

**Co-Production and Co-Governance:
Strategic Management, Public Value and
Co-Creation in the Renewal of Public
Agencies across Europe (COGOV)**



***COVID, CO-CREATION AND THE MANAGEMENT
OF PUBLIC SERVICES: A SHORT SURVEY OF THE
EMERGING LITERATURE***

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1. Introduction

1.1. Co-creation is increasingly popular in contemporary public sector discourses for several reasons. Firstly, the public sector is caught in a cross-pressure between growing expectations and scarce public resources. Secondly, the public sector has a limited 'reach' and needs to involve societal actors to solve increasingly complicated ('wicked' problems). And finally, the public sector produces its own distinct public value that many different stakeholders can help produce (Ansell and Torfing, 2021).

1.2. The COGOV project¹ commencing in 2018, aimed to explore this issue further by focussing on the policy problem of how strategic management can best enable managers and professionals in local governments and public agencies to exploit the drivers - and overcome the barriers - to the co-creation of innovative public value outcomes at both organizational and project levels, and by identifying which lessons can be shared on undertaking strategically managed co-creation.

1.3. The definition of co-creation is rooted in the belief that the term is best viewed as a process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas that enhance the production of public value in terms of visions, plans, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks, or services (Torfing et al. 2019). This can either be through a continuous improvement of outputs or outcomes or through innovative step-changes that transform the understanding of the problem -or task at hand - and leads to new ways of solving it. While the two terms *co-production* and *co-creation* can be used interchangeably and, in other cases as distinct terms,² the term 'co-creation' is used in this review to encompass features sometimes allocated separately to the 2 terms.

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² *Co-production*: Describes an interactive process through which the providers and users of public services apply their different resources and capabilities in its production and delivery. *It usually does not encompass actors beyond service providers and users and is limited to the joint production of already existing services.* *Co-creation*: Describes the process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas that enhance the production of public value in terms of visions, plans, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks, or services, either through a continuous improvement of outputs or outcomes or through

1.4. The arrival of COVID-19 occurred during the project's implementation - and in the middle of data-collection - not only challenged initial delivery plans, but also kick-started a debate as to the likely short and medium term impact of the crisis on how the public sector is administered and managed, what it means for public leadership and for the likely success of transformational approaches to service design and delivery, such as co-creation. Indeed, members of the COGOV research team have recently argued that COVID has meant that Governments need to ensure that citizens 'understand the complex challenges to public governance and see that government, for the most part, is populated with dedicated professionals who are doing their best to create public value for the citizens and society at large' (Dixon et al. 2021). Crucially, there is no better way to 'build broad-based, popular support and get in closer proximity to citizens than inviting them to participate in the co-creation of public governance' (Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, 2020).

1.5. This short literature review³ is aimed at kick-starting a wider debate on the impact of COVID-19 on public service renewal within and across nations and highlighting key themes in the literature that offer some positive directions towards innovative forms of public governance post-COVID.

2 Key Themes

2.1. Governmental responses to COVID-19 continue to shift and any commentary on those responses is necessarily contingent and in constant need of updating. However, it is possible to identify six main strands in the emerging literature on the public management aspects of the pandemic (as at July 2021). These relate to: The effectiveness of national and international responses; the role of citizens (and mutual aid); culture and public administrative traditions;

innovative step-changes that transform the understanding of the problem or task at hand and lead to new ways of solving it.

³ The survey was undertaken during June 2021 and involved searching for both academic, practitioner and 'grey' literature. A number of search terms were harnessed alongside COVID and 'Public' including: sector; leadership; management; administration. The following combinations were also searched: COVID and; co-production; co-creation; professionals; citizens; and collaboration. The terms were searched (from June 2000) via Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science and via the leading public sector journals published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS).

the effect on public sector professionals/managers; COVID-19 and co-creation; and the legacy of COVID-19.

