

Making Meaning Across Cultures: Inclusion as a Structural Condition for the Social Performance of Mission-Driven Organizations in Morocco

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Abstract

This article examines how culturally situated inclusion operates as a structural condition for the social performance of mission-driven organizations in intercultural contexts. Drawing on twenty-eight semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals from four organizational sectors in Morocco, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, startups, and family businesses, the study mobilizes a critical and interpretive epistemology articulated with an ethnographic sensitivity attentive to the cultural production of meaning. The analysis brings out three interrelated dynamics that together constitute a cultural grammar of social performance: intercultural negotiation as a process of meaning production, symbolic inclusion as a relational lever of engagement, and recognition as a foundational act that inscribes agents within the symbolic economies of allegiance. By bridging critical inclusion studies and social business research, two literatures that have so far evolved largely in parallel, the article argues that inclusion, when conceived in its relational, epistemic, and affective dimensions, is not a managerial supplement but a structural infrastructure of mission integrity. The Moroccan setting offers a generative case for rethinking social performance in Global South contexts, inviting a move beyond procedural approaches to inclusion toward culturally situated analytics of the internal conditions of mission.

Keywords: inclusion, intercultural management, Moroccan organizations, recognition, social business

Abstrak

Artikel ini meneliti bagaimana inklusi bersituasi budaya berfungsi sebagai keadaan struktural bagi prestasi sosial organisasi berteraskan misi dalam konteks silang budaya. Berdasarkan dua puluh lapan temu bual separa berstruktur yang dijalankan bersama-sama profesional daripada empat sektor organisasi di Maghribi; organisasi bukan kerajaan, institusi pendidikan, syarikat permulaan, dan perniagaan keluarga; kajian ini menggembelng epistemologi kritikal dan interpretif yang diartikulasikan dengan kepekaan etnografi yang prihatin terhadap penghasilan makna secara budaya. Analisis ini mengetengahkan tiga dinamik saling berkait yang bersama-sama membentuk tatabahasa budaya bagi prestasi sosial: perundingan silang budaya sebagai proses penghasilan makna, inklusi simbolik sebagai tuas hubungan bagi penglibatan, dan pengiktirafan sebagai

tindakan asas yang menempatkan ejen dalam ekonomi simbolik kesetiaan. Dengan merapatkan kajian inklusi kritikal dan penyelidikan perniagaan sosial, iaitu dua bidang literatur yang selama ini sebahagian besarnya berkembang secara selari, artikel ini berhujah bahawa inklusi, apabila ditanggapi dalam dimensi hubungan, epistemik, dan afektifnya, bukanlah sekadar pelengkap pengurusan tetapi merupakan infrastruktur struktural bagi integriti misi. Latar Maghribi menawarkan kes generatif untuk memikirkan semula prestasi sosial dalam konteks Selatan Global, yang mengajak kepada peralihan melangkaui pendekatan prosedural terhadap inklusi ke arah analitik bersituasi budaya mengenai keadaan dalaman misi.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by intensifying globalization, organizations are increasingly traversed by cultural, linguistic, and identity flows that destabilize the assumptions underpinning their own managerial models (Hofstede, 1980). Within this turbulence, the question of meaning at work has emerged as a central concern; not as an individual quest for fulfilment as it is often depicted in managerial discourse, but as a socially and symbolically situated process that unfolds within relational organizational settings traversed by power relations (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burr, 2015).

Inclusion has come to occupy a paradoxical position within this landscape. Mobilized as a performance indicator, a compliance requirement, or an ethical signal, it has become increasingly detached from the relational and political conditions that give it substance (Adamson et al., 2021; Ortlieb et al., 2021). Critical scholarship has long warned that organizations are not neutral containers: they are sites of normative production, in which managerial practices crystallize

ideologies and reproduce hierarchies (Ahmed, 2012; Nkomo, 1992). When

inclusion is reduced to a procedural indicator, it loses its capacity to interrogate the very dynamics it claims to address.

This tension takes on a particular acuity for mission-driven organizations; non-governmental organizations, social enterprises, educational institutions, and value-driven ventures, whose legitimacy rests precisely on their claim to operate beyond profit-maximization logics (Yunus, 2010; Defourny & Nyssens, 2017). For these organizations, social performance is not an externality but a constitutive purpose; and yet, the social business literature has only marginally engaged with the question of how inclusion, as a culturally situated process, conditions the very production of social value (Mair & Martí, 2006; Battilana & Lee, 2014). If meaning at work is co-constructed in interaction, and if inclusion constitutes the relational ground upon which recognition becomes possible, then inclusion can no longer be treated as a managerial add-on: it becomes a structural condition of

the social performance of mission-driven organizations.

The Moroccan organizational landscape offers a particularly fertile terrain for exploring this hypothesis. Marked by linguistic plurality (Arabic, Amazigh, French, and increasingly English), religious and regional diversity, and hybrid managerial influences originating from Europe, the Gulf, and North America, Morocco constitutes an intercultural setting in which universalizing managerial models inevitably encounter the friction of situated subjectivities (Allali, 2008; Carradine, 2018). Family businesses, NGOs, startups, and educational institutions in this context illustrate how communal logics and individualizing pressures coexist, often in unresolved tension, within everyday organizational life (Miminoshvili & Černě, 2022).

Drawing on more than a decade of fieldwork and consulting experience within Moroccan organizations, the present study seeks to contextualize culturally situated inclusion as a structural factor in the social performance of mission-driven organizations operating in intercultural contexts. Although the empirical inquiry was conducted in Morocco, several participants were non-Moroccans, whose involvement allowed the study to bring into view various social dynamics: intercultural negotiation, illustrated by cultural misunderstandings, linguistic tensions, and situations in which the duty to reinterpret managerial directives becomes a condition for their effectiveness; symbolic inclusion, experienced either through valorization

or through complete disregard; and recognition.

