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Ensuring social equity through service integration design

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ABSTRACT

This article poses the question, how can a design-led approach help managers and professionals in public-service systems recognize and reduce barriers to social equity? It introduces a service integration design (SID) model, a co-creative process for public-service managers and professionals in complex service system settings. The study shows how a structured and designed process can benefit the social equity of vulnerable groups, contributing to a timely discussion regarding the role of design in advancing the just and fair provision of public services in complex systems.

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KEYWORDS Social equity; collaborative management; service integration; design; co-creation

Introduction

This article presents a service integration design (SID) model that applies collaborative management in practice, enhancing the different dimensions of social equity. Social equity can be understood as means to strengthen public administration by offering a regime to the service of the public in all its complexity (Svara and Brunet 2020, 356). To advance social equity within a public-service system, a focus on the just and fair treatment of the most vulnerable people is needed (Cepiku and Mastrodascio 2021; Van Hootegem, Abts, and Meuleman 2020). The problems of the public-service system we investigate are evident in its fragmentation and organizational silos. A siloed service system hinders the management and employee decision-making that helps build services around user needs (Osborne 2020; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). Accordingly, we approach facilitating social equity in public services as a systemic challenge that cannot be resolved in single organizations or by individual professionals.

A SID model describes a strategic leadership format designed to strengthen a systemic approach in public services (see Osborne 2020; Osborne et al. 2022). A systemic approach requires practical frameworks and methods, such as a SID, to make it applicable in real-life contexts (Ansell and Torfing 2021, 212–213; Haynes et al. 2020, 70–71). SID is a co-creative design process for an interorganizational network. The model aims to help build a management structure that ensures the

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uninterrupted flow of public services for the most vulnerable citizens. The theoretical framework of this study is built on literature on collaborative management, co-creation, and design to explicate the need to approach social equity issues in public services through a systemic approach and interorganizational collaboration. Specifically, we focus on the design process of a network within a collaborative management framework.

Against this backdrop, the research question of the study is: *How can a design-led approach help managers and professionals working in public-service systems recognize and reduce barriers to social equity?* A case study depicts a SID process to co-create a structure for a network that would ensure the continuity of support for short-term prisoners in Finland. The research contributes to the theory building on social equity in complex service systems and the design and management of public-service networks (see, e.g. Löffler, 2015; Petrescu 2019; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), specifically by proposing a method for the design of a collaboratively led system. This research also offers a less-studied perspective on design as a principal method of enhancing collaborative management. Moreover, we contribute to the body of knowledge on the design of social equity in public services, which is a limited segment of the literature on equity (Cepiku and Mastrodascio 2021, 1028; Cepiku et al. 2020).

First, we introduce the collaborative management framework and how social equity, co-creation and design link to it. Next, we introduce the case underpinning the study, a project with short-term prisoners in Finland. We then explicate the service integration process conducted to create a solid service path for short-term prisoners. Finally, we discuss how the SID model applies collaborative management in practice to enhance the dimensions of social equity and how public-service managers and professionals can recognize and reduce barriers to social equity. Overall, this study shows how a structured and designed process can benefit the social equity of vulnerable groups, in our case, short-term prisoners in Finland.

Designing collaborative management to enhance social equity

Social equity and the complex service system

Social equity can offer a standard by which public administrators assess and evaluate their behaviour and decisions. On the other hand, it could be a criterion for effectiveness in public administration as efficiency, economy, productivity, and other criteria are (Frederickson 2015, 41). This article references Brunet (2011, 167–168, 173) by focusing on three different social equity dimensions that we see as relevant criteria for an effective public management network. Although the dimensions outlined by Brunet lean heavily on the assumption of equal treatment in the administration, we instead consider the social equity dimensions through the assumption of equity where a selective concern is targeted towards those most in need of assistance (Van Hootegeem, Abts, and Meuleman 2020, 258). The first social equity dimension, *procedural fairness*, requires administrators safeguard the due process rights of individuals. The process should be available to everyone but be tailored to individual needs. The second is *distributional equity or access*, which focuses on the provision of services in a manner that benefits those who are disadvantaged in the process. The third is *quality*, which ensures consistent quality services, no matter which organization of a service network is responsible for the individual services at the time. It is possible to

assess agency performance on each aspect of social equity (Brunet 2011, Van Hootegem, Abts, and Meuleman 2020).

Finland has a complex, multifaceted, diversified, and partially fragmented social and healthcare service system. There is a lack of communication and collaboration, overlapping roles and responsibilities, and rejection of services by organizations. Such fragmented and localized systems can hinder nurturing social equity and particularly affect the most vulnerable (Brunet 2011; Määttä 2012; Tuurnas et al. 2015). Overcoming these issues requires key actors within organizations to change their thinking (Dickinson and Glasby 2010; Haynes et al. 2020) and also structural solutions to tackle social equity challenges.

Collaborative management as a framework for tackling systemic equity challenges

A proven way to advance social equity is to adopt a long-term perspective and commitment, a strategic plan incorporating the different dimensions of social equity (Brenman and Sanchez 2012, 150). Ensuring the social equity of vulnerable service-user groups requires new collaboration structures (Ferraro, Etzion, and Gehman 2015). Providing functional and coordinated services requires clear organization of the input of different actors, the evaluation of results, and the ability to steer a multifunctional service system (Crawford 2012, 55–56). Collaborative management offers a framework to drive a multifunctional service system. It fosters negotiation, joint decision-making, promoting inclusion, and seeking solutions extending beyond the scope of an individual organization or a sector, which thus provide opportunities to develop the whole service system. It is about managing interdependencies between professionals who lack sufficient decision-making power in relation to each other (e.g. Fimreite and Læg Reid 2009, 285; Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997, 9; Määttä, Harkko, and Kalm-Akubardia 2019).

