

Revitalising the periphery: How support organisations drive the inclusive evolution of entrepreneurial ecosystems

Shuai Qin ^{*}

Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship, Aston Business School, Aston University, UK

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how support organisations for marginalised entrepreneurs (SOMEs), typically peripheral members within entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs), facilitate the inclusive evolution of EEs. Employing boundary theory and ethnographic research conducted over three years within a refugee entrepreneurship support organisation in Birmingham, UK, this study identifies a four-stage boundary work process: Knowledge brokering, Boundary buffer spacing, Boundary object developing, and Boundary practice institutionalising. These interconnected strategic stages enable SOMEs to reconfigure the knowledge-cognitive, resource-opportunity, and social network exclusionary boundaries of EEs progressively, facilitating EEs' adaptation to marginalised entrepreneurs' diverse needs and pursuits within the overarching growth-orientation of EEs. Theoretically, this study introduces a “periphery-to-centre” model of inclusive evolution, expanding the prevalent centre-driven perspective of EE inclusive evolution, and demonstrates how inclusion could coexist with EE's growth-orientation because of SOMEs' boundary work. The study also unfolds enablers for such effective boundary work, emphasising the effects of SOMEs' dual knowledge capabilities, dual network embeddedness, institutional rhetoric, and the path dependency of evolution.

Executive summary: In entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) research, an important but overlooked issue is how ecosystems can become more inclusive, allowing entrepreneurs from different backgrounds pursuing varied objectives to obtain the necessary support and resources. However, given that EEs often prioritise innovation and high-growth ventures, their ideologies and structures are hardly responsive to diverse entrepreneurs' distinctive pursuits and needs for support, causing their marginalisation. Despite community-based and non-profit support organisations for marginalised entrepreneurs (SOMEs) emerging to address this situation, their strategies and role in EEs' inclusion evolution remain understudied. Addressing this gap is critical as enhanced inclusion not only advances social equity but also strengthens EEs' resilience and innovation through the integration of diverse entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial activities. Leveraging boundary theory to conceptualise SOME's boundary work and how it affects the exclusionary boundaries (knowledge-cognitive, resource-opportunity, and social network boundaries) of EE, this paper develops a four-stage process model based on a three-year ethnographic study of a refugee entrepreneurship support organisation in Birmingham, UK.

The study conceptualises a “periphery-to-centre” inclusive evolution pathway driven by SOMEs, expanding beyond the dominant “centre-to-periphery” evolutionary perspective prevalent in existing EE literature. SOMEs leverage their distinctive position on the EE's internal periphery to simultaneously understand both marginalised entrepreneurs' distinctive needs and aspirations,

^{*} John Cadbury House, Aston University, 190 Corporation St, Birmingham B4 6QD.

E-mail address: s.qin2@aston.ac.uk.

and the operational dynamics and value orientations of EEs. Based on this dual understanding, rather than directly challenging the growth-oriented values of EEs, SOMEs strategically mobilise these established priorities to legitimise their innovative boundary work, gradually restructuring exclusionary boundaries while respecting existing EEs' priorities. This study reveals four interconnected stages through which this boundary work unfolds, with corresponding evolution of EEs' exclusionary boundaries: (1) Knowledge brokering - translating MEs' values and needs into EE-compatible discourse, creating initial shifts in EE members' knowledge-cognitive boundary and establishing sole resource conduits into EE through SOMEs; (2) Boundary buffer spacing - establishing specialised subsystems with complementary actors (social service providers outside EE) to deal with marginalised entrepreneurs' distinctive needs, forming externally-driven temporary expansion of resource and network boundaries while reducing EE members' perceived risks in supporting MEs; (3) Boundary object developing - creating collaborative initiatives that satisfy diverse stakeholders' interests, enabling internally-driven structural boundary expansion with bidirectional knowledge exchange between EE members and marginalised entrepreneurs, and facilitating direct resource and network access in EE; and (4) Boundary practice institutionalising - embedding accumulated boundary practices across multiple ecosystem levels, transforming temporary interventions into self-sustaining and self-expanding boundary changes across all dimensions.

The study also identifies critical enabling conditions for effective boundary work: SOMEs' dual knowledge capabilities; their dual networks with both social service providers and EE members; supportive rhetoric for economic diversity and inclusion in the institutional environment; and path-dependent factors where early boundary changes enable subsequent evolution. Moreover, this study challenges the binary opposition between growth orientation and inclusion in EEs, showing how boundary changes create structures facilitating bidirectional adaptation without sacrificing the growth objectives of EEs or forcing marginalised entrepreneurs to conform to mainstream definitions of success.

These insights offer important implications for policymakers and practitioners. The study suggests that supporting "periphery-to-centre" evolution through stable funding and supportive rhetoric, while providing SOMEs with a blueprint for conducting progressive boundary work.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) are dynamic, place-based systems that support entrepreneurial activity through interactions among diverse actors, institutions, and resources (Cantner et al., 2021; Spiegel, 2017; Wurth et al., 2022). While traditional EE research has largely prioritised high-growth, technology-led ventures (Spiegel, 2017; Wurth et al., 2022), recent scholarship has called for a shift toward inclusive EE evolution - that is, developing the capacity of EEs to support entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds in accessing the resources and legitimacy they need to pursue success on their own terms (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Birdthistle et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2021; Kumari et al., 2025; Ram et al., 2022; Thorgren and Williams, 2023). However, most research still conceptualises inclusion as a static parameter or policy aspiration, often measured through population-level indicators such as diversity, barriers, participation (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Isakova and Stroila, 2025; Neumeyer et al., 2019). In doing so, it not only overlooks how inclusion is enacted in practice but also tends to frame inclusion and high-growth orientation as conflicting priorities, reinforcing a binary view of EE goals (Morris et al., 2015; Neumeyer et al., 2019; Welter et al., 2017). This orientation leaves a critical gap: we know little about the mechanisms through which inclusion is developed within ecosystems that are growth-oriented. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for theorising inclusive evolution not merely as an aspirational ideal, but as a dynamic process of ecosystem change (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Birdthistle et al., 2022; Wurth et al., 2022).

Calls to address this puzzle are timely, particularly in light of growing evidence that many entrepreneurs remain systematically marginalised within their growth-oriented EE. A significant share of early-stage entrepreneurs do not conform to the high-growth archetype that current EE structures are designed to serve (Bakker and McMullen, 2023). For example, the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* (2025) reports that in 73 % of surveyed countries, at least one-third of nascent entrepreneurs are expected to remain solo over the next five years. These patterns reflect deeper structural mismatches between mainstream EE designs and the motivations, goals, and resource needs of marginalised entrepreneurs - particularly those affected by distinctive socio-economic disadvantage (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Bruton et al., 2023; Motoyama et al., 2023; Ram et al., 2022; Rath and Swagerman, 2016). While current studies document how marginalised entrepreneurs struggle to access funding, networks, and tailored support due to the knowledge and incentive gaps of dominant EE members (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Jiang et al., 2021; Ram et al., 2022), few have examined how such entrepreneurs gain ecosystem footholds through alternative channels.

In parallel, a small but growing body of EE inclusion research has begun to recognise support organisations for marginalised entrepreneurs (SOMEs) in EE as emerging "connectors" between marginalised entrepreneurs and other members (Krueger, 2021, p.124; Richey et al., 2022; Villares-Varela and Sheringham, 2020). Typically small, community-based, and often non-profit, SOMEs occupy the internal periphery of EEs, where they exert minimal influence on top-down policy but remain critical interfaces in EEs for marginalised entrepreneurs (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Duhaček Šebestová and Krejčí, 2021; Tihic et al., 2021; Villares-Varela and Sheringham, 2020). Despite their constrained capacity (Moulton and Eckerd, 2012), they mobilise relationships with EE members to

support MEs (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Braidford et al., 2013; Richey et al., 2022). However, existing EE inclusion literature on adaptiveness has largely focused on dominant actors and policy instruments in driving structural changes (Cho et al., 2022; Colombelli et al., 2019; Harima et al., 2024), leaving open the question of how peripheral actors like SOMEs exercise agency and facilitate inclusive evolution.

Synthesising across three key strands of EE inclusion literature - namely, conceptualisation of inclusion, marginalised entrepreneurs, and SOMEs - reveals a fragmented understanding of how inclusive evolution unfolds. Apart from the widely acknowledged top-down system evolution driven by dominant EE members, an open question remains: can the activities of peripheral actors like SOMEs - through their engagement with marginalised entrepreneurs and EE members - also influence the inclusive evolution of EE? Addressing this question allows a shift away from dominant centre-periphery models of inclusive evolution (Cao and Shi, 2021; Krueger, 2021; Kumari et al., 2025; Neumeyer et al., 2019), toward a more dynamic understanding of the inclusive evolution process. Hence, to address this puzzle, this study asks: How do SOMEs act strategically, and what impact do these actions have on EE inclusion?

The empirical setting of this paper provides a representative case for examining how SOMEs impact EE inclusion. I conducted close ethnographic observations over three years and two months within a refugee entrepreneurship support organisation, Irving, in Birmingham, UK, and conducted four rounds of 63 interviews with Irving staff (37), regional stakeholders (11), and refugee clients (15). This study adopts boundary theory as an analytical lens (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Neumeyer et al., 2019; Star and Griesemer, 1989). As SOMEs typically occupy a peripheral position in EEs where they both support marginalised entrepreneurs and interact with EE members, boundary theory offers a useful framework for two purposes: (1) conceptualising exclusionary boundaries within EEs and (2) examining the forms of boundary work SOMEs undertake between marginalised entrepreneurs and EE members and their effects.

Drawing on this theoretical lens and the existing EE literature, this paper first conceptualises three key types of exclusionary boundaries in EEs: knowledge-cognitive, resource-opportunity, and social network boundary. Building on these conceptual foundations, the empirical findings reveal a four-stage process model of how SOMEs, operating from their unique position at the periphery of EEs, progressively reshape exclusionary boundaries through interconnected boundary work: Knowledge brokering, Boundary buffer spacing, Boundary option developing, and Boundary practice institutionalising. This model illuminates the mechanisms through which SOMEs facilitate EEs' inclusive evolution to accommodate the distinctive needs and entrepreneurial pursuits of marginalised entrepreneurs, while also maintaining alignment with the ecosystem's growth orientation.

This study has a threefold contribution. First, it extends the dominant view in EE inclusion research that systemic change depends on powerful central actors, advancing instead a periphery-to-centre model of inclusive evolution. Second, it revises the binary assumption in inclusive EE literature by demonstrating how inclusion can enhance, rather than constrain, growth orientation when boundary strategies of SOMEs are strategically sequenced. Third, it extends boundary theory by applying it to normatively fragmented systems, theorising boundary work not as static coordination but as a recursive mechanism that reshapes and accommodates cognition, resources, and institutional logics over time.

2. Theoretical grounding

2.1. Marginalised entrepreneurs in EEs

In EE inclusion literature, various terms describe entrepreneurs facing barriers to inclusion: unconventional (Bakker and McMullen, 2023), underrepresented (Garcia et al., 2023), marginalised (Bruton et al., 2023; Ram et al., 2012), and disadvantaged entrepreneurs (Assenova, 2020). While definitions vary slightly, they all highlight how these entrepreneurs differ from the mainstream in their entrepreneurial motivations, views of success, and support needs - mainstream entrepreneurs being more aligned with the growth-orientation of EEs (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Ram et al., 2012). This section reviews the key features of marginalised entrepreneurs to set the scene for examining how exclusion unfolds in the next section.

First, marginalised entrepreneurs often have distinct motivations. They frequently face labour market discrimination due to disadvantages in education, identity, finance, culture, or health (Cooney and Licciardi, 2019). As a result, they are more likely to pursue entrepreneurship as an alternative route to self-sufficiency rather than opportunity (Bakker and McMullen, 2023), making them more susceptible to high-risk, precarious, and low-return sectors (Rath and Swagerman, 2016). For instance, ethnic minority entrepreneurs often operate in saturated ethnic markets such as food services and retail, which typically offer modest profit margins (Ram et al., 2012; Rath and Swagerman, 2016).

Second, for many marginalised entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial success goes beyond building high-growth ventures. While growth may become important as they access more resources and opportunities, research shows their primary goals often include stable household income (Bruton et al., 2015), personal development (Thorgren and Williams, 2023), and positive social identity (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022). For instance, for refugees, entrepreneurship can be a pathway to rebuilding lives and social identities (Thorgren and Williams, 2023).

