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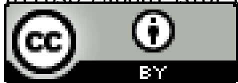

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Conclusions: Moving beyond building sandcastles … long-term sociotechnical infrastructure for social justice

Rob Wilson, Sue Baines, Andrea Bassi, Heli Aramo-Immonen, Riccardo Prandini, Inga Narbutaité Aflaki and Chris Fox

Introduction

This concluding chapter summaries the book's central premise, drawing from conceptual and empirical contributions of our collective experiences and reflection of enacting social innovation through co-creation. Throughout the volume we have explored current thinking and practices around co-creation and co-production. We have emphasised in particular the turn towards more asset-based and relational ways of thinking in the framing of individuals and communities as having their own assets, goals and means of change. This is allied to the need to be brought together in various combinations to form the sorts of mutuality envisaged by proponents of co-creation and co-production in policy and practice. In this final chapter we now turn to considering the transition needed from the current focus on pilot projects and interventions or experiments in co-creation, which almost always begin with a plan and end in what is an apparently concrete and impactful solution. The problem with these short-term investments, as many have come to realise, is that although we learn from them, we can rarely sustain or scale beyond the original resourcing. Or to put it another way - a world where pilots run aground, trailblazers burnout and pathfinders get lost.

We start with a reflection on the language of co-creation and then go on to dig a bit deeper into what is meant by 'scaling' co-creative social

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innovations. We pay particular attention to governance and the mixed success of digital tools. The need to cultivate a relational approach for social justice is emphasised. We further elaborate on the metaphor of the sandcastle and present a model that combines context-specific structures with reusable infrastructures able to support and sustain successive initiatives.

Co-creation: not as new as we think?

The need to work from the places and spaces where citizens and communities are aspiring to good lives is a key part of authentic approaches to co-creation. The language of participation has deep roots in the history and language of communities across the Europe. Multiple terms were used by partners and colleagues throughout the Co-creation of Service Innovation in Europe (CoSIE) project. These are illustrated in a simple visualisation (Figure 12.1). The data for this visualisation were provided by partners and colleagues at a Knowledge Exchange workshop in which all the CoSIE teams participated. As the word cloud (Figure 12.1) shows, our Italian and Swedish colleagues provide the largest number of terms for co-creation (five), followed by our Estonian and UK colleagues (four). Despite English being the most widely used language within the project, UK participants had four different terms for co-creation: co-production, personalisation, person-centred practice and

Figure 12.1: Word cloud of terms for co-creation

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desistance (a term particular to the criminal justice context where the UK pilot was situated). So even to native English speakers there are multiple alternatives for the term co-creation, each with its own nuanced definition. Finnish and Dutch partners used three terms, and Hungarian colleagues two. Conversely, our Polish and Spanish colleagues used a single term for co-creation ('*wspoltworzenie*' and '*co-creació*', respectively).

Using just 'co-creation' adds even more complexity and prompts pertinent questions: Do we all share the same understanding of 'co-creation' when we discuss it among our colleagues and participants? Are our intentions of co-creation understood by the instigators of co-creation – and the users and (dis)beneficiaries of service innovation?

An example from a later discussion in a workshop in the Netherlands was the idea of 'Polder' or 'Poldermodel' (Woldendorp and Keman, 2007), which has its antecedents in the activities of the reclamation of land from the sea via the associated community construction and maintenance of dikes. The core aspect for our Dutch colleagues was the length of time and consensus-based process where all stakeholders need to be heard, often summarised as 'cooperation despite differences'. An environment that encourages co-creation is a powerful one (and the encouraging thing here is that all the languages represented were able to mobilise a response to the challenge). However, to leverage that power, we must ensure that all participants in a process understand the co-creation concept in their own terms. So is the term 'co-creation' doing a disservice in a multilingual community? The evidence suggests there is a need to address this further, understanding the roots of the terms with their particular historical implications which can then scaffold or provide social infrastructure for co-creation.

