

Relevance, Understanding and Motivation – The Key Catalysts of Co-creation

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Co-creation promises a solution for the fiscal and service delivery problems faced by governments and public service bodies. Co-creation has been justified on several grounds, of which the most alluring is that co-creation conceives service users as active partners rather than passive service beneficiaries. In addition, co-creation has also been seen as a way to improve the effectiveness of services. Seemingly, co-creation is based on the ideal of active citizenship and on the logic of effective production combining the complementary and substitutive capabilities possessed by different stakeholders. Co-creation is typically defined as a mode of collaborative action, which is based on the complex combination of both top-design and bottom-up organisation from service beneficiaries.

As a practice, co-creation is seen in a positive light. However, in addition to improving the means of providing public services, co-creation also introduces new political, ethical, economic, cultural and managerial dilemmas. One big challenge has been the skewness in the distribution of participants in co-creation processes. The most active participants tend to belong to a higher social status, while the voice of the silent majority remains unknown.

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The CoSIE project (12/2017–11/2020) was launched to increase service innovations based on co-creative design. More precisely, the project aims to develop initiatives that 1) advance the active shaping of service priorities by end users and their informal support networks, and 2) engage citizens, especially hard-to-reach groups. In addition, the project focuses on the potential for ICT to widen participation in co-creating public services. The project includes several pilot projects developing innovative solutions to complex social challenges.

This policy paper highlights the state-of-the-art of co-creation in service design in ten European countries and also lists some of the key challenges and successes of co-creation.

The CoSIE Approach

The CoSIE project builds on the idea that public sector innovations (ICT-related or not) can best be achieved through the establishment of collaborative partnerships between service providers and service beneficiaries, i.e. public authorities and citizens. The main goal of the project is to contribute to democratic dimensions and social inclusion through co-creating public services by engaging diverse citizen groups and stakeholders in varied public services.

The core of CoSIE lies in co-creation and co-production, which, as concepts, are often defined similarly. Both involve the active involvement of citizens in public service delivery by creating sustainable partnerships between local authorities and citizens (Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2015). Co-creation is the joint, collaborative, concurrent, peer-like process of producing new value, both materially and symbolically (Galvagno and Dalli, 2014). It can be seen as the voluntary or involuntary involvement of public service users in any of the design, management, delivery and/or evaluation of public services (Osborne, Randor and Strokosch, 2016). We have chosen as a classification starting point the three types of involvement mentioned below:

- citizens as co-implementers of public policy,
- citizens as co-designers and
- citizens as co-initiators.

REA is a type of evidence review that aims to provide an informed conclusion on the volume and characteristics of an evidence base, a synthesis of what that evidence indicates and a critical appraisal of that evidence.

CoSIE enhances the public service quality and performance purely by basing the development process on end users' voices and the project leads co-creation to a new level by taking advantage of ICT in the development process.

Co-creation in Public Services - State of the Art in Europe

We conducted a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) about the current state of co-creation in the ten CoSIE partner countries (list of countries in the footnote). REA is a type of evidence review that aims to provide an informed conclusion on the volume and characteristics of an evidence base, a synthesis of what that evidence indicates and a critical appraisal of that evidence. The main purpose was to get a thorough synthesis to inform policy or practice and to answer questions about what is effective and what is not.

The rapid evidence research resulted in brief national reports describing the state of co-creation in the countries involved. It is important to stress the fact that since REA is not an exhaustive review, we did not compile and present all the existing cases of co-creation in each participating country but a representative selection of existing cases.

Key Findings

Categorization

Based on the description of the co-creation field presented in each report, we divided the participating countries into two main categories:

- a) Those where co-creation is relatively developed (high-medium level) and
- b) Those in which co-creation is under-developed or is still in its first steps (medium-low level).

The first group (high-medium level) of countries includes Finland, Sweden, Italy, the UK, and The Netherlands, while the second (medium-low level) includes Spain, Hungary, Poland, Greece, and Estonia.

