

# Re-employing Military Veterans with Service-Connected Disabilities: A Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focuses on addressing the phenomenon of re-employing military veterans with service-connected disabilities using the Case Study Strategy. To do so, this study explored a particular organizational context, called “Hero Apparel”<sup>3</sup>, which started as a rehabilitation center to employ disabled military veterans who were disabled due to the Sri Lankan civil war. Hero Apparel as a commercial enterprise is mainly focused on providing vocational training to veterans in the garment industry. Service-connected disabilities are impairments associated among military veterans that occur due to active engagement in military services. Veterans lose their sense of independence and self-reliance because of these impairments. To mitigate these social issues associated with disabled veterans, providing opportunities to be engaged in productive work in a defined organizational environment is a very effective way since the veterans get a chance to integrate successfully into their lives again despite being disabled. Therefore, Hero Apparel can be considered as an entrepreneurial innovation that emerged to assist disabled veterans to regain their productive rank within society back again by allowing disabled military veterans to be re-employed as workers in the garment industry and build appropriate vocational skills. This context intrigued this study to explore the relevancy of this re-employability phenomenon with the organizational mechanism of social enterprises. By doing so, this study was able to find that Hero Apparel is operated under the concept of social enterprise mechanism and has an inspiring context compared to mainstream workplaces as Hero Apparel does its business operations while being both commercially and socially oriented. This study also revealed that the provision of meaningful employment opportunities for disabled people can empower them since such work is capable of ensuring their independence and self-reliance. In the Sri Lankan context, social enterprises are relatively a new term. Therefore, as a study oriented toward the mechanism of social enterprises, this paper contributes to increasing the awareness of social enterprises within Sri Lanka by presenting the contextual factors of an organization, which operates under the concept of social enterprise.

**Keywords: Disability, Service-Connected Disability, Social Enterprise**

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<sup>3</sup> “Hero Apparel” is a pseudonym created to address the main organizational focus of the study.

## INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the “Rights of Persons with Disabilities” (2006), identifies, that people with disabilities are those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that create obstacles, which would prevent their full and effective participation within society in an equal manner. Even though employment is an effective way of integrating people with disabilities into the economy, unfortunately, they are often marginalized and discriminated against in the labour market. Social enterprises have emerged as a useful system through which such individuals would be integrated into economic activities, ensuring equal participation in society. Social enterprises are businesses, which were founded to pursue social goals while gaining commercial benefits. More specifically, social enterprises are operated in the commercial realm following the conventional business model. However, unlike private for-profit enterprises, their main goal is to meet social needs rather than make profits (Kelly, 2014). Therefore, a social enterprise mechanism can create social inclusion by meeting the needs of specific groups like people with disabilities. Thus, it can be utilized as an avenue to employ people with disabilities.

Service-connected disability is a part of the multifaceted situation of disability and it is a disease or injury incurred or aggravated during military service (Congress of the U.S., Congressional Budget Office [CBO], 2014 as cited in Stern, 2018). In terms of military services, ‘war’ is the most serious cause of creating permanent disabilities in servicemen (Gerber, 2000, as cited in Gunawardena, 2010). Considering the Sri Lankan context, the most prominent military service of military veterans was their contribution to the civil war to eradicate terrorism. The incorporation of combats such as guerrilla and terrorist tactics, as well as facing frequent suicide bombings and the use of heavy weapons (Gunawardena, 2010) resulted in a considerable no of battle casualties. Due to that, there was a serious imperative need to rehabilitate disabled veterans successfully in a meaningful manner to help them be re-absorbed into society more productively while helping them to adjust to a near-normal life along with their permanent disability state. To do that, the provision of vocational rehabilitation facilities to disabled military veterans was the most efficient manner to make them productively involved in society. As per Larsson (2004), rehabilitation is the process of preparing disabled soldiers for civilian lives and assisting them to find and hold places in businesses or industries by teaching them to adjust to their impairments while providing them with appropriate and marketable skills.

The main organizational focus of this study is a garment factory called “Hero Apparel. This organization is a military-managed garment factory, which was started during the latter part of the 90s as a rehabilitation project to provide vocational training to disabled veterans. The founding reason behind the implementation of this project was the greater amount of permanent disabilities that occurred among Sri Lankan military veterans due to battle casualties that resulted from the Sri Lankan civil war. This situation created an imperative need to initiate efforts in rehabilitation to make disabled veterans meaningfully re-absorbed into society to provide them with a near-normal life. This organization employed disabled veterans who held the potential in terms of physical capacities despite being disabled to be employed in productive employment.

