Co-Creation and Enhanced Youth Participation in Local Decision-Making

Narbutaite Aflaki, Inga; Nordberg, Kenneth; Hallik, Maarja; Kangro, Kadri

[Link to publication](#)

Inga Narbutaite Aflaki
Karlstad University (Sweden)
ORCID: 0000-0003-0413-5028
e-mail: inga.narbutaite-aflaki@kau.se

Maarja Hallik
Tallinn University (Estonia)
ORCID: 0000-0002-8535-8102
e-mail: maarja.hallik@tlu.ee

Kenneth Nordberg
Åbo Akademi University (Finland)
ORCID: 0000-0002-0073-1503
e-mail: Kenneth.Nordberg@abo.fi

Kadri Kangro
Tallinn University (Estonia)
ORCID: 0000-0002-2582-7034
e-mail: kadri.kangro@vorumaa.ee

Co-Creation and Enhanced Youth Participation in Local Decision-Making: The Perception of Public Sector Readiness[1]

Abstract: The reverted demographic pyramid makes youth a decreasing percentage of our increasingly ageing population, leaving youth groups with less power and chances to influence the future of public policies and services through established participation channels. There is a potential risk of losing the interests of broader, including less heard, youth groups in democratic decision-making and implementation. Research evidence shows that we need to broaden knowledge and accountability towards these groups by including them more in co-creation to secure their trust and meaningful policy impact. One major way to improve trust in the public sector is by enhancing the abilities of professionals, managers, politicians and NGOs to co-create public and individual values with youth groups for better services and solutions instead of acting and making decisions on their behalf. Also, cross-sector collaboration among institutional units or stakeholders from different sectors on a local scale is often required to enhance the value of services or local community decisions. This paper explores from a comparative perspective the readiness of the local governments for enhanced democratic participation and co-creation of public services and public value with youth. Based on document studies, interviews and cross-sectoral learning dialogues between engaged researchers, public sector and NGO representatives conducted in three countries – Sweden, Finland, and Estonia – the paper illustrates the current perceptions of public professionals and managers regarding their approach to co-creation with youth and the public

---

sector roles, readiness and perceived gaps. The paper distinguishes between the municipal ambitions of enhanced youth participation and co-creation.

Today, local governments across Europe experience a risk of losing the interests of broader citizen groups, including groups of less active, or rather less heard, youth in democratic decision-making processes. Young people, as a heterogenous group, are interested in a range of social and political issues (Checkoway, 2011; Henn & Foard, 2012), but the rigidness 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 (Pickard & Bessant, 2018). Young people instead favour alternative types of participation, for instance, activism and social media (Peart et al., 2022).

We need to broaden knowledge sharing and accountability by including the youth in more co-creative policy-making to cut this negative spiral. In the public sector, co-creation is seen as a new norm to democratise public decision-making, a potential solution to polarisation, political disenchantment, and lack of trust, especially in addressing wicked, unrulable issues (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). We understand co-creation as the highest level of stakeholder participation involving citizens and NGOs (Baines et al., 2023; Fox et al., 2021). It involves collaborative activity to enhance the individual and the public value of public services, based on a relational approach that aims to equalise power and possibilities for real influence through elements of participatory and deliberative democracy.

It is not a simple consultation, such as in the format of youth councils, nor is it a delegation of decisions to communities or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Rather, the approach is more ambitious, balancing political and expert knowledge with citizens' lived experiences and perceived values in analysing and drafting public interventions. Co-creation as a normative approach entails equal possibilities for young individuals to exercise agency by contributing to defining the goals or value of public intervention to meet the needs they consider important regardless of variations of their identities and backgrounds.

