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Shang, Liang; Chandra, Yanto

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ARTICLE

Exploring Social Entrepreneurship Co-Production Processes in the Disability Sector: Individual and Collective Action Views

Liang Shang^{1*}  and Yanto Chandra² 

¹Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Lingnan University, Hong Kong and ²Department of Public and International Affairs, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon, Hong Kong

*Corresponding author, email: echoshang@ln.edu.hk

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Abstract

From a humble experiment to tackle social problems, social enterprises (SEs) have transformed into key co-producers for a wide range of social services. However, despite an increasing interest in co-production, most SE studies in the field adopted a single-sided view of co-production, thereby limiting what co-production entails and how it works in SE. Drawing upon the New Public Governance (NPG) framework and an integrative view of co-production that embraces individual and collective action, we explored how the co-production process is enacted and designed from a service provider's perspective and presented qualitative insights from eight SEs in providing work-integration services for people with disabilities. Our findings revealed *strategic*, *operational* and *identity* dimensions of co-production in SE. We also showed the different roles that SEs and their stakeholders play in co-production and how these affect the processes. We offer a new contribution to SE co-production literature by highlighting a multi-dimensional co-production process model of SEs in their quest to deliver social services.

Keywords: social enterprises; co-production; disability; employment; stakeholders

Introduction

Social enterprises (SEs), which refer to organisations that aim to create social benefits using business activities (Nicholls and Teasdale, 2017), have become co-producer of the state for some years. Not surprisingly, there has been increasing interest in SE from the lens of co-production theory (e.g., Mazzei *et al.*, 2020; Calò *et al.*, 2018; Powell and Berry, 2021). Early co-production studies examined individual citizens' engagement in co-designing and co-delivering social services (e.g., Parks *et al.*, 1981). However, New Public Governance (NPG) has taken co-production to the next level, giving third-sector organisations such as SEs a more

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strategic role in co-producing services (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006), which coincides with state withdrawal in welfare provision (Hall *et al.*, 2016). In other words, co-production has morphed from an individual action where citizens act as *users* who co-produce services with the state (Bovaird *et al.*, 2015) or with SEs (Mazzei *et al.*, 2020) to a collective action where citizens *organise as groups* (e.g., third sector organisations such as SEs) to co-produce services alongside traditional service providers (Pestoff, 2012; Brandsen *et al.*, 2017). However, most SE studies adopt a single-sided view of co-production (i.e., the individual action), thereby limiting theoretical development in co-production.

Building on the premise that SE is a hybrid of public, private and civil society logics (Chandra and Paras, 2021), it appears that co-production, as it manifests in SEs, is likely to be complex, multifaceted, dynamic and involves various stakeholders rather than linear, one-dimensional or solo activities (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016; Mazzei *et al.*, 2020). On one end of the spectrum, the state positions SEs as a strategic tool for co-producing various services (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2004; Powell and Berry, 2021). As institutional bridges among sectors, SEs present a new solution to social and public problems deemed too complex or risky to tackle through unilateral organisational arrangements (Simmons, 2008). On the other end of the spectrum, SEs are facilitators of individual citizen (i.e., *users*, such as disabled people or the homeless) co-production by leveraging their voluntary participation and input in creating value inside and outside of SEs (e.g., Nicholls and Teasdale, 2017). In between the two spectrums, SEs represent the views of service users and engage in the marketisation of social services using commercial logic (Pestoff, 2006; Mazzei *et al.*, 2020), placing them in open competition with any business. As an embodiment of public-private-civil society logic (Chandra and Paras, 2021), SE is inherently pluralistic, thereby necessitating an integrated rather than a single-sided view of understanding SE from a co-production lens. Therefore, there is ample opportunity to push the ‘co-production in SE’ scholarship forward by integrating the *collection action* view, as an institutional bridge builder and partner of the state, in the delivery of social services, and the *individual action* view of co-production, as a user-provider co-production of services and business value.

Although SEs engage in diverse co-production processes (e.g., Chandra *et al.*, 2021), research on how SEs engage in co-production from an integrative view of individual and collective action has been limited. For example, Chandra *et al.*, (2021) examination of various SE co-production processes adopted a collective action view but placed the individual action view on the periphery. Similarly, Hall *et al.* (2016) examined the role of SEs as legitimate co-deliverer of health services under a ‘Right to Request’ policy initiative in the UK, ignoring the individual side of the action. Meanwhile, other SE studies examined the engagement of individual action in SE but ignored the collective action view (the exception is Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). Addressing SE co-production using an integrative lens may open new surprises, uncover paradoxes and unravel intricate relationships between SEs and their stakeholders in service production and delivery. This step will benefit theoretical development and offer SE practitioners and policymakers insights.

Because of the research puzzles above, we ask: *How do social enterprises engage in the co-production of social services? Specifically, what processes and roles are associated with their co-production processes?* In the following sections, we will briefly

outline the theoretical background that underlies the study, explain our methodology and report the findings.

Co-production in social enterprises

Co-production has been defined in various ways. Parks *et al.* (1981) described it as a '*mix of activities between regular service providers and citizens who consume services*'. Osborne and McLaughlin (2004) defined it as the '*involvement of third sector organisations in the direct provision of public and social services*'. Other co-production interpretations include '*engaging communities and co-producing tailored services to those in need*' (Hall *et al.*, 2016) and '*a service delivery role for voluntary and community organisations*' (Pestoff, 2012). From a service management perspective, co-production comprises the intrinsic interaction process between service providers and the users, as an inseparable component of service delivery (Osborne *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, from a public management perspective, the exploration of co-production focuses on how service providers strategically '*add-in*' service users' voluntary input into the service production and delivery (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). We adopted the latter approach for conceptualising co-production in this study, as our key focus is to examine the enactment of co-production processes in SEs from a service provider's perspective.

