Institutional work of territorial managers: towards co-creation processes to tackle Grand Challenges in a French case

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Context

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations for 2030 constitute major challenges for our contemporary societies. They correspond to public policy problems described in the literature as "wicked problems", that is, as particularly complex, pernicious, and even intractable problems (Torfing & Ansell, 2017). In this perspective, they have the particularity of surprising public managers and posing major challenges for their resolution. And, at first glance, they often seem incomprehensible and resistant to any form of treatment (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Typically, these problems often crystallize at the territorial level: on the one hand, the level closest to the citizen where most of the direct interactions between policy makers and their electorate take place (Kornberger & al., 2017). On the other hand, at this level, the consequences of wicked problems are visible daily (Weller & Pallez, 2017). Indeed, it is at the local level that territorial actors accompany migrants, support, and manage the consequences of climatic disasters, and deal with users who are ill, disabled or in precarious social situations. It is also at the territorial level that the challenges of the transition and the adoption of new behaviors to respond to the climate emergency crystallize.

Territorial managers are therefore at the front lines but are struggling to find effective solutions among a repertoire of existing actions. Faced with these particularly complex, pernicious, and even inextricable problems, territorial managers are under pressure: on the one hand, citizens expect a solution, on the other, politicians demand technical answers. Territorial managers are thus bogged down in methods of developing public policies that are running out of steam. There is no *ex-ante* solution because, in fact, wicked problems require public innovation. Indeed, the intensity of the problem, its multidimensional nature, sometimes coupled with urgency, mean that no single actor or organization can claim to have an effective solution (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Faced with a wicked problem, the development of a solution requires co-creation (Torfing & al., 2021) and necessitates the participation of several actors, each with a particular expertise, who together can produce the knowledge base necessary to make the problem at least intelligible (Head & Alford, 2015). In this respect, the sub-goals of SDGs 16 and 17 set by the UN correspond to these issues of local response, knowledge co-construction, and openness of decision-making processes. Really, while these goals are respectively more broadly concerned with the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, and the building of partnerships, they can be broken down into sub-goals that more specifically target the establishment of effective and transparent institutions

(SDG 16.6), the participation of stakeholders in decision-making (SDG 16.7), and partnerships with civil society (SDG 17.17).

Research object

While the nature of contemporary public policy problems requires co-creation practices at the territorial level, public managers are unsure about the content of these new practices and their implementation: *how to do it? How to mobilize stakeholders? How to structure their participation? How can we open the "factory" of local policies to outside ideas, knowledge, and resources? For what effects?* These public management issues are at the heart of research on the implementation and adoption of political reforms aimed at modernizing public action (Ferlie & al., 2003). Indeed, several studies show that slippages exist between political intentions and what is actually implemented (Moore, 1987; Matland, 1995; Hood and Peters, 2004; Cloutier & al., 2016; Guenoun & Matyjasik, 2019). In this respect, academic work on public entrepreneurs who implement change emphasizes the difficulties of implementation and the risks associated with "gambling" the public interest for personal and political gain (Cairney & Jones, 2016; Frisch-Aviram & al., 2020; Kingdon, 1985; Ongaro & Ferlie, 2020).

Thus, the dominant literature on co-creation identifies many positive consequences such as the improvement of citizens' trust in their administrations, the reinforcement of a more democratic governance, the improvement of the decisions' legitimacy and efficiency gains in their capacities to solve social problems, the mobilization of actors and the modernization of public services (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Huijbregts & al, 2021; Potz & Serval, 2022; Torfing & al., 2019, 2021). However, there is a major risk of counterproductive effects if strong distortions arise between the co-creation thought "on paper" and the actual practices on the ground. This is the crux of interest of this research which aims to understand **how territorial managers seize co-creation in field strategies and how they implement such processes within the framework of a territorial strategy oriented towards achieving the SDGs**.
Our objective is both **to provide some empirical evidence about this kind of strategy (which deals with wicked problems) and to place them in a broader theoretical perspective. This will increase their understanding and appropriation by territorial actors, politicians and managers**.

