

Public Value Co-Creation in Public Services: A multiple case study in Flemish local government

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Introduction

As we show in a recent literature review (Acar, Steen & Verschuere, *working paper*), co-production and co-creation in public services have increasingly been studied by scholars over the past two decades (Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). The involvement of service users in the delivery of public services, referred to as co-production, has been studied within public administration for a few decades (Brudney 1984; Ostrom 1996). More recently, co-creation, has become topic of academic research as well (Brandsen and Honingh 2018). These endeavors highlight the growing interest of government at different levels to involve citizens in public service design, implementation, delivery and evaluation (Ansell and Torfing 2021). Ultimately, this constitutes new forms of democracy (Capolupo, Piscopo, & Annarumma, 2020). Not exclusively, these new forms of democracy are expected to foster trust amongst public and private actors, improve service efficiency and improve democratic governance (Bell, Mullins, Herd, Parnell, & Stanley, 2021; Bovaird, 2007; Fledderus, 2015a).

We define public service co-creation broadly as “a process through which two or more public and private actors 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 [. . .], or services” (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019, 55). Opting for this definition allows us to explore different cases in which the involvement of citizens in public services goes from early commissioning and planning phases to later delivery and evaluation phases. Whereas some authors conceptually limit co-creation to these early stages incorporating an element of planning and understand co-production to be limited to the delivery phase of public service provision (Brandsen and Honingh 2018), we understand co-production to be a form of co-creation. For the sake of clarity, we will thus use the term ‘co-creation’ to denote co-production, but also co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, co-assessment and many others term surrounding the co-paradigm. This broad conceptual approach allows us to explore different instances of co-creation within a similar context, being Flanders.

Over the last decade, the scholarly literature has conceptualized the outcomes of participatory processes, especially co-production and co-creation in terms of public value enhancement or obstruction (Jaspers and Steen 2019; Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Bryson et al. 2017). Recent theoretical work has further developed existing typologies (eg. Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017) to link types of co-production with categories of public value creation (see McMullin 2023). Empirical works, on the other hand, have added to our understanding of outcomes of co-creation in specific contexts. Moreover, a case study by Fledderus (2018a) has explored trust in co-created employment services, another case study by Levasseur (2018) has explored accountability in childcare. Most empirical works are single case studies (Acar, Steen & Verschuere, *working paper*). And while these can study a specific public value (see above mentioned) or multiple public values (eg. Loeffler and Bovaird 2020a; Jaspers and Steen 2020) as outcome(s) of co-creation, these cases only allow for an in-depth analysis of co-creation outcomes within a single context. Only a few works have compared and contrasted the outcomes of co-creation across different cases. These undertakings are often limited to one specific policy domain, such as water (Allen, Walnycki, and von Bertrab 2017), social services (Flemig and Osborne 2019), waste management (Ezeudu et al. 2021) or environment (Hofstad et al. 2022). Only three works on the outcomes of co-creation that we know of, aim to gain insights across different policy domains (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Bovaird 2007).

In this paper, we aim to further advance the field by means of an exploration of the outcomes of co-created public services across different policy domains. Additionally, linkages between governance context and project characteristics will be explored in relation to outcomes of co-creation in terms of public value enhancement/obstruction as well. We will do so by comparing and contrasting what public values are impacted in two embedded cases of co-creation in Flanders. Our main research question is the following:

RQ1. What public values are enhanced/obstructed through public service co-creation?

As systematic research into the outcomes of co-creation in public services is growing, this empirical exploration allows for further theoretical harnessing of various factors that might contribute to public value enhancement or obstruction through co-creation. As stated, this research paper aims to explore the outcomes of co-creation and the context in which it occurs. By means of empirical exploration, policy domain, project characteristics and (local) governance context are thoroughly examined. In this way, linkages between public value enhancement/obstruction through co-creation on one hand, and context variables on the other hand, are further explored. We will do this by means of three sub-research questions:

RQ1.a. Are public value outcomes of co-creation determined by policy domain, and if so, how?

RQ1.b. Are public value outcomes of co-creation determined by local governance context, and if so, how?

RQ1.c. Are public value outcomes of co-creation determined by project characteristics, and if so, how?