Literature on co-production has two strands (e.g., Sorrentino *et al.*, 2018; Mazzei *et al.*, 2020). The first strand focuses on institutional arrangements and service planning (the collective view of co-production). This view concerns the *state-third sector relationships* in delivering social services. Collective co-production is rooted in the NPG framework and draws from the idea that co-production is not confined to users (Bovaird, 2007) but also involves other types of organisational actors, such as non-governmental and third-sector organisations that deliver social services jointly with the state actors (Sorrentino *et al.*, 2018; Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). Examples include non-profit healthcare organisations that co-produce with public healthcare organisations to coordinate the delivery of healthcare services in rural villages (Chandra *et al.*, 2021) and studies showing how SEs co-produce a variety of social services (Calò *et al.*, 2018; Nicholls and Teasdale, 2017). In this view of co-production, SEs, as in their primary role, are service co-producers who enrich the service provision and replace or complement the use of some other means (McMullin, 2021; Miller *et al.*, 2012).

The second strand focuses on individual action (the individual view of co-production). This view concerns a *user-provider arrangement* where citizens contribute to the production of their services (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Pestoff, 2009). Examples include how individual citizens are involved in developing innovative services in public spaces through an urban living lab project (Nesti, 2018) and how service users can facilitate the personalisation of adult social care (Flemig and Osborne, 2019). In this process, service users are involved as co-producers who participate actively in the service planning and implementation to improve service quality (Mazzei *et al.*, 2020; Selloni and Corubolo, 2017) rather than just assuming the role of passive service users. Following Osborne *et al.* (2016), this individual lens can also be extended to include actors in the immediate environments of the

service users – for example, their families and social workers, who also give input to the service delivery system.

Despite a growing interest in using co-production as a theoretical lens in SE research, most prior studies have adopted a one-sided view (Sorrentino *et al.*, 2018). Some scholars have adopted a collective action view of co-production. For example, Miller *et al.* (2012) studied the growth of SEs established by community health staff as legitimate co-producers of health services. Some other scholars adopted an individual view concerning service user-provider relationships. For example, Burgess and Durrant (2019) examined how a time-credit SE in the UK engages individual volunteers from a reciprocal exchange angle. Similarly, Selloni and Corubolo (2017) studied how SEs engage service users and other local actors in co-designing their services in a customised and collaborative form. However, what is lacking in the extant literature is how SEs engage in co-production from an integrative view of individual and collective action and what practices are involved in these co-production processes (Bovaird, 2015).

Methodology

In this study, we employed an inductive qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We used a multiple-case study design to generate rich and thick cross-case comparisons to draw insights while generating more rigorous findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). We adopted an integrative view of co-production that embraces individual and collective action and explored how SEs ‘add-in’ various stakeholders’ input (e.g., beneficiaries, family caregivers, social workers) and enable co-production in their practices of employing people with disabilities from a service provider’s perspective.

Sampling and data collection

We situated the study in Hong Kong, a key hub for SEs in Asia, and investigated SEs that provide work-integration opportunities (i.e., work integration social enterprises or WISEs) for *people with disabilities*. SE has a special place in Hong Kong because it has been heavily promoted and funded by the government to address poverty and unemployment after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (Chui *et al.*, 2021). This step parallels the adoption of new public management in Hong Kong’s welfare policies (Lee and Haque, 2006) because SE is seen as an efficient and sustainable social service delivery model. With the introduction of various public funding schemes (e.g., Enhancing Self-Reliance Through District Partnership Programme) that incentivise non-profits to establish SEs, the early development of the SE sector in Hong Kong is primarily dominated by work-integration activities for disadvantaged populations, such as people with disabilities (Defourny and Kim, 2011). These historical contexts shape the characteristics of SEs in Hong Kong and their organisational activities (Chan *et al.*, 2022). Up till today, disability employment is still a relatively large sub-sector of SE in Hong Kong, with over 20% of the 700 SEs in this category focusing on various types of disability (e.g., visual and hearing impairment, physical disabilities, mental illness).

Our sampling frame was drawn from an online SE directory compiled by a major SE supporting organisation in Hong Kong that has around 700 SEs (SEBC, 2019). We sent interview invitations in January 2019 to 30 SEs. Our decision to select these 30 SEs is based on (1) they need to be well-established work-integration SEs with sufficient publicly available information, (2) they need to operate within the disability space of SE, (3) they must still be actively operating an SE by the time of data collection and (4) the key person (founders or managers) were still working with the SE at the time of data collection. Among the 30 SEs we invited, 12 eventually agreed to participate in the study. The convention in case study research is to have around six to ten cases to achieve theoretical saturation, as Eisenhardt (1989) suggested. As we collected our data, we stopped after the eighth case because we no longer found new themes in the data (reaching saturation).

All SEs in our study have an established work-integration model with a minimum of eight years of operating experience by the time of the interviews; thus, these organizations are mature SEs. For research informants, we interviewed active founders and executive managers of SEs who have intimate knowledge of their SEs. In some cases where founders are not easily identified because the SEs were established as a sub-unit of a large non-profit organisation, we interviewed the managers and supervisors who made strategic and operational decisions and are knowledgeable on the actual management and operation of the SEs. These individuals assume the same role as founders/co-founders in start-up SEs, except that they do not stake their own money. We did not focus on any one type of disability because our goal was to understand the *processes and practices of co-production in social enterprises* rather than idiosyncratic issues in disability. Ethics approval has been obtained from the University's research ethics committee prior to our interviews.

We interviewed 13 informants across the eight cases with in-depth knowledge of SEs. Some cases have multiple interviews (e.g., Case #1) as these SEs have several key frontline leaders who jointly contribute to the day-to-day activities of SEs. The interviews aimed to examine the co-production processes of SEs operating in the disability space. We did not use the term 'co-production' in the interviews but used layman's language. We started with general questions about SEs' practices in providing jobs for people with disabilities (see Appendix I for the interview protocol) and probed deeper into how they engaged various stakeholders in the process. The first author conducted the interviews in the workplace of each SE between February and May 2019. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. After the interviews, the recorded interviews were transcribed and translated from Cantonese to English by a research assistant who majored in translation. Additional secondary data were also collected from various online sources to triangulate the data and to verify the credibility of our interview data (e.g., cross-checking types of beneficiaries using SEs' annual reports that are publicly available). A summary of case characteristics is shown in Table 1.

