



# **CoCreaYOUTH Project Insights for Enhancing the Readiness for Co-creation with Youth**

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## Introduction

These guidelines and insights from the CoCreaYouth project are primarily aimed at deepening the understanding of the contextual similarities and differences in public sector readiness for co-creation to enhance the value of public offerings with citizens.

The starting point of the project analysis is the potential risk of losing the interest and trust of broader, less heard youth groups in democratic decision-making (see e.g. [European Ombudsman's team address at the ENO conference in 2019](#)). Young people are a heterogeneous group interested in a range of social and political issues. However, the rigidity of established forms of representative democracy and the complete package of political views that political parties offer are not as attractive to them as to previous generations. Young people instead favour alternative types of participation, for instance, activism and social media.

Yet, many alternative forms of participation, such as **co-creation**, are still largely unexplored in the public sector. Where it has been used and studied, it has been found that co-creation can be successfully implemented at the local government level with potential benefits of such an approach are mobilisation of resources, public innovation, democratic legitimacy, and the creation of social capital (e.g. Bentzen, 2020; Kangro & Lepik, 2021). We also view co-creation in the public sector as possibly one of the highest levels of citizen and NGO participation. It is a collaborative, dialogical activity that aims at enhancing the individual and public value of service offerings and equalisation of power and possibilities for real influence through elements of participatory and deliberative democracy (Fox et al., 2021; Baines et al., 2023).

While there are not many examples of co-creation at the municipality level, there are even fewer examples of local municipalities co-creating with youth as a target group, particularly youth who are considered marginalised and not typically engaged in politics and civic activism. The assumption made in the CoCreaYOUTH project was that by including youth more in the co-creation of better services and solutions, instead of acting and making decisions on their behalf, the public sector and civil society can potentially secure their trust and meaningful policy impact. Thus, the project aimed to take initial steps in exploring the possibility of *“How to better include youth in co-creation with municipal stakeholders and vice versa?”*

To achieve our aim, we looked at existing studies and policy documents and conducted interviews and dialogues via two international workshops with local governments and NGOs (as partners associated with the project). These provided insights into some distinct features of local co-creation readiness and understanding of challenges in different national contexts. Albeit, it is important to note that this is only the initial step in understanding the potential of co-creating with youth - further exploration is needed, in particular from the perspective of the youth themselves.

## Co-creation readiness of municipalities (and NGOs) - project insights

In this project we have identified three key areas to assess co-creation readiness: *the system*, *the ethos*, and *the drivers*, based on the theoretical model developed in previous research (for example, the [CoSIE](#) project - Co-creating Public Sector Innovations in Europe

and [CoGOV](#) project - Co-Production and Co-Governance: Strategic Management, Public Value and Co-Creation in the Renewal of Public Agencies across Europe). These dimensions were chosen as a result of discussion with the project partners and by reflecting on the relevance of each of these for the comparative analysis of national contexts and local conditions. Project insights will be presented after an explanation of each key aspect.

## Key aspect 1: the system

The *system* variables are many and might be further subdivided into the following:

- (i) *legal/institutional/political* - to what extent the laws, policies, and (high-level) policymakers provide the framing and support to co-creation. Initiating, and especially sustaining co-creation requires shifting towards the governance logic that accommodates service planning and quality monitoring through conversations (across sectors and municipal departments) and learning from success and failures.
- (ii) *internal organisational characteristics* (collaborative culture, openness to cultural change). This implies unlearning traditional methods of service delivery and altering the approach to risks and failures. It demands courage from policymakers and top managers to acknowledge that public sector organisations may encounter setbacks. To create more suitable and efficient services, single organisations or service professionals must be willing to embrace knowledge from various sources, including service beneficiaries.
- (iii) *organising capacities* (human and financial resources, training opportunities for staff, stakeholder and citizen organising and established collaborations, trust). Interest and the capacity to involve citizens and other qualified stakeholders, to engage them, and value their work is fundamental. Lack of trust, previous disappointments, and fear of being unjustly exposed have to be overcome. Sustaining co-creative spaces requires *access to infrastructure* such as experimental meeting spaces, *appropriate use of digital tools*, and building relationships to keep the motivation. Different individuals need diverse platforms and tools, including digital ones, for reaching out and reporting their lived experiences for a just co-creation.

We found that formal national policies and legislation conducive to co-creation are in place, to various degrees, in all four national contexts as youth participation is sought and valued in principle. Some of the policies are relatively new, while others have existed for several decades. The legal norms may be seen as facilitating but not per se sufficient to enhance youth participation in local decision-making.

In the context of this project, co-creation was perceived by municipalities as a novel and unfamiliar approach to fostering participation. This highlights the historical reliance on more conventional methods like traditional hearings or consultations for youth engagement. Consequently, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how to effectively integrate more participatory and deliberative formats. This situation also implies that "less-active" youth, such as those who do not participate in the youth council, are frequently excluded from the process.