British Council (2018) stated that although the social enterprise concept is deeply rooted in the business practices of Sri Lanka, the terminology and the organizational model are quite new to the country. To conduct the study called ‘The State of Social Enterprise in Sri Lanka’, the British Council (2018) defined social enterprises using two key criteria and asked their participants to respond accordingly. Those considered criteria were the organizations whose missions are to generate social and community well-being while being engaged in trading activities to fulfill those missions. Since the ‘social enterprise’ term is new to Sri Lanka, the British Council (2018) recognized that, although most of the surveyed organizations met the study’s defined criteria, those organizations did not consider them as social enterprises necessarily.

Accordingly, Hero Apparel also has not recognized itself as a Social Enterprise. However, this study argues that Hero Apparel falls in line with the social enterprise definition as it was started as a self-sustaining organization to address the social issue of productively reintegrating military veterans with service-connected disabilities into the socio-economic milieu. Through this organizational mechanism, disabled veterans were provided with the opportunity to engage in active employment instead of living passively as disabled military veterans. As far as the ‘re-employability’ phenomenon is concerned, this study would like to state that, according to the organizational context of Hero Apparel, the employed disabled veterans within Hero Apparel had experienced a career transition from the military to the garment industry. Since, Hero Apparel is a military-managed garment factory, the employed disabled veterans were able to hold on to their career identity of being military veterans while being recognized as employees who work for the garment industry.

Given this context, this study aims to explore the re-employability phenomena of military veterans with service-connected disabilities, which occurred through an organization called Hero Apparel, whose organizational contextual factors demonstrate a linkage with the social enterprise mechanism. Therefore, out of this curiosity, this study aims to find answers to the research question of “Does Hero Apparel has practices of a Social Enterprise.”

Even though only a few studies have explored the experience of disabled veterans, almost no attention has been paid to the potential of re-employing disabled military veterans within an organizational context in Sri Lanka.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of Social Enterprises

Doherty et al. (2014) stated that Social Enterprise is a phenomenon. The phenomenon of social enterprise is currently experiencing fast-growing prospects in the contemporary world. Most scholars have agreed with the fact that though social enterprise is recognized as an emerging business form, there is no unified definition for this business concept yet. The reason could be that since there is a tremendous growth of interest in this social enterprise area, there is a growing amount of literature producing a variety of definitions and approaches.

Generally, social enterprises can be defined as businesses that are socially minded and revenue-generating (Katz & Kauder, 2011). This means, that the persuasion of a defined social mission is the primary purpose of social enterprises and at the same time, these businesses fulfill their financial viability by engaging in commercial activities, which is through the sales of the enterprises' products (Battilana et al., 2014).

Moreover, some scholars have incorporated the term *social economy* or the *third sector* to present the idea of social enterprises. For instance, Kelly (2014) defined social enterprises as business entities, which have been established within the social economy in order to stimulate the advancement of social inclusion. Clarke and Eustace (2009) also further stated that social enterprises belong to this third sector or the social economy and gave a glimpse of what types of organizations are established within this third sector or in the social economy. According to Clarke and Eustace (2009), these organizations could be independently operated by the state, may or may not be funded by the state, and these organizations might have instances where they are engaged in offering public services as well. Apart from these, the fundamental

objective of the organizations that are being operated in the third sector or in the social economy is to put their economic surplus/profits back into the organizations, so that they can continuously pursue their social objectives. Kerlin (2009) mentioned that this third sector or the social sector could be called the non-profit sector as well. Kerlin (2009) further highlighted that this sector has been able to experience entrepreneurial dynamics, which were capable of bringing solutions to social problems by introducing innovative goods and/or services to certain individuals, and/or communities whose needs were not satisfied by private or public companies.

### **The third sector or/and Social Economy**

Anyone can assume that the terms ‘third sector’ and ‘social economy’ can be used interchangeably. However, this interchangeability was somewhat vaguely discussed in the literature.

For instance, Clarke and Eustace (2009) and Kerlin (2009) used these two terms interchangeably to describe social enterprises. However, Hulgard (2011) argued that although there were similarities between the notions of social economy and the third sector, there were noticeable differences between the two, and the social economy as a concept was wider than the third sector. According to Hulgard (2011), the social economy has organizations, which have both profit and not-for-profit orientations whereas profit-oriented organizations are excluded from the third sector. Although profit-generating organizations are included in the social economy, the social economy is highly concerned with how these generated profits/funds should be utilized as well. Since the social economy encompasses both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations while having high concerns towards the profit utilization of the organizations who earn profits, according to Buhariwala et al. (2015), it can be stated that economically wise, the social economy exists between the free market and the public sector economy.

As far as the types of organizations included in the social economy are concerned, Hulgard (2011) included co-operatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations, and social enterprises as the different types of organizations that exist within the social economy. Even Fonteneau et al. (2011, as cited in Ballesteros & Llanto, 2017) stated that social enterprises belong to the social economy.