Third, owing to distinctive disadvantages across economic, sociocultural, cognitive, physical, and emotional dimensions, marginalised entrepreneurs frequently confront distinctive challenges in entrepreneurship (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017). For example, during the entrepreneurial preparation phase, groups such as refugees, people with disabilities, and ex-offenders often lack the cognitive readiness and specialised knowledge required for entrepreneurship due to career interruptions and psychological trauma (Cooney and Licciardi, 2019; Jiang et al., 2021). During implementation, they may also encounter language barriers, public discrimination, stigma, and reduced self-confidence (Cooney and Licciardi, 2019).

Taken together, these characteristics highlight the need for recognition and tailored support within EEs to enable marginalised entrepreneurs to meaningfully participate in entrepreneurial activity in ways that align with their own goals (Motoyama et al., 2023;

Wapshott and Mallett, 2018).

2.2. Boundary formation and exclusion in EEs

Boundary theory and boundary work provide complementary perspectives for analysing exclusion and inclusion within EEs. Boundary theory explains how social, cognitive, and material divisions emerge and become reinforced, often producing exclusionary effects (Ashforth et al., 2000; Hernes, 2004). Boundary work, by contrast, was originally introduced to describe the institutional practices through which individuals or organisations delineate and defend boundaries (Gieryn, 1983). Subsequently, it has been extended to encompass the practices through which actors adjust, weaken, or reconfigure boundaries (Carlile, 2004; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). In this study, boundary theory is used to conceptualise the characteristics of exclusionary EE boundaries (Section 2.2), while boundary work is employed to analyse how SOMEs may lower or reshape these boundaries and the conditions under which this occurs (Section 2.3). Together, these perspectives underpin the theoretical framework and align with the study's two sub-research questions.

Recently, the dynamics of boundary expansion and contraction have been applied to EEs to explain how entrepreneurial groups experience exclusion - for example, being cut off from support networks or knowledge flows (Hernes, 2004; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Identifying exclusionary boundaries requires attention to the lived experiences of entrepreneurs (Birdthistle et al., 2022; Motoyama et al., 2023; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Applying boundary theory to EE research helps reveal key exclusionary boundaries (De Bernardi and Azucar, 2019; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Three types of boundaries related to marginalised entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial activities can be identified. These boundaries are enacted and reinforced through the decisions and actions of EE members, yet their root causes lie in broader social and institutional structures that constrain their capacity and motivation to accommodate marginalised entrepreneurs.

2.2.1. Knowledge-cognitive boundary

First, the knowledge-cognitive boundary often stems from limited opportunities for EE members to interact with marginalised entrepreneurs and to identify shared interests in everyday social life (Ram et al., 2012; Rath and Swagerman, 2016). Factors such as spatial concentration in specific localities (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014), sectoral segregation in low-growth industries (Ram et al., 2012), and language or communication barriers (Cooney and Licciardi, 2019; Rath and Swagerman, 2016) restrict the development of EE members' understanding of marginalised entrepreneurs' circumstances, potential, and contributions, vice versa. As a result, EE actors interpret marginalised entrepreneurs through their own limited, path-dependent growth-oriented cognitive frames, which reinforces exclusionary judgments and decision-making (Morris et al., 2015; Neumeyer et al., 2019).

Carlile (2004) identifies three levels of knowledge boundary: differences in terminology (syntactic), interpretation (semantic), and practical interests (pragmatic). In EEs, knowledge systems are often centred on high-growth, tech-based, and venture-capital-driven models, underpinned by specific language, logic, and evaluation criteria (Audretsch and Belitski, 2017; Spigel, 2017). This orientation reflects institutional preferences for wealth creation and rapid market expansion (Shane, 2009), reinforced by both formal (e.g. funding policies) and informal (e.g. cultural norms) institutions (Spigel, 2017; Wurth et al., 2022). This dominant cognitive framework contrasts with marginalised entrepreneurs' realities and aspirations, which often prioritise stable income, personal development, and positive social identity (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Morris et al., 2015). Such misalignment creates cognitive "othering," where EE members struggle to recognise marginalised entrepreneurs' values. For instance, women entrepreneurs may be seen as lacking ambition due to their pursuit of work-life balance, facing so-called 'feminised barriers' (Ahl and Marlow, 2021, p. 59). This boundary hinders EEs' understanding of marginalised entrepreneurs' needs and contributions, limiting effective knowledge exchange (Carlile, 2004).

2.2.2. Social network boundary

Social network boundary emerges both from cognitive divides (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) and from structural segregation, as marginalised entrepreneurs are often concentrated in specific sectors or locations where opportunities for interaction and collaboration with mainstream EE members are limited (Ram et al., 2012; Rath and Swagerman, 2016; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Support structures shaped by the 'dogma of high-growth ventures' tend to prioritise entrepreneurs with scalable models and innovation capabilities (Morris et al., 2015, p. 714; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Consequently, actors such as start-ups, banks, incubators, investors, universities, and government agencies often form dense networks through institutional alignment and shared expectations, while marginalised entrepreneurs are excluded due to both sectoral concentration and identity-based stereotypes (Morris et al., 2015; Rath and Swagerman, 2016). This exclusion restricts access to key ecosystem interactions: for instance, collaborations often centre on innovation, overlooking immigrant-dominated retail and food sectors (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Rath and Swagerman, 2016). In addition, inherent social barriers - such as spatial concentration of marginalised entrepreneurs, language barriers, trust issue and cultural differences - also contribute to the formation of network boundaries within EEs (Bruton et al., 2023; Ram et al., 2012).

2.2.3. Resource-opportunity boundary

Third, in EEs, limited resources are typically directed toward entrepreneurs who meet mainstream success criteria, with eligibility often tied to high-growth or tech-oriented benchmarks (Spigel, 2017). For instance, investors may impose turnover thresholds or demand specific technological expertise (Morris et al., 2015; Rath and Swagerman, 2016; Spigel and Harrison, 2018); Government support programmes often target on startups that contribute more to job creation or tax revenue (Audretsch and Belitski, 2017); and training and support projects may incorrectly assume that entrepreneurs already possess specific foundational skills (Assenova, 2020;

Wapshott and Mallett, 2018; Ram et al., 2012). As discussed earlier, to achieve the kind of success they value, marginalised entrepreneurs often require different or additional forms of support - such as language training, cultural adaptation, confidence building, and business literacy. Meeting these needs requires tailored support structures and shared recognition across EE members (Brown and Mason, 2017; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Yet many EE members lack an understanding of marginalised entrepreneurs and perceive the costs of support as outweighing the benefits (Garcia et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2015).

Taken together, a major source of the three EE boundaries lies in pre-existing forms of social segregation, such as language barriers, spatial concentration, and life-course trajectories. These limit EE members' motivation and capacity to engage with marginalised entrepreneurs, thereby reinforcing EE members' decisions and practices that produce and sustain the boundaries.

2.3. Boundary work and inclusive evolution in EEs

2.3.1. Characteristics of SOMEs

In this paper, drawing on current EE inclusion literature (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Bruton et al., 2023; Motoyama et al., 2023; Neumeyer et al., 2019; Thorgren and Williams, 2023), inclusive evolution is defined as EE's enhanced capacity to support entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds in pursuing varied goals, by ensuring access to the resources and support they need to achieve the success they value.

As most EE members are often unaware of marginalised entrepreneurs' needs, lack the motivation to address them, and remain structurally unable to provide adequate support, not-for-profits and community-based organisations have become marginalised entrepreneurs' primary sources of interaction and assistance within the EE - referred to here as support organisations for marginalised entrepreneurs (SOMEs). However, existing research on SOMEs mainly focuses on their direct interactions with marginalised entrepreneurs (e.g. service provision), while overlooking how they operate within EEs, build relationships, and exert influence (e.g. Richey et al., 2022; Tihic et al., 2021). In parallel, EE evolution literature highlights the role of dominant actors influencing EEs from the centre outward (Cho et al., 2022; Colombelli et al., 2019; Harima et al., 2024). Both strands of research largely neglect SOMEs' role in inclusive evolution.

Literature on SOMEs could reveal their role as distinct members located at the 'inconspicuous' periphery of EEs. Their peripheral position relates to three structural characteristics: First, as small-scale non-profits, SOMEs have limited business support capacity, rely on public funding, and provide free services aligned with marginalised entrepreneurs' own definitions of success (Assenova, 2020; Duháček Šebestová and Krejčí, 2021; Moulton and Eckerd, 2012; Richey et al., 2022; Tihic et al., 2021). Second, they must actively mobilise knowledge, resources, and opportunities within the EE, which are often inaccessible to marginalised entrepreneurs (Braidford et al., 2013; Krueger, 2021; Richey et al., 2022; Tihic et al., 2021). Third, they have network reach in EE but it is limited, and they lack the power to influence EEs from the top down (Brown and Mason, 2017; Villares-Varela and Sheringham, 2020; Wurth et al., 2022).

2.3.2. SOME-driven inclusive evolution

The process through which SOMEs drive systemic change is fundamentally shaped by their peripheral characteristics within EEs. This positioning constrains their ability to directly influence institutional infrastructures or policy decisions (Moulton and Eckerd, 2012; Villares-Varela and Sheringham, 2020). As a result, SOMEs rely on engaging with EE members to help marginalised entrepreneurs access broader resources (Braidford et al., 2013; Richey et al., 2022). Existing studies have documented examples of collaboration between SOMEs and EE members (Braidford et al., 2013; Meister and Mauer, 2019; Tihic et al., 2021). These interactions suggest that EE members can be mobilised as partial participants in inclusive efforts led by SOMEs.

When situated within the broader exclusionary context examined in Section 2.2, such cross-boundary interactions take on evolutionary significance. As previously discussed, the persistence of knowledge-cognitive, resource-opportunity, and social boundaries stems from limited social connectedness, which reduce EE members' understanding of marginalised entrepreneurs and support capabilities. These conditions lead to a form of 'multipolar coordination' among EE members (Cao and Shi, 2021, p. 83), shaping collaboration, resource allocation, and eligibility-related decisions in ways that subtly reinforce the three boundaries faced by marginalised entrepreneurs.

From a boundary work perspective, SOMEs' three characteristics structurally resemble boundary spanners (Aldrich and Herker, 1977). Their interactions with EE members - though often limited and project-based - can initiate cognitive shifts among these actors (Meister and Mauer, 2019; Richey et al., 2022). For example, research shows that SOMEs help marginalised entrepreneurs understand mainstream business norms, while also explaining the specific challenges faced by marginalised entrepreneurs to EE members (Duháček Šebestová and Krejčí, 2021; Tihic et al., 2021; Villares-Varela and Sheringham, 2020). This translational role is essential for navigating the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic boundaries outlined by Carlile (2004).

Second, when EE members are successfully onboarded as partners, SOME-led projects may also give rise to boundary objects - these are flexible yet structured tools, concepts, or entities that carry different meanings across social worlds while enabling shared understanding and coordinated action (Star and Griesemer, 1989). Several EE activities documented in the SOME literature, where SOMEs and EE members collaborate to support marginalised entrepreneurs (Braidford et al., 2013; Richey et al., 2022; Tihic et al., 2021), may reflect the emergence of such objects. These can foster EE members' cross-boundary engagement and, as Carlile (2004) argue, potentially trigger deeper shifts in EE members' understanding and practice. These shifts can ripple outward at the ecosystem level. As the Section 2.2 explained, EE members' decisions play central roles in shaping the systemic boundaries that exclude marginalised entrepreneurs. Thus, changes in their perceptions and practices may reconfigure the underlying structure and logic of the EE over time (Spigel, 2017; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010).

2.3.3. Multi-level conditions of evolution

Above pathway suggests that SOME-driven inclusive evolution - though initiated at SOME's organisational level - may involve three analytically distinct but interlinked layers. As a type of EE evolution, each layer of changes would also be shaped by layered structural enablers (Cao and Shi, 2021; Colombelli et al., 2019). At the organisational level, creating knowledge translation and boundary object are enabled by SOMEs' position as peripheral yet connected actors, combining lived proximity to marginalised entrepreneurs with an understanding of EE members (Carlile, 2004). These activities can trigger changes in EE members' cognition and practices, especially when they are exposed to new interpretive frames and experiences that challenge entrenched assumptions.