Despite the richness of this setting, the intersection of three bodies of literature, critical inclusion studies, social business research, and intercultural management, has remained underexplored, particularly from the standpoint of Global South organizations. Most empirical work on inclusion stems from Anglo-Saxon or Western European contexts (Holvino, 2010; Thomas & Ely, 1996), while social business scholarship has been dominated by Bangladeshi, Indian, and Latin American case studies that rarely foreground the cultural construction of inclusion as a structuring variable. This article addresses that gap by posing the following research question:

“To what extent does culturally situated inclusion act as a structural condition for the social performance of mission-driven organizations in intercultural contexts?”

To address this question, the article draws on a qualitative inquiry conducted in Morocco, based on twenty-eight semi-structured interviews across four organizational sectors: NGOs, startups, educational institutions, and family businesses. The analysis is grounded in a constructivist and critical epistemology, mobilizing intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000) and an ethnographic sensitivity to the cultural production of meaning (d'Iribarne, 1989; Bardon et al., 2015).

The article makes three contributions. First, it reframes inclusion not as a managerial indicator but as a relational and symbolic process through which meaning is co-constructed. Second, it positions this renewed conception of inclusion as a structural condition of the social performance of mission-driven organisations, thereby connecting critical inclusion studies and social business research; two literatures that have so far evolved largely in parallel. Third, it offers a situated reading from a Global South context, contributing to the diversification of organisational theory beyond its dominant Western reference points.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on inclusion, social business, and the Moroccan organisational context. Section 3 details the methodology. Section 4 presents and discusses the empirical findings, organized around three structuring dynamics; the intercultural negotiation of meaning, symbolic inclusion as a relational lever, and recognition as a precondition. Section 5 acknowledges the study's limitations, and Section 6 concludes by drawing theoretical and practical implications for mission-driven organisations operating in culturally plural settings.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Inclusion in a critical and intercultural perspective

The concept of inclusion has undergone a significant evolution in organisational scholarship over the past three decades. Initially formulated as the corollary of diversity management, a question of who is in the room (Pless & Maak, 2004; Thomas & Ely, 1996);, it has progressively been reconceptualised as a relational and symbolic process concerning the conditions under which differences are recognised, valued, and translated into substantive participation (Holvino, 2010; Nkomo, 1992).

Critical scholarship has played a decisive role in this reconceptualisation. Ahmed (2012), in her foundational work on institutional diversity, has shown how discourses of inclusion can themselves become mechanisms of neutralisation: when articulated through procedural commitments and compliance indicators, diversity statements produce what she terms non-performative speech acts; utterances that promise change while perpetuating the status quo. Adamson et al. (2021) extend this critique by demonstrating that inclusion and exclusion are mutually constitutive within organisations, with formal inclusion practices often coexisting with

; and at times intensifying, informal dynamics of exclusion. This line of analysis invites us to read inclusion not as a state to be reached but as a contested, ongoing process traversed by relations of power.

Intersectionality theory has further deepened this analysis. Building on the foundational works of Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2000), organisational scholars have shown that inclusion cannot be apprehended through isolated identity categories, but only through the ways in which gender, social class, language, ethnicity, and other markers interweave to shape lived experience (Holvino, 2010; Nkomo, 1992). This perspective unsettles universalising accounts of the inclusive organisation and highlights the situated, asymmetrical, and often invisible dynamics through which some subjectivities are recognised while others remain at the margins (Dobusch, 2021).

A growing strand of the literature has accordingly reconfigured inclusion as a symbolic and affective practice, irreducible to procedural mechanisms. Several recent works underline the role of recognition; epistemic, cultural, emotional; in producing the conditions under which Individuals can experience a sense of belonging without being asked to relinquish their singularities. This perspective resonates with broader theorisations of recognition as a fundamental human need (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and as a relational dynamic that mediates organisational legitimacy. In this reading, inclusion is not only about access; it concerns the conditions under which presence becomes voice, and voice becomes consequential.

In intercultural settings, these dynamics are becoming even more complex. Hofstede's (1980) classical framework, although criticised for its

essentializing tendencies, signalled very early that managerial practices encode cultural presuppositions; subsequent work has shown that the transposition of Anglo-Saxon inclusion models to non-Western contexts often produces tensions, misunderstandings, or strategic compliance without substantive change (Miminoshvili & Černě, 2022). What is required, then, is analytics capable of holding together both the universal aspiration of inclusion and the cultural specificity of its enactment; a tension that animates the present inquiry.

2.2 Social business, social performance, and the human dimension

Alongside these debates, the field of social business has emerged as a distinct domain of inquiry. Drawing on Yunus's foundational vision (2007, 2010), social business designates a category of organisations whose primary purpose is to address social problems through economically sustainable means, with profits reinvested in the mission rather than distributed to shareholders. Defourny and Nyssens (2017) have proposed a broader typology that situates social business within a wider ecology of social enterprise models, ranging from cooperative traditions to entrepreneurial nonprofits and hybrid ventures, thereby accounting for the heterogeneity of mission-driven organising across geographies.

At the heart of social business research lies the question of social performance: how mission-driven

organisations produce, measure, and sustain social value beyond financial results (Mair & Martí, 2006; Yunus, Moingeon, & Lehmann-Ortega, 2010). Battilana and Lee (2014) have shown that hybrid organisations face distinctive tensions between commercial and social logics, requiring specific forms of organisational design, identity work, and human resource practices in order to preserve the integrity of the mission over time. Yet the human and relational dimensions of social performance remain comparatively underexplored: most existing frameworks measure outputs; beneficiaries reached, jobs created, environmental impact, without interrogating the internal cultural conditions under which the mission is actually carried out.

