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For all seasons? Exploring the policy-context for co-creation

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IMPACT

'Co-creation' is a major buzzword in contemporary governance. A range of public sector organizations nowadays declare co-creation as an overall strategy for their policies and actions. However, what co-creation should mean in operational terms often remains less clear. This article explores what co-creation could look like within three significantly different policy contexts: the exercise of authority, service delivery and regulation. To illustrate the argument, the article also explores the extent to which co-creation as a practice already exists in three Norwegian policy fields which resemble the three policy contexts. These three policy fields are child welfare and protection (authority), elderly care (service delivery) and climate policy (regulation). Although the illustrative examples are derived from a single country, they will be relevant to other countries as well.

ABSTRACT

Co-creation is a broad concept that can potentially be applied to many significantly different policy contexts. However, the co-creation literature has paid less attention to questions like how policy content conditions co-creation, and how this generic idea can be translated into different policy fields. To address this gap, this article aims to explore what co-creation might mean in different policy contexts, and discusses co-creation in the context of legal authority, service provision and regulation. The arguments are illustrated using examples from three Norwegian policy sectors: child welfare, elderly care, and climate policy.

KEYWORDS

Child welfare and protection;
climate policy; co-creation;
co-production; elderly care;
Norway; policy context;
service delivery

Introduction

'Co-creation' is a generic concept that is becoming more popular in many countries as a 'magic concept' (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). It is arguably 'the new kid on the block' (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a) and something that numerous public organizations are employing in their strategies by, for example, introducing the concept in masterplans and other strategy documents. However, when co-creation is mentioned, it is often without reference to, or an explanation of, what the concept should entail at the operational level.

There is good reason to expect that the implementation of concepts known as co-creation will depend on traditions of governance already in place in a given country (Voorberg et al., 2017), and country-specific variants of co-creation are therefore expected. However, in addition to traditions of governance, policy contexts may also have a significant impact. Little is known about how policy contexts condition co-creation, what co-creation might mean in different policy contexts (Ferlie, 2021), how the ideas of co-creation can be translated into a specific policy context, and the extent to which these arrangements actually create and not destroy value (Parker, Cluley, & Radnor, 2023).

The public sector has a multitude of functions and roles in modern societies. It provides services to its citizens, determines laws and rules of behaviour, monitors societal activities and the economy, ensures safety, makes plans, and delivers public services. This article focuses on three public sector functions that could possibly serve as arenas for co-creation initiatives—the public sector as a *legal authority*, a *service provider* and a *regulator*.

As a legal authority, the public sector is understood in terms of hierarchy and as a legal monopoly that is able to

exercise power and coercion. As a service provider, the public sector serves citizens by either using in-house services or by funding services that are contracted to private or civic providers, or a combination of the two. In this respect, some elements of market dynamics will be relevant to the function as a service provider. In reference to regulation, this is a function that has elements of legal authority, but in which the public sector aims to frame the behaviour of citizens, organizations and businesses through measures commonly developed through dialogue with the regulatees. In this respect, there are network-like elements in regulation. In summary, as this brief and preliminary explanation shows, the three functions to be explored are significantly different and will likely constitute considerably different contexts for co-creation.

In this article, co-creation is defined and understood as a broad concept, also covering what commonly is conceptualized as 'co-production'. Based on this understanding, it can reasonably be argued that the majority of co-creation studies relate to social policy and service delivery, not least elderly care, while there is an increasing number of co-creation studies relating to regulation, for example planning or climate policy (Jukic et al., 2019; Suhari et al., 2022). The number of co-creation studies related to authority seem more limited (but see Reitan, 2019; Scognamiglio et al., 2023). This could indicate that co-creation is more relevant in a service-delivery context than, for example, an authority context. However, it may just be the case that the concept itself has not spread among scholars studying empirical fields relating to authority to the same extent it has among service-delivery scholars. For that reason, it is worth exploring this in depth.

The discussion in this article is framed by the following research question:

How can the idea of co-creation be translated into different policy contexts, to what extent does co-creation already exist, and to what extent is co-creation a promising way of creating value in different policy contexts?

