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Market-based resistance: how migrant social enterprises navigate hostile institutional environments

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how migrant-led social enterprises (MSEs) use market mechanisms as tools of everyday resistance in increasingly hostile environments. Drawing on qualitative longitudinal research conducted between 2015 and 2022, we assess how Pinewood, a UK-based migrant social enterprise, navigated profound institutional changes through innovative organisational practices. Our theoretical approach synthesises "mixed embeddedness theory" with "everyday resistance" scholarship to reveal how MSEs maintain legitimacy and pursue social transformation. The analysis identifies three key mechanisms through which market-based resistance operates: strategic professionalisation, innovative service development, and the creation of alternative economic networks. These mechanisms emerged through organisational responses to critical incidents, including the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit-related turbulence, and COVID-19 adaptations. The study advances understanding of how migrant-led organisations engage in everyday resistance through market mechanisms, contributing to debates on migrant enterprise, institutional navigation, and social change within hostile migration regimes.

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Introduction

Migrant social enterprises (MSEs) are important institutional actors navigating increasingly restrictive socio-economic landscapes characterised by profound and enduring shocks, including prolonged austerity (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017), the "refugee crisis" (Mayblin and James 2019), and a "hostile environment" (Goodfellow 2020). Contemporary migration governance utilises an expanding architecture of control – visa restrictions, employment barriers, and welfare limitations – that systematically constrains migrant mobility and economic participation (Benchekroun 2024;

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Goodfellow 2020; Medien 2023; Slaven 2022). Within this punitive migration regime, migrant businesses defy conventional economic roles and emerge as creative sites of resistance and strategic adaptation (Hall 2015). In this regard, debates in this journal highlight the structural disadvantages migrants experience in the context of the hostile environment (Lubit 2024; Ram et al. 2022; Slaven 2022), and the role of migrant organisations in their social incorporation (Barglowski and Bonfert 2023; Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2025).

Against this challenging context, MSEs have evolved into nuanced institutional actors, proving adept at challenging and navigating restrictive infrastructures through market-based mechanisms (Dowling and Harvie 2014; Ram et al. 2022; Van Dam and Raeymaeckers 2017). This institutional environment creates layered barriers, fundamentally shaping possibilities for migrant economic integration (Jiang and Korczynski 2023). However, little research has examined migrant-led social enterprises, their operational context, and their strategies of resistance. In contrast to traditional migrant enterprises, which focus primarily on market opportunities or linear "break-out" trajectories (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017), MSEs develop innovative approaches that reframe prevailing narratives of migrant economic integration (Barraket et al. 2023; Busch and Barkema 2022; Groutsis et al. 2023). Their emergence reflects fundamental shifts in how marginalised communities respond to neoliberal governance, moving beyond community advocacy toward entrepreneurial strategies of survival and resistance (Ghorashi and Ponzoni 2014; Pio and Essers 2014; Stoyanov 2018).

Building on these institutional dynamics, our research addresses the research question: *how do migrant social enterprises deploy everyday forms of resistance to simultaneously pursue economic sustainability and social change within hostile institutional environments?* This question extends conventional analyses of migrant entrepreneurial adaptation by synthesising mixed embeddedness theory (Kloosterman 2010) with Johansson and Vinthagen's (2016) framework of everyday resistance. This synthesis imbues mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1999) with a sensitivity to agency, as understood by Emirbayer and Mische (1998:, 963), as a dynamic process of social engagement rooted in historical context yet directed toward future possibilities.

Our empirical context is a longitudinal study of an MSE, "Pinewood" (pseudonym), a social enterprise operating in the UK's West Midlands since 2014, which provides employment support, training, and enterprise development services to refugees and migrants. Founded by an entrepreneur of refugee origin who faced housing challenges in their youth, the organisation has grown from a small community-focused initiative to employing 80 staff with an annual turnover exceeding £7 million. The West Midlands location is significant: this post-industrial region, anchored by Birmingham – the UK's second-largest city – combines a long history of immigration with persistent inequalities affecting migrant communities (Villares-Varela, Ram, and Jones 2022). This context of demographic diversity alongside institutional hostility provides the terrain within which market-based resistance strategies unfold, situating our analysis within the broader hostile environment framework that characterises contemporary UK migration governance.

In this paper, we use a critical incident methodology that reveals key moments of institutional negotiation, demonstrating how MSEs transform structural constraints into strategic opportunities. The empirical findings present Pinewood's organisational trajectory across three critical periods: its response to the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit-related

institutional turbulence, and COVID-19 adaptations. Each period illuminates sophisticated organisational learning and strategic reconfiguration (Van Dam and Raeymaeckers 2017).

Our study advances theoretical understanding in three ways. First, we extend mixed embeddedness theory by demonstrating how MSEs actively deploy market mechanisms as creative tools of resistance, moving beyond conventional analyses of structural adaptation (Kloosterman and Rath 2018) that do not necessarily engage with the position that enterprises might take in racialised business spaces (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017). Second, we demonstrate how everyday resistance operates through the temporal and spatial dimensions of organisational practices, illuminating how MSEs create alternative economic spaces while maintaining institutional legitimacy over time (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016). Third, we demonstrate how professional expertise and market knowledge serve as strategic resources for navigating institutional change within increasingly restrictive migration regimes (Ghorashi and Ponzoni 2014; Ram et al. 2022).

The following pages establish our theoretical framework by integrating mixed embeddedness with scholarship on everyday resistance. This is followed by the methodology section, which details our longitudinal ethnographic approach before presenting findings that reveal three key organisational resistance mechanisms. We conclude by advancing a theoretical understanding of how MSEs deploy market mechanisms as tools of everyday resistance.

