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In Search of a Connection: Public Procurement and Active Labour Market Policies in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia

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ABSTRACT

Governments in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have increasingly utilised public procurement—their power to purchase goods and services—to assist disadvantaged groups in accessing better-quality jobs. This approach is part of a broader effort to create ‘good jobs’. However, it is necessary to examine whether this represents a new strategy for addressing persistent issues of inequality in labour markets. This review critically assesses whether public procurement and Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) form a coherent, sequential and complementary framework. The conclusion, however, is that this connection is not well-established. Instead, there is a disjointed situation where the two approaches lack meaningful integration, despite some efforts at the local level.

1 | Introduction

Governments in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have employed public procurement to support marginalised groups—such as young people not in education or employment, Indigenous populations, the long-term unemployed and individuals with disabilities—by favouring contractors who offer jobs or work experience to these groups. This approach differs from active labour market policies (ALMPs), which aim to increase the supply of labour by enhancing the employability of those who are unemployed or underemployed. While ALMPs generally focus on preparing individuals for available jobs, social value procurement operates on the demand side, leveraging government spending to ensure that contractors recruit from specific groups and adhere to ethical and labour standards.

The renewed emphasis on public procurement as a mechanism for integrating disadvantaged groups into the workforce and enhancing job quality signals a growing recognition of the limitations and opportunities inherent in the ‘work-first’ vs. human capital development debates within ALMPs. Proponents of the work-first approach argue that gaining work experience and securing rapid job placements are the most effective strategies for lifting people out of poverty—underpinned by the belief that any job is better than no job. Conversely, advocates for human capital development stress the importance of investing in education and skills for target groups (Lindsay 2014). Critics of the work-first model contend that its stringent conditions often compel individuals to accept low-quality jobs, thereby diminishing their autonomy in the workplace and contributing to a decline in job quality, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Jones, Wright, and Scullion 2024).

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In contrast, human capital development approaches are designed to produce more sustainable employment outcomes rather than merely facilitating initial job entry (Green and Sissons 2023). This approach aligns more closely with concerns about job quality, as it assumes that benefit recipients require retraining and upskilling to capitalise on existing job opportunities in relevant sectors or occupations. In other words, human capital development takes a more holistic view of what is needed to enhance individuals' ability to compete in the open labour market. Despite these distinctions, both human capital development and work-first approaches share a supply-side perspective on the labour market, assuming that jobs are readily available.

However, ALMPs are limited in their ability to address the lack of employment opportunities in certain regions, particularly post-industrial areas. They also face challenges in overcoming employers' reluctance to hire disadvantaged groups, especially those with disabilities, including mental health conditions (Frøyland, Andreassen, and Innvaer 2019). Moreover, ALMPs do little to tackle the issue of low-quality jobs in sectors such as hospitality and social care, where poor working conditions are prevalent (Erickcek 2019).

To address these issues, social procurement is being reconsidered as a tool to address labour market inequalities. Categorised as a commercial, contractual function, procurement has not been central to social policy and welfare state research. Our contention is that public spending with added social benefits is being rediscovered because it represents an important policy tool as part of the global political discourse around the need to combine decent or fair work and economic growth (Sustainable Development Goal 8). As such, it is also closely linked with the demand for a social investment state that seeks to smooth critical life transitions and put children wellbeing at the centre of modern social policy (Deeming and Smyth 2019; Esping-Andersen 2002). In fact, the rediscovery of social procurement is part of a renewed Third-Way consensus that seeks to combine the strengths of market economies with a focus on fair work. Another key dimension of this political discourse is the search for labour market inclusiveness, which focuses on reducing barriers of access to the labour market and employment retention for women, youth and other underserved communities (referred to as target hires in Figure 1 below). Figure 1 illustrates how ALMPs and social procurement can be interconnected to promote inclusive labour markets and workplaces, aligning with SDG8.

Drawing from various academic fields, including urban studies, public administration, social policy and law, as well as grey literature, this article analyses how governments in New Public Management (NPM) countries such as the United Kingdom, United States and Australia are using social procurement as a labour market tool. These countries were selected for three reasons. First, they are core NPM states, known for favouring quasi-markets, large-scale outsourcing and market testing, blurring the distinctions between public and private sectors (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Second, they possess liberal market economies characterised by low employment protection, insecure labour markets and a growing number of precarious jobs (Kalleberg 2018; Wilson 2021). Third, there is increasing concern that the social security system, particularly in-work benefits, effectively subsidises employers who offer low-quality

