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Global Trends in Social Inclusion and Social Inclusion Policy: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda

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As pressures build, this study can serve as a guidepost for scholars and policymakers to learn from global trends in social inclusion and social inclusion policy. Our systematic review of global trends in social inclusion and social inclusion policy points to the general expansion and retrenchment of social inclusion policy amid increasing social exclusion associated with trends such as globalisation and neoliberalism. In the absence of recent, detailed case descriptions of social inclusion policy at the national level, we call for a renewed scholarly focus on case studies of social inclusion policy. We also discuss the likelihood that persistent climate change, migration, ageing populations, and technological innovations are poised to dramatically influence global social inclusion and suggest that future research should seek to understand the relationship between these developments and social inclusion. As we look to the future and the growing needs of excluded populations, we aim to use this study to learn from and build on these global trends to promote the inclusion of excluded groups around the world.

Introduction

As global pressures from forces like economic shifts, political instability, war, and climate change build, the inclusion of the world's excluded is becoming increasingly vital for the well-being of socially marginalised groups, the functioning of our nations, and the future of the planet. While the inclusion of socially marginalised people has been a goal of social policy in the past, the world may need a renewed focus on inclusion as new social forces begin to rupture the cohesion of our nations and world order. Social policy refers to government measures aimed at improving human welfare and social conditions. It encompasses a wide range of interventions, from healthcare and education to social security and housing (Jordan, 2008; Blakemore and Warwick-Booth, 2013; Spicker, 2014). All the while, many nations are enacting exclusionary social policies that further alienate marginalised groups such as the LBGTQ community, immigrants, and women.

Despite the prominence of social inclusion and social inclusion policy as a goal of nations such as Australia and the United Kingdom in recent decades, little is known about trends in development at the global level. To our knowledge, there has yet to be a rigorous study of the subject. While much attention has been given to conceptualising and measuring social inclusion (Ben Brik and Brown, 2024), particularly at the national level, little scholarship has inquired into macro trends in and influences of social inclusion at the international and regional levels. Further, while there have been cursory reviews of national social inclusion policy (UNECE, 2022), few studies, if any, have examined international and regional trends in national social inclusion policy.

For clarity, this study distinguishes between social inclusion as a concept and social inclusion policy. Social inclusion as a concept refers to the theoretical understanding and definition of social inclusion in academic discourse. Social inclusion policy refers to the practical operationalisation of these concepts through governmental or organisational initiatives aimed at promoting inclusion, which we examine in our findings on policy trends.

Our study primarily focuses on identifying and analysing trends in both the conceptualisation of social inclusion and its application in policy. We acknowledge that questions of prevalence (the extent of social exclusion) and impact (the effects of social inclusion policies on disadvantaged groups) are important but are beyond the scope of this particular review. Our methods and data sources are not designed to directly measure prevalence or impact. However, we do discuss findings from studies that touch on these aspects where relevant.

This study aims to address three research questions: What global trends related to social inclusion have been discussed in the literature? What trends in national and international social inclusion policy have been discussed in the literature? And how do trends in social inclusion relate to trends in social inclusion policy, and how might this inform future social policy development?

While this scholarly lacuna is warranted for study in its own right, the answers to our research questions will help clarify the concept of social inclusion – an ever-mercurial concept – by treating the phenomenon in its macro context, further elucidating and problematising the concept. Moreover, this study has important practical implications for those who have been socially excluded, nations and international organisations invested in promoting social inclusion, and the development and evaluation of social inclusion policy broadly. Our aim is that this review will lay the foundation for future empirical work on the topic and the study of how emerging social forces may deleteriously affect excluded groups. The theoretical frameworks discussed below inform our research questions and provide a foundation for understanding and interpreting the global trends in social inclusion and social inclusion policy identified in this review.

Theoretical perspectives on social inclusion and social exclusion

Social inclusion is a multidimensional, multilevel, dynamic, and relational concept constituting both a process and a distinct outcome (Ben Brik and Brown, 2024). Growing out of the French Republican tradition of the 1970s (Lenoir, 1974; Silver, 1994, 2015), the concept evolved from restricted labor market involvement and material deprivation to fuller participation in society, including economic, social, political, and cultural activities. We conceptualise social inclusion across multiple domains – including environment and neighbourhood, civic and cultural, economic, social relations and resources, service provision and access, and health and wellbeing – spanning multiple systematic levels, including the individual, the family system, workplaces, and neighbourhoods (Ben Brik and Brown, 2024).

Social exclusion on the opposite side of the spectrum from social inclusion – has been associated with negative outcomes related to health, education, economic inequality, poverty, violence, and well-being (Khan et al., 2015), the abandonment of mainstream norms (Lafree, 1998; Liebow, 2003), the development of subcultures (Hagan and McCarthy, 1998), non-participation in the labour market (Atkinson and Hill, 1998), and withdrawal from social and political life (Putnam, 2000). By nature, social exclusion deleteriously effects socially marginalised groups, such as older adults (Nyqvist et al., 2021), people in workfare or public works programmes (Girardi et al., 2019; Gubrium et al., 2017), children (Gross-Manos, 2017; Koller et al., 2018), people who live in rural areas (Walsh et al., 2020), and those with developmental disabilities or mental illness (Wright and Stickley, 2013; Koller and Stoddart, 2021).

As a concept, social inclusion is relative to particular contexts, being conceptualised and operationalised differently in various national and regional contexts. Silver (1994) posited three paradigms of social exclusion observed in social inclusion regimes – solidarity, specialisation, and

monopoly. The solidarity approach draws on French Republican thought and attributes social exclusion to the breakdown of social solidarity, the specialisation paradigm draws on Anglo-Saxon notions of social differentiation because of individual specialisation in the labour market, and the monopoly paradigm views exclusion as a result of hierarchical group monopolies and their exertion of power through class and status that are remedied through social citizenship. Silver (2015) went on to suggest that Liberal thought conceptualised social inclusion as guaranteed rights to individual freedoms; Republican thought, social solidarity; Social Democratic thought, rights to a minimum standard of living; Conservative thought, natural hierarchy; and Confucian thought, social harmony over individual freedoms. Gidley *et al.* (2010) offered another approach framed by ideologies of neoliberalism, social justice, and human potential (Gidley *et al.*, 2010). Neoliberal approaches to social policy, which gained prominence in the 1980s, emphasise market-based solutions and individual responsibility over state intervention. In the context of social inclusion, neoliberal policies often focus on labor market participation as the primary route to inclusion, potentially neglecting other dimensions of social participation and well-being (Harvey, 1989, 2007; Caplan and Ricciardelli, 2016). Furthermore, a more general explanatory framework was described by Ruth Levitas (2005) who categorised social inclusion regimes as either the Moral Underclass (MUD), Social Integrationist (SID), or Redistributive (RED). MUD highlights the moral and cultural failings of the individual rather than structural issues in society; SID emphasises social exclusion as exclusion from paid work; RED prioritises the redistribution of power and wealth. Chau *et al.* (2018) have recently added Collective Production (COP) as a fourth approach, characterised by co-ownership of the means of production, agenda, and production process.