We also found some additional differences between the countries on the system level – while the EU countries of Sweden, Finland and Estonia do have some, although mostly traditional, systems in place for local youth participation, e.g. via youth councils, and some funding measures to support youth civic activism and municipal democratising initiatives, Georgia is

different. In the case of Marneuli municipality, we learned that youth are very active in self-organising, e.g. creating learning centres or youth councils, and would like to have more engagement opportunities. Yet the local government is not quite ready for more active forms of citizenship neither legally nor financially but a more coherent legal framework is in progress.

Systemic political culture issues, such as cultural diversity, lack of trust, education or acceptance of democratic rights in local communities are part of the readiness challenge, not only in Georgia but to some extent also in other multicultural contexts. In the Nordic welfare countries, where the expectations on the role of local municipalities to cater to the needs of the local population are very high this could also influence how much the civil society, or groups of youth, see the need to initiate action. Estonia falls somewhere in between the Nordic countries and Georgia, with local municipalities taking a moderately active role. That leaves space for civil society to step in to fill the gap. In our local contexts, we saw how existing motivation and some favourable conditions for active citizenship in democratic governance, while in place, may be challenged by a lack of resources, especially finances, staff availability, and human skills.

Remaining challenges:

- An important insight is that besides the formal rules, lack of trust and formal opportunities to participate is an essential barrier to co-creation.
- The cultural background of the youth and political culture may be another barrier. For example, the family background and the beliefs instilled about the trustworthiness of the public sector, or their lack of engagement with governance, but also lack of understanding of the political game and complexity of the issues in which their voices are asked for can be a hindrance. Thus it is essential to educate youth about their rights, issues discussed, and ways to engage in dialogue.
- Availability of resources is an additional major challenge. We see a difference between the smaller rural municipalities and the urban ones in that the rural municipalities are more concerned with available resources for developing co-creative activities, especially the lack of staff and resources for developing new tools, including digital ones.
- Another key challenge is how to achieve truly cross-sectorial organising and knowledge-sharing formats without excluding those municipal departments that are not used to having broader participatory dialogues with citizens, e.g. for defining development needs.
- Also, new participatory and co-creative initiatives can be held back by existing policies or laws.

## **The ethical compass**

This refers both to certain external norms as well as professionals' perceptions and attitudes that guide and help them to renegotiate their own and citizen roles in co-creation. The ethical compass is thus constituted by the broader ethos or the norms/performance criteria for the management of services against which they and the conversations with stakeholders/citizens will be evaluated.

Indicative of organisational cultures permissive to co-creation may be:

- Staff awareness of the nature and benefits of co-creation
- Staff willingness to involve citizens and external stakeholders

- Staff's openness to learning
- An asset-based perspective to citizens and service users, that implies a shift from seeing service users primarily in terms of deficit and risks
- Attempting to find a convergence towards a *common language* and defining *common objectives* (including what is meant by co-creation)
- Expectations of roles, relationships and methodologies
- Top-managers advocating for co-creation by framing local policies in such a way and putting organisational efforts and resources into the training of staff to support a shift towards co-creative culture.

Co-creation, as described by the project consortium, is viewed by most contacted municipalities as a new and unfamiliar way of conducting participation, which confirms that youth participation has primarily been in the form of more traditional hearings or consultations and that knowledge is lacking on how to implement more participatory and deliberative formats. The forming of actual suggestions for trying out co-creative activities did, however, reveal a more traditional top-down way of thinking, for instance by emphasising learning among youth rather than municipal organisational learning.

Generally, we could sense an openness to exploring and learning more about both co-creation principles and tools. 'We cannot know what the young people want and need - only they know and hence need to have a say'.

Key expressed challenges were the lack of know-how to skillfully conduct the co-creation process, as well as 'different time schedules', meaning that young people are often in a school or other activities during municipality officials' office hours. This opens up utilising formal and informal education arenas where youth are already available or engaged, but most expressed need for help in conducting co-creation in such contexts.

An important insight is that there are still major differences in how individual managers, public workers, or NGOs perceive the new democratisation and participatory ambitions. A remaining challenge is establishing a common understanding and language of co-creation in both local and cross-national contexts. Such as to what extent is co-creation about more inclusive and consultative formats, as well as whether issues are defined by the public sector or by local communities. Regarding new governance models and the tools used to implement them, both vested interests and conservative attitudes to participatory measures (traditional and digital) among public servants and elected representatives – may have to be tackled.

## The drivers

These refer to the roles and strategies undertaken by politicians, managers, professionals, NGOs and citizens (in contrast to fence-sitting or opposing) as well as more neutral intermediaries to prepare for or instigate co-creation in public decision-making. Actors in and outside NGOs top-managers, mid-managers, or even front-line managers may act as (cultural) *change drivers or facilitators*. Besides support from decision-makers and peers, the presence of motivated change drivers or facilitators makes co-creation efforts more successful as they engage in finding and engaging the stakeholders and facilitating sensemaking about the co-creative processes and necessary approaches.

