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# The Role of Work Integration Social Enterprises in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case Study of Lithuania

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**Abstract:** The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are internationally agreed-upon commitments to sustainable development, represent the global development agenda. Lithuania, along with other 192 countries, has committed to achieving these goals by 2030. The purpose of these goals is to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all and ensure that no one is left behind. As emphasized by SDG #17, an important role in achieving all SDGs is played by partnerships among all stakeholders, including partnerships developed by businesses and, especially, social businesses. In Lithuania, social businesses mostly act as work integration social enterprises (WISEs), working with the most vulnerable societal groups and ensuring their social integration into society, thus contributing toward the achievement of the SDGs. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented businesses from performing their usual activities and, subsequently, from achieving their social missions. Thus, in this study, we aimed to analyze the role of WISEs in achieving the SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania. The study is based on the interviews with Lithuanian de facto WISE leaders. The findings showed that the WISEs in Lithuania mainly contributed to SDG #1 "No poverty", SDG #2 "Zero hunger", SDG #3 "Good health and well-being", SDG #4 "Quality education", SDG #8 "Decent work and economic growth", and SDG #16 "Peace and justice" during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** social enterprise; work integration social enterprise; SDGs; case study; Lithuania

## 1. Introduction

Recent studies show that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the pursuit of sustainable development [1,2]. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unexpected and fundamental challenges in various areas, including health, economy, social security, education, culture, and many others, placing considerable strain on national health systems, disrupting global supply chains, causing instability in financial markets, and negatively affecting various economic sectors [2]. The high uncertainty and instability of the external environment have reduced economic development, slowed economic growth, increased unemployment, and highlighted the problems of poverty and income inequality in many countries [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic has, in particular, exposed the problems faced by certain social groups, such as the elderly, single parents, and people with disabilities [4–6]; these groups experience a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. In 2020, for the first time since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the world average sustainable development index decreased compared with the prior year; the decline was mainly due to the increase in poverty and unemployment after the pandemic [7]. The pandemic has affected all three aspects of sustainable development: the environmental, social, and economical. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has restrained the efforts of countries to achieve the SDGs by 2030 as well as highlighted their importance. There are some predictions that SDGs will only be reached after 60 years, i.e., by 2092 [8].

In such a situation, there is a need for all interested parties (government, business, academia, and civil society) to cooperate in the implementation of the SDGs. Thus, the governments in many countries have taken steps to accelerate multistakeholder partnerships to achieve the SDGs. In this way, one of the important roles is played by social businesses. Social business is distinguished by clear social goals and social benefits. At the EU level, the importance of social business and its contribution to the implementation of the SDGs are recognized in the European Union Social Economy Action Plan [9]. Researchers from different countries [10–12] have emphasized that social business plays an important role in the implementation of the SDGs as it solves complex societal problems through innovative activities that others do not see or are not capable of solving. According to Macassa [13], social enterprises (SEs) can be essential partners to local, regional, and national governments to ensure that *no one is left behind*, which increases the chances of achieving the SDGs. However, the situation varies among different countries.

In Lithuania, as emphasized in the evaluation report "Lithuania's readiness to implement the goals of sustainable development" [14], the involvement of interested parties is lacking in the dialogue for the implementation of the SDGs. In addition, the Voluntary National Review [15] of the implementation of the UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development in Lithuania does not explicitly outline a role for social business in the implementation of the SDGs. Although the activities of social businesses in Lithuania are expanding to new areas such as culture, art, food production, sports, etc., WISEs are still the dominant form of enterprise, which follow the social mission of reducing social exclusion and help to integrate vulnerable groups into the labor market [16].

WISEs in Lithuania, as in the case of other businesses, have faced considerable uncertainties during the pandemic but have sought to maintain their dual mission, i.e., generate income from the goods and services that they sell and help vulnerable groups of individuals to integrate into the labor market and society. However, studies examining WISEs' efforts to implement the SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic are lacking. Therefore, in this article, we aim to determine the role that the WISEs are playing in Lithuania in contributing to the implementation of the SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic (including both the first and second waves). Thus, this article is focused on this major research question: how did WISEs contribute to SDG achievements during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania?

This article is based on the data from qualitative research conducted in 2022. We conducted interviews with owners and heads of WISEs. This research contributes to a wider understanding of how social enterprises are contributing to the achievement of the SDGs in the country where, according to the abovementioned reports, the cooperation among different stakeholders in achieving the SDGs is rather limited. The structure of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on WISEs. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 presents our main findings. Section 5 contains a discussion. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper and describes some possible ways for future studies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Concept of the Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE)

WISEs emerged in Europe in the 1970s when civil society actors hurriedly sought for ways to help people excluded from and unable to access the labor market [17]. The main objective of an SE is to promote the integration of marginalized people belonging to socially vulnerable groups through organized theoretical and practical vocational training and/or the development of work skills [18]. On-the-job training, experiential learning, and mentoring are the most critical aspects of all types of WISEs [19]. In EU countries, "WISEs mainly work with long-term unemployed, older persons, migrants, NEETs, former convicts, and other groups who are at risk of exclusion from the labor market" [20] (p. 35). These groups are usually the target groups of SEs, i.e., groups that are the focus of the integration programs and employment activities that are conducted by WISEs. The target groups of WISEs depend on national policies and decisions to support and integrate certain

groups of socially vulnerable persons. According to Neverauskienė and Moskvina [21], four main types of WISEs exist in Europe.

The first group of WISEs takes care of the employment of target groups experiencing difficulties in the labor market and social life and helps them try entrepreneurship and engage in other productive activities. Socialization processes through work are an essential prerequisite for social integration. Some WISEs deal with the social integration of specific vulnerable groups, and other WISEs integrate several target groups. These companies offer permanent employment contracts to such individuals and on-the-job training. Working in such companies allows people to gain professional experience and learn various work skills. Typically, these types of SEs receive long-term public subsidies from the government to close the gap between the productivity demanded by the regular market and the capacity of vulnerable groups [17]. According to Davister et al. [22], it is the oldest form of WISE, which has been functioning since 1970.

The second group is the set of WISEs aiming to create stable and economically sustainable jobs for vulnerable people in the medium-term period. State subsidies are temporal or allocated for specific purposes (the adaptation of workplaces, professional orientation of personnel, training, etc.). These WISEs aim to increase target groups' work skills, and support is reduced as the workers become competitive in the labor market [21]. After the subsidies have ended, the WISEs maintain the target employees using their own resources and income from their economic activity. There are cooperatives operating in England and Germany that provide jobs to target groups like a regular business [17].