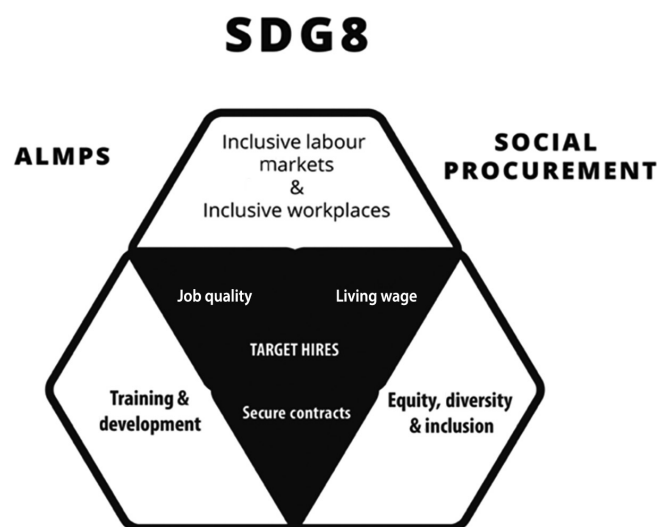


FIGURE 1 | Integrating Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) with social procurement for inclusive workplaces and labour markets: an SDG8 perspective.

jobs (Blundell 2024; Jacobs, Perry, and MacGillvary 2015; Puttick 2019). This has led to a consensus on the necessity of improving job quality, based on the premise that labour market problems are more closely related to the lack of good jobs than to a shortage of jobs or deficiencies in worker qualifications (Howell and Kalleberg 2019).

In this context, social procurement is being utilised as a corrective measure to enhance job quality, particularly in lower-end jobs. Public authorities can require or encourage employers to meet certain labour standards (Gibb and Ishaq 2020). Examples include the requirements for contractors to pay a 'real' living wage, calculated on the costs of living in a given area, as opposed to the statutory minimum wage (Wilson 2021, 6), access to training, greater 'employee voice' (trade union recognition), job security and increasingly equity, diversity and inclusion dimensions. A renewed focus on achieving sustained employment outcomes, combined with opportunities for training and development, suggests a shift away from work-first policies.

This article examines the mechanisms underlying social procurement, drawing on both academic and grey literature, and focuses on practices in Anglo-American contexts. It explores whether social procurement, as a regulatory tool in social policy, is being effectively implemented or whether the connection between public procurement and labour market policies remains weak. Despite renewed interest in social procurement among OECD countries (OECD 2022), this approach has received relatively little attention in social policy discussions (Yerkes and van den Braken 2019). This piece aims to address this gap by reviewing how social procurement operates in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. Our central research question for the review was: how do governments in ideal-typical NPM countries shape their public procurement policies to benefit socially disadvantaged groups and promote a good jobs agenda? The review follows a qualitative, semi-systematic format that seeks to address the 'what' and 'how' questions. The remainder of the article is organised into four sections. First, we discuss the growing criticism of work-first

activation. Next, we explore how contracting can be used to achieve social equity goals, either by directly targeting employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups or by indirectly improving job quality for low-income workers. We then present the review methods and findings, focusing on the most significant processes and mechanisms identified. In the final section, we reflect on the implications of these findings and suggest areas for future research.

1.1 | Work-First Activation and Its Discontents: A Shift Towards More and Better Jobs?

Since the mid-1990s, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom have followed similar paths in shifting from benefit programmes towards policies that encourage recipients to take on part-time, low-paid jobs with limited prospects for career progression. Work search requirements have been extended to groups who were previously exempt, such as single-parent families with young children and individuals with health conditions—a common trend across OECD countries over the past 30 years (Scarpetta 2023). In the United Kingdom, a priority of successive governments has been to move people off disability benefits and into paid work. However, the results of these policies have been mixed, with adverse effects particularly on Universal Credit claimants with mental health conditions (Wright, Robertson, and Stewart 2022).

This shift away from demand-side measures is closely tied to the development of quasi-markets for employment services (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016). Under this NPM model, government ministries no longer directly administer public goods; instead, they commission and contract out service provision, adopting a payment-by-results model intended to incentivise private providers to deliver the best value for money. This has been the case in the United States, where the 1996 welfare reform—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)—ended the bureaucratic/legal rule model, in which caseworkers determined eligibility criteria for benefit receipt. PRWORA facilitated the rise of an entrepreneurial government model, giving states and local governments greater leeway in achieving desirable outcomes, such as increased work participation rates and reduced welfare rolls (Diller 2000). States devolved welfare administration to counties and established monitoring mechanisms to hold local offices accountable for specific outcomes, with some functions outsourced to private organisations using a payment-by-results model for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. Similar market delivery reforms of former Public Employment Services (PES) have occurred across the OECD.

There has been growing recognition that while activation strategies help people move off benefits into paid employment, they do not support career progression, resulting in continued low pay and reliance on cash transfers. Increasingly, the issue has been framed as a need to access not just any job, but good or at least better-quality jobs, rather than bad jobs that are detrimental to workers' wellbeing (Warhurst and Knox 2022). The discourse around ALMPs has begun to emphasise 'sustained employment outcomes' as a new benchmark of success.

