

A Contribution to the NS Initiative

Co-creation and Co-production: Towards a Practical Approach

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Introduction

Serving in the 21st century is more difficult than ever. The rising costs of health and social care, growing citizen expectations, and a shrinking revenue base are increasing the complexity of service provision. Now more than ever, governments are looking for innovative ways to deliver better public services at significantly lower costs.¹

Within this context, co-creation and co-production have been presented as promising avenues for governments to explore new methods of service provision beyond the conventional. At their core, these concepts are about acknowledging the potential for citizens to act as value creators and work with government to produce services of high public value.

The traditional model of public sector service delivery typically involves governments delivering services to citizens.² These types of services remain common and necessary for the regular functioning of society - licenses and permits must be issued, potholes filled, and employment cheques cut. However, over the last 15 years, governments have made efforts to improve the services they provide to citizens through the emergence of citizen-centred approaches.³

The concepts of co-creation and co-production have recently attracted a lot of attention. In the process, they have lost some of their meaning. Today, co-creation and co-production have come to define actions ranging from citizen engagement to the shared responsibility between citizens and government for the creation and delivery of services. However, a lack of consensus surrounding the definition of these concepts means that they continue to be used for different purposes in different sectors and organisations.

In many cases, this lack of clarity makes it difficult for practitioners to meaningfully engage with and apply co-creation and co-production in practice. In efforts to dispel some of the uncertainty surrounding these concepts, this paper provides a starting point for developing definitions of 'co-creation' and 'co-production' that prioritises the practical utility of each concept. We begin with a brief review of the differences between co-creation and co-production before examining the range of definitions found within the academic and policy literature for each concept. We close by providing some basic guidance for the use of co-creation and co-production in practice.

¹ Jocelyne Bourgon. *A New Synthesis of Public Administration*. (Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011).

² Jocelyne Bourgon. *Service Delivery, Co-Creation and Co-Production*. 2013. Unpublished.

³ Ibid.

Defining the ‘Co’

The proliferation of models and means for engaging citizens in the policy making and service delivery process has resulted in a range of terms, such as co-creation, co-design, co-implementation, and co-production, to denote various forms of citizen engagement. While the exact breakdown of responsibilities and forms of interaction between government and citizens differ between these concepts, each shares a common understanding - that citizen engagement involves a form of ‘co’-operation.

In a sense, defining the ‘co’ is a necessary precursor to understanding the practical applications of co-creation and co-production. Throughout the academic and policy literature, ‘co’-terms have been used to describe forms of citizen engagement ranging from broad participatory strategies, such as crowdsourcing initiatives and e-petitions,⁴ to specific activities, such as the co-delivery and co-implementation of services by users. As ‘co’-terms continue to gain traction within policy circles, the multiplicity of uses and understandings threatens to water-down the usefulness of such terms in practice.

We understand the ‘co’ to describe a *shared responsibility* between citizens and government for the production of public results. A shared responsibility is not the same as an equal division of labour. Rather, it captures the different roles and responsibilities performed by citizens and government based on the specific challenge being faced.

In essence, the ‘co’ is about working with other actors to generate services of higher public value. It moves beyond citizen engagement. It is an active and co-operative process whereby government and citizens combine their respective skills and resources to improve collaborative service provision. While the specific form of engagement and the roles assigned to citizens and government are many and varied, the underlying emphasis on co-operation and shared responsibility are key to engaging actors in a meaningful way.

Co-creation and Co-production

More specifically, providing a useful definition of co-creation and co-production for practitioners involves clearly distinguishing the terms from each other. This is no easy task.

At the very core, both concepts are premised on the understanding that citizens can be considered valuable partners in public service delivery.⁵ However, key differences have led to three definitional understandings of the relationship between co-creation and co-production.

For some, co-creation and co-production can be used interchangeably.⁶ According to Terblanche, this understanding was most prevalent in the early literature.⁷ While subtle differences have begun to

⁴ Satish Nambisan and Priya Nambisan, *Engaging Citizens in Co-Creation in Public Services: Lessons Learned and Best Practices* (Washington D.C: IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2013).