A topic that deserves more attention is so-called local co-creation readiness. Co-creation ascribes a special role to the public sector in securing service development and implementation, shifting the focus from acting as a purely legal authority or customer-oriented service provider to participation and meta-governance of public and private value co-creation (Torfing et al., 2016). It implies a variety of tasks ranging from opening platforms for more inclusive participation and co-creation to facilitative leadership (Torfing et al., 2021) and accommodating co-creation norms in professional ethics (Fox et al., 2021). Overall, adopting and sustaining co-creation requires a systemic shift (Torfing et al., 2016) toward new governance logic in public organisations and service systems, also called transformative governance (Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

Public value co-creation mobilises resources, improves service solutions, and fosters innovative and legitimate responses to problems (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). This approach might imply democratic innovations by shifting interactions with peers, citizens and other stakeholders towards more participatory and dialogical formats. However, there are concerns about governments' commitment to democratisation, as allowing more spontaneous and flexible participation contrasts with attempts to control and institutionalise it (Bevir, 2013).

The variety of methods and tools currently available for co-creation requires knowledge, experience and reflexivity to select between the most appropriate ones for the context and target groups at hand, as well as the local readiness to test or adopt those.

In a multi-level governance system, especially smaller non-metropolitan municipalities are expected to be more inclined to accommodate aspects of participatory and deliberative democracy due to relative closeness to the citizens (Erlingsson et al., 2022, p. 101). This article examines, from a comparative perspective, the core issues and challenges experienced in co-creation with varieties of youth aged between 13 and 29 years regarding local (mostly municipal) co-creation readiness. It contrasts three studied national contexts around the geographic region of the Baltic Sea: Sweden, Finland, and Estonia - in search for similarities and differences.

This article builds on a pre-study conducted in the three European countries representing two different welfare state models – the Nordic and Eastern European – in 2022–2023 aiming to explore and support municipal co-creation readiness. Based on studies of policy documents, interviews and dialogues from two international workshops with local governments, NGOs (as partners and associated with the project), and researchers, this article provides evidence of some distinct features of local co-creation readiness and major challenges and offers some reflections for its enhancement. While the focus is on public sector readiness, we see clear interdependencies with civil society.

Conceptual Framework to Assess Co-Creation Readiness

Stakeholders in many national contexts still lack experience in co-creative service practices and how managers and governance logic may support them. The literature on this topic in public policy and administration research is still developing (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Fox et al., 2021; Hendrikx, 2020), and there are somewhat different yet partly overlapping ways of grouping the co-creation cornerstones in the public sphere (cf Tuurnas, 2016). In this study, we distinguish three groups of cornerstones associated with co-creation readiness: the 'system', the 'ethical compass', and the 'drivers' (Fox et al., 2021; Jukic et al., 2022).

The *system* variables are many and might be further subdivided into three key categories:
(i) legal/institutional/political support that provides the framing and scaffolding of co-creation. Especially important is support from higher-level decision-makers among politicians and public managers.

(ii) internal managerial characteristics, such as qualitative performance indicators, collaborative culture, delegating some decision making power to professionals, openness to de-learning by shifting usual ways of delivering services and changing the approach to risks and failures. It requires bravery from policy-makers and top managers to admit that public sector organisations may fail and have failed in the past and that to develop more adequate and effective services, single organisations, or service professional groups need to open up for knowledge from other actors and service beneficiaries.

(iii) organising capacities, such as human and financial resources, training opportunities for staff, established collaborations, and trust. Interest and the capacity to engage citizens and other qualified stakeholders based on recognising their contributions is fundamental. Trust is a precondition to this. Lack of trust, previous disappointments and fear of being unjustly exposed must be overcome. Sustaining co-creative spaces requires not only decision-makers' approval and financial support but also *access to infrastructure* and experimental spaces, such as meeting spaces, and building relationships to keep the motivation. Different individuals need different platforms and tools, including digital ones, for just co-creation.

