

Trui Steen
KU Leuven

Taco Brandsen
Radboud University

Coproduction during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic: Will It Last?

COVID-19 Viewpoint

Abstract: *Coproduction is flourishing under COVID-19, but can we expect it to last? Most likely, in post-COVID-19 times, people and institutions will easily slip back into business as usual. This essay addresses the relevance of coproduction under COVID-19 and argues for the need for coproduction initiatives to persist well beyond the pandemic. The conditions that made coproduction emerge are likely to change as emergency regulations and funds are abandoned and the sense of urgency disappears. Areas of public life where there could be a more lasting effect are those where the basic conditions for successful coproduction are already in place and only a push was necessary for coproduction to take off. These conditions include basic commitment, complementarity, and supportive regulative frameworks, all of which can be sustained beyond the crisis with targeted choices and sufficient support.*

Citizen involvement has been strongly boosted by the pandemic. The demand for public services has increased so suddenly and dramatically that governments cannot but rely on citizens to coproduce, from adhering to social distancing policies and providing informal care to producing medical and other goods that help prevent the spread of the pandemic and lessen its social and economic effects. Coproduction is perhaps more evident than it ever was: public health policies function only because citizens have massively, and voluntarily, chosen to cooperate.

The public debate tends to emphasize the strengthened role of the state, central leadership, and scientific expertise—but this is one-sided. It is definitely true that state power has grown, at the expense of individual freedom. Pessimists predict that recently imposed measures may stay in force well beyond the pandemic. *The Economist* (2020) spoke of “a pandemic of power grabs” in places where democracy was already weak. Yet, at the same time, central governments have never been exposed as more powerless and more dependent on their citizens. Despite the general yearning for strong leadership, the more decentralized systems of public service delivery appear to have acted more effectively. Furthermore, governments have proved utterly dependent on citizens, not only because of compliance with top-down directives, but also because of the many spontaneous, bottom-up initiatives that have sprung up in parallel, which have kept society functional, or at least bearable.

But what if the crisis turns out to be prolonged? New outbreaks of COVID-19 in the middle and long term are feared, with long-term economic and social repercussions. Coproduction initiatives thus will most likely need to be sustained beyond the immediate crisis. Some that stood out during the COVID-19 crisis built on earlier coproduction arrangements; others were newly developed during the crisis. The latter will pose specific challenges for sustainability. It is “critical that sustainability is built in from the beginning” (Brown 2015, 147), but such a question of organizational design was obviously a lesser concern in a crisis context. Therefore, even though coproduction is flourishing under COVID-19, a crucial question is, can we expect it to last?

In this essay, we seek to understand the relevance of coproduction under COVID-19 and its need to persist beyond the immediate COVID-19 crisis. Next, we outline conditions for the sustainability of coproduction to find out how government can support the continuation of citizen coproduction projects it has initiated, facilitate bottom-up citizen initiatives, and even aim for a multiplier effect.

The Relevance of Coproduction in the COVID-19 Crisis

Coproduction: Flourishing under COVID-19

The term “coproduction” finds its scholarly origins in the public sector, in the work of Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom (1996) and other economists from the 1970s who studied collaboration between government departments and citizens, showing

Trui Steen is professor in the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute. Her research interests include coproduction of public services, public sector professionalism, local government, and public sector innovation. Email: trui.steen@kuleuven.be

Taco Brandsen is professor of public administration at Radboud University, Institute for Management Research. His research interests include public services, coproduction, the third sector, and social innovation. Email: t.brandsen@fm.ru.nl

Public Administration Review, Vol. 80, Iss. 5, pp. 851–855. © 2020 by The American Society for Public Administration. DOI: 10.1111/puar.13258.

that effective service delivery was encouraged by collaboration between professional providers and service users, rather than central planning. In the past decades, governments have (re)discovered the citizen as an important actor in the design, implementation, and monitoring of public policies and services (cf. Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018a). Yet during the pandemic, coproduction has received attention as it rarely has before.

In practice, coproduction varies from projects started by professionals in the (semi)public sector introduced top-down to spontaneous bottom-up ideas by citizens. Governments worldwide have used a broad array of communication channels to call on citizens to contribute to limiting the spread of the virus and to protect and support people at risk (OECD 2020). In response, or spontaneously, citizens organized help for neighbors who were obliged to stay indoors; local governments, in turn, used their websites to provide free insurance to those volunteers and to link volunteers to people in need. Parents worked with teachers and their children to provide homeschooling. Indeed, if we interpret the term “coproduction” in Ostrom’s (1996) sense, as a “process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not ‘in’ the same organization,” the entire public health policy of social distancing and other voluntary restraints could be regarded as a gigantic coproduction project. The response to COVID-19 has required individual citizens to adapt to new rules that changed lifestyle patterns at a very basic level. None of the measures could have succeeded without collaboration on the part of citizens, in the face of limited opportunities for enforcement or encouragement.