Data analysis

We employed Gioia's methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), where we conducted an open-, axial-, and selective-coding process to code the interview transcript files. The methodology follows a gradual abstraction of codes from the first to second

Table 1. Case Background

Case	Interviewees	SE Activities	Business Nature	Years since Establishment (by 2019)	Legal Forms
1	#1 (manager), #2 (manager), #3 (social worker)	Trains and employs physically disabled people to produce custom-made souvenirs and deliver EQ training workshops to different organizations	Workshops; Souvenir Production	11	A charity under Section 88
2	#4 (superintendent)	Trains and employs people with intellectual disabilities to prepare pre-cut (i.e. wash, sort, peel and cut) vegetables for selling to partnered restaurants	Food Processing	16	A charity under Section 88
3	#5 (supervisor), #6 (manager)	A bakery that trains and employs people with intellectual disabilities to bake bread and cookies for sale	Bakery	9	A charity under Section 88
4	#7 (service manager)	A cleaning team that employs people with intellectual disabilities to provide cleaning services to individuals or companies; A bakery that trains and employs people with intellectual disabilities to bake cookies for sale and provide catering services.	Cleaning; Bakery	16	A charity under Section 88
5	#8 (manager), #9 (founder)	A vegetarian restaurant that employs hearing impaired people	Catering	8	Registered as a private company limited by shares
6	#10 (manager)	A vegetarian restaurant that employs hearing impaired people and intellectually disabled people	Catering	14	Registered as a private company limited by shares
7	#11 (manager), #12 (supervisor)	A cafeteria that trains and employs hearing impaired people	Catering	21	Registered as a company limited by guarantee
8	#13 (manager)	Trains and employs visually impaired people to guide workshops (i.e. tours) in absolute darkness through different situations	Experiential Workshops	9	Registered as a company limited by guarantee

levels and then the aggregate dimensions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The second author, who was not exposed to the field experience, analysed the data together with the first author, conducting a more theoretical, second-order analysis in an objective manner. We used a qualitative software package on the R platform (Huang, 2014) called RQDA to conduct data analysis. The authors read and coded the cases using a ‘think out loud’ approach to identify SEs’ co-production patterns and processes.

We also followed the ‘active categorisation’ process (Grodal *et al.*, 2021) by moving from generating initial categories to refining categories and eventually stabilising categories to ensure rigour in data analysis. For example, quotes such as ‘we hired people with different disadvantages so that they could help others’ and ‘our disabled employees work very well with elderly workers’ were abstracted into ‘*putting different groups of disadvantaged people to work together*’. Moreover, in reviewing our first-level codes and relating them to prior research, we identified that many codes related to the positive identities of employees. Thus, we created a category of ‘*promoting positive independence*’ as the label of a merged code. Finally, by looking deeper into how categories related to one another, we identified three main dimensions of co-production in SE: strategic, operational and identity.

After nine meetings between the authors over one and a half years, the research team reached a ‘consensus’ regarding the themes emerging from the data. Figure 1 below illustrates the data analytical process. In addition, the initial results were presented to practitioners and academia in several open seminars in 2020 and 2021 to gain initial feedback. This step helped us refine the categories as we juxtaposed them with the literature.

Findings

Upon inquiry into how SEs built co-production into their employment practices, our data analysis showed that SEs generally facilitate multiple co-production processes to tackle labour market inefficiency from three dimensions, integrating both the collective and individual sides of co-production. First, we found that SEs draw on *strategic co-production* with their unique positioning concerning other regular providers at an institutional level. From a collective action view, our SEs went beyond acting as sub-contractors to the state by co-governing the issues of disability employment along with other regular service providers. Second, from an individual action view, the SEs in this study facilitated *operational co-production* by actively involving their employees with disabilities and other actors in their immediate environments as co-producers to improve service users’ lived experiences (Osborne *et al.*, 2016). Thirdly, SEs also facilitated *identity co-production* in which employees are engaged in meaningful tasks and positions to co-construct positive social identities and connections.

Table 2 below highlights the first-level codes of each SE interviewed in this study in these three dimensions and their key characteristics.

Strategic co-production

We found that SEs in this study engage in strategic co-production by acting upon broader institutional arrangements (e.g., policy frameworks, existing supported

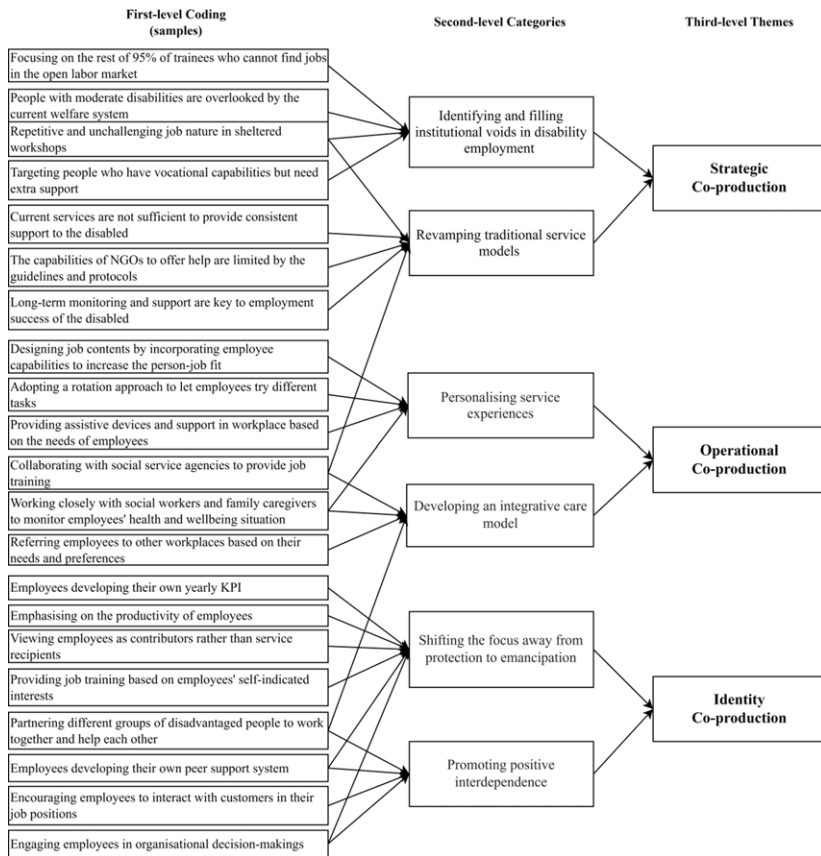


Figure 1. Data Analytical Process.