The third group aims to socialize people through productive activities. First, the goal of these companies is the (re)socialization of target groups by restoring social skills and ties, where the groups are only later integrated into the labor market; their clients usually have severe physical or mental disabilities and serious social problems (those suffering from addiction, former convicts, etc.) [20]. Neverauskienė and Moskvina [21] claimed that such activities are "semiofficial" work, i.e., not regulated by labor laws or labor contracts, and the income of WISEs from the market is small. These, for example, can be centers for adaptation to working life, which are primarily aimed to promote resocialization through work activities for people experiencing psychological and social problems.

The fourth group consists of temporary/transitional employment WISEs that offer temporary employment and internships to target groups. These enterprises aim to help people find a job in the active labor market [23]. For example, Belgian training companies offer on-the-job training, whereas French WISEs provide real year-long work [17]. Through practice and theoretical professional training that is adapted to individual needs, training or integration companies offer trainees the opportunity to improve their personal, social, and professional competencies, i.e., increase the employment opportunities for individuals. These enterprise programs are mainly aimed at the target group of low-skilled or long-term unemployed people and aim to quickly reintegrate workers into the mainstream labor market; as a result, disabled people or people with serious social problems are usually not employed by these organizations.

As noted by Cooney et al. [24], some WISEs cannot be strictly assigned to one of these categories as they work with several different integration models and different target groups. So, WISEs may differ in terms of their objectives, size, target groups that they work with, employment and social integration programs, resources available, etc. [16]. According to Cooney et al. [24] (p. 7), "several types of WISEs with different integration models may exist in the same country". However, they all have a common goal: "the integration of people belonging to the target groups into society through organised work activities and internships, training, the provision of missing work and social skills and/or a profession" [16] (p. 52).

The creation of employment activities or jobs for such people often requires the creation and adaptation of a suitable working environment. An environment must be created in which these people can successfully adapt and learn; the workplace needs to be adapted, a personal assistant is often needed, and these companies often need to spend time training

other employees. However, their activities require more than just the development of work skills or vocational training.

The problems experienced by people who belong to the target groups are not just that they need a job; there are often many aspects involved, from a straightforward lack of social skills to the lack of objects such as clothes. Target groups such as single parents face different difficulties than other target groups such as homeless people. They need constant support and attention to successfully integrate into the labor market. To successfully integrate people into the labor market, they often require motivation and counseling or other services to integrate them into the labor market (e.g., a job search). For a person to fully integrate into society, additional services and continuous support for the target groups are needed. According to Galera et al. [20] (p. 49), "WISEs take a holistic approach that emphasises social integration and a wide range of support services". This support often includes organizing help from psychologists and social workers, providing other social services (accommodation, reimbursing transport costs, working with families, etc.), and organizing sociocultural activities and leisure time. In addition, WISEs need to prepare and train their staff to work with these target groups. The successful integration of people into society requires additional resources and time from the WISEs [16]. WISEs need to adapt the workplace and environment for the target groups. Integration into the labor market requires the provision of additional services because only complex support measures can change an individual's values and attitude toward life and strengthen their motivation to integrate into the labor market and society.

Thus, WISEs are specific SEs because implementing their social mission requires additional time and resources. They not only take care of organizing the job, developing the missing work skills, and professional training for vulnerable groups, but also ensure assistance to these people (social, psychological, and other services). Only in this way can WISEs qualitatively integrate the target groups into social life and the working environment.

*2.2. Work Integration Social Enterprises in a Sustainable Development Context in Lithuania*

The origins of WISEs in Lithuania date back to the Soviet era when Lithuania was part of the Soviet Union. Around 1960, several production units for the blind and deaf were established to recruit these people and provide them with work [25]. Some of these institutions became private and continued their activities after Lithuania's independence. After Lithuania's accession to the EU in 2004, efforts were devoted to harmonizing Lithuanian policies with EU policies; this led to the adoption of the Law on Social Enterprises of the Republic of Lithuania in the same year. This law promoted the employment of people with various disabilities (not only the deaf and blind) and other vulnerable persons; it thus expanded the potential target groups by expanding the list of groups that were considered vulnerable. As a result, many SEs of this kind were created after the law was passed.

These companies offered open-ended employment contracts to vulnerable groups, but especially to disabled people, and they received government subsidies for wages to establish and adapt workplaces, train employees, etc. These statutory WISEs in Lithuania correspond to the oldest form of WISEs mentioned earlier. Organizations for people with disabilities and other civil society organizations started to strongly criticize the statutory social assistance model because it had no real social impact on the beneficiaries and received disproportionate public support [25]. The law did not oblige them to reinvest their profits into social causes. Obligations were lacking to address social objectives over commercial objectives, fairly remunerate the employees, or engage representatives of the main stakeholders or the target groups' members in the SE's governance as recommended by the European Commission and the EMES [26]. Consequently, many of these statutory WISEs experienced a mission drift phenomenon; commercial logic became dominated in many cases by these WISEs.

New players (Geri Norai LT, European Institute for Social Entrepreneurship and Innovative Studies, Enterprise Lithuania, and British Council) are setting new goals and priorities for social entrepreneurship, supporting the development of the diverse SE ecosystem in

Lithuania. In 2015, the government adopted a new concept for social entrepreneurship [27], which emphasized the priority of the social mission. Thus, to distance themselves from the statutory WISEs, WISEs began to be created de facto, which was primarily driven by their social mission to help vulnerable persons integrate into the labor market by providing them with employment, missing work skills, or professional training. WISEs are not only interested in integrating a person into the labor market but also seek to integrate individuals into society, reducing various existing stigmas. These WISEs in Lithuania can usually be assigned to the third and fourth previously mentioned WISE forms. However, sometimes, they simultaneously combine both temporary and permanent employment integration methods. WISEs usually do not receive long-term state subsidies as do statutory WISEs in practice. However, to ensure their activities' financial stability or increase their income, they seek to participate in various EU-supported projects and programs.

As with other SEs, WISEs face increasing public debate on social responsibility and sustainability [26]. Sustainability has three dimensions that are closely linked: economic, environmental, and social. The economic dimension of sustainability refers to the provision of goods and services for human needs while minimizing environmental damage. It includes production processes, consumption, and distribution. The environmental dimension is related to the preservation of natural processes, i.e., the conservation of biodiversity, natural resources for biological systems, and natural and human societies. Finally, the social dimension of sustainability refers to the preservation of values such as peace, freedom, and justice. According to Cooney et al. [24] (p. 4), WISEs are usually multiple-goal organizations:

WISEs mix social goals connected to their specific mission to benefit the community (the integration of people excluded from the labor market through productive activity but also, in some cases, other goals linked to community development such as the supply of services to elderly people, children, etc.) with economic goals related to their entrepreneurial nature [24], and they have environment goals (e.g., recycling goods). Galera et al. [20] (p. 58) observed that WISEs are increasingly taking the lead in tackling climate change by supporting the reconversion of the production system, the preservation of biodiversity, access to adequate, sustainable, and healthy food, and radical change in individual consumption patterns and collective dynamics and practices.