Social inclusion and social inclusion policy in a given national context can generally be characterised by one of these regime types, but regardless of context, social inclusion policy typically aims to promote the social inclusion of the general population or a specific subpopulation. As such, we consider social inclusion policy to incorporate many types of social policy. For the sake of this review, however, we limit our focus to social policy expressly called social inclusion policy or social policy with the express aim of promoting social inclusion or reducing social exclusion.

These theoretical perspectives on social inclusion and social exclusion inform our first research question by providing a framework for understanding how social inclusion has been conceptualised in different contexts. The various paradigms and approaches described here (e.g., Silver's solidarity, specialisation, and monopoly paradigms; Gidley *et al.*'s neoliberal, social justice, and human potential approaches; and the MUD, SID, RED, and COP frameworks) help us interpret and categorise the global trends in social inclusion concepts that we identify in our review.

Although social inclusion has seen robust theorising and operationalisation through social inclusion policy, there has been little attention to documenting national cases of social inclusion and social inclusion policy, as well as global trends in social inclusion and social inclusion policy, in recent years. We turn now to discuss the literature on global trends in social policy more broadly to further situate our review.

Theoretical perspective on trends in social policy

While the previous section focused on theories specifically related to social inclusion and exclusion, this section broadens our theoretical lens to consider how social inclusion policies fit within larger trends in social policy. This perspective is crucial for addressing our second research question on trends in national and international social inclusion policy.

We conceptualise global trends in social policy through the lens of welfare regime theory – popularised by Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology of liberal, corporatist, and social democratic welfare regimes. Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology, and its subsequent extensions, are

relevant to our study of social inclusion policy trends because they provide a framework for understanding how different types of welfare states might approach social inclusion. For instance, social democratic regimes might be expected to pursue more universal and comprehensive social inclusion policies, while liberal regimes might favour more targeted, market-oriented approaches (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The welfare state describes a system where the government plays a key role in protecting and promoting the economic and social well-being of its citizens, often through comprehensive social programmes and services (Gilbert, 2002; Goodin, 1988). By considering social inclusion policies within this broader context of welfare regimes, we can better interpret the trends we observe and understand how they relate to larger patterns of social policy development across different national contexts.

A myriad of scholars have both improved and criticised Esping-Andersen's (1990) approach. Recently, Aspalter (2023) has extended the theory to ten regime typologies that represent the entire globe, including the Social Democratic regime in Scandinavia, the Christian Democratic regime in most of Continental Europe, the Neoliberal regime in Anglo-Saxon countries, the Pro-welfare Conservative regime in East Asia, the Anti-welfare Conservative regime in Latin America, the Slightly Universal Rudimentary regime in South Asia, the Ultra Rudimentary regime in Most of Africa, the Exclusion-Based regime in Oil-Exporting Gulf States, the Selective Rudimentary regime in Northern/Central Asia and the Far East of Europe, and the Communist/Socialist Universal regime in Cuba. We generally agree with the conclusions of scholars in the welfare regime tradition that social policy is differentially conceptualised and operationalised in various national contexts. Aspalter's (2023) extended welfare regime typology is particularly relevant to our third research question, which examines the relationship between trends in social inclusion and trends in social inclusion policy. This framework allows us to understand how different welfare regime types might approach social inclusion policy, and how these approaches may change over time in response to global trends.

The development of national and supranational social policy seems to be influenced by global social, political, economic, and cultural trends. Since the 1980s, the world has seen the rapid development of social policy in the Global South and the rise of supranational organisations like the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations International Labour Organisation, and the World Bank (Deacon, 2007, 2013). This development and related trends in national welfare states have been largely influenced by global trends toward economic globalisation and the neo-liberalisation of government intervention (Deacon 2007, 2013). The global trend toward neoliberal globalisation and governance in the last forty years has been associated with devolving social policy reform in countries like Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom that now emphasise productivist workfare and labour force activation as principle interventions (Knotz, 2018). This trend has also been characterised as a turn toward 'social investment' policy, where nations invest in the populous to increase labour force participation, economic participation, and economic growth (Midgley, 1999; Bakker and Van Vliet, 2022).

In regard to social inclusion policy, the field of comparative social policy seems to have neglected case studies, empirical studies, and global trend studies. This may be because social inclusion policy is either subsumed or dissected by another domain of social policy. Regardless, while theorists such as Silver (1994, 2015), Ruth Levitas (2005) and Lyons and Huegler (2012) have developed typologies of social inclusion by characterising national conceptualisations of the concept, there exists a gap in the literature on whether these conceptualisations have culminated in regimes that have operationalised the concepts through social inclusion policy, how different approaches to social inclusion policy relate to social exclusion, and global trends in the development of social inclusion policy.

A notable gap in our discussion thus far is the influential work of Ruth Lister, whose contributions have been pivotal in shaping both the conceptual understanding and policy implementation of social inclusion, particularly in the UK context. Lister's work (1998, 2000,

2004) has been instrumental in bridging the gap between theoretical conceptualisations of social inclusion/exclusion and their practical policy applications.

Lister (1998) critiqued the UK's New Labour approach to social exclusion, arguing that it often focused too narrowly on paid work as the primary route to inclusion, potentially neglecting other important dimensions of citizenship and participation. Her work emphasised the need to understand social exclusion as a multidimensional process, not just an outcome, and highlighted the importance of agency among excluded groups. Furthermore, Lister's concept of 'differentiated universalism' (2000) has been influential in policy circles, suggesting a way to combine universal social rights with recognition of diversity and difference. This approach has implications for how social inclusion policies are designed and implemented, advocating for policies that are universally accessible but sensitive to the particular needs of different groups.

Lister's work on poverty and citizenship (2004) further expanded the conceptual framework of social inclusion by emphasising the importance of recognition and respect, not just redistribution, in addressing social exclusion. This perspective has influenced policy approaches that go beyond material provisions to consider issues of dignity, participation, and social recognition.

The UK-centric development of social inclusion/exclusion concepts and policies, as exemplified by Lister's work, has had far-reaching influences. It has shaped debates and policy approaches not only in the UK but also in the European Union and beyond, demonstrating how national policy innovations can have global impacts. This underscores the importance of examining national case studies, as they can provide valuable insights into the evolution and implementation of social inclusion policies on a broader scale.