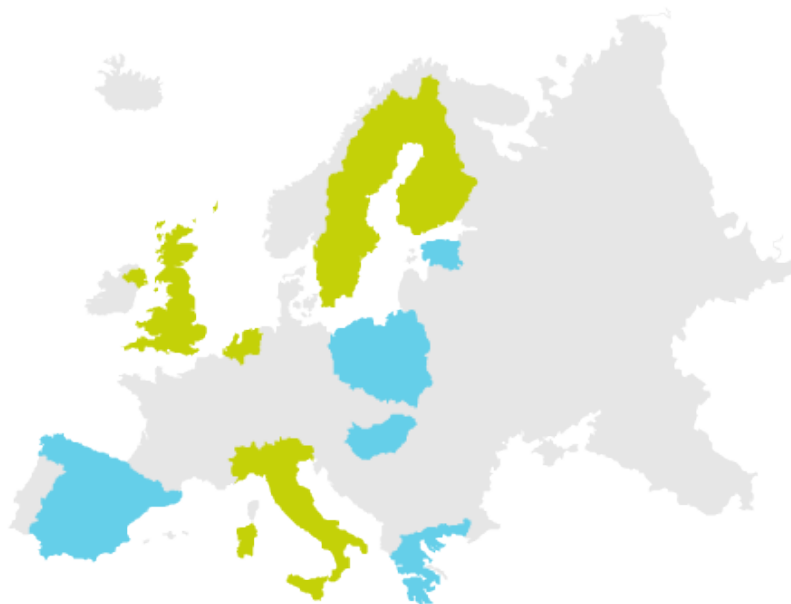


Figure 1: Co-creation is relatively developed (green). Co-creation is under-developed or is still in its first steps (blue).

Case categories

The cases collected from each partner can be divided into four broad categories:

- a) Health and social sector,
- b) education,
- c) improving public services/ administration, e.g. digitalization of services and
- d) improving city life and local government, e.g. civic engagement, budgeting, smart city, environmental sustainability, etc.

Most of the selected cases fell into the category of social and health care (19 of the 42), focusing on different kinds of social groups (children, elderly people, substance abusers, mentally ill, ex-offenders, homeless, etc.)

The second most popular category, although broadly defined, was the one described as improving city life and local government, which included 16 cases. These cases varied from participatory budgeting to environmental sustainability and from IT technologies that would improve citizens' lives (smart cities) to urban sustainability.