It is precisely here that the dialogue with critical inclusion studies becomes productive. If mission-driven organisations rely on the alignment, engagement, and meaning-making capacities of their members, and if inclusion shapes the relational ground upon which such alignment becomes possible, then inclusion is not a peripheral HR concern but a structural condition of social performance itself. Roberson (2019) has documented how diversity climate, closely tied to substantive inclusion, influences engagement, innovation, and organisational outcomes; however, this finding has rarely been explicitly extended to the social business context, where its implications are arguably most consequential.

This articulation is reinforced when the analysis is situated within Global South contexts, where mission-driven organisations operate within plural cultural systems that cannot be reduced to Western managerial models. Pless and Maak (2004) insisted very early on that building an inclusive culture requires more than principles: it requires processes attuned to specific cultural and historical configurations. Recent work has extended this perspective to explicitly post-colonial and intersectional readings of organisational life (Nkomo, 1992; Dobusch, 2021). The Moroccan setting, examined in the following section, offers a particularly rich illustration of these dynamics and a strategic site to test the proposition that culturally situated inclusion conditions the social performance of mission-driven organisations.

2.3 The Moroccan organisational context: Between communal logics and managerial hybridity

Linguistic plurality and composite cultural heritage

The Moroccan organisational landscape is shaped by a depth of intercultural complexity that few national contexts concentrate to a comparable degree. A historical crossroads between Africa, Europe, and the Arab-Muslim world, Morocco has been built as a society of multiple strata: to the indigenous Amazigh peoples were successively grafted Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Andalusians (Sephardim and Moriscos), sub-Saharan Africans, and Europeans (Allali, 2008;

Charhaddine, 2018). This ethnic and historical stratification is reflected today in a structural linguistic plurality: *darja* (Moroccan Arabic) as the dominant vehicular language, Modern Standard Arabic as the official language, Amazigh in its three regional variants (*tarifit* in the Rif, *tamazight* in the Middle Atlas, *tachelhit* in the Souss and Anti-Atlas) recognized as an official language since 2011, French as the language of scientific higher education and administration, and English advancing rapidly in technological and entrepreneurial sectors. Sunni Islam of the Maliki school, present since the eighth century, is not only a confessional anchor: it operates as a cultural infrastructure that permeates everyday norms, interaction rituals, and conceptions of dignity, duty, and allegiance (Bourqia, 2010; Charhaddine, 2018). Within this context, even the most ordinary organisational situation is traversed by multiple implicit codes that render any practice of inclusion necessarily situated; observable, for instance, in the permanent code-switching among languages that operates within Moroccan NGO teams both as a marker of social distinction and as a tacit device of inclusion or exclusion.

Hybridity of managerial models

Added to this cultural stratification is a hybridity of managerial models that constitutes one of the most structuring specificities of the Moroccan context. Three major influences are superimposed in contemporary organisations. The first, inherited from

the French protectorate (1912-1956), has bequeathed a rational-bureaucratic model grounded in vertical hierarchy, procedural formalisation, and the centrality of administrative writing (Chaouki & Charhaddine, 2016). The second, more recent, stems from the penetration of capital and managerial models from the Gulf Cooperation Council, which reintroduces an assumed paternalistic logic into Moroccan practices, articulated around personal loyalty to the leader and a patrimonial management of human resources. The third emanates from Anglo-Saxon influence, carried by the Moroccan diaspora trained in North America, by startup and EdTech ecosystems, and by the standards of international donors within NGOs: it injects references to *lean management*, agility, and Anglo-Saxon inclusive practices. These three influences do not succeed one another in a historical linearity; they coexist and intersect, sometimes within a single organisation. The logic of honour, theorized by d'Iribarne (1989) and reinvested in the Moroccan context by Frimousse and Peretti (2006) as well as Charhaddine (2018), remains within this entanglement the deeper grammar through which actors interpret authority, recognition, and sanction; where imported managerial models struggle to account for the moral weight of *hchouma* (shame or impropriety) or for the sacredness of personal dignity. Practices of inclusion, when imported as such, encounter this grammar and find themselves reconfigured, circumvented, or reinterpreted by the actors themselves.

Communal logics and pressures toward individualisation

A third characteristic of the Moroccan context lies in the unresolved coexistence between inherited communal logics and pressures toward individualisation carried by economic modernisation. Allali (2008) and Bourqia (2010) have each shown that the Hofstedian categories of individualism and collectivism apply imperfectly to the Moroccan case: society is structured rather around what Allali terms *familisme* (familism), an intermediate position in which the individual remains deeply anchored in extended family solidarities without dissolving into an abstract collective. This familial matrix functions as a social safety net in the absence of generalised unemployment coverage, yet it also weighs upon organisational practices: network-based recruitment (the *tawsiya*, a recommendation by a relative), promotion that blends competence and interpersonal loyalty, and conflict management through informal channels that bypass written procedures. The structuring values identified in the Moroccan literature, solidarity, sense of duty, respect for hierarchy, logic of allegiance, and sacredness of dignity (Benabdeljlil, 2007; Allali, 2008; Bourqia, 2010; Charhaddine, 2018); frequently come into tension with the requirements of objectification of HR practices carried by international standards. This tension manifests itself with particular acuity in the generational confrontation: a generation formed within the familist matrix encounters a younger biculturally exposed generation,

drawing on Anglo-Saxon references of individual autonomy and self-expression, who negotiates its relationship to authority and recognition in profoundly different terms. It is precisely within this zone of friction that the question of inclusion becomes analytically productive: not as the application of a model, but as a situated negotiation of the conditions under which singularities may become legitimate.

