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Co-creation as a driver of social innovation and public service reform?

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Introduction

Co-creation has come to the forefront of policy as an innovative way of planning, managing, delivering and assessing public services, especially in the fields of social care, health, education and housing. Although far from universally applied, it has powerful support and many committed champions. Co-creation implies but goes beyond making public services more responsive to the needs and wishes of individuals and communities. It means that people often thought of as ‘users’, ‘targets’ or ‘beneficiaries’ have knowledge and experience that is of value for shaping service innovations. As the Co-creation of Service Innovation in Europe (CoSIE) pilots progressed, engaged with diverse stakeholders and began to share their learning, it became more prominent and explicit across the project that co-creation can only be said to take place when people no longer have services ‘done to’ them. The mantra of disability activism, ‘nothing about us without us’, gained traction in the consortium.

Following the conceptual exposition of co-creation in [Chapter 2](#), this chapter highlights its advance in public policy and emphasises the association of co-creation with social innovation. Innovation means new ideas that are put into practice ([Hartley, 2014](#)). Social innovation is specifically about human needs ([Brandson et al, 2016](#); [Marques et al, 2017](#)). The idea of social innovation has been stretched in many directions and is sometimes accused of conceptual imprecision ([Pol and Ville, 2009](#); [Grimm et al, 2013](#); [Jenson, 2015](#)). Nevertheless, there is some agreement that core features include

forging new relationships and enhancing assets and capabilities (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019). The next two sections of this chapter comprise policy-focused discussion of co-creation and social innovation. Then we introduce examples from the CoSIE pilots of co-creative innovations in different public services in three countries, Estonia (social care), Hungary (improving household economies) and Spain (business start-up support for citizens adrift from the world of work). Across these examples we note common themes under which co-creation and social innovation intersect: shifting the balance of control; innovations in (co-)governing; roles of professionals; and extended or adapted the usage of digital technologies.

Co-creation in policy

Co-creation has gained support from international organisations including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank and the European Commission, as well as regional and national governments (Torfing et al, 2021). The European Commission has high expectations of co-creation to enhance citizens' rights, meet people's real needs and stimulate democratic participation (European Economic and Social Committee, 2022). Many calls within the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe research and innovation programmes feature co-creation (Timonen and Lolich, 2021). The CoSIE project responded to a call under 'co-creation for growth and improvement' that sought to foster co-creative innovations in public services on the basis that top-down models no longer meet citizens' expectations.

In this book we distinguish 'co-creation' from the longer established 'co-production' as discussed in Chapter 2. We concur with Torfing et al (2019), who show why a distinction is useful for policy as well as theory with an image of rungs on a co-creation ladder, evoking older versions of a ladder of citizen participation for the enhancement of democratic influence (Arnstein, 1969). The co-creation ladder denotes upward progress from limited forms of 'co-production' where end-users contribute to production and delivery but not to service design, planning or decision-making. We recognise, however, that 'co-production' in a more inclusive sense is in use especially in the English-speaking world. A recently published 'co-production handbook' with a largely (but not exclusively) UK focus, for example, sees the essential elements of co-production as both citizen action and citizen voice (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021a). This version of 'co-production' would come high up on the co-creation ladder.

Various elements and sub-elements have been defined through the 'co' prefix. Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) recognise three different modes of cooperation between citizens and the public sector, which they call co-governance, co-management and co-production. Co-governance refers to

the planning of public services and policy formulation. Co-management means interactions between different kinds of organisations such as citizens' associations and agencies of the state, primarily on policy implementation. Co-production, according to [Branden and Pestoff \(2006\)](#), operates at the delivery level when citizens produce their own services. Adopting a micro level of analysis, [Nambisan and Nambisan \(2013\)](#) discern distinct types of active contributions by citizens to public services:

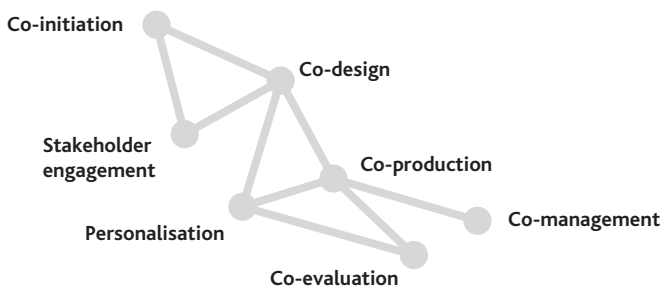
- Ideator: citizens can conceptualise novel solutions to well-defined problems.
- Explorer: citizens can identify, discover, and define emerging and existing problems.
- Designer: citizens can design and/or develop implementable solutions.
- Diffuser: citizens can support or facilitate the adoption and diffusion of public service innovations and solutions.

[Loeffler and Bovaird \(2021b\)](#) specify four 'cos': co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-assessment. Co-assessment, sometimes called co-evaluation, denotes participants involved in a process of assessment and improvement throughout the life of a service, intervention or project. It is likely to supplement and enhance other 'co' elements rather than follow on after them.

Early iterations of CoSIE attempted to draw upon the wide-ranging literature to position the different 'co'-elements within an overarching, rather linear framework. Experience from the CoSIE pilots showed that that co-creation is not linear and does not map neatly onto phases, stages or similar ([Wiktorska-Świącka, 2021](#)). Rather, it is better viewed as a 'constellation' through which various aspects and 'co' practices emerge. This is visualised in [Figure 3.1](#)

Policy interest in co-creation varies across different countries and service contexts. At the outset of the CoSIE project, [Sakellariou \(2018\)](#) led a

Figure 3.1: The constellation of 'co' elements



Source: CoSIE (2021)

review of co-creation in the ten participating countries from which two categories emerged:

1. Those in which co-creation was relatively developed (Finland, Sweden, Italy, the UK and the Netherlands).
2. Those in which co-creation was underdeveloped or on its first steps (Spain, Hungary, Poland, Greece and Estonia).

In the first group the environment for co-creation was favourable both at national and institutional levels. In Sweden, for example, the CoSIE pilot was implemented in the context of a legislative framework that obliged state providers of disability services to design them under a co-creative method. Before CoSIE began, the Social Services Department of the municipality of Jönköping was already undergoing a programme of transformation based on active dialogues with citizens. The pilot in Jönköping worked with Personal Assistance, which for various reasons (see [Chapter 4](#)) was lagging behind other municipal social services in co-creation. In the UK, co-creation (often entitled co-production) has been institutionalised and required by government agencies. For example, statutory guidance for English local authorities on social care stipulates a requirement for co-production, ‘when an individual influences the support and services received, or when groups of people get together to influence the way that services are designed, commissioned and delivered’ (Department of [Health & Social Care](#), 2016). There are also highly vocal advocates in civil society (The Social Care Institute for [Excellence](#), 2022).

In the second group of countries co-creation was not on the political agenda when CoSIE commenced but there was sometimes interest from civil society. In Estonia, for example, co-creation was rarely heard in the context of public services although the government used the term ‘engagement’ to denote taking account of the views of people whom decisions affect. Co-creation was quite widely advocated by Estonian non-government organisations, often directly associated with social innovation. In Poland, on the other hand, co-creation was barely recognised at all and there was a lack of concepts encouraging the involvement of stakeholders, particularly end-users, in public policies ([Sakellariou, 2018](#); [Wiktorska-Świąćka, 2021](#)).

Social innovation

The need for social innovation

Social innovation has been prominent in policy agenda for somewhat longer than co-creation, dating in its present-day form from the latter two decades of the 20th century. The challenge of social innovation is unavoidable for contemporary society increasingly beset by the great issues

relating to the search for subjective and intersubjective wellbeing, and at the same time marked by a continuing economic crisis and legitimacy of the state. In other words, meeting societal challenges calls for innovation. The [European Economic and Social Committee \(2016; 2022\)](#), representing socio-occupational interest groups and civil society to the European Union, sees social innovation as essential to boost participation by members of the public and civil society. [Evers and Ewart \(2021\)](#), drawing on a wealth of applied research across Europe, support this stance with the observation that co-production (or co-creation) should be framed as a form of social innovation in order to become a vehicle for democratising social services.

