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The unintended consequences of co-creation in public services—the role of professionals and of civil society organizations

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In this article, I underline two possible unintended consequences of co-creation programmes. First, by focusing mainly, if not exclusively, on the users' side, they underestimate the role of professionals (front-line public workers). Second, by emphasising the involvement and participation of individuals, they undervalue the contribution of collective actors (civil society organizations—CSOs—such as users' associations and representative bodies of peoples with special needs). The first weakness often undermines the sustainability of the co-creation strategy in the medium and long term because it does not produce an enduring systemic change in the public administration's attitude towards their citizens. The second one can reinforce inequalities in access to public services, instead of mitigating or overcoming them as intended by co-creation advocates.

The scholarly literature on co-creation typically and understandably stresses the role of users/clients in the process of service design and delivery (Pestoff, 2014; Brandsen et al., 2018). Numerous tools or mechanisms promote, increase and boost the contribution of the citizen as active co-producer ('prosumer') of public services, rather than a passive recipient (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006).

The role of professionals, however, can influence the success or failure of co-creation but is largely underestimated or taken for granted, and this represents a major gap in the literature (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013). Professionals often carry out activities following a 'business as usual' logic and are sceptical towards any changes in their ways of work and procedures. This is particularly noticeable in services with a high level of technical knowledge, such as health, education and some social services. Physicians, nurses, teachers and social workers operate following what has been defined as an 'inward look' and have difficulties in adopting a more 'outward look' that would recognize the lay knowledge and resources of people in caring for themselves and the others in their lives (Boyle & Harris, 2009).

In order to fill this gap in understanding and implementing co-creation, closer attention needs to be paid to the contribution of professionals in the realization of co-creation policy, as well as the new types of interaction emerging among them (new professionals 'ties'). In particular, the structural elements that can boost or obstruct the active involvement of professionals in the different phases of the co-creation process should be highlighted. This will help to identify the new skills that professionals need to develop. Change the mindset of

professionals is one of the main challenges any co-creation initiative has to deal with to be successful and sustainable. Co-creation, in short, implies a substantial redesign of the relationship between professionals and service beneficiaries.

Co-creation also implies a series of challenges for CSOs. Given its stress on active, direct participation of citizens as end users, co-creation might underestimate the role and contribution of CSOs in service implementation. In many European countries there is a strong tradition of involvement and collaboration between CSOs and different levels of government—local, regional, and national. This collaboration is very visible in the planning, delivering and monitoring of public service provision. Some authors define it as 'joint production' (Bance, 2018) or 'partnership' (Boccacin, 2014). Therefore, from the CSO perspective, it is necessary to distinguish what co-creation is and what it is not. For instance, co-creation is not information, consultation, advocacy, user association lobbying, or other traditional tools and mechanisms of CSOs' influence on the decision-making process concerning welfare policies.

Since co-creation entails direct end user involvement on an individual basis, this may have significant consequences from the point of view of democracy, access, equality and equity, given the uneven distribution of skills and capabilities among the population. Beneficiaries of welfare provision often belong to marginalized groups affected by low income or other kinds of disadvantage. These individuals may need services because they lack the resources or capabilities (cultural capital and social capital) that allow them to be fully included citizen in the social fabric. Because of this, among the potential negative effects of co-creation there is the risk of reproducing and reinforcing the divide between the well-off (included) and those in need (excluded). This is especially true in the cases of disabled, older, or non-self-sufficient people, and families with multiple problems.

Therefore, to be effective and sustainable, a co-creation programme should give particular consideration and meaning to the function, role and contribution of CSOs. When end users are not in a position to make an active contribution, the direct involvement of CSOs can help to nurture a sensitive institutional environment through becoming part of a co-governance service configuration. In other words, co-creation requires a new model of relationships between public administration and CSOs.

Disclosure statement

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