This article explores and perhaps fills some of the knowledge gaps described above. It is inspired by a research tradition that probably received more attention in the 1970s and 1980s than it does today: ‘comparative policy analysis’ (Ashford, 1992; Capano et al., 2015; Lowi, 1972; Kjellberg, 1977). The following section discusses and defines co-creation and discusses the relationships between co-creation and authority, service delivery, and regulation. There is then a brief note on illustrative policies and methodology, with a short introduction to three policy fields used to illustrate the argument: child welfare (authority), elderly care (service delivery) and climate policy (regulation). In the section about analysis, the main aim is to develop a typology of types of co-creation that could be imagined in the three aforementioned policy fields, discuss the extent to which these types of co-creation actually exist, and what consequences they have on value creation. The article concludes with some reflections on the need for empirical studies in this field.

Conceptual approaches and types of co-creation

In many Western countries, and among both scholars and public leaders, it is argued that we are witnessing a gradual and ongoing shift in the perception of the role of citizens in public governance (Barber, 2003; Fung, 2006; Voorberg & Bekkers, 2016; Warren, 2009; Sørensen & Torfing, 2023). In recent times, this has often been referred to as co-creation, and constitutes part of a larger change, commonly conceptualized as New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010). Co-creation is arguably a bricolage of concepts and theories taken from public service management, urban planning and innovation (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018; Lund, 2018). However, the concept of co-creation originates in business administration and marketing theory, reflecting the idea that value is created in the interaction between a provider and a consumer (Bernhard, 1965; Payne et al., 2008). Typical contemporary examples are tourism, social media, ‘Web 2.0’ and similar types of consumer–producer interactions (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014). The ‘co’ of co-creation indicates that a collaborative process involving different kinds of actors and resources is taking place, while ‘creation’ tells us that something is achieved that would otherwise not have been realized. This ‘something’ is *value*.

While neo-liberal economy has tended to understand value in terms of economic exchange and price, Benington (2011) points out that former classical economists had a set of value concepts referring to both exchange and price, human efforts in production processes, and usefulness for individuals or in situations. In the wake of NPM, it is suggested that value be seen in terms of economy, social and cultural life, politics and ecology (Benington, 2011). From this perspective, value is seen as a broad concept that can be both individual (what the public value) or collective (what adds value to the public sphere). In addition, value is an asset that can increase or decrease depending on the situation and what is involved, and can often dig into competing priorities. Therefore, the contrast in terms of

value destruction or disvalue, for everyone or for individuals, needs to be considered to the same extent as value creation (Parker et al., 2023; Sancino et al., 2018).

Despite the fact that the concept of co-creation stems mainly from the private sector, with an emphasis on private value (but see Redlich et al., 2019), it is argued that the concept is also relevant to the public sector. As noted by Osborne et al. (2016), the public sector is dominated by the production of services that, because of their discretionary and intangible nature, provide excellent conditions for co-creation. In addition, it is argued that public value is not created by the public sector alone but can also be generated by other actors. The solution to public problems often depends on the interaction between public actors and citizens, civil society and private companies (Benington, 2011; Torfing et al., 2019). Whereas citizens were once perceived as passive clients or demanding customers, it is argued that they are now increasingly viewed as active and responsible partners in public governance and service provision (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a; Pestoff, 2009; Torfing et al., 2019).

Co-creation belongs to a family of concepts commonly used to describe more recent trends in governance and public problem-solving. Similar or neighbouring concepts include co-production (Nabatchi et al., 2017), interactive governance (Torfing et al., 2012), collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008) and social innovation (Voorberg et al., 2015). Among scholars, each and every one of these concepts frame their own academic discourses. However, on closer inspection, a significant overlap can be found, where the same authors are moving between different concepts but still within the same conceptual family. Taken together, it is not easy to delimit the relevant literature on co-creation, and to separate co-creation from neighbouring concepts such as co-production.

The conceptual confusion that seems to characterise this field of research stems in part from the various conceptual strategies employed by different authors. Some authors tend to equate co-creation with co-production (Voorberg et al., 2015; Jo & Nabatchi, 2018), while others are more concerned about the various disciplines from which these concepts depart (Osborne, 2018; Osborne et al., 2016). A number of authors try to distinguish co-creation from other concepts by arguing that co-creation has some crucial and constitutive features that are less prominent in co-production and collaborative governance (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b; Brandsen & Honingh, 2018, p. 13). Other authors re-conceptualize older literature by arguing, for example, that Ostrom’s work (1999) is a central piece of co-creation literature, although Ostrom herself never used the term (Torfing et al., 2021, p. 200).