Method

Following the Prepared Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis guidelines (Moher *et al.*, 2009), we employed a systematic review to identify relevant studies in the databases Social Service Abstracts, ERIC, PsycINFO Academic Search Complete, EconLit, PAIS Index, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, and Google Scholar using ('social inclusion' OR 'social exclusion') AND ('international trends' OR 'global trends') for our first research question and ('social inclusion policy') OR ('social exclusion policy') and ('social inclusion policy' OR 'social exclusion policy') AND ('international trends' OR 'global trends') for the second research question. Studies were limited to the English language between 2008 and 2023. The review covers literature published between 2008 and 2023. This fifteen-year period was chosen to balance capturing recent trends with providing sufficient historical context. It allows us to examine developments in social inclusion concepts and policies over a significant time span while keeping the volume of literature manageable for a comprehensive review. We acknowledge that important work on social inclusion precedes this period, and where relevant, we have included references to seminal earlier works that continue to influence current thinking.

In this initial search, 1,270 articles were identified for the first research question and 498 for the second. Among these groups, studies were selected if they mentioned social in/exclusion or social in/exclusion policy and if their topic was directly or indirectly related to global trends in the concepts in their title or abstract. After that review, seventy articles remained for the first research question and fifty-three for the second. Then, we did a close reading of the remaining articles' abstracts to distinguish between studies too narrow in scope to address our research questions along the following inclusion criteria:

- Study scope or a significant portion of the study aimed at 'social inclusion', 'social exclusion', 'social inclusion policy', or 'social exclusion policy' in a national, regional, or international context;
- Study was a systematic review, conceptual or theoretical analysis, or empirical study;
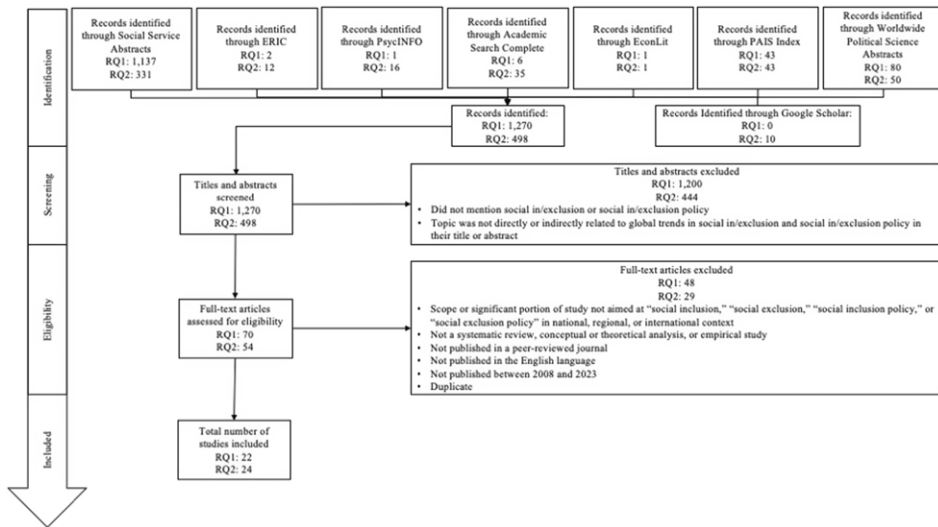- Study was published in a peer-reviewed journal;

Figure 1. Flow chart of study selection.

- Study was published in the English language; and
- Study was published between 2008 and 2023.

This analysis left twenty articles for the first research question and twenty-four for the second, excluding forty-eight articles and twenty-nine articles, respectively.

We also found government and non-government organisation (NGO) reports tangentially related to our research questions using the Google and Bing search engines by using our search terms in conjunction with specific countries referenced in our systematic review. However, UNECE (2022) published the only study we found relevant to our questions published in recent years.

While a systematic search was conducted, these studies were reviewed narratively to illicit common conceptual and thematic findings and gaps in the literature. These texts were closely read and analysed narratively to draw out national and global macro trends in social in/exclusion and social in/exclusion policy. For the group of studies related to the first research question, we analysed the studies to determine a description of the trend, the attributed cause of the trend, the geographical context of the trend, and the type of study conducted, and for our second question, we analysed the studies to determine a description of the trend, the geographical context of the trend, and they type of study conducted. We then abstracted the trends from each study to develop general themes between them. Potential biases include the specification of our search criteria and the absence of empirical data to support studies' claims for global trends (Figure 1).

Findings

Based on our review, we found most of the literature has pointed to the general increase of global social exclusion and a global trend in first the expansion of social inclusion policies and then their gradual retrenchment. We outline these trends and the reviewed literature below.

Trends in the prevalence of social in/exclusion

This section examines trends in the prevalence and manifestation of social exclusion globally, as reported in the literature. While our review did not identify studies directly measuring global

trends in social exclusion, we were able to synthesise findings from various studies examining social exclusion in different contexts and for different groups. It's important to note that these trends reflect the observations and analyses reported in the literature, rather than direct measurements of social exclusion rates. While we were unable to identify a study that took up the question of national, regional, or global trends in social in/exclusion directly, we were able to piece together macro trends with studies that look at individual aspects of the concept related to particular populations and countries. We found three broad trends in this literature – the persistence of social exclusion for specific groups, a trend toward increased global social exclusion, and a mix of decreased and increased social exclusion in certain contexts – detailed below and in Table 1. The first trend shows the persistence of social exclusion for specific groups, such as Indigenous peoples and asylum seekers, despite policy efforts to promote inclusion. This trend is observed across various geographical contexts, including Canada, Australia, and Italy.

The second trend indicates an increase in global social exclusion, attributed to factors such as neoliberalism, globalisation, and major events like the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend is reported in multiple studies across different regions, suggesting a widespread phenomenon. The third trend reveals a mixed picture, with some regions experiencing decreased social exclusion while others see an increase. For instance, Latin America initially saw reduced social exclusion due to specific policy measures, while East Asian countries experienced persistent exclusion despite economic growth. These findings highlight the complex and often contradictory nature of social inclusion trends globally, emphasising the importance of context-specific analysis.

The persistence of social exclusion for specific groups

The persistence of social exclusion for specific groups, despite policy efforts, reveals deep-rooted structural issues that social inclusion policies often fail to address adequately. In Canada, Absolon (2016) demonstrates how colonial legacies continue to exclude Indigenous peoples, despite government reconciliation efforts. *The Indian Act*, which still governs many aspects of Indigenous life, perpetuates systemic inequality by maintaining a separate legal status for Indigenous peoples that often results in reduced access to resources and decision-making power (Absolon, 2016). Similarly, in Australia and Italy, Armillei and Mansouri (2017) show how institutional racism maintains the exclusion of asylum seekers. They highlight specific policies, such as Australia's offshore processing centres and Italy's 'hotspot' approach, which violate human rights and exacerbate exclusion by isolating asylum seekers from society and denying them basic services (Armillei and Mansouri, 2017). These cases illustrate that social inclusion policies often fail to address underlying power structures and historical injustices, instead focusing on surface-level integration that does not challenge the status quo. This limitation of current social inclusion approaches is evident in multiple contexts and has several important implications.

