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## Sustaining and Growing Innovations in Democracy and Co-Creation

**Abstract:** Co-creation of public services implies new roles and responsibilities that, at least potentially, change the balance of control. In this way, it aligns closely with democratic renewal. This paper draws on the outcomes of a collaborative innovation project *Co-creation of Service Innovation in Europe (CoSIE)* funded under Horizon 2020. CoSIE built upon the idea that public sector innovations can be best achieved by creating collaborative partnerships between service providers (public sector agencies, third sector organisations, private companies) and citizens who receive services directly or indirectly. CoSIE was implemented through ten real-life innovation pilots in different public services across Europe. Results showed how co-creative methods could promote democratic dimensions, increasing the civic participation of marginalised and often voiceless population groups (residents of depleted urban neighbourhoods, disabled people in remote rural areas, citizens adrift from the world of work, and non-EU migrants). Some CoSIE pilots were more successful than others in extending impact beyond their immediate localities and service contexts. The paper highlights common factors that helped share learning and evolve project innovations into the ‘modus operandi’ of institutions and societies.

**Keywords:** *co-creation, public services, social innovation, lived experience, evaluation*

### Introduction

In the context of public services, co-creation refers to citizens’ contribution to shaping and implementing the services that affect them. This paper draws together learning about the intersection of co-creation, social innovation, and democratic renewal from a European Innovation Action entitled *Co-creation of Service Innovations in Europe (CoSIE)*. CoSIE received funding from the European Commission’s Horizon 2020 programme under a call for ‘co-creation for growth and improvement’. It was one of several projects funded by the European Commission on the co-creation of public services. The CoSIE consortium puts

particular emphasis on advancing co-creation with citizens who are typically excluded or overlooked.

CoSIE set out with two aims: to advance the shaping of service priorities by end-users and their informal support networks and to engage citizens, especially groups often called “hard to reach”, in the collaborative design of public services. That suggests a choice but co-creation is not synonymous with consumer models and notions of service recipients as “customers”. As enacted in CoSIE, co-creation is informed by social activism and advocacy by people with disabilities seeking support for independent living. Although CoSIE was not exclusively or even mainly about disability services, the mantra of disability activism “nothing about us without us” gained traction in the consortium and guided its moral framework. CoSIE adopted a definition of co-creation as a “collaborative activity that reduces power imbalances and aims to enrich and enhance the value in public service offerings” (Fox et al., 2021).

The project aims were addressed through ten real-life pilots across Europe, each working with a different service and responding with innovations to locally determined needs and priorities. The common logic was a commitment to re-envision and reposition those who typically are targets of services as asset holders with legitimate knowledge for shaping service innovations. The pilots and their target populations are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. CoSIE sites and target populations

Country	Pilot name	Target population
<b>Italy</b>	Reducing childhood obesity	Families of children in Reggio Emilia diagnosed as overweight or obese
<b>Sweden</b>	Strengthening social services with co-creation dialogue	Residents of Jönköping with various needs using the municipality’s personal assistance services
<b>UK</b>	Personalised services for people with convictions	Individuals serving community sentences or released from prison on a license
<b>Estonia</b>	Co-designing innovative community-based services with “Social hackathons”	People with disabilities or mental health problems in Võru county (a very remote, disadvantaged rural area)
<b>Hungary</b>	Self-sustaining villages (household economy)	Households in small, remote settlements beset by social and economic disadvantages
<b>Spain</b>	Empowering entrepreneurial skills	Citizens of Valencia left behind by the world of work
<b>Finland</b>	Youth co-empowerment for health and well-being through social media	Young people not in employment, education, or training
<b>Poland</b>	Neighbourhood meeting place for seniors	Older residents of a housing estate in the city of Wrocław
<b>The Netherlands</b>	‘No time to waste’ (reducing litter and illegal waste)	Residents of a socially and economically deprived neighbourhood in the municipality of Nieuwegein
<b>The Netherlands</b>	Improving services for unemployed people	Refugees at a long distance from the labour market in the municipality of Houten

Source: own study.

In the next section, we situate CoSIE within the key literature on co-creation and social innovation. Then, we expand on the project itself and explain the evaluation framework that produced the data drawn upon in this paper. The following section offers a summary of key results under four sub-headings: engaging diverse citizens; professional skills and organisational change; extending ICTs; and scaling, replication, and sustainability. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections on lessons learned.

