzing the local context of Taiwan. The "entry barriers" (such as the vocational training system with functional misalignments) and "growth barriers" (such as pervasive attitudinal barriers) revealed in the research illustrate that "disability" can be understood more as a product of social structure and institutional design than of personal intrinsic defects (Oliver, 1990). The analysis in the "Policy Paradox" section directly links the challenges in policy design to the fundamental issue of failing to fully implement the human rights spirit of the CRPD. This provides an analytical paradigm for future disability research in Taiwan to shift from "personal tragedy" to "social oppression" and "rights violation."

## VI. Policy and Practical Implications: From Recipient to Provider

At first glance, it may seem that this study provides little practical advice for individuals. However, the findings reveal that many participants had already pursued the very strategies that conventional guidance would suggest—seeking loans, training, and mentorship—yet still encountered systemic barriers. The most valuable contribution, therefore, lies not in reiterating advice already well known, but in illuminating how disabled entrepreneurs strategically navigated these constraints, offering implicit lessons for future entrepreneurs. Building on these insights, the goal of this study is to translate academic findings into momentum for policy reform. Based on the aforementioned results, I propose three distinct yet interconnected policy action plans aimed at addressing structural barriers and fostering a more supportive and inclusive ecosystem for disability-led entrepreneurship.

### 1. Enhancing the Comprehensive "Accessibility" of the Support System

Current policy conceptualizations of "accessibility" mostly remain at the level of improving the physical environment. However, the findings of this study indicate that for entrepreneurs, the accessibility of information, courses, and consulting services is also critical. The following are specific recommendations:

- (1) **Information accessibility:** It is suggested that all entrepreneurship-related policy documents, regulations, application websites, and online systems from all government departments (especially the Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Health and Welfare, and Ministry of Economic Affairs) provide diverse accessible formats. This could include web pages compliant with WCAG 2.1 AA standards, Easy Read versions, Braille electronic files, audio descriptions, and sign language interpretation videos, to ensure that entrepreneurs with different types of disabilities can access key information without barriers.
- (2) **Course and consulting service accessibility:** It is recommended that entrepreneurship courses, workshops, and consulting services organized or subsidized by the government list "attitudinal accessibility" as a core requirement. This implies that all lecturers and consultants could receive training on the CRPD and disability

awareness, learning how to interact with entrepreneurs with disabilities in an equal and respectful manner, acknowledging their professional competence, and avoiding the kind of ineffective support caused by prejudice, as encountered by Jane in this study.

## 2. Decoupling Welfare and Entrepreneurship: A Paradigm Shift from "Charity" to "Investment"

A central policy implication of this study relates to the exclusionary clauses linking entrepreneurship grants with welfare status, which may present an institutional obstacle preventing persons with disabilities from moving towards economic self-sufficiency. The findings suggest that a comprehensive review and revision of the Regulations for Entrepreneurship Grants for Self-Reliance of Persons with Disabilities and other related laws (e.g., New Taipei City Government, 2024) by the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Health and Welfare could be beneficial.

- (1) **Core Recommendation:** Consider abolishing the exclusionary clauses in the application for entrepreneurship grants regarding "not having other work" or "not receiving specific welfare benefits (such as low-income household status)".
- (2) **Paradigm Shift:** These findings point toward the need for a paradigm shift in policy thinking, repositioning entrepreneurship grants from a passive, abuse-preventing "welfare charity" model to an active, citizen-empowering "rights-based investment" model. This shift means the policy goal could be to "empower" rather than to "rescue."
- (3) **Concrete Practice:** More flexible support programs could be designed, for example, allowing entrepreneurs to retain part of their original income or welfare eligibility during the initial stage of entrepreneurship (e.g., the first one to two years) as a safety net. This would not only reduce entrepreneurial risk but could also be a concrete embodiment of the spirit of protecting the right to employment under Article 27 of the CRPD.

