CO-PRODUCTION

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PARTNERSHIP

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A growing number of practitioners and policy makers use the term "co-production" when they refer to collaborations in the regeneration process. Many of us now frequently use "co-production" in place of "partnership working" without being aware that there are important distinctions in the meanings that these terms have.

This article suggests that the concept of co-production offers a fresh perspective on important aspects of partnership working in regeneration contexts. A number of examples from the SURE Network[1] are used to illustrate how core elements of collaborative regeneration practice can be seen in a new light when looking at them through the lens of co-production. The benefits of using co-production rather than partnership working as the terminology to explain and analyse collaborative processes in urban regeneration are then discussed. This article concludes with a discussion of the implications this concept might have for both policy makers and practitioners.

Introduction

When co-production was identified as a specific concept in the early 1970s, it generated substantial interest in America[2]. Academics and practitioners then suggested that the co-production of public services in areas such as health care, policing, or the management of open spaces could improve service quality and reduce governmental spending at the same time. These suggestions were made at a time when the American government was struggling with severe budgetary constraints and pressures for public sector reform. Today many national and local governments seem to be re-discovering this idea. In Europe in particular, where cities have been hard hit by the economic downturn[3], the structural funds are increasingly focusing on the collaborative generation of services, jobs and enterprise[4].

Reinventing "partnership working"

Contemporary area-based regeneration policy and practice put an emphasis on effective partnership working and an integrated approach towards problem solving. It also includes a strong participative element and emphasises the involvement of local communities in the strategy development and implementation process.

Partnership has been one of the four guiding principles of the Structural Funds since their reform in 1989. In an urban context, the partnership is both horizontal between actors on the ground and vertical, with managing authorities and policy directorates at regional and national level. There are many forms and styles of partnership ranging from collaborative ventures for different agencies and civil society to tackle complex problems

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together, to more institutional approaches in which large public and private agencies determine policy priorities and develop strategy.

While partnerships at their best can be shining beacons of collaborative working, there is widespread scepticism about the capacity of partnership structures to facilitate the sharing of power, risk, capabilities and resources between organisations and across sectors. Smaller organisations in particular, which tend to be closest to the grassroots of communities, lack the capacity to engage with partnership processes, and where they are included at the partnerships table they frequently lack the "clout" to influence the decision making process.

These are just some of the reasons why the term partnership has become problematic – especially in the member States that have been working for longest with these participative approaches[5]. This also explains, at least in part, why we are beginning to use different terms, such as co-production, to describe collaborative practice in urban regeneration. Nevertheless, this shift away from "partnership" and towards "co-production" raises the question of what exactly do we mean by co-production. Furthermore, are there compelling reasons to develop a sharper distinction between co-production and partnership working?

Defining co-production

There are different definitions of co-production. Two of its leading scholars, Victor Pestoff and Tacho Brandsen[6], have worked on this topic for some time and Pestoff gives a simple definition which includes co-production alongside co-management and co-governance.

- *Co-production* refers to an arrangement where citizens produce, at least in part, the services they use themselves. Co-producing citizens do not rely on financial or other inputs from public agencies to develop a new or improve an existing service. However, at the site of service co-production we frequently find public officials providing direct support to citizens, community groups or small non-profit organisations.
- *Co-management* refers to a situation where different organisations work alongside each other to co-ordinate the delivery of a service or project. For co-management to occur direct user or citizen participation is not necessary, but actors from different sectors and organisations use their respective resources to directly contribute in practical ways to the delivery of a specific project or service.
- *Co-governance* is about the strategic planning of a service or a project. Actors from different organisations and sectors determine shared policy priorities and may translate these into strategic plans. Co-governance comes perhaps closest to what many regeneration partnerships are primarily engaged in[7].

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It is important to note that in the development and delivery of every project or service we are likely to find all of these three dimensions to some extent. However, each of these dimensions is distinct from the other. Directly co-producing a service is different from working closely with another organisation to co-manage its delivery. There is also a clear distinction between co-production and co-management, which are directly concerned with the provision of a specific service or project, and co-governance, which is primarily concerned with strategy and policy-making.

Some examples from the URBACT SURE network

To illustrate the different dimensions of co-production and to demonstrate that this concept easily relates to contemporary practice in urban regeneration we now provide some examples from the **SURE** network. **SURE** includes nine medium sized towns, which came together to learn from each other about inclusive socio-economic regeneration strategies. Each partner is at a different stage of development, and in many cases, it is not clear yet to what extent, their Local Action Plans will involve co-production, co-management or co-governance. One of the **SURE** partners, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (DLR), has a long track record of working with local communities and of

supporting the establishment of institutional infrastructures, which enable citizens to participate in the provision, management and governance of local services. Hence, it was relatively easy to identify three examples, which illustrate the different dimensions of co-production in the regeneration process.