Since the social economy comprises both profit-oriented and not-profit-oriented organizations, Kerlin (2010, as cited in Ballesteros & Llanto, 2017) stated that since social enterprises belong to the social economy, there are possibilities for having both for-profit and not-for-profit-oriented enterprises in the social enterprise phenomenon. However, the broader literature addressing the social enterprise phenomenon states that it would be irrational to use a categorization of organization to define an enterprise as a social enterprise, rather, a social enterprise should be recognized in terms of the core principle called “social innovation”.

### **Social Innovation in Social Enterprises**

Social innovations are defined in terms of activities and services, which are driven by the objective of serving a social need that is widely distributed through an organization with a social mission (Mulgan, 2006). For instance, Mulgan et al. (2007) highlighted an example called ‘Big Issue’, an international magazine established as a social enterprise to help vulnerable homeless people to make them able to earn adequate income and help them to be established well in their mainstream societies.

As broadly identified by Ballesteros and Llanto (2017), the literature has identified the main traits of social innovations. To begin with, it was stated that social innovation is established through an enterprise, in particular through a social enterprise that is capable of satisfying human needs, or they go after a mission to find solutions for a social demand. Secondly, it was stated that the social entrepreneurial process associated with social innovation is capable of rearranging or newly composing social processes or social relationships among/ between various social groups. Lastly, social innovations empower the people who are engaged in social innovations provided in terms of services or products.

### **Social Mission as the end goal of Social Enterprises**

The primary objective of a social enterprise is to pursue a social mission using a business strategy, which would be implemented via an organization to earn a profit simultaneously. More specifically, most of the time, the social missions of social enterprises are defined in terms of alleviation of social problems like inequality and exclusion within the society and it is done via labour market activation for people who are distanced from labor market participation (Kelly, 2014). The activation of the labour market is facilitated mainly via the provision of productive employment opportunities by creating revenue-generating businesses within the commercial sphere. As far as the groups of people who are distanced from labor market participation are concerned, Katz (2013) named such groups as low-income women,

disconnected youth, former offenders, and individuals with disabilities as examples. Social enterprises choose their target employees from such under-represented groups in the labour market participation as their target employees and sell a product or service to the open market (Kelly, 2014) to earn revenue. As Meltzer et al. (2018) stated the focus of social enterprises might be on establishing business enterprises that represent such underrepresented groups, or on upskilling such groups as well. However, when choosing its target employees, social enterprises have a lot of potential for hiring persons with disabilities (Katz, 2013).

Social enterprises are not confined only to the area of providing employment opportunities for those who are marginalized from the labor market. There are several other social missions activated through these social enterprises. For instance, according to Kelly (2014), such missions could be expressed in terms of provisions for education, training, and transportation, developing houses, services for the environment, social care, and childcare.

Accordingly, as per Ballesteros and Llanto (2017), social enterprises are capable of creating business solutions for social problems and act as agents who hold great potential for promoting inclusivity and sustainable development. Literature has stated that the main ambition of social enterprises is to utilize business as a game plan to attain healthy communities by creating prosperity within communities and thus achieving advancements in *human development* as its end mission (Ballesteros and Llanto, 2011; Weaver, 2017).

### **Employing People with Disabilities through Social Enterprises**

As stated by Nurhayati (2020), apart from improving one's financial condition, employment is capable of increasing the chances of individuals for more social interactions, building and strengthening their friendships, and enhancing their self-esteem. On the other hand, joblessness is capable of losing the sense of self-worth of individuals, destitution, and social prohibition.

Unfortunately, the processes of hiring, training, job tasks, and prerequisites for job retention in the traditional employment setting (Kelly, 2014), are not capable of providing support for those who face barriers to gaining productive employment, due to a lack of resources or experiences about accommodating the specialized needs of employees such as people with disabilities.

Social enterprises are capable of providing jobs for people with disabilities, thus engaging them within the economy, which would ultimately create social inclusion. As stated by Katz (2013), the viable strategy for employing people with disabilities lies within the social enterprise concept, which can create meaningful work that can be done by people with disabilities.

The study, which was conducted, by Medalla and Medalla (2018) using a social enterprise called "Handcrafted by Harl's" in the Philippines found that social enterprise was a viable mechanism for establishing sustainable skill development among people with disabilities, which would ensure their independence and self-reliance as its ultimate objectives. Accordingly, Meltzer et al. (2018) have also identified that social enterprises are capable of extending the employability skills of disabled people along with some other general benefits mentioned by several scholars, which can be fulfilled via social enterprises. They are namely, enhanced personal well-being, self-esteem, and independence along with an improved sense of integration in society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The ontological stance of this study is that productive ranks can be established within society via the provision of meaningful employment opportunities for those who are disabled. The research strategy used to conduct this qualitative research study was the 'Case Study' strategy. As Meyer (2001) stated, a case study is a detailed investigation conducted either within one or more organizations or within the groups of an organization, to present an analysis drawn from the phenomenon under consideration in terms of its context, processes, and relationships. More simply, according to Eisenhardt (1989), the case study strategy aims to focus on understanding the dynamics present within single settings.