## Co-Creation and Social Innovation

A much-cited characterisation of co-creation is “active involvement of end-users in various stages of the production process” (Voorberg et al., 2015, p. 1335). It is a useful but broad starting point allowing for detailed variations and emphasis. In the scholarly literature, there is a debate about the relative meanings of co-creation and the rather older term “co-production”. Co-production remains in broad usage and some practitioners prefer it or consider it interchangeable with co-creation. Brandsen et al. (2018), Osborne (2018), and Torfing et al. (2019) contend that a distinction is conceptually useful to avoid concept stretching. According to Osborne (2018), co-production refers to citizen contributions to the implementation of their services. In contrast, co-creation has “expanded from the production of individual public services (...) to public planning, problem solving and policymaking” (Torfing et al., 2019).

Torfing et al. (2019) elaborate on the distinction between co-creation and co-production with reference to an image of rungs on a ladder. In doing this, they evoke Arnstein’s (1969) influential ladder of citizen participation for the enhancement of democratic influence. The lower rungs denote limited notions of co-production that include implementation but not planning or decision-making while the higher ones aspire towards democratic renewal (Torfing et al., 2019). Simultaneously, co-creation implies that citizens exercise agency to define their goals to meet the needs they consider important. It was the stance adopted in CoSIE. Co-creation of public services has become a cornerstone of public policy (Osborne et al., 2016). There are many advocates and it is widely accepted as humane and inclusive. Despite the enthusiasm and support for co-creation, some sceptical voices warn of tokenism and failure to fully recognise imbalances of status and power (Dudau et al., 2019).

Co-creation in CoSIE emphasized the legitimate knowledge and lived experience of people who more typically have public services “done to” them. A pillar of co-creation, as understood in the project, was that co-creation must be supported by assets and strengths, i.e., capabilities (Fox et al., 2021; forthcoming). The key reference point is Sen’s (1990; 2001) concept of capabilities in which assets available to the individual form the basis for capabilities, leading in turn to functioning and well-being. The capability approach sees human beings along the anthropological dimensions of “receivers”, “doers”, and “judges”. The “judge” dimension (aligned with co-creation) refers to the idea that citizens can say what

has value in their eyes, and that this should inform policies and programmes that affect them (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2018).

Popular social media sites enable citizens to create, share, and comment on issues in ways providers and public authorities cannot control (Driss et al., 2019). Such channels potentially make room for enhanced individual input into services hitherto dominated by professionals (Brandsen et al., 2018; Torfing et al., 2019). There is a *prima facie* strong fit with co-creation and increased democracy although the evidence base remains weak (Lember et al., 2019).

The ‘C’ in CoSIE stood for “co-creation” while the “I” for “Innovation”. CoSIE situated the co-creation of public services in thinking on social innovation. Social innovation has been prominent in policy agenda for somewhat longer than co-creation but the ideas are closely interrelated (Baines et al., 2022). The social innovation denotes novel, effective, and just solutions that benefit society as a whole (Phills et al., 2008). Although somewhat fluid and contested, the idea of social innovation usually implies new forms of institutional relationships and collective empowerment. Social innovation mobilises citizens to be active in the innovation process (Voorberg et al., 2015). The idea has roots in various traditions internationally (Ayob et al., 2016). Especially in the European context, it coheres around new forms of institutional relationships and collective empowerment, particularly among the most marginalised (Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019). It is characteristic of social innovations across many contexts that they “raise the hope and expectations of progress towards something better (a more socially sustainable/democratic/effective society)” (Brandsen et al., 2016, pp. 6–7). Empirical studies of social innovation show that new ideas emanate from people and communities (Cottam, 2018). Co-creative aspects of social innovation include new provider-user relationships, revision of professional roles, collaborative forms of governance, reciprocity, co-operation, and collective empowerment (Evers & Brandsen, 2016; Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019; Oosterlynck et al., 2019). As articulated by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC, 2016), social innovation is essential to boost participation by the public and civil society and strengthen more direct democracy.