employment services, and subsidies to open employers) related to vocational rehabilitation and employment for the disabled. This dimension of co-production draws from a collective action view and concerns SEs' unique positioning and involvement in a parallel relationship with other regular producers – for example, private contractors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in *co-governing* the issues of disability employment at an institutional level (McMullin, 2021; Nicholls and Teasdale, 2017). Importantly, our findings also revealed that SEs not only engage in direct service provision but also seek to fill policy and service gaps left by current institutional arrangements by 1) identifying and filling institutional voids and 2) revamping traditional service models.

Identifying and filling institutional voids in disability employment

We found that all SEs in our study (cases #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, and #8) played a *void-filling role* by creating new and, in some ways, better employment opportunities and services to the underserved communities, which include individuals with

Table 2. Sample First-level Codes and Case Characteristics

Case	Sample First-level Codes	Key Emphases in Co-production
1	<p><i>Strategic:</i> Complementing sympathy-oriented public services <i>"We started this SE in order to fill policy gaps by designing jobs that can really accommodate needs of our members ... Most of current support is sympathy-based"</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational:</i> Employees designing workshop contents <i>"Our AQ workshops are designed together with members as we incorporate their stories to the content"</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity:</i> Improving self-efficacy through work <i>"Employees are very willing to improve their skills, and they become more and more confident after delivering workshops"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revamping traditional service models by moving away from sympathy orientation (<i>strategic</i>) • Co-designing workshop content with employees (<i>operational</i>) • Employees taking meaningful roles for co-constructing positive identities and connections (<i>identity</i>)
2	<p><i>Strategic:</i> Filling gaps of insufficient employment support <i>"We are a rehabilitation centre and supports people with severe disabilities. But we recognized the employment support for them was far from enough."</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational:</i> Incorporating employees' feedback into job design <i>"We always listen to their feedback and find ways to improve their job arrangements by incorporating their needs and requirements into them"</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity:</i> Having job coach to connect employees and the SE <i>"We have an occupational work social department. A job coach will work closely with new employees to help them find suitable positions"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying service gaps and expanding the scope of services of the parent NGO (<i>strategic</i>) • Incorporating employee input to improve job arrangements via service co-design (<i>operational</i>) • Service beneficiaries engaging in positive identities co-construction by serving a dual role as users and contributors (<i>identity</i>)
3	<p><i>Strategic:</i> Targeting neglected populations in the job market <i>"Most people with disabilities could not find jobs even after attending employment service programmes. We started this SE to support those who have certain vocational skills but failed to find jobs"</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational:</i> Customizing job content with employees <i>"Our chef put a lot of efforts into customizing job content together with employees ... to make sure they are able to function effectively just like others"</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity:</i> Improving self-efficacy through work <i>"We can tell our employees become happier and more outgoing after joining us ... They are now much more active in communicating with our customers"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying service gaps and creating new labour market opportunities for the marginalized (<i>strategic</i>) • Co-designing job content and products with employees (<i>operational</i>) • Employees are accommodated and empowered in the workplace to co-advocate changes in public awareness (<i>identity</i>)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Case	Sample First-level Codes	Key Emphases in Co-production
4	<p><i>Strategic: Extending impacts of sheltered workshops</i> <i>“Before this, we used sheltered workshops to support people with disabilities. Then we realized those jobs have limited impacts as they have low and even no salaries”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational: Engaging family caregivers to support employees</i> <i>“Family involvement is crucial to us. Because for those employees with intellectual disabilities, they need permission and support from their caregivers to perform outdoor jobs”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity: Forming peer support ecosystem</i> <i>“We combined people with intellectual disabilities and those with mental illnesses. And they work very well together by utilizing own strengths to help each other”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying service gaps and expanding the scope of services of the parent NGO (<i>strategic</i>) • Co-managing an integrative care model with individual stakeholders (<i>operational</i>) • Employees taking meaningful roles for co-constructing positive identities and connections (<i>identity</i>)
5	<p><i>Strategic: Addressing ineffective integration mechanisms</i> <i>“Providing employment training and services alone is meaningless . . . We have to provide a suitable working environment to them as a stepping stone for social integration”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational: Involving employees in workplace design</i> <i>“We involved employees in the process of designing an enabling workplace, for example, the light system in the pick up area is designed specifically for employees with hearing impairment”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity: From trainees to trainers</i> <i>“When our employees with disabilities become experienced, we will assign them to train new members and help them adapt to the working environment”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging sympathy-oriented social service model (<i>strategic</i>) • Co-designing workplace and job content with employees (<i>operational</i>) • Employees are empowered to take meaningful and value-added roles (<i>identity</i>)
6	<p><i>Strategic: Adding extra values to the work integration model</i> <i>“Many NGOs are providing employment services to people with disabilities. However, their impacts are limited. For us, we adopted a bottom-up approach to maximize the value and benefits of the work integration model”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational: Forming a holistic care team by engaging social workers and families</i> <i>“When we assign an employee to a new position, we will notify their social workers and</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing market failures in social integration (<i>operational</i>) • Co-designing a new employment model with employees and co-delivering care with other stakeholders (<i>operational</i>) • Supporting employees to initiate positive changes (<i>identity</i>)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Case	Sample First-level Codes	Key Emphases in Co-production
	<p><i>family members first. So that they could help the employee to get prepared for new changes. This is a team effort</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity: Challenging internalized oppression</i> <i>“When we only had one group of disabled employees, they felt they are at the bottom of the organization. Now we have diverse groups, and they can recognize their own strengths and start helping others</i></p>	
	<p><i>Strategic: Addressing insufficient integration support</i> <i>“Traditional sheltered workshops keep people with disabilities in a closed environment where they have no opportunities to interact with the public . . . Here, we want to provide a platform for them to achieve real integration”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational: Co-designing a productivity system</i> <i>“Our employees vary a lot in terms of their levels of functioning. We need to engage each one of them in designing a workable system and adjusting their job content”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity: Raising public awareness through positive images</i> <i>“Our employees are very talkative, and they enjoy interacting with customers a lot. Gradually, they can demonstrate to the society that they are capable of making contribution and creating values through their work”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging isolated sheltered workshop environments (<i>strategic</i>) • Co-designing workplace and job content with employees (<i>operational</i>) • Employees taking meaningful roles in raising public awareness (<i>identity</i>)
8	<p><i>Strategic: Presenting a feasible work-integration model to the business sector</i> <i>“Many employers have hesitation (with hiring people with disabilities). They feel it is risky. Our job here is to demonstrate a new model in which employees with disabilities greatly contribute to the organization”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Operational: Employees develop own performance KPI</i> <i>“Each year our staff will design their own development plan, establishment KPI, and identify areas they want to improve and achieve”</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Identity: Engaging in meaningful roles</i> <i>“A lot of our activities are designed by our employees with disabilities . . . They are also involved in decision-making, and eventually they’ve become encouraged to voice out their opinions and even argue with us sometimes”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing market failures in social integration (<i>strategic</i>) • Co-planning human resource management with employees (<i>operational</i>) • Employees as irreplaceable contributing members through meaningful engagement (<i>identity</i>)