There is no one single way to handle the conceptual complexity described above. It is more a question of what is useful for empirical analysis and how it can deepen our understanding of contemporary societies and governance. In this article, co-creation will be considered an umbrella-like concept that includes sub-types such as co-design, co-implementation and co-production. There are two main reasons for taking such a wide approach to co-creation:

- First, including types of relationships that mirror producer–consumer relationships in private markets is, it will be argued, more in line with the way co-creation is used in private sector research, where one tends to see every

single interaction as unique, and which has also inspired public sector research (Cluley & Radnor, 2020; Osborne et al., 2018; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014; Redlich et al., 2019; Skålen, 2022).

- Second, this wide approach allows different types of interactions to be seen under one common analytical umbrella, and allows the exploration of how 'simpler' types of co-creation can develop and transform into more complex types of interactions.

The conceptual choice this article follows is much in line with Torfing et al. (2019), arguing that co-creation ranges from the co-creation of individual services to more advanced types of collaboration among equal parties. It follows that co-creation can be defined as a process through which public and private/civic actors attempt to resolve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas (Torfing et al., 2019, p. 802).

From this conceptual perspective, co-creation covers many possible interactions between the public sector and its citizens, users, organizations and businesses. Co-creation can arise in the early stages of a policy process in which problems are detected and defined (co-initiating), in the stage in which solutions and associated tools are identified and selected (co-design), or in the process in which actions are taken (co-implementation) (Lund, 2018; Torfing et al., 2019). Co-creation can mean types of interactions that are well known and do not significantly challenge existing types of governance practices and routines (Alford, 1998; Alford & Freijser, 2018). In contrast, there are also more radical types of co-creation that significantly challenge existing forms of governance and democratic participation, for example interactive forms of leadership and governance arrangements in which citizens and groups of citizens are allowed to play an active role in a balanced relationship with political and administrative leaders (Lo & Røiseland, 2021; Røiseland, 2021; Røiseland & Vabo, 2016; Torfing et al., 2012; Torfing et al., 2019).

Co-creation can take many different forms and several co-creation typologies are suggested in the literature (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2016; Torfing et al., 2019). However, with a variety of definitions in play, there are barely any authoritative typologies or standard references in this regard. As a reference, four different types of co-creation are distinguished below, based on how they score on two underlying dimensions. The first dimension distinguishes between individual and collective, and therefore between co-creation involving, for example, a user and a professional, and a collective level involving groups or organizations. The second dimension expresses types of relationship, distinguishing between co-creation in which only two parties are involved (dyadic) and co-creation in which three or more parties are involved (polyadic) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of co-creation.

Level	Type of relationship	
	Dyadic	Polyadic
Individual	'Personal'	'Extended'
Collective	'Partnership'	'Network'

'Personal co-creation' resembles the classic customer–producer interaction in marketing theory, but may also characterise situations in which recipients of a public service, often directed by a professional, contribute with certain actions, like changing bandages after surgery or writing a postcode on an envelope (Alford, 1998; Torfing et al., 2019). Such forms of interaction create private value in terms of something useful for the individual. However, to the extent that public sector or public employees are involved, elements of public value are, by definition, also involved. This is common in the context of the Nordic welfare state, with a large, service-dominated public sector. Scholarly literature often refers to and conceptualizes these types of interactions as co-production (Osborne et al., 2022; Pestoff et al., 2006).

'Extended co-creation' is a type of co-creation similar to the first type but which also involves a third party. Third parties may, for example, be a family member, neighbours, classmates or fellow employees and work colleagues, who in some way contribute with actions and support related to the individual citizen in question. In elderly care, for example, family members are often expected to supplement the services provided by the public sector (Jenhaug, 2018), or parents are expected to support the learning process in school by engaging in pupils' homework (Alford, 2002).

'Partnership' is a type of co-creation in which a social group, a company or a civic organization engages in a two-sided collaboration with the public sector in order to create public value. In these cases, citizens do not just co-create their own welfare services but also create value for other citizens through voluntary work carried out in co-operation with public professionals and leaders. Scholarly literature refers to these types of co-creation using many different names, including partnership, voluntary work, social entrepreneurship and social innovation (Benjamin & Brudley, 2018; Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006).

'Network' is a type of co-creation in which several public/civic/private partners collaborate to contribute to public value. For example, users, citizens and voluntary organizations may collaborate with administrative staff, professionals and political leaders in a network-like setting to discuss problems and solutions in a given policy field (Bentzen et al., 2018; Røiseland, 2021).