The specific type of case study conducted concerning to this study is the 'single case study'. Although Eisenhardt (1989, as cited in Meyer 2001) highlighted the shortcomings of single cases in terms of the limitations that occur in generalizing and encountering several biases for information processing, this study argues that the context in which the case is being presented must be considered. Even Baxter and Jack (2008) said the most important consideration is the context and if the context or the environment is unique or extreme, the researcher can do a holistic single case study (Yin, 2003 as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008). The organization under consideration in this study is unique from the conventional as it is especially caring towards the employability of military veterans with service-connected disabilities.

The scholars stated that the case study strategy is well suited to the research questions that find answers to "how" and "why" questions (Meyer, 2001; Baxter & Jack, 2008). However, this study's research question begins with neither "how" nor "why". Even though the question is not presented like that, this study can be related to the rest of the criteria presented by Baxter and Jack (2008). They are, when the researcher is unable to manipulate the behavior of people involved in the study, when the researcher is under the belief that covering the contextual



conditions presented under the considered phenomena is very important, and when the boundary line between the phenomenon and context is not clear, the researcher can use the single case study approach. For instance, since this study sought to determine the re-employability of military veterans with service-connected disabilities through a social enterprise mechanism, a case study was chosen, because the case was the re-employability phenomena of disabled military veterans, which cannot be explored without the organizational context of Hero Apparel (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The total workforce in Hero Apparel amounted to 850, whereas there are around 20 percent of employees who suffer from disabilities in terms of both physical and mental. These disabilities were caused due to battle and various other non-battle circumstances. However, the prime focus of this study is to explore the re-employability phenomena of veterans who were disabled due to incurred battle casualties because of their active engagement in the civil war.

When conducting qualitative research, interviews are said to be the most used data collection method and are considered a useful means of uncovering the story behind a participant's experiences (Doody & Noonam, 2013). Interviews usually take place as a natural talking between the researcher and the participants, which would allow the participants to express their life events and in return would give a deep understanding to the researcher about the participants' social phenomena. Therefore, the prime data collection method used in this study was semi-structured interviews where ten interviews were conducted in total. Out of that, eight participants were military veterans with service-connected disabilities. To be more elaborative, four of the participants were in a crippled state with a loss of a leg, and the rest of the four participants had physical permanent disabilities due to exposure to various attacks on the battlefield. Apart from that, two interviews were conducted with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Human Resource (HR) Manager of Hero Apparel to gain a thorough understanding of the organizational setting of Hero Apparel.

Transcripts were produced using the interview recordings and analyzed using the "Thematic Analysis" method. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) described the thematic analysis as a "method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The entire process was followed according to the six phases of the thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). To begin with, familiarized myself with the collected data, then generated initial codes,

and searched for themes accordingly. Afterward, the themes were reviewed, defined, and named and subsequently produced the research paper as the final phase.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Clarke and Eustace (2009) identified the characteristics which distinguish social enterprises from traditional business models. Enterprises where ownership is within a community or among people with a shared interest and are established to tackle social or environmental needs as its central purpose, while being engaged in a traded activity to reinvest the profits to sustain and further, the social or environmental mission was the identified characteristics by Clarke and Eustace (2009). As far as the organizational context of Hero Apparel is concerned, this organization is a state-owned organization, which operates within the military community according to military regulations. However, this organization solely operates as a garment factory facilitating the re-employability of disabled veterans of its military community in the garment industry. The *vision* of Hero Apparel is to “make the lives of the veterans more meaningful and valuable and help them develop into contributing members of the society”. Its *mission* is to “use cutting-edge methods, create strategies of action, and set cost-effective parameters to produce garments that are of the highest quality while growing to meet more of the customers’ requirements (The website of the organization<sup>4</sup>). Thus, Hero Apparel can be considered as an entrepreneurial social innovation, which was established to address the social issue that prevailed among the disabled ideal manpower of armed services, who held the potentiality of being re-employed back in productive employment.

In exploring the relevancy of the contextual factors presented within Hero Apparel with the social enterprise mechanism, this study uses the model presented by Ballesteros and Llanto (2017), which outlined the performance indicators of a social enterprise. The performance indicators are as follows.