Why Is Coproduction Important under COVID-19?

To understand the relevance of coproduction during the pandemic, we construct a twofold argument. First, we explain how COVID-19 must be understood as a wicked issue and outline the importance of stakeholder participation and small wins. Second, we demonstrate the significance of citizen participation as part of crisis management in addressing COVID-19.

Addressing Wicked Problems through Stakeholder Participation and Small Wins.

Wicked issues are characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and high impact on society. They bundle multiple and often conflicting aspirations, values, and perspectives of stakeholders. Therefore, they are often contested, with controversy surrounding both problem definition and proposed solutions (cf. Rittel and Webber 1973). COVID-19 quite easily answers the definition of a wicked problem. As with other wicked problems, controversy surrounds many of the measures. The choice of the Swedish government, for example, to focus on awareness raising and to rely on common sense and self-responsibility of its citizens stands in firm contrast with the more paternalistic approach taken by other countries, where all but essential services were closed down and confinement was imposed. The apparent contradiction between health and economic policies and the limited knowledge of the effectiveness of different policy choices feed controversy and debate. In fact, the effectiveness of different approaches is likely to remain contested, even after we have all the facts and figures.

Like other wicked issues, COVID-19 is a problem that is “not amenable to top-down general solutions” (Head and Alford 2015, 713), as society is pluralistic and differences in perspectives

across social groups “confound the possibility of clear and agreed solutions.” Governments thus cannot address this challenge on their own but must employ collaboration across government agencies and with private actors, including businesses, knowledge centers, nonprofit organizations, and organized or individual citizens. This is often masked by a public discourse that stresses top-down leadership and compliance, because in a crisis it is important to suggest a sense of control—but public administration researchers should not confuse this for the reality of governance. As argued by Head and Alford (2015, 712), “while conclusive ‘solutions’ are very rare, it is possible to frame partial, provisional courses of action against wicked problems.” Cooperation increases the likelihood of creating a shared understanding of complex problems, finding and agreeing on provisional solutions, getting solutions implemented, and creating “small wins.” This refers back to Lindblom’s (1979) insight that an effective way of addressing major policy challenges is to rely on incremental steps. From the start of the pandemic, many such “small wins” initiatives have been introduced.

Crisis Management and Citizen Participation. The reliance on voluntary contributions from citizens, whether initiated by professionals or by citizens themselves, contradicts notions that addressing crises relies on top-down, hierarchical arrangements (e.g., Albtoush, Dobrescu, and Ionescou 2011). This will be less of a surprise to those acquainted with the evidence on disasters, because it has been demonstrated that citizens are mostly helped not by public authorities, but by other citizens; that they are, on the whole, quite rational even in extreme circumstances; and that, contrary to this evidence, public authorities usually expect citizens to panic and to require strict top-down guidance (Heide 2004).

Disaster and crisis management agencies, however, may not like spontaneous help by citizens because spontaneous help does not fit their plans and procedures or their organizational frames. In that sense, public administration research, with its inherent focus on state action, has tended to underestimate the resilience of society. Even if it is accepted that crisis management within government must be centralized internally, that does not imply that society can rely only on top-down control for its salvation. Rather, crisis calls for shared responsibility. Moreover, stimulating self-reliance of citizens and making use of spontaneously provided help from (organized) citizens provides opportunities for government to target support at vulnerable citizens who are not able to fend for themselves (IFV 2018). Nor can every crisis be expected to require the same type of response. In the case of the pandemic, top-down control is a dangerous illusion.

The Need for Coproduction to Persist. Virologists and epidemiologists have expressed fears of new outbreaks of COVID-19 in the middle and long term, as it is expected that it will take considerable time to develop a vaccine and make it available worldwide. This implies that behavioral changes and coproduction initiatives will need to persist, at least partly, beyond the peak of the COVID-19 crisis (if, indeed, there is only one peak, as we hope). Moreover, new initiatives will be needed after the pandemic, when attention will be shifting from short-term crisis management and relief to countering the long-term impact of this crisis on the well-being of communities. Governments’ ability to continue and even extend collaboration with other actors in society, including

coproduction with (organized) citizens, is all the more important, not least given the severe cuts that public services have faced and—given the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on public debts—will probably face in the coming years. But how likely is it that the present burst of coproduction will persist, rather than fizzle out?

