



The Co-Creation Compass

Interactive policy brief

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Creating Public Value Together: from Research to Action

By Jill Dixon, Erica Melloni, Leire Orue Echevarria, David Osimo, Lise Hellebø Rykkja, Keith Shaw, Line Marie Sørdsdal, Anna Triantafillou and Cristina Vasilescu



Modern public administration face a wider range of challenges than in the past, from designing effective social services that help vulnerable citizens to regulating data sharing between banks and fintech startups to ensure competition and growth to mainstreaming gender policies effectively across the departments of a large public administration.¹

These very different goals have one thing in common. To be solved, they require collaboration with other entities – citizens, companies and other public administrations or departments. The buy-in of these entities is the factor determining success or failure in achieving the goals. To help resolve this problem, social scientists, researchers and students of public administration have devised several novel tools, some of which draw heavily on the most advanced management thinking of the last decade. First and foremost is co-creation – an awkward sounding word for a relatively simple idea: the notion that better services can be designed and delivered by listening to users, by creating feedback loops where their success (or failure) can be studied, by frequently innovating and iterating incremental improvements through small-scale experimentation so they can deliver large-scale learnings and by ultimately involving users themselves in designing the way these services can be made most effective and best be delivered.²

Co-creation tools and methods provide a structured manner for involving users, thereby maximising the probability of satisfaction, buy-in and adoption. As such, co-creation is not a digital tool; it is a governance tool. There is little doubt that working with citizens in re-designing the online service for school registration will boost the usefulness and effectiveness of the service. And failing to do so will result in yet another digital service struggling to gain adoption.

The opinions expressed in this interactive policy brief are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Lisbon Council, the European Commission, the consortium members of the five research projects or any of their associates.

The interactive policy brief works to make knowledge more accessible through online circulation, interactive features such as hotlinks to articles cited in the footnotes, and a web-friendly format.

¹ [Jill Dixon](#) is senior researcher at Northumbria University. [Lise Hellebø Rykkja](#) is professor of public administration at university of Bergen and coordinator of the Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments (TROPICO) project. [Erica Melloni](#) is senior researcher at Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale and coordinator of the Energies for Local Administrations to Renovate Governance in Europe (ENLARGE) project. [Leire Orue Echevarria](#) is senior researcher at TECNALIA and coordinator of the Empowering Citizens to Transform European Public Administrations (CITADEL) project. [David Osimo](#) is director of research at the Lisbon Council. [Keith Shaw](#) is professor at Northumbria University and coordinator of the Co-Production and Co-Governance: Strategic Management, Public Value and Co-Creation in the Renewal of Public Agencies across Europe (COGOV) project. [Line Marie Sørdsdal](#) is senior researcher at the University of Bergen. [Anna Triantafillou](#) is head of the innovation lab at Athens Technology Center (ATC) and coordinator of the Understanding Value Co-Creation in Public Services for Transforming Public Administrations (Co-VAL) project. [Cristina Vasilescu](#) is senior researcher at Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale. The authors would like to thank Christophe Barton, Johanna Barton, Mike Bracken, Roberta Cocco, Commissioner Johannes Hahn, Paul Hofheinz, Tom Loosemore, Chrysoula Mitta, Francesco Mureddu, Charlotte van Ooijen, Diego Piacentini, Nathan da Silva Carvalho, Siim Sikkut, Sandy Speicher and Maximilian Strotmann.

'Co-creation is still in its infancy. If it does not mature, it risks moving from obscurity to oblivion without a moment of clear impact.'

² See Francis Guillard and Tina Hallett, "Co-Creation in Government," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* Spring 2015; Jacob Torfig, Eva Sørensen and Asbjørn Røiseland, "Transforming the Public Sector Into an Arena for Co-Creation: Barriers, Drivers, Benefits and Ways Forward," *Administration & Society* 1–31, 2016; Stephen P. Osborne, Zoe Radnor and Kirsty Strokosch, "Co-Production and the Co-Creation of Value in Public Services: A Suitable Case for Treatment?" *Public Management Review* 18.5, 2016. Graham Smith, *Democratic innovations. Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³ Anthony Arundel, Francesco Mureddu and David Osimo, "The State of 'Co-Creation': How Countries, Cities and Regions Are Using New Thinking to Deliver Better Services," *Lisbon Council Policy Brief*, 13.1 (2020).

⁴ Ibid.

Co-creation fundamentally affects the success or failure of any public intervention. It is a way to understand the needs and interests of the different players involved in a complex problem, gather their knowledge and insights and act accordingly for the successful implementation of the policy or service in question.

This is why co-creation is omnipresent in the public policy discourse these days. On the European Commission's website europa.eu alone, a search returns 19,000 matches in a search for "co-creation" across a variety of policy domains, ranging from circular economy to employment services, from music to manufacturing. And the popularity of co-creation is not limited to the so-called "Brussels bubble," where ideas of interest to European civil servants lose their appeal when they cross the Ring Road surrounding the European Commission's headquarter city. In a recent survey, 85% of public administrations in Europe said they are using some form of "co-creation" to innovate public-services delivery.³

On the other hand, the same survey shows that co-creation has not fully achieved its transformative impact. It is too often one-off and fragmented. It is pursued as an end in itself rather than a means for better serving users. Its definition is stretched to encompass almost any activity, including a simple brainstorming meeting with stakeholders as long as white boards and "post-it" notes are used. Its results are elusive because of its organic and serendipitous nature and cannot be evaluated through standard business practices such as measuring return on investment in particular when dealing with societal challenges. For sure, there are standardised methodologies and techniques, job profiles and technological tools for assessing progress, but they are not widely adopted.⁴

In other words, co-creation is still in its infancy. And if it does not mature, it risks moving from obscurity to oblivion without a moment of clear impact. Maturity means that governments make a radical strategic choice to focus almost obsessively on the users – not only as final recipients of public services but also as players involved in the delivery, from business to government to civil society.

This interactive policy brief aims to bridge the gap between the urgent need for co-creation and the lack of adoption of tools operating at scale – in other words, to help bring co-creation to maturity. To do that, it summarises key findings from

About the Co-Creation Compass

This interactive policy brief draws on research conducted by 50 research organisations in the context of the following projects: [Understanding Value Co-Creation in Public Services for Transforming Public Administrations \(Co-VAL\)](#), [Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments \(TROPICO\)](#), [Co-Production and Co-Governance: Strategic Management, Public Value and Co-Creation in the Renewal of Public Agencies across Europe \(COGOV\)](#), [Energies for Local Administrations to Renovate Governance in Europe \(ENLARGE\)](#), [Empowering Citizens to Transform European Public Administrations \(CITADEL\)](#). The projects were co-funded by the European Union Horizon 2020 programme.