In the case of Indigenous peoples in Canada, Absolon (2016) argues that social inclusion policies often take an 'add and stir' approach, attempting to integrate Indigenous people into existing societal structures without fundamentally altering those structures. For example, efforts to increase Indigenous representation in higher education or the workforce, while important, do not address the deeper issues of land rights, self-governance, and cultural sovereignty that are at the heart of Indigenous exclusion (Absolon, 2016). Similarly, Armillei and Mansouri (2017) demonstrate how policies aimed at asylum seekers in Australia and Italy often focus on language acquisition and job skills training, without addressing the systemic discrimination and xenophobia that create barriers to true inclusion. They argue that these policies 'fail to challenge the racialised construction of national identity' that underpins exclusionary practices (Armillei and Mansouri, 2017). This focus on surface-level integration is problematic for several reasons: (1) by not challenging underlying structures, these policies implicitly reinforce the idea that excluded groups must adapt to the dominant society, rather than society adapting to become more

Table 1. Trends in social in/exclusion

Theme	Trend	Cause	Geography	Type of Study	Reference
Persistence of social exclusion for specific groups	Persistence of social exclusion of Indigenous peoples	Colonialism and nonrepresentation	Canada	Conceptual	Absolon (2016)
	Persistence social exclusion of asylum-seekers in Australia and Italy	Institutional tradition of racism and control toward 'otherized' communities	Australia and Italy	Conceptual	Armillei and Mansouri (2017)
	Persistent social exclusion of Haitians in the Bahamas	Public xenophobia	Bahamas and Haiti	Empirical	Bennett (2010)
	Persistence of social exclusion for asylum seekers	*	Global	Review	Daiute et al. (2021)
	Increased social exclusion for African emigrants	*	Africa and Europe	Empirical	Katarzyna and Agata (2018)
Increased global social exclusion	Increased social exclusion	Neoliberalism and social cohesion policies	South Africa	Conceptual	Bidandi et al. (2021)
	Increased social exclusion	2008 financial crisis and COVID-19 pandemic	Global	Editorial	Cano-Hila (2022)
	Persistence of social exclusion	Focus on individual rights, antagonism between nations, focus on international actors instead of nations	Global	Legal review	Castellino and Bradshaw (2015)
	Increased social exclusion	*	Global	Conceptual	Czupich (2020)
	Persistent social exclusion	*	Asia	Editorial	Etzold (2019)
	Persistence of social exclusion	*	Montenegro	Empirical	Golubovic et al. (2022)
	Increased social exclusion in South Africa	Climate change	South Africa	Review	Khine and Langkulsen (2023)
	Undoing of socially inclusive housing policy	Neoliberalism and global financial crises	Greece	Conceptual	Maloutas et al. (2020)
	Increased social exclusion	2008 global financial crisis	Australia	Empirical	Martinez and Perales (2017)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Theme	Trend	Cause	Geography	Type of Study	Reference
	Increased social exclusion throughout the 20th century	Globalisation	Global	Conceptual	Middell and Naumann (2010)
	Increased social exclusion	Neoliberalism, globalisation, and the 2008 global financial crisis	Global	Conceptual	Munck (2012)
	Persistence of social exclusion in urban areas	Inefficacy of urban social inclusion policies	Global	Empirical	Sianes and Vela-Jiménez (2020)
	Persistence of social exclusion, particularly in South Asian and Sub-Saharan Africa	*	Global	Conceptual	Stefan et al. (2019)
	Increase in social exclusion	Nationalistic and xenophobic policy discourse in relation to borders and immigration as a result of climate change, economic shocks, and political instability	Global	Editorial	Wotherspoon (2018)
Mixed decrease and increase of social exclusion in certain contexts	Persistence of social exclusion in East Asia and the Pacific; reduced social exclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean	Democratisation, end of structural adjustment policies, economic growth, increased public social investment and social protection in Latin America and the Caribbean	East Asian and the Pacific; Latin America and the Caribbean	Empirical	Cecchini (2014)
	Decreased social exclusion in South America until mid-2010s; resurgence of social exclusion thereafter	Breakdown of neoliberalism through new industrial and social inclusion policies; possible trend of increased social exclusion through a resurgence of neoliberal policies after mid-2010s	South America	Conceptual	Ordóñez and Sánchez (2017)
	Decreased social exclusion in some European nations and an increase in others from 2010 to 2017	*	Europe	Empirical	Pawlas (2019)

*No reason given.

inclusive; and (2) policies that do not address historical injustices fail to recognise how past actions continue to shape present-day exclusion. For instance, the intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools in Canada continues to affect Indigenous communities but is often overlooked in social inclusion initiatives (Absolon, 2016); without addressing root causes, social inclusion policies may achieve short-term gains but fail to create sustainable, long-term change. Koller and Stoddart (2021) argue that this is particularly evident in policies aimed at including people with disabilities, where accessibility measures often focus on physical barriers while ignoring attitudinal and systemic obstacles; policies focused on integration often implicitly frame excluded groups as 'lacking' something that needs to be corrected, rather than recognising the systemic barriers that create exclusion. This can reinforce stigma and stereotypes (Numans et al., 2023); and by focusing on integration into existing structures, these policies miss the opportunity to create truly inclusive societies that value and benefit from diverse perspectives and experiences. To truly address social exclusion, policies need to go beyond surface-level integration and actively work to transform societal structures and power dynamics. This might involve, for example, reforming political systems to ensure meaningful representation of marginalised groups, addressing wealth inequality through redistributive policies, or reimagining educational systems to incorporate diverse knowledge systems and histories. As Daly and Silver (2008) argue, effective social inclusion requires a shift from focusing solely on the excluded to examining and challenging the structures and processes that create exclusion in the first place. This more transformative approach to social inclusion policy represents a significant challenge but is necessary for creating genuinely inclusive societies.

A trend toward increased global social exclusion

The trend of increased global social exclusion is attributed to multiple interconnected factors. Bidandi et al. (2021) argue that neoliberal policies in South Africa have increased social exclusion by prioritising market solutions over social cohesion. They point to the privatisation of public services and the reduction of social welfare programs as key factors contributing to increased inequality and exclusion (Bidandi et al., 2021).

Cano-Hila (2022) links increased social exclusion to the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, citing increased unemployment and poverty rates across Europe. The author notes that these crises have disproportionately affected already vulnerable groups, widening existing social gaps (Cano-Hila, 2022). Other attributions to this increase were climate change (Wotherspoon, 2018; Khine and Langkulsen, 2023). Munck (2012) provides a broader perspective, arguing that globalisation has exacerbated social exclusion by increasing economic inequality and labor market instability. He highlights how the global movement of capital and the resulting deindustrialisation in many countries have led to job losses and increased precarity, particularly for low-skilled workers (Munck, 2012).

