

Successful labor market inclusion of disabled people

Lieske van der Torre (SPG program, Utrecht University)

A large share of the population does not have equal access to jobs

It is hard for people with physical and/or mental impairments to find a job. This labor market exclusion can be due to the physical or skill requirements of a job, but often stems from factors other than people's disabilities. Prejudices amongst employers and the failure of society to recognize the potential of disabled people are more significant forces for exclusion. As a consequence, many disabled people are unemployed against their will. In the Netherlands, for example, about a tenth of the 25-45 year olds have a disability affecting their capacity to work. While 87% of all 25-45 year olds participate in the labor market, only 42% of people with a disability have such access to jobs (CBS, 18 July 2016).

Successful inclusion?

Increasing the labor market inclusion of disabled people can be viewed as a potential arena for public governance success. For disabled people, employment brings earned income, human contact, meaningful engagement, and heightened self-esteem. For society, getting better at including disabled people also has considerable potential pay-offs: lower social expenditure, alleviation of labor shortages, a more inclusive and fairer community. Moving beyond these general public value claims is where things start to get more complex. How to operationalize and achieve policy success in this domain?

Different actors at work at different levels

Any labor market initiative requires the cooperation between national and local governments, in combination with the private sector. Different actors may have different definitions of success and pursue alternative strategies to achieve it. The Dutch national government wants to employ as many disabled people as possible in a 'normal' job. Different government policies work towards this goal and multiple agencies contribute to the labor market inclusion of disabled people. Policy instruments include anti-discrimination legislation, physical adaptations of the workplace, subsidized jobs, and sheltered workplaces providing jobs exclusively for disabled people.

Local governments play a key role in achieving labor market inclusion in many countries. In the Netherlands, they are the formal executors of the so-called Participation Law, which underpins government's role in this domain. Local governments are tasked with encouraging employers to employ disabled people and with actively providing sheltered work themselves. The municipalities have significant policy discretion in executing the Participation Law. The idea is that local governments are best positioned to build policies which work for the local labor market and specific needs of the local community.

Contrasting national and local definitions of success

When studying successful labor market inclusion, a logical step would be to determine which municipalities are comparatively successful in executing this task. Yet in practice this is not that easy. The local discretion of municipalities and the idea that public value should be assessed in relation to the local context makes it hard to nationally compare outcomes. What if the local preferences are not congruent with national norms used in the benchmarks?

For example, some Dutch municipalities value care for and social inclusion of disabled people more than their participation in the *regular* labor market. Other municipalities have developed alternatives for sheltered workplaces; they are therefore relatively unsuccessful in the national benchmark. For example, the municipality Tilburg has been called 'uncompliant'¹ because it has decided not to offer sheltered work and invested in alternatives for sheltered work. 'Tilburg's Alternative' might be more effective in providing regular jobs to disabled people, but at the costs of putting lower emphasis on national measures of outputs.

¹ See: <http://www.binnenlandsbestuur.nl/sociaal/nieuws/geen-beschut-werk-wel-aan-het-werk.9529952.lynx>

Questions for discussion:

How would you design a study of 'valuable'/'successful' labor market inclusion of disabled people in this context?

In particular:

- *What research questions do you feel need to be prioritised?*
- *What research design principles would you use?*
- *How would you deal with the vexed issue of assessing success in this context?*
- *And what kind of explanatory approach(es) would you use once you have found a way to differentiate between high-performing and average/low performing municipal/regional policy regimes?*