Next, the *ethical compass* refers to certain external norms and professionals' perceptions and attitudes that guide and help them to renegotiate their own and citizen roles in co-creation. It is also constituted by a broader commonly agreed organisational ethos that includes commonly agreed norms or performance criteria for managing services against which they and the conversations with citizens/stakeholders will be evaluated. Indicative of organisational cultures permissive to co-creation may be staff awareness of the benefits of co-creation and supportive approach, staff willingness to involve citizens and external stakeholders and openness to learning, and top managers advocating for co-creation by framing local policies.

Co-creation requires an approach that accommodates an asset-based perspective to citizens and service users, which implies a shift from seeing service users primarily in terms of deficit and risks (Fox et al., 2021). Additionally, to increase the possibility that the co-creation process is successful, the different languages used by the stakeholders need to find a convergence towards a *common language* about what is meant by co-creation, objectives, expectations of roles, relationships and methodology. Instead, the failure to create convergent language results in a cacophonous language, where the communication remains a sum of different languages that do not merge into a meaningful conversation.

Finally, the *drivers* refer to the roles and strategies undertaken by politicians, managers, professionals, NGOs, citizens (in contrast to fence-sitting or opposing), and more neutral intermediaries to prepare for or instigate co-creation in public decision-making. Convincing politicians may be challenging when short-term effects are prioritised over longer-term gains. Various actors in and outside PSO may act as (cultural) *change drivers or facilitators*. It includes advocates among politicians, top managers, mid-managers, or even front-line

managers (Narbutaite & Lindh, 2021; Sørensen et al., 2021). Previous research (Narbutaite & Lindh, 2021; Narbutaite & Basi, forthcoming) shows that reliance on the presence of motivated and recognised intermediaries could help in engaging the stakeholders and facilitating sense-making about the co-creation without disempowering any party.

Having a concrete focus and motive 'why' and consistently sustaining efforts to convince stakeholders and service professionals may help to co-create. When presented professionally and repeatedly, the point of view of the targeted individuals supported by the services often convinces professionals and managers of the need for co-creation. Initiatives by motivated staff (within public sector organisations or NGOs) or citizen groups may act as catalysis for co-creation. The change agents may take on a variety of strategies to instigate change, such as reporting citizens' lived experiences and organising Living Labs for conversations of change.

In this article, we propose a synthesised framework that builds on these three cornerstones (see Fig. 1.) – the system, the ethical compass and the drivers – when assessing local readiness in our national contexts. We argue that these three dimensions should allow us to capture broader variables than just *public* sector readiness. For example, the drivers' aspects need to include the readiness of the concerned civil society organisations and groups of youth.

Legislation and National Policies

National policies and legislation are integral systemic readiness aspects. In our cases, they may, to various degrees, be seen as authorising or at least justifying youth as a specific target group (such as in social policies) or as part of the broader citizenry (as in social planning) participation in various areas of local decision-making. Some are relatively new, while others have existed for several decades.

For example, in the Swedish political context, The National Youth Policy (from 2019) targets municipal and regional governments to improve the mental health of youth between 13 and 25 years of age, offering them meaningful leisure time and involving them in societal development, such as in influencing their living environment. The concept of co-creation is not mentioned. Instead, its signifiers may be found among the typical concepts of 'engagement', 'participation', 'inclusion', and 'influence'. The recent law (2020) on implementing the UN Children's Convention has an even stronger emphasis on enhancing the rights of individuals below 18 years of age to influence matters that concern their basic needs, thus obliging local governments to identify their needs in social and health care, leisure, culture services or build environment.

These latter policies complement earlier legislation in such diverse areas as The Social Services Act (SSA from 2001) which aspirations to provide citizens with social assistance rights to participation and self-determination, or the Planning and Building Act (PBL from 2010) that requires (§8) municipalities to involve affected citizens on matters concerning local spatial planning, especially master plans. These legislations mostly serve as guid-

ing frame laws, leaving the design of participative features in the hands of street-level bureaucrats or local decision-makers. Especially in PBL, there are claims of a lack of clarity regarding more innovative participatory formats beyond consultation, but a similar situation abides in the social services area (Narbutaite- & Lindh, 2021). The PBL implementation has been criticised by research and parliamentary commissions exploring the status of democracy (Kulturdepartementet, 2016), although there have been numerous local pilots, and the SALAR has now intensified its methodological support. Path dependencies, lack of resources (ibid) and lack of sense-making seem to stand in their way.