The apparent contradiction between increased social inclusion policies and rising social exclusion suggests policy ineffectiveness. Sianes and Vela-Jiménez (2020) found that urban social inclusion policies often fail due to poor implementation and lack of coordination between different levels of government. They argue that many policies are developed without sufficient understanding of local contexts or involvement of excluded groups in their design (Sianes and Vela-Jiménez, 2020, pp. 5799–5800).

Mixed decrease and increase of social exclusion in certain contexts

A final trend in the literature has been a mix of decreased and increased reports of social exclusion in certain regional contexts. Regional variations in social exclusion trends highlight the importance of context-specific approaches and the complex interaction between economic policies, social protection systems, and social inclusion outcomes. Cecchini (2014) attributes

decreased social exclusion in Latin America to specific policy measures, such as conditional cash transfer programmes and increased public investment in education and health. These policies, characteristic of a more social democratic approach, have helped reduce poverty and improve access to education and healthcare (Cecchini, 2014). In contrast, Cecchini notes that East Asian countries experienced persistent social exclusion despite economic growth, due to limited social protection systems. This reflects a more conservative welfare regime approach, where economic growth is prioritised over redistributive policies (Cecchini, 2014). Ordóñez and Sánchez (2017) provide a more view of Latin America, showing how initial progress in reducing social exclusion was later reversed with the resurgence of neoliberal policies. They argue that many countries in the region had moved away from neoliberal policies, implementing more comprehensive social programs that led to decreased social exclusion. However, by the mid-2010s, there was a resurgence of market-oriented policies, which the authors characterise as a return to neoliberal approaches. This shift involved reducing state intervention in social welfare and emphasising individual responsibility and market solutions, which the authors argue contributed to increased social exclusion. Lastly, Pawlas (2019) noted increased social exclusion in some European countries between 2010 and 2017 and decreased social exclusion in others but stopped short of attributing this difference to a particular cause. These contrasts demonstrate that economic growth alone is insufficient for social inclusion. The nature of social policies, political systems, and the broader economic model play crucial roles in determining social inclusion outcomes.

Implications

These findings have significant implications for social inclusion theory, policy, and practice. The persistent exclusion of certain groups challenges current theoretical understandings of social inclusion, suggesting that theories need to more explicitly address historical injustices, power dynamics, and structural inequalities. For policy development, these findings imply a need for more holistic approaches that combine targeted interventions with broader structural reforms. Policies must address both immediate needs and long-term structural barriers and should be developed with the active participation of excluded groups. Future research should focus on developing measures of social inclusion that can capture its multidimensional nature, as suggested by Cordier *et al.* (2017) in their systematic review of social inclusion measures. Additionally, there is a clear need for more longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of social inclusion policies and to identify the factors that contribute to sustainable social inclusion outcomes. Moving forward, addressing social exclusion will require understanding its root causes and more context-specific approaches to promoting inclusion.

Trends in social in/exclusion policy

While we were again unable to identify a study that examined the question of national, regional, or global trends in social in/exclusion policy directly, we were able to piece together two macro trends with studies that looked at social in/exclusion policy in particular countries. We found two broad trends in this literature – the development and expansion of social inclusion policy in numerous countries since the 1980s and the recent retrenchment of social inclusion policy in certain contexts – detailed below and in Table 2. The first trend shows the development and expansion of social inclusion policies in numerous countries since the 1980s. This trend is evident across various regions, including Europe, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia. Many of these policies focus on areas such as education, employment, and digital inclusion. The second trend, however, indicates a more recent retrenchment of social inclusion policies in certain contexts. This is particularly noticeable in countries such as Australia and the UK, where initial enthusiasm for comprehensive social inclusion agendas has given way to more limited approaches. This trend often coincides with shifts towards more neoliberal policy orientations.

Table 2. Trends in social in/exclusion policy

Theme	Trend	Geography	Type of Study	Reference
Development of social inclusion policy	Increase in social inclusion policy is associated with decreased food insecurity	West Africa	Empirical	Anser et al. (2021)
	Establishment and increase in social inclusion policy beginning in the 1980s	Europe	Conceptual	Bernhard (2011)
	Increase in social inclusion policy	Australia, United Kingdom, and United Nations	Empirical	Cappo and Verity (2014)
	Evolution of agricultural policy in the 1980s to social inclusion policy in the 2010s	Europe	Empirical	Caraher (2015)
	Development of social inclusion policy in Australia (with the Social Inclusion Agenda) and Europe, and more modestly in Canada and New Zealand, since the 1990s	Australia, Canada, Europe, New Zealand	Conceptual	Carey et al. (2012)
	Development of social inclusion policy in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Indonesia, Macedonia, Nepal, and the United Kingdom since the 1990s	Australia, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Macedonia, Nepal, and the United Kingdom	Empirical	Chan et al. (2014)
	Implementation of additional social inclusion policies in 2010	Hong Kong	Empirical	Cheung (2013)
	Increasing focus of social inclusion policy by the European Union	Europe	Legal Review	Dawson (2018)
	Growth of neoliberal social inclusion policies in Australia between 2008 and 2012	Australia	Empirical	Deeming and Smyth (2015)
	Despite efforts to promote the social inclusion of the Thai Lao in Thailand by the national government in the last decade, their social exclusion persists	Thailand	Empirical	Draper et al. (2022)
	Social inclusion policy has been associated with more people attending higher education	Australia	Conceptual	Gale and Hodge (2014)
	The Europeanisation (neoliberalisation) of social inclusion policy since the early 2000s	Macedonia	Empirical	Gerovska Mitev (2013)
	Growth of social inclusion policy in higher education in Brazil, India, South Africa, and the United States	Brazil, India, South Africa, and the United States	Empirical	Gururaj et al. (2021)
	Establishment of social inclusion policy in Brazil in the late 1980s	Brazil	Empirical	Krüger et al. (2022)
	Like the United Kingdom, the growth of Australia's social inclusion policy in 2007 followed neoliberal trends	Australia	Conceptual	Marston and Dee (2015)

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued)

Theme	Trend	Geography	Type of Study	Reference
	Growth of social inclusion policy (mainly related to languages) in the Baltic states	Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania	Empirical	Muiznieks et al. (2013)
	Growth of Australian social inclusion policy from 2007 to 2013	Australia	Empirical	Saunders (2015)
	Growth of social inclusion policy (mainly in the areas of employment and economic integration) with the onset of the Europe 2020 strategy	Europe	Legal Review	Schoukens et al. (2015)
	Development of social inclusion policies in Brazil	Brazil	Empirical	Veiga and Rodrigues (2016)
	Increase in social inclusion policy through efforts to close the digital divide	Global, Hong Kong, and South Korea	Empirical	Wong et al. (2010)
Retrenchment of social inclusion policy	Abolishment of Australia's Social Inclusion Unit in 2011	Australia	Conceptual	Dean and Broomhill (2018)
	While (neoliberal) social inclusion policy expanded in the United Kingdom in recent decades, Brexit will promote social exclusion and gender inequality	United Kingdom	Empirical	Fagan and Rubery (2018)
	Diffusion of social inclusion policy through NGO networks in Serbia	Serbia	Empirical	Webb (2016)
	Expansion of social inclusion policy in the 2000s and subsequent retrenchment in the early 2010s in Australia	Australia	Conceptual	Wilson and Spoehr (2015)

These findings suggest that while there has been a global movement towards developing social inclusion policies, recent years have seen a more complex picture emerging, with some countries scaling back their efforts. This underscores the dynamic nature of social inclusion policy and its sensitivity to political and economic shifts.