2.2. The effectiveness of national and international responses

There are a growing number league tables of **how well countries are deemed to have handled the arrival and transmission of the infection**. These largely distinguish between those countries which adopted 'herd immunity' or 'containment' strategies and the speed of their decisions.

An international review of which countries performed best identifies Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia as winners, highlighting their early action, aggressive monitoring and enforcement (Bremner 2021). The review concludes that leadership, rather than resources or political orientation alone, is critical to successful country responses, and the ability to create a shared sense of commitment and sacrifice is essential. Those leaders who took the threat most seriously early on - and relied on science to guide the policy responses - are the ones who fared the best. What stands out is that all the best performing countries are located in the Southern hemisphere and had in the past encountered similar pandemic threats as COVID-19.

An OECD survey (2020) focuses on the actions of its 36 member countries in containing socio-economic consequences. It found that in the majority of cases, OECD countries have adopted a multi-channelled response by increasing expenditures, making commitments to support economic activity and deploying non-fiscal measures, such as regulation. These responses have been primarily applied to three groups:

- Support to *businesses and employees* has focussed on sustaining the cash flow of businesses by deferring or reducing tax expenditure obligations and increasing access to credit. The support to employees has been through government-funded allowances in lieu of wages and salaries, and by reducing or eliminating the waiting period for access to government benefits.

- Support to *households and individuals* has prioritised the elderly, the vulnerable and those who provide care for children and other household members. The support is in the form of direct payments and targeted assistance for heating and other costs.
- Within the support to *industries and sectors*, the health sector has received priority to ensure access to additional resources. In some instances, the education sector has also received additional resources, as governments have encouraged study and retraining. The focus of the OECD report however is on government measures rather than public management perspectives

In terms of country-focussed studies, Tom Christensen and Per Laegreid (2020) examine how the Norwegian Government successfully handled the COVID-19 crisis by balancing governance capacity and legitimacy. The Government controlled the pandemic by adopting a 'suppression' strategy, then a 'control' strategy based on a collaborative and pragmatic decision-making style, successful communication with the public, extensive resources and a high level of citizen trust in government. Further, the authors point out that responses to COVID-19 are an example of *co-production* depending just as much on citizens' behaviour based on trust in government as on government capacity. They also describe how this success needs to be understood in the context of competent politicians, a high trust society, reliable and professional bureaucracy, a strong state, a good economic situation, a big welfare state and low population density. As stated at the beginning of this literature review, the COVID-19 picture continues to change. Christensen and Laegreid's article was based on the early response of the Norwegian Government, which they describe as effective decision-making, handling and making sense of the situation.

Comparing the responses of US and UK with the more successful Germany, South Korea and New Zealand, Mariana Mazzucato and Rainer Kattel (2020) argue that to prepare for future pandemics, governments must build dynamic capabilities in the following areas: *capacity to adapt and learn; to align public services and citizen needs; to govern resilient production systems; and to govern data and digital platforms*. They conclude that years of privatization and outsourcing in the USA and UK have reduced capacity in public services: 'Lessons from successful responses to COVID-19 show that building back better, and preparing for future

crises, means investing in core public-sector capacities and capabilities, including the ability to interact with other value creators in society—designing contracts to deliver in the public interest’.

2.3. The role of citizens (and mutual aid)

A key aspect of national responses is **information provision to citizens and the compliance or involvement of the public**. A study into the response of the Nigerian Government to the pandemic highlights that the success and sustainability of public health programmes are highly dependent on the positive perception and acceptance by the general public (Oleribe et al 2020). They found respondents to their survey were unhappy with the manner of responses provided by the federal government and its agencies and rated as poor specific individual measures by the government and its institutions. Public health messaging however accrued better scores. This specific aspect was provided through a public private partnership between government agencies and mobile technology operators in the country. The authors recommend that this collaborative approach should be adopted to improve COVID-related public services in future.