A key challenge for social innovation is how individual examples can go beyond silos and discrete projects and have an impact beyond their original contexts. Factors contributing to survival, further development, and (occasionally) mainstreaming include: deploying evidence, seizing political opportunities, building legitimacy, securing funding, and capitalising on existing local and national priorities (Albury et al., 2018; Kazepov et al., 2019).

## The Project and Methods

CoSIE project teams consisting of municipalities, civil society organisations, companies, and universities implemented and evaluated the pilots. The project was carried out from 2018 to 2021. Each CoSIE pilot was concerned with fostering more effective solutions to persistent problems by innovation to incorporate the knowledge of people affected by services. Each

pilot had different target groups, service needs, and local settings. They took place in “brown field” sites with many other competing or cooperating interests and initiatives. Rationales for the pilots overwhelmingly emphasised issues of social justice for marginalised people who lack power. CoSIE did not presuppose a single pathway to co-creation. On the contrary, partners tested and developed diverse platforms and interventions. The focus of CoSIE was on human dimensions but the consortium also actively searched for new ways to use digital resources, including social media and open data, to enable co-creation in public services.

Evaluation of the pilots’ implementation and impact was undertaken by university-based partners in each country. Evaluation is distinguished by the importance of establishing value and making reasoned judgements about programmes, interventions, and policies (Fox et al., 2016). Evaluations in CoSIE were locally responsive and intended to be flexible while following broad guidelines and common reporting elements. All the evaluation teams undertook research interviews with project staff, beneficiaries of the services, and various stakeholders, either one-on-one, in focus groups, or both. All made careful observations of pilot events, meetings, and other activities. All reviewed relevant documents. Some but not all also designed and administered small-scale surveys. Running alongside and in close cooperation with the pilots was an element called User Voice. Through Community Reporting, User Voice trained and empowered people (including those marginalised and rarely heard) to share authentic stories in their own words, thus complementing more traditional forms of evaluation research data.

## Results

Positive outcomes in CoSIE could be demonstrated for individuals, organisations, partnerships, and communities. In this section, we draw attention to key results under the following headings: engaging diverse citizens; professional skills and organisational change; extending ICTs; scaling, replication, and sustainability. Given the pilots’ complexity, we do not attempt to cover all results in detail but highlight the main achievements, challenges, and setbacks under each subheading.

### *Engaging Diverse Citizens*

Impact evaluation of the CoSIE pilots at an individual level showed that citizens who would more typically have services “done to” them engaged in new ways and felt that they had been through an empowering experience. Engaging people unused to having their voices heard demands hard work, sensitivity to their needs, and sometimes extra resources. All the pilots achieved this to some extent. An outstanding example was the Estonian CoSIE pilot. It succeeded in adapting the “hackathon” format, a well-established means to facilitate innovation through intensive “sprint-like” collaboration, originally by prototyping in the IT sector. Three 48-hour “social hackathon” events were organised, each preceded by

6-9 months of preparation. The social hackathons mobilised people from different backgrounds – including individuals with disabilities – to co-create new services or innovative solutions to local community needs. The hackathon teams co-designed practical solutions (for example, healthier food for schoolchildren). Perhaps more importantly, there was also evidence of movement towards new local contexts where experiments and their spaces are favoured (Kangro & Lepik, 2022). This pilot (and others that adapted similar engagement methodologies) report that the fast pace is not suitable for everyone, but many practical measures can enable more people to participate (e.g., accessibility logistics, mentor support, appropriate communication). From the perspective of those invited to contribute, there is an important message that goes beyond such practicalities, necessary as they are. In the words of one hackathon participant, “is someone really listening or are they just nodding their heads?” She meant that people must not only be invited to participate, but their contribution must also make a difference.

The CoSIE pilot in Hungary took place in ten small villages where the population is in decline and household incomes are low. In the short term, the intention was to improve household livelihoods by enabling families to utilise their resources (including human resources, equipment, and natural resources) to empower them to take greater control over their lives. In the longer run, the aim was to initiate a new service model for local economic development. Previous interventions in rural Hungary supported horticulture and livestock farming but the CoSIE pilot differed in that it facilitated the rural communities to co-design local projects, choosing their own objectives and economic activities (Csoba & Sipos, 2022).