The fabric of mission-driven organisations in Morocco

A fourth element to illuminate is the singularity of the Moroccan fabric of mission-driven organisations, whose institutional consistency has considerably strengthened over the past two decades. The Moroccan associative heritage takes root in a long tradition of communal solidarity articulated around religious institutions (*waqf*, *zaouïas*, *jma'a*) and became institutionalised from the 1990s onwards with the liberalisation of civil society and the emergence of NGOs of development, advocacy, and social services across all regions of the Kingdom. This dynamic took a major turn in 2005 with the launch of the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a royal programme that structured the ecosystem of mission-driven organisations by articulating public, associative, and private actors around the fight against poverty, the economic inclusion of youth and women, and local development. More recently, the Moroccan social and solidarity economy (ESS) has undergone an accelerated

institutionalisation through Law 112-12 on cooperatives, the creation of dedicated umbrella structures, and the emergence of structuring actors such as INJAZ Al-Maghrib and Enactus Morocco, which each year train thousands of young people in impact entrepreneurship. Alongside these explicitly mission-driven actors, Moroccan family businesses carry an implicit social dimension through their territorial anchoring, their patrimonial logic of transmission, and the practice of philanthropy in the lineage of a modernised *waqf* (Allali, 2008). This heterogeneous fabric shares one common feature: it operates within an economy in which formal and informal modes intertwine, in which social mission must contend with strong viability constraints, and in which social performance cannot be detached from the internal cultural conditions that make durable collaborator engagement possible. It is precisely this articulation that the present study sets out to interrogate.

Synthesis: Toward the object of the article

Within this complex landscape, inclusion takes on contours that neither the procedural models of Western HRM nor the universalising models of social entrepreneurship adequately capture. It cannot be conceived as the application of a standardised device: it is constructed at the intersection of linguistic pluralities, logics of allegiance and familism, the grammar of honour, and the trajectories of mission-driven organisations that must hold together a social purpose and strong economic constraints. If social performance depends, as we have argued above, on the capacity of

organisations to enrol their members durably around a shared mission, then the cultural conditions of such enrolment become a question of the first order. Reformulated in light of the Moroccan context, the research question may be stated as follows: to what extent does inclusion, understood as a culturally situated relational and symbolic process, condition the capacity of mission-driven organisations to produce and sustain their social value within an intercultural context marked by managerial hybridity and the centrality of communal logics? The following section details the methodology that has been deployed to address this question.

3.0 METHODS

3.1 Research Design: A critical interpretive inquiry with ethnographic sensitivity

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design grounded in a constructivist and critical epistemology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015; Bardon et al., 2015). The choice of a qualitative approach is motivated by the very nature of the research object: meaning, inclusion, and recognition are not variables that can be meaningfully captured through standardised measurement, but processes that unfold within situated interactions and require interpretive engagement to be understood (d'Iribarne, 1989). A critical orientation is equally necessary because the dynamics of inclusion within organisations are inseparable from relations of power and from the asymmetrical distribution of legitimacy across cultural, linguistic, and

gendered subjectivities (Ahmed, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989; Nkomo, 1992).

Rather than claiming a full ethnographic immersion, the study adopts what we describe as an ethnographic sensitivity; an analytical posture attentive to cultural codes, symbolic practices, and the stratified meanings that participants attribute to organisational life (d'Iribarne, 1989; Bardon et al., 2015). This posture has guided the design of the interview protocol, the analytical attention paid to narrative and contextual detail, and the reflexive engagement with the researcher's own situatedness within the field. The study does not aim to produce generalizable causal claims, but rather to bring to light the patterns through which inclusion is experienced, contested, and recognised within Moroccan organisations operating at the intersection of communal and global logics.

3.2 Sample and data collection

The empirical material is based on 28 semi-structured interviews conducted in Morocco between June 2024 and December 2024. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture diversity along three axes: organisational sector, participant identity (gender, linguistic repertoire, and regional origin), and managerial position. Four organisational sectors were retained, each illustrating a distinct configuration of mission-orientation and intercultural complexity within the Moroccan landscape: non-governmental organisations,

educational institutions, startups, and family businesses (Allali, 2008). Table 1 presents the distribution of participants by sector

Table 1. Profile of interview participants by sector, gender, and linguistic repertoire

Sector	Participants	Gender (F/M)	Working languages	Cities
Non-governmental organizations	8	5F / 3M	Arabic, French, English	Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier
Educational institutions	7	4F / 3M	Arabic, French, English	Marrakech, Casablanca
Startups	7	3F / 4M	French, English	Marrakech, Casablanca

Family businesses	6	2F / 4M	Arabic, Amazigh	Marrakech, Casablanca
Total	28	14F / 14M		

Interviews were conducted in person and in the language chosen by each participant (Darija, Modern Standard Arabic, French, or English), for a duration ranging from sixty to one hundred and fifty minutes (average duration: approximately ninety minutes). The interview guide was structured around four thematic axes: perceptions of organisational meaning, lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion, dynamics of recognition, and tensions between local and imported managerial practices, while leaving substantial space for participants to introduce categories of experience that the researcher had not anticipated, in keeping with the interpretive orientation of the design.

Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interview, in accordance with the ethical standards prevailing in qualitative organisational research in Morocco. Anonymity was guaranteed: throughout the analysis and the present article, participants are referenced by pseudonymized codes capturing only sector, gender, and a sequential number (for example, NGO_F2), with all identifying organisational details systematically removed or aggregated.