moderate disabilities (e.g., people with basic communication skills and can maintain self-care with but need support in social situations).

SEs identified these individuals as *victims* of institutional voids who have difficulties in fitting into traditional employment services, such as sheltered workshops, which ‘normally form an isolated environment that is very different from the mainstream workplace’ (Interviewee #5) and also face great barriers to finding jobs in the open labour market. In addition, the Statutory Minimum Wage scheme¹ that came into force in 2011 in Hong Kong made the employment of the disabled in the labour market much more difficult. With increased labour costs, employers also became more cautious with their employment decisions, as an interviewee commented (Interviewee #13): ‘employers in the private sector are reluctant in hiring people with disabilities as additional training is needed . . . Consequently, it is increasingly difficult for these individuals (with moderate disabilities) to find jobs’.

Most SEs in our study had close ties with NGO actors (i.e., either established by NGOs as a sub-unit or collaborated closely with NGOs), and their development was influenced by the early SE movement in Hong Kong, which can be characterised as highly social service oriented due to some historical legacies (Chan *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, with their institutional ties in the disability employment field, SEs identified gaps and shortfalls in the service provision for people with moderate disabilities. Then, they strategically positioned their organisation to fill these voids. As illustrated by an interviewee who works as a manager of a bakery SE that a large local NGO established in Hong Kong (Interviewee #6):

‘We found that only 4% of participants (of the vocational training program) could find jobs themselves. Then we started to think how about the rest of the 96%. That is why we decided to launch social enterprises. We target individuals who are less competent and face various barriers in the labour market’.

Another example is an SE that trains and hires people with disabilities to become workshop facilitators. This SE recognised that the lack of commitment of private employers is a big gap in building an inclusive labour market. Hence, they started the SE around this identified gap with the aim of building and demonstrating ‘good practices’ in employing people with disabilities to other job providers, as the interviewee indicated (Interviewee 13#):

‘We want to show other employers that employing people with disabilities will bring positive impacts to the organisation. We are living proof of how meaningful engagement of disabled employees can benefit the company. Once they (other employers) are willing to take a risk and give it a try, they will know that it is actually quite easy’.

Revamping traditional service models

Most SEs in our study (cases #1, #2, #3, #4, #6, and #7) did not develop an entirely new employment model from scratch. Instead, they revamped traditional service models around the identified gaps by strategically extending the scope and expanding the coverage of employment services to underserved communities. These SEs

identified themselves not as the ‘replacement’ or ‘subsidiary’ of traditional social service programs but rather as a *complement* that seeks to close the service gaps. For instance, our interviewees identified that traditional employment supporting programs only provide six-month follow-up services. Once the six-month period is over, these individuals would be left without any support unless they quit or get fired from their jobs, as an interviewee commented (Interviewee #4),

‘We believe that long-term support is very important for them to maintain a job. Otherwise, they will just keep coming back to social service organisations and changing their jobs frequently. However, the current policy requires NGOs to discharge these cases and stop providing follow-up services after the 6-month period’.

Thus, understanding the need for long-term employment support, SEs have taken up the role of strategic co-producers who revamp traditional employment services and arrangements to provide better employment experiences for their employees with disabilities, as one interviewee noted (Interviewee #2):

‘We started this social enterprise to provide long-term and continuous employment services to people with disadvantages. We believe that by having appropriate and sustainable support, our disabled employees could sustain their career much longer in the job market’.

Another example is a vegetarian restaurant SE that hires people with hearing impairment. Recognising other employment programmes as having limited effects on beneficiaries, this SE focused primarily on revamping conventional service models and offering a one-stop service model that integrates rehabilitation efforts, after-care services, on-the-job training, and productive activities to achieve better service outcomes. As the interviewee mentioned (Interviewee #9), *‘Providing employment training and services alone is meaningless . . . We have to provide a suitable working environment to them as a stepping stone for social integration’.*

Operational co-production

Another dimension that SEs have engaged in is the operational co-production, which focuses on the ‘organising’ of SEs and how the participation of employees with disabilities and other stakeholders (e.g., social workers, family caregivers, private sector employers) can be ‘added into’ the planning and delivering of services. Here, co-production manifests in the voluntary participation and contributions of SEs’ individual service users and actors that constitute their immediate environment to *co-design* and *co-manage* individual service packages, improving employees’ lived experiences. In this dimension, co-production unpacks the SEs’ role in facilitating citizens’ and communities’ engagement and leveraging their input in co-producing employment services (Mazzei *et al.*, 2020).