Shanganagh Community Garden: An example of Co-production

The Shanganagh Community Garden came about as a result of the development work done by Dave Lawless. Lawless works for the government funded RAPID programme[8], which provides community development staff and project funding for the most deprived neighbourhoods in Ireland. In his role as RAPID Co-ordinator, Dave consulted local residents on whether they would have an interest in developing a community garden on a piece of waste ground adjoining their properties. Despite a muted response from residents living next to the area of land, the municipality improved the ground and provided the basic infrastructure for an allotment, such as fencing and footpaths. Half expecting a very slow take up, Lawless was surprised when requests from local residents flooded in; within a few months, all of the 40 plots had been allocated to local growers. Most of them live directly next to their plots, but some come from a little further away:
"It was absolutely amazing, the response was fantastic. There are families, but importantly many older men who are engaging in this gardening project. That brings so many health and social benefits to them and the community. This is a real success!"

Growers pay for all the equipment and materials needed to cultivate their plot and grow their produce while a social enterprise provides horticultural training. Together they have transformed the wasteland into an oasis where fruit and vegetables are grown and where important social contacts thrive. It is now expected that the garden will be extended to give more residents the opportunity to grow their own produce and, equally important, connect with a rapidly *growing* social network.

This project also reflects a wider and emerging interest in community gardening in Ireland. In neighbouring Dublin, for example, the municipality actively promotes this idea to its citizens across the city[9].

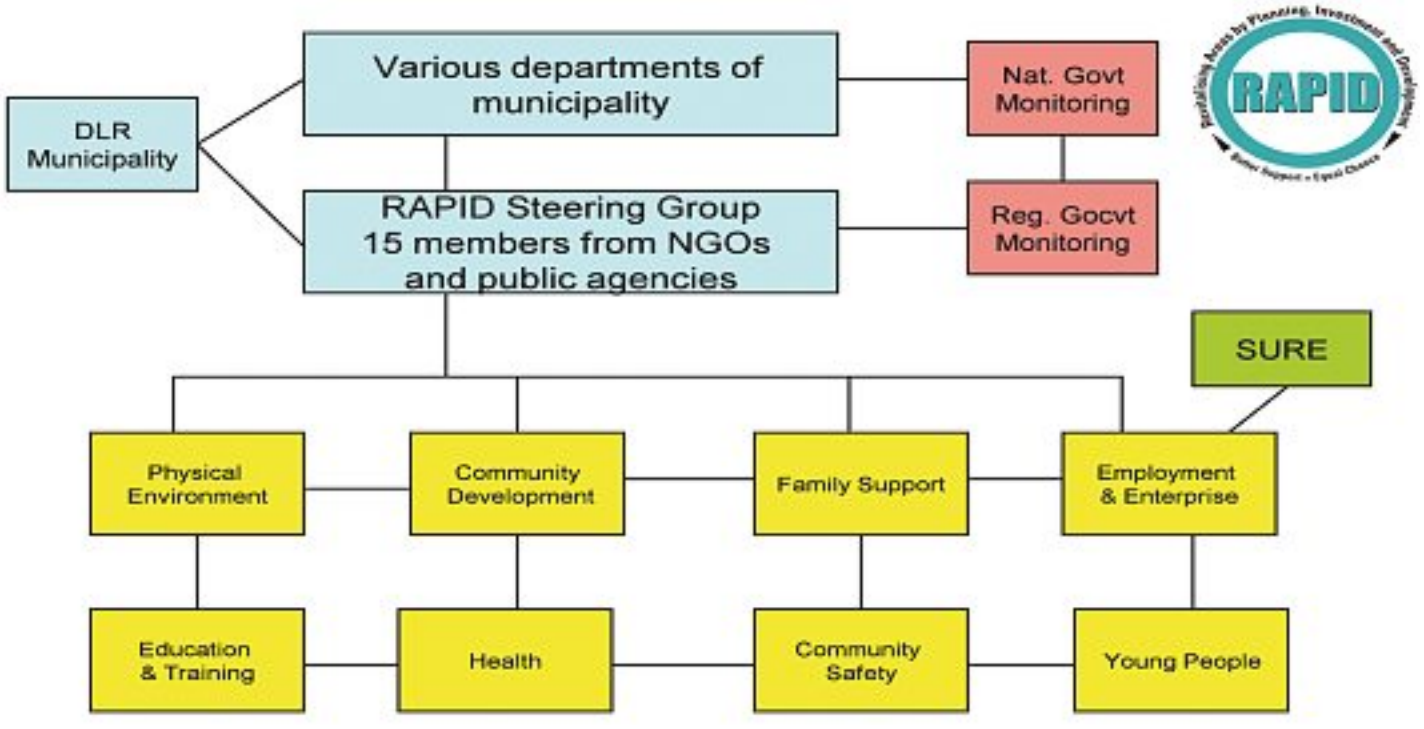
Shanganagh Park House: An example of co-management

Shanganagh Park House is a local community centre, which provides space for several dozen projects and services. The municipality owns the building and contributes towards its running costs. The community groups pay a rent for the space they use which goes towards the payment of administrative staff and running costs of the building. Most of the people you meet in Shanganagh Park House are volunteers. They come to help with the running of crèches for small children, support women who suffer from abuse, or provide sports and educational activities for young people[10].

