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The Application of Work Integration Social Enterprise in Low Resource Contexts: Building Capacity for Empowerment, Community Integration and Social Change

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Introduction: Work integration social enterprise (WISE) has been gaining traction internationally as a means of creating jobs and enhancing work capacity for several decades. Operating under several names and models in different regions, this unique form of community economic development draws on entrepreneurial strategies to create opportunities that might otherwise not exist for workforce participation of socially marginalized groups, particularly people with disabilities. The model can be particularly influential in low resource countries, where funding for health care and vocational rehabilitation are limited and where public stigma is particularly prevalent.

Objective: This presentation aims to 1) provide an overview of the WISE movement and existing operational models; 2) present examples of WISE as applied in low resource settings to improve health and social participation of people with disabilities; and 3) highlight areas of potential involvement for occupational therapists.

Approach: Beginning with a brief backgrounder on WISE and its historical development internationally, we will then present 3 case studies that highlight different methods of establishing WISE as a collaborative, consumer-partnered undertaking, and how WISE structures can address weaknesses in the local health care & disability support environment. We will conclude with a summary of risks and challenges, along with resources for WISE development.

Practice Implications: Emerging WISE best practices can enable occupational therapists to address issues of occupational injustice in diverse economies and social contexts, while drawing from the strengths of local communities.

Conclusion: WISE is a form of community development that can be a powerful tool for occupational therapists internationally.