



Coping With the Who's, What's and How's of Co-Creation

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Scandinavian Journal of
Public Administration
Vol. 30 No. 3 (2026)
p. 1-16

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.57765>

Keywords:
co-creation;
coping strategies;
local government;
Norway

Abstract

This article argues that public managers aiming to implement co-creation initiatives must find ways of coping with the emerging conflicts that arise from the clashes with traditional forms of governance. In this article we study these coping strategies focussing on who becomes involved (who), what is the value one intends to create (what), and how is co-creation organized (how). The theoretical part of the paper develops a typology of coping strategies covering avoidance, separation, compromise and integration. The analysis of these coping strategies is based on data from a Norwegian research project where a project group has followed nine examples of co-creation over a longer period. The study shows that real-world co-creation struggles to live up to an idealized definition of co-creation, and the concluding part discusses both negative and positive interpretations of this finding.

Practical Relevance

- This article explains what co-creation would mean in practical terms, referring to “who”, “what” and “how”
- The idea of co-creation collides with grounding public sector values, procedures and traditions, and knowledge about such conflicts is essential for public leaders, trying to implement co-creation in their organizations.
- The article argues that even if “pure co-creation” is hard not to say impossible to implement in existing public organizations, the idea of co-creation can still inspire for smaller changes that in sum may have profound effects.

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Article first published as an article in press: April 9, 2026
Article published in Vol. 30 No. 3: September 24, 2026

Introduction

Over the past decade, co-creation has emerged as a widely adopted concept, strategy and model for public governance (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a; Brandsen et al., 2018), not least in the Scandinavian countries. Despite the slight variations in definition found within scholarly literature, the majority of authors align the concept of co-creation with collaborations between diverse actors operating as equal partners, aiming to generate value for all participants (Torfing et al., 2019).

The application of this initially private sector concept (Payne et al., 2008) in the public sector means to generate public value by actively involving citizens, users, and stakeholders in the value-creation process (Brandsen et al., 2018; Røiseland et al., 2024). Creating public value this way have consequences for both the selection of partners which will be capable of realizing a certain value, the definition of the value one intends to realize, and the institutional design of the value creation process. These “who’s”, “what’s” and “how’s” have been described as crucial question any public leader needs to answer during any value creation process (Moore, 1995; Sancino, 2022), while the concept of co-creation depicts a specific type of such processes.

The introduction of co-creation in public service production and societal problem solving has many motives such as the need to mobilize resources, enhance innovation, create joint ownership and enhance democratic legitimacy (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b; Røiseland, 2021; Torfing et al., 2019). Co-creation is a form of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008) that brings together relevant and affected actors in networks and partnerships that contribute to the production of public value.

However, despite the alleged virtues and blessings, co-creation may have disruptive consequences for both public and private actors and for the established forms of organization, leadership and democracy in the public sector (Acar et al., 2023; Andersen, 2020; Bisschops & Beunen, 2018; Pestoff, 2018). Creating value by co-creation poses challenges for public leaders, both administrative and political (Aagaard, 2024). At the societal level, we cannot ignore that the introduction of co-creation carries the risk of malfeasance, corruption, and misconduct, potentially leading to more value destruction than creation (Cluley et al., 2020; Engen et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2022; Røiseland, et.al., 2024). For administrative leaders, co-creation also poses risks. On one hand, leaders cede control to the involved citizens and stakeholders. On the other hand, they are typically still held accountable for the outcome (Ferlie, 2021; Ongaro et al., 2021). The active involvement of citizens, users, and stakeholders may also challenge the established values and protocols among leaders and professionals, potentially leading to unconventional solutions and actions that leaders and professionals would typically avoid (Breimo & Røiseland, 2024; Fox, 2024; Koppenjan, 2024; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018). For elected politicians in a representative system, co-creation also poses risks because involving citizens this way takes away opportunities for “political wins”, which is crucial in a system based in party competition and election, and also because the outcome of co-creation may conflict with party manifestos elected politicians feel committed to (Elk & Regal, 2023; Regal et al., 2024; Røiseland, 2021).

Therefore, conflicts will arise when co-creation is introduced in contemporary public governance. This paper digs into the way local public actors and local public institutions tend to cope with these conflicts. Following our research question in this article can be stated as follows:

RQ: How do local governments cope with the introduction of co-creation initiatives, and how are these coping strategies influencing on the selection of partners (who), the value determination (what), and the institutional design of co-creation (how)?