Learning from co-creating?

The activities (and empirical studies) described in this book and the wider literature of academia, policy makers, non-profits and think tanks are part of what is now over a decade of attempts to generate change by improving the means of social innovation through participatory and co-creation methods. There is evidence beyond CoSIE as well as within it that co-creation and social innovation can provide the methods for enacting initial engagements with socially excluded or seldom heard population groups. Eseonu (2022), for example, shows how this has been achieved with racially minoritised young people in a hyper-diverse British city. Yet there seems much left to do in terms of understanding how social innovation is propagated, the tools (including digital tools) that are utilised, relationships to existing institutional structures, and wider theories of social welfare and social policy.

In a very widely cited image Murray et al (2010) showed social innovation processes on a spiral path starting from the recognition of a need to change

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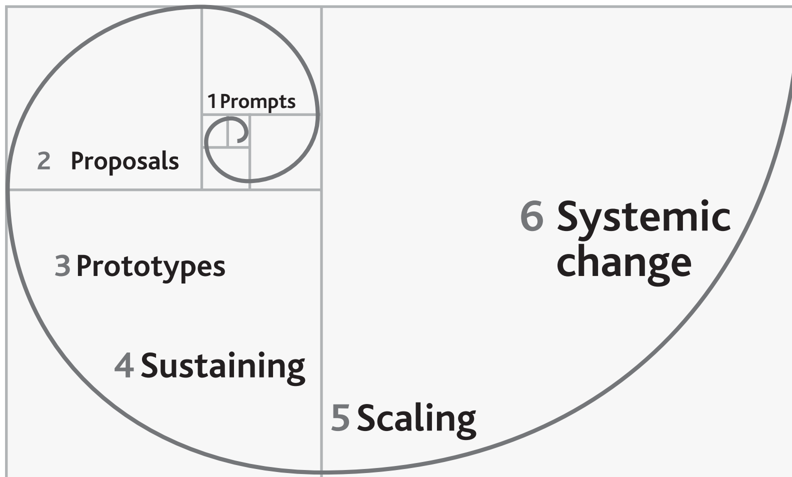
Figure 12.2: The six stages of social innovation



Source: taken from Murray et al, 2010: 11

(or an unmet demand) and eventually ending with a complete systemic change (see Figure 12.2). This path usually follows six steps (in a later version they became seven). However, most social innovations in practice fail to get beyond the third (prototyping) phase (Murray et al, 2010). Our language in the innovation context exemplified by the spiral has been typically borrowed from industrial and commercial innovation models in ways not entirely relevant to social innovation and this has perhaps inculcated expectations around the ways in which things ought to work, in particular thinking around scaling. Some of the prevailing optimism around citizen and community participation in designing and implementing social innovation seems to be grounded in misplaced confidence in a progressive spiral pattern.

Social innovations may not spread beyond their original context because they are not suitable for different conditions, or because their relevance is not recognised. This is a significant challenge. Having a strong evidence base can support scaling but is not sufficient. Equally important can be changing systems to support new ways of working, which in turn is often predicated on challenging existing values and building effective coalitions of people, communities and organisations with linkages across different scales (Kazepov et al, 2019). To do this, innovations must win the hearts and minds of key stakeholders (Barnett, 2021). Different routes not well represented in the spiral figure may lead towards wider system change. Typical scaling strategies that can be identified include:

1. increasing throughput to affect more people in need of the proposed solution (scaling up);

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2. expanding the approach to another (geographical) context through replication and diffusion (scaling out);
3. enhancing the character and quality of the approach to increase effectiveness (scaling deep); and
4. broadening the framework and resources of the approach by building new partnerships (scaling wide) (Moore et al, 2015).

A combination of two (or more) strategies is also possible. This fourfold typology represents a more nuanced version of how social innovations may grow and change than the spiral model or linear notions of 'scaling up'. It needs to be said, nevertheless, that there remains a gap between the promises of social innovation and more widespread benefits. Indeed, this in and of itself is a significant understatement.