3.0 Analytical procedure and reflexivity

Interviews were transcribed in their original language and subjected to a thematic analysis informed by an iterative, partially grounded coding strategy (Bardon

et al., 2015). A first cycle of open coding generated descriptive categories from the data; a second cycle organised these categories into broader analytical themes structured around the three guiding concepts of the article: meaning, inclusion, recognition, while remaining attentive to emergent patterns that exceeded the initial conceptual frame. Coding was conducted manually within a structured matrix, enabling inter-sectoral comparison and the identification of recurrences and divergences across the four organisational settings. Translations of the verbatim excerpts presented in the article were performed by the author with a concern for preserving the cultural and emotional texture of the original utterances, and key terms in Arabic, Amazigh, and French are preserved in italics where their connotations resist direct translation.

Reflexivity was treated as a constitutive component of the analytical process rather than as a methodological appendix (Bourdieu, 1986). The researcher's own position, as a Moroccan female academic moving between French-speaking and English-speaking scholarly communities, trained in intercultural management, and engaged with the field through both teaching and consultancy, has shaped both access to participants and the interpretive horizons brought to the data. This position is as much a resource as a constraint: it allowed for a degree of cultural fluency and trust that opened space for sensitive narratives, while requiring

sustained attention to the risks of over-identification with the field. The triangulation of perspectives across sectors, regions, and languages has contributed to mitigating these risks, without claiming to neutralise them entirely.

2.4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Meaning as intercultural negotiation

The empirical material gathered through the twenty-eight interviews shows with particular clarity that participants do not construct the meaning of their work from imported abstract categories, but through situated acts of negotiation between local cultural codes and the organisational frames they mobilise or undergo. Four mechanisms recurrently structure this negotiation: cultural misunderstanding as a revealer of implicit presuppositions, linguistic friction as a marker of legitimate authority, the incapacity of imported managerial frames to produce durable engagement, and productive reinterpretation as a strategy of meaning-making.

Cultural misunderstanding as a revealer

The narratives bring to the surface the tacit conditions of trust that structure organisational interactions; conditions that no managerial manual explicitly formulates. A coordinator at a rural development NGO recounts an episode in which the procedural rationality of a foreign donor was abruptly revealed as culturally strange. To the question: “Can you recall a situation where formal managerial requirements conflicted directly with local hospitality or social rituals?”, that was the coordinator:

“The foreign donor got annoyed because our meeting with the women's cooperative began 45 minutes late. What he failed to grasp was that refusing the tea and homemade bread they had prepared for us, in order to 'stick to the agenda,' was to insult them. Tea here is the sine qua non for establishing trust; it is not a coffee break.” (NGO_F1)

The verbatim does not describe a communicative failure but a collision between two normative orders: that of instrumental rationality, which places the agenda above the ritual, and that of communal sociability, in which the sharing of tea and bread constitutes precisely the ritual threshold to be crossed for speech to become binding. The meaning of work, for the coordinator, is not elaborated through compliance with the agenda but in the capacity to render visible, to the donor, the cultural grammar that makes cooperation itself possible.

Linguistic friction as a marker of authority

Moroccan linguistic plurality, far from being a mere contextual parameter, operates as an active device for structuring organisational legitimacy. A senior manager in an industrial family business answered to the question: “How is the use of technical or foreign jargon perceived by traditional leadership, and how does it affect the legitimacy of the message?” by evoking the symbolic rupture introduced by the return of a new generation trained abroad:

“The boss's daughter comes back from Paris and talks to her

father about 'cash-flow' and 'supply chain.' He stops her immediately: 'Speak to me in dirhams and just tell me whether the trucks of goods have left.'" (FAM_F1)

What is at stake here is not a pedagogical conflict but a claim of legitimate authority carried by a language: the patriarch refuses to allow Anglo-Saxon managerial vocabulary to disqualify his own operational language, anchored in the materiality of the trade. By demanding translation into his own register, he recalls that the legitimacy of the decision rests on its capacity to inscribe itself within a shared grammar, and not on the technical sophistication of its enunciation. The meaning of work, for the daughter as for the father, is negotiated in the very choice of language.

The incapacity of the imported frame

The deployment of Anglo-Saxon managerial models within organisations whose actors have been socialised into other relationships to authority frequently produces paradoxical effects, where formal procedure inscribes itself in discourse without transforming practices. The founder of a tech startup answered to the question "Have you ever tried implementing an imported management practice (e.g., horizontal hierarchy) that clashed with cultural norms regarding authority?" by formulating this with a particular lucidity:

"As a founder, I wanted to put in place a horizontal hierarchy:

everyone has the right to contradict me. But my young developers, freshly graduated, were educated in absolute respect for the teacher and the superior. Even when I propose a completely absurd technical strategy, they nod and say 'Yes Madam,' instead of challenging me as a team would do in Silicon Valley." (START_F1)

The founder's inclusive intention encounters a grammar of authority inherited from the educational system and from family structures, in which publicly contradicting the superior constitutes a form of *Hchouma*; that is, an act of impropriety that simultaneously wounds the authority and the one who contests it. Importing the ritual of horizontal critique without re-rooting it in a cultural grammar that renders such critique possible amounts to producing a managerial fiction: the procedure exists, but the meaning it purported to produce, intellectual engagement, and the circulation of ideas, remains suspended.