1. Business and Management Performance
  - Production Efficiency
  - Efficient Enterprise Management
  - Financial Viability

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<sup>4</sup> Due to ethical concerns, the source of the website would not be revealed because it could reveal the real identity of Hero Apparel.

2. Social Responsibility and Performance
  - Benefits provided for the poor and underprivileged people
  - Enhances the employee's quality of life
  - Encourages the development of the community
3. Environmental and Cultural Practices
  - Environmental and ecological friendliness

## **Business and Management Performance**

### **Production Efficiency**

Under this sub-performance indicator, its first criterion states that the organization's production process should be conducted according to the standardized industry specifications.

Our factory's functions complying with the stated international standards for operating a garment factory. We have been operating according to that composition (CEO of Hero Apparel).

Just as the CEO stated, the HR manager also said that to establish the standardized production process, Hero Apparel received the experts' help in the garment industry and succeeded in bringing a standardized factory system into the organization. There are departments for planning the production, sample making, and procurement along with a well-established standardized factory floor to conduct sewing, quality controlling, pressing, and packaging along with a management staff to oversee the operations within the organization. This organization also conducts research and developments to make improvements in the organization, especially regarding the products being produced. The research and development is mainly conducted through their work-study department.

Moreover, it is also demanded under this indicator, that the organization's production area should adhere to a fundamental layout, cleanliness, and safety regulations along with having worker-friendly tools and equipment within the work area. According to the observations, the organization's production flow has a proper layout with adequate spaces in between. There is proper lighting and ventilation installed and initiatives were taken to reduce the heat coming

from the machines being operated. Moreover, this organization has implemented the “5S”<sup>5</sup> concept to make the workspace of the organization more safe, productive, and organized.

### **Efficient Enterprise Management**

As per the performance factors presented by Ballesteros & Llanto (2017), the organization should have all necessary legal permits and licenses and be established with financial control systems and other financial procedures. Moreover, the leading management personnel should possess with required knowledge and adequate experience to run the procedures well within the organization along with proper implementation of business plans to denote that the enterprise is a strategic entity. Apart from these, the employees should carry basic technical knowledge to conduct production of the organization and the enterprise should have partners who support the organization financially, technically, and voluntarily, along with community support.

The Hero Apparel belongs to the government sector and is a military-managed organization. According to the CEO and the HR manager of the organization, Hero Apparel has a qualified accountant and an internal auditor in the organization. The external audits are done according to standard time frameworks. Apart from these, a proper tender procedure is in place within the organization as well.

Moreover, Hero Apparel is regulated via a Board of Management and the CEO of Hero Apparel acts as the commanding and controlling personnel of the organization. According to the CEO, there are certain restrictions regarding to the financial circulation for the operations as well.

Certain restrictions have been imposed on financial circulation. As the Commandant, I can make purchases of goods and services up to one million at a time. One member of the board can make such purchases from one to three million. Apart from that, if there is a big expenditure of more than 3 million, for instance, if a tender comes or if we need to buy raw materials for production, then we have to submit it to the Board of Management to get the approval (CEO of Hero Apparel).

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<sup>5</sup> A Japanese methodology for lean manufacturing that consists of five steps. Namely, they are Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardize, and Sustain (Tahasin et al., 2021).

Here, for instance, as the commander and controller of Hero Apparel, the CEO is capable of making payments of up to one million rupees, and then each member of the Board of Management is capable of approving the payments of between one to three million rupees. For all payments exceeding three million, the Board of Management should approve as a panel.

When preparing some decisions and strategic plans, when making a profitable and strategic way forward, I submit some of my plans to the board of management and get approval. Otherwise, most of the time, if the board of management comes up with an idea, feasibility, and market studies are done before launching the venture (CEO of Hero Apparel).

As far as strategic planning is concerned, the CEO mentioned that when producing a strategic way forward, the Board of Management approves the plans and when the Board of Management wants to initiate particular strategy implementations, the management takes the initiative to produce a project report and conduct a feasibility study. Apart from that, to assess the management functions, there are operational, administrative, and logistic conferences, which take place accordingly within the organization as well.

Although military officers conduct the management of this organization, they all possess the required knowledge and skills to carry out their jobs well. As far as the organization's technical assistance is concerned, the CEO stated that the entire staff from the factory floor to management positions is well trained with knowledge and experiences, and the organizational members share their knowledge as well.

### **Financial Viability**

Hero Apparel is a self-sustaining organization. Since Hero Apparel belongs to the military framework, it is considered a government institution. Although the legitimacy of Hero Apparel is as such, this garment is independently operated by the state. As a self-sustaining enterprise, the revenue generated through its production is sufficient to fulfill its financing requirements. For instance, the CEO mentioned to me that their factory operated in the Northern Western Province was acquired from the profits generated through the factory's operations. As far as its other financial indicators are concerned, Hero Apparel has a good amount of a liquid cash reserve and has valuable assets. According to the CEO, all these finance resources and assets are managed with transparency and accountability.