More recent takes on scaling of social innovation have critiqued the normative assumptions of the underlying political and economic rhetorics on scaling at the EU and national state level and the perversities these create for those undertaking such work (Ruess et al, 2023). Pfotenhauer et al (2022) identify three elements that in their analysis need to be addressed to provide a rebalancing of the dominant rhetorics: 'solutionism', 'experimentalism' and 'future-oriented valuation'. The first 'solutionism' refers to the problem of who decides, for whom, on what basis what is likely to work, thereby proscribing the boundaries of the solution to a problem. Second, the element of 'experimentalism' refers to the blurring of the boundaries of consent in the sorts of social innovation programmes and the ways in which both existing tools and technologies of social media and bespoke innovations gloss over moral issues of participation to foreground scalability as the key outcome of investments. The third element refers to the politics of scaling and the prevailing assumption that the 'future-orientated valuations' are economically dominated and privatised in the hands of a few powerful vested interests without wider considerations of the existing regulatory frameworks or norms of society. Considering a meaningful response to the challenges which these elements raise means '(we need) new visions of co-creation and for substantial deliberation on how participation and co-creation can be enabled in societies' (Ruess et al, 2023).

Certainly, the irony of being part of an EU Horizon project (and programme) attempting to co-create, evaluate and understand the dynamics of co-creation in local social innovation projects in order to co-create a set of generic tools and technologies scalable' for application at an EU level was not lost on us. We observed the ways that 'problems' and their attendant 'solutions' emerged to be addressed at the bid writing stage and for the pilots and project work packages on initiation of their work. This continued through the work, with extensive debates in the consortia about the role of technologies in and across the pilot activity, including the tension

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of applying commercial social media platforms with vulnerable citizens and communities on one hand (including evaluation of their use in situ) and the challenge of designing, building and evaluating bespoke tools with relatively small numbers of participants on the other. These debates persisted at the project level throughout as partners, work package leaders, and our project officer and reviewers, agonised over the contribution and scalability of the outputs of the both the pilots and the tools and technologies created (or not) and cross-cutting activities, in particular deliverables such as the Living Lab modelling tools, massive open online courses and the CoSIE Roadmap (see the CoSIE website and Jamieson and Martin, 2022).

The promise of co-creation and co-production as a sources of social innovation is that engagement of service users/citizens and wider stakeholders will both improve the design of what is offered as a service or product and its outcomes. Learning from CoSIE includes elements of an emergent alternative social system, for example, the co-creation methods deployed in the social hackathons in Estonia which instilled new contexts where experimentation and innovation were valued (Chapter 3; Kangro and Lepik, 2022). Other notable successes include facilitation of learning and development for personal assistance workers in Sweden (as discussed in Chapter 4). Capacity building through Community Reporting across all the pilot social innovations of the project co-created both insight and developing capabilities (Chapter 7). The work of the pilots in Italy (reported in Chapter 8) and Hungary (Chapters 3 and 10) began to show how specific interventions can lead to the emergence of new more inclusive stakeholder governance structures. There was evidence of potential to create the sorts of institutional structures envisaged by those who recognise the need to ingrain the ability to systematise engagement approaches more broadly (as outlined in Chapter 10).

Moulaert et al (2013), in the final section of their seminal edited collection on social innovation, proposed a holistic approach which bridges to collective action through long engagement and the production of knowledge. Brandsen et al (2018), in the concluding section of their widely read collection, propose a range of actions which basically imply the need to take a bespoke approach to the development of skills and relationships between the network of actors who have a role in initiating and sustaining co-creation efforts. Albury (2015) proposes a conceptual framework of three mechanisms for scaling and diffusion that research has shown to be promising in health and social care contexts, including organic growth, wide stakeholder engagement to mobilise demand and an enabling ecosystem (for example, appropriate leadership and investment approaches). Another stream of social innovation literature (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019) refers to three dimensions to be achieved to make the innovation sustainable: the satisfaction of unmet needs; community empowerment; and governance transformations. There

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seems to be an emerging consensus that both the structure and process of co-creation requires the generative power and elasticity as well as the concrete outcomes required to engage stakeholders in the current policy environment.