Additionally, in 2022, Lithuania was ranked 39th (out of 193 UN member states) on the Sustainable Development Goals Index [28]. According to the SDG index in 2022 [28], Lithuania was reported to have reached SDG #15, "Forests, land, and biological diversity". However, no progress was achieved in implementing SDG #2, "Zero hunger", SDG #10, "Reduced inequalities", or SDG #12, "Responsible consumption and production"; the status of working toward SDG #13, "Climate action" has decreased.

For 2021–2030, five systemic challenges regarding SDG implementation in Lithuania have been identified [14]:

- Low economic productivity;
- Social exclusion and inequality;
- Quality of education and educational inequalities;
- Regional differences;
- Climate change and the state of the environment.

Pučėtaitė et al. [29] noted that WISEs in Lithuania focus on contributing to sustainable development goals. The integration and empowerment of WISEs frequently aims to have a direct relationship with fighting poverty (SDG #1), hunger (SDG #2), inequality (SDG #10), the contribution to good health and well-being (SDG #3), quality education (SDG #4), and decent work (SDG #8) [29]. However, this research is limited by the analysis of several randomly chosen SEs. Thus, studies are lacking on aspects of WISE value chains, profits distribution, management practices, how they contribute to sustainable development, and the impact of these businesses on beneficiaries and society.

*2.3. COVID-19 Challenges for Social Business in Lithuania*

Social businesses and organizations implementing social projects have faced difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, as have traditional businesses. The business challenges caused by COVID-19 differed for each company; most businesses had to restrict spending and rethink their funding sources. Production and supply chains were partially or wholly stopped, transport and logistics were disrupted, and businesses had to adapt to the growth of e-commerce, liquidity challenges, employee management, and job adaptation challenges. Quarantine restrictions also revealed the high dependence of business on the decisions and regulations of the government, such as the inability to leave one's municipality and restrictions on commercial activities [30,31].

In Lithuania, the crisis mainly affected businesses operating in the transport, accommodation, catering, and leisure sectors. The recession has resulted in enterprises devoting more of their management time and resources to addressing the immediate challenges associated with COVID-19, which has diverted their attention away from potential innovation development or planning for technological renewal [32].

For businesses experiencing difficulties due to COVID-19, the state has started to apply various assistance measures: information and consultations for Lithuanian businesses affected by COVID-19, direct COVID-19 loans, loans to finance the operating costs of business entities, subsidies for employers during downtime, support for employers after downtime or for those affected by COVID-19, disposition of taxes, etc. [33]. However, Gudelis [31], who analyzed the policy measures applied by the Lithuanian government during the first wave of quarantine, noticed that the distribution process of business support (loans, compensation for employee downtime, etc.) in Lithuania, when compared with other countries, was slow and inconvenient for companies due to excessive bureaucratic procedures and the conditions imposed on companies. Such a mechanism for compensating downtime meant that companies were more interested in laying off workers than taking advantage of this support measure. During the quarantine period and in the following months, unemployment more rapidly increased among Lithuanian residents than in other EU countries. According to Gudelis [31], support measures for businesses affected by COVID-19 were insufficient or poorly implemented.

Social business differs from traditional business in that its primary mission is the social impact and benefit to society, i.e., the maximization of sensitive social problems, not shareholders' profit. Therefore, most of the earned profit is primarily used to implement social goals, i.e., it is reinvested in the development of the business's activities or used for public activities. During the pandemic, social businesses had to face financial challenges and look for ways to ensure the continuity of their social mission. However, studies that examine the social business activities in Lithuania during COVID-19 and their impact are lacking.

SAFEGE Baltija [34] (p. 31) conducted a study in the Baltic region and reported that the main challenges facing SEs in the region during the COVID-19 crisis could be divided into three groups:

(1) "The first category of challenges was related to a decline in orders, a decline in sales due to the suspension of some sectors of the economy and led to difficulties in meeting the obligations of enterprises—projects, payments for utilities, salaries, taxes, etc. . . . ;

(2) the second category of challenges related to uncertainty about the future and how government decisions will affect the business, what constraints there will be, and anxiety about planning future products due to uncertainty;

(3) the third category of challenges is related to the need to adapt quickly, which was not always possible due to the sector of the company's mode of operation, e.g., social work-related activities or the inability to trade live; which was the main channel of trade. Aspects such as childcare and the ability to balance work and family commitments to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic are also becoming critical challenges for social entrepreneurs and SEs' staff."

According to the SAFEGE Baltija report [34], other prevalent challenges among social entrepreneurs in the region were social isolation, increased production costs due to the need for additional measures to protect against COVID- 19, and problems with employees being afraid of becoming sick at work and contracting COVID-19.

Social entrepreneurs began looking for alternative sources of income as some sectors and services completely stopped; they had to redirect the business toward completely new areas of activity, e.g., online learning. Some enterprises tried to operate normally, but the clients' behavior was no longer normal; they charged more for their income, so even if the activities did not directly reduce, this naturally happened because of the changed situation.

> "SEs in Lithuania used standstill grants, wage subsidies, GPM payment deferral or agreement, tax deferral until the end of the quarantine and after the quarantine, as well as the "micro-enterprise subsidies" measures administered by the Ministry of Economy and Innovation. In addition, organisations with NGO status that provided social services and were affected by the consequences of COVID-19 were eligible for special subsidies due to the additional costs incurred during COVID-19." [34] (p. 31).

The COVID-19 support mechanisms provided by the state were stronger for those who went out of business. No support was provided for those who continued to work, develop new services, and reorient. The government support motivated people to quit rather than to move forward and reorient. However, many SEs did not take advantage of any of the COVID-19 financial support from the state because they did not meet the eligibility criteria or the support was unnecessary. Nevertheless, some SEs reported that the support measures were unsuitable for their businesses [34].

Thus, we concluded that as traditional businesses in Lithuania, social businesses faced similar challenges due to COVID-19: a decrease in orders, a drop in turnover, increased production costs, uncertainty and fear about the future and planning, the necessity to rapidly adapt, and human management issues. The available support measures, such as those for traditional businesses, were insufficient or poorly implemented. Social entrepreneurs lacked a specific support mechanism during the crisis.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Study Design

We conducted this study using a qualitative approach. We applied a multiple case study design. WISEs have not been sufficiently studied in Lithuania. The multiple case study design allowed us to obtain a more in-depth understanding of WISEs in Lithuania and their contributions to the SDGs. By using a multiple case study design, we identified unique and common features across different WISE cases.