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section we start by some conceptual clarifications, followed by a brief overview of literature concerning conflicts and possible coping strategies to cope with these. Based on these contributions we develop a four-fold typology of coping strategies as an analytical framework for the following analysis. In section three methods and data is presented. In this paper we use data from nine Norwegian co-creation initiatives, mapped based in document studies and informant interviews. In the subsequent section we analyse these cases to identify actual coping strategies employed. This section is

organized in line with the who-what-how-questions – referring to a) the selection of partners for value creation, b) the determination of value, and c) the institutional design of the process. A final section sums up, conclude, and draw some implications for future research and practice in this field.

Theory

In many Western countries, and among both scholars and public leaders, it is argued that we are witnessing a gradual and ongoing shift in the perception of the role of citizens in public governance (Barber, 2003; Fung, 2006; Voorberg & Bekkers, 2016; Warren, 2009). In recent times, this has often been referred to as “co-creation”, and constitutes part of a larger change, commonly conceptualised as New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010). “Co-creation” is arguably a bricolage of concepts and theories taken from public service management, urban planning and innovation (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018; Lund, 2018).

The word “co-creation” has been applied in many different disciplines and research fields since at least WWII (Røiseland, 2024). When “co-creation” entered public sector research about 20 years ago, it was not least inspired by research on markets and production systems in the private sector, reflecting the idea that value is created in the interaction between a provider and a consumer (Bernhard, 1965; Payne, et.al., 2008). Typical contemporary examples would be tourism, social media, “Web 2.0” and similar types of consumer-producer interactions (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014). The “co” of co-creation indicates that a collaborative process involving different kinds of actors and resources is taking place, while “creation” tells us that something is achieved that would otherwise not have been realised. This “something” is *value*, which in this context has a wide meaning as something useful for the involved and the society as a whole (Benington, 2011; Sancino et al., 2018).

After entering the public sector, the concept of co-creation has developed into something of a fashionable concept applied in many different public sectors and contexts (Brandsen et al., 2018). As with many similar and contemporary words, co-creation has characteristics of being a “magic concept” (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). From a critical point of view, it is difficult to argue the concept itself is labelling something completely new. To the extent anything is new, it must be the apparently willingness among public sector leaders to put these ideas into practice by defining co-creation as an overall strategy of their organizations (Røiseland & Lo, 2019; Breimo & Røiseland, 2021).

“Co-creation” belongs to a family of concepts commonly used to describe more recent trends in governance and public problem solving. Similar or neighbouring concepts include co-production (Brandsen et al., 2018), interactive governance (Torfing et al., 2012), collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008) and social innovation (Voorberg, et.al., 2015). Among scholars, each and every one of these concepts frame their own academic discourses. However, on closer inspection, a significant overlap can be found, where the same authors are moving between different concepts, but still within the same conceptual family. This rather messy conceptual landscape strengthens the need of a clearcut definition of co-creation.

The conceptual choice this article follows is much in line with Torfing (et al. 2019), arguing that co-creation is a broad concept ranging from the co-creation of individual services to more advanced types of collaboration among equal parties. It follows that co-creation can be defined as “a process through which public and private/civic actors attempt to resolve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas” (Torfing et al., 2019, p. 802).

What does this definition imply in relation to the three pronouns mentioned in the title of this article? Regarding the “who”, co-creation means boundary-crossing collaboration among equal partners rooted in different parts of society. While there will be actors from the public sector involved when co-creation is applied in the public sector, these will interact with persons and actors from civil society and/or businesses. The reason why these different actors can be assessed as equal despite their different roots, lies in the assumption about mutual dependency – all actors possess some kind of resources that the remaining actors need in order to reach a common goal. This leads us to the “what” of co-creation. Co-creation is about resolving a *shared*

problem, challenge or task, which can only become real if all involved actors take part in the determination and definition of the goal of the collaboration. Turning to the “how”, co-creation is a process of “constructive exchange” of various resources. Such a process can be institutionalized in different ways, but it must take a form where different actors act on a common institutional level. This means that following the definition above, co-creation cannot unfold within a strict hierarchical context.

Co-creation as described above clearly collides with the type of governance predominating contemporary societies. Regarding “who”, in real life it is more common that the actors who deal with societal challenges and task are rooted in representative democracy, either as elected politicians, or administrative leaders hired by elected politicians (Hendriks et al., 2020). Regarding “what”, the problems, challenges and tasks one tries to solve follows from political party manifestos or protocols among professionals. And regarding “how”, classic hierarchical governance where politics are separated from administration, and where both politics and administration is divided into silos, seem to thrive despite some supplements of neo-liberalism and network governance (Osborne, 2010). No surprise than that the “who”, “what” and “how” related to co-creation will give rise to conflicts when introduced in the public sector.