In the United Kingdom, concerns about welfare-to-work cycling at the bottom end of the labour market emerged in the mid-2000s. A National Audit Office (NAO) report (2007) called for a shift towards sustained employment as a measure of success for ALMPs, rather than quick job entry. The NAO suggested that this would improve the return on investment in employment programmes and reduce government spending. This was operationalised by defining success as participants remaining in paid employment for 26 weeks, as exemplified by the Conservative Government's Work Programme beginning in 2011 involving large-scale outsourcing of ALMPs to for-profit providers who received higher government payments the longer participants remained in employment.

In Australia, following the abolition of the Commonwealth Employment Service in 1998, successive governments implemented a regime of 'Mutual Obligations', marked by stringent conditionality. Employment services primarily focused on rapid job placement, leading to practices such as 'creaming'—selecting the most job-ready clients for assistance—and 'parking', where individuals with more complex needs are sidelined (O'Sullivan, McGann, and Considine 2021), also a feature of the United Kingdom. In response to criticisms of jobseeker 'churning', the Workforce Australia programme, introduced under the Morrison government (2019–2022), sought to move beyond a rigid work-first approach. The programme incorporated a performance framework assessing both short-term employment outcomes and service quality. However, the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services (2023), convened by the Albanese Labor government, found that the system still prioritises quick job placements. The committee recommended developing guiding principles for job quality, drawing on international models and establishing metrics to evaluate how effectively the system supports jobseekers in securing quality employment (Recommendation 41).

In the United States, political discourse around work requirements in welfare programmes remains deeply polarised. Republicans generally advocate for stricter conditions, while Democrats and liberal think tanks favour more flexible, outcomes-based approaches aligned with the workforce investment system overseen by the Department of Labor (DOL). Despite these divisions, recent developments show some bipartisan agreement on moving away from rigid work participation rates in the TANF programme (Pavetti 2023). These changes represent a shift towards evaluating success based on job outcomes rather than mere work participation, reflecting a broader, albeit modest, cross-party recognition of the need for reform in how TANF measures success.

Alongside critiques of work-first approaches and their contribution to the secondary labour market of insecure work, there has been renewed interest in leveraging procurement power to generate social value and create better jobs. The decline of the standard employment relationship (SER) is closely tied to contracting out—a key feature of the NPM model—often leading to poorer job quality. However, public authorities have significant influence over employment conditions through their spending power. This purchasing power can act as a countervailing mechanism to the negative effects of outsourcing by embedding job quality requirements into contracts. Warhurst and Knox (2022)

identify two broad categories of job quality relevant to such policies: intrinsic job quality, which refers to the nature of the job itself, and extrinsic job quality, encompassing terms of employment, pay, benefits, job design, social support, health, safety, work-life balance and employee representation.

In this context, the state can act as a responsible customer by embedding work quality and fair employment standards into its commissioning processes (Jaehrling et al. 2018). By strategically using their spending power, public authorities require higher labour standards on specific contracts and across entire supply chains, ensuring that suppliers and subcontractors lay the foundations for decent work and, by extension, create more secure, well-paid and fair employment opportunities.

In the United Kingdom, these initiatives have taken root in various forms, extending to devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. For instance, the Fair Work-First guidance in Scotland mandates adherence to principles such as employee voice and the living wage as conditions for receiving government aid, highlighting the Scottish government's commitment to fair employment practices.

In the United States, the Biden-Harris administration has shifted away from the pro-market and free-trade policies favoured by previous Democratic presidents, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. This transformation, encapsulated in the term 'Bidenomics', reflects a broader shift within the Democratic Party's economic philosophy (Leonhardt 2023). Through the enactment of the Inflation Reduction Act (2022), the CHIPS and Science Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021/2022, this approach leverages significant public investment to create 'good jobs'.

In Australia, prior to the 2022 federal elections, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) outlined plans to use government procurement to ensure that taxpayers' money supports secure employment for Australian workers through the introduction of the Secure Australian Jobs Code. The code would establish guidelines for the fair treatment of workers, including job security, fair wages and conditions (Howe, Irving, and Landau 2023). While the Albanese government has not yet introduced this code, the states of Queensland and Victoria, in particular, have adopted regulations that use procurement to strengthen labour standards.

These developments across countries signal a potential shift towards a social investment state that seeks to balance economic growth with social equity. Public procurement—the strategic purchasing of private goods and services by government authorities—has increasingly prioritised social equity as a legitimate function of private and public investment. Indeed, public procurement represents a key policy tool for labour market regulation, through the establishment of labour standards and the employment of underrepresented groups via employment requirements (Sarter 2024).

1.2 | Public Contracting as an Instrument of Social Policy: A Brief Overview

Governments have long used their spending power to promote equal employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups

(McCrudden 2007). During the New Deal era in the United States, extensive public work projects provided unemployment relief and stimulated aggregate demand. The Biden–Harris administration has revived this approach by using major infrastructure projects to shape regional labour markets and promote a good jobs agenda (The White House 2023). In practice, governments often attach conditions to public contracts to pressure contractors into adopting particular social policies (McCrudden 2007).