Our data analysis revealed that SEs seek to strengthen the functionality of their employment practices through two main strategies that leverage joint efforts and

participation of employees and other stakeholders, which are 1) personalising service experiences and 2) developing an integrative care model.

Personalising service experiences

To support beneficiaries to function effectively in their job positions, most SEs (cases #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, and #7) have collaborated with their employees in co-designing employment experiences by drawing on their prior experiences, knowledge, and preferences. SEs have innovated and customised job content to enhance the *person-job fit* by deeply engaging with their employees to understand their needs and preferences. Some innovative practices include dividing large tasks into smaller ones, simplifying the processes and rotating employees to take on different tasks to determine where employees' talents can be used to their full potential. For example, one interviewee stated (Interviewee #6):

'Knowing individual differences, our chef would try to divide the bread-making process into ten small tasks . . . For example, we are producing mini cookies recently . . . some (disabled) employees are responsible for making the dough, some are responsible for weighing the dough and others creating cookie shapes using a cookie press . . . By doing this, they are able to perform effectively just like others.'

In addition to co-designing job content, SEs also co-designed the working environment with their employees by incorporating their input and feedback to create an enabling workplace where employees can access appropriate assistive devices and support. These steps are vital to the effective functioning of disadvantaged employees, as noted by one interviewee (Interviewee #10):

'We engaged our employees in the (design) process and created a lot of notes and visual aids to help them. For example, by just looking at pictures, they will know how much dishwashing liquid they should use and how many ounces of sugar they should put in. For those with hearing impairment, we installed a special lighting system at the entrance so that they would know if someone were behind the door.'

Developing an integrative care model

SEs (cases #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, and #7) in our study also actively engage other actors in the immediate environments of employees, such as caregivers, social workers and even private sector employers, and leverage their participation to co-manage an *integrative care model*. In particular, SEs often needed to collaborate with social workers, including in-house social workers and those assigned to follow up on their former clients, to co-deliver services and care to support disadvantaged employees better. For instance, some SEs said that these partners help provide vocational training to their employees, as "*we do not have enough manpower to provide extensive basic training*" (Interviewee #7). If employees face great difficulties in the workplace, SEs will also refer them to partnered sheltered workshops where they could receive

vocational rehabilitation services in a safe and less stressful environment. As one interviewee noted (Interviewee #5),

'Sometimes when our employees get older or feel too stressed to continue working here, we would refer them back to sheltered workshops where they will feel more comfortable and relaxed . . . It is all about what they want to do and what they could do. (Together with other partners), we try our best to accommodate their needs and make changes to help them achieve their goals'.

SEs also worked closely with family caregivers of employees to better support their emotional well-being in the workplace and improve job arrangements. These caregivers have intimate knowledge and experiences with providing care, and thus, their involvement as co-producers in the implementation stage is vital, as one of the interviewees noted (Interviewee #11),

'We need to rely on social workers to deal with emotional breakdowns of our employees. These social workers have supported them for a long time and know them very well. If employees encounter difficulties, it is better to engage their social workers and family members to help them and to follow up on their situations'.

In addition, some SEs worked closely with private sector employers by encouraging competent employees to use the job opportunities and experiences in SEs as a stepping stone to larger companies for realising their potential, as one interviewee mentioned (Interviewee #13):

"We sometimes would refer our employees to larger corporates, so they could have opportunities to try different jobs and positions that may better match their capabilities and interests. For instance, some (of our employees) are interested in IT. But we do not have relevant positions for them. What we can offer here (in SE) is limited".

Taking these points together, we summarised that, from an individual action view, SEs facilitate an operational co-production process that engages various stakeholders to improve service user experiences and the quality of the employment services provided. These individuals serve as co-producers who help enhance the functionality of SE interventions and better accommodate the employment services to the needs of disadvantaged individuals by actively contributing their experiences, knowledge, and capacities to service innovations.

Identity co-production

Our third emergent theme was that SEs also engaged in identity co-production that concerns the issues of 'othering', which is how employees with disabilities come to see themselves relative to others and their changing roles and in continuous interactions with service providers (Radnor *et al.*, 2014). We found that SEs largely involved their employees as active co-producers rather than passive service

recipients for *co-constructing* positive social identities and connections, placing them more centrally in the social value creation process. In this process, SEs sought to shift the service focus from protection to emancipation and engage in positive interdependent relationships with employees.

Shifting from protection to emancipation

Unlike many employers that see disabled employees as a liability, all SEs in our study (cases #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, and #8) recognised their employees as valuable assets to the organisations. SEs have worked closely with employees to develop *mutual expectations* toward work motivation and productivity. As one interviewee highlighted, *'we would not lower our expectations for disabled employees. They know we are running a business and need them to perform their jobs'* (Interviewee #13). Due to the pressure to be financially sustainable, SEs rarely engaged their disadvantaged employees as mere service recipients. They did not consider themselves a charity business that either hires people with disadvantages out of pity. According to one of the interviewees (Interviewee #9):

'This is a workplace, not a sheltered workshop. We need to be responsible to our customers; therefore, everyone needs to have a sense of responsibility, and everyone should work for this together. Otherwise, we may face the situation of shutting down our business.'

Viewing employees as key enablers of organisational sustainability, SEs have adopted a wide range of emancipatory strategies to improve employees' capabilities, supporting them to become productive members of organisations (Chandra, 2017). For instance, job training has been identified as an important emancipatory intervention. Employees of SEs were encouraged to manage work expectations by developing a career plan and identifying skills and areas that they want to improve further through job training, as one interviewee described (Interviewee #13):

'Every year, we require our employees to prepare a career plan that outlines what they want to achieve, and we will develop our job training accordingly. For example, one of their goals last year was to strengthen personal skills. So, we incorporated a theme of customer relations in our training and provided them with more opportunities to meet customers to help them achieve their goals.'

Consequently, SEs can shift the focus away from protection to the emancipation of employees by enhancing employees' vocational and personal skills and building self-confidence. As noted by one of the interviewees, *'We put much effort into their training . . . with all the skills they learn at our organisation, they eventually will have greater chances of finding jobs outside if they want to'* (Interviewee #7).