The pilot was delivered by part-time “coordinators” from the villages who included social workers, agricultural advisors, coaches, and lay helpers. The coordinators and village mayors organised workshops with the participation of citizens and local stakeholders to discuss how the local families could activate themselves, then participants prepared plans for their activities with the project’s support. Community leaders commented at the outset that people in the villages had grown accustomed to helplessness in the face of paternalistic traditions and welfare dependency (Csoba & Sipos, 2022). Evaluators reported a turning point when the mayors became convinced of the innovative potential of participants, that they could bring in ideas that were a better fit for the local context (Csoba & Sipos, 2022). When it happened, this change of attitude contributed to local pilots’ success. In the words of one of the village mayors:

But some of the people got thinking, and they had ideas that would never have occurred to me. So, I think this is important, this thinking together, working together. It is important, how should I put this, well, that I had an idea myself what would come out of this, and what we really got out of it is something different, but what we got is at least as good as what I had in mind. So, you should give them the freedom to come up with their ideas themselves, you shouldn’t do the thinking for them.

The pilot in Hungary enhanced the operational mechanisms of local democracy, strengthened the ability of the localities to retain their populations, and contributed to the goal of sustainability (Csoba & Sipos, 2022).

Overall, the methodologies applied in CoSIE to engage citizens were well-appreciated and the evaluations evidenced that participants gained a sense of confidence and empowerment. However, reports from local pilots stressed that while careful preparation of co-creation events and sessions is important to ensure inclusion, follow-up is even more so. Tangible results are essential because without them, there is a danger of disillusionment and cynicism, the very opposite of what co-creation should achieve. For example, a serious threat to the pilot took place in Turku in Finland to find new ways and methods for involving young people not in education training or employment in co-creation to increase their participation in society. It did this through a hackathon format. Contrary to initial professionals' expectations, young people proved capable and willing to participate, and several good ideas emerged. However, disappointingly, the municipality back-tracked on its original intention to implement ideas generated by the young people. Fortunately, the university partner and an NGO stepped in and developed (with the young people) an idea for training about how professionals should encounter a young person as a client that had emerged from a hackathon. Tangible results similarly formed significant breakthrough points in other pilots, for example, cleaner streets in Nieuwegein (the Netherlands) and a summer installation on a housing estate in Wrocław, Poland.

### ***Professional Skills and Organisational Change***

Co-creation implies redesigning the relationship between professionals and service beneficiaries. From a practice perspective, asset-based approaches normally involve ways of working that differ from “business as usual” for organisations and front-line staff. Several CoSIE pilots focused specifically on professionals' “mind-sets” and the need to influence and change them, notably in Sweden, Finland, the UK, and the Netherlands. The pilots that worked directly on professional “mind-sets” bring insights into the kind of skills service staff need to develop to ensure a more pro-active and open-minded attitude towards the contribution of the beneficiaries in making decisions about their services. Seeing a person as a whole rather than as a collection of problems is especially important but surprisingly hard to do, given the tendency of many services to work in silos. A municipal employee who took a lead in the Dutch (Houten) pilot reflected:

Despite all my good intentions, I discovered that in the end, I was fulfilling our agenda not the agenda of the citizens. In fact, I did not even know what their agenda was! I missed the broader perspective and the person as a whole.

Pilots that highlighted the need to address mind-sets of individual staff also saw change in organisational practices and cultures as necessary to advance co-creation. Such change can involve painful shifts and stir up resistance (Torfing et al., 2019). Before co-creation can become institutionalised and enter the culture, as some CoSIE pilots reflected in their lessons learned, many small steps must be taken. As one observed, “grassroots workers and middle management are often too tied up and busy with their daily work to take the time and space needed to consider matters more broadly”. Professionals at the street level may be interested in developing asset-based and co-creative services but their working environment (e.g., tight time schedules and procedures they are expected to follow) may not enable them to switch to a new set of practices. The pilot with Personal Assistance services in the Jönköping municipality (Sweden) was by far the most successful in achieving organisational change. Impact evaluation showed that changes in organisational routines and culture (evidenced by monitoring of the service narrative) resulted from the piloting interventions in CoSIE. A particularly important factor was the use of reflective sessions to explore and challenge thinking through dialogue. These sessions engendered an open, respectful atmosphere and enabled front-line managers to act as change agents and leaders (Narbutaitė Aflaki & Lindh, 2021).