The simple typology above is useful for distinguishing four significantly different types of co-creation but it understates several other important dimensions that deserve mentioning:

- First, all types of co-creation discussed above can take place at different stages in a policy process (Dudau et al., 2019).
- Second, co-creation can be initiated by public as well as private or civic actors (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b; Christensen, 2022).
- Third, co-creation takes place in the context of governance traditions and institutional frameworks, which can vary from country to country (Voorberg et al., 2017), and even from locality to locality (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004).
- Finally, although by definition co-creation points toward interactions among equal partners who enjoy power and independency, in the real world, power is often distributed unequally, and what on paper looks like

creation of value can take the form of value destruction for involved actors (Parker et al., 2023).

Co-creation in the context of authority, service delivery and regulation

After this conceptual clarification, the next objective is to relate co-creation to different policy contexts. Following the then ground-breaking work of Lowi (1972), who distinguished between distributive, regulatory, redistributive and constituent policy, this article adopts the idea that ‘policy causes politics’, which is a reverse of the causal path still assumed by many (Smith, 2002). This implies that the process and effect of co-creation will be conditioned by the policy context, making transfer across policy functions a complex process with an unpredictable outcome. However, as indicated above, this article relies on a simplified typology that separates the public sector into a legal authority, a service provider and a regulator.

In the sociological tradition, *authority* is often referred to as ‘power plus’, which requires consent or legitimacy (Barnes, 1984). Authority as legitimate power means that citizens accept decisions and actions made by the state, even if such decisions do not express their individual preferences (Gilley, 2009). As modern societies in the western world seemingly enjoy a certain level of trust and legitimacy, exercising legal authority is a cornerstone in most public sectors.

From the sociological understanding, authority can stem from social norms and informal institutions, but this article will focus on *legal* authority, which is authority that comes from written sources such as laws and directives. According to Weber’s (1993) reasoning, the ultimate goal of exercising legal authority is to ensure fairness and equal treatment. For this reason, legal expertise is the main type of professional knowledge involved (see Table 2)

Delivery of services has developed into a core public sector function in most developed countries, and even more so in welfare states. Even if tangible goods serve as appliances for service provision (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), services like social work, healthcare, education, economic and business

support services, community development and regeneration, are not premanufactured products but, rather, are intangible, process driven and based upon a promise of what is to be delivered (Osborne et al., 2013). These characteristics affect how citizens and users evaluate service delivery. The idea that the service *process* itself may be a more important antecedent of customer evaluations than service outcome (De Ruyter et al., 1997) is highly relevant in the context of co-creation.

The provision of public services can be linked to legal authority, such as in the case of police and prison services (Osborne et al., 2022, p. 4). However, most public services are offered on a voluntary basis and citizens or other non-public actors can choose whether or not to accept them. In many countries citizens are even given a choice from a range of public and private providers (Pierre & Røiseland, 2016; Røiseland, 2016). Regardless of how they are delivered, the most prominent professional competencies in service delivery are the human sciences, including medical science, nursing and social work. The most common criteria for success in service delivery is a combination of efficiency, effectiveness and user satisfaction.

The third category, *regulation*, certainly contains strong elements of power and authority, but there are good reasons to categorize this as a separate type of policy function. This is because it increasingly involves organized interests and third parties, both in developing the regulatory regimes and in increasing the quality of regulation (Peters, 2000), and also by allowing third parties to enforce the regulation (Bardach & Kagan, 1982). For these reasons, regulation takes the form of dialogues and compromises between conflicting interests (Döhler, 2011), where the aim is to ensure long-term stability or long-term change. Regulation requires several core competencies and calls for professional legal, scientific, economic and technological knowledge.

The three functions represent considerably different contexts for co-creation. It is perhaps easiest to imagine co-creation in the context of *service delivery*. In this context, the public sector most commonly offers something on a voluntary basis, and both provider and recipient have a certain freedom to organize the transaction in a way that both parties benefit. However, implementing co-creation in service delivery may also increase problems related to inequality, and resourceful citizens and users may gain more value from co-creation than those with fewer resources (Røiseland, 2021). In addition, service delivery requires professional knowledge that non-public actors may not necessarily possess, and unrealistic expectations about what the public is able to deliver is a possible risk associated with co-creation. All in all, the co-creation of services will not per se increase value for all those involved—this is something that must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis (Parker et al., 2023).