In the past decade, there has been renewed interest in using government contracts to fulfil social policy goals (Davies, Buys, and Macdonald 2023). For instance, the United Kingdom's 2012 Social Value Act encourages public authorities to adopt socially responsible procurement practices. In the United States, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law 2021 includes a section titled 'Local Hiring Preference for Construction Jobs', which allows states and project recipients to prioritise disadvantaged workers or those from certain areas when hiring for federal highway projects (Federal Highway Administration 2022).

In Australia, the Federal Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) requires Commonwealth agencies to meet annual targets for contract volume and value, alongside Mandatory Set Aside requirements. Victoria was the first state to introduce a Social Procurement Framework in 2018, followed by Queensland and Western Australia. In Victoria, each state department and agency must prepare a Social Procurement Strategy (SPS) for the direct purchasing of goods, services, and construction through social enterprises and other social benefit suppliers.

1.3 | Contracted-Out PES (ALMPs) vs. Social Procurement

ALMPs have become characterised since the mid-1990s by the 'third-partyisation' of employment and support services, whereby the state stops directly providing these services and instead contracts these out to third-party providers (Ingold 2018). This approach is analogous to the state outsourcing other services, such as cleaning, highlighting the commercial nature of these arrangements. Crucially, there is no direct employment relationship between the state and the service providers; instead, their interactions are governed by a commercial law framework.

However, a countermovement has emerged, prioritising social over pure monetary value, broadly conceptualised as social return on investment. This movement strives to make commercial and contract law mechanisms more socially oriented, without reverting to direct state provision of a wide array of goods and services. The shift towards social value in procurement reflects an effort to achieve sustained employment outcomes through 'direct social contracts' for marginalised groups, moving away from a focus on rapid job placements. Moreover, it seeks to leverage the purchasing power of state and public authorities to: (a) implement employment requirements for target groups—whether or not they are referred by third-party job placement agencies contracted by PES—combined with employment support models, and (b) improve job quality by enhancing extrinsic measures such as job security and pay. This twin movement involves key mechanisms and governance arrangements that balance commercial objectives with social outcomes.

Barraket, Keast, and Furneaux (2016) propose a useful typology of social procurement. The first type involves the direct purchasing of social outcomes, such as job placement for the long-term unemployed or training for jobseekers. Under the work-first model, state and local governments purchase the social outcome of economic self-sufficiency, measured by job placements and benefit caseload reductions. The contracting out of job search assistance and job placement represents a form of direct social procurement.

The second type is indirect; here, social value is pursued through procurement linkages (McCrudden 2007), also known as horizontal policies (Arrowsmith 2010). In such contracts, the contract's subject matter is the provision of goods and services, with the delivery of social outcomes as an indirect aspect (Davies, Buys, and Macdonald 2023). Contracts can ensure legal compliance and require suppliers to provide additional social benefits (Arrowsmith 2010).

In sum, the evolution of indirect social contracts in these jurisdictions exemplifies a shift towards a socially progressive understanding of procurement away from purely commercial considerations. Community benefit clauses, set-asides, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) considerations and cooperative community benefit contracts also transform publicly commissioned contracts into social policy instruments. Social procurement, as a form of social policy, strategically responds to the tension between increased demand for social services and the need to be fiscally responsible (Barraket, Keast, and Furneaux 2016).

Despite the significant government spending through procurement, little attention has been given in social policy literature to whether public procurement is effectively aligned with ALMPs to advance labour market outcomes and whether there are connecting logics between the two. Drawing on Sarter's (2024) conceptualisation of the multifaceted linkages between public procurement and labour market inequalities, this review examines whether these connections are being made in practice and to what extent public procurement and ALMPs operate as integrated strategies. Whilst the literature on social value and procurement has grown significantly over the past decade (Loosemore, Keast, and Barraket 2022; Norbäck and Zapata Campos 2022; Troje and Gluch 2020; Wright and Conley 2020), this review goes beyond sectoral and local case studies to assess the existence and strength of connections between social procurement arrangements and labour market regulation.

1.4 | Questions and Methods

The review methods involved the collection and analysis of both peer-reviewed and grey literature. The goal was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms used in public contracting concerning disadvantaged groups, the levels of government involved, and the outcomes and challenges arising from various strategies. Specifically, our review questions were:

- I- Who are the main target groups of ALMPs and social procurement?
- II- How are procurement responsibilities distributed across different levels of government, and what are the sources of

rules and authority in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia?

- III- What are the contractual mechanisms of social procurement, both direct (ALMPs, employment services) and indirect (social value added to 'ordinary' 'public' contracts)?
- IV- What are the reported outcomes of social procurement?
- V- What are the main reported challenges?