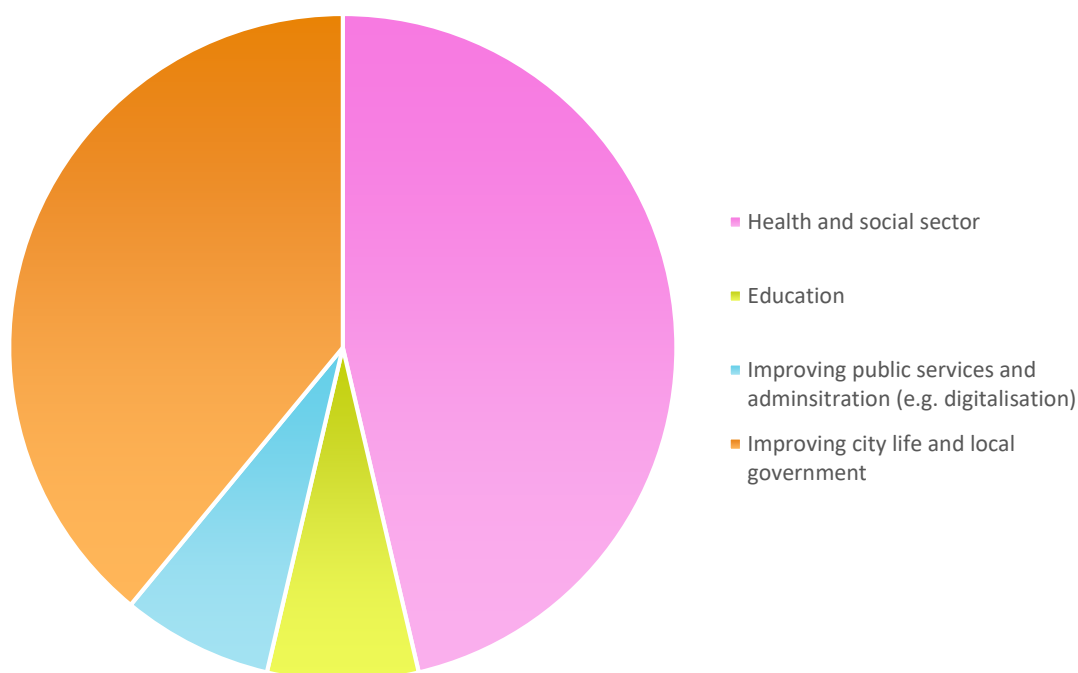


Figure 2. Case categories.

Funding

As can be expected, most of the selected national co-creation cases were funded by the public sector with public funding (26 of 42 cases). We also noted that when it comes to money, the EU-funded cases usually faced serious continuation and implementation problems when the funding period came to an end. Therefore, our recommendation is that when the EU funded project concludes that the public authorities together with the private and/ or third sectors search for feasible avenues of sustainability.

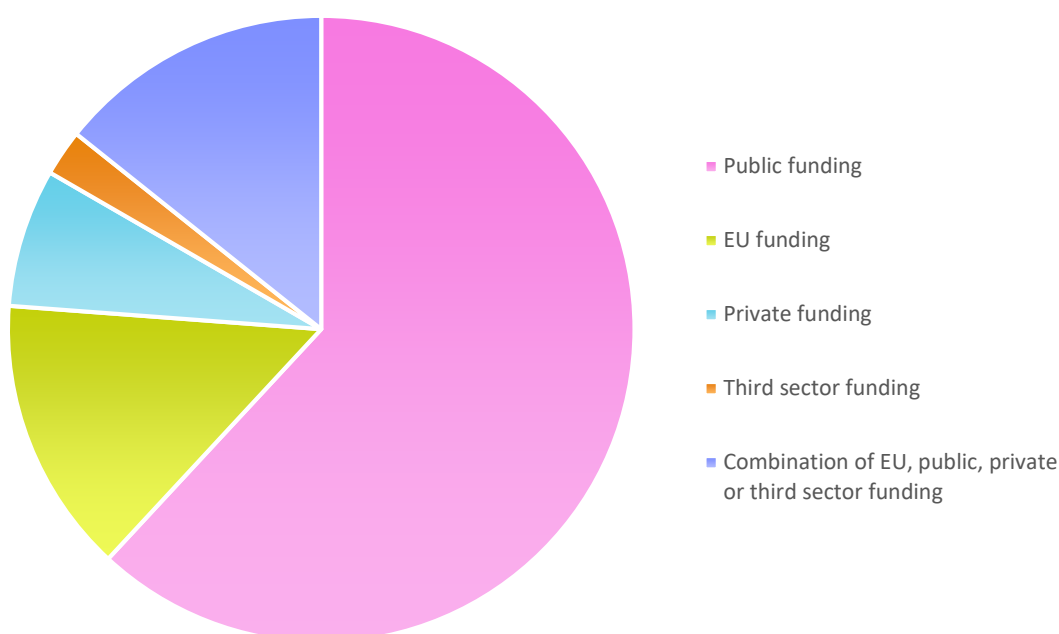


Figure 3. Funding resources

Level of Implementation

It is undeniably important to have a national legal or administrative framework that facilitates the implementation of co-creation in the public sector through constitutional and legal provisions, administrative guidelines, white papers, etc. However, national programs that ask for citizen participation are less feasible in terms of funding, especially when we contemplate the logistical and organisational aspects. From the moment the co-creation process requires input from the service users, it is only reasonable that such initiatives take place at the local or regional level. Therefore, the specific decisions and details of each type of co-creation should be left to local society and the collaboration between the local or regional authorities, private and third sector stakeholders and of course the users-citizens of each region or municipality.