During the initial phase of establishment, the organization only produced military apparel, which helped to detain the funds within the government/military itself which were paid for third-party suppliers before the establishment of Hero Apparel. At present days, the factory serves several local customers in the Sri Lankan market and the CEO shared his expectations of expanding the organization's wings into the international market.

However, due to the economic crisis that occurred within Sri Lanka, mainly in my opinion due to the foreign currency shortage, Hero Apparel had to cease its operations during the early phase of 2023, due to fabric shortages. Although the prevailing economic crisis had affected its production, both the CEO and the HR manager mentioned that during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020, as an Apparel manufacturer, this organization made an immense contribution to the local society and economy by producing medical Apparel.

We have taken up the challenge that Sri Lanka had for COVID-19. The entire Garment sector was closed. There were travel restrictions. People could not come from home. There was a lockdown. We were the only garment factory that worked at that time. We have contributed directly to the production of medical suits. Due to COVID-19, the entire production line was taken over by Hero Apparel. Otherwise, Sri Lanka would have to bear a separate cost to bring it from abroad. However, at that time, import and export had stopped, because there was a risk of Covid spreading through it (CEO of Hero Apparel)

When other garment factories were in an abundant state, Hero Apparel continued its production where the organization produced masks and safety medical suits needed for the medical staff around Sri Lanka while adhering to the COVID-19 protocols.

### **Social Responsibility and Performance**

#### **Benefits provided for the poor and underprivileged people**

To begin with, under this sub-performance indicator, it was stated that the enterprise should be established to serve marginalized communities. Although Hero Apparel was not established to provide benefits for those who are marginalized in the community at large, Hero Apparel succeeded in catering to the social issue of productively re-integrating disabled military

veterans into society. This organization is an entrepreneurial venture invention created within the military community itself. This study reflects that this venture was a great inspiration to the community at large, known as the civil society, which exists outside of the boundaries of the military community.

The social issue created among disabled veterans was unique from the social problems that exist within civil communities. However, Hero Apparel as a part of the military community in Sri Lanka succeeded in serving its vulnerable disabled soldiers to provide them with vocational rehabilitation and reinstate their spirits backs. Social enterprise literature has proven that social enterprises bring innovative solutions for social inclusion and is a mechanism established to define and promote the potential of disabled people by adapting to disability inclusion in an organizational environment (Mauksch & Dey, 2023). Therefore, this organization succeeded in bringing inclusivity within the military itself as this enterprise facilitated productive employment opportunities for disabled veterans who held the potential to be employed again without idling unproductively until their official military tenures were over.

Moreover, the benefits should be widely spread without enriching a few and the benefits should contribute to its larger community as welfare as well. The CEO stated that all the profits earned through the production of apparel within the garment factory were being utilized back within the military community itself. All of the profits were being utilized for the sake of advancing the welfare of the members within the military community itself. The welfare facilities were mentioned in terms of building houses, buying medical aids and equipment to perform surgeries for those who were injured, facilitating military members and their immediate family members with financial support during financial difficulties, and performing necessary maintenance for the institutions running under the control of the military and its community. As far as the benefits provided for disabled veterans within the Hero Apparel premise are concerned, the participants mentioned that they were provided with proper sanitary facilities, medical facilities such as adjusting their clutches and artificial legs, and food and accommodation facilities as well.

### **Enhances the employees' quality of life**

Under this sub-performance indicator, to fulfill the enhancement of the quality of life of the employed workers, the enterprise has to engage in fair trade and provide employees with secured income where the pay might be higher than the industry wage rates. Apart from these,

the employer/s of the social enterprise should secure the jobs of the employees along with the benefits for health and social security.

Considering the context in which Hero Apparel is operated, this organization experienced a change in the synthesis of its workforce. This scenario flows as follows. As I mentioned earlier, Hero Apparel was established to provide vocational rehabilitation in the garment industry for those who were disabled due to their engagement in civil war to eradicate terrorism. Since all these veterans were supposed to leave the army framework after their official service tenures were completed, Hero Apparel had to encounter a situation where they lacked the required workforce to run the operations within the garment factory, especially regarding its factory floor production operations. Therefore, the relevant authorities permitted to employ civil people outside of the military. Upon these recruitments, the authorities decided to employ those who had experience in working at the garment factories before. After these recruitments, these enlisted civil employees were considered military servicemen/servicewomen. According to the HR manager of Hero Apparel, wages paid in Hero Apparel were higher than the set industry wage rates in the garment industry.