Most emphasis in the pilots was on upskilling workers in their jobs but new hybrid roles also emerged. Some pilots involved volunteers with lived experience of services. In the UK, for example, peer mentors who had convictions brought lived experience of probation. CoSIE also co-created a much more radical initiative in the mentioned “encountering training” designed by young people for Finnish youth services. It challenged standard practice and reversed accepted roles in that the intended targets of the service make a substantial contribution to the training of professional staff.

### *Extending ICT*

CoSIE learned much about co-creative methods and tools – both digital and otherwise. At the outset, the project anticipated that taking advantage of social media would have the potential to help enhance public services and engage citizens’ voices (Jalonen et al., 2019). Results in this respect were very mixed. One of the most successful examples of reaching out with high use of social media to contribute to co-creation was the pilot in Valencia (Spain) who worked with people at a distance from the labour market to develop business ideas. Social media accounts and the pilot webpage were run by beneficiaries with occasional input and guidance from mentors. For this pilot, the technology was a leveller in the sense that, due to its increasing accessibility, it could be done by anyone and handing this over to citizens gives them a feeling of belonging. Indeed, the transfer of power was real and could be a source of tension with public service organisations. Estonia is a highly digitalised country but the use of social media in CoSIE was lower than expected. The pilot set out to adopt social media with enthusiasm and some success. However, for their target group (people with disabilities



in a remote region), personal meetings and encounters were still very important. Reflecting back with hindsight, the pilot leaders observed that “we wouldn’t expect so much from technology when it comes to small, rural communities and vulnerable people”. In two of the pilots, social media were entirely eschewed – the UK and the Netherlands (Nieuwegein). The setting for the UK pilot was probation services. In the highly politicised and emotive context of criminal justice, social media provides an outlet for – and potentially amplifies – hostility to the service and public shaming of its users. “No time to waste” in Nieuwegein took place in a neighbourhood beset by many social problems, including low income, high economic inactivity, poor housing, and crime. In both cases, social media were associated with labelling and stigmatisation and seen as entirely inappropriate.

Much is expected of open government data at the national and EU-policy levels. Under guidance from the coordinating team, the CoSIE pilots explored ways of engaging with open data and sometimes found practical means of deploying it in aspects of their co-creation. For example, they made various uses of data sets available from national and local sources (sometimes but not always officially branded as “open data”). Most typically, this served to help assess needs relating to the pilots and university teams with relevant expertise led or assisted in data interpretation and analysis. For others, however, available data sets related only to larger geographic areas and for the purpose of the local pilots were deemed not only lacking in granularity but actively misleading. There were two notable examples of imaginative ways in which pilots attempted to make open data part of their co-creation processes. In Estonia, open data available from statistical databases were given to hackathon participants to elevate their projects’ quality. In Spain, the team used open data portals as a gamification tool during public events to make people aware of its advantages and aspects.

Overall, despite some successes with various digital platforms and channels, their potential for co-creation proved lower in several pilot sites than anticipated. A key lesson was that digital technology, especially social media, may be unwelcomed, inappropriate, and even unethical in some service contexts.

### ***Scaling Replication and Sustainability***

The CoSIE pilots achieved valuable and outstanding episodes of co-creation. They demonstrated impact in specific sites and services at the micro and meso levels. However, the ambitions of CoSIE extended beyond this, to embed co-creation and inspire change much more broadly. In common with all social innovations, they faced the challenge of how to get beyond local implementation within the project timeframe. Some CoSIE pilots managed to reach beyond their original services and settings. Those in Estonia, Hungary, and Finland stand out for the recognition they gained and success in ensuring the application of their learning and practices at the national level and beyond.

In Estonia, social hackathons gained national attention and interest and became a flagship representing the progressive mind-set of Võru county. The pilot won the “most inspiring

initiative of 2019 award” from the president of Estonia. The social hackathon methodology was successfully adapted to different contexts across the country. In Tartu, the second-largest city in Estonia, a social hackathon event was organised with the help of the Võru CoSIE team. There was also international reach. Estonian CoSIE partners participated in development projects with similar social hackathon events in Hungary and Transylvania (Romania).