Productive reinterpretation

The actors most effective in the Moroccan field are not those who apply imported frames, nor those who reject them: they are those who reinterpret them, by retranslating them into the local cultural grammar so that they may there take on meaning. A field coordinator of an international NGO describes this operation of cultural translation:

"The headquarters in Geneva asked me to have rural artisans sign three-page GDPR consent forms in order to use their photos. If I hand them an official document

with legal terms to sign, they will be frightened and will believe it is for taxes or for the courts. So I reformulated it orally, with the village chief as guarantor, simply telling them: 'We are going to show your beautiful work to our friends over there so that they support you, do you agree, with God's blessing?' and we made a video of their agreement." (NGO_F2)

The operation is remarkable: the procedural directive is neither rejected nor applied to the letter but retranslated into a local grammar that preserves its ethical intent while allowing it to function on the ground. The coordinator produces meaning neither by complying with headquarters nor by opposing it, but by reinventing the conditions of its reception. It is within this retranslation operation that, for the majority of participants, the most intense experience of their work is lodged.

These four mechanisms converge toward a single observation: in the Moroccan context, the meaning of work is not deduced from the managerial frames mobilised; it is produced within the incessant negotiation between these frames and the local cultural grammars. The intercultural is not, here, an obstacle to be overcome, but the very terrain on which meaning comes about

4.1 Symbolic inclusion as a relational lever

The analysis reveals that, within the Moroccan context, inclusion operates far less through formal HR devices than through a symbolic economy made of gestures, spatial positionings, verbal addresses, and designations that validate or

invalidate a person's place within the work community. This symbolic inclusion manifests itself in two opposing forms: as a relational lever that multiplies engagement, and as a marker of exclusion that erodes legitimacy even when formal indicators remain satisfied.

Symbolic inclusion as a lever

When it occurs, symbolic inclusion has disproportionate effects relative to the apparent modesty of the gesture that embodies it. We asked a project officer in a development NGO if she can describe an informal gesture or welcoming sign in the field that made you feel deeply accepted and committed to the mission. She recounts an episode that illustrates the intensity of the shift:

"During a visit to a douar, the women of the cooperative did not seat me with the officials but pulled me by the arm to sit on the ground with them, near the fire, calling me Benti (my daughter). Without any diploma or HR bonus, I felt validated. I was so happy that I threw away my PowerPoint, ate with them, and rewrote the entire project that very evening so that it would truly fit their needs, with crazy energy." (NGO_F3)

The gesture, being pulled by the arm, seated on the ground, addressed as *Benti*, performs three simultaneous symbolic operations: it displaces the project officer from the position of detached expertise to that of fictive kinship; it abolishes the protocol hierarchy that separated her from the beneficiaries; and it inscribes her within a genealogy of care. The operational effects are immediate and disproportionate:

abandonment of the standardised device, complete redrafting of the project, and energetic over-investment. The participant herself designates the nature of this validation: “Without any diploma or HR bonus”,; that is, outside the formal devices of organisational recognition. A secondary-school teacher articulates an analogous mechanism in a different register:

“A very difficult student, one who never speaks, waited for me at the end of class just to say to me, very timidly: ‘Madam, with you, I do not feel stupid.’”
(EDU_F1)

The verbatim, short, condenses the entire dynamic: it is not the student who feels included, but the teacher who finds herself validated by the recognition that her inclusion of the other produces. Symbolic inclusion appears here as a relational loop in which validation circulates between the included and the includer, within an economy that defies the unidirectional metric of HR devices.

Symbolic inclusion as a marker of exclusion

The reverse of this economy is that it can be denied even where formal inclusion devices are in place; indeed, precisely through devices that purport to include. An experienced coordinator of an international NGO describes this dynamic with bitterness:

“The headquarters team systematically introduces me to institutional partners as ‘our local fixer/translator,’ reducing my ten years of crisis management experience to the

simple role of a voice GPS.”
(NGO_M1)

The symbolic designation, “local fixer/translator”,; produces an exclusion far more effective than a formal exclusion would: it includes the coordinator within the organisation while assigning him to a position that dispossesses him of his expertise. The metaphor of the “voice GPS” captures with cruel precision what this designation operates: the reduction of professional agency to an instrumental function. A senior manager in a family business describes a parallel dynamic in the register of gender:

“I noticed that the uncles and the sons always validate recruitments or equipment purchases on Fridays, on their way out of the mosque, within exclusively male circles to which I have no access. My reaction? Strategic frustration. I built my own parallel influence network with the women in the administration, in order to block or slow down their decisions whenever they do not suit me.”
(FAM_F2)

The symbolic exclusion from the male decision-making circle, articulated with a religious and social ritual presented as “natural,” does not formally attack the hierarchical status of the manager; she remains, legally, a member of the executive committee. But it displaces the effective exercise of power into a space from which she is structurally excluded. The response, the creation of a female counter-network, illustrates how symbolic exclusion generates, by feedback effect, circumvention strategies that fragment

organisational cohesion rather than reinforcing it.

These four narratives converge on a strong analytical observation: symbolic inclusion functions as a structuring variable for engagement and cohesion, independent of formal HR devices and often inversely correlated with their apparent sophistication. Where it operates, it multiplies the capacity for subjective investment in the mission; where it is denied, it erodes cooperation even where the formal indicators of inclusion are met.

4.2 Recognition as a precondition for meaning

If symbolic inclusion constitutes the relational ground of engagement, recognition represents its founding act; the act by which an individual is constituted as a legitimate interlocutor, capable of carrying a mission beyond his or her formal attributes. Three narratives, gathered across very different sectors and configurations, converge toward the same structure: recognition does not follow engagement; it precedes it and renders it possible.