Situating migrant social enterprises (MSEs) and everyday resistance

The interplay between "mixed embeddedness" theory and "everyday resistance" provides valuable analytical tools for understanding how MSEs navigate institutional constraints through market mechanisms. While mixed embeddedness attaches primacy to how structural conditions influence organisations, the idea of everyday resistance reveals how organisations challenge these constraints while maintaining legitimacy and market advantage. This theoretical synthesis furthers an understanding of how MSEs simultaneously pursue commercial viability and social transformation. In this section, we first look into the specificities of migrant social enterprises to then illustrate the value of combining these theoretical tools.

Migrant social enterprises

The distinctive characteristics of migrant social enterprises emerge from their complex positioning within the country of settlement: on the one hand, MSEs exhibit characteristics coherent with traditional enterprises, whilst on the other hand, they have the imperative to reconcile economic and social missions (Defourny and Nyssens 2017; Dey and Teasdale 2013; Macmillan 2013). This dual mission engenders inherent tensions in resource allocation, strategic decision-making, and operational priorities within broader social enterprises (Bull et al. 2018). The migrant context introduces additional layers of complexity to this equilibrium, as MSEs must navigate these challenges across disparate and potentially hostile socio-institutional environments (Wang 2006). In addition, they might face specific challenges that affect migrant enterprises more broadly, such as information asymmetries, constrained social capital accumulation, and institutional unfamiliarity (Benchekroun 2024; Martinez Dy, Jayawarna, and Marlow 2024; Slaven 2022).

Nevertheless, MSEs possess distinctive competencies that shape their crucial intermediary role, particularly within neoliberal economic frameworks that increasingly delegate social service delivery for marginalised communities to third-sector organisations (Mayblin and James 2019). These competencies predominantly derive from their diasporic connections and cultural embeddedness (Discua Cruz and Fromm 2019; Martinez-Damia et al. 2024) that enable them to strategically leverage their connections to access diverse resources, knowledge repositories, and markets typically inaccessible to traditional social enterprises and mainstream service providers (Martinez-Damia et al. 2024; Mayblin and James 2019; Odmalm 2004).

Notwithstanding the limited extant literature examining MSEs' characteristics, challenges, and institutional significance, these scholarly discussions have still neglected the critical dimension of MSEs' agency – specifically, how these enterprises deploy their distinctive characteristics to resist institutional constraints and create opportunities within challenging environments.

Mixed embeddedness and migrant enterprise

Mixed embeddedness illustrates how migrant entrepreneurs operate within complex institutional contexts, providing a nuanced understanding of their market participation. Initially theorised by Kloosterman (2010), the Polanyi-inspired framework helps us understand how entrepreneurial opportunities emerge through complex interactions between market dynamics, regulatory frameworks, and social networks. This multi-level analysis was an important corrective to earlier approaches that emphasised cultural characteristics or structural conditions in isolation.

Mixed embeddedness theory identifies three interrelated levels shaping migrant enterprise opportunities. First, markets are structured by matching consumer demand and entrepreneurial offerings within particular segments, such as the micro-level. These opportunities vary significantly across sectors and between ethnic-specific and mainstream markets. Second, regulatory frameworks comprise meso-level institutions that enable or constrain entrepreneurial action. These include both general business regulations and migration-specific rules that differently affect the market participation of migrant groups. Third, macro-institutional structures, including both formal and informal socio-cultural arrangements, shape access to resources, knowledge, and networks essential for business development (Kloosterman 2010).

Recent applications of mixed embeddedness reveal its explanatory power in contemporary contexts. Solano, Ram, and Rath (2023) demonstrate how regulatory frameworks fundamentally shape market opportunities, creating hierarchical categorisations of migrants. Their analysis reveals how transaction economies function differently across sectors, ranging from ethnic food retail to professional services, and require varied forms of capital and expertise. The framework proves particularly valuable for understanding "break-out" strategies (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017) – how migrant enterprises move beyond ethnic market niches toward mainstream economies by mobilising different forms of capital while maintaining legitimacy across varied institutional contexts (Ram, Theodorakopoulos, and Jones 2008)

However, mixed embeddedness has notable limitations. Firstly, it has explored how entrepreneurs' opportunities are shaped by racialised, classed, and gendered positions,

but offers limited consideration of the temporal dimension of the business strategies employed. More critically, while acknowledging racialised positioning, the framework inadequately theorises how ethnic hierarchies actively stratify institutional access and market opportunities. Recent scholarship on multifocality demonstrates that operating across ethnic and mainstream markets reveals systematic inequalities in opportunity distribution (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022), while intersectional approaches highlight how positioning mediates entrepreneurial legitimacy (Dy, Marlow, and Martin 2017; Essers and Benschop 2007). Additionally, the treatment of agency and resistance requires further development. While the framework recognises entrepreneurial strategy (Kloosterman and Rath 2018), it often understates how enterprises actively reshape their institutional context. Traditional applications tend to emphasise structural adaptation over transformative potential, restricting understanding of how market mechanisms enable resistance (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017).

Furthermore, mixed embeddedness traditionally focuses on individual entrepreneurs or firms rather than more collective organisational forms, such as MSEs. This individualistic orientation constrains potential analyses of how organisations might generate alternative economic spaces through coordinated action (Kuisma 2013; Newman 2007). For MSEs operating within hostile environments, this limitation is particularly significant as it obscures how racialised organisations strategically navigate institutional barriers through professional legitimacy and network mobilisation.

These limitations provide scope for productive theoretical synthesis. While mixed embeddedness highlights crucial structural conditions, capturing the transformative potential of MSEs demands engagement with perspectives that account for resistance and collective action, particularly within racialised institutional landscapes. This is what we aim to achieve by incorporating the framework of everyday resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016).