While co-creation can easily be linked to service delivery, it is more challenging to imagine co-creation when the public sector is exercising *authority*. In these cases, citizens, users, organizations and businesses are obviously in a weaker position vis-à-vis the public sector, and are therefore far from being equal partners. The opposite is often true, as partners in potential co-creation processes may be unwilling and coerced, raising questions about what public value means (Moore, 1995), and thereby creating a special

Table 2. Three public sector functions.

	Authority	Service delivery	Regulation
Main characteristics	Exercise of legitimate power	Serving, voluntary, intangible	Influence on markets and society through indirect measures
Type of professional knowledge	Legal	Science, human sciences	Scientific, economic, technological, legal
Possible criteria for success	Fairness, legality	Efficiency, satisfaction	Long-term stability or change
Possible drivers of co-creation	Improve outcome for non-public actors	Better fit between service and needs	Improve outcome, realizing common goals
Possible barriers to co-creation	Non-public actors in weak position	Lack of equality, Unevenly professional knowledge and expertise	Challenges with inequality. Free-rider behaviour
Possible risks of value loss with co-creation	Co-optation	Unrealistic expectations about delivery	Unequal spread of power. Free riding

setting for value creation (Osborne, 2018). By definition, non-public actors can never be equal to public actors in the context of legal authority. However, although in a weak position, it is possible to imagine both non-public and public actors finding motives to collaborate in the 'shadow of authority', since this may improve the final outcome for both parties. One practical example would be volunteer programmes for young criminals, which can both improve the life and prospects of participants and decrease the burden on police authorities (Krogh, 2020). In a wider context, even if legal authority implies a hierarchy among those concerned, laws can arguably be seen as both an enabler and a preventer of co-creation (Szescilo, 2018). However, there are certainly risks involved, such as the risk of co-optation where users become manipulated (Arnstein, 1969), implying that value destruction is a possible outcome of co-creation in such a policy context (Engen et al., 2020).

Improving outcome may also be a driver of co-creation in the context of *regulation*. Regulation increasingly involves organized interests and third parties (Peters, 2000), driven by expectations among both the regulator and the regulatees of increased precision and quality. In addition, co-creation in the context of regulation can be driven by common goals among actors, for example in relation to climate policy (Hofstad & Vedeld, 2020). However, as in the case of service delivery, co-creation raises concerns about the unequal distribution of resources and power among the regulatees, which may lead to a loss of value. For example some actors may possess more power and resources than others and regulation regimes may end up benefitting the powerful more than the less powerful. In addition, there may be issues with free riders in relation to the co-creation of regulation. Some participants may find it more convenient and efficient to free ride, rather than participating in time-consuming and resource-demanding collaborations with the regulatory authorities.

Illustrative examples: Norwegian child welfare, elderly care and climate policy

The discussion above singles out three policy functions as mutually exclusive ideal types (Ringer, 1997). When applying these categories to actual policy fields, it quickly becomes evident that policy fields contain elements of more than one type. The three functions are mixed in complex ways and it is difficult to imagine a policy field comprising only one single function. Nevertheless, most

policy fields will stem more from one function than the others.

Three policy fields, which largely comprise each of the three functions, are explained and explored below. The policy fields are child welfare (authority), elderly care (service delivery) and climate policy (regulation). Table 3 summarises a number of characteristics of the three fields.

The national context for the three policy fields is Norway, which forms part of what is known as the Nordic welfare state model, together with Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Pedersen & Kuhnle, 2017). These countries are characterised by a large number of in-house public welfare services, elements of redistribution built into the taxation system and other funding mechanisms, and a high degree of professionalism in the public sector.

Child welfare and protection is a function that to some extent combines the exercise of authority with service delivery. In the Norwegian system, child welfare and protection has the authority to place children at risk in, for example, foster care, against their parents will. At the same time, child welfare and protection is also expected to support and help families at risk. Responsibility primarily lies with local authorities, which offer a wide range of home-based family support services and foster care, and initiate the use of power and authority over families with problems. Norway's 356 local authorities are responsible for performing those functions pursuant to the Child Welfare Act 1992, as well as for providing advice and guidance; making administrative decisions in accordance with the act; preparing cases for consideration by the county social welfare board; and implementing and follow-up child welfare measures (Breimo et al., 2023).