Participative features are also prominent parts of the Finnish legislation targeting the activities of municipalities. The Local Government Act (410/2015) advocates broad citizen participation, for instance, by "planning and developing services together with service users" (§22) and institutionalising opportunities for young people to have a say in any issues that concern them (§26), one instance being youth councils. The Youth Act (1285/2016) specifically highlights the obligation of authorities to "organise opportunities for young people to be involved and exert an influence in the processing of issues related to local, regional and nationwide youth work and policies" (§24). While the ambitions for participation have been high in legislation, its practice has continuously been criticised since participative features are often put on top of more traditional forms of governing (Leino, 2008; Pihlaja & Sandberg, 2012). The Finnish aims of youth work and policy are summarised in the National Youth Work and Youth Policy programme. Over recent periods, the central theme in this document has been the prevention of youth marginalisation and the promotion of youth participation. For the most recent period of 2020–2023, the main aims are the reduction of social exclusion, the promotion of skills for participation, exerting influence, and promoting young people's trust in society. Besides NGOs and agencies, municipalities are seen as essential in outreaching work to marginalised youth and facilitating opportunities for youth to participate and exert influence. Youth councils are mentioned as important, together with a call for municipalities to develop new tools and methods to promote youth consultation.

In Estonia, youth participation is especially supported by the Youth Work Act, which primarily legislates local youth councils, while the Youth Sector Development Plan 2021–2035 sets out key priorities such as increasing youth's civic participation (inclusivity) and creating safety and trust.

One could argue that all priorities and ensuing action plans support the various aspects of co-creation preparedness and implementation (Youth Sector Development Plan 2021–2035). The documents emphasise considering young people as equal partners, having a say in the planning and design of services intended for them, having the ability to initiate and create solutions and being included in meaningful activities within the community. However, the term 'co-creation' describes cooperation among youth and is thereby not understood as a method of multi-stakeholder problem-solving activity as we have defined it. "Promoting participatory democracy requires more effective, transparent and feedback-based ways

of involving citizens. It has to be facilitated by (digital) platforms, a media space based on analytical argumentation, competent officials as well as reliable experts", has been said in the report (Sooväli-Sepping, 2020).

On the local municipality level, youth councils and local youth work are mentioned as primary ways of youth engagement in **the mentioned and many other policy documents.** According to the Estonian Human Development Report 2019–2020, one of the main challenges in developing democracy is a poor quality of public discussion, especially at the local level, and a lack of constructive dialogue and feedback from public authorities, leading to passivism from the citizens. It pinpoints the urgency to develop the skills for responsible citizenship.

In sum, regardless of the national policy and legislation openings, we see remaining evident challenges to engage citizens and groups of youth in more traditional and local political participation and, especially, co-creation. In what follows, we illustrate additional key issues of local readiness, especially on the public sector side, in the Baltic Sea Region, based on examples from small to midsize municipalities in Finland, Sweden, and Estonia, countries.

Local Practices

Sweden

Sweden is a unitary state with a population of 10.5 million, divided into 20 regions and 290 municipalities with far-reaching self-governance. The local system's *readiness* to co-create with youth in Sweden may be exemplified by the Alvesta municipal context, a midsize municipality of ca 20,000 inhabitants, and especially its organisational openness to change its management structures and principles. Inspired by the Scottish counterpart, the municipal Social Services have recently initiated a working model called "Barnets bästa gäller" [For the children's best] with the focus on meeting children up to 18 years at risk of exclusion from school, labour market, and society needs by a co-creative approach. This work has instigated new cross-departmental and cross-sectoral collaborations with researchers from the regional university looking for new ways to engage children and their caretakers. The new central organisational Unit for Development collaborates with representatives from the involved departments. This way, the top management expects to gauge broader organisational interest, counteract the silos effect, and enhance learning. One aim is to develop and spread participatory and co-creative methods among other departments.