Everyday resistance framework

Johansson and Vinthagen's (2016) concept of "everyday resistance" provides crucial analytical tools for understanding how subordinated actors challenge power relations while maintaining institutional legitimacy. Everyday resistance is defined as the "informal and non-organized resistance" (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016, 417) and an "ongoing process of negotiation between different agents of resistance (the resisters), between the agents of resistance and the agents of power (the targets), and between the two former parties and different observers" (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016, 418). The framework shows how resistance operates through four intersecting dimensions: repertoires of practices, relationships to power, spatiality, and temporality. For MSEs, this theoretical lens illuminates sophisticated organisational responses to institutional constraints that might appear merely adaptive on the surface.

The spatial dimension is valuable for understanding how MSEs create alternative economic spaces through market mechanisms. As Hall (2021) highlights, migrant enterprises often transform mundane business locations into sites of creative resistance. Through strategic network construction and innovative service delivery models, organisations generate spaces where conventional power relations can be subtly challenged. These spatial practices allow MSEs to maintain legitimate market positions while advancing broader social transformation.

Temporal aspects reveal how resistance strategies evolve through critical incidents and organisational learning. Hall (2021) shows how migrant enterprises, including MSEs like Pinewood, adapt their practices in response to institutional pressures while maintaining a commitment to social change. Agency involves temporally constructed intent and strategy, where actors' responses to structural constraints evolve through dynamic interaction with their context over time (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This temporal dimension reveals the processual nature of resistance – how organisations develop increasingly nuanced responses to regulatory constraints over time. Critical events, such as the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit, and COVID-19, represent key moments when MSEs reconfigure their strategic approaches (Hall 2021).

Repertoires of practices in Johansson and Vinthagen's (2016) framework can illuminate how conventional business activities can provide resistance strategies. MSEs develop service innovations that create employment opportunities while challenging institutional barriers. These practices might include upskilling workers, diversifying service offerings, and creating alternative economic networks. Such activities may appear purely commercial but can also serve as forms of everyday resistance operating through market mechanisms. Rather than direct confrontation, MSEs can adopt market-based strategies that appear compliant while adeptly challenging constraints – a dynamic that is insufficiently captured by conventional mixed embeddedness.

Methodology

Research design

Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) is a powerful methodological lens for examining how MSEs navigate hostile institutional environments through everyday resistance. As Thomson and McLeod (2015, 244) argue, QLR is "more of a sensibility and orientation rather than a specific research design", allowing researchers to understand social phenomena from a broader temporal perspective. This approach is consistent with our theoretical synthesis of mixed embeddedness and everyday resistance, as it captures both structural conditions and MSE responses over time.

Our research design focuses on Pinewood, an MSE operating in the UK's West Midlands region since 2014. The organisation primarily provides housing, employment support, training, and enterprise development services to refugees and new migrants in the locations where it operates. Although we understand the important differences between the experiences of refugees and migrants in the UK in relation to the policy framework, past experiences of trauma, the contexts of conflict or war in their countries of origin, impact of dispersal policies, amongst others, the organisation managed to cater to both new migrants and refugees, by being sensitive to their particular circumstances, whilst understanding the commonalities in the migration experience for their beneficiaries. Pinewood represents a theoretically significant case (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) for three reasons. First, the researchers' association coincided with a series of profound external shocks: the "refugee crisis", the recrudescence of the "hostile environment", Brexit, and the COVID pandemic. This allowed for the analysis of organisational responses to profound institutional change. Second, its service model spans ethnic and mainstream markets, enabling the examination of mixed embeddedness dynamics.

Third, its social mission, combined with market-based strategies, provides rich empirical material for studying everyday resistance.

Data collection and analysis

Our data collection took place over seven years and comprised 38 in-depth interviews divided into four stages of data collection: (1) 2015 (10); (2) 2017 (8); (3) 2019 (12); and (4) 2022 (8). Access to research participants primarily came through key actors within the organisation, including the CEO, board members, and trainers. We mainly interviewed workers and members of the social enterprise who held leadership responsibilities in various capacities at mid-career or senior levels. This resulted in a gender composition skewed towards male participants, as it is common to find more senior positions in businesses more broadly. To protect anonymity in a small and readily identifiable organisation, we do not report participants' specific ethnicities. At an aggregate level, Pinewood's workforce (and the colleagues we interviewed) reflect the diversity of the communities it serves alongside white British staff and board members. Where relevant, we analyse how this organisationally shared diversity, rather than discrete ethnic categories, intersects with institutional navigation and market access.

Employing a semi-structured interview methodology, we systematically updated our interview guides to track Pinewood's tactical transformations effectively. To "provoke understanding that transcends the mere reiteration of the interview's inherent indeterminacy" (McLeod 2003, 201), we incorporated event-based questioning related to each data collection period and posed retrospective inquiries between periods. These questions explored how contextual parameters -such as immigration policies, economic frameworks, conflict dynamics, and refugee influxes- influenced the hostile environment and subsequently examined how Pinewood mobilised its organisational resources and strategic responses. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and over two hours (see Table 1 for the profile of the interviewees).

Following Ram et al.'s (2022) approach to longitudinal qualitative research in migrant enterprises, we deployed critical incident methodology to capture key moments of institutional navigation. This allows researchers to identify significant events that shape organisational trajectories while maintaining sensitivity to broader contextual factors. In Pinewood's case, three critical periods emerged as particularly significant: the 2015 refugee crisis response (2015–2016), Brexit-related institutional turbulence (2017–2019), and COVID-19 adaptations (2020–2022). As Neale (2021, 2) suggests, QLR takes human agency seriously by focusing on how people "shape their evolving lives and are shaped by the evolving world of which they are a part". This temporal perspective reveals how Pinewood developed increasingly sophisticated responses to institutional constraints while maintaining a commitment to social transformation.