Conflicts arise when two or more alternatives appear to be incompatible, and the more one attain the first alternative, the less able one is to attain the second (Jaspers, 2021, p. 280). Conflicts may present themselves as competing logics with each their supportive constituency, or as an antagonism where the two poles in the conflict are seen as each other’s enemy, thus making peaceful co-existence impossible (Mouffe, 2013). In the context of co-creation, one such conflict would be between the representative democratic logic, claiming that only elected political representatives are accountable and can make authoritative decisions. This logic conflicts with the inherent logic of co-creation that says that relevant and affected actors should be involved in making decisions that affect their lives (Torfinn et al., 2024). Another example would be the norm that public managers and employees should treat all citizens equally, which conflicts with the inherent idea of co-creation to involve citizens to create needs-based solutions that may vary from citizen to citizen.

Conflicts can have positive as well as negative consequences for organizations. On the positive side it may lead to enhanced creativity, innovation, and higher quality decisions, but conflicts may also end in dysfunctional outcomes as sabotage, reduced productivity, and deterioration of relationships (Song et al., 2006). Most people and organizational members will therefore try to avoid situations ending in negative conflicts and stalemate. There is a wide spectrum of academic literature discussing how actors and organizations can manage conflicts, and the various options actors are faced with. One such example would be Michael Lipsky, analysing the ever-lasting conflict between service needs and available resources among street level bureaucrats. According to Lipsky, street level bureaucrats tend to cope with this conflict by for example ration out their services and try to control their clients (Lipsky, 1980). Another example is the Thomas-Kilmann model for conflict management, emphasizing conflicting actors who, in varying ways are focused about either satisfying their own concerns (assertiveness) or satisfying the concerns of their opponent (cooperativeness) (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). In the following analysis, however, we will take departure in a more tailor-made typology inspired by research on value conflicts in co-production – a research field which is often seen as equivalent to co-creation (Branden et al., 2018).

Our typology covers four basic, possible and substantially different behavioural patterns: *avoidance*, *separation*, *compromising* and *integration*. These four types denote raising levels of ambition when it comes to solving the conflicts between co-creation and established forms of governance.

Avoidance. This is a type of response which is also referred to as *bias*, and which means actors will give preference to values consistent with a broader set of values, at the expense of other values (Jaspers, 2021, p. 282). In a context where there is a bottom line of classic, hierarchical governance including public organizations, this strategy will mean avoiding any conflicts all together by not engaging in co-creation, either explicitly, or more implicitly by filling the concept of co-creation with something less challenging than described above.

Separation. By this strategy the aim is to build *firewalls* (Jaspers, 2021, p. 282) which structurally will separate conflicting values. In practical terms such a strategy will mean to allow for co-creation but keep conflicting governance logics apart in space and time. A typical example would be to organize co-creation in separate, temporary project organizations (Jacobsen, 2022), while the core organization follows a traditional type of governance.

Compromise means to find ways to balance opposed logics within a common system of governance. By this strategy actors create *hybrids* (Jaspers, 2021, p. 282; Jaspers & Steen, 2019, p. 610) by negotiating between different logics and find workable solutions which combine elements that are not fully compatible, for example by allowing oneself, in some specific cases, to deviate from core organizational values, like for example the principle of representative democracy.

Finally, *integration* is not a coping strategy per se but reflects an aim to find creative ways of dissolving the conflict altogether by combining incompatible governance logics in a synergistic way. Integration means to initiate and implement innovative changes that clearly break with former practices (Song et al., 2006), and where classic hierarchical governance and co-creation is transformed into a higher-order type of governance where the tension between the two opposed logics dissolves. For example, if the conflict is between ensuring equal and standardized service quality on one hand, and on the other engaging in needs-based co-creation on the other, the question might become: What does it take to provide the same needs-based solutions to all citizens? (Torfing et al., 2024, p. 52).

In table 1 we have suggested what these four strategies would possibly mean for the *who*, *what* and *how* of co-creation. Avoidance could for example mean reinterpreting co-creation into a tokenistic process where partners are pre-selected and controlled by professionals and political decisionmakers. Separation would typically mean to allow a limited number of partners to unfold in a time-limited project separated from the organizational core. When compromising, one will allow room for adjustments based on inputs from involved partners, but limited to certain politics, and still under professional and political control. Integration would mean engaging in real deliberation with pre- and self-selected partners within the core organization.