'85% of public administrations in Europe said they are using some form of "co-creation" to innovate public-services delivery.'

five large-scale projects on the topic funded by Horizon 2020, involving 50 leading research institutions. The policy brief distils the insights gained through three years of research, experimentation and the in-depth analysis of 150 real-life co-creation cases. In that sense, this policy brief is an ending because it summarises the key results of a wide array of studies in a self-contained narrative. But it is also a starting point for any interested reader or civil servant to access the wide range of knowledge and varied findings of the research projects behind it. Seen that way, this is your policy brief too – a chance to co-create policy together, a genuine effort to spread as much wisdom as possible in the hope that you too will soon be able to add your knowledge to it.

The policy brief begins with a concrete illustration intended to create a shared understanding of co-creation. It then summarises a set of organisational success factors and mistakes to avoid for entities already interested in implementing it. Finally, it provides a set of strategic policy inputs to encourage wide adoption and achieve impact at European scale: policy recommendations for public service reform in the context of the Digital Europe programme and the national resilience and recovery plans that will form part of the Next Generation EU recovery programme, suggestions for a future research agenda for Horizon Europe and inspiration for the European Green Deal, which provides the ideal opportunity for implementing co-creation at scale." The appendix, which begins on [page 20](#), provides a handy access to the key outputs of the five research projects.

I. What is 'Co-Creation?'

Defining co-creation is hard, and it risks turning into a theoretical debate rather quickly. Yet, for maturity to be achieved, it is necessary to reach a shared understanding of what scholars and civil servants are referring to when they use this newly-coined word. We propose a set of guidelines and definitions as a starting point.

Co-creation entails different intensity levels of user engagement – and more is not necessarily better.

Co-creation encompasses a wide range of tools with different degrees of user involvement – and lower levels of user involvement are equally if not more important. There are three fundamental approaches:⁵

- 1) **Co-construction.** This is invisible to users. It requires governments to "do their homework," to study users' needs and behaviour through user observation, desk research and data analytics. Because it does not require the explicit collaboration of users, it is the most widely applicable method and the least expensive – although it still requires professional skills. For instance, this can entail web analytics from an online service, or monitoring participation patterns in a government scheme, or observing how citizens react to the signs while entering a public administration office.

⁵ See Stephen P. Osborne, Zoe Radnor and Kirsty Strokosch, "Co-Production and the Co-Creation of Value in Public Services: A Suitable Case for Treatment?," *Public Management Review*, 18.5 (2016): 639-653. This research puts forward another case of intrinsic co-creation called "co-experience" which is the role of a citizen's life experience in shaping a public service encounter. The concepts are also summarised in [Francesco Mureddu and David Osimo, "Co-Creation of Public Services: Why and How," Interactive Policy Brief, 2019.](#)



'Co-creation is not a digital tool; it is a governance tool.'

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For further information on living labs, see [Lars Fuglsang and Anne Vorre Hansen \(eds.\), "Report on Strategic Case Studies," Co-VAL D5.2, 2019](#)

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See for instance on the experience of co-creation on eIdentity [David Osimo, "Co-Creating a Digital Identity Ecosystem In Europe," Co-VAL blog](#)

- 2) **Co-design.** This requires the active involvement of the external parties in the phase of service (re)design, not by directly asking them what is needed but through a set of well-defined methods. The most effective way is conducting semi-structured conversations and detecting users' reactions to "prototypes." Relevant methods include participatory design, prototyping and living labs.⁶
- 3) **Co-production.** This also actively involves external parties, but this time in the service delivery phase. It includes direct action from citizens and companies, by acting on incentives and leveraging the interest of different parties. It implies the highest level of engagement and is, therefore, the most resource-intensive approach to co-creation. Examples range from any form of volunteering such as apps developed by citizens based on open data and citizen reporters, to co-investment by local and national entities on a specific project, to private service providers complying with a new European voluntary standard in the solution they provide.⁷

Chart 1. The Three Intensity Levels of Co-Creation

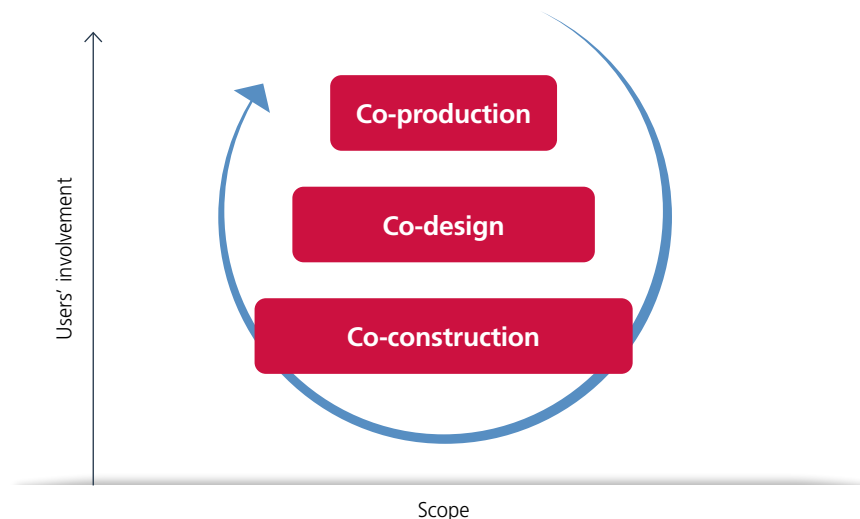


Chart 1 shows that the three approaches are incremental. Co-design requires a more active role of third parties than co-construction and co-production is more demanding than co-design. Co-construction has a broader application scope because of the limited effort for users. It can and should be applied to every public intervention. Each step is a prerequisite of the other. To be effective, co-production builds on co-design, and co-design builds on co-construction. In other words, you can't ask someone to collaborate in the delivery of an action if they were not involved in the design, and you can't co-design if you don't "do your homework" first by analysing user needs. It is cyclical: even after co-production, the behaviour of third parties should be closely studied through iterative co-construction and co-design to ensure effective deployment.

'Co-creation encompasses a wide range of tools with different degrees of user involvement.'

Co-creation is relevant for both policymaking and public service delivery.