A theme running throughout this volume is the extent to which the promise of digital tools and platforms was fulfilled, or not. There has been some optimism about the application of digital technologies, including social media and open data, as panaceas to support co-creation, despite a rather limited evidence base (Lember et al, 2019). Using the framework of Digital Social Innovation allows us to see that from a CoSIE-based perspective these approaches can be an input into bricoleuring interpretative multi-party co-creation conversations. One successful example was seen in the work of the Finnish pilot with its innovative application of social media for raising the voices of marginalised young people who did not normally interact with services (Chapter 5). Much less positive was the experience of the UK pilot (Chapter 6) where a proposed bespoke digital solution failed to deliver as proponents anticipated.

The cross-cutting work of the 'Living Labs' signposted how it is possible to bridge from a specific structural intervention in context to innovate *relationships* in the wider information systems infrastructures (soft and hard – or, as we would propose, sociotechnical). This is central to the possibility of cultivating through co-productive modelling processes both the system and the longer-term investments in shared components that produce the ability to sustain the system as platforms on wider sociotechnical infrastructure (see Chapters 10 and 11). However, such approaches need to develop both local social platforms as well as digital tools to provide the trusted governable platforms that we need to address the deep challenges faced by communities across the EU and beyond.

An emerging need for investing in a relational approach?

One thing we can be clear about is that the way forward is inherently relational and responses in a co-creative mode (innovative or not) require productive human relationships that are key to the delivery of services and the wider engagement with the wicked welfare challenges of contemporary society, such as ageing, immigration, climate change and inequality. Cultivating a relational approach potentially requires a reimagining of the co-creation and social innovation agendas from a fixed normative linear approach where interventions are treated as planned experiments with discernible outcomes to understanding these as processes of ongoing investment in learning as part of wider civic engagement in an inherently complex environment where the outcomes are almost always contingent (Lowe and Wilson, 2017; Charfe and Gardner, 2019; Bartels and Turnbull, 2020; Bartels, 2022; French et al, 2023).

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Taking a relational frame of conceptualising and enacting co-creation and related capabilities for social justice allows to explore a new approach to change, improvement, learning and research endeavours as a basis to address the complex challenges of societies. More fundamentally, this 'relational turn' asks a deeper question of our understanding of value creation. Viewed through a relational lens, value is dependent on the quality of relationships between component parts of a system, be it a set of collaborating partners with a shared agenda or a looser federated community, rather than the efficacy of overspecified individuated interventions aimed solely at fixing particular individualised problems (such as obesity) rather than developing agency and improving relations in the local community context. The investment in capability over the long term plays into wider debates in social investment, public service reform and democratic/participatory deliberation essentially related to strengths-based, capability building approaches. It pushes this argument forward by drawing upon recent refinements of capability theory (as we outline in Chapter 2). It also questions the basis on which current technologies have been developed, for whose benefit and whether our existing service platforms are governable and governed by those who ought to be involved (see Chapters 1, 2 and 11).

For all the efforts of programmes such as these and the vast resources invested in a range of national and international social programmes (such as the Big Lottery in the UK and the European Regional Development Fund and European Social Fund in the EU), the evidence for change (as opposed to performance activity) materialised beyond the immediate resourcing appears relatively scant. In the seminal work *Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls suggests that societies need to adopt the principles of social justice and enshrine them in systems with appropriate institutions whose role and responsibilities are to ensure the fair(er) distribution of social goods through 'social co-operation'. Later works on social justice emphasise the plurality of what counts as 'justice' in contemporary contexts, signalling the requirement for participative approaches such as co-creation to reach settlements within and between communities (Sen, 2005; 2006; Nussbaum, 2006). Arguments follow that social justice in order to be enacted should be redistributive in the development of the capacity building of capability (Pierik and Robeyns, 2007; Robeyns, 2017). Capability in these terms offers a way of making investments in humans and their environments which support the ongoing dynamic renewal of existing structures and communities in the face of complex issues (Teece et al, 1997; French et al, 2023; Ruess et al, 2023).