Promoting positive interdependence

Furthermore, understanding that disadvantaged individuals often have imbalanced power relations with others and hold lower social status in mainstream society, most

SEs (cases #2, #3, #5, #6, #7, and #8) have emphasised promoting positive interdependency through engaging employees in cooperative and collaborative settings. In addition to providing direct support, SEs have encouraged their employees to create their peer support system by forming reciprocal relationships with others. For instance, SEs grouped employees with different disabilities to work together, which enabled employees to overcome their internalised oppression, and recognise their potential in helping others, as described by a SE manager who hired both people with hearing impairment and with intellectual disabilities in their restaurant (Interviewee #10),

'When we only had one group of disabled employees, they felt they were at the organisation's bottom. Now we have diverse groups, and they can recognise their own strengths and start helping others . . . when they cooperate to work together, they become very good partners'.

Employees of SEs were also involved in co-producing added values in their work by taking on challenging tasks and roles – for example, engaging in management decision-making and supervising new employees (cases #3, #5, #6, #7, and #8). By engaging in these important positions and tasks, employees could develop self-esteem to form positive interdependent relationships in the workplace. As a result, one interviewee (Interviewee #7) commented that their organisation has a more harmonious atmosphere as *'everyone feels valued as an important member of the company'*. Another interviewee (Interviewee #9) also described, *'When our employees with disabilities become experienced, we will assign them to train new members and help others adapt to the working environment'*. Eventually, this approach facilitated meaningful engagement of SE employees, who are positioned and involved as *contributing* members of the organisations.

Moreover, SEs provided opportunities for employees with disabilities to interact with the broader community daily. These interactions helped reveal often-unrepresented contributions and capabilities of disadvantaged employees. Consequently, these individuals with disabilities can advocate for themselves and others within their communities, becoming their *own champions* to advocate for positive changes in the public awareness and attitudes associated with disabilities. For example, one interviewee described (Interviewee #6) the following:

'We brought them (disabled employees) to attend trade fairs and let them promote our products to the public . . . after some time, they are able to communicate with others confidently, and, in fact, they made a lot of friends on their own . . . our customers also said that they never knew disabled people could be so capable'.

Discussion

This study adopts a qualitative method of inquiry to examine a total of 8 SEs that offer employment opportunities to individuals with disabilities to understand how SEs engage in co-production from an integrative view of individual and collective

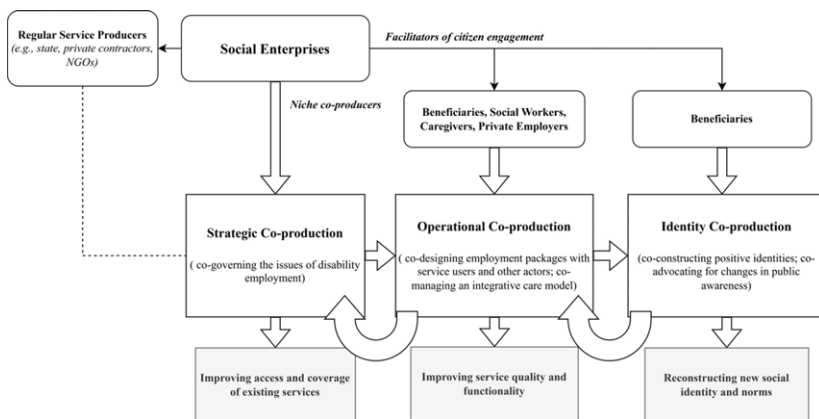


Figure 2. Multi-Dimensional Co-production Model of SEs.

action. Drawing upon the service provider's perspective, we find that SEs generally embrace various co-production processes on *strategic*, *operational* and *identity* dimensions. We cycle back and forth between the findings and literature to further unpack and understand SEs practices and co-production mechanisms (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

Subsequently, we theorise that through acting upon inputs from different actors, SEs could potentially act upon a '*multi-dimensional co-production*' model, within which SEs go beyond just offering alternative job opportunities in a top-down approach and facilitate various co-production processes at different stages (see Figure 2 below).

From a collective action view, we identify that SEs actively engage in *co-governing* the issues of disability employment. They acted as niche co-producers to the state actors and other regular service producers (McMullin, 2021) at an institutional level by complementing existing services and advocating for systematic changes in their employment practices. The work-integration SEs in our study were largely motivated by the early SE movement in Hong Kong and had relatively strong institutional ties to regular service providers (Chan *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, these SEs identified institutional voids by drawing upon existing institutional arrangements and revamped and innovated the traditional service models employment services around the gaps rather than creating an entirely new service model from scratch.

From an individual view, SEs act as facilitators of citizen engagement by mobilising inputs from various stakeholders to facilitate a process of *work with care* (Chui *et al.*, 2019). In the operational co-production, SEs actively involve service users in *co-designing* job content and workplace environments and *co-managing* an integrative care model to enhance the functionality of SE interventions and promote better employment experiences. In the identity co-production, SEs work closely with their employees with disabilities to empower them to become champions. Employees perform challenging and meaningful tasks in their workplace, actively *co-constructing* their own positive identities and *co-advocating* for changes in public awareness. In

this process, SEs shift the discussion from dependency and protection to positive interdependence.

Through efficient and effective co-production, SEs can integrate two seemingly opposing logics of welfare and business by designing employment as both an emancipatory tool and an engine that drives financial growth (Chandra, 2017). Thus, SEs have the potential to fill the policy and service provision gaps while pursuing financial sustainability simultaneously. In this process, SEs engage with various stakeholders to improve the access and coverage of services in underserved communities, improve service quality and functionality by innovating service planning and delivery and reconstruct new social identities and norms by developing positive social connections and identities. We conceptualise these processes as a 'multi-dimensional co-production' model by adopting an integrative view, within which SEs act as both co-producers of social services to the state (Simmons, 2008) and facilitators of citizen engagement that contribute to the service delivery system of SEs by embedding new forms of values, practices and social relations.