Too often, the debate on co-creation is artificially segmented into two different communities of practice and research: e-participation and service design. One deals with extending the democratic process to include a wider set of public decision making, the other with making services more effective through innovation. The reality is that co-creation covers both, and the challenges, risks, costs and benefits of both are very similar. The recommendations in the present policy brief apply to both areas.⁸

Co-creation is not just something that takes place with citizens.

As the examples cited so far should make clear, co-creation is important not only with citizens but with any third party which needs to be involved in delivering a policy goal, private or public, individual or organisation. When it comes to involving other organisations, co-creation is not only about appealing to individual needs; more generally, it is about finding the incentives for organisations to take part. These incentives are often tacit and can be detected better through observation than by direct questioning. For this reason, close monitoring of the participation rate of third parties after the launch of the service is crucial (a case of iterative co-construction). Table 1 below illustrates common use case of co-creation methods between different players.

Table 1. Different Types of Co-Creation

Type	Example
Citizens to Citizens (C2C)	Citizens self-organise via chat to care for local gardens
Government to Citizens (G2C)	Governments re-design online services to citizens by analysing low completion rates through data analytics
Government to Government (G2G)	The information- and communications-technology (ICT) department succeeds in obtaining that all departments to align their ICT systems with the interoperability standards, by studying how they currently use the system and reducing pain points. Central government ensures adoption by the local government of their national payment platforms by ensuring they have direct benefits such as cost reduction
Government to Business (G2B)	Central government convinces banks and other service providers to adopt eID standards in their authentication services by involving them from the early stage, addressing their concerns about predictable costs
Business to Business (B2B)	Businesses agree and widely adopt self-regulation standards for advertising through iterative meetings and online collaboration

⁸ On collaborative policymaking, see ENLARGE, "Collaboration with Civil Society in Policymaking: an Overview of Approaches and Tools," ENLARGE D1.1.



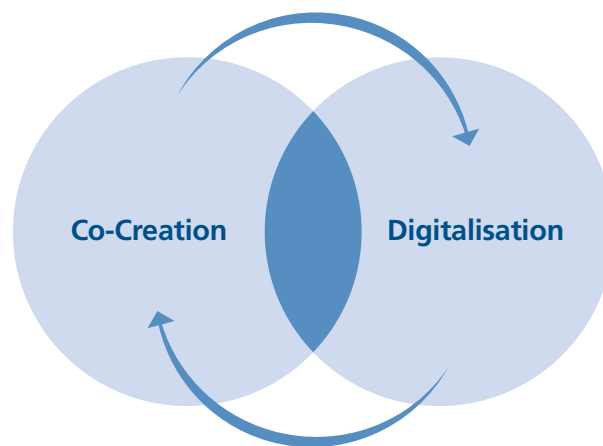
'The debate on co-creation is artificially segmented into two different communities of practice and research: e-participation and service design. The reality is that it covers both.'

Co-creation and digitalisation work better together

Co-creation is often associated with digitalisation – but they do not necessarily coincide. Co-creation is effective and important in analogue services as well through face-to-face sessions and ethnographic studies. And not all digital services benefit from co-creation: try asking a network administrator to set up a server by collaborating with its users.

But the reality is that there is strong overlap and mutual reinforcement. Most digital services need some degree of co-creation: they involve different service providers and users, who all need to collaborate effectively in the design and delivery. And co-creation is greatly helped by digital tools: by providing data on users' behaviour and enabling the remote collaboration of different people.

Chart 2. Relation between Co-Creation and Digitalisation



II. Success Factors for Implementation

By involving and advancing the participation of public and private actors, governments can improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of policy design and service delivery. But how can they do that without reinventing the wheel?

Section II of this policy brief is aimed at supporting individual public entities intending to adopt co-creation. Based on the hundreds of cases gathered by the projects, the success factors are divided in four organisational aspects: organisational design, participatory process, management and accountability. See Chart 3 on [page 7](#) for a schematic summary.

‘Co-creation is important not only with citizens but with any third party which needs to be involved in delivering a policy goal.’

Chart 3. Success Factors



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See also Chesney Callens, Koen Verhoest and Dries Van Doninck, "Enhancing Innovation through Public-Private Collaboration," *TROPICO Policy Brief*, 2020.

Organisational design

The composition of the collaboration and the partners' variety of knowledge, experience and resources is essential. Thoughtful consideration of whether the collaboration includes the right actors with the necessary expertise and resources to achieve the goals of the collaboration is key for positive interaction, learning and trust. Recognising that different actors in collaboration have different interests, incentives, expectations, operate in different regulatory contexts and may have different organisational cultures is important. The collaborative capacity of the core unit (i.e., the government) in many co-creation initiatives is essential for securing both strategic and operational management. Explicit ownership and responsibility for the development and running of the collaboration is critical, and the core unit or organisation in charge should have the necessary formal authority, legitimacy and resources for administering the initiative.⁹

And size matters. Collaborations with participants with varied interests and knowledge can lead to innovative ideas and experimentation, but this complexity also needs to be managed in order to create shared and agreed-upon solutions. A developed and well-established governance structure helps to create predictability and stability and should be adapted to the size and type of collaboration. Governance by a lead organisation is often beneficial, especially in small government-coordinated and contractual partnerships. Large collaborations coordinated by societal actors might benefit more from a distributed or horizontal kind of governance with a focus on joint decision-making and equal distribution of responsibilities.

The governance structure encourage goal alignment, stimulate interaction, give adequate process rules and monitor results, but should also allow for creative processes and improvisation. Specifying demands, mutual expectations, costs and risks in a written, formal agreement or contract will help align diverse goals and objectives. There is, however, a risk that creativity and flexibility are stifled and



'Co-creation is effective and important in analogue services as well.'