⁵ William Voorberg, Victor Bekkers and Lars Tummings, “Co-Creation and Co-production in Social Innovation: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda,” EGPA Annual Conference (Edinburgh, UK: 2013).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Nic S. Terblanche, “Some Theoretical Perspectives of Co-Creation and Co-Production of Value by Customers,” *Acta Commercii* 14(2), Art. #237, 1-8.

emerge, a recent meta-analysis of the literature on co-creation and co-production conducted by Voorberg et al.⁸ finds that the concepts are still considered to be closely related.

For others, co-creation is conceptualised as the broader concept under which co-production is just one of the main parts.⁹ Largely taken from the private sector literature, this understanding limits co-production to participation in the “core offering” of a service, while co-creation forms the broader umbrella under which value is created through the combined efforts of traditional and non-traditional actors.¹⁰

Finally, co-creation and co-production have also been presented as separate terms to denote different forms of citizen engagement. This understanding borrows from two separate literatures, one for each concept. While the specifics of the definitions vary within each respective literature, co-creation is generally viewed as the involvement of citizens in service design,¹¹ while co-production is conceptualised as the involvement of citizens in the production/implementation of their own services.¹²

Although each approach to co-creation and co-production demonstrates unique value, distinguishing their conceptual basis allows for more space to explore the practical approaches that public servants can take to utilise co-creation and co-production in practice. More detail on the specific understandings of co-creation and co-production, and their value in practice, will be explored in the following sections.

Co-creation

According to Voorberg et al., co-creation has become a ‘magic concept’ (a pervasive concept among academics and practitioners) embraced by practitioners as a key strategy for reform within the public sector.¹³

Definitions of co-creation differ across spheres of work. In the private sector, co-creation is perceived as a way to create efficiency gains through engaging consumers in the production of goods and as a means for adding value to the improvement or redesign of new goods and services.¹⁴

In the public sphere, co-creation takes on a different meaning it acknowledges the basic understanding that co-creation aims to serve a *public purpose*.¹⁵

In promoting a public purpose, Nambisan and Nambisan suggest that co-creation is about transforming the role of citizens from passive service recipients to active partners in the production of services.¹⁶ In essence, this approach moves beyond an understanding of citizenship that prioritises democratic

⁸ William Voorberg, Victor Bekkers and Lars Tummars, “Co-Creation and Co-production in Social Innovation: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda,” EGPA Annual Conference (Edinburgh, UK: 2013).

⁹ Michael Etgar, “A Descriptive Model of the Customer Co-Production Process”, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 36(1), 40-56.

¹⁰ Nic S. Terblanche, “Some Theoretical Perspectives of Co-Creation and Co-Production of Value by Customers,” *Acta Commercii* 14(2), Art. #237, 1-8.

¹¹ Christian Bason, “Discovering Co-Production by Design,” (Copenhagen: MindLab, 2014). Available from: http://mind-lab.dk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Discovering_co-production_by_design.pdf.

¹² Victor Pestoff and Taco Brandsen, *Co-Production, the Third Sector and the Delivery of Public Services* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008).

¹³ William Voorberg, Victor Bekkers and Lars Tummars, “Co-Creation and Co-production in Social Innovation: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda,” EGPA Annual Conference (Edinburgh, UK: 2013).

¹⁴ Stephen L. Vargo, and Robert F. Lusch, “Service-Dominant Logic: Continuing the Evolution,” *Journal of Academy Marketing Science* 36(1), 1-10.

¹⁵ William Voorberg, Victor Bekkers and Lars Tummars, “Co-Creation and Co-production in Social Innovation: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda,” EGPA Annual Conference (Edinburgh, UK: 2013).

¹⁶ Satish Nambisan and Priya Nambisan, *Engaging Citizens in Co-Creation in Public Services: Lessons Learned and Best Practices* (Washington D.C: IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2013).

participation (or “having a vote”) to one that encourages citizens to actively contribute to issues of importance to them (“having a say”).