Development of social inclusion policy by numerous countries

The literature pointed to a broad movement starting in the 1980s of the development and expansion of social inclusion policy and the reformulation of certain existing social policies to the narrative of social inclusion policy in numerous national contexts. Countries in nearly every region of the globe and international organisations like the United Nations and World Bank soon adopted the agenda of social inclusion policy. The literature generally attributed the popularisation of social inclusion policy to the European Union and the UK Labour government of the 1990s, which facilitated the adoption of the policy agenda in other countries. Interestingly, most of the literature pointed to policies between the 1990s and early 2010s, leaving a gap in knowledge of more recent policies. Our review also identified several specific examples of targeted initiatives aimed at social inclusion, demonstrating the diverse approaches countries have taken to address social exclusion. In West Africa, Anser *et al.* (2021) reported on social inclusion policies specifically aimed at reducing food insecurity. These policies included targeted food assistance programmes, agricultural support initiatives for small-scale farmers, and community-based nutrition education. The study found that these interventions not only improved food security but also enhanced social cohesion within communities. In Hong Kong, Cheung and Leung (2013) documented the implementation of additional social inclusion policies in 2010 that focused on fostering social inclusion through public housing and community development. Specific measures included the expansion of public housing quotas for disadvantaged groups, the introduction of mixed-income housing projects, and the establishment of community centres offering vocational training and social services. These initiatives aimed to reduce spatial segregation and enhance social mobility. Gururaj *et al.* (2021) highlighted the growth of social inclusion policies in higher education across Brazil, India, South Africa, and the United States, aimed at increasing access for underrepresented groups. These included racial quotas in Brazilian public universities, expansion of reservation policies for scheduled castes and tribes in Indian higher education institutions, extended curriculum programmes and financial support for historically disadvantaged students in South Africa, and the continuation and evolution of affirmative action policies in U.S. college admissions. While these policies have increased diversity in higher education, challenges remain in ensuring retention and success of underrepresented students. In the Baltic states, Muiznieks *et al.* (2013) noted the development of social inclusion policies primarily related to language rights and integration of linguistic minorities. These policies included language training programmes for non-native speakers, bilingual education initiatives in schools, cultural integration programmes, and policies to ensure representation of linguistic minorities in public sector employment. While these policies have made progress in linguistic integration, tensions remain, particularly regarding the balance between promoting national languages and protecting minority language rights. These examples demonstrate how social inclusion policies have been tailored to address specific exclusion issues in various national contexts, reflecting the multidimensional nature of social exclusion and the need for context-specific interventions.

Retrenchment of social inclusion policy in certain contexts

A subset of the literature described a recent turn toward the retrenchment of social inclusion policy in Australia, Latin America, Serbia, and the United Kingdom, following the resurgence of neoliberal and devolving trends in social policy in the early- and mid-2010s. In their 2018 study, Fagan and Rubery interestingly point to the possibility that Brexit in the United Kingdom would

undo the work of social inclusion policy by promoting gender inequality, which raises the possibility that recent global trends toward political instability, regime change, war, and changes in global order may explain trends in the retrenchment of social inclusion policy along with the larger theme of neoliberalism. While we identified two broad trends in social inclusion policy – expansion since the 1980s and recent retrenchment in certain contexts – the relationship between these policy trends and their impact on social exclusion prevalence is complex and not fully understood. This complexity arises from several factors. Despite the expansion of social inclusion policies, social exclusion has persisted or even increased in many contexts, suggesting that policy implementation alone may be insufficient to address deeply rooted social exclusion issues. The effectiveness of social inclusion policies varies across different contexts, which may be attributed to differences in welfare regimes, economic conditions, and cultural factors. For instance, countries with more comprehensive welfare systems might have seen better outcomes from social inclusion policies compared to those with more limited social protection. The retrenchment of social inclusion policies in certain contexts can be attributed to several factors, including shifts in political ideologies, economic pressures following the 2008 financial crisis, and changing public attitudes towards social inclusion initiatives. For example, in Australia, Wilson and Spoehr (2015) documented the expansion of social inclusion policy under the Labor government from 2007 to 2013, followed by retrenchment under the subsequent Liberal-National government. Our ability to draw definitive conclusions about the causal relationships between policy trends and social exclusion outcomes is limited by the lack of detailed national case studies and longitudinal data on policy impacts. This gap in the literature, particularly outside of Australia and Europe, prevents a comprehensive understanding of how policy expansion or retrenchment affects social exclusion prevalence in different contexts. Given these complexities, there is a clear need for future research to focus on developing comprehensive national case studies and longitudinal analyses of social inclusion policy impacts. Such research would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how policy developments affect social exclusion outcomes in various contexts. It would also help explain why some contexts have experienced policy retrenchment while others have not, and how these policy shifts relate to changes in social exclusion prevalence.

Social inclusion policy in national context: A call for case studies and global synthesis

While many nations have made efforts to intervene in the process of social inclusion through policy mechanisms, there is a lack of descriptive case studies that detail the histories, structures, and functions of social inclusion policy at the national level outside of Australia, the European Union, and the United Kingdom.

Feldman (2021) claimed that social inclusion has historically been one of the key aims of welfare states in Europe and the United States. However, the fickleness of conceptualising social inclusion has allowed for varied policy frameworks that fit with national culture and context, which have led some scholars to posit that social inclusion in the policy context has mainly manifested through means of economic integration, mainly in the areas of employment and housing (Cordier *et al.*, 2017). Social inclusion was first addressed by a concerted policy response in the 1980s by the European Commission (Wilson, 2006), where the concept of social exclusion eventually replaced that of poverty (Williams and White, 2003). By 1989, the European Commission was asked to address social exclusion, which lead to the institution of the United Kingdom's Social Exclusion Unit (Chau, 2018). The concept persisted in Europe into the twenty-first century as the Council of Europe's Human Dignity and Social Exclusion Project.