The South Korea Government response is depicted as agile and adaptive (Moon 2020). Each infected case was proactively identified and potential cases exposed as fast as possible. This approach required not only massive testing and quarantine of infected patients but also technological support to track their movements. It allowed the government to slow down the contagion speed and ease the spike of new infected cases. The approach required flexible organisational structures, increasing involvement of stakeholders and resources, and efficient decision-making processes for timely and transparent results. The point is made that Government actions could not have been effective if the public had not voluntarily cooperated with the non-pharmaceutical interventions such as social distancing and hand washing. Similarly, Irving Yi-Feng Haung (2020), describes the Taiwan experience as relying on public collaboration and voluntary assistance as significant contributors in effecting government policies. So, as discussed in Christensen and Laegreid (2020), social capital and other elements sustaining a peaceful co-existence of people is critical when collaborative response to collective problems are necessary.

Citizen engagement is seen as vital to national responses, but the role is often cast in a passive way, namely following regulations and ensuring civil compliance: 'Citizen engagement is of the essence as it simultaneously tackles two different pillars, that is, the assumption and commitment to following the established rules and protocols and the proper handling of relevant information versus misinformation or disinformation' (Cegarra-Navarro et al 2021).

The phenomenon of mutual aid in the UK during the pandemic is captured by a report from the New Local Government Network (2020). Mutual Aid groups are defined as self-organising groups where people come together to address a shared health or social issue through mutual support. Mutualism is described as breaking down the divide between helper and helped, emphasising equality in the social interactions between people. The essential finding detailed in the report is that there exists a great reservoir of latent goodwill and community spirit which can translate into actual capability in times of crisis. They also point out that while the mutual aid phenomenon has emerged across the country and in all kinds of varied communities, it has been significantly assisted by access to digital infrastructure and to social capital (2020: 5).

2.4. Culture and public administrative traditions

In considering the **impact of public administrative traditions** on government responses, a principal issue is that of the position of the citizen in relation to the state, but also the degree of centralisation vs decentralisation. Geert Bouckaert et al (2020) look at the response of four European countries to the COVID-19 pandemic in the first four months of 2020. The analysis focuses on Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy, countries which represent different models of administrative systems in Europe. Whereas France and Italy stand for the Continental European Napoleonic model with a traditionally highly centralized administrative setting, Germany is a federal state with strong Länder governments. Belgium has moved from a centralized (Napoleonic) country to a federal state in which subnational-level governments enjoy significant powers. Their analysis shows major similarities across the four countries: They all followed the containment logic, activated their risk management procedures, and increased hospital capacity. On the other hand, each country pursued its own path shaped by different starting conditions, historically inherited administrative cultures and state traditions. The authors find that responses are national, rather than EU created and are

shaped by distinct, country-specific approaches. This they term as 'coronationalism'. In particular, they make clear the important influence of multi-level administrative settings. Whereas France, with its conspicuously centralist approach, represents one governance extreme, Germany stands for the opposite model of a predominantly decentralized crisis governance. Italy and Belgium are to be positioned between these two extremes as they are characterized by intermediate degrees of centralization/decentralization in crisis governance.

Reference was made earlier to the importance of citizen engagement in national responses (Cegarra-Navarro et al 2021). Stephen Reicher and Clifford Stott (2020) examine the conditions under which the COVID-19 pandemic will lead either to social order (adherence to measures put in place by authorities to control the pandemic) or to social disorder (resistance to such measures and the emergence of open conflict). Using examples from different countries (principally the United Kingdom, the United States, and France), they isolate three factors which determine whether people accept or reject control measures: *the historical context of state-public relations; the nature of leadership during the pandemic; and procedural justice in the development and operation of these measures*. With implications for co-production and co-creation, they argue that adherence depends on whether people see themselves and authorities as part of a common in-group. Further, unlike Bremner (2020), they place less emphasis on leadership than on procedural justice in the interaction between authorities and their publics.

