Community development and co-production

Issues for policy and practice

SCDC Discussion Paper 2011 / 02
Understanding co-production

The concept of co-production has emerged in recent years as an innovative and valuable approach to the provision and development of public services. The New Economics Foundation describes it in two ways: from the perspective of service providers as developing an ‘active relationship between staff and service users as co-workers’, and from the perspective of communities as ‘engaging the assets that exist within communities to grow the core economy’. The ‘core economy’ is made up of all the resources embedded in people’s everyday lives – time, energy, wisdom, experience, knowledge and skills.

As such, co-production is a very similar concept to the ‘deciding together’, ‘acting together’ and ‘supporting independent action’ rungs of the familiar ladder of citizen participation. NEF cites the following as not being co-production:

- Service user involvement in assessing services
- Service user involvement in service design
- Representation on service boards and panels
- Service user consultation
- Informing people who use services

Co-production therefore is based on the principles that public services should approach service users as assets who have skills that are vital to the delivery of services; that “work” includes the things that people do to support each other; that opportunities for reciprocity should be sought and supported; and that attention should be given to weaving community networks around individuals and organisations.

Put in another way, the principles of co-production include:

- Recognising people as assets, because people themselves are the real wealth of society.
- Valuing work differently, to recognise as work the things that people as well as services do to raise families, look after people, maintain healthy communities and good governance.
- Promoting reciprocity, giving and receiving – because it builds trust between people and fosters mutual respect.
- Building social networks, because people’s physical and mental well-being depends on strong, enduring relationships.¹

¹ This list is adapted from Cahn, E. (2001), No More Throwaway People: The Co-production Imperative. Washington D.C.: Essential Books
The implications of all this for service providers is to move beyond consultation, user involvement and citizen engagement to equal partnership; to shift from ‘doing to’ to ‘working with’, and from providing to enabling and supporting. In this way, public service workers become brokers and facilitators, not just experts who can fix things, and both professional and experiential knowledge are valued and combined.

From a community development perspective, this means that public service workers and organisations become important contributors, advisers, advocates and fixers on the needs or issues that the community is concerned with.

The following diagram (source: nef) illustrates that co-production - in the centre - involves both co-planning and co-delivering of services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professionals as sole service planner</th>
<th>Service users/community &amp; professionals as co-planners</th>
<th>No professional input into service planning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professionals as sole service delivers</td>
<td>Traditional professional service provision</td>
<td>Professional service provision - users and communities involved in planning and design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals/users/communities as co-deliverers</td>
<td>User co-delivery of professionally designed services</td>
<td>Full user/professional/community co-production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users/communities as sole deliverers</td>
<td>User/community delivery of professionally planned services</td>
<td>User/community delivery of co-planned or co-designed services</td>
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</table>

NEF argues that co-production has the capacity to transform public services by rebuilding the traditions of mutuality that have dissipated in recent decades, and that it is essential to building sustainable public services by acknowledging and introducing the resources of interest and motivation that service users may be able
to provide, and that ultimately it can deliver better outcomes because it has participation at its heart.

From a community development perspective, these are type of relationships that communities seek, or value, in their relationships with public agencies – it is often a central component of the role of community workers and related staff to help bring about these relationships. In this way, co-production can be understood as one route towards the long term outcome from community development of ‘liveable, equitable and sustainable’ communities. We should be aware however that it should not be seen as the only route, and that co-production in its proper sense can only be viable when there is an alignment of the community and public agency view of what the problems are and how they can be addressed.

It is generally accepted that our current pattern of services and spending are unsustainable against future finance and demand. Moreover, the historic pattern of service delivery has largely failed those with the highest need. However, the overarching commitments in the national performance framework to early intervention, equally well and anti-poverty challenge historic service models to the extent that we need to fundamentally rethink how we deliver and what we are delivering.

The focus on outcomes in current policy challenges public services to revisit and reaffirm their essential purpose and why they exist. Outcome-driven thinking and planning becomes close to co-production in so far as we ‘can’t do outcomes to people’.

The community development perspective:
We start with some observations on co-production from a community development point of view:

- Evidence to date on the value of co-production is primarily to do with individual or family service users rather than collective / community relationships
- As such, it is often more top-down than it’s adherents would admit – more about service redesign than about community empowerment
- Many of the best examples of community development are also good examples of co-production
- Suggestions that co-production works best (or only?) in circumstances of relative affluence or competence which would imply that considerable
emphasis would need to be placed on building capacity for co-production among less advantaged communities

- Fears that it’s a (not-so) subtle form of cost-cutting and offloading functions that should rightly be the concern of government and the state exacerbated in recent months by its alignment with English ‘big society’ thinking
- It is probably new clothing for an old idea

Most, if not all community development is directed towards achieving improvements in community circumstances or the quality of community life, and this will normally involve working towards:

- changes in the nature or focus of public service delivery
- changes driven or delivered by the community itself
- changes involving shared decisions and actions typically through community planning processes, which is much the same as co-production.

The basic argument for community development is that there is unequal access to such changes or benefits in excluded or disadvantaged communities with community development being compensatory action to help build capacity and enhance the value of engagement between communities and public agencies. If co-production has the possibility of bringing benefits to communities that would otherwise be excluded, than community development may well be required to help communities build the capacity to engage with service providers to take the relevant decisions and actions. Community development support may equally be needed with service providers to better equip them to engage with communities and in particular disadvantaged or excluded community interests.

There has been much work done in recent years to advocate the value of community engagement and to encourage good practice (for example, National Standards for Community Engagement). There has also been work to flag up the importance of building capacity as a precondition of effective engagement as well as a core component of enhancing social capital. But there has been relatively little work done on the components of co-production practice in communities, and this is important in so far as co-production may well be one of the most positive routes towards the vision in the Community Empowerment Action Plan\(^2\) of community empowerment as a ‘process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them’.

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\(^2\) Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan, Scottish Government Housing and Regeneration Directorate, March 2009