The “encountering training” idea from Hackathons in Finland won a nation-wide innovation award from the Children’s Foundation in Finland, Iitla. The training has been bought by trade unions, in Helsinki, and Turku. The NGO partner has been awarded a grant to continue the training and develop it even further. The Association of Finnish Municipalities arranged a series of Experiment Labs targeted at the largest cities under the social sustainability theme. The Labs scaled the process, methods, and insights gained from the COSIE Turku service design process nationally with young people not in education, training, or employment as a target group. It was done together with The Sustainable City programme as a joint endeavour of the Ministry of the Environment, other ministries, municipalities, and other parties working towards sustainable development. The programme promoted sustainable growth (carbon reduction, intelligent systems) and sustainable well-being (social sustainability, healthy living environment). The Lab sessions were open to the public as a part of Finnish Experiment Week and the work was then presented to the representatives of the Prime Minister’s Office. Later, it was presented to the group of Husbankens innovators from the biggest cities in Norway.

The CoSIE pilot in Hungary directly fed into national policy and extended its impact far beyond the ten settlements directly involved in the project. Co-creation was included as a priority area in the announcement of a new development programme (the Family Household Programme). The call for proposals to this programme specified that if applicants include co-creation, they receive extra points during the evaluation of their bid. The CoSIE pilot team prepared a methodological document for the ministry announcing the programme and it was published as an annex to the application document.

Common factors that distinguish individual pilots that made a bigger difference appear to be: energetic and proactive networking, enrolling the interest of powerful stakeholders, and meeting perceived needs of other agencies in other places in ways that align with emerging national and regional priorities (e.g., sustainable cities, rural economic development).

## **Lessons and Conclusions**

In the original bid for CoSIE and early conversations, the consortium used the term “hard to reach” to refer to target populations. An essential lesson was to expunge the top-down thinking it implied. From the perspective of contributing citizens, the most important learning point is that they must not only be invited to participate, but their contribution must also be seen as making a difference. The CoSIE pilots attempted to address various “wicked” problems (crime, economic exclusion, unequal health outcomes) that are ambiguous, in-

terconnected with other problems, and have no end point or “stopping rule”. Co-creation is not linear, and a straight pathway from intentions to measurable outcomes may not always exist. Nevertheless, pilots in CoSIE found many new ways to collaborate and co-create, new processes to enhance the responsiveness of services, and sometimes new services.

In the CoSIE pilots, there were a few imaginative adaptations of various digital platforms and channels but their potential for co-creation proved lower than anticipated. The experience of some pilots demonstrated that the ungoverned nature of current social media renders it generally unsafe where vulnerable and stigmatised groups are involved. This paper limitation is that it focusses entirely on the pilots. Cross-cutting activities within CoSIE included digital story-telling as a tool for co-creation (Trowbridge & Willoughby, 2022) and interactive on-line modelling to support co-creative relationships in complex arenas of social innovation by improving collective learning and reflexivity (Jamieson et al., 2022). Various reusable tools generated by the project in the form of digital resources to support co-creative innovation can be viewed at CoSIE (2021).

Some CoSIE pilots managed to get beyond local implementation and began to make a difference on a larger scale. Common factors that distinguish them appear to be energetic and proactive networking, enrolling the interest of stakeholders with the power to act, and meeting the perceived needs of other agencies in other places. CoSIE demonstrated through its real-life pilots that it is possible to value the lived experience of people who receive public services and to nurture their contributions to shaping the services that affect them. It did so even in contexts that looked unpromising, for example, within services people are compelled to receive (work activation, criminal justice) and in places with longstanding traditions of patriarchal attitudes and top-down provision (Hungary, Poland). That implies a profound reframing of how people who access services are viewed, consistent with a paradigm shift towards more emphasis on capabilities and democratic renewal.

CoSIE inevitably faced challenges and experienced some setbacks. Nevertheless, evidence from the pilots is largely positive and tends to counter more sceptical voices about the value of co-creation for people who lack power and are rarely heard. However, it invites questions about the consensus that co-creation is indeed an orthodoxy and secure as a part of ongoing policy reform. Committed adherents view its further advance as inevitable. Yet, some pilots’ experiences suggest aspects of service structures and policies that push against co-creation, implying that its future legitimacy may be uncertain and contested.

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