Collaborative public management, collaborative governance and network governance research and literature fall easily in the same category (see ie. O’Leary and Vij 2012), but they do also have signifying differences, that are related to their causes and results (Kapucu, Yuldashev, and Bakiev 2009, 51) In this article we use the concept of collaborative management where the focus is on understanding and managing interdependencies between public, private, third sector and non-profit actors. A range of actions from these actors will be required to promote social equity, depending on which dimension of social equity is pursued. The action areas might include the performance of governmental agencies, delivery systems, and the attitudes and conduct of administrators (Svara and Brunet 2020, 352–353).

Solving complex social problems in a service system requires horizontal and vertical communication and coordination, combining collaborative negotiations on a horizontal level and decisions on an organizational one (see Axelsson and Axelsson 2006; Fimreite and Læg Reid 2009, 285; Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997, 9; Määttä, Harkko, and Kalm-Akubardia 2019). Collaborative management is built on the understanding that there is a resolute interdependence among all actors (Kapucu, Qian, and Khosa 2014, 4; Læg Reid and Rykkja 2022). Accordingly, it extends decision-making power to the structural level and makes it possible to combine services, knowledge, and methods to address the challenges affecting joint-service users in

a vulnerable position (Lægreid and Rykkja 2015; Määttä, Harkko, and Kalm-Akubardia 2019).

Although prior research suggests traditional leadership and its specific tools can lead to misunderstandings over the purpose of interorganizational collaboration (see, Tuurnas, Stenvall, and Rannisto 2016), and the potential value of services can be destroyed by collaborative processes (see Engen et al. 2020). Therefore, a functioning, collaborative network needs jointly defined, clear goals and systematic collaboration designed through mutually agreed structures and practices to enhance social equity.

Brennan and Sanchez (2012) use the term *social equity intervention*, which is a planned and resourced action to ‘correct a social wrong and improve the situation’ of a vulnerable group. Interventions can seek to break the chain of causality of a complex problem. Social equity interventions are action-oriented, and design is a central quality. The design work can involve establishing standards, analysing problems and potential, setting goals and improvement priorities, and specifying the activities of an improvement programme. Administrators can utilize tools such as an SID to plan such social equity interventions in collaborative settings. In this article, we describe an SID in use and address its qualities that enhance social equity.

Service integration design model to facilitate collaborative management

The SID model was designed specifically to dismantle complexity and unnecessary power structures and enhance trust and collaboration within an interorganizational network (Kostilainen et al. 2020). The process is later described through a real-life case. It is based on the principles of collaborative management and offers a systematic way to solve complex and intertwined problems by building of collaborative management structures for a goal-oriented horizontal and vertical network (O’Leary and Vij 2012). SID applies a systems approach to planning of a collaborative management network. Haynes et al. (2020, 71–72) suggest that a systems approach can support the processes of organizational change: cross-sectoral and inter-organizational collaboration can produce central value, the systems approach can change the way participants think rather than what they know, and the processes and collaboration can help participants see different opportunities. System-focused tools and methodologies can help teams to focus their work and convince those in power to support it.

SID has several similarities with the goal-oriented collaborative public management outlined by Eriksson et al. (2020), the participatory process described by Bryson et al. (2012), and the collaborative governance framework described by Emerson et al. (2011). Accordingly, the process identifies the joint problem and goal involving relevant stakeholders, encourages leadership, creates rules and structures, and applies inclusive methods to drive joint action.

An SID model uses a co-creation approach to engage parties in the design of a service network (Perikangas et al. 2022, 230). In this study, co-creation is defined in a classic sense as an instance of creative activity involving two or more people (Sanders and Stappers 2008, 6). Brandsen and Honingh (2018, 14) describe co-creation as the initiative and strategic phase of service planning. It involves assembling the relevant stakeholders to work towards a mutually agreed goal. In our case, the stakeholders are managers and professionals who need a joint management system that structures and legitimizes their work in a way that helps offer services to a certain

vulnerable service-user group. According to Botero and Hyysalo (2013), a typical aspect of co-creation is the design or planning work on a platform produced by the designers. Service integration design offers an institutional arena for collaborative management through a workshop format (Ansell and Torfing 2021).

Service integration design also makes it possible to (re)distribute the roles and the decision-making power in and between those organizations that design the collaborative network. Decisions on addressing social equity issues as problems that public-service agencies should solve sit with those who hold power (McCandless et al. 2022, 143). Accordingly, any SID process must involve top management and managers with decision-making power. It is they who will have to make joint decisions on roles, responsibilities, resources, integration, and communication on a system level (Agranoff and McGuire 2003, 177–178; Hujala et al. 2020, 131–134; Määttä, Harkko, and Kalm-Akubardia 2019).

In SID, the emphasis is on designing a collaborative network that contributes to systemic change in the practices and culture of organizations. It is easy for public administrators working in a siloed system to forget that their actions and the values embodied in their management influence the impact, effectiveness, and equity of government (Svara and Brunet 2020, 353). By opening the service system of a vulnerable service user to a wider network and creating shared knowledge and a shared structure, the design process offers an option for actors to enhance the social equity of the relevant service-user group. The current research presents the case of short-term prisoners in Finland, an SID process, and questionnaire and interview data to examine how a design-led approach can help managers and professionals working within complex public-service systems to recognize and reduce barriers to social equity.