Innovation is a multidimensional concept that refers to the implementation of new ideas, processes or products, with advantages for businesses and beneficial externalities for society (Committee of the Regions of the [European Union, 2015](#)). In industrial and commercial innovation bridging the gap between designers and users of new products and services is a common theme. Firms or individual consumers who modify or develop products have become an increasingly important source of innovations that may be commercialised ([Von Hippel, 2005](#)). The influential notion of open innovation urges businesses to seek commercial success by inviting customers to co-create with them ([Chesbrough, 2011](#)). In creative industries, for example, customers can supply the firm with innovative ideas and help them respond to market needs ([Czarnota, 2017](#)). More generally, firms that are successful innovators pool skills and obtain access to external knowledge ([Pittaway et al, 2004](#)). In short, commercial and public sector variations on innovation have in common the opening up of innovation processes to a broader range of people and organisations ([Baines et al, 2022](#)).

Social innovation has come to feature almost as prominently as technological innovation in EU policy ([Sabato et al, 2017](#)). In the words of José Manuel Durão Barroso ([2011](#)), then President of the European Commission, 'Europe has a long and strong tradition of social innovation: from workplaces to hospices, from the cooperative movement to micro-finance'. The upsurge of attention towards social innovation is seen in the many research and innovation projects on social innovation themes that have been carried out by partnerships of scholars and researchers from numerous European institutions with funding from the European Commission. The Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), directed by Agnès Hubert, in a well-known report proposed social innovation as a key to the relaunch of economic and social development in Europe. BEPA offered the following influential and often quoted definition: 'Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. Social innovations are new ideas (products, services and models), institutions or ways of working that simultaneously address social problems (more effectively than existing approaches) and create new social relationships or collaborations' ([BEPA, 2011](#)).

Social investment

Another closely associated set of policy agenda coheres around the idea of ‘social investment’ (Morel et al, 2012; Hemerijck, 2013; 2015; 2017; Smyth and Deeming, 2019). Social investment refers to the idea that spending on welfare should be treated as a form of ‘investment’ to improve human capital, combat intergenerational disadvantage, and enhance long-term prospects for economic and social participation (Hemerijck, 2013). Emanating from comparative social policy, it came to the fore with increasing recognition that welfare models originating in the mid-20th century were becoming less and less adequate (Esping-Andersen et al, 2002). Citizens face new social risks, including precarious labour markets, in-work poverty, changing family forms, poor work–life balance, rapid technological development and obsolete skills (Esping-Andersen et al, 2002; Hemerijck, 2013). Measures and instruments associated with social investment are intended to strengthen people’s skills and capacities over the life course. The European Commission (2013: 3) stated that ‘social investment policies reinforce social policies that protect and stabilise by addressing some of the causes of disadvantage and giving people tools with which to improve their social situations’.

Social investment has become influential but also generated criticism for being less pro-poor than more traditional social policy (Cantillon and Van Lancker, 2013) and moving away from entitlements and rights (Deeming, 2016). Hemerijck (2017: 12) counters that social investment emphasises ‘concrete needs and capabilities for social participation and inclusion’. This is elaborated by Morel and Palme (2017), who draw upon Sen’s (2001) conceptual framework on human freedom and human capabilities to make links with social justice and democratic development. In their analysis the normative building blocks of social investment include ‘enhancing political citizenship by increasing possibilities for active participation’ (Morel and Palme, 2017: np). From this viewpoint, social investment shares core principles with co-creation, most notably recognising people as assets and building human capacity. Social investment is a future-oriented perspective that aligns with social innovation because it emphasises a need for non-standard answers to non-standard risks (Baines et al, 2019).