At the *meso* level, the extent to which EE members engage with SOMEs and revise their knowledge schemas and inclusion thresholds is shaped by organisational realities that influence their openness to such interactions. Once EE members begin to interact with SOMEs, their evolving responses are recursively shaped by these accumulated experiences - given the path-dependent nature of EE evolution - which in turn inform their future decisions and practices (Mack and Mayer, 2016; Stam and Van de Ven, 2021).

Finally, at the systemic-institutional level, inclusive change may be enabled or constrained by the broader institutional logics, policy frameworks, and cultural norms in which EEs are embedded (Wurth et al., 2022; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). These macro structures shape the legitimacy of SOME-led actions, determine which initiatives receive support, and influence prevailing definitions of entrepreneurial value.

I thus conceptualise inclusive evolution as a SOME-driven, multi-level mechanism, wherein boundary work unfolds through recursive interactions across organisational, ecosystemic, and institutional domains - each shaped by layered enabling or constraining structural conditions, as illustrated in the theoretical framework (Fig. 1).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context – the Birmingham EE and Irving

3.1.1. Birmingham EE

Birmingham, the UK's second-largest city, has evolved from its industrial roots into a hub for technology and innovation. Its tech sector led national growth in 2021 and 2022, with over 2000 start-ups (Digital Birmingham, 2024). According to Birmingham City Council's Corporate Plan (2022, p.7), the EE is built on "advanced manufacturing, financial services, and technology". Table 1 shows the main members of Birmingham's EE supporting new venture development and their key activities.

Birmingham EE is underpinned by a dense network of interconnections among its members. Core institutional actors - such as Birmingham City Council, West Midlands Combined Authority, and Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership - tend to shape enterprise policy that prioritises high-growth and innovation-led ventures. They help allocate funding and collaborate with support organisations to build the region's entrepreneurial infrastructure. The enterprise teams of institutional actors and support organisations also function as key entry points for entrepreneurs, conducting initial assessments and matching entrepreneurs' needs with available support initiatives and resources. However, as shown in Table 1, major support organisations tend to design services and eligibility criteria around high-growth, tech-driven ventures. As a result, marginalised entrepreneurs are less able to access mainstream support.

This pattern can be reinforced through ecosystem networks. Organisations like Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce organise events and mentorship programmes that connect startups, investors, universities and support organisations. High-growth ventures often gain disproportionate visibility through award ceremonies and speaking opportunities at flagship events such as Tech Week. Universities contribute through incubators and research collaborations with support organisations and SMEs. Yet their research-led focus tends to inevitably focus on cutting-edge barriers and technological innovation, directing intellectual resources toward supporting relevant entrepreneurs. Investors often work closely with universities, support organisations, and networking events to identify preferred startups, meaning those already embedded in mainstream support structures may enjoy greater exposure to financial opportunities.

Despite "inclusive growth" being embedded in regional policy since 2017 to provide rhetoric support for including diverse entrepreneurs in the EE, these interconnected structural arrangements still reinforce themselves and demonstrate all three exclusionary boundaries from the theoretical framework: knowledge-cognitive boundary (via emphasis on growth-orientation), resource-opportunity boundary (via eligibility filters), and social network boundary (via selective networking platforms). Hence, Birmingham offers a highly relevant context to examine SOME's actions and the dynamics of exclusionary boundaries in action.

3.1.2. Irving – the SOME

In Birmingham EE, Irving is selected, a refugee entrepreneurship support organisation, as the empirical case because it exemplifies all three defining characteristics of SOMEs in the theoretical framework. It also enables a close examination of SOME practices and their potential influence on EE's inclusive evolution.

Originally founded in 2008 as a refugee housing provider, Irving expanded in 2012 to offer integration services including skills training, cultural activities, and career support. By 2019, it became a key factor in Birmingham's refugee service landscape. In 2020, a £1 million European Commission grant enabled Irving to launch the region's first formal refugee entrepreneurship service, with a dedicated team of business advisors and caseworkers.

Irving's modest scale and reliance on public funding reflect the first characteristics of SOMEs this study identified in the literature (Assenova, 2020; Moulton and Eckerd, 2012). Refugee entrepreneurs supported by Irving face distinct challenges, including language barriers, limited cultural literacy, and restricted professional networks. Their definition of success also differs, often centred on

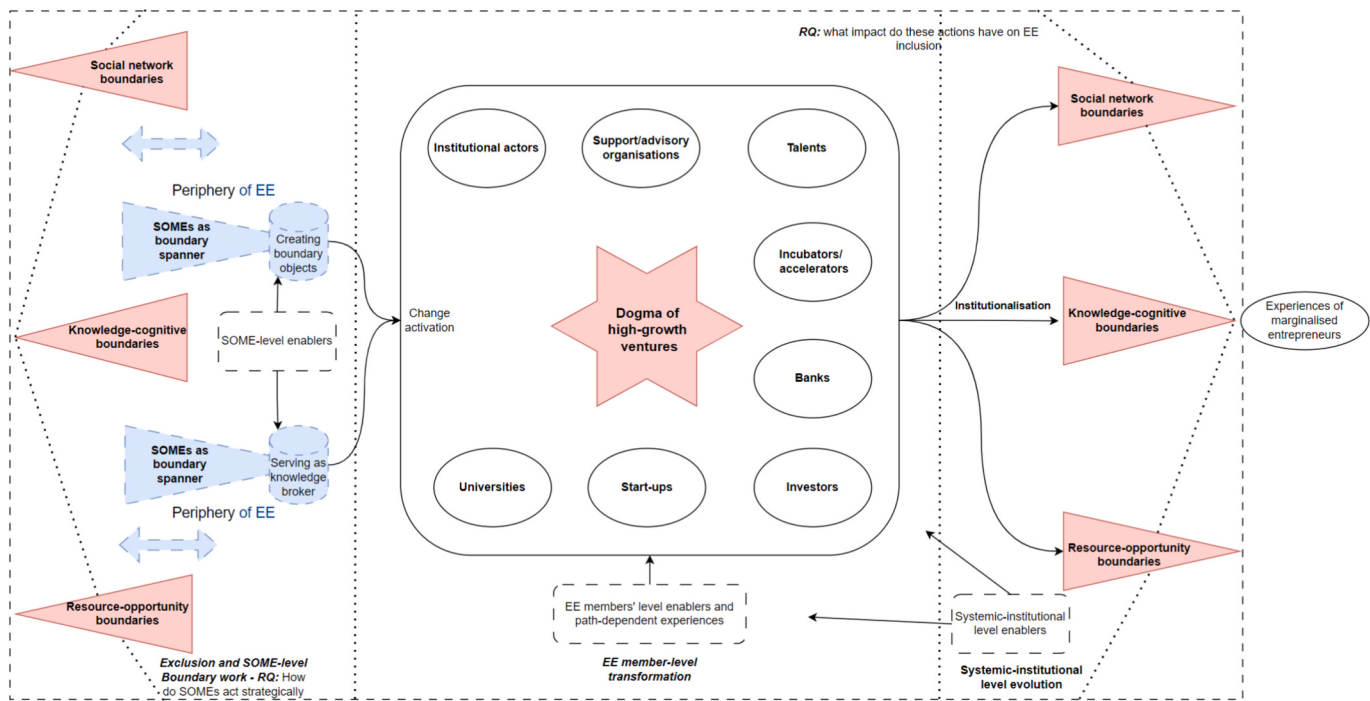


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework of EE exclusion and inclusive evolution.

Table 1

Key EE members of Greater Birmingham area.

Core EE Institutional Actors: · Birmingham City Council – provides strategic direction and policy support through initiatives like the Birmingham Business Growth Programme and Enterprise Zones. · Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership - coordinates regional economic development and investment. · West Midlands Combined Authority - oversees regional innovation strategies and funding allocation. · West Midlands Growth Company - a strategic economic development public-private partnership backed by West Midlands Combined Authority. It works with local authorities, universities, and businesses to promote Birmingham as a prime for investment and business growth. Exemplar network and business support initiatives: · Silicon Canal – a non-profit dedicated to fostering Birmingham's vibrant tech entrepreneurs by organising events, offering valuable resources, and building connections between individuals and organisations within the city's technology community. · Birmingham Tech - (now TechWM) A non-profit organisation dedicated to driving the growth of Birmingham and the West Midlands' tech ecosystem by hosting events, providing resources, and fostering collaboration. Its flagship event, Birmingham Tech Week, is the UK's largest regional tech festival, attracting tech experts and businesses. · Natwest Entrepreneur Accelerator a free six-month programme designed to support and empower high-growth entrepreneurs in the UK, helping them take their businesses to the next level. The programme offers one-to-one guidance from an acceleration manager, thought leadership events, peer-to-peer networking, and access to modern co-working spaces. · Innovation Birmingham - Tech-focused campus hosting over 170 digital businesses and providing incubation services, supported by the West Midlands Growth Company. · Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce - one of the UK's oldest and largest regional chambers of commerce. It supports businesses in Birmingham and the surrounding areas through networking events, policy advocacy, international trade assistance, and business training. · Enterprise for Success Startup Programme –an initiative by Birmingham City Council and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. It provides free support to early-stage businesses, including business advice, skills training, and resources to help entrepreneurs to grow.	Educational and Research Institutions: · University of Birmingham Enterprise - delivers commercialisation and incubation services, innovate ingenious technologies, novel therapeutics, energy saving devices, and much more, managing the Birmingham Research Park (office and lab space for innovative entrepreneurs and research-led enterprises). · Aston University's Centre for Growth - provides research-led business growth training programmes and investment opportunities for high-potential regional startups, entrepreneurs, and students. · Birmingham City University's STEAMhouse - innovation centre focusing on facilitating the collaboration between art, science, technology and mathematics for developing innovative enterprises and market solutions. Exemplar Investment Infrastructure: · Midven - a regional venture capital firm based in Birmingham that manages several funds aimed at 'most ambitious founder'. It focuses on investing in innovative companies across different sectors, providing both funding and strategic guidance. · Birmingham Technology Fund - dedicated to investing in early-stage technology companies in Birmingham. It aims to support tech startups with high growth potential by offering capital and strategic business support to accelerate their development. · Angel Investment Network Birmingham - a platform that connects startups with angel investors in Birmingham. It helps early-stage businesses secure funding from private investors who also offer valuable industry experience and networking opportunities. · Finance Birmingham - a public-private investment vehicle that provides flexible funding solutions to growing businesses. It offers debt, equity, and mezzanine options to support business growth. · Minerva Business Angels - an angel investor networks, based in the West Midlands. It connects early-stage and high-growth businesses with experienced angel investors who provide capital, industry expertise, and strategic guidance. It seeks ambitious and innovative companies with well-defined growth plans. · ART Business Loans –a community development finance institution (CDFI) that provides loans of up to £150,000 to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the West Midlands who has the potential to create or safeguard jobs. It focuses on supporting businesses that may struggle to access traditional funding, helping to drive local economic growth. · The Midlands Engine Investment Fund (MEIF) - supports high-growth small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Midlands through small business loans, debt finance, and equity finance. MEIF aims to create jobs and drive economic impact.
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sustainable livelihoods rather than rapid scaling. These factors require Irving to proactively mobilise EE resources to support its clients - aligning with the second SOME characteristic (Braidford et al., 2013; Richey et al., 2022).

Irving's peripheral position within the EE was established through its 2019 pilot project, which enabled initial participation in Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce events and limited engagement with EE members such as Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership and universities as an entrepreneurship service provider. While these activities raised Irving's visibility and allowed it to promote itself as a specialist in supporting refugee entrepreneurs, the engagement remained largely light-touch - for example, EE members occasionally referred refugee entrepreneurs to Irving - rather than involving deeper collaboration or co-design of initiatives. Crucially, Irving was not part of decision-making forums, resource allocation processes, or flagship events that shaped the direction of EE. As a result, despite gaining recognition and referrals from other actors, Irving's influence on main-stream structures was minimal. This relative lack of embeddedness and strategic influence highlights its peripheral network position and limited top-down power (Brown and Mason, 2017; Wurth et al., 2022) - the third defining characteristic of SOMEs.

Lastly, the timing of Irving's project (from late 2020) also enabled examination of how a SOME can strategically influence EE's inclusive evolution from the beginning.