The model has benefited from external financing, including national and EU funds, hiring coordinators with competencies in participatory methods, and competence development and mutual learning among personnel from several municipal service areas. The municipality has enrolled new coordinators and competencies from the civil society, not

least the targeted youth groups, to better address youth needs for leisure and integration activities. It resulted in co-creating more tailored support, such as assisting youth with jobs or preparation for the future.

The municipality has supported establishing an independent local Youth Council (representing youth from School Boards) as a referral body for municipal issues for five years. It is also enrolled in new dialogue-based interactions with civil society organisations to tailor support to the children and youth, such as supporting the establishment and sustainment of a new non-profit association that engages youth at risk interested in local motor club activities.

The municipal administration also started building up its experiences as an initiator of dialogues rather than a passive input receiver to engage youth in expressing their opinions on local development by organising a week of local democracy. It resulted in receiving voices about such issues as schoolyards and engaging with a responsible public housing company and youth in dialogues on improvements. All these collaborative experiences have impacted establishing a working communication, awareness of municipal activities and enhancing the trust of youth.

A remaining challenge is that the cross-sectorial organising and knowledge sharing still exclude some municipal departments, such as town planning, that are not used to having broader participatory dialogues with citizens in defining development needs, where the municipality also intends new participatory and co-creative initiatives.

In Alvesta, there are several drivers toward participatory and co-creative culture. The top management is one of them and has embarked on a more active employment policy to enrol key developmental competencies in participatory methodologies. It allows substantial freedom of action for service area managers to choose how to implement participatory methodologies by employing trust-based elements (Narbutaite, 2021). Mid-managers feel open to searching for external financial resources to test new ways. Both the top and some mid-managers also support participatory civil society activities in some policy areas within municipal jurisdiction that help identify some needed changes. In the proposed project collaboration context, there seems to be sufficient support from development coordinators, top management and political boards to test participatory and dialogical approaches to enhance the influence of groups of youth over the master plan in developing a new residential district in a socioeconomically segregated area, given external resources are secured. The aim is to respond to the need for equal access to meeting, recreational and other public spaces and achieve more satisfaction among youth in their living environment. Yet, the dilemma remains that co-creation makes sense for those with previous participatory experiences, and the acceptance of co-creation between municipal departments remains unequal. Shifting the organisation (and civil society) towards this change requires bottom-up initiatives. Currently, there is more acceptance for co-creation at the top organisational level, where new pilots are being placed.

Finland

The public governance model of Finland is closely related to that of Sweden, with strong municipal self-governance, but the municipalities are generally smaller (309 municipalities with a total country population of 5.5 million). Recent decades have been tainted by recurring administrative reforms driven by the growing economic unsustainability of small and mainly rural municipalities. In January 2023, an extensive regional reform transferred social and healthcare duties to the regional level, stripping municipalities of 60% of their annual budgets. In turn, municipalities received responsibility for proactive resident well-being activities and employment services. The reform has reshaped municipal roles and significantly increased the need for direct cooperation with other local actors.

Practically all municipalities in Finland have Youth Councils (Suomen Nuorisovaltuustojen Liitto, 2020), and there has been some experimenting with participatory budgeting for youth, especially in Helsinki (Nuorisoasiainkeskus, 2013). Additionally, Finnish municipalities must conduct outreach youth work targeted at marginalised youth. Among other things, they cooperate with NGOs in the arrangement of so-called Youth workshops, which promote the abilities of marginalised youth to educate themselves, find employment, and generally reinforce their competence to take control of their lives. Although these activities have participatory features, they largely do not correspond to actual co-creation.