By establishing temporal connections, our data could demonstrate the linkage between Pinewood's agency at time A and participants' retrospective reflections on the agentic outcomes of time A's decision-making processes at time B. This deeply contextualised approach facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interrelationships between organisational agency and its dynamically shifting contextual landscape.

An inductive analytical approach was applied to our qualitative dataset, comprising over 200,000 words of interview transcriptions. Our analytical strategy unfolded

Table 1. Socio-demographic details of participants.

Year	Pseudonym	Title	Gender
2015	Adams	Compliance officer	Male
2015	Alex	Board member	Male
2015	Frank	Chief executive officer	Male
2015	Isaak	Finance and operation officer	Male
2015	Jack	Board member	Male
2015	Jonathan	Caretaker team manager	Male
2015	Kevin	Board member	Male
2015	Oden	Regional manager	Male
2015	Raymond	Business development manager	Male
2015	Sophia	Head of research	Female
2017	Adams	Board member	Male
2017	Dennis	Contract management lead	Male
2017	Frank	Chief executive officer	Male
2017	Michael	Marketing officer	Male
2017	Oden	Regional manager	Male
2017	Terry	T&D Team Leader	Male
2017	Tyler	Training Coordinator	Male
2017	Victor	Volunteer	Male
2019	Dennis	Board member	Male
2019	Raymond	Business development manager	Male
2019	Mark	Support worker	Male
2019	Michael	Marketing and communication officer	Male
2019	Timothy	Trainer	Male
2019	Helen	Support team leader	Female
2019	Mattias	Support worker	Male
2019	Frank	Chief executive officer	Male
2019	Jacob	Digital marketing apprentice	Male
2019	Donald	Director of training subsidiary	Male
2019	Ava	Office coordinator	Female
2019	Alex	Board member	Male
2022	Aaron	Administration officer	Male
2022	Donald	Director of training subsidiary	Male
2022	Jenny	Project manager	Female
2022	Nick	Operational manager	Male
2022	Lilith	Trainer and employability coach	Female
2022	Pedro	Regional relationship manager	Male
2022	Raymond	Business development manager	Male
2022	Riona	Marketing and communication lead	Female

through a methodical, multi-staged process: the initial analytical phase involved isolating four discrete temporal blocks and conducting individual, granular analyses. This approach enabled the comprehensive open coding of raw data, wherein we assiduously preserved participants' original lexical constructions – their precise terminology, idiomatic expressions, and syntactical structures. Following the generation of first-order concepts, we undertook a systematic categorisation process, clustering conceptually similar themes into second-order interpretative categories.

The subsequent analytical iteration introduced temporal dynamics, comparing how these second-order themes (from each data collection period) evolved and interconnected across different chronological stages (Hermanowicz 2013; Neale 2021). The culminating analytical phase synthesised our second-order themes into three aggregated dimensions/mechanisms that encapsulate Pinewood's market-based everyday resistance strategies: strategic professionalisation, innovative service development, and alternative economic network creation across three distinctive historical periods that we identified.

Findings: market-based resistance in hostile environments

This section reveals how Pinewood developed three key mechanisms through which market-based resistance operates: strategic professionalisation, innovative service development, and alternative economic network creation, defined in the following way:

- **Strategic professionalisation** is the mechanism for establishing professional legitimacy and enhancing institutional capabilities. By strategically developing human capital and refining organisational practices, Pinewood transformed its approach to support provision, transitioning from community-centric operations to a more sophisticated, skills-based institutional model.
- **Innovative service development** conceptualises the organisation's capacity to reimagine and restructure service delivery mechanisms continually. This strategy enabled Pinewood to adapt its operational models, transforming institutional constraints into opportunities for strategic innovation and responsive support approaches.
- **Alternative Economic Network Creation** captures Pinewood's strategic process of constructing and mobilising supportive ecosystems beyond traditional boundaries. The organisation created resilient infrastructures that expanded its institutional reach by deliberately building and leveraging collaborative networks.

These mechanisms, emerging in distinct historical junctures in our dataset, have been both sequential and synergistic, contributing to Pinewood's organisational adaptation in the three periods we have identified.

Period 1: addressing the refugee crisis (2015–2017)

Strategic professionalisation – professional legitimacy establishment

Before 2015, Pinewood operated within a constrained organisational landscape defined by austerity measures in the United Kingdom, which significantly limited the scope of social enterprises and their impact on beneficiaries. Like many migrant-led enterprises, the organisation initially relied heavily on community support and informal networks to secure volunteers, workers, and essential resources. As board member Pedro candidly described, the organisation was "very small and parochial, offering services primarily to the Somali community".

The organisation's transformative journey began when Pinewood's leadership started critically examining the limitations of its traditional operational methods. Regional manager Oden articulated this pivotal moment: "You come to a point where you have exhausted your network, and we are reaching that level where we have to open up". This reflective stance was echoed by board member Kevin, who emphasised the necessity of involving expertise and "hiring proper workers" rather than exclusively depending on community networks.

In 2015, a significant influx of refugees into Europe (one million, according to UNHCR 2015) changed the sociopolitical priorities of central and local governments. The proportion of refugee populations increased in the four towns where Pinewood operates. Long-standing hostile policies within the UK also hampered mainstream service institutions from engaging with the community and understanding refugees' integration needs. This encouraged

the public sector to collaborate with community-based organisations that can offer solutions. Pinewood aimed to seize this opportunity to become one of those organisations by deliberately improving its employment relations and management practices: recruitment processes became more formal, strategically avoiding reliance solely on informal connections. The human resources department underwent significant upskilling, establishing structured procedures, including probationary reviews and staff appraisals, and fostering an organisational culture focused on continuous staff development.