A programme officer in a literacy NGO recounts, when asked, “Could you describe a moment when a community or partner entrusted you with a symbolic responsibility that signaled absolute trust?”, an episode that condenses, in a single gesture, the entirety of this dynamic:

“Last year, we closed a literacy project in a very conservative village in the Middle Atlas. At the closing ceremony, the president of the local association; an elderly man who looked at me with great mistrust at the

beginning of the project; asked me to follow him aside. Without a word, he pulled from his djellaba the key to the room where they keep the tribe's land archives and said to me: 'Benti, if one day we have a dispute with the authorities, you are the one who will come and speak for us. You hold our Amana (the sacred deposit of trust).' It was an unimaginable validation, from a man of his generation, toward a young woman from the city.”
(NGO_F4)

The *Amana*, within Islamic moral grammar, designates the sacred deposit whose holder becomes guarantor: the gesture far exceeds professional recognition. The president of the association inscribes the programme officer within an economy of trust whose coordinates exceed the organisation: he recognises her not as the executor of a project but as a legitimate representative of the tribe before the authorities. Recognition here does not reward work accomplished; it constitutes, retrospectively, the legitimacy of the agent, and prospectively, the condition of a durable engagement beyond the end of the project.

A parallel dynamic appears within the register of the family business, where recognition functions as a rite of admission into the circle of allegiance:

“In my uncle's company, power is very masculine. During the major Covid crisis, the cash was dry. My uncle called me into his office one evening, locked the door, and pulled from his safe his famous 'black notebook': the informal book in which he records debts of

honour, suppliers he has helped out ten years ago, money lent without contract. He handed it to me and said: 'The boys are too hot-blooded, they will fight with everyone. You have the intelligence of the heart. Call them one by one, remind them of our relationship, and bring back our money.' For me it was the Holy Grail of family integration. I used all my tact, I spent hours on the phone asking after families before mentioning money. I recovered 80 % of the receivables." (FAM_F3)

That was the answer when the interviewee was asked: "What key act of trust from leadership granted you access to the strategic or moral core of the organisation?"

The transmission of the "black notebook", an informal register of honour debts, constitutes an act of recognition that exceeds the attribution of a mission: it inscribes the manager within the patrimonial memory of the company, of which she becomes the keeper. This recognition, designated by the participant herself as "the Holy Grail of family integration",; precedes and renders possible the operational performance. Without this prior inscription within the economy of family allegiance, the mission could not have been carried out with the same intensity.

The third narrative, gathered from a secondary-school teacher, reveals the long temporality of recognition and its radiation beyond the immediate organisational frame:

"One morning, as I was arriving on foot, a large black sedan stopped beside me. It was a former student, expelled five years earlier for violence, who had ended up starting a transportation business. He stepped out, refused to shake my hand, and instead kissed me directly on the forehead. He said: 'Master (Oustad), the day you put me in detention, you told me my head was too hard for the street but solid enough to build walls. You were the only one who did not treat me as a thug.'" (EDU_M1)

Recognition here is deferred; it intervenes five years after the gesture it validates, and it takes the form of a specifically Moroccan ritual: the kiss on the forehead, which marks absolute respect toward elders and teachers. What the former student recognises is not transmitted knowledge but a non-reduction: "You were the only one who did not treat me as a thug." Recognition, within this narrative, operates retroactively on the meaning of teaching: it reveals that the teacher's engagement, even when unrewarded at the moment, was already producing meaning.

These three narratives converge toward a single analytical structure: recognition does not consecrate a pre-existing engagement; it constitutes it. Without it, the meaning of work remains suspended; available but without embodiment. With it, it becomes a force that exceeds the professional transaction and inscribes the agent within symbolic economies (the *Amana*, family allegiance,

intergenerational respect) whose effects durably engage.

4.3 Discussion: Inclusion as a structural condition of social performance

The cross-examination of the three empirical dynamics brings to light a coherent analytical structure that invites a reconfiguration of the dominant conception of social performance within mission-driven organisations.

The cultural grammar of social performance

The three dynamics are not three parallel phenomena: they articulate a single cultural grammar in which each level conditions the next. Intercultural negotiation constitutes the terrain on which meaning becomes possible; symbolic inclusion provides the relational infrastructure within which this meaning can become embodied in engagement; recognition seals the inscription of the agent within the symbolic economies that render engagement durable. This grammar functions beneath the explicit managerial devices; evaluation protocols, performance indicators, diversity charters; which presuppose its existence without being able to produce it. When this grammar is faulty, the formal devices remain in place but lose their performative capacity: the PowerPoint is still drafted but engagement no longer occurs (NGO_F3); the founder establishes horizontal critique but receives the “Yes Madam” that drains it of meaning (START_F1); the coordinator retains his position but becomes a “voice GPS” (NGO_M1).

From measuring outputs to analysing internal conditions

This structure frontally calls into question the canon of social performance measurement, which privileges the objectification of outputs: beneficiaries reached, jobs created, environmental impact, and social return on investment (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Mair & Martí, 2006). The organisations studied show that the actual production of these outputs depends upstream on internal cultural conditions that do not appear in any existing measurement frameworks. A woman's cooperative in the Middle Atlas may figure in the indicators of a development project without the programme officer having been recognised by the community, in which case the project's effect will fade with her departure, as illustrated by contrast in the episode of the *Amana* (NGO_F4). A family business may display excellent financial results while silently eroding the engagement of its female managers excluded from the decision-making circle (FAM_F2). This discordance between formal indicators and the actual condition of effectiveness justifies conceiving of inclusion not as a complementary theme but as a structural condition of social performance itself.