We will look at three municipalities with interest in co-creation pilots as examples of the Finnish circumstances: two mainly rural ones, Närpes, with 10,000 and Nykarleby, with 7000 inhabitants, and the mainly urban Vaasa, with 70 000 inhabitants. As an effect of the reform, all three municipalities have established new offices for welfare managers, who, at the time of writing, are still developing their role but have cross-sectoral duties and outreach to external actors.

We see a difference between the two rural municipalities and the urban one in that the rural municipalities are more concerned with available resources for developing co-creative activities, especially regarding staff resources and resources for developing new tools, including digital ones. While resources are limited also in Vaasa, they have developed an ambitious participation programme for 2021–2025, prioritising the development of new participatory tools, such as digital platforms and participatory budgeting. One of the aims is to increase the influence of residents and NGOs in decisions affecting their living environment, striving to become a 'happiest city'. In parallel with the programme, Vaasa secured financing from the state to develop new participatory tools. The programme especially highlights the necessity of developing cross-sectoral practices and providing training and toolkits for municipal officials to use when approaching citizens. The programme has thus far increased the number of workshops, meetings and hearings arranged by the municipality, and digital participative tools have been developed.

At the same time, co-creation, as described here, is viewed by the 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 by emphasising learning among youth rather than municipal organisational learning.

Nevertheless, there are strong visible drivers for co-creation. Driven by top management and some dedicated public workers, all three municipalities actively seek new tools to reach local youth and broader communities. Here, the regional reform and the new welfare duty are key driving factors, but also an awareness of growing mental illnesses and marginalisation of youth groups. Being midsize and small municipalities, they want to find tools to counteract youth flight to metropolitan areas by developing their sense of inclusion in societal development and place attachment.

Estonia

The Estonian public government system is divided into 79 municipalities (pop. 1,3 million), with some level of independence in implementing local policy issues within the legal framework. While the legal frame for citizen participation supports deliberation, its implementation in municipalities remains embryonic for several reasons. Firstly, the governance issue towards more deliberative democracy and co-creation has not been a focus of local development plans and strategies. Secondly, the lack of awareness of implementing this concept is a problem.

It is declared in the local development plans that governance has to be transparent and inclusive, but no significant actions and indicators are planned. As a result, participatory citizen engagement and deliberation at the local level is taking more traditional forms, such as collecting written proposals, committees, and public hearings. However, there are some recent positive signs of overall willingness to create a more fruitful dialogue between the local government and citizens on both sides. The problem is a lack of awareness of how to do it.

In our pre-study, we spoke with four municipalities, mainly small rural ones, that showed interest in testing co-creation with youth. Public professionals working in education, youth, and culture supported youth engagement and wanted to offer the youth more meaningful ways of participation to benefit youth well-being and contribute to local development. In general, we could sense an openness to exploring and learning more about co-creation tools and principles. They hoped that, as a result of the co-creation experience, youth would stay or return to the municipality and contribute to its socio-economic development, but also noted that "we cannot know what the young people want and need – only they know and hence need to have a say". All four municipalities were already using some novel formats to engage youth, but they were focused mostly on participatory rather than more structured co-creative formats, although the borderline is somewhat blurry. For example, one municipality was

proud of was "participation cafes" or after-school events where young people can, in a relaxed way, meet local politicians or other people to express their views. Another case explored was developing a constitution for Tallinn Youth Council through interactions between youth, politicians, youth workers and representatives of some youth organisations.

However, based on our initial observation, the capacity of municipalities in rural and more remote areas of Estonia to offer youth various engagement and participation opportunities is lower than in urban areas. The system level or organisational readiness, especially the availability of trained personnel and time, is perhaps lower than expected. The general opinion of the interviewees seemed to confirm that youth engagement and participation are not as systematically organised as they could be. In particular, the 'less-active' youth, e.g., those not participating in the youth council, are often left out.

