

Briefing Paper 12

User and community co-production of public services: fad or fact, nuisance or necessity ?

Tony Bovaird, Professor of Public Management and Policy, TSRC, University of Birmingham and Elke Loeffler, Chief Executive, Governance International

[Based on report prepared for the French Presidency of the European Union and presented to the Fifth Quality Conference (5QC) on Public Administration, Paris, October 2008]

Introduction

Co-production is rapidly becoming one of the most talked-about themes in partnership working in public services and public policy in Europe, North America and Australia. While there are various strands to the discussion, there has as yet been no coherent approach at government level or in the academic community to bring together the evidence on the potential – and the limitations – of user and community coproduction of public services and public policies.

Our research in this area is developmental. It sets out to explore the differing theoretical strands which contribute to current thinking on user and community co-production. It shows that some of these strands predict very different roles – and outcomes – from co-production. In particular, theories of co-production predict that it can deliver either individualised benefits from the design and operation of public services or more collective benefits which result from the external effects created by each co-producing user for other actual and potential users. However, the empirical evidence from our recent survey of citizens in five EU countries suggests that the practice of co-production is dominated by individualised co-production.

Our research is currently exploring the implications of this relatively weak performance of ‘collectivised’ co-production and how its potential benefits might be captured by public service organisations – e.g. through working with ‘intermediary’ third sector

organisations and through ICT and Web 2.0 solutions. Our early work suggests that both of these approaches can produce outcomes for many more people than those who directly take part in the co-production process.

Methodology

The empirical investigation reported here compares the current state of user and community co-production in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, and the UK, using focus groups to explore the different meanings given to co-production by different stakeholder groups inside and outside the public sector, and a survey of around 1000 citizens in each country to explore in practice some types of co-production behaviour.

Findings from the EU survey

The study focused on three different sectors which reflect distinctly different types of government functions:

- *Community safety*, as an example of coercive action on the part of the state
- *Local environment*, as an example of the regulatory function of the state
- *Public health*, as an example of the welfare improvement function of the state.

How important is the role of citizens in public service delivery?

When we asked this question of the focus groups in the five countries, the overall reaction of professional service providers was “we don’t know ... but probably very little”. A

few participants even complained about the relevance of this question. In particular, in the three Danish focus groups sessions, representatives of public agencies initially had great difficulty in understanding the topic to be discussed. However, when we asked citizens about their level of involvement in prevention and active intervention in activities related to community safety, local environment and health. In addition to this, we found a significant level of co-production by citizens in the five countries studied in all three sectors (Figure 1)

Where co-production works well and less well

If we look at what kind of contributions citizens make on a regular basis, an interesting pattern emerges (Figure 2). In general, citizens show particularly high levels of engagement when they can undertake activities which do not need much effort from them and do not require getting in touch with others. When it comes to makes changes to the personal lifestyle, there is a sharp drop – e.g. in the number of citizens who walk, cycle or use public transport, change to a more healthy diet or try to exercise. About half of citizens reported doing these often. Interestingly, all the activities at the bottom of the ranking list imply getting involved with others – be it a neighbour, a doctor, the police or strangers. It is not surprising that only a very few citizens

“It is difficult to find volunteers who wish to get engaged in community safety issues, even though many Danes are members of other types of association, such as sports clubs”.

A participant at a Danish focus group on safety issues

“When people recycle they think they have done their bit”.

A participant of a UK focus group on environment issues

wish to get engaged in some organised form on a regular basis. These are the so-called ‘usual suspects’, although some countries seem to have more than others.

In summary, the survey showed that ...

- there is already a lot more citizen involvement in public service delivery than the professionals taking part in our focus groups wanted to acknowledge.

Figure 1: Total level of co-production in community safety, local environment and health issues