3.2. Research strategy

For addressing the research questions, I employed a single-case ethnographic approach. This design is particularly suited to capturing how the strategies of SOMEs unfold over time and influence EE dynamics. As Spigel and Harrison (2018) note, the impacts of EE members often do not appear immediately, but emerge gradually through everyday practices and other members' perspectives, behaviours, and relationships (Cho et al., 2022; Hernes, 2004; Mack and Mayer, 2016). Given this, an ethnographic method allows for immersive engagement with Irving, enabling sensitivity to environmental contexts, minor practices, and unfolding events (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Moreover, this study integrates Langley's process perspective (Langley, 1999), which emphasises how organisational phenomena

evolve through event sequences, causal links between strategies and outcomes, and the timing of key developments (Gehman et al., 2018; Langley and Tsoukas, 2016). This approach aligns with the study's capture of inclusive evolution, which encompasses both shifts in EE members' attitudes, behaviours, and relationships - signalling boundary change - and marginalised entrepreneurs' perceptions of whether their needs and goals are responded to (Isakova and Stroila, 2025; Motoyama et al., 2023; Neumeyer et al., 2019; Rath and Swagerman, 2016). By foregrounding temporality, sequencing, and the interplay of diverse perspectives, the process perspective offers an approach to examine inclusive evolution as a dynamic and negotiated process shaped by different actors' interpretations. This makes it particularly compatible with an ethnographic design, as both emphasise immersion in situated practices and the unfolding of events over time. Thus, the theory-method fit (Gehman et al., 2018) in this study arises from the alignment between the theoretical aim - understanding how exclusionary boundaries are reshaped within EEs based on SOMEs' boundary work - and the methodological capacity of ethnography combined with process thinking to capture these dynamics with contextual depth and temporal sensitivity.

3.3. Data collection

This case study builds on my involvement with Irving through two connected projects. First, I was part of a team leading a longitudinal action research project (October 2020–November 2022) that collaborated with Irving on their three-year refugee entrepreneurship initiative. Second, I co-led an evaluation project (June 2022–December 2023) assessing Irving's support services. Together, these projects provided continuous engagement with Irving from October 2020 to December 2023. My roles included co-designing support strategies, attending service development meetings, monitoring impacts on beneficiaries and stakeholders, and later evaluating service outcomes. These activities offered rich opportunities for observation and interaction with Irving. Reflexively, it's important to note that while my action research influenced Irving's understanding of marginalised entrepreneur needs and provided insights about the importance of responsive services, it did not directly shape their interactions with EE members. In turn, this project actually helps legitimise the position of this paper, as it ensures Irving's motivation for engaging with the EE remains representative of typical SOMEs - driven by their vision for addressing the specific needs of marginalised entrepreneurs. This alignment helps extend the study's findings to other SOMEs operating within EEs.

3.3.1. Field observation

Following Langley's (1999; Langley et al., 2013) process perspective, I employed longitudinal, real-time observation to capture Irving's strategic actions and how inclusive evolution unfolded in Birmingham's EE. Irving's frontline team synchronised their calendar with mine, allowing systematic observation of diverse activities from early 2021 to end-2023. I observed 74 activities (community outreach, one-to-one sessions, workshops, trade fairs, networking events, pitches, internal meetings, and stakeholder engagements) and made 118 office visits, maintaining weekly presence for informal interactions. This extended engagement captured the complete rhythm of the process rather than isolated snapshots - a key principle in process research (Langley et al., 2013).

My observation protocol (see Web Appendix A) integrates Emerson et al.'s (2011) ethnographic fieldwork guidance with Langley's (1999) process research approach. It systematically records descriptive data (environment, participants, interactions, etc.), with particular attention to Irving's service design and how interactions with EE members occur, in what context they take place, and how activities, attitudes and behaviours within the EE evolve over time. Simultaneously, through structured reflection, it analyses the characteristics and underlying causal mechanisms of each observed event. This method enabled me to document not only 'what happened (inclusive evolution)', but also 'how it happened (SOME's strategies)' and 'why it happened (why strategies lead to inclusive evolution)' - which are key aspects of participatory observation in process research (Langley et al., 2013). This ultimately resulted in 92 pages of participatory observation notes, with specific categories and frequencies illustrated in Web Appendix B.

During the observation process, I adopted three distinct roles, aligned with Irving's practical context. This approach draws on Gold's (1958) typology of observer roles, which advocates adapting varied levels of participation based on research settings, and aligns with Langley's (1999) process research requirement to capture interactions across multiple levels.

First, during EE-level activities (e.g., networking events), I adopted an observer-as-participant role (Gold, 1958), focusing primarily on observation while engaging in informal conversations with other attendees. My researcher's identity provided unobtrusive access to participants' perspectives and updates. This helped capture relational dynamics - how EE members perceived and responded to Irving's engagement - in line with Langley and Tsoukas's (2016) emphasis on interaction in process research. Second, in one-to-one support sessions, I adopted a complete observer role (Gold, 1958), limiting my role to brief self-introduction and non-interference. This minimised disruption to the trust between Irving and refugee clients, addressing ethical concerns when researching vulnerable groups (Musante and DeWalt, 2010) and fulfilling Langley's (1999) emphasis on preserving natural process flows. Third, in all other Irving-led activities - such as group service delivery activities, office days, pitches, trade fairs, etc. - I acted as a participant-as-observer (Gold, 1958), assisting the team while observing. This 'participation in observation' method (Van Maanen, 1979) enabled me to gain insider insights and capture subtle organisational changes, consistent with Langley et al.'s (2013) immersive approach to capturing organisational process 'flow'.

These observations offer valuable insights into both why and how Irving engaged with other EE members. They also enabled me to track shifts in attitudes and behaviours among not only Irving's direct collaborators but also a wider group of indirect EE members. For example, during stakeholder engagement activities, I observed that many indirect stakeholders - though not formally collaborating with Irving - took part in its events or served as panellists due to their ties to Irving's direct partners. As a result, the data captured how the influence of Irving's collaboration extended beyond immediate partners, unfolding broader changes across the EE. Web Appendix C details the direct and indirect stakeholders observed, outlining their varying degrees of involvement in Irving's project.

3.3.2. In-depth interview

A further significant source of empirical data for this study derives from 63 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted at four distinct stages. Following Langley's (1999) temporal bracketing strategy, these interviews were strategically timed to correspond with significant developments in Irving's engagement with the Birmingham EE. Table 2 below summarises the interview collection phases, the justification for their timing, participant composition, and corresponding interview protocols.

I conducted repeated interviews with core informants and added new ones as relevant (Pettigrew, 1990). All Irving staff involved in this project were interviewed during their respective employment periods, with considerable continuity across phases - four senior managers from Phase 1 participated in all subsequent phases, whilst frontline staff were consistently interviewed except for two who departed after Phase 2 and six new staff who joined before Phase 3. For partners, I interviewed representatives from organisations having active collaborative relationships with Irving during each observation period, with several organisations participating across multiple phases (as indicated in Table 2). This sampling strategy aligns with the process perspective (Langley and Tsoukas, 2016), enabling me to track evolving attitudes and behaviours whilst incorporating fresh perspectives as Irving's network expands - a critical balance in process thinking (Langley et al., 2013).

All interviews were conducted either in person or virtually, recorded with informed consent, and lasted between 45 min and two hours. They were transcribed verbatim, resulting in a total of 1,020,000 words. Several interviewed senior managers responsible for Irving's Birmingham strategy were based outside the city (in the organisation's North-eastern headquarters). These managers were interviewed because they directly shaped Irving's strategic orientation across regions, including its entrepreneurship initiatives in Birmingham. To avoid compromising anonymity in a relatively small organisation, I do not specify which managers were locally or externally based. Importantly, Birmingham-based leaders also contributed to strategic decision-making, meaning the organisation's local voice was represented. However, the need for continuous coordination between local managers and externally based senior leadership introduced additional communication costs and slowed responsiveness. This dynamic may also reinforce Irving's peripheral position within the Birmingham EE, as it reduced its ability to act swiftly in dealing with local EE interactions.

3.4. Research analysis

My analysis strictly adhered to Langley's (1999) temporal bracketing strategy. This approach is particularly well-suited to capturing processes and pattern changes over time (Langley et al., 2013), and for identifying causal relationships between different actions and event outcomes (Gehman et al., 2018).

3.4.1. Bracket preparation

I followed Langley's (1999) temporal bracketing strategy by dividing the dataset into four analytical brackets reflecting Irving's evolving engagement with the EE. These brackets were identified through initial immersion into the dataset, during which I closely examined fieldnotes and interview transcripts to identify strategic inflection points. Turning points were defined based on notable shifts in Irving's strategies, partnership configurations, and service delivery approaches. The four brackets capture: how Irving transitioned from early-stage information gathering to initiating knowledge exchange with EE members (late 2020 to mid-2021), established delivery partnerships with social service providers outside the EE (late 2021 to early 2022), developed co-delivery arrangements with mainstream EE members (early to late 2022), and stepped back from direct service provision to focus on alliance expansion and collaboration with institutional actors (throughout 2023). The critical value of this temporal bracketing lies in maintaining sensitivity to events that may reflect changes in Irving's actions, collaborative relationships, and possible EE inclusion variations, which is essential for addressing the research questions. Such an approach aligns with Langley's (1999) and Langley and Tsoukas' (2016) recommendations that advocate identifying continuous periods of action demarcated by discontinuities or critical turning points to understand the rhythm and patterns of organisational evolution.

3.4.2. Coding process and thematic development

Within each time period, I conducted open coding of observational notes and interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006) without imposing predetermined theoretical concepts, to preserve participants' original expressions where possible (Gioia et al., 2013). To address the research questions, I focused on Irving's relationships with EE members when supporting refugees, how negotiation and collaboration were conducted, the enabling conditions for Irving's actions, and EE members' responses, marginalised entrepreneurs' perceptions, and EE activities. Similar codes were summarised into first-level concepts.

When consolidating first-order concepts into second-order themes, I considered both their descriptive similarities and their significance within the study's theoretical framework, in line with Langley's (1999) guidance on linking process data to theory. For concepts related to Irving's actions, I identified how they shared features reflecting specific boundary work. For example, "adapting internal integration services" and "establishing a subsystem by partnering with social service providers outside the EE" were grouped under "Buffer space for distinctive refugee entrepreneurial needs". This is because they both relate to addressing distinctive challenges faced by marginalised entrepreneurs that cannot be responded to by other EE members - such as business language barriers, limited cultural literacy, and low confidence - linked to exclusionary boundaries. Similarly, "introducing the subsystem to EE members" and "frame the value of the subsystem within the inclusive growth agenda" were grouped under "Communicating buffer space's relevance to EE members", reflecting Irving's efforts to articulate the strategic and contextual relevance of their partnership model with EE members. Also, I developed second-order themes to capture the enabling conditions of each action phase, by identifying how organisational and regional features support Irving's interventions. For the first-level concepts about EE members' reactions, refugees' perceptions, and EE-level activities, I focused on how they similarly indicated changes in the three types of exclusionary boundaries.

Table 2
Summary of interview phases.

