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Co-creation in local public organizations: a duality of public value outcomes

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In a fractured society, traditional policymaking does no longer seem to be effective in developing responses to complex problems. The public sector is required to change: participatory decision-making approaches such as policy co-creation with citizens are on the rise (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Torfing et al., 2021). A plethora of benefits in terms of public value outcomes are announced (Sørensen et al., 2021), encouraging public organizations, particularly at local level, to co-create. Yet, empirical evidence for these proclaimed benefits remains rare (Bentzen, 2022). Moreover, the “dark side of co-creation” has been somewhat neglected in existing work: yet, co-creation comes with numerous risks (Steen et al., 2018). As these are novel practices, it seems important to support practitioners through theoretical insights that take these risks into account in order to anticipate and limit potential failures and slippages (Brandesen et al., 2016). Yet, current academic work on co-creation shows a positive bias by focusing on the public values created, which tends to truncate part of reality when negative impacts are neglected. To provide a complete picture of the public value outcomes of co-creation, the co-destruction of public value as an unintended consequence must be studied in more detail (Ansell et al., 2022). Indeed, while some research has highlighted the negative effects of co-production gone wrong – i.e., during joint service *delivery* (Cui & Osborne, 2022; Engen et al., 2021; Järvi et al., 2018; Van de Walle, 2016; Williams et al., 2016; Bozeman, 2002; Williams et al., 2016), how public values can be diminished during the policy *design* phase – i.e., during co-creation – remains understudied. It is about challenging the assumption that “*the public sector can do more and better (...) if it joins forces with the stakeholders*” (Sørensen et al., 2021), by questioning the possibility that co-creation may lead to counterproductive effects by ultimately doing less - and less well. Thus, we ask how co-creation affects public value outcomes in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders taking into account public values that are both co-created and co-destroyed.

We do so through a qualitative single-case study of a French municipality’s co-creation process aiming to develop a local 2030 Agenda, thereby generating insights in a project that intends to co-create public value. We study both internal (public managers and elected politicians) and external (citizens and associations) stakeholders’ perceptions of the process. A duality of public value outcomes can be observed: while some public values are strengthened through co-creation, already weak ones may be further diminished. Moreover, not all participants are affected in the same way, and some experience more positive outcomes in terms of public value creation than others. Through a study of the effects on all involved parties, we contribute to literature by providing a complete picture of a local policy co-creation process, its risks and public value outcomes. We finally raise the important issue of non-participants and point out the risk of the consolidation of counter-democracy, should co-creation go wrong.

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