Taking such a relational approach breaks down the false dichotomy of the personal and collective and refocuses investments where the issues of resources and capabilities can be seen as an intention for the cultivation of agency (Claassen, 2016) in a wider framework of social pedagogy (Hatton, 2013; Charfe and Gardner, 2019). The argument that investing in the development

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of capability to provide the systems and cultivate relational human agency to enabling processes of social justice therefore feels generative in terms of the ways in which we might reposition the broader intentions of co-creation as a process of social innovation.

Towards concreteness AND elasticity?

Ultimately the question for any philosopher of social justice is what should this system and institutional form look like and how should it work? It is clear that the contemporary starting points for engagement are in the mode of linear projects with the challenges they bring in terms of explicit 'concrete' products and outcomes, constrained resourcing and associated evaluative frames (including what counts as evidence). What we have now (as the cover of our book implies) is a landscape of policy and practice 'sandcastles'.

The illusion that a sandcastle gives is one of concrete-ness. They are unproblematic in that they can be created efficiently using sand buckets (which act as moulds). People like creating them. Others admire them. They can be decorated with flags and shells. We can have competitions. We can protect and maintain them by building moats (Obrador Pons, 2009; Franklin, 2014). In the end, however, they are insubstantial, vulnerable to being washed away in social forces of the tide or kicked over by the policy careless or bullies leaving little trace of their existence. In spite of this critique concreteness matters both an imaginary and pragmatic exemplar for change and without the structure that process brings it is a significant challenge to engage the sceptical, whether they be policy makers or communities.

However, as well as the 'concreteness' we need the 'elasticity' to respond to the emergence and sustainability of innovation and change. As we have intimated, this requires investment in the social and technical (sociotechnical) infrastructures that support activity but also allow it to be cultivated and bricoleured through human capabilities into new process, mutuality and service. Such a generative approach potentially allow us to know and to learn and reflect; to govern and be governed; to manage and to steward; to lead and to collaborate.

Within our work we identified a range of core internal elements that are common to all the various approaches. They serve to make explicit certain key external elements and factors, which are relevant to any service environment if it is to be sustainable. The 'co-creation of service' model presented in Chapter 10 (Figure 10.5) derived from the modelling processes of the CoSIE project. It represents an attempt to present and interrelate a number of terms and categories to provide the basis for a language and framing of service innovation activities. It was adopted and utilised by some of the pilots to help them to visualise relationships between the actions they undertook locally and relevant external considerations. We return to that

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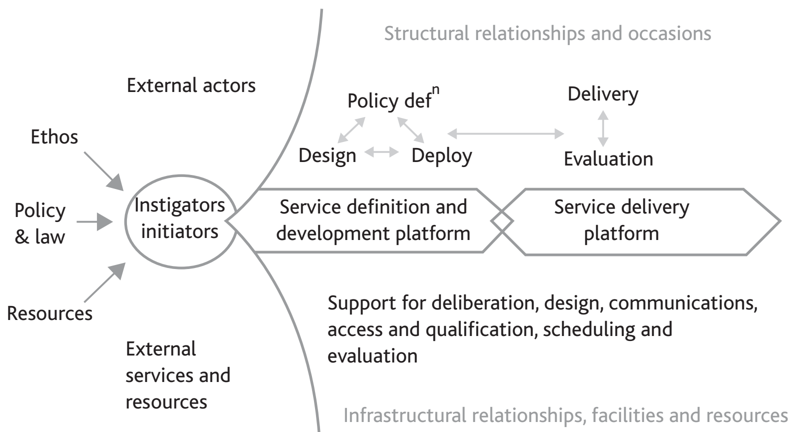
Figure 12.3: Structural and infrastructural relationships



model here to draw attention to a key learning point from the project: the distinction between 'structure' and 'infrastructure' and the initiation of 'services' and 'service environments', and the 'delivery of service' and 'service platform infrastructure' (see Figure 12.3).