What Can Research Tell Us about the Sustainability of Coproduction?

Defining Sustainable Coproduction

Jaspers and Steen (2020) address the question whether temporary coproduction initiatives can lead to sustainable outcomes, even after the temporary activity itself has come to an end. This paradox of temporary initiatives that create lasting outcomes provides valuable insights for the questions of what sustainable coproduction means and how the coproduction that emerged from the COVID-19 crisis can be sustained after the crisis—in other words, how not to lose this newfound capacity to address longer-term health, social, economic, and other needs. The authors point out two distinct yet interrelated aspects of sustainability. First, sustainability denotes the sustained effects of the coproduction—that is, reaching the coproduction initiative's goals and sustaining these effects over time. Second, sustainability of coproduction entails the use of coproduction as a means to design, deliver, and evaluate public services being sustained over time. Yet Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers's (2015) and Sicilia et al.'s (2019) literature reviews of coproduction research identify very few studies that examine coproduction from a long-term perspective. Therefore, we turn to the founder of the field, Elinor Ostrom, to provide us with insight on the conditions under which effective coproduction is likely to emerge.

Conditions for Sustainable Coproduction

A first condition that Ostrom (1996) deduced from the empirical evidence is the importance of legislative frameworks that allow coproduction initiatives to take place and to be continued. In a number of cases, the COVID-19 crisis provided a window of opportunity to break through procedural restrictions, opening up options for coproduction. For example, the urgency of the crisis made it possible for schools to loosen restrictions and adapt their teaching programs to fit online teaching and provide parents with access to platforms that helped them support homeschooling. Likewise, many enterprises were quick to loosen their policies on home office work, even when they had strictly opposed it before. Yet a crisis context may increase the need for legislation, for instance, to determine the liability of citizens who provide support but, in doing so, endanger themselves. Szescilo (2018, 138) has cast doubt on the potential of legislation to be a trigger for coproduction, especially for bottom-up initiatives, since “what is not prohibited is permitted” remains the key principle governing citizens' roles within the legal system.” However, he acknowledges that legislation may serve as a useful instrument for the promotion and dissemination of coproduction.

Jaspers and Steen (2020) argue that capacity building for sustained coproduction includes institutionalizing processes. According to their view, this extends beyond the provision of regulative frameworks supportive of coproduction and includes the structural allocation of required (staffing and financial) resources. This is backed up by Cinar, Trott, and Simms (2019), who argue that lack

of financial resources, and uncertainty brought about by lack of long-term funding specifically, hinders the ability of innovations to turn into routine. Unless governments make an effort to *sustain funding and to institutionalize the legal flexibility*, this condition is unlikely to be met.

Second, the contribution of professionals and citizen coproducers should be complementary rather than merely substitutive. If “each has something the other needs” (Ostrom 1996, 1082), each providing their skills, time, and perspective, there is the opportunity for synergy. Parents and teachers collaborating is such an example, in which each offers a different approach to supporting and motivating children (Honigh, Bondarouk, and Brandsen 2020). As schools were closed during the pandemic, parents came to offer something vital the teachers could not: physical presence. The fact that many public services could not be provided at the height of the pandemic obviously changed the equation: the added value of citizens' contributions was the greater for it. Whether that complementarity, and the acknowledgment thereof by professionals, will persist after a return to normal conditions must be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. For instance, there are examples of volunteers helping to disinfect hospitals when medical staff were overwhelmed. The desirability of this will obviously be regarded differently when hospitals return to more regular conditions. Yet in public spaces that are less obviously the domain of professionals, the role of volunteers may turn out to be more permanent.

Third, *incentives* directed toward both citizens and professionals help encourage and sustain coproduction. Closely related to this, Ostrom (1996) finds that *mutual commitment* is needed as well, so that coproducers can trust that if they continue or even increase their input, the other party will likewise do so. Jaspers and Steen (2020) point at the need to sustain the ability, motivation, and opportunity of coproducers, arguing that these conditions are crucial not only for making coproduction occur but also for sustaining it. Likewise, citizens are more likely to engage when they can see the advantage of doing so and it is therefore essential to consider the motivations and capabilities to coproduce (Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018b; Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2018). In a study of partnerships for projects with elderly people, Windle (2008, cited in Brown 2015, 147) similarly finds not only lack of financial resources but also lack of evidence of effectiveness of an initiative and lack of commitment to be major barriers for sustainability. Initially, fear of the pandemic and its consequences are sufficient motivators. This motivation has already decreased. Unless there are more fundamental reasons on the part of citizens to continue coproduction, this condition is unlikely to be met at a later point. At the very least, governments should continue raising awareness on this point, communicating the benefits of both top-down initiated coproduction projects and supporting bottom-up “small wins” initiatives in addressing the long-term effects of the crisis.