Theoretical perspective

To do so, we mobilize a neo-institutional perspective that is still an emerging field of research in public management (De Vries & al., 2016; Baldwin & al., 2019). De Vries & al. (2016) and Baldwin & al. (2019) emphasize the relevance of this theoretical approach when it comes to studying the implementation of new practices and the impact of the environment. Indeed, institutions understood as the rules of the game (North, 1990) largely condition the implementation of policy changes: " *In today's 'networked, multi- sector, no-one-wholly-in-charge' public sector (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014), there is growing recognition among scholars that institutions and institutional design are critical factors that shape policy outcomes*" (Baldwin & al., 2019: 890). To study how territorial managers shape their local institutional environment, we mobilize the concept of institutional work understood as the intentional action of actors to shape institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Tissone & al., 2019). The institutional work of territorial managers is "*vital to determining the mix and extent of changes enacted on the ground, and indeed whether and how policy slippage will occur*" (Cloutier & al., 2016). Then, our research object could be formalized with the following research question: **how do territorial managers organize the fit between their co-creation practices and their local institutional environment, and with what slippages vis-à-vis what co-creation should be?**

Methodological approach

Most prior studies in the field of institutional work take a qualitative and longitudinal case-study approach (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019), and analyze the process in retrospect (T. B. Lawrence & al., 2013). Therefore, a lack of in situ research on institutional work can be observed (Zarpelon & al., 2019). However, being present in the field as institutional work unfolds allows to directly identify the actors' day-to-day activities and changes therein (T. B. Lawrence & al., 2013, Tissone & al., 2019).

We therefore propose a methodological design around a single-case study, reconciling both retrospective and in situ analysis, triangulating data from different sources (Gioia & al., 2013; Reay & Jones, 2016) and different points in time. We collected data through non-participant observation (to date we account for approximately 15 hours) during five co-creation events, and information from informal conversations with the participating actors over the course of the co-creation process to capture their immediate reactions, impressions, and perceptions. Archival data provides material for retrospective analysis. Finally, semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of participants and members of the municipality make up a third data source. So far, interviews with 16 respondents (inhabitants, public service agents, elected local politicians, members of the agency hired to help plan the co-creation process) have been conducted and transcribed. Additional interviews and events to observe will take place shortly to complete data collection.

The collected data will be analyzed thematically (Miles & Huberman, 2003). A coding table based both on existing literature and emerging themes will guide analysis, allowing for "a prio-steriori" coding (Allard-Poesi, 2003). Thereby, data will be configured around a semi-structured coding table through open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

"Venelles in Transition", the co-creation of a territorial strategy to cope with today's Grand Challenges

In a rapidly evolving society with increasingly complex and interconnected problems, the territory is constantly confronted with new challenges. Today's Grand Challenges (Ferraro & al., 2015) – they can be subsumed under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – cannot be solved by one organization alone. Not only are national governments required to act, but these issues also imply the need for the development of local response strategies: to address these issues, territories are required to develop new and innovative ways that are tailored to local conditions.

To specifically address the SDGs, territories can develop their own Agenda 2030. However, in France, only a handful of municipalities have chosen to do so. One of them is Venelles, a small, 9.000 inhabitant municipality in the South of France, that has initiated the co-creation of a local Agenda 2030 under the name of "Venelles in Transition". As the smallest municipality doing so in France, the project has received the label of "France in Transition", a program led by the Ministry of Ecological Transition. This municipality therefore presents a unique case to study regarding the roles of the territory in a co-creation process aiming to address Grand Challenges and locally implement the SDGs.

"Venelles in Transition" consists of a series of co-creation workshops, preceded by a largely diffused questionnaire on the ecological transitions the local population would like to see. In addition to the inhabitants of Venelles, a number of local stakeholders have been invited by the municipality to participate. The co-creation workshops, range from a phase of assessment of the status quo, to the brainstorming of potential ideas, and the concretization of these ideas into precise propositions that can be included in Venelles' Agenda 2030. Having presented the results of these workshops to the public in

early 2022, the municipality, together with a set of citizen representatives, will now proceed to prepare the final 2030 Agenda until the summer.

Expected findings

The Venelles territorial strategy is based on four major co-creation phases: planning, mobilization, problems identification, co-construction of solutions, feedback, and finalization of the local Agenda 2030. The results trace the institutional work process by identifying strategies, practices, and effects of what co-creation actually is for each phase of the process.

Findings are structured around four main themes. We first propose to focus on the institutional work of territorial managers in practice, and the forms of institutional work they deploy depending on the stage of the co-creation process. We then explore the effects of their institutional work on the forms of co-creation they implement. Moreover, the effects of their institutional work on the transformation of the municipality will be discussed: which new practices, procedures, and tools are used to implement co-creation, and in which ways? We finally explore the slippages between co-creation as it is (ideally) meant to be, and the way it unfolds in this specific case. How does the process differ from what had been planned?

These findings may enable to draw some trajectories of institutional work in respect with their effects on what co-creation is vis-à-vis what co-creation should be.

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