We could sense an openness to exploring and learning more about co-creation tools and principles. The municipal professionals working in education, youth, and culture wanted to offer the youth more meaningful ways to participate on the municipal level and benefit youth well-being. '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 and 'different time schedules', meaning that young people are often in a school or other activities during municipality officials' office hours. The latter opens up utilising formal and informal education arenas where youth are already available or engaged.

The Estonian case shows that the drivers for co-creation are often motivated individuals who initiate projects and find resources to conduct them. All in all, the readiness level in the four Estonian municipalities is very different, with only one being ready to start a piloting co-creation with external support, while others indicated an interest in learning.

Conclusions and Discussion

In the national legislation and policies, we see strong ambitions for developing co-creative features, in our case, countries that set a positive climate for co-creation. Transforming these ambitions into municipal practice is another matter. Our cases show that the three identified cornerstones – system, ethics, and drivers – are all necessary to trigger interest in at least testing co-creation.

Smaller municipalities are, in many ways, closer to local communities, which is why we expected our study objects to be inclined to try out co-creation as a method. Here, we found some necessary motivation and favourable conditions, but also that system factors connected to resources – finances and human skills – are strongly hindering factors. Although we did find strong individual interest in co-creation, it is unequally spread and more common in matters related to youth leisure time and educational environment, perhaps due to relatively uncomplicated topics in contrast to social planning and living spaces. The cost of learning new conducts (for instance, training officials in using dialogue tools, developing new tools for

Fig. 1. Co-creation readiness

Corner-stones	Analysis dimension	Characteristics	SWEDEN (Alvesta municipality, Kronoberg region)	ESTONIA (rural municipalities from different parts of Estonia)	FINLAND (municipalities in Österbotten region
The System	The legal and political context	Political environment supportive of collaboration	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Legislation sets a positive climate for co-creation	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Managerial readiness	Readiness for changing the organisational structure	Partially	No	Partially
		Presence of collaborative and risk-taking culture	Partially	Not much	Partially
		Staff have decision making autonomy	Yes	Yes (to certain extent)	Yes
	Organising capacities	Sufficient financial resources	No	No	Partially
		Availability of skilled staff	Partially	No	Partially
		Training opportunities	Partially (mostly through ongoing projects)	Partially	Partially
		Experiences of dialogue-based interaction	Not much	Not much	Partially
		Practices assessing the impact of citizen in/exclusion	Not much	No	No
		Organisation enjoys a high level of public trust	Yes (with reservation for marginalised groups)	Partially	Yes
The Ethical Compass	Attitudes	Supportive perceptions of co-creation among staff	Partially	No/Partially	Partially
		Staff are willing to involve external stakeholders	Partially	Yes	Partially
		Staff awareness of the benefits of co-creation	Yes/Partially	Partially	Partially
	Organisational Ethos	Top-managers facilitate co-creation; the staff performance is guided by qualitative rather than primarily quantitative targets	Yes/Partially	No	Partially
The Drivers	Catalysing Strategies	Initiatives by motivated managers/staff/citizen groups	Partially (in some policy areas more than in others)	Partially	Partially

Source: Own study synthesised from Horizon 2020 CoGov and COSIE projects.

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, are still embryonic and reveal another obstacle: 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 act as catalysts for this kind of work in the best cases. In Vaasa (Finland) and Alvesta (Sweden), the municipalities started making use of external funding to assist this transition, which supports the notion that additional resources are vital for municipalities to learn to co-create. Municipalities might not even afford the time to prioritise developing knowledge on co-creation and look for funding, as the Estonian case illustrates.

When personal motivation and leadership of individuals determine participatory initiatives in the organisation (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 or political or economic shifts, and the system more or less returns to its previous shape. Thus, we conclude that while entrepreneurial change agency by a few individuals 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.

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 co-creation is about more inclusive and consultative formats, as well as whether issues are defined by the public sector or local communities. Accordingly, we see a prevalent understanding of co-creation as a simpler matter of personnel resources, methods and techniques, and almost no trace of seeing it as a political matter and the need for systemic change.