For others, the definitional understanding of co-creation is more highly focused on the point of interaction. Bason, for example, defines co-creation as involving citizens and end-users in the ‘design’ of services,¹⁷ where co-creation becomes associated with a specific, and early, point along the policy process - policy design. Alternatively, Nambisan and Nambisan suggest that engaging citizens as ‘designers’ of policy is just one of several potential ways in which citizens can contribute to the co-creation of services.¹⁸ They argue that citizens can also participate in co-creation as “explorers,” who identify and define emerging trends and existing problems; as “ideators,” who suggest how the needs and abilities of citizens can be leveraged to tackle broader public issues; and as “diffusers,” who facilitate the adoption and diffusion of public service solutions.¹⁹

Operationalising Co-creation

The above definitions provide useful insight for understanding co-creation; however, the broad scale and range of understandings leave room to explore the actual ways that co-creation can be used in practice. Rather than re-defining co-creation for ourselves, we identify two basic principles that appear to underlie the usage of co-creation by practitioners.

Firstly, co-creating policy responses is chiefly driven by efforts to address a specific need.²⁰ *It starts with an issue to be solved.* While co-creation, and co-terms more generally, have gained prevalence in many parts of the world, co-creation is not about engaging citizens simply for the sake of engagement. Rather, co-creation is a specific policy option available for practitioners to engage citizens in the policy making process.

Secondly, co-creation begins with a shared problem definition and is intended to generate shared results.²¹ In instances when co-creation is deemed necessary, the involvement of citizens and service users opens the range of policy options beyond conventional practices, where government relies on its regulatory power to develop and implement solutions to current challenges. Developing a shared understanding of a particular challenge, as well as a clear conception of shared results, forms the basis on which citizens are encouraged to “pursue their individual involvement in a manner that supports the collective effort”.²²

In essence, co-creation is about working with other actors to plan and design public service delivery systems that produce better results for society. It ensures that new policies and services complement the real contexts of the service environment and the lived experiences of service users.²³

¹⁷ Christian Bason, “Discovering Co-Production by Design” (Copenhagen: MindLab, 2014). Available from: http://mind-lab.dk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Discovering_co-production_by_design.pdf.

¹⁸ Satish Nambisan and Priya Nambisan, *Engaging Citizens in Co-Creation in Public Services: Lessons Learned and Best Practices* (Washington D.C: IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2013).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jocelyne Bourgon. Service Delivery, Co-Creation and Co-Production. 2013. Unpublished.

²¹ Jocelyne Bourgon and Rachael Calleja. *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore’s Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2015).

²² Ibid, p. 49.

²³ Jocelyne Bourgon. Service Delivery, Co-Creation and Co-Production. 2013. Unpublished.

Co-production

Co-production is not a new term.²⁴ For almost 30 years, it has been used within various spheres to denote the engagement of non-government actors in the provision of public services.²⁵

In general, definitions of co-production tend to differ along two main dimensions: the sharing of responsibilities,²⁶ and the types of activities performed by actors.

The type of activities that constitute 'co-production', as opposed to other forms of citizen engagement, have become a key source of debate in defining co-production. Broadly, Ostrom²⁷ and Parks et al.²⁸ define co-production as the "mix of activities" that practitioners and citizens "contribute to the provision of public services," where practitioners are seen as professionals, or "regular producers," while "citizen production" is seen as voluntary efforts to "enhance the quality and/or quantity of the services they use."²⁹ In this definition, the specific activity or role played by citizens in the 'co-production' of services is left open.

Alternatively, narrower definitions have limited the role of citizens in co-production to that of the 'co-producer', where citizens are involved in the direct production of a particular service. By this understanding, co-production is defined as "citizen involvement in the production of public services,"³⁰ or more specifically, "an arrangement where citizens produce their own services, at least in part."³¹ This definition changes the understanding of service delivery, where "services are no longer simply delivered by professional and managerial staff in public agencies, but they are co-produced by users and communities."³²

Definitions of co-production also offer varying understandings of the division of labour between citizens and public servants. For NESTA, co-production is defined as an "equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours."³³ In essence, this definition prioritises reciprocity between citizens and service providers, suggesting that co-production involves an equal division of labour between actors.³⁴

Similarly, Governance International defines co-production as citizens and the public sector "making better use of each other's assets and resources to achieve better outcomes or improved efficiency."³⁵ According to Bovaird and Loeffler, this too promotes reciprocity through the use of each other's assets in pursuit of better outcomes.³⁶ However, Governance International's definition appears to relax the

²⁴ Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler, "From Engagement to Co-Production: The Contribution of Users and Communities to Outcomes and Public Value", *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1119-1138.