### 3.2. Sampling

We employed a nonprobability purposive sampling method. Using our judgment, we selected a diversity of respondents that would provide the data needed to answer the study question. The academic literature highlights that no "right" amount exists for the study size in qualitative studies with participants, which can range from one to multiple based on the chosen study design [35]. Moreover, for a multiple case study design, the recommended optimal number of cases ranges from 4 to 10 depending on the study [36]. In total, we included 5 cases in the study.

We selected the cases from a preliminary list of SEs in Lithuania whose aims were employment opportunities creation for persons excluded from the labor market. The further selection of the SEs was driven by feasibility criteria.

We chose the criteria to reflect the purpose of this study and provide suitable answers for the given study question.

The cases/respondents in this study needed to meet these feasibility criteria:

(1)　The SE was operating for at least 2 years;

(2) The SE was operating during the COVID-19 pandemic period;

(3) The respondent should have a key position in the company (founder, director, etc.).

We also ensured the representativeness inherent to the heterogeneity of the cases through the selection of SEs whose main activities were classified into different industrial sectors, had different organizational ages, and were from different locations. Table 1 provides an overview of the final selection of cases. Each case was represented by one interviewee from the WISE. The diversity of cases provided the conditions for exploring WISEs and their contributions to the SDGs.

**Table 1.** Overview of the cases.

| Social Enterprise | Interviewee Title | Organizational Age | Sector | Target Group | Work Integration Activities | No. of Beneficiaries |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Case #1 | Director/Founder | 2 | Manufacturing | People with intellectual disabilities | Training and development of work skills | 10 |
| Case #2 | General Manager | 2 | Food | Adults with mental disabilities | Training and development of work skills | 20 |
| Case #3 | Director | 9 | Wood product manufacturing | People with intellectual disabilities | Training and the development of work skills | 9 |
| Case #4 | Director/Founder | 18 | Restaurant | Mostly ex-prisoners, ex-alcoholics, ex-drug addicts, etc. | Employment, on-the-job training | 20 |
| Case #5 | Director | 28 | Education | Persons released from prisons, youth | Informal vocational training, internships | 9 |

To ensure confidentiality, information about the study respondents is not provided. Given the wishes of the respondents, the names of the WISEs are not provided; instead, we refer to them by case number.

*3.3. Case Descriptions*

**Case #1: SE as an organizer of social workshops for people with intellectual disabilities**

Social enterprise #1 has operated since 2020 and implements a social mission to help adults with intellectual disabilities become more self-confident and financially independent of benefits. The SE was established right before the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully operated during the entire pandemic period. The company had about 10 people ready to work. This social enterprise cooperated with manufacturing companies, which provided the orders for producing simple products or services such as packing, sorting products, folding cardboard boxes, or sticking stickers. They provided companies with the services that required manual work. The companies entrusted them with manual production operations. The work that they were already performing included certain operations in the production of wall calendars (client was a printing house), cutting and stitching of disposable medical gowns (client was a sewing company), and assembly of plastic insulation parts (client was a manufacturing company). They also created business gifts such as cozy houses (candleholders). The SE helped people with intellectual disabilities to restore their work skills and find employment.

**Case #2: SE as an organizer of social workshop for people with mental disabilities**

Social enterprise #2 was an organizer of social workshops for adults with mental disabilities; the company had about 20 beneficiaries. Beneficiaries were mostly of working age; the youngest was 23 years old, and the oldest was close to retirement age. This SE was also established right before the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully operated during the entire pandemic period; they had been operating for two years. The enterprise's goal was to create or update work skills, and at the beginning, they specialized in the production

of confectionery. They started with confectionery—for example, teaching people how to bake a bun—after a while, they looked for new ideas. Now, the enterprise provides a wide range of products, including dried fruits and teas. The company even built a greenhouse and started growing their own herbs and vegetables, and they began to produce spices.

**Case #3: SE as an organizer of social workshop for people with intellectual disabilities**

This social enterprise was founded in 2013. Social enterprise #3 was an organizer of social workshops that fabricate wood products together with people with intellectual disabilities; this enterprise also organized educational activities for children and adults. The company operated in Vilnius and the surrounding district, and its team included nine people with intellectual disabilities, a foreperson, a social worker, a social worker assistant, and volunteers.

**Case #4: SE as an organizer of employer of socially excluded people**

By providing social integration services, social enterprise #4 aimed to help socially excluded persons integrate into the labor market. This social enterprise was founded in 2004. The enterprise ran a café that provided job training for persons excluded from the labor market, and the company worked with persons released from prisons, alcohol abusers, persons addicted to psychoactive substances, persons who had completed a rehabilitation program, persons with disabilities, and recipients of social benefits.

**Case #5: SE as an organizer of informal vocational training**

Social enterprise #5 was founded in 1994; it had experience in working with persons who had been released from prison. It provided informal education programs and informal vocational training such as woodworking, blacksmithing, cleaning, welding, etc. The enterprise also had an independent living house for people released from prison, with 9 people living there; the maximum capacity was 15 people. Moreover, they launched a new activity: an adolescent employment center that was working with at-risk teenagers.

*3.4. Data Collection*

We conducted the study between July 2022 and September 2022. The data for this study were collected via in-depth interviews with the WISEs' leaders. The interviewees were the directors of the SEs and one other employee as identified by the director (Table 1). We conducted the interviews through the video and audio conferencing tool Zoom, and we conducted one interview face-to-face. We recorded the interviews and later transcribed them. An in-depth interview usually lasted 60–90 min. We developed the guidelines for the in-depth interview study, noting the future interview topics: activities and contributions to SDGs, COVID-19 challenges, and SDG implementation during COVID-19. The selected topics helped to reveal the role of role WISEs in SDG achievements during the pandemic.

*3.5. Data Analysis*

We applied the content analysis method to analyze the obtained qualitative data. According to Berg [37], content analysis is the process of coding operations and data interpretation. This method is based on the study of categories and subcategories, which are formed depending on the topic of the study goals and objectives. According to Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas [38], content analysis allows for the identification of texts, meanings, and relationships of features or common themes and conducts their analysis in the selected study context. Content analysis helps with examining a text's features and helps with formulating reliable conclusions.

**4. Results**

*4.1. Contribution to SDGs*

The data showed that SEs contributed to various SDGs. As shown in Table 2, all five cases concentrated their efforts on contributions to three major SDGs:

(1) No to poverty: eradicate all poverty anywhere;
(2) Quality education: ensure inclusive and impartial quality education and promote lifelong learning that is accessible to all;
(3) Peace and justice: support the development of a peaceful and tolerant society, enable everyone to defend their rights through legal means, and establish transparent and efficient multi-functional institutions at all levels.