Such a professional strategy was manifested through a carefully curated recruitment approach that valued cultural understanding, migration expertise, and inclusive values. As Raymond, the business development manager, articulated: "We're a thought leader […] because our provision is created from those who've got the lived experience of fleeing conflicts". This approach was further elaborated by CEO Frank, who emphasised:

> It's not related to cash, it's not company issues, we can find a lot of medium managers from other places, but what sets us apart is our unique understanding of these communities, that element will be lost if we just expand for the sake of expansion.

While "no positive discrimination" has undoubtedly been Pinewood's guiding principle, this recruitment approach has been flexibly applied according to changing conditions based on external funding and collaborative opportunities, demanding that specific community knowledge and experiences be prioritised in recruitment. This applies to funding programmes like the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, which requires staff with lived experiences, connections, and specific knowledge of the Syrian community. The implementation of the specialisation strategy indeed opened doors for Pinewood's breakout – "partnering" with the mainstream.

On the other hand, the breakout resulting from this specialisation strategy also manifested at Pinewood's regional and national levels, advocating work and "role as community representation".

> Our work has been much more important; we are constantly being contacted by the media and the public sector to help them understand for example the influx of migrants and refugees and how do they deal with that and what it means […] we show that migrants and refugees can be an asset rather than being considered that they come here to take over the country. (Frank, CEO, 2017)

We observe here how community and professional legitimacy coexist in this early strategy, as they brand themselves as the go-to organisation to understand how migrants and refugees can add value to the UK in different ways.

Innovative service development – integration support

The 2015 refugee influx presented Pinewood with a critical opportunity to innovate its service development strategy, transforming it from a reactive community organisation to a proactive integration support provider. Pinewood's innovative approach was evident in its comprehensive service model, which extended far beyond traditional housing support. As Sophia, the head of research, explained:

> We take them through a support cycle […] it could be around health, it could be around physical activities, a discussion with the GP, things like that. Then, somewhere in that conversation, employment and training come up.

This holistic approach was particularly significant given the challenging institutional landscape. The UK's hostile environment policies have created substantial barriers for refugees, making Pinewood's innovative services critically important. The organisation began to develop a more integrated support framework, recognising that refugee integration required a multifaceted approach.

The organisation also implemented "trust sponsorship" in its employee development programmes to support this enlarged support portfolio and maintain its community-related expertise. This method aims to give employees without community connections or migration experiences the opportunity to learn and earn trust within the refugee community. Frank recalled this approach in 2017:

> Training our staff is the one thing we invest in. Some of our key staff who have been with us for five years now had never worked with BME communities before and were scared, but they're now becoming advocates and the voice because we gave them exposure to the work we do and how we do it.

Alternative economic network creation – network building

Pinewood's network-building strategy emerged as a crucial component of its organisational adaptation during the 2015 refugee crisis. The organisation deliberately expanded its collaborative ecosystem, establishing partnerships that would prove instrumental in its future growth and impact. The network development was multifaceted, encompassing relationships with various stakeholders. As regional manager, Oden highlighted, these partnerships included "Red Cross, the council, DWP, Fire Service […] Refugee Action; Amina Foundation […] Women's Aid". These connections were not merely transactional but represented strategic alliances that enhanced Pinewood's capacity to support refugee communities.

Board member Alex provided more profound insights into these strategic networking efforts:

> I do quite a lot for the Labour party, as you've heard, and I write national policy for the Labour party on things like housing and health […] Sophia, who's my head of research, I nicked from the City Council. She and Frank are now representing Britain on the OECD in Paris […] if there's something coming up like refugees, and everyone's playing silly buggers, I know that I can make a phone call and be at whatever top table there is, pushing our line.

Hence, Pinewood transformed from a small, community-focused organisation to a strategic network hub. Its ability to collaborate with mainstream institutions while maintaining its commitment to refugee communities sets it apart. Through strategic partnerships, advocacy, and innovative service delivery, Pinewood demonstrated its ability to respond effectively to the complex challenges of the 2015 refugee crisis.

Period 2: Brexit and institutional turbulence (2017–2019)

Strategic professionalisation – enhanced professional credentials

Following the Brexit referendum, which significantly affected the UK's business, trade, and labour market dynamics, Pinewood realised substantial changes in external opportunity structures. This was primarily reflected in two significant structural changes: increased resource uncertainty and the emergence of racist sentiment. These perceived changes

have led them to implement further "professionalisation" to maintain or expand their influence in the mainstream market. First, there was an increase in market uncertainty within Pinewood's sector. As a social enterprise actively seeking external partnerships in recent years, Brexit disrupted the European partnerships and knowledge networks that Pinewood had built over time. "I think that sharing the European network and research is much needed […] we shouldn't lose that European expertise" (Tyler, training coordinator, 2017). They also faced the potential loss of EU grants and resources they could have accessed. "Links with the EU and in terms of resources and the other challenges were on the local level because they don't know what's coming and how that will impact businesses" (Adams, board member, 2017). This operational uncertainty required Pinewood to adapt more urgently to market changes and stand out in the competition for domestic funding.

The professionalisation strategy was intrinsically linked to adapting to these challenges. As Raymond, the business developer manager, articulated, the approach was about "further developed a higher stakes approach to securing funding by actually acknowledging that we were the leading accommodation-based refugee resettlement and labour market integration service". Therefore, recruitment became increasingly strategic, focusing on bringing in professionals who could navigate complex institutional landscapes. As Raymond (2019) explained,

> with some contracts, you need people with experience working for mainstream agencies. These agencies are very traditional English, 'very white, very institutionalised' in how they do things, so we've had three staff who came from those agencies because we needed someone with the skills to talk to organisations from that background.