²⁵ Bram Verschuere, Taco Brandenson, and Victor Pestoff, 'Co-Production: The State of the Art in Research and the Future Agenda', *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1083-1101.

²⁶ Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler, "From Engagement to Co-Production: The Contribution of Users and Communities to Outcomes and Public Value", *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1119-1138.

²⁷ Elinor Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development", In *Polycentric Governance and Development. Readings from the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis*, McGinnis, Michael D. (ed.), (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1999).

²⁸ Roger B. Parks, Paula C. Baker, Larry Kiser, Ronald Oakerson, Elinor Ostrom, Vincent Ostrom, Stephen L. Percy, Martha B. Vandivort, Gordon P. Whitaker and Rick Wilson. "Consumers as Co-Producers of Public Services: Some Economic and Institutional Considerations," *Policy Studies Journal* 9, 1001-1011.

²⁹ Quoted from: Bram Verschuere, Taco Brandenson, and Victor Pestoff, 'Co-Production: The State of the Art in Research and the Future Agenda', *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1083-1101.

³⁰ Bram Verschuere, Taco Brandenson, and Victor Pestoff, 'Co-Production: The State of the Art in Research and the Future Agenda', *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1083-1101.

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³² Bram Verschuere, Taco Brandenson, and Victor Pestoff, 'Co-Production: The State of the Art in Research and the Future Agenda', *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1083-1101.

³³ David Boyle and Michael Harris. *The Challenge of Co-Production: How equal partnerships between professionals and the public are crucial to improving public services.* (London, UK: NESTA, 2009).

³⁴ Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler, "From Engagement to Co-Production: The Contribution of Users and Communities to Outcomes and Public Value", *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1119-1138.

³⁵ Governance International, "What You Always Wanted to Know About Co-Production". Available from: <http://www.govint.org/english/main-menu/our-services/engagement/co-production-tree.html> (Accessed March 8, 2015).

³⁶ Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler, "From Engagement to Co-Production: The Contribution of Users and Communities to Outcomes and Public Value", *VOLUNTAS* 23(4), 1119-1138.

definitional requirement for co-production to involve an equal partnership between citizens and services, opening the policy space for varying degrees of citizen engagement.

Operationalising Co-production

For policy makers, the challenge is to adopt a definition that is broad enough to open the range of potential policy options to ‘co-producing’ with citizens, while remaining narrow enough to ensure that ‘co-production’ is not a catch-all term for citizen engagement. Too far to either extreme could reduce the usefulness of the concept in practice.

Generally, co-production involves government partnering with citizens and communities to deliver services to users and beneficiaries. At its core, co-production involves a shift in traditional models of service delivery by dividing responsibilities between government and citizens based on which actor is best placed to perform specific tasks.

When choosing to co-produce services with citizens, government faces an infinite number of possible permutations for organising and sharing responsibilities between actors.³⁷ The specific form of the relationship and the way that responsibilities are divided will vary in each case based on the issue, the context, and the resources available. The challenge for government is to decide the best way to share responsibilities across multiple options ranging from government working alone to working co-operatively with others.³⁸

Guidance for Practitioners

For practitioners, the challenge of exploring new relationships with citizens surrounds the operationalisation of co-creation and co-production in practice. This is not an easy task and will involve thinking beyond conventional approaches to experiment, innovate, and find new and meaningful solutions to the challenges of today.

Our intention is not to provide practitioners with a ‘checklist’ of items for facilitating co-production. In reality, the form and substance of co-created and co-produced programs will vary substantially based on the nature of the challenge and the particular context in each specific case.