**Table 2.** Contribution to the achievement of the SDGs: perceptions of the SE managers 1.

| SDG | Case #1 | Case #2 | Case #3 | Case #4 | Case #5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| #1. No to poverty | + | + | + | + | + |
| #2. Zero hunger | + | + | - | + | - |
| #3. Good health | - | + | + | + | - |
| #4. Quality education | + | + | + | + | + |
| #5. Gender equality | - | - | - | + | - |
| #6. Clean water and sanitation | - | + | - | + | - |
| #7. Renewable and affordable energy | - | - | - | + | - |
| #8. Good jobs and the economy | + | + | - | + | + |
| #9. Innovation and good infrastructure | + | + | - | + | + |
| #10. Reducing inequality | + | + | - | + | + |
| #11. Sustainable cities and communities | - | + | + | + | + |
| #12. Responsible use of resources | - | + | + | + | + |
| #13. Actions for climate protection | - | + | - | + | - |
| #14. Sustainable Oceans: | - | - | - | + | + |
| #15. Sustainable use of land | - | + | - | + | + |
| #16. Peace and justice | + | + | + | + | + |
| #17. Partnership for sustainable development | + | + | - | + | + |

1 "+" means there is a link between the particular SDG and SE's activities. "-" there is no link.

The summary of their contributions to the achievements of the SDGs is presented in Table 2.

The SDG "No to poverty: eradicate all poverty anywhere" was one of the main goals addressed by the SEs in Lithuania. All five SEs indicated that they were addressing this goal in their activities:

*"95 percent of people with intellectual disabilities do not work, there are no suitable working conditions created for them. We aim to introduce businesses to the possibility of employing and empowering these people. They have potential, you just need to know how to access them, and they can create added value. We are on a mission. We also provide them with an opportunity to generate income and lift themselves out of poverty."* [Case #1]

*"The participants are mainly from social care institutions, but we also have from the community, everyone receives a reward that they can use for their needs. We reward everyone equally. We do not differentiate, because the abilities may differ among disabled people."* [Case #2]

*"Every year, we participate in the actions of the Food Bank and share the collected food products with the ones who need them < . . . >".* [Case #3]

*"Ex-prisoners, living in hostels, are dependent on psychotropic substances and experience a negative attitude from potential employers and colleagues. Therefore, it is even more difficult for them to get a job, because they have to show their real abilities to perform their*

*duties. This can be achieved according to the reintegration model developed by "Mano Guru", which solves the social and economic exclusion problems of the target groups, lack of social and work skills, economic passivity, low opportunities, and discrimination in the labor market. People acquire skills and then can work and earn."* [Case #4]

*"Our methodology is very clear, the search for employment relationships, and integration into the labor market. If you work you get paid, if you work you really won't starve. Employment and work are very important for the integration of persons returning from prisons."* [Case #5]

Another important goal that the SEs were addressing was "Quality education: ensure inclusive and impartial quality education and promote lifelong learning accessible to all":

*"Our activities include the development of work skills. We work with people of working age, so we promote the concept of lifelong learning."* [Case #1]

*"One of our main ideas is to develop work skills and continuous learning, e.g., new recipes, how to make a new product, and how to bake a new bun."* [Case #2]

*"We organize educations in which everyone can participate. Here is an opportunity to learn how to make something out of wood, but at the same time, there is learning to accept another person as they are. This is the place where disabled and healthy people integrate and work together."* [Case #3]

*"Ex-convicts and persons with problems, for subjective and objective reasons, become a problem for society, because they do not have a job or housing, and usually, their education is poor, therefore our organization enables individuals to acquire basic and secondary education. We cooperate with the adult gymnasium "Židinys". We provide opportunities to attend English and Lithuanian language courses. In our activities, we organize food production courses for our participants. We apply the method of professional theoretical and practical training in a specific workplace. Individuals are trained for the professions of waiters, bartenders, and cooks. After completing the prescribed course, individuals leave with work experience, recommendations for employers, and social, work skills that help them find the desired job and integrate into society."* [Case #4].

*"Nonformal vocational education, programs for individuals returning from prison. We allow teenagers to use the workshops we have. For example, they can repair their bicycle, grind wood, etc."* [Case #5]

Finally, all SEs indicated that they contributed to the goal of "Peace and justice: support the development of a peaceful and tolerant society, enable everyone to defend their rights through legal means, and establish transparent and efficient multi-functional institutions at all levels". They emphasized that they contributed to the development of a tolerant society and to the assurance of human rights.

*"We support the development of a tolerant society and promote tolerance towards other people. You have to communicate with their social workers, their lack of training sometimes leads to legal problems. Some people want to take advantage of them, so we sometimes have to help these people in various situations, but we do not exclude them."* [Case #1]

*"We are a small community, and whatever questions arise, the social worker tries to help, but at the beginning of the activity, there was a lot of negative attitude towards our activities. Cultivating tolerance is important to us. We changed that attitude towards us through product quality assurance and tasting events, we invited the community to talk and see for themselves."* [Case #2]

*"If necessary, we help people with disabilities to defend their rights and represent them."* [Case #3]

*"We cooperate with the Lithuanian Chamber of Bailiffs, participants are provided with all kinds of legal assistance, we mediate communication with bailiffs' offices, and we prepare*

*documents for institutions so that unpaid fines are replaced by public works. Public works is a great way out, many have gotten rid of debt and financial obligations. We help to represent the interests of our participants in various institutions".* [Case #4]

*"We help to deal with documents for persons who have left prisons, with bailiffs."* [Case #5]

The contribution to the SDG "Good jobs and the economy: Promote sustainable, comprehensive, and harmonious economic development, ensure full and productive employment, and decent work for all" was another important goal for the SEs. The SEs reported that they were contributing to this goal by providing work opportunities for people who were at risk of unemployment.

*"We meet this goal 100 percent. In our model, employed people contribute to overall economic growth and GDP creation. They contribute physically. If our organization is not there, which enables and integrates them into those companies, these people remain directionless, without work. As far as I know, this is the only method to engage them to create an appropriate working environment with assistants and social workers. We act as mediators between a person with a disability and a company."* [Case #1]

*"We contribute directly to the goal that people with mental disabilities acquire the necessary work skills and receive a certain reward."* [Case #2]

*"We try to create good working conditions, consider each person's ability to work according to their health status, and adjust workplaces for people with health problems. We created jobs for Ukrainian women."* [Case #4]

*"We are directly related to this goal, because through non-formal education, our clients acquire or restore work skills, and through internships, they often find permanent employment in those companies."* [Case #5]

All of the above-mentioned goals are related to reducing inequalities in society. Thus, the SEs also mentioned the contribution to the SDG "Reducing inequality: reduce inequality between individual parties".