The top right of the model represents a set of structural relationships and occasions. Each structural process can be populated via some or all of these processes with the identities of stakeholders or resources. For example, as we know, external actors (top left) represent a range of input to which a co-creative innovation process has been instigated or had to respond, including 'Ethos', 'Policy', 'Law'. The service life-cycle processes are distributed over, and supported by, a service definition and development platform and a service delivery platform (bottom middle and right). As an example, a social hackathon (as a method and as an outcome) represents such a definition and development platform. The nature of the delivery platform for any service or service set defined in a hackathon is one of the outputs of the co-creation process. In another case, a social enterprise business development support facility has been both service definition and development as well as the delivery platform. Thus, below the platform (the soft and hard infrastructure) we have a space in which to locate the sociotechnical infrastructural capacities to support deliberation, design, communications, the means of access to different sorts of services and service components and for the processes of qualification, scheduling and evaluation necessary for investments in capabilities and also management and governance.

The aim here is to respond to the problem of emergent sustainability by proposing parallel investments in reusable infrastructures able to support and sustain successive initiatives in co-creative service development. Having married an abstract, generic model of civic participation and of service, we

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have created the opportunity for the shared resources between a broad co-creation initiatives and services and potentially improved the sustainability of both the concreteness and the elasticity required to support long-term coordination, collaborative governance and adaption. The precise shape and nature of these resources will vary from context to context but we believe there is a strong likelihood that there are some universal elements that are common requirements in many classes of relational services.

Final reflections

We opened this volume with the observation that co-creation in public services has become a widely accepted orthodoxy and in tune with the times (Osborne et al, 2016; Brandsen et al, 2018). Committed adherents view its further advance as inevitable. Yet some pilot experiences suggest aspects of service structures and policies that push against co-creation, most notably short-term planning, policy 'churn' and silo working.

In spite of today's pressing societal challenges (ranging from climate change to unmet care needs in an ageing population) that require significant collaborative effort, governments and those working in government seem reluctant to look beyond short-term goals, economic-based assumptions of innovation and/or reactive responses to events. We have observed this over many years watching projects fail like a set of sandcastles that are washed way. Fundamental challenges remain in the collaborative design and delivery of public services and mutuality with authentic and meaningful participation of citizens affected by those services. Many approaches continue to insist on mimetically adopting the architectures of commercial approaches of business cases, target-based measurement and return on investment tools. These practices have created an ecology in which collaboration has become increasingly difficult to justify without specific purpose and resourcing.

The challenge for public service is that large, long-term centralised programme investments, where one collaboration architecture 'size and shape' fits all, are meeting an increasing variety and innovation in architecture on the ground. Bottom-up approaches are appealing and can be successful, as detailed throughout this volume. However, they can be too reliant on local circumstances to meaningfully scale or sustain elsewhere.

It is time for a change. That means moving away from designing solutions to societal issues that reduce relationships to transactions and/or policies which have the effect of foregrounding a particular version of the problems that individuals or communities have been saddled with. This is compounded by the fact that those most in need often have complex and disjointed relations with services, coupled with the problem that those working with and in the services often have limited resources to mediate their relationships with each other. To respond to these needs effectively and begin to address

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the challenges set by taking a social justice approach, we must act differently. Most importantly, we must both innovate our public service architecture and invest in individual and collective capabilities as an ongoing infrastructural investment, thereby creating the potential for cultivating the heterogeneous possibilities in relationships that make the lives of people and communities worth living.

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