Our definition of scholarly literature was straightforward, encompassing academic books, book chapters and, most commonly, articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Most existing systematic reviews in the government contracting space have focused on public procurement or public administration journals (Hafsa, Darnall, and Bretschneider 2021; Trammell, Abutabenjeh, and Dimand 2020). Our review, however, offered a comprehensive interdisciplinary viewpoint on social procurement, including insights from fields such as HRM, legal studies, social policy, urban affairs and sustainability studies.

Importantly, the review was conducted in a semi-systematic fashion (Snyder 2019) as it aimed to provide answers to the 'how' and 'what' questions about ALMPs and social procurement, to integrate different fields. This type of review differs from a systematic review and helps to overcome the limitations of the latter because it is broader in scope and more integrative. This is consistent with the guidelines for review analysis summarised by Snyder (2019), who noted that semi-systematic reviews are valuable in identifying research gaps across disciplines.

The peer-reviewed literature search was conducted using an extensive keyword search in Web of Science and Scopus, using the following search (term) string 'public procurement', 'labour standards', 'minimum wage', 'employment conditions', 'social benefit clause', 'community benefit', 'disadvantaged groups', 'marginalised groups', 'refugees', 'migrants', 'African-American', 'ex-offenders', 'youth', 'gender', 'veterans', 'disability', 'minorities', 'homeless', 'indigenous', 'vulnerable', 'inclusive', 'care-leavers', 'single-parent', 'not in employment, education, or training (NEET)', 'low-skill', 'employment', 'training', 'job-creation', 'workforce development', 'welfare to work', and 'good jobs agenda'. For both peer-reviewed and grey literature, studies were included if they focused on social procurement practices in the United Kingdom, United States or Australia, and were published between 2010 and December 2023. The initial search returned 440 potentially relevant studies. A subsequent targeted search in specific journals related to public procurement and social policy yielded an additional 2536 results. Two members of the research team reviewed the titles and abstracts, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria focused on relevance to social procurement. Where there was uncertainty, the team discussed and made final decisions collectively.

This process retained 194 studies after removing duplicates and inaccessible studies.

The grey literature search was conducted using Google, as well as government websites and archives such as the Department for Work and Pensions (United Kingdom), Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (Australia) and the

Department of Labor and Office of Research, Planning, and Evaluation (United States). We also included evaluations from devolved governments in the United Kingdom and reputable think tank reports from organisations like the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (United Kingdom), Center for American Progress (United States) and Brotherhood of St Laurence (Australia). The search terms utilised for the grey literature search were similar to those used for the peer-reviewed literature. Recognising the varying reliability and quality of grey literature, we prioritised reports from government and university sources, while still acknowledging the value of practitioner insights as highlighted by Adams, Smart, and Huff (2017). This search yielded 65 retrievable studies, which were further reviewed through full-text analysis, leaving 57 studies included in the final analysis.

We excluded studies that did not directly address the contracting mechanisms or outcomes related to disadvantaged groups or that fell outside our geographical focus. The final selection comprised 84 peer-reviewed and 57 grey literature studies, with an additional 27 studies (14 peer-reviewed and 13 grey literature) included through ongoing monitoring of new publications. To ensure the robustness of our analysis, included studies were assessed for quality, with particular attention to the credibility and relevance of grey literature sources. The data synthesis involved a collaborative effort, ensuring that each country's context was well-represented by team members specialising in that area.

1.5 | The Results

1.5.1 | Target Groups

People with disabilities represent the most frequently mentioned group in the literature ($N=33$), both about direct (ALMPs, employment services) and indirect social contracts (procurement), as shown in Table 1. There are considerable

TABLE 1 | Frequency of selected employment target groups specifically mentioned in literature.

Target group	Number
Disabled people/people with disabilities	33
Residents in deprived neighbourhoods	25
'Significant barriers' to employment	24
Racialised groups	23
Young people not in employment education or training	22
Public assistance recipients	18
Low-wage sector workers	11
Prison leavers	10
Single-parent families	8
Refugees and asylum seekers	6
Apprentices	2

overlaps between the people with disabilities, people with significant barriers to employment ($N=24$), public assistance recipients ($N=18$), and NEET young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) groups ($N=22$) and single-parent families ($N=8$). There is also a significant overlap between the 'racialised groups' ($N=23$) and 'residents in deprived neighbourhoods' ($N=25$) categories, particularly in the United States. Racialised groups are also included in set-asides for small minority-owned, mainly African-American, businesses (Chatterji, Chay, and Fairlie 2014) and Indigenous Commonwealth Procurement policies in Australia (Denny-Smith, Williams, and Loosemore 2020). Young people classified as NEETs are prime beneficiaries of social contracting within the construction sector. In the United Kingdom, paid placements and apprenticeships are common within the construction industry, such as the Symud Ymlean Moving Forward scheme in Wales, which ran from 2013 to 2016 and offered paid work placements for 6 months for NEETs from care or ex-offending backgrounds with construction companies (Loosemore et al. 2021).