Context of the study: short-term prisoners' service integration in a complex service system

The national institution providing all prison services in Finland is the Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency (CSA). The CSA defines a person sentenced to under six months in prison as a short-term prisoner. Such sentences are typically connected to drug and alcohol abuse but can also result from unpaid fines. The case in this study focused on a group of prisoners who suffer from alcohol and/or drug abuse and need treatment. Such people typically have several other problems in life as well.

Compared to many other service-user groups, knowledge of the service needs of short-term prisoners is difficult to obtain because they are typically outside the service system when not in prison. The position of these prisoners is especially vulnerable because they are typically societal outcasts, suffer from the consequences of drug misuse, have financial problems, and are more ill and in greater need of healthcare services than other prisoners (Wuolijoki et al. 2011). They spend a brief time in prison but are more likely to re-offend and return to prison. Studies show that short-term prisoners have fewer opportunities to receive the optimal treatment in or between periods of imprisonment than other groups of prisoners (Pitkänen et al. 2016; Tyni 2015).

In Finland, several national and local institutions ensure that individuals receive treatment during rehabilitation. In a fragmented system, rehabilitation is the sum of a process including diagnoses, services, guidance, and decisions made on an

organization-by-organization basis. Individually made decisions reduce the chances of successful service delivery (Määttä and Keskitalo 2014; Pulkki et al. 2011). There are not sufficient collaborative structures or networks to advance the treatment of short-term prisoners through rehabilitation, which leads to prisoners dropping out of rehabilitation programmes or being denied a chance to enrol at all. One result is that the same people repeatedly return to prison for short periods and never manage to secure treatment for their problems because it is unclear which institution (healthcare or the prison) is responsible for that treatment (Laurila et al. 2021).

To tackle these problems, the CSA established a design-led project titled *Short-Term Prisoners* that ran in 2021–2022. The project aimed to renew interorganizational collaboration, deliberate on structural changes, and manage collaboration between professionals to ensure smooth multi-sector service pathways could provide rehabilitation for short-term prisoners. The CSA collaborated with public social and healthcare institutions to renew the service system for short-term prisoners. Those contributing to the design process were carefully selected from among professionals and managers with the power to enhance short-term prisoners' experiences prior to rehabilitation (see Appendix I).

This case study relates to a two-day workshop, an SID process, held at the beginning of the short-term prisoners project in 2021 and continuing into the following year. The case of short-term prisoners' service integration presents a descriptive case study approach, as the case relies on descriptive theory and has a theory-driven focus (Tobin 2010; Yin 1993). Moreover, the case study approach can be described as instrumental (Stake 1995) in that it involves the case being applied as an instrument to investigate something other than the case itself.

Data collection and analysis

As is typical of case studies, several types of material combine to form the data (Tobin 2010). Data triangulation in the form of narrated experiences from three sources revealed the participants' experiences of the SID process. We wanted to understand how the process had enhanced change in the organizations. The research data consist of the answers to questions put to participants in the SID process ($n = 15$), interviews with the two facilitators of the process, and with its key stakeholders and representatives (Appendix II).

The participants received a link to an anonymous questionnaire approximately two weeks after the co-creation events had concluded. The questionnaire dealt with the process, expectations, and experiences of the SID process. Immediately after collating the questionnaire results, one of the researchers conducted a reflective interview with the two facilitators of the SID process. The meeting aimed to elicit the experiences and interpretation of the SID process and an assessment of the most valuable factors from the facilitators. The researchers also conducted four reflective interviews with key actors representing professionals and managers in the SID process approximately one year after its completion over the summer of 2022. The interviews aimed to determine how the service integration and network approach had been implemented and what aspects of the SID process had been most beneficial. In addition, the interviews sought to address whether the process and its implementation had advanced the social equity of short-term prisoners.

The key parties to the reflective interviews held project management, project coordination, social work management, and short-term-prisoner supervisor roles. They represented different organizations or parts of organizations connected through the network of managing short-term prisoners. They also represented both the horizontal and vertical levels of the service system. The project manager and coordinator had a holistic overview of the project acquired by initiating the SID process and working with all the organizations within the network. Their roles also included advancing the interprofessional work planned during the SID process. The manager of social work in healthcare services and the prison social worker both had a perspective on their own work.

Figure 1 illustrates the data and the analytical process. We used thematic analysis to identify, analyse, organize, describe, and report the themes discovered in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). We used *concepts coding* as our first-cycle coding method (Saldana 2016, 119). The method involves building on an understanding of the process of SID and focusing coding on conceptual ideas rather than single actions. The next phase of the coding process applied provisional coding (Saldana 2016, 168). After the first-cycle coding process that focused on SID, a researcher-formulated conceptual framework was used to build the coding structure. That structure made it possible to build connections between the codes to create themes.