Table 1: Suggestions about how coping strategies impact value creation

	WHO?	WHAT?	HOW?
	Selection of partners for co-creation process	The determination of value to be created	The institutional design of co-creation
Avoidance	Pre-selection, tokenistic process	Professional judgement and political decisions	Within “silos”, core organization
Separation	Invite a limited number of partners in a specific field	Framing fixed, but with some room for adjustments	Projects, experiment, limited in time and space
Compromise	Core group pre-selected	Pre-decisions by professionals, room for adjustments by involved partners	In core organization, but limited to some policies
Integration	Mix of pre- and self-selection	Deliberations among partners, ex ante political leadership	Co-creation as core organizational process

Methods and Data

Even though both the idea of co-creation and the term itself has spread across many countries, the Scandinavian countries provide a particularly interesting case for such a study. As so-called Nordic welfare states, they are equipped with vast public resources with a strong tradition for classic public administration, and the public sector can in many cases afford and allow itself to act alone with minor contributions from private actors such as businesses, civil society and citizens. If the driver towards co-creation is rooted in scarce public resources, certainly we

should not expect the Scandinavian countries to be among the most eager to embrace this idea. However, this is exactly what they do, and we find a great interest in the idea of co-creation in this region (Torfing et al., 2019; Røiseland & Lo, 2019). Even if parts of this interest in co-creation may be driven by rhetoric's and organizational fashion, there are also good reasons to expect it is partly grounded in a felt need for building additional capacity to govern effectively and legitimately. And furthermore, there is every reason to expect that introducing co-creation in the Scandinavian public sectors will clash with established forms of governance and management, and that public actors would need to cope with many conflicts when different forms of governance become mixed.

The research project from which data is derived, aimed to study the expectations, challenges and coping strategies employed by local government actors in Norway, in their efforts to use co-creation as a governance tool (Røiseland et al., 2024). Although co-creation arguably is a known practice with a long history in Norway, the term itself is rather new, and it is only recently surged as a strategy for renewing public governance. The idea that public governance could benefit from co-creation clearly collides with the grounding ideas about public governance that so far have dominated the public sector during the last 30-40 years. The main assumption driving the research project was that the current trend towards co-creation in Norwegian municipalities is demanding and challenging for elected politicians, public administrators, and maybe particularly for street level bureaucrats who are caught in the intersection between bureaucratic rule, New Public Management and co-creation.

The nine cases were identified informed by a Delphi-panel of national experts on co-creation (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004; Røiseland & Breimo, et al., 2024). The panellists were asked to nominate municipalities which they considered to have introduced and implemented co-creation as an element in their strategy for governing and serving their local community. Based on these inputs, the research team selected three municipalities which serve as *influential configurations* (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Put simply, the selection of case-municipalities expresses the idea that if co-creation does not make it there, it will not make it anywhere.

When selecting the nine cases of co-creation – three in each municipality – the research team actively searched for variation in policy content (Røiseland, 2024), spanning over functions such as legal authority, service delivery and regulation, represented by three Norwegian policy sectors, as shown in table 2 below: Child Welfare and protection (public authority), Elderly care (service delivery) and Climate policy (regulation) (Breimo, et.al., 2021).

Cases of co-creation

We made extensive document search on the three municipalities' websites to locate any document and initiative we saw relevant in the context of co-creation. Based in documents and interviews with administrative leaders in the three municipalities, we selected nine cases of co-creation. When approaching the nine cases (table 2), informants were recruited first based on their key leadership roles, second based on the so-called snowballing technique where additional informants were identified through advices from previous informants. The case studies were conducted during 2022.

Table 2. Cases of co-creation

Policy sector	Municipality		
	Asker (90' inhabitants)	Bodø (50' inhabitants)	Stavanger (131' inhabitants)
Authority (Child welfare and protection)	1. WELFARE LAB	2. FOYER	3. COLL. CHILDREN
Service delivery (Elderly care)	4. BEBO	5. VIRTUAL HEALTH	6. TOGETHER
Regulation (Climate policy)	7. SEIL - Centre for innovation	8. KRAFT	9. GREEN CITY

Interviews were made in two rounds, as already mentioned, first by interviewing sector leaders in the three municipalities (9 interviews), and secondly by interviewing leading participants in the nine cases of co-creation (33 interviews). Interviews focussed on the who, what and how of co-creation, including questions referring to what co-creation meant for the informant, their motivation for co-creation practices, the felt consequences of a turn towards co-creation, role dilemmas, conflicting organizational demands and democratic bifurcation, and how actors coped with these. The hour-long interviews were recorded and transcribed into text and coded. Appendix A contain detailed information about data sources.

The aim of these initiatives is briefly explained in table 3 in the next section, and more thoroughly in appendix B. The nine cases display a great diversity in terms of participants (who), aims (what), and organization (how). What they do have in common, still, is that they all involve actors outside the municipal organization, and their aim could hardly be reach by public resources alone. In that respect there is every reason to expect some tensions involved in these activities.