*"Discrimination against disabled persons with mental disabilities is reduced: 100% change happens first in a person, they start to have more self-confidence, they take more responsibility, if they used to live only on benefits and it was difficult for them to find a job, now they contribute to their well-being financially by doing certain jobs, which greatly increases their self-esteem. They can already brag to their relatives that they are working, their relatives' attitude towards them changes, they can buy certain things in the store that they could not afford, it is something for them to use the coffee machine in the company or to have lunch together with the company's employees, this is already an appreciation for them that they can be like the "healthy" ones. Socialization takes place, they see how other people live, and what other people's aspirations are, then their aspirations rise, and their motivation increases."* [Case #1]

*"We contribute directly to the reduction in inequality and discrimination against the disabled."* [Case #2]

*"We contribute to the reduction of inequality because the work rehabilitation of dependent people provides new work opportunities for socially excluded persons. Participants acquire the profession of waiter, cook, or bartender. They learn theory and participate in practical training. Here is their first internship and their first job, they are employed, they get paid, and they learn to earn and plan their lives. Currently, we also employ refugees from Ukraine, help them find housing, provide food, and help with things and clothes."* [Case #4]

*"We recommend future employees to companies, I know the managers of companies personally, and my initial condition for them is usually that they look at individuals returning from prison as full-fledged, equal persons, this is a key moment for me. I don't like labeling; they are people too."* [Case #5]

The SEs also indicated that they were contributing to other SDGs, but to a lesser extent than they were to the main ones.

Some SEs emphasized that their contribution to SDG "Zero Hunger: end hunger, ensure food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture" was more indirect through the implementation of SDG "No to poverty", as this goal is strongly related to "No to hunger".

*"Poverty is directly related to hunger, which means we contribute to the realization of this goal."* [Case #1]

*"Our customers make products and take some home. The kitchen is equipped for lunch, so people prepare their lunch. We constantly review the farmers' district advertisements, and we try to use their remaining products in our production."* [Case #2]

*"Our organization feeds people in problematic situations, we also support seniors, we organize coffee afternoons for them, we cooperated with the Food Bank, and provided lunch complexes for needy persons."* [Case #4]

The contribution to SDG "Good health: ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for everyone and all ages" was mostly indirect through the organization of healthcare activities after work and demonstrating social responsibility:

*"We are located in the social services building, when we have free time we use sports equipment. Sport classes are sometimes held, we support physical activity, a social worker ensures that clients take the necessary medications, etc."* [Case #2]

*"Together with the visitors of our workshops, we grow a vegetable garden, thus ensuring that people with disabilities have the opportunity to eat fresh vegetables. Also, our organization has a residential unit where people with disabilities live, where agendas are drawn up that include walks, active activities, healthy nutrition is taken care of, doctors' recommendations are followed. It is ensured that people with disabilities receive medical services on time."* [Case #3]

*"The activities of the institution are related to strengthening and raising the social and professional skills of the target group to help them establish themselves in the labor market. After completing rehabilitation programs, individuals addicted to psychoactive substances, find themselves in an unsafe environment and are at high risk of returning to old habits. Our organization aims to help individuals restore their health and take care of themselves, we promote a healthy lifestyle, and we work with addiction specialists who help our participants to understand the harms of addictions."* [Case #4]

The contribution to SDG "Clean water and sanitation: ensure that clean and properly controlled water is available to all" was also achieved through regular daily activities and work standards:

*"We must comply with all requirements, we check the temperature and the water quality. We must comply whether we like it or not."* [Case #2]

*"Yes, we ensure the quality of clean water, and we constantly research water quality. The concept of our organization is that water is provided to customers for free (we pay). We organize training on sanitation for our participants, we encourage them to be responsible for their health".* [Case #4]

The contribution to SDG "Innovation and good infrastructure: create flexible infrastructure, promote comprehensive and sustainable industrial development, and foster innovation" was related to the general developments of the industries that they were working in.

*"Our disabled people work for industrial companies and carry out orders for companies. For example, they are currently working for an automobile industry company. We create social innovation; it is not industrial innovation. We create social innovation through the employment of the disabled."* [Case #1]

*"For packaging, we work with industry companies to get sustainable packaging from recycled paper."* [Case #2]

*"We are trying to implement various programs so that our customers can see our activities and can easily order our products in the city and surrounding areas."* [Case #4]

*"We provide human resources to the industry, recommend applicants, and send them to practice in industrial companies."* [Case #5]

The contribution to SDG "Sustainable cities and communities: making cities and towns comfortable, safe, flexible, and sustainable" was developed around setting places for community gatherings.

*"We are located in a border town, there is not much going on there, so we organize events and we have an idea to open an outdoor cafe, we participate in local events."* [Case #2].

*"With our products, we contribute to the restoration and comfort of the communities' environment."* [Case #3]

*" . . . it exhibits the works of budding young artists and photographers in showcases, before the pandemic, farmers gathered at the salad bar on weekends. There was a market for organic products. Various events were held: meetings of business women, alpha course, business breakfast, seminars, training, and various discussions in the environment. < . . . > Educational events involving the community: healthy nutrition, healthy lifestyle lectures, open discussion events on topics relevant to society, and the organization of preventive events."* [Case #4]

The contributions to SDG "Responsible use of resources: to ensure sustainable usage and production models" were related to environmentally sustainable solutions:

*"Packaging is important to us, it must be sustainable, and the recycling of food scraps is also important to us, a company comes to us that takes away the scraps, and we try to keep waste and food scraps to a minimum. We try to keep as little food waste as possible, e.g., we make quince syrup, we pour the syrup into bottles, and after the quince is boiled, we further dry them and make sweets."* [Case #2]

*"Production waste is used in our workshop to produce various products."* [Case #5]

*"We try to use everything in production to minimize waste, we reuse everything that we can in the company, and we help people renew the things they have so that they don't have to buy new ones."* [Case #3]

*"Responsible use of water, and food products is the goal of our organization. We are developing the concept of zero waste in the activities of the cafe. IO1, the first intellectual product, was created—an analysis was carried out in the field of zero-waste catering in European countries."* [Case #4]

The contributions to SDG "Actions for climate protection: take immediate action to stop climate change and eliminate its effects" were related to zero-waste approaches and sustainable production:

*"We strive to do things sustainably, to use as much of everything as possible, as well as sustainable packaging, etc."* [Case #2]