While Cordier *et al.* (2017) found that social inclusion policy has mainly focused on decreasing unemployment and homelessness, which points to economic integration as a key pathway to social inclusion, Das *et al.* (2013) claim that no single set of policies can be classified as 'social inclusion policies'. Instead, they are a broad set of policies that cut across the domains of markets, services, and spaces with an emphasis on social inclusion. Embodying this philosophy, many

nations and international organisations have targeted multiple sectors with their interventions. A proponent of this line of thinking, UNECE (2022) found that social policy related to social inclusion has aimed at promoting equitable opportunities, inclusive growth, well-being, dignity, empowerment, social cohesion, stability, security, social justice, and social mobility, while limiting inequality, social divisions, threats to growth, and radicalisation.

Essentially, the policy approach has been to first identify which groups in a society may experience social exclusion, and then to grant equal legal rights or citizenship, remove barriers to access resources, or redistribute resources. Daly and Silver (2008) argue that most policy initiatives to promote social inclusion have targeted particular excluded groups, which may lead to further feelings of stigmatisation and that stronger policy mechanisms target those in power instead, leading to an examination of structural inequalities. Despite efforts at policies and programs to promote social inclusion, these programmes may perpetuate perceived and material social exclusion among service recipients (Numans et al., 2023).

Undoubtedly, governments must navigate complex political landscapes with social inclusion initiatives. For instance, Das et al. (2013) raised the tension between targeted and universal programmes for social inclusion. A natural conclusion after demonstrating that a group is excluded is to then to take steps to include them, but such efforts to target a specific group may draw the ire of other groups for a variety of reasons – such as a perception of special treatment – that can raise political obstacles. Nonetheless, many nations have accomplished targeted initiatives aimed at social inclusion.

Examples of national social policy efforts aimed at social inclusion include the Australian Social Inclusion Board, the Canadian Opportunity for All initiative, and the New Zealand Child and Youth Well-being Strategy (UNECE, 2022). Multi and international efforts include the Europe 2020 strategy, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the UN 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the World Bank (Atkinson and Marlier, 2010; Rogge and Self, 2019; UNECE, 2022; The World Bank, 2023; UNDESCA, 2023).

Despite our efforts, we were unable to identify detailed descriptions of the histories, structures, and functions of social inclusion policy outside of Australia and Europe. To address this gap in knowledge, we suggest future research set out to develop case studies of social inclusion policy. In the case of Australia and Europe, there should be updated reviews (for instance, we were unable to find descriptions of Australian social inclusion policy after the mid-2010s), and in the case of nations outside of Australia and Europe, we suggest that welfare scholars develop descriptions of their own countries. In addition to the rich detail of the histories, structures, and functions of social inclusion policy in various contexts, this undertaking would allow for the aggregation of cases to better understand global trends in social inclusion policy and the empirical study of the effects of various approaches to social inclusion policy on the process of social inclusion. Furthermore, detailed case studies provide rich, contextual information about how social inclusion policies are formulated, implemented, and evaluated in specific national settings. For example, a case study of Australia's Social Inclusion Agenda (2007–2013) could reveal how changing political leadership affected policy continuity and implementation (Carey et al., 2012). Such studies are essential for understanding the nuances of policy implementation and factors contributing to success or failure. Moreover, a collection of well-documented case studies allows for robust comparative analyses. For instance, comparing social inclusion policies for migrants in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands could highlight different approaches to integration and their outcomes (Costa and Ewert, 2014; Ravn et al., 2022). This helps identify best practices and common challenges across different contexts. Case studies also illuminate how global trends in social inclusion policy are interpreted and adapted at the national level. An example could be examining how the UN's Sustainable Development Goals related to social inclusion are implemented in countries with different

welfare regimes, such as the UK (liberal), France (conservative), and Denmark (social democratic) (Castellino and Bradshaw, 2015).

For social policy scholars, conducting such case studies could involve multiple methods: policy document analysis, such as examining official policy texts, legislative debates, and implementation guidelines (e.g., analysing the evolution of the UK's *Equality Act* 2010 through various drafts and parliamentary discussions); interviews with key stakeholders, including policymakers (e.g., ministers responsible for social inclusion), implementers (such as local government officials or NGO leaders), and members of target populations (such as representatives from disability rights groups or ethnic minority communities); longitudinal studies tracking policy outcomes over time, such as following a cohort of beneficiaries of Brazil's Bolsa Família programme over a decade to assess long-term impacts on social inclusion; and comparative analyses, for instance, comparing the effectiveness of language integration policies for immigrants in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. These studies should capture both formal aspects of policy design and the lived experiences of targeted populations. For example, a study on social inclusion policies for people with disabilities could combine analysis of accessibility legislation with in-depth interviews of disabled individuals about their daily experiences of inclusion or exclusion. By undertaking such comprehensive case studies, social policy scholars can contribute to a more nuanced and practical understanding of social inclusion policies. This knowledge is crucial for informing future policy development, such as designing more effective anti-discrimination measures, and improving implementation strategies, like enhancing coordination between different levels of government in federal systems.

Discussion

Our review of global trends in social inclusion and social inclusion policy has pointed to the general expansion and retrenchment of social inclusion policy amid increasing social exclusion associated with global social, economic, and political trends. In the absence of recent, detailed case descriptions of social inclusion policy at the national level, we call for a renewed scholarly focus on case studies of social inclusion policy.

Our review points to several gaps in the literature that will likely be important for the international community and socially excluded groups around the world in the coming decades. Climate change, migration, ageing populations, and technological advances all stand as potential threats to social inclusion that warrant further study.

Anthropogenic climate change is associated with increased food and water insecurity, increased frequency and intensity of natural hazards, political instability, and mass migration (IPCC, 2022). Climate change, per se, has not been a central part of traditional social inclusion conceptualisations. However, environmental factors have been considered in social inclusion frameworks to varying degrees over time (Grant, 2001). Early conceptualisations of social inclusion, such as those developed by Levitas (1998) and Silver (1994), focused primarily on economic, social, and political dimensions of exclusion. Environmental factors, including climate-related issues, were not explicitly part of these frameworks. However, as awareness of environmental issues has grown, scholars have begun to incorporate these considerations into social inclusion concepts. Arthurson and Baum (2015) explored the links between social inclusion and climate change vulnerability in Brisbane, Australia. They found that when social dimensions are added to physical vulnerability, it amplifies the scale of overall vulnerability to climate events, suggesting a need to integrate social inclusion frameworks with climate vulnerability assessments. Saad-Filho (2021) argues for the integration of 'green' macroeconomic policies with progressive industrial and social policies in developing economies, recognising the interconnection between addressing climate change and promoting social inclusion. Adlam (2020) provides a philosophical perspective, suggesting that climate disaster may fundamentally reshape our understanding of

inclusion and exclusion, as we all potentially become 'unhoused' in the Anthropocene. Habeeb and Javaid (2019) illustrate how marginalised populations, particularly those living in slums in Dehradun, India, are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change impacts, underscoring the importance of incorporating social inclusion considerations into climate resilience planning. Despite these efforts and while scholars such as Adlam (2020) and Ben Brik and Brown (2024) have begun to raise the environmental dimension of social inclusion, the literature inadequately addresses the question of exactly how environmental factors relate to social inclusion, how climate change and natural hazards relate to social inclusion, and what social inclusion policy may be formulated to address these relations. Therefore, climate change specifically represents a significant gap in traditional conceptualisations and focus. As climate change increasingly affects social and economic systems, there is a growing need to more fully integrate climate considerations into social inclusion frameworks and policies.