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[Chesney Callens, Koen Verhoest, Dries Van Doninck and Emmanuel Dockx, "Comparative Case Studies on External Collaboration in eHealth Partnerships." TROPICO D7.1, 2020](#)

unexpected opportunities lost if the agreement or contract is overly rigid. Sufficient design freedom should therefore be preserved by limiting restrictions on creative solutions.¹⁰

Participatory process

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See also [Wiljan Hendriks, Marlot Kuiper and Nicolette Van Gestelon, "Scientific Report on the Conditions for Involvement of Professionals in the Strategic Renewal of Local Governments and Public Agencies, Possible Impediments and Counteracting Mechanisms," COGOV D6.1, 2020.](#)

In collaborations and co-creation processes that involve many different actors, facilitating frequent connections and interactions between the participants is important to ensure information exchange, sharing of ideas and to enhance learning. One frequent way to achieve this is by creating smaller groups, teams or "task-forces" where the interconnectedness between actors is high. The exploration of new ideas and solutions require a certain autonomy of the actors and/or the group. Here, autonomy to self-organise and a clear mandate will help.¹¹

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See [Tiina Randma-Liiv and Kadi Maria Vooglaid, "Organising for e-Participation: Learning from European Experiences," TROPICO D5.2, 2019.](#)

In order to fully benefit from initiatives that specifically aim for more participation and involvement from citizens, users or clients, there is a need to systematically target higher levels of participation to ensure that their viewpoints, ideas and recommendations are incorporated into decisions and implemented in the resulting services. Both organisational design and process design can support more meaningful and higher levels of participation. Structures and processes designed to ensure proper feedback are often missing. Feedback is particularly important when trying to create a climate of inclusion, transparency, trust and creative interaction. Organisational capacity is needed to respond to questions, facilitate discussion and debate and to provide professional feedback to participants and users.¹²

Leadership and management

Managing the interactions between the participants in the collaboration is important, and combining different management strategies is beneficial. Supporting the development and creation of a shared vision and common goals helps to align interests. Proper monitoring and evaluation of goals, processes, and positive, negative or unexpected outcomes is essential. Specific performance indicators related to the functioning of the collaborative arrangement or specific tool/initiative can support this.

Leadership is essential to drive, mediate and facilitate collaborative processes and co-creation. Transformational leaders, focusing on positive motivation and inspiration, can be catalysts for change. A leadership that balances a clear focus on the desired outcome with flexibility and exploration, and which can deal with complexity, is valuable. A sequential approach, initially focusing on building trust between various stakeholders and a shared understanding of digitalisation efforts, before moving towards a more transactional or managerial leadership style is recommended. Leadership that supports differences of opinion is able to mobilise resources and time to try out new ideas and innovations, and leadership that encourages learning across organisational boundaries is more likely to contribute to success, particularly if stimulated by experimentation and trial-and-error behaviour and by introducing new (external) knowledge. Politicians, professionals and managers should be aware of the necessity of funding and staff capacity when starting a co-creation project or service.

‘By involving and advancing the participation of public and private actors, governments can improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of policy design and service delivery.’

Providing the necessary resources is perhaps an obvious but nevertheless important success factor. A shortage of funding, expertise and capable personnel may jeopardise the performance of the initiative. Organisations and governments who provide enough resources are more likely to obtain positive effects. Related to this is also a long-term vision and resources to support the sustainability and continuous development of the initiative. A clear demarcation of the short term set up and long-term maintenance costs and funding is not only needed for proper management but for cementing the key components of legitimacy and trust.¹³

Accountability, legitimacy and trust

Accountability relations are often more dispersed in collaborative arrangements or networks that include many different actors. Traditional hierarchical accountability relations, related to upward accountability to elected politicians, needs to be supported by more dynamic, multi-dimensional accountability relations that ensure accountability also towards others within the collaboration itself, as well as towards users, clients or citizens (if they are not participants in the collaboration).

Building trust between participating actors is fundamental. Trust emerges through frequent encounters between individuals within the collaboration and between the collaborating organisations. Informal meetings are important in addition to more formal ones in order to learn more about each other’s interests, intentions and behaviour. Moreover, independent facilitators, using techniques for constructive dialogue, or the appointment of a formal committee to monitor the participatory process, can strengthen the results. Public agencies can also assume this facilitator or mediation role.¹⁴

Having a detailed and professional communication strategy involving different relevant actors (citizens, civil servants, politicians) is important, especially when new initiatives are launched. Encouraging open, transparent, two-way communication between the involved actors and organisations within the collaboration facilitates interaction, stimulates learning processes and trust. Information- and communication-technology (ICT) tools are indispensable for internal communication and can help enhance the interaction between the participants and can also be very useful for visualisation and for sharing ideas, data and knowledge. However, ICT stimulates co-creation and innovation in contexts where trust already exists, while face-to-face interactions are conducive to building trust, spurring mutual learning and crafting new solutions: balancing face-to-face contact with digital tools for communication is therefore needed.

Securing external support is especially important in collaborations and co-creation that cuts across distinct policy fields or which includes actors from different sectors. The collaborating organisations, elected politicians, the media and the broader policy sectors are all important actors. Their support is fundamental for the legitimacy of the collaboration and its results.

13
Ibid.

14
For the full analysis of cases related to this, see [Maïke Rackwitz, Gerhard Hammerschmid, Jessica Breugh and Enora Palaric, "Government Collaboration and Digitalisation: Comparative Case Studies on Collaborative Management for Government Digitalisation and Public Sector Innovation," TROPICO D6.3 2020.](#)



'The collaborative capacity of the core unit in many co-creation initiatives is essential for securing both strategic and operational management.'

III. The Don'ts

One of the advantages of a large-scale research commitment is being able to gather negative lessons learned and mistakes not to be repeated, based on the wide range of pilots and case studies covered by the projects. Here are a few:

Do not simply ask users: what do you need?

Steve Jobs used to quote Henry Ford: "If I'd asked customers what they wanted, they would have told me, 'A faster horse!'"

This famous quote is often misused to lessen the importance of user research. But the reality is that the sentence refers to *bad* user research. One of the mistakes of co-creation is to directly ask users rather than adopting proper methods for understanding their needs. Unfortunately, too often, co-creation starts with this bland open question, which leads to disappointing low-quality ideas from users and public administration that uses this poor feedback as a justification to proceed with the initial ideas. This is particularly true for European policy, where often the range of possible actions are heavily limited by the competences attributed in the Treaties of the European Union, so the knowledge gap between administration and final users is particularly large.

What should be done is to use the full set of methods and most definitely not to start with a blank page. Start with user research to define the problem and come up with initial ideas. Engage users in a structured dialogue to gain a better understanding of these ideas and their limitations. Expose users to prototypes and systematically observe their reaction. Gather and analyse feedback from different kinds of users and involve them in improving the ideas. Observe how users interact with the service and re-design the service accordingly.

Do not blame the users

Co-creation doesn't always work. On rare occasions, the atmosphere can turn negative and generate conflicts. More frequently, the interaction is not inspiring, and little insight is generated at the end. This is acceptable and normal – any intervention has a failure rate. However, the reason for the failure in the majority of cases lies with the organisers, not the participants. They should organise a post mortem and acknowledge what didn't work and why, and what can be changed in the future. A participatory evaluation process allows the actors to share the judgements about the results achieved – even the negative, unexpected ones – and about their motivations, and ensures organisational learning (for more, see the box on evaluations on [page 12](#)).