*"By implementing the project "Zero waste cuisine for sustainable future" in our activities, we contribute to stopping climate change, we use everything more sustainably, and we pollute less. We monitor how our electrical devices work; we try to replace them with energy-saving devices. We encourage our employees and participants to come to work by public transport and bicycles."* [Case #4]

The contribution to SDG "Sustainable use of land: conserve and restore land ecosystems, promote their sustainable use, responsibly manage forest resources, fight desertification, stop and restore soil degradation, and stop biodiversity loss" was mostly emphasized by SEs that related their activities to agriculture and the use of land:

*"We grow our vegetables in the greenhouse, and in addition, we take care of the environment of the institution where we are located."* [Case #2]

*"Our concept is to use everything sustainably, we participate in actions to replant the forest, and we try to use less paper already".* [Case #4]

*"Processing of industrial waste—companies bring waste to us for processing, so it does not end up in landfills."* [Case #5]

The contributions to SDG "Partnership for sustainable development: reinvigorate the global partnership for sustainable development and strengthen its means of implementation" centered around the partnerships developed by SEs to promote their activities:

*"We cooperate with the social services department, social service centers, their case managers, and social workers. We are online. Sometimes we can't solve all the problems alone, so we have to cooperate with their guardians, elders, and social workers, that's why we use the network."* [Case #1]

*"We cooperate with the municipality, with one company in Vilnius, they use our treats to decorate their events, in addition, they introduce our products to their foreign partners, we also have a close relationship with the Rotary club, the Lions club."* [Case #2]

*"We organize various discussions with young people, journalists, specialists, and government representatives to openly talk about what we are doing here and how we can reduce social exclusion. Addiction problems are on the rise, and real help for people in recovery is sorely lacking. We try to popularize the organization on an international scale, increase the reintegration model, in search of opportunities to develop activities with foreign organizations, and search for new work methods/methodologies in working with socially excluded groups."* [Case #4]

*"We are partners with manufacturing companies for internships and production waste recycling."* [Case #5]

The rest of the SDGs, such as "Sustainable oceans", "Renewable and affordable energy", and "Gender equality" were the least addressed by these five SEs.

*"We use only organic products, dishwashing, and laundry detergents."* [Case #4]

*"We reduce plastic, reuse, and recycle waste."* [Case #5]

*"We try to use renewable energy sources. We do not use polluting and energy-intensive equipment in our production. Conditions have been created for our customers to charge their phones, and the cafe has workspaces for working with computers."* [Case #4]

*"We ensure equal opportunities because our organization aims to help all individuals with problems."* [Case #4]

SEs are sometimes initiators of cooperation between social and traditional business. As one of the interviewees emphasized, *"We always ask "What can we do for you?", "Where can we help you?". Often this question leads to a beautiful friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation"* [Case #1]. Traditional businesses are quite responsive to the needs of SEs. This support might be identified as emotional empathy (*"motivation and desire to work and make themselves meaningful are often accompanied by supportive looks and smiles from company managers"* [Case #1]).

*4.2. Challenges Faced by Organizations during First and Second Waves of COVID-19 Pandemic*

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic started in February 2020 and lasted until June 2020. This was a period when enterprises suffered the most severe consequences. The challenges during the first wave of pandemic were related to the following:

o   Financial losses:

*"Suffered huge financial losses, we lost our income, so we had to stop our activities. The losses incurred, the debts incurred and the lack of any additional funding prevented the*

*full implementation of social integration and the provision of a full package of services to persons applying for assistance."* [Case #4]

o    Delays, slow-down, or termination of activities:

*"We were supposed to start on March 1, but we only started on May 25, everything had to be postponed. The activity started at the end of the first quarantine—in May 2020, although we had to start work immediately after the New Year."* [Case #1]

*"We have drastically reduced the number of persons living to 3–4 because of this, we have up to 20 places. We decided that in this way people wouldn't get sick or get infected by each other. < . . . > The training stopped, and there was an official ban from the government on conducting training in auditoriums. Distance education did not take place because we did not have separate rooms, and there was a lack of equipment—computers."* [Case #5]

*"As a result, production slowed down or stopped, orders decreased, and we could not carry out activities such as education."* [Case #4]

o    Psychological stress, uncertainty, and anxiety:

*"First of all, the shock and what will happen next, some workshops work remotely, and our work was contact, we had to reorient very quickly."* [Case #2]

*"There was a lot of uncertainty and anxiety, constantly changing rules that were difficult to adapt to. Contact and work were prohibited, people with disabilities could not attend social workshops, employees had to limit mutual contacts."* [Case #3]

*"It was difficult not only financially, but also psychologically because you see that a person needs all kinds of help, but you can only help minimally."* [Case #4]

o    A need to find new methods of communication and work arrangements:

*"< . . . > new ways of communication had to be discovered."* [Case #5]

*"The second challenge was vaccination, there were a lot of controversial opinions, we encouraged people to get vaccinated, but many refused because they were afraid. When we could return to contact work, we had to think a lot about how vaccinated and unvaccinated persons would not meet. Our social employee worker helped very much to convince why they should get vaccinated."* [Case #2]

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (October 2020–May 2021) produced similar challenges that were somewhat different than those of the first wave, as some enterprises had already implemented some solutions from the lessons learned during the first wave:

o    Remote work affected people with addictions to return to their old habits:

*"It affected people, during this time we had to work remotely, and some of our visitors returned to addictions when they were home alone during COVID."* [Case #1]

o    Remote work affected employee drop-off:

*"Some people have dropped off, and it continues until now, these people are working part-time. We have done our best, but the person himself must also be willing."* [Case #1]

The companies did not cease their activities during the pandemic; on the contrary, some of them started to produce new products and accommodated remote work quite well:

*"We took advantage of remote work, adapted our activities to the distance, built clay houses, took them out for people to color and decorate at home, and at Christmas, we sold those houses as business gifts. So we got away and had some income and during the COVID period, we campaigned companies that by buying business gifts from us for employees and partners, the company contributes to creating jobs for these people. Because they always buy from us or another business, they chose to buy from us."* [Case #1]

*"We used joint hybrid work, combining work from home and work on-site."* [Case #2]

*"We came up with dried products, we bought dryers, and we took apples home to customers. At first, we were afraid that there would be a very big loss because we still were invested in drying equipment and fruits. We even thought that it would spoil everything, but it turned out the opposite, now we have a new product—dried fruits, which everyone is very happy about and it has paid off very well."* [Case #2]

*"There was a time when we had to completely stop the activity of the workshop, but we had to ensure < . . . > the safety of people with disabilities."* [Case #3]

*"It was possible to deliver work to the homes of people with disabilities and carry out activities remotely, and it was clearer how to operate the principles of social bubbles and thus avoid the isolation of all employees and volunteers."* [Case #3]