Rather, we present several general ideas for thinking about how to co-create and co-produce in practice.

Building on Current Assets

In each policy change, not everything will need to be reformed.³⁹ Engaging in co-production and co-creation is not about overhauling an entire policy system or opening every policy decision to citizen participation. Rather, it is about working with and within current systems to preserve assets of value while discarding practices that are no longer of use.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jocelyne Bourgon and Rachael Calleja. *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore's Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2015).

³⁸ See Figure 15. *A Continuum of Possibilities* in Jocelyne Bourgon and Rachael Calleja. *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore's Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2015), p. 49.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The greatest challenge for policy makers will be to determine which assets to preserve, which to reform, and which to let go. By building on the assets and practices that are already available, co-creation and co-production can leverage and expand upon the resources that are available within society.⁴¹

Building on Existing Capabilities

While government possesses unique authority, expertise and resources, citizens and service users hold many of the capacities that government does not - specialized and practical knowledge of the issues being faced in each context, direct experience with current approaches, and insight into the ability for current approaches to meet future needs and expectations.⁴²

Co-creation and co-production are active attempts to make better use of the assets and capabilities already available within society.⁴³ They involve building on the strengths of others to develop solutions of higher public value at a lower overall cost. For practitioners, a primary task is to locate potential partners to leverage the capabilities of others in new ways to enhance value for society.

Exploring the Possibilities for Citizen Engagement

The responsibility for choosing the form of citizen engagement used to address a specific challenge rests with government.⁴⁴ In every policy decision, governments face a number of choices regarding whether, and to what degree, to involve citizens in the policy-making process. In some cases, the value added by engaging citizens in the creation of policy responses may be crucial to achieving the desired outcome for society. However, some challenges may be better addressed by government working alone. Only practitioners know when challenges would be well supported through citizen engagement. *It is up to practitioners to decide when to work alone, and when and how to engage citizens in the policy making process.*

Moreover, a decision to engage citizens in one form of citizen engagement neither precludes nor necessitates the use of complementary engagement practices throughout other segments of the policy cycle.⁴⁵ In some situations, practitioners could choose to engage citizens in the creation of a policy direction, through co-creation, while opting to deliver services alone. Alternatively, citizen engagement could be used exclusively for service delivery, or encouraged in both the development of policy direction and policy implementation. While further forms of engagement throughout the policy cycle are beyond the scope of this paper,⁴⁶ the point remains that the frequency with which such approaches are utilized in practice is an ongoing choice for government to make.

Matching Approaches to Desired Outcomes

In each case, the chosen approach and frequency with which citizens will be involved in the policy process will depend on three key features: the desired public purpose, the current context and circumstances, and the public sector's expertise in engaging citizens.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jocelyne Bourgon. Service Delivery, Co-Creation and Co-Production. 2013. Unpublished.

⁴³ Jocelyne Bourgon, *A Self-Help Guide for Practitioners* (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2013).

⁴⁴ Jocelyne Bourgon and Rachael Calleja. *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore's Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2015).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ For more information, see: *Adaptive Policy Making*, in Jocelyne Bourgon and Rachael Calleja. *The New Synthesis in Action: A Retrospective of the NS Labs Conducted in 2013-2014 Based on Singapore's Experience*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2015), p. 40-43.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

For practitioners, the challenge is to ensure that any given approach fits with the larger circumstances that define the reality in which the policy is to be implemented. Any mismatch between the approaches used and the desired purpose, circumstances, and capabilities present could limit the success of a given policy response.

Conclusion

Defining co-creation and co-production is no easy task. The wide range of definitions and uses of the terms found throughout the academic and policy literature makes it particularly difficult to distinguish various forms of engagement and to actively utilise such policy options in practice.

In efforts to avoid further confusion, we refrain from offering another definition. Rather, we attempt to highlight some of the larger points surrounding the actual use of co-creation and co-production in practice. In doing so, we hope to provide some value for practitioners seeking to explore participatory approaches as part of their policy solutions.

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