The management committee of Shanganagh Park House consists of representatives from the non-governmental organisations, which are using the building, local politicians as well as officers from the municipality. They share responsibility for the management of the facility, in particular making sure that sufficient income is generated without curtailing the range of services local people want to see at Shanganagh Park House. While much of this co-management work is routine, there can be very significant joint initiatives. For example, only recently, the municipality raised over €1million to refurbish the premises and the organisations using the building did their part by organising fundraising initiatives to obtain equipment and upgrade their service provision: *"When we started in 1977 everything was done on a shoestring. We had no heating and I used to scrub the bare floorboards every week. I look at the house now and think Shanganagh House is a shining example of what can be achieved when local communities and public agencies work together."* (Member of the Steering Group)

The RAPID Programme: An example of co-governance

RAPID (Revitalising Areas through Planning, Investment and Development) is a national programme in Ireland which operates in disadvantaged urban areas. In DLR, the RAPID programme was established in 2001 to tackle socio-economic disadvantage and social exclusion in two neighbourhoods, which also form part of the **SURE** target area. RAPID is supported by a local co-ordinator, Dave Lawless, who works with eight thematic sub-groups, each prioritising the resources that are available to regenerate the deprived neighbourhoods.



The diagram above shows how local and national government engage with locally determined priorities through the governance structure of the RAPID programme. The RAPID Co-ordinator reports to the Steering Group, which is made up of residents, politicians, non-governmental organisations and public agency representatives. Each of the eight task groups has a similar mix of members and the diagram also indicates how the **SURE** project fits into the overall programme structure. This structure is typical for regeneration partnerships. What makes RAPID different to many regeneration partnerships is that the co-governance arrangement is not focused on a single funding stream or a single issue. As such, the RAPID structure offers itself as a framework through which decisions on a range of funding opportunities and regeneration priorities can be made. Other partnerships, such as the Southside Partnership, which is an umbrella for a large number of regeneration programmes, also use the governance structure of RAPID to determine joint policy priorities and strategy across a range of issues such as health, housing, employment, crime and so forth. Furthermore, the participation of non-governmental organisations and residents is more than just "lip service" – without them dozens of projects, two of which were described above, would simply not come to fruition.

Parallel Production – a problematic approach

Parallel production is when civil society organisations, that are notionally part of the regeneration partnership process, end up "doing it alone" because relations with public authorities are weak. They work in parallel to public authorities while lip service is paid to "consultation" and "participation" and relationships are often solely focused on funding.

The following example comes from a study of three URBAN II programmes[11], which focused on the impact of European Union funding on non-profit organisations, which contribute to the regeneration process. This short case study represents a particularly stark example but sadly reflects regeneration practice found in many cities in Europe.

At the time, the URBAN II programme was being drawn up Youth Enterprise (not its real name) had worked in the neighbourhood for over 25 years, employed 250 staff and was running a wide range of services, largely from the properties it had acquired over time. Youth Enterprise wanted to create a community centre and use the URBAN II grant to refurbish a derelict building that had been donated to them by a private individual. It was very difficult for Youth Enterprise to secure URBAN II funding, despite its staff having significant experience and success in tendering for substantial youth service contracts in the area. Not only because the application process was considered very demanding, there were also criticisms that the project selection and approval process was biased towards the interests of public agencies which dominated the URBAN II partnership:
"The URBAN Steering Committee gave preference to projects put forward by public agencies. ... Very few third sector organizations were given a chance." (Project Officer)

Once Youth Enterprise had secured some URBAN II funding, the monitoring and reporting requirements put significant strain on staff, in part because the organisation had not used European Union funding before. Staff also felt that the programme management team offered very little support both in helping them respond to the monitoring requirements or in dealing with other problems, they encountered in delivering their project:
"The programme manager shows no interest whatsoever in what we are trying to achieve here. They only show up when they have official delegations who want to see an integrated youth training project." (Project Officer)

Officials from the municipality who were responsible for the programme management team, consultants that had been recruited specifically for the implementation of

URBAN II, saw no reason why they or the programme management team should be expected to provide additional support for service providers such as Youth Enterprise:
"I don't know in detail what their problem is. I can't get involved in all the URBAN projects. The question is if they do have substantial problems what are they going to do about it? That's their problem, isn't it?" (municipal official)

While Youth Enterprise had a highly successful track record in securing funding from public agencies, the director and his colleagues had learned to minimise the influence public officials would have on their work:
"I am glad when they don't get involved in our work. That always creates problems. We develop solutions with residents, not with public agencies." (Director)

Clearly real co-production goes beyond the normal contracting that takes place between funders and providers of services in traditional programme delivery arrangements.