We believe this research advances the field for at least two reasons. Firstly, as research into the outcomes of co-creation is growing, the need arises to systematically explore what factors might contribute to public value co-creation/obstruction. Second, recently governments have sought new ways to include citizens in public service provision (Ansell and Torfing 2021), assuming this leads to ‘better’ services (Dudau, Glennon, and Verschuere 2019), but is also believed to enhance the democratic quality of governance (Verschuere, Brandsen, and Pestoff 2012) and the relationship between (local) government and citizens (Baines et al. 2022). Because of these assumptions, involving citizens to commission, design, deliver and assess public services is becoming more common (Loeffler and Bovaird 2020b). This research will allow to empirically assess the assumptions on which co-creation is implemented. In the following section, we will further elaborate theoretically on public value co-creation/co-destruction on

the basis of the existing literature. After which we will disclose our methodology to introduce our cases and data collection and analysis methods. Thereafter, we share our results before concluding with some limitations, and a few points for academics and practitioners.

Public Value Co-Creation

The earliest contributions to the scholarly literature focused mostly on outcomes in terms of efficiency and effectivity (Anderson and Clary 1987; Brudney 1984). Academics have showed a growing interest in the outcomes of co-creation over the last two decades, and expanded the scope of outcomes they study. First, outcomes related to the service were expanded. Scholars looked further than efficiency and effectivity, and also studied quality and service innovation amongst other things (Bovaird 2007). Later work, also mentioned possible positive outcomes in terms of the relationship between citizens and (local) government (Tsai 2011) and the democratic quality of governance (Verschuere, Brandsen, and Pestoff 2012). Simultaneously, the outcomes of co-creation are theorized on in terms of its capacity to enhance public value (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). More recent endeavors, such as Farr (2016); Bryson et al. (2017); Jaspers and Steen (2019), have further developed this public value capacity and linked it to the enhancement of specific public values.

These latter type of works have researched the impact of co-creation on public values such as trust, equity and equity. Nevertheless, consensus seems far of as to whether co-creation enhances or obstructs certain specific values. For example, some studies found that co-creation enhances trust (eg. Bentzen 2022), equity in service delivery (eg. Xu and Tang 2020) and service access (Farr 2016). However, according to Kang and Van Ryzin (2019) co-creation does not have a significant effect in enhancing trust. Similar instances of co-destruction rather than co-creation are reported in terms of equity in service delivery (eg. Flemig and Osborne 2019). Based on a recent literature review (*working paper*), the authors have been able to distinguish three categories of public values that can either be enhanced or obstructed. These categories are the following: 1) service; 2) relationship; and 3) democratic quality. The service category holds specific public values related to the service in-itself, such as efficiency and effectivity, but also quality, service innovation, mobilization of resources and sustainability. The relationship

category holds public values related to the relations between (local) government and citizens, but also amongst (groups of) citizens, such as trust, civic education and learning, consideration of needs/values and responsibility. The last category holds values related to the democratic quality of governance. These latter include accountability, empowerment, inclusion and ownership. A full overview of the public values can be found in the table below.

Service	Relationship	Democratic Quality
Access	<i>Civic education and learning</i>	Accountability
Certainty	<i>Consideration of capacities</i>	<i>Empowerment</i>
<i>Effectiveness</i>	<i>Consideration of needs</i>	Equity in service delivery/outcomes
<i>Efficiency</i>	Impacting working conditions of civil servants	<i>Inclusion</i>
Mobilization of community resources	Individual freedom	Integration
<i>Quality</i>	Power relations	Legitimacy
<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Reciprocity</i>	Ownership
Service diversity & innovation	Responsibility	<i>Participation</i>
<i>Sustainability</i>	<i>Trust</i>	<i>Social capital</i>
		Social cohesion
		Transparency

Source: Acar, Steen & Verschuere (*working paper*), adapted from *Jaspers & Steen (2019)*.

Informed by recent research (McMullin 2023), we highlight that different types of co-creation (in this work: different projects) might lead to different outcomes; yet, attaining positive effects is also an act of balancing as certain public values might not be affected (positively), while others are (Loeffler and Bovaird 2020a). Public values are thus interrelated, generating complex causal patterns. Additionally, continuous facilitation seems to be important for the attainment of positive outcomes (Bentzen 2022). Lastly, the policy domain in which the co-creation occurs might also influence the outcomes thereof. Moreover, earlier work has mentioned differences in outcomes of co-created services according to policy domain by means of a vignette study (Fledderus 2015). A more recent contribution highlighted

that the opportunities to co-create and likelihood to arrive at positive effects depend on policy domain (Straussman 2020).