Contrasting the responses of Greece and Sweden, Evangelia Petridou et al (2021) conclude that there is more than one path to success when faced with a crisis, and that the strategies need to be adapted to institutional, political and cultural contexts. Greece's response is described as being driven by a position of weakness. The health system would not be able to cope with large numbers. Culturally it was considered difficult for the government to convince 'unruly Greeks' to stay at home. A centralised strategy of very stringent containment measures was adopted. A similar logic on the state's (in)ability to deal with a crisis has been invoked in Greece before, for instance in the case of the migration crisis in 2015. In contrast, Sweden's response to the pandemic was fronted by experts rather than politicians, reflecting the technocratic emphasis within the Swedish political system, characterised as it is by the absence of formal ministerial rule in relation to public agencies.

In the context of a decentralised state, broad guidelines rather than rules were used, with public acceptance based on high levels of trust.

2.5. The effect on public sector professionals/managers

Analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on the **work of public servants** includes an OECD report (2020) which describes the public sector as becoming accidentally agile as a result of the pandemic. Christopher Ansell et al (2020) describe the pandemic as a 'game changer' for public administration and leadership, arguing the need for robust governance responses to turbulent problems. Instead of relying on traditional public administration approaches, the public sector needs to meet crisis or 'turbulence' with robust strategies where creative and agile public organisations adapt to the emergence of new disruptive problems by building networks and partnerships with the private sector and civil society (2020: 4). Public organisations must cultivate and strengthen their collaborative relations with relevant and effective actors (2020: 7). Public leadership also needs to change, from transactional (aimed at ensuring compliance) or transformational leadership (seeking to formulate, communicate, and maintain a particular vision) to collective leadership. In times of turbulence, 'public leaders must engage in a dialogue with employees and stakeholders to elicit their inputs and persuade them to test new strategies in practice and help accelerate the learning process'.

Tudor Ticiu et al (2020) also point to the COVID-19 pandemic as a prime example of the new 'turbulent times' in which governments must operate. They argue that the concept of governance needs to evolve along with the 'world in which it resides' and that resilience becomes a sine qua non condition for success of any (good) governance process (2020: 12). Others focus on the role of public managers in times of crisis, pointing to the need to manage stakeholders, politicians and collaborative networks (Z. Van der Wal 2020). The emphasis here however is on more traditional forms of collaboration rather than co-production or even co-creation (for a distinction see Dixon, Shaw et al, 2021).

2.6. COVID-19 and co-creation

Why is co-production/co-creation important under COVID-19? According to Steen and Brandsen (2020) COVID-19 is a wicked issue and therefore not amenable to top-down general solutions. Governments must employ collaborative approaches. 'Co-operation increases the

likelihood of creating a shared understanding of complex problems, finding and agreeing on provisional solutions, getting solutions implemented and creating 'small wins' (2020: 852). Furthermore, public administration research has tended to underestimate the resilience of society in disaster and crisis management. The reliance on voluntary contributions from citizens they argue contradicts notions that addressing crises relies on top-down hierarchical arrangements. Sustainable co-production relies on three conditions: legislative frameworks that allow co-production initiatives; recognition of the contribution of professionals and citizen co-producers as complementary rather than merely substitutive; and incentives to encourage and sustain co-production.

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be argued, are particularly apt for a co-production/co-creation approach. Denita Cepiku et al (2021), make three points to support this position.

- Firstly, its ease of transmission threatens widespread incidence. The healthcare system can do little to help in this as communities themselves must self-organise to reduce the spread.
- Secondly, the high spikes in demand for hospitalizations meant that the strategy of relying only on the acute health system was likely to have a high failure rate, placing a high burden on community-based public services.
- Thirdly, strong socio-economic patterns in the rate of infection and fatality are evident (people with chronic health conditions, the elderly, the poor, men, and people from black and minority ethnic communities are more effected). The remedy lies in changing social behaviour and experiences rather than medical intervention.