Interview collection phase	Justification for interview timing	Participants	Interview protocol
Phase 1 (September 2021)	This phase captures the early development of Irving's project, including initial outreach to refugee entrepreneurs and preliminary engagement with EE members. At this stage, Irving primarily delivered one-to-one support and had not yet established formal partnerships with other EE members.	6 Irving managers (FM1-FM6) from headquarters including 1 staff lead based in Birmingham overseeing frontline delivery; and 4 EE members including representatives from mainstream support institutions (ST1-ST2), a private business advisory service (ST3), and a university representative (ST4). Total: 10 interviews.	Irving staff: Early challenges in refugee support, service strategy development, early networking experiences with EE members. EE members: Initial perceptions of refugee entrepreneurship and support, perceptions of Irving's role and potential.
Phase 2 (April 2022)	This phase followed Irving's transition to building partnerships with social service providers outside of the EE. During this period, services for refugees were delivered through a mix of one-to-one business meetings, internal integration services, and collaboration with external social service partners.	4 Irving managers (FA2, FA5, FA7, FA9); 5 frontline staff based in Birmingham (FA1, FA3–4, FA6, FA8); 3 partner organisations including a mainstream support institution (STT1), a community-based organisation (STT2), and a non-profit social service provider (STT3); and 5 refugee entrepreneurs from varied sectors and stages, including translation services (RE1, Sudanese, <i>planning</i>), medical equipment (RE2, Iranian, <i>planning</i>), catering (RE3–RE4, Syrian and Egyptian, <i>registered</i>), and online retail (RE5, Sudanese, <i>trading</i>). Total: 17 interviews.	Irving staff: Service delivery experiences, partner engagement strategies (with social service providers outside EE), emerging EE changes, coordination challenges. Social service partners: Motivations for collaboration, experiences of joint service delivery. EE members: Perceptions of Irving's work, evolving perceptions of refugee entrepreneurship and support. Refugee entrepreneurs: Service experiences, perceived support changes, reflections on entrepreneurial journey.
Phase 3 (November 2022)	This phase took place after Irving had developed formal collaborative initiatives with mainstream EE members. Refugee entrepreneurs began participating in collaborating EE members' services like incubator programmes, Irving's service portfolio expanded further and became more business-oriented.	6 Irving managers (FB4–6, FB9, FB11–12); 9 frontline staff based in Birmingham (FB1–3, FB7–8, FB10, FB13–15); and 10 refugee entrepreneurs spanning diverse sectors and stages, including translation services (RR1, Sudanese, <i>registered</i>), catering (RR2, Afghan, <i>trading</i> ; RR3, Syrian, <i>trading</i> ; RR7, Sudanese, <i>registered</i>), handcraft online retail (RR4, Syrian, <i>trading</i>), gardening and landscaping (RR5, Ukrainian, <i>planning</i>), manga toy shop (RR6, Hong Kong Chinese, <i>planning</i>), training services (RR8, Hong Kong Chinese, <i>planning</i>), bakery (RR9, Hong Kong Chinese, <i>trading</i>), and digital marketing (RR10, Indian, <i>planning</i>). Total: 25 interviews.	Irving staff: Service delivery experiences, partner engagement strategies (with EE members), emerging EE changes, coordination challenges. Refugee entrepreneurs: Service experiences, perceived support changes, reflections on entrepreneurial journey.
Phase 4 (March–June 2023)	This phase reflected a strategic shift, as Irving stepped back from direct service delivery to focus on coordination roles. Refugees began advisory roles with city council; more indirect EE members and social service providers explored engagement opportunities in refugee entrepreneurship support.	7 Irving managers (FC1–2, FC5–7); 2 staff leads based in Birmingham (FC3–4) responsible for partnership development and service coordination; and 4 collaborating EE members including representatives from 4 mainstream support institutions (STTT1-STTT4, with STTT1-STTT2 being the same organisations as ST1-ST2 from Phase 1). Total: 11 interviews.	Irving staff: Service delivery experiences, partner engagement strategies; legacy planning, emerging EE changes, coordination challenges EE members: Perceptions of Irving's work, experiences of joint service delivery, evolving perceptions of refugee entrepreneurship and support.

For instance, reduced perceived costs and risks of refugee support both reflected the attitudinal changes of EE members for supporting refugees, and were grouped under “Knowledge-cognitive boundary: Perception shift about ‘supporting marginalised entrepreneurs’.”

In the final step, I analysed the sequential and causal relationships between second-order themes and synthesised them into aggregate dimensions. These captured Irving’s key strategic actions alongside the corresponding shifts in ecosystem boundaries within each phase, illustrating how these dynamics unfolded over time. Based on this synthesis, I combined these aggregated themes correspondingly into four interlinked strategic stages: Knowledge brokering, Boundary buffer spacing, Boundary object developing, and Boundary practice institutionalising - each of which demonstrates what Irving did, the boundary-related impacts achieved, and the enabling conditions for such causality.

These four theoretical phases do not simply correspond to the four time periods of data collection, but rather represent key causal mechanisms identified through temporal bracketing analysis. Changes in EE boundaries during one phase often laid the groundwork for actions in the next, reflecting the path dependency central to process research (Langley et al., 2013). For instance, early knowledge-brokering enabled Irving to identify specific refugee needs which informed boundary-buffer strategies; similarly, the later push for institutionalisation was contingent on credibility built through effective boundary object creation. To ensure analytical transparency, Web Appendix D presents detailed illustrative diagrams mapping the relationships between first-order concepts and high-level themes, as well as the underlying rationale for theme development and categorisation.

Table 3
Irving’s strategic actions and effects on exclusionary boundaries.

Stage	Irving’s strategic actions within the EE	Effects on exclusionary boundaries
	Boundary knowledge collection and transpassing	Knowledge repository and nascent resource channels
Knowledge brokering (Oct 2020 – Sep 2021)	• Creating cross-boundary information collection channels • Identifying permeable areas within EE • Translating refugee experiences into EE-compatible ‘language’	• Knowledge - cognitive boundary: Shifts in EE members’ perceptions of marginalised entrepreneurs’ barriers and significance through SOME as knowledge repository. • Resource - opportunity boundary: SOME as sole conduit for EE information, constrained by limited internal service capacity. • Social network boundary: Marginalised entrepreneurs are visible to EE members through SOME without direct interaction.
	Buffer space at the periphery of EE	Externally-driven temporary expansion of EE boundaries
Boundary buffer spacing (Oct 2021 – Apr 2022)	• Buffer space for distinctive refugee entrepreneurial needs • Boundary concept negotiation • Communicating buffer space’s relevance to EE members	• Knowledge - cognitive boundary: Shifts in EE members’ perceptions of risk and capability needed for supporting marginalised entrepreneurs. • Resource - opportunity boundary: The subsystem broadened the range of accessible support resources for marginalised entrepreneurs in pursuing diverse entrepreneurial objectives. • Social network boundary: Newly involved complementary actors began engaging with EE members and advocating for marginalised entrepreneurs.
	Creating cross-boundary collaboration objects	Internally-driven structural expansion of EE boundaries
Boundary object developing (Apr – Dec 2022)	• Value demonstration of earlier boundary practices • Designing boundary objects with shared value • Providing ongoing boundary crossing support	• Knowledge - cognitive boundary: Collaborating EE members gained knowledge on supporting marginalised entrepreneurs; marginalised entrepreneurs internalised EE norms and reassessed their growth orientation. • Resource - opportunity boundary: Marginalised entrepreneurs received professional support from collaborating EE members, enabling qualified ones to access investor networks. • Social network boundary: The collaborating EE members begin forming direct relationships with specific marginalised entrepreneurs.
	Multi-layer institutionalisation	Self-sustaining and self-expanding boundary practices
Boundary practice institutionalising (Dec 2022 – Dec 2023)	• Policymaking level institutionalisation • Organisational level institutionalisation • Spatial institutionalisation	• Knowledge - cognitive boundary: Collaborating EE members have come to view supporting marginalised entrepreneurs as a competitive advantage and now seek to promote its importance within the EE. • Resource - opportunity boundary: Marginalised entrepreneurs are involved in EE governance as advisors; and support for them is embedded in collaborating EE members’ routine practice and daily dialogue, led by dedicated staff. • Social network boundary: Indirect EE members are onboarded into boundary practices; marginalised entrepreneurs are integrated into core EE programmes.

4. Findings

Irving's facilitation of inclusive evolution in the EE unfolds through four interconnected stages: knowledge brokering, boundary buffer spacing, boundary object developing, and boundary practice institutionalising. Each stage involves specific strategic actions, shaped by enabling conditions, that collectively reconfigure exclusionary boundaries. These boundary shifts are cumulative and path-dependent, with earlier stages creating the conditions for subsequent change. Table 3 summarises the strategies and their effects, while a detailed timeline of Irving's key events and actions is provided in Web Appendix E.

4.1. Knowledge brokering stage

4.1.1. Boundary knowledge collection and transpassing

At the initial stage, Irving acted as a boundary spanner. Its frontline team - combining refugee-background caseworkers and professional business advisors - navigated and translated between two distinct knowledge systems: refugee communities and EE members. Irving first built community-facing information channels through refugee-background staff using language, trust, and cultural familiarity. They gathered insights via focus groups, community outreach, and one-to-one diagnostics. This engagement surfaced refugee entrepreneurial experiences otherwise hidden from the EE: "Our staff who come from refugee backgrounds are really important. People trust them [...] bring out things we'd never hear in a formal meeting" (FM5).

Simultaneously, Irving managers mapped the landscape of EE support to identify members whose funding and service structure might allow flexible engagement with broader entrepreneurs. Through desk research, event participation, and pre-existent networks, the frontline team built a profile of EE members most likely to engage. In this process, the relational ties that Irving had developed since its 2019 pilot project provided an important source for identifying potentially receptive EE members. Yet these ties were not the enabler themselves; rather, they enabled Irving to recognise opportunities, alongside systematic research and outreach. Importantly, several organisations with no prior ties to Irving also engaged once approached. This indicates that rather than viewing the exclusionary boundary as homogeneous, Irving identified permeable areas:

"If you talk to ten investors or agencies, they'll all be talking about innovation, money [...] Some programme can support a wider range of people [...] they just don't want or they don't know how [...] And honestly, those are the ones who are easier to get on board" (FM3).

This mapping gave Irving's frontline team entry points for knowledge transpassing. Debrief meetings were held with identified audiences such as the city council, Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, two universities, and three mainstream support organisations. To prepare, the team translated refugee experiences into EE-compatible narratives and produced the region's first refugee entrepreneurship gap report. The report reframed refugees' challenges (e.g., language, cultural adaptation) as market access barriers and human capital needs, their cross-cultural skills as unique entrepreneurial capital, and their pursuit of self-sufficiency as contributions to consumer demand and the implementation of Birmingham's inclusive growth. Bilingual refugee clients also presented their experiences in person, providing a credible voice.

"Birmingham has this inclusive growth idea, which is top-down [...] This is our advantage. We deliberately position our project as an exemplar of implementing this agenda [...] This means they cannot simply ignore our approach" (FM3).

Such "translation" work reconstructed knowledge to traverse boundaries. Irving did not merely share information but reframed it into shared semantics intelligible to both the EE and refugee communities. While these efforts inevitably raised awareness and empathy, our data show that such awareness was always coupled with knowledge dissemination. EE members engaged because they could absorb refugee entrepreneurship into their own cognitive frames (e.g., inclusive growth, market opportunity), rather than because of purely emotive appeals. This approach was enabled by two key conditions: (1) Irving's dual-knowledge capabilities - combining community insight and business language; and (2) institutional rhetoric endorsement of EE diversity, which gave Irving discursive legitimacy and opened space for dialogue with EE members.

4.1.2. Knowledge repository and nascent resource channels

This early phase of boundary work affected the EE's network, resources, and cognitive boundaries. First, Irving's frontline team became the refugee knowledge repository in Birmingham. Through their and Irving managers' developing relational ties with EE members, this repository became visible and accessible, serving as an informal channel linking refugee communities with the EE. This indirect connection marked an early shift in the social network, as previously disconnected refugees began to enter the indirect dialogue with EE members through Irving:

"[An incubator] invite us to a round table to discuss our findings, wanna know what it means for them" (FM1). "Before us, if someone wanted information about refugee business, they have nowhere to go. Now [...] this won't be an excuse people can use anymore" (FM5).

Second, EE members' perceptions also began to shift. While previously framed as charity work, refugee entrepreneurship began to be seen as economically relevant, suggesting a cognitive reframing of refugee entrepreneurs as potential EE participants: "The biggest change is that in the past, we would consider this charity work [...] we know those activities can tick many boxes for our regional economy as well" (ST1). The data also suggest a sequential pattern of cognitive change. Early adopters were publicly oriented actors (Birmingham City Council, Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, universities), who actively endorsed Irving's initiatives and co-branded the debrief meetings (see Web Appendix D). Their visible endorsement provided discursive legitimacy, which in turn encouraged more market-oriented and risk-averse actors (incubators and accelerators) to follow. As ST1 recall the role of government bodies in Irving's debrief meeting: "When they [government, universities] sits at the same table, it leaves a message [...]"

we won't be the odd one out, and there is an agenda there."

Third, Irving's services offered a sole resource-access conduit, weakening the resource–opportunity boundary. Managers and frontline leads actively gathered information from EE events and relayed it to frontline advisors, who in turn passed it on to refugee clients. This internal flow made Irving a de facto information hub for refugees in the EE:

"They used to have literally no opportunity to receive business support tailored to their situations [...] we're like an information hub, trying to let clients know what's happening now in the market, in the system" (FM3). "Now with [Irving] as a first stop, someone can explain how things work" (ST3). Although still peripheral, Irving's actions established a boundary conduit where information could flow in and out of the EE.