Aside from these basic conditions for coproduction to succeed, there are other tricky issues. One concerns responsibilities and rights. *Roles, rights, and responsibilities* of governments, professionals, and citizens change in the process of cocreation and coproduction. Again, the current pandemic offers various examples. In care homes, reliance on long-distance care and assisting robots is likely

to increase, changing the relation between client and care provider. In public life, interactive and tailored solutions designed among citizens emerge alongside solutions that require only passive input from citizens, such as sensor-based technologies that track the movement of infected persons. How this will play out is very much up in the air.

Another issue is the role that *new technologies* will play (Clifton, Díaz Fuentes, and Llamosas García 2020). Although new technologies are often hailed as a driver of coproduction, it is far from certain that they will be. Indeed, the reverse could be true (Lember, Brandsen, and Tonurist 2019). The current COVID-19 crisis shows wide variation in practices. At one end, we see citizens using 3D printing to create face masks and respirator valves, making them direct contributors to (as opposed to only consumers of) public health care. Digital tools have allowed them to reorganize work patterns without help from the state, or even from their own employers. Simultaneously, we see more centralized monitoring and control through data sharing and sensor readings, suddenly legitimate, as concern over public health trumps all other restrictions that normally apply. Technological innovations offer the chance of enhanced efficiency, but once the immediate crisis response has passed, citizens may resist them for fear of losing control over decisions or over their data, rejecting the architecture of decision-making as favoring centralization and control. The response to the pandemic and the discussion over “corona apps” have highlighted the tension between voluntary and forced coproduction, raising issues of surveillance and data protection and sometimes demonstrating rather bluntly that governments remain the dominant partner in such discussions (cf. Whitaker 1980). Which type of application will become dominant remains to be seen. In any case, the discussion does point to the need for policy makers “to find a good balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to digital co-production” (Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018b, 300).

Conclusion

In the highly uncommon and unique situation of the COVID-19 crisis, public service professionals and citizens have engaged in many diverse coproduction initiatives, whether introduced by government or initiated by citizens. This article has applied insights from past evidence on coproduction from public administration research to the pandemic, focusing on the question whether and how sustainable coproduction is realistic.

History has taught us that major societal changes often come about after a crisis (e.g., voting rights after World War I, welfare states after World War II). Yet there are also many examples to the contrary. Based on an eyewitness account of the plague in London in 1665, Daniel Defoe noted that during the worst of the infection, religious conflicts were forgotten and charity was plentiful. However, when the plague started abating, everything went back to normal very quickly, even when thousands were still dying (Defoe 2003). Indeed, despite commonly heard assumptions that “everything will change,” research on past epidemics shows that this is not necessarily true. While it is clear that sharp population decreases and social upheaval as a result of pandemics can change the course of history or accelerate existing developments (Snowden 2019), most likely, in post-COVID-19 times, people

and institutions will easily slip back into business as usual. This is not only because deeply rooted social behavioral patterns are not necessarily changed by a few months’ lockdown, but also because the conditions that made coproduction emerge are likely to change as emergency regulations and funds are abandoned and the sense of urgency disappears.

Many community initiatives are likely to evaporate quite swiftly. The areas where there could be a more lasting effect are those where the basic conditions are already in place and where only a push was necessary for coproduction to take off. An example of this might be the involvement of parents in their children’s education, which has been proven to be beneficial to educational achievement. Of course, the same levels of “homeschooling” will not be sustained (nor would this be desirable), but the heightened interaction between parents and teachers, the greater involvement of parents with their children’s homework, and the swift adoption of digital technologies would easily allow a greater level of coproduction than existed prior to the pandemic. But it will require a deliberate effort on the part of policy makers and staff to sustain it after school returns to normal.

An important lesson for practitioners, therefore, is that in aiming for sustainable coproduction, choices need to be made. A guideline for making such choices, then, is to focus on those fields where the right conditions can be sustained relatively easily in normal times. Providing legislative frameworks where basic commitment is present is going to be more effective than trying to break through procedural restrictions when interdependency and mutual commitment are lacking. Many, probably most, beautiful initiatives we read of are going to disappear as the pandemic dies down. Some may be salvaged.