2.7. The legacy of COVID-19

A Deloitte UK article by Rebecca George & Ed Roddis (2021) identifies a number of **legacies of the covid pandemic for the public sector**. With direct relevance to co-creation and co-production, the authors point to the high pressure environment in which the lines between organisations and sectors became blurred in the public interest. They suggest that as the

crisis subsides, governments will be able to reflect on where public bodies excelled and where other sectors were effectively deployed to deliver the best outcomes. Insights will have been gained into how the public sector can respond to social and economic challenges by working with a broader eco-system of partners, collaborating and investing together.

Specifically in relation to local councils in the UK, Codrina Cretu (2020) argues that COVID-19 has accelerated the shift towards new operating models – away from a conception of local government as a delivery system towards one which sees it as a key player in a local system that creates the conditions for people and place to flourish. Changes in the way in which councils operate have included greater collaboration between local authorities other public sector bodies, citizens and the voluntary and private sectors. There has also been greater sharing of decision-making and the lending of more trust to citizens and communities. The distribution of more power to staff to deliver has also been a feature in many councils.

Trui Steen and Taco Brandsen (2020) address the relevance of co-production under COVID-19 and argue for the need for co-production initiatives to persist beyond the pandemic. Citizen involvement has been boosted by the COVID-19 crisis and co-production is more evident. Public health policies have functioned only because citizens have massively and voluntarily chosen to co-operate. This they contrast with the tendency in public debate to emphasise the strength and role of the state, central leadership and scientific expertise.

Priyanka Sharma's study of co-creation in India in the context of COVID-19 makes clear the relationship between co-creation and IT developments (2021). Social exchanges, mutual value creation and innovation are intertwined and the impact of technology has transformed the way markets function, making technology-enabled value co-creation an area for academic and practitioner enquiry. She asserts that different customer- and firm-side enablers can be combined and managed at two levels of service co-creation and value-based sustainable service outcomes. Thus, the investigation of the transition from co-development to co-evaluation of services can aid in developing agile strategies and addressing service innovation for business sustainability.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities and marginalisation in health and social care practice and policy (Beresford et al 2021). Co-production is identified as a key alternative approach, a process through which inequalities are acknowledged and addressed. It is about bringing together citizens, communities, patients, and/or service users with those working in public services, and attempting to form equitable partnerships. The point is made that co-production is not merely involving citizens, communities, patients, and/or service users once important decisions have been made by those who traditionally hold power, but rather is a way of these groups making meaningful contributions to the setting of the agendas.

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the complex interdependence of our social system. David Grizzle et al (2020) point to the need for a networked approach in responding to the pandemic. In their study of a U.S. city's response by evolving and expanding administrative and organizational networks, the authors stress the need to recruit diverse participants and then sustain the network through continued engagement. Whilst the argument for networks is strong, they point out that building and sustaining them is challenging.

Yeo and Lee (2020) argue that the successful pandemic response in South Korea is attributable to a nationwide whole community co-production among multiple actors, including government, various industries, sectors, jurisdictions and even individual citizens, within and across relevant public service and public policy domains. The authors point out that existing literature categorises co-production into two groups - state actors and lay actors. But in an emergency situation such as COVID-19 the boundaries of co-production should be flexible as the crisis may affect all segments of society. In response to the flexible and wider scope of who co-produces what public services, the authors suggest a new theoretical framework, 'whole community co-production'. This would increase the applicability of the concept of co-production in public administration studies by combining the whole community approach widely used in the fields of emergency management and public health. This study defines whole community co-production as the full engagement of the entire societal capacity to transform relevant and interlocking public services to minimize damage from emergencies and to build resilience.

3. Conclusion

This short review has identified a number of themes in the academic treatment of the public management responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: league tables and specific country responses, the role of citizens and mutual aid, the impact of culture and public administrative traditions and the effect on public sector managers and professionals. In terms of the legacy of the pandemic in relation to future public administrative paradigms, co-production/co-creation are being identified as alternative approaches well placed to address today's turbulent times.

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