Traditions of social innovation

Social innovation is a surprisingly old notion in the Western world. Ayob et al (2016) trace its sociological heritage back to the 19th century and Moulaert et al (2017) find even earlier antecedents. Until the 20th century, however, its meanings were often pejorative, associated with religious heresy or societal revolution (Moulaert et al, 2017). According to Ayob et al (2016), the first academic journal article to mention social innovation referred to a

description of planation slavery as a social innovation. Nevertheless, social innovation has illustrious precursors such as Joseph Schumpeter in economics and Gabriel Tarde in sociology. [Schumpeter \(1950\)](#) elaborated the concept of creative destruction as the property of the entrepreneur who represents the engine of the capitalist economic system. The influence of Schumpeter informs present-day thinking about innovation and entrepreneurship in business and technology. Tarde discerned a phase of rupture with respect to the normal process of social imitation and has influenced later ideas on the diffusion of innovations ([Howaldt et al, 2015](#)).

The phrase ‘social innovation’ in its modern sense appears to have been born towards the end of the 1980s in the European cultural context, starting from the seminal work of the German sociologist Wolfgang [Zapf \(1989\)](#) who introduces it in a substantial essay to identify a new class of innovations and distinguish them from the others (in particular those with a prevalent technological character). Social innovation has been applied to many fields, including urban renewal, territorial economic development, social use of communication and information technologies, and processes of deliberative participation ([Bassi, 2011](#); [Grimm et al, 2013](#)). At an international level, four main schools of thought and theoretical approaches to social innovation can be found:

1. The approach of French-speaking Canada that developed through the works of scholars and researchers who group themselves around the Centre de recherche sur les innovations sociales in Montreal – Quebec, founded by sociologist Benoît Lévesque towards the end of the 1980s ([Klein et al, 2009](#); [Klein and Harrisson, 2010](#); [Klein and Bellemare, 2011](#); [Klein and Roy, 2012](#)).
2. Urban renewal and development studies, represented by a series of research projects funded by the European Commission from the 1990s, and which see the French-speaking Belgian Frank Moulaert as the main scholar ([Moulaert et al, 2013](#); [Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019](#)).
3. The approach of sociology in Germany and Austria associated with the legacy of Schumpeter. The Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, ZWE der Technische Universitaet in Dortmund is a centre of excellence and the ZSI research nicholsh centre in Vienna (Zentrum fuer Soziale Innovation) also refers to this trend ([Zapf, 1989](#); [Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010](#); [Franz et al, 2013](#)).
4. Finally, and most recent, is the Anglo-Saxon approach that has developed mainly in private non-profit study centres and think tanks such as the Young Foundation and NESTA in the UK, in particular under the direction of Geoff Mulgan. In spring 2006 a group of researchers belonging in various capacities to the Young Foundation published an influential research report with the evocative title *Social Silicon Valleys: A Manifesto for Social Innovation* ([Young Foundation, 2006](#)). From an

academic point of view, the main references are to the Skoll Center for Social Entrepreneurship in Oxford and the group of scholars who gather around the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* of the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society of Stanford University, California (Mulgan, 2006; 2019; Phills et al, 2008; Murray et al, 2010; Nicholls and Murdock, 2012). The work of Mulgan and colleagues influenced European public debate (Barroso, 2011). However, their approach has been described as ‘quite Anglo-centric’ with rather less attention to inequalities and democratic deficits than European scholars such as Moulaert (Horgan, 2020: 244).

Examples of social innovation from CoSIE pilots

All CoSIE pilots were concerned with fostering more effective solutions to persistent problems by innovation in ways to incorporate the knowledge of people affected by services. In this section we illustrate the intersection of co-creation and social innovation, drawing on examples from the CoSIE pilots that took place in Hungary, Spain and Estonia. We highlight the following dimensions:

- Shifting the balance of control, underpinned by asset-based approaches.
- Innovative roles and relationships between professionals and citizens.
- Governance innovations or relations between organisations.
- Innovative/extended use of technologies (information and communications technologies).