The units of our analysis were the sentences and word groups formulated by the interviewees, and their meaning was formed around the three dimensions of social equity. We analysed the main themes of the SID process and collaborative management as an outcome against the different dimensions of social equity. We identified themes related to the change in communication and collaboration, roles and power relations, and practices and culture in the actor organizations. The final report on the analysis includes interview excerpts that help bring the report

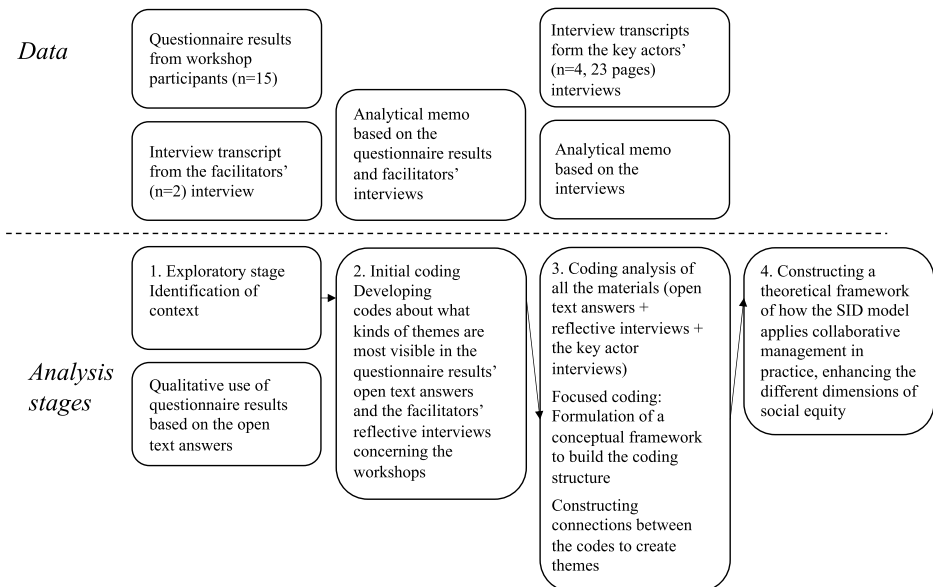


Figure 1. Coding process and the analysis stages of the data.

of the case alive. As Patton (2002) notes, such excerpts also help to capture the interviewee's views in their own words. The quotations also increase the robustness of the analysis and show that the interpretations have arisen from the data (Eldh, Årested, and Berterö 2020). An extensive table of quotations can be found in Appendix III. The quotations have been translated from Finnish into English by the researchers in such a way as to preserve their meaning but ensure readability.

Description of the SID process

The pre-understanding of the creation of the SID was that the presence of service silos meant the structures of organizations would not change without the management of collaborative networks and collaborative goal-setting (Læg Reid and Rykkja 2022, 695). The SID process aimed to deliver a clear understanding of the specific needs of a vulnerable service-user, the participation of professionals from different sectors, an atmosphere to enhance dialogue to elicit needs and concerns, and also provide tools to set goals and build new working methods and structures. The process is divided into four stages that address that setting.

Stage 1: preparatory actions for the workshops

Before the workshops, the facilitators and CSA defined a tentative goal for the design process: the expected outcome was a collaborative network in which each actor recognized their own and each other's roles and could work together within the public-service system. The starting point for collaboration was to obtain a clear picture of the needs of the service-user group, short-term prisoners. A description of the problems and needs of the service-user group was obtained prior to the workshop through a vignette titled *Hande*, which was created by the CSA and the facilitators. Vignettes are short stories of service-user group-specific service system encounters, providing an impersonal way to comprehensively describe the situations facing vulnerable people (Barter and Renold 2000). The example case of Hande, a short-term prisoner (for a detailed description of Hande, see Appendix I), is not a story of one person but a combination of experiences of vulnerable people who suffer from drug and alcohol misuse, lack of income, homelessness, and other social problems (Taylor 2006, 1187). After the service-user experience was encapsulated in the Hande vignette, workshop participants were asked to familiarize themselves with it before the workshops.

Professionals and managers involved in the different stages of Hande's support path were invited to participate in the workshop. The people chosen to collaborate had interdependent roles in various sectors, such as social workers evaluating service needs. The determining factor was the service user linking the actors together. Managers were key participants because of their decision-making mandate on the organizational level that contributes to outcomes on a structural level. The most important role of the managers was to jointly make organization-specific decisions that influenced the whole interorganizational system. Those decisions related to the service user's whole service pathway, not merely the span of the prison sentence. The workshops focused on collaboration negotiations between actors on a structural level; thus, service users were not involved.

Stage 2: workshop day 1, analysis of the status quo

The process involved 30 participants divided into three groups of ten. Each group included professionals from different organizations and who held different positions. Participants started by describing their role in the context of the Hande vignette. They discussed the actors involved in Hande's case and their roles, responsibilities, working methods, abilities, and concerns. Participants were asked to note where there was overlapping work and pinpoint where the responsibilities of actors were unclear.

Next, the participants identified critical transition phases and key players whose roles affected the ability of other actors to support a joint-service-user group. Suggested transition phases included making a diagnosis, providing rehabilitation, and granting income support. The process unveiled overlaps and issues with the collaboration and intervention stages where *Hande* was at risk of being diverted from support. By the end of the first day, best practices and challenges had been identified, and a shared goal formulated.

Stage 3: workshop day 2, Target setting

Participants defined a shared goal and formulated the best possible user journey in the service system for Hande. Participants identified the common need for change and the means to initiate the journey. They identified all the actors needed to provide sufficient support, their roles and responsibilities, and which changes and decisions would have to be made to achieve that. They were asked to co-create an ideal model of collaboration that would make the most of the competence in the network. The necessary changes, specific steps, and the decision-making supporting them were jointly defined in the course of the work. All actors involved determined the cooperation objectives and agreed on the division of labour and roles within the collaborative network. At the end of the workshop, the participants shared their understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the network.