Raymond's assessment reveals the racialised reality of institutional access. Pinewood's strategic recruitment acknowledges that mainstream partnerships require the deliberate inclusion of white British board members, which constitutes a strategic deployment of racialised social capital to access otherwise foreclosed institutional networks. Such practices illuminate how mixed embeddedness frameworks often obscure the racial stratification underlying opportunity structures, revealing MSEs' sophisticated institutional navigation within hostile environments.

In addition to strengthening recruitment, the organisation simultaneously invested in developing the professional capabilities of its existing staff. Mattias, a support worker, exemplified this approach: "I had a few [training] about mental health, about health and safety, recently I had leadership training and also I am about to take a new one about welfare benefits and universal credits".

Innovative service development – adaptation of service models

Second, Brexit created a paradoxical space for Pinewood's service development. While intensifying hostile attitudes towards their beneficiaries, it simultaneously opened new opportunities in the labour market for refugees and non-EU migrant groups. This led to a re-evaluation of the relationship between labour structure and migration. "[Brexit] has been also good news because the UK wants to know about migration and because of that a lot of people are talking to us, it's not 100 per cent bad news" (Frank, CEO, 2017). Pinewood viewed this by-product of Brexit as an opportunity to change public attitudes towards refugees and improve the economic lives of refugees in the mainstream.

Donald, the director of training subsidiary, recognised the time-limited nature of these opportunities:

> A lot of running around about getting skilled people in the future because in 5 or 10 years' time we will not have all these Eastern Europeans with the skills and capabilities that they have brought […] I think there's a time limit to these opportunities and that's probably a few years in which we can get stuff done [inclusion of refugees in the labour market] in this field and if we don't do it within that time it might close up.

Therefore, the organisation has adapted its service models to meet these changing dynamics. Moreover, integrating lived experiences and professionalisation within the Pinewood team enabled them to rethink more effectively the value of refugee labour and its significance to the British economy, society, and the public (Kangas-Müller, Eräranta, and Moisander 2024). By organising numerous events and maintaining a significant presence on social media platforms, they aimed to "make sure people realised how much we knew about refugees and how effective we would be" (Alex, board member, 2019) and by redefining refugees as essential contributors to the British economy rather than a burden.

Alternative economic network creation – alternative network development

Pinewood's network development during this period was characterised by strategic collaborations and expanded institutional partnerships to capitalise on the above opportunities and address challenges. Board member Alex referred to "partnerships with universities and city councils" designed to foster more professional knowledge and extend the organisation's social influence on the public.

The organisation positioned itself as a crucial intermediary, linking isolated support areas and sharing best practices. Dennis, the contract management lead, discussed plans for collaborative events:

> We're also thinking of having an event in city X with the city council, the Local Enterprise Partnership, the University, and others, all to showcase what we're doing […] It's not just about stopping hate crimes and basic rights […] this is what we're trying to communicate to the Council and all our social players.

By maintaining a significant social media presence and organising numerous events, Pinewood aimed to redefine public perceptions. As Alex noted, their goal was to "make sure people realised how much we knew about refugees and how effective we would be" by repositioning refugees as essential contributors to the British economy rather than a burden.

This period marked a significant phase in Pinewood's organisational development, where its strategies of partnering and advocating reached new levels of influence and scale, effectively responding to the complex challenges posed by Brexit and institutional turbulence.

Period 3: COVID-19 and international turbulence adaptations (2019–2022)

Strategic professionalisation – service model diversification

The COVID-19 pandemic, the start of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and the Ukrainian refugee crisis presented unprecedented challenges that demanded a

radical approach to Pinewood's professionalisation strategy. The organisation recognised the need to diversify its service model to address the increasingly complex integration requirements of highly diverse communities.

The service experiences and navigation of the institutional environment in recent years have facilitated Pinewood's reflection on its information exchange with diverse refugee communities, enriching its incremental knowledge and human capital. This accumulation of experience led to a radical turn in Pinewood's vision (Forés and Camisón 2016), enabling Pinewood to view integration services within a comprehensive support framework rather than an isolated service. Therefore, this unique diversification strategy is rooted in

> the interrelationship between the need for a holistic approach to a resettlement and integration of refugees and migrants rather than simply dealing with housing, simply dealing with employment, these things need to be handled in an overall framework rather than separately. (Donald, director of training subsidiary, 2022)

In this context, Pinewood realised that to integrate its beneficiaries effectively, it needed to demonstrate empathy by drawing on its team's lived experiences to connect with newcomers and understand their needs. Furthermore, they required staff with advanced professional skills capable of offering a range of services to help migrants and refugees meet the expectations of UK society, such as language skills, cultural understanding, and employment capabilities. This calls for a shift in the narrative from humanitarian to materialist perspectives, while ensuring the former remains on the agenda. This increased emphasis on material values aligns Pinewood's goals with the neo-liberal principles currently dominant in official discourse (Connell 2010, 22).

> They're not all tenants, some might be people coming for basic careers services, getting a CV and some advice and guidance or it could be someone who needs full emotional support, a full assistance package, a language package, employment skills package, so it would be across a broad range. (Raymond, business developer manager, 2019)

Therefore, Pinewood's development of a wrap-around service portfolio to meet diverse needs and deliver comprehensive integration has resulted in two distinctive features of its diversification movement. The first feature emphasises aligning human capital with wrap-around services based on Pinewood's accumulated knowledge. For example, Pinewood offers practical learning opportunities to employees and prepares them for the potential future needs of refugee clients.