The CoSIE pilot in Hungary set out to improve household livelihoods in small villages beset by multiple disadvantages. In the short term, the intention was to enable families to utilise their own resources of household economy (including human resources, equipment and natural resources) to empower them in taking greater control over their lives. In the longer run, the aim was to improve the local economy in disadvantaged rural areas. The process resulted in innovation on several dimensions. Besides a conceptual innovation, it evidenced a ‘process innovation’ with *shifting the balance of control* where the targeted marginalised families and individuals with limited resources took responsibility for designing and implementing their own household economy plans. The innovative pilot actions facilitated rural communities to co-design local projects, choosing their own economic activities and sharing their efforts and resources. This was a sharp departure from what has gone before (Csoba and Sipos, 2022).

At the same time, co-creation required *innovation in (co-)governing* service development by taking into use new operational mechanisms of (direct) local democracy and shifting the roles of the local mayors and coordinators

towards mobilising the household economies. Such joint engagement of citizens, public professionals and political leaders in co-creation targeting the same goals was a bold innovation in Hungary with its paternalistic traditions and high level of centralisation. Local leaders commented in the early stages of the pilot that people in the villages had grown accustomed to a feeling of helplessness in the face of paternalistic traditions and welfare dependency. Citizens and local leaders started gradually recognising that they were major sources of knowledge, ideas, experience for making the support services work, and that their informal networks were valuable assets. The pilot co-created opportunities for innovative solutions that also strengthened community integration. As a result of the piloting efforts, a novel community-based public services model was established aiming to improve the local economy (Csoba and Sipos, 2022). Its success directly fed into a new national programme where applicants get extra points during the evaluation of their bid for demonstrating co-creation.¹

The CoSIE pilots draw attention to the *innovative roles of professionals* especially in relation to citizens in receipt of services. This is important because it has been somewhat underdeveloped in much thinking about co-creation (Osborne and Strokosch, 2013; Hannan, 2019). Pilots in Sweden (Chapter 4) and the UK (Chapter 6) provided bespoke coaching sessions with elements of action learning that demonstrably increased service practitioners' capacity to deploy new tools and skillsets. The pilot in Valencia, Spain known as Co-Crea-Te aimed to improve the lives of citizens who find themselves adrift from the working world by providing them with tools to engage in business start-up projects. This pilot illustrates how co-creation can require professionals to discard cherished assumptions. As one team member reported, when people at a distance from the labour market were asked what they wanted from entrepreneurial training they said they did not want entrepreneurial training, there was already plenty of it around and it did not help them. As a result of hearing this, he reported that "our preconceived ideas came tumbling down around our ears."

Co-Crea-Te embraced the idea of *acompañamiento* – meaning that co-creation can be supported with the help provided not only by professionals, but also by people in receipt of services themselves. It was one of several pilots that drew attention to a need for greater emphasis on lived experience either for professionals themselves or others as part of their teams. The overall aim of the Co-Crea-Te pilot was to bring about a systemic change in the way public services were being delivered by providing a safe, stable and supportive environment, in terms of both a physical and digital co-working space, for people with few or no resources to find means of economic self-sufficiency. The co-working space (Co-Crea-Te) provided participants with several collaborative activities, including workshops, mentoring and pitching sessions.

Co-creation has also been made effective through innovations in governance involving new ways for public organisations to interact in a multiple actor context. This involved establishing new relationships with and between agencies and authorities, and bringing together organisations and groups with different values and priorities, sometimes attempting to bridge long-standing historical contradictions. A good example is the Estonian CoSIE pilot in Vorumma county, a very remote, sparsely populated area with few services and many disadvantaged residents. As a vehicle for co-creation this pilot adapted the format of the ‘hackathon’, a well-established means to facilitate innovation through intensive, fast-paced collaboration in small groups, originally by prototyping in the IT sector. IT hackathons are very popular in Estonia. The pilot challenged the traditional top-down decision processes by bringing together many different stakeholders (municipalities, non-government organisations, entrepreneurs, community leaders, vulnerable people who used services, and fellow citizens) to promote co-creative solutions to experienced local needs (Toros et al, 2020).