1.6 | Distribution of Procurement Responsibilities and Sources of Rules and Authority in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia

Table 2 illustrates how procurement responsibilities are distributed across different levels of government across the three countries. National and federal rules codify the obligations of contracting authorities in all three countries (Commonwealth Procurement Rules in Australia, the Federal Acquisition Regulations System in the United States, the 2015 Procurement regulations and the 2023 Procurement Act in the United Kingdom).

In Australia, the relevant federal legislation is the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013. The Department of Finance updates the Commonwealth Procurement Rules (CPR) every year (Amanze, Cahill, and Evans 2022). Indigenous Business Exemptions were added to the Australian Commonwealth Procurement Rules in 2011, followed by Indigenous Procurement Policy targets in 2015 (Storey 2019).

In the United States, Part 22 of the FAR entitled *Application of Labor Laws to Government Acquisitions*, a 120-page document, detailed the obligations of public contractors. Employers must pay workers covered by the DBA and DBRA (Davis-Bacon Related Acts) weekly; they must also provide the contracting agency, also weekly, a certified copy of all payrolls.

In the United Kingdom, procurement responsibilities are shaped by the Social Value Act 2012, Procurement Regulations 2015 and the Procurement Act 2023. These regulations mandate that contracting authorities consider social value in their procurement decisions. Notably, the Procurement Act 2023 does not explicitly reference social value, which remains a statutory duty under the Social Value Act 2013. Eighteen instances of the application of these UK procurement rules have been documented, demonstrating the United Kingdom's commitment to integrating social considerations into public procurement.

TABLE 2 | Country-specific procurement Arrangements ($N=94$).

Country-specific procurement arrangements	Number
National level regulation	
Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR), United States (includes set-asides for minority-owned small businesses)	9
Commonwealth Procurement Rules, Australia (includes set-asides for Indigenous businesses)	11
UK Procurement Rules (include Social Value Act 2012, Procurement Regulations 2015, Procurement Act 2023)	18
Sub-national regulation (including community benefit clauses)	
Devolved/State Level Clauses (including Scotland)	34
City/Municipal Level Clauses (including city ordinances)	22
Total	94

TABLE 3 | Specific mechanisms for creating social value in employment.

Mechanism	Number
Section 106 Town and Country Planning Act (United Kingdom)	4
Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) (United States only)	10
Living Wage Accreditations (United Kingdom)	4
Fair Employment Charters (Corporate Social Responsibility)	13
Total	31

In all three countries, subnational governments, states, local authorities and cities have considerable leeway about how they defined their procurement frameworks, for instance through adding community benefit clauses.

1.6.1 | Contractual Mechanisms of Social Procurement

Table 3 addresses the question regarding contractual mechanisms of social procurement, both direct (such as ALMPs and employment services) and indirect (such as social value added to ordinary public contracts). In the United Kingdom, as employment law is a reserved matter, in theory local authorities have little room for manoeuvre to go beyond the statutory minimum. In practice, the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales, regional and city authorities in England, such as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), use various policy instruments—accreditation and living wage certification campaigns, codes of practice, fair employment charters—to promote an inclusive growth agenda (Heery, Hann, and Nash 2020; Johnson, Herman, and Hughes 2023; Sutherland et al. 2015). Examples of provisions include the *living wage*, *voice at work*, *providing training in-work*, *local job opportunities*, *targeted recruitment & work experience for disadvantaged groups* (Johns, Raikes, and Hunter 2019; Wright and Conley 2020). Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act represents a direct mechanism of social procurement,

enabling local authorities to require developers to meet specific hiring targets as a condition of receiving planning permission (Johnson, Herman, and Hughes 2023).

In Australia, individual states have adopted their social value procurement frameworks that applied to their own contracting authorities. For example, in Victoria, the Social Procurement Framework aimed to ‘Provide opportunities for Victorians from disadvantaged backgrounds by procuring goods and services from social enterprises that directly employ disadvantaged jobseekers such as refugees and migrants and long-term unemployed people’ and ‘Promote fair and secure workplaces by procuring goods and services from suppliers and contactors that adhere to safe workplace laws and practices’ (Mupanemunda 2019, 6).

One of the most cited contractual arrangements in the US literature are Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs). The CBA movement, originated in 1990s’ California, comprises grassroots coalitions striving to ensure development projects benefit inner-city residents. They focus on using zip codes as a proxy for local deprivation and/or the concentration of communities of colour (Saito and Truong 2015; Douthat and Leigh 2017). Community members pledge support for a developer in return for community benefits such as targeted employment, living wage provisions and training schemes for priority groups. CBAs can operate alongside living wage ordinances or contracting rules for city-funded projects. In addition, First Source programmes, working alongside CBAs, entail preferential hiring of individuals referred to contractors via workforce intermediaries.