## 3. Constructing a Cross-Disciplinary Empowerment Ecosystem: Learning from International Models

The efforts of a single department may be insufficient to solve systemic problems. An effective support system likely requires cross-disciplinary collaboration. It is recommended that the Taiwan government could learn from successful international experiences, such as the "Chicagoland Entrepreneurship Education for People with Disabilities (CEED)" project. This model successfully integrates universities (academic knowledge), disability service organizations (community networks), and small business development centers (business expertise) to provide joint training and support networks for persons with disabilities, service providers, and business consultants (Renko, Parker Harris, & Caldwell, 2016).

- (1) **Taiwan's Action Blueprint:** It is suggested that coordination at the Executive Yuan level could be initiated, encouraging the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and the Small and Medium Enterprise and Startup Administration of the Ministry of Economic Affairs to establish a permanent "Cross-Departmental Coordinating Platform for Disability Entrepreneurship Support." This appears particularly crucial as current broad initiatives like the Social Innovation Action Plan (Executive Yuan, 2022) seem to lack specific, targeted measures for entrepreneurs with disabilities.

### (2) Platform Tasks:

- A. Jointly plan and implement the aforementioned entrepreneurship consultant training programs with "attitudinal accessibility."

- B.** Integrate resources from various ministries to provide one-stop application and consulting services for entrepreneurs with disabilities.
- C.** Establish a mentor network including successful entrepreneurs with disabilities, friendly business consultants, investors, and academics to provide customized support for entrepreneurs at different stages.

Achieving these goals may depend on such systematic reforms—from enhancing basic accessibility, fundamentally shifting policy thinking, to building a cross-disciplinary collaborative ecosystem—to help Taiwan break down invisible walls and pave a smoother, more dignified path for the entrepreneurship of persons with disabilities.

#### 4. Recognizing the Inner Transformation: From Medical Experience to Life Experience

Beyond systemic reforms, this study highlights that the most distinctive contribution of disabled entrepreneurs lies in their ability to reinterpret what society often frames as medical experience into a form of life experience. Instead of being reduced to pathology, participants demonstrated how their lived realities—navigating barriers, adapting daily routines, and cultivating resilience—offered unique insights into unmet social needs. This reframing process became a seedbed for entrepreneurial ideas: pain points in everyday life were transformed into proof of concept for new services or products. For future entrepreneurs with disabilities, the lesson is clear: their embodied experiences are not merely personal challenges, but strategic assets that provide a different lens to view the world and uncover innovative opportunities. By embracing this perspective, disabled entrepreneurs can reposition themselves not as passive recipients of care, but as active providers of value and change.

## VII. Conclusion

This study, through an in-depth analysis of empirical data from 15 social entrepreneurs with disabilities in Taiwan, aims to challenge and reshape the long-standing narrative that tends to view persons with disabilities as passive "service recipients." The research findings reveal that persons with disabilities are not only objects of social welfare but can also be "social contributors" with potential and agency. They may engage in entrepreneurship driven by the dual forces of survival needs and value realization, and their unique life experiences can become valuable assets for identifying social problems and proposing innovative solutions.

However, a significant contribution of this study lies in its systematic identification of the deep-seated "structural challenges" that may hinder the release of this potential. These challenges are manifested at three interrelated levels: first, a support system with functional misalignments, whose rigid vocational training and misaligned employment transition services may make it difficult for potential entrepreneurs to accumulate necessary human and social capital; second, a pervasive attitudinal barrier, rooted in societal stereotypes about persons with disabilities, which can cause entrepreneurs to encounter difficulties when seeking resources for growth, even after demonstrating their own expertise; third, a contradictory grant policy, whose design thinking appears stuck in an outdated welfare model, which may inadvertently create disincentives for individuals pursuing economic self-sufficiency.

Overall, the core argument of this study is that many of the greatest challenges faced by persons with disabilities in Taiwan on their entrepreneurial path may not stem from their personal impairments, but from a social environment with institutional barriers and cultural biases. A notable implementation gap appears to exist between the current policy framework and the human rights spirit of the CRPD. Therefore, this study's findings ultimately point to the importance of a profound paradigm shift in policy thinking in Taiwan if it is to build a truly inclusive society—a shift

from a passive, negative "welfare model" to an active, positive "rights and investment model." Only in this way can the invisible walls that may confine the disability community be addressed, allowing their innovative energy to flourish and bring more diverse and abundant value to Taiwanese society.

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