When presenting this analysis, we face a trade-off between delivering an in-depth analysis of a few cases and providing a broader, albeit shallower, report encompassing more cases. Although all nine cases have been studied thoroughly, we will prioritise a larger number of cases at the expense of details in the following sections. This choice enables us to cover a diverse range of contexts, both in terms of policy content and institutional settings.

Analysis

In this section we will first explore how these nine cases answered the “who”, “what” and “how”, explained in the theoretical section. In the second part we will relate these responses to the four coping mechanisms developed earlier, in order to conclude on which of the four mechanisms are in play in the nine cases. In between the two parts the reader will find a table summing up the analysis as a whole.

Who

In all the 9 cases there is a mix of public and private partners involved. In some cases, only one municipal unit is involved (f.ex. FOYER), while in most cases the co-creation process involves several units. This means that in most cases co-creation means a mix of both internal and external collaborations.

While we have taken as a theoretical starting point an idealized process starting with the selection of partners, followed by the definition of value and the institutionalization of a process, these cases demonstrate that often the aim (value) is predefined, and comes prior to the selection of partners. For example, when aim (value) has been determined based on professional judgements (f.ex. SAMMEN), there are also professional judgements in play when value partners are selected. This is obviously also the case for initiatives based on imported ideas and innovations elsewhere (f.ex. ‘Virtual Health’), where partners are selected based on the initiators assumptions about which partners can contribute to the value one intends to realize (f.ex. FOYER).

The summing up in Table 3 shows how, as an overall pattern, there is a firm relation between the selected partners (who) and the identification of value (what), independently of which of the two came first. However, not necessarily is there a clear-cut list of partners. The constellation of partners and actors can be more fluid, as is demonstrated in the ‘Green City’ case. In this case there is an organized project group and a reference group. But during the value creation process the involved have also learned how social media is a type of parallel arena in which people outside of those who are formally involved can have significant impact. Therefore, it is not always easy to determine who the participants in co-creation are.

Some of the cases involve legal barriers and obstacles when trying to involve partners in the value creation process. This is not least a challenge in cases where private property owners are involved or one intends to engage a private property developer, and where the legal framework for public procurement limits the extent to which private partners can be freely selected. It is easy to involve a private partner as discussion partner, but as soon as the aim becomes more

specific, it will normally evoke regulations for public procurement. In the *Together* case, where the aim was rather well developed prior to the selection of partners, one was forced to select a very important partner by a bidding process. While public procurements normally mean an ad hoc transaction between the public and a private actor related to a specific product or service, in this case one intends to create a more lasting and deeper relationship within the same legal framework. This challenge has consumed considerable resources and energy among the municipality's legal experts.

The 'Green City' project has been carried out in a municipality where co-creation is defined as an overall strategy, as the municipal master plan clearly states. We were told that this affects the political leaders as they find it much harder to oppose co-creation initiatives, even if they may be much more time-consuming than traditional bureaucratic or political procedures.

Summing up, all the nine cases involve partners outside the municipal organization. But while some, for the most, gather partners from different departments in the municipal organizations, most of the cases gather a wide range of private and civil partners. There are however important limitations as to how partners can be selected. Not least, when value is more or less pre-determined, recruiting private businesses encounters regulations of public procurement.

What

There are different ways of identifying value in these nine projects, and it is not always easy to involve all possible partners actively in the process of identifying value. Two of the projects (KRAFT and Collaboration with Children) are continuations of former projects where value was identified through a process involving many different participants and stakeholders. Taking these preceding processes into account when assessing the cases, it seems like the value has been defined by a larger group of partners.

Other cases involve challenges with potential target groups that cannot be involved easily. One good example is BEBO, the aim of which has been to develop unique housing arrangements for elderly, but where the target group does not exist as an organized group. Here, it was necessary to identify value through a survey to 'future elderly persons' who could potentially be part of the target group. In this case, the shared housing complex will be developed and flats sold in an open market. The link between the informants in the survey and the group which will ultimately reside in the housing complex is therefore less than clear.

A third variant in Table 3 is projects where value is fixed due to the diffusion of innovations and copying of projects from elsewhere. This is the case with 'Virtual Health' and 'Foyer'. In the latter, where the idea is to co-create housing services for vulnerable youth, the idea was adopted from abroad, where one can find more than 1000 similar efforts around the world.

A fourth and final type of value identification is projects that follow from decisions made by elected leaders after case-processing in the municipal administration. In these cases the determination of value follows from professional judgement by municipal staff member. Examples of these are 'Together', which was based on a municipal plan about social housing policy, and 'SEIL', which was established by a municipal council decision.