Do not start with active co-creation

Too often, as mentioned in the previous chapter, co-creation is associated with an active role of users through co-design and co-production, while co-construction is overlooked. But the reality is that for making active co-creation work, there should be an extensive effort to prepare through user research. For instance, to understand

‘Leadership is essential to drive, mediate and facilitate collaborative processes and co-creation.’

the problems in startups accessing public innovation funds, there should be extensive desk research, continuous monitoring and in-depth analysis of the participation data to understand bottlenecks and incentives. But too often, this is substituted by a set of meetings or online surveys that directly ask the questions. Besides being ineffective, this radically favours incumbents and those familiar with the context. The voice that will be heard and have influence will be those with pre-existing knowledge, and co-creation will, therefore, actually harm the achievement of the objectives. It is better not to do co-creation than to do it superficially.

Do not treat it as a one-off exercise

In any public initiative, co-creation needs to be continuous and iterative to be effective. It is easy to organise a one-off stakeholders group to kick off an initiative – but the key challenge is keeping these stakeholders engaged over time. It is necessary to design a full process, including how the contributions received will be treated. And there has to be a follow-up of the focus group with the observation of actual users behaviour and re-design. Co-creation needs to be permanent, at least at the level of co-construction by monitoring: how many people use the full online service, what is the completion rates, how many users take part in a support scheme, to what extent they correspond to the target and so on.¹⁵

Do not overpromise

Co-creation requires trust and long-term commitment. Governments often overpromise about the expected results of co-creation to achieve the participation of key players quickly (such as other departments, citizens, companies), but this is not only ineffective, it also severely damages future possibilities for co-creation. Co-creation can be conceived as a promise, and nothing harms trust as broken promises.¹⁶ The real challenge is maintaining commitment over time. Delivery is the only robust trust-building strategy and requires careful management of expectations and communication of results.

Do not ignore the costs

Taking part in co-design and co-construction requires time and effort by participants – to participate, but also to prepare. Governments too often fail to acknowledge this, and consider participation as a benefit for participants, rather than a cost. Frequent mistakes include organising too long or too many sessions; expecting users to register to a new platform or, even worse, install new software; asking for information that can be obtained through other means; and using jargon. Instead, the effort should focus on lowering the costs of participation by making the process clear and user friendly, reaching out in the language of the users and in a place where users already discuss the issues.

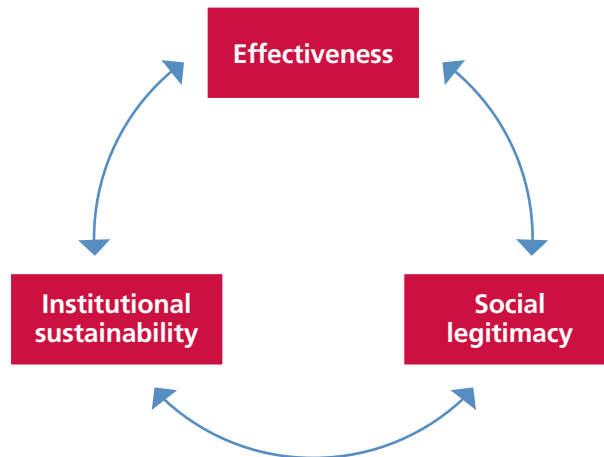
Ultimately, the biggest (and most frequent) mistake is not making the co-creation process itself user-centric. Too often, it is designed without taking into account the needs of participants, but mainly those of the organiser. By default, users are not interested in what the provider has to offer: attention, trust and participation have to be earned. Effective co-creation starts from a genuine effort to put users at the centre. Ineffective co-creation is ultimately insincere window dressing.

15 See [David Osimo, “How Local Government Reform is Key to Europe’s Digital Success: A Six-Point Programme for e-Government Renewal”](#) (Brussels: The Lisbon Council, 2018) and [Chesney Callens, Koen Verhoest, and Dries Van Doninck, “Enhancing Innovation through Public-Private Collaboration,” Tropico Policy Brief.](#)

16 The notion of promise is taken from [Erik Wilde, “An API is a Promise,” DZONE, 04 January 2021.](#) On the importance of delivery to ensure trust, see also [Andrew Greenway, Ben Terrett, Mike Bracken and Tom Loosemore, *Digital Transformation at Scale: Why the Strategy is Delivery* \(London: London Publishing Partnership, 2018\).](#)

'One of the mistakes of co-creation is to directly ask users rather than adopting proper methods for understanding their needs.'

Evaluating Co-Creation



Co-evaluation helps to strengthen the co-creation processes both in the design phase and in the implementation phase of initiatives. Setting the framework of the policy actions and of the goals envisaged (e.g., by agreeing on the “theory of change” of the proposed intervention) is key to share among different actors the sense of direction and responsibility of the future collaboration. Common rules and feedbacks on the progress achieved help to improve reciprocity and trust. The design of co-evaluation processes and tools (e.g., evaluation committees, where experts act as facilitators and citizens cooperate in setting the evaluative questions, collect information, and produce judgements) actively involves and empowers the participants, enhance the mutual understanding among different views, and the ownership on the final results. Another aspect to be taken into account is how to evaluate collaboration *per se*. As a process, collaboration can favour or hamper different results, depending on its workings within the public policy process (i.e., the set of activities undertaken to solve a common problem). The ENLARGE project provided a structured way to look at collaborative practices and suggested evaluating the collaboration outcomes in the context of the public policy action. Evaluation of collaborative processes should focus on three dimensions:

- 1) its effectiveness: if and how far the collaborative process has influenced the public policy process, determining some kind of change in the decision-making, implementation or evaluation phases;
- 2) its institutional sustainability: if and how far the collaborative process has been integrated into the traditional democratic processes, without generating disruptive conflicts or resistance;
- 3) its social legitimacy: its capacity to be perceived by public opinion as a legitimate tool to take public decisions and improve policy implementation. Qualitative tools of evaluation could be derived accordingly to these three dimensions to account for the collaborative actions undertaken.

[ENLARGE, “31 Case Study Reports and Case Study Cross Analysis,” ENLARGE D3.1 2018.](#)

‘For making active co-creation work, there should be an extensive effort to prepare through user research.’