1.6.2 | Reported Outcomes of Social Procurement

Table 4 highlights an important implementation gap between contracting objectives and employment outcomes, especially for ALMPs. For instance, sustainable employment outcomes, which include measures such as job duration beyond 26 weeks, wage progression and career development, were mentioned 54 times as a desired outcome. Rapid job placement was mentioned as an explicit objective 11 times only, yet rapid job placement was mentioned 48 times as an actual employment outcome. This was due to either lack of demand for labour for

TABLE 4 | Contracting objectives vs. employment outcomes ($N = 104$ and 95 , respectively).

Social contracting objectives	Number	Employment outcomes	Number
Rapid job placement (work-first)	10	Wage progression	11
Sustainable employment outcomes	54	Work entry	48
Preferential hiring (local hires)	21	Retention	6
Apprenticeships, traineeships, cadetships	19	Duration	1
		Career development	29

referred job seekers, or because employers did not appear to be 'either being willing to adapt their employment practices to assist vulnerable individuals to enter and hold down decent sustainable work' (Butler and Payne 2023, 16). There was evidence of goal drift in studies documenting the mismatch between the focus on sustainable employment and the actual results, with jobseekers being encouraged to take on jobs that they did not want (Ingold 2018).

1.6.3 | Most Reported Challenges

Table 5 lists the most frequently reported challenges in both grey and white literature. Flat career structures in sectors such as retail, hospitality and aged care severely limit employee progression, with employers either reluctant or unable to adopt high road policies and practices (Butler and Payne 2023; Cortis, Bullen, and Hamilton 2013; Schrock 2013). In one of the rare studies documenting how US officials (in Chicago) explicitly used workforce investment money to encourage employers to pursue high road policies, Schrock (2013) shows that policy-makers were able to incentivise manufacturing employers to improve job quality metrics. However, they had no such success with large retail companies, which were not motivated to provide better terms and conditions. As a result, partnerships between Chicago's work investment boards and retail groups were terminated. Similarly, in Australia, Cortis, Bullen, and Hamilton (2013) document that in low-wage industries, disadvantaged jobseekers often face limited opportunities for career advancement, cycling through precarious, short-term employment with little prospect for upward mobility.

Payment by results (PBR) intensified the competition between providers to access employers in an overcrowded field. In the words of Ingold and Stuart (2015, 455) 'there was competition between Prime (providers), within and between supply chains and also with commercial recruitment agencies and training providers'. The proliferation of return-to-work schemes and temporary employment meant that contractors competed among themselves to place their clients with local employers. As a result, employers were not motivated to deviate from short-term recruitment strategies. Employment services providers were forced to accept sub-standard hiring and working practices (Johnson et al. 2023).

The shift towards greater collaboration between contracting authorities and employers, especially in the United Kingdom and Australia (Lindsay, Osborne, and Bond 2014; Lindsay et al. 2021) seemed to have had little impact on demand-side

TABLE 5 | Frequency of types of challenges identified ($N = 83$).

Types of challenges	Number
No possibility for job progression (flat career structures), business models based on low road 'strategies'	10
Creaming and parking	6
No pipeline of skilled workers in local area	6
Competition between service providers	12
Competition between target groups and non-priority groups	9
Enforcement challenges	17
Measurement (monitoring) issues	16
Ongoing discrimination/barriers to entry for priority groups	7

issues. Employers continued to consider newly hired individuals referred through employment services as low-cost labour and saw social value outcomes as a box-ticking exercise (Butler and Payne 2023). Even when ALMPs offered specialised support to priority groups and brought employers into the hiring process, employers in low-wage sectors still viewed welfare schemes as a source of cheap, disposable labour (Johnson et al. 2023).

Other major challenges referred to weak monitoring and enforcement of employment standards. With weak contracting rules in place, there was little scope for contracting authorities to require better job standards ($N = 17$). Additionally, contracting authorities lacked the capacity to verify that employers complied with labour standards set out in contractual agreements ($N = 16$). Despite the growing adoption of personalised, wrap-around services targeting priority groups within ALMPs and an amplified focus on social value in procurement, there remained a noticeable absence of comprehensive reporting on job quality. Despite the best intentions of policymakers, the primary yardstick for success continued to be work entry, predominantly into low-paying employment sectors.

2 | Discussion and Conclusion

The starting point of this article was to question whether social procurement could be seen as part of a countermovement

intended to correct entrenched labour market inequalities by creating better quality jobs and by connecting disadvantaged groups, traditionally the subject of ALMPs, to good jobs. This draws attention to two separate but interconnected dimensions of public procurement as a social policy instrument. The first refers to public procurement as an instrument of labour market re-regulation, which works by inducing businesses looking to secure public sector contracts to guarantee higher minimum standards, for instance around the Living Wage in the United Kingdom (Johnson et al. 2023). The second dimension refers to the largely underdeveloped demand-side of labour market policies in contemporary Anglo-American political economies, which operates by connecting jobseekers and disadvantaged workers to public sector works through preferential hiring mechanisms (job creation programmes and wage subsidies) as well as the development of internal labour markets with genuine opportunities for training and career development. The critical questions posed were two-fold. Firstly, what does the literature tell us about how far social procurement is a policy instrument for making businesses more socially responsible and inclusive? Secondly, is it being used as a mechanism for creating demand for better quality jobs in traditionally low-paid, contingent labour markets? To answer these questions, a review was undertaken to examine how social procurement operated in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, focusing on target populations, distribution of procurement responsibilities across different levels of government; main contracting mechanisms, the labour market outcomes (mainly ALMPs) and reported challenges.