It is also noteworthy that different co-production processes are not isolated from one another but rather tightly connected. We find that SEs with a strong niche positioning in their strategic co-production tend to engage their stakeholders more deeply and actively than those who focus on increasing service quantity. For instance, a SE that challenges isolated sheltered workshop environments (e.g., case #7) would need more effort to innovate their services through deeply engaging with stakeholders, compared to an SE that extends the service scope of their parent NGO (e.g., case #4). The level and scope of citizen engagement in their operational and identity co-production may also influence the outcomes of strategic co-production (Radnor *et al.*, 2014). An SE that effectively engages beneficiaries on a deeper level will be more likely to achieve structural changes (Chui *et al.*, 2021). Thus, co-production's individual and collective action views are closely connected and intertwined rather than separated (McMullin, 2021; Miller *et al.*, 2012).

The contributions of this study are twofold. First, we contribute to the co-production literature by conceptualising an *integrative understanding* that bridges a view of individual engagement that concerns user-provider relationships (Flemig and Osborne, 2019; Pestoff, 2009) and a view of collective action that is rooted in the NPG framework (Sorrentino *et al.*, 2018). While it is commonly agreed that co-production exists in distinct forms (e.g., Mazzei *et al.*, 2020; Sorrentino *et al.*, 2018), the majority of SE studies only focused on a one-sided view (e.g., Flemig and Osborne, 2019), neglecting that SEs are embedded in larger complex systems. Adopting an integrative view, we propose a *new process model* that explains how SEs enact multiple co-production processes by serving a dual role as *niche co-producers* of social services and *facilitators of citizen engagement*. We extend the individual action view of collection by examining not only user-provider relationships but also how SEs engage other important actors in the immediate environments of service users in this process.

Second, we contribute to SE literature by adopting a *process* perspective to examine how SEs engage their stakeholders. This study advances the extant literature that has focused largely on the outcomes of SE actions (Chandra, 2017) by revealing the *participatory nature* of SE interventions and practices. We find that SEs can potentially reduce the gap between those who provide the services and those who benefit

from their practices by working closely with stakeholders. We also extend recent discussions on the ineffectiveness of SEs (e.g., Chui *et al.*, 2021; Chan *et al.*, 2022) by recognising the heterogeneity in SE practices (Mazzei *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, this paper offers a better contextual understanding of SEs by considering the institutional environments in the analysis.

Finally, this study offers substantial practical value in demonstrating the merits of co-production facilitated by SEs in tackling complex social problems by employing a collaborative and bottom-up approach in designing and implementing their solutions. Our findings also provide insights into how governments could work with civil society actors to address service gaps. For instance, the government could consider involving SE practitioners as formal partners to co-govern various social problems rather than engaging them as sub-contractors. Moreover, we suggest that SE practitioners should actively engage and leverage inputs from stakeholders at various stages of their co-production processes for optimising social service outcomes.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, this study's qualitative multi-case approach limits the findings' generalizability. Hence, future research could adopt a quantitative approach by involving a larger sample size to examine – for example, the association between organisational characteristics of SEs (e.g., age, legal status, organisational size) and their adoption of different co-production processes. Second, we focus primarily on work integration SEs in this study, which may be subject to historical path dependencies in their stakeholder engagement (Chan *et al.*, 2022). Other models of SEs may have different practices and mechanisms in their co-production processes, with different forms of collaboration or interactions with their stakeholders. More research is needed to investigate further the variation and heterogeneity in SE co-production models across different fields and contexts. Moreover, this study examines the service provider's perspective without many anchors in the service users' experiences of co-production. We often assume that SEs 'know best' about what their beneficiaries need. However, some efforts by SEs do not always produce the desired results in reality (e.g., Chui *et al.*, 2021; Chalmers, 2021). Follow-up studies could build on this paper by understanding how co-production is experienced and perceived by beneficiaries and examining the co-production outcomes for disadvantaged populations served by SEs.

Conclusion

This study advances the 'co-production in SE' scholarship by integrating co-production's individual and collective action views to examine how SEs engage their internal and external stakeholders in addressing labour market exclusion. Our findings demonstrate the multidimensionality in co-production practices in which SEs not only serve as niche co-producers but also act as facilitators of citizen engagement by leveraging contributions and active participation of stakeholders to enhance the functionality of their services to promote positive connections and identities of their service beneficiaries. We theorise a multi-dimensional co-production model that unpacks the distinct roles that SEs and their stakeholders play in co-production and how these affect the processes and in part the outcomes of co-production.

Competing interests. The author(s) declare none.

Note

I The Statutory Minimum Wage (SMW) has become effective on 1 May 2011 under the Minimum Wage Ordinance (Cap. 608), and the initial Statutory Minimum Wage rate was \$28 per hour (Labour Department, 2022).

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Appendix I

Part 1. SEs as Co-producers to Public Services

- What do you think are the roles of social enterprises in helping people with special needs? How would you describe this role?
- Why did you want to start a SE that employs people with disabilities at the very beginning?
- How would you compare the role and function of your SE with other existing service providers?
- How are employees selected? Do you have any specific requirements on the capabilities or working experiences? Where did you find your employees?
- What do you think of current social service programmes for people with disabilities or special needs?
- How do you think the model of work-integration social enterprise differs from the government's and/or traditional NGOs' programmes for people with disabilities?

Part 2. Perception of Difficulties Encountered by Disabled People

- What do you think are the barriers faced by people with special needs in the job market?
- What do you think are the most urgent needs of people with special needs?

Part 3. Beneficiary/ Stakeholder Engagement in SEs

- How are the jobs assigned to each employee?
- Is there any training for employees before they start working? If yes, is it on-job training?
- Do you involve beneficiaries in the decision-making of SEs? If yes, in what ways?
- Are there any special arrangements for employees in the workplace to make it easier for them to work? If yes, how?
- How are the relationships between you and your employees?
- How would you describe the interaction between your SE and employees with disabilities?
- Do your employees have the opportunity to interact or communicate with customers? How do they like it?
- What are your strategies for facilitating integration and inclusiveness of employees with special needs?
- How did the customers respond to your social enterprise approach?

Part 4. Impacts and Outcomes

- Did you see any changes from employees with special needs after working in your SE? If yes, what are the changes?
- What are the biggest achievements/impacts brought by your SE to society from your perspective?

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