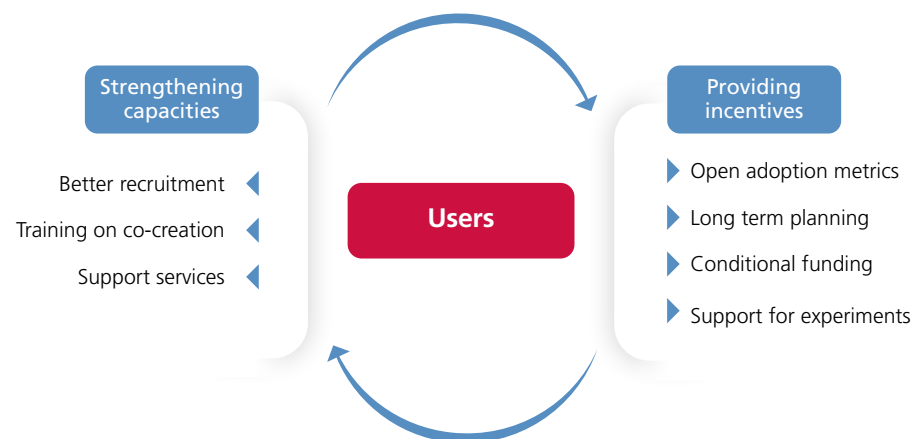
IV. Policy Recommendation: a Copernican Revolution with Users at the Centre

Co-creation is more than just a set of tools to make digital services more user-friendly. It can transform and support the achievement of broader policy goals. This is why the insights gained through the five projects presented here aim to help not only individual practitioners interested in applying co-creation but also high-level decision-makers across all policies and institutional levels. While the previous sections dealt with recommendations at the level of individual organisations, this section aims to provide system-level recommendations to promote wide-scale deployment.

The central recommendation is to radically increase the focus on users of public services and public policies – the final recipients, but also all players involved in the delivery. This is not a new notion, and is already present in policy documents such as *The 2017 Tallinn Declaration on Digital Government*. But the challenge is to bring this focus on users from a single statement in a manifesto to large scale practice spread across Europe. If users are not the genuine priority, co-creation remains a fancy concept destined for oblivion.¹⁷

To achieve this shift towards users, our policy recommendations aim to address two systemic and mutually reinforcing challenges: to ensure that those who are already motivated are able to implement co-creation by strengthening capacities, and to stimulate the willingness of reluctant agencies to adopt co-creation by providing incentives.

Chart 4. Strengthening Capacity and Providing Incentives



In the following recommendations, the lessons learned in the projects are adapted to the context of the current European policy actions: notably for the national resilience and recovery plans in the context of the Next Generation EU recovery plan, which have to include a section on public administration reform, and the new Digital Europe programme.

17 The Tallinn Declaration includes a fascinating annex on user-centricity principles. See [Council of the European Union and European Economic Area, The 2017 Tallinn Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment, 06 October 2017.](#)



'In any public initiative, co-creation needs to be continuous and iterative to be effective.'

18

See Ines Mergel, "Digital Service Teams in Government," *Government Information Quarterly* 36/2019.

Strengthening capacities

- 1) **Provide large scale training effort in public administrations.** The lack of specialised skills and modern professional profiles in public administration is a long-standing problem exacerbated by an ageing workforce. Co-creation is just one of the new competencies that governments worldwide have to develop. While there is a plethora of specialised service providers in the different domains of co-creation, it cannot be completely outsourced, and some basic elements should be present in all public administrations. User research and service design methods should be mainstreamed across all training modules for civil servants involved in service delivery. Planned lifelong learning measures should include innovative experience-based learning modules at scale, through massive open online courses (MOOCs), including simulation of co-creation cases.
- 2) **Enable talent attraction.** In addition, this requires new, more flexible recruitment mechanisms that can attract new profiles in government, such as user experience and user research specialists. For instance, most digital teams were created through *ad hoc* exceptions and extraordinary recruitment powers, but if we want co-creation to scale, it cannot be done by bending the rules and finding exceptions; it will require adapting recruitment mechanisms to allow for fast, agile recruitment processes. But recruitment is only the first step – retaining talent is equally important. Public agencies need to accommodate these new job profiles, more outcome than process-oriented. Both recruitment innovation and talent retention should be part of the public administration reform strategy.¹⁸
- 3) **Make available support services for smaller and local agencies.** Service design ultimately should become an infrastructural service in each European Union member state. A way to generalise the use of co-creation and specifically of policy and service design in each member state could be the establishment of "co-creation support services" (mirroring other infrastructural services such as payments and authentication platforms) responsible for providing direct support to local and central public administrations that are involved in the establishment of new services and that lack the internal capabilities. To this end, the service-design team would elaborate and make available toolkits and guidelines to be used by public administrations and will also provide public administration with direct support.

Providing incentives

- 1) **Make public funding conditional on the adoption of co-creation.** Co-creation, at least at the level of fully-fledged user research, should become a prerequisite for funding government innovation. No innovation in public services should happen without proper use of design methods, at least for assessing user needs at the level of co-construction. Any public body funded government innovation initiatives should make it a requirement to introduce co-creation methods in the project. European structural and investment funds and the Digital Europe programme should include a conditionality clause on the adoption of proper co-creation and co-design methods.

‘At the European level, data on the uptake of digital services should be included in the list of “high-value datasets” described in the latest proposal of the revised directive on public sector information.’

- 2) **Publish open adoption metrics.** Make metrics on adoption the key performance indicators of any government intervention and make the relevant data open. Metrics are a fundamental policy instrument in Europe, especially in areas that do not fall under the competencies of the European Union, such as public administration reform. Making adoption of any service the central metric will incentivise European governments to place users genuinely at the centre. Moreover, the metrics should not be elaborated through surveying citizens but by using data automatically generated by online services, such as the percentage of service transactions that are performed online. Many member states already do this, but data are not standardised. For this reason, every digital government service should publish adoption metrics openly and in real-time, and member states should work towards standardising such indicators. At the European level, data on the uptake of digital services should be included in the list of “high-value datasets” described in the latest proposal of the revised directive on public sector information. In general, any public intervention supported by European funds (starting with the upcoming Digital Europe programme) should publish data about not only the costs but also its adoption by target users. The [Co-VAL MetaMonitor](#) provides a first attempt to gather available national data on adoption.
- 3) **Ensure consistency and long-term planning.** While there is no shortage of experimentation, co-creation has long suffered from excessive fragmentation of one-off and temporary initiatives. Teams are created and dismantled, guidelines and principles are not fully implemented and experiments are not sufficiently evaluated or translated into services. Co-creation needs to be given a better, stronger mandate – something that agencies know will live beyond the rise or fall of the elected government that gave birth to it or the exceptional funding. In the context of the recovery and resilience plans, any intervention on co-creation and public sector reform should be designed to be consistent with other existing efforts, ideally under one coordinated long-term strategy. And the fundamental transformative actions should be designed to be sustainable beyond the one-off funding.
- 4) **Fund experimentation and research.** Co-creation requires continuous experimentation and research is needed to address some of the key bottlenecks. Service co-creation should remain an important part of the future research policy, notably as part of Horizon Europe, as outlined in Section V, which follows.