Conceptual framework

We have developed a conceptual framework that will be explored empirically by means of a multiple case study. Before turning to our methodology, we will first elaborate briefly on this framework. On the one hand, governance and project characteristics as well as policy domain are identified as possible contributing factors. Within each of these categories, a few indicative references are added for each of the factors. A small note on *nestedness* is offered. This is then linked to our categorization of effects in terms of service, relationship and democratic quality, on the other hand. We have chosen to disregard individual characteristics at this point in the research. Not as we deem them trivial. Rather, this research is explorative in nature and aims to capture the broad array of public values that can be impacted through co-creation; it is thus not driven by a need to arrive at general conclusions regarding the outcomes of co-creation and specific individuals. Below, we first offer an overview of our independent variables (in terms of governance context, policy domain and project characteristics) and our dependent variables (in terms of public value outcomes at the service, relationship and democratic quality levels).

Governance Context

- Size of municipality (Ngo, Edelenbos, and Gianoli 2019; Hue and Tung-Wen Sun 2022)
- Experience with CP/CC
- Demographics (Brandsen 2020)
- Ruling coalition and (non-)support for participation (Junius et al. 2020; Liao and Zhang 2012)
- Civil servant (non-)support for participation (Liao and Zhang 2012; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022)

Policy domain

- Salience and complexity (Neshkova 2014; Van Eijk and Steen 2016; Li et al. 2021)
- Nature

Project characteristics

- Project design
- Involved actors
- Tasks
- Role of professionals (Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2017)
- Role of external stakeholders
- Expectations and ambitions

Nestedness?

Do, and if so, to what extent, are these factors connected and enhancing or obstructing the momentum necessary for participative governance in the form of co-creation? Does a specific combination of factors above generate more/less positive (perceived) effects of co-creation initiatives?

(Perceived) Effects: Service

- Efficiency (Loeffler and Bovaird 2020a; Jaspers and Steen 2020)
- Effectiveness (Buntaine, Hunnicutt, and Komakech 2021; Liu, Wu, and McEntire 2021)
- Quality (Meriluoto 2018; Rêgo, Teixeira, and Da Silva Filho 2019)
- Satisfaction (Fledderus 2015; Amorim Lopes and Alves 2020)
- Sustainability & (un)certainity (Jaspers and Steen 2020; Bell et al. 2021; Fledderus, Brandsen, and Honingh 2015)
- Access (Allen, Walnycki, and von Bertrab 2017; Farr 2016; Lwembe et al. 2017)
- Mobilization of community resources (Bovaird 2007; Ezeudu et al. 2021)
- Service diversity & innovation (Lindsay et al. 2021; Brix, Krogstrup, and Mortensen 2020)

(Perceived) Effects: Relation

- Civic education, self-development and learning (Ezeudu et al. 2021; Lindenmeier et al. 2021)
- Trust (Fledderus 2018b; Kang and Van Ryzin 2019; Sudhipongpracha 2018)
- Consideration of needs (Cerdan Chiscano 2021)
- Consideration of capacities (Tsai 2011)
- Reciprocity (Lindenmeier et al. 2021)
- Individual freedom (Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen 2020)
- Impacting working conditions of public service workers (Tuurnas, Stenvall, and Rannisto 2016)
- (In)dependencies (Loeffler 2021)
- Power relations (Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016; Steen, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2018)
- Responsibility (Steen, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2018)

(Perceived) Effects: Democratic quality

- Participation (Bovaird 2007; Bell et al. 2021)
- Empowerment (Hjortskov, Andersen, and Jakobsen 2018; Jo and Nabatchi 2018)
- Inclusion (Strokosch and Osborne 2016; Cornet and Barpanda 2020)
- Social capital (Mees, Crabbe, and Driessen 2017; Jaspers and Steen 2019)
- Accountability (Levasseur 2018; Tuurnas, Stenvall, and Rannisto 2016)
- Ownership (Bentzen 2022; Sudhipongpracha and Wongpredee 2016)
- Equity in service delivery/outcomes (Jakobsen and Andersen 2013; Allen, Walnycki, and von Bertrab 2017; McMillan, Spronk, and Caswell 2014; Xu and Tang 2020)
- Integration (Strokosch and Osborne 2016; Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2017)
- Legitimacy (Ellery and Ellery 2019; Meijer 2016)
- Flexibility in decision-making (Bovaird 2007)
- Social cohesion (Kumar 2019; Tu 2018)
- Transparency (Ostling 2017; Loeffler 2021)