> "If I want to work in the housing department, I can go to the housing manager and request to observe him or sit with them for a couple of hours to understand what they cover and what are the learning points" (Helen, support team leader, 2019)

When encountering previously unserved communities, Pinewood strategically recruited "community insiders" as volunteers, advisors, or long-term staff, thereby facilitating the sophisticated dissemination of nuanced cultural and contextual understanding within the organisational team. This approach enabled the organisation to develop a more organic, deeply informed approach to community engagement, transforming potential knowledge gaps into opportunities for comprehensive and empathetic service provision.

The second feature is intentionally establishing rich cultural consensus, career development paths, and reward systems to reduce employee turnover, thus preventing the

outflow of accumulated knowledge that could delay the response to the needs of their beneficiaries and potentially impair Pinewood's efficiency and status in the mainstream market. "We need to make sure that we provide our staff with reasonable pay compared to the top competitors in the environment" (Donald, director of training subsidiary, 2022) and also "really driving forward the work in probationary reviews and a review system that is focused on continuous professional development, identifying individual aspirations in terms of where people want to be and how they want to grow" (Pedro, regional relationship manager, 2022).

Innovative service development – digital transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated Pinewood's digital transformation, compelling the organisation to radically reimagine service delivery methods in an unprecedented context of social distancing and technological constraints. The pandemic exposed both significant challenges and innovative opportunities for support services. A prime example was their swift acquisition of 100 laptops through external grants, enabling their beneficiaries to participate in online training while adhering to social distancing requirements. This initiative was more than a mere technological stopgap; it represented a fundamental restructuring of service provision.

The digital transformation allowed Pinewood to extend its reach beyond geographical limitations. By developing online training modules, language learning platforms, and virtual employment support services, the organisation could simultaneously support their users in multiple locations. Moreover, the digital transformation extended across team operation dimensions. Hence, digital innovation was not just about technology transfer, but about creating meaningful and accessible learning experiences for the team.

Online team meetings became the standard practice, replacing traditional in-person gatherings and enabling more frequent and flexible communication across different operational locations, as well as allowing staff members to participate in skill development workshops regardless of location.

Alternative economic network creation-network resilience

During this period, Pinewood's network-building strategy focused on creating resilient connections to withstand pandemic-related challenges. The organisation established new departments across various operational locations, including entrepreneurship support services, employment advisory, language training, digital training, and cultural literacy services.

The strategic recruitment of "community insiders" was crucial in expanding network capabilities. Aaron, an administration officer, noted the value of such recruitment: "Robertson improves the team because he is like a community leader from Ukraine. We could, therefore, be more engaged with Ukrainian refugee clients".

This strategy also prepared Pinewood better for emerging market needs. Furthermore, it established its community expert role by collaborating with mainstream stakeholders (e.g. government, civil society, foundations, research institutes, and funders) to provide housing and training services.

> Initially we only had 40 tenants, all from Somali backgrounds but now we work with over 700 and they come from 5 predominant backgrounds which are Sudanese, Eritrean, Somali, Iraqi

> and Iranian. So the focus has changed as the refugee population has changed and now we have community learning provision in all three cities. We're actually being proactive in the community as well. (Raymond, business developer manager, 2019)

This period marked a transformative phase for Pinewood, where the organisation's strategies of partnering and advocating reached unprecedented levels of influence, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of global challenges by simultaneously complying with neoliberal expectations of the role of a social enterprise and maintaining the humanitarian perspective on the refugee agenda by focusing on the "value" of workers.

Discussion

Our analysis reveals how migrant social enterprises (MSEs) utilise innovative market-based strategies as forms of everyday resistance within increasingly hostile institutional environments. The longitudinal study of Pinewood illuminates three key theoretical contributions that advance the understanding of migrant enterprise and institutional navigation.

First, we extend mixed embeddedness theory by demonstrating how MSEs actively reshape their institutional context through three key mechanisms: strategic professionalisation, innovative service development, and alternative economic network creation. Whilst Kloosterman (2010) emphasises structural adaptation, our findings reveal more dynamic processes of institutional engagement. First, we demonstrate how racialised market spaces for migrant-led social enterprises necessitate sophisticated strategies that enable MSEs to transform apparent constraints into strategic opportunities. Second, our analysis advances existing research on ethnic minority businesses "breakout" strategies by revealing how MSEs generate alternative economic spaces while maintaining institutional legitimacy. Pinewood's creation of hybrid service models spanning ethnic and mainstream markets demonstrates the spatial dimension of resistance. With our approach, we overcome some of the limitations of mixed embeddedness by incorporating the complex dynamics between racialised spaces in the market and the financial demands of a hostile and austere environment.

Second, our analysis illuminates how everyday resistance operates through the temporal dimensions of organisational practice. Following Johansson and Vinthagen's (2016) framework, we show how MSEs develop innovative responses to institutional constraints through time. We argue that this is a key contribution of our longitudinal qualitative approach, where we selected critical incidents – the refugee crisis, Brexit, and COVID-19 – that triggered strategic learning, thereby enhancing organisational capacity resistance. This temporal perspective reveals resistance as an ongoing negotiation process rather than discrete acts of opposition. Our findings extend Ghorashi and Ponzoni's (2014) work on organisational expertise for social change by demonstrating how market knowledge serves as a strategic resource for institutional navigation. Our longitudinal analysis reveals how resistance strategies evolve through critical junctures. The refugee crisis, Brexit, and COVID-19 represented more than external disruptions requiring organisational adaptation. These moments catalysed strategic reconfigurations that enhanced Pinewood's capacity for institutional navigation. Past responses to hostile policies informed subsequent strategic choices, creating organisational memory that strengthened resistance capabilities. This temporal perspective challenges mixed

embeddedness assumptions about structural adaptation by demonstrating how MSEs actively reconstruct opportunity structures through sustained institutional engagement.