Toward a situated theory of social performance

This proposition extends and displaces the existing literature. It extends Battilana and Lee's (2014) work on the tension between commercial and social logics within hybrid organisations by suggesting that this tension is not resolved solely through devices of organisational design but through the quality of the internal cultural grammar that renders them

operative. It displaces the procedural approaches to inclusion (Pless & Maak, 2004; Roberson, 2019) by showing that, within culturally plural contexts, inclusion cannot be conceived as the application of a universal model: it is constructed in situated acts of recognition whose coordinates are culturally specific. Where the dominant literature measures “diversity climate” through standardised scales, the Moroccan analysis invites a reconstruction of inclusion as a process whose markers are local: *Benti*, *Amana*, *Hchouma*, the kiss on the forehead, the sharing of the black notebook.

Moroccan specificity and the global south reach

This grammar cannot be generalised mechanically to other contexts. It is Moroccan in that it articulates a Sunni Maliki Muslim heritage, a familist matrix inherited from tribal and patriarchal structures, a logic of honour in which personal dignity constitutes the cardinal value, and a linguistic plurality that renders every interaction stratified (d'Iribarne, 1989; Allali, 2008; Bourqia, 2010; Charhaddine, 2018). Yet the analytical movement it invites, decentring social performance from outputs toward the internal cultural conditions of their production, carries a broader scope for social business studies in the Global South. It invites a break with an epistemology of measurement inherited from Anglo-Saxon contexts and the development of analytical frameworks that restore to each context its own grammar of legitimacy, engagement, and mission.

2.5 LIMITATIONS

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged in

order to situate the scope of the findings and chart future research directions.

A first limitation is **contextual**. The inquiry unfolds exclusively within the Moroccan organisational landscape, whose intercultural specificity we have underlined. While this specificity constitutes precisely the heuristic richness of the field, it limits the possibility of direct generalisation to other national or regional contexts. The dynamics of inclusion observed are inseparable from the linguistic, religious, and managerial configurations specific to Morocco, and any transfer to other Global South terrains would require a work of contextual retranslation rather than a simple importation of the results.

A second limitation is **methodology**. The study relies on a posture of ethnographic sensitivity rather than full ethnographic immersion; a choice justified by the research object, but one that limits the depth of analysis of everyday micro-practices. Moreover, the sample size, twenty-eight participants distributed across four sectors, enables thematic saturation but does not allow for robust statistical inter-sectoral comparison.

A third limitation is **epistemological**. The researcher's position, at once Moroccan, academic, and engaged in the milieu she studies, was treated as an analytical resource but also constitutes a risk of over-identification with the field. The triangulation of sectoral, regional, and linguistic perspectives has helped mitigate this risk without claiming to eliminate it, and readers are invited to interpret the results as a situated interpretation rather than a neutral description.

Finally, a fourth limitation is **conceptual**. Inclusion remains an ambivalent notion, susceptible to instrumentalisations that may dilute its critical potential (Adamson et al., 2021). By conceptualising inclusion as a structural condition of social performance, the article assumes this ambivalence without claiming to resolve it and invites future research to empirically examine the conditions under which inclusion actually produces the transformative effects attributed to it.

2.6 CONCLUSION

This article has examined the conditions under which culturally situated inclusion functions as a structural condition for the social performance of mission-driven organisations in intercultural contexts. On the basis of a qualitative inquiry conducted with twenty-eight professionals working across four organizational sectors in Morocco; non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, startups, and family businesses; the analysis has brought to light three structuring dynamics: intercultural negotiation as a process of meaning production, symbolic inclusion as a relational lever of engagement, and recognition as a foundational act of inscription within the symbolic economies of allegiance. These dynamics, articulated with one another, compose a cultural grammar of social performance whose coordinates largely escape both formal HR devices and existing frameworks for measuring social impact.

The article makes three contributions to the literature. At the theoretical level, it proposes reconceptualising inclusion not as a procedural indicator of organisational

diversity but as a culturally situated relational and symbolic process whose quality conditions the effectiveness of the mission. On the disciplinary level, it establishes a dialogue between critical inclusion studies and social business research; two literatures that have so far evolved largely in parallel, by showing that social performance cannot be conceived independently from the internal cultural conditions that render it possible. On the empirical level, it documents this articulation from a Global South context insufficiently represented in social business research, contributing to a broader effort to diversify the terrains and analytical frameworks of the discipline.

On the practical level, these findings invite mission-driven organisations operating in intercultural contexts to reconsider their inclusion devices not as protocols to be deployed but as terrains to be inhabited. The transposition of standardised models, whether diversity charters, participatory evaluation procedures, or social innovation methodologies, produces paradoxical effects when it ignores the local cultural grammar that makes certain gestures of inclusion possible or impossible. International donors, in particular, would gain from recognising that the performance indicators they mobilise rest on conditions of production that do not figure in their logical frameworks but nonetheless condition their actual effectiveness. For Moroccan actors of the social and solidarity economy, the stakes are symmetrical: it is a matter of making visible the specific cultural resources (the *Baraka*, the *Amana*, extended familism) that constitute a relational capital rarely

recognised within imported managerial frameworks.

This article opens several avenues for future research. A first avenue would extend the analysis to other contexts in the Maghreb and the Arab-Muslim world to interrogate the transferability of the identified dynamics. A second avenue invites the empirical examination of the correlation between the quality of internal cultural grammar and the long-term sustainability of mission-driven organisations, notably during generational transitions or scale-up moments. A third avenue, particularly relevant at a time when artificial intelligence is penetrating organisations in the Global South, would consist of interrogating how digital tools calibrated to Anglo-Saxon grammars may be reinterpreted or resisted within culturally plural contexts, thereby extending the mechanism of productive reinterpretation identified in this study. In all these extensions, the invitation remains the same: to think inclusion not as a universal to be applied but as a grammar to be reconstructed, in each context, in each organisation, in each encounter.

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