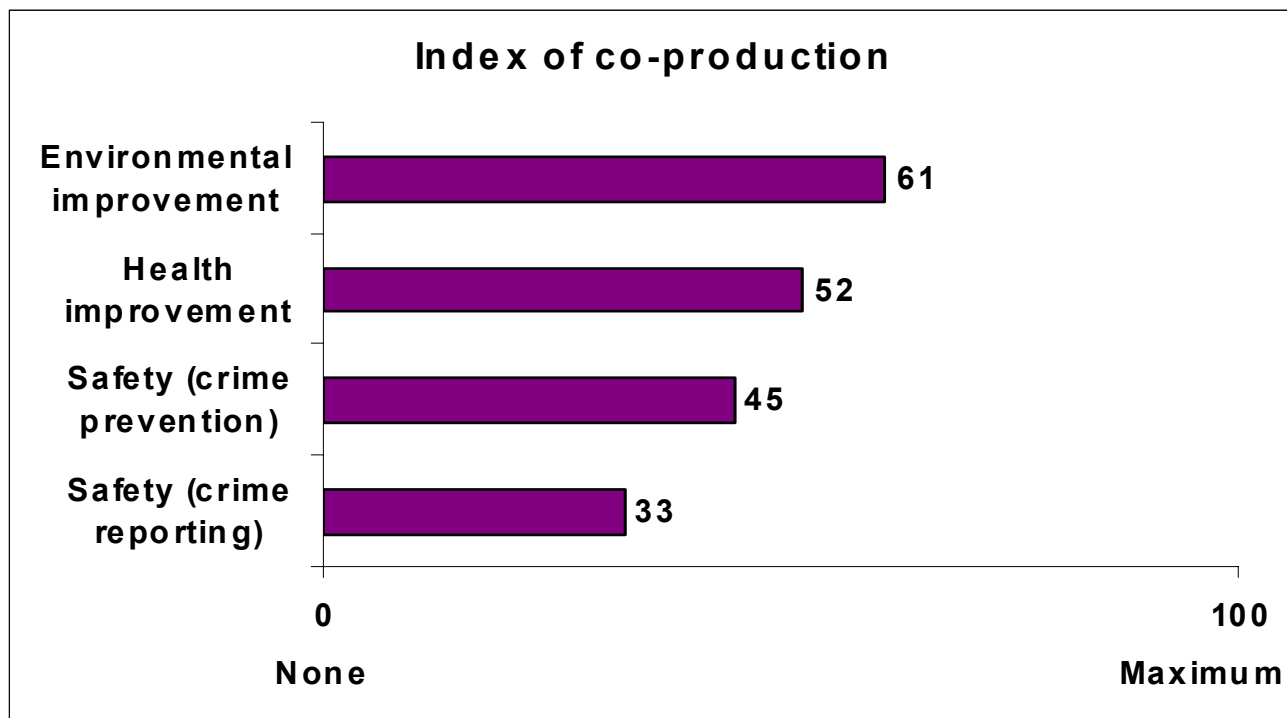


Figure 2: A ranking list of co-production: What citizens like doing best and least



- there is likely to be more citizen involvement in service delivery in the future due to the demographic changes taking place in most European countries. The involvement of citizens in delivering public services clearly increases with age, so that the 'ageing society' is good news in terms of increasing levels of 'co-production'.
- Citizens are most willing to make a contribution towards improving public services when it involves them in relatively little effort and when they do not have to work closely with other citizens or staff or professionals in the government.

What does this imply for public service delivery? So far, the quality improvement approaches in most public services have

tended to focus on how *professionals* can improve service quality and outcomes. Indeed, the most commonly used quality assurance systems tend to view service users and society from the perspective of what results are achieved *for them*, rather than viewing them as a resource. Once they are seen as a resource, working with them has a very different set of implications for the management and governance of public services. However, this perspective is still far from universal - as our focus group participants suggested, not all professionals working in public services are prepared yet to give service users a more active role. Third sector organisations are potentially more likely to share this perspective – but evidence is scarce.

Relative public value of 'individual' and 'collective' co-production

While the results above indicate that citizens are less inclined to spend their co-production efforts in group activities, this does not mean that such collectivised co-production is unimportant. As examples of how important it is to the creation of public value, in the UK there are about 350,000 school governors, who not only serve on committees to help run schools but also a legal liability for the affairs of the school; about 5.6m people help to run sports clubs; 750,000 people volunteer to assist teachers in schools; 170,000 volunteer in the NHS, befriending and counselling patients, driving people to hospital, fund raising, running shops and cafes, etc.

Admittedly, these numbers are relatively small, compared to the 8m people signed up as potential organ donors, and the 10m people within Neighborhood Watch schemes, all of which are more 'lonely' activities, which do not need to be programmed to the same extent within a person's daily timetable.

Nevertheless, the value of the contribution made by co-producers cannot be estimated simply by a head count. The potential 'external' benefits suggest that collective co-production may be sufficiently attractive to make its increase an appropriate target for public intervention, if the costs were kept commensurate..

Conclusions

This research distinguishes between individual co-production, where the benefits go essentially to the co-producer, and collective co-production, where the benefits go to a wider group. It suggests that the behaviour of

citizens is more likely to give rise to individual co-production, unless encouragement is given to mechanisms which lead to more collective co-production. The research has suggested the possibility that third sector intermediaries and that internet-enabled technologies are likely to fulfil the requirements which make collective co-production easier and more likely.

The implications of this analysis are that a more systematic and co-ordinated approach to collective co-production is needed if it is to rise above the levels which will result from purely 'self-organising' activities. Given the lack of such systematic arrangements in the public sector throughout Europe, the current levels of collective co-production should be regarded as a very poor indicator of their potential – this deserves to be the subject of further research.

Research Questions

- What is the current contribution of third sector organisations to the delivery of public services?
- What distinguishes third sector service delivery from delivery by organisations in other sectors – and are these differences important to service users and citizens?
- What impact has third sector service delivery made to citizens outcomes and to local quality of life?
- What are the strengths of third sector service delivery? And the limitations?
- To what extent does service delivery pose a threat to the independence of third sector organisations due to the increase of service contract funding?

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper.

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) and the Barrow Cadbury UK Trust is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the joint ESRC, OTS Barrow Cadbury Third Sector Research Centre