Third, our study reveals how MSEs simultaneously mobilise professional expertise to pursue commercial viability and social transformation. Pinewood's strategic deployment of market mechanisms demonstrates sophisticated capabilities that transcend conventional understandings of migrant enterprises. This builds on Ram et al.'s (2022) analysis of market knowledge in hostile environments, offering a more nuanced understanding of how MSEs maintain legitimacy whilst advancing social change. Crucially, our research conceptualises "market-based resistance" as an analytical framework that captures the complex interplay between economic strategy and social transformation. This framework highlights how marginalised organisations can leverage market mechanisms not as tools of capitulation but as sophisticated strategies of institutional navigation and social change.

However, Pinewood's achievements need to be located within broader questions about migration governance and social provision. While Pinewood strategically widens opportunity structures, several domains remain largely foreclosed to organisational action. First, credit and grant regimes constrain financial autonomy, evident in the post-Brexit contraction of EU-linked resources and the tighter competition for domestic funds during institutional turbulence. Second, housing and property tenure continue to produce precarity that wrap-around services can buffer but not resolve. Third, tightening regulatory and immigration frameworks increasingly couple legal status to service eligibility and labour-market access across all periods we analysed. We characterise Pinewood's approach as one of bounded resistance: sustained, market-mediated strategies that expand room for manoeuvre and reframe migrant value yet operate within legal-financial architectures that the organisation cannot, by itself, transform. Temporality matters because capability building (skills, legitimacy, networks) is cumulative and slow, whereas adverse policy shifts can be rapid, creating a persistent asymmetry between organisational agency and institutional change.

These dynamics are place-dependent. Pinewood's West Midlands setting (i.e. a post-industrial region with a long immigration history and entrenched spatial inequalities) both necessitates and enables its strategies: necessitates, because welfare retrenchment and labour segmentation heighten demand for intermediary support; enables, because dense civic infrastructures and diversified markets create relational pathways for "break-out" beyond ethnic niches while maintaining community legitimacy.

Pinewood's trajectory reveals the inherent tensions within contemporary migration governance. While the organisation successfully navigates hostile institutional environments and creates meaningful opportunities for refugees and migrants, its market-based strategies operate within a system that increasingly delegates social provision to entrepreneurial initiatives. Though enabling effective institutional navigation, the organisation's emphasis on professional legitimacy and service innovation potentially reinforces logics where refugee support becomes dependent on organisational capacity rather than systematic rights. This echoes broader contradictions within mixed embeddedness frameworks: MSEs may challenge exclusionary practices while simultaneously operating through market mechanisms that individualise responses to structural inequalities. Pinewood's success in demonstrating refugee economic potential while countering hostile environment narratives requires continuous organisational adaptation to prove worthiness within restrictive regimes.

At the time of writing, opposition to incoming flows of asylum seekers is at the core of the political agenda (The Guardian 2025), which will potentially change the discourses social enterprises will engage with, by strengthening further the idea of financial value in relation to the role of refugees and migrants in our communities. The everyday resistance strategies identified here thus operate within, rather than fundamentally challenging, institutional arrangements that position migrant communities as perpetual supplicants for market-mediated inclusion. This suggests that while MSEs create vital spaces for agency, their institutional navigation occurs within parameters that may constrain more transformative possibilities for addressing the structural sources of exclusion.

Our sample's male-skewed composition reflects broader organisational hierarchy patterns while highlighting methodological limitations. The strategic professionalisation documented here emerged from leadership positions traditionally occupied by men, raising questions about whether alternative resistance strategies operate at different organisational levels. Future research examining diverse staff positions within MSEs could reveal how gender intersects with institutional navigation in ways our leadership-focused analysis does not capture.

Conclusion

This study advances the theoretical understanding of how MSEs deploy market mechanisms as tools of everyday resistance within hostile institutional environments. Our longitudinal analysis reveals sophisticated capabilities that enable market-based resistance by the deployment of conventional market practices (professionalisation, service innovation, and network orchestration, among others) to contest exclusionary arrangements while maintaining institutional legitimacy. Through careful attention to professional expertise and strategic adaptation, MSEs like Pinewood demonstrate the capacity to navigate increasingly restrictive migration regimes while advancing social change.

Three key theoretical contributions emerge. First, we extend mixed embeddedness theory by demonstrating how MSEs actively reshape their institutional context through market mechanisms. Second, our analysis highlights temporal and spatial dimensions of everyday resistance in organisational settings. Third, we show how professional expertise enables sophisticated institutional navigation while maintaining a social mission.

Furthermore, a core contribution is methodological. By periodising Pinewood's trajectory into three critical junctures (refugee crisis, Brexit, COVID-19), we show how market-based resistance is processual and cumulative, not event-based. This temporal scaffolding explains how organisational capabilities accumulate and why resistance endures within tightening regimes.

Future research might examine how these dynamics manifest across different institutional contexts and organisational forms. Comparative analysis of MSEs operating in varied regulatory environments could yield valuable insights into strategic adaptation. Additionally, investigating how digital transformation shapes MSE resistance strategies presents promising research directions. For policymakers, our findings suggest the need for more nuanced approaches to migrant enterprise support that recognise MSEs' sophisticated organisational capabilities. Policy frameworks that recognise this institutional sophistication, rather than treating MSEs as transitional integration vehicles, may better harness their transformative potential for both commercial sustainability and social change.

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Ethics statement

Our research received ethics approval from the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham (approval ERN_15-1133, on 22 December 2015) for the first two periods of data collection; and from the Business and Social Science Ethics Review Committee at Aston University (Birmingham) (approval: 256-08-21; on 1 October 2021) for the remainder of the interviews. Participants were provided with details about the research project and its objectives, and they signed the relevant consent forms.

Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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