2.1 | Divergent Governance Models and Intervention Logics

Our review reveals the complex and varied governance models of social procurement across nations commonly grouped under the liberal welfare regime, specifically the Anglo-American countries known for their adoption of NPM and work-first reforms. This complexity underscores the importance of power-sharing arrangements and intergovernmental relations. The variability is not only international but also intra-national. For instance, significant regional differences exist within federal systems like the United States and Australia, and even within the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom, as different models of social security emerge (Simpson 2022). The potential for the new United Kingdom Labour government to adopt much more socially progressive procurement policies remains uncertain at the time of writing. Future research could investigate further and in more granular detail the sources of authority and legal interpretation of social procurement, as there remains a noticeable disconnect between socio-legal scholarship and social policy literature.

ALMPs and social procurement, though conceptually linked, are often guided by different intervention logics. ALMPs primarily focus on the supply side, aiming to activate individual jobseekers and engage sympathetic employers, often through social enterprises and community organisations. In contrast, social procurement operates under a market-shaping logic, particularly in large-scale infrastructure projects. This division explains the lack of coordination and the ad hoc nature of initiatives attempting to integrate these two policy areas. The

disconnection between ALMPs and social procurement is partly due to how social value is interpreted in procurement circles—typically as the added benefit of a contract, excluding employability and support services provided under ALMPs (Davies, Buys, and Macdonald 2023).

2.2 | Nuanced Similarities, Differences and Job Quality Concerns

The review also highlighted nuanced similarities and differences in the implementation of social procurement across these nations. The United States stands out for its emphasis on contract compliance, particularly using labour clauses to regulate labour standards, a practice more developed there than in Australia and the United Kingdom. For instance, the enforcement of ‘prevailing wages’ under the Davis–Bacon Act of 1931 is a federal requirement for construction, infrastructure and transport-related projects in the United States. There is no such prevailing-wage requirement for construction-related projects in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Regarding the creation of demand for better quality jobs, the focus across all three nations continues to be predominantly on supply-side employability measures rather than on fostering demand for higher-quality jobs, with the notable exception of the construction sector. In the United Kingdom, despite recent ALMPs emphasising the importance of sustainable employment outcomes, public assistance recipients often end up in low-paid, entry-level jobs, with in-work progression limited to career-focused conversations with work coaches (Jones, Wright, and Scullion 2024). In contrast, US workforce development programmes have more explicit language regarding the need for local investment boards to partner with quality employers, a practice reinforced under the Biden administration (Scott and D’Elia 2023). Australia’s recent ALMPs, such as Workforce Australia, have historically leant towards a work-first orientation, with minimal progression payments linked merely to training participation. The Albanese Government’s House of Representatives ‘first principles’ review of employment services in Australia (the first since it was quasi-marketised in 1998) proposes significant reforms and a new service delivery model based on less competition amongst providers, measures of progression and reduced compliance.

An important finding from this review is that while concerns about job quality are integrated into fair work procurement codes of practice—such as the living wage accreditation for social care in Scotland—these concerns remain largely marginal within the ALMP framework, especially in the United Kingdom. Although both social procurement and ALMP frameworks theoretically support decent work and economic growth (SDG8), ALMP metrics in practice are often limited to employment duration, earning progression and skills acquisition, with little emphasis on good jobs principles (Green and Sissons 2023, 87). Efforts to integrate job quality considerations are usually driven by local authorities and remain disconnected from national PES.

Finally, another empirical question that is rarely asked is the extent to which PES and contracted-out employment and support

services are adopting high-road HRM policies and practices for their own employees or subcontractors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that cost pressures and competition between providers, despite attempts to coordinate and integrate service provision between employment and skills providers, generally lead to high turnover and job dissatisfaction.

3 | Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The potential to align ALMPs and social procurement to create good work pathways for disadvantaged jobseekers holds promise, but the conclusions of this review are concerning. If social procurement continues to represent 'more of the same' rather than serving as an alternative or a complement to ALMPs, it is unlikely to significantly address the entrenched labour market inequalities that perpetuate economic and social disadvantage.

In conclusion, this article contributes to the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how ALMPs and social procurement intersect across different national contexts. It also underscores the need for future research to explore these intersections further, particularly in terms of what constitutes job quality across industries, sectors and jurisdictions, and how both ALMPs and social procurement contracting can better incorporate these elements.

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Material reproduced from other sources in this systematic review is appropriately credited, and permissions were obtained as necessary.

Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Consent

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data available in article supplementary material. The data that support the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.