Stage 4: post-workshop outcomes

After analysing the status quo, the participants outlined measures to reach the target. The facilitators of the SID process prepared a report on the workshop results. The implementation of the pilot programme began after the workshop and was guided by a complete analysis of the status quo, an ideal model for a collaborative network, and a description of measures to deliver the shared goals.

Results

The previous section described the SID process and its outcomes in detail. Below we examine the questionnaire and interview answers and assess how the different design elements of SID can enhance social equity. The open-text answers on the questionnaire revealed the most prominent themes in the participants' minds related to the elements of communication and collaboration in SID. In the interviews, the most comprehensive answers to questions came from the professional and project worker interviewed, who had both worked closely with the service users. The two managers' ideas on how the SID process could help professionals in their everyday work or how it might affect short-term prisoners were more vague. They did, however, have a stronger focus on the structural level changes and prospects. A common feature of all the interviewees' answers was topics concerning roles and decision-making power.

Communication and collaboration enhancing equity in terms of quality

The main characteristic of the SID process was creating an understanding among the professionals relating to a joint-service user. This network of organizations played a key role in clarifying the service path for the prisoners, defining tasks, roles and responsibilities between professionals and managers, and establishing collaboration and communication networks and structures between them. A questionnaire distributed after the SID workshops focused on how the process had helped advance communication and collaboration. In an open-text answer to a question on the main thoughts arising from the SID workshops, an anonymous respondent said: *'The[SID] process helped to start collaboration at the beginning of the project'*.

Over a year, a change from working in silos towards creating a more communicative and collaborative network was perceptible from the key actors' interviews. The change helped the CSA staff understand the interconnectedness of professionals. They realized how the people they are responsible for are vulnerable and need holistic care before, during, and after their sentences. A project worker (interview code INT01) put it as follows: *People used to work totally in silos at the CSA, and they didn't really understand that the client also had a life in the society. I feel that the awareness of what we do and why we do alcohol and drug rehabilitation during imprisonment has increased after the [SID process]*. This observation indicates that creating a structure for collaboration and communication can help professionals ensure the quality of services for service users in situations where the quality of the service in different organizations varies. Some professionals clearly did not know the options available to their customers to help with their problems.

Throughout the SID process, the organizations agreed upon communication practices within the network. Familiarization and trust built in the co-creation process strengthened the incentives of interaction. The threshold for communication was lowered, which enhanced collaboration. Previously, the appropriate people could not be reached when interorganizational expertise was required. For example, a prison social worker (informant code INT02) described how the previously siloed responsibilities and lack of contact hindered collaboration: *In the workshop, we discussed how it is sometimes very difficult to create [a collaboration] network because work in the city is so siloed. But now I think that collaboration has become easier. We have more contact details that are frequently updated*. Enhancing social equity through communication and collaboration means that objectives must ensure consistency of service, regardless of organization. This must be instilled in the creation of a collaborative management structure.

Another reason the collaborative management network was set up was the short-term prisoners' need to have decisions on services or benefits expedited so they could advance in the treatment process during the short period of their sentence. The SID process provided the organizations with tools to foster communication and collaboration, which resulted in the employees acquiring an improved understanding of the impact collaborative management could have on the efficiency of the treatment processes of short-term prisoners. When decisions could be made holistically in interorganizational teams, the decision-making on prisoners' service pathways now occurred earlier. INT01 said: *'We've started to plan the external placements earlier, during the evaluation of service needs. It is great to see that the municipalities take part and often pay for the treatment programmes'*.

Roles and decision-making power enhancing access to services

An integral part of the SID process was clarifying organizations' roles and ensuring the staff involved had the requisite knowledge and decision-making power relating to the prisoners' process. Access to services could be pursued by ensuring the people in the appropriate roles made timely decisions. Decision-makers understanding the impact of their decisions and procedures on other professionals on both the organizational and systemic levels helped nurture more user-oriented practices. That progression was another step towards equitable, collaborative management.

In an interview after the SID process, INT02 stated, *'I have been given the freedom to plan my own work. I have had a chance to influence how it looks and is'*. As a result of the SID process, employees enjoyed greater work autonomy. They could also start implementing plans, resulting in strong ownership and influence to enhance joint processes for short-term prisoners. Respondent INT01 actioned providing staff with the skills to work independently and collaboratively with other organizations: *'[The social workers conducting evaluations in healthcare] didn't trust themselves to lead the collaboration, so I took part in those [meetings] a lot [initially]. They wanted me to teach them how to lead. It has changed so that some workers don't ask me to participate anymore. They keep me updated on where we are going with each client, but they now have the courage to lead the collaboration'*. The change enhanced the negotiation power of the professionals, and establishing a collaboration structure during the SID process led to collaboration with other organizations becoming more effective, producing better results in terms of safeguarding services for short-term prisoners.