Methodology

In order to investigate the co-creation landscape in Flanders, two embedded cases will be explored (Yin 2014). These cases will be subjected to a within case and between case analysis, in order to explore our three types of independent variables (governance context, policy domain and project characteristics). For each of our cases, four subcases will be selected. In order to answer each sub-research question, a specific set of cases will be used. There are, for example, multiple health- and social care projects, across different municipalities, allowing to study public value co-creation within one possible policy domain across different governance contexts (small *vs.* large municipality, experience *vs.* non-experience with co-creation, continuous facilitation *vs.* discontinuous facilitation...). Below, we disclose our research design, as well as our methods for data collection and analysis below.

Research design & empirical context

Our research aims to add to the expanding literature on the outcomes of co-creation. It adds to the growing body of systematic research, while also being explorative in nature in the sense that it seeks to further our understanding of possible linkages between factors and outcomes (sub-RQs). A multiple case study allows for an in-depth study of different co-creation projects at the local level within one

regional context (Flanders). In total, 8 cases are thus selected following a most similar design procedure for the embedded cases. In this way, the researchers are able to ensure variety in governance context, policy domain, and project characteristics while also ensuring comparability.

Our first case, is a citizen budget case in one of the main Flemish cities (Ghent). The local government has decided to award a substantial amount (€6.000.000 in total) to co-creation projects in different neighborhoods within the city. In two waves, respectively 11 and 14 neighborhoods will receive funds to realize their projects. The Ghent Neighborhood Budget runs from 2020 through 2025. Projects can be proposed by citizens, civil society organizations and local entrepreneurs on an online platform. Thereafter, citizens from the neighborhood can vote on their favorite projects. After the most popular projects have been selected, plans are made to realize the projects. For this, the city does not only provide funds but also a neighborhood coach who facilitates the realization. Additionally and depending on the neighborhood, street level professionals are also helping with the realization of the projects. Resources from both public and private agents are shared with the aim to enhance public value for the neighborhood (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019). Projects have to be realized within two years; however, the COVID-19 crisis spurred the local government to include a policy allowing for a break of maximum one year. This means that all projects have to be realized within a maximum of three years after approval. Approval of the first wave projects happened in august 2021. All four of our embedded cases are first wave projects. We selected projects to ensure diversity in policy domains, while keeping local governance context (Ghent) and project characteristics (citizen budget) constant. Our aim with these four most similar cases is to explore the linkage between policy domain and public value outcomes of co-creation, which we believe is possible as project characteristics and governance constant are kept constant. Our four embedded cases for the Ghent Neighborhood budget can be found below in table 4. Apart from answering our main research question, we will also answer RQ1.a. (policy domain) with this set of embedded cases.

Sub-case Neighborhood Budget Ghent	Policy domain
NBG1 Caring Ant (De Zorgmier)	Health
NBG2 Community Center Bernadette (Buurthuis Bernadette)	Social services
NBG3 Safe Canal-villages (Verkeersveilige Kanaaldorpen)	Mobility
NBG4 Kayak Sharing (Kajakdeelsysteem)	Recreation

Table 3. Embedded cases and independent – Neighborhood Budget Ghent

Our second case, Caring Neighborhoods (*Zorgzame Buurten* in Dutch) is a subsidy distributed by the Flemish Government to local governments for the co-production of (social) care initiatives. The project itself follows the principle of ‘learning by doing and doing by learning’ and allows local governments to finance projects that are directed towards enhancing neighborhood/municipal quality of life and sense of community, foster inclusion and are publicly available to all citizens in that neighborhood/municipality. The projects are intended to further bridge formal and informal care. Local authorities or third sector organizations could apply for the funding of their projects. From March 1st, 2022 until February 29th, 2024, 133 projects will be carried out. The co-creation is constituted by the inclusion of citizens as co-producers of informal care surrounding the principle of ‘doing small things for others’ (*“het kleine helpen”*). Reiterating Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland (2019), different public and private actors share resources (time, knowledge, expertise) to enhance neighborhood care. Most projects co-design solutions for (elderly) loneliness, gather resources to provide informal care and aim to foster social cohesion by focusing on mutual action. As these 133 projects occur in different contexts (size of municipality, support for participation, demographics, role of professionals...), we believe this case offers the opportunity to compare and contrast (perceived) effects across a variety of governance contexts (size of municipality being the main factor of difference; yet, this is closely related to capacity of local governments – in Flanders, large cities, such as Ghent, have dedicated civil servants organizing and facilitating participation, while smaller municipalities often combine, for example, their communication and participation services in a small team), as policy domain (health and social services and project characteristics remain constant). Our four embedded cases for the Caring Neighborhoods project can be found below in table 4. Apart from RQ1, we will also answer RQ1.b. (governance context) based on these embedded cases.