Co-creation – Why Is It So Hard?

What looks good in paper does not necessarily work in practice. Modifications are a rule of thumb when working with different target groups. If the implementation does not reach the service users, their needs cannot be fulfilled.

A great deal of effort is needed in order to involve various target groups in the co-creation process, especially if the program focuses on people that need to be treated in a sensitive way. When collaborating with hard-to-reach and marginalized groups, the level of participation of the targeted service-users from so-called professionals of participation is hard to detect. In addition, if people do not understand the benefits their participation provides to their lives, the participation to the development actions will be reluctant and non-committal. Participants need both motivation and information. This is the only way to ensure representative participation and useful outcomes.

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Successful co-creation is a result of collaboration among several stakeholders from various levels of society. However, public sector very often takes the leading role but this should predominantly affect the roles of other stakeholders from the private and third sector. Unfortunately, in some cases, it has led to a situation where the process has ended up being directed and controlled by the officials. Active dialogue and collaboration between all participating sectors and stakeholders demands effort from all parties during the implementation process. It is, however, the key to success in multi-layered co-creation processes.

In many co-creation initiatives, the citizen influence and participation are based on various ICT solutions. In many EU countries however, there is still a significant digital gap between urban and rural areas as well as between different age groups. In other words, the population with lower digital literacy and skills cannot be reached through ICT solutions and are unable to influence public service delivery via smart technologies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Co-creation has a long way to go before it can be posited as one of the key policy creating strategies used in the public sector. It is a relatively new concept that still needs further elaboration. We also need to bear in mind that co-creation is not a self-evident value and that failures are to be expected. When successfully implemented, co-creation gives people a possibility to communicate, express their views and ideas and feel part of the design and implementation process but it can also have unintended and unwanted consequences if implemented without proper design and grassroots knowledge of the target group.

Recommendation 1

The participation and commitment of groups closely working with the target groups and service-users themselves is topical to the co-creation process already during the planning phase of co-creation initiatives. Involvement and interaction ensures that the development and outcomes are actually serving their targeted purpose.

The greatest challenge and at the same time the significant basic element in co-creation is the encouragement of the service/policy users and individual citizens and vulnerable groups to participate. The role of public servants is vital when implementing co-creation projects. When they are well informed and trained in co-creation methods and goals, they become the key players in enhancing co-creation. Understanding one's own role in the process is just as significant as understanding and supporting the role of others.

Recommendation 2

Public servants involved in co-creation projects need to be educated in and committed to the goals and purpose of the co-creation process. It is also important to understand that the outcomes might be something very different than first anticipated, and that implementation is possible only when it is conducted in close collaboration with target groups and relevant stakeholders.

In co-creation processes, the specific decisions and details of each type of co-creation should be left to local society and collaboration between the local or regional authorities, private and third sector stakeholders and to the users-citizens of each region or municipality.

By combining physical and virtual spaces, it is possible to enable citizens to make their voices heard and improve the fit between services offered and services needed. The existence of digital gaps must be taken into consideration. Especially, when the implementation focuses on small cities or even villages, where the digital gap might be wider.

Recommendation 3

If we want to involve as many citizens as possible from all classes, groups, genders, ethnicities and ages, it is very important to ensure that everyone is able to participate and use ICTs or to provide ICT support as well as alternative means and tools for participation.

Strong Points of Co-creation in Public Services

Improvement of transparency in the public sector

Low threshold and early stage opportunities for participation and influence for service users

Special effort to get vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups to have their voices heard

Beneficial and relevant collaboration between public, private and third sector

Broad-based collaboration with local organisations, stakeholders and service-users

Successful use of innovative methods in participation (mainly ICT-based solutions)

References

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