The approach of the informants towards the decision-making processes on the rehabilitation of short-term prisoners differed depending on whether they had a management role or worked directly with service users. The managers had a more instrumental perspective; however, all agreed that the employee working directly with the service users had to have sufficient decision-making power to advance the process, but management were expected to sanction their decisions to ensure the process was lawful and equitable. A manager from the CSA (interview code: INT03) stated that: *The most important changes in [the treatment of prisoners] have been that we have changed our internal processes so that planning responsibility has shifted to the staff working directly with the prisoners. We can move forward faster, and the same employees proceed with the prisoners [throughout the whole process]. The process has become better.* Not only were the horizontal level collaboration and clarification of roles beneficial to the short-term prisoners' process, but so too were the vertical decision-making processes that had been clarified because of the SID process. Tangible benefits could be seen in just one year:

A prison social worker (INT02) reported how there was now a mutual understanding and collaboration at the vertical level of decision-making: *I'm the one who prepares the processes. And then we have a supervisor who presents, and then a manager who makes the final decision. . . I think that we all have our own approach to the issue. I think that is what can help in the success [of the prisoner's treatment]. . . there are things that supervisors look at from the perspective of safety, and I look from the perspective of rehabilitation. We work together, and of course, there are situations where we need to negotiate a bit, but I think our differences are valuable, and we communicate openly.* For that interviewee, the value of the SID process manifested in terms of shared leadership and its effects on short-term prisoners' service processes.

Practices and culture shaping procedural fairness

The SID process helped the workshop participants understand their roles as part of a bigger system. It aimed to locate key players whose potential operational impact was more significant than others. Having such key players with considerable power over decisions could also be fatal in terms of equity. For instance, some key actors had a decision-making role where they could work as gatekeepers concerning the distribution of services, whether they were aware of it or not. Respondent INT01 voiced concern over such roles: *'If the core people who do this don't learn how to send service users to rehabilitation, who does this when the project ends? . . . They need our project workers in prisons to support the work'*. In these cases, short-term prisoners were in danger of missing out on equal treatment because of a lack of information or cultural prejudices built into the system. The SID process made these key actor roles more visible.

Advancing social equity can be viewed as improving procedural fairness, which can be damaged by discrimination against short-term prisoners. INT01 stated: *'Some prisons do not send inmates to rehabilitation [if they have] a positive drug test [result]. We have tried to bring this and other issues forward in prisons. . . But it's like talking to the walls'*. In addition, INT03 noted: *'I can imagine that [short-term prisoners are] a group that is not so wanted because of the alcohol and drug problems. But through this project, I hope the municipalities also see [rehabilitation] as a valuable use of resources'*.

All the interviewees saw challenges in offering rehabilitation for short-term prisoners. On the management and coordination level, the informants felt that significant changes were needed at the organizational and even regulatory levels. Moreover, the interviewees suggested that both attitudes towards substance abusers who were imprisoned and the culture must change. Respondent INT03 noted, *'Certain professionals have certain practices that do not necessarily fit with our processes, which is why we can't take service users forward in the process and on to rehabilitation quickly enough. We discussed it, and last time they said that they had received so much feedback that they started to think that their system was not user-centric. Hopefully, there will be changes in the future'*. The collaborative management system is effective when there is a commitment between the organizations and all actors in the system to follow the shared vision and change their practices accordingly. When a network is voluntary, even one actor not committing to the goals can jeopardize the whole process.

Nevertheless, the project was perceived to have had a positive impact after just one year. As INT02 said: *'We have taken short-term prisoners into consideration more. . . . We have long known that short-term prisoners are the group that returns after imprisonment, they are here many times, and the faces become familiar. They have been very pleased, and we got much positive feedback [from prisoners] because of enabling more rehabilitation'*. As INT01 noted, long-term systemic change is required for short-term prisoners to be able to access services on an equitable basis: *'This practice needs to be regularized, it must have clear structures, and everyone should have a chance to go to rehabilitation'*.

The continuity of the project and its funding were seen as integral to the successful continuation of collaborative management. INT02 said: I absolutely hope that the project can continue after this year. Or if not the project, the financing should continue. We have put so many people in rehabilitation now, which has been great to notice. It will be a shame if the financing ends. I hope that despite the project ending,

the collaboration continues with the municipalities in the same way. We have made work to develop the collaboration, and it can continue well in the future. . . . I believe that we have been able to offer equal opportunities for rehabilitation. If the municipality doesn't finance rehabilitation, we have our own project budget that we can use. And the municipalities have participated well in the service phase after the rehabilitation when organising the continuation of rehabilitation and service paths. I have been very positively surprised by that.

The results of the feedback questionnaire collected after the workshops indicated a similar need for continuity (through funding). A participant stated that after the creation of structures, roles and responsibilities in the network, '*the eternal lack of resources was left*'. The resource issue relates to the question of distributional equity but is not necessarily something the network could resolve, as it is primarily a public policy problem.

As a design-led approach, SID encouraged combining resources to generate desired results. The professionals and their managers made decisions collaboratively on changes to the network's vertical and horizontal specializations and coordination. These changes were subsequently applied in practice. The more holistic approach changed both individual and network roles of professionals and strengthened service-user-centred orientation and, therefore, helped the professionals and managers contribute to the social equity of short-term prisoners. Vertical decisions were made, and horizontal collaboration was improved in various ways. Moreover, informants reported that their understanding of each other's tasks, work processes, and management needs across sectors had improved.

Discussion

The current research addressed social equity through the dimensions of quality, access and procedural fairness (Brunet 2011). First, the results show that social equity in terms of quality of services can be advanced through communication and collaboration. Achieving that involves getting to know each other's work, building trust and the motivation to work together, and creating structural solutions to address problems within the network (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2011). Knowledge is co-created through cooperative action, and during the SID process, the actors recognized each other's roles in the collaborative network (Struminska-Kutra and Espeland 2020). The shared understanding of the impact of separate decisions in organizations facilitated the negotiations on the network level.