4.2. Boundary buffer spacing

4.2.1. Buffer space at the periphery of EE

Although EE members began to shift perceptions, most still hesitated to support refugees directly, citing a lack of capacity to meet their distinctive needs. These needs required new skills and resources that many found costly or inaccessible: "There are too many issues we can't address with existing resources. We need professionals to do this work" (ST2). This gap revealed an asynchrony - cognitive change had not yet led to behavioural change. To bridge this, Irving created a boundary buffer space: an intermediate structure addressing refugees' distinctive barriers and lowering the perceived cost for EE members to engage. This included using Irving's own integration services to tackle key issues that stopped refugees from benefitting from existing EE members, such as biased views about entrepreneurship and a lack of business English. It also involved bringing in social service providers from outside the EE to cover refugee needs that Irving couldn't fully address. This study refers to these outside providers as 'complementary actors' (CAs) to highlight how their services complement those offered by Irving and EE members.

"We build support pathways by spotting gaps, we won't recreate things mainstream providers could offer but don't want to, like marketing. We focus on challenges others can otherwise never address [...] a refugee might start with our diagnosis, then join another's [CA] cultural festival and another's mental support. That forms a small subsystem" (FA8).

The concept of boundary buffer space is embodied here as the subsystem created by Irving and its partnered CAs - a buffer space that does not simply push refugees toward the EE, nor does it require the EE to change its structure, but rather serves as a middle ground enabling refugees to evolve in an adaptive manner and allowing EE members to explore.

So how did the Irving team build cooperation with CAs? Their frontline lead and managers began by identifying and reaching out to social service providers, mostly community-based, from their regional network. These potential CAs focused on areas beyond Irving's remit, such as cultural awareness, mental health support, family reunions, and community kitchens. In their strategic discussions with these CAs, Irving's managers and frontline lead adopted a key approach: they reframed the concept of entrepreneurship support for refugees. They highlighted how the services offered by these CAs formed essential foundations for enabling refugee entrepreneurship and were needed within the EE.

"We had to completely reconstruct how they view their own services. When we showed them how language directly impacts business, or how culture is crucial for access market [...] they began to see their role in entrepreneurship world differently" (FA2).

I find this approach was particularly attractive to non-profit organisations that were seeking development and for whom refugees met their user eligibility criteria, as it enabled them to enlarge the scale of project beneficiaries and provide future opportunities for accessing new funding through their experience of supporting refugee entrepreneurship.

"We've always been looking for ways to expand our operations [...] Irving has connections with banks, chambers, universities local authorities and has received funding [...] this partnership may provide new possibilities for our future bids" (STT3).

Irving also worked to show EE members the relevance of this subsystem to them with EE's own language and value orientation. In March–April 2022, the frontline team ran two workshops to present new partnerships and services, with guests including Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, support organisations, and university staff. Irving's founder also spoke at a regional forum on inclusive growth. "Showcasing our cooperation [with CA] is crucial. We need to demonstrate to the mainstream how we're addressing refugees' needs, how we've resolved their main concerns [...] This isn't just slogans and policies, but actual changes" (FA9).

The data showed several path-dependent enablers at this stage. The knowledge development from previous phase prompted EE members to engage with Irving voluntarily. As ST1 noted, some members feared missing out on opportunities aligned with their goals, making them more open to Irving-led activities. Irving also used past learning to shape the subsystem around refugees' specific needs. The buffer space was also supported by key SOME-level factors. Irving's embeddedness in Birmingham's social service network, and its dual knowledge of both community and entrepreneurial support, helped it build trust with CAs and reframe entrepreneurship support in negotiations. As one staff member put it: "They [CAs] know us, trust us, and due to our work over the past two years, they are also willing to explore new ways of collaboration" (FA7).

At the EE level, although inclusive growth rhetoric remained tied to a "high-growth" mindset, its endorsement of EE diversity still provided a framework and opportunity for cleverly explaining the relevance between Irving's boundary work and EE members' interests.

4.2.2. Externally-driven temporary expansion of EE boundaries

The subsystem created by Irving had several effects on the EE. First, through the onboarding of previously overlooked CAs and Irving's diagnostic and support planning efforts, refugees seeking to start businesses gained access to a broader supportive infrastructure related to their goals. This temporarily expanded the EE's resource–opportunity boundary by drawing external actors to its

periphery and tailoring support pathways to refugees' specific needs.

"I tried to find regular business service, I don't have their number never see them, and I not meet their standard [...] I join one before and I not understand them [...] make me feel I am the only bad one in the room [...] but now I can solve my language barrier, learn culture, to discuss with people [...] they help me communicate business ideas" (RE5).

Second, refugees' social networks expanded through increased interaction with CAs. CAs also engaged with EE members via Irving-led activities to share knowledge, creating more indirect connections between refugees and the EE. This indirect connection acted as an intermediate form, neither complete isolation nor full integration, creating more meaningful links between refugees and the EE through the subsystem's mediation. It laid the basis for future network development. As EE member and CA commented: "Their collaboration is key [...] they're experts in understanding refugee backgrounds, which helps us identify and support talent." (STT1) "Now we see ourselves as part of the wider entrepreneurial community [...] with access to professional support and shared experiences" (STT3).

Lastly, the subsystem shifted the EE knowledge-cognitive boundary. Rather than directly challenging existing assumptions, Irving strategically reduced EE members' perceived risks for supporting refugee entrepreneurs. It helped reconcile mismatches between refugees' needs and EE members' capacity, lowering barriers to engagement for EE members. As STT1 said: "it felt like a whole new risk-benefit calculation [...] the way their alliance is set up, it seems to absorb most of that risk for us."

4.3. Boundary object developing stage

4.3.1. Creating cross-boundary collaboration objects

At the third stage, Irving aimed to directly involve EE members to support refugees, as the mainstream is "where the money, opportunities, professional contacts, and supply chains are rich" (FB6). To achieve this, Irving created boundary objects - a series of collaborative activities - between the subsystem it led and different EE members. These activities carried different but compatible meanings for each party involved - EE members, the subsystem, and refugees - allowing them to engage in joint efforts while maintaining their distinct cognitive perspectives and interests.

First, between April and July 2022, the frontline lead and managers sought to demonstrate the value generated by earlier boundary practices. They attended four regional networking events - hosted by Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, local universities, and the City Council - to reconnect with EE members from earlier stages. At these events, they introduced refugee entrepreneurs in the subsystem who had already begun trading. Second, Irving showcased the subsystem's impact by hosting a workshop and sharing case studies in advance. These highlighted improvements in language, confidence and cultural adaptation among eight refugee entrepreneurs across sectors such as catering, marketing, the arts, social enterprise, and e-commerce, while also showing how their unique business ideas addressed market gaps.

"We needed to be able to demonstrate our impact [referring to the subsystem] on entrepreneurship [...] I wanted people to see this transformation with their own eyes" (FB6).

Secondly, Irving proposed designed collaborative support activities (boundary objects) to different EE members and initiated negotiations. In these discussions, Irving's frontline lead and managers aligned their proposal with EE's growth priorities. They demonstrated how refugee entrepreneurs - when well-supported - could add value to the EE. It was emphasised that supporting refugees 'prepared by' the subsystem could help EE members (e.g. university programmes, incubators, accelerators) expand their reach, meet delivery targets, and even access inclusive growth funding with only minor adjustments to their existing models. Such partnerships could also strengthen their community reputation. To address these concerns, Irving also assured EE members that all activities would be delivered under the Irving-led project, with full responsibility for quality and accountability.

"Discussing their interests is key. We must start from their pain points [...] It's not that we need their help, but rather that we've worked to create win-win opportunities, helping them [EE members] grow their businesses [...] Everything is transparent and fair" (FB9).

Under this strategy, Irving successfully onboarded three EE members for collaboration, hereafter referred to as 'collaborating EE members' to distinguish them from other non-partnered indirect EE members. These partnerships included: working with a regional incubator (STTT4) and support organisation (STTT1) to deliver entrepreneurial training sessions for refugees; onboarding university educators, private sector experts, and retired professionals as mentors; co-developing the region's first refugee entrepreneurship toolkit with STTT2/ST2; and, launching a dedicated entrepreneurship camp for refugees with a university incubator (STTT3), supported by a new public grant. These collaborative projects functioned as boundary objects, offering 'multivocality' - meeting the diverse needs of different actors without requiring them to fully alter their perspectives. CAs gained more sustained presence and new connections within the EE; collaborating EE members benefited from potential economic returns, new funding, improved project outcomes, and enhanced reputation; and refugees gained better access to business resources aligned with their goals.

Thirdly, Irving provided ongoing support during service sessions delivered by collaborating EE members to ensure the effective operation of boundary objects.

"We stay involved in many sessions, not just translating, but explaining the cultural context too [...] or just make them [refugees] feel safe [...] to building trust between them [collaborating EE members] and the refugees." (FB13) "we can learn from trial and error; if we find a service isn't well-received by them, we can always bring the expert [Irving] back here to see how they can help out, ensuring we're doing the right thing" (STTT1).

This ongoing support illustrates that Irving's boundary work involves not only creating structures but also sustaining them strategically. Irving continued to act as a boundary spanner, ensuring that boundary objects functioned effectively.

The strategies at this stage also relied on key enablers. First, the earlier subsystem had improved refugees' entrepreneurial

readiness, giving Irving concrete examples to use in negotiations. Shifts in EE members' risk perceptions from earlier stages also paved the way for collaboration. At the SOME level, Irving's dual knowledge capabilities and network embeddedness in the EE positioned its team to engage with and understand the needs of refugees, CAs, and EE members alike, enabling them to be involved in boundary objects effectively. At the EE level, institutional rhetoric and funding related to supporting EE diversity also further encouraged EE members' engagement in these boundary objects.

4.3.2. Internally-driven structural expansion of EE boundaries

Irving's boundary object creation had three key impacts on the EE's exclusionary boundaries. First, it enabled selective direct connections across the social network boundary. Collaborating EE members began forming direct relationships with refugees through joint activities. Though limited in scale, refugees gained access to networking events and peer communities that were previously out of reach, creating new social ties: "What's truly remarkable is seeing [local investors] exchange business cards with refugee entrepreneurs and arrange follow-up meetings. These direct connections simply didn't exist six months ago" (FB3). "I'm very happy to meet other entrepreneurs and role models, we shared ideas, many unexpected interest communities, groups seeking investment, a lot, we added WhatsApp, arranged coffee meetings" (RR8).

This marked a shift from "indirect connections" between refugees and EE members in the previous two stages to "direct connections". Although these direct connections remained limited to some collaborating EE members, they signified that boundary objects created substantive "openings" in social networks, not merely permeation.

Second, structural business resource channels were established through co-developed activities with EE members. These included access to mentorship, technical guidance, investor networks (e.g. pitch sessions), and shared workspaces. Public funding also supported these collaborations: "Joining [STTT3] transformed my business and eyes opened. I gained access to venues and professional guidance that I previously couldn't afford" (RE5).

Third, Irving promoted the bidirectional crossing of the knowledge-cognitive boundary. EE members developed a deep understanding of refugees' circumstances, capabilities, and good practices for supporting them, while refugees internalised EE norms, expectations, and business practices. This mutual learning allowed refugees to shift their perspectives on growth and led to the emergence of hybrid narratives within refugee entrepreneurship - combining growth-orientation with the diverse pursuits of refugees.

"Previously, we had a standard model [...] now we're learning to listen - how their background might offer unique market opportunities. This reflection has changed us" (STTT4). "I started to feel maybe I'm not less than others. So I began to think I can grow this business [...] that will also further help my community and my family, giving jobs to other refugees [...] selling my special sauce to restaurants" (RR2).

These shifts show that Irving's boundary objects enabled mutual adaptation: EE members began to rethink how they could support refugee entrepreneurs, while refugees redefined what success meant. Though growth-oriented values remained dominant, Irving introduced more inclusive practices within that logic. Refugees accessed resources aligned to diverse goals, with some moving toward growth-oriented models and entering the broader EE to pursue expanded entrepreneurial ambitions.