The participants said that, though this garment used to be fully functioned by disabled veterans before, right now, the amount of disabled people employed in this organization is quite low. Yet, this organization still employs veterans who were injured due to other service-connected disabilities. According to the HR manager of Hero Apparel, apart from those who were disabled due to the civil war, there are soldiers, who suffer from non-battle injuries in terms of physical and mental disabilities.

Anyone who reads this might get confused about what happens to those who leave this organization due to their retirement. As government servants, the veterans are entitled to have a pension after their retirement. However, as mentioned above, this organization operates independently from other military operations and is fully dedicated to being operated as a garment factory with the dual aims of earning profits while pursuing its initially stated social mission.



In line with these end missions, the CEO of Hero Apparel has taken actions to upgrade the training syllabus established within Hero Apparel up to the level of NVQ-4<sup>6</sup> certification. This way, the CEO is trying to open up new career paths for the veterans once they settle as civilians after their military retirement.

### **Encourages the development of the community**

The CEO of Hero Apparel explained that Hero Apparel as an entrepreneurship venture has opened up livelihood opportunities for other people indirectly as well. He mentioned that Hero Apparel has a range of suppliers and due to that, Hero Apparel had opened up new jobs indirectly for the employees who work for Hero Apparel's suppliers.

### **Environmental and Cultural Practices**

#### **Environmental and ecological friendliness**

This dimension was addressed in terms of promoting and protecting local resources, actions taken to rejuvenate raw materials, having implemented a proper system to dispose of wastes, and the actions taken toward the advancement of indigenous knowledge.

As far as the Hero Apparel organizational context is concerned, they have taken some initiatives towards environment protection by implementing the green concept within the premise. However, not much rich data was received sufficiently to open up a discussion. Though the information was not sufficient, this paper would like to mention that Hero Apparel has won the 'National Green Award' due to its environmental and ecological friendliness.

Apart from looking through the stated performance indicators presented in a social enterprise context, attention can be diverted to look into the capability of social enterprises, which are specifically established to employ people with disabilities in creating meaningful employment opportunities. Usually, disabled employees face discrimination in the workplace due to a lack of workplace accommodations (Buhariwala et al, 2015). However, social enterprises that utilize their organizational role in society to employ disabled people are capable of creating

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<sup>6</sup> National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) – Level 4 qualification for the full national craftsmanship.

employment opportunities that can complement the unique capabilities of people with disabilities (Mauksch & Dey, 2023). For instance,

The biggest challenge we faced before starting this project was to decide on a suitable industry to socialize an empowered soldier. One of the biggest factors considered in choosing such a suitable industry was that disabled soldiers must be employed safely. If we go for heavy productions or machinery productions, the vulnerability of the soldiers would be greater. However, the garment industry is where which possesses the appropriate industrial process for someone with a physical disability (CEO of Hero Apparel)

When the founders of the project Hero Apparel explored the feasible industries to employ disabled veterans, they found the potential held in the garment industry to implement the idea of providing vocational rehabilitation for veterans who were disabled. Because the work associated with Apparel manufacturing has a sedentary nature, which means, manufacturing of garments can be done being in one place. More specifically, sedentary work involves sitting most of the time but may involve walking or standing for a short period (The Law Insider Dictionary, n.d). McBrinn (2018) discussed the effective utilization of sedentary work in doing craft work and conveyed that sedentary work was useful for acquiring new skills while exerting physical strength moderately along with work pleasure. Further, sedentary work can be almost applied to people who suffer from injuries as well (McBrinn, 2018). Two of the study participants mentioned that due to the nature of the available work in the garment factory, they were able to perform their respective duties easily despite the fact of having physical disabilities since most of the available tasks could be performed being seated.

All the disabled participants of this study were employed in Hero Apparel to make them undergo a rehabilitation process to acquire vocational skills in the garment industry. Larsson (2004) stated vocational rehabilitation was of utmost importance to gear up the disabled soldiers' spirits back again to ensure that they can win their productive ranks in society through the cultivation of suitable and marketable skills. Accordingly, these skills must be strong enough to ensure the independence of veterans as well as to increase their industrial efficiency.

Other organizations have the motive of making a profit and not the motive of socialization. However, here at Hero Apparel, apart from making a profit, we

also have a social responsibility to fulfill. The hidden purpose of this is that we can make an empowered soldier, a good soldier who can engage in self-employment, someone who can keep his self-respect, and someone capable of standing on his own feet as a trained soldier in the garment industry. We are already achieving that (CEO of Hero Apparel).

The HR manager also mentioned to me that this organization is trying to empower soldiers by increasing their capabilities through training and the development of vocational skills in the garment industry. By doing so the empowered soldiers can utilize the acquired skills to find other employment opportunities in the garment industry or start their own business where they can live as productive members of the society even after they retire from the military.