There are several ways in our studied contexts to drive organisational culture toward participation and co-creation. **The drivers for co-creation are often motivated individuals who initiate projects and find resources to conduct them.**

- The top management may embark on a more active employment policy to enrol key competencies in participatory methodologies. It allows substantial freedom of action for service area managers to choose their ways of implementing participatory methodologies by employing trust-based elements.
- Support mid-managers in searching for external financial resources to test participatory pilots.
- Support participatory civil society activities on issues in municipal responsibility that help to identify some needed changes.
- The remaining dilemma is that co-creation makes sense for those with previous participatory experiences, and the acceptance of co-creation between municipal departments and even municipalities in our national contexts remains disparate. Shifting the public organisation towards co-creation requires bottom-up initiatives. There may be more acceptance for co-creation at the top organisational level than among parts of mid-managers. A strategy that we have seen is that some organisations chose to 'place' new co-creation pilots at the central management or those units where there is more acceptance of active citizen involvement. This was also where major drivers and competencies for co-creation were concentrated. Conducting co-creation is not only a powerful move in governance but also a pragmatic one with expectations for both, better governance and knowledge development.

## Summarising insights from CoCreaYOUTH

Smaller municipalities are in many ways closer to local communities, which is the reason why we expected the contacted municipalities to be inclined to try out co-creation as a method. Here, we did find some necessary motivation and favourable conditions, but also that system factors connected to resources - both finances and human skills - are strongly hindering factors. Although we did find strong individual interest in co-creation, it is rather unequally spread and more common in matters related to youth leisure time and educational environment, perhaps due to relatively uncomplicated topics, rather than social planning and living spaces.

The cost of learning new conducts (for instance training officials in using dialogue tools, developing new tools for the local context, and arranging discussions with youth) seems difficult to overcome in small administrations. Nevertheless, initiatives stemming from engaged public professionals, social entrepreneurs, School Councils, or civic associations did have some impact in triggering dialogues based on youth needs, that is where municipalities were open to that already.

New formats for cross-sectoral interactions, including dialogues, may be still embryonic and reveal another obstacle, which is both a question of organisational ethos or prevalent norms and attitudes among a broader group of public officials and openness for learning. New organisational resources such as welfare managers in Finland or development coordinators in Sweden may, in the best cases, act as catalysts for this kind of work. In Vaasa (Finland) and Alvesta (Sweden), the municipalities started making use of external funding to assist this transition. This supports the notion that additional resources are vital for municipalities to learn to co-create. Currently, municipalities might not even afford the time to prioritize developing knowledge on co-creation and will not allocate time to look for funding, as was illustrated by one of the interviewed municipalities in Estonia.

When personal motivation and leadership of individuals determine participatory initiatives in the organization (new projects, experiments, reshaping the process, etc.), such short-term actions risk resulting in only temporal changes or 'sandcastles' (Baines et al, 2023) that do not survive the tide of political or economic shifts, and the system more or less returns to its previous shape. Thus, we conclude that while few entrepreneurial change agents may seize the opportunity for innovative co-creation initiatives, system and ethical factors remain necessary to properly support their anchoring in the local decision-making system to enable learning and sustain any positive implementation results.

Accordingly, in most municipalities, we saw a prevalent understanding of co-creation as a more simple matter of personnel resources, methods, and techniques, with almost no sign of seeing it as a political matter. Similarly, it was not seen as the need for a larger systemic change in most municipalities, although we found exceptions.

We have identified a few key strategies to support co-creation culture in our studied local systems:

- Developing cross-sectoral practices as well as providing training and toolkits for municipal officials to use when approaching citizens.
- *Transferring new competencies from civil society to the public sector administration* to better address youth needs may result in co-creating more tailored support, such as assisting with jobs or preparation for the future.
- Making *organisational changes* in the central municipal administration to allow for platforms where representatives from different departments discuss and share issues of common concern around the targeted groups.
- Fostering municipalities' function as initiators of dialogues rather than passive input receivers that engage youth in expressing their opinions on local development only on special occasions. For example, receiving youth voices about their schoolyards and also engaging a responsible public housing company and youth in dialogues on improvements.
- Employing or training organisational *human resources in facilitator skills* to help other public service professionals and managers with sensemaking about the value and possible formats of more active interface with citizens (also as service users) to increase the latter's active input into at least some aspects of decision making.
- Prioritising the *development of new participatory tools*, such as digital platforms and participatory budgeting, but involving citizens in their planning. Using media and platforms where young people prefer to interact, and engaging in conversation on their terms.
- Supporting the establishment and sustainment of non-profit associations that engage youth at risk in meaningful activities and building their trust in society.