Co-creation sometimes incorporates technological models including those developed in the private sector (Brandesen and Honingh, 2018). Some CoSIE pilots *extended or adapted the usage of digital technologies in innovative ways*. How this was done successfully with marginalised young people in Finland is explained in detail in Chapter 5. Technology-inspired hackathons as used in Estonia might seem at first sight a poor fit with the emphasis on inclusion and social justice. Yet, the CoSIE pilot there adapted the hackathon format in combination with the welfare ethos to improve collaboration between professionals and citizens in public service innovation. This pilot evidences that the fast pace is not suitable for everyone, but many practical measures can enable more people to take part (for example, accessibility logistics, mentor support, appropriate communication). ‘Social hackathons’ successfully mobilised people in Vorumma from diverse backgrounds – including individuals with disabilities – to co-create new services or innovative solutions to local community needs (Kangro and Lepik, 2022). The hackathons generated 35 project ideas. Twenty continued as citizen initiatives or as co-operation between different service providers. Six of them reached a level to scale up to a local or even regional service. According to the participants, understanding the many different perspectives of problems was one of the biggest benefits of the hackathons. Perhaps more importantly, there was also evidence of movement towards a new public sector culture where experiments and their spaces are favoured, locally and nationally (Kangro and Lepik, 2022). The pilot won the most inspiring initiative of 2019 award from the president of Estonia. Soon after, social hackathons were rolled out nationally.

The prospect of open data appears to match the principles of co-creation (Jalonen and Helo, 2020). CoSIE planned activities that, according to the

formal Description of Action, would include ‘identifying open data sources, if relevant, to support the co-creation nature of the project’. A few pilots identified some relevant sources of open data that informed the assessment of local needs while others deemed the quality and granularity of available datasets to be inadequate. Only two pilots, those in Spain and Estonia, managed to find ways to involve open data in co-creative processes with stakeholders. In Estonia the pilot team, in consultation with the main analyst of the Estonian Statistical Office, collected a wealth of accurate, up-to-date information and prepared a profile of the county in which the most important statistical characteristics of wellbeing were presented in visual form. This profile was introduced into the social hackathons and participants were expected use it to prove the importance of the problem they were trying to solve. In Co-Crea-Te open data were introduced during open days when the co-working space opened its doors to reach out to local business and neighbourhood associations. This was done with an element of gamification, making use of the city’s open data portal.

In addition to its imaginative if limited adoption of open data, Co-Crea-Te in Valencia was one of the most prolific users of social media in CoSIE. The level of on-line activity throughout the duration of the pilot was extremely high and this was mostly due to independent and largely unguided actions from citizens participating in the co-working space. Digital technologies including the website, blognotes, Twitter, Facebook, LindedIn, YouTube, Slack and Trello were run by the pilot participants themselves. The technology was a leveller and gave participants a feeling of belonging. The transfer of power to them occasionally proved to be a source of tension with public service organisations. In this way Co-Crea-Te saw shifting of the power balance between service users and providers.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the book’s core themes of co-creation and social innovation from a policy perspective. It then turned to the intersection of co-creation and social innovation in practice, briefly introducing three of the CoSIE pilots to illustrate ways it is possible to mobilise the knowledge of people who receive services and nurture their participation in service innovation. This proved to be so even in contexts that looked highly unpromising with people unused to having their voices heard. The pilots in Spain, Estonia and Hungary as discussed in this chapter achieved social innovations that made a difference to local people and their services. The ambitions of CoSIE extended beyond this, to embed co-creation and inspire change much more widely. The pilots in Hungary and Estonia began to move beyond implementing ideas in a specific setting to fulfil those ambitions. We return to the theme of scaling in [Chapter 12](#).

Note

- ¹ The link to the call for proposals with the co-creation methodological guide developed by the management of the CoSIE project can be viewed (in Hungarian) at: <https://tef.gov.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Családi-portaprogram-pályázati-felh%C3%ADv%C3%A1s-szociális-földprogram-pályázati-felh%C3%ADv%C3%A1s.pdf>

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