Implications for regeneration policy and practice

Regeneration is a complex process and all the partners have to contribute for it to work. It is often impossible to say why, when and where the collaborative process unwinds and turns into something that is adversarial and competitive. As the case of Youth Enterprise shows, partnership structures in themselves – especially those structured around funding opportunities - do not always provide any assurance that services or initiatives will be created in a collaborative and mutually supportive way. Despite the Structural Funds regulations insisting on the partnership principle and collaboration between public agencies and local communities, this often does not go beyond a simple funding relationship. Financing social enterprises and civil society organisations is of course an important pre-condition for the co-production of a service, but frequently obtaining and accounting for funding is anything but a collaborative process.

One of the key benefits of thinking about regeneration practice in terms of co-production, co-management or co-governance is that our attention is drawn to the interaction of the actors. There are different expectations associated with officials responsible for the development of policy priorities in time limited regeneration programmes compared to officers who engage with volunteers to create a new project or support the delivery of a service. Nobody should be expected to deal with all aspects of regeneration practice, but the term "partnership working" has become synonymous with all manner of political processes, practical actions and institutional structures typically associated with the development of integrated solutions to urban problems. The terminology of coproduction, in contrast, helps us make important distinctions about different, and often highly specialised, aspects of partnership working.

Focusing on the practical actions of individuals has further advantages. For example, when trying to encourage the adoption of successful social innovations in different European countries, policy makers and practitioners frequently struggle to convince their colleagues back in their own country that such approaches can be made to work in their local contexts. While there may indeed be many legal and institutional barriers to the adoption of practices from abroad, it is probably easier to change the behaviour of regeneration practitioners than to change the regulations, which govern the way in which public agencies operate. Identifying effective behaviours supports the transfer of good practice because behaviours can be learned, copied and adapted in ways, which respond effectively to the institutional context in which they take place.

Moreover, when we talk about how a project has been co-produced or co-managed our attention is focused on the benefits as well as challenges, which resulted from the actions taken, by funders and providers of services. This allows us to move beyond simply blaming the regulations, the institutions or the strategy for the lack of collaboration and instead helps us focus on the elements that matter in the creation of sustainable regeneration interventions, namely: constructive and task orientated collaborations between public agencies and local communities. Developing some simple indicators of co-production, co-management and co-governance could be the first step towards creating new benchmarks for effective collaborative regeneration practice. This might also re-energise debates about effective approaches to integrated urban regeneration because partnership both as a concept and as a terminology appears tired and overused.

Conclusion

Unpacking co-production has advantages over conventional discussions of partnership. It allows us to reflect more clearly on the purpose of the collaboration and on the relationships that are involved in the production, management and governance of a service or policy. In the context of urban areas, these distinctions can give us a better set of tools for understanding the processes at work than the broad concept of partnership. This approach allows us to ask the question "partnership for what?" and look at the inner workings of regeneration partnerships that make all the difference between success and failure. ●

(1) http://urbact.eu/en/projects/disadvantaged-neighbourhoods/sure/homepage/
(2) For a historical overview see: Brandsen and Pestoff, 2008, Co-production, Routledge
(3) Soto et al., 2010, Cities Facing the Crisis: Impact and responses, URBACT http://urbact.eu/fileadmin/general_library/Crise_urbact__16-11_web.pdf
(4) The latest such initiatives is the Social Innovation Europe programme: http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/innovation/policy/social-innovation/social-inno-event_en.htm
(5) For a contemporary analysis and discussion of the topic see: Seitanidi, 2010, The Politics of Partnerships
(6) Brandsen and Pestoff, 2008, Co-production, Routledge
(7) Pestoff, 2011, New Public Governance, Co-production and the Third Sector, Routledge
(8) http://www.dlrcdb.ie/rapid.htm
(9) http://www.dublin.ie/uploadedFiles/City_Development_Board/RHS_Panel/FINAL%20City%20Guide%20to%20Community%20Gardening.pdf
(10) http://www.shanganaghcdp.ie
(11) Schlappa, 2009, The Impact of European Union Funding in Cross-National Perspective, Aston University

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