Summing up, all cases reported in table 3 deviate from the idealized idea of gathering partners to solve a challenge or problem defined by the same partners. In some cases there has been such a process prior to the case we have studied, or for various reasons possible partners do not exist as an identifiable group. In most cases, however, value has been pre-determined by professionals and political leaders.

How

How these nine co-creation initiatives have been institutionalized or organized differs significantly. In some of the initiatives, like SEIL, the main aim is to facilitate the introduction of radical changes to the municipal organization as such, and the initiatives have therefore been organized at the very centre of the municipal organization as a matrix organization, where the aim is to create a flexible framework for innovation and co-creation.

In most other cases, though, co-creation is organized as pilots and project organization, sometimes followed by an aim to integrate the initiative in the core organization at a later point (Virtual Health), and sometimes one tends to see the project as something permanent (FOYER).

A special case in point is Kraft, where co-creation was intentionally organized in the form of a company with shareholders. Here, the organizational form itself was intended as an institutional framework for open collaborative processes, and therefore far from what we normally would associate with a company with shareholders. In this particular case, the different partners have been invited to buy shares at a symbolic price and the shareholders all participate in an annual stockholders meeting, where the board is elected.

Table 3. Summing up main results from analysis

Case	WHO? Main contributor to value	WHAT? Identifier of value	HOW? Institutional framework for value creation process	Type of coping strategy identified
BEBO (arrangements for social housing for elderly)	Two municipal departments, a private property developer, a reference group	Survey to believed target group	Public-private partnership, reference group, workshops	Separation
SAMMEN (social housing for elderly)	A municipal company and department + a private property developer after bidding process	From municipal plan	Public-private partnership	Compromise
Virtual health (home-based elderly care)	Different professionals related to elderly care, regional health authorities	Imported idea	Project-organization and cross- disciplinary team within municipal department	Avoidance/ Separation
SEIL (platform for innovation and learning)	Municipal departments, local businesses, and academia	Municipal council decision	Internal municipal matrix organization	Compromise/ Integration
Green city (umbrella for local climate planning)	Neighbourhoods, citizens, property owners, developers	A socio-cultural analysis followed by collaboration with citizens and stakeholders	Project organization with project groups and a reference group.	Separation/ Compromise
KRAFT (company for climate-friendly city development)	Local government, businesses in the area, voluntary organizations, academia	Collaboration with stakeholders in preceding project	Limited company with partners as shareholders + partnership agreements	Separation
Welfare lab (Centre for innovation in welfare services)	Municipal professionals and vulnerable children/families	Municipal council decision	Project under the municipal welfare department	Compromise/ Integration
Coll. Children (planning process)	Municipal professionals, families and children	Defined by a preceding inclusive process	A planning process with extensive participation from youth/children	Compromise/ Integration
FOYER (housing for vulnerable youths)	Municipal professionals, house owner, employers	Imported idea	A project under municipal department for child welfare	Avoidance/ Separation

Coping mechanism in play

In the section on theory, we developed a fourfold typology of possible strategies to be employed by the public sector to cope with tensions between classic hierarchical governance and co-creation: *Avoidance* (not engaging in co-creation), *Separation* (keep conflicting governance logics apart), *Compromise* (balance opposed logics) and *Integration* (dissolving the tension). The aim in this section is to identify the most dominant overall coping strategy within each of the nine cases, which is also indicated in table 3 above.

There are elements of *avoidance* in two of the cases – FOYER and Virtual health. Even if these are phrased as co-creation, they are heavily dominated by municipal professionals, and they appear to be more internal cross-sectorial collaborations, rather than co-creation as defined above. In both cases one has imported an idea and method from abroad, and the target group has been marginally involved in defining the aim or involved in the running of the project.

Five of the cases contain elements of *separation*. This is most tangible in BEBO, where one has created a partnership led by the private partner, and KRAFT where co-creation is organized in a stock company. In both cases the collaboration among partners is kept away from the municipal core organization. In three other cases there are elements of separation. In the before-mentioned Virtual health and FOYER case, the activity is organized as a project limited in time and space, and the involved professionals are full-time employed in the project, thereby not “disturbing” the core activity in the municipal organization. A similar separation is also present in Green city, where the activity is organized as a project.

Varieties of *compromise* can be found in five of the cases, most clearly in the case SAMMEN. In this case one has organized a partnership with private sector, and one has negotiated rules and regulation of public procurement in order to create a well-working partnership. There are also elements of compromise in before-mentioned Green city, where property owners and private developers are invited to take part in local climate planning.