References:

Ansell, C., & Torfing, J. (2021). *Public Governance as Co-creation*. Cambridge University Press.

Baines, S., Wilson, R., Fox, C., Narbutaite Aflaki, I., Bassi, A., Aramo-Immonen, H., & Prandini, R. (2023). *Concrete and Elasticity – Co-creation in public services: policy and practice for innovation and social justice*. Polity Press.

Bevir, M. (2013). *A Theory of Governance*. University of California Press.

Checkoway, B. (2011). What is youth participation? *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*, 340–345.

Erlingsson, G., Karlsson, D., Wide, G., & Öhrwall, R. (2022). *SNS Democracy Council report 2022: Local Democracy at a Crossroads*. SNS.

Fox, C., Baines, S., Wilsson, R., Jallonen, H., Narbutaite-Aflaki, I., Prandini, R., Bassi, A., Ganugi, G., & Aaramo-Immonen, H. (2021). *A New Agenda for Co-creating Public Services*. Turku University of Applied Sciences.

Hendrikx, W., Kuiper M., & Van Gestel, N. (2020). *Scientific Report on the Conditions for Involvement of Professionals in the Strategic Renewal of Local Governments and Public Agencies, Possible Impediments and Counteracting Mechanisms*. CoGOV Project Report, D6.1. www.cogov.eu

Henn, M., & Foard, N. (2012). Young People, Political Participation and Trust in Britain. *Parliamentary Affairs, 65*(1), 47–67.

Jukić, T., Hržica, R., Vrbek, S., Benčina, R., Dečman, M., Pevcin, P., Jaman, P., Puzjak, M., Rilko, D., Subašić, A., & Gilja, B. (2020). *Decision support system for assessment of organisational readiness for co-creation*. CoGOV Project Report, D7.1. www.cogov.eu

Leino, H. (2008). Kansalaisosallistuminen kaupunkisuunnittelussa: rajaorganisaatioita vai hybridien hallintaa? *Alue ja Ympäristö, 37*(2), 41–48.

Narbutaite-Aflaki, I., & Lindh, M. (2021). Empowering first-line managers as leaders towards methodical co-creation: the role of facilitated sense-making. *Public Money and Management.*

Nuorisoasiainkeskus. (2013). *Nuorisoasiainkeskus lanseeraa osallistuvan budjetoinnin pilotin: RuutiBud-jetin.* Helsinki: Nuorisoasiainkeskus.

Peart, M., Cubo-Delgado, S., & Gutiérrez-Esteban, P. (2022). Exploring the role of digital and socio-civic skills for promoting youth participation and digital citizenship. *European Journal of Educational Research, 11*(2), 697–709.

Pickard, S., & Bessant, J. (2018). *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pihlaja, R., & Sandberg, S. (2012). Alueellista demokratiaa? Lähidemokratian toimintamallit Suomen kunnissa. *Valtiovarainministeriön julkaisuja, 27.*

Sooväli-Sepping, H. (Toim.) (2020). Eesti inimarengu aruanne 2019/2020. Linnastunud ühiskonna ruumilised valikud. Tallinn: SA Eesti Koostöö Kogu.

Sørensen, E., Hendriks, C. M., Hertting, N., & Edelenbos, J. (2020) Political boundary spanning: politicians at the interface between collaborative governance and representative democracy. *Policy and Society, 39*(4).

Suomen Nuorisovaltuustojen Liitto. (2020) *Nuvalaisen käsikirja*. Suomen Nuorisovaltuustojen Liitto ry.

Torfing, J., Sørenssen, E., & Røiseland, A. (2016). Transforming the public sector into an arena for co-creation: barriers, drivers, benefits and ways forward. *Administration and Society, 51*(5), 795–825.

Tuurnas, S. (2016). *The Professional Side of Co-production*. Tampere University.