V. Co-creating a Research Agenda

One common conclusion is that many open questions have yet to be addressed for co-creation to be deployed at scale. And because of the social nature of co-creation, a strong research effort is needed in future years to accompany deployment and to ensure its effectiveness and impact.

'The biggest and most frequent mistake is not making the co-creation process itself user-centric.'

19

For statistics on adoption of co-creation in European public administrations, see [Anthony Arundel, Francesco Mureddu and David Osimo, "The State of 'Co-Creation': How Countries, Cities and Regions Are Using New Thinking to Deliver Better Services," *Lisbon Council Policy Brief*, Vol 13, No. 1\(2020\).](#)

For updated data on countries and cities, see Charlotte van Ooijen, Francesco Mureddu and Co-VAL stakeholders panel, "The 2021 State of Co-Creation: Delivering Services Together" *Lisbon Council Policy Brief*, (forthcoming).

Research not only provides good answers but also better questions. Concretely, research not only offers useful insight for policymakers but also a set of research questions that have yet to be answered. These could – and should – be included in the future work programme of Horizon Europe, where public-sector innovation is curiously overlooked.

In general, future research in what is a rapidly maturing field of co-creation should emphasise extensive and sustained empirical work. Given that the initial theoretical ground-clearing exercise has largely been undertaken, building the empirical base further should be a key priority, ensuring that such empirical work is well informed theoretically.

Methodologically, future empirical work should include:

- Comparative case-study based work which moves across sectors and jurisdictions (going beyond single cases), and studies based on large sample size (large N survey-based studies). It would also be interesting in longitudinally orientated case study work to track how traditional public agencies move to different co-creation approaches and any role of strategic management models in supporting such a change;
- Large-scale quantitative research would also allow for international benchmarking, which is still needed. This could indicate different experiences in collaborative innovation applications in different administrative traditions but also offer other useful insights and differences among public administrations in different countries.¹⁹

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound transformative impact on public administrations, public service delivery and the engagement of citizens. The government's frequent reformulations of COVID-19 restrictions clearly test the populations' understanding and patience. However, citizens' trust in government, compliance with rules and regulations, and acceptance of new norms and values are critical to the creation and successful implementation of national responses to COVID-19. Will this act as a spur to co-creation, because in order to build popular support, governments must get in closer proximity to citizens by inviting them to participate in the co-creation of public governance?²⁰

The five projects have identified, in collaboration with the stakeholders' communities involved in the projects, three clusters of research questions related to 1) the organisational setting, 2) the relation with digital technology, and 3) impact. In addition, the issue of evaluation deserves special attention for research and policy purposes and is more widely described in the box on [page 12](#).

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See also Christopher Ansell, Jacob Torfing and Eva Sorenson, "The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Game Changer for Public Administration and Leadership?" in *Public Administration Review*, 2020; and Amandine Lerusse and Steven Van de Walle, "Local Politicians' Preferences in Public Procurement: Ideological or Strategic Reasoning?" *Local Government Studies*, 2021.

'The challenge is to bring the focus on users from a single statement in a manifesto to large scale practice spread across Europe.'

Area	Questions
Organisational setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can co-creation help us to build robust solutions in the face of turbulence? What is the role of collaborative governance for crafting robust problem-solving strategies? What types of institutional designs, platforms, and arenas will help spur robust governance and which forms of leadership are conducive to this? - Is it possible to conceptualise a distinct form of co-creational leadership? - What are the underlying conditions, enablers, obstacles and drivers for the co-creation of public innovation? - What is the impact of multiple network membership and broader network-environment relations on the capacity of network organisations to function effectively in the face of competing and often conflicting demands? - What new institutional designs can be promoted to support the advancement of collaborative governance where politicians are brought into contact with professionals and non-state stakeholders and facilitate cross-sector collaboration? - How can elected politicians become fully involved in co-creation, and how can we understand network governance's relationship to traditional democratic systems? - How can strategic management facilitate professionals in coping with multiple role expectations: as co-creators and network partners?
Digitalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the role of digital technologies in co-creation? - What digital technologies carry the most potential risks and benefits for co-creation (e.g., Artificial Intelligence, blockchain, Internet of Things, etc.)? - What are the critical actions to be taken on public data governance so that public data can function as an enabler of co-creation and public sector innovation? - How should ICT/digitalisation in government be organised (central or distributed responsibility), and how can new technology/applications be implemented and pushed through? - How are digital strategies and ICT tools shaped by the "layered upon" national organisational structures and processes and cultures/administrative traditions?
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can co-creation at multiple levels help us to promote the European Green Deal? - What are the appropriate metrics for the use of co-creation for innovation in public services? - What qualitative and quantitative indicators are available or needed to monitor their impacts? - How can public authorities make co-creation more effective in terms of cost and red tape? - What is the relationship between public value impact and co-creation and between co-creation and leadership?



'User research and service design methods should be mainstreamed across all training modules for civil servants.'

21
See [European Commission, "The European Green Deal," COM/2019/640.](#)

22
[C40 Cities and Arup, "Powering Climate Action: Cities as Global Changemakers," Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015.](#)

23
See [ENLARGE, "Knowledge Map," ENLARGE D.3.4, 2018.](#)

VI. Inspiration: Co-Creating the European Green Deal

In the [European Green Deal](#), the European Commission pledges to turn the daunting challenge of climate emergency and environmental deterioration into an opportunity to achieve a social and ecological transition across all policy areas. The European Green Deal acknowledges that collaborative processes, which bring together citizens, national, regional and local institutions, research organisations, civil society and businesses alongside European institutions, are essential for legitimising policy actions and making them effective. People's active engagement in the design and delivery of the European Green Deal is deemed crucial, and the European Green Deal proposes, thus, a new pact where citizens are the driving force of the transition. As such, the European Green Deal is probably both the highest-level policy priority and the greatest use case for large case co-creation.²¹

Research confirms the importance of co-creation for sustainable development, showing that a "collaborative approach can deliver twice as many actions compared to less partnership-based approaches."²² Research has also shown, however, that collaborative processes both in general and in sustainable development are not "idealistic" processes, but rather "tortuous routes" whose success or failure is strongly dependent on design choices and policy tools put in place as well as by context conditions. Shedding light on design and context features favouring/hindering collaborative processes is paramount for enhancing collaborative policymaking and delivery in the social and ecological transition promoted by the European Green Deal.