Elderly care is a central part of the Norwegian welfare state system and represents a policy field which can largely be categorized as service delivery. This decentralized system of welfare provision is a finely tuned combination of local autonomy and strong integration at central and local levels. Elderly care services are provided through the 356 local authorities, each with different sizes and populations. Elderly care is also influenced by central government by way of legislation, monitoring and substantial block grant funding. The national government's overarching goal is a long-term, innovative restructuring process (Meld, 2012–13), the guiding principle of which is that more elderly people will live at home for longer—living active and independent lives with individually adapted services, security and dignity (Breimo et al., 2023).

The *climate policy* field exercises elements of authority by way of law-making. However, these legal tools and less stringent measures are commonly developed in collaboration with societal actors like businesses, transportation companies and interest groups. The overall national policy is outlined in the Norwegian Climate Act 2017, which is closely linked to EU policy and international agreements. A set of tariffs, a system of CO₂ quotas, support systems, technology/building standards and a variety of regulations, planning guidelines and sector policies accompany this objective. The guidelines emphasise local authorities' central role as a significant owner of real estate, procurer of goods and services, and urban planning authority. Hence, local authorities are expected to use a broad spectrum of roles and instruments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Breimo et al., 2023).

Table 3. Characteristics of three Norwegian policy sectors.

Contextual variables	Child welfare and protection	Elderly care	Climate policy
Main policy function	Legal authority	Service delivery	Regulation
Relative importance of consumer–provider co-creation	Some importance	Important	Less important
Geographical scope	Mainly local–regional	Mainly local	Local–national–international
Share of citizens affected by policy	Few	Many	Most/all
Degree of politicization	Low	Medium	High
Degree of policy standardization	High	Medium	Medium/low
The role of professionals	High	High	Medium/low

Table 4 departs from the typology used until now and aims to explain what different types of co-creation may mean in operational terms. This is not an empirical analysis quantifying the different types of co-creation. The aim of the analysis is to illustrate whether these types of co-creation could conceivably be seen in the three policy fields, how they could work, and to discuss the extent to which they already exist.

Personal co-creation exists in all three sectors and seems relatively well established. In child welfare, this is exemplified by ‘individual plans’—tailor-made plans for welfare resources offered to individual families and children where users are expected to be actively involved. In elderly care, this type of co-creation is commonly seen under headings such as ‘everyday rehabilitation’, where the aim is to help the elderly to reside in their own home and manage their own lives as long as possible. In climate policy, personal co-creation is exemplified by sorting waste for recycling at home, which was introduced in Norway in the early 1990s.

Extended co-creation means that a third party is involved in personal co-creation. In the context of child welfare, this could be family members, friends or schoolmates, who often play a part in tailor-made care plans, but where privacy rules are often an obstacle. In elderly care, relatives are commonly expected to provide additional care, which is sometimes seen as ‘consumer work’ (Dujarier, 2016) and criticised as being fundamentally at odds with the Nordic welfare model. In the context of climate policy, this is exemplified by collectives (families, neighbourhoods or workplaces) that encourage individual climate-friendly behaviour, such as ‘cycle to work’ schemes.

Partnership-based co-creation is a dyadic relationship between the public sector and businesses or organizations. In child welfare, there are user organizations for young people which have played important roles in reforming policy since the late 1980s, as well as informing young people and users about their legal rights. There are also several voluntary organizations and businesses that help local authorities to design better services for at-risk families and children. In elderly care, this type of co-creation is seen when voluntary organizations offer help and resources to the elderly, such as by organizing visitor programmes. In climate policy, an example of this type of co-creation can

be found when voluntary organizations engage with the public sector in a collective effort to promote climate-friendly lifestyles and behaviours.

Network-based co-creation is characterised by a polyadic relationship between the public sector and several organizations and businesses, often organized to design and evaluate policy in a given field. This type of co-creation is rarer than the three above but it is possible to find pertinent examples. In child welfare, a number of initiatives by the Ombudsman for Children bring together different kinds of interest organizations and researchers to develop policies. In elderly care, some form of user involvement exists through local and compulsory ‘elderly councils’, and there have also been a number of local experiments with ad hoc committees that propose relevant policy in the field. This type of co-creation can be found in climate policy, for example in various programmes and alliances between companies, businesses and voluntary organizations.

In summary, these real-world examples demonstrate that the four types of co-creation are conceivable in the three policy fields. They do not necessarily belong to routine operations and everyday practices, and each may be the exception rather than the rule. The examples are derived from a Norwegian context, and the four types of co-creation may take different forms in other contexts. Nonetheless, several of the examples will undoubtedly appear relevant and recognizable in other countries.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore how the context of policy conditions co-creation. Co-creation was defined in broad terms, focusing on collaboration to create value. Based on this definition, the article distinguished four different types of co-creation and discussed these in relation to three different public sector functions: the exercise of legal authority, the delivery of services, and regulation.