Accordingly, the disabled military veteran participants of this study were able to cultivate positive mindsets by being grateful for the support they received in restoring their productive spirit.

The available duty for a soldier who held a weapon is to work in a security job after his retirement (Male, 40 years old)

This participant disclosed the reality a soldier has to face after they retire from the military. Since soldiers are public servants in the government sector, they are entitled to a pension after their retirement. However, after retirement, if military service men choose to engage in employment, there are a limited number of civilian employment opportunities available for them to choose from. Being a security guard or a three-wheel driver are such options out of the limited opportunities available.

Although the reality is as such, the lives of this study's participants would be different from the rest of their veteran colleagues, who were being employed in the Hero Apparel. Because, due to their disabled nature, they were able to successfully integrate themselves into the garment industry to acquire a great set of skills and knowledge, which in return would help them to see more future career prospects after they retire from the military.

This study is not trying to justify the fact that being disabled is good and it created an advantage on the lives of the employed veterans in the Hero Apparel over others. Rather this study is trying to open up a rationalized discussion from the data it was able to generate. Moreover, a part of the vision statement of Hero Apparel emphasizes the organization's goal is to develop

appropriate marketable skills within the employed disabled soldiers in Hero Apparel, to open up new career prospects where veterans can utilize the acquired skills and knowledge in the garment industry after they retire from the military.

After I am done with my military service, I want to build something on my own. Otherwise, I feel like my life would be useless. I will build something on my own. A house, a vehicle, and a business for my family. I hope to use the knowledge and the experiences I could gather from this organization as well (Male, 35 years old).

Like this, the participants expressed the dreams they wanted to pursue after their journey in Hero Apparel. These dreams were either to build businesses of their own or to share their knowledge with other people. A participant said, that he had already begun disseminating his knowledge to his nieces and mentioned that in the further he might even start to run a tailor shop on his own. Similarly, one other participant stated his desire to share his knowledge in the field of the garment with others in society.

Medalla & Medalla (2018) identified that the creation of job opportunities empowers people with disabilities because such employment is capable of ensuring their independence and self-reliance. Social enterprises as an alternative economic space are capable of providing such employment opportunities for people with disabilities because the primary interest of these organizations is to build the social capacity of disadvantaged groups like people with disabilities through employment and training rather than being interested in profit maximization (Hall & Wilton, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka as a country has been dealing with many challenging situations ever since, in terms of political, cultural, social, and economic aspects. The civil war that prevailed in Sri Lanka for almost three decades was one such challenging phase that Sri Lanka successfully managed to overcome. However, this war created a greater amount of permanent disabilities among Sri Lankan military veterans. The occurrence of varying degrees of disabilities and the increasing number of disabled personnel during early the 90s created an imperative need to initiate efforts in rehabilitation to make disabled veterans meaningfully re-absorbed into society to provide them a near-normal life. Therefore, to address this social issue, a project called “Hero Apparel” was initiated as a vocational rehabilitation organization whose purpose was to develop Apparel manufacturing vocational skills within disabled military veterans by re-employing in the

garment industry until their official service tenures were completed. Therefore, this study rotated around the phenomenon of re-employing military veterans with service-connected disabilities facilitated through the organization of Hero Apparel and it explored the alignment of Hero Apparel to the Social Enterprise mechanism.

Although Hero Apparel does not recognize itself as a social enterprise, the contextual factors presented within the organizational environment of Hero Apparel perfectly align with the criteria used within the literature in defining the social enterprise mechanism. Since the social enterprise's mechanism is capable of providing employment opportunities for those who are disabled compared to the traditional mainstream work environment, the social enterprise is considered as an avenue that can enhance the development of such vulnerable groups like people with disabilities by installing social capabilities through employment and training of marketable industrial skills. Thus is capable of empowering them as its ultimate objective. Therefore, this study was able to find that social enterprise is a viable mechanism to promote disability inclusion in a work environment by implementing suitable performance indicators. Apart from that, this study also found that the facilitation of such suitable employment opportunities matched with the unique abilities of disabled people, was capable of establishing their productive ranks in the society. As far as the prime focus of this study is concerned, who are military veterans with service-connected disabilities were able to restore their productive ranks in society again due to their re-employment occurring in the context of Hero Apparel.

This study would like to encourage current and future entrepreneurs and managers to create inclusive work environments for people with disabilities and make them involved in the economy to ensure their independence and self-reliance. Moreover, since the term social enterprise is a newer term in Sri Lanka, future research efforts can dig more deeply into the organizational environments that operate under the concept of social enterprises and bring forth an enhanced awareness since the social enterprise mechanism is highly capable of advancing human development.

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