

Achieving climate neutrality through co-creation: understanding how middle managers and citizens interact.

The case of Klagenfurt.

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Faced with the complexity of the challenges of the 21st century, public organizations are invited to adjust their organizational structure by attenuating vertical approaches in favor of more inclusive and participatory models. As such, co-creation of public policy assumes that together, different types of stakeholders can better identify common problems and develop solutions by sharing their experiences and knowledge (Torfing, Sørensen and Røiseland, 2019). Currently at the experimental level in public organizations, it allows for the aggregation of a diversity of perspectives to develop innovative responses that suit the needs and expectations of citizens, and thereby has the potential to effectively address complex societal problems (Bentzen, Sørensen and Torfing, 2020; Ansell and Torfing, 2021) and create public value (Torfing et al., 2021; Voorberg et al., 2015).

Among the post-New Public Management (NPM) models of public administration, public value (Moore, 1995) emphasizes the role of government in producing value for users and society by building trust and legitimacy in public decision-making through democratic dialogue (Bryson et al., 2014). Its strong managerial dimension (Rhodes & Wanna, 2007) positions managers in the orchestration of public value creation. This renewal of public management implies a strategic change for public organizations. Change management at the level of decision-making functions has been widely studied (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hamel & Välikangas, 2003; Lahouel et al., 2015). In our research, however, we are interested in middle managers, both objects and actors of managerial transformations (Alis & Fergelot, 2012) with a limited latitude for action (Karlsson, 2019). They act as 'linking pins' (Raes et al., 2011) between top managers and citizens, which implies that they have a key role in the appropriation of change.

At present, it is discussed whether and how it is possible to transfer the public value approach to European public administrations from the United States where it originated (Rhodes & Wanna, 2007). This invites us to ask to what extent traditional procedures are alleviated in co-creation processes. We wonder about the role middle managers play in this context. Hence, we aim to explore how co-creation transforms the relationships between citizens and middle managers.

To do so, we study the city of Klagenfurt, Austria, which, as part of the European Commission's "100 Climate-neutral Cities" program, aims to co-create local public policy for a more sustainable future. To explore the relationship between the local public organization's middle managers and citizens in a co-creation process, we propose to mobilize a qualitative approach based on non-participant observation of co-creation workshops, and semi-structured interviews (Romelaer, 2005) with these two types of actors.

This research is still in progress at this point. Preliminary findings show that while managers seem to cling to their established role perceptions, and hierarchy effects remain strong, intentional efforts are made for citizens to express themselves. Citizens appear to be eager to seize this opportunity, and open to engage in the co-creation process. However, separation between types of actors with different competences, degrees of expertise, and backgrounds persists throughout the co-creation process. We propose to construct a typology of the relationships between middle managers and citizens participating in a co-creation process. Several types can be identified, ranking from a reciprocal relationship to mutual incomprehension.

Key words: co-creation; local public action; middle manager; public value

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