The illustrative analysis based on three Norwegian policy fields that comprise strong elements of authority, service or regulation, shows that although co-creation is a new concept in public-administration research in itself, its actual practice is both new and old. A number of examples have a long history, while others appear newer and more radical.

Table 4. Examples of possible types of co-creation in three policy fields.

Type of co-creation	Policy fields		
	Child welfare (authority)	Elderly care (service delivery)	Climate policy (regulation)
<i>Personal</i>	Applying ‘individual plans’ for at-risk families and children (allocating tasks through ‘individual plans’)	Elderly doing post-operative exercises for swift recovery (for example changing bandages, safety alarms, welfare technology)	Citizens sorting waste for recycling, and buying climate friendly products (for example recycling, re-use)
<i>Extended</i>	Family members, neighbours, friends and schoolmates look after and support (‘family meetings’, ‘class meetings’)	Relatives or neighbours look after and support elderly persons (for example shopping, cleaning)	Families, neighbours and workplaces endorsing climate friendly behaviour (for example urban living labs, cycling to work schemes)
<i>Partnership</i>	Voluntary organizations partnering with authorities to help at-risk children and families (for example user organizations, Red Cross)	Voluntary organizations and voluntary visitor programmes (visitor programmes, centres for volunteers)	Voluntary organizations partner with the public to promote climate friendly lives and behaviour (voluntary organizations)
<i>Network</i>	Open dialogue meetings, using ad hoc organizations for co-designing policies (for example projects involving user organizations for at-risk children and young people)	Open dialogue meetings, co-design committees (for example compulsory elderly council, ad hoc committees)	Open dialogue meetings, organizations participate in co-ordinating climate actions and policies (for example local projects)

As such, there is no reason to see co-creation as a new and radically different way of organizing the public sector. Co-creation may well be described as the ‘new kid on the block’ (Ansell & Torfing, 2021), but the ‘kid’ is not new—it has just not been noticed until recently! Introducing co-creation as an overall strategy in the public sector is only partly about developing something new. While some actors may have an interest in describing ideas like co-creation as ‘magic concepts’ that bring something new to the table, a more fruitful approach may be to review existing practices and then stimulate and develop relevant and promising activities.

The main aim of this article was to explore what policy context means for co-creation and to what extent different types of interactions can conceivably work in different policy contexts and sectors. The preliminary discussion and illustrative analysis indicate that co-creation can work in the distinct contexts of legal authority, service delivery and regulation, and there are practical examples supporting this view.

However, this does not mean that co-creation by definition will represent a positive contribution to public value in these policy contexts (Dudau et al., 2019). A more detailed analysis is needed to identify the extent to which involved actors actually share the problem/challenge/task at hand (Parker et al., 2023, p. 4), and whether a constructive exchange of resources between parties is taking place (Engen et al., 2020)—the two core elements in this article’s definition of co-creation (see above).

The typology in this article was developed ad hoc, in order to illustrate what co-creation could look like in different policy contexts. The typology only distinguishes between the level of interaction (individual versus collective) and the type of relationship (dyadic versus polyadic). In order to advance this field of research, the content of these types of co-creation, for example the type of activity, needs to be identified in detail. Does the interaction taking place involve the definition of needs or problems? Do the partners develop alternative solutions together? Do the partners engage in a wider design of actions and policy, or do they essentially implement an action or service?

Furthermore, the typology says little about the initiatives and lead partner. In theory, any partner can initiate co-creation and a variety of initiatives can be found in the illustrative analysis above. Systematizing this variety of initiatives in more detail is an important research task for the future.

Finally, even if co-creation in theory is about interactions among equal partners, the actual practices identified above evidently do not satisfy this criterion. This is especially true when authority is involved and co-creation takes place in the shadow of hierarchy, but this does not necessarily mean that citizens and users are powerless. Therefore, an important task is to identify the various forms of power and power bases that may potentially outweigh legal authority. Examples of this include the power rooted in users’ knowledge about themselves or users’ power following from their use of social and traditional media, which can impact the public sector’s reputation and behaviour. Understanding the details of these power relationships would require detailed qualitative studies that are beyond the scope of this article.

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