In particular, a series of obstacles hamper collaborative processes in sustainable development:

- Citizens' fear of being manipulated and of hidden interests of public institutions in the process;
- People's perception that their lack/low level of specific environmental knowledge makes their participation less useful;
- People's late involvement in the process and/or creation of false expectations;
- Promotion of one-stop collaborative processes and of participation for the sake of participation, without a real commitment (e.g. political) towards the process;
- Scepticism of public institutions and politicians towards collaborative processes and their resistance to collaboration with citizens and stakeholders;
- Rigid delivery procedures and weak communication of the process and of its outcomes at community, political and institutional levels;
- Lack of resources (e.g. knowledge, economic, legal) for the delivery of the process and/or implementation of its outcomes.²³

'Service design ultimately should become an infrastructural service in each European Union member state.'

The context also matters in shaping the success or failure of collaborative processes both in general and in sustainable development. Some of the main contextual conditions that influence the delivery of collaborative processes are:

- Public participation culture and previous experience contributes to the reduction in citizens', politicians' and civil servants' scepticism about and fear of public participation; its absence acts as a barrier to actors' trust in these processes;
- Social capital, civic culture, institutional trust and low corruption favour the creation of partnerships and citizens' and stakeholders' engagement and active participation in decision-making and delivery processes of public policies;
- Political stability reduces the risks of unsustainable/destructive changes in the regulatory, legal and institutional framework related to the sustainable energy collaborative processes.
- A legal framework that makes collaborative processes mandatory strengthens the neutrality of the process and links it less to a specific political party.
- A certain degree of autonomy of the institutions promoting the process allows them to respect commitments taken during the process and to implement its outcomes.

A key question for the delivery of the European Green Deal, in particular at the local level, is how to overcome recurrent obstacles even in less favourable contexts to ensure the effectiveness, legitimacy and sustainability of collaborative processes. Leveraging social mechanisms that favour collaborative processes is the way. Social mechanisms are causal explanations of why the context features combined with the process features shape the behaviours of some policy actors and trigger changes in their behaviour. Mechanisms are valued for their learning potential due to their relative general application.

An analysis of more than 30 case studies in the field of sustainable development under the ENLARGE project has revealed a set of recurrent social mechanisms favouring the legitimacy, sustainability and effectiveness of the co-design, co-production and co-evaluation processes. Mutual responsibility, by reducing inadvertent social exclusion and enhancing "peripheral vision," picking up on that which would normally go unnoticed, is fundamental for the co-design process. When it comes to both co-design and co-production, three mechanisms are important: the sense of belonging to a greater community which improves motivation, health and happiness; bandwagon (positive feedback loops) and threshold effects (where individuals' behaviour depends on the number of other individuals already engaging in that behaviour); and perception of opportunity (personal concrete incentives rather than abstract values).

Finally, feedback mechanisms that entail the production, handling and interpretation of information about efforts and outcomes in the light of previously established aspirations and goals are relevant for co-design, co-production and co-evaluation processes. ²⁴

24
Full details on the mechanisms and related case studies can be found in [ENLARGE, "31 Case Study Reports and Case Study Cross Analysis," ENLARGE 2018.](#)

Participatory
Action
Research
Policy
Public
Research

'European structural and investment funds and the Digital Europe programme should include a conditionality clause on the adoption of proper co-creation and co-design methods.'

Appendix: Tools, Tool Kits and Additional Services

The five projects synthesised here have produced a wealth of practical tools to support the adoption of co-creation. Here is a summary:

Games and Toolkits

- Gamebook: Choose Your Own Collaborative Adventure in Sustainable Energy is a living tool for all communities wishing to boost collaborative governance and to achieve better results in collaborative processes in the field of sustainable energy. There is not a single model of good collaborative processes: depending on the specific context, different sequences of events and choices can favour or hinder the outcome of a collaborative process. Produced as part of the ENLARGE project, the Gamebook is available in English, Estonian, French, Italian and Romanian.
- Knowledge Map provides a structured way to look at collaborative practices and to better understand them. The map provides researchers, policymakers and stakeholders with a clear identification of the different elements that one can analyse, to better understand the links between the collaborative process and the policy in which it is embedded. Furthermore, the map aspires to provide insights for policymakers and interested stakeholders that plan to design a collaborative process and to achieve, thanks to participation, better policy goals. Produced as part of the ENLARGE project, the Knowledge Map is available in English, Estonian, French, Italian and Romanian.
- The CITADEL Methodology support tool provides a step-by-step guidance along the co-creation process so that public managers can ensure the appropriate tasks are dispatched to the team members at the right time, the actions are taken accordingly and their results are tracked in order to allow managers to take decisions so to progress towards the establishment of the object identified as target of the co-creation process.

In addition, the projects will soon release:

- A Collaboration Monitor to help organisations engaged in collaborations to compare and improve the efficiency and legitimacy of their collaborative practices. It will be released by TROPICO.
- 'CO-CREATOR' Learning Game (both online and board) to teach elected politicians and public managers how they can manage challenges and dilemmas arising in relation to co-creation and collaborative innovation. It will be released by the COGOV project.

Co-creation
Practices
Collaborative
Public Value
Research

‘Large-scale quantitative research would also allow for international benchmarking, which is still needed.’

- An e-toolkit to provide holistic support for public service renewal through co-creation, covering assessment of readiness, identification of services, process support and quality assessment. It will be released by the COGOV project.

Dashboards

- The [TROPICO Codes of Collaboration](#) gathers a wide selection of rules and regulations for collaboration in 10 European countries.
- The [Co-Val Dashboard](#) maps digitally-enabled co-creation policies and practices in 28 European countries and six municipalities.
- The [CITADEL Innovation Platform](#) provides a virtual space where people can collaborate proposing ideas, commenting and discussing other people ideas.

Case-study repositories and reports

- The [Co-VAL Case Studies Repository](#)
- The [TROPICO Case Studies Repository](#)
- The [ENLARGE Case Repository](#)
- The [COGOV Repository of “Best” Practice](#)

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The Lisbon Council asbl
IPC-Résidence Palace
155 rue de la Loi
1040 Brussels, Belgium
T. +32 2 647 9575
F. +32 2 640 9828
www.lisboncouncil.net
info@lisboncouncil.net

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