*"We were looking for new business forms, and we tried to keep employees and participants. We tested food truck—a food cart that travels around the city of Vilnius and provides takeaway food. In this way, we have preserved the opportunity for people being integrated to continue working when the cafe was temporarily closed. This was a new attractive form of integration for the mentioned people when they communicate on the street and work under different conditions. The mentor was working together and motivated the participants to achieve their goals. We were happy that our socially responsible clients supported us by coming to buy the dishes on offer, making phone calls, and ordering food in advance."* [Case #4]

*"We continued to carry out activities only at a slower pace, we did not look for new residents/customers, and communication with prisons and state institutions stopped."* [Case #5]

During the pandemic, the WISEs contributed to several SDGs: no poverty, zero hunger, good jobs and the economy, good health, peace and justice, and quality education:

*"We contributed the most to poverty alleviation, we paid people money every month for the clay houses we made during the entire COVID period, and we worked remotely when there was no possibility to be in contact. We paid them regularly every month".* [Case #1]

*"Poverty, hunger, jobs, we try to maintain everything we did, we tried not to reduce people, as well as quality education."* [Case #2]

*"Most of all, we had to defend the rights of people with disabilities to services such as banks, medicine, etc. Many difficulties were caused by the fact that people with disabilities did not have electronic banking, and this greatly limited or made it difficult for them to receive social, banking, or medical services."* [Case #3]

*"We focused on reducing poverty and hunger and promoting good health. We supported our members not only financially, but also morally, and counseling by a social worker and a psychologist was provided."* [Case #4]

## 5. Discussion

The WISEs in Lithuania are facing a public narrative centering on sustainability and are searching for methods of contributing to all three sustainability dimensions: social, economic, and environmental. Their main aims are focused on offering work and social integration for people excluded from the labor market. Additionally, WISEs are usually engaged in income-generating activities; they produce goods and/or services. So, they contribute to both social inclusion and economic development [20]. Galera et al. [20] observed that WISEs are increasingly taking the lead with respect to tackling environmental issues as well. The results of the case study analysis showed that WISEs in Lithuania mostly contributed to the SDGs related to social dimensions, such as SDG #1, "No to poverty: eradicate all poverty anywhere", SDG #4, "Quality education: ensure inclusive and impartial quality education and promote lifelong learning accessible to all", and SDG #16, "Peace and justice: support the development of a peaceful and tolerant society, enable

everyone to defend their rights through legal means, and establish transparent and efficient multi-functional institutions at all levels". Moreover, the findings showed that WISEs contributed to economic development by addressing SDG #8: "Good jobs and the economy: promote sustainable, comprehensive, and harmonious economic development, ensure full and productive employment, and decent work for all". The SEs reported that they were contributing to this goal by providing work or professional training opportunities for people who were at risk of unemployment. Thus, the results of the case study analysis confirmed the results reported by Pučėtaitė et al. [29] before the pandemic, which was that WISEs in Lithuania were mostly focusing on social and economic development in practice. Moreover, from our results, we observed that WISEs are increasingly understanding the importance of environmental protection and were applying various environmentally friendly initiatives in their activities, such as sustainable packaging, recycling, reducing waste, etc.

However, the COVID-19 situation and restrictions limited WISE activities and complicated their contributions to SDG achievement. Most of the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic were related to the following: financial losses, delay, slow-down, or termination of activities; psychological stress; uncertainty and anxiety; and a need to find new methods of communication and work arrangements. During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, employee drop-off issues emerged. Some employees returned to addictions when they were home alone during COVID-19 isolation.

In the face of pandemic challenges, social entrepreneurs demonstrated quick responses and remarkable creativity. The pandemic forced social entrepreneurs to adjust to new conditions to survive the crisis; all five analyzed WISEs tried to maintain their activities and searched for methods to continue their social and work integration of people in vulnerable groups. WISEs adjusted to remote working conditions; e.g., in Case #2, the enterprise used joint hybrid work, combining work from home and on-site. In Case #3, the company delivered work to the homes of people with disabilities so that they could remotely perform their activities. In Case #5, the business continued to conduct activities, only at a slower pace. Additionally, some WISEs started to innovate and added new goods or services for their clients. For example, in Case #1, the WISE took advantage of remote work, adapted their activities to distance work, built clay houses, and took them out for people to color and decorate at home. At Christmas, they sold those houses as business gifts. Case #2 considered a new product, dried fruits, which everyone was happy with and has worked well since its inception. Case #4 tested the use of a food truck that traveled around the city of Vilnius and provided takeaway food; in this way, they maintained the opportunities for people to integrate and continue working while the café was temporarily closed. This was a new attractive form of integration for the people involved to communicate on the street and work under different conditions. Additionally, many conventional enterprises fired their employees during the pandemic in Lithuania [26]. However, WISEs looked for methods of saving these jobs while continuing to provide integration and working skills for their beneficiaries. Additionally, during the pandemic, the WISEs substantially contributed to SDG #2 "Zero hunger" and SDG #3 "Good health and well-being" because they provided additional necessary services for their beneficiaries, such as food, medicine, social work, or psychologist consultations, as well as transport for the most vulnerable groups, despite the changed situation and restrictions.

Thus, despite the huge uncertainty about the future, the WISEs in Lithuania were drivers in achieving SDG #1, "No poverty", SDG #2, "Zero hunger", SDG #3, "Good health and well-being", SDG #4, "Quality education", SDG #8, "Decent work and economic growth", and SDG #16, "Peace and justice" during the pandemic, especially because they worked with the most vulnerable groups of disabled people, ex-addicts, ex-prisoners, etc. and provided them with additional support.

## 6. Conclusions

This study contributes toward addressing the gap in the literature regarding how SEs contribute to the SDGs. We revealed that WISEs are quickly adapting to the changing

pandemic situation by providing new services, developing new products, or adapting their activities to address existing situations. WISEs in Lithuania were contributing to SDG #1 "No poverty", SDG #2 "Zero hunger", SDG #3 "Good health and well-being", SDG #4 "Quality education", SDG #8 "Decent work and economic growth", and SDG #16 "Peace and justice" during the pandemic. Additionally, we identified implications for practice by presenting different cases of how SEs have contributed to the achievement of the SDGs. Our findings also have implications for national policymakers by illustrating that social enterprises can be agents of change in a society. This highlights the need to recognize the roles that hybrid social enterprises can play in addressing sustainability challenges in society. We also acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the study was limited to a small number of WISES. Second, we focused on WISEs in Lithuania and did not consider other social businesses. Future studies might examine the different geographies and types of social enterprises' engagement in the SDGs and the progress made in achieving the global agenda.

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