4.4. Boundary practice institutionalising stage

4.4.1. Multi-layer institutionalisation

At the fourth stage, Irving faced the challenge of sustaining the boundary changes it had initiated. While project funding had enabled the creation of supportive structures, there were concerns that once funding ended, Irving would likely 'go back to integration support and it's hard to really focus on entrepreneurship' (FC1). To address this, Irving sought to institutionalise boundary practices - shifting them from temporary, project-led activities to enduring, self-sustaining institutional norms.

Irving adopted three key strategies. First, it aimed to embed refugee voices into the policymaking of the EE, ensuring ongoing institutional recognition of refugee entrepreneurship. Leveraging its demonstrated impact, Irving and city council co-secured a public grant to involve refugees in policymaking. This led to the formation of a community advisory group as part of the council's civic engagement initiative. Coordinated by the council's migration team, the group regularly shared insights with decision-makers in social services and economic policy, informing more inclusive policy development.

"Getting refugee representatives involved in policymaking is a real game-changer [...] They can share what they are going through, and give suggestions [...] Since this push came from the authority, I hope it also sets an example for other organisations" (FC4).

This strategy reflects Irving's desire to utilise refugees' agency to demonstrate the significance of boundary work, creating institutional recognition and thereby institutionalising this boundary practice idea at the EE level.

Second, as boundary objects stabilised, Irving institutionalised these experiences at the organisational level, preparing for a future with diminished Irving involvement. This occurred through: 1) gradually shifting from maintaining boundary objects to expanding them by connecting new CAs (e.g., connecting with the Ukrainian community organisation) to collaborating EE members for new activities; and 2) formalising effective practices into CAs' and collaborating EE members' operating procedures through hosting reflection sessions, ensuring sustainable collaboration between the subsystem and EE members.

"We went over their experiences [...] what's been working and what could be tricky going forward. It was really about helping them understand what collaboration between them could look like in the future [...] [STT3] could learn to do the initial assessments, what questions to ask, and how [STTT3] should maintain their newly learned cultural sensitivity, and most importantly, how to set up the easy referral pathways" (FC3).

Thirdly, in July 2023, Irving established a refugee support community within the EE by hosting a networking event which served as more than just a platform. It became a dedicated space for boundary institutionalisation. By bringing together a diverse group of

participants, including collaborating and indirect EE members (who haven't engaged in refugee support), CAs, and entrepreneurs, Irving created a physical and conceptual space for sharing collaborative boundary practices and reinforcing recognition of such efforts.

"We gave regional partners and others who care about this issue a chance to see what we've been doing [...] They started making their own connections, picking up our ideas and continuing the work [...] That's the kind of legacy we hope to leave behind" (FC2).

This symbolises CAs and collaborating EE members can now manage boundary practices themselves and attract other interested EE members, using the community as a central anchor point. The effective implementation of these strategies relies on enabling conditions. Firstly, in terms of path dependency, successful collaborations at the third stage offer visible proof of value, reducing resistance to institutionalisation among policymakers and collaborating EE members. Their work experience with refugees and CAs also created a skillset for collaborating EE members, motivating them to sustain boundary practices.

At the SOME level, Irving's dual knowledge capabilities still enabled it to make sense of their partners' new experiences supporting refugees within their respective operations. Institutionally, regional recognition of inclusive growth continues to legitimise Irving's experimental initiatives, such as the community advisory group. In addition, the existing high-frequency interaction among EE members provides ready-made channels for the horizontal spread of boundary practices led by collaborating EE members.

4.4.2. Self-sustaining and self-expanding boundary practices

Irving's work at this stage had driven EE boundary practices toward self-sustaining and self-expanding evolution. First, it institutionalised EE members' capabilities in supporting refugee entrepreneurs. Refugee support becomes a strategic organisational asset. Collaborating EE members began to view such work as a source of their differentiation and influence in EE, thus actively advocating for its importance within the broader EE:

"It's not just a one-off effort [...] this kind of collaboration can continuously benefit the region, and we can also play an important role in it" (STTT3). "To amplify the impact of this kind of collaboration, to turn our contributions into real value for the refugees, for ourselves, and for [the sub-system organisations], we need recognition" (STTT1).

Second, resource-opportunity and knowledge-cognitive boundary practices became structurally consolidated. What began as experimental initiatives evolved into routine operations. Collaborating EE members even adjusted staffing to support this institutionalisation in their organisation: "This might become one of our advantages [...] our staff are learning, a new manager has been assigned leading this collaboration [...] when we begin to constantly discuss what's next [...] the meaning of it for us has changed" (STTT4).

Third, self-expanding network connections began to emerge, marking a shift in the social network boundary. Collaborating EE members became catalysts for diffusion, sharing practices and values of supporting refugee entrepreneurs with others in the EE. New CAs - such as organisations supporting Ukrainian refugees - proactively approached Irving to seek collaboration to help Ukrainian entrepreneurs. Refugee entrepreneurs have begun accessing broader EE resources independently, as in the case of an AI-focused entrepreneur joining a tech-based incubator via STTT3. This suggests that as indirect EE members become involved in this network with CAs and collaborating EE members, they are beginning to, or are likely to, emerge as new sources of resources, knowledge, and networks for refugee entrepreneurs.

"We've been showing the results of our work to banks, policymakers, academics [...] and it's really a chain reaction. Once they gets involved, they also introduce others" (STTT4).

Field observations also revealed a variation in engagement levels among indirect EE stakeholders. While collaborating EE members were effective negotiators, interest still varied. For example, SkillWorks and EduConnect showed interest at events but remained hesitant due to their limited prior collaboration with social service providers. Flexibility of these organisations also matters, as STTT1 noted: "For an organisation with just three people, this kind of collaboration also represents a challenging shift."

5. Discussion

5.1. A process model of SOME-driven inclusive evolution of EEs

Based on the findings, this study develops a grounded process model that explains the mechanism of how SOMEs drive the EE inclusive evolution through sequential and multi-level changes, as shown in Fig. 2. The model synthesises four stages of boundary evolution into a recursive mechanism in which micro-level boundary work by SOMEs activates meso-level change of EE members and cumulatively aggregates into systemic-institutional evolution.

At the first stage, inclusive evolution is triggered through a knowledge brokering mechanism. SOMEs activate this mechanism by using their dual knowledge and outreach capabilities to collect information about marginalised entrepreneurs and identify permeable areas for engagement. They then disseminate an EE-compatible 'language' that translates ME-specific insights into terms recognisable within the ecosystem. This brokering is structurally situated: it draws on SOMEs' contextual knowledge of both marginalised entrepreneurs' experiences and EE logics, as well as their capacity to sustain information channels and act as a knowledge repository. This targeted translation initiates a perception shift about marginalised entrepreneurs' value and needs. Reinforced by institutional rhetoric on ecosystem diversity, the legitimacy of these early exchanges increases. While EE members do not yet act directly, they begin low-commitment info exchange through SOMEs. Systematically, this softens EE's knowledge-cognitive boundary. In parallel, the legitimised conduit role of SOMEs allows marginalised entrepreneurs' information access in EEs, easing the resource-opportunity boundary. Through these mediated exchanges, marginalised entrepreneurs also gain indirect interaction with EE members, gradually loosening the social network boundary.

The second stage is driven by a boundary buffer spacing mechanism. SOMEs create peripheral spaces that address MEs' distinctive

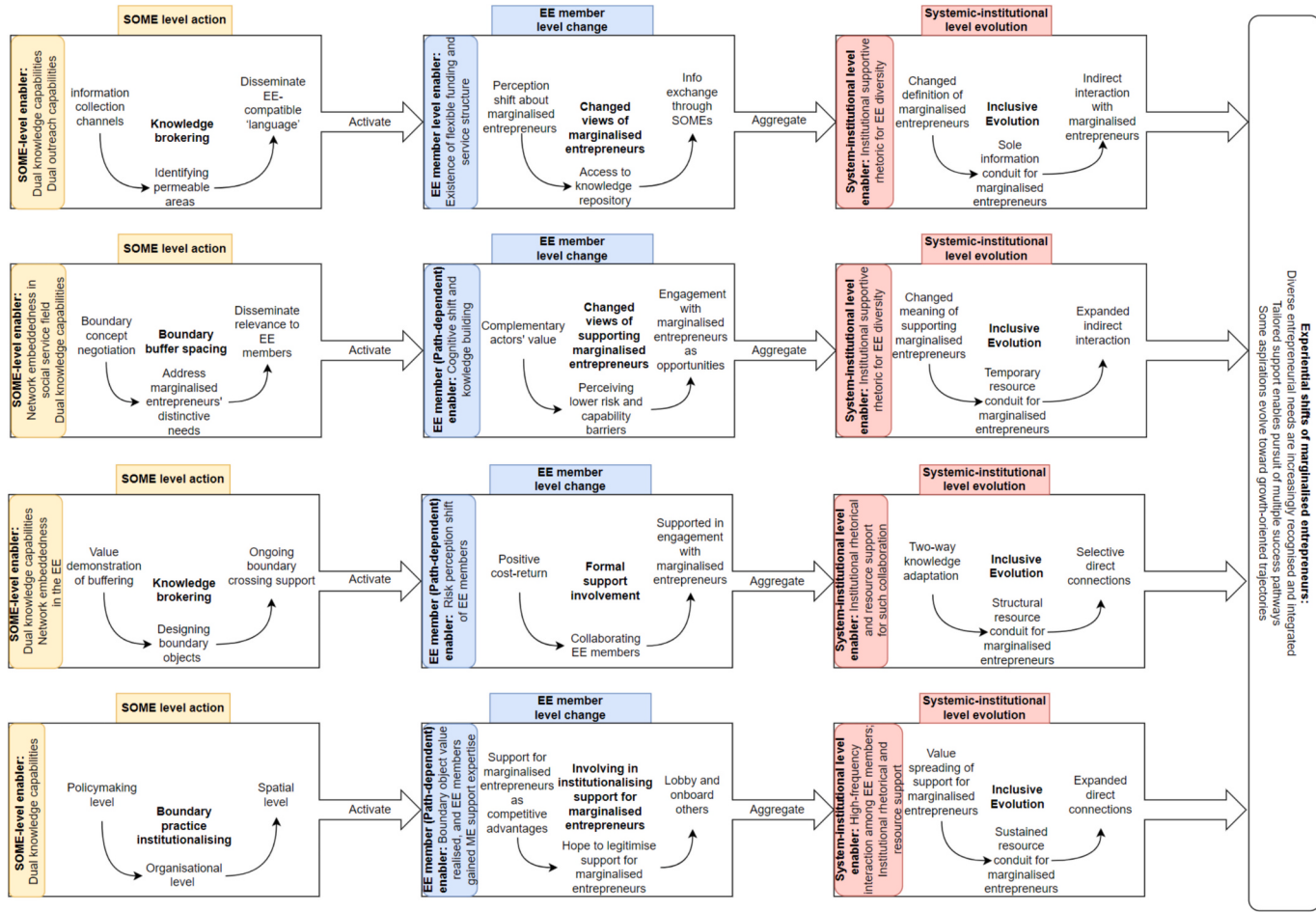


Fig. 2. Process model of SOME-driven inclusive evolution of EEs.

needs by onboarding complementary actors (CAs) from adjacent fields such as social services. Drawing on their network embeddedness and dual knowledge, SOMEs use boundary concept negotiation to frame CA services as part of entrepreneurial support for marginalised entrepreneurs, thereby temporarily positioning them within the EE. This extends the range of services accessible to marginalised entrepreneurs and produces a temporary shift in the resource–opportunity boundary. By staging the value of CAs for marginalised entrepreneurs, SOMEs demonstrate how their contributions can absorb EE members' perceived risks and lower capability barriers. As a result, EE members develop changed views of supporting marginalised entrepreneurs, reframing engagement as an opportunity rather than a liability. This generates a systemic-institutional level knowledge–cognitive boundary shift. Meanwhile, the buffer space also expands indirect interactions between EE and marginalised entrepreneurs through the dialogical participation of CAs in the EE, signalling an evolution at the social network boundary. The enabling conditions are twofold: prior cognitive shifts and knowledge from the first stage foster receptivity among EE members, while institutional narratives of diversity provide further legitimacy for recognising the buffer space.