References

- Albtoush, Reda, Radu Dobrescu, and Florin Ionescu. 2011. A Hierarchical Model for Emergency Management Systems. *University Politehnica of Bucharest Scientific Bulletin, Series C* 73(2): 53–62.
- Brandsen, Taco, Trui Steen, and Bram Verschuere. 2018a. Co-creation and Co-production in Public Services: Urgent Issues in Practice and Research. In *Co-production and Co-creation: Engaging Citizens in Public Services*, edited by Taco Brandsen, Trui Steen, and Bram Verschuere, 3–8. New York: Routledge.
- . 2018b. How to Encourage Co-creation and Co-production: Some Recommendations. In *Co-production and Co-creation: Engaging Citizens in Public Services*, edited by Taco Brandsen, Trui Steen, and Bram Verschuere, 299–302. New York: Routledge.
- Brown, Lisa. 2015. A Lasting Legacy? Sustaining Innovation in a Social Work Context. *British Journal of Social Work* 45(1): 138–52.
- Cinar, Emre, Paul Trott, and Christopher Simms. 2019. A Systematic Review of Barriers to Public Sector Innovation Process. *Public Management Review* 21(2): 264–90.
- Clifton, Judith, Daniel Díaz Fuentes, and Gonzalo Llamosas García. 2020. ICT-Enabled Co-production of Public Services: Barriers and Enablers. A Systematic Review. *Information Polity* 25(1): 25–48.
- Defoe, Daniel. 2003. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. London: Penguin Classics.
- The Economist. 2020. A Pandemic of Power Grabs. April 25.
- Head, Brian W., and John Alford. 2015. Wicked Problems: Implications for Public Policy and Management. *Administration & Society* 47(6): 711–39.
- Heide, Erik Auf der. 2004. In *Common Misconceptions about Disasters: Panic, the Disaster Syndrome, and Looting*. In *The First 72 Hours: A Community Approach*

- to *Disaster Preparedness*, edited by Margaret R. O’Leary, 340–80. New York: iUniverse.
- Honingh, Marlies, Elena Bondarouk, and Taco Brandsen. 2020. Co-production in Primary Schools: A Systematic Literature Review. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 86(2): 222–39.
- Instituut Fysieke Veiligheid (IFV). 2018. *Verminderd Zelfredzamen Ten Tijde Van Rampen en Crises: de Overheid Een Zorg?* [Decreased self-reliance during times of disasters and crises: A public concern?]. Arnhem, The Netherlands: Instituut Fysieke Veiligheid.
- Jaspers, Sylke, and Trui Steen. 2020. The Sustainability of Outcomes in Temporary Co-production. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 33(1): 62–77.
- Lember, Veiko, Taco Brandsen, and Piret Tonurist. 2019. The Potential Impacts of Digital Technologies on Co-production and Co-creation. *Public Management Review* 21(11): 1665–86.
- Lindblom, Charles. 1979. Still Muddling, Not Yet Through. *Public Administration Review* 39(6): 517–26.
- OECD. 2020. *Tackling Coronavirus (Covid-19) Contributing to a Global Effort, Cities policy responses, Working document*. Paris: OECD.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 1996. Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development. *World Development* 24(6): 1073–87.
- Rittel, Horst, and Melvin Webber. 1973. Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences* 4(2): 155–69.
- Sicilia, Mariafrancesca, Alessandro Sancino, Tina Nabatchi, and Enrico Guarini. 2019. Facilitating Co-production in Public Services: Management Implications from a Systematic Literature Review. *Public Money & Management* 39(4): 233–40.
- Snowden, Frank M. 2019. *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Szescilo, Dawid. 2018. Legal Dilemmas of Co-production and Co-creation. In *Co-production and Co-creation: Engaging Citizens in Public Services*, edited by Taco Brandsen, Trui Steen, and Bram Verschuere, 137–44. New York: Routledge.
- Vanleene, Daphne, Joris Voets, and Bram Verschuere. 2018. The Co-production of a Community: Engaging Citizens in Derelict Neighbourhoods. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29(1): 201–21.
- Voorberg, William, Viktor Bekkers, and Lars Tummens. 2015. A Systematic Review of Co-creation and Co-production: Embarking on the Social Innovation Journey. *Public Management Review* 17(9): 1333–57.
- Whitaker, Gordon. 1980. Coproduction: Citizen Participation in Service Delivery. *Public Administration Review* 40(3): 240–6.