Sub-case Caring Neighborhoods	Governance context – population and dedicated participation services (Y/N)
CN1 ‘Bridging’	Ghent (263.492) - yes
CN2 D’Opperstraat	Liedekerke (13.651) - no
CN3 OkzO	Halle (41.284) - no
CN4 Gazometerwijk	Sint-Niklaas (80.124) - yes

Table 4. Embedded cases and independent – Caring Neighborhoods

In order to research RQ1.c. (project characteristics), the Caring Neighborhoods case CN1 ‘Bridging’ will be compared and contrasted to the health and social services projects in the Ghent Neighborhood Budget case (NBG1 & NBG2).

Data collections & analysis

The data collection constitutes of gathering relevant documents (regulations, press announcements, reports and evaluations) and conducting interviews with relevant stakeholders. Relevant stakeholders identified belong to three groups: political actors, civil servants and citizens. Within each of these groups, we find diverging profiles: from (engaged) mayors to aldermen, managers to street-level professionals and both participating and non-participating citizens. Our goal is to interview at least one person for each of these categories in all of the cases, more citizens will be interviewed. We started interviewing civil servants that were actively involved in the facilitation of the different projects after our initial document analysis. This allows us to further expand our case knowledge without sacrificing possibly precious time with often harder to reach citizens. These were most often followed by observations during the projects, after which citizens were interviewed. Political actors were interviewed in light of the timing of the projects (we wanted to interview political actors when the project was well underway, in order to be able to discuss public values as outcomes of these cases).

For each of the projects, facilitating civil servants and street level professionals were selected on the basis of their involvement. We opted for civil servants in a more managerial role, as well as civil servants who were concerned with facilitation (neighborhood coaches in Ghent, for example) of the projects. Regarding political actors, we interviewed the aldermen responsible for citizen participation within the municipality. Where possible, we also interviewed mayors. With regards to citizens, we selected them on the basis of their commitment within the project. We interview citizen leaders, who initiated the project or actively help realize the project, and the citizens who were taking part in the project as in being recipients of the co-created services. Our interviewee selection was as follows: starting with facilitating civil servants, we gained more insights into the project itself. This was coupled to a first observation of the case, in which we approached the citizen leaders and invited them for an interview.

This would then be followed by a second (and possible third) observation. On these occasions, other citizens were recruited.

Our interviews were structured based on our conceptual framework. All civil servants were asked the same questions. In a first of two parts, questions surrounding contributing factors were asked. These concerned the experiences of the interviewee within the performed role, the bureaucratic organization of the project within the municipality, the political support for participation (or lack thereof) within the municipality, as well as possible earlier experiences with co-creation, amongst others. Only then we moved to the second part, asking the interviewee about expectations and ambitions surrounding the project, what of these were attained and what may be the explanations therefore. From this, we presented our list of public values within each of the different categories, and allowed for a discussion based on that to allow us to identify specific public values that were impacted through the co-creation. This second part was similar for political actors and citizens, but the first part was different. Political actors were asked about their role within the commissioning of these co-creative projects, while citizens were asked about their role within the design and delivery of these co-creative projects. We believe this choice is valid as for the citizen budget case, the role of political actors was formally restricted to the decision of organizing such a citizen budget; while, for the caring neighborhood case, project commissioning was formally done by the political actor interviewed (in 3 cases in partnership with the social welfare organization of the municipality) who did not further get involved in the following stages (design, delivery) of the project.

These interviews will be analyzed using NVivo and coded on the basis of our conceptual framework. Nevertheless, our coding might evolve as we conduct our analysis. Our conceptual framework is used to guide the exploration of public value outcomes in co-creation project across Flanders, but non-exhaustive.

Analysis

Data collection and analysis currently ongoing.

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