By enhancing collaboration between organizational actors, SID can provide an effective tool for collaborative management. It supports creating a shared vision and values, noticing interdependencies and overlapping responsibilities, creating mutual respect and effective communication, and promoting synergies between parties (Ansell and Torfing 2021; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2011; Lawrence 2017, 91). Therefore, we consider communication and collaboration elements that must be designed for collaborative management to ensure social equity through providing services of sufficient quality (see Brunet 2011).

Second, the distribution of work and understanding of each others's skills are key in determining roles and decision-making power to advance social equity as access. An organization must then have a participatory and open form of management that enables dialogue and joint reflection and creates the space to make changes at the

level of job descriptions or the organization (Archer and Cameron 2013, 9; Frederickson 2015, 47). Clearly stated roles and responsibilities can help create solid service paths and structures and prevent the duplication of resources (Määttä 2018, 36). Commitment to social equity requires organizational and political forms with the capacity for continued flexibility or routinized change within and between organizations (Frederickson 2015, 8). Such progress would require clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each actor, ensuring decision-making power is distributed equally, furnishing people with appropriate skills, and offering them tools to build confidence in their work.

Third, the results reveal that the practices and culture of the network shape the procedural fairness of the process. Jos (2016) states that interorganizational and cross-sectoral networks could advance social equity by ensuring procedural fairness. Prejudices and administrative barriers were key themes that could bar short-term prisoners from social equity. At the same time, there had already been changes in practices and culture that signalled a broader transformation over time. A systemic approach highlights the importance of understanding public services as nested consortiums of challenges and opportunities, where collaboration is required to tackle the multifaceted problems of service users. However, the system can also destroy opportunities by encouraging optimization, power games, or the avoidance of responsibility (Tuurnas et al. 2015). Accordingly, the culture around decision-making practices in organizations should change to require administrators safeguard the due process rights of individuals, and even tailor the services when needed. Administrators could advance social equity by ensuring procedural fairness is integral to their everyday work (Jos 2016, 761).

Organizational cultures that enhance social equity can be reinforced through frequent and sustained communication, honouring commitments, sharing information, and acknowledging mistakes (Jos 2016, 771.) All that can benefit multiple service users like short-term prisoners, who should be offered appropriate services promptly without prejudiced gatekeepers hindering efforts. The sustainability of collaborative management lies in the willingness and abilities of organizations to create long-term networks around the different public services. Nevertheless, the role of management in facilitating the opportunity to work collaboratively must be considered.

Matrix management is one of the most difficult management structures to apply (Axelsson and Axelsson 2006, 323–325; Mintzberg 1993). Commitment to a joint project can be encouraged by providing participants the widest possible ownership and the tools to establish collaboration. A method-based approach, such as SID, can offer missing tools to achieve structural changes for managing the public-service system, thus advancing social equity. An operationalized, step-by-step collaborative process helps identify ways to manage and lead collaborative networks.

Accordingly, working through the SID model resonates with the idea that these arrangements operate in complex systems that follow nonlinear patterns and must be fully understood before initiating action (Waddock et al. 2015). Service integration design offers a framework to aid in disentangling the complexity of complex service systems, thus creating chances for designing the systems more equitably (Ferraro, Etzion, and Gehman 2015; Lægreid and Rykkja 2022). This research suggests that a designed co-creative process – applying collaborative management in practice – can offer a systematic way to collaborate on all organizing levels and interorganizational networks, thus enhancing social equity. Accordingly, we propose a framework that visualizes the systematic approach (Figure 2).

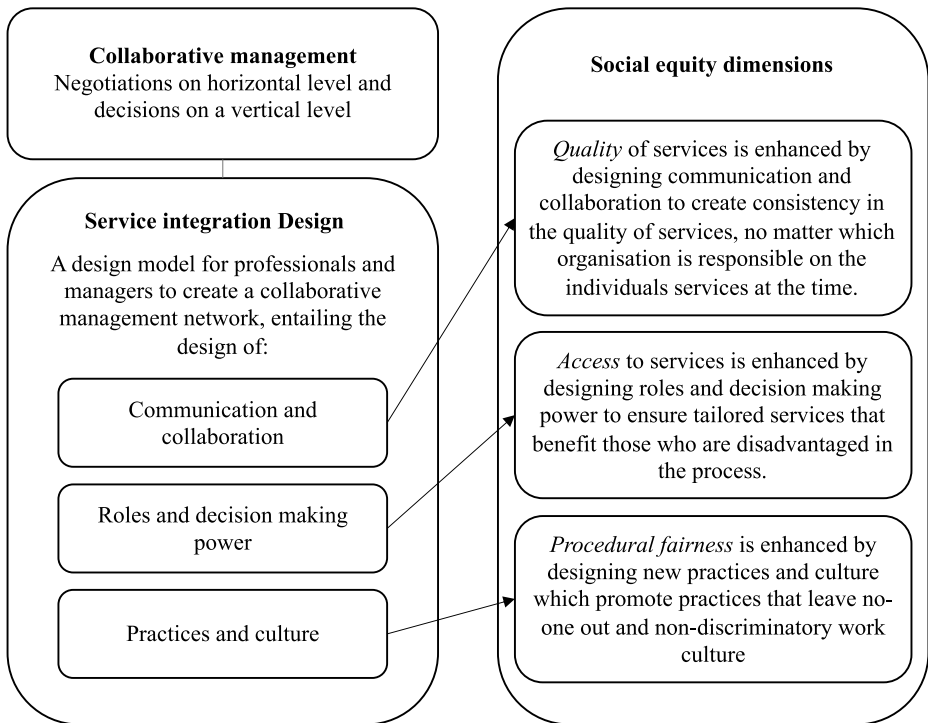


Figure 2. Proposed framework of how the SID model applies collaborative management in practice, enhancing the different dimensions of social equity.

