POLICY BRIEF

Why Addressing Autistic Unemployment Requires a Systems Social Entrepreneurship Approach

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What’s the issue?

Australian governments are displaying significant interest in autism: in March 2022 the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism’s report was released, the Australian and South Australian governments are developing Autism Strategies (Humphries, 2022; South Australian Labor, 2022) and the Senate Select Committee has recommended that the Australian Government develop a National Autism Employment Framework (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022). This interest is due, in part, to autism being the most prevalent, and the fastest growing, primary disability type that is supported by the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022), and that the autistic unemployment rate is more than three times the disability unemployment rate (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

There is an urgent need to address autistic unemployment for both social and economic reasons. Systems social entrepreneurship offers a research-informed response that can make an important contribution to this policy agenda.

Understanding the problem

The Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism report has recognised that the high rate of autistic unemployment cannot be addressed by existing interventions due to the Australian Disability Employment Services having a lack of autism expertise and generic disability services and strategies not catering to the specific sensory and communication challenges autistic people face. While there are some successful autism-specific employment programs they are considered limited in their reach and to predominantly focus on ICT (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022).

Autistic unemployment is a ‘wicked problem’. Wicked problems are complex social policy problems that cannot be successfully addressed with traditional linear program logic and an individual initiative approach (Rittel and Webber, 1973). This is because they have a multitude of intertwined and

Key Facts

- The unemployment rate for autistic people is 34.1 per cent which is more than three times the rate for people with a disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

- Supporting autistic individuals to start their own social enterprise and supporting social enterprises that are autistic led are recognised approaches for addressing autistic unemployment (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022).
underpinning causal factors which results in individual stakeholders seeing the problem differently (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007).

For autistic unemployment, the multitude of underpinning causal factors include every autistic person is different (Griffin, 2019), autism consists of a nonlinear spectrum of characteristics (Amaze, 2021), autism has a high level of co-occurring medical conditions (ND Australia, 2021), and autism impacts on many areas of an autistic person’s life (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022). Contributing to autistic and autism communities seeing autistic unemployment differently, are the numerous different models of autism that individuals adopt as their perspective (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022).

The Law of Requisite Variety highlights how to address wicked problems given their characteristics. According to the Law of Requisite Variety, only variety can address the multitude of causal factors and interdependencies underpinning a wicked problem (Ashby, 1956). Therefore, the approach for addressing autistic unemployment needs to have as much variety as autistic unemployment itself (Batty, 2007). While individual initiatives do not have the requisite variety, a coherent ecosystem of initiatives does (Eggers and Muoio, 2015).

Understanding systems social entrepreneurship

Two social enterprise approaches for addressing autistic unemployment were recognised in the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism report. These are supporting autistic people to start their own social enterprise and supporting social enterprises that are autistic led (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022).

Starting a social enterprise is a favourable employment option for an autistic person as it enables them to control their work environment (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022) and eliminate the sensory sensitivities and social interaction that often cause autistic people distress in the workplace (Hayward, et al., 2019). In addition, some autistic people have a preference to work from home and to have flexible work schedules (Klag et al, 2021) which can be more easily accommodated through self-employment. Starting a social enterprise also enables autistic individuals to focus on their passions (Robson, 2022), intense special interests (Grove et al., 2018), and desire for creating systems change towards greater equality, fairness, and social justice (Baron-Cohen, 2013).

If social enterprises aim to empower autistic people, and they are not autistic owned, they should at least be autistic led. Unfortunately, this is not the current practice of the social enterprise sector, with the lack of ‘beneficiaries’ in decision making positions being recognised as a weakness of the social enterprise sector (Holle, 2017). Addressing this weakness, and encouraging autistic led social enterprises, supports the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism report (2022, p. 73) recommendation to ‘increase the numbers of autistic people appointed to key positions in all organisations, including autism and disability-related organisations’.

Given that autistic unemployment is a wicked problem, the social entrepreneurship approaches that are supported need to be systems approaches so that they can have the requisite variety of autistic unemployment. There are three system social entrepreneurship approaches that in combination can have as much variety as autistic unemployment. These are the social innovation school of thought, the participatory systems approach, and the complexity approach. The social innovation school of thought supports the development of systems aware interventions (Martin and Osberg, 2007) and is an ideal approach for autistic individuals starting their own social enterprise. Recent research has introduced the
participatory systems approach which combines the characteristics of the participatory governance dimension of the European EMES social entrepreneurship approach with the social innovation school of thought (Zivkovic, 2022). The participatory systems approach has been purposefully developed to support autistic-led, but now owned, social enterprises (Zivkovic, 2022). The complexity social entrepreneurship approach focuses on the transition of ecosystems of initiatives to new coherent system states that are more appropriate for addressing wicked problems (Goldstein et al., 2010), such as autistic unemployment. New research has identified the opportunity to combine the three systems social entrepreneurship approaches to be better able to address wicked problems (Zivkovic, 2022).

**What policymakers need to do**

Policy makers need to take an ecosystem approach to address autistic unemployment. This need to take an ecosystem approach, when cohorts of people are disadvantaged in the labour market, is an accepted government approach. Existing examples of the approach include the Youth Jobs PaTH Industry Pilot’s that ‘work collaboratively with, relevant entities to deliver the Industry Pilot’ (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2020, p. 40), and the funding of the National Youth Employment Body which aims ‘to facilitate collaborative efforts that enable young people to secure decent work while addressing industry needs for a diverse, adaptable workforce’ (Brotherhood of St Laurence, n.d.).

Policy makers need to take a systems social entrepreneurship approach to address autistic unemployment, given the need for autistic individuals to control their work environment (Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism, 2022), focus on their passions (Robson, 2022) and special interests (Grove et al., 2018), and their desire to create systems change (Baron-Cohen, 2013, p. 213). A systems approach to social entrepreneurship should be embedded into an ecosystem approach by combining the three systems social entrepreneurship approaches: autistic individuals taking a social innovation school of thought approach to start a social enterprise, autistic individuals taking a participatory systems social entrepreneurship approach to lead a social enterprise, and ecosystems of stakeholders taking a complexity social entrepreneurship approach to address systematically autistic unemployment. The participants in this ecosystem could include autistic social entrepreneurs, business advisory services, business incubators, social enterprise funders, social enterprise networks, NDIS Local Area Coordinators, and Disability Employment Services.

**Conclusion**

While the chronic unemployment of autistic people in Australia needs to be urgently addressed, the approach taken needs to enable autistic individuals to thrive. The recognition by the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Autism (2022) of addressing autistic unemployment by supporting autistic owned and led social enterprises contributes towards addressing this need, and would enable autistic people to work while reducing the challenges they encounter in traditional workplaces. Given autistic unemployment is a wicked problem, a combined systems social entrepreneurship approach is required to support autistic owned and led social enterprises. This combined systems approach would incorporate the strengths of the social innovation school of thought, participatory systems social entrepreneurship, and complexity social entrepreneurship approaches.
References


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