Since Norwegian municipalities act under a complex set of rules and regulations reflecting a hierarchical type of governance, it is difficult to escape into something completely new. That said, however, there are elements of *integration* in three of the cases, where one tries to exceed tensions by creating something new. In the case of SEIL and Welfare lab, one has created a platform for innovation and learning in the very center of the municipal organization, thereby created a state of discontinuity of the municipal organization. To some extent this is also truth for Coll. Children, where one has developed a radical new type of planning process involving children.

The cases in table 3 is sorted according to policy content, where the three first relate to service delivery and elderly care, the next three to regulation and climate policy, while the last three refers to authority and child protection. As can be seen from the table, it is hard to find evidence for any clear-cut relation between policy context and coping strategies. This speaks against assumptions we made in the theoretical section about *regulation* being a context where co-creation would be easier to introduce.

Conclusion

Summing up, this analysis demonstrates that taking the introduction of co-creation into modern public sector seriously, is no easy task. Comparing what is actually happening in these initiatives with the theoretical ideal type we defined above, it is clear that practical co-creation initiatives tend to resemble less radical and more traditional forms of participation. Neither the selection of partners (who) or the identification of an aim (what) satisfies the ideal definition of co-creation we set forth in the introduction, and while there is a variety when it comes to organizing co-creation (how), in most cases co-creation is not influencing on the core organizational processes. Perhaps this is intended by the involved actors, using “co-creation” as a new, fashionable and “magic” label for types of participation which has a relatively long history in Scandinavian and Norwegian local governments (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Or, it could be an unintended outcome after applying available coping strategies to deal with conflicts following from the introduction of co-creation. In that case the intention is real, but actors are not able to realize these in full.

The typology of coping strategies we developed in the theoretical section, implicitly at least, define *integration* as the ultimate normative goal, where ideas of co-creation become deeply integrated in the system of governance by radical and innovative changes. Such a view point is put forward by several leading scholars in the field (e.g. Ansell & Torfing, 2021a, 2021b). This may be truth at a theoretical level. However, taking a more practical approach, one may wonder if the realization of these ideas is more effectively introduced into public sector by separating them from the core organization. Separation, for example by project organizations (Jacobsen, 2022), will allow actors to employ co-creation in full, and thereby testing to what extent this idea actually is delivering it's claimed potential.

However, one can also interpret the analysis in a different way. In this paper the departing point was an ideal type of co-creation, or “pure co-creation”, which challenges existing ideas and practices, and therefore involves some coping strategies among involved actors. But acknowledging that new forms of governance never replace former practices, but rather are layered on top of older ones (Osborne, 2010), one can argue a different and relevant approach would be to ask the more modest question of to what extent governance processes have become influenced by the idea of co-creation? Assessing practical real-world co-creation efforts against “pure co-creation” is important for analytical reasons, and important for pointing out potentially arising conflicts. But studying to what extent co-creation actually improves public sector invites for questions about smaller and larger changes that in the longer run will develop public governance into something new (Koppenjan, 2024). In other words – claiming that real-world co-creation do not live up to its ideal does not mean the idea as such has failed.

Acknowledgements/Funding

The author wishes to thank Janne Breimo (Nord University), Hege Hofstad (OsloMet) and Trond Vedeld (OsloMet) for their contributions to data collection. The project was funded by Research Council of Norway (Grant #300761).

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Appendix A: Sources of empirical data

Policy sector	Municipality		
	Asker	Bodø	Stavanger
Child welfare and protection (authority)	1. WELFARE LAB – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 4 informants with leading administrative employees.	2. FOYER – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 4 leading administrative employees	3. COLL. CHILDREN – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 2 leading administrative employees
Elderly care (service delivery)	4. BEBO – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 3 leading administrative employees and 2 from civil society and private sector.	5. VIRTUAL HEALTH – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 2 leading administrative employees and 1 member of political committee.	6. TOGETHER – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 4 leading administrative employees and 2 from private sector
Climate policy (regulation)	7. SEIL – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 3 leading administrative employees	8. KRAFT – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 2 leading administrative employees and 1 from private sector.	9. GREEN CITY – Web search – Document study – Interviews with 4 leading administrative employees.

Appendix B: Brief description of cases

Case 1: WELFARE LAB (Asker Municipality): Asker Welfare Lab started in 2013 as a pilot project to test service-design and investment-thinking methods in which the co-creation of ideas, processes and solutions is key. Here, the basic idea is to meet users with complex and persistent problems in a new and different way. The basic idea is to put the individual's unique life situation centre stage, meaning that the municipal service apparatus and its resources must operate as a single coordinated whole, where different yet relevant sectors are required to co-finance measures. Asker Welfare Lab also reflects new expectations to the users. Users are expected to be more active, both in formulating challenges and solutions, as well as improving their own life situation. Users will benefit from more individually adapted measures and a more expedited handling of their case.