Amid climate change, other factors like economic changes, political instability, and war will likely contribute to the continued salience of human migration, immigration policy, and subsequent immigration politics. While a growing literature has examined social inclusion among various migrant groups (e.g., Gingrich and Lightman, 2015; Medina and Thomas, 2021), many nations continue to exclude migrants from social programmes and fail to extend citizenship rights to certain groups. Moreover, no country currently includes climate change or natural hazards as justification for seeking asylum. As climate change and mass migration persist, future research should address our gaps in knowledge and formulate social inclusion policies to address these concomitant social issues.

Many nations are also facing growing pressures from ageing populations and technological advances that will likely influence social inclusion and social inclusion policy. Like migration, a well-established literature examines social inclusion among older adults and minority language speakers (e.g., Walsh et al., 2020; Nyqvist et al., 2021) As populations grow disproportionally older in many wealthy nations, pension programmes are growing increasingly salient as they face financial and political pressure and serve as a mechanism by which governments can promote social inclusion for older people (Zhu and Walker, 2019). As governments make changes to pension policies, future research should ask how those changes relate to social inclusion. Further, rapid technological developments in artificial intelligence, computing, and internet connectivity may also impact social inclusion by again reshaping national labor markets and the global economy. We suggest that future research build on the impactful area of digital inclusion (e.g., Ragnedda et al., 2022; UNDESA 2021) by exploring how these recent technological innovations relate to social inclusion.

Our review also demonstrated gaps in understanding social inclusion policy comparatively and empirically. Future research should examine the relationship between social inclusion policy and welfare regime types to understand if social inclusion policy operates similarly to and can be grouped with welfare policy at large. A more robust comparative framework could significantly enhance our understanding of social inclusion policies across different contexts. Building on the welfare regime typologies developed by Esping-Andersen (1990) and more recently expanded by Aspalter (2023), future research could explore how different welfare state models approach social inclusion. For instance, how do social democratic regimes in Scandinavia conceptualise and implement social inclusion policies compared to liberal regimes in Anglo-Saxon countries or conservative regimes in Continental Europe? Such comparative analysis could reveal how underlying ideological and institutional differences shape social inclusion efforts. Moreover, extending this comparative lens to the Global South could illuminate how emerging welfare states are integrating social inclusion concepts, potentially revealing innovative approaches that diverge from traditional Western models. This comparative perspective is crucial not only for academic understanding but also for policy learning and transfer, allowing countries to learn from diverse experiences in promoting social inclusion.

Moreover, many studies in our review suggested the persistence and even increase in social exclusion globally, increasing during the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence that confirms these claims and evaluates how national social inclusion policy may have mitigated or exacerbated this trend. Future studies employing quantitative methods to measure prevalence of social exclusion and rigorous policy impact evaluations would help fill this gap. Specifically, large-scale longitudinal studies tracking social exclusion indicators across multiple countries could provide more robust evidence of global trends. These studies could utilise standardised measures of social exclusion, such as the EU's At Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion (AROPE) indicator, adapted for broader international use. For policy impact evaluation, quasi-experimental designs comparing outcomes in regions with different social inclusion policies could offer insights into policy effectiveness. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative outcome measures with qualitative data on lived experiences of marginalised groups could provide a more understanding of policy impacts. Furthermore, systematic reviews and meta-analyses of existing empirical studies on social inclusion policy outcomes could help synthesise current evidence and identify key gaps. Developing and validating culturally-sensitive measurement tools for social inclusion across diverse global contexts is another crucial area for future research. Lastly, studies examining the interplay between social inclusion policies and other policy domains (e.g., economic, health, education) could illuminate how different policy approaches interact to influence social exclusion outcomes.

In closing, we should note that the search terms for our review naturally act as a limitation to this study. Since we were unable to find a previous review on this topic, we arbitrarily chose search terms for study selection based on our research questions and theoretical positionality. However, because social inclusion and social inclusion policy have been defined so broadly, we likely excluded studies that implicitly address social inclusion through other social policies. In addition, our choice to limit the review to literature published between 2008 and 2023 may have excluded relevant earlier works. While this timeframe allowed for a manageable and focused review of recent trends, it potentially overlooks important historical developments in social inclusion theory and policy. Future reviews might consider a longer timeframe or specifically examine the evolution of social inclusion concepts and policies over a more extended period.

Conclusion

As global pressures from social, economic, political, and cultural forces build, this study can serve as a guidepost for scholars and policymakers to understand and learn from global trends in social inclusion and social inclusion policy to inform our future. Returning to our initial assertion that our research questions would help clarify the concept of social inclusion, our review has indeed shed light on several aspects of this complex concept. First, our analysis of global trends revealed that social inclusion is not a static concept, but one that evolves over time and varies across contexts. We found that while early conceptualisations often focused on economic participation, particularly in the labour market, more recent understandings encompass a broader range of societal domains including political, cultural, and social spheres.

Second, our review of social inclusion policies across different countries highlighted the diverse ways in which the concept is operationalised. This diversity underscores the context-dependent nature of social inclusion and the need for tailored approaches in different societal settings. For instance, social inclusion policies in social democratic welfare regimes tend to emphasise universal access to services, while those in liberal regimes often focus more on targeted interventions for specific excluded groups.

Third, our findings revealed tensions within the concept of social inclusion itself. For example, we observed conflicts between approaches that aim to include marginalised groups within existing

societal structures and those that call for fundamental changes to these structures. This tension highlights the political nature of social inclusion and the need to consider power dynamics when conceptualising and implementing social inclusion initiatives.

Lastly, our review highlighted gaps in current conceptualisations of social inclusion, particularly in relation to emerging global challenges such as climate change, technological advancements, and increasing migration. These gaps suggest areas where the concept of social inclusion may need to be expanded or reconsidered in future research and policy development.

In the absence of recent, detailed case descriptions of social inclusion policy at the national level, we also call for a renewed scholarly focus on case studies of social inclusion policy. We also discuss the likelihood that persistent climate change, migration, ageing populations, and technological innovations are poised to dramatically influence global social inclusion and suggest that future research and policymaking seek to understand and mitigate the relationship between these developments and social inclusion.

As we look to the future and the growing needs of excluded populations, we aim to learn from and build on the global trends elucidated by this study to promote the inclusion of excluded groups around the world.

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