The third stage is governed by a collaborative boundary object mechanism. Building on the legitimacy of the buffer space, SOMEs co-design tangible collaborative support initiatives with selected EE members and provide ongoing boundary crossing support to sustain such collaboration. These boundary objects surface the positive cost–return of supporting marginalised entrepreneurs - anchored in the path-dependent value of buffer space - and enable the formal support involvement of EE members and their direct engagement with marginalised entrepreneurs. The mechanism nurtures two-way knowledge adaptation, further evolving the knowledge–cognitive boundary: EE members internalise skills relevant to supporting marginalised entrepreneurs, while marginalised entrepreneurs gain exposure to dominant EE resources and norms. The presence of such structured collaboration also provides marginalised entrepreneurs with formal channels of access to EE members and internal resources, thereby softening the resource–opportunity boundary and the social network boundary.

The final stage consolidates inclusive evolution through a boundary practice institutionalising mechanism across policy, organisational, and spatial levels. Here, SOMEs act as institutionalising agents, leveraging their dual knowledge to embed support practices for marginalised entrepreneurs into broader system logics. At the policy level, they align marginalised entrepreneurs' voices with institutional objectives; at the organisational level, they help routinise support practices in collaborating EE member organisations; and at the spatial level, they construct communities that recognise the value and practice of support for marginalised entrepreneurs. This process creates a recursive dynamic: collaborating EE members, having gained support expertise in earlier stages, now treat support for marginalised entrepreneurs as an internalised competitive advantage. They actively institutionalise it by mobilising others and reinforcing its legitimacy within EE. Enabled by dense interaction between members and sustained diversity rhetoric institutionally, support practices and knowledge circulate more widely within the EE. As a result, the knowledge–cognitive boundary is durably suppressed. The resource–opportunity boundary is stabilised through collaborating EE members' strategic role as embedded conduits, while the social network boundary is progressively weakened by ripple effects of member mobilisation. Inclusion thereby shifts from provisional adaptation to an embedded feature of the ecosystem's boundary architecture.

Across the four stages, boundary reconfiguration creates cumulative experiences for marginalised entrepreneurs. Initially supported by SOMEs, and later by EE members directly, marginalised entrepreneurs gain access to tailored support that fits their needs and goals. This also expands their sense of what's possible. For some, exposure to EE norms inspires a shift toward growth-oriented aspirations.

5.2. Contribution to the literature on inclusive evolution of EEs

This study advances EE inclusion research by conceptualising a “periphery-to-centre” model in which actors with limited systemic power - namely SOMEs - reshape exclusionary structures. While most studies focus on how central actors drive ecosystem change from the top down (Cho et al., 2022; Colombelli et al., 2019; Harima et al., 2024), this model shows how peripheral actors can enable incremental inclusive change in growth-oriented EEs. It reframes inclusion as a dynamic, recursive process of boundary evolution, and reveals how marginalised entrepreneurs gain ecosystem footholds through alternative, SOME-mediated mechanism.

The proposed four-stage model reveals how SOMEs progressively reshape cognitive, resource, and network boundaries (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Morris et al., 2015; Neumeyer et al., 2019). This trajectory transforms peripheral spaces that enable experiences of inclusion: Marginalised entrepreneurs with growth ambitions may transition into central EE circuits, while others still access adequate support for alternative forms of enterprise (Krueger, 2021; Kumari et al., 2025; Ram et al., 2022). The model thus offers an actionable framework for understanding how inclusive evolution unfolds without requiring a formal systemic overhaul. The underlying logic confirms the origins of exclusionary boundaries and demonstrates a counteracting approach. EE members construct and maintain boundaries toward marginalised entrepreneurs due to cognitive frames and capability barriers (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Morris et al., 2015). SOMEs sequentially counteract these dynamics through facilitating a stepwise cognitive development and capacity shift among EE members correspondingly. The recursive dynamic of EE evolution (Mack and Mayer, 2016; Stam and Van de Ven, 2021) also is surfaced in this process: initial cognitive change generates sustained interaction with SOMEs; buffer spaces recalibrate perceptions of capability barriers, paving the way for collaboration; support experiences build support capacity of EE members and activate further cognitive transformation; and these shifts ultimately shape collaborating EE members into agenda champions of support for marginalised entrepreneurs within the EE.

This study extends accounts of EE inclusive evolution by showing that enabling conditions are not confined to SOMEs' strategies but unfold across SOME, EE member, and systemic-institutional layers. While prior research highlights the role of structural enablers in shaping EE evolution (Cao and Shi, 2021; Colombelli et al., 2019), this model specifies which enablers matter and how they facilitate SOME-driven change across these layers.

At the organisational level, SOMEs' dual knowledge and network embeddedness underpin their ability to translate knowledge and construct collaborative mechanisms. These activities matter not in isolation but because they activate meso-level processes: EE members' interpretive frames, cost–return calculations, and support practices are reconfigured through iterative exposure to SOMEs' translation work and collaborative offers. The resulting meso-level shifts are further conditioned by EE members' initial openness to new service populations and by path-dependent dynamics, whereby each round of engagement recalibrates and enhances subsequent inclusion (Mack and Mayer, 2016; Stam and Van de Ven, 2021). At the systemic-institutional level, policy frameworks and cultural logics provide (or restrict) discursive legitimacy, shaping whether SOME-led practices stabilise as recognised norms and whether EE members' engagement is rhetorically and materially rewarded (Würth et al., 2022; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). By situating the model within this layered enabling structure, this study not only clarifies why not all SOMEs can trigger inclusive evolution, but also extends EE inclusive evolution scholarship by linking the micro-foundations of boundary work with the macro conditions that shape its cumulative effects.

5.3. Contribution to the literature on characteristics of EE inclusion

Second, the model in this study advances understanding of the relationship between inclusion and growth orientation, two characteristics of EE, by challenging the widely assumed trade-off between the two. Existing literature often frames them as separate priorities, arguing that the dominance of the “high-growth venture” ideology marginalises entrepreneurs with alternative motivations and needs (Morris et al., 2015; Neumeier et al., 2019; Welter et al., 2017). This tension is reflected in the misalignment between mainstream EE expectations and the entrepreneurial pursuits of marginalised entrepreneurs (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Bruton et al., 2023; Rath and Swagerman, 2016). While this study confirms such misalignment as the source of exclusionary boundaries, it also shows that boundary reconfiguration does not necessarily sabotage EE's growth orientation. Rather, SOMEs' boundary work reveals a more nuanced and potentially synergistic relationship between inclusion and growth.

This study demonstrates that inclusive evolution can occur by maintaining fidelity to the EE's growth logic while expanding its capacity to accommodate diversity. Instead of requiring EEs to redefine success or marginalised entrepreneurs to assimilate into existing norms, SOMEs facilitate a bidirectional adaptation. They help EE members perceive how engaging with marginalised entrepreneurs can advance their own organisational goals and achieve positive cost–return, thereby reframing inclusion as a strategic, rather than moral, imperative (Brown and Mason, 2017; Neumeier et al., 2019). This allows cognitive shifts to materialise into more tangible boundary changes.

This staged process of inclusive evolution enables mutual cognitive expansion: EE members gradually extend their interpretive frameworks, while marginalised entrepreneurs gain the confidence, competencies, and legitimacy to engage with the broader ecosystem on their own terms. This leads some marginalised entrepreneurs to move beyond survival to develop stronger growth aspirations and, over time, transition into mainstream EE networks. At the ecosystem level, this demonstrates that inclusion can act as a driver - not a drag - on high-growth potential by widening the pipeline of entrepreneurial talent and strengthening the ecosystem's adaptive capacity (Audretsch and Belitski, 2017; Welter et al., 2017). In doing so, the findings challenge traditional assumptions in high-growth EE research that frame inclusion as a normative or resource-draining agenda (Morris et al., 2015; Neumeier et al., 2019; Bruton et al., 2023). Instead, they suggest that well-sequenced inclusive strategies, facilitated by SOMEs, can enhance innovation, legitimacy, and systemic resilience (Brown and Mason, 2017; Spiegel, 2017; Birdthistle et al., 2022). Thus, inclusion and growth are not inherently oppositional but can become mutually reinforcing through carefully designed boundary work.

5.4. Contribution to the literature on boundary theory and boundary work

This study extends boundary theory by demonstrating how boundary work can operate as a mechanism of systemic evolution within complex, value-contested environments. Existing research has primarily examined boundary work in intra- or inter-organisational settings, where actors share relatively stable objectives and institutional logics (Ashforth et al., 2000; Carlile, 2004). By contrast, this study investigates a typical structurally fragmented and normatively unsettled context, where actors from both sides of boundary lack shared frames of reference and often advance conflicting definitions of value and success.

Within such conditions, boundary work is not best understood as a set of discrete interventions or stable mechanisms, but as an evolving and adaptive process that responds to ongoing shifts in cognition, roles, and interdependencies on both sides of the boundary. In its early phase, boundary work takes the form of knowledge translation. As cognitive orientations and perceived stakes of cross-boundary engagement begin to shift, it expands into collaborative experimentation and, ultimately, institutional embedding. Its transformative capacity does not stem from static design. Instead, it lies in the ability of boundary work to identify and adapt to heterogeneity, operate across system layers, and gradually redefine which forms of interaction and practice gain legitimacy.

These insights advance boundary theory by showing how boundary work can function as a driver of systemic change rather than a coordination mechanism. In doing so, the study responds to calls for extending the theory into more fluid and contested contexts (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005), and offers a framework for understanding how systems evolve through the interlinked progression of boundary work.

6. Practical implications, limitations, and future research

This study holds important practical implications. For policymakers, the findings suggest that promoting inclusive EE requires attention to SOMEs' strategic roles in the ecosystem. First, policymakers should acknowledge the limitations of top-down strategies;

even substantial investment in mainstream EE members may yield limited impact if the cognitive, knowledge, and operational structures needed to support diverse entrepreneurs are absent. Instead, inclusive evolution requires support for “periphery-to-centre” pathways, with SOMEs recognised as key boundary-spanning actors. This involves providing stable, long-term funding, strengthening SOMEs’ dual knowledge capabilities, and fostering rhetorical and institutional spaces that legitimise the value of their boundary work. Second, policymakers should move beyond the assumed trade-off between inclusion and growth by pursuing both in tandem - for example, through layered support models that address the varied needs of marginalised entrepreneurs while creating clear pathways for those marginalised entrepreneurs who develop growth-oriented aspirations to connect with broader EE resources.

For SOME practitioners, the study offers strategic insights into advancing EE inclusion. First, SOMEs should prioritise cultivating a deep understanding of both the distinctive needs of marginalised entrepreneurs and the value logics shaping the ecosystems in which they operate. This may involve assembling diverse teams and fostering internal mechanisms for experiential knowledge sharing. Additionally, SOMEs should cultivate dual network embeddedness, connecting both to social service infrastructures relevant to marginalised entrepreneurs’ lives and to EE actors whose participation is critical for sustained systemic engagement.

Also, SOMEs should pursue inclusive EE as a phased process rather than an abrupt transformation. This involves starting with knowledge brokering to reframe EE members’ understandings, creating buffer spaces to support EE members’ safe engagement with marginalised entrepreneurs, developing boundary objects to enable joint experimentation, and finally institutionalising inclusive practices so they can sustain and scale.

Despite providing rich insights into how SOMEs facilitate inclusive evolution in EEs, this study has two limitations. First, although the research spanned three years, it may still be insufficient to fully capture the long-term legacy and durability of institutionalised boundary practices, particularly after Irving’s project concludes (Spigel and Harrison, 2018). Second, while the analysis focused on EE-level change, it offers limited insight into how individual marginalised entrepreneur experience or respond to these evolving structures (Wapshott and Mallett, 2018).

These limitations highlight avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies could explore how inclusive structures initiated by SOMEs endure or unravel after external support ends, clarifying the conditions under which such practices persist or fade. Comparative research across national contexts could explore how different EE governance models and institutional frameworks enable or constrain SOME-driven inclusive evolution. Further inquiry into the micro-level experiences of marginalised entrepreneurs is also needed, particularly to understand how entrepreneurs navigate the new boundary spaces created by SOMEs.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Shuai Qin: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose; I confirm that all authors have agreed to the submission and that the article is not currently being considered for publication by any other journal.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2025.106557>.

Data availability

Exemplar data related to the themes are provided in the Web appendices, other anonymised data associated with this paper (interview quotes and field notes) will be made available upon request.

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