Overall, we argue that co-creation tools could tackle the interdependency aspect of complex problems. Such tools can help support public social health care and employment systems to re-combine existing organizations and resources to improve systemic functioning and collective effort. These tools consider the different roles in enabling systemic human-centric change and public sector innovations (Bason and Austin 2021). Because SID can dismantle complexity and create structure and communication channels between actors, it can be a tool utilized to enhance the equitable treatment of short-term prisoners from a systems perspective (Haynes et al. 2020, 71–72).

Here, social equity manifests in each step of the process in a different way and is in a continuous improvement cycle aligned with the process of planning public-service management (Frederickson 2015, 91). Accordingly, SID can also offer a roadmap for organizations. Being a deliberate process, it includes working towards a goal in a rational way via certain steps. Planning and improvement are strongly related, making the planning work by systematic steps a systemic future-oriented process (Brenman and Sanchez 2012, 150). As such, the design-led approach offers concrete tools for public-service organizations that deal with complex service integration processes (Ansell and Torfing 2021, 218).

This study has some limitations that arise from dealing with a limited number of interviewees, which prevents drawing generalizable conclusions. Nevertheless, a small-sample study provides an opportunity for researchers to acquire detailed knowledge and learn and develop theory (see Crouch and McKenzie 2006). It is

also important to acknowledge that the process was affected by restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time, complicating the planned follow-up to the initial process. In addition, the missing voice of the short-term prisoners in the evaluation of the longer-term results of the SID process can be considered a limitation since we only hear the professionals' and managers' perceptions. Nevertheless, that limitation does not prevent drawing conclusions on the usability of the SID process as a management design model and its implications for social equity.

Conclusion

This article asked how a design-led approach might help managers and professionals in public-service systems recognize and reduce barriers to social equity. It is a topical question that recent research has proposed should be studied (Osborne et al. 2022). By explaining the kinds of action managers and professionals would need to take to enhance social equity and how their implementation can be designed by focusing on different themes, we make a theoretical contribution to the discussion of how social equity can be addressed by public administration on the level of a complex service system (see Cepiku and Mastrodascio 2021). The examined case showed how the SID model could enhance different dimensions of social equity by designing communication and collaboration to promote the achievement of a common goal, align professional and organizational roles and goals, and clarify the necessary structural procedures on a horizontal and vertical level.

The current research indicates that a systematically designed collaborative network could address problems related to interorganizational work by offering tools to re-evaluate the system when necessary (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). This research reveals that a systematic design process can illuminate pathways enhancing social equity. Nevertheless, we cannot say whether the network from our case description has fully adapted to the collaborative management approach. Organizational and cultural transitions are so slow that fundamental changes can be seen only after a longer period. Moreover, it became clear that even though it is important to acquire the support and ownership of management in a service creation model with the experts, the professionals who are going to implement the new ideas need to be strongly present too, and their roles and decision-making power should be clearly communicated.

Finally, the study can be used to aid practitioners' work. Utilizing a co-creative design model can prove a stepping stone for practitioners seeking to create a public-service network, offering concrete tools to enhance social equity on a system level. The SID offers an analytical and practical tool, especially for public-service management. We stress that management can advance social equity in several ways – through collaboration, changes in structures and practices, and leading on both horizontal and vertical levels (Bihari Axelsson and Axelsson 2009; Bryson et al. 2012; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2011; Eriksson et al. 2020; Læg Reid and Rykkja 2022). We suggest future research paths might include a comprehensive practical analysis of collaborative management concerning social equity from a systems perspective. We also encourage researchers to analyse the role of design in advancing social equity in public-service systems.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix

Appendix I: Vignette: Comprehensive need for support – low motivation

Hande

Hande has three prison sentences of less than six months in length and four fines/imprisonment terms on the past register. Hande's first conviction was at the age of 18. Hande now faces another two-month prison sentence and has just arrived to serve the sentence at Helsinki prison.

Background and current situation:

Homeless, unemployed, and in debt, Hande is lodging with friends who constantly consume alcohol and other intoxicants. Hande's social network consists mostly of substance abusers, and there is little contact with family.

Hande has scarcely been in contact with the municipality's social work department and has often not attended scheduled appointments with social workers. Social workers have not reached Hande due to changing phone numbers and Hande not picking up mail. Hande has issues handling the rhythm of life and basic everyday skills (e.g. paying bills). Hande has rent arrears of €1500. Hande lives on basic income support, which has already been downgraded a few times because Hande does not maintain the search for a job. No mapping has been carried out on Hande's health condition, and there is reportedly no contact with health care.

Hande missed parts of elementary schooling and dropped out in the final term of the ninth grade. Hande does not want outsiders to know about the substance use, feeling it is under control. Hande is often indifferent towards other people, especially the authorities. Hande denies responsibility for actions and feels issues are down to circumstances or other people.