Case 2: FOYER (Bodø Municipality): This is a municipal project organization supporting young people towards independent living, learning and work. The goal is to deliver co-created services by offering supported housing, learning, training, counselling, employment support and health-improvement initiatives. Inspired by a similar effort in Scotland (Foyer Aberdeen), Foyer was established to provide assistance and support to young people at risk of homelessness.

Case 3: COLLABORATION WITH CHILDREN (Stavanger Municipality): This is a strategy initiated by the municipality to engage children and at-risk youth in matters related to their lives and well-being. A survey of children in child protection formed the background for the strategy. Having revealed serious problems and challenges, the survey was referred to as a wake-up-call for the child protection services. Our informants describe a strong, sudden urge to improve the municipally provided service. Increasing the involvement of children and youth in vital planning processes was seen as an effective method to improving the services. A strategy entitled 'Collaboration with children' will use both digital and physical platforms to involve youth and children, one of the aims of which is to develop a more accessible professional language to ease communication with children. The goal is also to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into their plans and practices.

Case 4: BEBO – Housing for elderly (Asker Municipality): BEBO is a pilot project that has brought public and private actors together to develop a special social housing concept featuring housing facilities for the elderly. The development of a handbook will provide guidance for the

scale-up of the networked pilot. The social living concept focuses on greater common spaces, shared facilities and neighbour interaction. BEBO thus aims to develop the concept and work out an approach for how to realize such co-created projects across relevant services and with the involvement of the elderly themselves.

Case 5: VIRTUAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT (Bodø Municipality): This is a project aiming to develop new types of services for elderly individuals requiring intensive care. Such users would normally be placed in nursing homes (either permanently or temporarily). The goal of VHD is to replace temporary stays in a nursing home with customized home-based services. This is a type of co-creation where service providers and users collaborate on the design and creation of a new type of welfare service.

Case 6: TOGETHER – Social housing initiative (Stavanger Municipality): This is a pilot project aimed at developing a municipal plot of land into a socially sustainable residential area: a mix of ordinary flats, more affordable housing, co-housing for the disabled, a nursery school and housing for the elderly. The project will be developed according to a ‘gaining by sharing’ principle; a mix of residents, outdoor and indoor meeting places, and co-creation with partners and future residents. The piloting lies both in getting social sustainability to materialize in a concrete residential area together with new ways of combining public property and initiatives with private planning and realization. ‘Together’ will be completed and ready for new residents by 2025.

Case 7: SEIL - Centre for innovation and learning (Asker Municipality): SEIL is an arena for collaboration on future solutions, innovative projects and coordinated implementation for the main municipal programme for implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015). SEIL is also a platform for meetings and courses, mainly to meet the internal demands for the training of leadership and practitioners in co-creation, innovative services and sustainability. This focus is a response to an expressed political goal to foster a cultural and organizational change of practice in the municipality. SEIL offers a crosscutting arena for collaboration in services and societal development, which includes goals regarding collaborative innovation to meet the needs and demands expressed by citizens, conceptualized as a ‘citizenship approach’. SEIL operates in close association with the municipality’s eight local citizen services ‘squares’, and plans to adopt digital service for improved outreach.

Case 8: KRAFT (Bodø Municipality): Kraft is a centre for sustainable societal development working to become a driver for business- and societal development promoting a circular and sustainable future in the city and surrounding region. According to the Kraft website, the centre has a threefold aim: to enhance climate- and nature-friendly change, to increase inclusion in work life and society, and to increase economic value creation. The centre is organized in the form of a company in which a large number of collaborators hold shares but where the leader is on the municipal payroll.

Case 9: GREEN CITY PROJECT (Stavanger Municipality): This is an autonomous foundation and a ‘competence network’ for businesses and organizations concerned with sustainable urban- and regional development in the region. The project operates closely with the municipal Climate- and Environment Department. The municipality has high climate ambitions and is active in several local, national and international networks. Co-creation is being integrated in the municipality, spearheaded by the planning department, and a senior official suggests that ambitious climate and sustainability goals cannot be reached without collaboration with other actors both internal and external to the municipality. Internally, they use climate budgeting to encourage alignment across departments and entities. Externally, interaction with Green City is a core strategic approach. The Green City project focuses on competence enhancement and technical development within area development, buildings, infrastructure, mobility, energy, social sustainability and circular economy. It is concerned with sustainable solutions in a long-term and holistic perspective that ensure predictability.